

The Artistic Characteristics and Evolution of the Clown Dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera

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Abstract: The clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera is an important component of this regional opera, carrying rich local cultural and artistic value. This paper analyzes the historical evolution, artistic characteristics, and modern innovations of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, revealing its dual expression in traditional opera and modern stage performances. The study highlights that the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera combines both local and dramatic styles, with its artistic language influenced by folk dance and traditional opera elements. As time progresses, the clown dance continues to evolve by incorporating modern artistic elements while maintaining traditional foundations, driving its innovation and development in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Gannan Tea-Picking Opera; clown dance; artistic characteristics; historical evolution

1. Introduction

Gannan Tea-Picking Opera is an important form of regional opera in Jiangxi, originating in the Ming and Qing dynasties and developing a distinctive artistic style over time. As one of the most significant roles in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, the clown not only drives the dramatic conflict but also displays local folk characteristics through exaggerated, humorous dance movements, rich expressions, and comical performances. The clown is the most important and distinctive performance role in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera. The unique body rhythm, flexible footwork, and close integration with the musical rhythm give the clown dance a remarkable stage presence and audience appeal. However, with societal development and changing aesthetic concepts, the artistic characteristics of clown dance have undergone corresponding transformations in different historical periods. This paper aims to outline the artistic characteristics and evolutionary trajectory of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, exploring its stylistic changes and influencing factors during different historical periods. Specifically, it will review the characteristics of body movements, footwork techniques, performance styles, and musical rhythms, analyzing how the clown dance has continued to develop while preserving tradition. The study also focuses on the innovative practices of the clown dance on contemporary opera stages, discussing how modern adaptations can help this traditional art form meet contemporary audience aesthetic demands, enhancing its spread and influence in the new era. This paper primarily employs literature review, historical research, and comparative analysis methods to systematically outline the historical development and artistic characteristics of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera.

2. Historical Origins of the Clown Dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera

2.1. *Origins and Development of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera*

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the rise of tea cultivation and trade, the tea-farming culture in the Gannan region gradually flourished, giving birth to a folk song and dance performance form closely linked to the tea-picking labor. According to relevant research, tea culture during the Ming and Qing periods not only influenced the local economy but also became a source of artistic creation. Tea farmers expressed their understanding and feelings about life through songs and dances in their daily lives, which gradually nurtured a performance art with distinct regional characteristics. For example, Li Jian points out that the tea songs and dances of the Ming and Qing periods, as reflections of the daily life of tea farmers, mirrored the social modes of production and people's emotional worlds, forming a folk art form rich in local cultural traits. These performances primarily focused on the production activities, emotional exchanges, and representations of rural daily life of tea farmers, blending rural atmosphere with strong life sensibility. Jiang Haisong also mentions that folk tea songs and dances often integrated the rhythms of labor and natural landscapes, resulting in a performance form with primitive and ecological features, showcasing the resilience and optimism of laborers. Over time, this primitive form of song and dance gradually evolved from individual entertainment into a dramatic and narrative performance art, further fostering the formation of Tea-Picking Opera. Zhou Hao analyzed the origin of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera and its connection to local folk culture, suggesting that the initial form of Tea-Picking Opera was not based on fixed scripts and performance structures, but rather on spontaneous creations by the people during agricultural and tea-picking activities. Only with the gradual standardization and development of folk art did it ultimately evolve into a theatricalized form of expression.

