



Study on the Repertoire Characteristics of Ninghai Flat Tune’s “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” from the Perspective of Cultural Identity

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How to cite this paper: Ge, H.Y., Li, Y.N. and Le, R.M. (2024) Study on the Repertoire Characteristics of Ninghai Flat Tune’s “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” from the Perspective of Cultural Identity. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e11832. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111832>

Received: June 14, 2024

Accepted: July 14, 2024

Published: July 17, 2024

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Abstract

The article takes Ninghai flat tune’s “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” as an example, and researches its repertoire characteristics from the perspective of cultural identity, analysing the four aspects of “female image of bravery, resourcefulness, and perseverance”, “music of flat tune that draws on the strengths of many and creates a style of its own”, “unique skills and techniques within the roughness”, and “the idea of indoctrination in which evil is not good and people are urged to do good”. Finally, it is concluded that the people’s sense of regional cultural identity should be established by protecting and innovating traditional repertoire and promoting and activating traditional opera art. From the perspective of local opera, the play “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” is a microcosm of the development of Ninghai flat tune, and the study of the characteristics of the play “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” will help to better inherit the traditional culture of Ninghai flat tune.

Subject Areas

Art, Culture, Music

Keywords

Opera, Ninghai Flat Tune, Juggling Teeth, Cultural Identity

1. The Origin and Development of Ninghai Flat Tune

Ninghai flat tune of Zhejiang Province is the first batch of items selected for protection of national oral intangible cultural heritage, which is popular in the

eastern part of Zhejiang with Ninghai and Xiangshan as the centre, Huangyan, Wenling, Linhai, Xianju, Tiantai, Fenghua and so on.

About the origin of flat tune, there are several sayings as follows. The book “Dictionary of Chinese Opera and Drama” thinks that it was “produced in the late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty” [1], “The History of Ninghai Flat Tune” says that flat tune was produced in the mid-Ming Dynasty [2], and “Ninghai flat tune”, a series of non-heritage masterpieces of Zhejiang Province, thinks that “it originated in the mid-late Ming Dynasty, matured in the mid-Qing Dynasty, and flourished in the late Qing Dynasty and early Civil War, and has a history of more than 400 years” [3]. Zhou Laida, on the other hand, believes that “Ninghai flat tune and flat tune vocalisation were formed during the Tongzhi and Guangxu periods, which belongs to the late Qing Dynasty” [4]. Although the exact time of the creation of the Ninghai flat tune still needs to be proved, according to the time of the emergence of the name of the flat tune, the origin of the flat tune, and Ninghai Local classes and Yongkun “long-term joint performances”, it can be ascertained that the flat tune must have been formed in the late-Qing Dynasty, and may have been developed to maturity [5].

Ninghai flat tune was originally started by some artists from Sanmen Bay in the south-east of Ninghai, who went to other people’s courtyards to sing “cheering words” with their families and rice baskets, and this kind of family-type troupe was known as the “Rice Bowl Tantrum Class” at that time (as Liu Zengtao, a veteran artist, once said). It is generally believed that the sound of Ninghai flat tune originated from the tunes of Xinchang and Shengzhou [6]. During the late Qing Dynasty, Ninghai flat tune’s “Shankengban” and Yongkun’s “Wugongzuo” and other theatre troupes have been performing together for a long time and have developed and survived. During this period, the “Ziyun Ban” (the master of which is Pan Yaqing of Guanzhuang Village, Ninghai County) broke the previous practice of “Ninghai flat tunes can only be performed by Ninghai people” by expanding the scope of apprenticeship, and at the same time, some stray Kun cavity and Hui opera artists were introduced, forming a mixed performance form of Kun cavity and flat tune opera, which optimised the singing style of flat tune and enriched the repertoire of the performance. It is learnt that the “Back Eighteen” version of Ninghai flat tune and its complete song system were formed at this time.

