

THE PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES AND VOCAL TREATMENT OF "HU XIUYING" IN "LIU HAI CHOPS THE FIREWOOD" OF HUNAN HUAGU OPERA

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ABSTRACT

Hunan Huagu opera is a traditional drama in Hunan province and one of the national intangible cultural heritages. This study investigates the performance techniques and vocal treatments of "Hu Xiuying" in the Hunan Huagu Opera "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood". Through literature search and Field stay method, this paper analyzes the details of "Hu Xiuying" performance from the perspective of body techniques, treatment of singing, specific singing sections and stage arrangement. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the role achieves an organic unity between "divinity" and "humanity" through stylized techniques, reflecting the significance of this character's portrayal in carrying forward the distinctive style of Hunan Huagu Opera.

Keywords: Hunan Huagu Opera, Hu Xiuying, Performance Techniques, Liu Hai Chops the Firewood

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INTRODUCTION

Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, is situated in central China along the lower reaches of the Xiang River. This historic city serves as both the birthplace of Hunan culture and a revolutionary stronghold, with its iconic Orange Isle where Mao Zedong studied under the statue that captures his youthful resolve to "guide the nation's destiny." Recognized as China's happiest city, Changsha offers unique charm whether you're exploring historical sites or embracing modern lifestyle trends. The play "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" features two central characters: "Liu Hai" and "Hu Xiuying". "Hu Xiuying", a thousand-year-old fox spirit originally devoted to her immortal life, willingly transforms into a mortal to stay with the simple-hearted woodcutter "Liu Hai". The character's complexity lies in her dual nature: she embodies both the ethereal charm of an extraordinary spirit and the tender emotions of a human longing for genuine human connection. (Sun Baoyi, Liu Chunzeng and Zou Guilan, 2013)

"Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" is a classic traditional opera in Hunan province, which combines mythological legends, folk stories and local artistic characteristics. In the first generation of Hunan Huagu opera, Tang Zhongbi, who played "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood", constantly refined her performance techniques and combined the "spirit" of a folk girl with the "charm" of a fox fairy, forming a distinctive artistic paradigm.

Current academic research on "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" predominantly focuses on the play's transmission and vocal analysis, with systematic exploration of Hu Xiuying's performance techniques remaining underdeveloped. This paper centers on the integration of "skill" and "emotion," examining specific performance details to analyze how Hu Xiuying achieves her role transformation from "fox spirit" to "human" through physical movements and vocal techniques. The study provides a micro-level perspective for preserving traditional local opera character performances.

To sum up, the history of Hunan Huagu Opera traces back to the Jiaqing era of the Qing Dynasty, while the legend of "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" had already taken shape during the Northern Song period. By the mid-Qing Dynasty, it had evolved into its current predominant version. This research not only holds significant importance for analyzing the performance techniques of Hunan Huagu Opera but also offers unique learning value in vocal treatment analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The overall research status of Hunan Huagu Opera

Current academic research on Hunan Huagu Opera has established a multidimensional framework, laying the foundation for detailed studies of specific plays and characters. In terms of genre-specific research, scholars generally focus on vocal systems and performance conventions: The melodic characteristics and rhythmic structures of core vocal styles like "Da Luoqiang" (drumming-style singing) and "Chuan Diao" (Sichuan-style singing) highlight their "lively and dialectally grounded" essence. The stylized logic of performance movements such as "fan dance" and "dwarf steps" reveals deep connections with Hunan's folk music and dance traditions.

In studies of regional cultural connections, scholars have proposed that "Hunan Huagu Opera serves as a stage vehicle embodying the 'scholarly-martial ethos and pragmatic advancement' spirit of Hunan culture." Meanwhile, the article "Dialectal Rhythm in Hunan Huagu Opera" provides linguistic evidence demonstrating how the phonetics, rhymes, and intonations of the Xiang dialect fundamentally shape vocal performance design. This research offers theoretical foundations for subsequent studies on the "dialect adaptation" of role-specific vocal styles.

In addition, inheritance and innovation research has been a hot topic in recent years. Although modern adaptations have made breakthroughs in stage technology and narrative rhythm, there are controversies about "weakening of stylized performance" and "overly popular singing

style". This view provides a reference perspective for analyzing the differences in performance and singing style of the role of Hu Xiuying in different versions.

