

Examining the Realistic Orientation in Chinese Opera Stage Performance Through Hong Kong and Taiwan Huangmei Opera Films

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Abstract. This paper examines the historical evolution and developmental direction of the realistic orientation in Chinese opera stage performance through the case study of Hong Kong and Taiwan Huangmei opera films. The study argues that the realism in stage sets and performance actions of Huangmei opera films is not a deviation from opera aesthetics but rather a continuation and innovation of Chinese opera's own realistic tradition. Through textual research on opera literature, the article demonstrates that realistic techniques have persisted from the Han Dynasty variety performances to the present. Huangmei opera films achieved a creative transformation of opera art through technological media, respecting traditional principles while meeting modern visual demands, thus providing significant reference for the contemporary cross-media development of opera.

Keywords: Huangmei Opera Films; Realism; Chinese Opera.

1. Introduction

After the introduction of film art into China, traditional opera—an indigenous performing art—faced significant impact. During this period, artistic genres that integrated opera with new technologies emerged, with Huangmei opera films standing out as one of the most successful examples. Huangmei opera films were a cinematic genre that flourished in the Chinese-language markets of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and East Asia from the 1950s to the 1980s. Based on traditional opera stage performances and vocal styles, they incorporated popular singing methods and were presented through cinematic techniques and acting styles, forming a unique representative art form of Chinese culture in global cinema.

In the study of Chinese opera, abstraction is generally regarded as a fundamental technique in opera performance (Zhang Geng, 2003), and the lyrical expressiveness arising from "diverging from form to achieve likeness" constitutes an important feature of opera aesthetics (Chen Duo, 2001). As a product of the integration of Chinese opera and Western cinema, Huangmei opera films adopted realism in both stage sets and actor performances. This development towards realism—whether it represents a rebellion against or inheritance of opera's developmental patterns, or a destruction or refinement of opera aesthetics—has long been debated in academia, particularly regarding the verification of its correlation with opera's realistic tradition. For instance, Mu Wei, in "An Analysis of the Integration of Opera and Film during Their Development," argues that more lifelike actor performances constitute a "subtraction" from opera (Mu Wei, 2024). Shao Xuan also contends that the realism of Huangmei opera films weakened opera elements and linguistic methods while amplifying the aesthetics of imagery (Shao Xuan, 2023). This is precisely the issue this paper aims to explore.

This paper employs textual research methods to systematically review historical materials and discourses on realism in the history of Chinese opera, detailing the persistent characteristic of realism within opera, and combines this with the realistic approaches of Huangmei opera films to argue the following conclusion: realism has been an inherent orientation and pursuit in Chinese opera since ancient times, and the realism of Huangmei opera films represents a successful development that adheres to the principles of opera. This research can broaden the conventionally perceived media adaptability boundaries of opera art and offer referential significance for the future development of opera creation.

2. The Evolution of Realism in Stage Sets

Since the 1920s, "virtuality" has been considered a core characteristic of Chinese opera, alongside comprehensiveness and stylization, forming the three major features. Therefore, the elaborate realism in the stage apparatus of Huangmei opera films appears to deviate from the commonly understood lyrical tradition of "one table, two chairs" on the opera stage. As recorded in "I Love Huangmei Opera" describing the production of the Huangmei film "The Kingdom and the Beauty" :

"Artists used models, wooden boards, photographs, light and shadow, and contrasting colors in the film studio to vividly construct a physical replica of the Forbidden City. Eunuchs in the imperial harem swayed as they extinguished candles and pushed open the Wumen Gate, while the bright yellow roof tiles of the Hall of Supreme Harmony were subtly revealed atop the white stone steps." (Chen Weizhi, 2005).

However, the theorization of virtuality in opera actually originated from the opposition between the Republican era and Western realism, with the emphasis on virtuality prominently emerging during the tours of Peking Opera actors abroad in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, during Mei Lanfang's visit to the United States, his advisor Qi Rushan declared that "real objects are not allowed on stage" (Qi Rushan). In fact, the realistic tradition of opera has a much longer and uninterrupted historical evolution. Tracing back to the early stages of opera formation, during the Han Dynasty, there was already a pursuit of concrete stage sets. For instance, Zhang Heng's "Western Capital Rhapsody" describes a *juedi* within the "Gathering of Immortal Performers":

"Wu Huo lifted the bronze tripod, and the Dulu people climbed poles. Performers dashed through narrow openings and leapt over mats like swallows skimming water; they thrust their chests against sharp points. They threw balls and daggers with dazzling speed, and met while walking on tightropes. The set depicted Mount Hua lofty and towering, with layered ridges and peaks. Divine trees and magical plants, with red fruits hanging in clusters... A grand gathering of immortal performers, with leopards and dancing bears acted out."

Zhou Yibai interpreted this as evidence that Han Dynasty *baixi* already employed installations and effects similar to modern stage sets (Zhou Yibai, 2005). Ye Changhai's "History of Chinese Dramaturgy" also cites Ren Erbei's similar view, believing it was "clearly stage scenery and effects for dramatic performances" (Ye Changhai, 1993). Furthermore, Dong Meikan, in "On Theatre" used this as evidence to express pride in the astonishing creativity of the Chinese people, who had developed stage installations as early as around the 2nd century BC. This description from the "Western Capital Rhapsody" indicates that the aesthetic standard for stage art during the Han Dynasty was realistic, not achievable through abstraction alone.

By the Ming and Qing dynasties, when opera reached maturity, stage sets pursued even greater verisimilitude. Cao Xinquan, a flute master who entered the late Qing court, wrote in his "Memoirs of Performing in the Former Qing Court":

"The Solemn Pagoda": Included a scene where five pagodas were hoisted from a well using iron wheels.

