

The Content of Taoist Ritual in Chinese Opera Scripts: From Song-Yuan to Ming-Qing Dynasties

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Abstract:

Taoism, as an indigenous Chinese religious belief, has profoundly influenced the landscape of Chinese opera art, leaving an enduring imprint on its subject matter, content, performance aesthetics, etc. Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, Chinese opera has been imbued with the essence of folklore literature, and has drawn inspiration from Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religions. Ritual performances have been intricately interwoven within the opera arts, evolving to reflect the spiritual and cultural ethos of the era. The enduring influence of Taoism on the art form is demonstrated in the perpetuation of opera scripts through generations. The Taoist rituals began to be featured in Song-Yuan opera scripts, with a heightened prevalence in the scripts of the Ming and Qing dynasties. These rituals are typically categorized into two distinct forms: Taoist mystic-techniques rituals and retreat and offering rituals. Through the examination of the evolution of Taoist rituals in opera scripts spanning from the Song-Yuan to the Ming-Qing periods, this research illuminates the nuanced interplay between ritualistic practices and the development of Taoism during these historical epochs, and how sectarian divisions notably influenced the creation of folk art.

Keywords: Chinese opera; Taoist ritual; religious content in opera scripts.

1. Introduction

Taoism, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of China, has long been intertwined with the rich tapestry of Chinese folk art. This native Chinese religion, characterized by its inclusive and pluralistic nature, has permeated traditional Chinese opera art through its doctrines, ideological perspectives, tales of immor-

tal beings, and intricate rituals. The fusion of Taoist elements with opera not only shapes the thematic essence of these works but also leaves a profound imprint on the very structure and style of opera performances. This study embarks on a journey to explore the dynamic evolution of Taoist rituals within the realm of opera literature across the illustrious Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. By delving into

the historical progression of the amalgamation between folk opera art and Taoist beliefs during these significant epochs, this research endeavors to offer novel insights and analytical frameworks that resonate with contemporary opera research paradigms and cultural preservation endeavors. Methodologically, this research paper adopts a rigorous approach, employing comprehensive literary analysis and comparative historical research techniques. It entails the meticulous organization and interpretation of a diverse array of literary sources, coupled with in-depth analyses of opera productions spanning the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. Through this methodical examination, the study aims to elucidate the specific representations of Taoist rituals embedded within opera scripts and uncover the evolutionary patterns inherent in operatic presentations. The opera scripts scrutinized in this study are sourced from Volumes I to IV of the esteemed *Collections of Ancient Chinese Opera*. Building upon the seminal work of esteemed scholar Liu Zhongyu (1946-), who delineated two fundamental types of religious Taoist rituals — one centered on sacrifices symbolizing devotion to deities, and the other focused on subjugating deities to assert dominance over supernatural entities — this research categorizes these rituals into Ritual of mystic techniques, encompassing practices like divination, incantation, and exorcism, as well as the Retreat (*Zhai*) and Offering (*Jiao*) rituals, involving activities such as seeking peace, healing ailments, and providing salvation to the departed [1]. In essence, this study sets out to unravel the intricate tapestry of Taoist influences within traditional Chinese opera, shedding light on the evolving nature of Taoist rituals and their impact on operatic expressions across the four pivotal periods in Chinese history.

2. Literature Review

The lineage of original Song-Yuan operatic scripts, as illuminated by Qian Nanyang (1899-1987) in his seminal work *An Overview of Chinese Opera Texts Collations*, can be discerned through a meticulous examination of various archival sources. These historical artifacts, though regrettably scarce due to the ravages of time, are invaluable windows into the operatic traditions of ancient China. Qian Nanyang's research unveils a treasure trove of operatic scripts primarily preserved in 'xi' records, notably encompassing Volume 37 of the *Yongle Encyclopedia Catalogue*, the *Narrative Compile of Nanxi* housing 65 Original Song Yuan Texts, as well as references in late Song opera scripts like *The Story of Official's Son* and *the Collection of Nineth-cell Cipu*. Furthermore, Yuan chuanqi scripts scattered across works such as *Compilation of the Yuan Scripts of Nanqu*, *Collection of Chuanqi*

