

# PHILOSOPHICAL SPIRIT IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA

Rong Liu

Department of Drama and Film Studies, Shanxi Normal University, Shanxi 030000 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7550-5480> |  [rliu2023@163.com](mailto:rliu2023@163.com)

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**Abstract:** Chinese drama has its origins in primitive forms of singing and dancing, and has since evolved into a comprehensive art form with a rich history. It is considered one of the three ancient drama cultures, alongside ancient Greek drama and Indian Sanskrit drama. Different nations have different cultures with unique national characteristics, while personalized philosophical concepts play a leading role in the formation of culture. Science, literature, art, education, etc., that belong to the cultural category, are all guided and influenced by philosophical thoughts, and drama art is the same. This article discusses and analyzes the philosophical thoughts behind traditional Chinese drama culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese Drama. Philosophy. Art. Culture.

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**Resumen:** El teatro chino tiene sus orígenes en formas primitivas de canto y danza, y desde entonces ha evolucionado hasta convertirse en una forma artística integral con una rica historia. Se considera una de las tres culturas dramáticas más antiguas, junto con la griega y la sánscrita de la India. Las distintas naciones tienen culturas diferentes con características nacionales únicas, mientras que los conceptos filosóficos personalizados desempeñan un papel destacado en la formación de la cultura. La ciencia, la literatura, el arte, la educación, etc. que pertenecen a la categoría cultural están todos guiados e influenciados por pensamientos filosóficos, y el arte dramático es igual. Este artículo discute y analiza los pensamientos filosóficos que subyacen a la cultura dramática tradicional china.

**Palabras clave:** Teatro chino. Filosofía. Arte. Cultura.

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## PHILOSOPHICAL SPIRIT IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA

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**Abstract:** Chinese drama has its origins in primitive forms of singing and dancing, and has since evolved into a comprehensive art form with a rich history. It is considered one of the three ancient drama cultures, alongside ancient Greek drama and Indian Sanskrit drama. Different nations have different cultures with unique national characteristics, while personalized philosophical concepts play a leading role in the formation of culture. Science, literature, art, education, etc., that belong to the cultural category, are all guided and influenced by philosophical thoughts, and drama art is the same. This article discusses and analyzes the philosophical thoughts behind traditional Chinese drama culture.

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### INTRODUCTION

Chinese drama is a highly traditional form of drama in China and is considered one of the most quintessential art forms with national characteristics and styles. Its roots can be traced back to ancient times wherein original song and dance were performed to entertain the gods and ghosts. The “Ode”, in *The Book of Songs*, and the “Nine Songs”, in *The Songs of Chu*, served as the basis for the libretto in the sacrificial ceremony. According to the customs at that time, people dressed up as “corpses” when offering sacrifices to ghosts and gods as they believed they could become the entities upon which the gods and ghosts relied. At the same time, the wizard wore the witch costume, held props, sang and danced to the accompaniment of music, in order to entertain the gods and ghosts. Over time, this practice became the foundation of drama in later generations (Wang, 2018). From the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period to the Han Dynasty, songs and dances slowly evolved from their origins, as entertainment for the gods and ghosts, to become forms of entertainment for the people. From the Han and Wei Dynasties up to the mid-Tang Dynasty, various novel songs and dances appeared. For example, *Juedi*<sup>2</sup> was originally a wrestling activity and later evolved

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Drama and Film Studies, Shanxi Normal University, Shanxi 030000 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7550-5480> Email: [rliu2023@163.com](mailto:rliu2023@163.com).

