

Education and Literacy in Yue Opera: Historical Development in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China

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ABSTRACT

Yue Opera holds the distinction of being the second largest opera in China and is celebrated as the country's second National opera. This study aims to examine education and literacy of historical development in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China. Through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing musicology and ethnomusicology. It investigates the historical development, cultural contexts, and artistic characteristics of Chinese Yue Opera. The research methodology involves conducting interviews with key informants who have extensive experience and expertise in Chinese Yue Opera, as well as observing live performances. The collected data is analyzed and interpreted in accordance with existing literature and theoretical principles. The findings of the study trace the evolution of Chinese Yue Opera from its origins as a rap art form to an opera prototype, and its subsequent development into the "Small Song Class" and "Shaoxing Opera." The comprehensive examination of the cultural and artistic aspects of education and literacy in Chinese Yue Opera provides valuable insights into this traditional Chinese opera genre. The study sheds light on its historical significance, artistic expressions, and cultural heritage. This research enriches our understanding and deepens our appreciation of the distinctive artistry encapsulated within Chinese Yue Opera.

Key words: Yue Opera, Cultural significance, Musicology, Ethnomusicology, Traditional Chinese Opera

INTRODUCTION

Yue Opera holds the distinction of being the second largest opera in China and is celebrated as the country's second National opera (Jiang, 2011; Liu, 2016; Liu, 2018; Ma, 2022; Liu, 2023). It is also recognized as the most widely spread local opera, commonly referred to as "Chinese opera" beyond China's borders. As one of the five major Chinese opera genres, Yue Opera originated in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, and has flourished both domestically and globally. Characterized by lyrical tunes, beautiful vocals, and captivating performances, Yue Opera has garnered popularity, particularly in regions such as Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu in southern China. Additionally, Yue Opera has been acknowledged as one of the first batch of national intangible cultural heritages. However, since the 1980s, Yue Opera has faced a significant decline, necessitating urgent efforts for its preservation and transmission (Stock, 2003; Jiang, 2009; Xi, 2017; Mu, 2022; Juan et al., 2023).

The development of Yue Opera encompasses a long and diverse history, traversing various stages of evolution. Tracing its roots back to the precursor "Singing books on the Ground," Yue Opera transitioned to the stage in 1906, undergoing transformations including the "little song class,"

"Shaoxing Literary Drama male class," "Shaoxing Literary Drama female class," and eventually becoming "Shaoxing Opera female." This progression led to the emergence of a local opera with national influence, spreading from Zhejiang to Shanghai. It was on September 17, 1925, that the term "Yue Opera" was officially adopted, appearing for the first time in a newspaper advertisement featuring a troupe performing in Small World Amusement Park. Shaoxing, the birthplace of Yue Opera, boasts a rich history and scenic landscapes, attracting numerous notable figures throughout ancient and modern times. The environment has fostered the emergence of exceptional talents and a rich folk culture, providing a deep foundation and fertile soil for the birth of the Art of Shaoxing Opera (Lim, 2010; Lovrick & Siu, 2011; Lei, 2011; Chen, 2022).

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, Yue Opera experienced an era of comprehensive prosperity and development under the care and attention of the Party. Performances of Yue Opera proliferated throughout the country and gained international recognition, captivating audiences in countries including France, Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, as well as across Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and Macao. The international cultural

community took notice, establishing Yue Opera as a major national opera. During this period, a plethora of new plays emerged, and numerous young talents emerged, showcasing their skills on stage. The multitude of singing styles within Yue Opera added vibrancy and diversity to this art form. Guided by the Party's policies on literature and art, and with the dedication of its artists, Yue Opera won the hearts of audiences, paving the way for its prosperity and development through sincere and delicate performances, euphonious and pleasant singing, and beautiful lyrical styles (Zhiliang, 2002; Feng, 2017; Yu & Chonpairot, 2021).

The singing style of Yue Opera possesses unique characteristics that hold significant research value. Through vocalization, timbre variations, and embellishments, singers create different charm and aesthetic beauty. The rise and fall of the key, the drawl between and at the end of sentences, and the constant repetition and melodic changes reflect the artistic characteristics of different singing schools. Each faction within Yue Opera employs distinctive techniques and skills in organizing tunes, forming their own distinct styles. The melodies and rhythms are carefully crafted to establish their unique artistic foundations (Jianxin, 2006b; Siu & Lovrick, 2013).

The genres of Yue Opera encompass a wide range of artistic elements, incorporating drama, singing, recitation, and acting, all reflected in the creation of typical artistic images. Among these elements, the singing style holds the highest level of originality, prominence, and influence, earning it the designation of "genre singing style." In 1942, renowned Yueju opera performer Yuan Xuefen spearheaded a comprehensive reform known as "New Yue Opera." This reform transformed the lively and dynamic singing style of the former "little song class" into a plaintive and soothing singing style known as "chi diao tune" and "xian-xia tune," ushering Yue Opera's singing art into a new era. All the genres within Yue Opera have developed and flourished based on the foundation established by these two main tones (Xiaoyan, 2006; Qifei & Chuangprakhon, 2022; Guocheng & Sensai, 2022).

