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JAPANESE ADAPTATION AND RECEPTION OF *THE PEONY LANTERN*

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ABSTRACT

After the Chinese classical literary work New Tales While Trimming the Lamp was introduced, it spread to Japan through the Korean Peninsula and gradually became popular in Japan. Among its stories, The Peony Lantern went through stages of translation, adaptation, and recreation, greatly enriching Japanese literature and playing a significant role in its development. This paper examines influential adaptations by analyzing Japanese adaptations and reception of The Peony Lantern, while also exploring new forms of classical literary works' dissemination in modern times and the importance of their transmission in the digital context. The aim is to enrich our understanding of classical adapted literary works, explore the East Asian inheritance of The Peony Lantern, and deepen our understanding of the profound cultural origins between China and Japan.

KEYWORDS: *Classical Literature, Adaptation, Kaidan*

1. RESEARCH BASIS

This research focuses on the adaptation and reception of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan, systematically examining its dissemination trajectory and influence to explore the characteristics and patterns of Chinese classical literary works in cross-cultural communication. The study employs multiple research methods including literature analysis, comparative research, and cross-cultural communication, focusing on the adaptation characteristics, dissemination methods, and reception effects of *The Peony Lantern* in different historical periods. Through in-depth analysis of representative adaptations, this study explores the patterns and development trends of Chinese classical literature in Japan, providing theoretical support and practical reference for promoting the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Meanwhile, this research also focuses on exploring the innovative dissemination of classical literary works in the digital age, offering new ideas and methods for promoting China-Japan cultural exchange.

1.1 Research Background

"Adaptation" (Adaptation refers to the creative method of imitating and adapting foreign ancient literary works by incorporating Japanese local elements for rewriting. The same applies throughout the text.) as a special literary form in modern Japanese literary history based on foreign literature creation, research on its content comparison and "reception" is essential. Our classical novel *The Peony Lantern* from Qu You's ghost novel *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp* preceded *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* by nearly 300 years, pioneering Chinese Ming and Qing Dynasty strange tales. After spreading to Japan through the Korean Peninsula, in 1666, Japanese monk Asai Ryoi "adapted" it into *Botan Dōrō*; later San'yutei Encho adapted it into *Kaidan Botan Dōrō*, which became popular in Japan and one of Japan's three major "Kaidan" (Kaidan refers to horror stories about yokai, ghosts, etc.) stories, greatly promoting the development of Japanese "legendary literature" (Legendary literature refers to fantasy novels with strange content, the same applies throughout the text). Tadakawa (1998) pointed out that with the introduction of *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp* to Japan and its widespread circulation, *The Peony Lantern* was continuously accepted by Japanese literature and had a profound influence on Japanese literature and arts, "even feeling as if it shouldered the genealogy of (Japanese) early modern Kaidan literature".

Since the 1980s, domestic academia has conducted research on *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp*. Research content mostly focused on content comparison of "legendary novels" and the study of Chinese classical novels' spread and reception in East Asia. These studies mainly focused on the overseas circulation and influence of *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp*. However, there is limited research on the evolution and reception of its included work *The Peony Lantern* in Japan. Research on modern "reception" that transcends the literary framework in other artistic fields is even scarcer. Su (2018) believes that examining the spread and reception of *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp* in East Asia helps us understand the commonality and uniqueness of East Asian literature, as well as different ethnic groups' aesthetic styles and cultural psychology. Zhang (2020) discussed the "reception" of *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp* in

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Japan, which went through three stages of "translation, adaptation, and recreation", and *The Peony Lantern* was continuously adapted and reconstructed by Japanese writers after translation. Xiao (2022) believes that the spread of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan transcended the literary field, presenting Japanese-style *The Peony Lantern* to Japanese audiences in various colorful art forms.

From previous research, it can be seen that domestic academia's research on Japanese adapted novels mainly focuses on comparative analysis between original works and adapted works, or analysis of their adaptation or reconstruction process, and analysis of "reception" in the literary field. There is less research on new forms of "reception" such as modern manga and film adaptations. Research on how to bring Chinese classical literary works back into Japanese public view in the new era is also relatively blank. Therefore, in the context of "Digital+", how to expand the "reception" path of Chinese classical literature in Japan based on "adapted novels", using modern technology such as multimedia to "spread China's good voice", "understand contemporary China" and "digital empowerment" are also important aspects this research hopes to explore.

1.2 Research Significance

President Xi Jinping (2016) pointed out that storytelling is the best way for international communication. We should innovate foreign discourse expression methods, study the habits and characteristics of different foreign audiences, adopt concepts, categories, and expressions that integrate Chinese and foreign elements, combine "telling our own stories" with "others telling stories", making stories more recognized by international society and overseas audiences. China and Japan are geographically adjacent with shared cultural origins and a long history of literary exchange. Famous Japanese civilization historian Kato Shuichi once pointed out: "Japanese people of every era express their thoughts mainly in concrete literary works rather than abstract speculative philosophy" (Katō, 2011). It can be said that literary exchange has played a crucial role in the interaction between Chinese and Japanese civilizations.

