

## Study of status improvement of Huangmei Opera

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**ABSTRACT:** Huangmei Opera was a local genre of drama. Through more than a hundred years of evolution, it has become a full-scale drama in China with influence spreading to Southeast Asia region. The rapid status improvement of Huangmei Opera is thought-provoking. The development of Huangmei Opera can provide reference methods and ideas for continuous development of other folk music forms. This thesis aims to explore the development path of Huangmei Opera. It will demonstrate the factors which helped Huangmei Opera rapidly become a major genre of drama with influence all over the country from a small-scale local musical drama. Furthermore, this thesis will also offer advice and suggestions for the future development of Huangmei Opera.

**Keywords:** Huangmei Opera; development; thinking

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Huangmei Opera is a local drama that originates from Huangmei County in Hubei Province, and develops and thrives in Anqing of Anhui Province. Huangmei Opera was originally called Huangmei Tune or Caicha (tea-picking) Tune. Young men and women in Huangmei area which is famous as “Tea Village” compiled and sang folk songs. Those folk songs are called by a joint name -- Huangmei Tune. In Qing Dynasty during Daoguang reign, a branch of Huangmei Tune moved eastward to Anqing area of Anhui Province. Anqing people started to sing it in local language and combined it with folk dances. Thus, an operatic form combined with songs and dances appeared. It was called Huai Qiang (voice) or Huai Tune which was the predecessor of current Huangmei Opera. Huangmei Opera is well-known for its subtle singing voice, natural performance, strong flavor of life, sincerity, and liveliness. It abstracts daily folk stories which can suit both refined and popular tastes and bring audience relaxation and joy. Due to its full-bodied vitality and fresh local flavor, Huangmei Opera is loved widely by the public.

Huangmei Opera was a small-scale local drama. Small-scale drama is a relative term compared with full-scale dramas such as Kun Opera, Gao Qiang (high

tune), Bang Zi, and Pi Huang. Full-scale dramas have a broad range of topics and various characters with well-equipped facilities. They are good at performing dramas telling stories about emperors, ministers, gifted scholars and beautiful ladies dressed in robes and jade belts. On the contrary, small-scale dramas are more about ordinary people’s daily life with less characters and simpler story lines. They mostly tell daily stories about men and women, husbands and wives, interpersonal communication, and family conflicts. In most cases, there are only two characters in small-scale dramas--clown and Xiao Dan (female character). In some plays, there is another character called Xiao Sheng (a young man’s role) to form three roles in one small-scale drama. Those dramas are usually called Liangxiao Drama or Sanxiao Drama. Full-scale dramas have influence all over the country while most small-scale dramas are based on local areas. Huangmei Opera plays before 1950s were mostly small folk life dramas made and performed by Huangmei artists. Those artists gave performance on both sides of Yangtze River for a long time. They chose the vast rural areas, cities, and towns on border of Anhui Province, Hubei Province, and Jiangxi Province for performance. At that time, the influence area of Huangmei Opera was narrow and there were not so many audiences; thus, Huangmei Opera was considered as “small-scale opera”.

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## 2 IMPROVEMENT OF DRAMA GENRE STATUS: FROM SMALL SCALE TO FULL SCALE

### 2.1 From rural area to urban area

Since the beginning of The Opium War, China entered modern times. Foreign powers invaded China in politics, economy, and culture. With the development of Chinese national capital, large and medium-sized cities with deformed industrial and commercial development appeared. Urban development was frequently accompanied by natural and man-made disasters. All these made numerous farmers from Anhui, Hubei, and Jiangxi provinces become destitute and homeless. Some of them rushed into cities, forming the vast class of peasant in the city. On one hand, they were cheap labor power for the development of urban industry and commerce; on the other hand, they were also the mass base for Huangmei Opera artists to survive and spread this art in cities. In 1920s, Huangmei Opera artist Ding Yongquan took his team to Anqing twice. They finally brought this opera to the city and found a place to survive among traditional dramas. It was an important move for Huangmei Opera to expand into cities from villages and have its ripe period there.

