

The Transmission Lineage of Sai Opera in Tanyin Village, Shexian

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Abstract: The Sai Opera of Tanyin Village in She County is an important component of the national intangible cultural heritage project "Handan Sai Opera." Based on fieldwork and documentary research, this paper takes the transmission lineage of Tanyin Village's Sai Opera as its subject, tracing its historical origins and developmental trajectory, examining the continuity of the Tang family's artistic tradition, and exploring the reconstruction and evolution of the transmission lineage following the intervention of intangible cultural heritage protection policies. The transmission lineage of Tanyin Village's Sai Opera is a product shaped by the interplay of familial craftsmanship, village society, and state institutions. Its continuation relies not only on the oral transmission and personal instruction within the Tang family but also on the ritual support provided by Tanyin Society as the primary temple dedicated to Nüwa. With the introduction of intangible cultural heritage protection systems, the agents of transmission have shifted from natural family succession to institutional recognition, the space of transmission has expanded from within the village to broader public domains, and the audience has extended to include youth and female groups. At the same time, the transmission lineage faces practical challenges such as aging practitioners, changes in cultural ecology, and the individualization of transmission agents, reflecting the complex landscape of ritual-based traditional theater adapting to contemporary social transformation.

Keywords: Tanyin Sai Opera; transmission lineage; intangible cultural heritage; Tang family.

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1. Introduction

Sai Opera is an ancient theatrical genre that was once widely popular in regions such as Shanxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, and Shaanxi. According to the Shuowen Jiezi, "sai" means "to repay." The Changjian also explains: "Today's common term 'saishen' (worshiping gods) refers to repaying deities through sacrifice, while 'sai' is also used to describe mutual boasting of victory." Clearly, "sai" signifies the act of repaying gods through ritual offerings. With this purpose in mind, Sai Opera emerged during community rituals welcoming deities—specifically, the "yingshen saishen" festivals—and evolved into a dramatic form

characterized by distinct ceremonial elements and strong regional features. Although there are no clear historical records regarding its origins or formation period, based on performance characteristics such as wearing masks and chasing or driving away spirits, it likely originated from Zhou Dynasty's "nuo opera," Han Dynasty's "xiangren opera" (a form where performers dressed as animals, immortals, or characters—known as "xiangren"—often wore masks), and Tang Dynasty's "daimian opera" (also called "daimian opera," featuring large masks and primarily dance-based performances). Some scholars, analyzing its makeup, performance style, and repertoire, suggest that Sai Opera may have taken shape during the Song or Yuan dynasties.

As a folk theatrical form, Sai Opera has always depended on rural communities' sacrificial traditions for its survival and continuity. A complete Sai Opera event is not merely a theatrical performance but rather a ritualistic drama system composed of divine invocations, main performances, and community parades. Ritual and performance complement each other; honoring gods and entertaining people proceed simultaneously. This dual nature allows Sai Opera to fulfill both spiritual aspirations—such as villagers' hopes for bountiful harvests and peace among people and livestock—and to fill communal entertainment gaps during festivals, thus ensuring its enduring vitality. In She County, Sai Opera is locally known as "pai sai" (Xu Xiaorong notes in "On the Vocal Characteristics of Sai Opera": "The term 'sai' and 'paiyou' belong to the same era and share certain historical connections. The character 'pai' in 'She County pai sai' should actually be 'pai'" or "dui xi." The Sai Opera performed in Tanyin Village belongs to the broader category of "Sai Opera," though locally it is also referred to as "saidui zi" or "dui xi." As a significant surviving example of this genre in southern Hebei, Tanyin Village's Sai Opera still preserves relatively intact performance procedures and ritual protocols. Its rustic performance style, strict ceremonial sequence, and unaltered primitive appearance offer valuable living models for understanding the developmental logic of early Chinese theater. To call it a "living fossil of opera" is no exaggeration.

The continuation of the Tanyin Opera is deeply intertwined with folk belief activities such as the worship of Nuwa and the belief in mountain deities. Li Yanping pointed out during her investigation of the Nuwa Palace Temple Fair in Shexian, "The 'she' is the basic organizational unit for each village to participate in the rituals and activities of the Nuwa Palace Temple Fair." Since Tang Wang Zhou Society failed to reach the summit, Tan Yin Society naturally regarded reaching the "First Summit Society" as its own achievement^[1]. One of the inheritance centers of the Shexian Sai Opera in Shexian County is the Tanyin Village. It is also the most important community in the Nuwa Sacrifice Ceremony and is the first community in the Nuwa Sacrifice^[2]. As the head temple society of Wa Huang, we are also at the core of this sacrificial system. The formation of this position was not accidental. The head temple society means having priority in the ritual sequence and also undertaking more burdensome sacrificial duties than other villages. The sacrificial network formed in the entire Shexian area around the Wa Huang Palace is not an isolated village behavior. Chang Yurong pointed out when studying the formation of the Nuwa belief circle in the Shexian area of Hebei Province that the belief circle does not worship multiple gods but rather a deity with a stronger aura and wider worship^[3]. This is the organizational structure of the belief in deities. The sacrificial function undertaken by the Tan Yin Society as the leading organization was precisely the concrete manifestation of this regional religious

