
DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Japanese Puppet Theatre

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Abstract: Puppet theatre art (*Bunraku*) emerged in Japan during the Edo period and was popularized throughout the country from the 19th century. *Bunraku* was recognized by UNESCO as “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” and a “World Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2003 and later was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. This art combines puppet controlling art, storytelling art and music performing art. *Bunraku* is a lively art which is able to present different topics of life of the Japanese people. This paper presents an account of the characteristics of *Bunraku* and makes some comparisons between Japanese puppet theatre and Vietnamese water puppet theatre.

Keywords: Japanese studies, puppet theatre, *Bunraku*.

1. Introduction

Puppet theatre is a kind of entertainment which is loved by many people in the world. There are many types of puppet theatre which represent the diverse creative activities of human. *Bunraku* is the typical puppet theatre of Japanese. *Bunraku* emerged in Japan during the Edo period and was popularized throughout the country from the 19th century. *Bunraku* was recognized by UNESCO as “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” and a “World Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2003 and later was inscribed on UNESCO’s

Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 [1]. This art shows the skillful techniques of Japanese artists in making and manipulating the *ningyo* (the human like puppet), the excellent Japanese storytelling art with carefully selected stories which are able to express important issues of Japanese society, as well as the masterful music performance of both the chanter and the *shamisen* player. This paper presents the characteristics of Japanese puppet theatre (*Bunraku*). It also aims to distinguish Japanese puppet theatre from the water puppet theatre of Vietnam.

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2. The puppets

The making of the *ningyo* (human like puppet) in *Bunraku* is a sophisticated work that takes lots of efforts. The wooden puppets are made with different parts: the main body (*dogushi*), the head, the mouth, the brow, the eyes, the wrists and fingers. The manipulators make the puppets' movements and expressions by controlling the strings inside the clothes which cover the puppet. All of the strings are attached to a bar to be controlled by hands [2]. The artists often dress up the puppets with the lifelike costumes, usually with full sets of *kimono* (Japanese traditional costume). The weight of the puppets varies between male and female characters. Female puppets have no legs and their movements are always virtually made by the manipulators. The puppet (or *ningyo*) is supported with additional tools, such as scarf, lute, paper, sword, etc. to express complex feelings of the characters. The female puppets often have a small nail near the mouth so that they can hold the scarf in some circumstances.

All over the time, the puppets have been modified to have more capabilities of expressing the emotion, the status of the characters which they represent in the play. For example, their eyes are made flexible to be able to blink; the brows can rise up and down, and the eyelids can close at times. In Japanese *Bunraku*, controlling the puppets is a collective work. Many people have to work together to manipulate one puppet. Major characters are often controlled by three manipulators: *omozukai* is the one who handles the movement of the head and the right arm; *hidarizukai* controls the left hand, and *ashizukai* is the one to control the feet. In *Bunraku*, the *ningyo* needs the support of the hands of the manipulators in order to perform actions or move. The human hands are used for holding things, or making the virtual legs for the doll, or help to hold the musical instruments. The strong movement of the character can be impressed by the sound of the operator's leg stamping on the floor. In the play *Date Musume*

Koi no Hikanoko, the woman character climbs the fire tower to ring the bell [3]. The use of the human hands was very effective in making the smooth movement of the puppet characters. In many plays, they just use the shaping of the hands and the arms to convey that the characters are sitting.

Usually, *Bunraku* puppeteers are hidden in black clothes. But in some cases, the puppeteer has his face shown to the audiences. This practice originated from the time that some puppet masters had become famous and gained the public's interest and the audience wished to see who was manipulating the puppets. In some plays, there are scenes in which four puppets and 12 people all appear on the stages. To foreigners, this may distract the audience's attention, especially with some unhidden faces of manipulators. However, according to a research, the Japanese audience accepts it. A survey of Japanese traditional culture conducted in Tokyo in 1983 with 1000 people at the age of 15 to 29 showed that: "Asked about the puppeteers in *bunraku*, nearly 60 percent thought they did not hinder enjoyment of the puppets" [4].

