

The Music Vocabulary and Dramatic Implementation of the "Lamplight Spirit" Comment on the National Opera "Praise on Guimei"

Yinjun Lin¹ Jiaya Wei²

¹ School of Music, Yunnan Arts University, Kunming, Yunnan 650500, China

² Yunnan Honghe Prefecture Cultural Center, Honghe, Yunnan 661100, China

ABSTRACT

The national opera "Praise on Guimei" is an original opera created by Yunnan local colleges and universities using Western opera art forms as a carrier and combining local multi-ethnic music elements. The opera is based on the touching story of Zhang Guimei, a model of the times, who founded Huaping County Girls' Senior High School in Lijiang City, Yunnan Province. It revolves around the conflicts in the development of drama and the overall layout of the opera, realizing the intention of writing and praising people in the opera, and promoting the great "lamplight" spirit of the people's teachers. This article will analyze the spiritual connotation and artistic characteristics of the work from three levels: theatrical performance, music creation, and practical significance.

Keywords: National opera, Zhang Guimei, Dramatic properties, Realistic significance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The national opera "Praise on Guimei" created by Lijiang Teachers' College premiered at the Grand Lecture Hall of Lijiang Municipal Party School on December 23, 2021, and was later improved and performed on the stage of the 17th Yunnan New Drama (Festival) Exhibition on October 19, 2023. This is an opera that promotes the main theme and is also an innovative opera created to actively implement the important speeches of General Secretary Xi Jinping at the opening ceremonies of the 11th National Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the 10th National Congress of the China Writers Association in the new era. The opera aims to deeply learn and promote the "Zhang Guimei Spirit". The creation and performance of opera fully showcase the professional competence of Lijiang Normal University. The creation, singing, playing, and performance of the opera are centered around the teachers and students on campus, reflecting Lijiang Normal University's close attention to the theme of the times and active promotion of the cutting-edge awareness of local profound and valuable artistic works.

"Praise on Guimei" adopts the title of national opera. In Dr. Yang Quanhai's thesis "Research on the Artistic Style of Chinese National Opera Singing", the definition of national opera is as follows: Chinese national opera is a musical form that runs through the entire work and plays a leading and driving role, with Chinese national colors and characteristics, to reveal the Chinese national language conveyed on stage, mainly through singing and supplemented by narrative. It is a series of dramatic, contradictory, and emotional forms that occur in the assumed context of "Chinese stories".¹ This is not only the artistic positioning of the creative work, but also the goal of creating a lyrical narrative opera that integrates local ethnic music styles, using music with Chinese ethnic colors and characteristics to interpret Chinese stories. As the first national opera created in Lijiang, "Praise of Guimei" is based on the advanced deeds of Zhang Guimei, a model of the times. It tells a series of stories about Zhang Guimei, the principal of Huaping Girls' High School in Yunnan, who promotes the establishment of a girls' high school and helps girls in the

1. Yang Quanhai, The Study on the Singing Style of Chinese National Opera [D]. Northeast Normal University, 2022.

mountains change their destiny with knowledge. It vividly presents Zhang Guimei's excellent qualities of teaching and educating people, cultivating moral character, leading students to set aspirations, and advocating women's self-esteem, self-reliance, and self-improvement. The successful performance of the work is attributed to the joint efforts and unremitting efforts of the creative team of Lijiang Normal University, including playwright Cai Xiaoling, composer Wang Fei, directors Wang Fei and He Zhanqiang, and Zhang Guimei's lead actor He Jia. Together, they contribute to the presentation of Zhang Guimei's boundless love spirit in opera.