organizational structure. From this, it can be seen that the Tan Yin Village Sai Opera has been able to continue for hundreds of years without interruption. This is not merely because it is an ancient art form like a "living fossil", but rather the fundamental reason lies in the fact that the sacrificial system it is attached to has its own enduring vitality. The sacrificial functions it undertakes are precisely the concrete manifestation of this regional belief organizational structure. It is precisely the cultural support of folk beliefs that has enabled the Sai Opera performances in Tanyin Village to continue to this day despite the changes in society.

2. The ritual process and artistic features of the opera

The performances of the Tanyin Sai Opera are concentrated from the 13th to the 16th of each January. At the beginning of the 14th of January, each village leader organizes personnel to carry the deity sedan and go to invite the deity. On the 17th of January, the organizer then organizes personnel to carry the deity sedan to send the mountain deity and Nuwa back. Thus, the entire Tanyin Sai Opera welcoming and competing activities during the Lantern Festival are all over. The performance takes place on an open plain. From the 1st to the 3rd of the third lunar month, the Tanyin Society also organizes opera performers to walk to Nuwa Palace, participate in the Nuwa sacrifice ceremony and perform opera. The performance of the Tanyin Festival Opera has a strict set of procedures. Before and after the opera performance, there are solemn and lively welcoming and sending-off activities, mainly including inviting the deity, praying for the deity's peace, rewarding the deity with the opera, entertaining the deity with the folk activities, and sending off the deity, etc^[2]. At present, the plays frequently performed in Tanyin Village are "Defeating Chiang Kai-shek Completely", "Night Investigation of Bai Bi Guan", "Collecting Qin Ming", "Ningguo Mansion", "The Battle of Handan", "Beating Ye Liang", etc. The competitive drama is performed in a vernacular style, with a rich and simple tone, and has a strong original flavor. In terms of content, it mainly focuses on military campaigns. The competitive drama mainly features historical stories, and also includes mythological legends. From the perspective of the entire ritual, the competitive drama is a group ritual activity, which is a pictorial interpretation of the ritual ceremony with characters. However, it is also a drama, with dramatic aesthetic factors such as character roles, dance movements, and storylines. The competitive drama is a distinctive ancient genre of drama. It integrates drama activities with folk sacrificial activities, combines square art and stage art, and closely links drama performances with folk customs^[4]. The shadow puppetry was in its early stage of development in the history of drama. In terms of characters, costumes, props, singing styles and dialogues, it maintained a remarkable originality and roughness. Qin Pei

pointed out in her research on Guoyi Nu Opera and Shadow Puppetry that the narrative of the shadow puppetry is short, each performance lasting about 10 minutes, with simple plots and is a highly symbolic and simulated performance with strong indicative nature^[5]. The language of the Tan Yin Sai opera is rich, the movements are exaggerated, and the accompaniment consists only of percussion music without string music. The tone is deep and simple. The regulatory and controlling function of the Sai opera ceremony in rural society mainly lies in its own unwritten regulations, which have a certain restraining effect on the behaviors and consciousness of the villagers. And by regulating the social relations, behaviors and consciousness of the rural society, it achieves the social management effect of safeguarding the interests of the rural community^[6].

3. The lineage of the Tang family

The first generation: Tang Tingchu (1836 - 1915). He was a scholar from the Qing Dynasty and ran a ticket agency in Tianjin. He was fond of writing script for competitions and organizing plays. He could play various roles and made significant contributions to the preservation and inheritance of the Pianyin Village competition plays. Tang Tingchu's identity was quite unique - he was both a rural scholar and an entrepreneur. This "both scholar and businessman" social role enabled him to have both cultural literacy and economic strength, allowing him to play a role in the creation of competition play scripts and the organization of performances.

The second generation: Tang Xianzhong (1898 - 1960). He was well-versed in both literature and martial arts. When he was young, he served in the military and had excellent shooting skills. He was also a master of the Tanyin Hongquan style of boxing. During the period when the provincial government was stationed in Tanyin Village, Tang Xianzhong served as the village chief and led the villagers in building and digging canals. He loved performing in competitions and personally gave performances and taught his disciples. Tang Xianzhong's social status as the village chief directly linked the inheritance of the competitions with the village's public affairs. The performances of the competitions received support from the village's administrative forces during this period.

