

The Origin, Evolution and Current Situation of Puju Opera for God Worship at Dongyue Temple in Puxian County

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Received: 2 March 2026; Accepted: 28 March 2026; Published: 17 April 2026

Abstract:

Religious sacrifice is closely connected with traditional Chinese opera, and the sacrificial opera at Dongyue Temple in Puxian County is a typical example of the integration of folk beliefs and local opera. Combining documentary research with field investigations in 2024, this paper sorts out the evolution of its opera tunes from the exclusive dominance of Kunqu Opera to the rise of Bangzi Opera and its final formation into Puju Opera, expounds the core driving forces such as financial constraints and changing aesthetic tastes, and points out that the essence of this evolution is the shift of sacrificial performances from prioritizing “entertaining the gods” to “amusing the people” while retaining the educational core of moral enlightenment. It also reveals the practical predicaments in the inheritance of Puju Opera, providing a reference for relevant research.

Keywords:

Dongyue Temple in Puxian County, Sacrificial Opera, Evolution Of Opera Tunes, Puju Opera

1. Introduction

Religious sacrifice is one of the important origins of traditional Chinese opera, and the two are inextricably linked. Opera performances with the dual functions of entertaining the gods and amusing the people are mostly held during religious activities. On the 28th day of the third lunar month every year, the birthday of the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, a temple fair is held at Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain in Puxian County, Linfen City, Shanxi Province, with opera performances staged on the temple's stage. However, historical evolution shows that the opera tunes performed on the stage of Dongyue Temple in Puxian County have undergone changes due to the passage of time, social development and shifts in people's aesthetic tastes. The evolved opera genres have been passed down to the present day and will continue to develop in the future. [1]

2. The Cultural Connotation and Contemporary Landscape of Dongyue Temple in Puxian County

The exact time when Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain in Puxian County was first built remains unrecorded. Yet according to the record in Records of Puxian

County that “it has been repeatedly renovated since the Zhenguan reign of the Tang Dynasty”, it is certain that the temple was constructed prior to the Zhenguan period. As a sacred place dedicated to the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, the temple takes its name from Mount Tai, the Eastern Great Mountain, and the relevant sacrificial beliefs in Shanxi also originate from this worship. In ancient times, ancestors held a profound reverence for the incomprehensible forces of nature, believing that all mountains, rivers, mounds and forests were inhabited by gods. The concept of the “Five Great Mountains” took shape in China during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty, with Mount Tai revered as the supreme among them. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, the worship of the Five Great Mountains was endowed with new connotations: the mountain gods were anthropomorphized, transforming the worship of nature into the worship of ghosts and gods, and the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, as the deity of Mount Tai, was believed to be in charge of life and death in the mortal world—a belief also recorded in *The Complete Collection of the Origins of the Three Religions and the Genealogy of Gods*. After Buddhism was introduced to China in the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the folk integrated the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai with Yama and Kṣitigarbha, the Buddhist deities in charge of life and death. Through localization, the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai was revered as their superior, and the three deities are jointly enshrined in Dongyue Temple. There are many theories about the origin of the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, and Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain enshrines him as Huang Feihu, a character in the Qing Dynasty novel *Investiture of the Gods*. Though fictional, this claim has been widely accepted by the public due to the novel’s popularity.

