

## Article

# Belief in Drama: A Study of the Religious Factors in Ancient Chinese Puppet Dramas

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**Abstract:** Puppets, a kind of wooden figure whose movements are manipulated by artists, were frequently used in ancient Chinese singing and dancing activities and dramas. The uniqueness of substituting human beings for puppets has drawn tremendous attention from scholars. However, despite previous research on the long development process of puppet dramas, a considerable number of details remain neglected, and behind these details lies an abundance of complicated religious factors. Therefore, this paper uses several fragments as entry points in terms of puppet dramas' modeling, materials, craft, rites, function, artists, organization, and other aspects to comprehensively analyze the influence of witchcraft, Daoism, and Buddhism on China's puppet dramas. This research first unveils that a ferocious appearance and mahogany as a material, both used in puppets, are outer manifestations to reveal the magical power of witchcraft. Next, the rites performed in Li Yuan Jiao using ritual puppets were characterized by mystery in their implication and ambiguity in their religious sect, which was related to the attempt to hide their notorious identities as wizards on the part of the artists. Third, general puppet artists enjoyed a fairly high social status, conferred by their semi-religionist identity and the puppet dramas' historical status. Finally, the improvement in the puppet-making process and the emergence of skeleton-style puppets embody the secularization of the spread of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** puppets; exorcism witchcraft; Daoism way of expelling evil spirits; Buddhist belief; drama



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## 1. Introduction

Puppet dramas, also known as wooden puppet shows, were a kind of ancient folk drama art characterized by men manipulating puppets on stages while hiding themselves off stage (Figure 1). Puppet dramas often contained complete story plots and stylized character features for singing and dancing entertainment or theatrical performances. The core prop of puppet dramas is the wooden puppet, whose appearance imitates a real person, while the movements are dexterous. According to their different shapes and methods of operation, puppets can be divided into four different types, namely, “marionettes” (*tixian kuilei* 提線傀儡)<sup>1</sup>, the “glove puppet” (*budai kuilei* 布袋傀儡)<sup>2</sup>, the “rod puppet” (*zhangtou kuilei* 杖頭傀儡)<sup>3</sup>, and the “shadow puppet” (*pi ying xi* 皮影戲). It is worth noting that shadow puppetry is a type of folk drama performed with silhouette figures carved from hide or cardboard. Although it falls into the puppet drama category, it is distinguished from the other forms, which use three-dimensional shaped wooden puppets, due to its highly specialized and independent characteristics, such as performances that utilize light and shadows and flat forms made of hide or cardboard. Therefore, it is not included in the scope of this paper. Chinese puppet dramas originated in the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), and after its refinement in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), this art form reached its peak in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and has been a popular form of folk entertainment ever since.



**Figure 1.** A pair of marionettes (Huang 2008) p. 25. Materials: wood and cloth. Dimensions: left, H. 63 cm × W. 28 cm; right, H. 64 cm × W. 29 cm. Fujian 福建, Quanzhou 泉州. Fujian Puppet Theatre Collection.

In recent years, the study of puppet dramas has gained increasing attention from more and more scholars. Its distinctive style, ritual ceremonies, and interaction reflect the cultural ideologies of different eras. The academic research on puppet dramas has mainly concentrated on the following three aspects: the historical origin, visual effect, and religious relationship.

First, there are still three different arguments for the historical origins of the puppet. Zhou Yibai 周贻白 and Sun Shiwen 孫世文 argued that puppet dramas originated from ancient burial figurines (Figure 2) (Zhou 1982, p. 35; Sun 1980, p. 40). They stated that Chinese puppet dramas developed from burial figurines in the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC) to entertainment performance figurines in the Han Dynasty and finally became puppet dramas in the performance of stories. Sun Kaidi 孫楷第 asserted that the puppet originated from the Fangxiang God (*Fangxiangshen* 方相神) in ancient myths, who exorcised ghosts and eliminated epidemics for people, as the appearances and performance styles of puppets were related to a certain extent (Sun 1944, p. 83). Dong Meikan 董每戡 believed that the puppet originated from India and represented a sacred religious faith, contrary to China's funeral culture (Dong 1949, p. 368). Moreover, the famous Chinese story of a craftsman, Yanshi 偃師, who made wooden figures is also derived from the Brahma Sutra (*Fanjing* 梵經). In addition, William Dolby systematically examined the origins of Chinese puppets, discussing the plausibility of origin theories such as burial figurines, the Fangxiang God, and Yanshi. He argued that although scholars have suggested various possibilities to support these arguments, all lack credible direct proof, and that what is certain is that the earliest physical puppets found are from the Han Dynasty (Dolby 1978, p. 99). Robin Ruizendaal held that the origin of the puppet was a comprehensive consequence that might be related to exorcism rituals, the manipulation of effigies, dance, and masked dance (Ruizendaal 2006, p. 20).



**Figure 2.** Funerary figurines with music. Material: wood. Dimensions: H. 32–38 cm. Housed in the Hunan Museum, Changsha, China. Photo Source: official website of the Hunan Museum<sup>4</sup>.

Second, multiple pieces of research have been conducted to explore the nature of images and cultural metaphors within puppet dramas from artistry perspectives. For instance, Li Song's 李嵩 (1166–1243, a court painter in the Southern Song Dynasty) character genre painting, *"Skeleton Fantasy Show"* (*Kulou huanxi tu* 骷髏幻戲圖), is worth studying because it depicts an absurd scene of a giant skeleton operating marionettes to perform a puppet drama. By using the theory of iconography, historical knowledge, and theater knowledge, Chen Zhiyong 陳誌勇 interpreted the painting and opined that it is probably a realistic reflection of the lives of itinerant entertainers in the Southern Song Dynasty (Chen 2022, pp. 177–86). Kang Baocheng 康保成 further proposed that the painting may be imagery material for promoting Buddhism (Kang 2003a, p. 128). In addition, scholars have examined the relationship between baby play paintings of the Song Dynasty and puppets. Chen Weiyang 陳維艷 and Zheng Caiwang 鄭才旺 suggested that the puppets in Song's paintings had a social function beyond entertainment and contained a blessing for children's healthy growth (Chen 2021, pp. 77–81; Zheng 2020, pp. 54–59).

