

The History of Chinese Peking Opera

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Abstract

With Peking Opera on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, Peking Opera in the classroom has become a breakthrough point for students to get to know traditional culture. Peking Opera, with its wealth of knowledge and superb performances, has made it possible for students to improve their performance in all aspects, and it is a vivid example of integrating disciplinary synthesis in the field of music once again. By integrating humanities, history, literature, music, art and even sociology into the repertoire of Peking Opera, students are able to experience the philosophy of life and aesthetics embedded in the theatre through the repertoire, which in turn leads to a "cultural self-consciousness", and the formation of emotional attitudes and values that are proud of traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: History; Chinese; Peking Opera

Introduction

China is an ancient oriental civilisation with a long history, a vast territory and many nationalities, which has nurtured many rich and splendid cultural heritages for its people over thousands of years of history. Peking Opera was born around 1790 to 1840 during the Qing Dynasty, a period of turbulence and crisis, and it was gradually formed on the basis of the original Beijing Kun and Yi voices and through the mutual influence, exchange and integration of local opera voices such as Huiban, Han tune, and Qin tune with other foreign opera troupes. In the 70 years from 1840 to 1917, Peking Opera gradually matured and took on a new look in terms of scripts and literature, performing arts, music and singing, performance forms, troupe system, casting, audience and box office, and so on, after countless stage performances. All in all, Peking Opera is formed on the basis of some ancient opera genres, which inherits and carries forward the artistic characteristics of Chinese opera in a more complete and distinctive way (Ma et al., 1999). This is also one of the important reasons why the state has put forward the policy of introducing Peking Opera into the classroom.

On 21 February 2008, the Ministry of Education of China issued the Notice of the Office of the Ministry of Education on the Pilot Work of Introducing Peking Opera into Primary and Secondary School Classrooms. The Circular decided that in order to uphold the spirit of the 17th National Congress of the CPC, to pass on the excellent culture of the Chinese nation, and to build a common spiritual home for the Chinese nation, the Ministry decided to introduce Peking Opera into the music curriculum of primary and secondary schools. In the revised *Compulsory Education Music Curriculum Standards*, Peking Opera was added to the curriculum according to the specific conditions of students in different school grades, and 15 classical Peking Opera pieces were finally identified as the teaching content of primary and secondary school music classes, and distributed to all grades. In addition, it is also proposed

that from March 2008 to July 2009, the pilot work of introducing Peking Opera into the classroom will be carried out in primary and secondary schools in ten provinces and cities, namely, Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Heilongjiang, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hubei, Guangdong and Gansu, and will be gradually rolled out across the country (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2008). Once this policy came out, it was undoubtedly a revelation of how to pass on and promote outstanding traditional culture in China, which not only aroused widespread concern and discussion among various people in the education sector, but also attracted the attention and discussion of schools, parents and students.

History of Chinese Peking Opera.

Chinese Peking Opera is one of the representatives of Chinese traditional theatre, with a long history and rich artistic connotation. The History of Chinese Peking Opera is a reading book on Peking Opera published by China Theatre Publishing House, which includes four books: the upper, middle and lower (Sub-volumes 1 and 2). The study of the history of Chinese Peking Opera in the book covers a number of aspects, including its origin, formation, course of development, characteristics of genres, artistic style, performance techniques and relationship with society and culture, etc. It is a relatively comprehensive and complete review of the history of the art of Chinese Peking Opera. The following is an overview of the literature on the history of Chinese Peking Opera.

The conception and formation of Peking Opera.

Studies of the history of Chinese Peking Opera on the origin of Peking Opera mainly focus on the Qing Dynasty, and it is believed that Peking Opera evolved from the local operas and operatic songs of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. With the passage of time, Peking Opera has gradually developed unique performance styles and artistic characteristics, as well as development characteristics and evolution processes in different historical periods.

Beijing was the political, economic and cultural centre of China, and with the prosperity of the commodity economy and the people's growing demand for culture and entertainment. Between about 1700 and 1850, opera genres from all over the country converged on Beijing and engaged in a special encounter, entering the so-called "Luantan Tones" period, which is of course also referred to by some historians as the "controversy of Hua and Ya". During this period, artists from different types of theatre sang with each other, and different voices were absorbed and fused with each other in the course of the performances. Gradually, a large-scale comprehensive theatre genre emerged that could accommodate various voices or form a new genre with a higher degree of mutual dissolution (Ma et al., 1999). Among them, the Hui Ban's entry into Beijing and the merging of Hui and Han played an important role in the formation of Peking Opera.

