

A Probe into the Successful Factors of the Chinese National Opera "Struggles in an Ancient City"

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" is one of the most successful national operas since the new century. The reason for its success is demonstrated in three aspects: mass foundation, choice of subject matter, and musical characteristics. The dissemination of novels, films and TV series of the same name in the early period laid a foundation for the masses; the choice of revolutionary historical themes and the strong support of governments at all levels have enabled its patriotic education function to be greatly exerted; the use of Chinese folk music and opera board cavity structure has been accepted by the general audience and has enhanced the aesthetics of the Chinese public. These are the main factors that contributed to the great success of the play and its widespread circulation in society.

Keywords: national operas, Struggles in an Ancient City, success factors

I. INTRODUCTION

The art form of opera has an extremely important position in the history of modern music. It originated in Italy and flourished during the European Renaissance. After centuries of development in Europe, a large number of classic opera works have emerged, and a number of great opera composers have become successful. The symphony separated from opera has now become a separate musical genre. Bel Canto, with the development of opera, has gradually matured and perfected. It is recognized as the most scientific singing method in the world and has been spread all over the world with a large learning group.

After three hundred years of development history in the West, opera began to spread slowly to China, and China began its exploration in opera. Since 1920, Li Jinhui has incorporated folk music materials such as folk songs, minors, tunes, etc. into children's songs. The children's cabaret dramas he has created are considered to be the embryonic form of Chinese opera and also mark the beginning of Chinese opera exploration. In May 1945, the opera "White Haired Girl" was performed in Yan'an with unprecedented success. The emergence of "White Haired Girl" is considered to be the symbol of the birth of Chinese new opera and national opera, which has an important impact on the creation of Chinese opera, meaning that after more than 20 years of exploration and accumulation, Chinese opera has found a suitable way for its development. Between 1950-1970, the national operas "Xiao Ehei's Marriage", "The Red Guards on Honghu Lake" and

"Sister Jiang" were staged, pushing the creative development of Chinese opera to its peak. This period is also hailed as the most prosperous period of Chinese national opera creation, creating unprecedented brilliance in the history of Chinese opera, and also playing an extremely important role in the history of modern Chinese music. The opera has been widely disseminated in China and is loved by the broad masses of people. To this day, the stories and arias of these operas are still in constant performance and widely sung.

During "the Great Cultural Revolution" period, the creation and development of Chinese opera was interrupted. After the reform and opening up, Chinese opera ushered in a new period of creative development. During this period, the number of opera creations and performances has increased significantly, and creation no longer focuses solely on national operas, but shows a tendency to diversify creative development. However, most of the works were short-lived and could not be preserved as high-quality plays. Until the emergence of the national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" based on the novel of the same name, it caused a huge sensation, shined on the stage, achieved great success, and became one of the most popular opera works in the new century, pushing the development of Chinese national opera creation to a new climax.

II. ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT OF THE NATIONAL OPERA "STRUGGLES IN AN ANCIENT CITY"

A. *Introduction to the national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City"*

The national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" was written by the Chinese People's Liberation Army General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the victory of the anti-fascist war. In 2005, the Song and Dance Troupe of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army premiered in Beijing. In 2007, to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the founding of the army, the play was revised and re-performed.

According to the plot arrangement of the story, the opera adopts the narrative method of recalling the narrative. It is centered around a modern young woman Chen Yao sitting on the speeding train and reading the novel "Struggles in an Ancient City". Such a concept is like crossing a time tunnel to the time when the story takes place. The whole drama uses Chen Yao as the main line to start the narrative, and through her reading to show the historical scenes of the year, with a total of 14 plays. The story told by the opera is on the eve of the victory of the Anti-Japanese War. The Japanese army wanted to destroy the enemy-occupied area of Baoding City, Hebei Province with biochemical weapons. In order to stop the enemy's plan, the first protagonist of the opera Yang Xiaodong went deep into the enemy-occupied area to launch a revolution. In the course of the revolution, he experienced the interweaving and selection of mother-child relationship, sisterhood, comradeship and love, launched a desperate struggle with the enemy, countered the puppet army Guan Jingtao, and won the victory of the revolution. The whole play is arranged properly. Whether the actors' vocal skills and stage performance, or emotional catharsis, the scenes of life and death, the scenes of tears, are highly integrated, shaping the image of a heroic group of revolutionaries who did not fear life and death for the victory of the revolution in the war years.

B. *Artistic achievements of the national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City"*

The national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" has not only won the unanimous welcome from the performing artists in the literary and artistic circles, but also received the unanimous praise from the scholars in the literary and theoretical circles. It has won many honors and awards. In November 2005, he won the "Chinese Drama Award" of the Ninth China Drama Festival; in 2006, it won the first prize of the tenth army's new literary and artistic works; in November 2006, it won the first prize of the National Outstanding

Repertoire Performance; it won the Tenth National Spiritual Civilization "Five One Project" award in September 2007; it won the "Wenhua Award" for performance, script creation, dance design, music creation selected by the Ministry of Culture in November 2007; in February 2008, it was selected as "2006-2007 Top Ten Fine Plays of National Stage Art Fine Works" and so on. Some mainstream newspapers and magazines competed for comments and reports, which further increased the popularity of the play. Various art groups and major art schools also use this opera as the school's reserved repertoire for rehearsals and performances. Some of the classic verses in their plays, such as: "It's a Shame that I Can't Be Filial to My Mother" and "My Mother Is in the Cloud", have also been selected in the vocal music textbook in colleges and universities, and have become the vocal music teaching track, which have been sung by the majority of teachers and students.