The third category of studies unfolds the relationship between puppet dramas and religions, which is closely related to this study. Xia Min 夏敏 discussed the artifacts, characters, and rituals as a whole and then suggested that, with the religious function of exorcism and sorcery, puppet dramas integrated the stage performance with the altar of sacrifice to eliminate disasters, pray for fortune, and express blessings (Xia 2005, pp. 48–56). Kang Baocheng 康保成 argued that Chinese puppet dramas were greatly influenced by Indian puppet dramas, along with the propagation of Buddhism (Kang 2003b, pp. 58–72). Ye Mingsheng 葉明生 analyzed the historical relationship between puppet dramas and primitive religious rituals to propose a different treatment approach to preserve the ecological space of religious culture in contemporary puppet dramas (Ye 2009, p. 38).

Through a field study on marionette theater in Quanzhou, Robin Ruizendaal concluded that the two most important functions of the traditional Chinese puppet drama are exorcism and entertainment, among which the exorcism function is embodied in exorcising demons that harm the dead and the living, as well as barbarians that threaten the empire (Ruizendaal 2006, p. 17).

In summary, by researching puppet dramas primarily from the perspectives of history, art, and religion, scholars have made abundant achievements, which, however, are inadequate in two aspects if analyzed carefully. First of all, since these research perspectives are mostly limited by researchers' disciplines, the research findings have a fairly limited scope of application, and comprehensive research on religious factors in puppet dramas via the application of interdisciplinary study is still lacking. Next, by using single research techniques, such as literature research, art analysis, connotation interpretation, field studies, and other common research methods, an in-depth study is made easier, but the mixed impact of complicated factors on the development of puppet dramas will be easily neglected. Therefore, using a theoretical, multidisciplinary approach, this paper intends to

explore the relationship between puppet dramas and native witchcraft and Daoism, as well as foreign Buddhism. The research perspective is focused on analyzing the most neglected microscopic variations in as much detail as possible by using phenomenon analysis and offering explanations to ultimately unfold the religious environment and social background that propelled puppet dramas to reform.

## 2. Witchcraft Puppet Dramas with the Concept of “Expelling Evil with Evil” (*Yi Xiong Zhi Xiong* 以凶制凶)

The primary function of modern puppet dramas is entertainment, while in ancient China, puppets were widely used in various folk witchcraft activities. The most common function of puppets was to expel evil spirits, which means to perform rituals to dominate, manipulate, and operate specific supernatural, mystical forces to protect humans from evil spirits (Yu 1994, p. 236). Chinese people believed that evil forces could harm both the dead and the living and hence had to be exorcised (Chia 2019, p. 21). Because of similarities in the style and material features between puppets and witchcraft, they were used as a material characteristic to communicate with ghosts and gods in order to expel evil gods, ghosts, and other demons who brought harm to men, livestock, and grains. The following sections discuss the functions and meanings of puppets in witchcraft activities from three aspects: image features, the ritual ceremony, and the performer’s identity. In the following text, the puppet’s functions and meanings in witchcraft activities are explored from the dimensions of form style, material analysis, and ritual performance.

Puppetry is a kind of performance art in which style changes are primarily reflected in its facial appearance. These distinctive facial appearances are not only the pure imitation of real people but also elaborate creations and artistic expressions, which are deliberately designed to correspond to dramatized, costumed, and anthropomorphized demands.

Puppets have a rich source of roles, including demon warriors, theatrical characters, literary figures, and images of women. Among them, the demon warriors mostly feature fierce expressions. Despite the various kinds and patterns of puppets, most of them have vicious appearances, which are closely associated with their functions of warding off evil spirits. For example, the puppet heads carved in palm wood passed down in the family of Xu Zhuchu 徐竹初 in Zhangzhou 漳州 City, Fujian Province, are about 4 cm high. These puppets all have fierce, glowering expressions with scowling and closed mouths, presenting a vicious artistic style as a whole (Figure 3). The reason why these puppets were designed to have fierce looks is that their purpose was to exorcise evil spirits, as these ferocious facial expressions accorded with the “expelling evil with evil” concept, which means dispelling disasters using sinister figures.



**Figure 3.** Puppet heads carved in wood (Wang 1995, p. 59). Material: wood. Dimensions: H. 4 cm. Collection of Xu Zhuchu.

This tradition and concept can be traced back to the convention of using peach wood figurines to ward off demons in the remote antiquity of China. Wang Chong 王充 (27–97),

who lived in the Han Dynasty, in his book *Lun Heng-The Ghost Chapter* (*Lunheng dinggui pian* 論衡訂鬼篇), quoted a myth recorded in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing* 山海經) to illustrate the origins of using peach wood to expel devils. He specified that in remote antiquity, Emperor Huang (*Huangdi* 黃帝) not only governed the earthly world but also ruled the hell of ghosts, and he sent two generals from heaven to take charge of all wandering ghosts on Earth, namely, Shen Tu 神荼 and Yu Lei 郁壘. These two brothers lived on Peach Mountain (*Taodushan* 桃都山) over the East Ocean (*Donghai* 東海), and on the mountain, there sat a giant peach tree with branches stretching over 3000 miles. On top of the peach tree, there stood a golden rooster that crowed every day the moment the sun rose and shed light on it. Afterward, all roosters on Earth crowed, one after another. At that time, Shen Tu and Yu Lei guarded the “ghost gate” (*guimen* 鬼門) on two sides north-east of the giant peach tree. They watched over all big and small ghosts and wandering spirits returning from the earthly world. According to popular sayings in folklore, these ghosts and spirits can only come out at night and must return to their hell before dawn and before the rooster’s crow. Therefore, if Shen Tu and Yu Lei noticed any evil spirits who intended to harm humans in the earthly world, they would tie these ghosts up with reed ropes and throw them into the mountain to feed the hungry tigers there (Guo 2011, p. 703). Additionally, because peach wood was common everywhere, ancient Chinese people made huge peach wood figurines according to their conceptions of Shen Tu and Yu Lei and set them in front of their gates to expel demons.

Since then, Chinese people have believed that peach wood can exorcise evil spirits, which has become an important tradition in folklore. For Chinese Daoist priests, peach wood swords are crucial tools that can help them to protect haunted families from ghosts and keep their households safe. The masters of geomancy often carried peach wood and vermilion-painted charms to the houses where dead bodies were recently found to help the residents eliminate evil spirits and avert possible disasters. Moreover, folk witch doctors usually tied a small peach wood sword and a small bag of vermilion around the waist of those who could not concentrate to help them drive away evil ghosts, as these people were believed to be haunted.

