

A Study on the Inheritance and Innovation of Guangdong Han Opera: A Case Study of Xianhua Li as a Representative Inheritor

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Abstract: The Guangdong Han Opera is an important component of Lingnan culture. The Dan role, with its unique performance style and profound cultural connotations, holds significant value for inheritance and innovation. This study focuses on the artistic practices of Li Xianhua, a representative inheritor of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera. By examining her fifty-year artistic career, the study analyzes her outstanding contributions to the inheritance, performance innovation, and mentorship in the Guangdong Han Opera. Employing a combination of case studies and literature research, the study emphasizes Li Xianhua's practices in vocal design, performance style, and repertoire innovation, revealing the multiple inheritance pathways of Guangdong Han Opera since the 1970s. The research findings indicate that Li Xianhua has promoted the innovative development of Guangdong Han Opera by integrating traditional techniques with modern artistic elements, gradually attracting the attention of younger audiences. Simultaneously, she has established a systematic succession mechanism in cultivating young actors, providing crucial support for the sustained development of the Guangdong Han Opera. The study also discovers that the application of digital technology and the deepening of international cultural exchanges have opened up new spaces for the dissemination and promotion of the Guangdong Han Opera. The innovation of this research lies in systematically analyzing Li Xianhua's artistic practices and cultural contributions from an individual perspective, unveiling the vitality of Guangdong Han Opera in the contemporary cultural context and its implications for the inheritance of Chinese traditional culture. This provides an important reference for the protection and innovation of intangible cultural heritage and offers theoretical support and practical pathways for the sustainable development of Guangdong Han Opera.

Keywords: Guangdong Han Opera; Li Xianhua; Cultural inheritance; Artistic innovation

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1. Research background and significance of Guangdong Han Opera

Guangdong Han Opera, with its rich history and diverse content, is a typical representative of Lingnan traditional culture^[1-2]. Its unique artistic style, profound cultural foundation, and varied forms of expression make it an integral part of the spiritual and cultural life of the people in Lingnan. Since being listed as a national intangible cultural heritage representative project in 2008, Guangdong Han Opera has begun to attract academic attention. As one of the important roles in Guangdong Han Opera, the Dan role occupies a significant position due to its delicate performance style, elegant singing, and unique character portrayal^[3].

In the context of Lingnan culture, Guangdong Han Opera is not only a performing art but also a crucial carrier of local cultural identity and historical memory. The Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera provides a strong theatrical appeal to the audience by expressing the complex emotions and diverse identities of female characters^[4]. It is not only one of the cores of traditional aesthetic expression in Guangdong Han Opera but also plays an important role in traditional culture dissemination, social education, and emotional communication. However, with the rapid changes in contemporary society in the 1970s, the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera faced a crisis of inheritance, including audience loss, a gap in actor succession, and difficulties in adapting traditional skills to contemporary aesthetic demands^[5]. Therefore, achieving the modernization of artistic forms while preserving traditional culture became an urgent issue to address.

As a representative inheritor of the Dan role in the Guangdong Han Opera, Li Xianhua's artistic career provides a model for the inheritance and innovation of the Guangdong Han Opera^[6]. She has not only created a series of classic characters but also cultivated a new generation of successors in teaching and guidance. Through in-depth research on Li Xianhua's artistic practices, researchers can better understand the core value and development path of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera, providing important insights into the protection and innovation of intangible cultural heritage.

2. Research methods and objectives

This study employs a combination of literature analysis, case studies, and field investigations, focusing on Li Xianhua to explore the inheritance and innovation of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera. By analyzing Li Xianhua's artistic career, representative Guangdong Han Opera repertoires, and teaching experience, the study summarizes the characteristics and significance of her artistic practices. Simultaneously, the study integrates anthropological and cultural theoretical frameworks to explore the adaptability and dissemination pathways of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera in the contemporary social context. The main objectives of the study are as follows.

To trace the development trajectory of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera: By reviewing the historical origins of Guangdong Han Opera, this study reveals the unique position and artistic characteristics of the Dan role in Lingnan culture.

