



The Historical and Musical Characteristics of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe in the Social Context

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Chinese Opera, specifically the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe, embodies a rich tapestry of cultural heritage and artistic expression that has evolved through centuries. The study aims to investigate the historical and musical characteristics of the Henan Qu Chinese opera troupe in the social context.

Materials and Methods: Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and archival research. Participant observations during performances, rehearsals, and cultural events, along with interviews with troupe performers, directors, and cultural experts, provide a multifaceted perspective on the opera's evolution and current practices. Archival documents and recordings complement these insights by tracing the troupe's historical development.

Results: The research highlights how the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe has navigated significant historical upheavals and adapted to contemporary challenges while maintaining its distinctive musical and theatrical identity. Innovations in performance and outreach have helped sustain interest and relevance among newer audiences, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between preserving traditional art forms and embracing modernity.

Conclusion: The Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe exemplifies the successful adaptation of traditional cultural expressions to modern contexts, underscoring the importance of innovative strategies in audience engagement and artistic collaboration. The study underscores the potential of traditional arts to remain culturally and socially relevant, offering insights into broader strategies for cultural preservation.

Keywords: Chinese Opera; Cultural Preservation; Artistic Innovation; Traditional Arts; Audience Engagement

Introduction

Chinese Opera, as a quintessential form of cultural expression, is deeply interwoven with the historical and social fabric of regions across the world. The Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe is a testament to this rich tradition, encapsulating centuries of artistic evolution and cultural heritage within its performances. This research endeavors to delve into the historical and musical dimensions of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe within the broader social context, aiming to unravel the intricate layers of tradition, innovation, and societal resonance embedded in this art form (Chen & Chonpairot, 2023; Fan, 2024; Liu & Chonpairot, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Henan Province, located in central China, has long been hailed as a cradle of traditional Chinese opera, nurturing a diverse array of opera styles including the illustrious Quju. The Quju genre, characterized by its lively melodies, vibrant costumes, and expressive storytelling, holds a special place in Henan's cultural tapestry. The Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe, a stalwart custodian of this heritage, has preserved and propagated the essence of Quju through generations, evolving alongside societal shifts and artistic trends (Mei et al., 2018; Tang, 2021; Jingfang, 2023).

Despite its enduring legacy, the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe faces contemporary challenges stemming from rapid socio-economic transformations, changing audience demographics, and evolving cultural landscapes. These factors raise critical questions about the preservation, adaptation, and relevance of traditional opera in modern society (Brown, 2019; Wang, 2021). How does the historical trajectory of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe intersect with broader social dynamics? What are the distinctive musical elements that define its identity, and how do they resonate with contemporary audiences? Addressing these questions not only enriches our understanding of cultural heritage but also sheds light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in the realm of performing arts (Chen, 2015; Lam, 2022; Wu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023).



This research holds significant implications for multiple stakeholders, including scholars of cultural studies, musicologists, practitioners of traditional opera, and policymakers invested in cultural preservation. By meticulously examining the historical evolution and musical intricacies of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe within its social context, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the adaptive strategies employed by traditional art forms in response to societal changes (Wong, 2015; Bu, 2023). Furthermore, the findings may inform strategies for cultural revitalization, audience engagement, and intergenerational transmission of artistic knowledge, fostering a deeper appreciation and sustainable legacy for traditional opera forms (Lv et al., 2023; Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Jingjin & Minghua, 2024).

In summary, this research embarks on a journey to uncover the timeless allure and contemporary relevance of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe, offering a nuanced exploration of its historical roots, musical essence, and social resonance. Through this interdisciplinary inquiry, we aim to illuminate not just the past and present of Quju opera but also its potential pathways into the future, ensuring its enduring legacy in an ever-evolving cultural landscape.

Objective

To investigate the historical and musical characteristics of the Henan Qu Chinese opera troupe in the social context.