### 2.2 From street performance to stage performance and to film & TV transmission

One-man show, Sanxiao Drama, and Three-Beat with Seven-Song were the three main forms of Huangmei Opera in its early stage. The performance was mainly given on stages made of grass or on street stalls. Even on the eve of liberation, Huangmei Opera was simple and crude in form and few in artist. In order to make a living, many artists had to temporarily cooperate as a team and went to Shanghai for stall show. The audiences were mainly fellow-townsmen from Anhui, Hubei, and Jiangxi who were trying to survive in better cities. Few people paid attention to stall performance and thus there was little influence left by Huangmei Opera. 1952 is the year that Huangmei Opera was performed on the stage in Shanghai for the very first time. The performance ended with great honor and greatly boosted the development of Huangmei Opera. After 1950s, Huangmei Opera became a genre with great influence developed from a local drama<sup>1</sup>. Film was the main channel to spread culture before the reform and opening-up policy was issued. In 1950s, the Huangmei Opera plays *Goddess Marriage*, *The Weaver Girl and the Cowherd*, and *Emperor's Female Son-in-law* was made into films and achieved huge success. The films helped Huangmei Opera enter thousands of households and became the most popular opera with the greatest in-

fluence. According to statistics, *Goddess Marriage* alone attracted about 3 million audience abroad and 150 million fans at home. From cities to villages, from old people in white hair to children still learning how to speak, and from Gobi Desert to busy marketplace, people were amazed by the artistic charm of the play. Therefore, Hong Kong Huangmei Opera films had enduring prosperity for decades. For example, Shaw Brothers rescheduled Yueju Opera film *The Butterfly Lovers* and made a Huangmei Opera film of it. It was issued in Taiwan and attracted large numbers of audience. *Goddess Marriage* is a monumental work in the development of Huangmei Opera with great influence in China and overseas. People have naturally formed an equation that Huangmei Opera = *Goddess Marriage*. The many amazing arias in this play are still audience's favorite.

After the reform and opening-up, television became the main media for cultural communication. The artists seized the opportunity and paved a way to combine Huangmei Opera and television. Since the middle of 1980s, Huangmei Opera was performed on television which helped this folk art achieve another leap. This combined art form created a fairy tale of Huangmei Opera TV play and further improved the popularity of Huangmei Opera. In total, there are more than 60 Huangmei Opera plays with more than 200 episodes made into TV drama. Huangmei Opera television play won China Golden Eagle TV Art Awards for Public TV Show for 12 years in succession. It was a vital step for Huangmei Opera to become a full-scale opera. By using film and television, Huangmei Opera walked into people's life and made a record in the coverage and number of its audience.

### 2.3 From amateur artists and teams to professional ones

Huangmei Opera in embryonic period only had individual actors and actresses instead of teams. The actors and actresses were mainly farmers and handcraft workers. To celebrate festivals, they sang folk songs in land boat or used dragon lantern for performance. One would start the performance and others could voluntarily join as associates. After the performance was completed, all the actors and actresses would dismiss and gather again for the next show. They used leisure time for singing and performance which was obviously to amuse themselves and others. At that time, performance was not a way to make a living.

In the middle and later stages of Huangmei Opera, Erxiao Drama and Sanxiao Drama and some adaptation from other full-scale plays were frequently required due to the development of audience demand and Huangmei Opera art. Gradually, clothes, stage properties, music voice design, and rehearsal became necessary and fixed requirements before any formal performance. In order to fit corresponding consumption and to make up the delayed labor, actors and ac-

<sup>1</sup> Hai Zhen. 2003. *A Music History of Traditional Chinese Opera* (1<sup>st</sup> edition), Culture and Art Publishing House: Footnote 2 on Page 214.

