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Watershed, Immigration, and Vocal Music: Field Research on the Flow of Yuediao Theatrical Troupes and Localization of Vocal Music in the Middle Reaches of the Han River

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Abstract: The middle reaches of the Han River, as a transitional zone for the integration of southern and northern opera cultures, are the core field for the southern transmission and localization evolution of the Central Plains Yuediao. The existing research on Yuediao mainly focuses on the origin of opera genres and singing techniques, lacking systematic research on the correlation between watershed geography, immigration history, and vocal changes. This article takes Xiangyang, Laohekou, Gucheng and other areas in the middle reaches of the Han River as the research scope. Based on first-hand field research data, it explores the core driving forces of the flow of Yuediao theatrical troupes and the evolution mechanism of localized singing from three dimensions: watershed space, immigrant migration, and local customs. Research has shown that the Han River system has built a spatial corridor for the dissemination of traditional Chinese opera, Ming and Qing immigrants have provided a carrier for cultural heritage, and local customs have shaped the survival ecology of traditional Chinese opera. Together, these three factors have promoted the comprehensive regional reconstruction of the Central Plains Yuediao from the flow of troupes, accompaniment system, and aesthetic core to dialect phonetics, forming a unique Xianghe Yuediao vocal system.

Keywords: Middle reaches of the Han River; Watershed space; Migration of immigrants; Yuediao theatrical troupes; Localization of singing style

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1. Introduction

The middle reaches of the Han River cover core areas such as Xiangyang, Laohekou, and Gucheng. It is a transitional zone connecting the Central Plains opera culture with the Jingchu and Qinba opera cultures. Its special watershed location makes it an important venue for the southern transmission of northern opera and

the iteration of local opera. Yuediao originated from the Central Plains region and gradually spread to the middle reaches of the Han River basin through population mobility and commercial shipping during the Ming and Qing dynasties. After hundreds of years of regional adaptation and cultural integration, it has formed a distinctive form of Xianghe Yuediao that is different from Henan Yuediao. The current academic research on Yuediao mainly focuses on the tracing of theatrical genres, singing techniques, and compilation of plays, with relatively little systematic correlation between watershed geography, immigration history, and vocal changes. It neglects the underlying driving role of geographic space and population migration in the localization of traditional Chinese opera. This article is based on first-hand field research data, breaking away from a single perspective of traditional Chinese opera art research, and combining the perspectives of human geography and folk culture to analyze the deep logic of the environment, immigration activities, and the flow of Yuediao theatrical troupes in the middle reaches of the Han River Basin, as well as the localization of vocal styles. It explores the unique laws of regional opera evolution and helps to explore and revitalize the cultural value of traditional opera in the region.

2. Geographical and cultural foundation of the middle reaches of the Han River and the reasons for the mobility of the Yuediao theatrical troupes

2.1. Watershed water system: spatial carrier for cross-regional flow of Yuediao theatrical troupes

The middle reaches of the Han River have a crisscrossing water system and accessible waterways. Since ancient times, it has been a core corridor for regional trade, population circulation, and cultural dissemination, providing natural geographical support for the cross-regional flow and global dissemination of the Yuediao theatrical troupes. The main stream of the Han River runs through core areas such as Laohekou, Xiangyang, and Gucheng, and its tributaries are densely distributed in towns and villages, forming a water-land transportation network. Compared with land transportation blocked by mountains, the convenience of water transportation greatly reduces the touring and mobility costs of opera troupes. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, commerce flourished in the middle reaches of the Han River, with numerous docks and towns along the coast. Business and commerce gathered, and the market was bustling, which gave rise to a strong demand for folk opera appreciation. Various theater troupes relied on waterways to tour along the river and land, forming a fixed mobile performance route. The Yuediao theatrical troupes initially entered northwest Hubei from southwest Henan along the Han River waterway, with Matou Town as its core foothold, gradually radiating and spreading to surrounding villages, breaking down spatial barriers to regional cultural dissemination. The spatial pattern of the watershed belt presents the characteristics of gathering along the riverbank and infiltrating into inland rural areas for the dissemination of Yuediao. Coastal towns have become the core nodes for the landing and rooting of Yuediao, while remote villages have become the extension areas for the regular tour of the troupe. This flow pattern, formed by relying on the water system, lays the foundation for the distribution pattern of Yuediao in the middle reaches of the Han River, and also provides a wide range of communication audiences and regional scenes for the subsequent localization and integration of singing styles.

