

# Research on the Secondary Creation and Artistic Innovation of the Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun”

**Bo Dong, Ruiji Shengchuan\***

School of Music and Dance, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou 510006, Guangdong Province, China

\**Corresponding author:* Ruiji Shengchuan, S33c99rj-4@gzhu.edu.cn

**Copyright:** © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

**Abstract:** Guangdong Han Opera, known as the “Peony of the South,” is a treasured art form with a history of over 300 years. As one of the three major opera genres in Guangdong, it primarily uses Pi and Huang tuning, incorporating Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Chuiqiang, and minor tunes, with Zhongzhou rhyme as its stage language. The roles are divided into seven categories: Sheng, Dan, Chou, Gong, Po, and Jing (including Hongjing and Wujing). Its accompaniment instruments, particularly the Touxian, Dasuluo, and Haotou, are distinctive, making it an excellent Pi and Huang opera genre in southern China. In 2008, Guangdong Han Opera was listed in the national intangible cultural heritage, recognizing its artistic value and entrusting it with the mission of inheriting and developing this opera genre. This paper focuses on the Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun” and employs methods such as literature review and case analysis to explore its achievements in secondary creation and artistic innovation. The opera has achieved innovations in script, character, music, and stagecraft, and made breakthroughs in performance form, narrative technique, and cultural connotation, promoting the inheritance and development of Guangdong Han Opera and providing insights into contemporary drama innovation.

**Keywords:** Guangdong Han Opera; Wang Zhaojun; Secondary creation; Artistic innovation

**Online publication:** March 7, 2025

## 1. Introduction

Guangdong Han Opera has a long history, incorporating various tunings, rich role categories, and unique accompaniment instruments<sup>[1]</sup>. It was selected for the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2008. However, in modern society, it faces challenges such as audience loss and insufficient inheritance of talents. “Wang Zhaojun” is a carefully crafted stage artwork after the implementation of the revitalization and development plan of the Guangdong Han Opera, possessing significant research value<sup>[2]</sup>. This opera reproduces the humanistic style of the Western Han Dynasty and the vast desert through traditional and elegant stage presentation and concentrated and exquisite

character settings. Simultaneously, it seeks artistic leaps in style innovation, endowing characters with new thinking and life choices, and shaping an emotionally rich, distinct love and hate, youthful, and patriotic image of Wang Zhaojun. Based on inheriting the fine traditions of Guangdong Han Opera, it learns from, integrates, and incorporates various contemporary artistic elements, making it a production with modern aesthetic taste and aesthetic level.

Although current research on Guangdong Han Opera and “Wang Zhaojun” has achieved certain results, there are still many deficiencies. This paper focuses on the secondary creation and artistic innovation of the Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun,” conducting in-depth research from multiple dimensions such as script, music, and stage performance. The aim is to expand research areas and provide new ideas and methods for the inheritance and development of Guangdong Han Opera.

## **2. Overview of Guangdong Han Opera and the play “Wang Zhaojun”**

### **2.1. Historical origins and artistic characteristics of Guangdong Han Opera**

The singing style of Guangdong Han Opera is an important embodiment of its artistic characteristics<sup>[3]</sup>. It primarily uses Pi and Huang tunings, incorporating various tunings such as Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Chuiqiang, and minor tunes, preserving numerous ancient melodies. Additionally, it employs Zhongzhou rhyme as its stage language. This diverse fusion system gives Guangdong Han Opera a unique singing style. In different plot scenes, music can appropriately enhance the atmosphere and strengthen the drama’s appeal<sup>[4]</sup>. When expressing heroes’ lofty aspirations, the exciting and sonorous Pi and Huang tunings fully demonstrate their brave and fearless spirit. Whereas, when expressing delicate emotions, the melodious and winding minor tunes can vividly portray the characters’ inner worlds. The division of role categories is also a prominent feature of Guangdong Han Opera, mainly divided into seven categories: Sheng, Dan, Chou, Gong, Po, and Jing (including Hongjing and Wujing). Each category has its unique performance norms and artistic characteristics<sup>[5]</sup>.

