

On the Regional Characteristics of Jin Opera Performance and the Evolution of Opera Scripts: A Study of Beating the Princess

Shutong Di

*College of Arts, Qilu Institute of Technology, Qufu, China
dst18536168566@outlook.com*

Abstract. This paper takes the classic Jin Opera piece Beating the Princess as an example to analyze the characteristics of Jin Opera performance and its influence on later generations. The study begins with an overview of the historical origins and artistic features of Jin Opera, followed by a detailed analysis of the plot and performance methods of Beating the Princess. It focuses on the language and expressive techniques involved in Jin Opera's performance characteristics. By examining the performance conventions of representative arias in Beating the Princess, the unique charm of Jin Opera's singing style is revealed, showcasing its aesthetic qualities of passionate vigor coupled with delicate subtlety. The research finds that Jin Opera's vocal music possesses distinct regional characteristics and rich expressive power, with its unique musical language and singing techniques making significant contributions to the development of opera art. This study aims to preserve and promote the art of Jin Opera.

Keywords: Jin Opera, regional dialect, Beating the Princess, influence on later generations, opera art

1. Introduction

Jin Opera, as one of the important traditional opera genres in northern China, has a long history and profound cultural heritage. Its performance characteristics, with their unique artistic charm, stand out prominently in the garden of Chinese opera, making it a significant subject for the study of traditional Chinese music culture. Beating the Princess is one of the representative works of Jin Opera, also known as A Bedful of Ivory Tablets. The plot revolves around the family conflict between Princess Shengping, the daughter of Emperor Daizong of Tang, and her husband, Guo Ai. The princess's absence from Guo Ziyi's birthday banquet triggers a conflict, leading Guo Ai to beat the princess in anger. Emperor Daizong resolves the dispute by prioritizing harmony between the ruler and his subjects, highlighting filial piety and family ethics. The play handles the court conflict with a commoner approach and has been praised as "the pearl on the crown of Jin Opera."

As a representative work of Jin Opera, Beating the Princess provides a valuable subject for research due to its unique performance form and musical artistry. To further reveal the artistic characteristics of Jin Opera in music and performance, this paper will focus on the performance system and musical features of the play. The study will conduct a detailed analysis of representative

arias in *Beating the Princess* and explore the characteristics of Jin Opera's performance system and idea.

2. Overview of Jin Opera art

Jin Opera is one of China's traditional operas, also known as Shanxi Bangzi or Zhonglu Bangzi. It is a highly representative regional opera form in Shanxi Province. Originating in central Shanxi, it is widely popular in central and northern Shanxi, as well as parts of Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia, and Hebei. It is one of the four major Bangzi opera genres in Shanxi and was listed in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage on May 20, 2006 [1].

3. Plot summary and historical origins of *Beating the Princess*

Beating the Princess is a classic work in the traditional repertoire of Jin Opera. Its story prototype is derived from historical events of the Tang Dynasty. Historical records such as *Zizhi Tongjian* and *Old Book of Tang* document the marriage between Princess Shengping and Guo Ai during the reign of Emperor Daizong of Tang and related conflicts. This royal household event provides the core skeleton of the plot. The play features six main characters: Emperor Daizong, Empress Shen, Guo Ziyi, Madame Guo, Guo Ai, and the princess [2].

The story primarily recounts how, during the birthday celebration of Guo Ziyi, the Prince of Fenyang, all sons-in-law came to pay their respects except for Princess Shengping, who arrogantly refused to attend. Guo Ai returned to the palace in anger and beat the princess, triggering a Court turmoil. Later, Guo Ziyi bound his son and went to the court to ask for punishment. Emperor Daizong, showing wisdom and consideration for the bigger picture, not only did not punish Guo Ai but instead promoted him and reconciled the young couple. The folk saying widely circulated in Shanxi, "Never-ending golden branches, never-counted grain," vividly describes the importance of *Beating the Princess* in the traditional repertoire of Jin Opera.

