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Impact of Salome on Chinese Literature & Response to its Imagery in Early Twentieth-century China and Britain

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Abstract: *Salomé, a classic one-act play created by Oscar Wilde born in the Victorian era, was adapted from Bible but given a new meaning under Wilde's secondary production. This richness of imagery contributes to a deeper understanding of the texts the exploration of the imagery in Salomé from different perspectives and in different historical and cultural contexts is an important way to expand the content and spiritual richness of the play, which offers an opportunity to explore both the characteristics of Victorian literature and the literary values derived from Salome over time. At the same time, Salomé's one-act play was also well received in China in the early twentieth century, influencing many Chinese audiences. In short, Salomé has become popular around the world because the imagery in Salomé and its main themes have been able to give birth to different critical understandings and cultural values in different cultures and from different perspectives. This approach will facilitate the research and investigation about the similarities and differences in the cultural connotations of the work from different perspectives in the future.*

Keywords: *Salomé; The Dance of the Seven Veils; Orientalism*

1. Introduction

In *Salome*, a one-act play with orientalist overtones, Oscar Wilde takes a Western perspective on an Eastern story, lending new meaning to its imagery. In the midst of colonial expansion, Britain was witnessing the rapid expansion of its cultural, political and economic influence, and the play *Salome* was likewise disseminated broadly. Furthermore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, China was immersed in a period of change, and the introduction of Western culture manifested a critical impact on its developing cultural scene. At this time, while studying Western culture, the Chinese literati grasped the importance of ideas and theories of Western literature, and comprehending Western literary works became one of the keys by which the *new cultural movement* developed. In the early twentieth century, when *Salome* was released in change-hungry China, intellectuals and audiences, despite the play's orientalist imagery, embraced it in exclusive ways.

Due to dissimilarities in terms of historical and cultural backgrounds of the two countries, the imagery, cultural connotations and central content of *Salome* emerge differently in the estimation of the distinct audiences. People's understanding of *Salome* no longer relies on the text alone, but new interpretations are created in alignment with the ethos of society according to that society's own needs. In other words, the depth and breadth of influence of a literary work in China depended not only upon the text but also upon the practical and utilitarian value of the work. It is also this unique manner of understanding that has added unique connotations to *Salome*'s symbols. This essay will explore the differences in the imagery of *Salome* as understood by British and Chinese audiences, as well as the impact of *Salome* on Chinese audiences in the early twentieth century.

2. Differences in the understanding of Salome's imagery in China and the UK and the Chinese response

Wilde's *'The Dance of the Seven Veils',* Salome's dance before King Herod, paradoxically features both an interweaving of seduction, debauchery, desire and exoticism, imbued with orientalist overtones, in addition to a female quest for self. As Victorian English society was bound by tenets of asceticism, the rather indulgent and hedonistic characters in *Salome* sent shockwaves through English society. *'the*

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Dance of the Seven Veils' functioned as an important tool that Salome employed to fulfil her desires; it thus represents a means by which women exert control through the power of seduction, mystery and eroticism. Therefore, "The 'dance of the seven veils' that occurs at the climax of *Salomé* has often been read as a cryptic shorthand for the dramatist's own aesthetic and erotic interest in the male form"[1]. In Victorian England, *the Dance of the Seven Veils* is notable for its blending of the male gaze with Orientalist tendencies. Sensual in tone, Salome's dance represents Wilde's presentation of carnal desire as a kind of transient pleasure to be derived in the present moment. At the same time, however, Shireen Malik offers an alternative view that "Wilde does not describe Salome's dance or suggest that she remove any veils; her dance is invariably assumed to be one of unveiling, thus revealing herself" [2]. Although *'the Dance of the Seven Veils'* is an essential means of revenge for Salome, it also goes some way in breaking stereotypes by revealing women's rebellious side, expressing their desire for freedom while affirming their need for self.

