

Inheritance and Innovation of Guangdong Han Opera: Xu Qing's Artistic Practice and Thoughts

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Xu Qing's artistic practice in the field of Guangdong Han Opera, and deeply explores his contributions to the inheritance and innovation of the genre. Through studying Xu Qing's related practical activities, this paper analyzes his specific measures in drama creation, talent cultivation, market expansion, and cultural dissemination, and reflects on the impact and significance of these practices on the development of Guangdong Han Opera. The study finds that Xu Qing's artistic practice provides valuable experience for the inheritance and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera in contemporary society, and is of great value for promoting the sustainable development of Guangdong Han Opera.

Keywords: Guangdong Han Opera; Inheritance and innovation; Xu Qing; Artistic practice

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1. Introduction

As one of the three major opera genres in Guangdong, Guangdong Han Opera has a history of nearly three hundred years^[1]. In 2008, it was listed in the national intangible cultural heritage list, carrying rich historical and cultural connotations and being an important representative of Lingnan culture^[2]. Under the wave of globalization and modernization, Guangdong Han Opera faces many challenges, such as a shortage of inheritors and fierce competition in the performance market. Its inheritance and innovation have become an important issue that needs to be solved urgently^[3].

Xu Qing, a national first-level screenwriter, is currently the vice chairman of the Guangdong Dramatists Association and the vice president of the Guangdong Han Opera Inheritance Research Institute^[4]. He has been dedicated to the field of Guangdong Han Opera for many years and has accumulated a lot of first-hand artistic practice and theoretical experience. With a strong sense of responsibility and mission, he has devoted himself to the inheritance and innovation of the Guangdong Han Opera. Through various practices such as drama creation, talent cultivation, and market expansion, he has made important contributions to the development of the Guangdong Han Opera. The study of Xu Qing's artistic practice helps to understand the contemporary inheritance and innovation path of Guangdong

Han Opera in-depth and provides a useful reference for the sustainable development of Guangdong Han Opera.

2. Overview of Guangdong Han Opera

2.1. Historical origin

Guangdong Han Opera, originally called Waijiang Opera, can be traced back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties^[5]. At that time, a large number of foreign provincial troupes singing Yiyang Cavity, Qingyang Cavity, and Luan-tan entered Guangdong. During the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, Waijiang Opera troupes became gradually active in Guangdong. In the 24th year of Qianlong (1759), foreign troupes established the Waijiang Liyuan Guild Hall in Guangzhou. Since then, Waijiang Opera has been widely spread in eastern Guangdong, northern Guangdong, western Fujian, and southern Jiangxi, and has gradually formed Guangdong Han Opera with a unique style through the integration with local folk music, Buddhist and Taoist music, and Zhongjun class music^[6]. In 1933, Qian Rezhū, a native of Dabu County, Guangdong Province, wrote an “Outline of Han Opera”, officially naming Waijiang Opera as Han Opera, which was renamed Guangdong Han Opera in 1956^[7].

2.2. Artistic features

The performance program of Guangdong Han Opera is rich and diverse, and its martial arts belong to the South School, emphasizing the flexibility and agility of the body, with vigorous and powerful movements, showing strong Southern martial arts characteristics^[8]. The face makeup mainly uses black, red, and white, and different colors symbolize different personality characteristics. For example, black represents bravery, red represents loyalty and virtue, while white and cyan represent cunning and treachery^[9].

Stage singing is an important feature of Guangdong Han Opera, which is mainly based on Pi Huang, and also incorporates various voice cavities such as Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Chuiqiang, and minor, preserving a large number of ancient musical scores^[10]. The stage language is Zhongzhou rhyme, reflecting the inheritance of the Central Plains culture by the Guangdong Han Opera. The diversified integration system enables Guangdong Han Opera to appropriately set off the atmosphere according to different plot scenes, enhancing the appeal of the drama.

In terms of role types, Guangdong Han Opera is divided into seven major roles: Sheng, Dan, Chou, Gong, Po, and Jing (Hongjing, Wujing). Each role has its unique performance norms and artistic characteristics, playing an indispensable role in the drama.