tresses gradually turned to be professional performers from amateurs. Fixed performance teams were thus formed. The purpose of performance was changed from self-amusement into profitable show. In order to make a living by performing Huangmei Opera and to increase income, the artists have been continuously innovating the plays and trying hard to absorb the essence of similar arts, so as to improve the artistic expression force Huangmei Opera. Professional actors/actresses and teams are better for drawing on the wisdom of the masses, editing or creating stories with many characters and dramatic storyline contradictions. Artists' professionalism has helped them compete for a broader market and better living condition. Furthermore, accumulated art essence in Huangmei Opera and gradually solid audience foundation can provide strength and confidence for Huangmei Opera which is a genre with simple artistic factors. These two factors form the internal driving force for Huangmei Opera to become a full-scale opera.

#### 2.4 *Characteristics of music and wording*

By using Anqing dialect, the music voice and wordings of Huangmei Opera are easy to understand. Compared with northern languages, Huangmei Opera is more soft and beautiful. Compared with southern languages, Huangmei Opera is manlier. The language of Huangmei Opera has a neural dialect system that also combines mandarin and Peking Opera spoken in Beijing dialect. This combination has played an active role in improving the understandability of Huangmei Opera and the audience coverage scale of it.

Huangmei Opera is called "the country music of China" the music voice range of which is about one octave. With less prolongation of tune, not slow pace in adagio and not fast pace in allegro, Huangmei Opera has a proper overall musical tension. Its five-voice melody and grading melody pattern can show concentrated reflection of the common music perception and aesthetic habit of Han nationality.

The musical structure of Chinese Operas can be mainly divided into three parts: Banqiang pattern, Qupai Lianzhui pattern, and Banqiang Qupai mixed pattern. Huangmei Opera belongs to the mixed pattern that includes both Banqiang pattern and Qupai Lianzhui pattern. The main voice pattern of Huangmei Opera is of Banqiang pattern. It takes one tune as the basis and develops other voice tones by mode tonality, meter, rhythm, and speed. Qupai pattern is a voice structure that connects different Qupai (tunes) together according to the requirements from storyline. Banqiang pattern is similar to repetition in composition. It has features of saving materials and concentrated image which is convenient for remembering and singing. The main voice tune of Huangmei Opera contains the most dramatic expression. It is one of the widely-spread tunes of Huangmei Opera and a sign for the maturity of this amazing opera. Qupai Lianzhui pat-

tern can turn any fashionable tunes into Huangmei tunes according to storyline. It is where the driving force for Huangmei Opera to obtain continuous development lies. Huangmei Opera contains two main music systems: Banqiang and Qupai. It has a main voice system which has concentrated materials and is convenient for singing. It also has the ability to absorb tunes with strong flavor of the times.

For accompaniment, orchestral music was introduced into Huangmei Opera bands in 1950s. In late 1970s, Huangmei Opera music was more like orchestral music while absorbing certain expression methods from western operas. From the reform and opening-up till now, Huangmei Opera has also combined electro-acoustic bands into its band system which has improved its artistic expression force.

With easy-to-understand wordings, flexible tunes, and fashionable accompaniment, Huangmei Opera has contained the advantages for its sustainable development. All these advantages can guarantee that Huangmei Opera will always progress on the leading edge of Chinese opera development.

