Article

The Influence of Daoism on the Dramatization of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju

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Abstract: This study employs a collection of fresh resources of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju (Sichuan opera) to examine the influence of Daoism upon the dramatization of Chinese theatre. In contrast to Buddhism, it has long been supposed that Daoism has exerted only a minor influence on Chinese theatre. Despite some progress after the year 2000, the research into Daoism's influence on Chinese theatre is still in its infancy. Noting the gap in the literature, the study identifies that the Liaozaixi of Chuanju has provided us with some exceptional insights into Daoism's influence on Chinese theatre. Since 2012, the successive publication of 24 Liaozaixi scripts of Chuanju allows us to more fully enter the exploration. Reinforced by these fresh resources, the study summarizes the influence of Daoism on the Liaozaixi of Chuanju into two typical adaptation approaches, "transplantation" and "improvement". By analyzing the two approaches, the study will manifest how Daoism has shaped the dramatization of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju and will employ these approaches to exemplify the confluence of religions and dramas in Chinese folk culture.

Keywords: *Liaozaixi zhiyi*; Daoism; dramas; Sichuan

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1. Introduction

Liaozaixi refers to the plays dramatized from the stories in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozaixi zhiyi* 聊齋志異) by Pu Songling (1640–1715).¹ *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (hereafter *Strange Tales*), a collection of almost 500 tales, is one of the most outstanding works of classical tales in Chinese literature history (Mair 2010, pp. 691–93). In Chinese theatre history, Liaozaixi also ranks amongst the most popular cycle plays, along with Sanguoxi and Shuihuxi, which are historical plays, respectively, adapted from the two great classical Chinese novels of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義) and *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳). The first printed version of *Strange Tales* appeared in 1766, far later than the two aforementioned novels, but its dramatization happened quickly probably because of its high adaptability and popularity (Du 2003, pp. 6–9). Merely two years later in 1768, the earliest play adapted from *Strange Tales* appeared (Guan and Che 1983, p. 1). From then onwards, efforts to dramatize *Strange Tales* have witnessed rapid growth. To date, the number of scripts of Liaozaixi in the Chuanju amount to more than 130, as well as no fewer than 40 in Jingju or Beijing Opera (Du 2003, p. 6; Zhu 1985, pp. 698–714). Moreover, the influence of Liaozaixi is so broad that it can also be observed in roughly at least 150 types of traditional Chinese operas (Du 2003, pp. 69–71; Guan and Che 1983, p. 1).

On account of the great number of Liaozaixi, its popularity, and the cultural interaction behind the dramatization in different areas, the research potential of Liaozaixi should not be underestimated. However, the potential has not been fully explored for two reasons. The first is the several rounds of castigation of Liaozaixi from 1963 to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Although almost all types of traditional theater had been banned and criticized during this period, the castigation of Liaozaixi seems more dreadful because it is heavily loaded with supernatural and religious imagery (Du 2003, pp. 101–2). In 1963, the Ministry of Culture decided to ban all "ghost plays" from stages

(Greene 2019, p. 107), and Liaozhaixi is doubtlessly included. For instance, responding to the policy of the Ministry of Culture, the government of Sichuan province immediately banned 35 “ghost plays” in the same year, while 19 of those banned plays belong to Liaozhaixi (Du 2003, pp. 101–2). Due to the heavy and relentless castigation over this period, it took a quite long time before Liaozhaixi entered the public again and it consequently received little scholarly attention roughly until the 2000s. Besides, although the number of the documented Liaozhaixi is statistically large, very few of them have been published. Though some efforts have been made in this area since the 1980s (Guan and Che 1983), roughly only 20 scripts have been printed. Because of these two reasons, the great research potential of Liaozhaixi has not been fully explored.

Fortunately, the recent research into Liaozhaixi of Chuanju has offered us some notable improvements. The foremost one is a groundbreaking study by Jianhua Du (2003). This study not only elaborately examines the whole development of Liaozhaixi of Chuanju from its birth to today but also sheds light on several significant themes involving its origin, style, and popularity. Du’s study saves us many preparatory jobs and sets a fixed starting point for subsequent studies. Furthermore, 24 genuine scripts of the Liaozhaixi of Chuanju, which are mainly finalized in the 19th century, have been published since 2012. These fresh materials enable us to fully explore the research possibilities of Liaozhaixi. After a meticulous investigation on them, the present study argues that these fresh materials provide us with new and exceptional insights into the influence of Daoism on the dramatization of Chinese theatre. More precisely, these new materials illustrate how Daoism has shaped the dramatization of the Liaozhaixi of Chuanju. The insight is so exceptional because very few studies have shed light on this area. Developing this argument will broaden our understanding of the relation between Daoism and Chinese theatre.

2. The Relation between Daoism and Chinese Theatre

Speaking of the influence of religions upon Chinese theatre, Buddhism commonly ranks at the top and has gained the most academic attention. As *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk and Popular Literature* summarizes (Mair 2011, p. 168), the influence of Buddhism on Chinese theatre starts from the earliest stages of development and covers not only the content but also the form and conventions of Chinese theatre, such as role types, gestures, and structure. Many studies have also furthered this discussion. For instance, Victor H. Mair (1989) focuses on transformation texts of the Tang dynasty (618–907) to illustrate the Buddhist contribution to the development of Chinese theatre. Additionally, Baocheng Kang (2004) argues that Buddhism has shaped the form of Chinese theatre in different respects involving theatrical stages, characters, tunes, dialogues, script structures, and rituals.