In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera underwent a transformation from its primitive song-and-dance format into a fully developed regional theatrical genre. This transition was closely linked to the social changes, cultural exchanges, and the continuous development of theatrical arts of the time. According to Zhang Guoliang, during the late Qing and early Republic, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera gradually completed its transition from a local folk performance to a professional stage art form, marking the maturation and diversification of regional theater. On one hand, the performance system of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera was gradually refined during this period, with role categories such as Sheng (male lead), Dan (female lead), and Chou (clown) becoming more stable, showcasing distinct dramatic characteristics. Xu Xiaodong points out that the role of the clown was strengthened during this period, becoming one of the key dramatic functions of Tea-Picking Opera. The clown not only performed comedic and entertaining roles but also helped regulate the dramatic atmosphere, advancing the plot and adding emotional depth to the entire performance. The expansion of the clown's role made the plots and characterizations of Tea-Picking Opera more complex and multifaceted. On the other hand, the artistic style of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera was influenced by other regional operas, particularly Gan Opera and Hui Opera. Li Qun indicates that during the late Qing and early Republic, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera began to absorb and integrate elements such as the vocal styles, performance procedures, and dance movements of Gan and Hui Operas, driving its artistic innovation. This fusion not only enriched the performance forms of Tea-Picking Opera but also enhanced its artistic level, securing its place in the realm of folk operas. In particular, in the treatment of vocal styles, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera incorporated more regional tonalities, making its singing more vivid and filled with local flavor. As urbanization progressed, the performance space for Gannan Tea-Picking Opera expanded from rural settings to urban areas, gradually moving toward professionalized stage performances. Zhou Changhong mentions that with the development of urbanization, Tea-Picking Opera performances were no longer confined to rural gatherings and festive events but entered more formal and standardized stage settings, becoming one of the key genres in regional theater. This process not only promoted the spread and development of Tea-Picking Opera but also enhanced its cultural influence, reaching a broader audience.

In the 20th century, particularly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera received significant support and protection from the national government. During this period, with the implementation of cultural policies and an emphasis on traditional art forms, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera entered

a new stage of development. According to Li Wei, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, under government support, gradually received more standardized management, and the establishment of professional troupes further refined its performance system and artistic style. In this process, the opera's performances not only strengthened traditional artistic expressions but also witnessed more innovations in stage performances, particularly in the enhancement of acting techniques and stage effects. The clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera underwent significant changes during this period. According to Cheng Maolin, during this stage, the clown's dance movements no longer adhered solely to traditional, formulaic gestures but were further innovated and enriched. This transformation was influenced by modern dramatic performance techniques, especially with the introduction of modern dance elements, which significantly enhanced the clown's expressiveness. The clown's dance became more dynamic and expressive, integrating elements of modern theatrical body language and emotional expression, resulting in a more diversified and layered stage effect.

In recent years, with the growing emphasis on the protection of intangible cultural heritage, the inheritance and innovation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera have received more attention. Zhou Lina points out that, in this context, many troupes and universities are actively promoting the inheritance and development of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera through stage performances, academic research, and initiatives such as "Opera into Campus." For instance, some opera troupes have innovatively adapted traditional plays, incorporating modern elements to create new productions that maintain traditional characteristics while attracting the interest of younger audiences. Simultaneously, some universities have strengthened academic research and theory-building by offering specialized courses and holding academic lectures, providing a solid foundation for the opera's inheritance and development. Additionally, the promotion of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera has also gained support from various sectors of society. Xie Yun notes that local governments have expanded the influence of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera through cultural activities, exhibitions, and performances. Furthermore, the recognition and protection policies for intangible cultural heritage have encouraged more troupes and cultural institutions to increase their support for this art form. These efforts have effectively promoted the inheritance of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, ensuring the preservation of its cultural heritage and providing ample space for innovation. In conclusion, the inheritance and innovation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera in the modern era have been supported by government policies, as well as by growing attention from the social and academic communities. Through the integration of traditional art forms and modern theatrical elements, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera continues to revitalize, becoming an important part of Chinese traditional opera and showcasing the unique charm of regional culture in the new era.

2.2. The Theatrical Origins of the Clown Role

The clown, an important role type in traditional Chinese opera, can be traced back to the Zaju (variety plays) and Nanyue (Southern opera) of the Song and Yuan dynasties. The clown often appears with a humorous and witty image, mainly taking on the roles of comic relief, regulating the pace of the plot, and creating comedic effects. The performance characteristics of the clown include exaggerated facial expressions, comical movements, flexible footwork, and witty dialogue, making it one of the most entertaining roles in Chinese opera. In various theatrical genres, the performance style of the clown has distinctive features. For example, in Peking Opera, the clown typically uses stylized movements such as "dwarf steps" and "broken steps" to convey wit and humor, while in Huiju and Kunqu Opera, more emphasis is placed on the clown's humorous and mocking nature [1].

