

# "Xi'nan Opera Exhibition" Provides Contemporary Inspiration to Opera Practitioners

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**Abstract:** *As an important milestone in the development of Chinese drama, Xi'nan Opera Exhibition has important implications for the creative work of contemporary opera workers. By analyzing the characteristics of Xi'nan Opera Exhibition in the development of drama, Xi'nan Opera Exhibition, with its eclectic and diversified development attitude, wide selection of repertoires and theatrical sentiment of using foreign things for Chinese purposes, encourages the public to focus on solving contemporary problems, and brings important implications for the social responsibility of contemporary opera creation and the realization of its social functions.*

**Keywords:** Xi'nan Opera Exhibition, Opera development, Social responsibility, Contemporary enlightenment.

## 1. Introduction

At the critical moment of the strategic stalemate of the War of Resistance, the cultural movement of the War of Resistance encountered unprecedented challenges and severe limitations. Whether it was the theater team in the rear or the front line of the battle, it was difficult to obtain stable and continuous development support, and its road of artistic exploration and practice was particularly rugged. Faced with the current situation of the shrinking theater team and the silence of script creation, a group of theater workers who uphold progressive ideas took the initiative to gather together to seek the way forward for the development of theater. "In order to meet more difficult battles and heavier tasks, we urgently need an opportunity similar to the gathering in Wuhan to reunite, mobilize again, and conduct a grand review [1]." How to break through the limitations of theater work and inspire the morale of the military and civilians in the anti-fascist struggle has become the goal of theater workers. Under the design of literati and patriots such as Tian Han, Ouyang Yuqian, and Xiong Fusi, after consultation and deliberation, and extensive solicitation of opinions, the "First Southwest Theater Exhibition", referred to as "Xi'nan Opera Exhibition", was successfully held in Guilin, Guangxi. In this drama exhibition, more than 30 art teams from Guangdong, Hunan, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Yunnan and other provinces were gathered to perform various repertoires including drama, opera, Peking opera, Gui opera, etc. A drama materials exhibition and a drama workers conference were also held. It was a large-scale drama event with a grand scale and connotation, and successfully achieved the historical purpose of Xi'nan Opera Exhibition: "Through concentrated discussions and exchanges on art and culture, summarize and improve the cultural level of drama during the Anti-Japanese War, and better contribute to the Anti-Japanese War [2]." Today, when we stand at the important moment of commemorating the 80th anniversary of the "Xi'nan Opera Exhibition", we look back and reflect on this cultural event again. It is not difficult to find that the "Xi'nan Opera Exhibition" has undoubtedly stood a brilliant milestone in the vast starry sky of Chinese drama art. Its profound significance far exceeds the scope of history. Like a beacon, it illuminates the way forward for contemporary opera practitioners and even the entire art field, providing valuable and profound enlightenment and inspiration.

## 2. An Inclusive and Diverse Attitude Towards Development

Xi'nan Opera Exhibition is characterized by diversity, which is first reflected in its carefully planned repertoire selection. During the 94-day grand exhibition, Xi'nan Opera Exhibition not only deeply excavated and presented the treasures of Chinese opera art - Sichuan Opera, Yunnan Opera, Guizhou Opera and Guangxi Opera, but also widely accepted and grandly launched a variety of drama styles such as emerging Chinese drama, imported Western drama, modern musicals and long-standing puppet shows with an open and inclusive attitude. These drama works of different styles and schools complement each other on the same stage, and together weave a colorful picture of drama art. Under the environment at that time, the concept of opera genres had not yet been widely and deeply subdivided by the academic community, but the exchange and cooperation across the boundaries of genres and cultures shown by Xi'nan Opera Exhibition undoubtedly injected a strong vitality into the development of Chinese drama art and opened up an unprecedented new path. It provides a broad stage for various theater troupes and drama creators to draw inspiration, exchange ideas, and deepen their understanding from a variety of theatrical forms, thereby promoting the in-depth exploration and display of different theatrical personalities, and providing unprecedented possibilities for mutual learning, integration, and innovation among various theatrical forms.