To analyze Li Xianhua's artistic practices: Starting with representative Guangdong Han Opera repertoires and teaching experiences, this study explores her specific contributions to artistic innovation and inheritance, revealing the aesthetic qualities of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera.

To discuss inheritance and development strategies: In the context of modernization and globalization, this study explores how the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera can combine traditional charm with contemporary culture to reach a broader audience.

To propose practical suggestions for protection and innovation: This study aims to provide a theoretical basis

and practical reference for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, promoting the sustainable and dynamic development of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera.

3. Overview of Guangdong Han Opera

3.1. Historical origins and characteristics of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera

The history of Guangdong Han Opera can be traced back to the late Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty ^[7]. It originated from the original vocal form spread from the Central Plains and evolved by incorporating local traditional music and dialects. Initially known as “Wai Jiang Xi” (foreign river play), it was introduced to eastern Guangdong by Han Opera troupes in southern Jiangxi, Hubei, and Hunan. Gradually, it combined with the local Chaoshan and Hakka cultures, forming a theatrical form with regional characteristics. Its singing style is dominated by “Xipi” and “Erhuang”, enriched with various performance elements such as Daban and Xiaoqu. This vocal system is in line with the Han Opera of the Central Plains, but it also incorporates local languages and musical characteristics such as Hakka and Chaoshan dialects, reflecting the distinct cultural characteristics of Lingnan.

The Dan role, originating from the female character performances in traditional operas, is a highly expressive role in theatrical culture and an essential component of Guangdong Han Opera ^[8]. It inherits the traditional characteristics of the Dan role in the Han Opera of the Central Plains but presents distinct regional features in its specific manifestations. The performance emphasizes delicate emotional expression, with a soft and melodious singing style. It focuses on shaping characters through delicate body movements and elegant postures, retaining the stylized movements of traditional Dan roles while incorporating the unique artistic style of Lingnan culture. This fusion demonstrates the diversity of the Dan role in the Guangdong Han Opera and its unique position in the Chinese theatrical system.

The classification of Dan roles in the Guangdong Han Opera includes Zhengdan (main female role), Huadan (lively and spirited female role), and Guidan (young and innocent female role) ^[9]. Zhengdan often portrays a gentle and elegant female image, while Huadan focuses on lively and spicy characters. Guidan specializes in depicting the innocence and purity of young girls. This role division enables the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera to adapt to both the solemnity of historical dramas and the lively diversity of folktales. The core of the Dan role lies in combining singing, recitation, and body movements to give life to the character through delicate performances, achieving emotional resonance and aesthetic experience in theatrical art.

3.2. The status and value of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera

As one of the core roles in Guangdong Han Opera, the Dan role not only plays a significant part in performances but also plays an irreplaceable role in promoting the inheritance and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera ^[10].

3.2.1. The core embodiment of expressive power in Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role)

The Dan role maximizes the artistic characteristics of Guangdong Han Opera through delicate performances. Singing, as an essential component of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera, best showcases the unique charm of its phonology. The singing style of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera retains the traditional “Pi Huang” vocal style while incorporating elements of Lingnan folk music, resulting in rich rhythmic variations and emotional tension. Li Xianhua, known as the “First Dan” of Guangdong, innovates in both singing and performing, skillfully utilizing false voice conversion techniques. Her singing not only preserves the musical characteristics of Guangdong Han Opera but also draws on singing techniques from other drama genres. She focuses on conveying emotions through sound, interpreting the character’s inner world with loud and powerful singing, allowing the audience to experience a richer

auditory sensation.

The traditional aesthetic characteristics of Guangdong Han Opera are fully exhibited through the Dan role's stage performances^[11]. Guangdong Han Opera actors vividly portray the characters' personality traits and emotional states through dynamic body language and diverse facial expressions. For example, Li Xianhua's portrayal of Hong Fenlian, a virtuous and filial daughter who fell into prostitution due to her humble birth and reliance on her father for survival, in the play "Bao Gong and Niu Niu", fully demonstrates the heroine's multiple personalities, successfully creating another typical and elegant ancient female character^[12].