In conclusion, Yue Opera has undergone a remarkable journey over the past century since its humble beginnings in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province in 1906. It has evolved from a modest folk drama into the second largest opera in China. As a local opera rooted in dialect, Yue Opera's growth has not been without challenges. Therefore, the study of Yue Opera's development offers a deeper understanding of its cultural significance. Furthermore, Yue Opera's popularity as an opera art, particularly its widely sung singing style, has laid a solid foundation for its century-long success. Hence, an investigation into Yue Opera's singing art, understanding its characteristics and types, provides a broader perspective on the art of Yue Opera. This endeavor is of immense significance in promoting and preserving Yue Opera's excellent traditional culture.

Given the extensive history and unique characteristics of Yue Opera, this study aims to examine the education and literacy of historical development in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China, through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing musicology and ethnomusicology. By doing so,

it contributes to the dissemination of Yue Opera's exceptional traditional culture, while also offering valuable insights to those with an interest in Yue Opera.

Research Question

- How can the innovative integration of Yue Opera in educational contexts contribute to literacy development and cultural appreciation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The General Knowledge of Yue Opera in China

Yue Opera, one of China's five major opera genres, has a rich history that spans from its origins as the "Landing Singing book" performed by peasants to its development into the popular "little song troupe." Over time, Yue Opera absorbed influences from other genres and expanded its performances from rural areas to urban centers. The inclusion of female actors marked a significant milestone, leading to the establishment of women's classes and the rise of women in Yue Opera. The popularity of Yue Opera grew, with thousands of women's classes and a large audience base. Despite the disruptions caused by the Japanese invasion, Yue Opera persevered and eventually gained widespread acceptance and recognition. Reforms in the mid-20th century propelled Yue Opera to new heights, and it continued to flourish after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Today, Yue Opera enjoys a prominent position both within China and internationally (Jiang, 1998; Iovene, 2010).

In the mid-1930s, women's classes gained immense popularity. By 1935, there were over 20,000 women's classes with more than 400,000 performers across the country, and the total number of women's classes exceeded 200. The Japanese invasion of Zhejiang in 1938 prompted a mass migration of people to Shanghai, providing a larger audience for the performances of female classes. As the influence of Yue Opera grew, the name "Yue Opera" gained wider acceptance among audiences, media outlets, and actors, ultimately replacing other designations. In 1942, a comprehensive reform of Yue Opera was launched, resulting in notable productions such as "Lu Xun's Blessing" and the successful staging of "Xianglin Sister." With the founding of the People's Republic of China, Yue Opera experienced rapid development and entered a new stage of prosperity. Over the past few decades, Yue Opera has gained influence both domestically and internationally, earning a stellar reputation worldwide (Rao, 2011; Branner, 2014; Chen & Christie, 2023).

The General Knowledge of the Vocal Style of Yue Opera

Yue Opera has developed its unique vocal style and singing techniques over time, emphasizing the relationship between character and sound, as well as the expression of emotion through singing. The genre encompasses various singing genres, including lyric singing, narrative singing, and dramatic singing, each characterized by different tempos, melodies, and expressive qualities. Singing has always been the

primary form of performance in Yue Opera since its inception in 1906 and understanding the core element of “singing” is essential in grasping the essence of the genre. The early founders of Yue Opera genres, such as the renowned “Ten Sisters” and “Queen of Yue Opera” Yao Shuijuan, have made significant contributions to its development (Dafeng, 1981; Goldstein, 2010).

The singing tunes of Yue Opera have evolved and expanded throughout its history. The introduction of the first professional accompaniment band in 1920 marked a significant milestone, and various singing styles, such as “chidiao qiang” and the “Xian-xia-tune,” have been incorporated and enriched by different actors. The creation of new singing techniques, such as the “six-character tone,” and the exploration of male and female duets have further diversified the repertoire and performance techniques of Yue Opera. Opera combines standardized movements and refined representations of life through formula and program. The formula includes standardized choreography and repetition of life movements, while the program is derived from life but refined and beautified according to certain norms. Good artists can break through some of the limitations of programming and create their personalized normative art. The program serves as a model of beauty and contributes to the continuous transmission of opera across generations (Liu et al., 2022; Jian et al., 2022).

In Yue Opera, both the male and female roles have their own distinct vocal styles. The male role, initially portrayed by actresses, gradually became a vital component of Yue Opera. The founders of the male role genre explored singing techniques based on their voice characteristics, displaying rich emotions. However, due to its origins from the rap-based “ground singing book,” there were still some deficiencies in singing, such as a tighter larynx and limitations in the treble range. The female role genre, on the other hand, had several commonalities among the various genres, with actresses sharing a clear and articulate singing style. While their singing techniques were still in the early stages, they exhibited exceptional skills and charm (Lawson, 2014; Chan, 2019).

