

Roots of Traditional Chinese Opera

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Abstract: This paper briefly reviews the development of traditional Chinese opera and fills a gap in the study of this traditional Chinese art out of China. It is hoped that it will draw the attention of more foreign scholars to the study of traditional Chinese opera.

Keywords: Chinese Traditional Opera; Roots and Development; History

Introduction

Chinese opera originated from song and dance activities in primitive society. Through the Han (202 BC–220 CE), Tang (618–906 CE), Song (960–1279 CE), and Jin (1115–1234 CE) dynasties, Chinese opera developed into a remarkably complete art form (Brandon, 2011). Since the day it was formed, Chinese opera has never again interrupted its development. From the Zaju of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) to the legends of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the Huabu Luntan Opera of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the many kinds of local operas represented by Beijing opera today, it has been active on stage for more than 800 years (9). Additionally, over the years of its long development, the types of opera have multiplied from the initial north and south to spread throughout the country, including more than 348 different local operas (Chinese Ministry of Culture, 2017), making it the most well-known form of traditional Chinese art.

The following is an overview of Chinese opera's main developments.

1. Nanxi in southern China during the Song Dynasty

Chinese opera had a more developed operatic form since the Nanxi was developed during the Southern Song period. Due to Nanxi was primarily concentrated in Wenzhou, this operatic form also became known as the “Wenzhou Zaju” or “Yongjia Zaju” (Yongjia is the old name for Wenzhou) or simply known as “xiwen” (2). After its formation, the Nanxi was spread outwards from Lin'an, the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty, and quickly spread over Zhejiang Province and to the southern provinces, and then to the northern capitals during the late Southern Song Dynasty. Unlike other operas that were performed for the pleasure of royal family members, Nanxi opera originated in Wenzhou as a genuine folk drama. As a result, Nanxi Opera attracts a large audience. Friendship, love, loyalty, and betrayal are common themes in Nanxi Opera (3).

Nanxi had a long and complete structure, one Nanxi theater piece had between 20 and 30 scenes, sometimes could even between 40 and 50 scenes long (4). During the show, the performers sang, talked, and acted as narrators. Seven types of roles can be categorized: sheng (male), dan (female), jing (painted face male), mo (middle-aged male), wai (non-starring roles), tie (a secondary female role, which is attached to the main role of a Dan), and chou (comical character) (Lim, 2010). A point worth noting here is that over the centuries, female characters in Chinese opera were often been performed by males, who were made up to resemble women.

A symbolic theatrical performance has begun to emerge in addition to singing and dancing. Several virtual performances, including opening and closing the door, climbing hills and horse riding, have also been used in the play (Zhang, 2021). Onomatopoeia effects have also been used. The most special performance was using people as doors and tables. Two people stand on either side, means a door in the middle. One person bent down and his back was the table (5). This is a very meaningful principle of performance, which at the time, perhaps due to the limitations of the conditions, Chinese opera uses human body to express a certain meaning. It affected the form of Chinese performance aesthetics system.

2. Zaju in northern China during the Yuan Dynasty

It is unanimously recognized as Yuan Zaju that shows the maturity and prosperity of Chinese opera (Mackerras, 1988). It developed during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, was a mature dramatic form that had a more precise structure than earlier forms. There are normally “four acts and a prologue”. In other words, the four stories are told along with a short beginning. Yuan Zaju could also have more than four acts. For example, the “*Romance of the Western Chamber*” is composed of 21 acts. In general, a brief introduction or a brief extension was added to the main action. The roles in Yuan Zaju could be generally classified into dan (female), mo (male), jing (painted face) and za (aside from the three categories above). A main character sings only in each act with the other roles participating in talking. Actresses had an important place in Yuan Zaju since they acted not only as female characters, but they also impersonated male roles. “Travels of Marco Polo” mention that 20,000 actresses lived in the capital of Yuan (6).

Many literary poets became scriptwriters for Yuan Zaju for a living. The Yuan government had abolished imperial examinations and therefore, the literati's social status had plummeted, making it a trend (Evans, 2006). Literature resorted to scriptwriting which in turn gave rise to many of Yuan Zaju's most famous playwrights. Yuan Zaju can be considered a dynasty opera (Chan, 2018). It was written during the rise of the Yuan Dynasty, flourished during the development of the Yuan Dynasty, and finally disappeared with the end of the Yuan Dynasty. Moreover, while Yuan Zaju flourished, Nanxi continued to develop during the Yuan dynasty; while Yuan Zaju was in decline at the end of the Yuan dynasty, Nanxi was in a period of prosperity and development. This was the basic trend since the Song Dynasty when Nanxi began to spread, and it would continue to develop until the mid-Ming Dynasty when it entered its evolutionary phase.

