

# A Comparison of the Current Status of Tibetan Opera Research in Chinese and English Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

Tibetan opera is a cultural treasure of the Chinese nation with a splendid and long history, attracting the attention of researchers in China and foreign countries. At present, both Chinese and English studies on Tibetan opera in China and foreign countries have achieved certain results. It is found through sorting out that: In terms of status research, the output and power of Chinese research on Tibetan opera is far better than that of English research; in terms of research content, the Chinese and English studies of Tibetan opera pay attention to the origin, traditional theatrical pieces, mask art, performance style and program, protection and inheritance, and translation and dissemination. However, there are also research fields that are not covered by each other. At the same time, both Chinese and English studies of Tibetan opera incorporate multidisciplinary theories such as ethnology, anthropology, art, and culturology. Nevertheless, Chinese studies tend to focus on textual studies, while English studies pay more attention to field investigations and field visits. The Chinese and English studies of Tibetan opera are complementary and symbiotic, which is conducive to the comprehensive knowing and understanding of the trend of Tibetan opera research in the academic community, and is also conducive to the prosperity and development of Tibetan opera research in China and foreign countries.

**Keywords:** *Tibetan opera, Research status, Research content, Research theory and method.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan opera originated from the relatively developed oral literature, singing and dancing arts, folk talking-singing art, and religious ritual art [1] in the early Tibetan society, and it is the crystallization of the collective wisdom of the Tibetan people. As a uniquely charming ethnic minority drama in the garden of Chinese opera, Tibetan opera has a history of more than 600 years [2]. It was included in the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2005, and in 2009 was included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In 2003 and 2013 respectively, two national seminars on the development of Tibetan opera were held respectively, and Tibetan opera appeared as keywords in international seminars on Tibetology many times. Tibetan opera is a cultural

treasure in the art treasure house of the Chinese nation and even the world [3], attracting the attention of scholars in China and foreign countries. Tibetan opera researchers are all over China, Germany, Canada, the United States, Bangladesh, Australia and other countries. The study of Tibetan opera has highlighted important academic value in protecting the outstanding cultural and artistic heritage of Chinese ethnic minorities, reconstructing the large cultural circle of Chinese civilization, and building advanced culture and cultural innovation. Therefore, it has attracted the attention of academic circles in China and foreign countries, and the research results are quite fruitful.

General Secretary Xi's important speech at the CPC's National Conference on Ideological Publicity Work clearly pointed out that it is necessary to well tell Chinese stories, spread Chinese voices, and improve the country's cultural soft power and Chinese cultural influence [4]. Based on this context, this article sorts out the Chinese and English literature on Tibetan opera, especially

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comparing the research status and content of Tibetan opera between Chinese and English, trying to clearly present the status quo of the study of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English, which will help promote the in-depth study of Tibetan opera, help the protection and development and inheritance of Tibetan opera, and be more beneficial to the promotion and publicity of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.

## **2. COMPARISON OF THE RESEARCH STATUS OF TIBETAN OPERA IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH ACADEMIC CIRCLES**

A total of 878 Chinese journal articles were retrieved with the theme of "Tibetan Opera" in the advanced search project of CNKI database. After repeated screening, some news, book reviews, or anonymous authors and other articles were removed, and finally 821 valid documents were obtained. The foreign English literature mainly came from the full-text database WOS, with 106 journal articles initially obtained. After data deduplication screening<sup>1</sup>, only 15 journal articles were obtained. The retrieval time was as of February 18, 2020.