The Types of Chinese Opera

Chinese opera encompasses three primary art forms: folk song and dance, rap, and burlesque. Originating from primitive song and dance, Chinese opera is a comprehensive stage art with a history dating back to the Han, Tang, Song, and Jin dynasties. It integrates literature, music, dance, fine arts, martial arts, acrobatics, and performing arts, with over 360 different types. Chinese opera is characterized by the convergence of multiple art forms that express their respective individualities within a shared nature. Through centuries of development, five main opera types have emerged: Peking Opera, Yue Opera, Huangmei Opera, Pingju Opera, and Henan Opera, refer to Table 1.

Research Theory

The current study aims to investigate cultural significance of Yue Opera. It employs a multidisciplinary approach,

Table 1. The types of Chinese Opera

Opera Type	Description
Peking Opera (Bin, 2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Originated in Beijing, integrated various regional opera styles with local folk tunes. - Standardized forms in literature, performance, music, and stage art. - Diverse singing styles, with Erhuang and Xipi as the main vocal types. - Accompanied by huqin and drum instruments. - Roles categorized as sheng, dan, jing, chou, gong, wu, and liu, each with unique performance routines and skills. - Predominantly depicts historical stories, with over 1,300 traditional operas.
Yue Opera (Hong, 2006; Chen & Yu, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second-largest opera type in China, also known as Shaoxing Opera. - Originated in Sheng County, Zhejiang Province, and flourished in Shanghai. - Long lyrical style, focusing on singing with beautiful and emotionally captivating performances. - Multiple artistic schools, popular in southern regions such as Shanghai, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian, Jiangxi, and Anhui.
Huangmei Opera (Jianxin, L., 2006; Jianxin, X., 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primary local opera in Anhui, originated in Huangmei, Hubei Province. - Influenced by various folk songs and regional operas, forming unique artistic characteristics. - Known for simple and melodious singing style, expressing emotions with rich expressiveness. - Performances characterized by simplicity, meticulousness, and vividness.
Pingju Opera (Bo, 2006; Fei, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional opera of the Han nationality, popular in northern China. - Originated from Luanxian County, Hebei Province, gradually gaining popularity. - Developed with influences from Peking Opera and Hebei Wooden Clappers. - Divided into East Road and West Road, with East Road being the dominant style.
Henan Opera (Lin, 1986; Liangzhong, 1990; Jun & Yaxian, 1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Largest local opera in China, primarily performed by the Han nationality. - Originated in central China, developed from the continuous inheritance and innovation of Henan Bangzi Opera. - Known for sonorous atmosphere, rhythm, clear diction, and expressive charm. - Performances vividly convey the inner feelings of the characters.

combining musicology and ethnomusicology, to explore different aspects of this traditional Chinese opera genre.

1. Musicology, as a theoretical subject, provides a framework for understanding the various elements of music within Yue Opera. It encompasses fields such as music aesthetics, music history, music ethnology, music psychology, and music pedagogy.

2. Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, focuses on the study of traditional music from different cultural contexts. It investigates how specific musical traditions, like Yue Opera, are constructed, utilized, disseminated, and developed within their cultural settings. By adopting an ethnomusicological perspective, the researchers will analyze the fundamental characteristics and cultural significance of Yue Opera. This will involve examining its historical development, cultural contexts, and the role it plays within the broader Chinese cultural landscape.

METHOD

Key Informants

The key informants were selected based on five criteria established by Li Lei, the heirs of Chinese intangible culture. These criteria include having a minimum of 30 years' experience in creating, singing, or performing Yue opera, a comprehensive understanding of Yue opera culture and development, winning the highest awards in various Yue opera competitions, being recognized as a provincial-level transmitter of Yue opera by the government, and making remarkable contributions to the dissemination and development of Yue opera. These key informants, including a scholar and two famous Yue opera actresses who also serve as transmitters of Zhejiang's provincial intangible cultural heritage of Yue opera, are highly important sources of information for the research, refer to Table 2.

