

Article

A Comparative Study on Narrative and Audience Experience between Chinese and Western Stage Plays

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Abstract: From a comprehensive cross-cultural perspective, this paper systematically compares the underlying narrative structures and the resulting audience experiences between traditional Chinese and Western stage plays. Historically, Western theatrical traditions have heavily relied on realistic, linear narration characterized by concentrated dramatic conflicts, often adhering to Aristotelian principles of unity to create a compelling illusion of reality. In stark contrast, Chinese theatrical arts frequently employ a freehand, highly virtualized, and episodic narrative style that prioritizes symbolic expression and poetic resonance over strict realism. Building upon these foundational distinctions, the paper further analyzes the profound differences in audience engagement, specifically examining viewing distance, interactive modes, and the mechanisms of emotional resonance. While Western theater often maintains a strict fourth wall that encourages psychological immersion and individual catharsis, Chinese theater traditionally fosters a more fluid, communal environment where the boundary between performer and spectator is highly permeable. The root causes of these divergent theatrical paradigms are deeply explored through the lenses of aesthetic traditions, cultural psychology, and underlying social values, ultimately revealing the essential distinctions shaped by distinct Eastern and Western cultural genes. By constructing a robust comparative framework encompassing narrative, experience, and culture, this study effectively addresses the inherent limitations of previous superficial comparisons. Ultimately, the findings provide vital theoretical support and practical insights for the creative innovation, contemporary adaptation, and effective cross-cultural communication of global theatrical arts in the modern era.

Keywords: stage plays; narrative mode; audience experience; cultural roots; theatrical arts

1. Introduction

Stage plays, as an important artistic carrier that conveys cultural connotations and aesthetic pursuits, showcase the unique achievements of Chinese and Western civilizations in the field of performing arts. How the narrative mode is constructed and how the audience's experience is formed not only reflects the artistic characteristics of different cultural systems but also reveals the differences in aesthetic traditions, thinking habits, and social psychology between China and the West. In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, and the cross-cultural communication and collision between Chinese and Western stage plays have also become more frequent. By deeply comparing the core differences in "the way of storytelling" and "how the audience watch and participate" between Chinese and Western stage plays, this study explores the root causes behind these differences [1].

Currently, the research on stage plays in the academic circles at home and abroad has produced a relatively rich body of work, but there are still obvious research gaps and room for improvement. From the current research situation, foreign studies focus on Western musicals and dramas, exploring dimensions such as realistic narration, linear structure, and dramatic conflicts, inheriting the core idea of Aristotle's "mimetic theory" and focusing on the correlation between narrative logic and stage presentation, as well as

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the evolution of audience acceptance psychology and interaction patterns [2]. However, there is a lack of systematic comparative analysis and in-depth interpretation of the Chinese traditional opera's freehand narrative and audience experience. Domestic research mostly focuses on the stylized performance of traditional Chinese opera and the creation of artistic conception, or solely explores the artistic characteristics of Western stage plays. Although there are some cross-cultural comparative studies, they mostly remain at the level of listing superficial phenomena and fail to deeply integrate the narrative structure, audience experience, and cultural roots, especially lacking targeted discussions on core issues such as "how the narrative mode affects audience participation" and "how cultural genes shape the viewing and performing relationship." It is difficult to fully reveal the inherent logic of the essence of the differences between Chinese and Western stage plays through this research.

Based on the current research status and shortcomings, this paper takes "the comparison of narrative and audience experience in Chinese and Western stage plays" as the core, based on a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on the core mainline of "the way of storytelling" and "how the audience watch and participate," breaking through the limitations of existing research, and focusing on the two major systems of traditional Chinese opera and Western musicals and dramas. It conducts a comparative analysis from two core dimensions of narrative structure and audience experience, deeply exploring the cultural roots that cause these differences, and filling the research gap in the "narrative - experience - culture" triad in existing studies [3, 4].