3.2.2. An important carrier for the inheritance and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera

The Dan role, as a crucial component of Guangdong Han Opera, serves as the core link for its inheritance and innovation. Typically, Guangdong Han Opera actors pass down traditional skills and artistic styles through intergenerational transmission. For instance, in her artistic career, Li Xianhua not only inherited the performance characteristics of her mentor Liang Suzhen but also incorporated modern musical elements and stage technology innovations into her performances, giving new vitality to the Dan role. In the Guangdong Han Opera film "Jin Lian", Li Xianhua's portrayal of Pan Jinlian breaks through traditional moral constraints, redefining the character with complex psychological layers and a unique female perspective, showcasing the diverse possibilities of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera.

Additionally, the inheritance of the Dan role in the Guangdong Han Opera is reflected in the training and guidance of young actors. As a national intangible cultural heritage inheritor, Li Xianhua ensures the intergenerational continuation of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera through the cultivation of outstanding actors such as Huang Lihua, Ji Bing, Guan Leying, Liao Yaming, and Xu Shangmei. These young actors inject new vitality into the Dan role of Guangdong Han Opera by continuously innovating based on inheriting traditional skills.

3.2.3. A bridge to enhance emotional resonance with the audience

The Dan role plays a significant role in emotional communication with the audience in Guangdong Han Opera. Through the delicate display of female characters' emotions, the Dan role can evoke emotional resonance in the audience, thereby enhancing their understanding and identification with traditional Chinese culture. For example, in the representative new repertoire of Guangdong Han Opera, "Butterfly Dream", Li Xianhua skillfully portrays two distinct characters, the young woman fanning the grave and Tian Shi, not only showcasing the characters' emotional conflicts but also deepening the audience's appreciation for the artistic expressiveness of Guangdong Han Opera.

The dissemination of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera is not limited to the Lingnan region of China but has also become an important bond for forging a sense of community among the Chinese people through overseas dissemination. During the overseas dissemination of the Guangdong Han Opera in Mauritius, the Dan role has become a widely popular segment among overseas audiences due to its delicate emotional expression and elegant performance style. Through overseas theater performances and exchange activities, Guangdong Han Opera has established cultural connections in overseas Chinese communities, laying a foundation for its dissemination and development on the international cultural stage.

3.2.4. Reflecting the diversity of Lingnan culture

The singing style and performance style of the Dan role integrate elements of Central Plains Han culture, Hakka culture, and Lingnan local culture, exhibiting the characteristics of multicultural intersection. For instance, in music, the

singing style of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera combines the rhythm of Central Plains operas with the liveliness of Lingnan folk tunes, making the artistic expression of Guangdong Han Opera more distinctive. In terms of performance, the Dan role focuses on both the stylized movements of traditional operas and incorporates the unique delicacy and elegance of Lingnan culture, showcasing its unique cultural charm.

In conclusion, the Dan role, as an essential component of Guangdong Han Opera, is not only a significant embodiment of theatrical performance art but also plays a central role in cultural inheritance, emotional communication, and artistic innovation. Studying the Dan role in the Guangdong Han Opera can deepen our understanding of traditional theatrical art aesthetics and provide valuable references for the protection and inheritance of Lingnan culture. As a treasure of Lingnan culture, the Dan role possesses profound academic research and practical application value.

4. The artistic career and performance characteristics of representative inheritor Li Xianhua

4.1. Li Xianhua's artistic growth journey

Li Xianhua, the representative inheritor of Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role), is known as the founder of the "Xian Style" and is a recipient of the "Double Mei Flower Award" in Chinese drama. She is also a provincial-level representative inheritor of Guangdong Han Opera, a national intangible cultural heritage. Her artistic career began in a family full of dramatic atmosphere. Under the guidance of her mother, she came into contact with and studied Guangdong Han Opera from a young age, demonstrating extraordinary artistic talent.

