

## On the Development of Huangmei Opera

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### Abstract

Huangmei opera is an important traditional Chinese local opera, known as one of China's five major operas. However, its development situation is worrying: performances and audience reduce, performance and management talent loss seriously, and screenplay innovation lags. Huangmei opera against the background of contemporary cultural industry needs to focus on cultural orientation, performance quality improvement, personnel training and the use of modern media, etc. to achieve self-help through art and transition markets.

**Key words:** Huangmei opera; Current status; Countermeasures

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### INTRODUCTION

Huangmei opera is a main opera of Anhui province and originated in Huangmei County located in the junction of Hubei, Anhui, and Jiangxi, then drew the nutrition of Qingyang tone and Anhui opera in Anqing district, and then integrated local folk art and flourished in Anhui Province. It has more than 200 years' history. Huangmei opera roots in private sector, is the success of practice of working people in Hubei, Anhui, Jiangxi and the surrounding areas. It maintains the pure folk aesthetic characteristics. Most of them are drew on folklore and everyday life, such as the famous opera "Mow greenfeeds

for pigs", "Making tofu", "Goddess Marriage", whose main images of the performances are often civilians and the ideas expressed are real telling coming from bottom. For this reason, the form of expression in Huangmei opera is not so rigid, but pursuing a kind of flexibility and simplicity. Huangmei opera is fevered by the majority of people relying on the strong local flavor and plain language, which makes it have the same reputation as Beijing opera, Shaoxing Henan opera and Pingju opera, named as China's five major operas, and was collected in the first batch of intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. This is the greatest accolade for Huangmei opera which is relatively young.

### 1. CURRENT STATUS OF HUANGMEI

#### 1.1 Audience of Huangmei Reduces: In a Flat Trend

The third group of protecting intangible cultural heritage includes community or community groups, groups, individuals or non-governmental organizations. But now the number of its audience which is a basis for the development is declining. Opera market's decline is a common phenomenon across the country. According to the survey, there are more than 80% enthusiasts of Huangmei are elders, and it is a fact that the young audience is indisputable (Zhu & Wang, 2014). Now because of the constant update of communication and media providing the public with more options of entertainment and cultural consumption, thus further suppress the space of opera's survival. The masses' attention to Huangmei opera's survival is not high, and the shrinking consumer market became the first problem as Huangmei opera trying to be developed.

#### 1.2 Serious Loss and Lack of Professional Performers and Management Personnel

Intangible Cultural Heritage requires talent for inheritance because of lacking substantive material carrier, Huangmei

opera's development is restricted by the shortage of talent. Huangmei opera professional performing talents disconnect and many trades have no successor. Currently, take Anqing City Theatre for example, the average age of the actors is over 35, and there are very few actors whose age is under 30. Director and other staff are around the age of 50, and the lack of personnel is more obvious in the band, and even disconnected (Shao, 2013). The lack of professional performing talent is also reflected in the "celebrity", a sustainable development of the play must have a leader, such as Mei Lanfang, Xun Huisheng, Shang Xiaoyun, Cheng Yanqiu, the "Four famed female-role performers" in Beijing opera. Thus the whole drama rejuvenates and innovates. Meanwhile the students of Huangmei opera are difficult to be employed, and the cast and crew are paid low. The salary of the secondary actors in some professional troupes in Anqing is only 800 yuan before the reform of in 2007, and they can get some extra pay when there are performances.

Huangmei opera must be integrated into the market, and the transformation of traditional cultural development requires professional management talents to operate, but now the theater managers are often part-time jobs of actors, who are lack of professional management experience and prior ideas of management and marketing, resulting in the relatively loose internal organizational structure and can not make the right response when face to the market shocks. This situation shows the importance of requiring comprehensive management talent of Huangmei opera.

### **1.3 Reducing Professional Troupes, Poor Survival Status of Folk Troupes, and Reducing Performances**

Huangmei opera troupes apparently can not be spared in the big wave of troupes reform. But the problem is that the designers and implementers of reform often lack a comprehensive understanding of the arts community, and cannot estimate all the possible consequences caused by the reform. The reform of uniformity is obviously problematic. Regardless of Huangmei opera as a traditional cultural form holding the cultural responsibility for public welfare, the reformers' mind is good for reform itself, focusing on the government and the market to promote theater to marketability. But the reality is, there are many retired personnel who made contribution and be taken care more care of in the theater before the reform, so when the funding ends, it makes troupe which has no money accumulated worse. Furthermore, this model is not conducive to staff's creation to a certain extent. Currently, the national professional Huangmei opera troupes reduced from more than 50 to more than 20, but only half of them operate normally, and the remaining 10 troupes only deal with a few sporadic performances. Overall, the trend has not been effectively curbed. (Chen, 2013).

In contrast, survival of civil troupes is more difficult, they do not have a fixed government fund with entirely

market-oriented operation. Since they are not professional troupes with loose organization, lack of stability, lack of professional training, the level is uneven, making big problem of extending market, which leads to a reduction in performances to some extent.