III. THE MASS BASIS OF THE SUCCESS FACTORS OF THE NATIONAL OPERA "STRUGGLES IN AN ANCIENT CITY"

A. *Readers of the novel*

The novel "Struggles in an Ancient City" is a novel created by the author Li Yingru based on his personal experience during the Anti-Japanese War. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the underground workers waged a desperate struggle with the enemies in the enemy-occupied area and won the final victory. After the novel was published, some literary and art experts published a large number of praised articles in journals and magazines, and it was also widely welcomed by readers. Later, it was translated into more than ten foreign languages, including Russian, German, Japanese, Korean, English, and Bulgarian, and was published and distributed abroad, gaining a large number of readers. The script of the national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" was adapted based on this novel.

B. *Audience of film and television drama and the modern drama*

The distribution and publication of the novel "Struggles in an Ancient City" in China and foreign countries has attracted more audience's attention, including TV film directors and producers and other literary experts. Since its publication in 1958, the novel has been continuously adapted into various art forms such as movies, TV series, dramas, and various local dramas in the following decades. For example, it changed into a modern drama of the same name in 1959 and premiered in Xi'an, Shaanxi. Later, in order to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the founding of the army and the 72th anniversary of the victory of the

Anti-Japanese War, the Xiangyang Dramatic Art Troupe re-arranged the play. In 1963, "Struggles in an Ancient City" was adapted into a screenplay, filmed by Bayi Studios into a movie of the same name, and released in November 1963; in that era when television sets were extremely rare, movies became the one of people's main spiritual cultural activities. At the same time, because there are fewer movies released in this period, every movie released can get a large audience. Moreover, "Struggles in an Ancient City", as a well-known film at that time, left a deep mark on the psychology of this generation. Since the 1990s, with the popularity of television, classic literary works and movies from the 1950s and 1960s have been successively filmed in TV series. In 1995, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese Anti-Japanese War, in 2005, to commemorate the victory of the Sixth of China's Anti-Japanese War On the tenth anniversary, it was twice remade into a TV series of the same name and released on major TV stations, which had an impact within a certain range. In addition, it was adapted into various local dramas, such as Ping opera.

Before the advent of the opera "Struggles in an Ancient City", the spread of these novels, movies, TV series and other forms of the same name in the society moved and inspired many people, and also made people more familiar with the plot. This has made certain popularity among the masses. So when the opera is on, people are more willing to enter the theater to appreciate this different art form, which is one of the factors of its success.

IV. THE THEME SELECTION OF THE SUCCESS FACTORS OF THE NATIONAL OPERA "STRUGGLES IN AN ANCIENT CITY"

In the development process of Chinese national operas, operas with revolutionary historical themes occupy an important position. In the "Writing Dictionary" edited by Zhuang Tao, the historical content reflecting the life of the Chinese people's revolutionary struggle from 1919 to 1949 in literary and artistic works is called the theme of revolutionary history.¹ The opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" belongs to the theme of revolutionary history. The choice of this theme is also one of the factors for the success of the opera. There are two main reasons for choosing the theme of revolutionary history: history and reality.

A. Historical reasons

In May 1942, Mao Zedong issued a "Speech at the Yan'an Symposium on Literature and Art" at the

Literary Symposium in Yan'an. The "Speech" clearly pointed out the direction in which literature and art serve the workers, peasants and soldiers, emphasizing that literary and artistic creation should take root in the masses, be familiar with workers, peasants and soldiers, and make active contributions to the revolutionary cause. The publication of "Speech" has had a profound impact on the development of Chinese opera and the direction of the entire Chinese literary and artistic creation. Due to the influence of "Speech", in 1945, just before the end of China's Anti-Japanese War and the upcoming War of Liberation, China's first national opera "White Haired Girl" was born, with great success, welcomed by the public, and became a milestone in Chinese history of opera, and the creation of Chinese national opera in the following decades was deeply influenced by it. It is worth mentioning that "White Haired Girl" chose the theme of revolutionary history, and then the classic dramas "The Red Guards on Honghu Lake" and "Sister Jiang" created in the 1950s and 1960s also chose the theme of revolutionary history. The choice of theme should be one of the successful experiences of Chinese national operas.

B. Realistic reasons

From 1919 to 1949, this period of war history in China was the most profound disaster for the Chinese nation, and also a period in which China experienced major historical changes. China has paid a painful price during this historical period and left a deep mark on the hearts of the Chinese people. Using history as a mirror, one can see the rise and fall of the nation. The creation of literary and artistic works on the stage can increase the appeal of the narrative and inspire the fighting spirit of modern people, and transform the works of revolutionary historical subjects into literary and artistic creations, which can not only educate the public on patriotism, but also enhance national cohesion, so it is very necessary to choose the theme of revolutionary history.

The opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" chose the theme of revolutionary history, and it chose the period of Anti-Japanese War in this period of war history. This is the first Chinese national opera to choose the theme of Anti-Japanese War. Although there are many works in the history of Chinese opera that choose the theme of revolutionary history, most of them choose the Chinese domestic revolutionary war. The opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" created a precedent for the theme of the Anti-Japanese War, and it got the strong support of the government, more opportunities for performances on major occasions, and more media coverage and support. It played an important role in the education of nationalism.

¹ Zhuang Tao, chief ed. Writing Dictionary [Z]. Shanghai, Chinese Dictionary Press, 1992, 04 (Version 1), p307.

V. THE MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SUCCESS FACTORS OF THE NATIONAL OPERA "STRUGGLES IN AN ANCIENT CITY"

National opera as a kind of Chinese opera genre is precisely because of its distinctive national color. Professor Ju Qihong, a well-known Chinese opera research expert, once defined the national opera in his book "General History of Chinese Opera Music": "In the dramatic development of music, the main use of the musical structure and development methods of the opera board cavity is mainly used to write opera pieces with large sets of characters."² The use of folk music and the use of traditional operas in operas is an important reason for the success of the opera "Struggles in an Ancient City".

A. *The use of folk music*

The storyline of the opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" took place in Baoding City, Hebei Province. First, the local folk music was excavated, and then it was reasonably used to reflect the local characteristics and highlight the local music style.

Therefore, the entire opera's music is based on Hebei's folk music, northern opera and Leting drum, and is written using the traditional Chinese five-tone debugging scale. At the same time, the folk music elements of Shandong, Shanxi, Henan and other provinces in the surrounding provinces of Hebei are blended into the opera, so that the music of the whole play is not only prominent in national style, but also rich and colorful.

Chinese folk music is mainly presented through the two elements of syntactic structure and melody in the creation of opera. The technique of using theme songs to run through the whole drama is an important method for the creation of Chinese national opera. For example, the theme song "Country Ballad" that runs through the whole opera is to absorb the music tune of the Hebei folk song "Pakchoi", which is familiar to everyone. The whole song uses the main voice of "Pakchoi" to change and develop. The melody is based on pure four degrees from re to so, or from sol to re. It uses not only the tone of the original folk song, but also the structure of the original folk song question and answer style.

B. *Application of plate cavity structure of traditional Chinese opera*

The Chinese national opera has absorbed the traditional Chinese opera's plate cavity structure so that it can be unique in the history of Chinese opera and even the world opera. This is also an important

contribution of Chinese national opera to enrich the world opera.

According to Mr. Ju Qihong's definition of national opera, it can be seen that the use of the opera plate cavity is its most distinctive feature, and it is also the most distinctive sign that distinguishes it from other genres of opera. The plate cavity structure is a structural style in Chinese opera and folk art form music. It is also called a plate-style change structure, which is similar to the *partita* in Western music. The Chinese people's familiarity with and love for folk music and the structure of the opera plate cavity structure that they have been accustomed to enjoying opera for hundreds of years have made it easier for them to accept modern opera works with such style characteristics.

There are three arias in the opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" that use plate cavity structure for structural creation. They are Yang Xiaodong's "It's a Shame that I Can't Be Filial to My Mother", Yang Xiaodong's mother's "My Mother Is in the Cloud" and Jin Huan's "Smell the Flower again at Victory". These three arias are mainly carried out through the change of rhythm, that is, such a "rhythm-slowboard-allegro-rhythm" rhythm change method that shows the inner emotional conflicts and psychological changes of the characters and shapes the heroic character image.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although Chinese national opera produced a large number of excellent works in the 1950s and 1960s, and they pushed Chinese operas to the top, few masterpieces have been published despite the large number of operas performed from the end of the last century to the new century. In 2005, the success of the Anti-Japanese theme Chinese national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" pushed the Chinese national opera to a new climax. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to carry out research on this opera and explore the reasons for its success, which can provide useful experience and inspiration for the development of Chinese folk songs and even the development of Chinese music.

The success of the Chinese national opera "Struggles in an Ancient City" is inseparable from the joint efforts of the creators and performers; it is inseparable from the dissemination of novels, movies and TV dramas of the same name in the early period; it is also inseparable from the important role played by the theme of revolutionary history in patriotism education, the support of governments at all levels, and the performance opportunities for many exchanges with the audience; it is even more inseparable from the use of Chinese folk music and opera plate cavity structure, which makes it more in line with the aesthetic habits of the Chinese public and accepted by the broad audience. Therefore, the success of the opera "Struggles in an

² Ju Qihong, *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Operas and Musicals* [M]. Hefei, Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, Jan. 1st, 2014, p11.

Ancient City" should also be comprehensive and extensive. This requires more researchers to study the opera from a more comprehensive perspective, providing new ideas and theoretical support for the development of Chinese opera creation.

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