2. THE DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION OF THE "LAMPLIGHTER" OF THE TIMES

As a national opera that praises the advanced deeds of Zhang Guimei, "Praise on Guimei" has demonstrated the feasibility of using opera to tell the story of China in the new era through multiple rounds of performances and its appearance on the stage of Yunnan New Opera (Festival) Exhibition, realizing the "creative transformation" and "innovative development" of modern Chinese literature and art. The prototype character in the opera, Teacher Zhang Guimei, is an outstanding student in the Chinese class of Grade 88 at Lijiang Normal University. In 2008, she promoted the establishment of the first free girls' high school in China and served as its principal. Over the past decade, she has visited more than 1600 households, traveled over 110,000 kilometers, and changed the fate of more than 2000 girls. In 2020, the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China awarded Zhang Guimei the title of "Model of the Times" and was named the "Touching China 2020 Person of the Year". In 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping awarded her a medal and was awarded the "July 1st Medal" by the Party Central Committee. In 2022, she was elected as a representative of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China... As a woman who chose to go into the mountains to help a group of girls change their personal fate and even the fate of the entire family through learning, Zhang Guimei embodies her spiritual connotation and exemplary style precisely because of her selfless dedication and noble sentiment of illuminating others. Lijiang Normal University uses opera to tell its touching story, praising its plum blossom like qualities and promoting its boundless love for teachers and spirit.

The whole drama is divided into four acts in chronological order, selecting the causes, processes, and results of Zhang Guimei's founding of Huaping Girls' High School as the main content, shaping her image as an advanced teacher with tenacity, perseverance, and hard work. The opera "Praise on Guimei" intertwines character dialogues, inner monologues, and dramatic voiceovers to promote narrative and achieve multidimensional dramatic development. The main theme of the opera is the emotional journey of Zhang Guimei, who founded the Women's High School. The main contradiction at this level is concentrated in the conflict between personal ideals and reality. Zhang Guimei's educational journey was full of difficulties and hardships. She officially founded Huaping Girls' High School in 2008, with the aim of providing educational opportunities for girls in mountainous areas and changing the unequal situation of education between men and women. In the first act of the call of the mountains, the reason why Zhang Guimei founded a girls' school is revealed. Teacher Zhang Guimei treks to the mountains to find student Xiaoxia. In the play, Xiaoxia and related characters sing the "Difficult Classic" in a duet, and the lyrics of the song "The Cao family gathered dowry money, there is hope to save my father, and I am willing to marry into a far poor village" interpret the phenomenon of women in mountainous areas having to drop out of school and get married in order to support poor and weak families. Xiaoxia's aria "The Sound of Books" expresses the longing for knowledge in the hearts of girls in mountainous areas, singing the sorrowful feeling of "asking the earth, but cannot convey to me the sound of eloquent reading". Teacher Zhang Guimei was constantly searching in the valley when the tragic news of Xiaoxia's death came, pushing the grief of the drama to a high point. In accordance with the plot, Zhang Guimei's duet with Xiaoxia's father, "Home Visit", sang the heavy blow of the bad news and the unbearable feudal ignorance. She couldn't help but lament the unfortunate fate of the girl from a poor family, and even more so, she sang about Teacher Zhang Guimei's determination to establish a girls' school.

The second act depicts the difficult process of raising funds to establish a girls' school, with controversies, doubts, ridicule, and trampling surging from all directions like a tide, but it did not make Zhang Guimei give up. Any grievances were no match for her wish to establish a campus for the girls in the mountains, and to provide them with a protective umbrella. In the second act, Zhang

Guimei's aria "I Have a Dream" softly and delicately expresses her inner desire as a teacher and mother to protect the fate of the mountain girl. And the soft tone formed a sharp contrast in tone and drama with the bizarre and dissonant melody of the song "Two Yuan" that was later mocked and sung.

The third act of illness focuses the drama on the protagonist's tenacious spiritual qualities. The cruel darkness of reality and physical pain cannot stop her strong wishes, highlighting her noble spirit of "burning a lamp" to contribute to society. This scene mainly uses Zhang Guimei's duet "Living Day by Day" with the doctor and the male lead singer "The Disease Accompanies You" to sing about Zhang Guimei's deteriorating physical condition. However, the following chorus "Good News from the Great Hall" shifts from a low and sad tone to a cheerful and celebratory tone, achieving a new turning point in the drama.