#### 2.5 *Heritage*

Chinese opera is a culture form through active heritage. The opera plays are inherited by oral teaching that inspires true understanding. Furthermore, opera is an art of "character". In a sense, it is an objective law that a play cannot be called a real opera play if it has one character missing. To a certain degree, continuous play of traditional culture depends on whether inheritors can show up. During more than a hundred years of development, outstanding artists have shown up a batch after another in Huangmei Opera plays. They used their own hands and wisdom to develop Huangmei Opera into its prosperity step by step. In 1950s and 1960s, with the driving force of "Opera Revolution", Huangmei Opera achieved its first peak. Art teams represented by Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang created the glorious achievement that brought Huangmei Opera the first prosperous period in its history. In 1960s and 1970s, brilliant actors and actresses represented by Ma Cailou, Tian Yulian, Ding Tong and Liu Guanghui led Huangmei Opera to its second peak. The Five Golden Flowers (Ma Lan, Wu Qiong, Wu Yaling, Yang Jun and Yuan Mei) were the representatives during that period, bringing Huangmei Opera the second prosperous period. "Five Golden Flowers" was the symbol of Huangmei Opera at that time. Since the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, Han Zaifen, Wu Qiong, Zhang Hui, and Yang Jun have become the mainstays of Huangmei Opera in the new period of broad culture vision. Being transmitted through successive generations of outstanding artists, Huangmei Opera has maintained its benign development and avoided artist generation division or temporary shortage. During the development history of Huangmei Opera, those brilliant and hardworking artists have

passed this precious opera down from generation to generation and created a suitable inheriting form for Huangmei Opera art.

## 2.6 Plays

Early-stage Huangmei Opera plays had no work from scholars. They were mostly created and performed by Huangmei artists. Those plays reflected daily life stories of the underclass, such as *Count Barley*, *Weave Cotton Spin*, and *Sell Bamboo Hat*. In 1950s, intellectuals joined the extraction and recreation of traditional Huangmei Opera plays. They helped enhance the literariness of Huangmei Opera and bring the original folk features and popularity to a higher level. With this effort, Huangmei Opera had greater influence. *Goddess Marriage*, *Emperor's Female Son-in-law*, and *Story of a Handkerchief* are the representative plays created at that time. Those stories were rooted in folk life and enhanced the affinity between the plays and the audience. They helped Huangmei Opera greet the spring of art with creative efforts. In 1980s and 1990s, *A Dream in Red Mansions* and *Much Ado about Nothing* were performed in Huangmei Opera with its gentle artistic style to present the extensive knowledge and profound scholarship of Cao Xueqin and Shakespeare. They deepened the ideological implication of this opera genre and expanded its cultural capacity. Besides, the elegance of *Huizhou Lady*, the fairy-tale flavor of *Swing Set*, the poeticized structure of *Pretty Girls through Wind and Rain*, the simple and interesting nature of *Away from Her* and *Papaya in the Market*, the manly spirit of *Hu Lei* and *Emperor Qianlong Distinguishing the Paintings*, the patriotism of *Li Siguang*, and the creation of brilliant plays such as *Endless Love*, *Escape from the Mountain*, *Spring Comes after Winter*, *Spring Comes to Jiangwan*, *Lady Xing Xiu*, *Commoner Bu Yi*, *Scholar Huang An* and *Ma Gu* have all manifested the cultural revolution and great capacity of Huangmei Opera. Huangmei Opera has turned these objective merits into subject pursuits and well adapted to the changes of era with its enhanced artistic factors. It maintains the same pace with the trend of social aesthetics. Huangmei Opera plays can show colorful landscape for real. With creation of more and more excellent plays, audience at home and abroad have got to know and accepted Huangmei Opera. Deeper understanding from more audience has helped Huangmei Opera get on a bigger urban stage from village grass stage, leading it to become a full-scale opera well-known all over the world.

To sum up, Huangmei Opera contains both objective and subjective factors to develop from small scale to full scale. It has a musical system with preciseness and openness, innovation consciousness with flexibility and acuteness, plays with historical heritage and rich connotation, and audience of a wide range. All these factors have promoted the evolution of Huangmei Opera to become a full-scale opera. In ad-

dition, the weak formality and the various singing techniques of Huangmei Opera can also make it possible for this opera to maintain continuous development.

## 3 SOME CALM THOUGHTS ABOUT THE "FULL-SCALE HUANGMEI OPERA"

There is no doubt about the name -- "Full-Scale Drama Huangmei Opera". At last, Huangmei Opera has been listed in the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage, meaning the centennial development of Huangmei Opera has made brilliant achievement. The current identity of "Intangible Cultural Heritage" implies that there is an arduous road for future development of Huangmei Opera. How to maintain its own unique art style, cultural value, and aesthetic value in economic globalization and rural urbanization while moving in steady steps in market economy is the first question for Huangmei Opera. Its future development requires our calm thoughts.