The third generation: Tang Ziyuan (1935 - 2012). The leader of the Tan Yin Nuwa Society, after the reform and opening up, he led the villagers to undertake construction projects and established the Tan Yin Earthwork and Masonry Engineering Team. He had a passion for art and believed in Nuwa. He organized the restoration of opera performances and Nuwa worship activities, participated in the application for the intangible cultural heritage of opera performances, and trained the next generation of opera actors. Tang Ziyuan experienced the entire process of the

opera performances in Tan Yin Village, from their decline to resurgence, from being self-sustaining in the folk to obtaining institutional protection. In the contemporary inheritance of opera performances in Tan Yin Village, he played a crucial role as a bridge between the past and the future.

The fourth generation: Tang Xiangping (1967 -), born in February 1967, from Tan Yin Village. In 1981, she entered the Shexian Xiaohua Opera Troupe to study drama performance. He served as the martial arts coach and director of the troupe. Since childhood, she followed her father Tang Ziyuan to learn the performance of competitive opera, mastering the art of competitive opera and assisting him father in organizing competitive opera performances, teaching new actors singing and movement techniques, and handling the makeup work of the actors.

The fifth generation: Tang Hongjian (1992 -), son of Tang Xiangping, a county-level inheritor of Sichuan Opera and vice president of the Pianqing Sichuan Opera Research Association. In 2008, he began to participate in Saixi Opera performances and played various roles. He is the new generation successor of Sichuan Opera.

4. The protection system for intangible cultural heritage and the reconstruction of its transmission lineage

The institutionalized expansion of the inheritance scope. Traditionally, the inheritance and performance of the Saixi opera in Tan Yin Village were limited to the village itself. The opera was usually performed by a volunteer opera troupe composed of villagers during the Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, or village temple fairs, and was not held outside the village for commercial performances. After the intervention of the intangible cultural heritage protection system, the inheritance activities broke through the boundaries of the village. Tang Xiangping participated in performances such as the Shexian Spring Festival Gala, the Northern Culture Year, and provincial and municipal tourism development conferences. He also carried out the "Intangible Cultural Heritage in Schools" activity, explaining to students the importance of intangible cultural heritage inheritance and protection. The inheritance targets expanded from family members and local villagers to the youth student group, and the inheritance space expanded from the village interior to a broader public cultural domain.

In terms of the cast composition, traditionally, the performance of the "Sai Opera" was dominated by male roles, with very few female participants. According to the recollections of the elderly artists during the field investigation, in the past, women were not allowed to participate in the Sai Opera. If female roles were needed in the plot, male actors would dress up as women. This situation was related to the low status of women in ancient

times and their inability to participate in sacrificial activities. However, during the investigation in the Tan Yin Village, the author observed that this traditional rule has undergone significant changes. During the Lantern Festival performances, there were female actors appearing in supporting roles. More typically, in the performance of the "Offering to Nuwa" during the Nuwa Memorial Ceremony, four of the "Eight Immortals" were played by female actors, and there was a phenomenon of women dressing up as men. The author asked the members of the troupe about this matter, and the reply was that the number of Sai Opera performers was decreasing, and some roles could not be filled by male actors alone, so female actors were also included. From the field observation, the addition of female actors not only alleviated the pressure of insufficient actors in the troupe but also changed the long-standing performance pattern of the Sai Opera, which was dominated by men. This change is not unique to the Sai Opera. As the protection of intangible cultural heritage progresses, some old taboos and rules in the inheritance process are gradually loosening. From another perspective, originally only men could participate in the performance of the Sai Opera, but now women can also take the stage. Objectively, this has expanded the scope of the inheritance group and provided more inheritance strength for the Sai Opera.

The institutional challenges of the inheritance environment. The survival of shadow puppetry is closely linked to folk beliefs. Li Jia pointed out in her research on shadow puppetry in Northwest China that from the long historical evolution of shadow puppetry, we can observe the significant influence of traditional opera culture on its appearance, prosperity and decline. The limitations in art and the changes in the cultural soil of shadow puppetry led to its decline. Now it has disappeared from the stage, but the historical information it scattered among the people reveals the original form of folk performances hundreds of years ago, and also provides valuable materials for us to further understand folk sacrificial dramas^[7]. This judgment also applies to the Sai Opera in Shexian County. With the transformation of the agricultural society and the decline of folk beliefs, the cultural support for Sai Opera is gradually weakening. If the inheritance lineage is separated from the cultural soil that gave it birth and relies solely on institutional recognition and financial support, can it achieve sustainable inheritance? This is a question that needs to be tested.