### ***2.1 Comparison of Tibetan Opera Research Output in Chinese and English Academic Circles***

#### ***2.1.1 Annual Number of Published Papers***

According to the annual number of published papers of "Figure 1" and "Figure 2", in terms of research time, as of the date of retrieval, Chinese Tibetan opera research had a history of 63 years, and foreign Tibetan opera research in English had a history of 47 years; in terms of the total number of articles published, the former had about 55 times the amount of articles published by the latter, which directly reflected the difference between the more and fewer research results of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English. Judging from the Chinese annual number of published papers of Tibetan opera in "Figure 1", the earliest research on Tibetan opera in China began in 1956, and the research could be roughly divided into four stages:

In the first stage, from 4 articles in 1980 to 24 articles in 1987, the research on Tibetan opera in China ushered in the first peak stage; the second stage was from 1997 to 2003, with a maximum of 37 articles published; in the third stage, from 2004 to 2009, the number of articles published increased from 12 to 40. This had a lot to do with the inclusion of Tibetan opera in the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2005 and in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. The study of Tibetan opera thus opened a new chapter; in the fourth stage, from 2010 to 2014, the number of articles published increased from 12 to 49, reaching a record high. During this period, the "China Religious Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Status and Countermeasures Academic Seminar" held in 2011, the "National Seminar on the Development of Tibetan Opera" held in 2013, and the "National Seminar on the Inheritance and Protection of Opera Genres of Intangible Cultural Heritage" held in 2014 increased the exposure of Tibetan opera and attracted the attention of scholars. As a result, relevant research emerged endlessly, and the total number of published papers at this stage spanned the shortest time with the largest number of articles issued in the four stages. It can be seen from the annual number of articles published in English in "Figure 2" that the distribution of foreign studies was sporadic, and the earliest appeared in 1979. From 1979 to 2018, a total of 15 articles were published. With the exception of 2 articles in 2014 and 3 articles in 2015, the number of articles published in all other years was 1. In short, the time of Chinese Tibetan opera research is longer than that of foreign research, and the number of articles published is more, directly reflecting the great disparity in research results between the two.

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1. Data deduplication mainly refers to repetitive documents. The documents that are eliminated are mainly documents published by Chinese authors or documents that are too different from the theme, and English documents written in English by foreign scholars are selected to participate in the analysis.

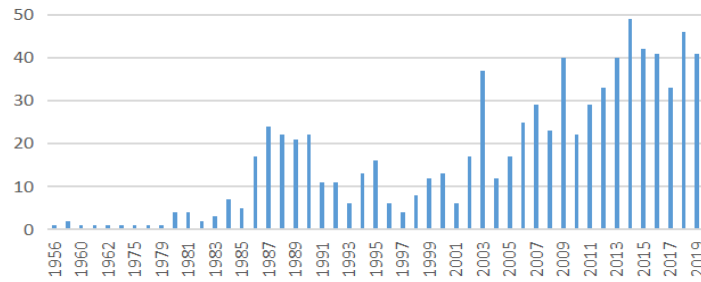


Figure 1 Annual number of published papers of Chinese studies on Tibetan opera.

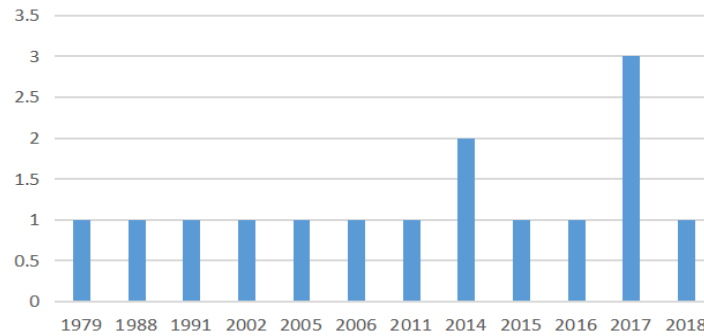


Figure 2 Annual number of published papers of English studies on Tibetan opera.

### 2.1.2 Source Journal

Regarding the analysis of source journals, some Chinese journals with more than 10 articles published are selected for statistics. Because of the limited number of foreign countries, they are all included in the statistics, as shown in "Figure 3" and "Figure 4".