<sup>2</sup> At first *Juedi* was a combat skill, and later it became a method of training soldiers, and then evolved into a folk competition, an entertainment activity. Similar to current wrestling, sumo wrestling and other activities all compete in pairs.

into a game activity covering all performing arts, also named *Baixi*. *Canjunxi*<sup>3</sup> was performed in the form of questions and answers between two facetious actors. Later, the folk performing arts continued to develop, based on the *Baixi*, during the Han and Wei Dynasties, and the songs and dances, during the Sui Dynasty. *Zaju*<sup>4</sup> emerged during the Northern Song Dynasty and became an independent category of art. During that time, *Goulan*, also in theaters in modern society, emerged as the popular folk stage dedicated to performing *Zaju*. The folk dramas *Zaju*, performed in *Goulan*, not only focused on the storyline, but also inherited the traditional performance style of combining *Canjunxi* and song-and-dance dramas seen in the Tang Dynasty. Starting from the storyline, the originally separate elements of songs, dances and acrobatics were combined into a highly comprehensive performance style, incorporating various skills (Li, 2022, p. 149).

During the Yuan Dynasty, *Zaju* experienced significant development, evolving into a new form of drama. Although *Yuan Zaju* is still referred to as *Zaju*, it differs greatly from the humorous and joke-filled short dramas of the early Song Dynasty. The storylines in *Yuan Zaju* became increasingly intricate, and the performances were notably longer, allowing for the inclusion of more diverse content and more profound reflections of the social life in that time. *Yuan Zaju* generally adhered to a structured format, typically made up of four acts, each with a natural segment of the storyline and organized by musical elements. Within each act, multiple performances were commonly featured, providing both logistical conveniences for the production and imaginative space for the audience. This particular characteristic is an important hallmark of Chinese drama arts (Ren, 20203, p. 76). Furthermore, *Yuan Zaju* emphasized intricate role divisions. In addition to the principal performers, *Zhengmo*<sup>5</sup> or *Zhengdan*<sup>6</sup>, the drama also included additional supporting roles, such as *Chongmo*<sup>7</sup>, *Tiedan*<sup>8</sup>, *Jing*<sup>9</sup>, *Fujing*<sup>10</sup> and *Chou*<sup>11</sup>. *Yuan Zaju* had already developed a complete literary script,

<sup>3</sup> *Canjunxi* is a popular performance form in Tang and Song dynasties. This form is performed by two characters, one is called *Canjun* and the other is called *Canghu*. In the performance, two actors make audiences laugh with funny dialogue or actions, thereby satirizing government affairs or social phenomena.

<sup>4</sup> *Zaju* is a traditional Chinese art form that combines song, voiceover and other dances.

<sup>5</sup> The principal male performers in Yuan Zaju, equivalent to Sheng in drama after the Ming Dynasty.

<sup>6</sup> The serious young, middle-aged female performers in Yuan Zaju.

<sup>7</sup> The secondary positive male performer makes his debut in Yuan Zaju.

<sup>8</sup> The secondary female performer in Yuan Zaju.

<sup>9</sup> The male performer of high status with a character, quality, or appearance that differs from the ordinary people and has outstanding traits in Yuan Zaju, also called "Painted face".

<sup>10</sup> The performer with bold and reckless characters in Yuan Zaju.

<sup>11</sup> The performer with witty or sly characters in Yuan Zaju

predominantly composed of lyrics and *binbai*<sup>12</sup>. These lyrics were often structured according to the formats of poems of the Song and Jin Dynasties and Song-speech Drama, with specific requirements for word count and rhythmic length.

From the perspective of Chinese drama, the literary works of the Tang and Song Dynasties, especially the poems, are considered the foundation of drama scripts. However, it is important to note that drama is a comprehensive stage art that cannot be solely created through the influence of literature alone. In addition to literary elements, Chinese drama incorporates formalities, virtuality, and narrative elements, and caters to the audience's aesthetic pursuit of beauty, joy and taste. These different performance forms find their basis in various philosophical propositions, such as Dao and Objects<sup>13</sup>, *yin* and *yang*, human and nature, emptiness and entities, form and spirit, as well as rituals and music. In summary, Chinese drama is rooted in the soil of traditional Chinese culture, therefore, it is bound to be fully influenced and restricted by philosophical thoughts (Hegel, 2021).

