

## PROCEEDINGS ARTICLE

# The Development of Traditional Local Playlets in Recent Years From the Perspective of Wanwanqiang Shadow Play in Quwo, Southern Shanxi Province

Zhengyu Yan<sup>1,\*</sup>, Nan Li<sup>2</sup>, Hongrui Gao<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Academy of Music, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China<sup>2</sup>Academy of Fine Arts, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China

## ABSTRACT

Wanwanqiang shadow play, an intangible cultural heritage project, is a popular folk opera in Quwo County, southern Shanxi Province. It has a unique singing tune, orchestration, and playing method. With the rapid development of China's economy and culture, it is urgent to protect and inherit local traditional playlets. This study explores the Wanwanqiang shadow play in Quwo and tries to find out the reasons and solutions for the obstruction of the inheritance and communication of folk playlets.

## ARTICLE DATA

## Article History

Received 13 April 2022

Revised 21 April 2022

Accepted 24 October 2022

## Keywords

Local playlet

Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo

County

Communication

Inheritance

Obstruction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Quwo in southern Shanxi Province has a long history, a variety of cultures and a glorious and excellent cultural tradition. Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County is a brilliant star in this art field. The emergence and development of Quwo Wanwanqiang opera is closely related to the Wanwanqiang opera in Tongzhou in Eastern Shaanxi [1]. According to the "opera chapter" of "Encyclopedia of Chinese operas", Quwo "Wanwan" in the Qing Dynasty was introduced by folk artists in Shaanxi Province [2]. After more than 200 years of evolution and development, it entered its heyday from the late Qing Dynasty to the period of the Republic of China. And then, with the communication of local lovers of Wanwanqiang opera and influence of local characteristics, Donglu Wanwanqiang opera had changed, the troupe expanded, and the repertoire, music, singing tune and musical instruments had been gradually enriched. After a long time of change and

development, it became new Wanwanqiang shadow play with the characteristics of Quwo County. During the period from late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, Wanwanqiang opera troupe reached its peak, with more than 30 troupes and more than 80 plays. Due to the tangled warfare among warlords, the masses had no means to live, and the shadow puppet troupe was unable to avoid the disaster. It fell apart and nearly became extinct [1].

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, with the strong support of the party and the state, the shadow puppeteers scattered all over the country started their career again and formed a new team. 15 shadow puppet troupes such as Anliu, Banzimao and Yuanzhuzi revived [3], and Wanwanqiang opera became one of the important mass cultural and artistic activities at that time. In order to meet the needs of social culture, Quwo re-integrated the original shadow plays into reality show, and

\*Corresponding author. Email: [yanzy@sxu.edu.cn](mailto:yanzy@sxu.edu.cn)

established the "Quwo Wanwanqiang Troupe" in the 1960s, and then arranged more than 20 ancient costume dramas such as "Shuang Bao En", "Qing Bai Ju" and "Hua Liu Lin" [1].

Since its spread into Shanxi Province for half a century, Wanwanqiang opera troupe in Quwo County has absorbed anything and everything, with unique singing tune and playing method [4]. And a comprehensive standardized theatrical troupe was formed [5]. In terms of repertoire, Wanwanqiang opera has inherited the characteristics of shadow play and made the improvement in the development of drama type mechanism. Therefore, the "new" and "old" operas coexist, and 38 plays of Quwo Wanwanqiang operas are arranged. Besides, Wanwanqiang opera has been performed for national leaders and international friends, participated in professional theatrical group on behalf of Linfen City, and won many awards.

## **2. ANALYSIS ON THE DIFFICULTIES AND CAUSES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOLK ART SINCE THE 1980S**

### **2.1. Development Dilemma and Reason Analysis**

At present, Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County is trapped by the sharp contraction of the performance market, the serious aging problem of professional group, the lack of follow-up talents, the imbalance of skills, the single form and other adverse factors that are not conducive to the development of Wanwanqiang opera, and the Wanwanqiang opera is in a situation of extinction and cannot completely get rid of the downturn. According to Liu, head of the Wanwanqiang Opera Troupe, in recent years, there are only 32 people in troupe, and the government subsidizes 40000 yuan a year. Because the cost of the small theater is low, it costs 300 yuan once perform. In the past year, there were more than 300 performances and more than 20 plays, but now there are only five. Due to the low salary, a large number of artists left, including hairdressers and migrant workers. Performance alone can no longer meet the living needs of actors [5].

