

historical and cultural environments; while adaptive changes based on regional culture, social transformation, and technological innovation have continuously expanded its expressive dimensions within the Chinese musical tradition. This development path of "preserving tradition while innovating" not only provides a theoretical basis for the contemporary inheritance of Sichuan Opera but also offers a typical case for exploring the living continuation mechanism of traditional Chinese music.

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FROM FOLK ARIA TO NATIONAL HERITAGE: AN ART HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF HENAN OPERA

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Yu Opera (豫剧, Yùjù) is one of the leading national forms of traditional Chinese theater, alongside Peking Opera, Yue Opera, Huangmei Opera, and Pingu. Its origin is linked to Henan Province, whose one-character abbreviation 豫 (yù) became the basis for the official name of the genre after the founding of the People's Republic of China [1]. This article presents an art historical analysis of a specific branch of Henan Opera – Yu Opera – highlighting its musical language, dramaturgical features, and contemporary challenges related to its preservation as part of national heritage.

Material and Methods. The materials used for this study include works by Chinese scholars and encyclopedic sources. The methods applied are general scientific approaches and the historical-cultural method.

Results and their discussion. Yu Opera experienced rapid development in the basin of the Yellow and Huai Rivers, where it gained widespread popularity. According to statistical data, it held a leading position for an extended period in terms of the number of performers and opera troupes. Although outside China it is often referred to as "Henan Opera", within Henan Province it is considered only one of the three major local opera forms, alongside Quju (曲剧) and Yuediao (越调) [1].

Professional Yu Opera troupes are found not only in Henan but also in regions such as Hubei, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shandong, Hebei, Beijing, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. Additionally, a troupe operates in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, indicating the genre's broad geographical reach.

The history of Yu Opera spans more than two centuries. Its golden age occurred during the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), and after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it received new momentum for development. By the mid-1980s, Yu Opera had surpassed over 300 other regional theatrical forms in terms of popularity and number of performances. In 2006, it was included in China's first national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, affirming its status as a vital element of the country's cultural identity.

Yu Opera emerged during the transitional period between the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. In its early stages, it primarily consisted of arias performed without stage makeup, which were popular among the common people and contributed to its rapid spread and growth.

The origins of Yu Opera remain a subject of scholarly debate. Precise information about its genesis is fragmented, and ancient written sources offer only limited documentation. As a result, few researchers have undertaken comprehensive analysis and reconstruction of its historical development.

Since the 1920s and 1930s, numerous hypotheses have emerged within academic circles regarding the origins of Henan Opera. However, no single theory has gained universal acceptance, as none provides sufficient evidence to establish definitive conclusions. Consequently, both similar and contradictory viewpoints continue to coexist.

The four most widely recognized theories concerning the origin of Yu Opera are:

- derivation from the theatrical traditions of Shanxi Province;
- emergence from the folk musical practices of Henan;
- influence of operatic melodies popular in the Central Plains of China;
- evolution from the early form of Henan Bangzi [2].

Henan Opera represents a unique fusion of ancient traditions and modern forms, combining strength and softness, openness and generosity. Its aesthetic is rooted in the principle of "harmonizing opposites", which lends the art a distinctive expressiveness.

The hallmark of Henan Opera is its vocal artistry. Singing in this genre is characterized by a powerful, resonant, and richly textured tone that blends restraint with emotional intensity and masculine vigor. The performer's voice remains pure, natural, and vibrant, skillfully conveying the inner emotions of the characters. The opera's rhythmic structure is clear and dynamic, its dramatic conflicts sharp, and its narrative logically complete. Combined with humorous and light-hearted melodies, Henan Opera proves versatile – suitable for both comedic performances and grand portrayals of emperors and generals.

In Western tradition, Henan Opera is sometimes referred to as "sorrowful singing", a term especially fitting for tragic dramas. In key scenes, the technique known as "plate singing" is employed – a smooth, rhythmically precise delivery with clear articulation that is easily understood by the audience. This highlights the artistic charm of Henan Opera as an integral part of the cultural heritage of Central China.