## 1 LOYALTY, FILIAL PIETY, MORAL INTEGRITY AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA

As Hegel famously stated, “Confucius’ philosophy is China’s national philosophy, forming the foundation of Chinese education, culture and practical activities” (Li; Lin, 2019, p. 191). Over the course of more than 2,000 years, Confucianism has consistently been the predominant ideology in Chinese society, exerting a profound influence on every aspect of life. The principles of loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness, advocated by Confucianism, have long served as the fundamental moral norms in ancient Chinese society, also the basic behavior criterion shaping social interactions and interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the themes of loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness became central to ancient dramas, representing the prevailing moral and ideological perspectives of the time. This point became the defining feature across various forms of traditional Chinese drama, ranging from the *Southern Drama*<sup>14</sup> and *Zaju* of the Song and Yuan Dynasties to the Legends as well as numerous regional dramas during the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

In a broader sense, the concept of “The Drama of Loyalty to the Emperor” encompasses dramas that involve the idea of loyalty to the emperor. Ideally, this would involve dramas explicitly centered around the emperor as the main character. However, in ancient dramas, there are few instances where the emperor is portrayed directly. Instead, the

<sup>12</sup> The performers’ inner monologue and dialogue in Chinese drama.

<sup>13</sup> The “Dao” refers to generally invisible laws or principles; The “Objects” refers to tangible, visible and physical objects or systems.

<sup>14</sup> *Nanxi*, also the *Southern Drama*, is the earliest Han drama genre that emerged in southern China from the 12th to the 14th century. It is one of the earliest mature forms of Chinese drama.

idea of loyalty to the emperor is often implicit in the narratives. This may be attributed to the strict prohibitions imposed by feudal rulers in past dynasties, which forbade the portrayal of emperors and concubines on stage. The criminal laws of the Ming and Qing Dynasties clearly stipulated that “Dressing up as emperors, concubines, loyal ministers, martyrs, sages, and saints was strictly prohibited, and those who violated this law would be beaten with a hundred sticks. Any home, no matter the federal officials or the ordinary people that take those violators in, will be guilty of the same crime.” From the Confucian perspective, “loyalty” falls within the realm of morality and proper conduct, and it is a virtue that should be extended to both objects and individuals. Confucianism generally advocates supporting and being loyal to virtuous emperors while despising weak and tyrannical ones. Ancient dramas, influenced by this idea, aimed, on one hand, to affirm and praise emperors who maintained stability, unity and economic prosperity in the country, and, on the other hand, dedicated to exposing some emperors’ ruthless and decadent spiritual essence. The emperor directly impacts the atmosphere within the imperial court. If the emperor is stupid and foolish, treacherous ministers rise to power while loyal ministers suffer. If the emperor is of keen intelligence and excellent judgment, the whole imperial court and even the whole country will be stable and prosperous. This kind of theme is often depicted in ancient Chinese dramas, such as *Caolu Ji*, *Dongchuang Ji*, *BaiPao Ji*, *Zhaoshi Guer Ji* and *Gucheng Ji*. *Caolu Ji* narrates Liu Bei’s three visits to Zhuge Liang’s humble abode, seeking his assistance as a military advisor. With Zhuge Liang’s loyal support, Liu Bei enters Xichuan and establishes himself as emperor in Chengdu. *Dongchuang Ji*, also known as *The Story of General Yue Fei Defeating the Enemy*, portrays Yue Fei’s heroism, a national hero in the Southern Song Dynasty, who was betrayed and ultimately killed by the treacherous minister Qin Hui (Bao, 2021, p. 22). These dramas represent the concept of “loyalty to the emperor”, inherent in Confucianism, from various angles, reflecting different perspectives on wise emperors, foolish emperors and tyrants.