In comparison to other traditional Chinese operas, the clown in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera possesses a unique regional and folk character. The clown's image is often based on rural laborers, reflecting humor and wit found in everyday life. The clown's dialogue is lively and humorous, often infused with a strong Gannan dialect, while their dance movements are typically modeled on daily activities, such as simulating farming, tea picking, or carrying loads. Due to the lively and upbeat rhythm of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera music, the clown's dance adopts a flexible, energetic, and comical style, which enhances the entertainment value and appeal of the performance [2].

2.3. *The Folk Dance Foundation of the Clown's Dance*

Many movements in the clown's dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera are directly derived from local folk dances, particularly those that express the vitality of rural life, such as "tea picking steps" and "load-bearing steps." These dance movements not only enhance the opera's rural characteristics but also make the clown's performance more relatable to the daily experiences of the audience, making it easier for them to understand and connect with the performance. Moreover, the rhythmic qualities and body language found in Gannan folk dances have played an essential role in the development of the clown's dance, making the dramatic expression more vivid and dynamic [3].

Traditional folk activities in Gannan, such as ritual ceremonies, festive celebrations, and agricultural practices, have profoundly influenced the formation and development of the clown's dance. For example, during traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival, Gannan is known for dragon and lion dances, lantern displays, and folk "yangge" (a type of traditional dance), all of which feature exaggerated and humorous dance elements. These elements were borrowed and reimagined in the clown's dance of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera. Additionally, the influence of agricultural culture contributed to the incorporation of mimetic movements, such as sowing, harvesting, and carrying water, further bringing the dance closer to the daily life of rural communities and enhancing its authenticity and humor [4].

In conclusion, the historical origins of the clown's dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera are deeply rooted, inheriting the performance characteristics of the traditional Chinese opera clown while incorporating the unique folk dance style and life atmosphere of the Gannan region. By examining its historical development, theatrical origins, and folk dance foundation, a clearer understanding of its artistic characteristics and cultural value can be attained, providing a theoretical basis for further research [5].

3. **Artistic Characteristics of the Clown Dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera**

3.1. *Dance Form*

The body movement characteristics of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera exhibit distinct comedic, stylized, and exaggerated traits. The clown uses humorous and playful body movements to convey the comedic elements in the opera. The performance is exaggerated yet natural, often incorporating wide-ranging body twists, jumps, and changes in facial expressions to enhance the dramatic effect. Additionally, the clown dance features a highly stylized movement system, including specific steps, gestures, and body postures that demonstrate a unique sense of rhythm and body language, enabling the audience to quickly identify and comprehend the role of the clown.

The clown dance's footwork is flexible and rhythmic, characterized by movements such as "small jumps", "sliding steps", and "spins". For instance, "small jumps" are commonly used to portray the clown's lively and agile character, making them appear more quick-witted and lively. "Sliding steps" enhance the humor by making the character's movements appear light and whimsical. "Spins" are often employed to express exaggerated emotional states, such as surprise, panic, or mischief. The clown's body posture emphasizes looseness and rhythm, with variations in footwork shaping the vibrant and dramatic role of the clown.

The clown's gestures and facial expressions are marked by humorous exaggeration. For example, the clown often uses gestures like "scratching the ears", "rubbing the nose and shaking the shoulders", among others, to strengthen their comedic image, while also adopting exaggerated facial expressions such as wide-eyed looks, frowning, or smiling broadly to enhance the theatrical appeal. Moreover, the clown's performance style incorporates folk characteristics from the Gannan region, such as mimicking rural labor and playful antics, imbuing the dance with regional flavor and a sense of everyday life.

3.2. *Performance Style*

The performance style of the clown dance is defined by exaggeration and comedy, often employing exaggerated actions, sudden changes in rhythm, and dramatic bodily expressions to create humor. For example, when portraying panic or shock, the clown might dramatically lean backward, fall down, or flail their arms,

intensifying the dramatic conflict. Additionally, the clown frequently enhances the stage performance through staged falls, quick movements, and comical body twists, making the performance more entertaining and engaging. A classic example can be found in the clown dance from the traditional Gannan Tea-Picking Opera piece *Diao Guai*, where Liu Er, the typical clown character, performs with exaggerated actions and humorous expressions. In this piece, several key theatrical techniques such as “short steps”, “single sleeve”, and “fan flower” are creatively combined to form a vivid, playful dance performance that highlights the clown’s impatience and excitement during a journey.

