

A Study on the Folklore Ecology of Foshan Cantonese Opera

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Abstract

As an important component of traditional Chinese opera, Foshan Cantonese opera carries the essence of Lingnan culture and the unique charm of Guangfu culture. In order to deepen the understanding of the essence of Cantonese opera art, provide new perspectives and ideas for the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera, and provide useful references for the external dissemination of other intangible cultural heritage, this study adopts literature research method, field survey method, questionnaire survey method, and meta-analysis method, comprehensively using multiple research methods to deeply understand the artistic characteristics, survival status, and practice and thinking of Cantonese opera art museum in the protection and inheritance of Cantonese opera in Foshan. Research has found that Cantonese opera in Foshan is facing challenges such as an aging audience, a shortage of actors, and a shrinking market. This paper intends to propose corresponding strategies to effectively promote the dynamic inheritance, scientific protection, and innovative development research of Cantonese opera.

Keywords

Foshan Cantonese Opera, Folk ecology, Inheritance and Development

1. Introduction

1.1 Historical background

Cantonese opera, as a brilliant treasure in traditional Chinese culture, has won the reputation of “Southern Red Bean” with its profound historical and cultural heritage, unique artistic style, and exquisite performance skills. Foshan Cantonese Opera has a history of hundreds of years and is an important part of Lingnan culture. It originated from Guangdong folk rap and opera performances during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and after hundreds of years of development, gradually formed its own unique artistic style and performance system. As the first Cantonese opera themed museum in China, Foshan Cantonese Opera Museum showcases a large number of precious cultural relics and historical materials related to Cantonese opera, witnessing the entire process of Cantonese opera from its birth to development, and reflecting its profound historical and cultural heritage. It is not only an important component of China’s intangible cultural heritage, but also a valuable asset shared by all mankind.

However, in today's accelerated modernization process and diversified cultural development, Cantonese opera is facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. With the deepening development of globalization, cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, and the external dissemination and exchange of Cantonese opera has become a new topic. "In the broadest sense, literary translation activities are the inevitable path for all literary and cultural exchanges" (Wang, 2007, p.5). This project focuses on the investigation and research of the folk ecology of Cantonese opera in Foshan and its translation to the outside world. Through the research, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the current survival status and inheritance mode of Cantonese opera in Foshan. We hope to contribute to the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera and make this ancient art form shine new on the new stage of the new era.

1.2 The Folk Ecology of Foshan Cantonese Opera

As an important branch of Cantonese opera, Foshan Cantonese Opera carries the essence of Lingnan culture and the unique charm of Guangfu culture. Foshan Cantonese Opera occupies an essential position in traditional Chinese opera due to its profound historical and cultural heritage, unique performance style and superb acting skills, rich and diverse repertoire and themes, diverse and integrated music styles, exquisite and gorgeous costumes and makeup, and a development concept that emphasizes both inheritance and innovation.

1.2.1 The Artistic Characteristics of Foshan Cantonese opera

The performance style of Foshan Cantonese opera is simple and rough, emphasizing the display of true kung fu. The actors showcased the unique performance charm of Cantonese opera through their unique skills such as zip line, eye movement, small jump, and waist bending, as well as martial arts performances based on Southern martial arts. The actors of Foshan Cantonese Opera Troupe have mastered superb acting skills through long-term training and performance practice. They pay attention to the comprehensive use of song, stage speech, dance-acting, and combat, and through delicate performance techniques, showcase the inner world of their characters to the fullest. At the same time, they also pay attention to emotional expression in their performances, allowing the audience to deeply feel the ups and downs of the plot and the emotional changes of the characters.

The repertoire of Foshan Cantonese Opera is vast, covering various aspects such as history, legends, and folk stories. These plays not only have a profound cultural heritage, but also incorporate modern elements and characteristics of the times, making Cantonese opera more in line with the audience's daily life and aesthetic needs. The Foshan Cantonese Opera Troupe focuses on the creation and adaptation of new plays, injecting new vitality and energy into Cantonese opera by introducing new themes and creative techniques. At the same time, they actively explore and organize traditional plays, allowing the traditional art of Cantonese opera to be inherited and developed.

