

Cultural Memory in Sounds: A Musical Anthropological Interpretation of the Newly Composed Guangdong Han Opera “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu”

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Abstract: This paper employs the theories and methods of music anthropology to conduct a deep analysis of the newly composed Guangdong Han Opera “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu.” By exploring its musical forms, performance rituals, and the cultural connotations of the Hakka people, it reveals the unique cultural memory embedded in the musical aspects of the opera. The study finds that “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” is not only a representative work of the newly composed Guangdong Han Opera but also an important carrier of Hakka cultural inheritance and dissemination. Its music and performance are closely linked to the history, emotions, and social life of the Hakka people, providing a vivid example for understanding the characteristics of Hakka culture and the functions of musical culture.

Keywords: Guangdong Han Opera; Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu; Music anthropology; Hakka culture; Cultural memory

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1. Introduction

Guangdong Han Opera, as one of the three major opera genres in Guangdong, boasts a profound historical and cultural heritage, earning the reputation of being the “Peony of the South”^[1]. It integrates the characteristics of Central Plains culture and Lingnan culture, exhibiting the charm of regional culture through unique music and performance forms. “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” is a newly composed large-scale production of Guangdong Han Opera, themed on the solemn and stirring history of the Hakka people’s migration to Southeast Asia^[2]. It vividly portrays the Hakka people’s patriotism and fighting spirit during a specific historical period.

Music anthropology emphasizes studying music within a cultural context, focusing on the interrelationships between music and factors such as society, culture, and history. From this perspective, the music in “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” is not merely auditory art but also carries significant symbols of Hakka cultural memory. Through an anthropological interpretation of the opera’s music, this paper delves into the cultural connotations behind it, understands its role in the inheritance and development of Hakka culture, and explores how it reflects the collective

memory and identity of the Hakka people.

2. Cultural background and plot overview of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu”

2.1. Historical background of Hakka migration to Southeast Asia

The migration of Hakka people to Southeast Asia is a magnificent chapter in history^[3]. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to factors such as livelihood and warfare, a large number of Hakka people left their hometowns and traveled across the ocean to seek a better life in Southeast Asia and other regions. They endured hardships in foreign countries, worked hard, and gradually established themselves overseas. In this process, the Hakka people not only spread Chinese culture but also absorbed local cultural elements, forming a unique overseas Hakka culture.

“Qiaopi” is an important cultural phenomenon in the history of Hakka migration to Southeast Asia^[4]. It refers to remittance vouchers sent back to China by overseas Chinese through informal channels and financial and postal institutions, often accompanied by letters or simple messages. These vouchers carried the thoughts and concerns of overseas Chinese for their families at home, reflecting the socio-economic conditions of that time and the life experiences of the overseas Chinese.

2.2. Plot introduction of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu”

Set in the late Qing Dynasty, “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” tells the story of Tang Haishun (Shun Shu), a water carrier who frequently travels between Southeast Asia and Meizhou, delivering “Qiaopi” for his villagers^[5]. By chance, he learns that his townsman Ye Changlin has been working overseas for many years without any news, and his wife, Youying, struggling in poverty, is forced to sell their young daughter to treat her mother-in-law’s illness. Youying tearfully begs Shun Shu to find Ye Changlin and redeem their daughter. Shun Shu embarks on a journey to find Ye Changlin, enduring countless hardships and searching throughout Southeast Asia. He even crosses the ocean to find Ye Changlin working on the construction of the Trans-Pacific Railway in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of the United States. On their way back to Meizhou, they encounter many misfortunes such as shipwrecks, but Shun Shu remains committed to his promise and ultimately completes his mission.

Meihuadu, as an important scene in the opera, symbolizes the place where the Hakka people depart and return. The ancient town of Meihuadu gathers the spirit of the Hakka people of that era, embodying their steadfastness, patriotism, perseverance, and enterprising spirit.

3. Musical form analysis of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu”

3.1. Singing music

3.1.1. Vocal music system

The singing system of Guangdong Han Opera is rich and diverse, with Pi and Huang tunes as the main component, integrated with various vocal styles such as Kunqu and Gaoqiang. It also adopts Zhongzhou rhyme as the stage language. This diverse fusion characteristic is fully reflected in “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu.”

As the dominant part of the opera’s singing, the Pi and Huang tunes play unique roles. The Xipi tune, with its bright rhythm and smooth melody, has strong narrativity and expressiveness. It is often used to express characters’ excited emotions, tense plots, and cheerful scenes. For example, in the singing passage where Shun Shu decides to embark on a journey to find someone, the use of the Xipi tune makes the rhythm compact and the notes jump powerfully, fully highlighting his courageous and resolute character traits and determination. Through a high-pitched and bright voice, combined with the melody of the Xipi tune, the actor showcases Shun Shu’s lofty aspirations

vividly, allowing the audience to deeply feel his inner sense of justice and responsibility.

The integration of Kunqu adds a delicate and graceful charm to the singing of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu.” Known for its elegant and beautiful style, Kunqu plays a significant role in some lyrical scenes. For instance, in singing passages that express the character’s delicate emotions, the Kunqu melody flows gently like a babbling brook, unfolding the character’s inner feelings delicately and making the audience more deeply experience their inner world.