Similar to Victorian audiences, to early twentieth-century Chinese audiences, *'the Dance of the Seven Veils'* functions as a symbol of Salome's courage as a woman who dared to act upon inner longing. However, the variance in understanding and choreography between Chinese and British audiences is that "When *Salome's 'the Dance of the Seven Veils'* was brought to the Chinese stage in the 1920s, *Salome* was somewhat adapted by the Chinese writer Tian Han, who deliberately reduced the lascivious and decadent mood of the dance and focused on Salome's revolt, rebellion and quest for freedom, but at the same time the play took on a utilitarian dimension"[3]. *'The Dance of the Seven Veils'* thus functions as a symbol of the pursuit of freedom, an awakening self-awareness and a break with traditional female stereotypes. Moreover, following the May Fourth Movement in China, society gradually gave birth to "the content of the ideological enlightenment movement that emphasizes the freedom of human personality and the establishment of self-consciousness and independent personality, that is, the historical and practical activities of the new cultural and literary movement of the May Fourth Movement consciously pursued the goal" [4]; in the eyes of Chinese audiences, the symbolism of *'the Dance of the Seven Veils'* coincided with this new trend, and in consequence, *Salome* grew in influence with particular adaptations in China. The early twentieth-century Chinese choreography of Salome was more radical in its presentation of Salome's spirit, and Lady Yushan, who demonstrated Salome's feminine strength on stage, was highly sought after at the time, while London preferred their dancers to express individualism. For instance, "Allan, avowedly no suffragist, aligned herself with the rebellious cultural modernism of Margot Asquith and her set, who celebrated a mobile, expressive individualism but disparaged the aims and methods of political feminism"[5] . In consequence, at the outset, the imagery of *'the Dance of the Seven Veils'* was understood differently by the audiences and performers of the two countries. In Britain, *'the Dance of the Seven Veils'* symbolises a combination of defiance, frenzy and individualism that breaks the image of women keeping silent, while in China, it symbolised an important way of pursuing freedom and stood as a model for nescient feminists. Due to the complex nature of the dance, its meaning can be analysed from a variety of perspectives, and as J. P Riquelme points out, "Wilde's dancer is as much iconoclast as an icon. She is because she fuses the aesthetic and the political in 'the truth of masks'. The truth of masks is, of course, the double mask of drama, tragedy and comedy in perpetual oscillation and indissoluble conjunction" [6]. Ultimately, this difference in understanding exists not only between cultures but also between different social groups within the same culture, as people view 'the Dance of the Seven Veils' differently, leading to variant interpretations.

For British and Chinese audiences as well, the imagery of Salome's death is marked by different responses. In the academic mainstream, there are two different views of Salome's death, one being that it constituted a punishment on the plane of secular morality: a social erasure of the individual spirit. As Salome seriously undermined Victorian standards, a potent punishment was merited. At the moment of Salome's death, both the chaos of the Eastern kingdoms along with the incest, love and human desire disintegrates as subversion fails and the "moral order" is restored. However, it seems likely that this imagery, for the British audience, also confronted the hypocrisy of this morality as detrimental to women. As women's consciousness awakened due to the gathering British feminist movement, Salome's death implied, to some extent, a revelation of the feminine predicament and an appeal for women's interests. Still, another view is that Salome's death simply functions as a dramatic stroke that serves the audience's aesthetic experience as Salome's inevitable death pushes the play to its peak and ends abruptly as a means of providing catharsis. And "Wilde lets Salomé die at the absolute height of her ecstasy, at the moment of her highest triumph that no earthly experience could match afterwards" [7]. This understanding panders to the aestheticist notion that morality, politics and society should not influence art, so Salome's death should not focus on whether it is morally critical, nor should its value be measured in terms of morality. Instead, the focus should be more on the audience's experience of the

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art and whether they enjoy the emotional value of the ephemeral but eternal.

Like the British, Chinese audiences considered Salome's death to arise from the oppression of a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Victorian focus on the silencing of women in the interests of the moral order, the Chinese audience's evaluation of Salome's death went in three separate directions, and while the general direction of the Chinese thinking bore similarities to that of the Victorian British, it tended to differ in detail. While also exploring the relationship between the individual and society, the first strain of Chinese thought followed the spiritual exploration of women, that is, the awakening of female self-awareness, personal development and search for autonomous power in love and gender relations. According to Zhou Xiaoyi, "Salome represents the ideal, love, art for art's sake, and the rebellion of desperation" [8]. Accordingly, Chinese audiences were more interested in the exploration of women in love. Moreover, Salome's decisiveness in pursuing love brought courage to the young men and women baptized by new ideas that dared them to follow the exigencies of love and to fall in love freely.

The second observation is that in the traditional model of Chinese literature, female characters are largely portrayed as passive, whereas the passion of Salome breaks the stereotype in traditional literature while lending humanity to the character. Referring to the early twentieth-century writer Tian Han, Liu Nuo notes, "Tian Han believes that Salome's death, 'with eyes unseeing other people and ears unhearing other things, with life seeking what she loves and martyring what she loves, is so intense that it brings all courage and fierceness, bringing about the fervour of life beyond death, the strength of personal will, the extreme manifestation of desire is the glory of Salome as a 'human being'"[9]. Salome's love was born but to die, and this noble expression of the human spirit invested in Salome a humanity that surpassed that of a mere character. In other words, it was the spiritual qualities underlying Salome's death that resonated with Chinese audiences, and her role as a symbol of the new age woman, ushering in spiritual inspiration and boundless courage, influenced the behaviour patterns of youth. And this pattern of behaviour is in keeping with the spirit of individualism that Western audiences have come to admire. This is a time when Salome is no longer just a character without an ego but is representing the individual to society as rebellious. Because of this, her value as a human being is reflected. The perception of Chinese audiences is beginning to focus more on their own hearts and personal values as Salome explores herself, which is why the new youth accepts *Salome*. A third view is that Salome's death created a unique emotional link between death, aesthetics and love, changing how Chinese audiences understood love. Accordingly, Salome's death represented the ultimate love in the eyes of Chinese audiences. Because of this, Salome was interpreted by Chinese audiences as an avatar of extreme and intense love, an embodiment of romanticism that extended an important influence on the portrayal of female characters in Chinese narrative.