The music style of Foshan Cantonese Opera is unique, mainly consisting of Bangzi and Erhuang, while integrating various musical elements such as Gaoqiang, Kunqu, Guangdong folk rap, and tunelet. These musical elements blend together to form the unique musical style of Cantonese opera. The orchestra of Foshan Cantonese Opera Troupe pays attention to the harmony and unity of music in their performances. Through clever arrangement and performance techniques, various musical elements are perfectly integrated together, bringing wonderful auditory enjoyment to the audience.

The costumes of Foshan Cantonese opera are mostly made of Guang embroidery, with rich and vibrant colors and rich local characteristics. These costumes not only showcase the artistic beauty of Cantonese opera, but also reflect the profound cultural heritage of Guangfu. The makeup of Foshan Cantonese opera is concise and colorful, and the actors' facial makeup is carefully designed and drawn to highlight the characters' personalities and characteristics. These makeup and costume elements together constitute an important part of Cantonese opera stage art.

1.2.2 Foshan Cantonese Opera Artists and Their Contributions

A large number of outstanding artists have emerged in the Cantonese opera industry in Foshan, who are not only skilled in their craft, but also dedicated to the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera art. Among them, artists such as Xue Juexian, Ma Shizeng, and Bai Jurong created the five major singing styles of Cantonese opera, which had a profound impact on the development of Cantonese opera. Xue Juexian's performance skills are comprehensive, and he is known for his ability to perform both male and female roles;

Ma Shizeng's performance is free and natural, and his acting skills have reached a state of perfection; Bai Jurong is renowned in the theater world for his singing skills.

In addition, the Foshan Youth Cantonese Opera Troupe is also an important representative of Foshan Cantonese opera art. The troupe was founded in 1957 and has been renowned both domestically and internationally for its strong capabilities, impressive lineup, rigorous style, and superb performance for half a century. A group of famous performing artists in the Cantonese opera industry have emerged, including Cantonese opera master Liang Yintang and one of the "Four Famous Dans of Cantonese Opera" Zhong Zhuofang. They have created and performed many popular plays among the audience, such as "Four Fat Chickens" and "Foshan Huang Feihong", making great contributions to the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera in Foshan. In addition, the current leader of the Cantonese opera troupe, Li Shuqin, as a literary worker in the new era, has been committed to upholding integrity and innovation, exploring and creating a sustainable and normalized new model for the development of Cantonese opera for many years, based on her strong emotional attachment to Cantonese opera culture. She took the lead in integrating Cantonese opera culture with fashion salons, film and animation, kung fu, cultural and creative products, stamps, and new media, and conducted various cross-border attempts of "Cantonese opera+", continuously leading the trend of Cantonese opera.

1.2.3 The Significance of Folk Ecology and Folklore Studies

Foshan Cantonese opera is closely related to the local seasonal customs. Cantonese opera performances are an essential part of traditional festivals and important celebrations. These theatrical activities not only enrich the cultural life of local people, but also promote the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera. In addition, Foshan Cantonese opera incorporates many elements of performance rituals and folk beliefs during the performance. For example, before the performance, there will be rituals such as worshiping the opera god to pray for a smooth performance and the safety of the audience. These rituals and folk elements not only enhance the mystery and solemnity of the performance, but also reflect the close connection between Cantonese opera and folk beliefs. Meanwhile, Foshan Cantonese opera plays an important role in the local community area. Many communities and villages have their own Cantonese opera troupes or "private groups" that regularly or irregularly organize performances and exchange activities. These community areas have become important strongholds for the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera culture.

Foshan Cantonese Opera is not only an art form, but also a reflection of folk culture. It integrates the folk customs, historical culture, and social changes of the Foshan area, and has profound value in folklore studies. The repertoire, singing style, and performance style of Foshan Cantonese Opera are deeply influenced by the folk culture of Foshan, reflecting the lifestyle and values of the people of Foshan. Meanwhile, Cantonese opera in Foshan is also an important component of folk activities in the Foshan region. Cantonese opera performances often become an indispensable cultural element in traditional festivals, celebrations, and other occasions in the Foshan area. These activities not only enrich the spiritual and cultural life of the people of Foshan, but also promote the inheritance and development of folk culture in the Foshan area. As a cultural treasure, Foshan Cantonese opera carries a profound sense of cultural identity and belonging. Cantonese is the common language of the Greater Bay Area, and Cantonese opera is its most representative artistic symbol. The people of Foshan can deeply feel the close connection with their hometown culture through appreciating Cantonese opera, which plays an important role in maintaining regional cultural diversity and social stability. At the same time, Cantonese opera has spread to various parts of the world with overseas immigrants since the mid Qing Dynasty, and has had a profound impact in more than 160 countries and regions around the world such as Mexico, Cuba, and Africa, becoming an important cultural link connecting China with overseas Chinese.