2.2. Migration of immigrants: The mass media of cross-disciplinary landing and rooting in China

The large-scale population migration during the Ming and Qing dynasties was the core cultural driving

force for the introduction of Yuediao from the Central Plains to the middle reaches of the Han River and its implementation and survival. The immigrant group became the core carrier for the dissemination, inheritance, and transformation of traditional Chinese opera. In history, the middle reaches of the Han River, due to its vast territory, sparse population, and advantageous location, have repeatedly accepted immigrants from the Central Plains, Qin and Jin regions, especially the large-scale influx of immigrants from Henan into Xiangyang and Laohekou areas. This not only brought the production and lifestyle of the Central Plains region, but also carried the original Vietnamese opera culture and folk aesthetic habits. The village communities formed by the settlement of immigrant groups have formed a stable audience circle for traditional Chinese opera. Folk activities such as worshipping gods, weddings and funerals, festivals, and market fairs all rely on traditional Chinese opera performances as important carriers, providing a living environment for the long-term residency and performance of the Yuediao troupes. Unlike the flow of traditional Chinese opera brought about by short-term commerce, the settled lifestyle of immigrants has achieved the normalization and inheritance of Yuediao. The original Yuediao singing style, plays, and performance forms have been passed down from generation to generation in the immigrant community. At the same time, the long-term coexistence and cultural integration between immigrants and local indigenous residents have enabled the Central Plains Yuediao to no longer be limited to immigrant circles, gradually integrating into the local folk cultural system, achieving initial cultural adaptation in crowd interaction, and accumulating a mass foundation and cultural conditions for the subsequent localization transformation of singing styles [1].

2.3. Local folk customs: Cultural support for the survival and development of Yuediao theatrical troupes

The unique Jingchu local folk culture in the middle reaches of the Han River has built a cultural ecology for the long-term existence and continuous flow of the Yuediao theatrical troupes, promoting the deep integration of foreign theatrical genres into local social life [2]. The folk customs in the northwest region of Hubei combine the simplicity and richness of Central Plains folk customs with the agility and gentleness of Jingchu folk customs. Folk activities such as temple fairs, festivals, and clan celebrations are flourishing, and opera performances are an indispensable core content in various folk scenes. The local folk have always advocated for rituals, entertainment, gods, singing, dancing, and praying for blessings. The demand for watching traditional Chinese opera is strong, forming a local cultural atmosphere of "Yuediao in every village". The strong demand from the folk has prompted Yuediao troupes to continuously optimize their mobile tour modes and carry out regular performances in rural areas. In the long-term process of adapting to local customs, Yuediao theatrical troupes actively adjust the content and form of performances to fit the local folk scenes, adapt to the different performance needs of small rural festivals and large temple fairs, and gradually break free from the constraints of traditional Chinese opera in the Central Plains. At the same time, the support of local clans and gentry for folk opera, as well as the improvement of the apprenticeship system for folk opera, has led to a continuous increase in the number of Yuediao troupes and an increasingly stable inheritance system. They have gradually transformed from migrant troupes to resident troupes, completing the core transformation from "transit performances" to "rooting in the countryside".

3. The localization generation of Yuediao singing in the middle reaches of the Han River from the perspective of cultural integration

