Inheritance and Innovation of Chinese National Opera

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Abstract: In the historical process of the development of opera in the 20th century, Chinese national opera has its unique artistic value and representativeness. It is said to have unique artistic value for the reason that it is rooted in the deep soil of traditional Chinese culture and folk music, and has been able to highlight the national and humanistic style of its musical composition. It vividly demonstrates the cultural connotation of Chinese national opera in telling Chinese stories, bringing Chinese characters to life, manifesting Chinese style, presenting Chinese style and blossoming Chinese spirit. It is said to be representative for the reason that many of its aria have become classics in the world of contemporary opera and are well-loved by people. Chinese national opera has gone through a hundred years from the beginning to the present, and many excellent works have been circulated around the world. Once the operas “The White-Haired Girl”, “Xiaoruihei’s Marriage”, “Jiang Jie”, “Red Guards of Lake Honghu”, etc. were published, they have become representative works with high artistic level and political identity, and are also important works that are worthy of pride in the field of contemporary Chinese opera and have a special status in the history of Chinese opera. Many national opera performances not only draw on the traditional opera style, but also merge with Western bel canto singing techniques, successfully shaping brilliant and dynamic character images under different roles, which has resulted in many widely circulated classical aria: “Praise of Red Plum”, “The People of Five Continents Laughing Together”, “I Contribute Youth to Communism”, “Sea Breeze and Sorrow”, “Looking at the Liberation of the Working People in the World”, “Clear Water and Blue Sky” and so on. Each aria of them uses the Western opera creation structure as the carrier, combining national music elements, to highlight the unique artistic charm of China’s national opera. Therefore, this paper mainly analyzes the inheritance and innovation of Chinese national opera, further to deepen and explore the cultural connotation and artistic value of national opera.

Keywords: Chinese Ethnic Opera, Innovate, Inherit.

1. Research Review

Through various channels, the author has searched for literature related to Chinese national opera, including 741 published academic papers, 396 master’s and doctoral papers, and 29 newspaper publications. This article intends to conduct a classified study of the above literature results from the perspectives of research on the historical development of Chinese national opera, research on the musical characteristics of Chinese national opera, and research on the inheritance and innovation of Chinese national opera. The following visualization analysis on the literature of Chinese national opera has been conducted as follows.

2. Visualization analysis

(1) Annual publishing trend analysis: From the perspective of annual analysis of research, research on Chinese national opera has been on a spiral upward trend since 2006, indicating that the academic circles has always been enthusiastic about the study of Chinese national opera; and to some extent, it indicates that the study of Chinese national opera possess certain academic value.

(2) Distribution of main topics: From the perspective of research topics, there are 375 pieces related to national operas, 307 pieces of Chinese national operas, 122 pieces of Chinese operas, 49 pieces of "The White-Haired Girl", 42 pieces of "Mulan Poem", 41 pieces of opera performances, and 39 pieces of the opera "The White-Haired Girl". From these data, the research on national operas is the most frequently, followed by the research on Chinese national operas, indicating that the academic circles has considerable interest in the field of Chinese national opera.
(3) Distribution of journals: "Opera" accounts for 9.97%, "Northern Music" accounts for 9.02%, "Home Drama" accounts for 8.54%, "Song of the Yellow River" accounts for 7.59%, "Modern Music" accounts for 4.75%, "Chinese Theatre" accounts for 4.43%, and "Musical Works" accounts for 3.32%, just to name a few. From the analysis of the above data, it can be seen that the proportion of journals with high academic value published in papers is not very high, mainly concentrated in popular ordinary journals such as "Drama Film, and Television Arts", "Music and Dance", and "Higher Education". However, there are relatively few influential articles on the research of Chinese national opera, which to some extent can indicate that the development of Chinese national opera is worrying, and the depth of research needs to be further pursued and explored.