Ninghai flat tune has a regional style that is very different from other types of theatre in terms of performance form, music style and story content. It mainly adopts the combination of songs, singing before and helping after, and accompanied by gongs and drums, and mostly retains the style of ancient southern opera, with the repertoire of family ethical plays, more martial arts plays, exaggerated performance forms, and various kinds of workmanship, such as the “Bird Steps”, the “Turtle Steps”, and the “Crane Steps”. After the development of the performance of masterpieces “Small Money” in the “Juggling Teeth”, “a horse with two saddles”, “holding the bottle skiing”, “eating porridge” in “Selling Veg-

etables and Spitting Red” and so on are even more exquisite. Thus flat tune is also recognised as one of the ancient Chinese opera genres by the “Dictionary of Chinese Opera” and the “Dictionary of Chinese Opera Genres” [7].

It can be found that the current theoretical research on Ninghai flat tune mainly focuses on the study of the future development of flat tune’s inheritance, and there are articles on the study of Ninghai flat tune’s inheritors and on the current development of flat tune, as well as articles by scholars who specialise in the investigation of flat tune’s technique of “Juggling Teeth”. In terms of repertoire research, there are a few scholars who have studied the traditional repertoire of flat tune, “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” and the new play “Ge Hong”. However, there are few studies on the play “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” from the perspective of cultural identity. In this paper, we take the traditional play “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” of flat tune as an example to analyse the repertoire characteristics of the play from the perspective of cultural identity, and to stimulate the collective consciousness of the local people and enhance the sense of cultural identity by means of the local small plays.

2. Analysis of the Characteristics of the Play “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon”

There are more than 100 traditional repertoires of Ninghai flat tune, among which 36 major plays called “the first eighteen” and “the last eighteen” are representative. The repertoire retains the characteristics of the free structure of the Song and Yuan southern operas, and the contents often promote family ethics and morality rather than grandiose national operas. In addition, Ninghai is deeply influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, and most of the plays celebrate “repaying grudges with virtues and eulogising the fact that everyone can become a sage”. Take the play “Golden Lotus Beheading Jiao” as an example. The play is also called “Little Money”, which is one of Ninghai flat tune’s “Back Eighteen”. 1957 flat tune veterans organised a flat tune performance team to go to Hangzhou to perform the traditional play “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon”, which was a great sensation. 1962 Ninghai People’s Government formally approved the establishment of Ninghai flat tune Theatre Troupe. At the same time, it excavated and adapted traditional plays such as “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” and “Double Dragon Locks”, making a major breakthrough in the development and inheritance of flat tune [8].

As a signature play of Ninghai flat tune passed down to the present day, “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” has greatly reflected the regional customs, human history and folk art of Ninghai in terms of storyline, character portrayal, performance formula, performance style and accompanying music. The characteristics of the play are analysed from four perspectives: the image of women portrayed in “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon”, the flat tune music presented, the special skills revealed, and the thought of edification embedded in the play.

1) Courageous, resourceful and resilient female figures

The story of “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” originates from a historical legend circulating in Ninghai. According to the legend, in the Qing Dynasty, there was a vicious-looking, scabby, horned bully “Unicorn Dragon” Li Jiao in the mountainous area of Xinchang. He was the king of the mountain, killing and maiming people, and forcibly married two sisters, Jinlian, a woman of the people. Jinlian hated him, so she came up with a brilliant plan to stab the “One-Horned Dragon”, to rid the people of harm. This magical legend praises and celebrates the spirit of Jinlian, a female figure who is brave and courageous, to rid the people of harm. After the Qing Dynasty, Zhang Hanlin wrote this folk story into a play called “Little Money”, which was widely performed on the stage [9]. From this, we can see that the local culture of Ninghai has given women more room for development to a certain extent, and women can not only be the lady in the dark who is crazy about love, but also the resourceful village girl. In the literati theatre, women’s roles are not necessarily socially disadvantaged and dependent on others, but rather, they can rely on their own qualities of bravery, resourcefulness and resilience to find a way out and achieve success. Just as Jinlian, who penetrates into the dragon’s den and bravely cuts down the scales, attracts the attention and love of theatregoers with her unique charisma, the success of the characterisation is based on the good spiritual qualities of defying power and fighting courageously embodied in the regional culture of Ninghai.