Filial piety is a cherished virtue deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and a fundamental aspect of Confucian ethical teachings. Confucius, the representative figure of Confucianism, not only put forward the concept of filial piety, but also provided comprehensive explanations and interpretations of its significance. Confucius attached great importance to filial piety, considering it an essential component of “benevolence” and a crucial criterion for being a truly humane individual. Filial piety toward parents and brotherly friendship serves as the foundation for “benevolence” and the starting point for extending care and love to others. “An honorable and wise person focuses on cultivating the fundamentals.” Therefore, Confucius emphasized that a true gentleman builds his moral character by excelling in the practice of filial piety (Zhou, 2022, p. 97). The *Classic of Filial Piety* explicitly states: “Filial piety starts with serving one’s parents, progresses with serving one’s lord, and ends with establishing oneself” (Zhao, 2010, p. 35). Loyalty and filial piety are inseparable. However, as time passed, conflicts often arose between loyalty and filial piety. Feudal scholars devoted ten years

of diligent study in pursuit of fame and to bring honor to their ancestors. Yet, they faced a predicament: achieving fame would inevitably lead to their departure from home, making it difficult to fulfill their filial duties. This created an inherent contradiction between loyalty to the country and filial piety towards one's parents.

For example, in the sixteenth chapter of *The Story of Lute*<sup>15</sup>, Cai Bojie desires to resign from his official position to care for his parents after he became the number one scholar in the Han Dynasty. However, his request is rejected by the then prime minister Niu, and the then emperor thought that “Although filial piety is important, one man's final responsibility is to progress with serving one's emperor; How can you rush to repay your parents when the country is facing tough times?” As a result, his parents died in a famine (Gao, 2010). In *The Story of the Four Sages*<sup>16</sup>, Wugusun Liangzhen requests leave from his duties to search for his relatives. The then emperor said that “I grant you a one-year leave, allowing you to gallop on a post horse in search of family. When you are reunited with your family, you will go back to your duties immediately. By doing so, you contribute to both your parents and the country.” The outcomes in these two dramas differ due to the different responses received. In *The Story of Lute*, Cai Bojie was unable to go home to take care of his parents, which eventually led to their parents dying in a famine, and his wife Zhao Wuniang had to sell her hair for money to bury her father. In *The Story of the Four Sages*, the family finally reunited under Wugusun Liangzhen's efforts in seeking family and relatives. Scholars, in these dramas, often prioritize loyalty to the emperor over filial piety toward their families. This portrayal reflects the prevailing Confucian influence of the time, with creators driven by the strong endorsement of the ruling class to promote enlightenment and the widespread dissemination of their works. The concept of filial piety, being an integral part of Confucian education, finds its place in numerous literary compositions (Xu; Zhang, 2016, p. 76).

Within the development of Confucianism, “moral integrity” is an integral and systematic component of the values encompassed by “loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity, and righteousness.” Over time, the understanding and application of moral integrity have evolved and changed. Confucius explicitly stated, in *The Analects of Confucius*, that “If one, knowing how such ease should be prized, manifests it, without regulating it by the rules of propriety, this likewise is not to be done” (Zhang, 2021). Thus, rituals and ceremonies have become a means of expressing and upholding moral integrity. The dramas, with the theme of moral integrity, played an important role in ancient dramas like those centered around loyalty and filial piety. There are generally two types of dramas that highlight moral integrity. The first type includes Chinese dramas that praise the concept of justice and integrity in defending national honor and displaying patriotic sentiments. Confucian culture places

<sup>15</sup> *The Southern Drama* is written by Gao Ming at the end of the Yuan Dynasty, among the most widely performed works in the history of traditional Chinese drama.

<sup>16</sup> The legend script of the Ming Dynasty.

great importance on individual integrity and integrity at the level of national struggle. A person's ability to uphold their integrity often becomes a significant measure of their life and social value. In *The Story of Scholar Qu Yuan Throwing Himself into the River*, facing the foreign invasion and the country in danger, Qu Yuan devotes himself to saving the country and the people, and finally, although exiled, died without regrets. The steadfast patriotic spirit is reflected in this *Zaju*. Legendary Chinese dramas, like *Jingzhong Qi* and *Zhan Yuefei*, which exalt the national hero Yue Fei, fully embody the essence of Confucianism with their emphasis on “[...] loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness” (Sang, 2013, p. 4). These historical figures exemplify the strong national integrity and patriotic sentiments advocated by Confucianism. The second type of Chinese drama promotes patriarchal rule and espouses the concept of female chastity. These dramas oppose independent marriage and love, advocate against widow remarriage and uphold the women's ideals maintaining perpetual chastity, obeying parental authority in marriage and subjugating themselves to their husbands. Such portrayals represent the outdated and oppressive aspects of Confucianism, with the legendary drama *Butterfly Dream* as its typical play of this theme.