Research tools

Interviews and observations are valuable research tools used to gather primary data and gain in-depth insights into the subject of study. The following research tools were utilized:

Interviews

Conducting structured or semi-structured interviews allowed for direct interaction with the key informants. The interviews provided an opportunity to explore their perspectives, insights, and personal experiences related to Yue Opera. Open-ended questions were utilized to encourage detailed and informative responses, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Observation

Active observation was employed during live performances of Yue Opera and rehearsals to gather firsthand data. Additionally, observing rehearsals and interactions within the opera troupe provided insights into the collaborative process. Detailed notes and recordings were used to document and analyze the observed aspects.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an essential component of this research as it enables the author to examine and interpret the collected

Table 2. Key informant background and expertise

Key Informant	Background and Expertise
Scholar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National first-class actor - Extensive experience in Yue opera creation, singing, and performance - about the culture and development of Yue opera - Winner of top awards in various Yue opera competitions - Recognized as a provincial-level Yue opera transmitter by the government - Made outstanding contributions to the dissemination and development of Yue opera
Famous Yue opera 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National first-class actor - Prominent figure in Yue opera acting and performance - Well-versed in the culture and development of Yue opera - Achieved success in national competitions and received top accolades - Designated as a provincial-level Yue opera transmitter by the government - Contributed significantly to the dissemination and development of Yue opera
Famous Yue opera 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accomplished composer of Yue opera music - Recognized as a national first-class composer - Extensive knowledge of Yue opera development and vocal style - Notable achievements in creating excellent Yuediao music works

data in relation to the research objectives, contributing to the education literacy of Yue Opera. By employing relevant concepts and theories, the author seeks to acquire valuable insights and enhance the understanding of Yue Opera.

The data collection process involves conducting literature analysis, extensively reviewing pertinent sources to explore the development of Yue Opera. Historical documents, scholarly articles, and other written materials are carefully examined to gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Yue Opera over time. In addition, field investigations and interviews with key informants, including actors and experts in Yue Opera, are conducted to gather further data.

Through meticulous examination and interpretation of the collected data, the author aims to draw meaningful conclusions and identify patterns. By employing suitable theoretical frameworks, the research aims to provide a deeper comprehension of the cultural and artistic significance of Yue Opera's development. Ultimately, this study strives to contribute to the existing knowledge and enhance education literacy regarding the unique characteristics and importance of Yue Opera.

RESULTS

From an educational literacy studies perspective, the emergence and development of Yue Opera shed light on its relatively youthful position in the extensive historical

trajectory of Chinese opera art that spans thousands of years. Throughout the span of over a century, Shaoxing Opera has achieved remarkable success, attained international recognition, and secured a significant place in the annals of Chinese drama. During its nearly 100-year evolution, Yue Opera has cultivated a distinct artistic and cultural style specific to southern China. Diverging from the trajectory of many other traditional opera genres in China, the birth and growth of Yue Opera were not directly rooted in traditional opera music. Instead, its progression was influenced by public aesthetic preferences and market demands, evolving in response to changes in the performing arts. Consequently, societal, and cultural influences, combined with shifting market dynamics, propelled Yue Opera from its “embryonic stage” to the “formation and development stage,” ultimately reaching its “mature and prosperous stage.”

The Origin Period of Yue Opera (Before 1906)

In the field of education literacy studies, the origin and development of Yue Opera can be observed within the broader historical context of Chinese opera art, which spans thousands of years. Yue Opera, originating in the fields of Zhejiang Province, gradually expanded, and flourished in the Hangshaoyong area before taking root in Shanghai, where it gained national influence. Through continuous innovation and efforts, Yue Opera successfully integrated urban and rural cultures, combining accompaniment music with singing performance to vividly express tenderness and leisure.

During the early stages, the transformation of Yue Opera from a rap art form to an opera prototype led to the evolution of its accompanying music. Hu Qin instruments became part of the first orchestra in Yue Opera’s history, gradually establishing an accompaniment band pattern with the Hu Qin as the core. This replaced the previous reliance on drum accompaniment during the singing period and formed a close relationship with the singing performers, contributing to the development of Yue Opera music.

According to Wu Fenghua, a Yue Opera performer, the early history of Yue Opera is relatively obscured due to the lack of written records and incomplete data. However, oral historical materials passed down among old artists provide insight into its origins. The precursor to Yue Opera was the “Falling to the Ground Singing Book” created by a farmer named Jin Qibing in Shaoxing around 1870. Prior to the “singing books on the ground,” there was a progression from Tiantou rap to singing performances at people’s doors, later transitioning to teahouses and restaurants, ultimately evolving into the form of “singing books on the ground.” Historical records indicate that Tiantou singing books thrived during the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty from 1820 to 1830, while the formation of “Landing singing books” became popular in Shaoxing, Hangzhou, Jiaying, and Huzhou during the Xianfeng period of the Qing Dynasty in 1870.

The performance form of “singing books along the door” emerged as a means to meet market demands and alleviate economic difficulties during the farming off-season. This practice involved farmers going door to door to sing songs in exchange for alms, signifying a shift towards a

semi-professional nature for singing books. Simultaneously, the musical content of this period adopted simple language and displayed a realistic and romantic artistic style, drawing inspiration from daily life experiences through elements such as exaggeration, metaphor, and irony.