5. The contemporary characteristics and development challenges of the inheritance lineage

The inheritance lineage of the performance art of Tan Yin Village presents several notable characteristics in the contemporary era: the dual superposition of family inheritance and institutional inheritance. The inheritance

lineage of the performance art of Tan Yin Village retains the traditional model of intergenerational transmission within the family, with the Tang family continuing to perform the art for five generations. It also incorporates the "representative inheritor" recognition mechanism granted by the intangible cultural heritage protection system. Tang Xiangping is not only the fourth-generation inheritor of the performance art of the Tang family but also a national-level representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage. These two identities form a relationship of mutual support and tension in the specific inheritance practice. On the one hand, family inheritance provides a solid technical foundation and historical context for institutional inheritance; on the other hand, institutional inheritance provides broader resource support and legal guarantee for family inheritance. The group characteristics of the inheritance population. As a collective performance art, the inheritance of the performance art of Tan Yin Village essentially requires an "inheritance population" rather than a single individual. The performance of the Tan Yin Village performance art requires the organization of the village head, the mobilization of the entire village, the collection of funds and provisions, and the allocation of roles - this entire process is essentially a collective action within the village. Tang Xiangping has trained more than thirty young and middle-aged actors and more than fifty young trainees, to a certain extent, compensating for the problem of individualized inheritance. The inheritors of the performance art are important carriers. Tradition and innovation in parallel. Tang Xiangping adopted the strategy of "preserving the essence and innovating" in the inheritance process - he not only restaged traditional plays such as "Defeating Chiang Kai-shek Completely", "Ningguo Mansion", "Night Investigation of Baibei Pass", and "Huluang Pass" but also created new plays such as "The Battle of Handan", "Receiving Qin Ming", "Beating Yan Liang", "The Eight Immortals Paying a Visit to Nuwa", and revolutionary-themed "Red Tan Yin". This strategy maintains the traditional form of the performance art while injecting new contemporary content into it.

However, the inheritance lineage of the Tan Yin Village Opera also faces significant challenges that cannot be ignored. The aging of the inheritance group and the risk of a gap. The situation where the number of inheritance group members has decreased and the aging phenomenon is severe has not been significantly improved. Although Tang Xiangping has trained many students, the overall age structure of the opera performers is still not optimistic. The younger generation is facing multiple real challenges such as going out to work and academic pressure. With the acceleration of the urbanization process, more and more rural young people choose to go out to work, and the village-based social foundation relied on for inheritance is constantly weakening. Changes in the inheritance environment have led to the loosening of the cultural

support for Tan Yin Village Opera. If the inheritance lineage is separated from the cultural soil that gave birth to it and relies solely on institutional recognition and financial support, can it achieve sustainable inheritance? The individualized tendency of the inheritance subject. The intangible cultural heritage inheritance system identifies individuals as the objects of recognition, while Tan Yin Village Sai Opera is a collective performance art, its inheritance essentially requires the collaboration and inheritance of the entire troupe. The inheritance methods of traditional drama include family-based inheritance and apprenticeship. However, in the implementation of the intangible cultural heritage protection system, individual inheritance persons are often given more emphasis, and attention to the inheritance group is relatively insufficient. This individualized system design may affect the group foundation of Tan Yin Village Sai Opera inheritance.

6. Epilogue

The transmission lineage of the Tan Yin Village Sai Opera is a dynamic process that gradually shifted from being passed down orally within the family to being officially recognized by the state system. The continuation of the skills of the four generations of the Tang family constitutes the historical foundation of this lineage; the intervention of the intangible cultural heritage protection system has added a new level of institutional construction on top of this foundation. The inheritor Tang Xiangping holds the dual identities of a family heir and a national-level representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, which is the personification of this historical transformation. The value of the transmission lineage of Tan Yin Village Sai Opera lies not only in its recording of the trajectory of the transmission of an ancient opera genre, but also in providing a micro-window for observing how tradition continues and transforms within the framework of modern institutions. From Tang Tingshu's "also being a scholar and a businessman" to Tang Xianzhong's "village chief and artist", from Tang Ziyuan's "village head and project team leader" to Tang Xiangping's "national-level inheritor of intangible cultural heritage", the social identities of each generation of inheritors have been changing, but the transmission of the opera skills has never been interrupted. This continuation itself is proof of the vitality of local culture. The evolution trajectory of its inheritance lineage indicates that the contemporary inheritance of ritual-based traditional dramas cannot merely rely on the natural continuation within the family, nor can it be entirely dependent on institutional recognition and support. Instead, it requires seeking a dynamic balance among the three forces of family

inheritance, village society, and national institutions. The protection of rural ritual drama heritage should strengthen rural cultural construction, create a favorable cultural environment, adhere to the "people-oriented" protection path, and scientifically advance in inheritance and innovation, protection and development^[8]. The inheritance lineage of the Tan Yin Village Opera not only records the transmission of skills over four generations of the Tang family, but also witnesses the convergence of folk beliefs, village society and state institutions. Precisely because of this, it holds cultural-historical significance that transcends individual cases.

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