First of all, there are various publications on Tibetan opera research in Chinese and English in China and foreign countries, such as art publications, ethnic publications, cultural publications, music publications, anthropology publications, etc. At the same time, this also reflects the diversification of the research types of Chinese and English literature on Tibetan operas in China and foreign countries, and the publications with a large number of published papers are mainly art and ethnic journals. There are a total of 213 publications on the Chinese study of Tibetan opera in China. The publications with a large number of published papers are mainly distributed in art and ethnic publications. For example, "Tibetan Art Studies" (formerly known as "Art Research Trends") is both an art publication and an ethnic publication, with 266 articles published, reflecting the importance placed by this publication on the national treasure of Tibetan opera. There are 9 foreign publications of Tibetan opera research in English, mainly in drama and ethnic categories,

such as "Asian Theatre Journal" (5 articles) and "Revue D'Etudes Tibétaines" (3 articles).

Secondly, in terms of the grade of the source journals for Tibetan opera research, Chinese journals include core journals and ordinary journals; and the foreign English literature mainly comes from the WOS core collections, all of which are highly influential research publications. Among the 821 Chinese Tibetan opera research papers published at the level of publications, 244 are from core journals, accounting for 29.72% of the total literature, mainly in the ethnic category such as "Tibetan Studies", the comprehensive art category such as "National Arts", the drama category such as "Sichuan Drama", the cultural category such as "Cultural Heritage", the communication category "China Radio & TV Academic Journal", the film and television category such as "Contemporary Cinema", and the literature category such as "Studies of Ethnic Literature", etc. It can be seen from this that Chinese core publications not only attach great importance to the ontology research of Tibetan opera, but also pay attention to the derivative research of Tibetan opera, such as artistic value, protection and inheritance, and dissemination. Among the 15 foreign articles on Tibetan opera, 5 are from "Asian Theatre Journal", 3 are from "Revue D'Etudes Tibétaines", and 5 are from "Inner Asia", "Asian Music", "The Drama Review", "American Ethnologist", and "Asian Ethnology", respectively.

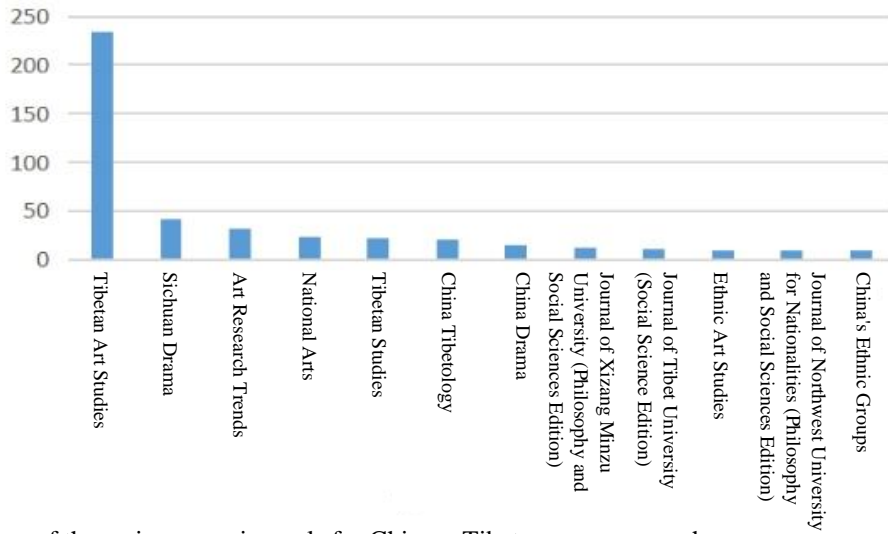


Figure 3 Diagram of the main source journals for Chinese Tibetan opera research.

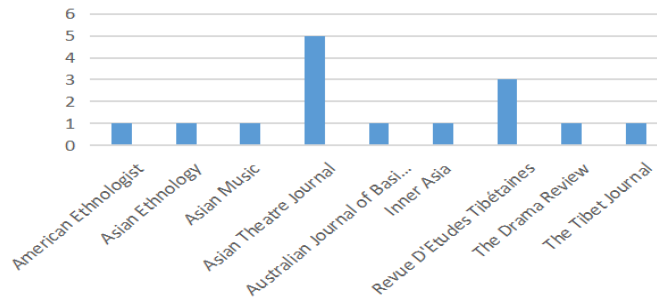


Figure 4 Diagram of the main source journals for the study of Tibetan opera in English.