In 1973, at the age of only 11, Li Xianhua stood out in fierce competition and was admitted as a student to the Han Opera class at the Meizhou Regional Drama School. There, she received systematic professional training in the Guangdong Han Opera, laying a solid foundation for her performance. After completing her studies, she joined the Guangdong Han Opera Theater and studied under the famous Dan actor Liang Suzhen. Liang Suzhen, the second-generation main Dan role of the Guangdong Han Opera, played a significant guiding role in Li Xianhua's artistic growth with her delicate performances and proficient skills.

Li Xianhua's early representative works include playing Chai Junzhu in "Zhuangyuan Mei" and successfully rescuing the scene in "Lin Zhao de and Wang Jin'ai", demonstrating her deep understanding of the characters and proficient mastery of singing and performance skills. In "Hua Deng An", her portrayal of Chen Caifeng injected new vitality into the Dan performance of the Guangdong Han Opera with her crisp and lively voice and delicate emotional expression. Later, she won the first prize for performance at the Second Guangdong Provincial Arts Festival for her portrayal of the filial daughter Hong Fenlian in "Bao Gong and Niu Niu."

In 1991, to further enhance her artistic attainments, Li Xianhua went to study at the China Drama Academy during her pregnancy. This eight-year learning experience allowed her to encounter more traditional drama genres and expression techniques. Especially under the influence of Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera, her performance skills and artistic style were further enriched and expanded. During this period, she not only consolidated her understanding of Guangdong Han Opera but also tried to incorporate the essence of different art forms into the performance of Guangdong Han Opera, laying a solid foundation for her future artistic innovation.

4.2. Performance skills: Singing innovation and stage performance

Li Xianhua's singing skills are known for their innovation and expressiveness. Based on inheriting the traditional vocal style of Guangdong Han Opera, she attempts to innovate by switching between true and false voices and diversifying rhythmic changes, making the singing more emotionally tense and artistically appealing. For example, when

portraying the filial daughter Hong Fenlian in “Bao Gong and Niu Niu”, she skillfully switched between true and false voices, vividly expressing the character’s innocence and subtle changes in inner emotions. She focuses on the fit between sound and emotion in her singing design, allowing the audience to directly feel the character’s inner world through unique timbre and rhythm.

In terms of performance, Li Xianhua emphasizes combining traditional stylized movements with modern stage performance. Every movement and expression on stage has been carefully considered to ensure an accurate portrayal of the character’s image. For instance, when portraying Tian Shi in “Butterfly Dream”, she successfully crafted an elegant and dignified yet enduring female image through delicate body movements and precise expression management. Additionally, Li Xianhua explores new musical expressions in the Guangdong Han Opera. In some repertoires, she incorporates modern musical elements and bel canto, enriching the singing of the Guangdong Han Opera. For example, in the 2024 Guangdong Han Opera film “Jin Lian”, she combines traditional singing with bel canto, giving the character unique artistic charm through redesigned tones and rhythms. This innovation not only expands the dissemination scope of Guangdong Han Opera but also attracts more young audiences.

4.3. Analysis of representative repertoires of Guangdong Han Opera Dan role

4.3.1. “Bao Gong and Niu Niu”

“Bao Gong and Niu Niu” is an important representative work in Li Xianhua’s artistic career. Her portrayal of Hong Fenlian in the play, with lively performances and superb singing skills, shapes a classic character full of emotional tension. She focuses on emotional expression in her singing design, exhibiting delicate emotions through the conversion of true and false voices and rhythmic changes. Simultaneously, her body movements are highly infectious, vividly presenting the character’s personality traits through precise actions and expressions.

4.3.2. “Jin Lian”

“Jin Lian” represents Li Xianhua’s significant exploration of artistic innovation. This Guangdong Han Opera film is based on the image of Pan Jinlian from the Chinese classical masterpiece “Jin Ping Mei”, but it breaks through the traditional drama’s simplistic interpretation of Pan Jinlian’s image in character portrayal. Li Xianhua delicately portrays Pan Jinlian’s complex human characteristics and diversified emotional expressions through psychological layers. In her singing design, she incorporates modern bel canto elements, making the character’s inner world more vivid through music. Meanwhile, she adds modern lighting and prop designs to the stage performance, enhancing the drama’s visual impact and emotional appeal. This play not only successfully attracts young audiences but also provides a successful example of the modernization of the Guangdong Han Opera.