As a treasure of Chinese culture, Chinese opera has a long history and a wide variety of characteristics. However, in the development of modern society, Chinese opera faces many challenges. After the founding of New China, various types of Chinese opera developed rapidly. Under the guidance of the literary and artistic policy of "letting a hundred flowers bloom and bringing forth the new through the old", traditional opera has been widely explored, sorted out and reformed, and various opera types have achieved different degrees of development. Many ancient opera types that were on the verge of extinction have been restored and developed. For example, Kunqu Opera and Hebei Bangzi, these opera types were already in a state of decline before the founding of New China. At the same time, some local small operas have gradually grown into large-scale opera types, such as Hunan Flower Drum Opera and Yunnan Flower Lantern Opera. New

opera types are also constantly emerging. On the basis of folk songs and dances and rap art in various places, many new local operas have developed. Such as Beijing Quju, Jilin Jiju, Hebei Tang Opera, Qinghai Pingxian Opera, etc. The emergence of these new opera types has enriched the treasure house of opera art and reflected the prosperity of culture and art in various places after the founding of New China. However, in its pursuit of diversified development, opera art still faces some challenges that cannot be ignored. The "barrier" phenomenon in the development of various opera genres is becoming increasingly prominent. The communication and integration between different genres and between opera and other art forms are not sufficient, which to some extent restricts the pace of further innovation and development of opera art. Each opera genre carries its unique performance style, musical voice system and rich repertoire tradition. These distinctive personality characteristics certainly constitute the diversity and charm of opera art, but at the same time, they also set certain obstacles for dialogue and cooperation between different genres. Not only that, regional culture and language differences have also exacerbated the gap between genres. In terms of inheritance concepts, although the deep reverence and persistence of some opera practitioners for traditions reflect the respect and inheritance of cultural heritage, in some cases, this persistence may also become a potential obstacle to innovation and integration, making opera art cautious and conservative when exploring new paths. Moreover, if opera is isolated from other art forms, it will limit the innovative development of opera itself and deprive the audience of the diversified needs of appreciating artistic works. In this context, the historical practice of Xi'an Opera Exhibition undoubtedly provides us with valuable inspiration and reference. At that grand art event, opera works of different genres and various forms of drama works gathered together and were displayed on the same stage, which not only showed their own style and charm, but also broke the boundaries between genres in mutual learning and communication. This cross-genre display mode not only brought a visual and auditory feast to the audience, giving them the opportunity to experience the unique charm of operas from all over the world up close, but also built a diversified communication and learning platform for opera practitioners, so that they can more intuitively recognize the commonalities and differences between different genres and different art forms, and open up a broader idea and space for the innovative development of opera art.

The Xi'an Opera Exhibition tells us that by strengthening exchanges and cooperation between different types of operas and various art forms, opera art is fully capable of crossing boundaries and achieving more diverse and inclusive development.

Huangmei Opera's unique and diversified development experience since the founding of the People's Republic of China has provided us with valuable examples of opera development. Its development process is full of the absorption and integration of multiple cultures. It not only adheres to its own artistic traditions and essence, but also actively draws on the advantages of other art forms with an open mind, and constantly innovates and improves itself. From cooperation with movies to deep integration with dramas, film and television dramas, every cross-border attempt of Huangmei

Opera has injected new vitality and connotation into it, greatly improving its artistic expression and viewing experience. These efforts have not only broadened the artistic boundaries of Huangmei Opera, but also made it glow with new vitality and vitality in modern society, becoming a bridge connecting tradition and modernity. To some extent, the experience of Huangmei Opera's development is consistent with the inspiration given by Xi'an Opera Exhibition. They both emphasize the diversity, inclusiveness and innovation of culture, as well as the role of a bridge connecting tradition and modernity.

