

Development Dilemmas and Breakout Strategies on Local Operas: A Case Study of Jinghe Opera in Jingzhou

Renqi Luo

Yangtze University, Jingzhou 434023, China.

317965690@qq.com

Abstract

As an local opera, Jinghe opera used to enjoy a glorious past. However, the changing era put Jinghe opera in a dilemma of dialect, pattern and inheritance, which has posed a great threat to its existence. Based on deep research of Jinghe opera in Jingzhou, three strategies are proposed: mass communication strategy, communicating by means of fragmentation; exploration and innovation strategy, setting aside “dignity” and making bold innovations; talent inheritance strategy, taking initiative to enter schools and campuses to nurture inheritors.

Keywords

Dilemma, strategy, Jinghe Opera.

1. Introduction

From 1950s to the early twenty-first century, in just a fifty-year, over a hundred of local operas had disappeared, on an average of two per year. [1] By far there are a bit more than 260 traditional operas in China. What’s worse, the limits of themselves, coupled with the innovation of various art forms in recent years, have posed a severe threat to traditional operas and aroused wide concern for the status of some local operas known by few.

The art of opera is viewed as a national treasure and a witness to excellent traditional Chinese culture. Local operas are the splendid flowers, which symbolize the customs of certain areas and are widely spread in all corners of China. Jinghe opera is one of the the most representative local operas in Jingchu area. According to different sayings, the origin of Jinghe opera varies. Some say it stemmed from Lixian and later transported to Jingzhou, Hubei province. Others say it originated in Jingzhou and transported to Lixian afterwards. Lixian and Jingzhou are close to each other in geographical position, both of which belong to Jinghe basin around Yangtze rivers. Therefore, It is namely Jinghe opera. Jinghe opera enjoyed a prosperous and splendid history. However, on the background of general decline in traditional operas, it has also undergone tough experiences and struggled for breakout.

2. Analysis on the Development Dilemma of Jinghe Opera

Jinghe opera was born in the era of agricultural civilization, a period when there were scarcely any art forms. Life was monotonous then. Watching an opera on the corner of street would be a satisfying spiritual entertainment. Unfortunately, local operas like Jinghe opera gradually fell behind the process of cultural changes, trapping itself in great dilemmas.

2.1 The Bottleneck In The Development of Dialect

Modern Mandarin Chinese wasn’t popularized widely until the year of 1955. However, Jinghe opera emerged under the reign of emperor Yongli in Ming dynasty and prospered in the middle of Qing dynasty. So It was an objectively historical reason that Jinghe opera was sung in dialect. In the era of agricultural civilization, dialects literally brought a sense of belonging. Folk opera singers wouldn’t travel far to perform and common people usually went for an opera during spare time after farming. It was the accent and noise that they enjoyed, which later transformed into a sense of agreement on certain opera. Though the two places, Lixian in Hunan province while Jingzhou in Hubei province,

differ in administrative districts. They are close to each other in geological position and share similar dialects. A vocal aria will suffice to prove that the two groups of opera singers share the same origin during artistic communications. The sense of intimacy is subtly beyond words. In addition, Jinghe opera has perfectly integrated arias with dialectical lyrics. So it would otherwise undermine the lingering charm of Jinghe opera to sing in Mandarin Chinese.

Unfortunately, with the fast development of mass media in modern days, dialect has become a tough obstacle and handicap to the communication of operas. In the past, Jinghe opera only had to concentrate on local places since there was no need to explore wider markets. But for the time being, an increasing variety of arts have been shown to the audiences via more convenient means of communication. With a wider range of art to choose, local audiences are divided. Lasswell proposed that communication must lay emphasis on contents and objects. Jinghe opera, however, taking dialect as an carrier, virtually has given up non-local audiences, leading to a result of limited target audiences.

On the contrary, all those well-developed and widely-popularized operas tend to use more straightforward language to perform: Kunqu opera has abandoned part of traditional Suzhou accent and resorted to Zhongzhou rhythm; Beijing opera learns from Zongzhou rhythm, and even uses Mandarin Chinese in some monologues and dialogues; [2] Henan opera is performed in an easily-understood accent of Henan province.

In contrast, Jinghe opera still inherits the tradition of dialect, which interferes with its development in spite of the unique lingering charm it brings.

2.2 The Limitation Of Pattern

Kunqu opera was listed among as the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in May 2001, a brand new stage for the development and inheritance of traditional cultures. In fact, China has attached much importance to intangible heritage. On June 1st, 2011, Intangible Cultural Heritage Law came into force. China has, by far, listed 162 “traditional operas” as national intangible cultural heritages in four batches respectively. [3] All provinces have actively launched campaigns for the protection and preservation of local operas and achieved noticeable success, making profound contributions to sustaining the diversity of culture. Jinghe opera was added to national intangible cultural heritage list in the first batch On June 9th, 2006. Jinghe masses art center shoulders the responsibility to gather and integrate Jinghe opera artists in local places, as well as provide financial supports, field construction and policy supports. Some Jinghe opera artists count on stronger policy supports to improve the current status of Jinghe opera. Instead of getting itself involved in market competition, Jinghe opera hopefully relies on policy-supported pattern to develop. However, affected by fiscal pressure, only 1.0832 million yuan is allocated for item expenses in the overall budget of Jingzhou masses art center in 2017, the part for the Jinghe opera can be predicted.