2. The Current Status of Research on the Inheritance and Development of Cantonese Opera in Foshan

Foshan Cantonese Opera, as an important part of China's excellent traditional culture, has always been a focus of academic and cultural attention in terms of its inheritance and development. Domestic scholar He Wanping (2021) uses literature review and case analysis methods in her study "Research on the Inheritance and Development Strategy of Foshan Cantonese Opera" to sort out the artistic origins of Foshan Cantonese Opera, analyze the current status of its inheritance and development, and explore its inheritance and development strategies. She notes that as an important representative of local traditional culture in Foshan,

Cantonese opera faces problems such as aging audience, shrinking consumer market, shortage of scriptwriting talents, actor gaps, insufficient theater troupe funding, and inadequate marketing and promotion. In response to these issues, she proposes strategies such as establishing a new mechanism for the development of Cantonese opera in Foshan, improving policies for the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera, and creating an atmosphere for the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera, aiming to promote the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera in Foshan. Yuan Jun (2019) analyzes the challenges of the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera in the context of the new era in “A Brief Analysis of the Inheritance and Development of Cantonese Opera in the New Era: Taking the ‘Cantonese Opera Entering Schools Model’ as an Example”. Taking the Bao’an model in Shenzhen and the Nanhai model in Foshan as examples, he proposes the importance of the “Cantonese Opera Entering Schools” model and conducted in-depth discussions. He notes that the “Cantonese Opera in Schools” model is of great significance for addressing the aging of the audience, solving the problem of talent shortage in Cantonese opera, and promoting the reform and innovation of Cantonese opera. Through this model, schools can become a cradle for cultivating Cantonese opera talents, while also helping to stimulate students’ interest and love for traditional culture. These studies not only provide important references for the current status of the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera in Foshan, but also provide valuable ideas and suggestions for promoting the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera. In the future, further attention needs to be paid to the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera, actively exploring new development models and innovative paths, and contributing to the inheritance and promotion of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

3. Research and Practice of Cantonese Opera in Foshan

3.1 Research Overview

This study adopts various research methods such as literature research, field investigation, questionnaire survey, and meta-analysis. It comprehensively uses quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis to collect literature and materials on Cantonese opera research at home and abroad, sorts and analyzes them, and conducts field investigations in places such as Foshan Cantonese Opera House and Cantonese Opera Art Museum. A questionnaire is designed and distributed to collect public opinions and suggestions on the recognition, frequency of exposure, and cultural dissemination of Cantonese opera in Foshan. The collected data and information are comprehensively analyzed to study the performance style, acting skills, repertoire and themes, music style, clothing and makeup of Cantonese opera in Foshan and its folk ecology, explore the inheritance and development status of Cantonese opera in Foshan, and analyze the current situation, challenges, and opportunities of Cantonese opera in overseas dissemination and exchange. This study finds that Foshan Cantonese opera has achieved certain results in its inheritance, development, overseas dissemination, and exchange, but problems such as aging audiences, actor gaps, and shrinking markets are also constraining its inheritance and development.

3.2 Research process

3.2.1 Document Research

By consulting a lot of documents, we aim to understand the historical background, artistic characteristics, and inheritance and development status of Foshan Cantonese Opera in modern society. We aim to focus on analyzing the dissemination challenges and opportunities of Cantonese opera in the context of globalization, as well as the current academic research progress on Cantonese opera translation and introduction.