From a historical perspective, Huangmei Opera has experienced two brilliant developments after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Each round of its development is inseparable from the combination and innovation of Huangmei Opera with other art forms. The creation of Huangmei Opera drama films is the first brilliant achievement of Huangmei Opera. Classic works such as Huangmei Opera drama films "The Fairy and the Cowherd", "The Female Prince Consort" and "The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl" have caused a sensation across the country as soon as they were released. They are like a fresh spring breeze that blows across the country and attracts widespread attention and enthusiastic responses across the country. Through the mass media of film, the unique artistic charm of Huangmei Opera is displayed, and Huangmei Opera is promoted to a wider audience group. It not only "provides a precious paradigm for newcomers of Huangmei Opera and preserves fresh materials for the study of Huangmei Opera [3]." It also establishes a solid artistic status for Huangmei Opera. Huangmei Opera performance art masters such as Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang have made great contributions to the success of Huangmei Opera drama films. Through the screen, Huangmei Opera art has become an eternal classic, and has provided valuable learning examples and performance paradigms for later Huangmei Opera newcomers, preserving fresh and precious first-hand information.

The mutual learning and integration of Huangmei Opera with drama, film and television drama has brought Huangmei Opera a second glory. Huangmei Opera has absorbed the more realistic dramatic features of drama, film and television drama, and has produced many Huangmei Opera TV dramas since the 1980s. For example, Huangmei Opera TV dramas such as Yan Fengying, Diao Chan, Xiao Ci Dian, Huangshan Love and Yaozhi Xinghua Village, etc., combine the artistic characteristics of Huangmei Opera and TV dramas to form a novel and unique performance form. This innovation not only broadened the dissemination channels of Huangmei Opera, but also "adapted to the needs of modern society and fully satisfied the convenient individualized cultural consumption" through the modern media of TV dramas. It has won more audiences for Huangmei Opera [4]. The outstanding performances of Huangmei Opera masters such as Ma Lan and Huang Xinde during this period have further established the status of Huangmei Opera in the hearts of modern audiences. These Huangmei Opera TV dramas not only retain the original singing charm and performance style of Huangmei Opera, but also cleverly combine the narrative techniques and visual presentation of TV dramas to form a novel performance form that is both traditional and modern, both classical and fashionable. This unique artistic style not

only allows the audience to immerse themselves in the appreciation of Huangmei Opera art, but also allows them to experience richer emotional expression and visual enjoyment, giving new vitality to the traditional art form of Huangmei Opera.

Actively introducing and rehearsing excellent foreign plays is also the unique feature of Xi'an Opera Exhibition. This makes the drama content of Xi'an Opera Exhibition rich and diverse. In the drama lineup of Xi'an Opera Exhibition, there are not only progressive plays such as "Old Home", "Sunrise" and "Home" that reflect domestic reality. There are also foreign plays such as "La Traviata" and "Thunderstorm" that satirize reality. "Its scale, the number of participating teams, the richness of content, and the length of time can all be said to be "unprecedented [5]." This inclusive attitude allows Xi'an Opera Exhibition to have a global vision and mind while maintaining local characteristics. In this diversified drama atmosphere, the audience's choice of repertoire has been greatly expanded, and their exchange of ideas is no longer limited. Instead, they can freely explore and share their insights and feelings about drama art in a more open and inclusive environment. This not only provides the audience with a richer artistic experience, but also provides a broad stage and opportunity for drama people, allowing them to constantly exercise and improve themselves in practice, and eventually grow into excellent drama talents.

