

A Comparative Study of Entertainment Consumption and Social Characteristics in Historical Context: An Analysis of the Song Dynasty of China and the Ancient Roman Period in the West

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Abstract: This study conducts a comparative analysis of entertainment consumption and its embedded social characteristics in two pivotal historical contexts: Song-dynasty “Goulan Washe” in China and ancient Roman theatres. It explores how leisure activities reflected and shaped societal structures in these civilizations. The paper first establishes the historical backdrop, contrasting the socio-political and economic contexts that gave rise to these entertainment venues. It then examines how cultural traditions, political systems, and economic conditions shaped their entertainment contents. A comparative framework analyzes performance genres, practitioner composition, audience demographics, and architectural forms. Analysis of consumer groups highlights their distinct demands and preferences, revealing divergent social characteristics in entertainment consumption. Finally, the study discusses the underlying causes of these differences and their implications for contemporary entertainment practices. By elucidating historical parallels and contrasts, this research deepens understanding of the cultural logic of Eastern and Western performing arts and provides insights for preserving and adapting traditional Chinese cultural heritage in modern leisure contexts.

Keywords: Comparative Study; Entertainment Consumption; Entertainment Venues; Roman Theatre; Social Characteristics

1. Introduction

Entertainment consumption across diverse cultural forms and historical contexts reflects deep historical roots and rich cultural meanings, closely intertwined with patterns of social development. Studying entertainment practices

in specific periods allows a more comprehensive reconstruction of past cultural dynamics and offers new perspectives for comparative research in the arts, shedding light on the historical evolution of entertainment institutions and theatre culture in both Eastern and Western traditions.

The Song dynasty represents a pivotal stage in Chinese civilization and a peak period of premodern entertainment consumption. During this era, the entertainment sector flourished, with “Goulan Washe”—urban venues functioning as spaces for leisure, performances, and market-based entertainment—standing out as a distinctive institution. These establishments hosted diverse performances and commercial activities, reflecting the social characteristics and cultural vitality of Song urban life. In contemporary terms, artistic production remains central to cultural, economic, and social systems, making historical studies of entertainment institutions relevant for understanding long-term cultural patterns.

In contrast, the ancient Roman period laid the foundations of Western civilization, with theatres exemplifying artistic organization and cultural management in the ancient West. Roman entertainment, dominated by theatrical performances and gladiatorial spectacles, differed substantially from Song practices due to variations in religion, social structure, and value systems. Meanwhile, Song “Goulan Washe” operated as integrated entertainment ecosystems. Despite these differences, both systems reveal the social characteristics and cultural priorities of their respective societies.

However, comparative analyses of entertainment consumption across these two civilizations remain limited. Addressing this gap, this study examines the institutional structures, performance practices, and social functions of Song “Goulan Washe” and Roman theatres. The

research aims to uncover the distinctive social features embedded in entertainment consumption and to deepen understanding of how culture shapes artistic systems and social life.

2. Related Work

Although entertainment consumption has attracted increasing scholarly attention, systematic research on representative ancient entertainment institutions—particularly the Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” and theatres of the ancient Roman period—has been limited. Existing studies on “Goulan Washe” primarily address general introductions, architectural forms, historical development, and theatre history, while aspects of entertainment consumption—such as performer composition, performance content, and audience structure—have rarely been examined in a comprehensive manner.

Moreover, current scholarship predominantly focuses on the historical development of Chinese theatre architecture, and comparative studies of theatre systems and artistic management between Eastern and Western institutions of the same period remain scarce. Considering the representative significance of Song “Goulan Washe” and Roman theatres, such cross-cultural comparison is of considerable academic value. Investigating ancient entertainment consumption comparatively can clarify underlying social characteristics, highlight cultural differences shaped by historical contexts, and provide insights for contemporary entertainment development in an increasingly integrated cultural environment.

This study adopts literature analysis, comparative study, and logical analysis. Literature analysis reviews historical research on the Song dynasty and the ancient Roman period, encompassing social conditions, entertainment industries, theatre operations, urban leisure life, performance practices, and management of entertainment markets. The comparative method identifies similarities and differences in social characteristics embedded in these entertainment systems, while logical analysis synthesizes historical materials to draw conclusions regarding their development and historical influence.