The term “righteousness” originally conveys the notion of “appropriateness,” which encompasses meanings, such as “moral correctness”, “goodness” and “equality”. On the whole, righteousness involves making value judgments, with “benevolence” or “Tao” serving as the standard of judgment. Within Confucianism, both “benevolence” and “Tao” hold similar meanings and represent ideal moral ideals (Guo, 2021, p. 21). Virtually all ethical matters and behaviors can be evaluated through the lens of righteousness. Confucius said: “In dealing with the world, a leader has no prejudice or bias: they go with what is right” (Zhang, 2019, p. 23). Confucius believed that a noble person should not engage in unnecessary conflict or oppose things without reason. Instead, they should use “morality” as their guiding principle. Confucius advocated that “A good scholar can become an official. He who excels in the study can follow an official career” (Zhang, 2019, p. 56). However, he requested his disciples to enter politics with the purpose of “practicing righteousness” and not to compromise morality for personal gain. In ancient dramas, numerous plays bear titles related to righteousness (*yi* in Chinese), such as the legendary dramas *Yixia Ji*, *Zhongyi Lie* and *Taoyuan Jieyi*. Guan Yu, in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, was often revered as the epitome of loyalty. He is a man of great righteousness highly praised by Confucianism, the ruling class and the common people. Historically, the drama with Guan Yu, as the principal performer, has long dominated the stage of folk drama. In *Zaju* of the Yuan Dynasty, the drama related to Guan Yu held significant prominence, featuring repertoires, such as *Start a Solo Run*, *Three Wars against Lv Bu* and *Riding Alone for a Thousand Miles*. In Confucian ethics and moral concepts, righteousness is often inseparable from loyalty and ritual observance (Xu, 2018, p. 98).

## 2 HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA

The concept of “harmony between man and nature” holds significant importance in ancient Chinese philosophy, representing a fundamental expression of thought. This traditional theory primarily originates from Confucianism and Taoism, while also containing elements of Mohism and Yin-Yangism. Regardless of the specific interpretation, the idea of “harmony between man and nature” is widely accepted within the framework of traditional Chinese thought and its development. Given that Confucianism and Taoism have long been at the core of traditional culture, their perspectives, on the “harmony between man and nature”, have become dominant in understanding the relationship between humans and the natural world within traditional society.

The theory of “harmony between man and nature” has been a subject of concern and discussion among scholars throughout history, including Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Dong Zhongshu, Liu Zongyuan, Zhang Zai, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and others. Confucius and Mencius held the view that “heaven and man are interconnected” and emphasized “the alignment of human virtue with the principles of heaven”. They recognized the relationship between human nature and the natural world, and stated that “Those who put their heart into it will know their nature, and if they know their nature, they will know heaven.” Mencius even pointed out that human nature comes from nature and identified “benevolence”, “justice”, “ceremony” and “wisdom” as the four sources for “four ends” of human nature, also the innate aspects of human nature. The “uniformity of nature and human beings” is Lao Tzu’s view. He emphasizes the importance of following the natural order and seeking unity between heaven and humanity. “Do not by the Human (doing) extinguish the Heavenly (constitution)” is Zhuangzi’s view. His philosophy centered around the concept of “non-action” and regarded the heaven’s natural way as the highest standard for human conduct, advocating the harmonization of human actions with nature (Wang, 2019, p. 112). Dong Zhongshu proposed the idea of “Nature and Humans Respond to Each Other.” Dong Zhongshu believes that the sky has four seasons, and humans have limbs; the heaven has *yin* and *yang*, and humans have sorrow and joy, highlighting the interaction and similarity between the two and laying the foundation for the traditional Chinese theory of “harmony between man and nature.” During the Tang Dynasty, scholars, like Liu Zongyuan, viewed the relationship between heaven and man as one of intersection and mutual influence, emphasizing their dialectical unity. Zhang Zai of the Song Dynasty believed that the birth and transformation of all things corresponded to the gathering and dispersing of “Qi.” While Zhu Xi, an agent scholar in the Song Dynasty, considered “heaven’s principle” as the overarching principle governing the universe, which is the foundation for the theoretical basis for the heaven, earth, ruler and subjects’ hierarchical order. The integration of man and heaven is completed under the guidance of “Cherishing heavenly principles and overcoming human desires.” Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming, representatives of the School of Mind, emphasized

