

Research on the Aesthetic Connotation of Structure in the Traditional Paradigm of Han Opera Costumes

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Abstract:

The Han opera costume, also within the category of Chinese opera costumes, is characterized by that costumes and aesthetic paradigm have the unity of typology. Besides, the Han opera costume gathers the aesthetic characteristics of formula beauty and freehand brushwork beauty. Influenced by the regional aesthetic characteristics and technological characteristics, the shape, collocation, pattern and color of opera costumes have been improved and innovated for traditional Han opera costume on the basis of retaining the wardrobe system of opera costumes, so as to make the Han opera costume not only conform to the identity and character of opera characters, but also integrate the regional aesthetic characteristics. Based on the typology of traditional opera costumes, a more detailed corresponding setting has been made with the top ten professions of Han Opera. Thus, an aesthetic paradigm with a unique regional art performance form, which does not only conforms to the stylization of opera costume, but also represents the characteristics of local opera, has been formed. Having made a comparative analysis on the aesthetic connotation of the traditional and current Han Opera costumes through the research on the structural aesthetics of the costumes, this paper puts forward the corresponding thinking on the aesthetic differentiation.

Keywords:

Han Opera Costume Paradigm, Structure, Aesthetic Differentiation

1. Introduction

Han opera is an ancient type of Chinese opera, formed in Hubei in the middle of the Qing Dynasty, with a history of more than 400 years. During the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, Chu opera artists brought ood block into Beijing which once stood out in the “controversy of the Hua and Ya” with a fancy and lively art form. The Han opera costume, based on the costume system of Song Dynasty and Ming Dynasty, follows the characteristics of Ming costumes as per the principle where “singers, dancers and jugglers should abide by the clothing system of the Qing Dynasty, while opera artists are not limited by clothing when playing the role of ancients” in the “ten

no followings” in the policy where the Qing Dynasty promotes Manchu nationality. At the same time, the Han opera costumes also have their own unique artistic characteristics, such as the differences in the decoration of opera costumes in different industries, the changes in shape, the characteristics of craftsmanship, and the differences in the use of patterns and colors.

2. Paradigm Characteristics of Traditional Han Opera Costumes

Following the stylized characteristics of opera costumes, the Han opera costumes are in the same line with Chinese traditional opera costumes from the regulation of wearing to the shape of costumes. The profession of Han Opera is divided into ten and the detailed classification of the profession makes it more complicated to regulate the wearing of the characters with the costumes.

2.1. Wearing System of Traditional Chinese Opera Costumes

In Chinese opera costumes, the costumes, hats, shoes and boots worn by characters are collectively referred to as “wardrobe”. Relying on the artistry of costumes, Chinese opera costumes provide a bridge for the shaping of characters, the development of plot and the expression of emotion. As the wearing rules are established by the joint efforts of audiences and characters over the ages, a conventional common understanding is formed. Based on the above, corresponding norms for the wearing of opera costumes are formulated. The prescriptiveness of opera costumes is the wearing requirements of actors when acting, that is, the wearing rules followed by actors or roles when playing stage characters. The strict wearing regulation makes the wearing of all kinds of characters in the play have rules and regulations. “It is better to wear the worn-out cloth than wear incorrect cloth” is what the prescriptiveness of opera costumes is, that is, the wearer is required to establish a stable type-corresponding relationship with the costumes. It is one of the wearing systems of traditional Chinese opera to distinguish the costume standards according to the appearance needs of professional roles and define the wearing regulation through typed roles.

In addition, the prescriptiveness of opera costumes will also take into account the iconic images and personalized references of some characters. While conforming to the stylized provisions of opera costumes, the prescriptiveness also gives the role a stable and distinctive modeling definition, which is the second characteristic of the costume system, that is, with the corresponding relationship between costumes and specific roles considered, there will be specific costumes for specific roles on the stage. Although the wearing of Han opera costumes follows the program norms regardless of dynasties, regions and seasons, the identity, social status, age, personality and situation of different characters will still be distinguished through specific, artistic and specified styles, patterns and colors, which is also the embodiment of the artistic characteristics of freehand brushwork in opera performance. For example, in stage roles, Liu Bei usually wears yellow robes, Guan Yu wears red robes, and Zhang Fei wears black robes. From the lyrics “red-faced Guan Gong, white-faced Cao Cao and black-faced Zhang Fei” in On Opera, we can see that the makeups correspond to the role. After long-term singing, they have become a specific impression in the audience’s cognition.