In comparison with Vietnamese water puppet theatre, we can see some similarities and differences: Like Japanese puppet in *Bunraku*, the puppets in Vietnamese water puppet theatre are also made of wood. Their bodies are not covered by clothes but are painted according to the characters which they stand for. Vietnamese water puppets also need the strings and the bars to connect the puppets and the manipulators. There are also additional tools joined to the puppets, for example, the fish catching tool attached to the fisherman puppet. In *Bunraku*, there are only puppets of human characters, but in Vietnamese water puppet theatre, there are also puppets of the animals, such as the dragons, the buffaloes, the ducks, etc. In Vietnamese water puppet art, the audience can concentrate on the story and the masters of the puppets totally. Only the puppets appear on the water stage while the manipulators are totally hidden behind the curtain. In the past,

Vietnamese puppeteers were anonymous and not introduced to audience, but recently, when puppet theatrical shows are made to tourists and city audiences, the artists start to appear before the audience at the end of the show.

3. Storytelling art

In the past, the storytelling art in *Bunraku* was developed with the popularity of “The tale of the Heike”. After centuries of development, *Bunraku* has learned the best of Japanese storytelling art. “Heavily” compacted with social issues, *Bunraku* is not simply a kind of entertainment. There are two common types of story in *Bunraku*, one is *Jidaimono* that tells the things about the historic accounts (for example, *Shusse kagekiyo* – Stories of Warriors), and another is *Sewamono* that tells the things related to the person’s life (for example, *Sonezaki Shinju* – The love suicides at Sonezaki). With *sewamono*, *Bunraku* employs the characters that are common people in its play. It focuses more on human problem, especially the weak in society. For *Jidaimono*, it cares much about the *giri*, the *ninjo* (the people of duty) with the tragedy of the persons who cannot escape their duty and just do what they are forced to do. *Jidaimono* often has its setting based on the strongest period of Samurai culture in the 1600s. It uses the past events as the metaphors for the present, and praises the loyalty of the people to the feudal dynasties. The main motifs used in *Bunraku* plays are the love suicides and the conflict between the social obligations and the human feelings. For example, regarding the contradiction between the self and the duty, the self and the other, the social obligation and personal emotion, *Keisei Awa no Naruto* tells the story of the married couple leaving home to find the stolen sword of their master. The husband, for this pursuing the thief, had to make himself a part of the gang, and by mistake he killed his own daughter who was on the way to seek for her parents. The play tells the story of the people who were driven by the duty, the social responsibility, and on the way to fulfill

the social duty, they had their roles conflicted with the personal responsibility, namely family relation. Choosing the prostitute, the aristocrats, etc. as its characters, *Bunraku* plays do not promote the escape from social order, but show a quite pessimistic view about society. The love between the aristocracy class and the prostitute can never be accepted and the two persons involved just can find a way by committing suicide.

A story in *Bunraku* often has around 12 parts. Depending on specific performances, the number of parts can be more or less. Stories of *Bunraku* plays often show different emotional aspects of Japanese people (eg. happy, desperated, nervous or worried, etc). They are reflections of the ordinary life of Japanese people, and through the stories, the plays help promote the humanism in Japanese society. *Ningyo* characters are representatives for classes in society, with the feelings and emotions of Japanese people.

The storytelling art in Vietnamese water puppet theatre is quite different from that of Japanese puppet theatre. As an entertainment art of farmers in the spare time, water puppet theatre is often derived from the daily activities of the farmers, such as working in the field, catching the ducks, going to the pagoda, etc. Water puppet theatre does not tell a full story but often entertains the audience by scenes of wooden puppets acting like humans or animals with the impressive movements, for instance, the scenes of beautiful fairies dancing, or the dragons moving around, playing with balls. The stories of Vietnamese water puppet theatre only reflect the joyful life and emotions of Vietnamese people.