The research value of this paper lies in constructing a three-dimensional comparative framework of "narrative structure, audience experience, and cultural roots" from a cross-cultural perspective, breaking through the limitations of the single perspective of existing research, deepening the understanding of the essence of the differences between Chinese and Western stage plays; at the same time, the research results can provide references for stage play creators, helping them retain their own cultural characteristics while absorbing the excellent elements of heterogeneous cultures, innovating narrative modes and viewing and performing forms, enhancing the artistic appeal and cross-cultural communication power of the works, and promoting the two-way exchange and common development of Chinese and Western theatrical arts.

2. Analysis of Causative Differences

2.1. Differences in Social Structure and the Ecology of Performance and Audience

The development of Western and Chinese stage plays is rooted in fundamentally different social structures and the ecologies of performance and audience, which directly shape their narrative logic and the ways audiences experience them [5, 6].

Since the Renaissance, Western stage plays have been closely tied to civil society. The commercial theater systems represented by London's West End and New York's Broadway have formed a mature industrialized ecosystem [2]. In 2024, the West End attracted 17.1 million audience members and had a box-office revenue of over 1 billion pounds. Broadway achieved a box-office revenue of 1.89 billion US dollars during the same period, with 14.7 million audience members and a seat occupancy rate of 91.2%. This highly commercialized theater model requires plays to capture the audience's attention within a limited timeframe, leading to structural features centered around linear narratives and concentrated conflicts. For instance, the strict regulations of the "Three Unities" concerning time, place, and plot are essentially products designed to meet the fragmented viewing needs of the urban middle class.

Traditional Chinese opera has long been associated with patriarchal society and folk temple fairs. The performance and viewing scenes are more mobile and community-oriented [7, 8]. Although the contemporary Chinese stage play market is growing rapidly (in 2025, there were 128,500 drama performances nationwide with a box-office revenue of over 20 billion yuan), it still exhibits the dual characteristics of "classical inheritance + market cultivation." Opera performances account for approximately 19.3%, and the

audience is predominantly young people under 35 years old (accounting for 55%), while modern forms such as dramas and musicals cater to the cultural consumption needs of urban areas. This transitional nature of the social structure allows Chinese stage plays to retain the dot-line and open-ended structural features of traditional opera narratives while simultaneously addressing modern audiences' expectations for compact plots, resulting in a unique "traditional-modern" hybrid narrative mode.

2.2. Differences in Cultural Roots and Aesthetic Thinking

The differences at the level of cultural philosophy are the core root of the divergence in the narratives of Western and Chinese stage plays, which directly determine the essential differences in aesthetic experiences [9].

Western culture is centered around the "dichotomy of subject and object," emphasizing rational analysis and individual struggle. This way of thinking is projected onto the stage, forming a realist narrative tradition [10]. From ancient Greek tragedies to modern dramas, the stage is regarded as a "slice of life," restoring real-world contradictions through realistic settings, actions, and dialogues. The audience, as "bystanders," observes the conflicts between individuals and fate.

Chinese culture is based on the concept of "harmony between man and nature," pursuing freehand expression and overall harmony [11]. This has led to the formation of a virtualized and stylized performance system in traditional Chinese opera. The stage time and space are highly free. "A whip represents a galloping herd of horses, and an oar symbolizes a long-distance journey on the river." The audience needs to actively participate in decoding symbols and complete the scene construction through imagination. This "assumptive" aesthetic requires the audience to have profound cultural qualities. For example, the ethical connotations behind symbols like Peking Opera facial makeup and water sleeves are essentially an aesthetic practice jointly completed by "creators-audiences." Although contemporary Chinese dramas have introduced Western realist techniques, they still retain the aesthetic tendency of "emotion taking precedence over logic." For example, Teahouse connects the changes of the times through the fates of small characters, focusing more on emotional resonance than rational criticism.