Literature review

This study delves into the historical and musical characteristics of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe within the context of social dynamics. It situates itself within the broader discourse of cultural preservation, performance studies, and sociological analyses of traditional art forms. One key theoretical framework guiding this investigation is the concept of cultural heritage and its transmission across generations. Scholars argue that traditional performing arts, such as opera, play a pivotal role in embodying and transmitting cultural identities, serving as repositories of collective memory and artistic expression. Building upon this notion, the research also draws from theories of cultural capital, which posit that artistic traditions, skills, and knowledge confer social status and symbolic power within communities.

1. Historical Evolution of Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe

The historical evolution of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe is a focal point of this study, tracing its roots back to the early 20th century and examining its transformations over time. This sub-topic explores how historical events, such as the War of Resistance Against Japan and subsequent political shifts, influenced the development and performance styles of the opera troupe. Additionally, it investigates the role of key figures like Zhu Wanming in shaping the early identity and repertoire of Henan opera, shedding light on the socio-political contexts that shaped artistic expressions during different periods (Fong & Chan, 2019; Chabrowski, 2022).

2. Musical Characteristics and Artistic Innovations

Another crucial aspect of this research is an in-depth analysis of the musical characteristics and artistic innovations within the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe. Drawing from musicological perspectives, this sub-topic delves into the melodic structures, tonalities, and performance techniques that define Quju opera. It also examines how the opera troupe has incorporated modern elements and technological advancements while preserving the essence of traditional music, highlighting the dynamic nature of cultural adaptation and artistic evolution (Li & Thotham, 2023; Ye et al., 2023; Yan, 2024).

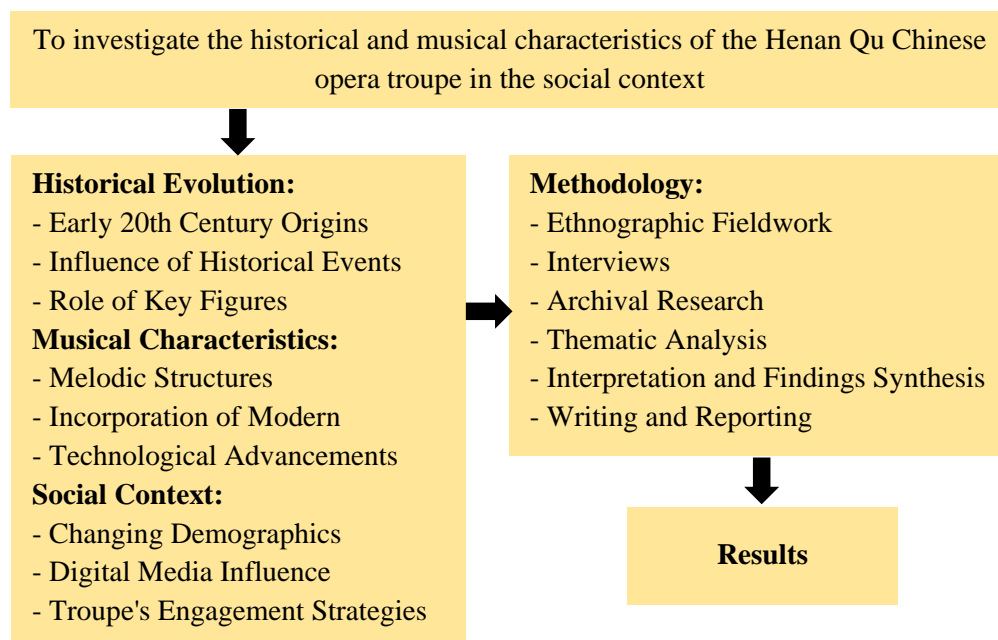
3. Social Context and Audience Engagement

The final sub-topic of the literature review centers on the social context and audience engagement strategies employed by the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe. Utilizing sociological frameworks, this section explores the changing demographics of opera audiences, the impact of digital media on cultural consumption patterns, and the troupe's efforts to engage with diverse communities. By analyzing audience reception, outreach programs, and collaborative initiatives, this sub-topic aims to elucidate the role of

traditional opera in fostering social cohesion, cultural exchange, and intergenerational dialogue in contemporary society (Zhang et al., 2017; Runghirun & Intarot, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

Utilizing a comprehensive review of existing literature and a mixed-methods approach, the study seeks to unravel the complex interplay between individual artistry and collective cultural dynamics. The conceptual framework for this study is structured around key components, each representing a thematic area derived from the literature review and the methodological approach.



Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in ethnographic methods, archival research, and thematic analysis to investigate the historical and musical characteristics of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe within the social context. Ethnographic fieldwork involves participant observation, interviews with opera performers, directors, and cultural experts, as well as immersion in opera performances and cultural events. Archival research focuses on historical documents, recordings, and artifacts related to the opera troupe's evolution and repertoire. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring themes, patterns, and cultural meanings embedded within the opera troupe's performances and socio-cultural interactions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Research Methodological Steps

Step	Description
1. Ethnographic Fieldwork	Conduct participant observation during Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe performances, rehearsals, and backstage interactions. Engage in informal conversations with troupe members.
2. Interviews	Conduct semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including opera performers, directors, cultural scholars, and audience members, to gather insights and perspectives.



Step	Description
3. Archival Research	Review historical documents, recordings, photographs, and artifacts related to the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe's history, repertoire, performances, and cultural significance.
4. Thematic Analysis	Analyze data from ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and archival sources to identify thematic patterns, cultural symbols, performance styles, and socio-cultural dynamics.
5. Interpretation and Findings Synthesis	Interpret findings within the context of cultural preservation, social identity, artistic innovation, and audience engagement. Synthesize key insights and research outcomes.
6. Writing and Reporting	Compile research findings into a comprehensive report, integrating theoretical frameworks, empirical data, analysis, and scholarly discussions. Communicate research outcomes effectively.

Results

The Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe, a cultural and historical treasure, has evolved significantly since its inception in the 1920s. Key figures like Zhu Wanming played a significant role in its development, leading to a shift in thematic focus and performance styles. The troupe's resilience during challenging times like the War of Resistance Against Japan and the subsequent government ban underscores its cultural and historical significance. The musical aspect of the troupe is diverse, utilizing Qu Chinese Opera styles like "Yangdiao" and "Shipian," each with distinct tonalities and rhythmic patterns. The melodic structure, characterized by a downward trend and pentatonic scale, reflects a unique regional flavor. These findings highlight the Troupe's enduring cultural significance and artistic contributions within the broader social context.

1. Historical of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe

1.1 Early Period (1926-1946): Henan Qu Chinese Opera, a social art form, has evolved from folk traditions to a prominent form since the early 20th century. Zhu Wanming's role in the birth of Henan opera in 1926 was significant, as he led the Tongle Society in Dengfeng County, showcasing resilience and determination in early performances. The early Qu Chinese Opera was primarily transmitted orally by folk artists, focusing on social life, folklore, and historical narratives. In 1928, Zhu Wanming absorbed elements from popular dramas in Luoyang, blending traditional high-stage music with contemporary storytelling techniques. By 1930, Qu Chinese Opera embraced a diverse range of influences, transitioning from intimate family dramas to grand historical spectacles. The War of Resistance Against Japan (1931-1945) fueled the rapid development of Henan Qu Chinese Opera, with performances spreading across the province and new talents emerging. The post-war era saw both bans and revivals, showcasing the societal and political dynamics that shaped the art form's trajectory. The transition from stilt performances to stage showcases, from local themes to national narratives, and from amateur enthusiasts to professional actors marked a transformative phase for Henan Qu Chinese Opera, paving the way for its continued innovation and relevance in modern times.

