

# On the Use of Cantonese Opera Singing Elements in the Puppet Theatre of Kozhou

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**Abstract:** Puppetry is one of the traditional folk art forms with a long history in China. Puppetry is one of the traditional folk art forms with a long history in China. After it was transmitted to the Gaozhou Prefecture of Guangdong by the Fujian Zhangzhou Puppet Show during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, it gradually took root in the local culture of Guangdong, and the Gaozhou Puppet Theatre was born as a result. Under the radiant influence of Cantonese Opera, the number one theatre in Lingnan, in the western part of Guangdong, the Gaozhou Puppet Theatre has been passed down through the generations, and has used the Cantonese Opera cantata, an element of Cantonese Opera that is the essence of the art, in its unique puppetry accent. Nowadays, when many "non-heritage" cultures are facing difficulties in inheritance and development, it is especially crucial for the puppet theatre of Gaozhou to be able to use the elements of Cantonese Opera's singing in the new era, so as to make Gaozhou Puppet Theatre a new life and make the public appreciate the art again by incorporating the elements of Cantonese Opera's singing.

**Keywords:** Gaozhou Puppetry Theatre; Cantonese Opera Singing; Inheritance and Development

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## 1. Overview of Gaozhou Puppet Theatre

Gaozhou Puppetry is a kind of traditional folk theatre in Gaozhou, Guangdong, China, which is classified as puppet theatre rather than human theatre, also known as "puppet theatre", "puppet show", "puppet show", and "ghost show" in the dialect. It is also known as "Puppet Show" and "Puppet Show", which means "Ghost Show" and "Ghost Boy Show" in the dialect. Gaozhou Puppetry belongs to the four major puppet theatres of China in terms of puppet production and performance form, and its predecessor was the Bubu Puppet Theatre in the area of Zhangzhou, Fujian Province today. During the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, the largest Xian Tai Temple was built in Gaozhou in order to glorify Lady Xian Tai, the heroine of Southern Guangdong, and a group of Fujian puppet theatre artists were attracted to perform in celebration of the event, which was very popular among the local people, and gradually took root in the Gaozhou Prefecture of Guangdong Province (present-day Gaozhou City of the Guangdong Province's Maoming District) and spread to villages of all sizes in the territory of the prefecture. In 2006, the Gaozhou Puppet Show was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list.

As the predecessor of the Gaozhou Puppet Theatre, the puppeteer of the Fujian Ragdoll Puppet Theatre, in his performances, the physical mobility of the Ragdoll Puppet Theatre is mainly supported by the puppeteer's five fingers and palms of the hands to support the puppet's torso and limbs, which would hinder the puppet's headdress, costumes and movement design. In order for puppetry to flourish in the southern Guangdong region, the puppeteer of Gaozhou improved the puppetry on the basis of the Bubu Puppet, transforming the type of puppetry from Bubu Puppet to the more flexible and lively Staff Puppet, which also laid the groundwork for the healthy combination of Gaozhou Puppetry and Cantonese Opera singing elements in the future.

Under the influence of the culture of the yearly routine, which is unique to the folklore of the western region of Guangdong, the puppeteer of Gaozhou gradually formed a folk artist who brought together playing, pulling, strumming and singing in one body, and the props required, such as the cloth curtain frame, puppets, gongs and instruments, were all loaded down by a load of puppet boxes, and they performed puppetry on the streets of various places. This kind of "single-handed" "walking performance" style gradually

became the fixed form of Gaozhou Puppet Theatre's single-person stage performance in the future. This kind of one-man puppet theatre is often performed in front of the temples and in the fields for the local people during the Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, temple fairs, and specific annual festivals of each village, and so on.

## **2. Overview of the Development of Cantonese Opera in the Gaozhou Region**

Cantonese opera is a kind of traditional Chinese opera sung in Cantonese dialect in Guangdong, and it is also the largest type of opera in the Lingnan region, whose popular areas include the two provinces, Hong Kong and Macao, and overseas Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora areas. Cantonese Opera originated from the Southern Opera of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and took shape after absorbing the essence of a large number of excellent opera cantatas such as Haiyan cantata, Kunshan cantata, Bang Bang cantata, etc., and combining them with the traditional folk music of Guangfu. The people of western Guangdong, including Gaozhou, were also fond of this localised form of opera, because Wuzhou, the birthplace of the Cantonese vernacular, and its neighbouring Gaozhou were naturally deeply influenced by the vernacular language, and when Cantonese Opera was sung in Cantonese vernacular as a local dialect, the people would resonate with the vernacular voices of the actors and actresses on the stage to a greater extent than the Peking Opera's Peking Opera, or Kunshan Opera, which were not the same. It is not comparable to the Peking Opera or the Kunshan Accent of Kunqu, which have been spreading in the Lingnan area.