the unity of “heaven and man in one mind” and challenged the belief of Cheng-Zhu’s Neo-Confucianism in “the primacy of principles”. They asserted that the human mind is the universe’s core, and understanding the principles within the mind is essential for achieving harmony with heaven’s law. This humanistic view of “heaven and man” places significance on the human beings’ inner nature (Fang; Wang, 2022, p. 173).

Although different eras and thinkers have assigned various ideological meanings to the concepts of “heaven” and “human”, within the context of the “harmony between man and nature,” their understanding of the relationship between “man” and “heaven” shares similarities. Regardless of whether they advocate for “the oneness of heaven and man” or “Nature and Humans Respond to Each Other,” they both share similarities and emphasize the importance of man’s harmonious coexistence with heaven and nature. This Chinese philosophical concept has had a profound influence on the intentional creation of Chinese drama art, which embodies the unity of man and nature as well as the fusion of substance and essence. During the Yuan Dynasty, Gu Ying expressed the view that music should be intangible rather than tangible, and its essence should lie in its meaning. It should not simply imitate the predecessors’ words or pursue superficial beauty. The music should blend with the scene and convey meaning beyond mere words. Another example can be found in the traditional drama *Wen Zhaoguan*<sup>17</sup>, where Wu Zixu sings, “I am like a wild goose mourning in the sky, I am like a dragon swimming on a shallow beach, I am like a fish swallowing a hooked line, and I am like a boat losing its rudder in the waves” (Su; Niu, 1962). This type of libretto exemplifies the concentrated depiction of the union between subject and object, evoking a specific artistic conception. Additionally, drama performances incorporate techniques, such as cloud hands, cloud steps, shooting swallows and orchid fingers. Similarly, in music and melodies, there are elements, such as phoenix nodding, underwater fish, wind into pine, river water, water fairy and pomegranate flower. These techniques and elements draw inspiration from nature and are refined into iconic artistic programs (Wu, 2022, p. 30).

On the other hand, the “harmony between man and nature” also requires that human beings should never abandon or separate from nature, but that man and nature are integrated. This perspective also contributed to the formation and development of the entire Chinese philosophical and thought system. Chinese drama places significant emphasis on using the method of scattered perspective, contrasting with the focused perspective used in Western drama. It transforms the vast time and space into a continuous “stage time and space” in the sequence form, rather than a single fixed stage as seen in Western drama. The concept of “harmony between man and nature” permeates the entire Chinese philosophical system of thought and the inner characteristics of all Chinese drama. The art of Chinese drama has always attached great importance to the beauty of form and the stylization of art forms. It

<sup>17</sup> *Wen Zhaoguan* is a traditional Peking Opera repertoire that tells the story of Wu Zixu (a military strategist in Wu State in the late Spring and Autumn Period).

considers the expression of emotions as the highest aesthetic pursuit, strives for a seamless harmony between form and emotion, and allows for a high degree of artistic freedom. Such aspects can find a philosophical and aesthetic foundation in the concept of “harmony between man and nature” to a certain extent. Harmony serves as the central value orientation within the concept of “harmony between man and nature.” Confucianism advocates that

[w]hen joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness are not yet expressed as a response to other things, they are in a state of balance. When they are expressed in words and deeds in accordance with the rites, harmony is achieved. Balance is the foundation under heaven, while harmony is the universal rule under heaven. If a ruler can achieve balanced harmony, both heaven and earth will be in their proper places, and all things will prosper and thrive (Kong, 2015, 28).