## 2.2 Comparison of Tibetan Opera Research Power in Chinese and English Academic Circles

### 2.2.1 Leading Scholars in Tibetan Opera Studies

There is a large disparity in the number of scholars of Tibetan opera research in Chinese and English and in the number of articles published by individual scholars, which is the further evidence of the close attention and importance given to Tibetan opera in China. After the matrix analysis, it reveals that there are 595 scholars studying Tibetan opera in Chinese and only 14 scholars in English. The top 10 Chinese authors in terms of number of articles published are shown in "Figure 5". Among them, scholars with relatively more achievements include Liu Zhiqun (71 articles), Cao Yali (23 articles), and Liu Kai (16 articles). Liu Zhiqun's research focuses on the origin and development of Tibetan opera, the genres of drama, and the comparison with Chinese and foreign operas and plays; the research of the latter two scholars mainly focuses on Qinghai Tibetan opera. There are only a handful of scholars

of Tibetan opera in English as opposed to Chinese scholars of Tibetan opera. ("Figure 6") Among them, the scholar who has published the most articles is Fitzgerald Kati, who has published 3 articles, and all other authors have 1 article. Kati's systematic research on Tibetan opera benefits from her rich education and research experience. In 2010, Fitzgerald Kati received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drama from Barnard College. She once went to Kathmandu, Nepal to study at the Tibetan Opera Association for 3 months and studied at the Advanced Tibetan Opera Class of Tibet University from 2010 to 2012 [5]<sup>270</sup>. From August 2017 to July 2018, she studied at the Minzu University of China as a visiting scholar in the Fulbright Project; from September 2018 to July 2019, she conducted scientific research at the Central Institute of Tibetan Studies in Varanasi, India; from August 2019 to February 2020, she studied at the Minzu University of China for doctoral studies with the support of Fulbright Scholarship [6]. Rich learning experience, solid drama knowledge and accomplishments, as well as on-the-spot contact with Tibetan culture, has enabled her to have a certain depth and influence on the Tibetan opera research.

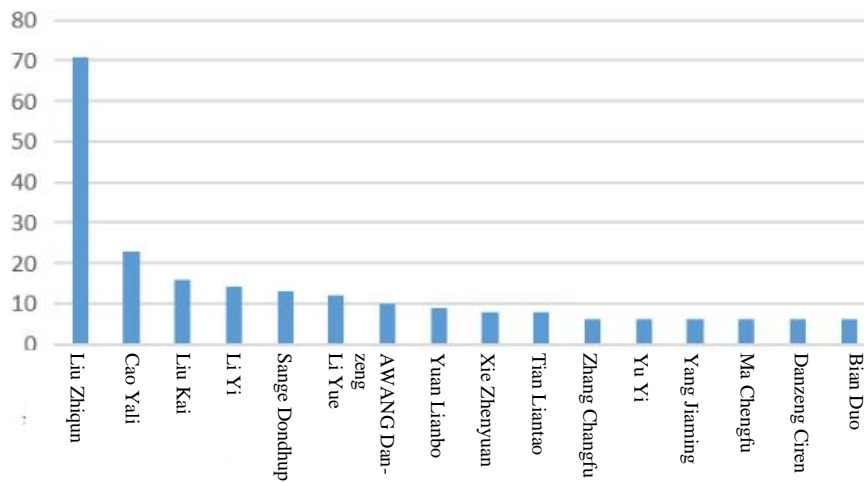


Figure 5 Diagram of the major scholars in Chinese Tibetan opera studies.

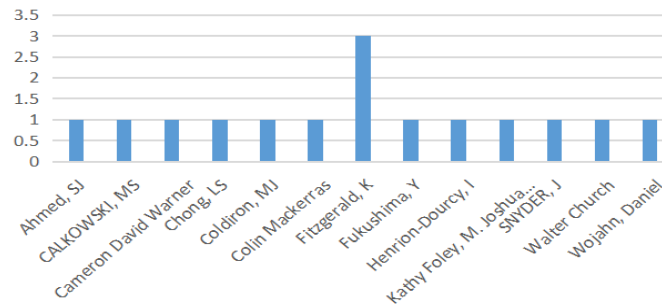


Figure 6 Diagram of the major scholars in English Tibetan opera studies.