Progress of special research on the play Liu Hai Chops Wood

As the "symbolic play" of Hunan Huagu Opera, the research on "Liu Hai Chops Firewood" focuses on the connotation of the plot, stage presentation and music design, which provides a theatrical context for the study of characters.

Scholars widely recognize the underlying value of the "human-fox romance" narrative in both plot and cultural significance. In his study "Research on the 'Human-Beast Romance' Theme in Hunan Folk Opera," Chen Hao argues that "Liu Hai Chops Firewood" conveys a folk spirit of "labor supremacy and resistance against oppression" through the love story between Hu Xiuying and Liu Hai. Hu Xiuying's "fox demon" identity serves as a metaphor for "free marriage and love." Meanwhile, "Folk Symbolism Interpretation of 'Liu Hai Chops Firewood'" focuses on scenes like "chopping firewood" and "marriage alliances," suggesting the integration of cultural elements from Hunan's "agricultural rituals" and "wedding customs." This provides a cultural context for understanding Hu Xiuying's "folkloric movements" in her performance, such as ceremonial toasting gestures and wedding hall postures.

In studies of classical versions and stage adaptations, scholars have conducted extensive comparative analyses between "traditional editions" and "modern adapted versions". The research titled "The Evolution of Stage Versions of 'Liu Hai Chops the Firewood' (1952-2023)" reveals that the 1952 premiere version by Hunan Huagu Opera Theater emphasized Hu Xiuying's "fox-like" agility through rapid fan movements and light-footed steps. In contrast, the 2018 "cultural-tourism fusion edition" highlighted her "humanity" through added life simulation segments and reduced demonic actions. The study also notes how stage design and lighting influenced performance techniques across versions: traditional editions' "lyrical sets" required actors to enhance scene associations through physical movements, while modern versions' "realistic sets" minimized stylized performance conventions.

In the study of music and vocal design, "A Musical Analysis of the Core Aria in 'Liu Hai Chops the Firewood'" stands as a seminal work. Using the classic duet "Brother Liu Hai, You Are My Husband" as a case study, the paper highlights its adoption of the "erliu" rhythm pattern from Sichuan folk music. The melody primarily employs pentatonic scales with brisk and highly repetitive rhythms, aligning with the characteristic "easy-to-sing" nature of traditional Chinese opera. Additionally, the article analyzes the instrumentation arrangement featuring suona (Chinese flute) and dizi (flute) as primary instruments, complemented by gongs and drums for rhythmic support. This orchestration design effectively enhances the emotional fluctuations in Hu Xiuying's vocal performance, with elaborate suona embellishments in cheerful passages and simplified accompaniment in lyrical sections.

Existing achievements in the study of the role of "Hu Xiuying"

At present, there are few special studies on the role of Hu Xiuying, which are mostly scattered in the research of plays or individual case analysis of actors. They can be summarized into two directions: acting techniques and singing treatment.

Research on Performance Techniques: Current studies predominantly focus on the theatrical presentation of "human-fox dual identities." The article "Identity Shaping in Hunan Huagu Opera Dan Roles" examines Hu Xiuying as a case study, highlighting actors' use of stylized physical movements to distinguish character attributes. When portraying fox traits, performers employ characteristic gestures like shoulder-lifting, tiptoeing, and lively glances, combined with rapid fan-waving spins to convey the demon's agility and cunning. Conversely, for human characteristics, actors adopt relaxed postures with lowered shoulders and slow steps, using everyday actions such as "placing hands under the chin while observing the hair" and "gentle gestures of passing firewood" to portray the maiden's tenderness and simplicity.

Research on Vocal Techniques: Studies in Hunan Flower Drum Opera (Hunan Huagu Opera) vocal techniques primarily focus on "timbre selection" and "emotional modulation". The paper "Timbre Control in Female Vocal Techniques of Hunan Huagu Opera" suggests adjusting timbre according to plot emotions. For the joyful segment "First Encounter with Brother Liu" (e.g., "Here I'll compare Brother Hai"), a bright and crisp timbre is required, combined with glissando and vibrato techniques to convey the girl's vivacity. In the lyrical section "Forced to Leave Home" (e.g., "Crying for Brother Hai, my husband"), the timbre shifts to a low and melancholic tone, incorporating weeping patterns and drawn-out phrasing to express sorrowful emotions.