(4) Distribution of research institutions: Shenyang Conservatory of Music has 43 pieces of research, Henan University 43 pieces, Central Conservatory of Music 30 pieces, Nanjing Academy of Art 24 pieces, Xi'an Conservatory of Music 24 pieces. In addition, Liaoning Normal University, Hunan Normal University, Harbin Normal University and other comprehensive universities have also been involved. But the institutions that involve in this topic are still more concentrated in professional musical college, which is comforting and also gratifying, since the in-depth study of this field by professional scholars is beneficial to the development of Chinese national opera.
(5) Fund distribution: There are 15 items of the national art and science planning projects, 7 national social science funds, and 7 humanities and social sciences research institutes of the Ministry of Education. The other projects are all distributed at the provincial level, indicating that Chinese national opera still accounts for a relatively small proportion of major national topics, and there is still a long way to go in the research of this filed.

(6) Distribution of secondary topics: The most fruitful research is on the theory of national opera, accounting for 20.40%; The second is the research on opera creation, accounting for 10.16%. From the perspective of national opera research works, "The White-Haired Girl" and "The Daughter of the Party" have attracted the most attention. In addition, opera, aria, opera music, and yangge operas are also hot spots in academia.

Therefore, from these theoretical results, this paper extracts the most cited and representative results for research. It is divided into: research on the historical development of Chinese national opera, research on the musical characteristics of Chinese national operas, research on the inheritance and innovation of Chinese national opera, and so on.


3.1 Budding Stage of Chinese National Opera

The art of Chinese national opera in the 20th century, both in terms of its development process and in terms of its artistic process, has shown some stage characteristics, either implicitly or indirectly. The earliest Chinese opera creations were those composed mainly by Jinhui Li, whose children's musicals “The Sparrow and the Child”, written in 1920, is considered to be the origin of Chinese national opera, and Jinhui Li is thus regarded as the “pioneer” of Chinese national opera. In general, Li's Children's musicals has completed the process of opera art from scratch in our country. At the turn of the 1930s and 1940s, when China was in a state of internal and external crisis, a large number of composers who had studied Western music began to experiment with Chinese opera by drawing on the experience of Western opera and creating a style of Chinese opera in accordance with its formal rules. They successively produced works such as "Qiuzi", "The Western Chamber", "Jing Ke", etc., among which "Qiuzi" composed by Yuanluo Huang is the most accomplished, influential and representative. Regarding the characteristics of this period, Lin Wang's paper published in Northern Music, No. 37, 2017, stated, "China has formed a strategic unified line centered on the revolutionary base area of the Yan'an Anti-Japanese War. This period saw the gradual development of Yangge opera with elements of national and local opera ditties, the content of which was mostly based on themes close to people's lives, attacking feudal superstition and promoting freedom and democracy, and was well loved by the people." The new opera, "The White-Haired Girl", which appeared in April 1945, was the first landmark work and the cornerstone of the maturity and development of the new Chinese national opera. It was the first time that the concept of "new opera"
was used, and the birth of Chinese national opera has revealed the importance of learning from traditional Chinese opera. It has gradually become a consensus that Chinese national opera creation should follow the path of traditional opera.