2.3. Differences in Economic Models and Industrial Ecosystems

The economic foundation shapes the creative direction and dissemination pathways of stage plays. Differences in industrial ecosystems between the East and the West directly influence narrative strategies and the commercial design of audience experiences. The Western stage-play industry is highly developed, with commercial theaters centered around Broadway and the West End in London forming a closed-loop model of "high investment-high return." The average production cost of a single musical exceeds 8 million US dollars, with box-office revenue contributing over 50%. Additionally, derivative products, such as tours, film and TV adaptations, and merchandise, significantly enhance profitability. This model necessitates universal narrative logic and strong entertainment value. For instance, classic plays like *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* attract global audiences across cultural boundaries with simple emotional cores and stunning audio-visual effects. In 2025, the single-show box office of *The Phantom of the Opera's* China tour exceeded one million yuan, demonstrating the enduring appeal of commercial narratives. The Chinese stage-play industry, on the other hand, is still in a phase of rapid growth. In 2025, the musical market reached a scale of 1.807 billion yuan, reflecting a year-on-year increase of 7.55%. However, the proportion of original plays remains below 40%, with a heavy reliance on markets in first-tier cities, as musicals in Shanghai account for 56% of the national total. This industrial characteristic results in the coexistence of "local exploration" and "introduction and imitation" in Chinese stage-play narratives. For example, original musicals like *The Great Barrister* attract young audiences with Cantonese dialects and local stories, achieving a 100% attendance rate. Meanwhile, imported versions of *Les Misérables* and *Notre Dame de Paris* still account for half of the box

office, reflecting the relatively high acceptance of Western classic narratives among Chinese audiences. The economic disparity also leads to limitations in stagecraft technology and marketing promotion for Chinese stage plays, highlighting the need for further refinement in audience experiences.

2.4. Differences in Performance Forms and Narrative Carriers

The essential difference in performance forms is an intuitive manifestation of the differences between Chinese and Western stage plays, which directly determines the presentation mode of the narrative and the perception path of the audience. Western stage plays use dialogue and action as the core narrative carriers. The performance systems are divided into the "experiential school" and the "expressive school." The former emphasizes the complete integration of the actor and the character, while the latter reminds the audience of the fictional nature of the stage through the "estrangement effect." Both systems are based on "realistic imitation" and advance the plot through body language and the rhythm of the lines. The audience enters the story world in an "immersive" way. For example, the Western version of the drama *Teahouse* pays more attention to scene restoration and character psychological portrayal, allowing the audience to perceive the changes of the times through details. Traditional Chinese operas use singing, reciting, acting, and martial arts as comprehensive narrative means, and the performance is highly stylized. The division of roles into sheng, dan, jing, and chou, the use of symbols such as water sleeves and facial makeup, and the emotional expression in singing and reciting together form the narrative system. The audience needs to "understand by implication" to comprehend the story. This performance form makes the narrative more lyrical and poetic. For example, in the Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion*, the emotional transition is conveyed through singing rather than relying on plot conflicts by switching between Du Liniang's dreams and reality [5]. Although contemporary Chinese stage plays have integrated Western performance skills, they still retain the gene of stylized expression. For example, the postures and singing in the Peking opera *Farewell My Concubine* have become the core identifiers that distinguish it from Western dramas.

3. Analysis of Audience Experience Differences

To illustrate the differences in transmission logic and core features more clearly, the following chapters will delve into three major dimensions [12]. These will uncover the underlying mechanisms of variations in audience experience step by step, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

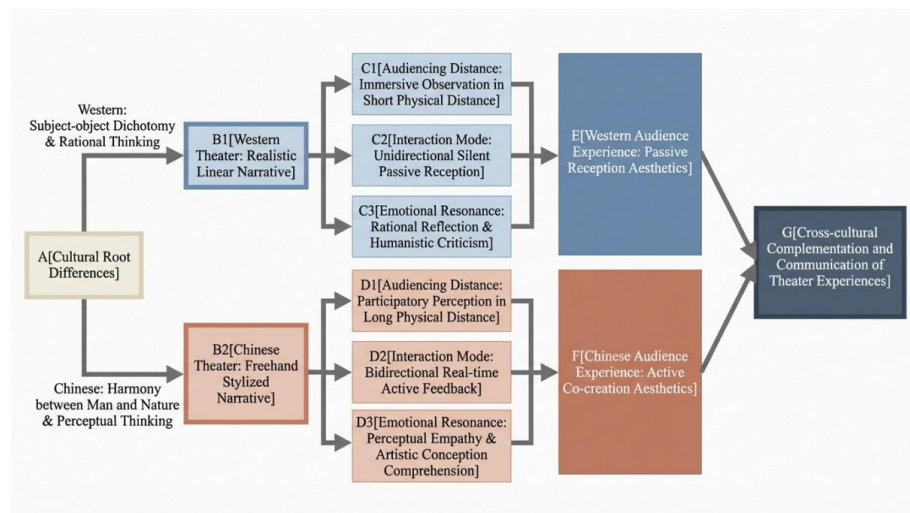


Figure 1. Framework of Core Dimensions for Analyzing Differences in Audience Experience of Chinese and Western Stage Plays