In 1790, to celebrate the 80th birthday of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, Anhui artist Gao Langting led the Anhui troupe to Beijing to perform, bringing a different kind of local tunes, which gave the audience in the capital a refreshing feeling. Later, the Sixi, Hechun, Chuntai and other Huiban went to Beijing one after another, then known as the “Four Huiban Entering Beijing”. After entering Beijing, the Hui tune, with its rich and beautiful vocal tunes, wide-ranging and easy-to-understand repertoire, high-standard performances, and popularity and simplicity, gained a foothold in the capital, creating very favourable conditions for the birth of Peking Opera.

Around 1828, Hubei Han opera artists went to Beijing to perform with Huiban artists. This was because Han opera had frequent contacts and cooperation with Huiban before they entered Beijing, and their voices, tunes, performance scripts, artistic methods, and performance styles were all very similar. Even so, the Han opera artists who joined the Huiban also produced many new changes to the Huiban's performances. Firstly, the unique styles of Hubei Xipi and Erhuan were introduced into Huiban, which made Huiban more rich in vocal tunes. Secondly, it laid the foundation for the situation in which the cast of characters was dominated by students. Before the arrival of the Han tune in Beijing, Beijing's theatre troupes mainly performed Dan's roles, and the number of actors in Dan's line was also the largest. However, with the arrival of the Han transfer in Beijing, the number of plays with male roles began to increase, especially those with the old man as the main character. This contributed to the gradual development of the Beijing theatre scene from a predominantly Dan(female role) to a predominantly Sheng(male role). The merging of Hui and Han in Beijing laid the foundation for the formation of the Peking Opera Leather Reed Voice. There was also a change that transformed and improved the sound tunes and singing style of the Xipi and Erhuang voices. Before the Han tune was incorporated into the Hui Ban, as the Hui Ban was a comprehensive opera troupe compatible with many types of operas, the tunes sung by the troupe were very redundant and the melodies were straight and simple. Han tune of Xipi and Erhuang, of the voice of the tune melodic rich, very good to make up for the shortcomings of the Hui tune, and after the Han tune actors and Hui Ban actors to sing together, innovation of a both Han and Hui reeds of certain characteristics, but not completely the same as the original Han Hui reeds of the so-called “Chu tune new sound” of the Xipi, Erhuang of the cantata. This new type of reed singing, melodious and rounded tone, both high and exciting superiority, but also has a rich and deep long, rich in the musicality of the reed voice, strengthening the performance ability of the reed cavity. In addition to melodic innovations, they also created and multiplied the [Erhuan rocking plate], [Erhuang loose plate], [Erhuang guide plate], [Erhuang rolling plate], [Fast three-eye], [Slow three-eye], as well as the [anti-erhuang] and other plate styles based on the two-reed plate styles of the Han tune, which made the singing flexible and changeable, and gradually formed a set of singing structure that conformed to the laws of life, and also meticulously revealed the changes in the characters' feelings, and was rich in music and aesthetics. The last change was in the singing language. The last change was the transformation of the singing language. The singing of Chinese opera is based on the tones of its unique local language. Therefore, after entering the capital, the actors of the Han tune, while working with the artists of the Hui tune to reform the sound of the leather spring, also made some changes to the singing language. Firstly, in the stage singing, the “Zhongyuan rhyme”(i.e., Zhongzhou rhyme) was adopted as the language standard, in order to eliminate the language gap between the audience in Beijing. Secondly, the use of “Hu Guang Yin”. On the basis of the Zhongzhou rhyme, the tones of the singing and reading were based on the tones of the local language of

Hubei. Therefore, after the Han tunes entered the Huiban, the Huiban gradually evolved and transitioned to a new type of theatre, which eventually formed the new type of Peking Opera (Ma et al., 1999).

As mentioned above, Peking Opera was formed around 1840 through the mutual exchange and fusion of different types of theatre. Since then, the art of Peking Opera has been on the stage of theatre in a different form and has been passed down for a long time.

The gradual maturation of Peking Opera.