There are many "adapted literary works" in Japanese literary history created through imitating and adapting Chinese classical literary works. On one hand, they greatly enriched Japanese literature and played a huge role in promoting the development of Japanese literature. At the same time, they objectively promoted cross-cultural exchange and border-crossing between China and Japan. Although *The Peony Lantern* was adapted multiple times after being introduced to Japan, its inherent content of "rewarding good and punishing evil" has been consistently used, invisibly realizing the vision of shaping our national image and highlighting China's profound historical heritage. In the new era, with the continuous improvement of our comprehensive national strength and international status, international society's attention to our country is unprecedented. Research on the "adaptation" and "reception" of *The Peony Lantern* can not only enrich the relevant content of *The Peony Lantern* adapted literature research but also provide materials for further exploration of the Japanese literary world's "reception" research of *The Peony Lantern* after the Meiji period. Meanwhile, by understanding the types and development of "adaptation", we can discover its advantages and limitations, further appreciate the profound influence of Chinese classical literature on Japanese literary works, and explore the characteristics of Japanese audiences. Additionally, "adapted literature and reception" has important practical significance for exploring the East Asian inheritance of Chinese literature, seeking the deep cultural origins between China and Japan, and initiating dialogue between Chinese and Japanese literature. For the new era of telling Chinese stories through Chinese classical literary works, telling the story of Chinese excellent culture well, and better "telling China's story and spreading Chinese culture", it has very important reference significance.

2. ADAPTATION AND RECEPTION OF *THE PEONY LANTERN*

Before discussing the Japanese adaptation and reception of *The Peony Lantern*, it is necessary to explain the research methods and framework. This study mainly uses literature review, text analysis, and comparative research methods to examine important adaptations of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan and analyze its dissemination characteristics and reception in different periods. The research will focus on representative works from the Edo period and modern times, exploring their changes and innovations in the dissemination process. Meanwhile, this study also pays attention to examining new forms of dissemination of *The Peony Lantern* in the digital age, hoping to provide reference for the modern dissemination of classical literary works.

2.1 Dissemination and Reception in the Edo Period

Compared to *The Peony Lantern*'s ordinary status in China, its widespread dissemination in Japan can be described as "flowers blooming better outside the wall". Through translation, adaptation, and transformation of *The Peony Lantern*, a series of very famous works called "Botan Dōrō" was formed in Japanese literary circles. This not only demonstrated its vitality and influence as a Chinese classical literary work but also promoted cultural exchange and literary innovation. The reception forms of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan mainly manifested in two ways: adaptation and translation. Adaptation refers to re-creation based on the original work, while translation refers to translating the original work into Japanese. The following introduces several influential adapted works.

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According to existing materials, *The Peony Lantern* was transmitted to Japan through the Korean Peninsula in the 17th century. Earlier works like Korean scholar Yun Chun-nyeon's *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp with Sentence Explanations* paved the way for the spread of Qu You's classical Chinese novels. However, in terms of circulation and influence, it is generally believed to have started with Japanese monk Asai Ryoi's creation of *Otogi Bōko*. This work had rich and diverse themes, covering content including strange tales, love stories, etc. It included 18 stories rewritten in Japanese from *New Tales While Trimming the Lamp* and is known as the ancestor of Japanese Kaidan novels. As a representative of "adapted novels", *Otogi Bōko* not only retained the basic plot and theme of the original work in the process of adapting Chinese strange tales but also incorporated Japanese local cultural elements. This not only improved its dissemination and acceptance in Japan but also promoted the development of Japanese early modern literature.

Subsequently, famous Japanese Edo period writer Ueda Akinari created *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* based on *The Peony Lantern*. *The Cauldron of Kibitsu*, as one of its short stories, tells the story of a talented and beautiful woman who chose to commit suicide due to an unfortunate marriage and ultimately turned into a fierce ghost to take revenge on her husband. It combines Chinese traditional strange elements with Japanese local Shinto beliefs, not merely describing human-ghost romance but also representing Ueda Akinari's reflection on human nature and social phenomena in the context of ancient Japanese society.

San'yutei Encho combined different versions of *Botan Dōrō* circulating at the end of the Edo period to create the rakugo performance *Kaidan Botan Dōrō*, which, along with "Yotsuya Kaidan" and "Sarayashiki", is known as Japan's three major Kaidan. This work tells the story of Iijima Heizaemon's daughter O-Tsuyu who died for love, and after death, she and her maid O-Yone meet her lover Shinzaburo every night carrying a peony lantern. In addition to continuing the plot of unfinished love between humans and ghosts, it also reveals the contradiction between loyalty and filial piety, with loyalty triumphing over filial piety in the ending, indirectly highlighting the social form that Japan pursued at that time.

