



# Industrialization of the Culture and Aesthetics: Reconsideration of the Lingnan Opera Films in 1950s and 1960s

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**Abstract.** This paper takes the Lingnan opera films in the 1950s and 1960s as the research object to explore the cultural transmission and industrial aesthetic construction in Lingnan opera films during this period. Under the theory of film industry aesthetics, this paper probes into the transformation of opera art under the production mode of Lingnan opera film industry, as well as the aesthetic pursuit in opera concepts, cultural industry and other aspects, and then analyzes the construction of cultural system of Lingnan opera film symbolization and the spread of industrialized opera culture. It is believed that through carefully selected Chinese story themes, creative image creation art, innovative image production technology, and systematic and standardized cultural industry operation, drama films are revitalized.

**Keywords:** Lingnan Opera Film · Industrialization Communication · Film Industry Aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

The 1950s and 1960s were the prosperous and mature period of Chinese traditional opera films. From the perspective of the development history of Lingnan films, the production of Lingnan traditional opera films with a broad mass cultural basis played a decisive role in the survival of modern Lingnan films. At present, there is still a big dispute about the scope and significance of Lingnan film research. The author believes that the research scope of Lingnan film and Lingnan culture is the same, including Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macau and Gui Qiong areas. The research scope and significance are closely related to the history, geography, cultural origin of Lingnan area, as well as the close contact between Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau and many other elements. This paper mainly takes Cantonese Opera, Chaozhou Opera, Guangdong Han Opera, and Qiong Opera with unique Lingnan characteristics as the main research objects of Lingnan opera films. Under the theory of “film industry aesthetics” [1], this paper explores the transformation of opera art under the production mode of Lingnan opera film industry in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the aesthetic pursuit presented in opera concepts, cultural industries, etc. Then it analyzes the cross-border communication and cultural identity of Lingnan opera and film in Southeast Asia.

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## 2 Industrial Aesthetics of Lingnan Opera Films

### 2.1 The Artistic Turn in the Mode of Industrial Production

The 1950s and 1960s were a transitional period in which the crisis and turnaround of Lingnan films coexisted. The state-owned film and television media of Guangzhou's planned economy were closely related to the private film and television media of Hong Kong's market economy. Cantonese Opera, Chaozhou Opera, Guangdong Han Opera and Qiong Opera are the four popular operas in the Lingnan region, and also an important field of entertainment in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau. In the 1920s, with the continuous innovation of film technology, many theaters in Lingnan began to add film equipment to show films. The film's rich story content, gripping plot, and cheaper ticket price than traditional opera have broken the monopoly of traditional opera. Since the beginning of the 1930s, the popularity of Cantonese opera has declined, while relatively cheap film entertainment has become increasingly prosperous. The stability of life after the war has caused the demand for films to outstrip the supply and the shortage of talents. Film studios have invited Cantonese opera stars and creators to join the film industry. Lingnan opera films absorb resources from all sides, co-exist with folk customs and culture, incorporate opera art, film industry and entertainment industry into opera films most effectively, and combine them with popular culture deeply to create Lingnan opera films with strong regional characteristics.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Lingnan opera films, which entered the film transformation period, entered the stage of Guangdong and Hong Kong cooperative filming, and prospered along with it. As a capital fertile land with more stable investment and more reasonable tax revenue, Hong Kong has attracted the Chinese film industry in Southeast Asia to set up factories in Hong Kong. The large and institutionalized mass production mode has enabled the creators of the drama film industry to use their familiar inherent skills to produce drama films from limited resources in the fastest and lowest cost way, integrating drama, drama, music, literature and other cultural resources, and inheriting the characteristics of Lingnan culture that is open, inclusive and advancing with the times. The creators of the film industry actively explored the production mode of the drama film industry, and many artists bravely explored the integration of film industry and drama art, drama aesthetics and film aesthetics. In terms of script creation, the writers of Cantonese operas "judge the play by the people" [2], while the film "judge the people by the play", [3] The essence of opera art is performance, not story. The "outline play" of Cantonese opera refers to the impromptu performance of actors on the spot according to the outline. With the development of opera films, the performance mode of "outline play" is gradually replaced by the performance of complete scripts. The types of Lingnan opera films gradually changed from traditional costume dramas to modern fashion dramas, and then gradually developed various art forms, such as opera records, Cantonese opera films, opera miscellaneous brocade films, Cantonese opera excerpts, and Cantonese opera documentaries. Lingnan opera films gradually matured in this process.