From about 1840 to 1917, as the nature of our society and the ideology and culture of our country continued to change, the Peking Opera gradually matured artistically. It was mainly manifested in the following five aspects: Firstly, the emergence of the Former Three Masters and the Latter Three Masters, which was also a sign of the maturity of Peking Opera. Referring to the representative actors in the formative period of Peking Opera, the Former Three Masters were Yu Sansheng, Cheng Changgeng, and Zhang Erkui, also known as the Former Three Masters of the Elderly Scholar. The latter three are: Tan Xinpei, Sun Juxian and Wang Guifen. They are known as the Three Masters of the Old Sheng. The repertoire of their performances are mainly traditional plays. Secondly, the management of the troupe is institutionalised, standardised, and fixed in the form of regulations. For example: it is forbidden to lift the curtain and peep outside; it is forbidden to sit on the seat of the drum master of “Nine Dragon Mouth”, and no one else is allowed to sit without permission; it is forbidden to sit on the theatre box, or to sit on the knees, and so on. There is also a collective system to the famous actors to pick the transition of the class system, the beginning of the formation of Peking Opera, inherited the Huiban system, the individual actors in the team, the main and secondary are not clearly distinguishable, the musicians should be accompanied by the whole troupe of actors, no actor has a special piano, drummer. Until the establishment of the famous actor system has slowly changed. Thirdly, many new plays were created and staged, with a variety of themes and styles, which can be roughly divided into four categories: the original play, the folded play, the small play, and the continuous play. The original play refers to a form of play that is performed in a single performance. Folded opera refers to a certain piece or a certain scene selected from the present opera. A small theatre refers to a relatively short performance time and a complete but simple storyline. A serial theatre refers to a long script with many characters and a complete and twisted plot, usually performed over several days. Fourthly, the art of stage performance has matured. The classification of roles in Peking Opera became more complete, subdivided under the framework of Sheng Dan, Jie Jiu, and Chou, and enriched the character settings, so that the actors could perform their respective roles and better serve the script and the audience.

It is also worth mentioning that Peking Opera began to flourish in various parts of the country, such as Tianjin, Shandong, Shenyang, Henan, Hangzhou and Shanghai. Especially in Shanghai, where there were many theatres and many different styles of opera, Peking Opera gradually became a unique style, and became the “Southern School” of Peking Opera with a Shanghai style.

The heyday of Peking Opera.

The heyday of Peking Opera was around 1917 to 1937, a period when China's Anti-Japanese War broke out in full force and the wave of the May Fourth Movement swept people's minds forward. Under the major changes, Peking Opera also developed in a better direction and began to go global.

It is mainly manifested in five major aspects:

1) Changes in the concept of theatre and aesthetics.

The concept of theatre in this period put more emphasis on the social function and role of opera. The characteristics, value, status and future of Chinese opera were confirmed. New dramas that opposed feudal autocracy and national oppression and propagated the idea of democracy. Improve the social status of Peking Opera actors, break the stereotypes, and attract the literati and scholars to devote themselves to the compilation and creation of Peking Opera. As people's horizons widened, their aesthetic concepts and appreciation improved, and Peking Opera developed new aesthetic standards. Firstly, the roles were transformed from mainly Sheng to both Sheng and Dan. Because of the deepening of the democratic ideology, a large number of female audience have entered the theatre, changing the structure of the audience, but also to promote changes in the structure of the repertoire, by the role of the main plays, gradually transferred to the role of the main plays, or even the emergence of the trend of the main Dan Dan, Dan's role in the development of the road opened up. Secondly, the literary nature of the script is emphasised. Although Peking Opera has a very high level of performance, due to its predecessor being a local folk opera, the scripts were rather crude and the cultural level of the actors was low, so the plays performed generally lacked literary character. Thanks to the efforts of various people in the Peking Opera sector, the scripts of Peking Opera have gradually become more structured, with reasonable plots and beautiful language. Thirdly, the art of Peking Opera is emphasised as a whole. Actors are required to co-operate with each other, regardless of whether they are the main character, the pianist or the supporting actors, and strict requirements are imposed, reflecting the spirit of one play without two. Fourthly, under the premise of healthy competition, we boldly carry out innovations and constantly enrich our performances (Li, 2008).

2) From the Academy to the Theatre School.

The Peking Opera Academy has a long history and has trained a large number of key actors and actresses. In 1930, the Chinese Opera School was established, a new type of school for training Peking Opera actors, but with some differences from the original school. For example, the school offered cultural classes in language, mathematics, English, and history; allowed boys and girls to attend the same school; conducted regular activities to observe plays; and founded the Student Self-Governance Association, which rehearsed and performed plays, contributing greatly to the cultivation of talent for Peking Opera.

3) Formation and development of the Peking Opera genre.

Art, as a social ideology, is always a product of a certain stage of social history, and is always the crystallisation of the artist's understanding, evaluation and expression of a certain social life and human emotions. Peking Opera covers several genres and thousands of repertoires, and each genre and repertoire has its unique performance style and cultural connotation.

The formation of Peking Opera genres can be divided into objective and subjective factors. The objective factors include: firstly, the formation of Peking Opera genres was a product of the development of the art of Peking Opera to a mature stage, but according to that time, it only had a history of 100 years. The reason why Peking Opera genres produced so many genres at that time could not be separated from its strong absorptive power and ability to draw on, constantly growing itself and slowly forming distinctive features. Like the very popular Dan school at that time, the most famous are known as the “Four Famous Dan” Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Xun Huisheng, Shang Xiaoyun, each of them has formed a different style and school.