2.2. Classification of Traditional Han Opera Costumes

Traditional opera costumes are mainly divided into five categories including mang, pei, kao, zhe and yi, where mang, also called officer dress, is a formal dress worn by emperors and generals with high status, “pei” is a common dress worn by the families of officials at all levels on household occasions, “kao” is the military uniform commonly used by military officer, “zhe” is a kind of long gown with inclined collar, mainly including young man flower pleat, plain pleat, female flower pleat and old female pleat and “yi” is a general term for costume. Generally, there are four parts including long clothes, short clothes, special clothes and accessories. The common ones include overcoats, tight clothes, monk clothes, vests, cloaks, summer clothes, arrow clothes, dragon arrows, medallion pattern arrow clothes and ordinary arrow clothes, where summer clothes are divided into intellectual clothes and martial clothes.

The roles of Han opera are divided into Mo, Jing, Sheng, Dan, Chou, Wai, Xiao, Cai, Fu and Za, which are more detailed than those in other operas. Besides, the opera costumes are also divided according to their professions. Among the top ten professions, Mo mainly wears “bagua coat” and “cape”, Jing mainly wears “mang” and “official clothes”, Sheng mainly wears “sword clothes” and “pleats”, Dan mainly wears “kao”, Chou mainly wears “chayi” and “kaichang”, Wai and Xiaoxing mainly wear pleats and “dayi”, Cai mainly wears “peiyi” and “sashouyi”, Fu mainly wears “peifu” decorated with camisoles and Za mainly “official clothes”, “kao” and “dayi”.

In the traditional Han opera repertoire, the corresponding characteristics between roles and costumes are clear and classic. The impressive appearance of roles in many classic operas is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. For example, in the 1954 *Yuuzhoufeng*, a Han opera film, starred by Chen Bohua, Zhao Yanrong appeared in satin Ruyi symmetrical flower female cape, and Mr. Zhao was dressed in gold floating embroidered dragon Mang robe (Figure 1), which are typical traditional costumes worn by Dan and Jing at home. Appearing in the audience hall, Zhao Yanrong wore a phoenix coronet, a female Mang suit with scattered flower pattern, and a three-river-water cliff pattern on the hem (Figure 2), which is the typical appearance of Dan on formal occasions. [1]



Figure 1. Stills of the Han Opera Film *Yuuzhoufeng*.



Figure 2. Han Opera Performing Artist Chen Bohua Dressed in a Female Mang.

In the traditional Han Opera *Guizhongyuan*, Chen Bohua dressed in a woku skirt playing lively and lovely young Liu Yulian, Yulian with the Chou makeup wore chayi with shuichun at the waist and straw sandals, Yulian’s mother with browband on her head wore a dark pigmented pi with a jade belt around her waist, which is a typical Fu appearance in traditional Han Opera, and Yue Lei wore blue zhe with no crown or hat, showing his sorehead Xiaoxing appearances (Figure 3). These characters have

become eternal classics spread up to now due to their precise positioning and aesthetic height of clothing and appearance. [2]



Figure 3. Stills from the Han Opera Film Guizhongyuan.

3. Research on the Traditional Structure and Features Of Han Opera Costumes

3.1. Structural Features of Han Opera Costumes

Retaining the external contour characteristics of ancient costumes, traditional Han opera costumes follows the “cross” structure of the ancient robe system as a whole, that is, the horizontal shoulder sleeve line is the “—”, and the vertical connection between the front body and the back body is the “|”. In terms of structure, it also retains the unique segmentation form of ancient clothing due to the limitation of cloth width. The structural characteristics of ancient clothing are closely related to the manufacturing level, sewing level and aesthetic needs of weaving at that time. Due to the limited cloth width of the handloom, the transverse sleeve cannot be cut into a whole piece. Therefore, the transverse sleeve is generally spliced. For example, the sleeve is cut and spliced symmetrically. The widest part of the body width is the width of a complete cloth, and other parts are cut according to the modeling requirements, which is not only in line with the design of saving materials, but also reflects the wisdom of the ancients in production. In addition to making rational use of the width of the cloth, opera costume also retains the common straight-line cutting in ancient clothing, and even the use of local three-dimensional cutting.