Actively introducing excellent foreign repertoires and integrating them with local opera art is also an important way for Chinese opera to continue to innovate and develop. Taking Huangmei Opera as an example, by introducing and adapting excellent foreign repertoires, it not only enriched the artistic expression of Huangmei Opera, but also played an important role in international cultural exchanges. In 1986, the Huangmei Opera Theater of Anhui Province launched the Huangmei Opera version of Shakespeare's play "Much Ado About Nothing". In the same year, the play was invited to participate in the first China Shakespeare Festival held in Shanghai. Soon after, it was recommended to perform in Beijing, and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom watched the performance. Combining Shakespeare's classic works with the unique singing and performance style of Huangmei Opera brings a brand new artistic experience to the audience. This cross-cultural artistic fusion not only shows the artistic charm of Huangmei Opera, but also promotes the exchange and understanding of Chinese and Western cultures. Similarly, the Huangmei Opera musical "The Return of the Lady" launched by Wu Qiong Drama Studio in 2012 and the Huangmei Opera lyrical comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream" performed by Zaifen Huangmei Theater in 2018 are both successful cases of trying to combine Huangmei Opera with Western drama. These works, while retaining the traditional charm of Huangmei Opera, incorporate the concepts and performance techniques of modern drama, giving Huangmei Opera new vitality and vigor. The success of these performances not only connects the humanistic thoughts of Chinese opera with those of Western drama, but also explores the scope and core of the aesthetic value of opera in the cultural integration.

Connecting the Xi'an Opera Exhibition with the development of Huangmei Opera, it is not difficult to find that

if Chinese opera wants to continue to develop in modern society, it must maintain an innovative and open attitude. The evolution of Chinese opera has been a magnificent epic of continuous exploration and change since ancient times. It is neither a static convention nor a predetermined outcome. With the rapid development of modern information technology and the growing demand of the people for diversified and high-quality cultural life, Chinese opera is facing unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Against this background, the spirit of daring to try and not afraid of trial and error has undoubtedly become the key to promoting the sustainable development of opera art. Trial and error is not a simple wrong attempt, but a courage and wisdom to explore the unknown and break through tradition. In the modernization process of opera art, every attempt may be a challenge to tradition, or it may be a door to a new realm. It is these successful or failed attempts that have become the source of power for the continuous advancement of opera art, prompting us to constantly break through self-imposed limitations, keep up with the pace of the times, and meet the growing cultural needs of the people.

### **3. Emphasis on the Social Responsibility and Social Functionality of Drama**

#### **3.1 Chinese Opera has Always had a Strong Social Function**

During the Anti-Japanese War, drama, as an art form with a strong sense of social responsibility and appeal, was given a special historical mission. The holding of the Xi'an Opera Exhibition not only greatly broadened the channels for ordinary people to contact drama during the war, provided them with more opportunities to watch drama, enriched their spiritual and cultural life, but also invisibly inspired the patriotic feelings and national pride deep in the hearts of the people. At the same time, the Xi'an Opera Exhibition is also constantly reminding and spurring every dramatist: in this special period, drama is not only a form of artistic expression, but also a social responsibility and historical responsibility.

Studying the Xi'an Opera Exhibition and paying attention to the social functionality of Chinese opera are of great significance to promoting the prosperity and development of Chinese opera. As an important part of traditional culture, Chinese opera has shouldered the lofty mission of inheritance and enlightenment since ancient times. It uses a unique and vivid way to bring traditional Chinese virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity, righteousness, courtesy, righteousness, and shame to life on stage, and invisibly receives the nourishment of virtue and the baptism of the soul. The storylines and characters in opera often contain profound moral implications, which can guide the audience to establish positive values and outlooks on life. As an intangible cultural heritage, Chinese opera also carries a rich historical and cultural heritage. Through opera performances, the audience can learn about ancient historical events, legends of characters, folk customs, etc., thereby deepening their understanding and knowledge of their own culture and enhancing people's cognition and recognition of their own cultural roots.