3.2 Initial Rising Stage of Chinese National Opera

After the founding of New China, Chinese national opera has made great progress, and gradually moved forward towards the Chinese style and Chinese manner. Chinese national opera Opera music has also made some bold attempts to inherit tradition and draw on the successful experience of foreign operas, resulting in a large number of excellent operas that reflect the revolution and construction of the Chinese people. In 1957, Chinese Theatre Association and the Chinese Music Association jointly held a symposium on the new opera. The symposium proposed that the new opera must inherit and carry forward the traditions of China's national drama and music, utilize existing opera creations, appropriately draw on the experience of foreign opera art, and creatively develop the new opera of a nationalistic nation with different genres and styles that Chinese audiences love to see and hear. Under the guidance of this ideology, the innovation of Chinese opera concepts and the artistic value system established by the opera world have been consolidated, strengthened, and developed. The establishment of the National Grand Theater in the 1950s and the introduction of a large number of foreign classical operas to China, coupled with the rapid development of local and traditional Chinese operas, provided favorable conditions for the exploration of the nationalization of Chinese opera at that time. During this period, many operas that quickly reflected modern social life were also created and were widely welcomed by society, which in turn further promoted the development of opera. The most representative plays during this period include "Red Guards of Lake Honghu", "Jiang Jie", and "Ayiguli". "Red Guards of Lake Honghu", which premiered in 1959, and "Jiang Jie", which premiered in 1964, are not only the two most important works in the history of Chinese opera, but also symbols of the highest achievements in contemporary opera creation in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China. They enjoy the same lofty status in the minds of the Chinese people as "The White-Haired Girl". It can be said that the brilliant success of these two works in the 1950s and 1960s indicates that China's opera creation and the entire opera art industry have entered a mature period. The opera "Red Guards of Lake Honghu", which appeared in the rising period, "can be said to be a monument in the the development history of Chinese national opera. It is an opera with the characteristics of a Banqiang-Form, in which the two structures of "No sadness, No tears" and "Looking at the Liberation of the Working People in the World" in the Banqiang-Form arias reflect the dramatic tension and expressive function of the Banqiang-Form music unprecedentedly."

3.3 Rapid Development Stage of Chinese National Opera

After 1976, China has entered a new era of socialist construction, and opera creation has taken new steps in the era of reform and opening up. China's literary and artistic industry has swept away the dull situation, driving unprecedented prosperity in stage art, and thus entering a new stage of opera development. The mainstream style represented by "The White-Haired Girl", "Red Guards of Lake Honghu", and "Jiang Jie" is as difficult to surpass as the three peaks that stand in the history of Chinese opera. Since then, driven by the wave of reform and opening up, Chinese opera has experienced a creative peak represented by "Red Guards of Lake Honghu" and "Jiang Jie". From "the daughter of the Party" to "Wild Fire and Spring Breeze Fighting the Ancient City", this is a development that has gone through a huge fault. For a long time after "Jiang Jie", Chinese national opera was absent. More than 20 years later, the famous Chinese musician Guangnan Shi's famous masterpiece, "The Mourn", completed in 1981, gradually revived the Chinese national opera, which suffered a devastating blow during the Cultural Revolution. "The Mourn" is the first lyrical psychological drama in China, and it is also the first opera created by a composer in accordance with the structural pattern and dramatic development techniques of Western grand operas. The highlight of this opera lies in the organic combination of the connotation of Xun Lu's works and Guangnan Shi's musical talent. In general, the two works "The Mourn" and "The Field" represent the highest level of opera creation in China after 1976, both in terms of ideological and artistic qualities, the organic combination and overall embodiment, as well as in mastering and controlling the rules of opera, or in the inheritance, development, reference, and innovation of the aesthetic concept of opera. They are also important signs that opera creation in the new era has reached a second new level. The works such as "The Daughter of the Party" and "Wild Fire and Spring Breeze Fighting the Ancient City" born during this period are extremely influential. From "Jiang Jie" to "Wild Fire and Spring Breeze Fighting the Ancient City", this is a huge development after experiencing a fault. "From the perspective of music creation, contemporary opera creation is still in the process of comprehensive development, with diverse opera types mushrooming. Chinese national opera has thus become a unique genre."

In the new era, due to the changes in the living environment of opera and the development of artistic concepts and tastes, there has been a trend towards elegance in opera creation, namely, to continue to explore deeply in the direction of serious opera, to promote the comprehensive aesthetic sense of opera to a higher aesthetic level, gradually advancing to achieve integrated balance as the main goal of artistic exploration.