3.2.2 Questionnaire Survey

Foshan Cantonese Opera, as a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, carries rich historical and folk connotations. However, in the context of globalization, Foshan Cantonese opera faces challenges in terms of inheritance and development, as well as international dissemination. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the current situation of Cantonese opera in Foshan and explore effective ways for its ecological development and external translation, our team designed a set of questionnaire surveys, targeting the public of different ages, genders, and residential areas. A total of 120 valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, the respondents aged 19-30 accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 57.5%; Female respondents accounted for 71.67%; 50.83% of the respondents reside within Guangdong Province (excluding Foshan). The questionnaire surveys

intend to investigate the public's understanding level of Foshan Cantonese opera, the current status of the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera in Foshan, including audience characteristics, performance venues and interactive experiences, understanding level of stage singing and recitation language, the level of familiarity with traditional cultural elements, etc., and the current international dissemination status of Foshan Cantonese Opera, including overseas performances, challenges and measures in the translation and introduction of Foshan Cantonese Opera. By analyzing data, we aim to reveal the level of understanding and willingness to participate in Cantonese opera among different groups, providing data support and suggestions for the current research on the inheritance, development, and international dissemination of Cantonese opera in Foshan.

The survey results show that over half (56.66%) of the respondents have some understanding of Foshan Cantonese opera, but there is still a considerable proportion (41.67%) of the respondents who have only heard of it but do not have much or no understanding at all. It is worth noting that the young group (19-30 years old) lacks understanding of Foshan Cantonese opera, with over one-third (33.96%) of respondents indicating that they have little exposure to Foshan Cantonese opera, while 12.26% of respondents have never had any exposure to it. The respondents generally believe that the audience of Foshan Cantonese Opera is mainly concentrated among the elderly and middle-aged, while the proportion of young people and foreign tourists is relatively low. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that although Foshan Cantonese opera has a certain level of public awareness, there is still significant room for improvement overall, and it is facing the challenge of an aging audience. At the same time, the international influence of Foshan Cantonese opera is insufficient.

The survey also found that the public is familiar with the traditional elements of Foshan Cantonese opera, such as the dialect characteristics in singing and the auspicious patterns on costumes, but lacks in-depth understanding. Meanwhile, the majority of respondents from non-Foshan regions believe that the stage singing and recitation language of Foshan Cantonese opera poses certain difficulties. From this, it can be seen that language is a major obstacle to the inheritance, dissemination, and popularization of Cantonese opera.

3.2.3 Expert Interview - The Current Situation of Cantonese Opera in Foshan

Our project team went to Foshan Cantonese Opera House to interview Ms. Li Shuqin, the director of Foshan Cantonese Opera House, to explore the specific practices, challenges, and solutions of Cantonese opera in protection and inheritance, and to understand the efforts and achievements of Cantonese opera in innovative repertoire, talent cultivation, and market promotion.

Ms. Li Shuqin points out that Foshan Cantonese opera has a strong mass foundation; In recent years, the works created by Foshan Cantonese Opera Theater have won many honors nationwide, for example, *White Snake* won the Outstanding Film of the 19th Chinese Film Huabiao Award, which has enhanced the social influence of Foshan Cantonese Opera. The artistic expression of Cantonese opera is quite complex and difficult to understand, mainly due to its long history and constantly changing characteristics. The characteristics of Cantonese opera, such as its tune, melody and lyrics influenced by ancient literature, have enhanced its cultural charm, but at the same time, they have also made it difficult for young audiences to understand and accept. Dean Li thinks that the lines of Cantonese opera are difficult to understand, and the lyrics have strict sentence structure and grammar requirements, which increase the difficulty of comprehension. In addition, young people in modern society face greater pressure and pay more attention to time management and efficiency, making it difficult to find enough time to deeply understand Cantonese opera, which is also in line with the demand for "speed" in the principle of language economy. Therefore, the younger generation has a low interest in traditional opera, leading to a serious aging of Cantonese opera audiences. At the same time, there is a common problem of talent shortage in the Cantonese opera industry. Due to its proximity to major cities such as Guangzhou, Foshan Cantonese Opera House also faces certain difficulties in attracting and retaining talent, and key positions such as screenwriters are even rarer. In terms of inheritance and development, there is still a lack of innovative expression in Foshan Cantonese opera. How to meet the new expectations and demands of the people for culture, and how to promote the inheritance and development of opera, are important issues that need to be addressed in Foshan Cantonese opera.

