

Red Spirit Inheritance in Chinese National Opera

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the inheritance of the red spirit in Chinese opera, analyzing its characteristics and evolution in terms of connotation construction, artistic carriers, and inheritance mechanism by combing through classic red operas of different historical periods. From the Yan'an period to the new era, the red spirit has undergone a value transmutation from class narrative to people's narrative in opera. Artistic carriers such as music, literature and stage have become the key codes for the inheritance of the red spirit, while the inheritance mechanism has gradually shifted from political preaching to cultural consciousness. In the face of contemporary challenges, red opera needs to innovate in content, form and dissemination, so as to realize the intergenerational inheritance of the red spirit and the development of the times.

Keywords

Red Opera; Red Spirit; Connotation Construction; Artistic Carrier; Inheritance Mechanism

Introduction

After more than a hundred years, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has always adhered to Marxism as its guide, leading the Chinese people through thousands of hardships to embark on the road to prosperity, on which it has accumulated rich historical experience and fine traditions, and forged the Red Spirit (Bao, 2025). General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of the inheritance of the red gene in his speech at the Mobilization Conference for the Study and Education of Party History in 2021, which pointed out the direction of how to inherit the red culture in the field of culture and art. Since the birth of Chinese opera, through a hundred years of development, “red themes” have always occupied a mainstream position. Back in 1942, Comrade Mao Zedong's “Speech at the Yan'an Literary and Artistic Symposium” laid down the tone of serving the people, workers, peasants, and soldiers for literary and artistic creation, since then, literary and artistic creation with red themes has flourished, and opera, as a comprehensive form of art, has become an important carrier for the spread of the red spirit. By 2017, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism

launched the “Chinese National Opera Inheritance and Development Project”, the creation and inheritance of red operas were given a new mission for the times, and played a unique social and cultural function in different historical periods.

From an artistic point of view, despite the abundant research results on Chinese opera, there is still a gap in the systematic analysis of the “red spirit” in opera. As an important part of Chinese culture, how the Red Spirit can be embodied, inherited and developed in opera as an art form requires in-depth and comprehensive investigation. In reality, the “Z-generation” has grown up in a multicultural environment, and has difficulties in accepting the red culture. However, phenomena such as “Yimeng Mountain”, which has received more than 100 million broadcasts on the Jitterbug platform, provide valuable insights into how red culture can break through the communication dilemma and realize intergenerational inheritance. An in-depth study of the inheritance of the red spirit in Chinese opera will help to better understand the transmission path and value realization of red culture in contemporary society.

So, how does the Red Spirit realize intergenerational transmission through the three-dimensional carrier of “music - literature - stage” in opera? What are the changes and continuity of the logic of transmission of the Red Spirit in opera in different historical periods? This study will focus on these two questions.

1. Connotation construction of the Red Spirit: Value Transmutation From Revolution To Construction

(1) Yan'an period (1930s - 1950s)

Born in 1945, “The White-haired Girl” is regarded as a classic of Chinese red opera, with its class narrative as the core, profoundly demonstrating the “spirit of turning over”. The death of Yang Bailao in the play is a tragic climax episode, in which he is forced by the landlord Huang Shiren to kill himself, which vividly interprets the cruel reality that “the old society forces people to become ghosts”, and triggers the general public’s strong accusation against the feudal exploitation system. In terms of music creation, “The White Haired Girl” skillfully adapts and integrates Hebei folk song “Little Cabbage” and other folk music elements into it, and at the same time closely integrates with the dramatic conflict. For example, after Xi'er is abused by Huang Shiren, the music style changes from the original naivety to grief and indignation, promoting the development of the plot through the change of music, and constructing a “people's” discourse with a broad mass base, so that the audience can deeply feel Xi'er's and other grassroots people's strong desire to turn over a new leaf and be liberated (Wang, 2018).

(2) Post-nationalization (1950s - 1960s)

Sister Jiang, which premiered in 1964, highlights the “spirit of faith” in the heroic narrative. In the classic section of the play, “Praise for the Red Plum”, the character of the red plum in the face of snow and frost is closely linked to Jiang's firm belief in communism, and “The silk worm will not stop until it dies, and it will be given to oth-

ers to protect them from the wind and cold.” This is a reflection of revolutionary romanticism, and it vividly demonstrates the spirit of Jiang’s selflessness and bravery for the cause of the revolution. The story of Sister Jiang’s selfless dedication and courageous spirit for the revolutionary cause is vividly shown. From the perspective of political metaphor, the image of red plum is highly symbolized in the play, becoming a symbol of communist spirit. Comparing with the opera Liu Hulan of the same period, although both of them focus on heroic characters, there are differences in cultural expression and narrative style. Sister Jiang pays more attention to the use of traditional Chinese cultural elements, and creates a heroic image with distinctive Chinese characteristics through operatic music and literary narrative.