2.2 Modern Dissemination and Reception

The *Kaidan Botan Dōrō* series, as a literary work occupying an important position in Japanese literary history, has had a profound influence on later literary creation. Meanwhile, *Kaidan Botan Dōrō* also has rich forms of dissemination in the new era, such as TV drama adaptations. For example, in 2019, *Reiwa First Year Version: Kaidan Botan Dōrō* was broadcast in Japan as a horror drama starring Ono Machiko and others, presenting a modern perspective of the story. Such works, as products of China-Japan cultural exchange, have become an indispensable part of China-Japan cultural exchange with their profound themes and rich plots.

Furthermore, the development of digital technology has posed new demands and paths for cultural dissemination and exchange in the new era. Digital technology has a profound impact on the protection and dissemination of classical literary works. Meanwhile, exploring innovative dissemination of classical literary works is particularly important and necessary in the context of "telling China's story well" and "digital empowerment". Through forms such as digitization of classical works, their stories and connotations can be more effectively preserved and promoted, while providing richer forms for reference materials, thereby promoting the modernization of classical literature research and dissemination. Its applications are diverse, such as using bibliometric methods to evaluate the academic value and influence of classical literary works. Using data such as citation counts to evaluate their academic status, or quantitatively describing the development trends of classical literature from an overall perspective helps understand the general characteristics of literature in specific periods. In short, digital technology has played a positive role in protecting and disseminating classical literary works. Through new methods such as digital humanities platform applications and literary dissemination in the new media information age, it has not only improved the research level and dissemination efficiency of classical literary works but also created new forms of expression and experience for literary works.

3. CONCLUSION

Through research on the adaptation and reception of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan, we can deeply analyze the strong vitality and cultural adaptability demonstrated by Chinese classical literary works in cross-cultural communication. Since the Edo period, Japanese literary circles have adapted and innovated *The Peony Lantern* at multiple levels and dimensions, forming the distinctive "Botan Dōrō" series of works. These adaptations not only retained the core themes and ideological connotations of the original work but also incorporated Japanese local cultural elements, achieving the localization transformation of literary works. This successful cross-cultural adaptation practice provides an inspiring typical case for exploring the overseas dissemination of Chinese traditional culture. Notably, this adaptation process both maintained the artistic value of the work and gave it new contemporary significance, demonstrating the strong inclusiveness and extensibility of Chinese classical literary works in a heterogeneous cultural environment.

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The dissemination process of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan fully demonstrates the influence and adaptability of Chinese classical literature. From Asai Ryoi's *Otogi Bōko* to Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, and to San'yutei Encho's *Kaidan Botan Dōrō*, each adaptation has endowed the work with new cultural connotations and contemporary characteristics. This continuous innovative adaptation not only greatly enriched Japanese literature but also built an important bridge for China-Japan cultural exchange. Especially in shaping China's national image and showcasing Chinese cultural charm, these adapted works have played a positive promoting role. Through research on these adapted works, we can clearly see the dissemination trajectory of Chinese classical literature in Japan and its profound influence in different historical periods, which has important academic value for understanding the history of China-Japan cultural exchange.

In the new era context, the dissemination of *The Peony Lantern* presents new characteristics and development trends. With the rapid development of digital technology and increasingly diverse media forms, the dissemination carriers of this work have broken through traditional text forms and extended to multiple fields such as TV dramas and digital media. This innovation in dissemination forms has not only improved the accessibility and influence of the work but also provided useful reference for the modern dissemination of classical literary works. Especially in the "Digital+" context, classical literary works have gained broader dissemination space and more diverse forms of expression through new media platforms and digital technology. This innovation in dissemination methods not only helps expand the work's audience but also opens up new paths for the modernization of classical literature dissemination.

The arrival of the digital age brings new opportunities and challenges for the dissemination of classical literary works like *The Peony Lantern*. Through modern technological means such as digital humanities platforms and new media dissemination, we can more systematically protect and disseminate classical literary works, significantly improving research efficiency and dissemination effectiveness. With the support of big data and artificial intelligence technology, the compilation, research, and dissemination of classical literary works have gained new development space. This not only helps protect and inherit classical literary works but also provides new ideas and methods for exploring "telling China's story well". Meanwhile, the application of digital technology also provides new research methods and tools for classical literature research, enabling researchers to conduct in-depth analysis and discussion of works from more dimensions.

This study shows that research on the Japanese adaptation and reception of *The Peony Lantern* has important practical significance and theoretical value. It not only deepens our understanding of China-Japan cultural exchange history but also provides useful insights for promoting the international dissemination of Chinese culture in the new era. By examining the dissemination process of *The Peony Lantern* in Japan, we can better understand the opportunities and challenges faced by Chinese classical literary works in cross-cultural communication. Future research directions can further explore innovative applications of digital technology in classical literature dissemination, and conduct in-depth research on how to enhance the international influence of Chinese classical literature through innovative dissemination methods. Meanwhile, attention should also be paid to how to achieve innovative expression in modern communication contexts while maintaining the cultural core of the works, thus better serving the international dissemination of Chinese culture and international cultural exchange. This will not only help enhance the international influence of Chinese classical literature but also contribute wisdom and strength to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

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