The integration of dialect and vocal styles constitutes the core focus of this study. As detailed in "The Use of Xiang Dialect in Vocal Performance of 'Liu Hai Chops Firewood'," Hu Xiuying's singing strictly adheres to the tonal patterns of Xiang dialect. For instance, characters like "fu" (husband) and "ge" (brother) must be pronounced as "fu" and "go" in the dialect. Moreover, when extending modal particles such as "ke" (oh) and "tiao" (ah), the performer must preserve the dialect's characteristic intonation variations to authentically portray the character's regional identity.

This study centers on the character "Hu Xiuying", focusing on the synergistic relationship between performance techniques and vocal treatment. On one hand, it integrates existing fragmented research to establish a specialized role study system. On the other hand, it delves into the unique demands of the "dual identity as both human and fox" on performances and vocal styles, revealing its distinctions from other dan roles and enriching the research dimensions of Hunan Huagu Opera characters. The findings provide theoretical references for the "inheritance and innovation" of Hunan Huagu Opera roles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literature research

The researchers conducted a comprehensive literature search using various resources, including websites (<https://www.baidu.com>) with a variety of literature and videos of the Hunan Huagu opera "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood", the collection encompasses Chinese music history books, academic journals, and local folk art materials. The focus is on gathering books about opera performance techniques and vocal repertoire materials related to Hunan Huagu Opera. After systematically compiling key elements, we will visit the theater of a troupe to observe these performances, thereby broadening our knowledge base.

Field study method

The researcher graduated from the Performance Department of China's premier opera institution, the China Academy of Chinese Opera. Since 2015, they have been teaching opera at Hunan Vocational College of Arts' Drama School. Through 19 years of dedicated study and research on Hunan Huagu Opera (a traditional Chinese folk dance drama), the scholar has gained extensive practical experience in teaching and performance. During their decade-long career with Hunan Huagu Opera, they also apprenticed under multiple local artists and national heritage bearers to refine their craft. For instance, Professor Ouyang JuLi from Hunan Provincial Art Vocational College, along with Vice President and Professor Zhou Wenqing, have also apprenticed under Liu Zhaoqian. Liu Zhaoqian is a first-class performer at Hunan Huagu Opera Theater, a National People's Congress deputy for the ninth session, and a recipient of both the "Wenhua Award" and "Plum Blossom Award". She is also an intangible cultural heritage inheritor of Hunan Huagu Opera. During their academic research, scholars explored the relationship between these cultural inheritors and the contemporary development of Hunan Huagu Opera art. Through the participatory observation method.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Performance techniques of "Hu Xiuying" in "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood", a Huagu opera in Hunan Province.



Figure 1 "Hu Xiuying" in "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood", prop: feather fan

1) Dance Techniques: The stylized expression of "human-fox unity" in Hunan Huagu Opera's young female roles centers on "lightness, agility, elegance, and charm." Hu Xiuying, embodying the identity of a "fox spirit," integrates fox-like physicality into traditional movements, creating a unique paradigm that intertwines "immortal grace" with "fox demeanor." This fusion isn't mere superficial addition but achieves visual representation of character identity through layered techniques like "fan movements," "stage steps," and "eye contact coordination." Hu Xiuying's signature prop is the feather fan. When first meeting Liu Hai, she holds the fan to conceal her face, with half of its surface veiling her brows and eyes. A gentle wrist movement causes the fan's edge to tremble slightly, accompanied by a "shuffling step" as she approaches Liu Hai. This "fan-shielding" gesture originates from the folk opera tradition of young female roles (xiaodan) "shyly meeting their first love," but the fan's rapid vibration mimics a fox's startled tail flick, hinting at her supernatural identity. The fan here serves as both a disguise tool and a feather symbol representing the "fox spirit." As the plot deepens and Hu Xiuying's feelings for Liu Hai grow, the fan evolves into an emotional instrument. She fully unfolds the fan, gently tapping Liu Hai's shoulder with the fan ribs, then smoothly drawing it back in a semicircle toward her chest, forming an inviting posture. The fan's full spread mimics a fox's graceful tail sway, blending the delicate shyness of a common maiden with the boldness of a fox spirit.