Secondly, Peking Opera genres are the products of the times and society. As an artistic phenomenon, Peking Opera genres cannot but be influenced by the needs of a particular era, social trends and the interests and hobbies of the audience, and they must be adapted to the needs of the society and the audience in order to survive and develop; otherwise, they will inevitably dry up and die out. Like Mr Mei Lanfang's new ancient costume dramas, such as *The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers*, *Chang'e Runs to the Moon*, and *Daiyu Burial of Flowers*, with their simple plots and elegant words, beautiful costumes, innovative costumes, and exquisite songs and dances, they brought a brand-new look to the stage of Peking Opera, which was highly sought after by the literati and praised by the audience (Bai, 2008).

Thirdly, it is influenced by the geographical environment and humanistic background. As mentioned earlier, Peking Opera has become a school of its own in Shanghai - the Hai Party, and the Peking Opera still in Beijing is known as the Peking Party. The two Parties have their own strengths and weaknesses, generally speaking, the Beijing party of art specifications require rigorous and complete, moves to be stable and generous, voice tone to regulate the shortcomings of too limited stereotypes, innovation is slower. The Hai party focuses on artistic innovation. Dare to make bold breakthroughs, follow the trend of the times, the disadvantage is that it is easy to be rash and negligent in the treatment of art. In addition, the cultural differences between the two places are large, the audience's aesthetic interests and different ways of watching, such regional cultural differences also make the formation and development of Peking Opera parties more diversified (Niu, 2004).

The subjective factors for the formation of Peking Opera genres are: firstly, the highly programmed norms, and the solid basic skills of the actors. The second is the accumulation of noble moral and artistic qualities as well as profound life experience of the artists. Thirdly, the actors are good at making use of their strengths and avoiding their weaknesses, performing according to their own conditions, bringing their strengths into full play and then making up for their shortcomings through learning. Fourthly, the actors are innovative in creating distinctive characters and working together with like-minded groups to create new and trendy plays. Fifth, there should be the heirs and audience of the genre, art is a long history, once a genre needs successors and audience, which has a far-reaching impact on the inheritance of the genre (Lin, 2021).

4) New developments in musical accompaniment and stage art in Peking Opera.

Peking Opera reformed the orchestra by adding gong and drum musicians and the instrument erhu, which was later modified to make its sound more in tune with the Peking Opera, so it was also known as the Peking Erhu. In terms of stage art, character modelling, make-up and costumes are as close to life as possible; the set forms of drama are absorbed and made more realistic.

5) Theoretical research and propaganda activities of Peking opera.

During this period, nearly one hundred books were published on Peking Opera. Among them, there are about 20 to 30 influential ones, such as Zhou Jianyun's *Bow Department from the publication*, Chen Yanheng's *Say Tan*, Qi Rushan's "Theatre from the book", Zhou Mingtai's "Several Liju Series", Zhang Cixi's *History of the Pear Garden of Yandu in the Qing Dynasty*, Wang Zhizhang's *Qing Shengping Department Zhilue* and *Qing dynasty actor biography* and so on. There are also several Japanese writings about the history of Peking Opera: *History of Chinese Modern Opera*, *History of Peking Opera in 200 Years* and so on. Regarding the publicity activities, the domestic methods include: comprehensive literature and art newspapers and special opera newspapers, such as *Big World*, *Jing Daily*, *Pear Garden Bulletin*, *Drama*, etc.; magazines *Drama Monthly*, *Drama Monthly*, *Drama Series*, etc.; the importation of the phonograph pushed forward the birth of recordings, so that people could listen to Peking Opera in their homes without leaving their homes; and the shooting of films on Peking Opera left valuable video materials for the future generations, all of which contributed to the development of Peking Opera. The filming of Peking Opera films has left valuable video materials for future generations, all of which have played a great role in promoting the spread of Peking Opera. Overseas: Many famous Peking Opera artists in China have visited and performed abroad. For example, Mr Mei Lanfang visited Japan three times, the Soviet Union twice and the United States once, which increased the influence of Peking Opera overseas and played a positive role in the development of world theatre (Huang, 2017).

6) Relationship between Peking Opera and social culture.

Peking Opera is not only a form of artistic performance, but also an important part of Chinese society and culture. The research literature not only discusses the relationship between Peking Opera and history, politics and social life, but also reveals the important position of Peking Opera in Chinese traditional culture.

Conclusion

Summing up the literature, it can be seen that the research on the history of Chinese Peking Opera covers a wide range of fields, which is of great value and significance to the understanding of the development of Chinese theatre culture and traditional art, and provides more theoretical support and practical guidance for the introduction of Peking Opera into the classroom and the inheritance and development of traditional culture.

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