2) Draw on the strengths of others and make their own style of flat tune music

Ninghai flat tune music is actually a kind of high-cavity theatre formed by the influence of the Tuning Cavity, Kun Opera and the localisation of Ninghai, and it sings several songs together, which belongs to the “song-plate concatenation body”. The culture of flat tune Song Cards has a long history, and the origin of some Song Cards’ names can be traced back to the songs of the ancient times hundreds or thousands of years ago, such as “Point Jianglip”, “Mountain Goat”, “A Flower”, “Step by Step”, etc. The Song Cards are very important in the culture of Flat tune. To a large extent, the Flat tune music brand inherits the content of Kunqu opera and tune, reflecting multiple ways and repetition, but it also shows great local characteristics after being integrated with the local music of Ninghai.

In terms of the characteristics of a song, Ninghai flat tune songs are characterised by the fact that they are not “fixed”. Traditional tunes have their own rules, and only by following the fixed guidelines in the connotations of the tune (sentence, word, level and rhyme) can a tune be called a certain kind of tune. However, there is no need to meet these specific requirements, and most flat tune only need to meet some of the requirements, which is the so-called “rules” not “fixed” [10]. Another example is the flat tune [Purple Flower Sequence] of the rhetoric and no level, rhyme, word count, even the basic number of sentences are not standardised. Then this “no rules” song can only be regarded as an ordinary singing section, which does not belong to the category of song. This cha-

characteristic of Flat tune's song is the embodiment of Flat tune's local musical characteristics, which is to a great extent closely related to the politics, economy and culture of the Ninghai area at that time.

In terms of song sets, flat tunes have the characteristic of "with set but without pattern". "One of the characteristics of the music system is that the use of sets should follow a certain style", that is, the connection of the songs in each set follows a certain order. The flat-tune music system belongs to the tune-plate linkage, but it does not connect the tune-plates according to the traditional set pattern, but is more free and has its own "organisational development and singing principle", which is called "with a set but without pattern" [11].

Flat tune's singing style and accompanying instruments are also different. It mainly adopts the singing method of "singing and harmonizing", that is, singing in the front and helping in the background, which echoes each other to set off the atmosphere of the performance. Flat tune has various forms of help, such as guide help, scattered help, repeat help and follow help. The accompanying instruments are a set of special gongs and drums, commonly used as a big gong, a big drum, a big horn and a small gong, which are known as "three big ones and one small one", in addition to big cymbals and big horns [12]. The flat-tone accompaniment music is closely related to the content of the play, and specific instruments are used for the appearance of special characters or for the dubbing of specific actions, such as the tuba, which is used for the appearance of the villainous character "One-Horned Dragon" in the play "Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon" for the speech, and for walking the dragon's footsteps, etc.

Local theatre is usually performed in dialect, and Flat tune is no exception. However, since Flat tune has been processed by writers and integrated with many types of theatre, the language it uses is also more diverse, and can be summarised as "one mouth, two cavities, three combinations". The term "one mouth" refers to the fact that all the Dan characters, except the old Dan, sing with a "small mouth" (*i.e.*, a false voice). The "two voices", commonly known as the "male and female voices", *i.e.* the "combination of true and false voices", is a way of using the voice that must be mastered by the roles of young in the Flat tune style. The "three combinations" refers to the style of the Ninghai, Ningbo, and Suzhou dialects adopted by the Flat tune clowns in their singing. These characteristics are also reflected in "Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon".

3) A unique stunt which has a style of one's own

The traditional drama "Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon" focuses on the special stunts of Flat tune, such as juggling teeth, holding a bottle and skiing, and double-saddling a horse. The reason why these stunts are so special and refreshing is not only because such skills themselves show the solid and profound basic skills of the actors, but more importantly, such skills are naturally integrated into the story of the play rather than added for the sake of showing off, which makes the characters portrayed in the play more vivid, and adds unique charms to the overall performance of the opera, which not only demonstrates the wild beauty

of Flat tune's ancient simplicity and ruggedness, but also elaborately sculpts the characters' emotion in detail, thus expressing the characters' emotions to the fullest extent. The emotions of the characters are expressed to the fullest, thus creating a contrasting artistic effect.