Since the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai is believed to govern life, death, ghosts and gods, Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain features buildings and statues associated with these themes [2]. Flanking the grand mountain gate are the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower, with the Paradise Tower standing above the gate. The Music Tower, a Qing Dynasty structure with stone lions in front of the stage dating back to the Ming Dynasty, is located above the third cave-shaped temple gate and serves as the stage for sacrificial performances [3]; directly opposite it is the Palace Hall where the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai is enshrined. According to *A Tour of Dongyue Temple in Puxian County* [4]: The Hell Scenery, in addition to the Music Tower, there are two other stages in the compound, and all three were used simultaneously for the birthday of the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai in ancient times, with opera troupes gathering here not only to perform but also to compete with each other. A field observation on the 28th day of the third lunar month in 2024 found that only the Music Tower opposite the Palace Hall still hosts opera performances today, while the other two stages have become venues for competitions among gong and drum teams. Each team has 11 to 12 members, mostly middle-aged and elderly people, and 8 to 9 such teams perform in the front hall. Their music, though with simple rhythms, is striking for its grand momentum, and all members are dressed in bright festive costumes. On the platform behind the Palace Hall, folk artists perform Henan Zhuizi solo for a fee, their impromptu shows mainly intended to offer blessings and pray for customers and their families. The Puxian Puju Opera Troupe stages five excerpts at the Music Tower: *Strolling in the Garden*, *Appreciating the Flowers*, *The Execution Ground*, *The Story of Lan and Mei* and *The Civet Cat for the Crown Prince*.

The people of Puxian County attach great importance to the temple fair marking the birthday of the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai. On this day, the government invites the Puxian Puju Opera Troupe to perform in celebration, and local residents also

spontaneously organize gong and drum teams for the festival. People come to the temple fair to visit the morning market at the foot of Boshan Mountain, to experience the lively festive atmosphere, and above all, to worship the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, praying for the health and well-being of their families. Unlike worshippers at other temples who have various wishes, those at Dongyue Temple only pray for good health and family peace—a belief closely linked to the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai being the ruler of life and death. The Puju opera performances at the Music Tower and the folk gong and drum shows not only celebrate the deity's birthday and create a lively atmosphere for the temple fair but also achieve the dual purpose of entertaining the gods and amusing the people.

3. The Historical Evolution of Sacrificial Opera and Tune Shifts at Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain

Opera performances for god worship at the temple fair of Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain are not a modern custom; such performances have existed since the construction of the Music Tower, though the exact time of the tower's construction and the start of the performances remains unknown. It can only be inferred from an inscription dating back to the 8th year of the Zhengde reign of the Ming Dynasty (1513) that sacrificial opera performances were already held here by that time. Inscriptions from the 7th year of the Kangxi reign (1668) and the 8th year of the Yongzheng reign (1730) of the Qing Dynasty depict the unprecedented prosperity of the temple fair but do not record the opera tunes used for the sacrifices. Inscriptions from the 17th year of the Qianlong reign (1752) and the 42nd year of the Qianlong reign (1777) first mention two opera genres: "Su Tune" (Kunqu Opera) and "Local Opera" (the local Bangzi Opera). An inscription entitled *Eternal Memory* from 1777 records that the local gentry of Dongshen Mountain (the old name of Boshan Mountain in the Ming and Qing Dynasties) deemed the Local Opera disrespectful to the gods and resolved to stage Su Tune instead. Thus, it can be known that during the Qianlong reign, the local Bangzi Opera was banned from sacrificial performances at Dongyue Temple, and only renowned Kunqu Opera troupes were invited to perform Kunqu Opera. [5][6]

There are two main reasons for the exclusive performance of Kunqu Opera at the temple during the Qianlong reign. First, influenced by the "Flower Opera vs Refined Opera" debate in the opera circle, the local gentry favored the elegant Kunqu Opera and regarded the Local Opera as inferior. Second, Kunqu Opera was at the height of its popularity then, with a highly mature artistic system. However, this practice led to two problems: first, inviting renowned Kunqu Opera troupes incurred enormous costs, and with numerous sacrificial activities held at the temple several times a year, the organizers could hardly afford the expenses by the late Qianlong reign, as recorded in an inscription from 1792 that "the heavy financial burden has often delayed the opera performances on the sacred day" [7]. Second, the organizers' preference for Kunqu Opera ignored the aesthetic tastes of the general public. Though refined, Kunqu Opera was mostly appreciated by educated audiences, and ordinary people found it uninteresting, which weakened the important purpose of "amusing the people" of the temple fair. Affected by these problems, coupled with the vigorous development of Bangzi Opera and the gradual decline of Kunqu Opera, the temple began to stage the local Bangzi Opera for sacrificial activities. A record from the Daoguang reign notes that "no Luantan Opera (Local Opera) is performed on the sacred day" [7], indicating that Kunqu Opera was only retained for the birthday itself, while Bangzi Opera was

staged on other days. This marked the gradual shift of the sacrificial activities from prioritizing “entertaining the gods” to “amusing the people”, and the evolution of opera tunes from the elegant Kunqu Opera to the more popular local Bangzi Opera.