Scripts, and *the Bibliography of the Li's Hai Cheng Lou Collection* provide additional insights into the operatic landscape of the era. Despite the tragic loss of over ninety percent of these historical scripts, a handful of unaltered Song-Yuan gems have withstood the test of time. Notable among these are *The Top Scholar Zhang Xie*, *The Story of Official's Son*, *Sun the Butcher*, *Tale of White Rabbit*, and *Tale of the Pipa*, revered as the oldest and most authentic Nanxi scripts that have been preserved to date [2, 3]. The surviving Song-Yuan scripts that have been passed down to us have not emerged unscathed from the tides of history. Ming authors, in their creative endeavors, have left their mark on these scripts, modifying them to varying degrees. However, a close examination of the ritualistic elements from the Song-Yuan to the Ming-Qing periods can be gleaned through an analysis of extant Ming editions of Song-Yuan Opera scripts, Yuan zaju scripts, and scripts from the Ming and Qing dynasties. By juxtaposing and comparing these script editions, scholars can begin to trace the evolution of ritual contents across these transformative epochs, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in Chinese opera.

3. Analysis

The ritualistic practice of 'worshipping the star lords of the Northern Dipper with lanterns', as depicted in the Yuan Zaju *The Story of Peach Blossom Girl Deciphering Spells*, unveils a narrative thread woven with elements of celestial reverence and the pursuit of longevity [4]. This ritual, central to the character Peng Da's quest for an extended life span under the guidance of the enigmatic Peach Blossom Girl, draws its roots from ancient beliefs in stellar influences and the venerable cult of longevity [5]. The act of *Worshipping the Great Dipper* finds its origins in the esoteric realm of ancient star worship and the pursuit of eternal vitality. As elucidated in Volume 66 of the *Secret Essentials of the Most High*, this ritual involves a sequence of ceremonial steps: from the burning of incense and candles to the presentation of offerings to the birth star, culminating in heartfelt prayers. Through these meticulously orchestrated rites, practitioners aspire to ward off misfortunes, cleanse themselves of transgressions, and secure the gift of an enduring life [6]. However, within the narrative confines of *The Story of Peach Blossom Girl Deciphering Spells*, the portrayal of this intricate ritual remains somewhat elusive. While the zaju script briefly outlines the ritual elements, such as incense burning and sacrifices, it swiftly transitions to subsequent scenes without delving into the detailed procedural intricacies of the worship practice. The ritual of worshipping the Northern Dipper, albeit mentioned as a pivotal concept within the

script, primarily serves as a narrative device to propel the storyline forward, rather than as a focal point for detailed exploration. This narrative choice hints at a broader thematic strategy prevalent in Yuan zaju scripts, where ritualistic elements often function as symbolic motifs to advance character development and plot progression, rather than as detailed expositions of ceremonial practices. The ritual of worshipping the star lords of the Northern Dipper, in this context, serves as a narrative catalyst that underscores themes of divine intervention, celestial influence, and the quest for longevity, enriching the dramatic tapestry of the zaju while leaving the intricacies of the ritual itself shrouded in mystery and allusion.

The intricate practice of Kaozhao, a Taoist mystic technique encompassing the inspection of demons and the summoning of spirits, along with the subsequent evaluation of their transgressions and the imposition of penalties, stands as a cornerstone of esoteric ritual within Taoist traditions. Rooted in ancient mystic practices, Kaozhao embodies a structured ceremonial process that delves into the realms of spiritual communion and metaphysical adjudication [7]. The Tang dynasty Taoist text '*Jin Suo Liu Zhu Yin*' in the *Daozang* provides a detailed roadmap of the Kaozhao ritual, outlining a sequential procedure that involves the construction of an altar, the establishment of a sacred space akin to a prison, the invocation of celestial forces symbolized by the mainstay and the dipper, the summoning of spirits and generals, and the expulsion of malevolent entities [8, 9]. This systematic approach to Kaozhao, as documented in ancient texts, underscores the methodical nature of Taoist practices aimed at navigating the spiritual realm [10]. The third scene of the Yuan zaju '*The Story of Celestial Master Zhang's Interrogation of Matrimonial*' unfolds as a vivid enactment of the Kaozhao ritual, mirroring the procedural intricacies delineated in '*Jin Suo Liu Zhu Yin*'. Within the script, the ritual is not merely described but intricately woven into the fabric of the dialogue, with spells, invocations, and the roster of celestial beings seamlessly integrated into the characters' recitations. The meticulous staging directions, denoted by cues such as "Ke", serve as prompts for the actors, guiding their movements and vocalizations through each segment of the ritual. Noteworthy is the script's attention to detail, with specific cues like "calling down deities" and "hitting commandment plague" meticulously delineating the specialized actions and utterances required for each ritual component. Through these cues, the script not only captures the essence of the Kaozhao ritual but also provides a comprehensive and immersive portrayal of the ceremonial proceedings, offering a window into the rich tapestry of Taoist mystic practices as translated onto the theatrical stage. In essence, the incorporation of the Kaozhao ritual

within the Yuan zaju script not only serves as a dramatic device but also functions as a lens through which audiences can glimpse the intricacies of Taoist mystic-techniques, underscoring the fusion of spiritual tradition and performative artistry within the realm of Chinese theater.