In contrast, it has long been assumed that Daoism exerted only a minor influence on Chinese theatre, and some important studies in Daoism or Chinese theatre have even overlooked or refused to discuss this issue. For instance, as a foundational study in discussing the relation between religions and Chinese theatre, the study of Yingde Guo (1988) underscores the influence of Buddhism but totally ignores Daoism. The ignorance is not an isolated case and can be seen in some other studies too. For two other instances, Zhaoguang Ge (1987) has examined the relationship between Daoism and Chinese traditional literature, while notably, he has not included dramas in the main discussion but merely mentioned them. Likewise, Zhan Shichuang’s study (Zhan 1992), which is believed to be the first comprehensive history of Daoist literature, thoroughly discusses Daoist tales, poems, and prose but barely argues anything about Daoist dramas. The consistent neglect reveals that the relation of Daoism and Chinese theatre has claimed little attention for a long period.

As time goes on, however, we can find some studies in this field. Overall, it has been argued that the influence of Daoism on Chinese theatre cannot be underestimated because of its vital role in Chinese cultural history (Zhan 1997, pp. 3–4). Specifically, more in-depth studies in the area have been published since 2000. For instance, Hanmin Wang (2007) examines several themes of Daoist dramas; and Yihan Tong (2009), retrospectively, examines

the origin and development of Daoist dramas. These works are commendable because they have provided us with a firm starting point in the field. Furthermore, there are some case studies concerning the influence of Daoism on dramas (Wang 2002; Xu 2005). Despite these, on the other hand, the field is still in its infancy because many essential themes in the field have not been examined. For instance, as Wang Guowei demonstrates (Wang 1984, p. 163), the essence of dramas is to narrate stories via music and dances. From Wang's perspective, the adaptation of tales for the theatrical production is a significant research issue in Chinese theatre. Concerning the given issue, the influence of Buddhism has been sufficiently discussed (Zhang 2011), but very few works have shed light upon Daoism.

However, reinforced by the new and exceptional insights derived from the fresh materials of the Liaozaohai of Chuanju, the present study would like to fill the research gap. At the outset, the great influence of Daoism on the Liaozaohai of Chuanju is rooted in the local folklore of Sichuan. As one of the most important birthplaces of Daoism, Sichuan local folk culture has been profoundly influenced by Daoism (Kleeman 2016, pp. 1–51), which can be observed in stone inscriptions, music, and literature (Sichuan Sheng Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui 1998, pp. 37–48). Likewise, Chuanju is also deeply imbued with Daoism. Among the approximate 4000 surviving scripts of Chuanju, no fewer than 600 of them are related to Daoism; and dramatists of Chuanju often employ Daoist tales to develop or adapt scripts (Sha 2009, pp. 23–25). Moreover, it has been assumed that the local conviction in Daoism has significantly influenced how the Liaozaohai of Chuanju adapts the original stories (Du 2003, pp. 134–36). Those new resources now enable us to fully explore how Daoism has influenced the adaption of the Liaozaohai of Chuanju and broaden our understanding of Daoism's influence on Chinese theatre.

3. The Two Approaches: Transplantation and Improvement

At the outset, I would like to briefly clarify the methodology before the main discussion. As the study aims to examine the influence of Daoism in the dramatization of Liaozaohai of Chuanju, the argument mainly rests on the comparison between the original tales and the adapted scripts. The comparison enables us to clearly recognize how Daoism has shaped the Liaozaohai's adaption of the original tales.

Moreover, I do not want to reduce the forthcoming argument to an unsorted and simple insertion of some Daoist characters, plots and doctrines. Instead, to highlight how Daoism has shaped the dramatization of Liaozaohai of Chuanju, the study has sorted the relevant resources and summarized the influence of Daoism into two typical adaptation approaches or manners: "transplantation" and "improvement". Before the main discussion, it is necessary to clarify what the two approaches mean in the study and why they are so important and could contribute to our understanding of the relation between Daoism and Chinese theatre.

Transplantation, in the present study, manifests an attempt at linking or integrating the storyline of the original tale with the beliefs and worships of some inserted Daoist immortals and mythologies. Technically, most scripts of the Liaozaohai of Chuanju have substantially preserved the storyline of the original tale. At the same time, because Chuanju has long been imbued with Daoism, some Daoist characters, most of whom are Daoist immortals, are transplanted into the stories in the adaptation. I term the insertion of Daoist immortals as "transplantation" instead merely "insertion" because the dramatization does not merely insert some Daoist immortals. It emphasizes the seamless incorporation of the belief and worship of these transplanted immortals into the storyline of the original tale. As will be discussed below, the transplantation makes the original stories and the inserted Daoist immortals and the worship of themselves inseparable. The other adaptation approach, improvement, is more straightforward and means that Daoist characters in the original tales, most of whom are Daoist priests, are commonly improved and even refined into flawless figures. As can be seen, the two adaption approaches are likely to be shaped by the local belief of Daoism in Sichuan.