1.2 Founding Period (1949–1959): The People's Republic of China led to a resurgence of local opera troupes, including the revitalization of the "Xinxing Opera Society." This revival reflected a broader resurgence in traditional arts and resonated with local opera enthusiasts. The transformation of the Xinxing Opera Society into the state-owned Zhengzhou Qu Chinese Opera Troupe marked a significant milestone, showcasing the fusion of traditional art forms with evolving societal structures. The troupe's first major play, "Dream of the Red Chamber," in 1955, showcased their adaptability and innovation, blending traditional narratives with contemporary influences. The meticulous planning and execution of the performance captivated audiences and garnered widespread acclaim across Henan Province. However, the evolving artistic landscape led to further adjustments and refinements, leading to the troupe's rebranding as the "Dream of the Red Chamber Troupe." The Zhengzhou Qu Chinese Opera Troupe's trajectory reflects



artistic evolution, societal shifts, and cultural aspirations. The troupe's journey in navigating a changing social context is reflected in its resonance of traditional narratives with modern audiences and ongoing innovations in artistic expression.

1.3 Official Establishment Period (1966-1982): In 1960, the Henan Provincial Government elevated the Zhengzhou Qu Chinese Opera Troupe to provincial status, forming the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe. This move, integrating talent from various performance groups, marked a shift towards professionalism and innovation. Notably, adaptations like "Dream of the Red Chamber" showcased a fusion of multiple musical styles, drawing from both Qu Chinese Opera and contemporary operatic influences like "The White-Haired Girl." This period also witnessed technological advancements and modern stage techniques, enhancing the overall quality and appeal of Qu Chinese Opera performances. The troupe's emphasis on talent development and teamwork further contributed to its enduring legacy in the evolution of Qu Chinese Opera within the social context.

1.4 Legacy and Renewal Period (2000-2023): The Henan Provincial Qu Chinese Opera Troupe has experienced significant growth and development, attracted international attention, and fostered cultural exchange. Artists like Li Jinbo, Zhang Xinfang, and Wang Xiuling have contributed to the troupe's success, presenting enduring plays like "Chen Sanlian" and "Qin Xianglian" while innovating with new themes like "five blessings" and "marriage." The troupe has received prestigious awards and recognition, including being listed as a national intangible cultural heritage and participating in the International Drama Festival in Istanbul. Their commitment to talent cultivation and modernization is evident through collaborations with institutions like the Chinese Opera Academy and the establishment of the Henan Opera Art Protection and Inheritance Center. The Troupe remains committed to exploring new artistic horizons, fostering collaboration with diverse art groups, and contributing to the continued prosperity and legacy of Qu Chinese Opera within Chinese culture.

2. Musical Characteristics of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe

Henan Qu Chinese Opera is a dynamic musical style with a diverse array of styles, with around fifty commonly used in performances. These styles are typically used only once and seldom repeated. For example, in "Chen Sanliang," various tunes like "Yang Tune," "Yin Yang Sentences," "Da Han River," and "Xiao Han River" are employed, each with its distinct musical personality. Some tunes, like "Yangdiao" and "Shipian," can have extended singing sections, while others, like "Crying for the Heavenly Emperor" and "Yin Yang Sentences," have sparse and intricate characters. The flexible utilization of these tunes contributes to the opera's richness and audibility, as the vocal music comprises several independent pieces, adapting to the plot's development and characters' emotional nuances. This fluidity in musical composition is a defining characteristic of Qu Chinese Opera, reflecting its adaptability and artistic innovation within the social context.

2.1 Musical Structure: In dissecting the Qu Chinese Opera structure found in "Chen Sanliang," we encounter a one-paragraph style that can be categorized into three distinct types based on its composition. The first and most prevalent type is the four-sentence style, characterized by a tidy and square structure, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Example 1, music score of Chen Sanliang's Genealogy
Source: Lingyao Wang, transcription from fieldwork in July 2023

Score Example 1 presents a rendition employing the Yangdiao tune, characterized by a distinctly square structure. Across the first three sentences, each comprised of four bars (identified as clauses in the illustration), all but the final sentence span four bars. Furthermore, the initial sentence spans eight words, while the subsequent three sentences consist of seven words each.