3.1. Reconstruction of vocal base: The transition of sound quality from Zhongyuan Bangzi to Xianghe Yuediao

The localization of Yuediao singing in the middle reaches of the Han River is first reflected in the regional reconstruction of the vocal base, realizing the transformation from the high-pitched and vigorous Bangzi tune of the Central Plains to the gentle and long-lasting characteristic vocal tune of Xianghe. The original Yuediao of the Central Plains is based on the northern dialect, with a high-pitched and vigorous singing style, a strong rhythm, a regular and tense style, and is suitable for the aesthetic of the open northern region. After being introduced into the middle reaches of the Han River, influenced by local hydrology, climate, dialect phonetics, and folk music, there was a systematic improvement in vocal tone and vocal techniques. The dialect of the middle reaches of the Han River belongs to the southwestern Mandarin Hubei region, with a soft and gentle tone, without the jerky and firm characteristics of northern dialects, directly changing the pronunciation, rhyme and line style of singing. On the basis of inheriting the original Yuediao style framework, local artists weaken sharp high notes and firm jerks, optimize the vocal techniques of combining true and false sounds, and make the singing style have the dual characteristics of high-pitched transparency and lingering elegance. At the same time, incorporating the melodic elements of mountain songs, flower drum plays, and Xiangyang tunes from the Han River Basin, elongating the rhythm of the tail tune, and forming a melodious and soothing vocal feature with high tail notes, gradually shaping the Xianghe Yuediao vocal system that is different from Henan Yuediao, and constructing a unique Yuediao timbre base for the middle reaches of the Han River.

3.2. Accompaniment system adaptation: Regional instruments empower singing with local charm

The regional transformation of the accompaniment system in traditional Chinese opera is an important carrier for the localization and implementation of Yuediao singing. The adjustment of instrument configuration and performance techniques further strengthens the regional aesthetic characteristics of Han River Yuediao. The Central Plains Yue style accompaniment is centered around Bangzi and Banhu, with a strong rhythm and heavy tone, highlighting the tough texture of the cavity. After being introduced to the middle reaches of the Han River, Yuediao troupe artists combined local folk instrumental performance traditions to reconstruct the Yuediao accompaniment system. On the basis of retaining the core main instrument of the four-stringed instrument, they added commonly used local folk instruments such as Yueqin, bamboo flute, sheng, etc., weakening the strong rhythmic percussion of Bangzi and adding a soft and layered feeling to the instrumental accompaniment [4]. In terms of performance techniques, we abandon the original rapid and compact accompaniment rhythm and adapt to the local soothing and gentle singing rhythm, incorporating the sliding and vibrato performance techniques of Jingchu folk music to deeply match the accompaniment melody with the localized singing style. At the same time, combined with the unique playing style of folk gongs and drums in the Han River Basin, the rhythm arrangement of opera percussion music is optimized to meet the atmosphere requirements of local folk performance scenes. The localization and adaptation of the accompaniment system allows Yuediao singing to break free from the rigid characteristics of northern opera, forming a unique singing style that combines rigidity and softness, and conforms to the aesthetic and folk atmosphere of the Han River region.

3.3. Aesthetic core iteration: Regional culture shapes vocal emotional expression

The deep infiltration of regional culture promotes the localization and iteration of the aesthetic core of Yuediao singing, achieving a transition from northern narrative aesthetics to Han River local aesthetics. The singing style of Zhongyuan Yuediao focuses on the narrative of family and country, loyalty and righteousness, with strong and straightforward emotional expression, full of tension, and in line with the bold and simple humanistic temperament of the northern region. The middle reaches of the Han River have the regional characteristics of warm mountains and rivers, blending north and south. Local culture advocates a gentle, implicit, and simple realistic aesthetic style, while folk opera focuses more on the narrative expression of common life, local customs, and joys and sorrows. In the long-term localization development, the Han River Yuediao gradually weakened the grand and tragic emotional expression, optimized the melody rhythm and singing style, and adapted to the narrative of local life plays. Artists finely adjust the tone, speed, pitch fluctuations, and intensity of breath to delicately depict the everyday emotions of ordinary characters, such as endurance, tenderness, joy, and melancholy. They abandon the emotional expression of the original singing style, which is open and close, and strong and outward, and use a warm, introverted, delicate, realistic, and soothing natural singing style that conforms to the emotional cognition and aesthetic habits of local people [3]. For example, in rural-themed plays, the singing style is gentle and rounded, the emotional expression is subtle and sincere, without excessive exaggeration of tension, and is more in line with the simple texture of rural life; In folk sacrificial plays, the singing style is calm, solemn, melodious, and soothing, which is suitable for the folk core of praying for blessings, entertaining gods, and maintaining harmony with neighbors. At the same time, combining with the aesthetic preferences of local people, simplifying some complex formulaic singing styles, enhancing the popularity and transmission of singing styles, and deeply adapting Yuediao singing styles to the local cultural context of the Han River Basin, completing the transformation from foreign opera vocal styles to local folk vocal styles.