The fundamental reason for the differences in the understanding of Salome's imagery lies in the different socio-historical contexts and results through purposes that resonate in a particular cultural context. Whether *Salome* was presented to a Victorian British audience or an early twentieth-century Chinese audience, its imagery was constantly given new meanings based on the text. As such, the interpretation of motifs proves fluid, serving the aesthetic function in *Salome* but also, particular societal needs. In consequence, the Chinese audience's acceptance of the adjusted version of the one-act play relates both to its social impact and aesthetic value. It also bears noting that Orientalism, while comprising China, Orientalism refers to the entire Eastern world, and *Salome,* set in the Middle East, did not arouse discomfort or cause offence to Chinese audiences, who were not particularly aware of associated Western stereotypes.

3. The Impact of Salome on China and Reflections

Modern Chinese literature is divided into three stages, the first lasting from 1917 to 1927 when *Salome* gradually appeared before the eyes of Chinese audiences. Following its introduction to China, *Salome* was choreographed and performed by The Nanguo Theatrical Group in 1929, and the spread of *Salome* in China followed rapidly. Firstly, it influenced the way some groups of writers approached the understanding and expression of love. As a case in point, how Bai Wei treated her love is resonant with Salome, as in the following description: "In her love letter to Yang Sao, writer Bai Wei wrote the words 'If you don't kill me, I will kill you. I must kill you! I am 'Salome', even more, poisonous than 'Salome'. I love you. I love you; I want to love you. "[10]. Accordingly, love, beauty, and death form a vital link in the conceptions of Chinese writers of the period, and the imagery of Salome's death constitutes an important factor in the shift in people's conceptions of love. The actions and spirit of Salome became how the Chinese writer community expressed love, and this trend of living for love and

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dying for love grew to include the wider public audience.

In addition, the imagery and plot of Salome have influenced Chinese writers to a certain extent in the creation of novels, plays and poems. The most typical example is the historical drama *Wang Zhaojun* by the Chinese writer Guo Moruo, which was heavily influenced by *Salome*. For instance, "Especially the episode in which 'Salome kisses John's head and dies', which had a powerful effect on Chinese writers and became a source of inspiration for many. In *Wang Zhaojun* (1924), Guo Moruo devises a similar ending in which the Emperor, out of love for Wang Zhaojun, cuts off Mao Yanshou's head and kisses it to share the emotion left by Wang Zhaojun" [11]. This play is a parody of Salome. While both plays display some degree of feminine opposition, Salome's kissing of Jokanaan's head is more indicative of female resistance. In contrast, the emperor's kissing of Mao Yanshou alludes to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society and functions as a critique of social mores. As an added measure, the conflict between soul and body in *Salome* greatly influenced the style and approach of Chinese writers. Furthermore, from a commercialism perspective, Salome represents a fashion: "As this scene suggests, the drama was discussed as if it was a fashionable commodity, one in which Wilde and Salome become signs of value which circulate the city"[12] ; it was this fashion that drove the growing influence of Chinese drama, as Wilde drove to some extent the consumer power of the time.

Finally, groups of Chinese writers have created new motifs, Chinese style, yet evocative of *Salome*. In the realm of poetry, Guo Moruo's poem *'Phoenix Nirvana'* employs a phoenix concept influenced by his view of death and the present moment: "This story of the phoenix gathering incense wood and burning itself, coming back to life after death, symbolically expresses the poet's view of Chinese society at the time. This image of the phoenix was influenced by Salome, so the phoenix is a product of modern Chinese literature, resulting from the Chineseization of Western ideas" [8]. As such, the phoenix symbolises a spirit of bravery, struggle and tenacity. Comprising concepts of life from death and rebirth, the phoenix also evokes the poet's desire to bury the old society and fight for the liberation of his country. Moreover, the cultural zeal for bravery and tenacity from life to death and the desire for freedom suggest *Salome's* spirit, particularly where the pursuit of love leads to death. Additionally, the aesthetics of death functioned as an essential means for Chinese aesthetic writers, who embraced Wilde's influence, to rebel against injustice and feudalism. Paradoxically, however, the *Fenghuang* or Chinese phoenix is a traditional divine animal, although the story of rebirth through fire is borrowed from the Western phoenix. Due to the similarity between the *Fenghuang* and the Western phoenix, a gradual synthesis of the Western phoenix as a *Fenghuang* transpired. When mingled with Western culture, the traditional Chinese imagery appropriated the western mythology, as with the spirit of Salome, gradually giving birth to a modern spirit through a familiar symbol.