The application of Gaoqiang plays a crucial role in expressing the character’s intense emotions and dramatic conflicts. Characterized by its high-pitched and passionate style, Gaoqiang often pushes the atmosphere to a climax when the plot develops into tense and intense conflicts. For example, during the singing passage where Shun Shu and Ye Changlin encounter a shipwreck, the use of Gaoqiang makes the melody soaring and passionate. Through powerful singing, combined with the rhythm and melody of Gaoqiang, the actors portray their struggle and strong desire for survival on the brink of death, creating a shocking experience for the audience and immersing them in the thrill of the shipwreck and the resilience of the characters.

3.1.2. Melody characteristics

The melody of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” possesses distinct Hakka characteristics and strong emotional expressiveness, closely related to Hakka culture and dialect features.

The melody line mainly consists of stepwise and small jumps, which not only align with the phonetic characteristics of the Hakka dialect but also make the melody easy to sing. Adopting Zhongzhou rhyme as the stage language, combined with the rich tones and melodious voice of the Hakka dialect, the stepwise and small jumps in the melody better complement the changes in dialect tones, making the lyrics more natural and smoother when sung. For instance, in some narrative singing passages, the melody progresses steadily and smoothly, telling the story like a detailed narration, allowing the audience to clearly understand the content of the lyrics. When expressing the excited emotions of characters or emphasizing certain important scenes, the use of small jumps creates certain ups and downs in the melody, enhancing the expressiveness of the music and the infectiousness of the plot.

3.1.3. Lyric characteristics

Lyrics are an integral part of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu,” exhibiting strong cultural characteristics of the Hakka people. The lyrics are simple and vivid, and heavily utilize Hakka dialect vocabulary and colloquial expressions, fully showcasing the unique charm of the Hakka language. For example, phrases like “not afraid of hardship” and “searching for loved ones” are commonly used expressions in the Hakka dialect, giving the lyrics a distinct regional cultural flavor of the Hakka people and allowing the audience to experience the rich Hakka customs.

The lyrics are closely centered around the plot, combining narration with lyrical expression, and possess strong infectiousness. In terms of narration, the lyrics detail the characters’ experiences and the development of the story, enabling the audience to clearly understand the context of the plot. For instance, when Shun Shu sings about his arduous journey of searching for people in Southeast Asia, the lyrics vividly describe the various difficulties and challenges he encounters, making the audience feel like they are accompanying him on that treacherous journey. In terms of lyrical expression, the lyrics deeply convey the characters’ emotions. For example, when Youying sings about her missing daughter, the delicate lyrical description reveals her inner thoughts and suffering, allowing the audience to deeply feel her helplessness and deep love as a mother.

3.2. Instrumental accompaniment

3.2.1. Use of traditional instruments

The traditional instruments of Han Opera in Guangdong play an indispensable role in the accompaniment of “Tianfeng

Haiyu Meihuadu.” Their unique timbres and playing characteristics add rich colors to the music of the opera.

As the leading instrument, the first string occupies a central position in the orchestra. Its bright and crisp sound, with strong penetrating power, can clearly lead the melody in the orchestra, setting the tone and dominating the musical rhythm. The playing of the first string is particularly prominent in some important arias and scenes. For example, when Shun Shu appears, the first string, with its unique melody and rhythm, lays the groundwork for his image, showing Shun Shu’s integrity and courage through lively melodies. In some tense and exciting plots, the fast playing and passionate melodies of the first string enhance the tension and drama of the storyline, making the audience’s emotions rise accordingly.

String instruments such as the dihu (two-stringed Chinese fiddle) and yehu provide rich harmonic support for the singing. The soft and mellow sound of the dihu and the slightly ancient and mellow sound of the yehu complement each other with the first string, forming a harmonious string combination. When actors sing, the playing of string instruments varies according to the melody and emotion of the singing, enriching the musical hierarchy. When the singing is more lyrical, the string instruments highlight a warm and romantic atmosphere with gentle playing. When the singing is passionate, the string instruments increase their intensity, echoing the singing and enhancing the expressive power of the plot.

3.2.2. Functions of percussion instruments

Percussion instruments play an important role in creating an atmosphere, enhancing emotions, and controlling the rhythm in “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu.” Their use makes the storyline more vivid, tense, and dramatic.

The combined use of percussion instruments such as drums, gongs, and cymbals can create various sound effects according to the needs of the plot. When portraying a shipwreck scene, the rapid drum beats are like surging waves, and the strong sound of gongs and cymbals is like the howling of the wind. They intertwine to simulate a turbulent and dangerous sea, creating a tense and dangerous atmosphere. This immersive experience allows the audience to feel the fear and struggle of the characters in the shipwreck.

Percussion instruments can also express characters’ emotional changes through rhythm variations. When a character is emotionally excited, the rhythm of the percussion instruments speeds up and the intensity increases to highlight the character’s excitement. When the character is calm, the percussion instruments play in a gentle and slow rhythm, creating a peaceful atmosphere.