Every year during the annual festivals in the Gaozhou area, the local puppet theatre folk artists would not only perform between villages, but also Cantonese Opera troupes from Wuchuan, Zhanjiang, Maoming and other neighbouring places would take advantage of the grand festivals in the western part of the country to come over and perform. This kind of Cantonese Opera troupes go to the local area and set up a stage to perform in the countryside "while there are many people", which is called "making a big theatre". Cantonese opera is known as "big theatre" by the Cantonese people because of the large number of actors and actresses, the large rehearsal space, the large audience, and the long duration of the performance, and the large scale of the performance, which is why the Cantonese people call it "big theatre". Cantonese Opera performances in the countryside usually take place in the following situations: Firstly, during the annual festivals, the villagers will take the lead to invite Cantonese Opera troupes to come to celebrate the festivals through the village people who will raise funds from every household in the village, and since the annual festivals in each village are different, there are cases where a Cantonese Opera troupe will "go to war" in a number of villages. Secondly, wealthy merchants and gentry from different villages would invite Cantonese Opera troupes to perform when they celebrate the birthday of their families, or when they pay tribute to the elderly in their villages. Thirdly, Cantonese opera troupes are also invited to perform on the birthdays of Madame Xian, on the birthdays of Bodhisattvas in the temples of Gaozhou, as well as on the celebrations of the ancestral halls of various families. To sum up, Cantonese Opera, like the puppet theatre of Gaozhou, has been integrated into the daily life of the local people in Gaozhou, both in terms of folklore activities and production and rest.

## **3. Elements of Cantonese Opera singing in Gaozhou Puppet Theatre**

### **3.1 Learning and applying Cantonese opera singing**

The traditional Gaozhou Puppetry Theatre uses the "puppet accent", which is a special Gaozhou Puppetry Theatre singing accent that adopts the tones of Gaozhou's mountain songs and sings in Gaozhou's vernacular language. Puppetry is performed in the form of a combination of rap and singing, usually one line sung and one line spoken, alternating between prose and rhyming lyrics. Sometimes the puppeteer will add a few lines of "Bakudou" on a whim, Bakudou refers to improvised singing, in which the actor plays according to his feelings at the time of the performance, which are different from the script or have not been rehearsed. In the Gaozhou puppet theatre, the belly-bursting scene is mostly the use of "ee-ya-ha", "ee-ya-li", and other phrases of the Gaozhou dialect, or the liner notes of the Gaozhou mountain songs, which are mostly used for the puppets to show the changes of moods, such as surprise, anger, and joy, in order to enhance the puppets' breath of life and bring the audience the most realistic auditory sensation. This is to enhance the puppet's vividness and to bring the audience the most realistic listening experience.

The same kind of "belly-bursting theatre" has also appeared in Cantonese opera for a long time. After the victory in the war, a Cantonese opera troupe in Xiguan, Guangzhou, performed "Guan Gong Chopped Cai Yang", in which two of the troupe master's pupils played Guan Gong and Cai Yang, and asked "Master, which one will die first?" The troupe master, who was smoking cigarettes and was addicted to cigarettes, replied, "Both of them deserve to die." So the two went on stage, after the martial arts have to the

ground to play dead, the stage gongs and drums, the audience booed, the dragon set rushed back to the background to ask the master of the class, the master of the class at this time has eaten enough cigarettes back to the spirit of the immediate rush to put on the robes, pick up the whisk on the stage, the mouth recited the words, said, "Good, good, the suffering is difficult. Cai Yang first death, Guan Gong up" said, to Guan Gong with a whisk finger "up", making Guan Gong back from the dead, because the master of the class temporarily added this "belly-bursting theatre" a great success, attracted the audience off-stage a applause, so the belly-bursting theatre as a Cantonese Opera, a great success, the audience of the stage, the audience of the stage. As a result, the Bakudou Opera has been preserved as a form of improvisation in Cantonese Opera. The belly-bursting in the puppet theatre of Gaozhou also draws on this artistic treatment.

In addition, Mr Liang Dongxing, the "non-heritage" historical heir of the puppet theatre in Gaozhou, uses one or two lines of the "handboard" in Cantonese opera before the opening of his one-man puppet theatre, which is also known as the palm board, in the performance of martial arts scenes. In Cantonese Opera, the handpan, also known as the palm pan, refers to the master of the gongs and drums with the nature of command. The role of the palm board was originally to hold the drum bamboo, hit the board, the drum to command the lower hand to hit the gongs and drums and the entire orchestra's performance, in order to match the performance and singing of the actors and actresses of Cantonese Opera, and in the single stage puppet theatre puppet theatre artists have to do a combination of blowing, pulling, playing and singing, to achieve the effect that the gongs and drums and the singing of the lyrics are tightly linked to the effect of the atmosphere, which is the same as the master of the palm board of the Cantonese Opera for the plot of the rhythm of the control of the same, to the classic puppet theatre in Gaozhou. Take the classic Gaozhou puppet theatre play "Yue Fei Retreats the Golden Soldiers" as an example, the opening two lines of the "handboard" are: "The Golden Dogs are arrogant, invading the Central Plains and committing crimes! Like the opening of a Cantonese opera, the opening lines are a thunderbolt that stirs up the emotions of both the actors and the audience, and then the puppetry accent is used to sing the subsequent sections.

