

Exploring the development of Chinese magic: take the Zoroastrian elements in unearthed artifacts as an example

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Abstract. This essay explores the development of Chinese magic, specifically use the effect of Zoroastrian element that developed in the illusions as an example. This essay highlighted the basic introduction of the Chinese illusions from the Han to Tang Dynasties, and explained the reason why the self-injured performances is special from other illusions. The main part of this essay is to challenge the common agreement in the academia about the time that Zoroastrianism was introduced to China during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, provide evidence to prove that it is actually came into China earlier in the Han Dynasty. The final part of this essay shows a usual process of foreign culture's development, which transform from a formal ceremony to an entertainment-purposed activity to make itself closer to publics.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, illusions, development, Han Dynasty, Seven Sacred Sword.

1. Introduction

This essay aimed to demonstrate the development of Zoroastrian in terms of social and cultural aspect from Han Dynasty to present day and prove the appearance of it in Han Dynasty to against the common agreement in academia that the Zoroastrian was imported into China in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and further symbolized the development of Chinese magic history by looking at historical documents, modern research, and heritage relics.

Zoroastrianism is an Iranian monotheistic religion, which is the religion that almost within the longest history in the world. The core belief of Zoroastrianism is that human must make a choice between good and evil. Some of the Zoroastrian celebrations required self-injurious element, which is the main topic this essay discussed about.

This essay mainly includes three parts. First, it is showcasing the development of Chinese illusions along dynasties from Han to Tang. Secondly, the essay explained why the Zoroastrianism had already affected the illusion of China since the Han dynasty by adding self-injure elements in that. Finally, the essay will discuss the later development of the Zoroastrian illusions, including the illusions in Song Dynasty, and contemporary society.

2. Introduction to illusion in Han, Wei Jin, and Tang dynasties

The term “magic” in Chinese denotes two meanings. First, it is a skill of presenting illusion to entertain the audience, which is common for both ancient and modern society. Most of the performances were meticulously crafted to enchant civil status through the conjuration of mirages that make people believe. The second definition refers to an omnipotent image that was used to present religion theory to wider audiences [1].

Throughout Chinese history, it is evident that different dynasties have tremendous differences in all areas, and the same is true for illusions.

In the Han dynasty, the illusions performances already been promoted in a formal way. It has been documented in historical records that the first illusion performance happened in the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, in 108 BC [2].

When Zhang Qian arrived in the country of Anshi, the Emperor there sent some people (ministers) to follow Zhang Qian back to China and explore the situation here, including two men who knew illusions. When they are successfully back to the capital of Han, Emperor Wu throws a party to

celebrate their honor. During the celebration, those two people demonstrated their magical techniques which brought Chinese people a huge impression. This is the beginning of illusion development in China [3].

Later on, the Han dynasty's powerful state and frequent diplomacy led to the further promotion of illusion in this country. Until the flourishing period of the dynasty, the illusion had become a popular way of entertainment in the prevalence of all classes within the national territory.

Since it occupies a significant position in society, some people who want to improve their social status begin to use it as a tool. For instance, when Empress Li just dead from disease for a few days, the emperor missed her so much that an illusionist named Shao Weng said could let her soul occur. He asked the emperor to sit in front of a curtain and used candles to make shadows that were shaped like Empress Li, the emperor cried immediately [3].

Until the time of the Wei and Jin dynasties, the traditional illusions followed largely the same pattern as the Han dynasty, which can be systematically divided into eight types: acrobatics, magics, wrestles, imitations, clowns, puppeteers, dances, and dramas. Additionally, based on the illusions of China's mainland, the artists in the Wei and Jin dynasties also received advanced techniques from neighboring minorities and Western countries [4].

'Anecdotes About Spirits and Immortals' records that in the middle of Yongjia of the Jin dynasty (307~313), some Western people who were within numbers of illusion techniques entered Jiangnan (the south side of China). They demonstrated performances such as breaking the tongue then renewing it and spitting fire, which made Chinese people gather to see [5].

One of the four great Chinese masters who translated the Buddhist scriptures named Kumarajiva was born in Guzi, a Western country on the side of the Silk Road. According to 'The Book of Jin', he had used a set of swallowing needle illusions to convince the other monks. At that time, the other monks said that they were very in awe that Kumarajiva swallowed the needles and tasted them no different than eating food [6].

