

# A Review of Studies on Tibetan Traditional Drama

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**Abstract**—The traditional Tibetan drama represented by eight major Tibetan drama (hereinafter referred to as Tibetan drama) has distinct national characteristics and artistic characteristics. It is a wonderful work in the garden of Chinese national literature and art and is an important part of Chinese excellent traditional culture. Studies on Tibetan drama in China and foreign countries started from 1920s, involving many aspects and fields such as historical origin, drama genre, and script story, and play a crucial role in summarizing and analyzing the performance experience of Tibetan drama, exploring the theory of Tibetan drama, and promoting the development and improvement of Tibetan drama art.

**Keywords**—Tibetan drama; review of studies; artistic characteristics

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan drama was born and formed under the unique geographical and humanistic environment of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. It has a long history, unique charm, and distinctive national characteristics and artistic characteristics. It is a wonderful work in the garden of Chinese national literature and art, and is an outstanding part of Chinese excellent traditional culture. Studies on Tibetan drama in China and foreign countries started from 1920s; but until the reform and opening up, the study of Tibetan drama in the academic circles has always been at the level of translation and introduction, and there are few articles and books devoted to such studies. This paper intends to sort out the situation of studies on Tibetan drama from three aspects: domestic studies, foreign studies and comparison studies on Tibetan drama and other dramas, summarize the study results, and analyze and evaluate the achievements and shortcomings in the studies.

## II. DOMESTIC STUDIES ON TIBETAN DRAMA

Judging from the domestic studies, the famous Tibetan scholar Wang Yao is undoubtedly a representative figure who carried out pioneering study on Tibetan drama earlier<sup>1 2 3</sup>. Based on the wood version, the manuscript and the dictation of old artists of Tibetan drama, he edited and

<sup>1</sup> Wang Yao. Collection of Tibetan Drama Stories, China Theatre Press. 1st edition, May 1963. p.1.

<sup>2</sup> This article is attached in the book "Collection of Tibetan Drama Stories" published in 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Yao. Collection of Tibetan Drama Stories, China Theatre Press. 1st edition, May 1963. p.177.

published the first Chinese translation of the eight traditional Tibetan dramas — Collection of Tibetan Drama Stories, and introduced and commented Tibetan Drama from many aspects such as the legend of origin, the way of performance, and the content of the subject matter in the article "Tibetan Drama and Its Stories", and highly commented this "Tibetan drama with strong national style and national characteristics". When introducing and commenting the drama "Princess Wencheng", he made a preliminary discussion on the origin, the way of performance, the dance vocals, etc. of Tibetan drama; when discussing the way of performance of Tibetan drama, he said,<sup>4</sup> before the liberation, the Tibetan drama mainly adopted the mode of performance on square. [Labrang (Xiahe) area in the southern of Gansu Province adopted the form of performance on stage due to being affected by Han drama.] In the performance, the performers may make up simply, wear masks in different shapes and colors to show the good, evil, loyal, and traitor natures of the characters; on the side, there is a special person using allegro to explain the development of the plot to the audiences. When the performer steps on the scene, there is accompaniment of percussion devices, and the performer will dance with the rhythm. When singing, the backstage performers may join in singing behind the stage. As the performance is conducted in square, in order to prevent loss of sound, performer's voice generally must be high and loud so that the vocal style have the straightforward feature of the plateau people.

From this comment, it can be seen that Wang Yao's studies on Tibetan drama's way of performance had been quite professional and in-depth, fully reflected his profound Tibetan cultural theory, comprehensively summarized the unique style of Tibetan drama, and profoundly summarized and concluded the mask and aria style features of Tibetan drama.

He also set a high value on the artistic characteristics of Tibetan drama:

This kind of drama draws material from historical legends, highlights what should be emphasized, and eliminates the part to be deleted. It can well show the skills of the playwright and artists. It is neither away from historical truth nor limited to historical data. On the basis of being in line with the historical fact, it subjects to necessary

<sup>4</sup> Wang Yao. Collection of Tibetan Drama Stories, China Drama Publishing House, 1st edition, May 1963, p. 177.

artistic process, hence shows distinctive subject and vivid characters and images<sup>5</sup>.