### **1.4 Lagging of Screenplay Innovation**

Huangmei opera's glorious status can not live without the unremitting efforts of several generations of Huangmei opera workers and excellent innovation of screenplays. With the social development and progress, people's spiritual and cultural needs are increasingly diverse, the traditional Huangmei opera's outstanding works such as "Goddess Marriage" and "Chuangyuan Girl" have impregnable position in the public's mind, but playing old drama day by day is clearly lagging behind social development. Huangmei opera's development is a process of innovation, in the past many folk troupes improvised when they performed. But now with the creative work specialized, the script innovation is confined to live. Creative repertoire is gradually difficult to keep pace with times, and stay on the interpretation of the historical themes, less reflecting the characteristics of the times. Even if there are some new works, it seems that they walk into a misunderstanding and live away of masses' life, which pursuit mainstream and elegance in content, and non-drama and luxury in expression form. The creation of the script tried to pull Huangmei opera away from the rank of the "vulgar" culture, pushing it into the so-called noble culture.

### **1.5 Lack of Funding Leads to Shortage of Material Equipment and Non-Material Information**

In recent decades, Huangmei opera obtained few funding. Investment in infrastructure construction and equipment is basic salary for staff and mainly rely on the performance to maintain balance. Building a theater group of the hundreds of million for a Huangmei opera troupe is a fantasy. In the interior, quota management and staff salaries are not guaranteed. Updates on the usual equipment and personnel recruitment for the troupe are not so easy, Huangmei opera performance groups have failed to completely get rid of limiting government funding after 30 years of reform and opening up, which is the bottom line of the living of Huangmei opera groups. It is the funding shortage leads to the overall decline of Huangmei opera's professional research and creation. There is a saying in Huangmei opera "36 drama, 72 opera". According to survey of CCTV, Huangmei opera ranks best in the audience rating. However, our theoretical research still stuck in the mature stage, while the script writing and staff training lags behind which leads to a lack of material equipment and non-material information.

## 2. STRATEGIES

### 2.1 Merge in Civilian Life, Make Good Cultural Orientation, and Improve the Quality of Performances

The famous dramatist Wang Zengqi once talked about opera crisis: "There is a rule in the history of literature, when a literary form recesses, there is only two things could save it: the one is the folk stuff, another is exotic thing" (Wang, 1981). This rule also applies to a Huangmei opera's development.

Huangmei opera initiates in the folk songs and dances, imports public aesthetic taste, streams in the countryside, and originates in towns and cities. Its lively arts scene has distinctive cultural features of countryside. The cultural gene of Huangmei opera determines it belonging to the mass and general public. Therefore, reform of Huangmei opera should have a clear cultural orientation, go back to the masses, maintain their own cultural folk aesthetic qualities, and aim to the general audience. It must extend to grassroots and masses, explore new themes, understand the needs and living conditions of people, and create outstanding works loved by the public.

We can start in two ways: first, create Huangmei opera script. As a relatively young opera, Huangmei opera has strong plasticity. On one hand we can use the traditional theme and continue to express public's pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty. We should pay attention to the plot settings and a sense of humor in these subjects. On another hand, which is a more important that combining public's real life, looking for new material, and exploring new themes. Shows the new changes people's private life in time since the reform and opening up, as well as and new spirits and emotional demands, such as citizenship, legal awareness, desire for social justice and fair. Second, increase performances among masses. County troupe and civil troupe can grasp the audience's needs more accurately for its unique environment, and their presence can declare popular features of Huangmei opera more clearly. Currently the entertainment is tedious in rural areas where Huangmei opera born and grew up, and Huangmei opera has a natural close contact with countryside. So Huangmei opera should be promised in the rural market. County troupe and civil troupe should concentrate on performances for grassroots. In urban areas, professional troupes should give full play to its characteristics of art, reduce costs as much as possible, create good scripts, and make more people walk into the theater to accept Huangmei opera's edification. Huangmei opera belongs to public, and should allow people to participate in it actively.

### 2.2 Combining With Modern Media

The form of communication of opera has undergone tremendous changes from stage performances to the press, radio, television, Internet and other mass media.

The modern mass media provides audience with unprecedented convenience with the technical advantages of dissemination. "In many operas, Huangmei opera contacts with various media most frequently, and has the highest frequency of receiving a transplant" (Shao, 2013).

Marriage between mass communication media and opera has a long history. After the first movie came to China, it played a great role in terms of the spread of opera culture, and produced opera film which is a special form of art. Since the early 20th century, the film has always played the most active and most creative role in dissemination process of opera, and became the most important form of communication in addition to stage performances. The first combination with Huangmei opera and movie was "Goddess Marriage". "Goddess Marriage" is a milestone for the development of Huangmei opera, which not only heralded the reform of the mode of Huangmei opera's transmission, but also greatly enhanced the Huangmei opera's influence, and brought the local opera to audience of the country and the world. On the other hand, as the "Goddess Marriage" succeeded, a lot of good movies of Huangmei opera began to emerge, according to incomplete statistics, in the past 60 years, China produced 18 Huangmei opera movies. This has far-reaching implications to the collecting and discovering of Huangmei opera's traditional repertoire, as well as the inheritance of the art and market development.