For example, the Huangmei Opera "The Fairy Couple", which was edited and adapted after the founding of New China, has



become a shining pearl on the opera stage with its unique artistic charm and profound social significance. In this play, the hero Dong Yong is given a brand-new image of a farmer. He is simple, hardworking and kind. These qualities deeply attracted the Seven Fairies, making her give up the prosperity and dignity of the heaven and resolutely choose to spend the fireworks of the world with Dong Yong. Dong Yong's simplicity and truthfulness are his most dazzling qualities, and are also the source of the Seven Fairies' love and affection for him. On the stage, Dong Yong's image is portrayed vividly. His hard-working figure and honest smile make people feel the love and persistence of an ordinary farmer for life. The Seven Fairies' love for Dong Yong is even more passionate and active. She ignores the differences in status and class and bravely pursues her true love. This firmness and persistence is undoubtedly a huge challenge and breakthrough in the social background at that time. When New China was just founded, feudal marriage and love concepts still existed to a certain extent. Marriage is often seen as a marriage between families and a match between families, which often ignores personal wishes and emotions. The Seven Fairies chose to abandon this outdated concept and bravely pursue their own happiness. This is not only a respect and adherence to personal emotions and wishes, but also a call and promotion for social progress. The image of the Seven Fairies has therefore become a symbol of marriage freedom and gender equality advocated and respected by society at that time. Through the Huangmei Opera "The Fairy Couple", people have seen the beauty and power of love and felt the importance of personal emotions and wishes, which undoubtedly played a positive role in promoting the renewal and progress of social concepts.

With the changes and progress of society, the social functionality of Chinese opera is also constantly evolving. Its social functionality is constantly enriching and developing to adapt to the needs of the times and changes in the audience. Take Huangmei Opera as an example. This form of opera originated from the folk and rooted in the countryside. With the migration of rural people to cities, its audience group has also achieved unprecedented expansion. This change not only brought a broader stage and more audiences to Huangmei Opera, but also put forward new challenges and requirements for its content and form. In order to adapt to this change, Huangmei Opera has actively adjusted and innovated the content of the repertoire while maintaining its traditional charm and unique charm. From early classic works such as "The Legend of the Goddess" and "The Female Prince Consort", it began to try to introduce more literary masterpieces and modern themes. Huangmei Opera works such as "Dream of Red Mansions", "Peach Blossom Fan", "Home", "Spring", and "Autumn" adapted from literary masterpieces have appeared. These works not only enrich the artistic expression of opera, meet the audience's growing artistic needs, but also give it a deeper ideological connotation and humanistic care. Through delicate character portrayals and in-depth social analysis, these new works have triggered the audience's thinking about human nature, destiny, and social reality. They have brought the audience closer to literary classics in a unique way and further enhanced the social responsibility and social functionality of Huangmei Opera.

### 3.2 Respecting and Pursuing True Feelings is the Key to

### the Development of the Social Functionality of Modern Opera

In modern society, as an art form, the social responsibility of opera is no longer to simply convey orders or dogmas, but to inspire the audience's inner resonance and deep thinking through exquisite artistic techniques. Contemporary opera works should have profound ideological connotations and humanistic care to touch the hearts of the audience and guide the audience to think deeply about social reality, life value and other issues. Only in this way can opera works truly play their social functions and have a positive impact on the audience. Therefore, opera creators need to dig deep into social reality, pay attention to the actual lives of the people, and cannot apply fantasy to their creations. At the same time, opera creators need to pay attention to the comprehensive artistry and appreciation of opera, and use the coordination of sound, light, electricity and stage art to allow the audience to directly feel the meaning while enjoying the performance.

The reason why Xi'an Opera Exhibition has an important position in the history of Chinese drama development is not only because it provides a platform for dramatists to display and communicate, but more importantly, it is like a bridge that closely connects drama art with ordinary audiences, creating an unprecedented opportunity for the latter to get close to and deeply understand the essence and purpose of drama. On the stage of Xi'an Opera Exhibition, although the types and performance forms of various dramas are different, the creators' attitudes towards the war of resistance and their keen attention to the mission of saving the nation transcend the repertoire. This is a powerful spiritual force that deeply shakes the hearts of every audience and makes the audience no longer regard drama as an untouchable "concept".