The fourth act of running the school is a further promotion of the overall plot, and the difficulties encountered in running the school are revealed in the conflicts between Zhang Guimei and the teachers and students' duets and duets. The female quartet "Six Points" and the female quartet "Resignation" about student performance, as well as the students' chorus "Fear of Darkness", all demonstrate the difficult situation and numerous challenges of the girls' school. But it was also resolved in a beautiful development. Under the call of the Party, everyone decided to persevere under the call of faith. Zhang Guimei sang "Because of You" with all the teachers, and the increase in enrollment rate, as well as the return of graduating students singing "Teacher's Mom" and "Want to Be You", all confirmed that the female expert Zhang Guimei had successfully supported the academic path of young girls in mountainous areas on the top of the mountains, and achieved her ideals with the strong support of the great motherland and her faith in the Party. Watching the achievements along the way, Zhang Guimei sang with tears in her eyes the never-ending "Hope" in her heart, while everyone sang together the "Faith" that has supported her to this day. Through dramatic conflicts, she portrayed the characters' experiences to highlight their spiritual character and pay tribute to outstanding individuals.

As an opera work that requires collective cooperation, the development logic, rhythm, and pace of the entire "Praise on Guimei" are the result of collective cooperation. The intricate design of

some small characters in the plot, such as the use of local dialects and the interweaving of classic song fragments, provides extended space for music and drama, and also makes the characterization of characters more localized, life oriented, and contemporary. The arrangement of the opera has the authenticity and drama of characters. While adhering to the principle of vocal performance, it also incorporates storytelling to enhance the expressive function of the entire opera, achieving the artistic rules of drama creation. The creation of music, combined with the conflicts and twists of opera, creates emotional ups and downs that move people's hearts.

3. THE MUSICAL EXPRESSION OF "LAMPLIGHT SPIRIT"

As a comprehensive art form, opera is inseparable from drama and music, which is why there is the saying "script is the foundation of opera, and music is the soul of opera".² How to tell the stories of China and Yunnan well depends on the creation of music and the choice of music style. Due to the fact that the plot and character design of the opera "Praise on Guimei" are based in Lijiang, Yunnan, and the specific scene of its drama takes place in Huaping County, Lijiang. In order to make the music of the play realistic, most of the music is written in ethnic tones and references local folk music materials, fitting the regional character images and immersing the audience in it, creating an atmosphere from both visual and auditory perspectives.

The diversified use of choral singing is driving the development of the entire drama. The drama has various forms such as mixed voice choral singing, female voice choral singing, male voice choral singing, lead singer and choir, etc. It not only constructs the emotional tone of the drama together with Zhang Guimei's lyrical singing, but also provides a sound effect with ethnic characteristics for the drama. The most impressive aria of the play is the chorus of the last scene, "People of Women's High School". This is a single trilogy work with reproduction, written in the Chinese music style of six tone scale, achieving the nationalization of the march. The lyrics of "People of Women's High School" come from the oath of Huaping Women's School founded by Zhang Guimei, which is the most expressive phrase of Zhang Guimei's spirit.

2. Ju Qihong, Luo Zhongshu, Exploring Musical Dramatism Based on Authenticity: A Review of the Opera "Lady Yang" [J]. Peoples Music, 2004(07): 13-15.

The music created by the composer based on the meaning of the words powerfully interprets Zhang Guimei's lofty aspirations as a "person of women's high school". This song achieves the integrity of the opera structure and enriches the imagery of the music. The accompaniment of the Western Symphony Orchestra is powerful and uplifting, with alternating male and female voices singing the main theme. The overlapping and coordinated voice levels recite the valuable qualities of Zhang Guimei, including strength, generosity, courtesy, diligence, wisdom, and simplicity. The theme song "I was born into a high mountain, I want to be at the top of the peaks" adopts a horn like tone (sol do) and a melody form of major triad decomposition, creating a dynamic tone and passionate musical language, showcasing Zhang Guimei's heroic spirit despite being a daughter with lofty aspirations and boldness. This choral piece is placed in the fourth act of the opera, which is the climax of the opera's recitation and a summary of Zhang Guimei's emotional journey and character development, praising her spirit and courage as a person of women's high school. In addition to symphonic choral works, composers also create choral works that are integrated with local ethnic music. The unaccompanied duet "Dawn" is a cappella Lisu language choir created based on local Lisu music materials, singing out respect and blessings to elders like Zhang Guimei who are also teachers and mothers, to express gratitude for the bright light shining in her dark mountains. The choral composition of the entire opera tends to be diversified, achieving an organic integration of ethnic music elements and modern composition techniques.