4.3.3. “Butterfly Dream”

“Butterfly Dream” is one of Li Xianhua’s most representative repertoires. In this play, she portrays two distinctly different characters simultaneously: a clever and lively young woman and a dignified and elegant Tian Shi. Through delicate portrayals of these two characters, Li Xianhua demonstrates her deep understanding of Dan’s performance and precise grasp of the character’s inner world. In her singing performance, she focuses on expressing the character’s emotional transitions through tone and rhythm changes. In terms of performance skills, she successfully portrays two distinct yet realistic characters through flexible body movements and expression changes. This play not only showcases Li Xianhua’s artistic attainments but also reflects the significant potential of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) in emotional expression and artistic innovation.

Li Xianhua's artistic career and performance characteristics primarily focus on the inheritance and innovation of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role). Through in-depth research on traditional skills and new attempts at modern artistic elements, she has not only shaped a series of classic characters but also provided important references for the future development of Guangdong Han Opera. Her artistic achievements are not only a personal resume but also a model for Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role).

5. The inheritance and development of Guangdong Han Opera

5.1. Li Xianhua's role in the inheritance of Guangdong Han Opera

Li Xianhua has long been committed to the inheritance and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera. Her artistic career has not only accumulated rich artistic experience for the Dan role of Guangdong Han Opera but also laid a foundation for its inheritance and development.

With over 50 years in the art, Li Xianhua injected new vitality into Guangdong Han Opera in the 1970s through her skilled performance and innovative spirit. As a representative inheritor, she is well aware of the responsibility to protect and pass on traditional culture. She not only showcases the charm of Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) through her own stage performances but also promotes its dissemination among different social groups through diverse forms. For example, by participating in national and provincial art exhibitions and other activities, she has brought the Guangdong Han Opera to a wider audience. Especially in overseas cultural exchanges, artists such as Li Xianhua, Yang Xiuwei, Xie Renchang, Zhang Guangwu, Zhong Lijun, Li Huanxia, Huang Lihua, Ji Bing, and Guan Leying made multiple visits to Europe, America, Southeast Asia, and other regions in the 1990s, contributing to the international promotion of Guangdong Han Opera.

Li Xianhua's inheritance work is also reflected in the restoration and innovation of repertoires and skills. For instance, she successfully restored the "pole-carrying skill" in the repertoire "Yin Yang He" and, through careful research on traditional singing and movement patterns, ensured the continuation of many classic Dan role skills of Guangdong Han Opera. She also innovated based on this, making it more suitable for the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences.

In the process of inheritance, Li Xianhua pays special attention to cultivating a new generation of Dan role actors. She believes that inheritance lies not only in the continuation of technology but also in the understanding and recognition of artistic spirit and cultural values. Through meticulous guidance and patient teaching, she has trained a group of outstanding young actors for the Guangdong Han Opera. Based on inheriting traditional skills, these actors further enrich the expressive forms of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) through innovative practices.

5.2. Innovative practices of the Dan role in the new era

In the early 20th century, the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) faced the dual challenges of inheritance and development. To adapt to the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences, Li Xianhua carried out artistic innovation based on traditional skills. Her innovative practices are mainly reflected in singing design, stage performance, and the application of modern technology.

5.2.1. Singing innovation

Li Xianhua incorporates modern musical elements into her singing design, such as adding bel canto techniques, making the singing more layered and artistically appealing. Through the conversion of true and false voices and the diversification of timbres, she enriches the expressive form of the Dan role singing. For example, in the Guangdong Han

Opera film “Jin Lian”, she enhances the character’s emotional expressiveness by redesigning the rhythm and melody of the singing. This innovation not only preserves the traditional charm of Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) but also brings it closer to the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences.

