



# A Comparative Study of "Liu Sanjie" in Stage and Movie Art

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**Abstract.** With the popularity of the movie "Liu Sanjie" in 1961 and the shaping and dissemination of various forms of artistic means before and after, "Liu Sanjie" has now become an important narrative text of Guangxi Zhuang folk culture. In contrast to its continuous interpretation in stage art, "Liu Sanjie" is gradually absent from the construction and creation of contemporary movie works. As a folk legend passed down by word of mouth, the imaginative and romantic nature of the story of "Liu Sanjie", the expressive nature of the song elements, and the display of the regional scenery inherently provide a lot of space for stage art to express, but also become a creative constraint for screen art, which emphasizes more on the reproduction of real life. Only by finding specific paths suitable for different artistic expressions, culture and art can realize a good blend and intertext.

**Keywords:** "Liu Sanjie"; Character Analysis; Film Art; Stage Art

## 1 Introduction

In her book "New Interpretations of Philosophy", Susan Langer emphasized that "the ways that are widely used to convey ideas may impose more than one form and boundary on the way we think." [1] This suggests, in a sense, that each tool or means has its own unique personality, and is always suited to express what it is competent to express or form, while it will always create barriers to expression for the opposite. Even for related or similar others, they may present different effects of expression at different times and on different occasions. Among them, the dissemination of short videos is conducive to sharing rural culture with the public, and the "live streaming of goods" in the short video platform can be combined with the development of agricultural economy, which can promote the development of rural economy and industry, and attract a large number of high-quality people to join the ranks of rural construction, providing specific ways for the implementation of rural revitalization strategy.

It should be noted that although the story of "Liu Sanjie" was first circulated in the folklore, the real means of spreading the story out of Guangxi and into the world is the modern movie medium. A film titled "Liu Sanjie", a tribute to the 10th anniversary of the founding of the new China, has been widely acclaimed since its release,

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and has been successfully screened in theaters in more than fifty countries around the world, setting a new record for the number of domestic feature films distributed overseas<sup>[2]</sup>. In addition, the film, which was produced fifty years ago, has become a key way for many individuals from different cultures to understand Guangxi and recognize the Zhuang culture, and has gradually evolved into a bright business card for the cultural export of the Guangxi region.<sup>[3]</sup>

Intriguingly, the movie *Liu Sanjie*, which was born half a century ago, was the first cinematic adaptation of the folk tale of *Liu Sanjie*, which was already at its peak once it was released. After that, the movie *Liu Sanjie*, produced by Guangxi Film Studio in 1978 with the same name, attracted little attention. Although the song-and-dance romance *Looking for Liu Sanjie*, released in 2009 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the fiftieth anniversary of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, partly "caters to the public's interest in exploring minority cultures and demonstrates that its main goal is to promote the culture of ethnic minorities through the 'Liu Sanjie' homeland sentiment," the film was already at its peak when it was released. The film partially "caters to the public's interest in exploring ethnic minority culture and demonstrates that its main goal is to promote ethnic minority cultural tourism in Guangxi through 'Liu Sanjie's' homeland"<sup>[4]</sup>, but it still could not avoid a low rating of 5.7 on the Douban website. With the cultural symbol of "Liu Sanjie" and the entertainment consumption psychology of modern audience, the story of "Liu Sanjie" has been created and adapted many times in modern media, and presented in different forms and styles, such as variety shows and TV dramas, etc., but it still hasn't been recognized and remembered by too many audiences. The story of "Liu Sanjie" has been created and adapted many times in modern media and presented in different forms and styles, such as variety shows and TV dramas, but it still hasn't gained too much recognition and remembrance from the audience, and the work disappeared from the public's view in a hurry soon after its release.

Guangxi's "Liu Sanjie" culture, both in the past and at present, has been able to burst into vigorous life passion in stage art. This is not unrelated to the romantic and imaginative nature of the story itself, the innate performativeness of the characters who can sing and dance well, the exotic nature of the place where the story takes place, and the sense of strangeness and freshness brought about by the barrier of time. These elements provide a lot of space for the creation of stage art. Despite being a comprehensive art category, screen art is obviously fundamentally different from stage art. For Krakauer, he sees key differences between the two remarkably similar technologies of screen and theater. "As the theatrical presentation necessarily focuses on the performers themselves, film, however, is able to independently focus on depicting specific parts of the performer and detailing the surroundings."<sup>[5]</sup> Further, film gives meaning to things that are not even remotely noticeable in everyday life, such as things that are still and unmoving, by shaping them through the lens. At the same time, compared with stage art, movies pay more attention to the complete storyline and the close connection with real life. Obviously, the story of "Liu Sanjie" is very close and "natural" because it better follows the law of stage performance; at the same time, it also fails to find the way and path suitable for screen expression, and is gradually absent in the construction and creation of contemporary film and television

works. At the same time, because it has not been able to find a suitable way and path for screen expression, it is gradually absent from the construction and creation of contemporary film and television works.