The reason why *Beating the Princess* has been passed down to this day and is deeply loved by the people is that the traditional culture it contains aligns with the spiritual needs of people across eras [3]. The Jin Opera version of *Beating the Princess* achieves a high level of excellence in plot setting, character development, and artistic expression, making it a classic frequently performed on the Jin Opera stage. The success of the play lies not only in its captivating storyline but also in its profound ideological connotations and exquisite artistic expression. The play uses a "Interpreting elegance through Vulgarity" approach to transform court conflicts into popularization family disputes, showcasing the ethical concepts of harmony between ruler and subjects and family harmony, which align with the mainstream values of the feudal era. Although the play depicts how Emperor Daizong prioritized state affairs to properly resolve the dispute between the princess and her husband, thereby strengthening unity between ruler and subjects, a closer look reveals that it consistently adopts a Folk perspective, staying close to daily life and handling palace conflicts in a folk transformation manner, giving the play strong artistic appeal [4].

The values promoted in the play, such as respecting elders, mutual understanding between husband and wife, and family harmony, align with contemporary society's emphasis on family harmony. The mutual understanding between ruler and subjects and the balance of power and responsibility can also be extended to mutual understanding and pardon between different groups and social strata in contemporary society, conveying the wisdom of resolving conflicts through rational communication. Although the background is set in the feudal era, the idea and humanistic spirit contained in the play still resonate with audiences today. For example, in the *Advising the*

Palace segment, the empress, following the emperor's decree, advises the couple with both reason and emotion, pointing out the princess's fault in not attending the birthday celebration while also understanding the husband's feelings. She advises the couple to maintain marital harmony, showcasing the empress's love and wisdom. This reflects the humanistic ideology of mutual affection and consideration between ruler and subjects conveyed by *Beating the Princess*.

4. Application of Jin Opera's regional dialect characteristics in *Beating the Princess*

As a representative of Shanxi local opera, Jin Opera extensively uses Shanxi local dialect in its lyrics and dialogue, forming a unique linguistic style and artistic charm. This dialect characteristic not only enhances the regional identity of the opera genre but also injects vivid vitality into its performances.

The language of Jin Opera is based on the Taiyuan dialect, incorporating features from various counties and cities in the Jinzhong region. In terms of phonetics, the most notable feature is the retention of the entering tone, such as "bu" read as "no" and "shuo" read as "say." The Jin dialect retains all four tones. The four tones, namely four types of pitch contours, were classified in ancient Chinese as level, rising, departing, and entering, also known as "tone categories." During the Yuan Dynasty, tone categories were refined based on the voicing of initial consonants, resulting in eight categories: dark level, light level, dark rising, light rising, dark departing, light departing, dark entering, and light entering [5]. The abundant use of rhotacization, such as "zheer" (here) and "naer" (there), is also prominent. These phonetic characteristics are particularly evident in *Beating the Princess*. For example, in the aria of Guo Ai, the word "no" in the line "You say the royal daughter does not respect her in-laws" is pronounced with the typical Jin dialect entering tone, enhancing the rhythm and expressiveness of the language.

Jin Opera extensively uses vocabulary unique to the Shanxi dialect, which often exhibits the following characteristics:

Retention of ancient words, such as "yelai" (yesterday) and "nianshi" (last year).

Unique forms of address: such as "poyi" (wife) and "han" (man). In *Beating the Princess*, Princess Shengping refers to Guo Ai as "guojiahan" (Guo family man), while Guo Ai refers to the princess as "poyi." These dialect-based forms of address both suit the characters' identities and add a touch of daily life. Emperor Daizong's use of "wawa" (child) in the line "The children don't understand things" is also typical Jin dialect vocabulary.

In the empress's aria: Recalling An Lushan's rebellion, intent on seizing the emperor's splendid realm, thanks to Li Taibai, who brought Guo Ziyi, we managed to behead the traitor An Lushan, quell the An-Shi rebellion, and secure the Tang Dynasty's foundation. The old prince protected the realm. Words like "banlai" (brought) are relatively colloquial expressions with Shanxi dialect characteristics.

The grammatical structure of Jin Opera's language also reflects the characteristics of the Jin dialect:

Special word order: "fanchila" (chiguofanle).

Reduplication: "kankan" (take a look), "shuoshuo" (have a talk).

Unique complements: "chishang" (eat up), "nashang" (take up).

Negative forms: "bula" (don't).

These grammatical features are ubiquitous in the dialogue of *Beating the Princess*. For example, Guo Ai's lines like "You tell us" and "This matter can't just be left like this" adopt typical Jin dialect grammatical structures, making the characters' language more vivid and natural. The summarizing line: "Scolding the daughter and advising the son-in-law, every household in the world is the same."