3. Historical Background of Song-Dynasty Entertainment Venues and Roman Theatres

Originally, “Washe” referred to temple spaces, while “Goulan” literally denoted connected railings enclosing performance areas. During the Song dynasty, “Goulan Washe” emerged as representative urban entertainment venues, integrating performance spaces with market-entertainment complexes. While their precise origin remains uncertain, their proliferation and prominence are traceable to the Northern Song period [1].

Through analysis of dramatic literature, official records, and visual sources, “Goulan Washe” are observed to have developed extensively in Northern Song Bianliang (Kaifeng), reflecting the city’s growing urban population and increasing demand for leisure and cultural consumption. These venues functioned as multifunctional spaces combining entertainment, commerce, and social interaction. Professional performers, including actors, acrobats, singers, and storytellers, were drawn to these sites, creating a dynamic performance ecosystem. In addition, temporary festival spaces known as “Gousi” emerged during major celebrations, providing flexible platforms for seasonal or itinerant performances.

The expansion of “Goulan Washe” was closely intertwined with the political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural vitality of the Song dynasty. The abolition of ward-based urban governance facilitated their geographical and organizational growth, while the diversity of performances—ranging from drama and opera to acrobatics, music, and public sports—satisfied a heterogeneous urban audience, from wealthy officials and literati to merchants and common residents. “Goulan Washe” thus functioned not only as centers for entertainment consumption but also as hubs of cultural exchange, contributing significantly to the vibrancy of Song urban life. As noted in “Mengliang Lu”, “Washe refers to structures that assemble when people gather and disassemble when they leave—easily formed and easily dispersed. In the capital, they became spaces where the elite indulged in excess and where youths lingered, often causing disruption” [2]. Architecturally, “Goulan” represented semi-permanent performance structures within Washe, forming core stage areas, whereas “Gousi” were temporary, smaller-scale sites. The integration of audience spaces, stages, and surrounding commercial facilities (teahouses, wine shops, and food stalls) created a comprehensive

entertainment ecosystem that accommodated thousands of patrons and facilitated continuous cultural engagement.

Historical and visual records similarly illuminate theatre development in ancient Rome. Roman theatres evolved alongside the empire's political, economic, and cultural expansion. Ancient Rome, emerging in the early ninth century BCE on the Italian Peninsula, expanded through the Roman Kingdom and Republic into a vast empire encompassing Europe, Asia, and Africa by the first century CE. Theatre was central to Roman cultural life, hosting a wide range of entertainment including drama, music, dance, gladiatorial games, and beast combats. Unlike the predominantly wooden and temporary structures of Song "Goulan Washe," Roman theatres were constructed from durable materials such as stone and concrete, many of which survive today, providing concrete evidence for analysis of spatial design, audience arrangement, and performance logistics.

Representative Roman theatres, including the Colosseum and Pompeii Theatre, reveal not only architectural sophistication but also explicit social stratification: seating arrangements reflected hierarchical status from emperors and senators to common citizens and slaves. Roman theatres served multiple social functions: they were spaces for mass entertainment, political display, and civic identity formation, often funded or organized by state authorities or wealthy elites. Theatres were also integral to religious festivals and commemorative events, blending civic, cultural, and leisure activities in ways comparable to the multifunctional role of Song "Goulan Washe."

Overall, Song dynasty "Goulan Washe" and ancient Roman theatres share the function of facilitating entertainment, cultural exchange, and social engagement, yet they differ in architectural permanence, scale, audience composition, and institutional support. While "Goulan Washe" reflect flexible, commercially driven urban spaces catering to diverse social strata, Roman theatres illustrate state-supported, monumental spaces designed to reinforce social hierarchy and civic culture. These contrasts underscore the interplay between historical context, urban development, and entertainment consumption in shaping the cultural landscapes of East and West.

4. Development Factors: Comparative

Analysis

Stable governance and economic prosperity provided a foundational institutional framework for the growth of the Song dynasty "Goulan Washe"—urban entertainment venues integrating performance spaces and market-entertainment complexes. Historical sources such as *Record of the Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor* and *Urban Entertainment Districts and Daily Life* indicate that the Song leisure system, combined with pro-commerce governance, strengthened urban markets and cultural production. Government policies, as documented in *Studies on Social Life in the Song Dynasty*, actively facilitated commercial participation, expanding both audience reach and performer networks, which in turn promoted the professionalization of entertainment consumption.