The accompaniment instruments are divided into Wen Chang and Wu Chang. The Wen Chang instruments include head strings, erhu, and sanxian, while the Wu Chang instruments include war drums, big drums, and bian drums. The head string, Da Suluo, and haoto are unique accompaniment instruments of the Guangdong Han Opera. As the leading instrument, the head string has a clear and bright tone, which can lead the playing rhythm of the entire orchestra, and is mainly suitable for accompanying adults with false voices; Da Suluo has a majestic and heavy sound, which plays an important role in enhancing the dramatic tension, mainly suitable for accompanying relatively slow and stable tunes; Haoto is often used for the contrast at the beginning or the end, and its loud sound can quickly attract the audience's attention, which is mainly suitable for creating a grand, intense and exciting atmosphere for the play.

3. Xu Qing's artistic practices

3.1. Drama creation: Inheriting classics and introducing innovations

Xu Qing achieved remarkable success in the creation of the Guangdong Han Opera, adhering to the philosophy of

inheriting classics while introducing innovations. His works span a variety of themes, focusing not only on the exploration and interpretation of traditional stories but also on real-life experiences and regional cultures, injecting new vitality into Guangdong Han Opera.

In the rearrangement and adaptation of traditional repertoires, Xu Qing has conducted in-depth research, preserving their essence while innovating to cater to the aesthetic tastes of modern audiences. He has carefully refined the plots, characterizations, and language of the scripts, allowing traditional repertoires to shine with new charm on the contemporary stage. For instance, in the adaptation of the classic repertoire, “Bai Li Xin Recognizes His Wife”, Xu Qing enriched the characters’ inner worlds while retaining the original story framework, showcasing the profound emotions between Bai Li Xin and his wife after enduring hardships, thereby enhancing the repertoire’s emotional appeal.

In creating new repertoires, Xu Qing has primarily focused on red themes, Hakka themes, and regional folklore, tightly integrating Guangdong Han Opera with local culture. For example, his large-scale red theme repertoire “Li Jianzhen” is based on the life story of the revolutionary predecessor Li Jianzhen, showcasing her heroic struggle for the revolutionary cause. This repertoire not only possesses profound ideological connotations but also innovates in artistic expression, combining traditional Guangdong Han Opera performance forms with modern stage technology. Its novel musical composition and stage direction have captivated audiences, earning it the Excellent Work Award from the 11th Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five-One Project” in Guangdong Province in 2019, fully attesting to its artistic value.

Another representative work of Xu Qing’s is “Bai Men Liu”, which won the First Prize for Scriptwriting at the 8th Guangdong Provincial Arts Festival and the Guangdong Lu Xun Literary and Art Award. It was even adapted into a theatrical film. With a unique perspective and captivating storyline, this repertoire showcases the social landscape and character destinies of a specific historical period, innovating in scriptwriting, musical design, and stage presentation, and promoting the external promotion, inheritance, and development of Guangdong Han Opera.

3.2. Talent cultivation: Fostering heritage and building a talent pipeline

Talent is the key to the inheritance and development of Guangdong Han Opera. Deeply understanding this, Xu Qing has dedicated himself to talent cultivation, employing various methods to nurture the next generation and build a reasonable talent pipeline.

Xu Qing places great emphasis on the foundational training of young talents. He collaborates closely with drama schools, establishing student learning and talent cultivation bases. Frequently visiting these schools, he teaches students and personally guides their performance skills, patiently explaining and demonstrating everything from vocal techniques to body movements. He also focuses on cultivating students’ love for Guangdong Han Opera, enhancing their cultural identity and sense of mission through narratives about the genre’s historical stories and artistic characteristics.

At the Guangdong Han Opera Inheritance Research Institute, Xu Qing actively promotes talent cultivation models such as “group-led classes” and “one-on-one” mentoring, fully utilizing the role of veteran artists in passing down their skills and experiences. He organizes experienced artists to work with young actors, providing meticulous guidance in various aspects such as character understanding, emotional expression, and performance pacing, thereby helping young actors continuously improve their performance levels. This model not only enables young actors to grow rapidly but also promotes the inheritance of traditional Guangdong Han Opera skills.

Xu Qing also actively provides young talents with opportunities to showcase their abilities. He encourages them

to participate in various performances and competitions, allowing them to hone their skills in practice. Under his guidance, many young actors have made their mark in significant performances and competitions, emerging as new forces on the Guangdong Han Opera stage. He also recommends outstanding young talents to higher-level artistic platforms for further learning and exchange, broadening their horizons and enhancing their artistic accomplishments.