Above all resources have proved that in the Wei and Jin dynasties, the illusions all dive into the masses, and are used in the religious prepose. While in the Tang dynasty, this field had been developed into a fancier form and applied as a diplomatic tool that represents the nation's power.

Several general types of illusion popular in the Tang Dynasty include deformity, self-injury, invisible, curse, praying for rain, and heavy lifting extra. All of them can be further divided into smaller genres. For example, the deformity illusion contains deformed people and objects. For deforming people, this technique appears in China during about Warring States period (475-221 BC). A person called Zhao Guo learned this skill from master Yong Shigong who possessed the ability to transition between the form of human, deer, tiger, and mouse (Xinghe, 2014). In addition, changing objects as they were before was another technique that usually appears in on-street performances. To be more specific, historical documents have recorded an illusion that uses a tool to draw a line upon the ground. This mark would then dramatically transform into a flowing river [7].

For the diplomatic use of illusions, in the Tang dynasty, this form of formal performance begins to be popular. The "Fish Dragon Dance" (changing the fish into a huge dragon) is one of the grandest performances. It is usually shown to the emissaries on the annual New Year's Day after the main ceremonial activities. 'A Record of Yearly Observances' wrote that the illusions next to the Western Capital (fish dragon dance) "inwardly caressing the various Chinese, outwardly embracing a hundred barbarians" [8]. In the Tang dynasty minister's mind, this theatrical performance of illusions is an excellent form of demonstrating the nation's power, especially during the New Year's celebration when all the messengers from other countries are coming to China.

The "Sacred Longevity Music" reached its flourishing time during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. On his birthday ceremony, 140 performers wearing gold hats and multicolored clothes switch positions to form 16 characters, meaning our emperor is the greatest one in history, with the highest moral standard. So, the greatest emperor will be immortal, to make our country strong forever [1].

At this moment, the illusions not only function as entertainment, but are more used as symbolic performances to showcase the power of a nation and the honor of a person. The elements in an illusion performance have often been given more meaning than themselves according to the situation, thus making mass entertainment more systematic.

3. Zoroastrianism has affected the Chinese illusion since the Han dynasty

In the author's opinion, the bloody part of the illusions since they occur is the reflection of Zoroastrianism which can be proved by the following several reasons.

3.1. Self-injury performance does not have a suitable environment for development in ancient China

The main reason is that it is contrary to mainstream Chinese Confucianism. The confusing book 'Classic of Filial Piety' states that the beginning of filial piety is avoiding injuring the body parts since they are received from parents [9]. Meanwhile, filial piety is one of the most crucial ideologies in the ancient Chinese education system. Since the Han dynasty, a minister named Dong Zhongshu first raised the idea of sole Confucianism as the national ideology, the thoughts of being good to older families began to dominate all the Chinese people's minds [10]. Later, the Han imperial legislated filial piety into the basis of the political system and regularly promoted it through edicts and laws. Most importantly, the election of ministers also considered the filial piety and honesty of a person and there were strict punishments for the unfilial people according to the law [11]. Therefore, filial piety is one of the main criteria for examining a person's behavior, also to not injure one's own body is the foundation of being filial.

However, the most seeable characteristic of a self-injury performance is to hurt the performer's body. So, if a person still wants to have a positive reputation in front of others, which is a common wish for ancient people, he may avoid inventing this type of illusion, meaning that this illusion will never be invented by Chinese people.

3.2. The gate of cultural exchange is already opened in the Han dynasty

According to 'The Record of History', Zhang Qian arrived at several places along the Silk Road including Dawan, Yuezhi, Daxia, and Kangju while he was trying to establish contact with other countries as an emissary [3].

The country Daxia is the birthplace of Suruchi, who is the creator of Zoroastrianism. It has been the center of Zoroastrian activity. A Greek writer named Ctesias even wrote that Suruchi was the king of Daxia, which indicates that it should be a place full of Zoroastrian culture. Meanwhile, this is a country with a territory including the southern part of Sute and Samarkand, thus, it has been an important route for the east-west trade, which means it should have some connections with China as a huge trade center in the eastern world [12].