### **2.2. Evolution of the “Wang Zhaojun” story in drama**

The story of “Wang Zhaojun” has been performed in drama for a long time. In the Yuan Dynasty, “Breaking the Lonely Dream of a Wild Goose in the Han Palace Autumn” presented the love tragedy and national pain between Han Yuan Di and Wang Zhaojun from Han Yuan Di’s perspective, portraying Wang Zhaojun as patriotic and loyal but with limitations<sup>[6]</sup>. In the Ming Dynasty, Wang Zhaojun’s image became more three-dimensional in “He Rong Ji,” expressing resistance to fate. In the Qing Dynasty, “Hanging Pipa” enriched Wang Zhaojun’s emotional layers. Modern drama genres have diverse interpretations of this story. The large-scale new Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun” is based on Mr. Cao Yu’s namesake play, undergoing secondary creation and artistic innovation. The opera reproduces the humanistic style of the Western Han Dynasty and the vast desert through traditional and elegant stage presentation and concentrated and exquisite character settings. Simultaneously, it seeks artistic leaps in style innovation, endowing characters with new thinking and life choices, shaping an emotionally rich, distinct love and hate, youthful, and patriotic image of Wang Zhaojun.

### **2.3. Creative background and early versions of Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun”**

In terms of artistic expression, early “Wang Zhaojun” productions followed the traditional norms of their respective genres in music, singing, and performance forms<sup>[7]</sup>. For example, in Peking Opera, diverse tunings such as Xipi and Erhuang have unique charm and expressiveness when portraying Wang Zhaojun’s emotions and plot developments. The performance emphasizes basic skills such as singing, recitation, acting, and martial arts, showcasing the characters’ inner worlds through delicate movements and expressions. Yue Opera, known for its beautiful singing and

lyrical performance style, portrays Wang Zhaojun as more gentle and graceful, emphasizing her delicate emotions and resignation to fate.

Compared to these early versions, the large-scale new Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun” offers significant innovations<sup>[8]</sup>. In plot setting, it breaks through the traditional framework of love tragedy and national pain, exploring more diverse themes and connotations. For instance, it delves deeper into Wang Zhaojun’s inner world, highlighting her self-awareness and national responsibilities, and enriching the plot. In character portrayal, it breaks away from the traditional image of weakness and passivity, endowing Wang Zhaojun with a more distinct personality and contemporary characteristics. This shapes a new image that is emotionally rich, distinct in love and hate, youthful, and patriotic.

### **3. Secondary creation practice of Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun”**

#### **3.1. Script adaptation: Theme deepening and plot reconstruction**

The traditional “Wang Zhaojun” stories often focus on the personal fate tragedy of Wang Zhaojun and the political game between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu. However, Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun” elevates the theme to a new level, emphasizing mutual understanding, tolerance, and integration between nations. The expression of native land emotion in the script is also more delicate and in-depth. Wang Zhaojun’s missing feelings for her hometown and relatives are no longer expressed through a few lyrics but through a series of plots and detailed depictions, showing the contradictions and struggles in her heart. Before deciding to go to the frontier, Wang Zhaojun was filled with fear of the unknown life and attachment to her hometown. However, she knew that her choice was related to the peace and tranquility of the country, so she resolutely stepped on the road to the frontier. This deep exploration of native land emotion makes Wang Zhaojun’s image fuller and allows the audience to resonate emotionally more easily.

Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun” carries out secondary creation on the traditional script through theme deepening and plot reconstruction, making this classic story retain the traditional cultural connotation and better meet the aesthetic needs and value orientation of contemporary audiences<sup>[9]</sup>. This innovative script adaptation provides a useful reference for the inheritance and development of Guangdong Han Opera and offers new ideas and methods for script creation in other drama genres.

#### **3.2. Character shaping: Re-exploration and presentation of character images**

In Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun,” the shaping of characters by actors is one of the core links of secondary creation<sup>[10]</sup>. Through deep exploration of the characters’ inner world and the use of exquisite performance skills, the emotional changes and personality characteristics of characters such as Wang Zhaojun are vividly presented on the stage. In the process of character shaping, actors pay attention to cooperation with other actors and show the emotional relationship and conflict between characters through tacit performance. The relationship between Wang Zhaojun and Emperor Han Yuan Di, the conflict between Wang Zhaojun and Mao Yanshou, and the mutual respect and cooperation between Wang Zhaojun and the chieftain of the Xiongnu are all realistic and moving under the wonderful performances of the actors. This delicate character shaping and wonderful performance make the character images in Guangdong Han Opera “Wang Zhaojun” vivid and three-dimensional, allowing the audience to feel like they have traveled through time and space, experiencing the vicissitudes of life and the joys and sorrows of the characters in that era.