This shift from Kunqu Opera to Bangzi Opera is further evidenced by the changing repertoires staged in the sacrificial performances across three periods of the Jiaqing reign. In 1800 (the 5th year of the Jiaqing reign), the performed works still included a number of Kunqu Opera pieces; by 1803 (the 8th year of the Jiaqing reign), Bangzi Opera repertoires began to emerge in the performance list and take up a certain proportion; and in 1820 (the 25th year of the Jiaqing reign), the staged works were predominantly Bangzi Opera, marking a complete change in the main opera tune of the sacrificial performances at Dongyue Temple. [8]

Based on the records and analysis in *A Brief History of Puju Opera* by Wang Xingrong[8], the proportion of Kunqu Opera repertoires gradually decreased while Bangzi Opera repertoires increased from 1800 to 1820, which confirms the evolution of sacrificial opera tunes from Kunqu Opera-dominated to Bangzi Opera-dominated. During its development, Bangzi Opera absorbed artistic elements from Kunqu Opera and took root in folk life, with its repertoires mostly adapted from folk stories, legends and historical events. Closely aligned with the aesthetic tastes of the general public, Bangzi Opera was deeply loved by people and gradually became the core of sacrificial performances. The local Bangzi Opera continued to develop and later evolved into the predecessor of Puju Opera, which is the key reason why Puju Opera is now staged for sacrificial activities at Dongyue Temple.

4. Puxian Puju Opera Troupe: Personnel Composition, Performance Repertoires and Modern Performance Practices

As stated above, the opera tunes used for sacrificial performances at Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain in Puxian County have undergone a complete evolution: from Kunqu Opera to Bangzi Opera, which after further integration and development, finally formed Puzhou Bangzi Opera, now known as Puju Opera. The sacrificial performances witnessed at the temple on May 6, 2024 were staged by the Puxian Puju Opera Troupe. Based on a brief exchange with Qiao Wuhu, the leader of the Puxian Puju Opera Troupe, it is found that the troupe's personnel composition has its own characteristics and problems. The performers are relatively elderly, mostly born in the 1970s, with only one member born in the 1990s, resulting in a shortage of young successors. [9] Most of them have a junior high school education, graduated from art schools or studied under veteran artists, boasting solid professional skills but lacking innovation. However, the troupe covers all opera roles, and most performers are local to Linfen, ensuring the integrity of the troupe and the flexibility of performance mobilization.

On the basis of traditional martial instruments (such as female board drum and banhu) and civil instruments (such as erhu and flute), the orchestra has added Western instruments like cello and violin, enriching the sound effect and conforming to modern aesthetics. The orchestra includes a young member born in 1998 who graduated from an art school, bringing fresh blood to the team, sharing professional theories and techniques, and promoting the improvement of the orchestra's artistic level.

The working group is an indispensable part of the troupe. Members such as Song Pumeng and Li Songwen hold multiple positions concurrently, which not only reflects

the troupe's small scale and shortage of staff but also demonstrates the strong comprehensive abilities of the members. The troupe consciously arranges video recording of performances to lay the foundation for research and internet development. However, the cameraman is relatively old, not sensitive to internet trends, making it difficult to attract young online audiences.