In response to these challenges, Li Shuqin and Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre have taken a series of measures to better promote the inheritance and development of Foshan Cantonese Opera, including strengthening cross-border integration and innovation, increasing talent cultivation efforts, and improving the quality of works. She proposes that in the current era, the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera

require extensive cooperation with all sectors of society to jointly promote innovation and development of Cantonese opera. Under her promotion, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theater has realized the integration of ancient and modern times in form, led by China-Chic, and attracted more audiences through cross-border and circle breaking. For example, in the cross-border integration of ancient style garden parties and trendy fashion markets, the public can see selected opera highlights, pop bands, and cross-border performances of Cantonese opera and jazz music. Secondly, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre strengthens the construction of its cultural talent pool, and provides training and practice for the new generation of young actors through methods such as “conducting training with performance”; Through activities such as introducing Cantonese opera into schools, a group of young talents such as screenwriters, directors, and actors have been cultivated. Foshan Cantonese Opera will continue to strive to polish the “Cantonese Opera Culture” city card and promote the interweaving and integration of modern civilization and traditional culture.

4. Investigation, Research, Analysis, and Discussion on Foshan Cantonese Opera

4.1 Challenges in Inheritance and Development Status

As an important representative of traditional Chinese opera, Foshan Cantonese opera faces multiple challenges such as aging audiences, actor gaps, and shrinking markets. These challenges not only affect the inheritance of Cantonese opera, but also limit its artistic innovation and development. In addition, as a local opera, Cantonese opera faces dual language and cultural barriers in its international dissemination due to its unique language and cultural elements, making it more difficult to translate and promote Cantonese opera internationally.

4.2 Strategies for Promoting Inheritance and Development

4.2.1 Establish a Multimodal Comprehensive Corpus Database for Cantonese Opera

This study believes that establishing a Cantonese opera corpus database has a positive promoting effect on the inheritance and protection of Cantonese opera. By collecting and organizing classic Cantonese opera scripts, singing styles, performance videos, and other Chinese language materials, search and organize English corpora based on the collected data, and establish a comprehensive Cantonese opera corpus database so as to provide rich materials for the research, inheritance, and innovation of Cantonese opera. This not only helps to preserve the cultural heritage of Cantonese opera, but also provides a foundation for the digital dissemination and education of Cantonese opera.

4.2.2 Collaborate to Offer Relevant Majors or Courses in Universities

This study suggests that Cantonese opera research institutes collaborate with higher education institutions to offer courses such as cultural external publicity or Cantonese opera translation, in order to cultivate composite talents with Cantonese opera professional knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills. These talents will play an important role in the English translation and international dissemination of Cantonese opera, promote Cantonese opera translation work, and improve the quality of the English translation of Foshan Cantonese opera. “As a form of cross-cultural communication, translation is to achieve successful communication between the people with different cultures and languages” (Wang, 2024, p.97). “The study of English translation of Chinese classics is an important aspect of translation research” (Wang & Men, 2010, p.i). Offering English translation courses for Cantonese opera classics in universities can kill two birds with one stone in terms of translation research and dissemination of classics.

4.2.3 Innovate the Performance Forms of Cantonese Opera

Cross-border integration, innovative repertoire, and the use of modern technology can attract more young audiences and broaden the market and audience of Cantonese opera. For example, Cantonese opera elements can be integrated into modern cultural products such as musicals, movies, and animations, or combined with Chinese intangible cultural heritage such as lacquer fan, which is currently popular on the international stage, to carry out exciting activities and increase the fashion sense and attractiveness of Cantonese opera.

4.2.4 Strengthen Talent Cultivation and Team Building

Through methods such as “conducting training with performance” and introducing Cantonese opera into schools, discover and cultivate young talents such as screenwriters, directors, and actors, forming a reasonable talent pool. At the same time, provide a good development platform and treatment for Cantonese opera talents, and attract more outstanding talents to join the Cantonese opera industry.

5. Conclusion

Through document research, questionnaire survey and expert interview, it can be seen that Foshan Cantonese Opera occupies an important position in traditional Chinese opera. And the challenges that Foshan Cantonese Opera is facing in such aspects as aging audiences, actor gaps and shrinking markets are likely to be overcome through establishing a multimodal comprehensive corpus database for Cantonese Opera, collaborating to offer relevant majors or courses in universities, and innovating the performance forms of Cantonese Opera.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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