There are two points worth noting in this comment: first, Wang Yao fully affirmed the material selection angle and tailoring skills of Tibetan dramas. He believed that the selection of materials was perfect, and it was always charming with either light or heavy makeup, which strongly highlighted the personal characteristics and intelligence of the heroes; second, Wang Yao held that Tibetan drama also had very clever skill in processing the relation between historical fact and artistic truth, fully demonstrated the Tibetan people's life wisdom and romanticism, and achieved the dialectical unity between the two factors. Wang Yao's control on the two artistic features of Tibetan drama is undoubtedly fair and accurate. This kind of romantic feature is the main characteristic and aesthetic pursuit of Tibetan drama.

Another notable researcher is Mr. Qu Liuyi, a famous Chinese drama theorist. In 1964, he made a general introduction to Tibetan drama from the origin, content and way of performance of Tibetan drama in his book "Chinese Minority Drama". Although the length of the article is not long, but there is not lack of insight. When talking about the origin of Tibetan drama, he clearly pointed out:

The folk rap "Lama Mani" is a form of folk vocal art involving rap. The scene where artist carries a comic story painting is called "Tangka" in Tibetan. The painting is hanged aside when rapping<sup>6</sup>. The performer may sing while pointing the character and story shown in the painting by using a lash. It seems that the painting art is used as an aid to the art of rap, so that the audience can obtain an auditory image, and more the visual image. Its vocals are only [Lama Mani] tone, and they don't have to be accompanied by instruments when rapping. The libretto or script of a ba-llad-singer can not only be used for rapping but also be used as the performance script of Tibetan drama. The difference is that the former is a rap conducted by one person. The person not only narrates in the position of a third-person but also rites and perform rap in the position of the character in the story; however in the performance of Tibetan drama, the narrative part of the third-person prose is conducted by an outsider beside, while the actor only sing lyrics. This shows that "Lama Mani" has profound influence on the literature and performance form of Tibetan drama.

Judging from the study results of many scholars later, Qu Liuyi's judgment on that the origin of Tibetan drama was from Lama Mani was undoubtedly accurate and pertinent. This comment not only illustrates the flesh-and-blood ties between Tibetan drama and the Tibetan traditional rap literary form Lama Mani but also pointed out the difference between the two factors in a meticulous manner.

From Wang Yao and Qu Liuyi to the 1980s, the basic situation in the field of studies on Tibetan drama was: the

study depth was insufficient, and the overall study level was not high. For example, there are partial contents discussed about Tibetan dramas in some works such as Ren Naiqiang's "Tibetan map and record" and "Xikang's Notes" and Zhuang Xueben's "Dramas in Tibet". In addition, some domestic newspapers and magazines have also successively published many articles about propagating and introduction of Tibetan drama, but the theoretical value is generally not high. After the 1980s, with the gradual deepening of the reform and opening up, especially since entering the new century, under the influence of Western literary theoretical trend of thought, domestic academic circles have set off a wave of studies on Tibetan drama, and gradually deepened the relevant studies, and made extensive discussion and studies focusing on the origin of Tibetan drama, the genre of dramas, and artistic features; hence a large number of theoretical articles and monographs with high academic level have emerged. Among them, Liu Zhiqun, Jue Ge, Bian Duo, and Liu Kai's works are outstanding. After sorting out the status of relevant studies, it is concluded as shown in the following "Table I":

Among them, the most striking phenomenon is that up to now what is still appreciated by academic colleagues is undoubtedly the big discussion conducted on the classification and genre of Tibetan dramas between Liu Zhiqun, Liu Kai, Gazang Caidan, Ma Chengfu and other scholars in the middle of 1980s. They once made many times of fierce discussion and argument related. It was quite like the "contention of a hundred schools of thought" in the Warring States Period. It is precisely because of the scientific and serious research attitude of extensive scholars in the academic circles so that it has effectively promoted the in-depth development of the research and discussion of Tibetan drama art. (See "Table I")

<sup>5</sup> Wang Yao. Collection of Tibetan Drama Stories, China Drama Publishing House, 1st edition, May 1963, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> Qu Liuyi. Chinese Minority Drama, The Writers Publishing House, 1st edition, February 1964, p. 20.