Within the realm of Nanxi opera, a form of Chinese opera originating from the Song and Yuan dynasties, intricate rituals play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative fabric of various theatrical works. Two notable examples from this tradition, '*The Story of Jing Hairpin*' and '*The Story of Yue Fei's Framing*', offer intriguing insights into the evolution and elaboration of ritualistic practices within theatrical performances across different editions and periods. In '*The Story of Jing Hairpin*', a Song-Yuan Nanxi opera, the ritual for the salvation of the dead takes center stage, intertwining elements of Taoist ceremonial practices with theatrical storytelling. Through an examination of various editions, it becomes evident that the Jiajing-period Ming edition stands out as a representative version closest to the original texts of the Song-Yuan dynasties, relatively untouched by Ming literati interventions [2]. Although the ritual text itself is absent from the scripts, scattered references to ritual materials such as streamer, registers, tablets, etc., between the male and painted-face characters hint at the underlying Taoist influences guiding the salvation ritual for the deceased [11]. Comparing this early Ming edition with later Ming versions reveals a gradual embellishment of ritual details, with the incorporation of professional ritual texts into the lyrics and the addition of sessions such as the 'Universal Salvation' for orphaned souls, enhancing the holistic nature of the ritual depiction. The evolution from the original to later editions showcases a shift towards a more specific and elaborate portrayal of the ritual performances, moving beyond mere superficial mentions by the male character to a more nuanced and detailed exploration of the ceremonial processes involved. In '*The Story of Yue Fei's Framing*', an early Ming edition delves into the ritual for Averting Calamities, drawing from ancient Taoist texts such as the Ritual of the Offering of the '*Most High for Dispersing Calamity and Praying for Blessing*' to construct a comprehensive ceremonial framework. Through references to historical sources like the '*Yongle Encyclopedia Catalogue*' and the '*Narrative Compile of Nanxi*', scholars have traced the lineage of the ritual text, suggesting ties to the original Song-Yuan texts or their adapted renditions [12]. The detailed ritual procedures outlined in the Ming edition script mirror the traditional Taoist practices associated with averting calamities, encompassing steps such as issuing announcements, sealing the altar, invocations, meditation on masters, lighting incense-burners, and offerings to deities. The script's incorporation of professional Taoist ritual terminology

and the comprehensive depiction of ritual elements signal a meticulous effort to present a thorough record of the Averting Calamities Ritual, underscoring the script's role as a valuable repository of ceremonial knowledge within the theatrical context [13]. The nuanced exploration of ritualistic practices within Nanxi opera not only enriches the dramatic tapestry of these theatrical works but also offers a window into the evolving nature of ceremonial traditions across different textual editions and historical periods, illuminating the enduring significance of ritual performances within Chinese cultural and artistic landscapes.

The intricate interplay between textual editions, ritualistic practices, and narrative evolution within Nanxi opera presents a complex tapestry of continuity and innovation, particularly evident in works like *'The Story of Jing Hairpin'* and *'The Story of Yue Fei's Framing'*. Despite uncertainties surrounding the authenticity of Ming edition scripts compared to original Song-Yuan texts and the extent of Ming literati interventions in ritual details, a nuanced analysis unveils a continuum of ritual content across different versions, underscoring a pattern of transmission and adaptation across dynastic boundaries. In the case of *'The Story of Jing Hairpin'*, the Ming edition script raises questions about its fidelity to the original Song-Yuan texts and the potential influence of Ming literati on ritual details. While uncertainties persist, the depiction of rituals such as the Taoist ceremony for the salvation of the dead within the opera hints at a deep-rooted connection to traditional practices. The gradual enrichment of ritual descriptions in later Ming editions signifies a deliberate effort to enhance the holistic nature of the ceremonies, revealing a nuanced evolution in the portrayal of ritual performances across textual iterations. Similarly, in *'The Story of Yue Fei's Framing'*, the narrative intricacies surrounding the ritual for Averting Calamities highlight a continuity in ritual content despite potential Ming literati modifications. The incorporation of elements like setting up altars for Taoist priests within the opera's plot suggests a deliberate continuity with established ceremonial practices, bridging the gap between textual adaptations and ritualistic traditions. The preservation of core ritual elements across Ming editions, albeit with minor variations in tunes or wording, underscores a consistent thematic thread linking the original Song-Yuan texts, Ming editions, and subsequent chuanqi adaptations [12]. The observation of ritual content across different versions of these Nanxi operas reveals a pattern of ritual transmission and adaptation that transcends dynastic boundaries. Despite potential modifications by Ming literati, the underlying structure and essence of ritual performances exhibit a remarkable continuity from the Song-Yuan era through the Ming dynasty and into later adaptations. This continuity underscores a deep-seated