This opera revolves around the personalities, psychology, and individual aspirations of the characters in the play, composing impressive arias. Zhang Guimei's two impressive arias, "I Have a Dream" and "Hope", vividly depict Zhang Guimei's desire to educate girls in the mountains. The girl, mother, and goddess of wisdom in the lyrics are all female identities. These two arias both sing with a feminine tenderness, expressing women's thirst for knowledge to change their destiny. The handling of the arias achieves the portrayal of musical images, character personalities, and psychology, grasping and highlighting the high integration of musicality, singing, lyricism, and drama throughout the play. The aria "I Have a Dream" is performed by Zhang Guimei in the second act of "Dreams". Passersby asked Zhang Guimei, who was standing on the city street to raise funds, if she really wanted to open a

girls' school. Zhang Guimei responded by singing "Let me, those girls who are afraid of the dark, walk out of the mountains" and "I want a clear voice of books, knowledge and strength, and the joy of my country and family". The overall rhythm of the music is balanced and stable, and the overall speed is not fast. The melodic form of the music presents a wave shape, and the rising and falling melodic lines show the feminine tenderness of Zhang Guimei. At the same time, with the lyrics, it radiates her teacher's ethics and maternal brilliance. The singer's penetrating tone and the coherence of singing emotions achieve the unity of the actor and the performer. The accurate expression of singing emotions, combined with physical performance, shapes the character's personality and vividly depicts the character's inner and outer image.

The opera "Praise on Guimei" achieves the unity of dramatic and lyrical elements in the exploration and revelation of characters from the perspective of audio-visual creation. From the perspective of music creation, it uses different singing styles and music colors to promote plot development, symbolize emotions, and shape characters.

4. THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CREATION OF THE NATIONAL OPERA "PRAISE ON GUIMEI"

"Art is created by humans and exists for them. The center of art is the form of human life, and art is the medium through which humans transcend the limitations of life and gain infinity."³ The artistic creation of the opera "Praise on Guimei" reveals the color of Zhang Guimei's life heritage. Through artistic processing, it continuously extends Zhang Guimei's vitality and presents a spiritual value that transcends life. It allows the audience to understand the life heritage of great people from opera art works, and makes the character "Zhang Guimei" deeply rooted in people's hearts in the form of opera. The opera "Praise on Guimei" is named after "National Opera", achieving a Chinese ethnic color in both drama and music creation, and conveying the true story of Chinese model Zhang Guimei through singing as the main narrative method. Whether it is the story characters, audio format, or stage presentation, the creator's intention to integrate Chinese culture and Yunnan regional

3. Wang Yuechuan, *Art Ontology* [M]. China Social Sciences Press, 2005: 111.

culture can be seen, responding to the call for firm cultural confidence advocated by the current modernization development of China, achieving creative transformation and innovative development of literary and artistic creation, which is enough to glimpse the deep thinking and serious pragmatism of the creative team. Compared with other original operas in Yunnan in the past, "Praise on Guimei" has a progressive nature.