The clown dance relies not only on bodily movements but also on the close relationship between language and musical rhythm. In Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, clown performances are usually accompanied by humorous and witty lines or dialogue. The dance movements must synchronize with the rhythm of the language to enhance the comedic effect. For example, during fast-paced dialogue, the clown may perform quick steps and comical gestures, whereas during slower sections, exaggerated body movements and pauses might be used to create a unique dramatic rhythm. Furthermore, the clown’s performance often incorporates hand clapping and foot stomping, making the rhythm more pronounced.

The performance style of the clown in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera emphasizes audience interaction and improvisation. Clown actors often break the “fourth wall” and engage directly with the audience, such as winking, imitating the audience’s actions, or speaking to the audience during the performance. This improvisational approach enhances the fun of the performance and makes it more lively. Moreover, the improvisational nature of the clown dance also reflects the actors’ ability to respond to the scene spontaneously, adjusting their movements and rhythm to better fit the stage atmosphere and enhance the overall performance.

3.3. Music and Rhythm Coordination

The musical accompaniment for clown dance is distinct, primarily using traditional percussion instruments (such as gongs, drums, cymbals) and string instruments (such as erhu, pipa) from Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, creating a light-hearted and humorous stage atmosphere. When the clown appears on stage, they are usually accompanied by lively melodies, such as “quick step march” or “comical tune”. These musical rhythms not only highlight the clown’s humorous personality but also provide a rhythmic foundation for the dance movements. Additionally, the clown dance often incorporates musical techniques like “irregular rhythms” and “pauses and variations”, adding variety and dramatic tension to the performance.

The rhythm of the clown dance is usually lively and emphasizes “light, agile, and elastic” movement characteristics. For example, during fast-paced music, the clown dance often employs frequent small jumps, quick steps, and rapid hand movements, while slower rhythms may bring exaggerated body movements and facial expressions to create rhythmic contrast. Furthermore, the changes in rhythm are closely tied to the storyline. For example, in moments of unexpected events or dramatic conflict, the music may suddenly speed up, prompting the clown to respond with rapid spins, staged falls, or sudden stops, thus enhancing the dramatic effect.

In summary, the artistic characteristics of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera lie in its unique dance form, exaggerated and comedic performance style, and close coordination with musical rhythms. By studying these artistic features in depth, a more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic value and cultural significance of clown dance can be achieved, providing theoretical support for the inheritance and innovation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera.

4. The Evolution of the Clown Dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera

4.1. Traditional Period (Qing Dynasty to Republic of China)

The early form of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera primarily originated from folk rituals, celebrations, and rural entertainment activities. During the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, performances of Tea-Picking Opera were often held in open-air venues, and the clown’s dance movements were largely improvised, relying on the actor’s personal physical expressiveness and exaggerated everyday actions to

enhance the drama and entertainment value. At this stage, the dance style of the clown was greatly influenced by the folk dances of Gannan, such as movements from rural labor tasks and folk games, which made the performance closely aligned with rural life.

As Gannan Tea-Picking Opera gradually developed into a regional theatrical genre, the dance movements of the clown became more fixed and standardized. For example, movements like the “ghost step”, “tipping step”, and “staggering step” became key dance steps, while gestures such as “rubbing the nose”, “scratching the head”, and “hands on hips with body twist” emphasized exaggerated comedic effects. These standardized movements not only enhanced the character’s recognizability but also provided a foundation for the actors’ improvisational performances. Many of the clown’s dance moves mimicked nature, particularly animal shapes, with sayings like “Flying birds and running beasts, even the actions of a tea-picker are all included”, such as: “the yellow dog stretching its waist”, “the turtle digging the sand”, “the lion opening its mouth”, “the frog playing in the water,” “the cat stalking at night”, “the monkey startled,” “the crow spreading its wings”, “the fox crossing a ridge”, and “the butterfly collecting nectar”. Furthermore, the clown’s dance during the traditional period emphasized fast-paced rhythms and flexible, varied movements, which fit the overall lively and playful style of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera.