On the birthday of the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, the Puxian Puju Opera Troupe carefully selected five classic excerpts to perform. *Strolling in the Garden* is adapted from *The Lin Bone Bed*, a revised traditional opera reworked by Zhao Yi and others in 1979, telling the story of Wen Yan, a scheming woman who commits evil deeds, curries favor with the emperor, and finally confesses her crimes drunkenly and commits suicide. *Appreciating the Flowers* is selected from *The Flame Steed*, adapted by Zhao Yi in 1964, recounting the story of Li Yanrong in the Northern Song Dynasty who is framed for injustice; Ai Qian rushes to the border on the flame steed to deliver the news, and Li Yanrong leads his troops back to the capital to redress the injustice and reunite his family. This opera features a complete range of roles and places equal emphasis on singing and acting. *The Execution Ground* is derived from Xue Gang's *Uprising Against the Tang Dynasty*, revised into *The Genealogy of the Clan* and premiered in 1957, telling the story of the elderly minister Xu Ce who saves the descendant of a loyal minister by exchanging his own child with the infant son of Xue Meng at the execution ground—a play requiring various professional roles. *The Story of Lan and Mei* criticizes the oppression of human nature by feudal concepts of loyalty and filial piety through the depiction of conflicts between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law in the An family, expounding the theme that mutual understanding is the key to a harmonious family. *The Civet Cat for the Crown Prince* is a traditional multi-act Puju Opera, telling the story of Consort Liu in the Northern Song Dynasty who colludes with a eunuch to replace the prince born to Consort Li with a skinned civet cat; the truth is eventually revealed by Bao Zheng, who redresses the injustice for Consort Li. This opera features the Hualian role as the leading role and places equal emphasis on singing and acting for the Sheng and Dan roles.

The five excerpts selected by the troupe are all classic Puju Opera works, covering historical stories and folk daily life with rich and wonderful content, which are deeply loved by the on-site audience. According to the troupe leader Qiao Wuhu, the excerpts are chosen not only to attract the audience and enhance the lively atmosphere of the temple fair but also to express the sincere wishes of the people for peace to the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai. He believes that “sincerity leads to miracles”. Though the excerpts have no religious themes, their core values such as “exhorting people to do good”, “karma and reincarnation” and “retribution for good and evil” admonish the people to uphold kindness, especially on the birthday of the Eastern Emperor of Mount Tai, the ruler of life and death, so that their wishes can be fulfilled.

The author also found that the Puxian Puju Opera Troupe adopted two performance forms on the day due to the lively on-site atmosphere: one is playing recorded accompaniment and vocal music through audio equipment with performers lip-syncing on stage, and the other is amplifying the sounds of the orchestra and performers with microphones and in-ear monitors for a live performance. Qiao Wuhu introduced that the troupe always makes preparations for both forms for every performance. Due to the noisy crowd at the temple fair, the gong and drum performances, and considerations for the performers' vocal conditions, the troupe used the recorded form for *Appreciating the Flowers* and switched to live performance for *The Execution Ground*. It is evident that the use of electronic

equipment has become a common practice in current performances. In sacrificial performances, people value “sincerity leads to miracles” more than adhering to rigid traditional forms.

5. Conclusions

The evolution of the opera tunes for sacrificial performances at Dongyue Temple on Boshan Mountain in Puxian County is mainly due to the unaffordable cost of Kunqu Opera performances and its incompatibility with folk aesthetic tastes. This change also reflects the shift of sacrificial performances from prioritizing “entertaining the gods” to “musing the people”. Nevertheless, in these sacrificial activities with strong religious beliefs, the “amusing the people” performances still carry out moral enlightenment for the audience, which prevents the sacrificial activities from becoming pure entertainment and preserves their profound divine power. At present, the sacrificial performances at Dongyue Temple are closely linked with the development of Puju Opera. The troupe maintains a reverent heart for the gods and actively integrates modern performance methods, presenting an overall healthy development trend. However, the troupe is facing predicaments such as a shortage of young successors and inadequate online communication, which not only hinders the development of Puju Opera but also poses a hidden danger to the future of the sacrificial activities at the temple. To promote the sustainable development of Puju Opera and enhance the popularity of the temple fair, the local government needs to make full use of the internet for publicity and improve the treatment of Puju Opera performers. In addition, scholars need to pay continuous attention to Puju Opera and explore its profound cultural connotations. The author hopes that this paper can attract more scholars to study the sacrificial activities at Dongyue Temple in Puxian County and the Puju Opera performed here.

Conflicts of Interest

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

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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