### 3.1 Joint promotion of "Huangmei Opera" by Anhui Province and Hubei Province

Anhui Province has the cultural strategy of "Enhance the Cultural Value of Anhui Brand, Well Promote Huangmei Opera, and Build a Culture-Rich Province" while Hubei Province promotes to "Bring Huangmei Opera to Its Motherland". It is a special case to see an opera being "competed for" due to its prosperity in the development history of Chinese operas. Competition can bring greater opportunities for further development of Huangmei Opera. Firstly, both the competitors will enhance their financial investment on it. Cultural development cannot progress without economic foundation. Thus, Huangmei Opera cannot develop without the space-time environment and social life it lives in; neither can it develop without any restraint from economic foundation. At present, there is no economic problem for Huangmei Opera. Secondly, competition can arouse more attention and thus can increase the audience for Huangmei Opera. Anhui Province and Hubei Province have respectively held five and seven art festivals. Through various reports on periodicals and media platforms, the glorious achievement and development result of Huangmei Opera has again aroused mass audience's enthusiasm. Thirdly, competition is about competition for talents and for fine plays. Continuous development of art must have both brilliant talents and fine plays. During the competition between Anhui Province and Hubei Province for more than 20 years, both provinces have cultivated or introduced a batch of brilliant talents and created many good plays. In the meantime, competition is also about competition for opera troupe establishment. Anhui Province has formed a situation of tripartite confrontation among Anhui Provincial

Huangmei Opera Theater, Anqing No.1 Huangmei Opera Troupe, and Anqing Zaifen Huangmei Opera Theater. Hubei Province has also formed a troupe pattern centered by Hubei Huangmei Opera Theater and Huangmei Opera troupes from local theaters in Hubei Province. Huanggang of Hubei Province now plans to invest 150 million RMB on building Grand Huangmei Opera Theater. In the near future, both provinces can continue the glory of Huangmei Opera by maintaining the tripartite patterns in balance.

The same genre of drama can generate different art styles in different regions, such as South Kun Opera and North Kun Opera, Eastern Henan Tune and Western Henan Tune, the Jing School and the Shanghai Style in Beijing Opera, etc. The examples can provide certain reference for the continuous development of Huangmei Opera in different regions of Anhui Province and Hubei Province.

### 3.2 *Dispute about the birthplace of Huangmei Opera*

The author thinks it can temporarily come to an end about the origin of Huangmei Opera if we consider it in a developmental perspective as there's very few historical data we can use to track the early stage of Huangmei Opera. Current Huangmei Opera tunes in Anhui Province has gone through major changes compared with the original ones. Elder Huangmei Opera artists have passed away in succession. Even if they were still alive, they should be around 90 years old<sup>2</sup>. Thus, they witnessed the mature period of Huangmei Opera and could not be clear about earlier information of it. There is strong smell of gunpowder in the fight for the birthplace of Huangmei Opera. What shall be a serious academic debate now has become a saliva fight. However, neither side can provide powerful evidence to show the origin of Huangmei Opera. Both sides only evaluate the origin driven by hometown emotion and lead to injury in the friendly relationship between the two provinces with the problem remaining unsolved. Each party has its own story to tell about where Huangmei Opera originates. The author thinks Huangmei Opera probably originates from the range centered by Huangmei County and Susong County and is close to Anhui Province and Hubei Province. This opinion shall be consistent. If the administrative division after liberation could divide Huangmei and Susong into one province, there shall be no confusion about the origin any more. By looking up to the existing literature and history or

reality, it is meaningless to keep fighting for an origin tag. Only people who are stuffy enjoy tracking origins and regard "origin" as true value. Africans are considered to be ancestors of all humans. How are they living now?