The performance form evolved from “singing books along the door,” also known as “walking books,” which involved roaming through the countryside. As tunes were easy to learn and sing, and the content was easily understood, it gained popularity, leading to more people singing books. Around 1870, performers of “singing books along the door” began to spread from Shaoxing’s Sheng County to nearby areas, performing in teahouses and restaurants and securing stable singing venues. This marked the development of the “singing books on the ground” performance form.

The performance style of “singing books on the ground” differed significantly from previous forms. Singers carried a case table, used simple hand movements, and had individuals providing accompaniment by knocking on thresholds with ruler boards and bamboo “Dugu” instruments. With an urban-dominated audience, longer and more complex storylines were introduced. Performers drew inspiration from biographies, folklore, drama stories, and tanci to create lengthy plays with intricate plots. These performances could last for several days, weeks, or even months.

The transition from “singing books at the head of the field” to “singing books along the door” and eventually to “singing books on the ground” marked the evolution of this art form from amateur self-entertainment to a semi-professional and professional form of singing. With improved singing conditions and creative works, the overall artistic level of Yue Opera advanced, expanding its influence through fixed venues, growing troupes, and a widening audience. This period laid the groundwork for the transformation of “singing books” into the embryonic form of opera.

Considering the insights provided by performer Wu Fenghua and historical records, it becomes evident that the early development of Yue Opera involved a collective effort, and the “singing books on the ground” performance form can be considered its true precursor. From Tiantou Rap to singing along the door and later performing in teahouses and restaurants, Yue Opera underwent its first transformation in 1906, marking the origin stage of Yue Opera. During this period, Yue Opera evolved from the form of quyi into a stage play, incorporating both auditory and visual elements.

The Early Development of Yue Opera (1906-1922)

During the period of 1906-1922, Yue Opera underwent significant transformations, transitioning from a folk-art form to an opera genre known as the “Small Song Class.” This marked a qualitative leap as Yue Opera began to flourish locally as a form of Chinese opera.

The birth and dissemination of the “small song class” performance form

The “Small Song Class” emerged as the early stage of Yue Opera’s evolution from quyi to opera. It derived its name

from the folk tunes of Shaoxing Sheng County, characterized by a strong local flavor. On March 27, 1906, a group of artists, including Yuan Fusheng, Li Maozheng, Gao Binghuo, and Li Shiquan, formed the “Small Song Class” and performed in front of Xianghuo Hall in Shengxian County, Zhejiang Province. This period saw significant musical breakthroughs, with the introduction of stringed instruments based on the Huqin and improved performance levels. Notably, popular plays like “Jade Hairpin” and “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai” were adapted during this time.

The “Small Song Class” quickly gained popularity and flourished in rural areas, particularly in Shengzhou County. Within a year of its inception, over 200 troupes emerged in Shaoxing, consisting primarily of male actors. As the popularity grew, performances expanded from Sheng County to Shanghai, Hangzhou, and other regions.

“Small song class” in shanghai and musical development

With the commercialization of the “Small Song Class,” many semi-farmers and semi-artists transitioned into professional performers, leading to the emergence of troupe agents. In 1910, the class ventured into the provincial capital, Hangzhou, to explore new markets. Artists from Yuan Sheng Mu Troupe made their debut in Shanghai in 1917, and their hard work over the years resulted in the creation of new plays like “Jade Hairpin” and “Butterfly Lovers.” Musical performance also evolved, with the formation of a three-instrument band consisting of a drum, banhu, and douzi. Finally, in 1921, the first-ever Yue Opera band was established at the Shengping Stage in Shanghai.

During this period, the repertoire of the “Small Song Class” expanded, incorporating plays from other local operas and adapting stories from scrolls, books, and folklore. Costume and makeup underwent changes, and the singing style merged elements of both southern and northern schools. The performances showcased a range of emotions, including sobbing and impassioned expressions. The rhythm was divided into *adagio*, *mediato*, and *allegro*, catering to the needs of various plays.

After a decade of practice, improvement, dissemination, and promotion, the “Small Song Class” was ready to make its mark in Shanghai. Despite initial challenges, the artists persisted in their efforts to create an art form accepted by the Shanghai audience. They drew inspiration from Shaoxing Daban and Beijing Opera, incorporating their techniques and language into Yue Opera. These efforts paid off, and in April 1920, the “Small Song Class” returned to Shanghai and received a warm welcome, establishing a strong presence in the city.

During the performances in Shanghai, the “Small Song Class” witnessed the first musical innovation in Yue Opera. Zhou Linzhi, the owner of Shanghai’s Shengping Ge Stage, took the initiative to invite music teachers and pianists to form the first full-time band in the history of Yue Opera. This transformation enriched the musical elements, incorporating folk tunes and Qu styles, which continue to be part of Yue Opera’s tradition. With these changes, the

“Small Song Class” entered a new era known as “Shaoxing Opera.” The first band used the three Instruments refer to Figure 1.