Furthermore, the two approaches are fairly exceptional when it comes to the landscape of Chinese theatre, particularly concerning the period of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties (1644–1911). For one thing, in Chinese theatre, apart from those plays adapted from Daoist tales, the insertion of Daoist characters in other themes of dramas is not uncommon though, while notably, these dramas more often employed Daoist immortals as a simple tool to convey the esteem of loyalty, filial piety, and richness (Wang 2007, pp. 45–96). Such a plain and unsophisticated insertion hardly makes a significant difference to the adapted story, nor does it reflect an adequate influence of Daoism upon dramatization. The transplantation of Daoist immortals derived from the *Liaozhaixi* of Chuanju, in contrast, is so exceptional because it manifests a deliberate and sophisticated attempt at linking the storyline and Daoist beliefs and worship which will be unfolded in the forthcoming discussion. For another, in Chinese folk literature, the deconstruction and vilification of Daoism and Daoist priests are often observable probably due to the discouragement of Daoism since the establishment of the Qing Dynasty and other reasons (Wang 2007, pp. 45–96). In contrast, the consistent improvement of Daoism and Daoist priests derived from the *Liaozhaixi* of Chuanju is therefore fairly exceptional and notable. In summary, although it is less controversial to say that Buddhism outweighs Daoism in its influence upon Chinese theatre today, the *Liaozhaixi* of Chuanju, however, offers an exceptional sample in that Daoism outweighs Buddhism. After clarifying what the two approaches are and why they are so exceptional, the following argument is also developed from the two approaches.

3.1. Transplantation Strategy

As far as available resources are concerned, the transplantation is most often observed in dealing with some controversial characters and plots of the original tales. As *Strange Tales* mainly takes shape from folk tales collected by Pu Songling, the origin of those stories is diverse and unrefined (Zhu 1985, pp. 578–79). Some characters in those stories, as a result, are morally controversial. For example, some visit brothels, and some encourage others to commit crimes. Although Chinese theatre is first and foremost a venue for entertainment, moral education becomes an increasingly significant aim of Chinese theatre after the 17th century (Zhang 2014, pp. 66–71). In this context, some of those characterizations are inappropriate for theatre. Therefore, those controversial characters and associated plots should be reconstructed in the dramatization, and the most common solution to this problem is to transplant Daoist characters to replace those controversial characters and, all the while, remove the controversial plots. As a result, the transplantation not only solves these moral contradictions but also seamlessly incorporates the transplanted Daoist characters and beliefs into the storyline. The present study chooses two scripts *Cutting off the Turtle's Tail* (*Zhan guiwei* 斬龜尾) (Du 2003, p. 295) and *The Matchmaker of a Finger* (*Yizhi mei* 一指媒) (Li 2013, vol. 4, pp. 129–76) to illustrate how the transplantation is carried out.

The script *Cutting off the Turtle's Tail* is adapted from the story *The Wife of Shen* (Shen Shi 申氏; Pu 1979, pp. 619–21), and the storyline of the original tale is briefly summarized below:

A man named Shen cannot make a living for his family, and his wife complains and urges him to make money. In a fit of pique, his wife asks him to rob for money. Shen refuses and attempts suicide out of shame, but Shen's dead father appears to save him. Shen's father suggests that Shen hide in a field for a robbery. Following his father's suggestion, Shen takes a club and hides in that field but finds a man already hiding there. Seeing the man climb the wall and enter the house, Shen conjectures that the man is a burglar and plans to rob the burglar later. After a while, on seeing the man jump out, Shen immediately clubs the burglar. Shen, however, finds that the "man" is a monstrous turtle and then punches it to death in panic. It turns out that the monstrous turtle usually impersonates a man and harasses the Kang family next to the field. As a result, Kang's family deems Shen a hero and gifts him a big sum of money.

Although a seemingly happy ending is provided in which the monstrous turtle is killed and Shen obtains some material returns, the story is somewhat morally controversial.

Above all, the story seems to convey that a malicious motive is likely to reach a good outcome. Additionally, the two characters, Shen and Shen's father, manifest no righteous or praiseworthy qualities but spiteful and illegal ideas. Although Shen accidentally kills the monstrous turtle and is thus recognized as a hero by the victims in the end, readers clearly know that his real and unspoken motive is to snatch the loot of the "burglar". Shen's father, moreover, is even more appalling because he encourages his son to commit robbery (Ren 2015, p. 1974). So observed, the two characters and the whole story are morally inappropriate for theatre.

To address the problem, the script *Cutting off the Turtle's Tail* has transplanted the Great Emperor Zhenwu (Zhenwu Dadi 真武大帝) (Anonymous 1990, pp. 33–37; Cook 2008, pp. 1266–67), a well-known immortal in Daoism, to replace Shen's father and reconstruct some controversial plots. In Daoist mythologies, the Great Emperor Zhenwu (hereafter Emperor Zhenwu) is commonly known as "The Heaven Lord of Sweeping Devils" (Dangmo Tianzun 蕩魔天尊) who frequently appears in combats against devils and monsters (Luan 2009, pp. 604–5). The first part of the script remains almost the same as the original tale, and the reconstruction starts from Shen's attempted suicide:

When Shen is just about to commit suicide, Emperor Zhenwu appears and saves him. Handing over Shen a magical sword, Emperor Zhenwu dispatches him to hide in a field to catch a burglar there. When Shen arrives there, he sees a man climbing a wall to break into a house. Soon after, Shen hears cries and shouts from the house and immediately realizes that the man must be the burglar. Seeing the man jumping out over the wall, Shen slashes him with the magical sword. However, Kang's family, the victim, at first captures Shen and believes him to be the monstrous turtle who usually harasses them. At this moment, Shen finds a turtle's tail on the ground and realizes that the "burglar" he had struck had to be the monstrous turtle. Kang's family then recognizes Shen as a hero and appreciates his help.