In addition, even though Sute never established a powerful state in a certain area, they still maintained an independent cultural and economic system. According to the excavated materials in China, we must admit that this ethnic group was influenced by paganism, but they still retained a regional Zoroastrian culture. To be more specific, the bone jars from Katajiken showcase that the inhabitants adhered to Zoroastrian burial rites [12].

3.3. From an archaeological perspective, since the Han dynasty, there are already some self-injured elements in Chinese magic.

As mentioned before, the culture of neighboring regions was passed to China after the opening of the Silk Road. Since the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, Anxi began to send people who were good at self-injured magic to China. In the late Western Han dynasty, there are a large number of people from the Western reign entered China and provided performances with animals in the palace, which called "The Great Hunting", and were rewarded with an official title for doing that [13].

“The Collection of Pictures with Three Talents” recorded that, magic in China was invented in the Qin and Han dynasties, while the magic that took place in the palace such as swallowing a sword, and walking on fire were arts from the East (Qi Wang and Siyi Wang, 1988). At the end of the Han Dynasty, the monks An Huizhe and Kang Huizheng who were known as illusionists also the ones who separated Buddhism into China [14].

There are also a large number of pictorial stones that document the Zoroastrian performances. For example, the stone dug out in Henan in 1972 is shown below (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Pictorial stones that document the Zoroastrian performances

Some scholars thought that this picture is about a story in Confucianism called the “massacre of Nie Zheng by himself” . This is a story about an assassin named Nie Zheng who suicide in a trap that's hard to get out of [15]. However, this opinion can be against by the following two evidence:

First of all, the overall atmosphere of this painting is relatively relaxed, the person on the right-hand side is clapping his hand, and the person on the left side seems to be very respectful to the other two. So, this kind of pleasant ambiance should not showcase the story of killing people.

Secondly, according to the historical document, the weaponry Nie Zheng used was a sword, while the thing held in the person on the stone's hand looks as same as the iron pyramid dug out from Nayang comb from the Han dynasty, but not the sword [16].

Other scholars think that this painting may reflect the ideas of other religions such as Buddhism and Taoism. This can also be refuted by the original purpose of those religions:

The main goal of Buddhism in using magics is to demonstrate the result of successful practices. While Taoism uses magic as a tool to showcase the effects of becoming immortal. However, the self-injured activities themselves are parts of Zoroastrian behavior [16].

4. The late development of Zoroastrian culture

The common agreement from modern academia stated that the “heart-stabbing and disemboweling” illusion brought by Sute into China during the Tang Dynasty was trying to suit the Han community by joining more cultural activities. The “Seven Sacred Sword” or “Qisheng Sword” can be a perfect example of this process. This performance had been developed from an individual process of casting spells to a group of seven people conjured since the Tang dynasty to the Song dynasty (Figure 2)[17].



Figure 2. Qisheng Sword Toy

Until the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, the literatures and frictions began to document huge number of Qisheng Sword element, which have the audiences from the whole China [17]. Therefore, it is evident that this performance already has a huge range of effect in the public life. However, since the self-injured actions involved in this performance really against the idea of project self-body to avoid the sad of parents, so later in the Ming Dynasty, this performance hardly never appears in front of the public.

According to social media nowadays, Baoji City, Chencang quarter remains the tradition of having “heart-stabbing and disemboweling” performances at the year with thirteen intercalary months in lunar month. It may be an inherited culture from the “Seven Sacred Sword”, since the clothes that participants wear are very similar to the relics that represented the “Seven scared Sword” performance [17].

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the exploration about Zoroastrianism really reflects the common exchange and adaption of the development of foreign culture, especially illusions in China. From the transformation of it from western world to the mainland China, in the early Han dynasty, to the further influences and change of its way to promote, the development of Zoroastrian illusion performed a dynamic and continue interplay of native and foreign tradition. The integration of Zoroastrian self-injury elements, challenge the prevalent Confucian ideals, and reflects the complexity and the unwavering of the Chinese customs, while its transformation from formal religious ceremony to common entertainment prove the publics’ pursuit of spiritual and visual exciting.

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