The relaxed cultural policies of the Song dynasty encouraged literary production, theatrical scriptwriting, and popular cultural expression, creating a supportive environment for "Goulan Washe" to flourish. Regulations recorded in *Collected Institutional Statutes of the Song Dynasty: Finance and Commerce* protected merchant interests, promoted urban commerce, and incentivized the concentration of entertainers and audiences in dense urban centers. The abolition of ward-based governance and curfew restrictions further expanded public space, allowing "Goulan Washe" to operate with greater flexibility and attracting diverse performers, from acrobats and storytellers to elite drama troupes. Consequently, these venues evolved into multifunctional hubs that blended entertainment, cultural exchange, and commercial activity, catering to a wide spectrum of urban residents.

In contrast, Roman theatre development was heavily supported by state patronage and elite sponsorship. From the third century BCE onward, Roman society exhibited conspicuous consumption among the slave-owning elite, with lavish banquets, luxury clothing, and ornate residences reflecting the culture of elite display. Within this context, entertainment consumption rapidly expanded as part of both elite lifestyle and urban leisure. Roman authorities financed theatre construction and organized public spectacles, including gladiatorial games and musical performances, to assert political legitimacy and secure popular favor. Public spectacles, while hierarchical in seating

arrangements, were largely accessible to all social classes, functioning as inclusive civic entertainment and reinforcing social cohesion across the empire [3].

The rise of the urban citizen class in the Song dynasty further stimulated entertainment demand. Cultural activities previously dominated by aristocratic circles became market-oriented services, intensifying commercialization and secularization in “Goulan Washe” and creating sustainable livelihoods for professional performers. High population mobility and economic prosperity in Song cities encouraged cultural exchange, allowing performers and audiences from diverse regions and social strata to interact, circulate musical and storytelling traditions, and hybridize regional performance styles [4].

Similarly, Roman theatres and arenas acted as civic spaces for social interaction, cultural expression, and political discussion. Performances—ranging from theatrical plays to gladiatorial combat and beast hunts—both entertained and conveyed cultural narratives, reinforcing civic identity and public cohesion.

Overall, comparative analysis reveals that the Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” reflected the rise of a commercialized urban society, emphasizing market-driven, multifunctional entertainment accessible to diverse social groups. In contrast, Roman theatres embodied hierarchical yet broadly accessible public entertainment, often tied to state patronage and civic rituals. Despite these differences, both systems illustrate the crucial role of entertainment consumption in shaping urban culture, social interaction, and collective identity, offering valuable perspectives for cross-cultural studies of historical entertainment development.

5. Industry Status Comparison

Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” offered a wide array of performances, including acrobatics, drama, storytelling, dance, and “cuju” (ancient Chinese football), featuring renowned artists such as Kong Sanchuan and Ding Dousai. Continuous performances attracted urban citizens, encouraged cultural participation, and helped promote artistic development. Roman theatres, by contrast, presented literary drama alongside gladiatorial combats, venationes, and large-scale naval reenactments, often sponsored by the state [5]. Despite the violent nature of some spectacles, these performances drew wide

audiences, from emperors and nobles to common citizens.

Performers in Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” included professional actors and folk artists, with no gender restrictions, which promoted female social visibility and economic participation. Specialists in drama, acrobatics, and storytelling competed to attract audiences, giving rise to star performers documented in Dongjing Meng Hua Lu. Street performers, performing outdoors or in marketplaces, supplemented indoor shows, making entertainment accessible to a wider public. In Roman theatres, performers were predominantly male, including actors, slaves, freedmen, and gladiators; all dramatic roles were male-only, while gladiators, often slaves or criminals, demonstrated skill and courage. Professional musicians and dancers further enriched the performances [6].

Audiences of Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” were primarily urban citizens, including merchants, artisans, officials, wealthy families, and literati, many of whom had both leisure time and disposable income. Military officers settled in the capital after demobilization under Zhao Kuangyi’s “appointing officials with wine” policy frequented these venues, supported by their proximity to garrisons. Additionally, women, children, peasants, clerics, and household servants attended performances. The emergence of women’s paid labor allowed them to gain economic means, making women an important segment of entertainment consumers. This broad audience supported both professional performers and folk artists, making “Goulan Washe” key sites of social entertainment and cultural exchange [7]. Roman theatres attracted an even broader spectrum of society, from nobles to slaves. Performances were often free, promoting inclusion, although seating arrangements reflected social hierarchies, allowing all classes to engage with cultural entertainment [8].