Comparing the script and the original story, we can see that the transplantation of Emperor Zhenwu has reconstructed the story and cleared away all controversial issues. In the first place, instead of encouraging Shen to commit robbery, Emperor Zhenwu hands Shen a magical sword and sends him to capture a burglar. The rearrangement redirects the theme of the original story, which is morally misleading as discussed before, into an event where an immortal comes to salvage someone honest but temporarily lost to return to the right track. Additionally, the rearrangement reshapes the subsequent plots and makes Shen a respectable hero. As seen in the script, saved and dispatched by Emperor Zhenwu, Shen abandons robbery but follows Emperor Zhenwu's suggestion to catch the burglar. The subsequent combat between Shen and the monstrous turtle, which is a robbery for a burglar's loot in the original tale, now also transforms into a righteous fight for a praiseworthy purpose. As such, this transplantation does not merely solve the moral controversies in the original story but also underscores Emperor Zhenwu's marvelous power and deep compassion for humans.

Regarding the transplantation, a more intriguing question arises as to why the script chooses Emperor Zhenwu instead of another immortal with the same duty and function. Although it has been argued that the Liaozaixi of Chuanju has been deeply influenced by Daoism, Emperor Zhenwu is clearly not the only one among Daoist immortals who functions as a guardian and combats against devils. For instance, Zhong Kui 鍾馗 (Anonymous 1990, pp. 153–54) and Guan Yu 關羽 (Anonymous 1990, pp. 109–12; Haar 2008, pp. 454–55) are also known for subduing devils and monsters. Therefore, merely the function and duty of Emperor Zhenwu cannot satisfactorily explain why the script chooses him over others.

Concerning the question, I argue that the deeper reason for choosing Emperor Zhenwu is so that the storyline of the original tale could facilitate the worship and beliefs of Emperor Zhenwu. In the original story, the villain is a monstrous turtle, while an intriguing fact is that a monstrous turtle is also frequently observed in the worship of Emperor Zhenwu. Although the identity of the monstrous turtle in Daoism varies in different resources, it is often an evil monster subdued by Emperor Zhenwu (Luan 2009, p. 605). For instance,

according to *The Comprehensive Survey of Deities of Three Religions* (*Sanjiao yuanliu soushen daquan* 三教源流搜神大全) (Anonymous 1990, p. 35), the monstrous turtle is an impersonation of a devil but is trodden and subdued by Emperor Zhenwu in a combat. Studying the cultural worship of Emperor Zhenwu, we can see that the monstrous turtle has become an indispensable symbol. This can be exemplified by the trodden turtle in some statues of Emperor Zhenwu. In doing so, the original story and the worship of Zhenwu could be connected by the monstrous turtle, and this is the reason for the adaption choosing Emperor Zhenwu. Discerning this could also help us understand other reconstructed plots in the script. For instance, the magical sword mentioned in the script can also be seen in the worship of Emperor Zhenwu, as Heaven has delivered a magical sword to Emperor Zhenwu as the weapon against devils (Anonymous 1990, p. 34). The appearance of the magical sword also illustrates an attempt at transplanting the worship of Emperor Zhenwu into the adapted story.

More importantly, if we switch our perspective from the Liaozaixi to Daoism, the transplantation derived from the script could illustrate another picture. It can be also said that the transplantation successfully uses the worship of Emperor Zhenwu to facilitate the dramatization of the original tale in Chuanju. Seen from this perspective, the original tale *The Wife of Shen* has also been transformed into a new variation about how Emperor Zhenwu subdues the monstrous turtle and, therefore, can be used to strengthen the worship and beliefs of Emperor Zhenwu.

The transplantation approach can be further illustrated and evidenced by the script *The Matchmaker of a Finger*. The script not only transplants Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 (Baldrian-Hussein 2008, pp. 712–15), one of the Eight Immortals in Daoism, to address some controversial plots but also uses the storyline to facilitate and develop the worship and beliefs of Lü Dongbin. The script is adapted from the story *Ruiyun* 瑞雲 (Pu 1979, pp. 601–3), which is summarized as follows.

Ruiyun is a prostitute famous for her sheer beauty and artistry. When the madam wants Ruiyun to start to serve brothel visitors, Ruiyun pleads that she wants to select the first guest by herself, and the madam agrees. Mr. He, a young but unwealthy man, admires Ruiyun and pays some money to meet Ruiyun. Ruiyun is delighted to see Mr. He and treats him kindly, but Mr. He refuses to spend the night with Ruiyun because he considers himself inferior. One day, a scholar visits the brothel and meets Ruiyun. Before leaving, the scholar taps Ruiyun's forehead with his finger. The spot that has been tapped immediately turns inky black, and Ruiyun's face thus becomes scary and ugly, so no guests come to see her again. Ruiyun is then forced to work as a maid and live a miserable life. When Mr. He hears this, he pays some money to set Ruiyun free from the brothel, and the two get married. A year later, Mr. He accidentally meets the scholar in an inn. The scholar asks whether Mr. He has heard of a famous prostitute named Ruiyun, and Mr. He narrates Ruiyun's experience and their marriage. The scholar is so pleased to hear this and tells Mr. He that he met Ruiyun before and used his magic to blacken Ruiyun's face to protect her. After knowing this, Mr. He asks him to undo his magic, and Ruiyun recovers her beauty.

In the story, the scholar seems to be a positive character who uses his magic to protect Ruiyun from being visited by other brothel guests. Yet, this character has been criticized by some commentators because of his meddling (Ren 2015, p. 1925). From the perspective of moral education through Chinese theatre, however, I consider the character open to question not for his meddling but for two other reasons. First, the scholar's help, most of all, is more of an accidental impulse than a result of his compassion. According to his narration, he had never thought of helping Ruiyun at first until he was shocked by her beauty in the brothel. Therefore, as a positive character, the scholar has not manifested adequate compassion. Second, the scholar's action appears heartless and inconsiderate about Ruiyun. As the caster of the magic spell, he clearly knows that his magic will make Ruiyun ugly and even scary, which consequently leads to Ruiyun's miserableness. If the scholar had attempted to help Ruiyun, he should have also considered when to break his magic spell to return Ruiyun to a normal life; otherwise, his magic could not have helped

her but ruined her. However, in the given context, we cannot see that the scholar has done anything for Ruiyun before meeting Mr. He, so it is likely that he had never thought about undoing his magic at all. If so, the scholar is truly unthoughtful because he never considers the negative consequence of his magic.