(3) New Era (2010s - present)

Launched in 2018, “Yimeng Mountain” profoundly interprets the “Spirit of the Beginning” from the perspective of the people’s narrative (Wu, 2019). The cantata “Wait for Me, Dear One” depicts the deep friendship between the people of the Yimeng Mountain region and their sons and daughters from the perspective of civilians, vividly demonstrating the contemporary connotation of “fish-water love between the Party and the masses”. Compared with previous red operas, “Yimeng Mountain” has realized an important shift from “struggle” to “sharing” in terms of value expression. It no longer only emphasizes the cruelty of the revolutionary struggle, but also pays more attention to the efforts of the people in pursuit of a better life under the leadership of the Party and the close connection between the Party and the masses, so that the red spirit can be expressed in a way that is more close to life and the masses, which triggers a strong resonance with the contemporary audience.

2. The Inheritance Code Of Art Carriers: The Intertext of Music, Literature and Stage

Red operas have always adhered to the nationalized characteristics of the pentatonic scale in terms of melodic features. For example, the song “Ying Shan Hong” is a clever reconstruction of Jiangxi folk songs, with a beautiful melody, based on the pentatonic scale and incorporating the musical style of Jiangxi, which not only has a strong national flavor, but also vividly expresses the deep hope for the Red Army. In the design of the singing section, the aria often becomes the key to the sublimation of emotion. For example, Tian Yumei’s aria “Ten Thousand Miles of Spring Colors Fill the Homeland” in “Daughters of the Party” shows Tian Yumei’s love for her home country and her firm belief in the victory of the revolution to the fullest through the stirring melody and affectionate lyrics. In terms of accompaniment innovation, many red operas organically integrate symphonic and ethnic instruments (Xue, 2020). Take “The Long March” as an example, when expressing the theme of the army and the people in the opera, the suona and the strings are skillfully used to carry on a dialogue, and the high and bright sound of the suona and the melodious sound of the strings are intertwined with each other, which vividly shows the love between the army and the peo-

ple and the hardship and determination during the Long March.

In terms of characterization, Red opera has undergone a transformation from “lofty and perfect” to “vivid and full of life”. Take Lin Sheng in *Yimeng Mountain* as an example, he is not only a brave soldier, but also a father. In the play, Lin Sheng's heart is full of struggle and pain when he faces the choice between the revolutionary mission and the protection of his family, and finally he sacrifices himself for the revolutionary cause. This kind of portrayal of the character's multiple identities and complex emotions makes the character image more real and fuller. In terms of conflict design, the red opera focuses on closely intertwining individual destiny with the flood of history. In *Honghu Red Guard*, Han Ying sings “Mother's tears flow like water” when facing the enemy's coercion, showing her firm revolutionary will and loyalty to the Party in the strong conflict between affection and revolutionary choice. The use of dialect is also a major feature of the literary scripts of red operas. For example, “Ballad of the Canal” skillfully uses the dialect of Jiangsu folk songs, which enhances the authenticity of the plot and the regional cultural characteristics, so that the audience can feel the background of the story and the life of the characters in a more profound way.

Red operas are unique in their use of symbolic systems in the stage space. For example, in the scene “Tying the Red Head Rope” of “The White Haired Maiden”, the red flag, oil lamp, straw shoes and other elements form a distinctive visual metaphor. The joyful scene of Xi'er tying the red head rope contrasts strongly with the dilapidated houses and simple oil lamps, highlighting the class differences. In terms of interactive design, the emergence of immersive theater provides new possibilities for audience participation. For example, in “On the Taihang Mountains”, the “chorus” ceremony between the soldiers of the Eighth Route Army and the audience makes the audience feel as if they are in the historical scene of the war, which enhances the audience's experience and understanding of the red spirit. With the arrival of the new media era, technological empowerment provides a broad space for the narrative expansion of red opera. The Red Boat uses AR technology to vividly restore the scenes of the First National Congress of the Communist Party of China, allowing the audience to feel history more intuitively and enhancing the attractiveness and infectiousness of the red opera.