With the prosperity of the economy and the improvement of living quality, most of the practitioners of folk traditional art change careers and do more profitable jobs due to low wages and the inability to support their families. In addition, the local government pays less attention to the performance team, making the overall quality of the performance team worse than before. Also, the team is chaotic and disorganized. At the same time, with the

introduction of new forms of entertainment and foreign culture and changes in people's ideas, values, aesthetic tastes and aesthetic concepts, people's appreciation habits have changed. Therefore, the traditional Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County is facing a severe challenge. Due to various factors, the once popular opera has lost its former glory and is in a hopeless situation [6]. The difficulty in getting started with opera is reflected in the fact that opera is a comprehensive stage performing art [7] integrating music, action, literature, script, stage art, character modeling, etc., with rich connotations. As far as drama is concerned, it is necessary to understand it, but today's young people like fast-paced things, and the slow and old traditional opera simply cannot attract young people. Most of the people who like opera are the elderly and opera fans. However, it is still a small group. And Quwo Wanwanqiang opera cannot attract new fans, resulting in the gradual decline.

### **2.2. Communication Dilemma and Reason Analysis**

#### **2.2.1. Single Development Mode**

In most cases, Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County is performed offline. Even though Shanxi Province is extremely rich in tourism resources, few tourists come to Shanxi for watching plays. Without an audience, there is no market, let alone the renaissance of Wanwanqiang opera. Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County is a cultural tourism resource with opera characteristics, and its development should be valued by the state and by organizations [8]. However, Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County has no position in the market. Without good use of Wanwanqiang opera, a tourism resource cannot be converted into cash. And then, there are no more funds for the development of Wanwanqiang opera. As a rare local opera, the development mode of Quwo Wanwanqiang opera is relatively single, and the Wanwanqiang opera will gradually die out only through the traditional performance mode.

#### **2.2.2. Single Media**

Wanwanqiang opera is rooted in Quwo, and its singing tune also adopts local pronunciation. However, its dialect habits limit its promotion prospects, and foreign tourists cannot understand it. For example, modern Peking Opera does well in this item. The theater performance will be equipped with corresponding subtitles. Even if the audience does not understand a dialect, they will watch it with subtitles.

### 2.2.3. Lagging Behind Mainstream Culture and Media

As an art form rooted in the folk, Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County can be said to be derived from the folk and performed in the folk [9]. These dramas truly reflect the local people's lives and make people empathetic. That is why the Wanwanqiang opera troupe would be invited to perform in festivals, weddings and funerals. People loved to watch, and people at that time did not have any other forms of entertainment. Nowadays, there are various forms of entertainment. People have more and more ways to obtain information and have more preferences. Wanwanqiang opera is less and less attractive to people. In addition, weddings and funerals or commercial performances are carried out in songs, dances and other forms, making Wanwanqiang opera useless and gradually fade out of the public's vision.

### 2.3. Inheritance Dilemma and Reason Analysis

The inheritance of Wanwanqiang opera is passed down by word of mouth between master and apprentice. There are few materials, books or relevant literature about Wanwanqiang opera. Moreover, the core staffs of Wanwanqiang opera troupe in Quwo County are all over 40 years old, and the artists are in short supply. The inheritance dilemma of Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County can be divided into two parts. The first is the dilemma of "spread" and the other is the dilemma of "inheritance".

At present, few people in Quwo County have inherited Wanwanqiang opera. When the older artists of the previous generation are getting older, all senior artists have left one after another, making many skills and representative works gradually vanish [1]. In addition, some old artists are not open-minded enough. They think that they can't take out the "unique skills" they have learned hard. In fact, such an idea is not conducive to the communication of Wanwanqiang opera. It is suggested to change the original feudal concept and maintain an open and tolerant attitude, and then young people would begin to like and love Wanwanqiang opera.

Opera is a comprehensive skill. The growth of an opera performer requires years of stage practice and training [10]. However, the income cannot guarantee the basic survival needs of actors, the number of enthusiasts of opera has decreased sharply. Some young practitioners with great artistic talent have no longer concentrated on Wanwanqiang opera, but changed careers or businesses [11]. Therefore,

training and bringing up a new generation of artistic talents and how to attract more young people are other problems. Nowadays, many popular operas have been introduced into schools, so that students can be influenced by operas from an early age. Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County needs to establish an innovative inheritance mode and let more young people know about it and love it.

## 3. PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION ON INHERITANCE AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES BASED ON THE ABOVE PROBLEMS

### 3.1. Using New Media

The digital development in the 21st century has gradually changed people's way of life. Modern science and technology basically occupy 90% of their free time. Modern human beings almost access the information resources on Internet. Therefore, it is suggested to cooperate with performers or successors to upload videos of Wanwanqiang opera to the Internet to promote Wanwanqiang opera. According to the 49th statistical report on China's Internet Development released by the China Internet Information Center, by December 2021, the number of Internet users in China had reached 1.032 billion, with an increase of 42.96 million over December 2020. And the Internet popularizing rate reached 73.0%. It is undeniable that intelligent terminals can be used as a platform for the mutual transmission of various cultural forms, and their cultural transmission range is the widest and the communication audience is the largest. However, people can also meet the cultural needs of the masses even they stay at home. Tiktok platform also takes advantage of the trend, becoming the largest intangible cultural heritage publicity platform in the industry. Among many intangible cultural heritage arts in China, more than 90% of inheritors of intangible cultural heritage have chosen to settle in the short video network platform to publicize and promote by publishing some videos on the production and performance of intangible cultural heritage art. With the spread of short videos, traditional operas are full of the flavor of times, and Chinese audiences can understand traditional operas.