As discussed, the scholar seems to be a positive yet unsatisfactory character because of his ruthlessness and unemotionality. That is not to say that such a character should not be allowed in Chinese theatre; however, the character seems unusual and probably contradicts the audiences' common expectation of a helper. One may argue that, in fact, the scholar is a spirit or a magician because Mr. He and Ruiyun have conjectured this at the end of the story. If the conjecture was conclusive, the narration and inconsiderate behavior of the scholar can be regarded as tests for Mr. He. However, the original tale offers no additional clue to support the conjecture. It is therefore inconclusive to assume the scholar as a spirit or a magician merely relying on the hunch of Mr. He and Ruiyun, and we can see that none of the subsequent annotations have taken the conjecture as a solid reference (Ren 2015, p. 1925).

In the script, the character of the scholar undergoes a deep reconstruction. In the first place, the scholar is transformed into Lü Dongbin, one of the Eight Immortals in Daoism, who is far more warm-hearted and considerate in the adapted story of the script. In contrast to the scholar who accidentally helps Ruiyun, Lü Dongbin comes to help Ruiyun because of his compassion for Ruiyun. His first soliloquy in the script clearly demonstrates that he attempts to make Ruiyun meet Mr. He again. The soliloquy also introduces the fact that Lü Dongbin's strategy for helping Ruiyun is that he will use his magic to make Ruiyun ugly at first and then undo this when the time is ripe. As seen from the script, we can see Lü Dongbin has fully carried out this strategy. At first, he uses his magic to make Ruiyun ugly and then visits Mr. He's family to undo his magic after Mr. He and Ruiyun become a married couple. Additionally, the script has rewritten some plots to maintain the respectability of Lü Dongbin. In the original fiction, the scholar visits the brothel and then accidentally meets and helps Ruiyun there. Although numerous dramas in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) such as *Xie Tianxiang* 謝天香 (Li 2003, pp. 153–54) and *A Dream of Glorious Windows* (Yunchuan meng 雲窗夢) (Li 2003, pp. 74–75) deal with the concept of scholars visiting brothels, entering a brothel seems morally inappropriate at any rate. More importantly, when it comes to the Qing dynasty, plots concerning prostitutes and brothels become less popular due to the increasing recognition of loyalty and filial piety (Zhang 2014, pp. 66–71). As a script authored in the Qing dynasty, the script therefore discards the plot of visiting the brothel. In the script, when Lü Dongbin comes to save Ruiyun, Ruiyun happens to walk around the gate of the brothel, so Lü Dongbin can cast his magic without entering the brothel. This replacement also addresses the moral contradiction and maintains the respectability of Lü Dongbin.

This transplantation, the present study argues, also transplants Daoist beliefs into the storyline, as Ruiyun is a prostitute, and Lü Dongbin, appropriately, is the guardian angel for prostitutes in Daoism (Liu 2005, pp. 471–72). There are a few identical stories which show Lü Dongbin as the guardian of prostitutes in two primary sources that constitute the worship of Lü Dongbin: *The Biography of Patriarch Lü* (Lüzū zhi 呂祖志) and *The Complete Works of Patriarch Lü* (Lüzū quanshu 呂祖全書). Furthermore, the script also cites a poem attributed to Lü Dongbin of reality with a slight adaption:

The internal elixir has been made, while I have not returned to Heaven but stayed in the human world to reveal others. The two heads of my shoulder pole are carrying the sun and moon, and I seclude myself in mountains and rivers with a gourd.²

The insertion of this poem is very significant because it clearly demonstrates the dramatist's attempts to firmly link the story with the worship of Lü Dongbin. This also reflects the influence of Daoism.

In brief, the script *The Matchmaker of a Finger* transplants Lü Dongbin to replace the character of the scholar who seems unsatisfactory and seamlessly integrates the story and

the worship of Lü Dongbin. As well, from the perspective of Daoism, the transplantation transforms the tale of *Ruiyun* into a variant describing how Lü Dongbin helps a prostitute, as shown in other stories in *The Biography of Patriarch Lü* and *The Complete Works of Patriarch Lü*.

Furthermore, the transplantation adaption is not merely observed in rewriting some controversial characters and plots but also in some other cases. Despite commonly being much simpler, the transplantations in these cases are clearly not random insertions of Daoist immortals but have considered the context of the storyline. For instance, a script named *Caocao Becomes a Dog* (*Caocao Biangou* 曹操變狗) (Du 2003, p. 280), which is adapted from the tale *Empress Zhen* (*Zhenhou* 甄后) (Pu 1979, pp. 420–22), has inserted the Perfected Person Huatuo (Huatuo Zhenren 華佗真人) into the adapted story.