The word shushuo" means to scold or advise, and when spoken in dialect, it emphasizes that such conflicts between couples are common in daily life, possessing universality.

The Jin Opera dialect is an important artistic feature and cultural gene of this opera genre. Beating the Princess, as a classic play, provides valuable experience with its successful use of dialect. In the contemporary context, we must both cherish this linguistic heritage and explore paths for its innovative development, allowing the Jin Opera dialect to continue to thrive under new historical conditions.

5. The evolution of the script and performance procedures of "beating the golden branch"

5.1. Evolution of the script

The first version is the old Puzhou Clapper Opera Man Chuang Hu (Full Bed of Hu Tablets). The earliest Clapper Opera adapted from the Qing Dynasty legend Man Chuang Hu, either as Man Chuang Hu or Beating the Princess, was likely performed by Puzhou Clapper Opera or Tongzhou Clapper Opera. The old Puzhou Clapper version of Man Chuang Hu is corroborated by a stage inscription stating, "Performed by Puzhou Yunsheng Troupe at Jiulongtou in Hejin in the 8th year of the Tongzhi Reign (1870) of the Qing Dynasty." The script consists of two parts: "Beating the Princess" and "Resisting Foreign Enemies," with the former's plot basically identical to the current performance version. Next is the old Zhonglu Clapper Opera Man Chuang Hu, an early script of Jin Opera's Beating the Princess. It shares the same plot as the Puzhou Clapper version but features richer lyrics. The full play has nine scenes, including birthday worship, palace beating, palace complaint, son-binding, palace persuasion, and four martial arts scenes of quelling rebellions. Later, the martial arts segments were gradually omitted, the "birthday worship" scene was often cut, and "Palace Quarrel" and "Palace Persuasion" were frequently performed as standalone acts.

The 1952 Beijing Performance Version of Beating the Princess was the Jin Opera script performed by the Shanxi delegation at the First National Opera Observation and Performance Conference. Scenes included Palace Beating, Palace Quarrel, Son-Binding, and Palace Persuasion. The princess was renamed Tang Junrui, with "Ancestor Worship," "Birthday Worship," and martial arts scenes deleted, retaining the essence for a brisk rhythm that was widely praised. Beating the Golden Branch: Disrupting the Palace" ingeniously employs multiple traditional Chinese opera tunes. These diverse and rhythmic musical melodies are interspersed throughout the performance, creating an environment and atmosphere closely related to the plot's progression and the characters' states. At the same time, it immerses the audience's body and mind in that special royal household event [6]. This version maintained the traditional framework while adjusting details, such as moving the on-stage costume change of Emperor Tang and Guo Ai to off-stage.

The 1955 film script of Beating the Princess, produced by Changchun Film Studio as an opera art film, was refined by dramatists organized by the Shanxi Provincial Cultural Bureau. Adapted from the 1952 conference script, it included scenes like "Playing Chess" and "Palace Beating," adjusting plots and repetitive arias for smoother storytelling, sharper characterizations, and polished lyrics. After the Cultural Revolution, the Shanxi Provincial Jin Opera Troupe rehearsed and performed an enriched version of the 1950s scripts, omitting only the ancestor-worship segment in "Birthday Worship" while retaining other content and scenes from the Li Beichen version, widely adopted by troupes in North China. The 1984 "Comprehensive Reform" adaptation saw the Shanxi Provincial Jin Opera Troupe innovate the script, performance, music, and stage design. While maintaining the overall framework, the final "Palace Persuasion" was changed to "Dual Persuasion" by the Empress and Lady Guo (recast from laodan to qingyi), with lyrics revised into multi-rhyme new verses, a

group dance added, and symphonic orchestra accompaniment—but it failed to gain traction. After a century of performances and refinements, Jin Opera's *Beating the Princess* has become a masterpiece, still widely sung today for its festive harmony, gorgeous freshness, and universal appeal [7]. The continuous evolution of its script has expanded its status and influence in Jin Opera.