As a stage art skill which is widely praised and attracted much attention, "Juggling Teeth", along with "Face Changing" in Sichuan Opera, can be said to be the representative of Ninghai Flat Tune to a certain extent. 2006, Ninghai Flat Tune was selected as the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List for the skill of "Juggling Teeth". "In 2006, Ninghai Flat tune was selected as one of the national intangible cultural heritage". "Juggling Teeth" is a performance programme for the role of "One-Horned Dragon" in "Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon". The actor polishes the pig's tusks and fixes them in his mouth, and then uses the tusks in accordance with the interpretation of the plot, either by holding them in his mouth, or by biting the tusks up and down, or licking the tusks with his tongue and turning them up and down, left and right, or by inhaling them into his mouth, or by spitting out the tusks all of a sudden, which can be summarised as the five techniques of "Holding, Biting, Licking, Swallowing, and Spitting", so that the character's arrogant and ferocious behaviour can be shown in a more graphic way. The character's arrogant and ferocious personality traits [12].

"Juggling teeth" is an ancient game of teasing children in Ninghai. During the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty, Yang Jingyue, an artiste of Flat tune, was the first to set the precedent of "juggling teeth". Since then, with the inheritance and innovation of generations of artists, "juggling teeth" has become more and more perfect and difficult. Although "juggling teeth" seems primitive and cruel, the performance with big ups and downs combines subtlety with roughness, and portrays the image of "One-Horned Dragon", which is both a man and a beast, to the core. The different number of teeth exposed shows the different emotions of the character, and this kind of exaggerated and realistic action makes the "Unicorn Dragon" appear in front of the audience, which is wild and dynamic at the same time. The famous director of Shao Opera, Mr. Ding Shengkui, once praised, "There are a lot of dragon plays in the country, but it is rare to see such vivid performances as the Ninghai Flat tune's 'One-Horned Dragon' which is endowed with personification."

In addition, Flat tune is also good at using dance to express the details of scenes and the characteristics of characters. The "Skiing with a Bottle" and "Double Saddle" in "Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon" are the bold creations of Ninghai artists. The former uses a large number of dance movements to accentuate the appearance of Liu Bangrui, a young man in thin clothes, walking hard in the snow, and the actor holds a mandarin duck bottle that is "hot when it is hot and cold when it is cold", and through the virtual performance of the "footwork", he contrasts the cold and slippery road, trembling and about to fall and still have to force himself to control the pitiful situation. The latter, as the name

suggests, should reflect the scene of two people riding a horse together, most of the traditional skills for a single horse, but the play to reflect the urgency of Jinlian and Liu Bangrui's escape, so the dance movements are designed for two people bending their knees in eights, back to back, half-squatting, suddenly forward, suddenly backward, suddenly circling, realistically reproducing the wretchedness of the two people fleeing, with a similarity between the shape and the spirit. These movements are built into the story of the plot, the audience has both audio-visual enjoyment and spiritual fluctuations. This also reflects the characteristics of Flat tune's theatre and local customs, displaying skills and telling the plot together.

4) The idea of indoctrination, in which evil cannot prevail over good and people are urged to turn to the good.