In summary, the Liaozaixi of Chuanju often transplants Daoist immortals into the adapted storyline to facilitate and develop the worship of the transplanted immortals and the indoctrination with Daoist beliefs. As a result, the transplantation seamlessly connects the original story with the worship of Daoist characters, and the consistent embellishment of Daoist characters derived from the transplantation clearly contributes to the advocacy of Daoism. This is more obvious when compared to Buddhist figures. The Liaozaixi of Chuanju shows little interest in transplanting and embellishing Buddhist figures and beliefs (Du 2003, p. 136). Even worse, Buddhist monks sometimes appear as negative characters in the adaption. Two instances in point are the lascivious monk in *The Palace of Ten Lords* (*Shiwang dian* 十王殿) (Li 2012a, vol. 1, pp. 91–150) that adapted from *Judge Lu* (*Lupan* 陸判) (Pu 1979, pp. 58–61) and the villainous monk in *The Marriage of a Dull Son* (*Chi'er pei* 痴兒配) (Li 2012b, vol. 3, pp. 125–211) that adapted from *Xiaocui* 小翠 (Pu 1979, pp. 428–33). The two scripts are also popular and well-received at local theater, but the negative characterization of the Buddhist monks sets a strong contrast to the positive Daoist characters. Such an arrangement also underscores the preference of Daoism in the Liaozaixi of Sichuan.

3.2. Improvement Strategy

The improvement in the study means the elevation of existing Daoist characters in the original stories, most of whom are Daoist priests. As will be discussed below, the consistent improvement of Daoist priests is exceptional.

Daoist priests in *Strange Tales* are not always positive but fall into three types based on their moral standards: positive, neutral, and evil (Zhan 2017, pp. 59–68; Wu 1995, pp. 318–19). The triple classification can be more comprehensible in some instances. The Daoist priests in *Chang Ting* 長亭 (Pu 1979, pp. 577–81) and *Yang Dahong* 楊大洪 (Pu 1979, pp. 536–37) belong to the positive type because they fight against monsters or employ their magic to help civilians. The neutral Daoist priests generally play the role of an erudite consultant, or a mystifying illusionist exemplified by the two in *Yu De* 余德 (Pu 1979, pp. 187–88) and Daoist Priest Shan (*Shan Daoshi* 單道士) (Pu 1979, pp. 140–41). Besides, some evil Daoist priests reach their evil purposes at the expense of other people, such as the two in *A Female in Changzhi* (*Changzhi nüzi* 長治女子) (Pu 1979, pp. 282–84) and *Zhou Kechang* 周克昌 (Pu 1979, pp. 496–97). The triple classification demonstrates that Daoist priests in *Strange Tales* are not always positive.

However, when it comes to the Liaozaixi of Chuanju, according to available resources, very few evil Daoist priests have been observed, if any. After enumerating surviving materials, Du (2003, pp. 135–36) has demonstrated that the Daoist priests in the Liaozaixi of Chuanju are always positive. Notably, here arises an intriguing issue. Since Daoist priests in Liaozaixi are always positive, an issue that should be identified is whether the Liaozaixi of Chuanju dramatizes only the stories containing positive Daoist priests or has elevated the Daoist priests in the original tales. After a meticulous examination, the present study discovers that the Daoist priests who are flawed or even evil in the original stories have witnessed an enhancement in the dramatization of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju. A fundamental reason behind the upgradation is probably the conviction in Daoism in Sichuan, a place where the Daoism originated. However, in Chinese literature

history, Daoist priests are often vilified as shown in *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記) (Zhang 2009). Thus, the elevation of Daoist priests in *Liaozhaixi* of Chuanju seems exceptional and worth a deep examination. The present study also chooses two instances to illustrate how Daoist priests have been improved. The first one makes a positive but slightly flawed priest flawless, and the other one elevates an evil priest into an honorable one.

The first instance comes from the script *Drawing the Skin* (*Hua pi* 畫皮) (Li 2012a, vol. 1, pp. 37–90) that rests on the story with the same name in *Strange Tales* (Pu 1979, pp. 48–51). The Daoist priest in the original story is positive but slightly flawed, while the character has witnessed a remarkable enhancement in the script, and the slight flaw in his character is eliminated. This improvement exemplifies that the Daoist priests are always expected to be ideally positive and flawless under the influence of the local conviction in Daoism. Although the story is well-known, a brief introduction is still necessary:

A gentleman called Wang comes upon a homeless girl who claims to be an ill-treated concubine. Because of her attractiveness and his empathy for her, Wang agrees to let her stay in his studio. Although Wang's wife advises him to send the girl away, Wang does not relent. One day, at a marketplace, a Daoist priest warns Wang that he has been enveloped by an evil aura, but Wang deems it a scam and dismisses his counsel. When he reaches home, he discovers that the girl is a monster in painted human skin. Wang returns to the Daoist priest, pleading with the priest to save him. The priest agrees but is reluctant to take the monster's life, and thus offers Wang only a flywhisk to drive the monster away. Wang hangs the flywhisk outside his bedroom, but it has little effect, and the monster comes and rips out his heart. Knowing the tragic event from Wang's wife, the priest vows to subdue the monster and then decapitates it in combat. Later, the priest informs Wang's wife to visit a lunatic beggar to resurrect her husband. The beggar humiliates Wang's wife by coughing up phlegm and asking her to swallow it. To revive Wang, Wang's wife swallows it. Back home, the phlegm hardens and ascends from her stomach to her throat and eventually becomes a heart. She inserts the heart into Wang's gaping chest wound, and he revives.