Various wood types are suitable for making puppets, such as mahogany, camphor wood, beech wood, schima superba, and basswood. Among them, puppets made of mahogany are nothing special in terms of practicality but do have a special cultural meaning. First, puppets made of mahogany have such a long history that the first record about them appeared as early as the Warring State Period (403 BC–211 BC). *Stratagems of the Warring States, Qi* (*Zhanguo ce qi ce* 戰國策 齊策) records a fable of conversations between a puppet made of mahogany and a puppet made of terra. The former says to the latter, “You are made of the terra on the west shore of the Zihe River 淄河. When the rainy season comes, you will be done for as the river water rises.” The puppet made of terra replies, “I will end up with just being the terra on the west shore of the Zihe River again. However, you were carved into a human figure from a peach juvenile branchlet, when the river water drifts you away, you will be lost (Gao 1987, p. 85)”. Despite the absence of an indication that the puppet made of mahogany was a puppet in the true sense of the word, the two puppets were highly similar with regard to their figures. Second, there was a folk custom of exorcism by figures made of mahogany in ancient times. In the Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220–420), during the Lunar Chinese New Year, it was popular to erect a human figure made of mahogany by the door to exorcise evil spirits and pursue good fortune. This custom further evolved into the practice of painting door gods on the door after the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589). Third, as a simulacrum agent in witchcraft, a puppet made of mahogany was used to suffer in place of the sick or to transfer disaster. For example, more than one puppet made of mahogany was found in Tomb No. 1 and Tomb No. 3 of the Han Dynasty at Mawangdui 馬王堆, as well as in the northwestern Beacon (Feng sui 烽燧) Sites of the Han Dynasty, and they were mostly mortuary objects, which were used for exorcism.

The puppet, also with a wooden human shape, inherits the function of the peach wood man to ward off evil spirits and imitates its harsh words and deeds; only then can it exert its extraordinary religious power. Moreover, it should be noted that, although the puppet needs to ward off evil spirits, it often appears in rituals, so the horrible and fierce image of the puppet is weakened to a more general aesthetic. The humanized and artistic content thus increases.

### 3. Li Yuan Jiao 梨園教: Puppet Dramas in Daoist Activities

During its domestic spread, Chinese Daoism was actively integrated into folk entertainment activities and then evolved into Li Yuan Jiao (Pear Garden Religion), which incorporated puppet dramas to perform Daoist rites. Li Yuan Jiao, which came into being in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and prevailed in the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), was considered to be a combination of the Lvshan 閩山 sect of Daoism and puppet dramas and mainly prevailed in the northeast of Fujian Province and the rural areas of Hunan 湖南 Province (Li 1996, p. 47). The sect is exceptionally mysterious and rarely recorded in ancient archives. However, it has been passed down in folklore for hundreds of years, and Lord General Tian (*Tiangong yuanshuai* 田公元帥) was respected as the founder of this lineage (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Lord General Tian marionette (Huang 2008, p. 32). Materials: wood and cloth. Dimensions: H. 68 cm × W. 34 cm. Huang Tongxing 黄通行 Collection.

In 2002, Ye Mingsheng 葉明生 conducted a field investigation of Li Yuan Jiao in Wushiling 烏石嶺 Village, Qingyuan 清源 Township, Shouning 壽寧 County, Fujian Province (Ye 2002, pp. 17–53). He found that the local Li Yuan Jiao performers possessed the dual identities of both Daoist priests and puppet actors, but their training mode was different from that of ordinary drama artists and closer to the procedures of Daoist priests. Due to the severe technical difficulties of operating puppets, the training of puppet artists started with them serving as apprentices. They needed to learn to play gongs and drums, sing with the cavity, and manipulate the threads. Additionally, they had to sign documents to commit to converting to Daoism and swear to take responsibility for promoting it. With the improvement in their Daoist knowledge and skills, they could be rewarded with official Daoist titles, monastic names, and possessions, which helped them to be recognized for their ability to “avoid disasters and pray for blessings” (*rangzai qifu* 禳災祈福) for the public by performing puppet dramas.

Puppetry continues to thrive in many rural areas, despite a decline in the number of performers and audience members, largely due to its continuing significance within traditional religious practices. Although much of the repertoire is secular, puppetry provides an economical means of entertaining deities who are invited to visit during gratitude and vow-repayment ceremonies, as well as to confer blessings during celebratory events (Chen and Clark 2010, p. 335). Specifically, the ceremonies have five main functions: 1. Exorcising evil spirits to protect the house (*zhenzhai* 鎮宅). After constructing a new house, people

should create an auspicious space to sacrifice to ancestors and gods, so a ceremony to exorcise evil spirits is necessary for the house's security. 2. Redeeming a vow to gods (*huanyuan* 還願). After realizing wishes for wealth, offspring, longevity, and social status, families should invite Li Yuan Jiao masters to perform ritual ceremonies. 3. Ten people guarding the blessing (*Shibaofu* 十保福), which means to hold rites to eliminate the illnesses of family members who have suffered from serious diseases and have not recovered for a long time. Therefore, ten strong men should show up to promise to share the patient's pains. 4. Redeeming the soul (*shuhun* 贖魂). Soul redemption is a ritual for people frightened by evil spirits and helps them retrieve their souls. 5. Removing evil spirits (*chusha* 出煞). This means that rites should be held to pray for blessings to exorcise the evil spirits of afflicted patients.

Apart from manipulators using marionettes to perform witchcraft during these religious rites, puppet dramas were another activity performed to accomplish these rites. It often takes one day to perform the puppet rituals, which are usually performed on a divine stage constructed inside the house, and the theme of the chosen puppet drama must correspond to the patient's symptoms. For instance, if the male family member's spirit is thought to be enticed or stolen by a demon, "*Chen Jinggu Collects the Fox*" (*Chen Jinggu shou huli* 陳靖姑收狐狸) of the "*The Legend of the Nanny: Part II*" (*Nainiang chuan* 奶娘傳第二本) is the correct choice. Chen Jinggu 陳靖姑 is a Daoism goddess in folklore in Fujian Province and is regarded as the protective goddess of helping, delivering, and saving babies, as well as expelling demons and monsters. To this day, the populace of some regions in Fujian refer to her as Foster Mother (*Nai'niang* 奶娘) and perform rituals to entrust their children to her care until the youngsters reach adulthood (sixteen years of age) (Chen 2017, p. 7). However, the fox is considered a "spiritual monster" (*jingguai* 精怪) in Chinese folk culture, which is a spirit without any physical shape but with magic power, so the fox is thought to be both an animal and spiritual monster. However, there is one necessary condition for these foxes to convert their physical shape from animals to spiritual beings: they should absorb and collect the "Jing Qi" 精氣 (vital essence) from humans, which refers to the semen generated during sexual intercourse. This semen is considered to be beneficial and healthy and can even bring immortality to mortals once taken (Yao 2002, p. 260). In a novel titled "*Quelling the Demons' Revolt*" (*Pingyao zhuan* 平妖傳) in the Ming Dynasty, a fox turns itself into a beautiful lady to seduce a man and obtain his "Jing Qi" in order to become an evil spirit. "*Chen Jinggu Collects the Fox*" is needed to help the patient recover.