Instead of relying too much on policy supports, art is bound to integrate with markets. After People’s Republic of China was founded, film production was once the privilege of state-owned film industries. But since the reform and opening up in 1997, private capital has been taken in, combined with the overthrow of traditional state-owned pattern. Regulated by markets, film industries are confronted with the challenge of affording the loss all by itself and have suffered a lot in the process. But since elimination arouses early concern which results in better services and works, Jinghe opera is destined to be marketized. Though under the protection of policy, intangible heritage is not free from extinction. It is high time that Jinghe opera promoted itself so that better development is accessible. If Jinghe opera only “waits,takes,requires” and mainly relies on government and reject marketization routine, it will soon be eliminated by markets.

2.3 The Dilemma Of Inheritance

Constrained by historical realities, the inheritance of traditional operas mainly depended on traditional master-disciple system in troupes. Children offered tea to their master and would make a living with their master since then. Disciples’ achievements depended on their master’s skills and self-cultivation, as well as their own abilities, diligence and so forth, which were not secure. With the popularization

of nine-year compulsory education, parents prefer to send their children to normal schools for security, rather than have them join the opera troupe to learn a certain skill. Though there are some systematic opera schools designed for modern opera teaching, only limited quantities of famous operas are taught by them. Fewer and fewer youngsters have access to local operas, let alone go for systematic studies. To make matters worse, opera requires training at an early age. It's rather hard or even impossible to be expert without strong foundation. Local opera troupes usually rely on elder masters to live on since fresh blood falls short of demand. Once these elder masters are not fit enough to sing any longer, traditional operas will be at the risk of extinction. Aging members and few inheritors are two key problems that Jinghe opera faces.

In Jingzhou, there are two national inheritors of intangible heritage, Sir Liu Houyun and Madam Tan Fuxiu. But it is a pity that Mr. Liu passed away, without any personal disciple left. He had a good knowledge of Jinghe opera as well as a good command of "Chang Nian Zuo Da", which literally means a combination of singing, reciting, acting and acrobatic fighting. In Jingzhou, no one can replace his status in Jinghe opera. Meanwhile, quite a lot of word-of-mouth arias weren't sorted out in time which were irretrievable masterpieces. Tan Fuxiu is 85 years old now but she is still an A-lister who can be seen on the stage frequently, and her singing skill doesn't fade. She confirmed that she wouldn't leave the stage as long as she was able to sing but she added that the mission of inheritance was not guaranteed since there was no youngster in the troupe.

3. Strategies on developing Jinghe opera

3.1 Mass Communication Strategy

Having accumulated for over six hundred years, Jinghe opera, to a great extent, differs from new art patterns created by mass media in terms of narrative, stage design, music, acting and so forth. To a majority of audiences, new art patterns are more attractive, which is the result of years of current preference.

Actually, mass medium isn't anything to be afraid of, but a ray of hope for traditional operas. The range of targeted audiences of Jinghe opera is small, with only local audiences included, which is obviously an obstacle to its development. If Jinghe opera takes initiative to embrace mass media, taking advantages of the convenience and width of communication, it will spark wider markets.

In fact, traditional operas have been dedicated to integrating with mass media. In 1905, China's first Beijing opera film, *Dingjun Mountain*, was released, starring Tan Xinpei. It was an excerpt of Beijing opera *Dingjun Mountain*; In the 1950s, Beijing TV station produced the first opera television show; Later, Henan Television launched the program "Li yuan chun" in 1994 and Anhui Television launched the program "Xiang yue hua xi lou" in 1999, both of which won a round of applause. In 2001, CCTV, as a national medium, opened an opera channel. Nonetheless, the way traditional operas embraced mass media remained rigid. The opera excerpts shown on TV still inherited the 4 to 3 screen portion in low image quality applied many years ago. There was only one fixed camera stand and the lights and stage design lagged. In recent years, though the new opera competition program has made much progress in competition setting and programme recording, traditional operas are not compatible with normal TV packaging in modern days. Consequently, the sense of presence on stage is consumed up by cameras. And the diffused passage and formalized acting aren't in harmony with audiences' feelings of tempo. These primitive means of recording are not supposed to be learned by Jinghe opera.

Nowadays, the field of mass communication shows the feature of fragmentation in all aspects. Things like WeChat, Weibo, short videos, short films and so forth catch audiences' eye proactively and rapidly. If traditional operas remain to be that rigid, it will be pretty hard for them to survive on the background that media are flooded with overwhelming information. So it is wise for Jinghe opera to try fragmentation ways of communication. For those classic songs, reforming the present recording pattern is necessary: increasing camera stands and clips in order to create lively rhythm and a sense of immersion; put emphasis on making attractive video clips to boost publicity. For newly-created

opera songs, the passage can be cut down and condensed to “short opera” so that audiences can learn about Jinghe opera in the shortest time, which is to capture some steady audiences.