## 2.2 Aesthetic Pursuit Presented by the Concept of Traditional Opera

In the drama film, as a carrier and means of communication, the film has not changed the essence of drama, which is essentially the embodiment of Chinese aesthetic spirit. Lingnan opera films reflect the aesthetic taste of Cantonese opera, Chaozhou opera and other Lingnan operas. Nationalization has always been the artistic direction that the creators of Lingnan opera films have been trying to explore. The aesthetic pursuit presented is mainly reflected in the following two aspects: “Let things speak for themselves, refine and control; have both form and spirit, and enjoy both refined and popular tastes”.

The aesthetic creation thinking of Lingnan drama and film is embodied in “expressing one’s ambition by relying on things and refining one’s restraint”. The expressions of drama film and Cantonese opera stage are different. The film narrates the story through the combination of shots, and completes the transformation of time and space with the transformation of different scenes and characters; The drama stage is performed in a continuous and complete time and space, through the ups and downs of different scenes and characters, the plot of each scene is transformed. The advantage of film language in lens language makes its expression more concise and restrained. The Cantonese opera film *Never Say Goodbye* shot in 1959, on the basis of following the stage narrative mode, smoothly completed the transformation of time and space through montage, the plot development was concise and restrained, and the narrative rhythm was compact. The application of “expressing one’s will by relying on things” in drama originates from the creator’s intuitive insight into the internal meaning of a particular thing, and refines and perfects it. The final poem in the last “Fragrant Fragrance” of *Never Say Goodbye*, “embracing each other, leaning close to each other, and the two branches of the tree reveal the imperial lady’s fragrance”, not only explains the bleak and tragic environment, but also shows the delicate feelings of the characters who live and die together. The lyrics and songs express their aspirations, concise and restrained, and one chant and three sighs.

In the 1950s and 1960s, under the influence of the market economy, the entertainment industry in Hong Kong became a market dominated by the audience, and the drama and film formed an aesthetic feature that combines form and spirit, and appeals to both refined and popular tastes. The themes are mostly drawn from traditional Chinese operas and western films. The films focus on emotional expression, but ignore ideological expression. The artistic styles are increasingly diversified. The seriousness and entertainment, elegance and popularity of the films coexist. It reflects the hot issues of current social life, and reflects the common sense and secular spirit of Lingnan opera and film with the audio-visual language and humorous language that the masses enjoy. In 1961, the Hong Kong Phoenix Film Company and the Pearl River Film Studio jointly filmed the Chaozhou opera film *The Mirror and the Lychee*, which praised the independent pursuit of marriage and the adherence and loyalty to love. When she threw the litchi handkerchief to Chen San at the lychee market, Wu Niang immediately uttered her heart’s voice of “feeling like a dream, thinking about infinite shame”, and sang to Yi Chun, “Just a bunch of litchi, don’t guess my heart”. The characters’ internal feelings and external images were in unity of opposites, and the voice and feelings were integrated, full of expressiveness. On the aesthetic level, the film practices the aesthetic pursuit of both form and spirit, enjoying both refined and popular tastes, realizing the transformation

of Chinese aesthetic spirit into traditional opera images, and presenting the aesthetic characteristics of elegance and secular.

### 3 The Intercultural Communication of Lingnan Opera and Film

#### 3.1 The Construction of Symbolized Cultural System

Lingnan opera film not only inherits the Chinese aesthetic spirit, but also constructs a symbolic cultural system, promotes the cultural transmission of Chinese opera, and enhances the spread of Chinese culture to the outside world. In the construction of cultural system, symbolization is to clearly refine the expression form and connotation of cultural objects, making them become cultural communication symbols with the characteristics of the times. In this sense, the important premise of the cross cultural communication of Lingnan opera and film is to construct their own cultural symbol system and make it become the symbol of cross cultural communication. The cultural system construction of Lingnan opera film mainly covers the following two aspects: the symbolic implication of opera artistic emotion and the symbolic interpretation of opera artistic understanding.

The art of drama needs to be expressed by emotional means. The symbolization of drama and film is also the process of transferring emotions. In the 1950s and 1960s, the rapid development of Lingnan opera and film was not just the popular entertainment phenomenon in Hong Kong, but the new emotional symbolic implication formed on the basis of traditional opera art and in the integration and creation of opera art and film industry. From the symbolic point of view, its deep meaning reflects the following two aspects: on the one hand, for overseas Chinese, the symbolic process of Lingnan opera and movies is actually a deep emotional attachment. This kind of “nostalgia utopia” [4] is where the overseas Chinese convert their emotions. On the other hand, for Hong Kong, which was under colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s, Lingnan opera films have the symbolic meaning that the original residents have not been completely conquered by colonialism, and they have endowed the Chinese people with strong self-esteem. As a folk force, Lingnan opera and film advocated Chinese traditional virtues, folk culture and artistic ideas, and constructed a cultural counterweight system against the mainstream institutional system and imperialism.