If one is afflicted by mania, the "*Biography of Hua Guang*" (*Huanguang zhuan* 華光傳) should be performed, which is about Hua Guang taming the Demon King (*Guiwang* 鬼王) and extinguishing his poisonous fire. Hua Guang is the god of fire in Chinese mythology and one of the four Dharma Protectors (*hufa sisheng* 護法四聖) in Daoism. He is an incarnation from an oil lamp in front of the Buddha, and his primordial spirit is the elf of fire. Hua Guang possesses remarkable supernatural power and previously burned the Fire Demon King (*Duhuo guiwang* 毒火鬼王), the original owner of Mount Ling (*Lingshan* 靈山), to death. Therefore, when performing, sometimes Daoist priests would talk to themselves and ask questions loudly: "Is it you who haunted this person and bring this disease? Leave his body! Be quick! Take away your evil spirit!" These sudden and abrupt questions during these puppet rites were obviously to exorcise evil spirits so that the patient would recover as soon as possible.

Since Li Yuan Jiao regarded the religious ceremony puppet as its foundation to gain establishment, its artists originally had the identity of wizards, by which they held funerals to perform exorcisms for the hosts. However, since a prohibition against witchcraft was imposed by Emperor Renzong of Song 宋仁宗 (Li 1985, p. 2340), wizards became notorious characters regarded as evil, suppressed by the government, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. In order to survive, in the performance of religious ceremonies with puppets, wizards spared no effort to mask and hide their witchcraft traits; they acted as though practicing Buddhism and Daoism and concealed their wizard characteristics in an

attempt to seek legalized status. Therefore, the puppet performances were deliberately conducted mysteriously and religiously by using dramas to replace the ritual and perform the religious ceremony. For one thing, the title “*Da Jiao*” 打醮 (saying mass for the departed souls in the Daoist way) was replaced by “*Zuo Foshi*” 作佛事 (holding a Buddhist service) when Daoist priests were setting up an altar, and in performing the ritual, the gods first to be summoned were Sakyamuni Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, Nagarjuna, and Bodhisattva, all Buddhist gods preceding the ritual to reduce its likeness to wizardry, and for another, in order to manifest the blood lineage of the Lvshan 閩山 sect of Daoism, Daoist gods such as Chang Tao-ling 張天師, Zhen Wu Emperor 真武帝, and Emperor Bright (*Huaguang* 華光) were placed on the table to imbue the ritual event with Daoist character. From this, it can be seen that the religious nature was not inherent to Li Yuan Jiao but a result of religious secularization throughout history.

The reasons why these wooden puppets were embodied with magic power and why puppet dramas had religious functions are closely related to the Lvshan Branch of Daoism. In his *The Daoist Body*, Krisofer Schipper compared the folk puppet opera troupes with Ji Tong 乩童 (Chinese spirit medium) in Taiwan 臺灣 District (Schipper 1993) and suggested that the relations between manipulators and puppets were the same as the relations between Dharma Masters and Ji Tong. In other words, the Dharma Masters used haunted Ji Tong to perform exorcisms, while puppet manipulators used puppets to carry out this procedure. From this point of view, puppets in Li Yuan Jiao were endowed with religious deities because they experienced the “consecration ceremony and draw eyes” (*kaiguang dianyan* 開光點眼) rites in Li Yuan Jiao. After these rites, puppets were no longer ordinary figurines but spiritual mediums haunted by deities.

In sum, Li Yuan Jiao prevailed in folklore, with the specific characteristics of performing puppet dramas not because of artistic features but because of this organic integration of Daoism to use puppet dramas as Dharma vessels to expel disasters and cure diseases. Moreover, the combination of Daoism and puppet dramas helped Daoism to attract more followers, an active movement of both propaganda and entertainment. The entertainment nature of puppet dramas can appeal to numerous audiences, and colorful folk tale repertoires are more attractive than simple Daoist rituals. Therefore, Daoism uses puppet dramas instead of rituals to convey Daoism ideology, making the alienation of puppet dramas a tool for realizing a religious function.

#### 4. “Head of Dramas” (Baixi Zhi Shou 百戲之首): Puppet Artists’ Social Status

Puppets and performances were considered auspicious, even sacred, but the social role of the puppeteer was ambivalent in traditional society, and folk performers were often stigmatized as outcasts (Orr 1974, p. 82). However, the social status of Chinese puppet drama artists differed greatly from that of other theater actors. In ancient China, the societal structure was divided by social status, with the ranks of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants being higher than those of other professions. Actors were discriminated against and rejected by mainstream society. However, puppet drama artists were the exception, as this kind of performance was regarded as a kind of quasi-religious drama and served the function of exorcising evil spirits, so puppet dramas were promoted as “Head of Dramas”.

From the Tang Dynasty onwards, a government office dedicated exclusively to the management of palace music and dance, Jiao Fang 教坊 (office in charge of imperial music), was established to cover the music, dance, performing arts, and the like related to the palace banquet. The performances held in Jiao Fang were predominated by ceremonial music and dance, and it was fairly late that the puppet performance was included in the substance of Jiao Fang. However, according to *Miscellaneous Records of Yuefu* (*Yuefu Zalu* 樂府雜錄), due to its ancient history and positive effect on the rescue of Emperor Gaozu of Han 漢高祖, the puppet drama ranked first in the listings of all theaters. Even to this day, in the case of a puppet company meeting a troupe company, the former will enjoy a



priority performance. Given this, it can be seen that the puppet artists of the Tang Dynasty outranked other artists.