As a continuation of traditional art, modern opera leaves a strong conceptual impression. This conceptuality may come from the long historical background of opera, complex performance forms, and its deep connection with traditional culture. The cultural connotations and values conveyed by modern opera are also different from the cognition of contemporary young people. As a carrier of traditional culture, opera often emphasizes traditional virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and patriotism. However, the development of modern society and the change of lifestyle have made young people no longer generally accept and identify with these concepts. This makes it difficult for young people to resonate with the content of traditional opera. Compared with entertainment forms such as TV dramas and movies that are closer to the tastes of young people, the singing, posture and performance rhythm of opera also seem somewhat unique and difficult to understand. Young people will feel unfamiliar and alienated if they are not interested in a deep understanding of opera. Respect and pursuit of true feelings are the cornerstones for opera art to transcend the boundaries of time and space and establish emotional connections with audiences of different times. It requires creators to not only deeply explore the inner world of characters and accurately grasp the subtle changes in emotions during the creation process, but also present these emotions with a sincere attitude to avoid empty lyricism and false sensationalism. Only in this way can the audience feel the sincerity and depth of emotions while enjoying the opera,

and thus resonate and generate thinking.

The Huangmei Opera Theater of Anhui Province created the Huangmei Opera "Thunderstorm" based on Cao Yu's drama "Thunderstorm" as a model of innovation and reform of opera. Its great success after the performance is no accident. On the basis of maintaining a deep respect and delicate pursuit of true feelings, the play bravely took the step of modern exploration and realized the deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional opera forms. By adjusting the order of appearance and relationship of the characters, the relationship between Sifeng and Zhou Ping was explained first, and the core of "Thunderstorm" was reinterpreted from the perspective of "fate". Since the relationship between Zhou Ping and Sifeng is the only one that can reflect the cycle of cause and effect, "brother-sister incest" has become the explicit theme of "Thunderstorm" to express "fate". [6] " By highlighting the insignificance of ordinary people and the impermanence of fate, the audience can feel the helplessness and sadness of life more deeply. It gives the work a deeper ideological connotation and humanistic care.

Huangmei Opera "Thunderstorm" is a successful work of innovation and reform. Its success lies first in maintaining respect and pursuit of human "emotions", and secondly in actively seeking innovation and reform in modernity, focusing on the complexity and diversity of human nature. Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of opera, combined with advanced stage technology, it presents a profound Huangmei Opera work, guiding the audience to have profound thinking, and also attracting young audiences with its new form, injecting new vitality into the inheritance and development of Huangmei Opera. As an important part of human culture, opera has always been committed to reflecting core values such as human nature and human feelings. Through in-depth excavation and delicate expression of true feelings, opera can more accurately reveal the complexity and diversity of human nature. On the one hand, it can be easy to understand and guide the audience to think about eternal themes such as life, love, and friendship. On the other hand, it can also enhance the audience's humanistic literacy and aesthetic level. On this basis, creators can combine modern means and integrate modern concepts to obtain more, younger, and more thoughtful audiences, and then develop the social responsibility and social functionality of opera art in the new era.

"Xi'an Opera Exhibition" not only injected new vitality into the opera world at that time, but also provided valuable inspiration for today's opera workers. As practitioners of opera development in the new era, we must adhere to the eclectic and diversified development attitude, actively absorb the advantages and elements of other art forms, innovate and integrate, and dare to try and make mistakes, so as to meet the aesthetic needs of modern audiences and make opera art more colorful; secondly, we must pay attention to the social responsibility and social functionality of drama, pay attention to social reality in the process of creation and performance, refuse dogmatic preaching, reflect the true feelings of the people, convey positive spiritual power, and contribute to the progress and development of society; in addition, we must pay attention to the cultivation and expansion of the audience, and through holding various forms of opera performances,

lectures, exhibitions and other activities, let the audience have more opportunities to contact and understand opera, and feel the unique charm and value of opera. At the same time, we should use modern fashionable means, such as the Internet and social media, to promote and popularize opera more widely, thereby attracting more attention and participation from young audiences, and firmly promote the prosperity and development of Chinese opera art.

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