The Middle Stage of Yue Opera Development (1922-1938)

During the period of 1922-1938, Yue Opera entered a new historical stage characterized by the development of the “Small Song Class” into “Shaoxing Opera.” In September 1921, Fei Cuitang, Yan Huanting, and other male artists performed in Shanghai, marking the first theater performance of Yue Opera in the city. This event led to the adoption of the name “Shaoxing Opera.” In June 1922, the “Small Song Class” made its debut at the “Big World,” the largest entertainment venue in Shanghai. As the development continued, the name was further changed to “Shaoxing Drama of Yue County Class.” Notably, Ma Tiao and Wang Yongchun formed a separate troupe, performing in the Shanghai Big World, which contributed to the expansion and recognition of Yue Opera as a distinct opera genre.

This period witnessed significant progress in both the content and form of Yue Opera. New plays like “Jasper Hairpin,” “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai,” and “Meng Lijun” were created, showcasing the unique style of Yue Opera, and establishing the development direction of “talent and beauty drama” within the genre. Artists drew inspiration from other renowned operas such as Wuju, Peking Opera, and Shaoxing Opera, incorporating ancient costume plays and serial-script operas into their repertoire. This led to the addition of numerous new plays, including “Maitreya Buddha,” “Liu Jin Sending a Melon,” “A Girl for a Prince,” “Jade Dragon Prince,” “Zhaojun and Pan,” “La Camellia,” “Meng Jiangnu,” “Lotus Lamp,” and more. During this period, artists demonstrated a strong commitment to learning, progress, and bold reform, resulting in notable achievements in music performance and artistic expression. The development of Yue Opera during this stage also saw a transition from predominantly male actors to female actors. It can be divided into two stages: the male class (1922-1923) and the female class (1923-1938).



Figure 1. The first band used the three Instruments: drum, banhu, douzi
Source: Yue opera museum

Male class (1922-1923)

Upon entering Shanghai, male class artists faced challenges but persevered with open-minded learning and continuous innovation, ultimately establishing themselves in the industry. This encouraged artists in Sheng County to recruit apprentices and become teachers, passing on their knowledge and skills to the next generation. Some talented individuals were transferred to Hangzhou and Shanghai opera troupes. Additionally, numerous artists formed their own teams and toured local urban and rural areas, extending the influence of Shaoxing Opera. The male class had a significant presence in more than 30 theaters, including Xinhua Garden, Jinghua Opera Garden, Shengping Stage, and Republican Theater. Prominent opera groups such as “Yuan Shengmu Class,” “Meiduo Ashun Class,” “Ma Chaoshui Zhang Yubiao Class,” and “Wang Yongchun Bai Yumei Class” featured renowned performers from Shaoxing Sheng County.

During this period, the singing style underwent various transformations, incorporating medium and allegro styles, as well as wailing-style singing. Accompaniment retained elements like chiban and flat drum, while the voice accompaniment “Lingshou” was replaced by the Erhu. Some groups added three strings and percussion instruments. The main melody was the Sixian normal tune, earning this period the name of the “men’s Sixian normal tune period.” To depict historical themes more widely, artists introduced the Shaoxing Untantan instrument and developed new accompaniment methods. Repertoire was divided into martial arts plays and literary plays. Martial opera performances featured instruments such as big gong, big drum, King Kong leg, Banhu, three strings, and suona, using the “Erfa” singing style. Gong, ruler plates, and single leather drums were used for beats, while the singing style remained in the original normal tone. Hangzhou Opera’s “Wulin tone” and Yao Opera’s “Qing singing style” also influenced the musical development during this stage.

Female class stage (1923-1938)

The influence of “Mao Opera” led the male class to consider establishing female classes. In July 1923, the first-ever female class in the history of Yue Opera was formed in Shijia’ao Village, Ganlin Town, Sheng County, Shaoxing. This marked the beginning of the development stage for female performers in Shaoxing Opera. The creation of the female class allowed young women to break free from social and family constraints and pursue their passion for the stage. By joining the opera, they not only gained a means of livelihood but also improved their social status and fought for their rights and freedom. This development significantly influenced the growth of Yue Opera.

During the Shaoxing Opera period, mixed-gender performances emerged. As artists increasingly left behind farming to focus on opera, their wives and children accompanied them on tours, leading to the participation of women on stage. Clever young girls learned to sing through constant exposure and training. Consequently, mixed-gender performances became common, with roles assigned based on the

actors’ talents rather than adhering strictly to gender norms. Boys and girls often shared the stage and acted together. The introduction of the female class transformed the trajectory of Yue Opera. Women playing both male and female roles became a distinctive feature of Yue Opera, distinguishing it from other regional operas. This development brought about significant changes in music singing, performance style, and repertoire content, propelling the opera towards a more refined and elegant artistic direction.