In addition to paying attention to performers and successors, the innovation of opera in education can also rely on new media. At present, many intangible cultural heritage products are exploring the innovative path of intangible cultural heritage

education based on teaching and learning. In 2019, the social media department of people's network and Tencent QQ launched a public welfare game "I am the inheritor of intangible cultural heritage", which enabled netizens to participate in the game to become "inheritors of intangible cultural heritage" and use the intangible cultural heritage items in the game to unlock and synthesize. While unlocking the intangible cultural heritage project, people could also understand the historical background and production techniques of the intangible cultural heritage art. After knowing the relevant knowledge, people could also obtain more game gift packs through the interesting Q&A. The new model of "intangible cultural heritage + poverty alleviation" has been implemented in most poverty-stricken areas. This innovative form has led the majority of netizens to jointly help protect intangible cultural heritage.

At the same time, network promotion is also the latest and most effective way of promotion. Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County take the "hitch ride" of the network, promote its popularity with the help of the network platform, and quickly return the funds invested in the market and invest more funds in new construction. With the publicity of new media and traditional media such as newspapers and television, the effect of 1+1>2 would be achieved.

### 3.2. Using New Technology

Nowadays, there are some obstacles for the promotion of Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County, such as ambiguous video and audio data, obsolete paper materials, and word-of-mouth inheritance form, which is not conducive to the communication. It is suggested to use high and new technology to rearrange the Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County, organize the repertoire into a volume, and retain clear video, audio and paper materials. Secondly, it is suggested to strengthen the application of science and technology on stage. With the development of science and technology, stage design is becoming more important in the performance. The traditional stage arrangement of "one table and two chairs" can no longer meet the requirements of the new drama. 3D, VR, LED and other technologies can be used to make the plane become three-dimensional and vivid. At the same time, the visual experience of the audience will be enhanced, the background and environment of the story will be better described, and the characters will be depicted more deeply. In recent years, a full-LED screen is adopted in the Spring Festival Party, which can create a variety of composite spaces and can be adjusted as needed. With the free switching of stage background, the connection between the real world and imagination and the complementary singing and plot, there are infinite new possibilities.

### 3.3. Compiling Innovative Plays

It is suggested to create more plays that cater to the preferences of young people, and integrate the tradition with the culture of the new era. Nowadays, it is difficult for contemporary young people to be interested in the slow pace and old-fashioned form of traditional opera. Many traditional arts have won more young people's favor through the form of "being outstanding among circles" (network popular words, which means not only being concerned by small circles, but also beginning to enter the public's field of vision). For example, combining with electronic music and rap and creating novel plays are all good ways for Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County to "get outstanding among the circles". In 2015, Guangdong opera theater produced the rehearsal of "decisive battle against Tiancefu", which was the first combination of Internet and Opera (Cantonese Opera) in China and based on the 3D online game of martial arts "JX Online 3". It was reported that the team would combine the traditional Cantonese opera culture with the contemporary popular online games, and create a new type of Cantonese Opera with positive thinking and rich martial arts, aiming to attract young people, creating a unique cultural brand in Guangdong and cultivating a new generation of lovers of Cantonese Opera. Judging from the box office, "decisive battle against Tiancefu" achieved the expected goal and results. It was reported that the play had been performed more than 30 times in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, Foshan and other places, with more than 50000 viewers, and the ticket revenue was about 200000 yuan. This was a large amount of income for drama performance. From the "decisive battle against Tiancefu", people can see the revitalization of traditional opera. The inheritance and innovation of Cantonese opera in artistic form is worthy of further exploration and development of other opera varieties.

### 3.4. Expanding New Markets

Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County has sufficient conditions for the development of tourism resources. To attract attention, people must first understand it. For the development of Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County, it is suggested to take the following measures.

#### 3.4.1. Designing Cultural and Creative Products

For Wanwanqiang opera, it is suggested to design some cultural and creative products, such as pendants and decorations of opera characters, which can not only increase income, but also leave a deep impression on people. There are many fresh products that can be made by traditional methods, which should be used most. It can not only inherit culture



through the production of cultural and creative products, but also maintain close contact with consumers. However, the production of modern commodities is not to simplify the original traditional skills. In order to attract customers, it is necessary to do a good job of each product with the mentality of a craftsman. For example, the "Xue Rong Rong" and "Bing Dwen Dwen" of the Beijing Olympic Winter Games are loved by people all over the world, which further proves the importance of a good cultural and creative product for cultural communication.

