

A Literature Review on the Structure of Portrait Exhibition

—Taking Teahouse as an Example

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Abstract: Lao She's *Teahouse* has always been a research hotspot in academic circles, but there are relatively few academic studies on the "portrait exhibition" drama structure in *Teahouse*. This paper mainly adopts the method of literature research, and studies the articles on the dramatic structure of the portrait exhibition in *Tea House* and other articles on the research of the portrait exhibition structure from three aspects: the connotation, advantages and application of the portrait exhibition. Judging from the current research status, in-depth research on the "portrait exhibition" structure is obviously insufficient. Most of the relevant articles have mentioned it when studying structural art, but have not conducted in-depth research on it. These articles either discuss it as a part of structural art or analyze the role of portrait exhibition style through the creation of scripts, but they have not conducted comprehensive and systematic research and discussion on it. This literature review hopes to sort out the research progress of the predecessors by sorting out the relevant literature, and at the same time clarify the ideas for the future paper writing.

Keywords: portrait exhibition, style drama, structural art of *Teahouse*

1. Introduction

In drama, due to the strict limitation of performance time and space, the script needs to show striking and intense conflicts in the limited time and scenes, depict the activities of characters and reflect social life. Therefore, the "three unities" came into being, that is, the plot of a script must be limited to the same event, the event takes place in the same place, and the time contained in the plot is also limited to one day (24 hours). This traditional drama method introduced from the West is based on the law of conflict, and in the 19th century, it ushered in the impact of innovation - the "portrait exhibition" structure. The "portrait exhibition" structure no longer revolves around a central event to develop dramatic conflicts, and then develops character relationships around multiple dramatic conflicts, but instead focuses on the presentation of characters. It chooses a central scene as the background, and then let all the characters appear in sequence, only describing the characters' voices and smiles in the scene. The plot unfolds in sequence according to the order in which the characters enter the scene, and is influenced by the characters without any abrupt arrangements. There are some excellent examples of this kind of structure at home and abroad, such as Lao She's *Tea House*, Cao Yu's *Sunrise*, and Gorky's *In the Bottom*. However, at present, the number of excellent portrait exhibition dramas in China still needs to be increased, and the research

on the drama structure of portrait exhibition is not very active, and the number of related articles is relatively small. In addition, through the study of scripts with a “portrait exhibition” structure, it can be found that Mr. Lao She’s *Tea House* not only has many characters and complicated clues, but also has a time span of 50 years. It deserves to be the most representative work among such structured scripts. Therefore, this article adopts the method of literature analysis to sort out and classify the research on the dramatic structure of portrait exhibition in *Tea House* and other articles on portrait exhibition in terms of its connotation, advantages and application in creation.

2. Research Status

2.1. Research on the Meaning of Portrait Exhibition in “Tea House”

Existing studies have continuously supplemented and enriched the connotation of portrait exhibition in turn. For example, in Liu Qing’s “On the Artistic Structure of the Drama *Teahouse*”, she believes that the portrait exhibition style structure abandons the plot setting of traditional dramas and focuses more on character shaping, using characters to promote plot development. Therefore, its artistic structure is not complex, but the characters have a variety of threads [1]. Gao Shuxia clarified in “The Drama *Teahouse* and Western Modern Theater Theory” that this structural art has the characteristics of “alienation” influenced by Western theater theory, that is, deliberately creating distance barriers between actors, audiences, events, and characters, so that the audience Both actors and actresses can jump out of simple dramatic situations [2]. Cao Wei agreed with Liu Qing in “Miracle on the Eastern Stage—On the Structural Art of *Tea House*” and expounded that the portrait exhibition style promotes the development of the storyline through character creation, breaking through the traditional characteristic of “plot first”, making drama more natural and social [3]. In “Appreciation and Analysis of the Artistic Features of Lao She’s *Tea House*”, Shi Xinjie asserts that the structure is mainly based on the changes of characters as clues, and uses characters instead of dramatic conflicts to promote the development of the storyline [4]. Liu Kekuan also held the same point of view in “The Conventional Paradigm and Artistic Innovation of Drama Creation in the Seventeen Years” [5]. Generally speaking, it can be clarified that the portrait exhibition style is in one or two fixed backgrounds, using character changes as clues and using characters to drive the plot. It can break the time limit of drama, de dramatize and more naturally express the theme ideas, and reflect the structure of social reality at that time.