As is mentioned above, there is a dialect dilemma for Jinghe opera. But the similar dilemma exists for Cantonese songs. However, through repeated practice, the language barrier for Cantonese songs can be overcome because of its short length and mature video works. Likewise, with short passages, polished quality and corresponding captions, Jinghe opera can not only attract audiences, but also guide audiences to learn autonomously.

After video excerpts and short operas are finished, mass media can be made use of to establish publicity camps. Mass media once took advantages of itself to divide audiences’ time that should have been allocated to operas. But if Jinghe opera equip itself with fragmentation characteristics just like mass media, the equal attributes they share will make it possible for Jinghe opera to win back.

3.2 Exploration and Innovation Strategy

In the film, *Farewell My Concubine*, Cheng Dieyi and Xiao Sier had a fierce debating on whether model productions were Chinese operas. Xiao Sier believed that it was Chinese opera if it has the tunes Xipi and Erhuang, while Cheng Dieyi insisted that it was not Chinese opera because costumes and settings weren’t decent in model productions. When having a discussion on historical culture, we emphasize that “what is inherited can’t be changed” and tend to “be faithful for the original”. It is the blind idea of “integrity”- even a slight change being a loss of integrity, that seriously gets in way of traditional operas’ innovation.

In terms of culture, “The trend of era always prevails”. [4] Our languages, characters, art patterns and means of communication have gone through huge shifts. They keep adapting to any given circumstance at any given stage in history in order to better serve for human’s spiritual lives, for which they survive and develop smoothly. Equaling adjustments and changes with a loss of integrity, indeed, overacts. Many researches have confirmed that the saying “Three major acting systems in the world” is a false hearsay. However, some still immerse themselves in it. Quite a lot of teaching materials even take delight in reiterating it constantly. A false feeling of integrity brought by national pride easily misleads us.

Except for arias based on local dialect and playing with Danbo, Jinghe opera has little significant difference from other traditional operas in terms of costumes, properties, facial painting, roles and so forth, which indicates a lack of characteristics. Whether to stick to tradition or resort to innovation is also a tough dilemma that Jinghe opera artists in Jingzhou are confronted with. On one hand, they hope that Jinghe opera will keep up with the changing times and take roots. On the other hand, they apprehend that its original characteristics may be spoiled and contaminated. But ultimately, Jinghe opera set out to make cautious and brave innovative attempts. The new opera, *Carrying a Load and Surrounding the Drums, Sing a Jinghe Opera*, absorbs the two artistic forms in local Jingzhou-carrying a load and surrounding the drums, and makes it to have them integrate with complement, and promote each other. It is a typical work as to combine traditional operas with music. Modern adaption, *The Red Women*, made bold innovations. It absorbs current fashions in terms of scenery, costumes and arias without abandoning the essence of Jinghe opera, which contributes to drawing closer to the audiences. The classic song, *Take a Concubine on Mount Liantai*, achieves the form of “one scenery two acts”, which means elder groups and student groups perform simultaneously on the stage to show the inheritance of art.

Jinghe opera is small in volume, but low in pressure and easy to reform, which becomes an advantage in innovation. The kind of decisive and desperate reform is not a negative compromise as to inheritance, nor does Jinghe opera lose its integrity. It is an active response to the tough dilemma as well as a brave act of exploration and innovation.

3.3 Talent Inheritance Strategy

As is mentioned above, prominent operas can yet nurture talents via a few specialized opera schools. Local operas, somehow, still inherit traditional master-disciple system, which is hard to be involved

in contemporary education systems. Without young reinforcement, the inheritance of Jinghe opera is unrealistic.

Youngsters are the backbones and hopes for the future. To have constant fresh blood join in, Jinghe opera must enter schools and campuses actively to select and nurture potential youngsters endowed with interests, perseverance and talents.

Jinghe opera troupe in Jingzhou, with the lead of Jingzhou masses art center, has launched significant cooperation with Yangtze University to popularize Jinghe opera since the year of 2015. It has entered Yangtze University, Jingzhou Education college, middle schools and high schools in Jingzhou for several times to perform, receiving a warm welcome. Many local students had never heard of Jinghe opera before but they became interested after watching the performance, and even joined the amateur performing troupes.

In the year of 2017, the Jinghe opera troupe of Yangtze University was founded, with ten students selected and taught systematically by elder Jinghe opera masters. Though these young students had no strong foundation in opera, driven by interests, they could still give performances autonomously through systematic studies and help with the performances and operations of Jinghe opera troupe in Jingzhou. They have become the fresh blood of the troupe and the hope for the future of Jinghe opera. In the meantime, young students have unique advantages in energies, ideas, new media technologies and so forth, which bring about new vitality to Jinghe opera in performance, creation and publicity.

4. Conclusion

Jinghe opera, just like many other local operas, can't be blinded by its glorious past or escape from the dilemma. Facing the new era, if Jinghe opera takes initiative to change itself, confronts with frequent culture changes with scientific, objective and friendly attitude and break out actively, it will be favorably inherited and well developed.

Acknowledgements

The Open-ended Fund of Chu Culture Academy of Yangtze University.

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