Confucius believed that “balance” and “moderation” were the ideal states, and closeness to these states signifies the utmost harmony. He stressed the harmonious integration of opposing factors and elements in beauty and art, avoiding one-sided emphasis while denying the other. This is the aesthetic principle of art reflected through “enjoyment without indulgence and grief without excessive distress.” The pursuit of emotional harmony and the “balance” aesthetic standard by Confucianists consistently resonate throughout Chinese cultural thoughts, influencing ethics, morality, philosophy, aesthetics and artistic conceptions. Classical Chinese drama, as a concentrated expression of Chinese culture, naturally reflects this influence. Content shapes form, and form, in turn, influences content. Ancient playwrights employed the form of a “happy ending” to create the beauty of “balance,” aiming to achieve a gentle and harmonious portrayal. This form serves as a manifestation of the desired outcome, in line with the principles of “harmony between man and nature.”

The inclusion of a happy ending is a significant structural feature of ancient Chinese dramas and has been a subject of considerable debate in the study of Chinese classical tragedy since Wang Guowei. The reason for its prominence lies in the aesthetic characteristics of blended sorrow and joy, which prevent Chinese drama from conforming to the “pure” tragedy and comedy seen in Western dramas. Chinese dramas often exhibit a mixture of bitterness and joy. Even in tragedies, comedic elements and gags are incorporated. Even when the outcome is unfortunate, a glimmer of positivity is maintained. Whether it is a tragedy, comedy, or serious drama, Chinese drama invariably concludes with a harmonious and happy ending. The ending of the play tends to reunite the protagonists in a dream or a fairyland, such as the drama *Liangzhu Huadie* (Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai turning into a pair of butterfly lovers after their death), and the story between Tang Xuanzong and Yang Yuhuan (the highest-ranking imperial concubine Yang and emperor Tang Xuanzong reuniting in a fairyland). Alternatively, it may feature a virtuous official or emperor seeking justice for the people, as depicted in “Selling Rice in Chenzhou”<sup>18</sup>. In some cases, deceased characters transform into

<sup>18</sup> *Selling Rice in Chenzhou* is the Chinese drama of the Yuan Dynasty.

vengeful spirits to exact revenge on their enemies, as seen in the *Injustice of Tou O*<sup>19</sup>. Or the descendants of those who suffered grew up to avenge the deaths of their relatives, as in *The Orphan of Zhao*<sup>20</sup>. Good triumphs over evil, beauty conquers ugliness and, after experiencing separation, the characters are ultimately reunited. The plot construction follows a pattern of trials and tribulations, where suffering is eventually compensated, and justice prevails. From a perspective of tragic consciousness, Chinese drama serves as a means of salvation from suffering and the most significant path to alleviating pain. It embodies the universal human desire to escape hardship, chaos, suffering and pain. Thus, the emotions, conveyed in Chinese drama, are not about indulging desires and pain, but rather expressing a sense of tranquility, righteousness, mourning without causing harm, and finding balance within the bounds of propriety, benevolence and justice (Wu, 2008, 66). As a result, drama achieves internal harmony, mutual support and harmonious unity of emotions and principles. The conflicts between emotions and principles are consistently resolved in a harmonious manner, adhering to the principles of “controlling with Propriety” and bringing happiness to all.