4.1 Always Based on National Singing Techniques

Music is an important means of expression in national life, and it must have a certain national character. Nationality is the most important style characteristic of Chinese national opera[3]. The musical form of "Jiang Jie" is highly consistent with the thoughts, emotions, and life of the ethnic group at that time, fully interpreting the ethnic characteristics of music. Moreover, in terms of singing, the opera "Jiang Jie" fully embodies the unique techniques of our national singing. This is mainly manifested in the following two aspects: on the one hand, it is a reference to the singing techniques of "clear articulation" in national singing methods. "Clear articulation is not only the singing standards followed by the Chinese
nation in singing, but also the most basic aesthetic standards of the Chinese nation, mainly including enunciation, returning to rhyme, and receiving sound (Meng Zhang, 2020)[5]. Taking the excerpts from "Jiang Jie" as an example, the rhymes attributed to "an" are broken, cold, sweet, and intermediate, as shown in Figure 7. In terms of singing method, singers are required to ensure that the beginning of the words is clear, the abdomen of the words is extended, and the end of the words is well collected. On the other hand, it is a reference to "Run-cavity" in national singing methods. "Run-cavity" refers to the beautification and decoration of the vocal cavity and melody during singing to achieve the goal of elegance and moving, enhancing the color and charm of the work. In the aria "I Contribute Youth to Communism", the decorative embellishment of the front leaning tone in the national singing method is adopted, such as the two characters "Duan" and "Jiu". This fully demonstrates Jiang Jie's anger. Another example is that although the word "le" appears to have a dependent sound, minor third decorative sound should be added before the word "xiao" in actual singing to enrich the melody while increasing the flavor of the aria language, thus fully demonstrating the revolutionary spirit of Jiang Jie.

4.2 The Reference of the Singing Characteristics of Traditional Chinese Opera

The red classic opera "Jiang Jie" is mainly based on Sichuan folk songs, drawing on the language characteristics and expressive techniques of different types and styles of national operas such as Beijing Opera, Sichuan Opera, Wu Opera, Yue Opera, and Sichuan ballad-singing. It not only has strong drama, but also has smooth and beautiful singing ability. Taking "Bangqiang (vocal accompaniment in some traditional Chinese operas)" as an example, it is widely used in Sichuan opera and Hunan opera as a highly dramatic form of singing, which can express the thoughts and emotions of characters and set off the atmosphere of opera. In the aria "Chuanuy Liberation" from "Jiang Jie", and in the singing of "Looking at the Yangtze River and Mountain City", "Bangqiang" as a technique is used. Through the use of "Bangqiang", not only does it clearly explain and supplement the story background and the ideas that Jiang Jie wants to express, but it also successfully lead to the following passionate singing, as shown in Figure 8. Not only that, the aria also uses the traditional opera's crying tone. For example, in the singing of the aria 'Revolution to the End is as Strong as Steel', when singing 'The cold wind blows against the face and rolls the frost, the heart is like a knife, and the pain is like a broken intestine!', a crying tone is used, which helps to resonate with the audience. Another example is the singing of the aria "DaQu Liquor Blows Fragrance at the Opening of the Pot" of the opera "Jiang Jie", which uses the style of Sichuan opera for reference and use.

4.3 The Absorption of Singing Techniques from Western Vocal Music

National opera singing should fully demonstrate the artistic expression of opera on the basis of adhering to national characteristics. In the singing of the opera "Jiang Jie", although only traditional folk singing and traditional opera can express Jiang Jie's indomitable and steadfast revolutionary spirit, there are certain restrictions on the display of character images and the singing methods of vocal music, which affects the artistic performance effect. Therefore, the musical and artistic characteristics of the opera "Jiang Jie" are also reflected in the absorption of singing techniques from Western vocal music, such as bel canto, sequence techniques, chest belly breathing, and Italian singing. In the singing of "Red Praise", the technique of bel canto was used. In "Walking in the Footsteps of the Martyrs", the use of Western sequence techniques not only enhances the vitality of the music melody, but also indirectly emphasizes the music theme.