Hu Xiuying's fan cannot be wielded with the casual ease of a typical young female role; it must embody the ethereal grace of "floating," as if the fan itself were her soul rather than a mere object. This spiritual essence relies on wrist and fingertip control: When swaying the fan, she uses only wrist movements to guide the handle, creating subtle vibrations that mirror the fluttering fur of a fox in the wind.

Body movements ("cloud steps", "rounding the field", "small steps")



Figure 2 The classic action of "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood"

Note: Before this movement, the feet used "cloud steps", "round field" and "small broken steps" to convey a variety of emotions. These classic steps can fully express the emotional state of "fox fairy" and "ordinary people"

Hu Xiuying's distinctive gait design masterfully distinguishes her between "fox spirit" and "human" states. When appearing as a fox spirit, she executes the "cloud-step" technique, feet pressed together with quick alternating taps on the inner soles, maintaining an upright posture while subtly swaying at the waist to create an ethereal "cloud-treading" motion. Unlike standard young female roles' cloud steps, Hu's version features narrower strides, faster cadence, and a unique "side-twist" mechanism: each left foot tap triggers a rightward torso twist, with her fan-wielding hand naturally swinging backward. This fox-like movement enhances the ethereal quality of her "divine aura," mirroring how fox spirits navigate forest paths with agile sidestepping.

After transforming into a mortal, her gait combines "round steps" with "small quick steps". When walking in a "round step" posture, she slightly bends her knees, lowers her center of gravity, and takes larger strides with full foot contact, mimicking the steadiness of a woman working in the fields. Yet when emotionally agitated, she instantly switches back to "small quick steps" with forward-leaning posture, hands shielding her chest, and anxious eyes. This instant shift between "human steps" and "immortal steps" reveals her inner anxiety about "fearing exposure of identity". "Hu Xiuying's gait conceals fox-like traits. Even when walking like an ordinary mortal, her knees possess more 'spring' than typical young female roles, much like how felines appear steady but can dart out at any moment."

In the dance choreography, Hu Xiuying's "circling" movements contrast sharply with Liu Hai's "leaning" posture. Hu Xiuying circles around Liu Hai using various stage steps, her fan-like movements tracing arcs before him like a fox circling a stake. Meanwhile, Liu Hai lowers his center of gravity, standing shoulder-width apart with a slight tilt to create a stable "stake" position. He occasionally lifts his hand to gently support Hu Xiuying's elbow, preventing excessive circling. These dynamic interplay of circling and leaning not only showcases Hu Xiuying's agility and initiative but also reflects Liu Hai's steadiness and tolerance. Through this harmonious blend of strength and gentleness, the performance progresses from "Immortal Protecting Human" to "Human Protecting Immortal" and ultimately to mutual reliance a profound emotional progression.

2) Eye and facial expressions:



Figure 3 The eyes and expressions of Hu Xiuying.

Note: The left picture shows the eyes "looking at the bangs brightly but not directly", while the right picture shows the eyes "stealing a glance at the bangs with shyness."

The performance emphasizes the concept of "eyes as windows to the soul." Hu Xiuying's eye movements reveal distinct layers of emotional depth through her evolving role. When first encountering Liu Hai, her eyes display a "bright yet indirect" gaze: rapid eyeball movements followed by brief glances at him before quickly shifting away, then a subtle upward glance with a faint smile. This "stealthy glance" technique originates from the traditional "shy-eyed" demeanor of young female roles in folk opera, but incorporates fox-like vigilance to portray her curious yet guarded psychology. Hu Xiuying's flowing gaze resonates with Liu Hai's

the character "qin" to make the singing style more playful. When expressing grievance ("I am not an ordinary woman in mortal attire"), a "Yiyin" (half a degree lower than the main tone) is appended after the character "fei", creating a lowered timbre with a tearful texture.

Furthermore, the core duet "Bigu Tune" in "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" stands as a prime example of vocal interaction between "Hu Xiuying" and Liu Hai. After Hu Xiuying initiates her melody, Liu Hai's singing enters with a "half-beat delay," creating a "chasing-singing" effect: "Hu: Brother Liu Hai, you're my husband! Liu: Sister Hu, you're my wife!" The lingering "luo" (final tone) of Hu Xiuying's "luo" is seamlessly followed by Liu Hai's "luo," forming a "female high, male low" harmony that intertwines the "liveliness" of the fox spirit with the "depth" of the woodcutter. During expressions of determination, their voices synchronize, as seen in "Go! Go!" where Hu Xiuying's falsetto overlaps with Liu Hai's chest voice, creating rhythmic resonance and emotional connection. This "chasing" and "following" duet design not only demonstrates Hu Xiuying's proactive approach to Liu Hai but also subtly conveys their mutual emotional pull.