3. Chuanqi in the Ming Dynasty

The Ming Chuanqi, also known as legends, inherited the Nanxi system in form and content, moreover, it was more complete. The word “chuanqi” originates from the general term for absurdist fiction during the Tang Dynasty. The legends in the Ming referred to long dramas prevalent at that time (Birch, 1999). During the Ming Dynasty, legends gradually replaced Zaju and reached a new peak as the latter became less and less popular. Legends have distinct characteristics of the times. The development of social economies, the prosperity of commodity economies, and the expansion of citizen classes all helped the legends enter a time of prosperity. Based on the southern Nanxi and the northern Zaju, the legendary stage art of the Ming Dynasties has developed significantly (Birch, 1999). A variety of facial makeup colors are used to distinguish the personalities of different characters in the face paints, which can be divided into handsome and ugly roles. Meanwhile, the legend's performance pays particular attention to the design of the scene, using simple props and realistic lights to achieve an impressive visual effects (1). In terms of special emphasis, the legend breaks through the structure of Zaju with four acts and a prologue, scripts in the Ming dynasty ranged from 30 to 50 chapters each, and chapters were used as a unit of measurement. In contrast to Zaju which has a limitation of only one character can sing, all the characters in legends can sing. Chuanqi's format was comparatively more flexible, since singing could be done by one role, as aduet, rotating among different roles or as a group (Lim, 2010).

The performance of “excerpts” became the main fashion in the late Ming Dynasty onstage (Hsiao, 2007). For excerpts, only the most outstanding part of the script would be selected and performed because it took up much time and effort to enact the entire performance. Its simplicity could also demonstrate the actors' performing standards and this form of performance became a trend at that time.

The Ming legends include a variety of local song singing styles. Among them, Kunshan tune and Yiyang tune are the most popular and influential (Li, 2019). During the Jiajing period, Wei Liangfu ((1522-1573, circa.) reformed Kunshan tune, a euphemistic, delicate, fluent, and long-term “water mill tone” has been created (7). At this time, a full-scale orchestra is created with strings, winds, and drums (7). Yiyang tune, which originated in Jiangxi province, has gained a significant amount of popularity among the people. It is performed by folk artists and when it spreads to one place, it combines the local dialect and music to make a new localized tune. Yiyang tune does not require orchestral accompaniment and uses only gongs

and drums as its rhythm. It is different from the elegant Kunshan tune. Moreover, these two tunes represent two different trends in Chinese opera.

The beginning of the legends coincided with the official end of the Nanxi era, in which the difference between the two operas lies not just in the change of name, but also in the fact that the system had changed significantly.

4. Local opera and Beijing opera in the Qing Dynasty

The early to mid-Qing Dynasty was dominated by Kunshan tune (also called Kun opera), which was extremely popular among the scholars. From then on, the Huabu (Flower Section) operas became increasingly ubiquitous. Huabu refers to a variety of local operas in northern China other than Kun opera, in addition, many operatic tunes and types of unique characteristics were gradually formed. During the reign of emperors Qianlong and Jiaqing, there was a phenomenon known as the “conflict between Kun operatic tune and other tunes” which actually referred to competition among the different operatic tunes from different genres. Through the late Qing period, the Peking opera developed and grew, which led to the palace opera being replaced by it.

To congratulate and celebrate Emperor Qianlong's 80th birthday, the Hui (a branch of Kun opera, which from the southern province of Anhui and sang in Hui tune) troupes arrived at the capital in 1790 (10). Gradually after this, there were 10 more Hui troupes that went to the capital. When the Hui troupes settled at the capital, they absorbed elements of the other opera types that were popular there. At the beginning of the 19th century, actors performing the Han tune from Hanshui region in Hubei Province also arrived at the capital. As the Hui troupes had a strong lineup during that time, most Han tune performers would work with them during the various performances. This led to the convergence as well as the absorption and combination between the Han and Hui tunes. As a result, a new opera type, Pihuang opera, later known as Beijing (also spelled as Peking) opera which makes use of xipi and erhuang as its main operatic tune was gradually formed. Beijing opera became the most well-known opera all over China and is regarded as the “national opera” (8).

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