When Lingnan opera films are presented in a symbolic way and spread as one of the main manifestations of Lingnan culture, they face the problem of interpretation and understanding by the recipients of Lingnan culture. When opera was presented as a film form, there was a symbolic interpretation of the understanding of Lingnan opera art, which may involve folk stories, national spirit, regional culture, as well as story plots, scenes, costumes, singing, performance, music and other related things. In the process of cultural construction by the general public, we can understand the meaning of symbolization from the vivid and unique drama films, and explore the Chinese cultural spirit behind the drama films. On the one hand, based on the experience of drama and film, viewers use artistic symbols as the media to realize the close relationship between the cultural experience of different cultural recipients and Chinese culture. On the other hand, symbols only express themselves and speak for themselves [5]. Therefore, the transmission and understanding of Lingnan opera and film symbols, because of their

free and open nature, are based on the foundation of Lingnan culture, as well as their extensibility and innovation to the outside.

### 3.2 The Spread of Industrialized Traditional Opera Culture

With the progress of science and technology and the development of modern cultural industry, the cinematization of Lingnan opera art and the cross media communication of opera films have become more complicated. In the 1950s and 1960s, under the influence of industrial production, drama art formed a new art form that is more in line with the current market and audience needs. The cinematic performance in drama film production mainly includes the following aspects: stage space becomes image space, real actors become illusory images, the assumption of drama becomes the authenticity of film, the beauty of actors' stage performance becomes the beauty of actors' pictures and lenses, and the performance of plots through actors' performance becomes the performance of plots through lens combinations. Walter Benjamin believes that industrialized art production is democratic and widely disseminated. Art production leads to the disappearance of the uniqueness and "aura" of a work of art, but it allows more people to appreciate the art produced by industry and promotes art to the public [6]. As Benjamin said, opera films enable the spread of opera art in a wider area, so that more people who cannot enjoy the stage performances of opera can watch opera performances anytime and anywhere. Opera films, like commodities, meet people's entertainment life and spiritual needs.

The industrialization of traditional Chinese opera culture communication has made Lingnan traditional Chinese opera film expand the scope of cultural communication with its wide range and fast speed of communication. Lingnan opera film, as a comprehensive mass art form that integrates the imprint of the development of the times, has unquestionable cultural communication power. In the 1950s and 1960s, Southeast Asian countries launched "anti Chinese" and other movements due to various complex reasons such as politics, economy and diplomacy. The transmission path of Chinese mainland films has been blocked. Hong Kong's special political status as a colony has made it a "free port" valued by Chinese businessmen in Singapore and Malaysia. The injection of capital has made Hong Kong an important place for the external transmission of Chinese films. Guangdong Opera, Chaozhou Opera, Qiong Opera and other Lingnan local operas, as the important basis for overseas Chinese to divide their ethnic groups by dialect, have laid a solid foundation for the cross-cultural communication of Lingnan opera and movies, and become an important spiritual consolation for the motherland to connect overseas Chinese at this time. On the other hand, the spread of culture in traditional Chinese operas is relatively peaceful, and the cultural spirit of drama films is similar to that of the world. Its worldwide theme not only makes Chinese feel the feelings of family and nation, but also makes overseas opera lovers feel the cultural spirit of China.

## 4 Conclusion

In the 1950s and 1960s, the development of Lingnan drama and film was prosperous and mature. In the process of development, which was once brilliant but has now declined, Lingnan drama, represented by Cantonese opera, was transformed into a gripping drama

film, which made a unique artistic contribution to promoting and inheriting the artistic aesthetics of traditional Chinese drama, constructing and developing the Chinese cultural system, and promoting the cross-cultural communication of drama art. Up to now, it is of positive significance to analyze its advantages and disadvantages, gain and loss, and weigh the right and wrong of its advance and retreat for the creation of traditional Chinese opera art with national characteristics. With the high development of China's film industry, drama films are also making new era drama films full of vitality through carefully selected Chinese story themes, creative image creation art, innovative image production technology, and systematic and standardized cultural industry operation.

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