3.3. Market expansion: Diversified strategies to activate the performance market

Facing the challenge of a shrinking performance market for Guangdong Han Opera, Xu Qing has actively explored diversified market expansion strategies, striving to activate the performing arts market and create broader spaces for the genre's development.

Xu Qing believes that the Guangdong Han Opera should center on and serve the overall situation, fully utilizing its cultural service functions. He promotes the involvement of Guangdong Han Opera in various cultural activities, actively fulfilling performance tasks and public cultural events aligned with the central tasks of the municipal party committee, government, and propaganda department. Through these activities, Guangdong Han Opera not only brings traditional cultural enjoyment to the local community but also enhances its social influence and establishes a positive social image.

Utilizing the advantage of Guangdong Han Opera's use of "Zhongzhou phonology" and Mandarin as its stage language, Xu Qing actively develops new performance markets. He advocates for the redevelopment of performance markets in Guangdong and Chaoshan, strengthening cooperation with units and enterprises in the Pearl River Delta region with performance needs. Through collaborations with local cultural institutions and enterprises, various performance activities are organized, attracting more audiences to the Guangdong Han Opera. He also expands the "cultural benefit" performance market, ensuring consistent government procurement and orderly implementation of activities such as community, village, school, enterprise, and military camp visits. Through these activities, Guangdong Han Opera gradually reaches grassroots audiences, cultivating a large number of potential viewers.

Xu Qing also focuses on strengthening the exploration and development of internal and external resources within the genre, developing "drama derivative" projects that align with market demands. He promotes the integration of Guangdong Han Opera with the cultural and creative industries, developing a series of cultural and creative products with Guangdong Han Opera characteristics, such as drama character dolls, cultural shirts, and postcards. These products not only possess commemorative value but also serve as important carriers for promoting Guangdong Han Opera, further expanding its influence.

3.4. Cultural dissemination: Enhancing influence and promoting Han Opera culture

Xu Qing actively promotes the cultural dissemination of Guangdong Han Opera, utilizing various channels and methods to enhance its popularity and influence and celebrate its cultural heritage.

With the help of the media, Xu Qing intensifies the promotion of Guangdong Han Opera. He strives for support from provincial and municipal mainstream media, setting up special columns and programs on local newspapers, radio stations, television stations, and the internet to vigorously promote the developmental origins, artistic characteristics, and high-quality repertoires of the Guangdong Han Opera. Through comprehensive media coverage, more audiences are exposed to and develop a fondness for Guangdong Han Opera, creating a wave of enthusiasm for the genre in the Meizhou region.

Taking advantage of Guangdong Han Opera's status as a national intangible cultural heritage, Xu Qing integrates resources and taps into the potential of the genre and its repertoires. He promotes the launch of special publi-

cations and albums dedicated to the Guangdong Han Opera, further establishing its image through authoritative promotion by high-end media and marketing strategies. These publications and albums provide in-depth introductions to the history, artistic characteristics, and classic repertoires of the Guangdong Han Opera, offering valuable reference materials for its inheritance and development and elevating its status in academic and cultural circles.

Xu Qing also facilitates the international exchange of the Guangdong Han Opera, allowing it to reach beyond national borders and into the global sphere. Seizing the opportunity to jointly apply for world intangible cultural heritage status with five provincial Han Opera troupes (from Hubei, Fujian, Hunan, Shaanxi, and Guangdong), he continuously advances the project construction of “Guangdong Han Opera (Han Music) Stations” and the “Guangdong Han Opera Overseas Inheritance and Promotion Center.” Through these projects, the influence of Guangdong Han Opera continues to expand overseas, attracting the attention of foreign audiences and scholars and promoting cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world.

4. The impact and significance of Xu Qing’s artistic practices

4.1. Promoting the inheritance of Guangdong Han Opera

Xu Qing’s drama creation plays a significant role in inheriting the traditions of the Guangdong Han Opera. His re-arrangement and adaptation of traditional repertoires enabled classic works to be passed down and developed, preserving the traditional essence of Guangdong Han Opera. The creation of new repertoires, primarily focusing on red and Hakka themes, tightly integrates Guangdong Han Opera with local culture, enriching its repertoire library and providing more material for its inheritance.

In terms of talent cultivation, Xu Qing has nurtured a large number of Guangdong Han Opera talents through various methods, providing a solid talent foundation for the genre’s inheritance. He emphasizes cultivating young talents’ love and sense of responsibility for the Guangdong Han Opera, ensuring that its inheritance has successors. These young talents not only inherit traditional Guangdong Han Opera skills but also inject new vitality into the genre’s development.