In a nutshell, "Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon" tells the story of a folk woman who uses her wisdom to kill a bully in the face of power. The content and arrangement of the play is very close to the daily life of the people, whether it is Liu Bangrui, the scholar who is taking the examination, Song Jinlian, the official lady, or the villainous bully "One-Horned Dragon", most of these characters are popular with the poor people or pay great attention to them. On the whole, the play portrays the government lady Jinlian as courageous and resourceful, and the villain Li Jiao as evil and disreputable, with Jinlian as the representative of the righteous faction who eventually overcomes the evil forces and keeps peace on one side. The play portrays characters who are courageous in resistance and active in struggle, and tells the storyline of doing good deeds in time and treating people with sincerity, which can show the ancient people's longing for a better life. At the same time, the play also shows the strong edifying colour of the Flat tune plays, exhorting people not to go down the road of "many wrongdoings will lead to self-imposed closure", reflecting a kind of "good people" culture. In addition, most of the flat tune repertoire does not sing the praises of virtue, and does not tell about the national events that are far away from the daily life of the people, which is closely related to the geographical location of Ninghai at the edge of the centre of culture and the historical and cultural background that the repertoire is processed by the lower intellectuals, and it can be reflected that the flat tune repertoire has the characteristics of "coming from the masses and going to the masses". It can reflect the characteristics of Ninghai Flat tune as "coming from the masses and going to the masses".

"Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon" the Scale is not only a piece of theatre, but also a carrier of excellent traditional Chinese culture. It carries rich historical information, cultural symbols and moral concepts, and conveys to the audience the wisdom, courage and sense of justice of the Chinese nation through the form of performance. Through watching the play, the audience can have a deeper understanding and feel the profoundness and unique charm of Chinese culture. At the same time, in modern society, cultural identity and cohesion are crucial to social stability and development. As a representative play of Ninghai flat tune,

“Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon”, with its unique artistic style and deep cultural heritage, can inspire the audience’s pride and sense of belonging to their hometown culture. By enjoying and passing on this play together, people can enhance their understanding and recognition of each other, and promote social harmony and stability. Not only that, through telling the story of Jinlian’s fight to rid the people of evil, “Jinlian Beheaded the Dragon” promotes the national spirit of justice, bravery and wisdom. These spirits are valuable assets formed by the Chinese nation during its long historical development, and they still have an important inspirational and leading role in contemporary society. The performance and publicity of the play can stimulate people’s patriotic fervour and national pride, and promote the inheritance and promotion of the national spirit.

3. Building Regional Cultural Identity through the Art of Opera

Local operas born from the people may face various challenges with the development of the times and changes in lifestyles, but they are also bound to have a reasonable significance for their existence. As a precious traditional culture of the local and even the Chinese nation, Ninghai Flat tune has witnessed different humanistic styles in different historical periods, condensed the ingenuity of the labouring people, supported the emotional pursuit of the labouring people, carried the collective memory of the nation, and embodied the cultural creations of the labouring people in the long-term production and living practices. Therefore, to a certain extent, it is feasible to establish a regional cultural identity with local operas.

1) Preservation and innovation of fine traditional theatre productions

Cultural identity is necessary to find a suitable foothold. Protect and innovate the fine traditional repertoire of Ninghai flat tune. Show the unique charm of the flat tune art, and at the same time, the innovation of the repertoire can naturally integrate modern advanced ideas into the people’s lives through public entertainment. On the one hand, Ninghai flat tune needs to respect and inherit the tradition, maintain the unique style and aesthetic connotation of the theatre, and on the other hand, strengthen the innovation and integration, and continuously develop and expand its own content. The continuous innovation and development of the art of flat tune can arouse the curiosity and attention of the people of Ninghai, so that the people will know and understand the art of this opera on their own initiative, which is not only the protection of the technical level, but also the reconstruction of the cultural form.

2) Promotion and activation of traditional theatre arts

In the present era of advanced technology and rapid information dissemination, it is not enough to protect and innovate the traditional theatre arts. What is more important is to promote the fine traditional culture, so that the people can feel the unique charm of the Chinese culture, thus generating a high degree of cultural identity and cultural self-confidence. The promotion of Ninghai flat

tune can rely on school music education, the school organised by the students to observe the daily training and performance of Ninghai flat tune, into the story behind the heritage of Ninghai flat tune, to better stimulate the students' interest in learning the national culture. The relevant departments can also take advantage of new media technology, through short videos, documentaries and other forms of network media to promote the art of flat-tune, so that this small local theatre into the public's field of vision, towards a greater exchange and integration of time and space.