2.2. Research on the Advantages of Portrait Exhibition

Fang Xiaoyi discussed in his work “From *Under the Roof of Shanghai* to *A Village on Treasure Island*—Creating under the Background of the Society” that the portrait exhibition structure can connect the character plot while showcasing the group portrait style drama of numerous characters, closely adhering to the theme, and avoiding the chronological performance of letting the characters go through the motions [6]. In addition, the portrait exhibition structure can be closer to social life because of its uniqueness, helping dramatist better reflect social reality and expose social darkness. From this, the author believes that the way of expression of this kind of drama that is close to life can better express the public’s aspirations, easily resonate with the audience, and thus be accepted and understood by the audience, and play a promoting role in expressing the dramatist’s thoughts and educating the public. The expression of naturalization and life is also mentioned in Cao Wei’s “Miracle on the Eastern Stage—On the Structural Art of *Tea House*” [3]. Similar to the famous portrait exhibition-style drama *Tea House*, there is also Cao Yu’s *Sunrise*. Wan Yahong mentioned in “On the Structural Art of Cao Yu’s *Sunrise* that Cao Yu used the portrait exhibition style to shape fifteen characters with different personalities and vivid images, and divided these characters into two categories:” surplus “and” deficiency “. As the plot develops, let these characters, who are

guests and hosts, complement each other, showcasing the inner and outer sides of a semi-colonial urban society. [7]. While highlighting the theme of “loss is not enough to provide surplus”, they cleverly showcase characters from both social levels. By adopting a portrait exhibition style writing structure, Cao Yu was able to better express his in-depth thinking on social reality issues. This structure also endows the drama *Sunrise* with more documentary quality, further enhancing the realistic artistic value of the work.

2.3. Research on the Application of Portrait Exhibition in Creation

Luan Rui introduced how he applied the portrait exhibition structure to the modern dance drama *All Beings* in the article “The Application of Portrait Exhibition-style Drama Structure in Dance Drama—Taking the Dance Drama *All Beings* as an Example” to supplement the narrative ability of dance drama *Insufficient* [8]. The use of this structure not only increases the way for the audience to understand the dance drama, but also clearly presents the framework of the dance drama, enabling the audience to better understand the theme of the dance drama. In addition, using this structure can express deep emotions through different dance expressions, highlight the expression of characters’ emotions, weaken the influence of the plot, and focus the audience’s attention on the dancers. The author believes that this will also help guide the audience to understand stage art and enhance the expressive effect of dance drama. In “The Construction of Character Relationships in Portrait Exhibition-style Dramas”, Ma Chao discussed the importance of the construction of character relationships in dramas with portrait exhibition-style structures based on his graduation script “What Likes to Be in the World”. It further proves that in the process of screenwriters creating portrait exhibition-style drama scripts, the relationship between characters will play an important role in the structural layout and event development of the entire script [9]. Liu Tiequn talked about how the Guizhou opera *Breakthrough Song* cleverly uses the structure of portrait exhibition, with multiple cultural celebrities as the core performance objects, to show the gathering of literati in Guilin Cultural City. The external characteristics of the show helped the play successfully interpret the theme of Guilin Cultural City [10].

3. Conclusion

This literature review is helpful to sort out the previous research progress on portrait exhibition through literature review, and provide some ideas for later scholars’ paper writing in this area. Through the classification and integration of relevant literature, the author found that Chinese scholars have not done enough in-depth analysis of portrait exhibition. Most of the relevant articles mentioned it when studying the structural art of a play, discussed it as a part of the structural art, or analyzed its role by taking the creation of the play as an example. Because of the limited length of the discussion or the single angle of discussion, the discussion on the portrait exhibition structure is often not comprehensive enough. As a result, the author believes that there is still a gap in the systematic research on the exhibition of portraits in the academic world. Therefore, the author thinks that the future study of drama structure can start from the systematic study of portrait exhibition structure, so as to better deepen people’s understanding of this structure and apply it to modernization.

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