4.2. Post-1949 (after the Founding of the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1978)

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera entered a new stage of theatrical development, with the government promoting the organization and standardization of local operas, thus leading to a more structured development of clown dance. During this period, traditional folk performance forms were organized and summarized, and the movement system of the clown dance gradually became standardized. The formalization of body postures, steps, and gestures was systematically compiled, which increased the plasticity of the clown dance on stage. Additionally, the establishment of professional opera troupes and the widespread practice of specialized training led the clown dance to evolve from spontaneous, improvised performances to more systematic, stage-oriented ones.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera underwent a transformation from rural theaters to formal stage settings, and the clown dance also underwent corresponding changes. Many traditional clown dance elements were preserved, but the performance forms placed more emphasis on expressing dramatic conflict and stage direction. For example, the clown’s dance assumed a greater role in narrative development, not only creating humorous effects but also driving the plot forward. Additionally, influenced by other opera genres such as Peking Opera and Huangmei Opera, the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera incorporated new body techniques, enriching its expressive forms.

4.3. Post-Reform and Opening-Up (1978 to Present)

After the reform and opening-up period, with the diversification of cultural and artistic development, the clown dance of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera underwent innovation and integration based on traditional forms. On one hand, while maintaining its standardized movements, the clown’s dance absorbed modern dance, aesthetic elements, and theatrical body language, making the performance more flexible. For example, in some modern adaptations, the clown’s comedic movements were combined with the fluidity of modern dance, making the stage performance more natural and enhancing its visual appeal. On the other hand, the dance style of the clown was also influenced by popular culture, such as films and animation, with some performances incorporating more contemporary comedic elements to attract younger audiences.

In the 21st century, the stage presentation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera’s clown dance also saw significant changes. The concept of modern theatricality was introduced, making the spatial direction, lighting design, and stage coordination more refined. For instance, the clown’s dance was no longer confined to specific areas on stage; instead, it was integrated with multi-layered stage designs, making the performance more three-dimensional. Meanwhile, advancements in stage technology, such as LED backgrounds and projection techniques, provided new opportunities for innovative performances, making the clown dance more dynamic and engaging.

In the digital era, the methods of disseminating Gannan Tea-Picking Opera's clown dance have undergone fundamental changes. New media forms such as short video platforms, live streaming, and documentaries have become vital channels for promoting traditional opera culture, allowing the clown dance to reach a broader audience. Additionally, digital archives of operas, intangible cultural heritage databases, and other resources have played a significant role in preserving and transmitting clown dance traditions. For instance, some opera troupes and universities have organized digital records and online courses to document and promote traditional clown dance techniques, ensuring that the dance form is better protected and developed in the modern era.

The evolution of the clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera has moved from folk improvisational performances to staged and standardized acts, then to modern innovations that combine traditional elements with contemporary art. This continuous adaptation reflects the unique charm of Gannan opera culture, showcasing how it maintains its traditional features while embracing modern artistic influences.

5. Conclusions

The clown dance in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, as an integral part of Chinese regional opera, serves as a vital cultural heritage that encapsulates the essence of folk traditions while offering distinctive artistic value. Its evolution from folk song and dance during the Ming and Qing Dynasties into a formalized theatrical performance reflects the dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation, as well as the influence of social and cultural changes. The clown dance is characterized by exaggerated humor, dynamic movement, and a strong connection with musical rhythms, blending traditional Chinese opera clown elements with regional folk dance to create a localized and lively performance style. Over time, its stylistic changes have been shaped by societal aesthetics, the structure of the opera performance system, and the dissemination environment, transitioning from a formalized and dramatic presentation to a more contemporary, stage-driven art form. To ensure its continued preservation and development in the modern era, it is essential for government bodies, opera professionals, researchers, and the wider community to collaborate in maintaining its cultural relevance while embracing innovative artistic practices.

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