## **2 The Art of Expression: Drama Emphasizes the Power of Feelings**

### **2.1 Aesthetic Characteristics of Stage Art**

Broadly speaking, "stage art" describes those works of art that are presented on the stage as a vehicle. More precisely, it is a kind of comprehensive performance art in which actors portray their roles and incorporate various artistic components in the three-dimensional space of the stage, covering many types of artistic expression, such as drama, opera, acrobatics, dance drama, magic and music, etc. However, the stage art is aesthetic in nature. <sup>[6]</sup> However, from a stricter point of view, we usually understand this stage art as theater art. As a specific category of art, the creation of stage art follows the general laws of art creation in general.

According to Hamilton, a contemporary American theater critic, drama is a kind of interpersonal struggle that is manifested by actors on stage with irrational forces (e.g., emotions) and is visible to the audience. Sometimes the emotional impact in a play may outweigh the actual or objective impact. Ancient Chinese opera attached great importance to Brecht's "strangeness effect" and used a great deal of symbolic techniques to achieve this goal, so that its content originated from the everyday but transcended the everyday, and the characters' images and expressions were meticulously planned and shaped, using exaggerated expressions to present realistic scenes. <sup>[7]</sup>

The creation of both theater and opera has very profoundly influenced the creation of contemporary stage art. The basic fixity of the performing and viewing areas in the stage space makes it necessary for stage performances to go beyond the general experience of interaction and place greater emphasis on the exaggerated nature of the actor's performance, the expressiveness of the music and dance, the atmosphere of the stage, and the spectacle of the performance's effects. Overall, stage performances clearly emphasize the radiating power of emotion and the shocking effect of transcending life.

### **2.2 Innovations and breakthroughs of "Liu Sanjie" in stage art**

2020 In 2019, jointly planned by the propaganda department of the Guangxi Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Guangxi Culture and Tourism Bureau, the Guangxi Drama Troupe produced a contemporary colorful drama titled "New Liu Sanjie" and received wide acclaim after its premiere at the Opera House of the National Grand Theatre. The play also successfully passed the 2020 National Stage Art Essence Innovation Support Project and the 2020 Script Funding Project Selection of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and was also included in the 2020 planning of the main stage performing arts theme of the whole of China to create

works<sup>[8]</sup>. The outstanding results of the "Five Ones Project" were rewarded and won the 17th Wenhua Prize in September of that year from China's culture and arts government.

The modern color tune drama "New Liu Sanjie" follows the pace of the times, and while inheriting the classics, it makes bold innovations and adaptations in the plot, performance, music and stage effects. In addition to a "strong sense of the times"<sup>[9]</sup>, some scholars believe that "strong romantic feelings" and "distinctive poetic character" are the most distinctive features of this work. Obviously, for an already familiar theme, the play is able to adapt to the current situation, shorten the emotional distance with the contemporary audience through the implantation of the current plot in the story, and eliminate the sense of strangeness to the greatest extent possible. In terms of audio-visual presentation, the play is rendered to the best of its ability, using a large number of traditional and modern elements, allowing the audience to complete a mind-blowing journey in a novel and unfamiliar audio-visual feast.

In terms of spectacle, in addition to the indispensable singing and dancing elements in the stage performance, as well as the regional mood of the play's choreography, "The New Liu Sanjie" also unprecedentedly adds modern balancing vehicles to the props. These elements are added to enhance the modern fashion flavor of the play. At the same time, the main actors of the play put great efforts in driving the balance car because they have to take into account the beauty of the physical dance and the complete interpretation of the songs at the same time. According to the creators, the addition of the balance bike "allows the actors to move around the stage more quickly and dramatically",<sup>[10]</sup> thus breaking the boundaries of a fixed stage and "greatly increasing the dynamism and spectacle".