### 2.2.2 Major Academic Institutions for Tibetan Opera Research

The academic institution of Tibetan opera research is the unit where the author belongs. There are similarity and difference in academic institutions between the main forces of Tibetan opera research in China and foreign countries. The similarity is that these research institutions are mainly universities, which conform to the law that scientific research is the basic function of universities; at the same time, there is a large gap in the number of papers issued by research institutions. As shown in "Figure 7", the top ten research institutions in China with the number of Chinese publications related to Tibetan opera research are: Tibet University (41 articles), Xizang Minzu University (including Xizang Minzu Institute) (31 articles), Minzu University of China (26 articles), Chinese National Academy of Arts (24 articles), Qinghai Nationalities University (including Qinghai Nationalities Institute) (17 articles), The Tibet Autonomous Region Institute of National Art (21 articles), Southwest Minzu University (including Southwest Minzu Institute)

(20 articles), Tibet CangJuTuan (16 articles), Chengdu University (9 articles), and Sun Yat-sen University (8 articles). From the perspective of institutional nature, these academic institutions are mainly ethnic colleges and universities; geographically speaking, these academic institutions are mainly distributed in the Qinghai-Tibet region, followed by the southwest region. It can be seen from "Figure 8" that the main foreign academic institutions for Tibetan opera research include Ohio State University (2 articles), University of California, Santa Cruz (1 article), University of Oklahoma (1 article), University Laval (1 article), and University of Lethbridge (1 article); besides, University of Leipzig, Griffith University, University of Dhaka, University of Essex, Giorgio Cini, Veniza, Aarhus University, and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan all have 1 article, respectively; in addition, there are 2 articles from unknown organizations<sup>2</sup>. In terms of the number of articles published in the countries where foreign

2. Two American scholars' articles, including 1 article of Snyder, J and 1 article of Fitzgerald, K, fail to clearly indicate the author's institution. It is also temporarily unable to investigate and verify them on the Internet.

Tibetan opera research institutions are located, the research of the United States is relatively prominent with 4 articles, followed by Canada with 2, and the

others all with 1. Geographically, foreign Tibetan opera research institutions are mainly distributed in Europe and America, followed by Asia.

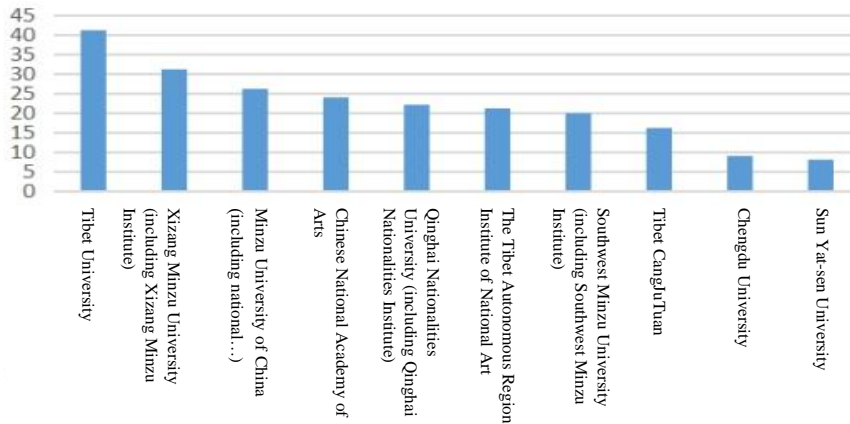


Figure 7 Diagram of the major research institutions in Chinese Tibetan opera studies.