In addition to the commonalities with traditional costumes, the Han opera costumes also have their own uniqueness in structure. For example, the four-dragon flat gold mang robes in the traditional Chinese opera costumes won the third place in the national quality evaluation of the same industry held by the Arts and Crafts Company of the Ministry of Light Industry in 1981. The bottom of the mang robe is swing-up and tilted low very steady, the lines are rigid, and the cuffs are wide, making it different from others.

3.2. Craftsmanship of Han Opera Costumes

There are a lot of requirements in the production of traditional opera costumes. Each costume has to go through more than 10 processes including designing, drawing, blanking, patterning, embroidering, pulping, cutting, sewing and ironing.

According to the records in the *Annals of Chinese Opera Hubei Volume*, Hubei opera costumes are mainly made of Han Embroidery, mostly in five colors, focusing on the beauty of decoration. Characterized by strong lines, clear layers, simple

modeling and rich colors, Han Embroidery was used in cloth, suiting silk, printing and grass embroidery in the early stage, but it is later used for silk fabrics such as satin, silk and crepe by combining various stitching techniques including tripping, needle layering, color breaking, reed flake, box silk black-white, ice bamboo plum and lantern brocade. In addition to Han embroidered costumes, there are Jingxiu costumes and Li Youcheng family costumes workshop in Laisu Township, Tongcheng County. With a longer history than Han embroidered costumes, Jing embroidered costumes maintain the legacy of Warring States embroidery, such as herringbone embroidery and braid embroidery in terms of stitching. In the past, due to the limitation of conditions, the cloth for making opera clothes was mainly cloth, a small amount of silk and satin, and the process was mainly thread embroidery and velvet embroidery.

At present, on the basis of retaining the traditional production technology, the stitching method and the pattern remain unchanged, but the color changes. Besides, the three-dimensional effect of the pattern is increased to change the two-dimensional effect into the three-dimensional effect. The stitching method for flat gold embroidery is a common stitching method (Figure 4). In terms of materials, setting thread is used instead of cotton thread and sewing thread, because the thickness of setting thread is only half of that of sewing thread, and the embroidery pattern is more delicate and flat. Artificial silk thread is used instead of silk thread, because silk thread has the disadvantages of non-wear resistance and easy fuzzing.



Figure 4. Flat Gold Embroidery Three-river-water Cliff Pattern.

4. Aesthetic Characteristics of Traditional Chinese Opera Costumes

The wearing of traditional Chinese opera costumes has its established wearing procedures and aesthetic characteristics. “In traditional Han opera, actors should wear white lining before making up, and Jing and Chou should wear colored trousers before making up. After making up, Sheng and Jing should wear large coat and white collar before wearing costumes. When wearing Mang, they must wear Zhe inside, with a white collar inside and a single white collar outside. When wearing Kao, they must wear arrow clothes inside before Kao with flags tied. To wear tight clothes, it is necessary to wear silk-braided belt. There are three ways to wear silk-braided belt: “money”, “chopstick tip” and “bagua knot”. Broad belt should be worn on the left back, waist scarf should be worn on the right back, and finally the belt should be worn. When wearing Pei, you must line it with Zhe covered by white collar. When wearing a woolen blue robe, you should tie your waist bag inside.”[3] It can be seen that the traditional Chinese opera costumes pay great attention to the wearing and matching. Each type of clothing does not only pay attention to the external visual appearance, but also pays attention to the comfort and rationality of the internal wearing. At the same time, it also takes into account the beauty of the cuff, neckline, bottom hem and other parts.

In the Han Opera film *Yuzhoufeng*, Zhao Yanrong pretends to be crazy in the golden palace. In order to show her madness, she takes off one sleeve of the female mang robe. The double-opening female zhe white lining with white stand collar under the mang robe (Figure 5) can be clearly seen when she moves. From the details, we can see that the costumes in traditional Han Opera are rigorous and orderly. Although the audio-visual materials are black and white, we can still see that the costumes are well made of exquisite materials.



Figure 5. Stills When Han Opera Performing Artist Chen Bohua Plays Zhao Yanrong.

5. Comparative Thinking on the Development of Chinese Opera Costumes

Traditional Chinese opera costumes pay attention to the general type and emphasize one for all. Characters in the same industry generally share the costumes of the corresponding category, which is also related to the low living standard of people at that time. It was difficult to buy a set of clothes and there were no conditions to design costumes for each play.