In terms of shock value, the innovation and interpretation of the music was instrumental. As a traditional drama, "New Liu Sanjie" retains the audience's familiar classic tunes, such as "Mountain Song is Better than Spring River Water", "Thanks a lot", "Pan Song" and so on. As a colorful drama, the play still retains the distinctive folk music in the selection of the orchestra. At the same time, in order to be able to show the rich and delicate emotions in the story, and to enhance the interpretation of the story and the lyricism of the feelings, the music director of the play boldly adopted an orchestra after many arguments. On the basis of paying full tribute to the classics, the whole play is full of modern music elements such as pop, rock and rap, as well as classical music elements such as American music. The interpretation of the whole music is well-tempered and brilliant, which brings a strong shock to the audience's mind.

From the 1960 song and dance drama "Liu Sanjie" premiered in Beijing, which was a big hit, to the 2003 "Impression - Liu Sanjie", which pioneered the domestic large-scale landscape performance, to the 2018 national dance drama "Liu Sanjie", which was dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and to the 2022 colorful melodious drama "New Liu Sanjie", which is a brand new rendition of the drama between tradition and modernity, "Liu Sanjie" has remained lively and vivid along with several generations, which obviously owes much to the wonderful shaping and dissemination of stage art. At the same time, the distinctive characters in the legend of "Liu Sanjie", the beautiful songs

and even the imagery that unites the region, nationality and history have provided a lot of materials for the creation of stage art.

However, as one of the comprehensive art categories, film art, which integrates sound, light and color, and at the same time maintains a close relationship with modern science and technology, has had a mediocre response in the modern video narrative of "Liu Sanjie". The root of the problem is that, unlike stage art, which emphasizes abundant emotional tension and strong expressive power, screen art (such as movies) is, to some extent, more suitable to serve as a mirror reflecting real life.

### **3 Reproduced Reality: The Movie as an Asymptote to Real Life**

#### **3.1 Cinematic Art's Attention to Reality**

In 1961, Changchun Film Studio produced and distributed a musical landscape story called Liu Sanjie, based on the rumored story of Liu Sanjie. The character of "Liu Sanjie" won as many as ten awards for her outstanding performance and precise re-creation of the plot, including the second prize for the first place in the photography category in the Popular Film Awards and the first place for sound and visual effects; at the same time, the character of "Liu Sanjie" was also portrayed in the film. At the same time, the character of "Liu Sanjie" has become a permanent symbol of exemplary performance.

Regarding the victory of the movie, some researchers pointed out that this work "satisfied the aesthetic needs and viewing mentality of the public of various cultural and educational classes at that time". On the one hand, the film's storyline is set up in such a way that the revolt of the working people against the exploitation and oppression of the landlord class is shown to the fullest extent through three scenes of weighty mountain song duets, where the songs reveal the true voice of the general public. On the one hand, the songs also play a key role in the narrative of the film, which uses the method of "expressing and transmitting emotions through songs" to show that, in the "stressful and confrontational" environment of the story, Liu Sanjie and her villagers have a passion for labor and a spiritual outlook that aspires to a free and beautiful life. In the "stressful and confrontational" environment of the story, Liu Sanjie and her villagers show their passion for labor and their desire for a free and beautiful life.

The year 1961 was not long after the founding of the new China, and although "revolution" and "struggle" have gradually withdrawn from the view of history, they are still deep memories in the minds of the people who have experienced a long period of war. Closely related to this memory is the underlying psychological preconception that "the struggle will surely end" and "the revolution will surely win". Such memories and expectations are satisfied by the audience in the process of watching the movie Liu Sanjie. In addition, unlike the treatment of music in many film and television works, the music in the film is not just an auxiliary element to "set the mood" or as a "spectacled national element embellishment", which is good to have, and does not affect the overall situation, but rather, it is used as a powerful element of resistance against violence and oppression. Instead, music is used as a powerful

weapon to resist violence and oppression, and to push the main plot forward. Thus, although the movie *Liu Sanjie* is defined as a "musical landscape film," the function of music and landscape in the narrative greatly exceeds its function of being watched and appreciated.

Admittedly, although the 1961 film *Liu Sanjie* was the first attempt to present this theme on the screen, and its audiovisual presentation was not without its roughness and tenderness when viewed from today's perspective, it is still a rare masterpiece because of its close connection with reality and its accurate expression. Since the birth of the movie, every step of its development and progress has been driven by powerful technological innovation. Nevertheless, for an excellent movie, whether in the past or at present, the real standard for measuring the artistic level of a movie is still to return to the content of the movie.