In the Song Dynasty, the artists of puppet dramas enjoyed an even higher social status. With the prevalence of puppet dramas at the palace, puppet drama artists would often be requested by emperors to attend to the feasting monarchs, which was recorded in *The Incidents of Past Ages in Qiantang* (*Qiantang Yishi* 錢塘遺事) by Liu Yiqing 劉一清 of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), in *New compilation of the History of the Song Dynasty* (*Songshi Xinbian* 宋史新編) by Ke Weiqi 柯維騏 of the Ming Dynasty, and other ancient books. Moreover, records of puppet artists' names began to appear in a considerable number of ancient books—for example, in *Recall the Records of the Capital City of Kaifeng* (*Dongjing Meng Hua Lu* 東京夢華錄) by Meng Yuanlao 孟元老 of the Song Dynasty, the names of then-famous puppet artists, such as Ren Xiaosan 任小三 for rod puppets, Zhang Jinxian 張金線 for marionettes, and Li Waining 李外寧 for puppets triggered by gunpowder. As we all know, generally, no artists' names would be left in specific registries in ancient books, but this rule was broken in the Song Dynasty, which reflected the continuous rise in the social status of puppet artists. Afterward, a book entitled *West Lake Old Man Record* (*Xihu Laoren Fansheng Lu* 西湖老人繁勝錄) by an unknown author recorded puppet artists, including Chen Zhongxi 陳中喜 for the rod puppet, Lu Jinxian 盧金線 for the marionette, and Liu Xiao Pu She 劉小仆射 for the water puppet. It is worth mentioning that, among a host of puppet artists, Lu Jinxian, who excelled at performing with the marionette, was the most well known, for he was present in *Old Stories of Wulin* (*Wulin Jiushi* 武林舊事) by Zhoumi 周密 under his real name, Lu Fengchun 盧逢春, and even addressed as Jinxian Lu Dafu 金線盧大夫 (Mr. Lu, the gold thread manipulator) in *Mengliang Lu* 夢梁錄 by Wu Zimu 吳自牧. The term “dafu 大夫” was originally used to refer to an official position and was used as a respectful form of address for artists. Such an address was rarely seen in ancient times due to the enormous gap in social status between officials and artists. A puppet artist was called in such a way as to demonstrate the degree that his exquisite skill could reach. Moreover, as the puppet drama boomed, specific non-governmental puppet organizations and industries appeared. To illustrate, *Mengliang Lu* mentioned twenty-four puppet companies at Sujia Lane (Sujia xiang 蘇家巷), which, for one thing, embodied a group named after its locality and, for another, reflected the huge number of puppet artists.

In Quanzhou, Fujian Province, the marionette was closely related to religious activities, and many Daoist priests were also masters of puppet performances. When performing, their stages were decorated in the shape of eight trigrams, and thirty-six puppets with strong religious overtones were placed on the stages (Li 1995, p. 142). These puppet artists were called honorable “Xian Sheng” 先生 (respectful address for teachers, masters, etc.) rather than humble “Xi Zi” 戲子 (discriminatory address for actors), which indicates their higher social status compared to other ordinary drama artists. For example, it is recorded in *Zhonggan Temple Books* (*Zhong Qian Miao Zhong Bu* 中乾廟眾簿), Kanxia 坎下村 Village, Shaowu 邵武 City, Fujian Province, that puppet artists performing when the temple was under construction were referred to as “Xian Sheng” (Anonymous 1892, p. 79). Moreover, these puppet artists in western Fujian were considered quasi-religious clerics, so they were titled “Shi Fu” 師傅 (a respectful address for masters in Daoism and other religions at that time) and treated with respect by the hosts. This fact reflects that the high social status of puppet artists is attributed to their religious status.

In addition, Chinese people have a rooted clan concept, and clan surnames that have been recorded in the genealogy have significant importance in China. However, “Xi Zi” was not accepted by the patriarchal clans, as they were believed to be the shame of the family. In *Reassembled Genealogy of the Yus in Shulin in Jianyang* (*Shulin yushi zhongxiu zongpu* 書林余氏重修宗譜) written during the Qing Dynasty, it is recorded that “Scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants are all decent professions for gentlemen, while prostitutes, actors and servants are shameful for everyone; for those who were involved in these kinds of jobs, their names must be removed from family genealogy. (Yu 1896, p. 5)”. From this rule, we

can conclude that being an actor could destroy one's reputation, not only for the individual but also for the whole family.

However, puppet artists were not excepted from this stipulation, and they were even allowed to participate in imperial competitive examinations. For instance, the *Gantoufen Genealogy of the Elder Branch of Lis* (*Zhenshan zhangfang gantoufen lishi jiapu* 圳山長房竿頭份李氏家譜) (Yu 1896, p. 5) in Zhenshan recorded two marionette artists, namely, Lord Xing Lin (*Xinglingong* 興麟公) and Lord Xing Jin (*Xingjingong* 興晉公), while *The Genealogy of Lins in Sudong* (*Yingdong linshi zupu* 罌東林氏族譜) (Anonymous 2003) mentioned another famous marionette artist, Lin Hongxiu 林洪岫, and specified his use of seven threads to manipulate puppets. The *Genealogy of Ye in Wenshan* (*Wen Shan Ye Shi Zong Pu* 文山葉氏宗譜) kept at Chengguan 城關 Town, Shouning 壽寧 County, Fujian Province, has a complete record of Ye Zhaosheng 葉昭升, a marionette puppet artist, including his years of birth and death, infant name, Daoist name, and educational background (Anonymous 1946, p. 296). Any marionette puppet artist, before he executes the Daoist sacrificial rites, must obtain a Daoist name to demonstrate an air of formality. These facts are evidence that puppet drama artists were widely accepted by society, which is the result of their undeniable relationship with religion. On the one hand, puppet dramas had the function of warding off evil spirits, offering people spiritual solace, and enhancing the emotional identification of these puppets. On the other hand, in puppet dramas, puppets took a human shape, so this form of performance aroused reverence for the artists from the audiences.

### 5. Eastward Spread of Buddhism: The Improvement in Puppet Manufacturing and the Spread of the Buddhist Void

Above is the discussion of the influence of Chinese native witchcraft and Daoism on puppet dramas, covering the role of exorcist played by puppets and performance rituals, as well as the religious connotation represented by both. However, the fabular function hidden behind the image of a puppet in Buddhist culture is not fully unfolded. However, it seems that the development of Chinese puppet dramas closely follows its development path. To be specific, these puppet dramas developed from original burial figurines to sacrificial figurines and then to entertainment puppets. However, in this seemingly complete logic chain, the impact of foreign religions, especially Indian Buddhist culture, was conveyed.

The origins of Indian puppet dramas can be traced back to antiquity (Dong 1949, pp. 312–21), with records in ancient texts such as the *Mahabharata* (*Mo he po luo duo* 摩訶婆羅多) and religious scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Baogafan ge* 薄伽梵歌). Dating back to 2500 BC, the ancient civilization of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, which spread over thousands of kilometers, has left us with a diverse collection of archaeological relics. Among these relics is a terracotta bull with a detachable head that could be manipulated by a string, resulting in limited animation. Additionally, a terracotta monkey was discovered that moves vertically by sliding up and down a stick (Ghosh and Banerjee 2006, p. 14).