3. Historical evolution of inheritance mechanisms: from political proselytizing to cultural self-consciousness

Yan'an Luyi upholds the policy of “Literature and art serve the workers, peasants and soldiers”, which lays a solid foundation for the creation and dissemination of red operas. Under the guidance of this policy, many literary and art workers have gone deep into the grassroots and created a large number of red opera works that are close to the life of the masses and reflect their voices, so that the red spirit can be widely disseminated to the people. Entering the new era, in 2017, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism launched the “Chinese National Opera Inheritance and Development Pro-

ject”, which provides strong support for the inheritance and development of red opera at the policy level, and promotes the all-round development of red opera in terms of creation, performances, and talent cultivation.

In professional colleges and universities, the rehearsal of red classics has become an important teaching practice. The school-based course “The Long March” opened by the Central Conservatory of Music, through the rehearsal of red operas, allows students to deeply understand the connotation of the red spirit in practice, and cultivates students' artistic literacy and sense of cultural responsibility (Hui, 2024). In primary and secondary school music education, the teaching of opera segments has also been widely used. For example, “Waves of Honghu Lake” has been selected as a teaching material of the People's Teaching Edition, which enables primary and secondary school students to come into contact with red operas in the music classroom, and to cultivate their knowledge and love of red culture from an early age (Ying, 2025).

The integration of culture and tourism provides a new model for the inheritance of red opera. By combining red opera with local tourism resources, the Jinggangshan live performance has created a new mode of “experiential inheritance”, allowing visitors to enjoy the performance while experiencing the historical atmosphere of the revolutionary base of Jinggangshan, and enhancing their understanding and realization of the red spirit. In terms of digital communication, the launch of the NCPA's “Online Opera Hall” has provided a new way for red opera to reach the Z-generation. Through the analysis of the pop-up interaction of “Daughter of the Party”, it is found that the audience of Generation Z actively participated in the discussion and expressed their views and feelings about the red opera during the viewing process, which helps the red opera to expand its influence in the young group.

4. Contemporary Challenges And Innovative Paths

With the development of the times, intergenerational aesthetic differences have become a major challenge for red operas. post-00s grew up in the era of information explosion, and were exposed to diversified forms of culture and art, and often have a “sense of distance” from traditional operas. Some works simply pile up red symbols, lacking in-depth excavation and innovative expression of the red spirit, in sharp contrast to innovative works such as “Yimeng Mountain”.

To cope with these challenges, red opera needs to innovate in content, form and dissemination. In terms of content innovation, “atypical” red characters should be explored, and the red spirit should be shown from the perspective of ordinary people, so that the story can be closer to life and resonate with the audience. In the form of cross-border, it can be fused with musical theater, rock and other popular art forms. For example, “Song of Spring” tries to use rock aria, injecting new vitality into the red opera and attracting the attention of more young audiences. In terms of communication innovation, the short video platform provides an opportunity for the “fragment-

ed dissemination” of red opera. Through user participation and secondary creation, the red opera is widely disseminated on the network in a more vivid and interesting form, expanding the audience scope of the red opera.

5. Conclusion

Opera's inheritance of the red spirit is essentially an artistic continuation of “people-hood”. From “The White-haired Girl” in the Yan'an period to “Mount Yimeng” in the new era, the red spirit has undergone a transformation from class narrative to people's narrative in opera, and has always been closely connected with the people's lives and emotions. In terms of artistic carriers, music, literature and stage cooperate with each other, becoming the key code for the inheritance of the red spirit. The inheritance mechanism has also gradually developed from the initial political preaching to cultural consciousness, and with the help of systematic guarantee, education and dissemination and market innovation, it has realized the wide dissemination of the red spirit. In the face of contemporary challenges, the red opera can only achieve breakthroughs in content, form and dissemination by constantly exploring the red opera in keeping the correctness and innovation, activating the vitality of the red genes, continuing the inheritance and development of the red spirit in the new era, realizing the leap from “historical memory” to “contemporary resonance”, and contributing to the development of socialist cultural construction. This will enable the red spirit to continue to be inherited and developed in the new era, realize the leap from “historical memory” to “contemporary resonance”, and play an important role in the construction of socialist culture and the shaping of national spirit.

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