3.1. Viewing Distance: The Dual Division Between Physical Boundaries and Psychological Perception

The viewing distance is not merely a physical spatial separation; it is also a psychological perception distance shaped by narrative settings and stage layouts. Chinese and Western stage plays, based on different narrative needs, have constructed completely opposite viewing and performing spaces. Western dramas and musicals are founded on realistic linear narratives and follow classic theatrical norms such as the "Trinity Rule." The stage is created as a highly realistic independent narrative space. Through closed-stage sets, realistic scenery, realistic lighting, and sound effects, a virtual boundary of the "fourth wall" is constructed. This design strictly separates the audience from the stage, requiring the audience to enter the pre-set narrative scene as observers, creating a physically close and psychologically immersive viewing experience. Chinese traditional operas, with a core of expressive and virtualized narrative, abandon realistic scenery and closed stages. They use empty stages, stylized props, and simple stage settings, breaking the physical boundary of the "fourth wall" and forming an open viewing space. This boundaryless stage setting eliminates the clear physical separation between the audience and the performance, instead creating a special viewing distance where there is physical detachment but psychological proximity.

3.2. Interaction Mode: Behavioral Differences Between Passive Reception and Active Participation

The interaction mode serves as the intuitive external manifestation of the audience's experience. The narrative characteristics of Chinese and Western stage plays shape the interaction patterns between the audience, actors, and the stage, highlighting a distinct division between "passive silent acceptance" and "active immediate feedback." The realistic narrative and "fourth wall" setting of Western stage plays demand that interactions between the audience and performers adhere to strict ritualized rules, characterized by single-directionality, silence, and delay. Audiences occupy a passive receiving role and are prohibited from intervening during the performance. Influenced by Western rational aesthetic traditions and theater norms, audiences are expected to remain silent throughout the performance, focusing on watching, listening to lines, and appreciating the acting. Interaction is limited to intermission breaks, applause, and cheers at the conclusion of the play, with some serious dramas even prohibiting any sound or movement that might interfere [13]. In contrast, Chinese traditional opera's representational narrative and community-like audience-performance ecology foster a two-way, immediate, and participatory interaction model. Here, the audience transcends the role of mere information receivers to become co-participants in the aesthetic process. The stylized performances, lyrical singing segments, and open-stage settings of opera create opportunities for immediate feedback. Audience behaviors such as "applause," "cheers," "responses," and even spontaneous applause are integral components of the interaction, directly merging with the performance and establishing a two-way emotional exchange between actors and the audience.

3.3. Emotional Resonance Point: Core Differences Between Rational Reflection and Artistic Conception Empathy Emotional

Resonance is the ultimate point of the audience's experience. The narrative orientation and aesthetic tradition of Chinese and Western stage plays have created completely different emotional triggers for the audience, resulting in a fundamental difference between rational critical reflection and emotional empathy. Western stage plays, with realistic linear narrative and concentrated dramatic conflicts as the core, rely on the "subject-object dichotomy" thinking mode. Emotional resonance focuses on individual destiny, human contradictions, and social criticism, with rational reflection as the core feature [14]. Their narratives often focus on conflicts between individuals and fate, individuals and society, and individuals and themselves, triggered by a complete plot

loop, distinct character arcs, and tragic or critical endings, prompting the audience to deeply reflect on humanity, society, and existence. Chinese traditional opera, with representational stylized narrative and artistic conception creation as the core, relies on the cultural concepts of "harmony between heaven and man" and "harmony and unity." Emotional resonance focuses on ethical emotions, artistic conception appreciation, and patriotism, with emotional empathy and spiritual understanding as the core features. Their narratives weaken intense dramatic conflicts and logical loops, emphasizing the transmission of implicit emotions and profound artistic conception through stylized performance of singing, acting, fighting, and dancing, as well as the creation of real and virtual scenes, triggering cultural empathy and spiritual resonance in the audience.