"Golden Lotus Surge from the Earth": Included a scene where five large golden lotus flowers were hoisted from a well onto the stage; the petals opened to reveal five large Buddha statues seated inside.

"Arhats Cross the Sea": Featured a large constructed whale fish that could hide dozens of people; water was pumped from a well and spouted from the whale's mouth. (Cited from Yi Jing, 2008).

Moreover, shortly before the birth of Huangmei opera films, the "mechanized sets" plays of Shanghai-style Peking Opera had become a hallmark of that tradition. These plays relied on mechanical devices and realistic sets on stage to create lifelike effects, enhancing the visual spectacle. For example, using steel cables (wires) to allow actors playing immortals to "fly" through the air was highly popular with audiences at the time, becoming a trendy performance.

It is evident that realism holds a significant place in the aesthetic pursuit of stage apparatus, especially considering opera's identity as popular culture. In other words, the elaborate realism in the stage sets of Huangmei opera films simply accomplished what predecessors had aspired to achieve

more effectively. For both opera history and the audiences that contributed to the commercial success of Huangmei films, this stage art realism undoubtedly represents progress based on the "realistic" orientation within opera history.

3. The Evolution of Realism in Performance

Beyond stage art, the performances in Huangmei opera films also turned towards realism. For example, actors actually held hands or rode real horses, rather than using the abstract movements of traditional opera stages, such as using water sleeves to signify holding hands or a horsewhip to represent a horse. This shift was influenced by the film medium itself; the requirements of the frame and cinematic language promoted performative realism. The traditional opera stage is relatively wide, requiring actors to use broad, significant gestures to occupy the space. However, this is largely related to the venue, technological level, and cost of theatrical performances—opera was performed in a context of "poor theatre" (Jerzy Grotowski, 2002), not due to an inherent orientation towards "abstraction."

The establishment of the lyrical characteristics of opera performance actually occurred during the Republican era within the school performances of Peking Opera. For instance, Zhang Pengchun, in his analysis of Mei Lanfang's performance art, specifically emphasized that it "does not excel through meticulous and lifelike imitation of reality" (Zhang Pengchun, 1995). This was an academic summary of the characteristics of the Beijing-school Peking Opera of that specific period and school, not a description applicable to the entire history of Chinese opera. However, due to the immense fame and large audience of the Beijing-school Peking Opera, whose duration and breadth of influence surpassed other genres and actors, a Matthew Effect was formed, causing the performance forms and purposes that originally constituted the majority to become the neglected "long tail."

As with stage art, traces of realism can be found from the very inception of Chinese opera. Starting with the story of "Minstrel Meng's Guise" from the "Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Jesters", the importance of realistic imitation by actors was evident. During Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasty opera performances, the method of "treading the bamboo horse" was used to pursue simulated reality. Yao Yuanzhi's "Miscellaneous Notes from the Bamboo Leaf Pavilion" records "using bamboo to make a horse's head, with the tail decorated with colored silk" (Yao Yuanzhi, 1982). Even in the Qing Dynasty, Tiejiao Shanren discussed "drama": "In the theatrical arena, value lies in verisimilitude; do not merely seek gorgeousness to please. Sorrowful sounds enact heartbreaking grief, truly resembling close kin of bygone years." (Yu Weimin & Sun Rongrong, 2008). This explicitly advocates valuing "verisimilitude" in performance. Although the aesthetic demand in performance effect was for "truth", the performance methods were mostly "simulated reality". This indicates that the goal of realism in performance has long been embedded in the cultural DNA of opera art.

A more objective discussion on the relationship between opera performance and realism can be found in the writings of a renowned Chinese opera director from the New China period:

"Our stage art and conventional techniques are, in general, refined from life. They are the result of processing based on the logic of life and the logic of art. Therefore, when applying conventions, one should not start from the conventions themselves, but from life; not use conventions to restrict life, but use life to enrich and revise conventions." (A Jia).

This view illustrates that the purpose of conventions in opera art is still realism, albeit requiring recreation and adaptation based on different media and aesthetic demands.

Therefore, the performative realism of Huangmei opera films is not a deviation from opera tradition but rather a revival and reinterpretation of the realistic tendencies deeply embedded in the genetic makeup of Chinese opera, facilitated by the unique characteristics of the cinematic medium. This transformation not only reflects the natural evolution of artistic forms in response to changing media but also uncovers a long-standing realistic tradition in Chinese opera history that had been overshadowed by the discourse of "abstract expressiveness." It prompts us to reexamine the diversity and complexity of performance aesthetics in Chinese opera.

4. Conclusion

In summary, as a unique cultural phenomenon in the history of 20th-century Chinese-language film and television, Huangmei opera films were rooted in traditional opera and successfully shaped a timeless art form by integrating modern cinematic language and popular elements. By tracing the lineage of realism in the history of Chinese opera, this paper argues that the realistic tendency of Huangmei opera films was not a deviation from opera aesthetics but rather a continuation and innovation of a long-existing realistic tradition within it.

Precedents can be found in Cantonese Opera records, where lyrics or melodies were specifically altered to suit the new technology of records (Rong Shicheng, 2006). This adaptation to new media or updates in material culture is not an unusual phenomenon. Therefore, the realistic practices of Huangmei opera films should be seen as a creative transformation of opera art within its modernization process, a form of cross-media transformation. They both respected the internal laws of opera and responded to the demand for visual authenticity in popular culture, ultimately achieving success in both commercial and artistic dimensions.

The case of Huangmei opera films reveals that the vitality of traditional Chinese art lies precisely in its openness to dialogue with the times and integration with technology. Huangmei opera films not only did not undermine opera aesthetics but, by expanding its expressive dimensions, provided valuable historical references and innovative pathways for the contemporary continuation and development of opera.

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