**TABLE I. RESEARCH ON TIBETAN DRAMA IN CHINA SINCE 1980S**

S/N	Name	Main works or articles	Field of study	Main arguments
argument	Liu Zhiqun	"Chinese Drama Chronicles Tibetan", "Chinese Tibetan Drama Art", "Tibetan Dramas and Customs", "Chinese Tibetan Drama History", "Tibetan Drama Art Tour", "Tibetan Drama Picture and Text Chronicles", and "Tibetan Art"	Tibetan drama playwright	1. The origin of Tibetan drama is diversified; 2. The Tibetan dialect and artistic features are used as the standard for the classification of dramas; 3. The artistic features are discussed from the aspects of drama text, performance system and mask art; 4. The significance of and program for Tibetan drama protection
2	Bian Duo	"Return to the true features of Tibetan drama — on the origin, development and artistic features of Tibetan drama"	Tibetan drama playwright	1. Tibetan drama is originated from the white-mask Tibetan drama before the 8th century; 2. Tibetan drama art is studied and discussed from various aspects such as performance program, rhythmical part, dance performance skills, music aria, mask art, Tibetan drama troupe, subject classification and religious color.
3	Jue Ge	"Review of Tibetan Drama"	Tibetan drama composition	Tibetan drama art is studied and discussed from various aspects such as the development history, structural form, music aria, drumming instruments, and rhythmical part of Tibetan drama.
4	Liu Kai	"Re-recognition and Reflection on "Tibetan Drama"—"On the Normalization of the Names of Tibetan Dramas", "From the Normalization of the Names of Tibetan Dramas to the Classification of Tibetan Dramas — A Reply to Comrade Liu Zhiqun's Discussion", "On the Formation, Development and Characteristics of the System of Tibetan Dramas", "Classification of Dialect Culture and Tibetan Drama Species", "The Proposing of, Divergence in and Bridging of the Study of Tibetan Drama Species", and "Tibetan Drama and the New Sense of the Township People Exorcising"	Study of Tibetan drama	He presented his opinion on the origin, name, and genre of Tibetan drama.
5	Cao Yali	"On the Tragic and Comedy Factors Contained in Tibetan Drama — Analysis of the Tragic and Comedy Characteristics in Qinghai Huangnan Tibetan Drama", and "Qinghai Huangnan Tibetan Drama"	Study of Tibetan drama	He made studies and discussion on the development history and current situation, performance plays, folk theatrical troupe and artists and stage art characteristics of Qinghai Huangnan Tibetan drama.
6	Li Yun and Zhou Quangen	Tibetan Drama	Study of Tibetan drama	He made studies and discussion on the development history, cultural expression form, artistic features, protection and inheritance, and scripts of Tibetan drama.
7	Zhang Ying	"Tibetan drama songs and dances"	Tibetan drama photographing	They made demonstration and discussion on the origin and development of Tibetan drama, white mask and blue mask, eight Tibetan dramas, Tibetan folk theatrical troupe and Tibetan drama costumes.
8	Qiangba Qujie and Ciren Langjie	"Tibetan Traditional Dramas — Ajiram Art Research"	Study of Tibetan drama	They made study and discussion on the art of Tibetan drama from perspective of the influence of Shimingxue (Ten most classical natural sciences of Tibetan Classical Culture) on Tibetan drama and music aria
9	Li Yi, Xin Leiqian	Research on the forms of Tibetan drama	Study of Tibetan drama	Over an in-depth field investigation, they made study and discussion on Tibetan drama from the historical evolution, script, performance, stage art and organizational forms of Tibetan drama.