The development of Huangmei opera movie is not very good in the 21st century, but we can not deny Huangmei opera's market value and movie which is a mass media with powerful force of spreading. While actively promote the film industry, we concern more on Huangmei opera movie, make full use of advanced equipment and filming conception, to enhance its technical content and further enhance its artistic quality. We need to organize Huangmei opera film and television production companies actively and carry out the creation and production of Huangmei opera film products. Promote the dissemination of the culture of Huangmei opera strongly domestically and internationally.

The development of communication of opera further develops with the development of media. With the popularity of television in 1970s, the television quickly became the most influential mass media of communication. "Old opera art and emerging media closely cooperated around 1980s, achieved the treasured destiny" (Ye, 2011). Television has wider range of communication and audience, and the most important is its high penetration, with the development of society, the television sets can be seen in almost all the American families. The primary audience Huangmei opera is the middle-aged and elder people, compared to watching movies, they prefer to enjoy entertainment at home. So the reform made by television to Huangmei opera's mode of transmission is more thoroughly, and thus is more conducive to the rapid development of Huangmei opera.

The televisionization of Huangmei opera includes Huangmei opera documentaries on stage, Huangmei TV

art film, Huangmei TV series, featured television series, etc. During the televisionization process of Huangmei opera, Huangmei TV series and television shows reflects its spread in the form of new features mostly. We should vigorously strengthen the development of these two forms. Firstly, development of Huangmei opera TV series, on the one hand it plays an important part in innovation of Huangmei opera's repertoire, on another hand it prompts Huangmei opera's expression forms plot and setting due to the characteristics of television. We must actively promote the integration of Huangmei and TV series, while retaining the form of TV series to express Huangmei opera's singing, using Huangmei opera's elements besides singing to adapt it as television series( such as " Joy fairies " and so on ), advocating culture and traditions of Huangmei opera. Secondly, we should vigorously develop huangmei opera television shows, in recent years, along with the "Talent show" taking the heat, which causes the emergence of many emerging culture. Huangmei should also give full use of the advantages of TV shows, expanding its influence by use of TV shows, and selecting outstanding young actors for Huangmei opera.

In the 21st century, with the promotion and application of Internet technology, the development of mass media has conducted a qualitative leap. Huangmei opera remains in open attitude and actively cooperate with the nascent medium. But the cooperation with internet is lack of long-term plan with clear goals. We need to strengthen the internet construction of Huangmei opera, increase the transmission speed, quality and efficiency of Huangmei opera culture using of technology, and create a online museum of huangmei opera.

### 2.3 Personnel Training

Huangmei opera's prosperity is because of the development of Yan Fengying, Malan, Han fun and other "celebrity", and the all-round development of talent. We need to innovate personnel training model. Firstly attempt to grasp huangmei opera education into basic education range in Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei and other places, developing students' interest in Huangmei opera. Using the "watching more" effect of psychology (prefer familiar things), cultivate potential audience. Moreover, focus on building Huangmei opera's professional schools, training professional performers, writers, choreographers and so on. During the training, fully consider the characteristics of the art of Huangmei opera, pay attention to the combination of theory and practice, that is, schools should cooperate with troupes, school provides troupes talents, and troupes provide students with the opportunity to practice. Finally, train high-level talents of Huangmei opera relying on the art school, who understand Huangmei opera as well as the management and marketing.

### 2.4 Combining With Tourism

From the perspective of the development trend of China's tourism industry, the early level of sightseeing is gradually replaced by high-level cultural tourism, the development

of cultural tourism is becoming the trend of tourism development. Huangmei opera's development should take the road of integration.

Anqing locating in southwest of Anhui, has two wealth, Huangmei opera and tourism resources. Huangmei should combine with tourism resources of Anqing. Currently, Huangmei opera of Anqing performed mainly in Huangmei opera hall and Yue tea houses and other venues, and the form is simplex. "The development Huangmei opera industry must set aside the old conception of self-enclosed and self-development, it must promote the combination of arts and economic and develop itself taking the advantage of the opportunity" (Pan, 2014). We should further promote Huangmei opera's penetration in tourism. Huangmei opera personnel should enhance their initiation and consciousness about the integration of tourism development. Huangmei opera troupes and tourist attractions can sign long-term contracts, sending the opera into the hotel and scenic spots; strengthening "experienced" tourism of Huangmei opera based on the performances. Such as teaching to sing opera or sing with famed actors; some tracks of Huangmei opera were created in the context of nature, we can take advantage of this feature, fully borrow Taishan moutain's "Fengshan ceremony" to conduct large-scale live performance; build theme parks of Huangmei opera in Anqing, highlighting its leisure, participatory and entertaining characteristics. We also can set up opera training institutions, Hall of Fame, fans centers under the framework.

Huangmei opera art is not only the pride of Anqing people, also the pride of Chinese people, as a national intangible cultural heritage, Huangmei opera should not be the heritage in the process of development. We should fully recognize the artistic characteristics of Huangmei opera and current social environment, to promote the development and inheritance of Huangmei opera in the practice.

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