5.2. Performance formulas of *Beating the Princess*

Beating the Princess fully employs Jin Opera's traditional performance techniques. For example, Guo Ai (the son-in-law) uses "hair flicking" and "sleeve shaking" to vividly convey anger, while Princess Shengping's "water sleeve skills" and "stage walking" delicately depict her arrogance. Stylized performances like "pose striking" and "sidewalking" enhance stage effects. Emperor Daizong and the Empress enter with "imperial steps"—steady, solemn paces with expansive gestures—embodying royal majesty. Princess Shengping's demeanor exudes petulance, with brisk steps, proud glances, and gestures reflecting her nobility. Guo Ai's performance balances youthful vigor with military resolve: drunk and enraged, his exaggerated movements (sleeve-flinging, foot-stamping) intensify anger; when Guo Ziyi brings his bound son to the palace, heavy gait and bowed posture highlight the old minister's reverence.

In character portrayal, *Beating the Princess* exemplifies Jin Opera's role-category art. Guo Ai (played by Xusheng, bearded male) acts with vigour; Princess Shengping (portrayed by Qingyi, young female) balances singing and acting; Emperor Daizong (played by Laosheng, elderly male) blends dignity with kindness. Diverse role characteristics are fully expressed, creating vivid figures. Key scenes use stylized elements: during Guo Ai and the princess's dispute, "antiphonal singing" and "eye contact"—paired with clapper rhythms—heighten tension. In "Palace Persuasion," the Empress combines gentle gestures, amiable singing, and lifelike movements (sleeve-flicking, shoulder-patting) to show patient mediation, infusing emotion into formalized formulas. Rituals like birthday worship and palace audiences strictly follow traditional opera etiquette—e.g., the Guo family's "three bows and nine kowtows" during worship, or the princess's defiant turn and raised head when refusing to bow—aligning with feudal norms while reflecting character through gestural contrasts.

6. Influence and enlightenment of *Beating the Princess* on Jin Opera's development

As a Jin Opera masterpiece, *Beating the Princess* has profoundly influenced the genre's development. Its artistic achievements perfected Jin Opera's performance system, with many formulas and vocal designs widely adopted. Performance needs for roles (emperors, empresses, sons-in-law, princesses) drove finer norms in body movements and singing—e.g., the Empress's gentle "Palace Persuasion" vocals or Guo Ai's impassioned acting—enriching templates for later actors. The play's accessible plot and ethical resonance made it a staple for Jin Opera troupes, expanding its audience and serving as a "living calling card." It also launched masters like Ding Guoxian and Niu Guiying, providing a platform for skill-honing and becoming a vital inheritance carrier for talent cultivation.

Enlightenment from *Beating the Princess* includes: First, staying rooted in life. By focusing on royal family conflicts and integrating grand history with ordinary emotions (marital strife, family ethics), it proves operas reflecting human nature can transcend eras. Second, continuous innovation to meet modern aesthetics. Its enduring popularity stems from balancing traditional essence with contemporary techniques, offering critical lessons for Jin Opera's inheritance. Third, integrating character shaping with artistic features: distinct roles (wise Emperor Daizong, arrogant Princess

Shengping) combined with Jin Opera's singing and movements form a unique charm, indicating the need to "establish identity through characters." Finally, classic works as inheritance cores: Beating the Princess's century-long popularity shows classics are cultural memory pillars. Jin Opera's inheritance requires collating, reviving, and innovating classic plays to rejuvenate traditions [8]. Since its 1952 national acclaim, Beating the Princess has been transplanted by numerous local operas. As Lü Zuowen noted, widespread use of slide subtitles could aid audience comprehension and expand viewership, revitalizing Jin Opera for modern cultural construction [9]. The "Plum Blossom Edition" performance also inspires contemporary opera creation and education, indicating that other Jin Opera works will follow its path to global influence [10].

7. Conclusion

Analysis of Jin Opera's Beating the Princess reveals its unique charm in vocal music, performance formulas, and character shaping, embodying Jin Opera's aesthetic of "generous passion with delicate euphemism" as a model of traditional-modern aesthetic integration. Jin Opera dialect, a vital artistic feature, offers valuable experience from Beating the Princess' successful use. In the contemporary context, we must cherish this linguistic heritage while exploring innovative development to sustain its vitality.

Facing modern opera challenges, Jin Opera must uphold "integrity while innovating": deepening traditional play excavation and exploring modern aesthetics. Beating the Princess' success not only highlights Jin Opera's glory but reveals the law that traditional opera thrives by rooting in life, maturing through art, and enduring as classics—precious experience for Jin Opera and other local operas' inheritance and innovation.

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