### **3.3. Music creation: Fusion of tradition and modernity**

Music creation retains the characteristics of Guangdong Han music, using classic tunes such as “Lang Taosha” to express emotions. It incorporates elements of Mongolian long tunes, showing regional customs. Modern musical instruments are introduced, and technologies such as mixing and editing are used to innovate sound cavity design, drawing on modern vocal techniques to make the singing more expressive.

In “Wang Zhaojun,” classic tunes of Guangdong Han music such as “Lang Taosha” and “Bai Jia Chun” are widely used. The use of these tunes not only adds a strong Guangdong Han Opera charm to the repertoire but also allows the audience to experience the unique charm of Guangdong Han music. In the scene where Wang Zhaojun misses her hometown, the tune “Lang Taosha” is selected. Its melody is beautiful, and the rhythm is slow. Through delicate playing and the actor’s emotional singing, Wang Zhaojun’s homesickness is expressed incisively and vividly.

Besides absorbing other musical elements, “Wang Zhaojun” actively uses new music technology to enrich sound and expressiveness. In terms of instrumentation, it boldly introduces modern musical instruments such as electronic keyboards and violins, combined with traditional Guangdong Han Opera accompaniment instruments such as head strings and big su gongs to create a richer and more diverse sound effect. The use of electronic keyboards can simulate various sound timbres, adding a fantastical color to the music; the addition of violins enhances the lyricism and appeal of the music, making the melody more beautiful and pleasant. In the scene where Wang Zhaojun and Emperor Han Yuan Di part ways, the wind sound simulated by the electronic keyboard and the sad melody played by the violin echo the deep playing of the head string, creating a desolate and sad atmosphere that fully demonstrates the reluctance between the two people.

In music production technology, modern mixing, editing, and other techniques are used to carefully process the music, making the coordination between different musical instruments and singing voices more harmonious, and the overall effect of the music more perfect. Through mixing technology, the volume, timbre, and spatial position of different musical instruments and singing voices can be adjusted to form an organic whole auditorily, enhancing the three-dimensional and hierarchical sense of music. In terms of editing, the rhythm and duration of the music are precisely controlled so that the music and the development of the plot are more closely integrated, better setting off the atmosphere of the plot and the emotions of the characters. At the critical moment of tense plot development, a tense and exciting atmosphere is created by speeding up the rhythm of the music and enhancing the intensity of the music, allowing the audience’s emotions to tense up accordingly; while in the lyrical scene, a warm and soothing atmosphere is created by slowing down the rhythm of the music and weakening the intensity of the music, allowing the audience to better feel the emotional world of the characters.

### **3.4. Stage design: Creating an immersive stage experience**

In the design of stage scenes, “Wang Zhaojun” highly restores the unique style of the Western Han palace and desert grassland. In the Western Han palace scene, traditional Chinese architectural elements such as carved beams and painted rafters, vermilion pillars, and palace gates are used to create a dignified and majestic atmosphere. The interior layout of the palace focuses on details, with exquisite bronze ware, silk curtains, and other props displayed, showing the luxury and elegance of the palace. These scene designs not only conform to the historical background but also provide a real spatial environment for the activities of the characters in the play. For example, when Wang Zhaojun lives in the palace, the audience can feel the repression and restraint of her environment through these scenes, thus better understanding her inner world.

In the scene of going out, the lighting design is even more ingenious. Blue and white cold-tone lights are used to simulate the coldness and loneliness of the desert, and the dynamics of the sand are expressed through the