reverence for traditional ceremonial practices and a commitment to preserving the essence of ritualistic storytelling within the evolving landscape of Chinese opera.

The evolution of ritualistic depictions in Ming and Qing dynasty opera works reflects a significant expansion in the variety and complexity of ceremonial practices embedded within the theatrical narratives. Through a comparative examination of these operatic creations, a discernible proliferation of ritual types emerges, encompassing traditional Taoist mystic-techniques and elaborate rituals such as Retreat and Offering ceremonies, underscoring a rich tapestry of ceremonial traditions interwoven with dramatic storytelling. The Qing chuanqi opera *The Palace of Eternal Life* introduces distinctive Taoist mystic-techniques' rituals, notably the 'Achieve Mortuary Liberation and Ascend to Heaven' ritual, which delineates the Taoist perspective on the post-mortem transformation of individuals shedding their mortal forms and ascending to the celestial realm [14]. Additionally, the 'Soul-Recovering' ritual elucidates a mystical process of spiritual reintegration, adding layers of metaphysical depth to the operatic narrative. Other Taoist mystic-techniques rituals like 'Exorcism' in *'The Story of Tan Flower'* and 'Summoning of Underground Warriors' in *'Heavy Happiness'* further enrich the repertoire of ceremonial practices, infusing the operatic landscape with esoteric rites and supernatural elements.

The Ming and Qing opera works exhibit a profusion of storylines intertwined with Retreat and Offering rituals, underscoring a thematic continuity with traditional ceremonial customs. Examples such as the Yellow Retreat Rites in *'The Story of Qilin'* and *'The Peony Pavilion'*, the Jade Register Rites in *'The Story of Expressing Loyalty'*, and the Rites of Lantern Festival in *'The Uprising of Li Zicheng'* showcase a diverse array of ritualistic practices embedded within the operatic narratives. Notably, the early Qing opera *'The Peach Blossom Fan'* exemplifies a heightened level of detail and specificity in ritual presentations compared to scripts from the Song-Yuan period. The meticulous portrayal of the Yellow Retreat Rites in this opera, ranging from the altar layout to ritual procedures and lyrical components, underscores a profound sense of integrity and professionalism in the performance of rituals. This enriched depiction highlights a conscious effort to elevate the ceremonial aspects of operatic productions, imbuing the performances with a sense of authenticity and cultural depth. In essence, the Ming-Qing opera works manifest a vibrant tapestry of ritualistic practices, ranging from traditional Taoist mystic-techniques to elaborate Retreat and Offering ceremonies, each contributing to the immersive world of theatrical storytelling. The intricate interplay between ceremonial traditions and dramatic narratives underscores a rich cultural heritage embedded

within the operatic fabric, reflecting a continuum of ritual evolution and innovation that transcends temporal boundaries, enriching the operatic experience with layers of spiritual, metaphysical, and cultural significance.