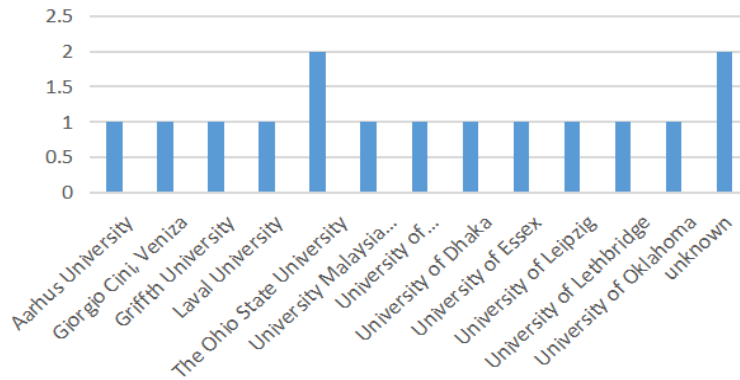


Figure 8 Diagram of the major research institutions in English Tibetan opera studies.

### 3. COMPARISON OF THE CONTENT OF TIBETAN OPERA STUDIES IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH ACADEMIC CIRCLES

After sorting out the research literature on Tibetan opera in Chinese and English, it can be found from the diagrams that the similarities and differences between the two in the research coexist, and the similarities dominate.

#### 3.1 Similarities

The focus of Chinese and English Tibetan opera research in China and foreign countries has the following similarities: (1) The study of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English is similar in subject matter and covers a wide range of topics; it can be roughly divided into the ontology research of Tibetan opera and the interdisciplinary and multi-perspective derivative study of Tibetan opera; (2) Studies on the ontology of Tibetan opera, such as

the origin of Tibetan opera, traditional theatrical pieces, mask art, and performance style and performance form are the areas that Chinese and English academic circles pay the most attention in China and foreign countries; (3) Derivative research on Tibetan opera, such as the protection, inheritance, and translation and dissemination of Tibetan opera are also quite popular among researchers.

#### 3.2 Differences

The main differences in the hot topics of Tibetan opera studies in the Chinese and English academic circles in China and foreign countries are mainly manifested in: (1) The main concern of Chinese academic circles is the regionality and innovation of the genre of Tibetan opera, while foreign academic circles have not paid much attention to this; (2) Foreign research is particularly interested in the training of Tibetan opera

performance talents, which is not very prominent in Chinese research.

#### **4. COMPARISON OF THEORIES AND METHODS OF TIBETAN OPERA RESEARCH IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH**

The study of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English academic circles has both universality and individuality in terms of theories and methods. First of all, both of them pay more attention to interdisciplinary research in research theories. The study of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English in China and foreign countries uses multi-disciplinary theories, such as ethnology, anthropology, art, culturology, variation and other disciplines. Secondly, in terms of research methods, both Chinese Tibetan opera studies in China and foreign countries have used textual research, field investigations, and field visits. Chinese research is mostly textual research, which analyzes, compares and summarizes the literature, while foreign research pays more attention to field investigations and field visits, such as obtaining first-hand information through in-depth study at Minzu University of China and Tibet University, or conducting in-depth interviews with Tibetan opera performers.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Based on the data retrieved from CNKI database and WOS database, this article analyzes the research of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English academic circles. The study of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English academic circles in China and foreign countries has achieved good results. The ontology research of Tibetan opera in China has begun to form a system, and the perspective of multidisciplinary research has made Tibetan opera research flourishing; there are relatively a few studies on Tibetan opera in English in foreign countries, and the distribution is fragmented and unsystematic. Nevertheless, studies in Chinese and English academic circles in China and foreign countries make up for each other's deficiencies to a certain extent. Based on the above analysis of the current status of the study of Tibetan opera in Chinese and English, it is found that there are certain shortcomings in the study of Tibetan opera in China and foreign countries, such as the high repetition rate of Tibetan opera literature, and the lack of comprehensive research on the ontology of Tibetan opera and its derivative research and so

on. Looking forward to the possible trends of Tibetan opera research in China and foreign countries, considerations can be made from the following aspects: improving the overall quality of Chinese and English Tibetan opera research, paying attention to the depth and breadth of research; further increasing the research on the inheritance, protection and innovation of Tibetan opera; strengthening the research on the transformation and functional value of Tibetan opera, and fully exploring the modern value meaning of Tibetan opera.

#### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Daiqiong Liu.

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