### 3.3 *Quantity of plays may not lead to better results*

Experiences tell us, classic plays form an important carrier for a genre of drama. They can help some endangered genres revive or even back to life. For example, the play *Fifteen Strings of Cash* had great success in 1950s and brought Kun Opera back to prosperity. People honored it as "One Play Saved a Genre". The classic status of one play requires for several generations of artists' long-turn stage practice and talent. Think about how many years *Goddess Marriage* and *The Weaver Girl and the Cowherd* took for improvement. Beside long time of practice, there are other indispensable factors which helped those plays become classic. For example, film was almost the most important entertainment for ordinary people to enjoy after dinner at that time. By enjoying operas in films, people can obtain unforgettable visual satisfaction and meet this old form of art. Whether audience can remember it well is an important standard to judge whether a play is classic. From the beginning of the festivals held by Anhui and Hubei till now, many plays have been created and performed. Some of them won national rewards and have attracted numerous audiences. Huangmei artists shall cherish the hard-won honors from these excellent plays and painstakingly study the tones, wordings, script structures, clothes, stage settings, and accompaniment for better consistency with the artistic characteristics of Huangmei Opera. They shall work harder on innovation while sticking to traditions, so as to achieve the result that "move the steps without changing the forms" in opera innovation. Practice has shown us that creating good plays is the major method to get operas a new life. Imagine that if we use current teams to rearrange *Goddess Marriage* and *Emperor's Female Son-in-law* in a modern aesthetic way and invite the successors of elder artists to re-perform those classic plays, the tickets may be sold out. This method has been proved in the development of Peking Opera and Yu Opera.

### 3.4 *Living space of Huangmei Opera*

Huangmei Opera is lack of richness in school and line of business. Thus, its selection and creation of plays are restricted to a certain extent. It is more important that Huangmei Opera is rooted in the borderline area of Anhui Province, Hubei Province, and Jiangxi Province. Although there are many theaters for Huangmei Opera, people still have the impression that Huangmei Opera is a local opera from nowhere with dispersed living space. In comparison, other local

<sup>2</sup> The writer just measured it as Chinese people's average life. There is no hidden reference that older artists have longer life. Please understand there is no blasphemy but sincere respect. The data is from *2007 World Health Report* published by World Health Organization. Hong Kong *Wenhui Daily* quoted from the report and said Chinese men's and women's average lifetimes are 71 years and 74 years respectively.

operas, such as Yu Opera, Hebei Bang Zi, and Yueju Opera, have wide and centered living space. We can have a bold assumption (We can say it is bold for the time being. In fact, it may be true in the future.) that if Anhui Province and Hubei Province cooperate to take Huangmei County and Anqing County as the bases for Huangmei Opera and work together on creating the glory of it, they may form an important and wonder part in the development history of Chinese operas. It can become a story passed on with approval which also accords with the development law of opera genres. "My idea is combine brother opera genres with similar languages, similar artistic styles, and adjacent regions into one, so as to form a genre which can have a larger coverage area"<sup>3</sup>. The Huangmei Opera schools in Anhui Province and Hubei Province are from the same origin; thus, there's no problem about similarity. If we can combine the strength of these two provinces and continue the development of "full-scale Huangmei Opera", why not try so?

#### 4 CONCLUSION

"From a small-scale local play to current full-scale drama, the trumpets and drums of Huangmei Opera have performed for more than a century...Birds on the trees flew into thousands of households long ago. Stories about the fields are still spreading everywhere. Palace flowers still look bright on the hats. The man and the woman on the Magpie Bridge leaning close to

each other will be in love forever". By quoting the ending of the full-length television documentary "The Full-Scale Drama -- Huangmei Opera", I wish this unique flower of art, Huangmei Opera, prosperous forever!

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<sup>3</sup> Liu, H.S. 1996. *Liu Housheng's Essays of Chinese Traditional Opera (1st Edition)*. Beijing: China Theatre Press.