5.2.2. Stage performance innovation

In terms of stage performance, Li Xianhua enhances the visual impact of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) through innovative use of props, lighting, and costumes. For instance, in “Changing Faces to Fight the Father”, she combines traditional skills like chair work and feather work with modern stage design, making the character more three-dimensional and vivid.

5.2.3. Crossover cooperation

With the development of multiculturalism, Li Xianhua also attempts to promote Guangdong Han Opera through crossover films. For example, she has participated in the filming of multiple Guangdong Han Opera drama films, bringing the art form to a broader audience through the medium of film.

5.2.4. Guangdong Han Opera repertoire innovation

Li Xianhua actively explores innovations in Guangdong Han Opera repertoires. For example, she invested in the creation and adaptation of “Bai Men Liu” and its sequel “Zhang Tai Qing Liu”, enriching the emotional clues and storylines of the characters to make the repertoires more aligned with the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences. This innovative practice not only injects new vitality into Guangdong Han Opera but also demonstrates the potential for the integration of traditional art and modern culture.

5.2.5. Young actor training and succession mechanisms in Guangdong Han Opera

Li Xianhua views the training of young actors as a crucial task for the inheritance of the Guangdong Han Opera. In her view, young actors are not only the hope for the future development of Guangdong Han Opera but also the key to the continuation of the Dan role. Therefore, she focuses on comprehensive training for young actors from both technical and artistic perspectives.

5.2.6. Technical training

On the technical level, Li Xianhua emphasizes rigorous training in basic skills for young actors, including singing, posture, recitation, and movement patterns. In teaching, she stresses the refinement and standardization of skills, requiring each young actor to solidly grasp the core skills of the Guangdong Han Opera. For instance, in the Dan role teaching, she particularly emphasizes the use of true and false voices and timbre changes, expecting students to exhibit rich emotional layers in their singing performances. Additionally, through demonstration performances and detailed explanations, she imparts complex Dan role movement patterns to students, helping them master key techniques.

5.2.7. Artistic training

On the artistic level, Li Xianhua focuses on cultivating young actors’ ability to understand characters and artistic expressiveness. Through analyzing the plot and character personalities, she guides students to deeply explore the emotional clues of characters and learn to convey their inner worlds through body language and expressions. She emphasizes that actors need to “lead sound with emotion and emotion with sound”, enhancing the artistic appeal of their

performances through the fusion of sound and emotion.

5.2.8. Practical opportunities and stage guidance

Li Xianhua provides many practical opportunities for young actors to hone their skills in actual performances. For example, she leads students to participate in provincial and national opera exhibitions, creating chances for them to showcase their talents on large stages. During stage guidance, she helps students identify and improve issues in their performances through on-site corrections and post-performance summaries. Furthermore, she encourages students to bravely experiment on stage, integrating their personal artistic styles into the Dan role performances to form unique performance styles.

5.2.9. Construction of succession mechanisms

To ensure the intergenerational inheritance of the Guangdong Han Opera, Li Xianhua also actively promotes the construction of succession mechanisms. For instance, she has established a dedicated training class within the Guangdong Han Opera Theater to systematically cultivate young actors. Simultaneously, she collaborates with local governments and cultural institutions through non-heritage inheritor programs and drama-in-school activities, aiming to spread the artistic charm of the Guangdong Han Opera to a broader social group.

5.2.10. Effectiveness and impact

The group of young actors trained by Li Xianhua has injected new vitality into the Dan role of Guangdong Han Opera. Outstanding actors like Huang Lihua and Ji Bing have won multiple awards at provincial art festivals, becoming important successors of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera. These young actors not only inherit Li Xianhua's artistic style but also incorporate their own innovative elements into their performances, further promoting the development of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera.

In summary, Li Xianhua plays a significant role in the inheritance and development of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera. Thanks to Li Xianhua's promotion and dissemination, Guangdong Han Opera has not only continued the protection of traditional skills but has also expanded its influence. Her inheritance practices provide a classic example of the protection and innovation of other drama arts, laying a solid foundation for the future development of the Dan role in Guangdong Han Opera.