Puppetry accent in the singing will often use "male voice head female voice tail" vocal singing form to deal with. The male voice head refers to a large part of the lyrics sung in front of the words, which is similar to the usual flat throat of the raw characters in Cantonese opera, using the real, natural voice; the female voice tail refers to one or two words near the end of each line of the lyrics, which is similar to the usual sub-throat of the Dan characters in Cantonese opera, using the delicate, brittle, fake voice, which is extremely difficult to sing. Puppet theatre artists in the singing of male and female voices to switch freely, without obvious traces of transition, the female voice to sing "beautiful and sweet", with this contrasting voice transformation to highlight the distinctive singing flavour of the puppet theatre in Gaozhou.

Since there is only one puppet performer in the puppet theatre, it is necessary for one person to interpret the voices of all ages and roles on the stage, no matter men, women, young or old. This is not only extremely demanding on the singing skills of the puppeteer, but also poses a considerable challenge to the physical strength of the performer. During a performance, the puppeteer not only has to take care of the performance, but also has to put in a lot of effort in singing. After such a demanding performance, most artists' voices will be nearly fatigued, and most of the puppet theatre artists, mainly the older generation of artists, has not been compared to the physical strength of young people or middle-aged people. Most of the old generation of puppet theatre artists are not from the class, folk artists, usually for the puppetry obsession or want to find a livelihood to learn puppetry, singing has not been instructed to practice, by listening to the opera to imitate learning to sing. This will lead to a single stage puppet theatre singing skills are uneven, for the puppet theatre listening quality and the integrity of the programme can not guarantee the results.

For the reform of the singing voice in the puppet theatre in Gaozhou, the Gaozhou Puppet Theatre Troupe adopts the performance of a large class instead of a single stage puppet theatre, and at the same time, while preserving the puppet voice, it absorbs the singing voice of Cantonese opera, that is, it absorbs and learns from the Cantonese opera's plate accent, and achieves the specialisation of specialists in special roles, and the puppet roles are dubbed by different actors, and the language and is sung in Cantonese vernacular. In order to innovate the puppet theatre, the troupe adopts the "Cantonese Opera Cavity" instead of the "Puppet Cavity", and at the same time, transplants Cantonese operatic songs and cantatas into the puppet theatre, and replaces the original simple puppet theatre stage with modern stage sets, which enriches the puppet theatre's expression form, and enhances the puppet theatre's aesthetic quality. The puppet theatre has been enriched by the use of modern stage sets to replace the humble puppet theatre stage, enriching the form of

puppet theatre expression, enhancing the aesthetic realm of puppet theatre, and giving puppet theatre new vitality. The professional actors from the school class are guaranteed in their singing skills, and the Cantonese opera's system of transporting the cadences and rhythms is more mature compared to the original puppetry cadences, with some specific transformations of true and false voices. In addition, due to the increase in the number of performers, puppet theatre can incorporate new forms of singing such as monologue, counterpoint, group singing and unison singing. This will reduce the pressure of puppet theatre performers compared to the single stage puppet theatre, and at the same time, the separation of male and female voices can also make the audience not easy to get out of the opera, and the Guangfu vernacular has a wider audience compared to the Gaozhou vernacular, so that it can absorb the attention of more foreign audiences.

## Conclusion

The combination of Gaozhou Puppetry and Cantonese Opera was once praised by Professor Ding Yangzhong of the Central Academy of Drama as a pioneering move. With the progress of the times, most of the traditional "non-heritage" arts lack compatibility and openness, and there are concerns about the inheritance and development of the same non-heritage arts, which has led to the loss of attraction for the younger generation of audiences who have the aesthetics of keeping up with the times and the pursuit of diversified and multi-layered arts. By absorbing and applying the singing elements of Cantonese Opera, the puppet theatre of Gaozhou is a further enrichment and improvement of the puppet accent, which is a reform initiative in the whole history of puppet theatre development. At the same time, the combination of Cantonese Opera and Gaozhou Puppet Theatre, which is also a non-heritage art, symbolises that two different non-heritage cultures can resonate with each other through the common artistic elements, and ultimately achieve the goal of "non-heritage art". At the same time, the combination of Cantonese Opera and Gaozhou Puppet Show symbolises that two different non-heritage cultures can resonate with each other through their common artistic elements, and ultimately achieve the effect of complementarity. The benign combination of the two also provides valuable practical experience and value for the inheritance and development of other traditional art forms, so that more "non-heritage" cultures can be revitalised and continue to be passed on in Chinese traditional culture for generations.

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