In this story, we can clearly see that the Daoist priest is righteous and respectable because he helps Wang subdue the monster and informs Wang's wife how to revive Wang. However, the priest, as some commentators have noted, is at times unsatisfactory because his reluctance to save Wang and the powerlessness of his flywhisk are partly the causes of Wang's death (Ren 2015, pp. 123–24). The incompetence is likely to weaken the capability and respectability of the priest, which seems unacceptable to the local patrons of Daoism. Maintaining the storyline of the original story, the script subtly reconstructs some plots to seamlessly elevate the Daoist priest as below:

A Daoist priest, who meditates in Mountain Hua, has sensed that Wang is snared in a monster's vicious scheme and descended to help Wang. At a marketplace, the priest pretends to accidentally crash into Wang to strike up a conversation. The priest first warns that Wang is trapped by a monster, but Wang does not believe this. To make Wang realize his dangerous plight, the priest points out that the girl is a monster in disguise and helps Wang to debunk the deceitful self-description of the "girl", but Wang rebuffs the priest's advice again. However, Wang soon discovers the truth and returns to the priest for help. The priest unhesitatingly agrees to subdue the monster. The priest first hands over a flywhisk to Wang and starts some preparatory works (the script does not explain what those preparatory works are). However, before the priest starts the exhortation, Wang mistakenly supposes that this flywhisk is adequate to drive the monster away, and he immediately goes home without letting the priest know of his absence. On noting that Wang has left, the Daoist priest instantly pursues Wang to save him. Just before the priest reaches his house, Wang is murdered. The priest subsequently combats the monster and subdues it.

Compared to the original tale, I identify that the script makes three enhancements to the Daoist priest. The first lies in the priest's motive for helping Wang. The priest in the original story just discerns that Wang is trapped by an evil spirit when encountering Wang

in a marketplace, while the priest presented in the script is very different. Meditating by himself in Mountain Hua, the priest senses Wang is in jeopardy and immediately departs to save him. In contrast to the original priest, the priest in the script seems more capable because he could remotely sense the monster's viciousness. Additionally, the priest in the script seems so compassionate because he immediately departs to help Wang, while we do not see this with the priest in the original tale.

The second improvement lies in the conversation between the priest and Wang. In the original story, the Daoist priest only warns Wang against his dangerous situation but offers nothing to make Wang trust the warning, so it does not seem inexcusable that Wang takes his warning as a scam. In contrast, the Daoist priest in the script is far more thoughtful and considerate. In addition to a warning, the priest not only points out that the girl is a monster but also counsels Wang to understand why the self-description of the "girl" is untrustworthy.

The third one is the most significant because the priest's responsibility for Wang's death is exempted. The improvement appears when Wang comes to ask the priest for help. The priest in the original story is hesitant to subdue the monster and finally gives Wang only a flywhisk which is too powerless to drive the monster away, and Wang is consequently murdered. In stark contrast, the priest in the script at first shows no reluctance or mercy but unhesitatingly agrees to fight against the monster. Although the priest gives Wang a flywhisk too, it is clear that the flywhisk is not the only assistance offered by the priest. In this context, we can see the priest has determined to accompany Wang to combat the monster when some preparatory works are finished. Wang, however, overestimates the power of the flywhisk and rashly reaches home before the preparatory works are finished. On noting Wang's absence, the priest does not leave him alone but immediately runs after him to save his life. Although Wang is murdered at the end, his death partially results from his rashness or carelessness but has nothing to do with the priest.

While maintaining the storyline of the original tale, the three improvements have not only cleared away the priest's potential responsibility for Wang's death but also made the priest more thoughtful, considerate, and compassionate. The deliberation behind the seamless improvements also conveys the influence of Daoism that Daoist priests should be ideally positive and flawless.

The other instance of the improvement is *The Case of an Antique Zither* (*Guqin an* 古琴案) (Ni 1983, pp. 59–83), which is adapted from a story of *Deceits in Scam* (*Juzha* 局詐) (Pu 1979, pp. 442–46). In contrast to the improvement of a positive but flawed priest that we have identified in the preceding instance, the instance has elevated an evil priest into an honorable one. The original story recounts a scam planned by a Daoist priest:

A man named Li is a good player of the zither, and he has accidentally bought an antique zither and hidden it in secret. One day, the newly appointed magistrate named Cheng calls on Li, and the two become friends. A year later, Li visits Cheng's residence and notices a zither on a table. Both Li and Cheng play a piece on the zither. Li is ravished by Cheng's skills and asks Cheng to accept him as a pupil. The following year, Cheng teaches Li the art of the zither, but Li never discloses the antique zither. One night, Cheng visits Li and plays a rare music piece and tells Li that a fine old zither could make the music even better. On an impulse, Li takes out the zither and asks Cheng to replay the piece, and the music is sheer perfection. After this, Cheng tells Li that his wife is even more proficient in playing zither and invites Li to come to his house with the zither the next day if Li wants to enjoy a great performance. The next day, Li visits Cheng as Cheng's suggestion. Enjoying Cheng's wife's virtuoso performance, Li gets drunk owing to Cheng's overwhelming hospitality. When Li takes his leave, Cheng suggests that Li should come to take the zither the next day because Li is so drunk and the zither would probably be mugged on the way, and Li agrees. Arriving at Cheng's residence the next day, however, Li finds the house empty. After a few years, Li finally realizes that Cheng was not a magistrate but a Daoist priest.

Cheng's scam, which costs him three years, is well-designed and split into four steps. Cheng, at first, fakes an identity to approach Li. Next, Cheng makes Li know and admire his skills in a seeming accident. After worming himself into Li's confidence, Cheng plays a rare music piece to instigate Li to show off the zither. In the final step, Cheng persuades Li to bring the zither to his dwelling to enjoy his wife's performance and then urges Li to drink too much and take the zither away. In the story, Cheng is so thoughtful and patient, and the scam is so well-designed that Pu Songling and some commentators highly praised Cheng and Cheng's scam (Ren 2015, pp. 1454–55).