Indians have mature techniques for making puppets, meaning they can create puppets with genuine appearances that look just like real human beings. In the *Classics of Collected Metaphorical Miscellanies* (*Zapi yujing* 雜譬喻經) of the Eastern Han Dynasty, a talented Indian puppet craftsman is recorded (Zhang 2017, p. 139). According to the book, he manufactured a beautiful woman figurine, which was thought to be a real lady by another man. This man wanted the figurine to stay with him for a night, yet when he tried to hold its hands, he realized that it was wooden. Other than this record, we can find that marionettes came into being in ancient India. For instance, in *Saddharma-smrty-upasthana-sutra* (*Miaofa shengnian chu jing* 妙法聖念處經), it is written that: "As for the musicians, they manage to manipulate wooden figurines through threads" 譬如樂主，撚弄木人，須假線絲，方成作用 (Fa 2008, pp. 437–38). This description is supposed to be one Gatha (*jisong* 偈頌) from the Buddha, which emphasizes the omnipresent karma in the world, yet it also provides evidence that marionettes had a long history in India.

Early communications between China and India started with the transmission of Buddhist culture, which served as the platform for Sino-Indian cultural communications and integration. Puppet dramas are no exception in this historical trend. According to Xu Dishan's 許地山 research, puppet dramas that prevailed in West China had strong connections to Indian marionettes in their early stages (Xu 1927, p. 14). Then, the spread of Buddhism in China promoted the techniques of puppet manufacturing and the related Buddhist concepts conveyed by those puppets, which reflect the profound influence on Chinese puppet dramas.

### 5.1. Dissemination of Woodworking Techniques

The spread of Buddhism promoted the development of Chinese wooden architecture and Buddha statue carving technology, as numerous monks engaged in construction, and these monks later became masters of carpentry skills. Due to the prosperity of Buddhism during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, temple constructions boomed nationwide. According to *Luoyang Qielan Ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (*A Record of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang*), more than a thousand Buddhist temples were distributed inside and outside Luoyang, the capital city of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534). During the construction process, Buddhist monks participated extensively in carpentry constructions and cultivated a considerable number of skilled craftsmen who were also Buddhists. According to Li Zhao's 李肇 *National History Supplement* (*Guoshi bu* 國史補) in the Tang Dynasty (Li 2021) p. 317, it would cost thousands of Guan (*Guan* 貫: A unit of money in the Tang Dynasty) to repair a collapsed corner of the Chongxuan Temple (*zhongxuan si* 重玄寺) in Suzhou 蘇州 City, yet a Buddhist monk easily solved the problem in less than a month by using only wooden wedges. After the Wei and Jin Dynasties, Buddhism became popular in China, and many Buddhist temples and statues were built during that time. During the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577), in particular, the emperors spared tremendous human resources to build Buddhist grottoes to place their coffins. It is recorded in the *Additional Biography of the Eminent Monks: the life of Shi Mingfen* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan Shimingfen zhuan* 續高僧傳釋明芬傳) that “the Buddhist grottoes in Cizhou 磁州, . . . . in which the sculptures are carved to scare away men and ghosts. (Dao 2014, p. 1094)”. This record shows that statues in the temple are so exquisite that they can even astonish humans and ghosts.

With the development of carpentry technology, the craft of puppetry was rapidly refined and applied to Buddhism. For instance, Emperor Shi Hu 石虎 (295–349) in the Zhao Dynasty (319–351), a devout Buddhist, creatively combined the Buddha with puppets to design a four-wheeled sandalwood cart for Buddhist propaganda. Lu Hui's 陸翽 *Records in Yezhong* (*Yezhong ji* 鄴中記) (Yu 1995, p. 436) in the Jin Dynasty had a detailed record about this: the sandalwood cart was about 6 m long, and a golden Buddha stood prominently on the carriage, surrounded by over ten wooden puppets clad in cassocks. When the carriage moved, the puppets spun the golden Buddha around. Whenever a puppet turned to face the front of the Buddha, it lit a few incense sticks, bowed to the Buddha, and then inserted the incense into the stove, and these actions were identical to a real person's movements. Given this, we can see that due to the spread of Buddhism, Chinese puppets were made to imitate Buddhist monks, which also fostered the introduction of superb Indian puppet-making techniques to China.

Thus, there is a certain linkage between the progress of puppet-making technology and the spread of Buddhism. The boom of Buddhism in China contributed to the construction of timber temples and Buddhist statues and indirectly resulted in a leap in puppet-making techniques. During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, a host of new styles of puppets emerged, such as device puppets and water puppets. Appearing in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420), the device puppet was designed with an ingenious mechanical structure. According to the *Records in Yezhong* by Lu Hui, it had multiple functions, such as marching, transport, labor, and performance, and it could be said to be a robot in ancient times. The water puppet had working principles that were generally similar to those of the device puppet, except for its application: the device puppet was used on land, while the

water puppet was used in water. China's puppet-making technology experienced a giant leap in the Wei-Jin North–South Period (220–589), which was also one of the most prosperous periods of Buddhism since its introduction to China. Since these two periods highly overlapped, the spread of Buddhism presumably more or less promoted the progress of China's puppet-making process.

### 5.2. Transmission of Buddhist Ideology

With the widespread Buddhist classics and the emergence of Chinese translations, the concept of “life is like a dream, and all the four elements are void” (*rensheng ru meng, sida jiekong* 人生如夢，四大皆空: the four elements refer to the four material factors “earth, water, fire and wind”) had a profound influence on Chinese people.

During the glorious age of the Tang Dynasty, puppets were widely used in Buddhism to create analogies for the phenomena of emptiness and delusion. Zen Buddhism (*Chan-zong* 禪宗), in particular, adopted more ultimate metaphors, even denying the existence of Buddha, the Buddha Dharma, and all living creatures. The *Ballads and Stories from Tun-Huang* (*Dunhuang bianwen ji* 敦煌變文集) uses puppets to compare life to bubbles, lightning, and fire: “It's also like puppets, which are controlled by threads. they dance, sing, walk or move, and when the song is over, the puppets will be thrown away. Till all the disasters and sufferings are expelled, and no longer capable to make actions. Fortune then arrives. Once connected, man will be haunted and lose the control of his body. (Han 2000, p. 757)”. This means that the behaviors and gestures are just like puppets, manipulated by others, with no control over their own bodies.