<sup>a</sup>. Note: For a comparative study of Tibetan drama and other related drama species, this paper intends to make relevant review below, and will not be repeated here.

### III. FOREIGN STUDIES ON TIBETAN DRAMA

From the perspective of foreign studies on Tibetan drama, the translation media (translation studies) and research on Tibetan drama are still relatively lagging behind so that most foreign readers know little about Tibetan drama and are relatively unfamiliar with Tibetan drama<sup>7</sup>. First, in terms of text translation, seen from the information collected so far, it was not until 2013 that Mr. Wang Yao translated his early published "Selected Tibetan drama stories" into English. Second, seen from the existing partial papers and works related, most of them still stay at the level of general overview, and only individual chapters involve studies of Tibetan drama, such as "Tibetan Civilization" and "Tibetan Epic and Rap Artist" written by Shi Taian, a famous French Tibetologist. Shi Taian once said in the preface to the book "Tibetan Civilization":

The author does not hold the extravagant hope of seeking for involving in all fields and all times of Tibetan Civilization. This book is only to provide an overview of the Tibetan civilization that we know today<sup>8</sup>.

In the book "Tibetan Civilization", the author only used about one page of space to give a general introduction to the theme, opening statement, performance content and performance form of the Tibetan drama. Nevertheless, the unique research perspective of foreign researchers can also provide Chinese with a valuable experience and reference.

### IV. STATUS QUO OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TIBETAN DRAMA AND OTHER DRAMAS

Liu Zhiqun is one of the scholars who compared the Tibetan drama with the Han dramas and the Indian classic Sanskrit drama earlier<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup>. His article "Comparative Study of Chinese Tibetan Drama and Indian Classic Sanskrit Drama" expounds the similarities and differences between Tibetan drama and Indian classic Sanskrit from aspects of historical development origin, story content and role, form structure and drama aesthetic thinking, and on this basis, explores the cause of formation of the artistic characteristics and advantages of Tibetan drama. In addition, Liu Zhiqun also published the "Comparative Study of Dramas and Tibetan Drama", the "Comparative Study of Chinese Tibetan Drama and Western Drama" and the "Comparative Study of the Overall Aesthetic Form of Tibetan Drama and Dramas". Xie Zhenyuan's book, "Comparison of Tibetan Drama Culture and Han Drama Culture", strives to "search, refine, sum up their commonalities and individualities, and the similarities

and differences in their artistic traits through an equal dialogue with Tibetan and Chinese drama cultures", and further "explores the mutual influence and penetration of Tibetan and Chinese drama cultures, and thus confirms the flesh-and-blood ties between Tibetan culture and Chinese culture, providing scientific evidence for the origin and development stages of Chinese drama art history".

### V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, it can be seen that Chinese and foreign studies on Tibetan drama involve the historical origin, the genre of drama species, script and stories and other aspects and fields, and play a key role in summarizing and analyzing performance experience of Tibetan drama, exploring the theory of Tibetan drama and promoting the development and improvement of Tibetan drama art.

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<sup>7</sup> Wang Yao. Selected Tibetan drama stories (English). New World Press, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> See (French) Shi Taian (author); Geng Sheng (trans.). Tibetan civilization [M]. China Tibetology Publishing House. 2012, 2nd edition. Preface.

<sup>9</sup> Chongqing Federation of Science Circles. Summary Compilation of the Achievement of Chongqing National Social Science Fund Project (Vol. 2). Chongqing Publishing Group, December 2014. p.706.

<sup>10</sup> Chongqing Federation of Science Circles. Summary Compilation of the Achievement of Chongqing National Social Science Fund Project (Vol. 2). Chongqing Publishing Group, December 2014. p.706.