Educational literacy and cultural appreciation

The early development of Yue Opera during the period of 1906-1922 laid a solid foundation for its future growth and cultural significance. The birth of the “Small Song Class” marked a significant milestone in the evolution of Yue Opera from a folk-art form to a recognized opera genre. The expansion of performances to Shanghai and the establishment of a full-time band further enhanced its artistic expression and musical richness.

From an educational literacy perspective, the study of Yue Opera’s early development provides valuable insights into its cultural significance and artistic evolution. Understanding the historical context, musical innovations, and audience reception during this period contributes to a deeper appreciation of Yue Opera’s unique characteristics.

The integration of Yue Opera in educational contexts promotes cultural appreciation and fosters a sense of cultural identity among students. By studying the early development of Yue Opera, students can gain a comprehensive understanding of its origins, growth, and artistic transformations. This knowledge enhances their literacy skills, including language proficiency, critical thinking, and cultural understanding.

The Mature Period of Yue Opera Development (1938-1949)

The outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression marked a significant turning point in the history of Yue Opera. Prior to this period, male classes dominated the performance form of Yue Opera, with “Shaoxing Wenopera” experiencing its peak in the Shanghai metropolitan area after continuous improvements and artistic references. Although women’s opera also emerged during this time, its activities were primarily concentrated in Zhejiang. Women’s opera performances in Shanghai had limited influence and were often transient, holding a lower status in the city’s opera music culture. However, with the onset of the war, the situation underwent a significant shift as female opera troupes swarmed into Shanghai. Male performing groups coexisted with female groups initially but gradually declined, eventually being replaced by female troupes. This marked a major transformation in Yue Opera, with the main body of performers transitioning from male to female.

Since 1938, women’s opera troupes gradually took over from men’s troupes. Esteemed actresses such as Yao Shuijuan, Shi Yinhua, and Xiao Danguai played pivotal roles in the reform of Yue Opera during this period, contributing to the development of women’s Yue Opera. In 1942, a comprehensive reform of the opera was initiated by practitioners

led by Yuan Xuefen, followed by the participation of Yin Guifang. Notably, the “Yue Opera Ten Sisters,” including Yuan Xuefen, Yin Guifang, Cong Shuizhao, Xiao Dangui, Xu Yulan, Fu Quanxiang, Fan Ruijuan, Xu Tianhong, Zhang Guifeng, and Wu Xiaolou, made significant contributions to the advancement of Yue Opera. In October 1942, they began the comprehensive reform known as “New Yue Opera.” This reform path was further expanded by Yin Guifang and Zhu Shuizhao in September 1944, leading major Yue Opera troupes in Shanghai to undergo substantial changes and development. The transition from male actors to female actors marked a significant transformation in Shaoxing Opera.

During this period, the communication and promotion of Yue Opera shifted from rural areas and small towns in Zhejiang province to Shanghai, the largest metropolis in China. To adapt to the new environment and cater to the Shanghai audience, Yue Opera actors continued to adjust. The social and cultural environment of Shanghai provided fertile ground for the progress of Yue Opera, presenting a rare historical opportunity for its rapid development. The reforms introduced during this period created a melodious and melancholic music style that became the defining tone for the future development and performances of Yue Opera. It had a profound influence on the formation of repertoire, music, stage imagery, troupe structure, and operational mechanisms, ushering in a new stage in the history of Yue Opera.

The Flourishing Period of Yue Opera (1949-2022)

Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the development of women’s Yue Opera entered a vibrant phase. Extensive reforms and improvements were undertaken throughout the Yue opera community, resulting in remarkable achievements in areas such as organizational structure, infrastructure development, talent cultivation, repertoire creation, and comprehensive artistic endeavors. Numerous singing schools were established, broadening the reach of Yue Opera performances, and enhancing the popularity of Yue Opera actors. Since the 1950s, Yue Opera has gradually expanded its presence beyond national borders, captivating audiences, and garnering appreciation both domestically and internationally.

The 1970s marked a golden era for Yue Opera’s development. Under the leadership of Zhejiang Province, Yue Opera performers from various cities underwent centralized training, with a particular focus on hiring vocal music teachers to provide auxiliary guidance. As the influence of Yue Opera continued to grow, the number of Yue Opera troupes witnessed a steady rise. According to statistics from the Zhejiang Provincial Cultural Market Administration Office in 1995, there were 238 registered folk Yue Opera troupes, comprising over 7,000 practitioners.

Towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, Yue Opera experienced rapid progress. Shengzhou, the birthplace of Yue Opera, alone hosted nearly 100 folk troupes, while other regions under Taizhou, such as Huangyan, Luqiao, Yuhuan, Wenling, and Jiaojiang, boasted over 200 troupes. Other cities also witnessed the establishment and growth of numerous folk Yue troupes. During this

period, Yue Opera ventured abroad, staging performances across Asia, America, and Europe, receiving significant acclaim. After watching a Yue Opera performance, renowned Japanese folk dancer Dai Jieko expressed, “Your performance is so beautiful. Your folk music is exquisite and captivating.” The city government of Grenoble in France held a grand reception, awarding the city’s Medal of Honor to Yuan Xuefen, the general director of art, and bestowing the Medal of Honorary Citizen upon three troupe leaders, highlighting the influence of Yue Opera on an international scale.

In the present stage of the 21st century, Yue Opera artists have embraced bold innovations, breaking free from traditional patterns and conventions of Chinese opera. This has allowed the distinctive personality and characteristics of Yue Opera to flourish, drawing inspiration from other artistic forms, and employing innovative approaches. Notably, advancements in science and technology have led to significant transformations in the stage aesthetics of Yue Opera. Scenic designs now incorporate realistic or vivid props, extending beyond mere houses and plants to encompass three-dimensional scenery. Elements such as real water and rain are utilized to convey the plot, and special effects like spray painting and LED lighting are employed to create captivating visuals. The integration of rain, water, and life itself reinforces the seamless connection between art and reality. Lighting techniques have also undergone significant changes, offering a wider range of tones, enhancing the beauty of the stage, and being controlled by computer systems for greater flexibility. In terms of dance, Yue Opera fearlessly incorporates modern elements, blending imagery and abstraction to deliver performances that captivate audiences. During this period, Yue Opera transcended the boundaries of Zhejiang province and emerged as a prominent opera genre nationwide. It is now regarded as the second-largest opera style in China, celebrated as “the most popular local opera,” and recognized internationally as “Chinese opera.” Yue Opera also holds the distinction of being among the first batch of China’s national intangible cultural heritage list.

Table 3. The periods in its development

Period	Timeframe	Summary
Origin Period	Before 1906	Qualitative leap from folk art to opera, marking the beginning of Yue Opera.
Early Development	1906-1922	Introduction of "Small Song Class," improved musicality, and adaptation of plays.
Middle Stage	1922-1938	Emergence of "Shaoxing Opera" with male and female performance classes.
Mature Period	1938-1949	Reforms, organizational advancements, talent training, and repertoire development.
Flourishing Period	1949-2022	Rapid growth, increased popularity, national and international expansion, incorporation of modern elements.

Conclusion: Yue Opera has gone through five distinct periods in its development. The Origin Period (before 1906) marked a qualitative leap from folk art to opera. The Early Development (1906-1922) introduced the “Small Song Class” and witnessed improved musicality and play adaptations. The Middle Stage (1922-1938) saw the emergence of “Shaoxing Opera” with male and female performance classes. The Mature Period (1938-1949) brought reforms, organizational advancements, and talent training. Finally, the Flourishing Period (1949-2022) witnessed rapid growth, expanded popularity, national and international success, and the incorporation of modern elements, refer to Table 3.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study on the cultural significance of Yue Opera conducted a multidisciplinary investigation using a combination of musicology and ethnomusicology approaches. The aim was to explore various aspects of Yue Opera, including its historical development, cultural contexts, and role within Chinese cultural traditions. The research methods employed included interviews with key informants and observations of live performances, providing primary data for analysis.

The findings of the research are consistent with the existing literature on Yue Opera. The study affirms that Yue Opera originated in Zhejiang Province and gradually gained prominence, particularly in Shanghai. The evolution of Yue Opera from its early forms of “singing books along the door” to the establishment of the “Small Song Class” and the subsequent development of “Shaoxing Opera” aligns with the historical accounts and progression of the art form described in the literature (Chen & Yu, 2006; Wu, 2018).

The research results also support the theoretical principles of musicology and ethnomusicology. By analyzing the musical elements, performance styles, and cultural significance of Yue Opera, the study aligns with the theoretical frameworks and concepts within these disciplines. Musicology provides a framework for understanding the various elements of music within Yue Opera, while ethnomusicology explores how the opera is constructed, disseminated, and developed within its cultural settings (Bo, 2006; Fei, 2006).

The study’s use of interviews and observations as research methods is consistent with the aim of obtaining primary data and gaining in-depth insights into Yue Opera. The interviews with key informants, who possess extensive experience and expertise in Yue Opera, offer valuable perspectives, insights, and historical knowledge. The observations of live performances and rehearsals provide firsthand data on the artistic and collaborative processes involved in Yue Opera (Jianxin, 2006a; Wu, 2018).

In conclusion, the current study on the cultural significance of Yue Opera has provided valuable insights into the historical development, cultural contexts, and artistic characteristics of this traditional Chinese opera genre. The findings are consistent with the existing literature, theoretical principles of musicology and ethnomusicology, and the research methods employed. By enhancing education literacy and deepening the understanding of Yue Opera, this study

contributes to the broader field of education studies and cultural research.

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