However, when recontextualized into the cultural context of Chuanju, which has been deeply imbued with Daoism, this evil Daoist priest seems inconsistent and has to be reshaped, regardless of how glorious he and his scam were believed to be. In the script, *The Case of an Antique Zither*, the priest has been reshaped into a positive one. Before discussing how the priest has been elevated, this script itself deserves a further discussion because it is not a traditional play but a modern version authored by Ni Guozhen (1929–2010) in the 1980s. In contrast to the aforementioned three instances that substantially preserve the main storyline of the original tales, the adaption presented in the script is far more thorough because the dramatist reshapes the original story into a detective story (Du 2003, pp. 268–69). On the other hand, although the adapted storyline of the script has been largely reconstructed, the script clearly comes from the story *Deceits in Scam* (Du 2003, p. 272). It is therefore too risky to completely separate the adapted story from the original one, so the study regards the Daoist priest in the script as one adapted from the original tale. The outline of the adapted story in the script can be summarized as below:

A female musician named Yaqin has an old and precious zither, and her family keeps the lute in secret. Zhao, Yaqin's cousin, is a maid of a prince who is fond of playing zither. To please the prince, Zhao visits Yaqin and persuades her to present the zither to the prince. At the same time, a Daoist priest, who is an old friend of Yaqin's family, also visits her for alms. Sensing Zhao's malicious intention after a brief chat, the Daoist priest intimates Yaqin and asks her to secretly deliver the zither to him in the name of alms. Yaqin does this and then places an ordinary zither in the room to confuse Zhao. At midnight, Zhao murders a maid and takes the ordinary zither away. He also shifts the blame onto an innocent relative of Yaqin. After a thorough investigation, the magistrate of the prefecture debunks Zhao's conspiracy and jails him. The zither is then returned to Yaqin.

In contrast to the original story, the script narrates a story with a happy ending in which the villain is punished. Zhao comes to snatch the zither to please the prince even at the cost of murdering a maid. Yaqin does not succumb to Zhao's coercion and successfully keeps the zither. The magistrate, who is impartial and insightful, discovers the truth and imprisons Zhao. Though not a central character, the Daoist priest is a positive character who is thoughtful and honest. Above all, after a brief conversation with Zhao, the Daoist priest astutely discerns Zhao's nasty intention and advises Yaqin to relocate the zither in secret. Moreover, the priest conceals the zither safely until it is returned to Yaqin.

In summary, exemplified in the two preceding instances are the enhancements of the characters of Daoist priests in the Liaozaixi of Chuanju. Meanwhile, we can see the enhancement is also a result of the local belief of Daoism in Sichuan. The consistent improvement of Daoist priests is fairly exceptional in Chinese folk literature, and also manifests the influence of Daoism on theatre.

4. Conclusions

The two approaches, transplantation and improvement, have illustrated how Daoism has shaped the adaptation of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju. Because of the conviction in Daoism in Sichuan, dramatists of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju usually transplant Daoist immortals to adapt the original tales. For the same reason, it has been argued that Daoist priests are always positive in the Liaozaixi of Chuanju, and many improvements in these characters can be observed in the dramatization. Furthermore, the influence of Daoism upon Liaozaixi can be more fully understood under the argument of the "eventual

confluence” between religions and dramas in Chinese folk culture (Zhang 1993, pp. 1–10). The term of eventual confluence means that religions and dramas will unite and become inseparable as the final stage of their development because dramas have to rely on religions for survival, and religions also see dramas as an advocacy tool to attract more believers. As regards the Liaozaixi of Chuanju, we can clearly find an eventual confluence of the dramas and religions. For the dramatists of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju, an indispensable consideration is how to make their works more popular and acceptable in a new cultural environment. Daoism is probably an excellent tool for the dramatists because it not only frequently appears in *Strange Tales* but also has suffused the folk culture and belief in Sichuan. Therefore, incorporating Daoism in the dramatization is likely to enhance the acceptability and popularity of the Liaozaixi of Chuanju. In turn, the plots concerning Daoist characters derived from these scripts also embellish Daoism and advocate Daoist ideologies.

Furthermore, the study does not merely argue the influence of Daoism upon the Liaozaixi of Chuanju but also illustrates the great academic potential of Liaozaixi, which needs to be further examined. Because of the exclusive conviction in Daoism, the Liaozaixi of Chuanju, as this study has argued, provides an exceptional insight to broaden the argument of the influence of Daoism upon Chinese theatre. In the same vein, it can be expected that the Liaozaixi of other operas or other areas could provide some exclusive and insightful research potential as well. Since Liaozaixi, as discussed at the beginning of the study, spans no fewer than 150 types of traditional Chinese operas, depending on the great number, the research space is also promising. As time goes on, more scripts of Liaozaixi could become available to us, and more discoveries can be expected there.

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Notes

- ¹ The study chooses *Liaozhai zhiyi* published in 1799 by Shanghai guji chubanshe as the primary source, and the base text of the edition is the manuscript of the Studio of Forging Snow (Zhuxuezhai 鑄雪齋). Completed in 1751, this manuscript believed to be the most comprehensive one among the several early versions and has been commonly adopted as a basic reference by modern studies (Zhang 1993, pp. 51–63).
- ² The original version of the poem is “還丹功滿未朝天, 且向人間度有緣。拄杖兩頭擔日月, 葫蘆一個隱山川” (Peng 2008, p. 9681), and the adapted version derived from the script is “煉丹功滿遂升天, 再向人間度有緣。拄杖兩頭擔日月, 葫蘆一個隱山川” (Li 2013, vol. 4, p. 157).

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