4.2. Facilitating innovation in Guangdong Han Opera

Xu Qing’s innovations in drama creation have brought new developmental ideas to the Guangdong Han Opera. By combining modern elements with the traditional characteristics of Guangdong Han Opera, he has introduced innovations in scriptwriting, musical design, and stage presentation, making the genre more aligned with the aesthetic tastes of contemporary audiences. For instance, in musical composition, he integrates modern musical elements, adding new charm to Guangdong Han Opera’s music. In stage presentation, he draws inspiration from modern drama and dance, enhancing the visual appeal of the Guangdong Han Opera.

Xu Qing’s innovative initiatives have also opened up new paths for the development of Guangdong Han Opera in terms of market expansion and cultural dissemination. He actively explores diversified market expansion strategies, develops “drama derivative” projects, and promotes the integration of Guangdong Han Opera with the cultural and creative industries, creating new economic growth points for the genre’s development. In cultural dissemination, he utilizes new media platforms and external exchange projects to enhance the popularity and influence of Guangdong Han.

4.3. Enhancing cultural identity and exchange

Xu Qing actively promotes the cultural dissemination of Guangdong Han Opera, enhancing its popularity and influ-

ence through various channels and means, and celebrating Guangdong Han Opera culture.

Xu Qing leverages the power of media to intensify the promotion of the Guangdong Han Opera. He strives for support from provincial and municipal mainstream media, establishing special columns on Guangdong Han Opera in local newspapers, radio stations, television stations, and the internet. These columns vigorously promote the developmental origins, artistic characteristics, and excellent repertoire of the Guangdong Han Opera. Through comprehensive media coverage, more audience members can understand and appreciate Guangdong Han Opera, creating a wave of enthusiasm for the art form in the Meizhou region.

Xu Qing takes advantage of the status of Guangdong Han Opera as a national intangible cultural heritage to integrate resources and tap into the potential of the genre and its repertoire. He promotes the launch of a series of special publications and albums dedicated to Guangdong Han Opera as an intangible cultural heritage, further establishing the image of Guangdong Han Opera through authoritative promotion in high-end media and marketing strategies. These special publications and albums provide in-depth introductions to the history, artistic characteristics, and classic repertoire of Guangdong Han Opera, offering important material support for its inheritance and development. They also enhance the status of Guangdong Han Opera in academic and cultural circles.

Xu Qing also facilitates external exchanges for the Guangdong Han Opera, enabling it to reach beyond China's borders and onto the global stage. Taking the opportunity of jointly applying for World Intangible Cultural Heritage status with Han Opera troupes from five provinces (Hubei, Fujian, Hunan, Shaanxi, and Guangdong), he continuously advances the project construction of "Guangdong Han Opera (Han Music) Stations" and "Guangdong Han Opera Overseas Inheritance and Promotion Centers." Through these projects, the influence of Guangdong Han Opera overseas continues to expand, attracting the attention of many overseas audience members and scholars, and promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

5. Conclusion

Xu Qing has conducted various artistic practices in the inheritance and innovation of the Guangdong Han Opera, achieving numerous accomplishments. Through work such as drama creation, talent cultivation, market expansion, and cultural dissemination, he has made significant contributions to the development of the Guangdong Han Opera. His practices not only promote the inheritance and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera but also provide valuable experience for its sustained development in contemporary society. However, the inheritance and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera is a long-term and arduous task, still facing many challenges. In future development, more artists and cultural workers like Xu Qing need to make joint efforts. While preserving traditional characteristics, people should continue to strengthen the creation of new dramas, constantly introduce excellent works with era characteristics and cultural connotations, intensify talent cultivation, improve the talent training system, cultivate more high-quality professionals, further expand domestic and foreign markets, innovate market expansion strategies, and continuously improve the market competitiveness of Guangdong Han Opera. People should also strengthen cultural dissemination, enhance the popularity and influence of Guangdong Han Opera, and let the "Southern Peony" of Guangdong Han Opera bloom with more brilliant brilliance in the new era. With continuous efforts from all parties, Guangdong Han Opera will continue to move forward on the path of inheritance and innovation, making greater contributions to promoting excellent traditional Chinese culture and facilitating cultural diversity.

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Disclosure statement

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