Compared to the scripts, paintings had a more direct role in spreading Buddhist concepts, among which the most famous piece was *Skeleton Fantasy Show* (*Kulou huanxi tu* 骷髏幻戲圖) (Figure 5). This painting is now stored in the Forbidden Palace Museum in Beijing 北京故宮博物院; it is 27 cm in length and 26.3 cm in width, with a circular fan shape. The painting depicts a performance by a juggler accompanied by his family. In the middle of this painting, a big skeleton sits on the ground and manipulates a small skeleton with threads. Behind the skeleton, there is a woman breastfeeding a baby, and another baby is standing in front of the skeleton, concentrating on the skeleton puppet drama. A lady is extending her hands to embrace this baby. The theme and image are both rare in Chinese paintings, appearing to be both mysterious and rich in connotations. In previous dynasties and generations, various scholars utilized different paradigms to study this painting but could not reach a conclusion. However, it is certain that this painting depicts a scenario of a puppet drama (Liao 2002, pp. 24–27).

Skeletons appeared repeatedly in artworks during the Song Dynasty. Before Li Song, skeletons were also drawn by some other painters. For example, Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112–1170), the founder of Quanzhen Daoism (*Quanzhen jiao* 全真教), and his student, Tan Chudian 譚處端 (1123–1185), created many paintings of skeletons, which can be proved by poems such as “*Self-Painted Skeletons*” (*Zihua kulou* 自畫骷髏), “*Sighing Skeletons*” (*Tan kulou* 嘆骷髏), and “*Skeleton Song*” (*Kulou ge* 骷髏歌). Quanzhen Daoism used skeletons as imagery in literary and artistic creation, mainly for two purposes. One was to warn the world that if you want to pursue eternal life, you should turn around immediately. The second most common use of the image of the skeleton is as a symbol of those who refuse to turn around and pursue salvation (Idema 2014, p. 14). In addition, many terracotta figurines of skeletons from the Song Dynasty have been unearthed, such as the single-sided molded terracotta figurine (*danmian moyin taoyong* 單面模印陶俑) collected by the Hong Ancient Art Society (*Honggudai yishu xueshe* 泓古代藝術學社), which depicts a skeleton that is tearing its fleshy face with its hands (Figure 6). Another terracotta figurine in the Zhengzhou Daxiang Ceramic Museum 鄭州大象陶瓷博物館 is of the same type (Figure 7), which reveals that the skeleton was a fashionable artistic theme in the Song Dynasty.



**Figure 5.** “Skeleton Fantasy Show” and parts. Dimensions: H. 27 cm × W. 26.3 cm. Colored silk manuscripts. Collection of the Beijing Palace Museum in China. Photograph taken by the authors.



**Figure 6.** One-sided molded terracotta figurine from the Song Dynasty. Materials: ceramide. Dimensions: H. 4.2 cm × W. 10.6 cm. Hong Ancient Art Society collection. Photograph taken by the authors.



**Figure 7.** Song Dynasty figurine of illusionary play. Material: ceramide. Dimensions: H. 13.7 cm × W. 5.3 cm. Housed in the Daxiang Ceramic Museum, Zhengzhou, China. Photograph taken by the authors.

Since skeletons were regarded as unfortunate items in Chinese culture, representing death and evil, why did these images frequently appear in the Song Dynasty? Previous studies have suggested that the phenomenon was based on Zoroastrian (Xianjiao 祆教) illusions of West Asian origin (Du 2009, pp. 106–8). Although the evidence is inadequate, it reflects international contacts and communication during the Song Dynasty. We believe that the appearance of skeletons was influenced by the Buddhist “Contemplation of the Skeleton” (Baigu guan 白骨觀: Practices of the Bones of the Dead). The Contemplation of the Skeleton is one of the five essential practices in the original Buddhism inherited by Shakyamuni Buddhism, and the whole of Buddhism respects it. In Yijing’s 義淨 translation of the Vairocana Miscellanies of the Fundamental Sayings (Genben shuo yiqie youbu pinaiye zashi 根本說一切有部毘奈耶雜事) (Shi 2014, p. 525) in the Tang Dynasty, it is recorded that when the Buddha was alive, he instructed his disciples to draw white-boned skeletons for the practice of the Contemplation of the Skeleton. In this way, the disciples considered how corpses decay into white bones, reminding them of the world’s uncertainty and that death may come shortly. Moreover, imagining that the world is full of white bones reminded people of the disciples and to untie their attachment to their mortal bodies and enter the realm of Nirvana (niepan 涅槃) pursued by Buddhism.

The main character is a skeleton, and the puppet manipulated by it is also a skeleton, and thus, the skeleton is regarded as having symbolic meaning in the painting. Given this, is there any connection between the skeleton and the puppet? Kang Baocheng 康保成 believes that the Chinese words “Kuilei” 傀儡 (puppet) and “Kulou” 骷髏 (skeleton) both derive from “Dulou” 髑髏 (skull) (Kang 2003a, p. 128), which is the skull of the dead. In folklore, once a man died, he became a ghost, so these puppets, skulls, and skeletons had the same origin as ghosts. In other words, puppets and skeletons shared the same origin.

Buddhism was introduced to China during the Eastern Han Dynasty, gained widespread popularity in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and peaked in the Tang Dynasties. In the Song Dynasty, it was utterly secularized and integrated into the daily lives of Chinese people. One typical example is the evolvement of Mahoraga (*Mohele* 磨喝樂) in China. Mahoraga, originating from Indian Buddhist images, gradually secularized into conventional dolls to worship for kids (Fan and Long 2022, p. 177). Even more importantly, Buddhist concepts had a significant influence on thoughts in the Song Dynasty, including the formation of the Confucian School of Idealist Philosophy (*Lixun* 理學) and the School of Mind (*Xinxue* 心學) and the creation of Quanzhen Daoism by Wang Chongyang, which originated from Zen Buddhist ideas. These ideas are reflected in the cultural relics of the Song Dynasty, such as the puppets in the *Skeleton Fantasy Show*.

To summarize, two aspects influenced Chinese puppets in terms of both techniques and concepts from Indian Buddhism. First, advanced Indian puppet manufacturing techniques were introduced to China with the eastward trend of Buddhism. During the construction of Buddhist architecture and sculptures, the skills of wooden craft techniques were improved, which ultimately promoted a leap in puppet manufacturing craftsmanship. Second, puppets also served as a medium for Indian Buddhism’s popularity in China. The Zen Sect of Buddhism often used images of puppets in Buddhist scripts to verbally express the concepts of emptiness and delusion; the *Skeleton Fantasy Show* is an example of actively combining puppets and skeletons together. By broadcasting the “Contemplation of the Skeleton” in Buddhism, believers were encouraged to abandon their attachment to human bodies and appearances. In other words, in an attempt to spread Buddhist scripts and attract more believers, Indian Buddhism indirectly promoted Chinese puppet manufacturing craftsmanship while, at the same time, endowing Chinese puppet dramas with the cultural features of Buddhism.