### 3 TAOIST AND BUDDHIST THOUGHTS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA

Taoism, an indigenous Chinese religion, centers around the pursuit of immortality. It originated from the pre-Qin belief in immortals and took shape in the late Eastern Han Dynasty through the amalgamation of beliefs and health practices from various regions. Over time, Taoism absorbed certain elements from Buddhism and Confucianism. Through significant developments and evolution during the Southern and Northern Dynasties, as well as the Song and Yuan Dynasties, it grew into a vast religious system with rich content. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a foreign religion that originated in India and was introduced to China via the Western Regions during the Han Dynasty. During the process of Sinicization, Buddhism actively assimilated and incorporated traditional Chinese culture through the collision and interaction between Chinese and Indian cultures. It occasionally adapted and modified some of its characteristics or appearances to suit the Chinese social environment (Han, 2023, p. 62). The resulting Chinese Buddhist culture emerged from this interplay with traditional ideology and culture. It managed to coexist with traditional Chinese Confucianism and Taoism, eventually becoming an integral part of Chinese traditional ideology and culture. These theories nourished and inspired artistic creations, leading to the production of numerous dramas in ancient China, which boasted novel content and rich imagination.

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<sup>19</sup> *Injustice of Tou O* is a drama created by Guan Hanqing, a dramatist in the Yuan Dynasty.

<sup>20</sup> *The Orphan of Zhao* is a drama, with historical themes, created by Ji Junxiang in the Yuan Dynasty.

Theories, such as the immortality of the soul, heaven and hell<sup>21</sup>, and the retribution for good and evil<sup>22</sup> are major theoretical pillars of Taoism and Buddhism. They are also religious theories that Chinese people are relatively familiar with (Huang, Li, 2022, p. 90). Playwrights were influenced by these theories, and the dramas they created served as vehicles for promoting religious ideas to a broader audience. For instance, the concept of good being rewarded and evil being punished is consistently propagated in dramas. In the Southern Drama *The Story of the Hairpin*<sup>23</sup>, the protagonist Qian Yulian exemplifies loyalty to her husband, Wang Shipeng. She defies evil, perseveres through difficult circumstances and, after enduring various hardships, is ultimately reunited with her husband (Tong, 1989, p. 65). Such an ending acknowledges and praises Qian Yulian's unwavering loyalty and fortitude. Similarly, in the *Injustice of Tou O*, the fulfillment of all three vows, made by the protagonist Tou O, obviously represents the essence of retribution and justice, affirming Tou O's filial piety. Numerous similar stories exist, such as the tale of Guan Yu in the Three Kingdoms period (His unwavering loyalty transcends time and leads his soul to capture Lv Meng for vengeance) and the story of Wang Xiang in the Jin Dynasty (He lies down on the ice to fetch carp for his stepmother). These types of dramas provide an avenue for boundless imagination for those confined by reality. They also offer solace for individuals enduring suffering, providing comfort for their souls. Dramas influenced by religious ideas, regardless of their genre, bring the audience closer to religion to varying degrees or contribute to the further popularization of religion.

## CONCLUSION

Artistic expressions serve as a vehicle through which people in a specific society and era perceive and comprehend the world around them. They are not created arbitrarily but are shaped by a nation's philosophical thoughts and cultural traditions. Art forms that embody national characteristics and the spirit of the times often accumulate a rich cultural essence. Chinese drama, in particular, represents a comprehensive reflection of traditional Chinese philosophy. To truly understand its cultural implications and aesthetic characteristics, it is necessary to interpret drama within the broader context of the entire history of philosophy and culture. This approach enables us to accurately grasp the profound cultural connotations embedded within the drama.

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<sup>21</sup> "The theory of the immortality of the soul" and "the theory of heaven and hell" are Buddhist theories popular among Chinese folk. "The theory of the immortality of the soul" believes that the soul always exists in the circulation of human beings (soul reincarnation after death). "The theory of heaven and hell" believes that after death, people can go to heaven or fall into hell according to their good karma or sins.

<sup>22</sup> Retribution of good and evil: Buddhism and Taoism share the concept that Good karma begets good, good karma begets good, and bad karma begets bad.

<sup>23</sup> The Story of the Hairpin, a southern drama script of the Ming Dynasty (the author is unknown).

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