5.1 Strengthening the Rehearsal of Classic National Operas to Occupy the Ideological Propaganda Highland

In the context of the new economic normal, increasing investment in red classic operas such as "Jiang Jie" and making every effort to rearrange them to occupy the ideological propaganda highland. Not only is it an important key to enhancing the artistic vigor and vitality of red classic opera works, promoting Chinese ethnic opera, but it is also an important channel for inheriting red genes and promoting red culture in red classic opera. In the rearrangement of "Jiang Jie", emphasis should be placed on upgrading the music quality, adjusting the lyrics, and relocating the musical instruments. While maintaining the original musical style of "Jiang Jie", it should be promoted to conform to the audience's appreciation requirements of the new era. For example, by using LED screens to reproduce the real situation of the village at that time, we can create a multidimensional space that is rich in layers and lifelike, allowing viewers in the new era to feel the revolutionary spirit expressed in the red classic works closer to the real environment, thereby better inheriting and developing Chinese national opera, and forming Cultural self-perception and self-confidence.

5.2 Maintaining and Strengthening National Characteristics to Form a Unique Artistic System

In order to make good use of the red resources, carry forward the red tradition, and inherit the red gene, it is even more necessary to maintain and strengthen the red classical opera with national characteristics to form a unique artistic system and provide support for the inheritance and development of Chinese national opera, especially at a time when there is an increasingly serious tendency towards the entertainment of the literary ecology and a generally high level of literary creation without prominence. The extremely strong national character of Sister Jiang, for example, not only reveals the personal qualities of the Chinese people such as their inherent backbone, but also reflects the Chinese national style. Its musical character is precisely due to the characteristic national style, "a new opera developed from the basis of opera". On this basis, the red classic songs are innovated to form an independent and well-established artistic system like opera, thus forming a unique musical artistic characteristic and expression. "It is the presentation of technical aspects such as ethnicized singing, folk style melodies and the borrowed use of the opera music panel style."
5.3 Cultivating Chinese National Opera Performers to Grow the Talent Pool

The inheritance and development of Chinese national opera cannot be separated from the strong support of opera performing talents. Therefore, in order to better inherit and develop Chinese national opera, it is necessary to pay attention to the cultivation of talents, and through the continuous growth of the talent pool, we will be able to create better and more up-to-date classic red operas. For example, in the version of "Jiang Jie" (2021), in addition to three soprano singers, two young singers, Liu Tong and Yang Xiyinzi, are also cast in the role of "Jiang Jie". They obtained practical training in opera rehearsals, not only enriching their stage experience, but also obtaining baptism in the spiritual level. In addition, different cast members can be allocated according to different level needs and performance occasions. In addition, new media such as Tiktok can also be used to vigorously promote the red classic opera, stimulate more young people's interest in the red classic opera, and lay the foundation for talent cultivation and growth. This not only helps to expand the excellent red classic opera, but also helps to broaden the mass base and social influence of Chinese national opera.

5.4 Building on the Foundation of the Nation and Focusing on the World Stage

In order to promote Chinese national opera to the world stage, based on the national foundation, continuous innovation is the top priority. Since the reform and opening up, traditional Chinese dramas, such as Henan Opera, have successively gone abroad and played local opera performances with Chinese characteristics on the world stage, and have received high praise. Chinese folk opera should also be based on national characteristics and strive to reach the world stage. In the new era, in order to better inherit and develop Chinese national operas, it is not only necessary to strengthen the rehearsal of classical national opera and opera, it is necessary not only to strengthen the rehearsal of classical national opera, occupy the ideological propaganda highland, but also to maintain and strengthen national characteristics and form a unique artistic system. At the same time, it is necessary to cultivate talents for Chinese national opera performance, expand the talent pool and to the maximum extent, based on the national foundation while moving towards the world.

6. Theoretical Construction

In the historical process of the development of Chinese national opera in the 20th century, Chinese national opera has its unique artistic value. Through further research on various literature related to Chinese national opera, it is not difficult to find that among the major artistic genres of the Chinese nation, Chinese national opera is undoubtedly the most glorious tradition and brilliant achievement. Classic plays such as "The White-Haired Girl", "Red Guards of Lake Honghu", "Red Coral", and "Jiang Jie" have played a tremendous spiritual inspiration role in the history of China's democratic revolution and socialist construction that cannot be matched by other forms of Chinese opera, depicting the most beautiful scenery in the history of Chinese opera, and leaving an indelible memory in the aesthetic practice of opera.