However, with the passing of the 1920s and 30s, a wave of Chinese writers emerged, hostile to decadence and irrationality, and *Salome*'s frenetic plot and decadent, erotic atmosphere drew criticism. Although aestheticism and romanticism were prevalent in China, and under the influence of writers such as Wilde, some of the youth drifted into "sentimentalism" or escaped reality through aestheticism; "Most Chinese playwrights, often introduced or borrowed from certain non-utilitarian and super-utilitarian artistic creations in Western literature with a distinctly utilitarian goal in mind, reflecting the role of the national cultural psychological inertia of emphasizing reason and practicality" [13]. At the same time, a debate was fomenting as to whether to embrace Chinese tradition or Western culture. As opposed to cultural differences, the variability in understanding between Chinese and British audiences grew out of consideration of the national character and social history. Of course, the necessity to reflect on the excessive worship of aestheticism also arose as society sought a balance between aesthetics and human emotion.

4. Culture and Communication

Unfortunately, "Works on modern Chinese dramatic culture, despite their excellent qualities, appear painfully few—especially at this moment when interest among the new generations of students and scholars in Chinese theatre in general and modern Chinese theatre, in particular, is increasing"[14]. Although the works of writers influenced by Wilde have been translated into various languages, feedback and analysis are not particularly extensive. Nonetheless, one work worth mentioning is the play *Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu. The female characters in *Thunderstorm*, including Fan Yi, are typically Salomé-style, socially bound near-maniacs, rebellious in word and deed, and of course, erotic and lustful. As an iconic Chinese play, the Chinese literary and artistic community has done its utmost to promote *Thunderstorm* abroad. For example, the play was translated into English by Wang Tso-Liang and A.C. Barnes in 1958. Then in 2006 *Thunderstorm* was turned into the film *Curse of the Golden*

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Flower by Chinese director Zhang Yimou, who changed the modern setting to one of royal intrigue. Subsequently, in 2016, *Thunderstorm* was adapted into an opera that made its commercial debut overseas at the Theatre in London. However, this attempt by *Curse of the Golden Flower* met a lacklustre response, with most of its awards overseas being related to costume design, perhaps by the tendency to Chinese costumes in the movie to evoke eroticism, violence and chaos of Orientalism. Although the film generated some feedback overseas, it did not perform well at the box office. Still, it remains significant as an attempt by the Chinese film industry to recycle the influence of Wilde by attempting to influence Western culture through a syncretic blend of Wilde and traditional culture. In addition, when *Thunderstorm* was screened at the Theatre in London, it incorporated traditional Chinese instruments, and according to an interview in China's Xinhua, “Brian Hick, an elderly man in his 60s, told reporters that this was the first time he had seen a modern Chinese opera and felt that the opera *Thunderstorm* was a good interpretation of Chinese culture in the form of Western theatre, with the Chinese instruments, in particular, adding to it quite a lot classical atmosphere”[15] . Despite the cultural and linguistic differences, the theme of love is common to the whole world, and the aestheticism of the Chinese opera is also very accessible to British audiences.

Notwithstanding, it must be admitted that the influence of modern Chinese drama overseas is limited, whereas the influence on Chinese writers in the early twentieth century by Western authors such as Wilde was extensive. However, while integrating Western intellectual and literary influences, Chinese writers would retain a certain degree of Chinese cultural heritage, “Regardless of the particular literary style or artistic philosophy they promulgated, all were adamant in their demand for a modern Chinese literature that could proudly be compared to its Western counterpart in its capacity to reach and uplift the common people” [16]. In the same way, without changing the original storyline, Chinese writers drew what they needed, in terms of staging and imagery, from the work. Moreover, while embracing the aestheticism and decadence represented by Wilde, Chinese writers tended to contextualise these qualities by their cultural backgrounds and through traditional stories rather than appropriating too much of the Western framework as a backdrop for novels or plays. However, concerning the impact of modern Chinese works on British audiences, the lack of translations as well as the initiative to seize the opportunity to disseminate literature and art has to some extent hindered the understanding of Chinese culture among British audiences, thus indicating a responsibility on the part of Chinese scholars.

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