4. Music performing art

Originally, the performance of *Bunraku* was considered as a ritual performance. In early times, *Bunraku*’s performance was connected with the role of the wandering Buddhist monks who travelled around to tell the legends of the

temples. With the use of *Biwa-hoshi*, the musical instrument derived from Central Asia, these blind monks chanted the stories, such as “The tale of the Heike” (*Heike monogatari*), and later, many stories of various kinds. Up to now, *shamisen*, the varied version of the *biwa hoshi*, has been an essential part of the *bunraku* play. The voice of the chanter coworks with the music of the shamisen to keep the mood for the puppet operation and to make aesthetic feelings to the audiences. The chanter and the shamisen player are found to the right of the long stage. The audience can both enjoy the puppets and the expressive emotions of the chanters. The place where the chanters and *shamisen* player sit can be rotated, it is very convenient for the shifting the teams in a long play.

The chanters have an important role in making the success of the play. In *Bunraku*, there’s no female who acts as chanters, but the male chanter will cover the female voice as well. His face is emotionally explicit, the voice is highly mastered and can be changed to various tones or pitches. To maintain the strong voice throughout the performance, the chanter must master the skill of using the voice so that he will not be tired during the play and he can control well the tones for each dialogue, each narration part. The *shamisen* player keeps a humble and also an important role in the play. During the performance, he just stays without drawing the audience’s attraction at all. However, the music from his *shamisen* really helps guide the characters’ actions and the chanter’s narration. It is extremely hard for the chanters and shamisen players to have their positions in the puppet crew and it takes dozens of years to be a master in chanting or *shamisen* playing [5]. *Bunraku* play is often performed in the theatres, or sometimes the crew is invited to make performance at one’s private place. Traditionally, among the puppet crew, often the chanters have high respect from the public, but the puppet actors only have a low social status. This is originated from the long tradition of Japanese theatre, in which the society did not appreciate the actors, or even humiliated them.

Similarly, in Vietnam, the artists did not receive much respect in the past.

Music performance is also an important feature of Vietnamese water puppet theatre. While *shamisen* is the only musical instrument in Japanese *Bunraku*, Vietnamese water puppet theatre uses many instruments, such as drum, flute, 16 string zither (*đàn tranh*), etc. Vietnamese water puppet does not have one single chanter on the stage but often has an ensemble of chanters to sing the songs which explain the content of the scenes and help the plays happen continuously.

5. Conclusion

In general, Japanese puppet theatre, *Bunraku* is a kind of performance that needs concerted efforts of all the people who get involved. Team working is important for every kind of collective arts, but for *Bunraku*, the collective characteristic is more crucial. The puppet manipulators, the shamisen player and the chanter must support the other’s work to make a smooth play. With the mixture of local stories and imported musical instruments, this kind of art seems to stick with locality and reflect the life, the soul of Japanese people. *Bunraku* is worth the pride of Japanese people with the skillful combination of different arts like singing, story telling and music playing.

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Đặc điểm của nghệ thuật múa rối Nhật Bản

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Tóm tắt: Nghệ thuật múa rối (*Bunraku*) xuất hiện ở Nhật Bản trong thời Edo và đã trở nên phổ biến khắp cả nước từ thế kỷ thứ 19. *Bunraku* đã được UNESCO công nhận là “Kiệt tác di sản phi vật thể và truyền miệng của nhân loại” và “Di sản văn hóa phi vật thể của thế giới” vào năm 2003, sau đó được đưa vào danh sách Di sản văn hóa phi vật thể đại diện cho nhân loại vào năm 2008. *Bunraku* là sự kết hợp của kỹ nghệ điều khiển các con rối, nghệ thuật kể chuyện và nghệ thuật biểu diễn âm nhạc. Múa rối Nhật Bản là một nghệ thuật sinh động, có khả năng biểu đạt những chủ đề khác nhau về đời sống của người dân Nhật Bản. Trong bài viết này, người viết tìm hiểu một số đặc điểm của nghệ thuật múa rối Nhật Bản để cung cấp thông tin cơ bản về một di sản văn hóa của thế giới. Ngoài ra, người viết cũng so sánh một số đặc điểm của nghệ thuật múa rối Nhật Bản với nghệ thuật múa rối nước của Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Nghiên cứu Nhật Bản, nghệ thuật múa rối, *Bunraku*.