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## Study on the Changes of Singing Behavior of Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera from the Perspective of Cultural Ecology

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### Abstract

In the process of modernization, the singing behavior of Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera has undergone changes since the 1950s due to environmental factors. Since January 2020, Chinese researchers have conducted extensive investigations on the cultural ecology of the singing behavior of Shanghe Yang Opera in Huaihua City to explore these changes. The aim of this research is to understand the causes, manifestations, and relationship between the changes. Through comprehensive investigation and analysis using cultural ecology theory, the following conclusions have been drawn: 1) the changes in singing behavior are influenced by changes in the living environment; 2) these changes are evident in three aspects: ideas (such as the purpose and function of singing), form (including lyrics, music, and singing techniques), and manner (occasions and programs); 3) there is a positive correlation between the evolution of cultural ecology surrounding singing behavior and the manifestation of these changes.

**Keywords:** Cultural ecology, Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera, Singing behavior concepts

### Introduction

Cultural ecology, proposed by anthropologist Julian Steward in the 1950s, examines the laws of cultural variation through the interaction of factors in the natural and social environment. Chinese opera, including the Yang Opera, embodies the spirit of Chinese culture. The Upper River Yang Opera, prevalent in certain regions of China, has gained recognition and was listed in cultural heritage lists. However, due to rapid development in society and other



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aspects since the 1950s, the natural, human, economic, and social environment of the Upper River Yang Opera has changed, leading to changes in its singing behavior. Researchers conducted an investigation to analyze these changes from a cultural ecology perspective and explore their causes and manifestations.

## Objectives

1. To explore the causes of the changes in the singing performance of Shanghe Yang opera in Huairen County from the perspective of cultural ecology.
2. To reveal the manifestations of the changes in the singing performance of Shanghe Yang opera in Huairen County and the relationship between these manifestations and their causes.

## Literature Review

### 1. Relevant Cultural Ecology

Julian Steward's book "The Theory of Cultural Change" in 1955 precipitated the emergence of cultural ecology on an international scale. He posited that culture and its ecological surroundings interacted, resulting in varying cultural forms and processes of change (Sima Yunjie, 2007, pp. 119-120). American anthropologists in the 1960s were influenced by Steward's theory and published works on cultural ecology, such as R. Rapaport's "Pigs for the Ancestors: Ecological Rituals of an Ethnic Group in New Guinea" (1968) and J. Bennett's "Dwellers of the Northern Plains" (1969).

From the 1980s onwards, cultural ecology expanded globally, fostering an interdisciplinary approach. In China, scholars recognized the importance of cultural ecology in the 1980s and translated foreign works to introduce its development. However, due to China's rich cultural history, comprehensive studies were required to define and establish the principles of cultural ecology.

Chinese scholars proposed diverse definitions of cultural ecology. Sima Yunjie (1990) defined it as the examination of the influence of natural and social factors on culture. Wang Yude (2003) focused on studying the ecological context, cultural diversity, and cultural changes. Hou Xin (2004) applied cultural ecology to the study of urban space and culture, emphasizing the interrelationship between urban culture and specific environments.

Cultural ecology has attained global recognition as an interdisciplinary field, with Chinese scholars contributing to its development through research and the proposal of their own definitions and principles.



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## 2. Review of the achievements of Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera

The Huaihua City Records, written by the Huaihua City Codification Committee in 1994, stated that folk song and dance rap performances were popular in the Huaihua area during the Qing Qianlong period. This later evolved into Yang Opera during the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods. However, systematic research on Shanghe Yang Opera was lacking until the 1980s, when scholars began to delve into the topic (Hunan Huaihua Codification Committee, 1994, pp. 731). Noteworthy research on Shanghe Yang Opera includes books such as "Hunan local drama series 2" (1989) and "Hunan opera music integration - Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture" (1990), which provide a comprehensive exposition on the origin, distribution of genres, and artistic characteristics of Yang Opera, including insights about Shanghe Yang Opera. Additionally, Tian Jun (2005) analyzes the origin, development history, and main features of Shanghe Yang Opera music, while Yin Jianjun (2010) provides a detailed explanation of the composition of the main vocal cadences, use of tonal modes, basic structural features, and main characteristics of Shanghe Yang Opera.

Furthermore, research conducted by Zhang Wenhua (2015, 2017), Liu Min (2012), and Huang Lida (2016) focuses on the origin, development, and musical characteristics of Shanghe Yang Opera. These studies have contributed to the formation of a cultural ecology theory system and have enriched the development of cultural ecology in China. The application of cultural ecology is widespread across various disciplines, serving as a methodological system for studying culture and offering new ideas for addressing challenges in cultural development. The research findings on Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera serve as a theoretical basis for this study.

### Research results

#### 1. Causes of Changes in Singing Behavior of Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera

Varieties and genres of art are shaped by specific spiritual climates in different cultures and time periods (Danner, 1995, p. 33). As human social history progresses, diverse environments have influenced the development of distinct production methods, lifestyles, languages, mentalities, and customs (Xia Riyun & Zhang Erxun, 1991, p. 6). The ecological environment, including the natural, economic, and social aspects, plays a crucial role in the survival and transformation of regional cultures. To understand the changes in Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera's singing behavior, it is important to examine its natural, humanistic, and social ecological environment.