### 3.2 The Absence of "Liu Sanjie" in Contemporary Cinema

Films that are skillful in their techniques but weak in their attention to reality are not easy to be accepted and resonated by the audience. This of course does not mean that movies can only perform the function of documentaries, or simply record and imitate reality. Tarkovsky once pointed out, "Reality, not a simple copy of reality!"<sup>[11]</sup> In Bazan's early theoretical clock, we can also find more similar ideas. If montage represents an "expressive" re-creation of the movie, then there are many people who would take Bazan's theory of the long shot as the basis for its opposition. However, in fact, Bazan's long shot theory contains a lot of creative discussions about "recreating reality", and even all the means of cinematic expression, whether it is long shot or montage, are successful in terms of cinematic means if they are initially intended to restore a cinematic space and time that is infinitely close to reality, which, in Krakauer's words, "conforms to the cinema". In Krakauer's words, they "meet the methodological requirements of the movie".

Throughout the creation of films with ethnic themes, it is not because they do not restore reality that they deviate from the essence of cinema. The more difficult problem is that many so-called ethnic films do not tell the story of the ethnic group, nor do they convey the value and culture of the ethnic group, and the ethnic elements in the films are only a kind of whitewash and embellishment, which do not take up the center of the story, but are the so-called spectacle of the ethnic imagination.

In 2009, during the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of New China, Su Youpeng and Huang Shengyi co-starred in the film "Seeking Liu Sanjie," a romantic love story with elements of music and dance, which showed a real world of dreams to those who felt helpless in their souls because of the influence of modern civilization.<sup>[12]</sup> Although the film was named after Su Youpeng and Huang Shengyi, it did not convey ethnic values and culture, but rather a whitewash and embellishment. [Although the film's name is related to "Liu Sanjie", it presents the journey of young men and women who have lost their spiritual beliefs in modern civilization and set out to find their spiritual home in order to escape from the difficulties of reality. Although the story of "Liu Sanjie" has been mentioned many times, and the songs of "Liu Sanjie" have been presented many times in the movie, they seem to be some

forgotten classics, or a dream that has been covered by reality, or just like the tree of love that is shown in the movie. Like the tree of love, it is only for others to watch and remember. "Liu Sanjie" is no longer an important narrative thread in the movie, nor is it the driving force behind the main plot. On this level, although "Searching for Liu Sanjie" possesses a variety of representational elements of ethnic minorities, such as characters, costumes, music, regions, scenery, etc., these seem to be like small stones that can be seen but cannot be melted into the flowing water, and are unable to influence the color and texture of the water, let alone determine the final direction of the water. The movie is still a gradual line of real life, only that this line is not woven by the stories of ethnic minorities, they are just small ornaments that serve as embellishments.

#### **4 Conclusions: Contemporary Cinematography on Ethnic Minority Themes**

As a multicultural province, Guangxi is home to 11 unique ethnic minorities, each of which has constructed its own culture and values and shaped a distinctive ethnic culture in the process of continuous growth and reproduction. All of these resources have become a constant source of inspiration for literary and artistic creation in Guangxi and the country as a whole. However, in contrast to the numerous works and masterpieces in music, dance, fine arts, acrobatics and other stage arts, Guangxi's ethnic minority culture has not become an important source of nourishment for contemporary film and television creation, not only is there a lack of works, but there is also a lack of significant film and television productions.

Not only limited to the Guangxi region, but also looking at the whole of China from a wider perspective, we can see that film and television works featuring ethnic minorities, as a way of interaction and communication between ethnic groups, are a key bridge for fairly conveying culture and promoting ethnic harmony. However, compared to the current environment in which China's movie industry is booming, minority-themed works are lagging behind. "The movie is gradually weakening, which is mainly reflected in the scarcity and insufficient number of classic works."<sup>[13]</sup> Objective barriers to expression do exist, but if the issue about the relationship between tradition and modernity can be well handled, and specific paths suitable for image expression can be found, the national culture will be able to go global with the excellent expressive power of contemporary images as well as its powerful propagation power, and the art of cinema can likewise be fed in the nourishment of culture. As a pillar of modern mass media, the wide influence of movie art makes it not only shoulder the responsibility of creating excellent art, but also do its best in the historical mission of telling Chinese stories and promoting Chinese culture.

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