Transitioning to the up-and-down sentence structure, the composition predominantly features sentences containing either 8 or 10 words, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Example 2, music score of Chen Sanliang's Genealogy
Source: Lingyao Wang, transcription from fieldwork in July 2023

Score Example 2 showcases sentences with a distinct up-and-down structure, evident in phrases like "bought copper bell yarn on the street" and "pulled from the north tower to the top of the west tower," each containing 10 words. This pattern is similarly observed in other segments like "Da Han River," "Xiao Han River," and "Poetry," highlighting a consistent usage of sentences with varying word counts.

2.2 Melodic Structure: "Chen Sanliang" is a Qu Chinese opera that showcases unique melodic characteristics that contribute to its emotional depth and regional flavor. The melody begins with a high pitch and gradually descends, creating a melancholic and introspective tone that resonates with the audience. This downward trend mirrors the local pronunciation nuances of Henan, lending a natural and comforting quality to the performance while staying true to Henan's cultural identity. The downward



melodic trend, coupled with deliberate pacing and a lingering finish in the final line, effectively conveys the deep sorrow within Chen Sanliang's inner world.

The melodic structure of "Chen Sanliang" predominantly relies on a pentatonic scale, occasionally incorporating biased tones like "fa" and "si." This choice enriches the melody with gracefulness and a distinct Henan opera flavor. The melody unfolds through a combination of 'do,'re,'mi,'sol,' and 'la' notes, evoking a folk song aesthetic. Chen Sanliang also employs melodic progression, and fourth interval jumps to enhance its expressive range. The progression adds nuance and sensitivity to the melody, while the fourth interval jumps contribute to the narrative depth, resonating well with audience expectations.

2.3 Musical Techniques and Vocal Expressions: The combination of lyrics and music is a pivotal aspect of Qu Chinese Opera performances, influencing the emotional depth and audience connection. This study delves into the intricate techniques employed in the singing music of "Chen Sanliang," a renowned piece within the Henan Qu Chinese Opera repertoire. Through a detailed analysis, this research aims to shed light on the nuanced approach to lyrical delivery and musical embellishments in Qu Chinese Opera, offering valuable insights into its cultural and artistic significance, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Musical Techniques and Vocal Expressions in "Chen Sanliang"

Aspect	Detail
Start singing with a weak beat	In "Chen Sanliang," the emphasis on "eye sing" is evident, where lyrics are sung from a weak beat, akin to Yu Opera. This technique involves a half-beat pause at the start of sentences, beginning with high notes and concluding on middle notes, creating a structured and harmonious composition.
Concluding with a rhyme	Qu Chinese Opera, including "Chen Sanliang," often employs rhyming techniques to conclude musical phrases. This is demonstrated through rhyming schemes where the last characters of consecutive sentences rhyme, enhancing lyrical cohesion and leaving a lasting impression on the audience.
Lubricating tune	The singing style in "Chen Sanliang" incorporates various embellishments, including vibrato, leaning notes, slippery sounds, and interjections in the Henan dialect. These elements add depth and texture to the melody, making it more dynamic and engaging. Vibrato, for instance, is used to convey emotional nuances, while interjections in the Henan dialect enrich the cultural authenticity of the performance, captivating the audience with its warmth and vibrancy.

Discussion

The findings of this research into the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe reveal a complex interplay between traditional cultural expressions and contemporary societal dynamics, consistent with the theoretical principles discussed in the literature review. The historical evolution of the troupe, especially during significant periods such as the War of Resistance Against Japan and the Cultural Revolution, illustrates the profound impact of socio-political changes on artistic practices, aligning with studies by Fong & Chan (2019) and Chabrowski (2022) that discuss how historical events shape performance styles in traditional opera.