In this regard, the author also conducts a preliminary study from the historical development of Chinese national opera, the musical characteristics of Chinese national opera, and the issues of inheritance and innovation of Chinese national opera. It is believed that Chinese national opera is the most brilliant artistic achievement and widely influential opera product in Chinese opera, with long-lasting artistic charm and vitality. The key question is "whether and how to adhere to the people-centred creative orientation in the creation of national operas in the new era, and how to dialectically view and scientifically deal with the propositions of innovative transformation and creative development therein." There is still a long way to go before Chinese national opera can become an important reference in the various artistic disciplines of the new era in China.

At present, due to the limitations of various objective conditions on the subject studied in this article, there are few similar related research topics (papers) found in foreign journals. In China, research on Chinese folk opera is only conducted on historical periods, some on the inheritance of nationalization, and some on the use of foreign things for China. However, there are few comprehensive analysis and research findings on the "pioneering and innovative" of classical significance in the works. Therefore, it is of great historical and practical significance for the development of Chinese national opera theory and practice to explore how to inherit and innovate Chinese national opera and explore its social and artistic values from multiple perspectives. The main research object of this thesis is the classic Chinese national opera "Jiang Jie", which is mainly studied and discussed in the following aspects: 1. A study of the historical development of Chinese national opera in its lineage, uncovering the similarities and differences between the various development periods so as to identify breakthroughs for innovation. 2. A study of the musical characteristics of Chinese national opera to summarize and organize the directions for future creation. 3. Through a study of the problems of inheritance and innovation in Chinese national opera, combined with Chinese folk music theory, the historical role of Chinese folk opera in the development of Chinese opera and its guidance for future development are summarised according to the tutor's guidance.

7. Conclusion

Throughout the hundred years since the birth of children's musicals, there has been a wide range of perspectives and ideas in the study of Chinese national opera. Through analysis, it can be seen that the theoretical research on Chinese national opera presents the following situation:

1) Aspects of musical identity: Yao J[23] in “Reflections on the Historical Evolution and Formal Development of Chinese National Opera” in the journal “The New Voice of Yue-Fu” talks about the musical characteristics of national opera, "Ethnicity is the most important stylistic characteristic of Chinese national opera". The scholar has conducted research on the pronunciation and enunciation of singers, affirming the role of the singing aesthetic of "clear articulation" in shaping characters, and also strengthening this characteristic of national identity.
2) Aspects of inheritance and innovation: Ke Ma conducted a study on the nationalization of opera in the translation of "New Opera and Old Tradition - Views on the Development of New Opera Based on Traditional Chinese Opera". Meng Zhang conducted a study on the inheritance and innovation of ethnic opera in her article "Opera: The Background of the Era in a Diverse Style". Qihong Ju conducted a study on the creative ideas of opera in his "An Overall Study and the Historical Track of National Opera--A Preface of Study on Chinese National Opera Creation in the New Time".

From the above literature research, it can be seen that scholars have a very broad research perspective, which reflects both the positive and lateral studies of Chinese national opera. Chinese national opera can be said to be the most brilliant and socially influential opera variety among the artistic achievements of opera, with bright and tenacious vitality and artistic charm. It is the product of an organic fusion of Chinese and foreign music and theatre arts, and has both a theatrical musicality and a musical theatre, as well as a Chinese style and Chinese manner that other outstanding Chinese operas should have. Due to the tireless research and efforts of numerous scholars, Chinese national opera has been able to penetrate the public's perspective more deeply, laying a good theoretical foundation for the international stage, and indicating the direction for the cultural confidence of Chinese music. In short, to continue to pass on the classics, to continue to add to the socialist literary creation, is what our hearts yearn for and where our responsibilities lie.

References