The first is the use of ethnic music materials. The story of "Praise on Guimei" takes place in Huaping County, Lijiang, northwest Yunnan. Here, the Miao, Lisu, Han, Naxi, Pumi and other ethnic groups live together, forming a phenomenon of diverse ethnic cultures intertwined and coexisting. In order to deeply restore the historical landscape and create a regional atmosphere, cultural elements of local ethnic minorities have been incorporated into the creation of music and images, such as using ethnic music materials, folk dialect phrases, wearing ethnic minority costumes, etc., emphasizing the integrity of opera narrative, rather than simply transplanting or copying the form of Western opera, and combining it with traditional Chinese culture and art. The second is the combination of singing and acting by opera performers. The casting in "Praise on Guimei" is more in line with the real characters in the story, especially He Jia, who plays Zhang Guimei. With her solid singing skills and emotional experience, she portrays different images of Zhang Guimei, such as sadness, joy, and excitement, reflecting the overall improvement of artistic literacy of contemporary Yunnan opera actors. The third is the common aesthetic pursuit of composition, scriptwriting, and performance. Only when the composer, scriptwriter, and performer of an opera work together to achieve an ideal comprehensive state, can the emotions of music and drama be highly integrated. The music in "Praise on Guimei" is created in conjunction with the progress of drama, with grand and symphonic music complementing the climax of dramatic emotions, and lyrical music accompanying the contraction of drama. The interweaving and conflict between drama and music runs through the entire process.

This opera also has its imperfections, which can provide corresponding reflections for future generations to create. Firstly, there is a lack of attention to detail in music. A good opera should have a high degree of integration between music and drama, with dramatic conflicts and movements being handled by music. This helps to further clarify the specific procedures and content of the

high integration between drama and music.⁴ However, the music composition in "Praise on Guimei" focuses more on the expression of grand dramatic scenes, lacking detailed transitions and commitments in the connection of scenes and character movements; Secondly, music creators pay more attention to the depiction of the musical image of the protagonist Zhang Guimei, lacking the depiction of the identity of secondary characters or group images, which makes the audience's impression of secondary characters not deep and unclear. Composers should consider the main and secondary lines of dramatic conflicts, as well as the main task personality and secondary character personality, so that opera can achieve a progressive artistic style.

5. CONCLUSION

The national opera "Praise on Guimei" created and performed by Lijiang Normal University is a tribute to outstanding alumnus Zhang Guimei; It is the combination of artistic aesthetic literacy and humanistic spirit; It is also a humanistic concern for social role models. This work, which is rich in spiritual connotation and artistic cultivation, can help the public find a strong spiritual resonance. This resonance is not only related to the times, but also closely related to every individual living in the social environment. As one of the important carriers of cultural dissemination, it adds new strength to Yunnan opera. Opera combines music and drama to express people's maintenance and pursuit of fate, which is a high embodiment of human spiritual civilization. At the same time, it can be seen as another form of "Zhang Guimei documentary", which not only shoulders the significance of historical records, but also carries the real living conditions, spiritual needs, and ideological emotions of the people, reflecting the rich spiritual connotation of opera creation. The creation of "Praise on Guimei" reflects Yunnan's opera creation efforts to constantly break through the inherent mode of imitating Western opera creation, and incorporate the essence of Chinese culture, regional culture, and ethnic culture. This play has progressive significance for how ethnic opera can inherit Yunnan culture, tell the story of Yunnan well, and achieve cross-border integration of Chinese and Western art.

4. Sheng Mei, On the academic hotspot and development space of Chinese National Opera Research [J]. *Journal of Modern Chinese Literature*, 2022(04): 78-83.

Zhang Guimei won the award of "Moving Chinese People". In her speech, she wrote, "Destiny puts you on the precipice, and you give the world fragrance." This is also a true reflection of Zhang Guimei's life creed. No matter how many difficulties and obstacles she encounters, as long as she holds the highest faith and hope in her heart, she will be able to overcome all difficulties and even the limits of life. The spiritual qualities she embodies are exactly what Lijiang Normal University wants to convey through the national opera "Praise on Guimei".

REFERENCES

- [1] Yang Quanhai, The Study on the Singing Style of Chinese National Opera [D]. Northeast Normal University, 2022.
- [2] Ju Qihong, Luo Zhongshu, Exploring Musical Dramatism Based on Authenticity: A Review of the Opera "Lady Yang" [J]. Peoples Music, 2004(07): 13-15.
- [3] Wang Yuechuan, Art Ontology [M]. China Social Sciences Press, 2005: 111.
- [4] Sheng Mei, On the academic hotspot and development space of Chinese National Opera Research [J]. Journal of Modern Chinese Literature, 2022(04): 78-83.