### 3.4.2. Setting Up Special Tourist Lines

In order to develop tourism resources, it is necessary to attract people to travel, which requires to specify some characteristic tourist routes to attract tourists. In addition, it is suggested to integrate Wanwanqiang opera into the whole tourism process. Considering the local characteristic culture of Quwo, it is suggested to establish relevant facilities to combine nature with humanity. During the tourism process, tourists can also experience the fun of wearing costumes, putting on make-up and performing on stage. Then tourists can have a deeper and more interesting experience. When celebrating festivals, special activities can also be carried out, such as the Yaodu cultural festival in Linfen City. Creating their own characteristic activities can also help expand the popularity of Wanwanqiang opera. At the same time, tourists can understand and accept the art form of Wanwanqiang opera, and then love Wanwanqiang opera [12].

## 4. CONCLUSION

With the use of literature research and investigation, this study analyzes the development dilemma, communication dilemma and inheritance dilemma of Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County, studies the intangible cultural heritage of Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County and the development of tourism resources, and proposes to protect and inherit Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County by means of using media and technology, creating dramas and expanding the market. Wanwanqiang opera in Quwo County is a treasure of Chinese culture, known as "the first singing tune in southern Shanxi". Protecting and inheriting it is of great significance to the continuous development of the Chinese nation, and it is suggested to make great efforts to continue to inherit and carry forward it. In the past, traditional opera was an effective means to meet people's entertainment needs, cultivate their sentiment and help build a harmonious society. In today's society, traditional opera culture

should not stick to the old model or the old rules. Instead, it should conform to the trend of the times, absorb new nutrients, face the market, and boldly carry out the inheritance and innovation of opera art with the awareness of market survival and competition. Only by making good use of the current high and new technology, seeking new ways of development with the help of modern high and new technology products, understanding the needs of the masses, mobilizing the broad participation of the masses, and arousing the civilized memory in the hearts of the masses can we develop and expand, glow with new vitality, establish a sense of pride in the national culture in the hearts of the people, and effectively preserve and disseminate folk art, especially folk opera culture. The depressed situation of the opera market can also be changed, and a new spring of opera will come.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Tian Yue. A Study of Quwo Wanwanqiang [D]. Shanxi University, 2012. (in Chinese)
- [2] Xiaoshu Sun. Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage and Protective Tourism Development in Linfen City [D]. Shanxi Normal University, 2015. (in Chinese)
- [3] Chao Ma. Research on Quwo Story-Telling From the Perspective of Folklore [D]. Shanxi Normal University. (in Chinese)
- [4] Yu Wang. Analysis of Wanwanqiang Opera in Shanxi Province [J]. *Drama*, 2021(4): 2. (in Chinese)
- [5] Wenfeng Liu. Investigation Diary of the Current Situation of Operas and Troupes in Shanxi [J]. *Chinese Drama*, 2006(2): 4. (in Chinese)
- [6] Xiao Liu. Protection and Inheritance of Local Opera Resources in the Context of "Intangible Cultural Heritage" – Taking Xiaoyi Shadow Play, Puppets, and Wanwanqiang as Examples [J]. *Journal of Jinzhong University*, 2018, 35(5): 6. (in Chinese)
- [7] Tingxiu Yao. Study on Xiaoyi Wanwanqiang [D]. Shanxi Normal University, 2015. (in Chinese)
- [8] Haiyan Wang. Review and Reflection on the Reform of Chinese Opera in the 20th Century: Zeng Zhixin's "Talking on Opera Improvement" [D]. Southwest University, 2018. (in Chinese)

- [9] Min Tian. Study on Wanwanqiang and Rural Folk Life – Taking Xiaoyi Wanwanqiang as a Case [D]. Shanxi Normal University, 2012. (in Chinese)
- [10] Chunmei Jiao. Development and Protection of Local Opera Resources From the Perspective of Cultural Ecology – Taking Xiaoyi Wanwanqiang Opera as an Example [J]. *Symphony: Journal of Xi'an Conservatory of Music*, 2014, 33(4): 6. (in Chinese)
- [11] Yujie Huang. Analysis of Shanxi Opera Tourism Development – Taking "Wanwanqiang" in Shanxi as an Example [J]. *Drama Home*, 2012(07): 19–20. (in Chinese)
- [12] Jiabo Ren. Talent Construction and Opera Career [J]. *Oriental Art*, 2005(14): 1. (in Chinese)