6. Challenges and prospects of modern Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role)

6.1. Dilemmas of cultural globalization and the survival of traditional arts

Driven by the wave of globalization, cultural diversity and local characteristics are facing increasingly severe challenges. Guangdong Han Opera, as a representative of traditional theater in the Lingnan region, is confronted with multiple difficulties in its survival in modern society.

6.1.1. Audience gap and market reduction

Cultural globalization has brought diversification in modern forms of entertainment, with movies, television, and streaming media becoming the primary cultural consumption methods for contemporary people. In contrast, the audience for traditional operas like Guangdong Han Opera has shrunk, especially among the new younger generation, where the appeal of traditional arts has significantly declined. The Dan role, as an essential part of Guangdong Han Opera, relies on a stable audience base for its inheritance and development. However, in the current cultural market,

the performance opportunities and commercial value of traditional operas need to be improved. Therefore, the key issues that need to be addressed are how to effectively interact with the new generation of young audiences, establish stable links, increase performance opportunities each year, and continuously disseminate and promote it on a larger scale.

6.1.2. Weakening of the inheritance mechanism

The inheritance of the Guangdong Han Opera mainly relies on the apprenticeship system and family inheritance model. However, with changes in the socio-economic structure, more and more young people prefer to leave their hometowns to work outside and pursue other professions. This phenomenon can limit the selection of intergenerational inheritors of the Guangdong Han Opera.

6.1.3. Weakening of cultural identity

The cultural exchange brought about by globalization has gradually diluted the uniqueness of local cultures. Guangdong Han Opera, as an important carrier of Lingnan culture, has seen a gradual weakening of its cultural identity among the younger generation. Some audiences tend to embrace cultural products with universal appeal and global influence, showing significantly reduced interest in traditional arts. This weakening of cultural identity can affect the influence of Guangdong Han Opera.

6.2. New paths for art dissemination through digital technology

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, the rapid development of digital technology provides new possibilities for the dissemination and innovation of Guangdong Han Opera. By utilizing digital technology, Guangdong Han Opera can break through the limitations of traditional stage performances and reach a broader dissemination space.

6.2.1. Practice of dramatic visualization

Currently, the dissemination and promotion of Guangdong Han Opera are no longer confined to the stage. Through cross-boundary filming of opera movies and the production of video resources, this traditional art form can be disseminated to a wider audience. For instance, Li Xianhua's involvement in Guangdong Han Opera films like "Jinlian", "Baimenliu", and "Hudie Meng" not only conveys the traditional skills of Guangdong Han Opera but also enhances its expressiveness through imaging technology. This visualization practice not only helps preserve the classic repertoires of Guangdong Han Opera but also attracts the attention of more young audience.

6.2.2. Online education and opera promotion

The application of digital technology can open up new channels for the education and promotion of Guangdong Han Opera. For example, through online courses and live streaming platforms, the teaching content of the Guangdong Han Opera can be conveyed to a global audience. Guangdong Han Opera teachers and actors can disassemble opera excerpts, singing styles, and movements of various roles step by step through online teaching methods, helping students intuitively understand Guangdong Han Opera culture. This online education model not only overcomes geographical limitations but also improves the efficiency of Guangdong Han Opera's external dissemination.

6.2.3. Application of virtual reality and augmented reality

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies will provide innovative ways to display traditional arts. For instance, VR technology can offer an immersive theatrical experience for the audience, allowing them to feel

the stage charm of the Guangdong Han Opera. Through AR technology, the audience can interact with Guangdong Han Opera performers, enhancing the fun and appeal of Guangdong Han Opera. The application of digital technology will not only expand the expressive forms of Guangdong Han Opera but also attract more young audiences to this traditional art.