At present, due to the support of national policies and the increase of government promotion, the production funds of major troupes are relatively abundant, so “one design for one play” has become a common way of costume production and almost all the protagonists have tailor-made, hand-embroidered and well-made costumes. However, the funds of local small troupes are relatively tight, so most of the costumes are made of satin fabric and imitated silk fabric, and embroidery is also mainly relatively cheap machine embroidery. In addition, some costumes directly use digital printing instead of embroidery, which makes the production cost cheaper. Although the patterns are rich and colorful, the texture is far lower that of manual embroidery, especially for the visual feeling of audience watching closely in small theater. The large troupe’s practice of customizing costumes for plays and characters has increased the visual feeling for the audience, especially favored by young audiences. The multi-dimensional artistic effect will divide the attention to the slow rhythm of opera and attract more young people into the theater, which is conducive to the promotion of traditional culture. However, due to the close connection between the costumes and the characters and the obvious characteristics, there is also a waste that a set of costumes is only suitable for one play, and the costumes will be put on the shelf after the play. In this process, a more prominent problem occurs, that is, with the continuous improvement of the audience’s aesthetic demand, the costumed props of some newly compiled operas have been criticized by the audience in the reform of shape and aesthetic orientation, which has aroused the voice of discussion and criticism, and exacerbated the disputes that new fans tend to reform and innovate, while old fans tend to inherit the tradition.

Li Rongsen, a national intangible cultural heritage inheritor, said in an interview, “the structure of the skirt and robe used to be in the shape of “a bell”, that is, straight and broad. Since the youth version of the *Peony Pavilion*, shaping of the style has been emphasized to reflect the beauty of the body, and strengthen the gender characteristics. As a result, the theater has dealt with the improvement of traditional styles imperceptibly.” [4] It can be seen that the most significant change in the structural outline of the traditional costume is that it has changed from the loose linear structure in the past to the shaping fit type with obvious western characteristics. Traditional theatrical costumes generally follow the shape of wide sleeved robes made of ancient robe system, with straight-line cutting as the main sewing means. The external outline of the costume does not shape the body, which shows the introverted and implicit aesthetic tendency of ancient costumes, while the current opera costumes have been improved in terms of version, color and technology. The shape of “waist-cinching” appears, highlighting the beauty of the character’s figure. However, this improvement has also caused topics and disputes. Some old opera fans do not buy this improvement, thinking that they have lost the stretch and elegance of traditional opera costumes. Blindly catering to modern aesthetics will inevitably appear shallow.

Among the newly compiled operas, the costumed props of the youth version of the Han opera *Tale of White Snake* of China Wuhan Han Opera Theatre are commendable. The protagonist changed his/her costume four or five times according to the needs of the plot. There are all kinds of clothes for men and women in the play, including pi, zhe, da and monk clothes. According to the needs of the characters, the costumes not only in line with the business program, but also in line with the character positioning are designed for each play. The costumes are bright, adhering to the colorful artistic characteristics of the traditional Han opera costumes. At the beginning of the play, the White Snake is dressed in white pi, pink headdress and pink shoes, and the Green Snake is dressed in green pi, green headdress and green shoes. The dress color is unified and bright. The White Snake wears a white waist skirt and the Green Snake wears a green da, which also reflects the design corresponding to the character’s identity (Figure 6). [5] In the play, Xu Xian wears blue and white zhe and an academic hood, holding a dark brown oil paper umbrella (Figure 7), which makes people can’t help but remind Liu Mengmei, a role in the youth version of Kunqu Opera *Peony Pavilion*, which is also the classic Xiaosheng shape in the new drama. Liu Mengmei wears a gray cross-collar Taoist robe (male zhe) and a fishbelly white transparent yarn vest, a black square Xianggong hat (Confucian scholar square towel), with a brown burden on his back and a brown oilcloth paper umbrella (Figure 8). [6] This contrast reflects the elegance and beauty of Kunqu opera costumes and the bright and eye-catching costumes of Han Opera incisively and vividly. Different local operas have different styles and distinctive characteristics, which is the charm of local operas.



Figure 6. Stills of the Youth Version of Han Opera *Tale of White Snake*.



Figure 7. Xu Xian's Appearance.



Figure 8. Liu Mengmei's Appearance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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