Henan Opera features traditional role types: Sheng (male characters), Dan (female characters), Jing (painted-face roles), and Chou (comic characters). A standard troupe typically includes "Four Sheng", "Four Dan", and "Four Painted Faces", along with additional roles such as four soldiers, four generals, four maids, eight stage performers, two official booths, and four laborers.

The Sheng roles are further divided into:

- Zhengsheng (also known as Hongsheng, Dasheng, or Dahongfeis),
- Ersheng (sometimes referred to as "Two Red Faces"),
- Xiaosheng (young male characters),
- Wusheng (martial characters, also called Biansheng).

Henan Opera comprises four main melodic styles, each associated with a specific region of the province: Xiangfu – Kaifeng area, Yudong – Shangqiu area, Yuxi – Luoyang area, Shahe – Luohu area.

Among the four melodic styles of Henan Opera, Yudong and Yuxi are considered the primary forms: the former is oriented toward comedic plots, while the latter focuses on tragic narratives. By the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), Henan Bangzi had spread widely, adapting to various regional conditions – from linguistic nuances to aesthetic preferences. This led to the formation of four stable melodic types, each reflecting the cultural characteristics of its respective region.

Among the most renowned performers of Henan Opera are actresses Chang Xiangyu, Chen Suchun, Cui Lantian, and Ma Jingfen, whose names have become synonymous with artistic excellence and expressive stage presence. Alongside them, prominent male actors such as Zhao Yiting, Tang Sicheng, and Li Sizhong made significant contributions to the development of the genre.

Zhao Yiting (1895–1992) was a member of the Chinese Theatre Association and served as director of the Henan Provincial Theatre Association. His artistic career spanned more than six decades, leaving a profound impact on the history of Chinese theater. Zhao is recognized as one of the key figures in the formation and advancement of Henan Opera.

Tang Sicheng (1924–1993) was also a member of the Chinese Theatre Association and served as the head of the Henan theatrical organization. His stage artistry played a significant role in shaping and popularizing male roles in Henan Opera. Tang Sicheng is rightfully regarded as a master of the genre, with his creative legacy serving as a benchmark for future generations.

Li Sizhong (1921–1996) was an outstanding performer of Henan Opera, renowned for his portrayal of the heilian role – a character with a darkly painted face symbolizing strength, determination, and dramatic intensity. His stage technique and profound understanding of the role made him one of the most recognizable representatives of this character type.

Despite its status as a significant regional genre included in China's system of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Henan Opera faces a number of serious challenges related to its preservation and continued development. Like many other local theatrical forms, it is under pressure from market-driven economics and shifts in modern lifestyles. The decline in the number of performances, waning interest among urban audiences, and the predominance of elderly viewers in rural areas raise concerns about the future of the genre.

To address these challenges, a range of strategic solutions has been proposed. One promising direction is the integration of Henan Opera with the tourism industry, which could help expand its audience base and enhance the genre's visibility. Another important step involves the in-depth study and systematization of materials related to Henan Opera, along with increased investment in its development. The industrialization of opera tourism is viewed as a timely and relevant response to contemporary cultural demands.

Specific measures include:

- Strengthening tourism-related promotion of Henan Opera;
- Establishing a recognizable brand for regional opera culture;
- Developing projects focused on immersive tourist experiences;
- Organizing specialized opera festivals;
- Training new professionals for opera tourism;
- Exploring and implementing diverse models for growth in this sector.

These initiatives aim not only to preserve the cultural significance of Henan Opera but also to revitalize it in the context of the 21st century.

Conclusion. Henan Opera (豫剧, Yùjù) represents a unique phenomenon within the system of traditional Chinese theater, embodying a rich historical legacy, regional characteristics, and artistic innovation. Its centuries-long evolution – from folk arias performed without makeup to a nationally recognized genre – reflects the complex process of shaping Henan Province's cultural identity and its contribution to the broader theatrical landscape of China. The diversity of melodic styles, expressive vocal techniques, rich role structure, and outstanding performers have made Henan Opera an integral part of China's intangible cultural heritage. However, in the context of modernity, it faces challenges stemming from shifts in the social landscape, declining audience interest, and the need to adapt to new formats of artistic perception.

1. Yu Opera / Henan Opera. URL: <https://www.chinaeducationtours.com/guide/culture-yu-opera.htm>. (date of access 06.11.2025).