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### 1) Changes in natural ecology

Natural ecology is crucial for preserving cultural traditions. Different natural surroundings give rise to unique regional cultures, as the environment shapes the people. The development and evolution of Shanghe Yang Opera's singing style is closely tied to its natural ecological environment. This opera is typically performed in the villages surrounding the provinces of Hunan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Hubei, and Guangxi. The region's high mountains, dense forests, limited transportation, and limited external interactions have provided a natural barrier that maintained the traditional singing tradition of Shanghe Yang Opera. Through spontaneous transmission in folklore life, this tradition has been preserved. In the traditional social context, local production practices, festivals, folk rituals, belief ceremonies, and recreational activities served as the primary "inheritance field" for the singing behavior of Shanghe Yang Opera. This unique social life nurtured and developed the opera's singing style, which served as a spiritual outlet for people in the region to express themselves and their emotions.

However, significant changes in production, lifestyle, transportation, communication technology, and increased connectivity with the outside world in the 20th century have led to the transformation of local production practices, ideologies, and behavioral patterns. The traditional folk life that was intricately linked with the singing behavior of Shanghe Yang Opera has gradually been replaced by modernized ways of living, diminishing or even disappearing the traditional "inheritance field" that supported the opera's singing tradition.

Today, cultural inheritance has shifted as people actively adopt foreign cultures and cultural dissemination occurs through markets and schools. This has impacted the field of cultural inheritance for Shanghe Yang Opera. WXG, a 79-year-old inheritor of Shanghe Yang Opera, expressed in a survey interview that during her childhood, there were numerous folk activities in her area, often accompanied by a Yang Opera performance. However, due to environmental changes and the impact of social, economic, and cultural development, the number of folk activities has decreased significantly, along with the scarcity of folk theaters and theater masters (Zhao Shilin, 1994, p. 63). In accordance with the national intangible cultural heritage protection policy, the base for the singing behavior of Shanghe Yang Opera has gradually shifted from traditional folk life to local school campuses and stages.

### 2) Changes in economic conditions

Material production is the foundation of society and the driving force behind social progress. The mode of production determines the level of cultural development. In the region where Shanghe Yang Opera was popular before 1949, feudal oppression hindered economic growth. However, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the socialist



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system promoted economic development, leading to urbanization and a decrease in public spaces in rural areas. This resulted in less opportunity for collective rehearsal and preservation of Shanghe Yang Opera. Economic interests have also shifted villagers' focus towards money, causing fewer artists to devote time to practicing and promoting the opera. Additionally, the emphasis on education has left little time for children to engage in cultural activities like Shanghe Yang Opera. The changing socio-economic environment, improved transportation facilities, and influx of external populations and cultures have greatly influenced the form and content of the opera.

### 3) Changes in the social environment

Shanghe Yang Opera, a precious cultural heritage, originated and thrived within the social life of villagers. It is deeply intertwined with the folk traditions of the region, encapsulating the region's social development, emotions, and wisdom. However, globalization and urbanization in the 20th century marginalized and even banned traditional cultures like Shanghe Yang Opera. During the 1960s, the opera suffered criticism and suppression, leading to the disbandment of its classes, destruction of repertoire and instruments, and interruption of cultural inheritance. Fortunately, with the "reform and opening-up" policy in the 1980s, efforts were made to restore and protect Shanghe Yang Opera as part of China's intangible cultural heritage. It has gradually resurfaced, with the formation of the "Hecheng District Yang Opera Preservation and Inheritance Center" in 2012 and its official recognition as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2014. Today, driven by the protection of intangible cultural heritage, Shanghe Yang Opera is experiencing a revival and adapting to the changing social landscape.

## 2. Changes in Singing Behavior in Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera

The creation and development of culture are closely tied to its environment. When there are changes in the cultural ecological environment, cultural reforms and adaptations are necessary for sustainable development. This is also true for the singing behavior of Huaihua Shanghe Yang Opera. From a psychophysiological perspective, artistic singing and language involve dynamic behavior that coordinates breathing sensation, vocalization, resonance, and expression to create singing behavior that follows certain rules and is full of expression. Singing involves the purpose of singing, the form of the act (including lyrics and melody), and the manner in which it is performed (including the occasion).







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Another change can be observed in the forms of singing behavior. In the past, the opera was performed in flexible venues like temple terraces, ancestral halls, and open spaces. Accompaniment was limited to instruments like huqin or, in larger groups, gongs and drums. Today, Shanghe Yang Opera is moving towards professional theater stages, incorporating Western instruments like violins, as well as introducing modern elements such as lights, scenery, costumes, and props.

The modes of singing behavior have also undergone significant changes. Initially, the opera was orally passed down by renowned artists who taught students in villages. Now, Shanghe Yang Opera offers professional training courses and incorporates elements from other opera styles to innovate and improve singing skills. Modern plays have complex plots, vivid characters, and a wide range of music, further enriching the expression in Shanghe Yang Opera's singing behavior.

In conclusion, the evolution of singing behavior in Shanghe Yang Opera reflects changing perspectives, levels of development, and societal needs. It has shifted from a folk-focused practice to a more professional theater performance, incorporating modern elements and expanding its repertoire.

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