## 6. Conclusions

During the development of puppet dramas, religious factors changed continuously and were unique in different periods, specifically displayed as diversity in function, abundance in style, and variation in locality.

During the pre-Qin period, the early forms of puppets were funerary figurines, which imitated human shapes and were buried in tombs with the dead. During the Han and Jin Dynasties, the burial figurine became more exquisite and ingenious in construction. For example, the funerary figurines unearthed from the Mawangdui Tomb were dressed in splendid colorful clothes, and large wooden puppets with movable limbs were excavated from tombs of the Han Dynasty in the area of Laixi, Shandong Province. Against this backdrop, the puppet gradually transformed from an article for funeral use buried underground into an object used for social life on land and was used by the ruling class in performances for funeral rites to expel evil spirits and eliminate plagues. The socialization of the puppet's function initiated the religious exploitation of puppets, laying a foundation for the dual-track development of the puppet toward religion and entertainment in later generations.

In the Tang Dynasty, the puppet prospered. First of all, with official recognition, puppet dramas were incorporated into court entertainment and were consolidated and promoted in terms of their social status. In addition to the bureaucratic stratum, the common people and literati showed a passion for the puppet, as exemplified by the popularity of puppet dramas and puppets often being used as a theme when the literati were chanting and writing poetry. Next, the puppet's functions and applications tended to be diversified among religious worship, performance for Buddhist service, singing and dancing entertainment, military reconnaissance, etc. Additionally, their religious value was further expanded. For example, Buddhism boomed in the Tang Dynasty, and puppet performances would often be present in Buddhist services to publicize and explain sutras, becoming an important part of Buddhist culture. Third, in terms of location, puppets not only prevailed within the territory of the Great Tang Empire but also spread to its neighboring country, Korea.

In the Song Dynasty, the puppet reached its peak. In terms of puppet style, rod puppets, gunpowder-triggered puppets, flesh puppets, and water puppets were developed from the original marionette. As the puppet's tendency toward entertainment and drama continued, it was seen in many dramas and on many occasions. Meanwhile, the puppet's religious functions still thrived. In terms of locality, the puppet drama performances in the northern region were usually conducted amid an atmosphere of sacrificial offerings to ghosts and gods to eliminate agitation. In the southern region, the puppet's religious function exerted a sacrificial influence on folk She Huo 社火 (folk art performance held at traditional or religious festivals), becoming a religious rite for avoiding disasters among adults and holding a Guo Guan 過關ceremony (an old custom consisting of holding a ceremony for children in hopes that they would thrive) among children. Moreover, in terms of religious influence, the puppet drama varied between the city and the countryside. Due to the close linkage between the puppet's formation and sacrifice, in the countryside, importance was still attached to puppets in religious rituals, with puppet dramas performed to entertain gods and make vows. In the city, the puppet's entertainment function was valued for the concepts of gods and ghosts that it represented, which created an abundance of conflict with the urban mainstream civilized life.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the mystification of the puppet drama's function in preventing disasters and praying for blessings, the puppet's ability to communicate with gods enabled it to be viewed as a joss, which was deified continuously and blended into people's daily production and lives. Because of its functions of receiving and entertaining guests and redeeming lost souls, puppets remained active on holy days and at festivals, idolatrous processions, and funeral rites. In a religious form, it prevailed extensively in the southern region, including Fujian, Zhejiang, Hunan, and Sichuan, and its prevalence prominently suggested the fact that puppet artists were simultaneously Daoist priests, establishing altars at home, observing rituals when casting spells, etc. Moreover, puppet dramas were closely associated with folk witchcraft. As a result, the Xianghuo opera 香火戲, which featured religious rites performed with puppets, prevailed in the Jiangnan area (south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River), and its names, changing

with the region, were Yang opera 陽戲, Tiyang opera 提陽戲, Yuan opera 願戲, Li Yuan Jiao, etc.

In summary, this paper highlights that the uniqueness of Chinese puppet dramas not only lies in their form as popular entertaining activities but also is an outcome of overlapping with witchcraft, Daoism, and Buddhism. The mysterious religious elements within puppet dramas were generated based on common psychological demands, reflecting people's longing for supernatural power. From the viewpoint of witchcraft, several puppets were designed to present ferocious expressions, which, together with the implication of exorcism contained in the mahogany, enabled the ancient puppet to play the role of "expelling evil with evil". From the perspective of Daoism, Li Yuan Jiao, dedicated to the puppet performance for religious rites, was characterized by mystery in its message and ambiguity in its sect in terms of ritual. This was related to the early puppet artists, who, in an attempt to be free of their notorious wizard identities, always imitated orthodox Daoism and Buddhism to hide their real identities during performances. From the viewpoint of puppet artists' overall social status, they outclassed other artists due to their semi-religionist identity and the historical status of puppet figurines. From the perspective of Buddhism's influence, the improvement in puppet-making techniques and the emergence of skeleton-style puppets, for one thing, manifested progress in the puppet-making craft against the backdrop of Buddhism's rapid spread, and for another, it was the embodiment of the dissemination strategy of the secularization of the Buddhist void concept. Therefore, the entertainment factor is the basic function of Chinese puppet dramas, which integrated witchcraft, Daoism, and Buddhism and can be regarded as a mixture of ancient exorcism, devil expulsion, disease cures, and emptiness that eventually constructed a unique cultural system.

The uniqueness of Chinese puppet dramas lies in the integration of various religious rituals into traditional Chinese opera performances. This kind of art can combine the religious deity and a relaxed atmosphere to formulate a performance in which gods can have fun with human beings, and this procedure reflects the characteristics of secularization and entertainment. The religious culture endowed puppet dramas with mysterious connotations and holiness, reducing the seriousness of religious rites to be closer to folk conventions. Puppet dramas then became the head of all traditional Chinese operas, conveying thousands of years of the history and culture of China. Although this research provides a vivid case for studying the influence of different religions on puppet dramas, the interactive mechanism still requires further exploration.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Marionette: a type of puppet in which the joints are attached with silk threads, and the actor controls the movement of the puppet by pulling the threads.
- <sup>2</sup> Glove puppet: a type of puppet with a hollow head, where the actor puts his hands into the head to control the puppet's movement with his fingers.
- <sup>3</sup> Rod puppet: a type of puppet that the performer controls by manipulating a main pole linked to the puppet's head and two hand poles attached to the puppet's hands.
- <sup>4</sup> Figurines playing music. <http://61.187.53.122/collection.aspx?id=1332&lang=zh-CN> (accessed on 21 March 2023).



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