movement and flickering of the lights. When Wang Zhaojun walks in the desert, the lights move with her steps, as if she is looking for a bright hope in the darkness. This lighting design not only enhances the three-dimensional and spatial sense of the stage but also allows the audience to better feel Wang Zhaojun's firmness and bravery on the way out. Through the careful design of stage scenes, lighting, props, and other aspects, Guangdong Han Opera "Wang Zhaojun" has successfully created an immersive stage experience. In the process of appreciating the performance, the audience seems to travel through time and space, being in the Western Han Dynasty and the desert grassland, and personally experiencing Wang Zhaojun's emotional world and the vicissitudes of history. This immersive stage experience can not only enhance the audience's understanding and feeling of the repertoire but also inject new vitality into the inheritance and development of Guangdong Han Opera.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The development of Guangdong Han Opera, including the production of "Wang Zhaojun," is filled with both opportunities and challenges, requiring continuous efforts in multiple key areas to achieve sustainable and viable progress. In terms of future creations and performances, it is essential to uphold the spirit of innovation, deeply explore traditional cultural resources, and combine them with contemporary social hotspots and audience demands to create more excellent repertoires with distinctive characteristics of the times and cultural connotations. In music creation, it is necessary to continuously explore the integration of traditional and modern music elements, attempt collisions with different styles of music, and present a rich and diverse range of musical genres. In stage design, it is crucial to keep up with technological trends, and fully utilize modern technological means such as virtual reality and augmented reality technologies, to present a more shocking visual experience for the audience and create an immersive stage effect with a strong visual impact and artistic appeal.

Secondly, the talent cultivation system needs further improvement. Close cooperation with universities and art schools should be strengthened, and a stable talent cultivation base should be established to cultivate professional writers, directors, actors, music creators, and stage designers for Guangdong Han Opera. In the cultivation process, emphasis should be placed on combining theory with practice, allowing students more opportunities to participate in actual repertoire creation and performance to accumulate practical experience. A sound talent incentive mechanism should be established, improving the treatment and social status of inheritors, attracting more talents to devote themselves to the cause of the Guangdong Han Opera, and providing solid talent support for its development.

In terms of cultural inheritance, it is essential to strengthen the excavation and inheritance of the cultural connotation of the Guangdong Han Opera. By holding academic seminars, cultural lectures, exhibitions, and other activities every year, we can deeply explore and study the historical origins, artistic characteristics, and cultural values of the Guangdong Han Opera, allowing more people to understand its cultural connotation. Guangdong Han Opera should be incorporated into the school education system, and activities such as "Guangdong Han Opera Entering Campus" should be carried out. Textbooks and courses suitable for students should be developed to cultivate their interest and love for Guangdong Han Opera, ensuring its continuous inheritance and development among the younger generation.

The large-scale new Guangdong Han Opera "Wang Zhaojun" has laid a good foundation for the further development of Guangdong Han Opera. In the future, continuous efforts should be made in areas such as creation and performance, talent cultivation, market expansion, and cultural inheritance, promoting and facilitating the inheritance and promotion of excellent traditional Chinese culture in a broader range.

## Funding

This work was supported by the sub-topic “Research on Language Folklore Art” of the 2022 China National Social Science Fund Art Major Project “Theoretical and Practical Research on Chinese Art Folklore” (Moderator: Professor Bo Dong)’s phased research results (Grant No. 22ZD06).

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- [1] Luo G, 2018, Phonological Study on the Singing Tunes of Guangdong Han Opera. *Art Hundred Schools*, 2018(02): 190–194.
- [2] Huang D, 2020, Exploration of Performance Innovation of Guangdong Han Opera on the Modern Stage. *Drama Home*, 2020(15): 38–39.
- [3] Xiao Y, 2021, Innovative Paths for Script Creation in Guangdong Han Opera from the Perspective of Art Aesthetics. *Sichuan Drama*, 2021(03): 121–124.
- [4] Jiang D, Wang Q, 2022, Communication Strategy of Guangdong Han Opera in the New Media Era. *Media Forum*, 2022(10): 103–105.
- [5] Qian R, 2019, *An Outline of Han Opera*, Sun Yat-sen University Press, Guangzhou.
- [6] Ma Z, 2016, *Broken Dream of Autumn in the Han Palace*, Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing.
- [7] Fu J, 2019, *On the Art of Drama*, Shanxi Education Press, Taiyuan.
- [8] Liao B, 2019, *The Development History of Chinese Drama*, Shanxi Education Press, Taiyuan.
- [9] Song J, Wang N, 2019, *Chinese Drama Studies*, Sun Yat-sen University Press, Guangzhou.
- [10] Zheng C, 2020, *On Drama Culture*, Wuhan University Press, Wuhan.

### Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.