4. Exploration of the Deep-rooted Causes of Experience Differences

4.1. Root of Aesthetic Tradition: The Value Division Between Expressive Sentiment and Realistic Representation

The aesthetic tradition forms the foundation of stage drama's artistic style. Distinct philosophical concepts and aesthetic pursuits between China and the West define divergent narrative paradigms, creating a fundamental contrast between expressive representation and realistic imitation. This serves as the ultimate source of differences between the two theatrical systems, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Aesthetic Traditions between Chinese and Western Stage Plays

Comparison dimension	The aesthetic tradition of Chinese stage plays	The aesthetic tradition of Western stage plays
Core idea	Oneness of Heaven and Humanity, moderation and subtlety, expressing meaning and expressing emotions	Subject-object division, rational analysis, realistic imitation
Narrative orientation	Expressive virtualization, point-and-line style, emphasizing the artistic conception while downplaying the plot.	Realistic linearization, closed-loop, multiple conflicts and multiple logics
Expression of emotion	Subtle and restrained, understanding and empathy, gentle and comforting	Direct and forceful, explosive expression, rational reflection
Aesthetic Core	The perception of spiritual essence and the resonance with cultural consensus	The examination of real contradictions and the reflection on the good and evil in human nature

Rooted in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, Chinese culture emphasizes the concept of "harmony between heaven and man" and implicit beauty. It rejects direct realistic replication in favor of symbolic and stylized expression. This approach shapes Chinese opera's abstract and virtualized narration, characterized by non-realistic scenery, flexible time-space structures, and stylized singing, acting, and fighting. Audiences achieve an intuitive aesthetic experience through symbolic decoding and artistic conception, prioritizing emotional resonance over logical analysis.

Western culture, influenced by ancient Greek rationality, adopts the "subject-object dichotomy" and Aristotle's concept of mimesis, emphasizing realistic imitation, linear storytelling, and heightened conflicts. The "fourth wall" technique creates an immersive

and enclosed narrative space, guiding audiences toward rational reflection on individual and societal contradictions [15].

4.2. The Origin of the Theatre Space: The Formulation of Open Community-type and Closed Individual-type Structures

The theater space serves as the physical carrier of the viewing and performing relationship. Its layout design and functional positioning directly determine the viewing distance and interaction mode. The Chinese and Western theater spaces have taken two completely different paths since their inception, further solidifying the differences in narrative and audience experience. The viewing and performing space of traditional Chinese opera is attached to folk fairs, ancestral halls, tea houses, and opera stages, belonging to open and fluid public community spaces, without strict physical boundaries or viewing and performing norms. Such spaces have the core function of "gathering people for entertainment," with the stage and audience seats integrated as one, and there is no barrier between the actors and the audience. The viewing and performing behavior integrates into folk social activities, festivals, and sacrifices, and combines entertainment and community nature. This spatial form determines that the narrative of Chinese stage plays does not need to be compact and closed, and the interaction does not need to be silent and constrained. Audiences can freely enter and exit, give immediate cheers, join in conversations and discussions, and the viewing and performing process is the sharing and release of collective emotions. Even though contemporary theaters tend to become standardized, the genetic traits of the traditional open spaces still continue. Audiences still retain the habit of active participation and immediate feedback in viewing and performing, and the narrative also better conforms to the collective aesthetic preferences. The theater space of Western stage plays originated from ancient Greek open theaters and developed into a box-shaped enclosed theater in modern times, belonging to independent and closed professional art spaces. The core function is "immersive viewing and performing," through the "fourth wall" to strictly separate the stage from the audience seats, constructing an exclusive narrative scene. Such spaces emphasize viewing and performing order, requiring audiences to remain silent and focus on watching, and prohibiting any behavior that disrupts the coherence of the narrative. The viewing and performing behavior is an individual independent aesthetic experience and rational thinking. The enclosed space and realistic scenery enhance the immersive nature of the narrative, forcing the audience to receive plot information passively as an observer. Linear narrative and concentrated conflict designs are also fully adapted to the viewing and performing needs of enclosed spaces. Individual and silent viewing and performing experiences have become the norm, and the independence of the theater space further amplifies the individual aesthetic characteristics of Western stage plays [14].