2) Nianbai (conversation):

The dialogue of "Hu Xiuying" is rooted in Changsha dialect. When embodying the fox spirit, her lines predominantly adopt "rhymed speech", a rhythmic vernacular style characterized by precise phrasing and classical poetic elegance. Through alternating between "rhymed speech" and "free speech," the narrative achieves an organic blend of celestial refinement and earthly accessibility. The tone, pacing, and vocabulary dynamically adapt to the character's evolving identity and emotional states, creating an artistic effect where "speech becomes the voice of the soul."

For instance, her self-introduction upon first meeting Liu Hai: "I am Hu Xiuying, a servant from the Hu family. Hearing you are busy chopping wood, I have come to meet you." Each line contains five characters, rhyming with the "ong" tone. The recitation features a leisurely rhythm, drawn-out endings, and rising intonation, complemented by the gesture of "holding a fan at chest level," all showcasing refined elegance. This rhythmic speech borrows from Xiang Opera's "Guimen Dan" style while incorporating Changsha dialect tones (such as pronouncing "feng" as "fong" instead of Mandarin's "feng"). This creates an elegant yet earthy blend, where every word hangs in the air like ethereal breath, making listeners feel she is not speaking but emitting celestial energy, while maintaining the folk essence of Hua Gu Opera.



Figure 5 The first generation of "Hu Xiuying", senior Tang Zhongbi.

Note: This picture shows that the play "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" is a classic work, which has been passed down to this day. From the costumes and props of the first generation, there will be no too many changes, which is the classic play that "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" wants to inherit.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Discussion

The "Hu Xiuying" character stems from the actor's masterful and creative performance techniques, combined with distinctive regional singing styles and emotional expression. This fusion perfectly integrates the mystical qualities of a "fox spirit" with the sincere emotions of a "human woman," achieving both technical excellence and spiritual unity. The debates focused on how to innovate while preserving traditional essence, adapt interpretations to contemporary changes, balance school traditions with personal style, and address practical challenges in inheritance and talent cultivation.

Conclusion

The classic performance techniques of "Hu Xiuying" in Hunan Huagu Opera's "Liu Hai Chops the Firewood" owe their excellence not merely to technical mastery, but more crucially to a precise grasp of the character's essence. This portrayal masterfully captures both the ethereal charm and allure of a "fox spirit" and the dual qualities of kindness, devotion, and courage characteristic of an earthly woman. The physical expressions cloud steps, circular movements, small quick steps, and fan techniques vividly convey the fox spirit's agility and celestial aura. Her eyeswork employs nuanced glances of "restraint, release, contemplation, and bashfulness," all executed with perfect precision.

The vocal techniques masterfully transition from "Xianqiang" (immortal melody) to "Fangdiao" (earthly tune) through nuanced variations in timbre, rhythmic cadences, ornamentation, dynamic contrasts, and breath control. The dialogue delivery skillfully balances the refined elegance of Changsha dialect with its colloquial charm, harmonizing the character's ethereal aura with earthly sensibilities. The pivotal interactions with Liu Hai are amplified through coordinated movements like "following", "circling", and "passing", heightening emotional authenticity. The iconic "Bigu Tune" (a traditional love ballad) stands as the cornerstone of this performance, vividly portraying Hu Xiuying's passionate pursuit of love, unwavering resolve, and courageous defiance against adversity. This vocal interpretation not only cemented "Bigu Tune" as a classic in Hunan Flower Drum Opera but also established its enduring legacy across China.

Therefore, the Hunan flower-drum opera "Liu Hai Cutting Firewood" carries the characteristics of "appreciation by both the refined and the vulgar" of the Hunan flower-drum people. At the same time, the inheritance and innovation of local opera role performance provide a valuable artistic paradigm.

These Performances reflect universal issues facing traditional opera's survival and development in modern times, offering valuable references for future Huagu (flower-drum) performers.

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