3.4. Integration of dialect phonology: Regional reshaping of pronunciation and rhythm

Dialects are the core underlying logic of localizing vocal arts. The phonological system of Southwest Mandarin in the middle reaches of the Han River has reshaped the pronunciation, rhyme, and intonation of Yuediao, becoming the most intuitive artistic feature that distinguishes it from Central Plains Yuediao [4]. The Central Plains Yuediao relies on the Central Plains Mandarin system, with a strong tone and distinct four-tone fluctuations. The pronunciation is firm and powerful, and the lines are mostly based on the tone of each character, with a regular and rigid rhythm. The dialects in core areas such as Xiangyang, Laohekou, and Gucheng in the middle reaches of the Han River belong to the Southwest Mandarin Hubei region, which has essential phonetic differences from the Central Plains Mandarin, providing a core phonetic foundation for the localization and reconstruction of Yue style singing. The overall tone of the local dialect is gentle and smooth, with gentle fluctuations in tone, without the rigid falling tone, hard bending, and strong jerking of northern dialects. The yin and yang tones are gentle and soft, with natural and smooth transitions between rising and falling tones. The pronunciation is rounded and relaxed, with weak spout strength. The spoken rhythm is gentle and relaxed, with a strong sense of daily life. At the same time, the local dialect retains a large number of Jingchu local spoken vocabulary, supporting words, and unique oral intonation and rhythm, forming an independent phonetic system that is different from Central Plains Mandarin. This phonetic difference directly promotes the comprehensive transformation of cross-tone pronunciation, rhyme, line tone, and supporting tone. In the long-term practice of local singing and intergenerational inheritance, Han River Yuediao artists

have gradually abandoned the rigid pronunciation and rigid rhyme patterns of Central Plains Yuediao, and fully adapted to the pronunciation habits of Southwest Mandarin and the Hubei region to reshape the vocal system. In terms of pronunciation processing, weaken the strong nozzle force and tight head force of the northern singing style, soften the sharp edges of the character sound, optimize the connection processing of the beginning, belly, and end of the character, make the character sound full, round, and transition naturally, and eliminate the rigid and abrupt auditory feeling; In terms of rhyme processing, we abandon the concise and straightforward short rhyme and direct contraction mode of the Central Plains Yuediao, adapt to the soothing and long oral rhythm of local dialects, extend the rhyme and drag, and make the residual rhyme of the lines long and coherent [5]. At the same time, the artist cleverly integrates the natural intonation and light-to-heavy rhythm of local daily spoken language into the singing melody, breaking the rigid phonological framework of native overtones. Based on the rhythm of dialect spoken language, the rhythm of supporting words, dragging, and pausing is fine-tuned, making the singing melody conform to the language habits and auditory cognition of local people. And the deep integration of dialect phonetics has enabled Han River Yuediao to break free from the phonetic barriers of foreign theatrical genres, achieving a deep adaptation between singing style and regional language and culture, forming a down-to-earth and localized style, greatly enhancing the dissemination and recognition of the theatrical genre in the local community.

4. Summary

This study confirms that the Han River system corridor provides natural spatial support for cross regional flow and global dissemination, and constructs a communication pattern of gathering along the river and spreading to rural areas; The settlement style migration of immigrants from the Central Plains during the Ming and Qing dynasties provided a core population carrier for the survival and intergenerational inheritance of Yuediao, promoting the integration of foreign opera into local community life; The local folk culture that blends north and south in the middle reaches of the Han River provides a stable cultural ecology for the transformation and development of the Yuediao theatrical troupes, as well as artistic improvement, and realizes the identity transformation from transit tours to local roots. Under the joint action of multiple factors, the middle reaches of the Han River Yuediao has completed a comprehensive localization reconstruction. Through reshaping the foundation of the vocal system, optimizing the accompaniment system, iterating the aesthetic core, and integrating dialect phonetics, it has departed from the artistic paradigm of Central Plains Yuediao and formed a Xianghe Yuediao vocal system that combines both northern and southern characteristics and is in line with the characteristics of the Han River region. This article breaks through the single research perspective of traditional Chinese opera art, constructs a localization research framework of "space population culture", enriches the research results of basin opera and immigrant opera, and provides new research ideas for interpreting the internal logic of the integration of North-South opera culture.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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