Musically, the troupe has maintained its distinctive identity through the preservation of traditional Quju elements while also adapting to modern tastes and technologies. This balance between preservation and innovation is a crucial aspect of cultural capital as discussed by Bourdieu (in Lam, 2022), highlighting how traditional arts contribute to social status and community identity. The adaptation strategies employed by the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe, such as integrating modern elements into performances, resonate with Tang's (2021) observations on the evolution of Chinese folk music, emphasizing the necessity of evolving with the audience's changing preferences.



Moreover, the troupe's efforts in audience engagement and community interaction, particularly through educational programs and digital outreach, demonstrate a strategic approach to cultural transmission and audience expansion. This aligns with Yang et al.'s (2023) analysis of the spatial and temporal distribution patterns of traditional opera, suggesting that proactive engagement strategies are essential for the survival and relevance of traditional performing arts in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe's journey through the 20th and 21st centuries exemplifies the dynamic relationship between traditional cultural forms and the societal contexts in which they operate. This study has shown that the troupe's historical and musical characteristics are not only reflections of its cultural heritage but also active responses to the changing social environment. The troupe's ability to navigate the complexities of modernity while maintaining the core elements of Quju opera offers valuable lessons in the preservation and adaptation of cultural heritage.

The Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe's journey from its historical roots to its contemporary adaptations encapsulates a broader narrative prevalent in the evolution of Chinese opera. This case study not only highlights the resilience and adaptive strategies of a traditional opera form but also reflects significant trends affecting the opera landscape across China. The troupe's ability to navigate historical upheavals, shifting political landscapes, and changing audience demographics exemplifies the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity that many traditional cultural forms face today. As the troupe integrates modern elements into performances and utilizes digital platforms for broader engagement, it mirrors a larger movement within Chinese opera to stay relevant and appealing in a rapidly changing cultural and technological environment. Understanding this transformation from historical practices to modern adaptations offers vital insights into the survival strategies of traditional performing arts. It underscores the necessity for continuous innovation and targeted outreach to sustain the cultural legacy and societal relevance of opera in China. Thus, the evolution of the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe not only enriches our appreciation of its artistic achievements but also serves as a crucial lens through which to view the ongoing transformation of Chinese operatic traditions in the contemporary era.

Furthermore, the research outcomes underscore the importance of continuous adaptation and community engagement in preserving traditional arts. The troupe's success in integrating modern elements and leveraging new media highlights the potential pathways for other traditional art forms to remain relevant in an increasingly digital and globalized world. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional opera troupes like Henan Qu can sustain their cultural legacy and continue to resonate with both contemporary and future audiences. The insights garnered from this research may inform broader strategies for cultural preservation, enhancing the viability and vibrancy of traditional performing arts worldwide.

Recommendation

1. Enhance Digital and Educational Outreach: Given the changing audience demographics and the increasing influence of digital media on cultural consumption patterns, it is recommended that traditional opera troupes like the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe expand their digital and educational outreach. This could include developing comprehensive online platforms that feature virtual performances, interactive learning modules about the history and elements of Quju opera, and digital archives of past performances. Such initiatives could attract a younger audience and provide educational resources that foster a deeper appreciation and understanding of traditional opera. Collaborating with educational institutions to integrate opera into the curriculum could also broaden the audience base and ensure the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge.

2. Foster Innovative Artistic Collaborations: To maintain the relevance and vibrancy of traditional opera in contemporary society, fostering artistic collaborations that blend traditional opera with other art forms is recommended. These collaborations could involve cross-genre performances that incorporate



elements of modern theater, dance, and visual arts. By doing so, the Henan Qu Chinese Opera Troupe can innovate within the framework of traditional opera while appealing to a broader audience. Such collaborations not only preserve the core elements of Quju but also introduce these traditional forms to audiences who might not otherwise engage with classical opera. These collaborative efforts should aim to create new works that respect and highlight the unique characteristics of Quju while exploring contemporary themes and storytelling techniques.

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