3.2.3. Coordination between music and performance

The instrumental accompaniment and actors’ performances are closely coordinated and intertwined in “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu,” creating a splendid stage effect.

When actors sing, the instrument playing closely matches the singing, varying according to the rhythm, melody, and emotions of the singing, enhancing the expressive power of the performance. When actors sing high notes, the volume of the instruments increases appropriately, and the playing intensity is strengthened to highlight the exciting emotions. When actors sing low notes, the instruments accompany them with gentle playing, highlighting the lyrical atmosphere. For example, when You Ying sings an aria expressing sadness, the string instruments accompany her with a slow and gentle melody, complementing her singing and rendering the sadness even more deeply.

Music can also enhance the infectivity of actors’ performances by creating an atmosphere. In some emotionally profound scenes, the melody and rhythm of the music can enhance the corresponding atmosphere, allowing actors to better integrate into their roles and express their characters’ emotions. At the same time, it also makes it easier for the audience to immerse themselves in the storyline and emotionally resonate with the characters.

4. Performance ritual and cultural significance of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu”

4.1. Components of the performance ritual

The performance ritual of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” encompasses various elements such as actor makeup, costume dressing, stage arrangement, and stylized movements during the performance. The actors’ makeup follows the tradition of Guangdong Han Opera, with different designs based on the character’s personality, identity, and gender. For instance, the female roles have delicate and elegant makeup, while the male roles exhibit a more dignified look.

Costume dressing is also meticulously considered, with various characters wearing clothing that reflects their specific styles and symbolic meanings. For example, Shun Shu’s attire represents his identity as a traveler, being simple and practical, while Youying’s clothing showcases the traditional dress style of Hakka women, which is concise and elegant.

The stage arrangement creates different atmospheres through sets and props, such as the quaint scene of Meihuadu or the exotic ambiance of the South Seas. Stylized movements during the performance, including singing, reciting, acting, and fighting, are integral to Guangdong Han Opera. The actors showcase these movements with exquisite skill, conveying the plot and characters’ emotions.

4.2. Cultural significance of the performance ritual

The performance ritual of “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” carries multiple cultural significances. Firstly, it serves as a showcase of Hakka culture, allowing viewers to intuitively experience its unique characteristics, such as Hakka clothing and architectural culture, through the actors’ performances and stage presentations.

Secondly, the performance ritual fulfills the function of inheriting cultural memory. As a traditional art form, Guangdong Han Opera bears the historical memories and cultural traditions of the Hakkas. During the performance, elements like music and acting pass down the historical stories and spirit of the Hakkas’ journey to the South Seas, enabling the younger generation to understand and remember their ancestors’ struggling journey.

Furthermore, the performance ritual enhances social cohesion. Watching the show becomes a cultural activity shared by Hakkas and other audiences. In this process, people share cultural experiences, strengthening their cultural identity and sense of belonging, and promoting social cohesion.

5. Hakka cultural memory carried by “Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu”

5.1. Native land emotion and struggling spirit

The characters’ experiences in the play deeply reflect the Hakkas’ native land emotion and struggling spirit. Shun Shu, determined to fulfill Youying’s entrustment, bravely crosses mountains and rivers to find Ye Changlin, demonstrating the Hakkas’ emphasis on loyalty and responsibility towards others.

Ye Changlin and other Hakkas work hard overseas, participating in building the Trans-Pacific Railway, showcasing their diligence and perseverance. While struggling in a foreign country, they never forget their hometown and maintain contact through “overseas Chinese letters,” reflecting a strong native land emotion. These spirits constitute an essential part of Hakka cultural memory, inspiring generations of Hakkas.

5.2. Cultural identity and identity construction

“Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu” reinforces Hakka’s cultural identity and identity construction by exhibiting Hakka cultural elements. The music, costumes, language, and other elements in the play possess distinct Hakka characteristics, serving as cultural symbols that evoke Hakkas’ sense of identity and belonging to their culture.

For overseas Hakkas, watching the play allows them to revisit their hometown's cultural memories and strengthen their identification as Hakkas. Simultaneously, the play showcases the unique charm of Hakka culture to other groups, promoting cultural exchanges and understanding, and facilitating the spread and recognition of Hakka culture in a broader context.

6. Conclusion

As a newly composed representative repertoire of Guangdong Han Opera, "Tianfeng Haiyu Meihuadu" vividly showcases the rich connotations of Hakka culture through its unique music, performances, and storyline. From the perspective of ethnomusicology, the play's musical forms and performance rituals are closely linked to Hakka cultural memory, making it a crucial carrier for inheriting and expressing Hakka culture.

Studying this play not only provides insights into the artistic characteristics and cultural values of Guangdong Han Opera but also offers a clearer understanding of music's essential role in cultural inheritance, social cohesion, and identity recognition. In the current globalized context, protecting and inheriting traditional art forms like Guangdong Han Opera is significant for maintaining cultural diversity and preserving national cultural memory. In the future, further research and promotion of traditional arts such as Guangdong Han Opera should be strengthened to unleash new vitality in the new era and continuously inherit and promote the excellent cultural traditions of the Chinese nation.

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Disclosure statement

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