6.2.4. Digital archives and data analysis

Digital technology can be used to establish digital archives for Guangdong Han Opera. By digitally preserving classic repertoires, singing styles, movements, and performance videos of the Guangdong Han Opera, important resources can be provided for its research and dissemination. Additionally, through big data analysis, the needs and preferences of audiences from different regions can be better understood, providing data support for the external dissemination and development of Guangdong Han Opera. For example, analyzing the interactive behaviors of young audiences on social media can help the Guangdong Han Opera Inheritance Research Institute design new repertoires that better align with contemporary aesthetics.

6.3. Potential of Guangdong Han Opera in international dissemination

As a representative art form of Lingnan culture, Guangdong Han Opera has significant dissemination potential in international cultural exchanges. In recent years, with the advancement of cultural diplomacy and the “Belt and Road” initiative, the influence of the Guangdong Han Opera on the international stage has gradually expanded.

6.3.1. Cultural bond in overseas Chinese communities

Guangdong Han Opera has a long history of dissemination in regions like Southeast Asia and has a certain audience base among overseas Chinese communities. It not only maintains the cultural identity of overseas Chinese Hakka communities but also strengthens the overseas dissemination of the Chinese national community consciousness.

6.3.2. Window for international cultural exchanges

Guangdong Han Opera inheritors like Li Xianhua have made multiple performances in Southeast Asia, Europe, and other places, making significant contributions to the overseas dissemination of Guangdong Han Opera. In these overseas cultural exchange activities, they have successfully attracted audiences from different cultural backgrounds with their delicate performances and unique artistic styles. For instance, repertoires like “Hudie Meng” and “Jinlian” have touched many overseas audiences through vivid characters and emotional plots, earning Guangdong Han Opera a wide international reputation.

6.3.3. Challenges and countermeasures in cross-cultural dissemination

Although Guangdong Han Opera has a certain influence in overseas Chinese (Hakka) communities, expanding its international influence requires considering how to attract the attention and interest of an international audience. Overseas cross-cultural dissemination faces challenges such as language and cultural backgrounds. For example, the language barrier in the Guangdong Han Opera may affect the international audience’s understanding of the plot and characters. To address this, methods like subtitle translation, multilingual commentary, and background knowledge introduction can be employed to help international audiences better understand the cultural connotation of Guangdong Han Opera and stimulate their interest in learning Chinese through it.

Furthermore, by collaborating with diverse international art forms, the expressive forms of Guangdong Han Opera can be expanded. For instance, combining Guangdong Han Opera with modern dance, musicals, and other forms

while preserving its traditional characteristics can enhance its cross-cultural appeal. Such innovation will not only enrich the diverse expressiveness of the Guangdong Han Opera but also attract more attention to it in international cultural exchanges.

7. Summary

Guangdong Han Opera is an important representative of Lingnan culture, and its inheritance and innovation reflect the continuous development of intangible cultural heritage. By analyzing the fifty-year artistic practice of Li Xianhua, a representative inheritor, this study explores multiple paths for the inheritance, innovation, and dissemination of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan Role). Li Xianhua demonstrates the core value of Guangdong Han Opera's inheritance through her artistic career. She not only inherits traditional skills but also makes a series of innovations in singing style design, character shaping, and stage performance, giving Guangdong Han Opera a contemporary form of expression. Simultaneously, she combines modern education with the traditional apprenticeship system to establish a systematic inheritance mechanism and continue the intergenerational inheritance of Guangdong Han Opera through the training of young actors.

The study also finds that digital technology provides new opportunities for the dissemination of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role). From drama visualization to online teaching and the application of virtual reality technology, Guangdong Han Opera will gradually break through geographical and temporal limitations, attracting the attention of more young audiences. Furthermore, Guangdong Han Opera inheritors like Li Xianhua promote the overseas dissemination and promotion of Guangdong Han Opera in international exchanges, further enhancing the global influence of Lingnan culture. The case study reveals the vitality of the Guangdong Han Opera (Dan role) in the contemporary cultural context and clarifies the importance of its inheritance and innovation. In the future, while preserving its traditional characteristics, Guangdong Han Opera will further integrate contemporary aesthetics and digital technology development, moving towards a broader cross-cultural dissemination space and promoting the revival and overseas development of traditional Chinese culture.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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