4. Discussion

The examination of Retreat and Offering rituals within the context of Ming and Qing opera scripts reveals a nuanced evolution in the depiction of ceremonial practices, characterized by a shift from concise descriptions lacking in procedural intricacies to more elaborate and detailed portrayals, particularly evident in the delineation of Taoist mystic techniques' rituals. Traditionally, the script content pertaining to Retreat and Offering rituals exhibits a remarkable conciseness, often lacking in-depth procedural details. For instance, the lantern ritual in the *Story of Peach Blossom Girl* may be sparse in its description, potentially omitting crucial elements like deciphering spells. This brevity in textual representations of ceremonial practices underscores a prevailing trend towards succinctness in conveying ritualistic content, a characteristic that distinguishes these rituals from the more intricately detailed Taoist mystic techniques' rituals found in select works. In contrast to the brevity observed in *Retreat and Offering* rituals, texts elucidating Taoist mystic techniques' rituals, such as the Yuan zaju '*Story of Celestial Master Zhang's Interrogation of Matrimonial*', demonstrate a heightened level of specificity. These rituals are characterized by detailed descriptions of procedures and elements, offering a more comprehensive insight into the mystical practices embedded within the operatic narratives. The specificity of these rituals underscores a deliberate effort to enhance the richness and complexity of ceremonial depictions, imbuing the performances with a sense of authenticity and depth. A closer examination of later Nanxi scripts revised by Ming literati reveals a trend towards augmenting the details of rituals in response to the original Song-Yuan texts. These revisions introduce additional layers of complexity to ritual performances, enriching the procedural aspects and incorporating new elements into the ceremonial practices. The Ming and Qing playwrights further expand the repertoire of Taoist rituals within opera works, introducing large-scale Retreat and Offering rituals characterized by more complete procedural frameworks. This evolution signifies a conscious effort to enhance the authenticity and immersive quality of ritual performances, reflecting a growing emphasis on intricacy and specificity in the portrayal of ceremonial traditions. In essence, the transition from concise descriptions in *Retreat and Offering* rituals to more detailed depictions in *Taoist Mystic Techniques*' rituals underscores a broader trend towards

enriching the ceremonial content within Ming and Qing opera scripts. The revisions made by Ming literati and the contributions of later playwrights highlight a concerted effort to enhance the complexity and authenticity of ritual performances, expanding the repertoire of Taoist rituals and imbuing the operatic narratives with a heightened sense of cultural depth and artistic sophistication.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of Taoist ritual content within Chinese opera scripts reveals a rich tapestry of spiritual evolution, mirroring the transformative journey of Taoism across different sects from the Song-Yuan to Ming-Qing periods. This study sheds light on the intricate interplay between religious doctrines, societal influences, and artistic expressions, underscoring the dynamic nature of ritualistic representations within the operatic tradition. The transition from the Song-Yuan to Ming-Qing periods witnesses a profound evolution in the portrayal of Taoist rituals within opera scripts. During the Ming-Qing dynasties, an abundance of scripts surpassed those from the earlier era, reflecting a burgeoning interest in Taoist themes and practices. The dominance of the Way of Complete Perfection during the early Yuan Dynasty, with its emphasis on inner alchemy and asceticism for achieving immortality, left a lasting imprint on the creation of opera texts, particularly evident in the proliferation of 'Plays on Salvation by Immortals' during that period. Yao Shuyi's analysis of Yuan Dynasty plays reveal a diverse range of Taoist-related opera scripts, with a notable focus on tales of transcendence and immortality. While detailed descriptions of Taoist mystic techniques rituals are discernible in works like the Yuan zaju, the emphasis on Retreat and Offering rituals remains relatively sparse in contemporaneous scripts. This disparity underscores a thematic shift towards mystical practices and spiritual enlightenment in opera narratives during the Song-Yuan period. The Ming Dynasty heralded a shift in Taoist dynamics, with the Quanzhen Dao's influence waning in favor of the Zhengyi Dao. Emperor Taizu's patronage of Zhengyi's rituals and subsequent imperial endorsement of Taoist practices marked a significant turning point, leading to the widespread adoption of talismans, incantations, and ritual ceremonies for longevity and immortality. The Ming and Qing eras witnessed a proliferation of Taoist ritual content in opera scripts, reflecting a cultural reverence for mystic techniques and ceremonial traditions. As the Qing Dynasty embraced Neo-Confucian ideologies, Taoist influences on politics diminished, yet its impact on folk customs and beliefs remained profound. Taoist mystic techniques and practical rituals permeated all strata of society, shaping the cultural

landscape and influencing popular literature, including the creation of opera scripts. The Ming-Qing period saw a renaissance in the depiction of Taoist rituals, with an expansion in the variety and complexity of ritualistic content, signaling a maturation in the portrayal of ceremonial practices within the operatic tradition. In conclusion, the evolution of Taoist ritual content in Chinese opera scripts reflects a dynamic interplay between religious traditions, historical contexts, and artistic innovations. From the sparse depictions of rituals in early eras to the elaborate and refined representations in later periods, the opera scripts serve as a testament to the enduring legacy of Taoism in shaping cultural expressions and spiritual narratives throughout Chinese history. This study illuminates the multifaceted relationship between ritual practices, social livings, and artistic endeavors, underscoring the profound influence of Taoist doctrine and rituals on the rich tapestry of Chinese opera.

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