3.1. Strengthening the Integration of Opera Art in Festival Celebrations

Strengthening the integration of opera art in festival celebrations is an important measure to enhance the sense of regional cultural identity and promote the inheritance of opera culture. The art of opera is an important part of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, and festival celebrations are important moments for people to reunite and communicate. By displaying the art of opera in festivals and celebrations, it can effectively pass on and promote the culture of opera, and enhance the public's knowledge and recognition of traditional culture. Integrating the art of opera into people's daily lives creates a joyful and harmonious festival atmosphere while enhancing the emotional connection between people. According to the theme and atmosphere of the festival, choose the appropriate opera repertoire and performance forms, and include the performance of opera as an important content to ensure that the art of opera occupies a certain proportion in the celebration activities. Combine modern technological means to innovate the performance form of opera art, such as the use of lighting, sound and other modern stage equipment to enhance the audio-visual effect of opera performance. Explore the integration of opera and other art forms, such as opera and dance, opera and drama, etc., to create a diversified performance style and attract more audience attention. It is also possible to increase the publicity of the integration of opera art in festivals and celebrations through the media, the Internet and other channels, so as to increase public awareness of and attention to the art of opera. Setting up the opera art display area at the celebration site, displaying opera costumes, props and other cultural elements, so that the audience can have a more in-depth understanding of the local historical legends, folk stories and customs, deepening the influence of the opera art in the folklore, and thus enhancing the identification with the regional culture.

3.2. Strengthening the Dissemination of Opera Art in Cultural Education

As an important cultural carrier, opera art has the function of spreading cultural education. Through the performance of opera art, the audience can subconsciously draw a lot of cultural nutrition for interpersonal communication in life, and also know to remind and restrain themselves from propriety, righteousness, honesty and shame. This kind of action of constructing values in watching thea-

tre also becomes one of the manifestations of cultural identity at a certain level. An example is the teaching of the art of theatre in villages and towns. As an important form of organisation of regional culture, the art of opera plays an important role in villages and towns. Through the performance of opera art, it can strengthen the cultural connection and sense of identity among the members of the village and town, and promote the formation and development of the sense of community in the village and town.

To sum up, the establishment of regional cultural identity through the art of opera needs to start from many aspects, including the protection and innovation of good traditional repertoire, the strengthening of the integration of the art of opera in festivals and the strengthening of the dissemination of the art of opera in cultural education, etc. The effective implementation of these strategies can help strengthen people's sense of identity and belonging to the regional culture and promote the inheritance and development of the regional culture.

4. Concluding Remarks

Nowadays, the wave of modernisation is hitting this age violently, and the accelerated pace of urbanisation and the transmutation of lifestyles are causing the cultural memories and national traditions that were closely related to us in the past to slip away from us silently. Traditional skills, folklore and traditional culture are more or less in a precarious situation. It is urgent to protect the cultural ecology, continue the excellent traditional national culture and enrich people's spiritual home.

Although, Ninghai flat tune is a local opera, small operas can also shake people's hearts and view the world. Through the inheritance of Ninghai Flat tune opera art, it stimulates the collective consciousness of the local people, endows the local people with the common emotion that has been passed down for hundreds of years, and nurtures a new fine culture with the local culture that is close to the people of Ninghai, so as to establish a cultural identity with the art of opera, and strengthen the cultural self-confidence. The inheritance and protection of Ninghai flat tune should start with an in-depth study of traditional artistic elements such as opera singing, performance techniques, scripts, music, stage sets, etc., to explore its unique artistic value and cultural connotation. At the same time, the existing Ninghai flat tune performances can be protected by means of audio, video and written records to prevent artistic loss. Not only that, it should pay more attention to cross-field cooperation and integration, and encourage cross-border cooperation between Ninghai flat tune and other art forms, such as modern dance, drama, music, etc., to create new forms of artistic expression, in order to attract more young audiences, and let more people understand and love Ninghai flat tune.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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