4.3. Cultural Psychological Roots: The Social Attitude Contest Between Collectivism and Individualism

The core viewpoint of this article is that the fundamental differences in narrative and audience experience between Chinese and Western stage plays stem from divergent social attitudes toward the relationship between art, the individual, and the collective. China upholds a collectivism-oriented social psychology, while Western societies emphasize individualism [12]. This attitudinal opposition forms the core element shaping all differences, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Cultural Psychology between Chinese and Western Stage Plays

Core of cultural psychology	China: Collective-oriented Social Attitude	Western: Individual-oriented social attitude
Core demand	Group harmony, ethical consensus, emotional empathy	Individual freedom, independent thinking, and humanistic speculation
Narrative orientation	Weaken individual conflicts and strengthen collective ethics and national sentiments.	Strengthen individual resistance, highlight individual value and social criticism
Audience and Performance Positioning	Collective socializing, group enjoyment, joint participation	Individual aesthetic sense, independent thinking, passive observation
Social value	Cultivate collective consciousness and convey mainstream ethics	Awaken individual consciousness and promote humanistic reflection

Cultural psychology, as a concrete manifestation of social consciousness, directly determines audience aesthetic expectations, viewing behaviors, and emotional resonance, and constitutes the underlying logic running through narrative and experience. Influenced by Confucian principles such as "moderation," "harmony," and the patriarchal system, Chinese culture centers on collectivism, emphasizing individual obedience to the collective and group emotional consensus [6]. In stage plays, this leads to weak individual conflicts, happy endings, ethical education, and collective emotional resonance. Viewing becomes a collective social activity with immediate interaction and shared aesthetic experience.

Western culture, shaped by the Renaissance and Enlightenment, centers on individualism, stressing individual value, independent thinking, and resistance. In stage plays, this results in intense conflicts, individual destiny, social criticism, and tragic or reflective endings. Viewing is an independent aesthetic act, with silent watching and rational reflection as dominant experiences.

4.4. Root Cause

Education serves as the core pathway for cultural transmission and the shaping of thinking. The fundamental differences between Chinese and Western educational models not only subtly shape the aesthetic and worldview of teenagers but also directly influence the underlying logic of the creative process of artists, becoming a significant driving force behind the differences in narrative and audience experience of stage plays. This is also the implicit key thread that runs through the formation of these differences. In short, educational models are the "initiating source" of aesthetic and creative perspectives: Chinese education nurtures a group-oriented and empathetic aesthetic and creative mindset, while Western education shapes an individual-oriented and speculative aesthetic and creative mindset. These two models further nourish the narrative techniques and viewing-performance relationships of stage plays, allowing the differences between Chinese and Western dramas to form a complete cultural transmission loop. To sum up, the aesthetic tradition determines the artistic expression style of stage plays, the theater space shapes the physical form of the viewing-performance relationship, cultural psychology lays the foundation for the underlying logic of social attitudes, and the differences in educational models are the key link that connects the three and conveys thinking. The four elements interact with each other and progress layer by layer, ultimately forming systematic differences in narrative and audience experience between

Chinese and Western stage plays [15]. This difference is not a matter of superiority or inferiority but rather an artistic outcome nurtured by different cultural soils, providing diverse references for cross-cultural drama exchanges and innovations.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the development and cultural exchange of Chinese and Western stage plays in the context of globalization, proposing that narrative differences and audience experiences reflect profound cultural disparities between the two traditions, while advocating for innovative integration and coexistence of diversity. The paper systematically analyzes core differences in narrative approaches and audience engagement between Chinese and Western stage plays, followed by an exploration of the cultural roots behind these disparities. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication and innovative development, it advocates a balanced strategy of preserving traditional roots while embracing contemporary innovations and adapting to cultural integration. This perspective provides a systematic explanation for the current lack of clear guidance on cultural adaptation and innovation pathways in industry practices addressing such issues.

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