Architecturally, Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” were wooden structures with compact layouts, typically featuring a main hall, stage, and audience seating. Designs emphasized functionality and adaptability to accommodate diverse performance types. Surrounding tea houses and taverns created integrated entertainment hubs, generally located at central urban intersections. Larger venues could host several hundred spectators, while smaller spaces served more intimate performances. Roman

theatres, in contrast, were monumental stone or concrete constructions, often seating tens of thousands, with attention to acoustics, stage visibility, and audience circulation. Elevated locations and tiered seating reflected both the civic importance of spectacles and hierarchical social organization.

Overall, comparative analysis shows that Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” represented multifunctional, commercially driven entertainment ecosystems catering to diverse urban populations, whereas Roman theatres embodied grand, state-supported public entertainment reflecting social hierarchy while remaining accessible to the broader public. Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” offered highly diverse performances, including acrobatics, drama, storytelling, dance, and “cuju” (ancient Chinese football), combining artistic sophistication with broad entertainment appeal [9]. These venues were not merely spaces for amusement but also important platforms for cultural transmission. Song theatrical forms such as “zaju” (variety plays) and “nanxi” (Southern drama) flourished in these spaces, reaching wide audiences and promoting the development of performing arts. In contrast, ancient Roman theatres included drama but focused more on competitive and often violent spectacles such as gladiatorial combat, venationes, and public executions [10]. These performances served political and social functions, reinforcing civic control and conveying moral or political lessons. Roman drama, while entertaining, often drew on contemporary society, politics, and culture to critique social vices and human desires, provoking both laughter and reflection. Performers in Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” were predominantly professional actors and folk artists, whose skills and styles evolved under competitive market pressures. Women played notable roles, contributing to increased visibility and social status, while individual performers relied on artistic innovation to attract audiences and maximize earnings. Market competition encouraged collaborations between scholars and performers, and organized scriptwriting groups, known as Shuhui, emerged to sustain cultural creativity and prevent stagnation in artistic production. By contrast, Roman theatre performers were mainly male, including actors, slaves, freedmen, and gladiators. Gladiatorial contests relied heavily on slaves and criminals, showcasing courage and skill while symbolically

reflecting social hierarchies [11]. Professional musicians and dancers complemented performances, enhancing theatrical spectacle. Audiences of Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” were primarily urban residents, including merchants, artisans, officials, wealthy families, and literati [12]. Ordinary citizens also attended through low-cost access and diverse programming. The introduction of women’s paid labor provided them with independent economic means, making them an increasingly important segment of entertainment consumers. Roman theatres drew an even broader audience, from nobles to slaves, including young people, the elderly, and women. Public spectacles such as chariot races fostered civic engagement, while fan factions (red, white, green, and blue) sometimes evolved into politically active groups, illustrating the intertwined nature of entertainment and social politics [13].

Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” were mostly wooden structures with compact layouts, emphasizing practicality and flexibility [14]. Larger venues could accommodate several hundred spectators, while smaller ones supported intimate performances. Surrounding tea houses, taverns, and commercial facilities created integrated entertainment hubs. Many commercial offerings, including food items and playthings, were directly linked to performances, such as sugar figurines of theatrical characters and painted masks, reflecting early commercialization of entertainment. In Roman theatres, monumental stone and concrete constructions accommodated tens of thousands [15]. Designs prioritized acoustics, visibility, and stage arrangements, with tiered seating strictly following social hierarchies, from nobles to ordinary citizens to slaves.

6. Conclusion

Overall, Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” represented multifunctional urban spaces with diversified content, professionalized performers, and commercially supported cultural exchange, fostering both artistic innovation and female social participation. Roman theatres, through grand architecture and competitive spectacles, served as instruments of social control, civic cohesion, and political propaganda. Comparative analysis highlights how each system reflected the cultural and social priorities of its respective society and provides historical lessons for contemporary entertainment development.

The comparison of Song dynasty “Goulan Washe” and Roman theatres highlights lessons for modern entertainment. Diversified programming meets varied audience needs and fosters cultural innovation. Government support—through policies or patronage—sustains the industry, while cultural exchange enriches performance traditions. Inclusive access across social groups promotes engagement and social cohesion. Economic prosperity underpins sustainable entertainment. Modern industries can draw from these insights to balance diversity, accessibility, policy support, cultural exchange, and economic foundations.

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