Performance and the Transformation of the Social Culture

—A Study of the Version Transformation of *Tie Guantu* (铁冠图)*

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Approach from the method of the New History study, based on case study, this paper will focus on the different version of an opera play in the late Ming and Qing Dynasty, and trace the changing process from the *Tie Guantu* to *Mingmo Yihen*, to examine the emergence of the culture hierarchy in the early century China. Furthermore, this paper tries to combine the history of performance into a broad definition of culture history, try to correct the previous history research framework which ignores the performance.

KeyWords: performance, culture hierarchy, microscope history

Tie Guantu (*The Iron Crown Picture*) was a popular Current-Event Opera appeared in folk word in the end of Ming Dynasty, which was adapted into a famous Wenming Xi (Civilized Play) to propagandize nationalism in the end of Qing Dynasty Shanghai. Approach form the Microscope, combined with the case study and empirical study, this paper tries to examine the emergence of the culture hierarchy in this transformation process. Moreover, due to the influence of elite history and linear evolutionary history, the study of opera has been ignored in the academic field of history for a long time, which is dominated by a structure focusing on political history, economic history and ideological history. In practically, opera plays an extremely important role in everyday life of the ordinary people in traditional society. In the process of turning from the rural to urban performance, how the opera being modernized, how the spirit life has been changed in these process? It's no doubt that we have open a window to those issues when we survey history from the perspective of performance.

In the lives of ordinary people of the pre-modern China, they would perform to celebrate the harvest, to worship the Birthday of fairy in festival. But those performance, just as M.M Baxtnh (1998) pointed out, "It is not only an acting style, in common sense, it can't be included into the art's domain. It lies in the intersection of life and arts. In fact, this is live itself, but it has been given a special kind of amusement style" (p. 8). The significance of folk theater is that it kept some characters of Carnival, and releases all hierarchical boundaries. In the performance with the carnival characteristic, the freedom of contact between people overarching everything, the

* **Acknowledgements:** This paper is support by Women's Human Resources Development & Management Research Base, Shandong Women's University, P.R.China, 250300.

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barriers and boundaries among class, property, family and gender blurred. However, in the process of modernization, the culture hierarchy and hegemony came into emergence. Beginning with the opera improvement movement in the late Qing dynasty, opera was improved into a high status as a tool to educate people, though it was looked down on in the traditional society. When the reformists tried to refine “National Opera”, meanwhile, a large number of folk art was neglected. The gap between elite culture and folk culture is sharper and sharper. We will examine this process by the transformation from *Tie Guantu* to *Mingmo Yihen*.

The Folk Performance and the Dissemination of *Tie Guantu*

The performance, especially, religious drama plays an important role in the coming into being of folk culture. At least from the South Song Dynasty, acting activities appeared in some villages in the ritual, taking the temple as the center, acting becomes a part of the sacrifice in rural areas. This new development has a significant impact on folk religion and culture of Ming and Qing Dynasty, after then the acting become an integral part of folk religious activities.

The first is the festival celebrations. There will have acting activities in Lantern Festival, such as Lunar month February 2th, March 3th, and Tomb Sweeping Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, the Winter Solstice and so on. For example in the Qing Dynasty, “On the birthday of the Spirit, every temple is willing to play opera more than a month, no exception” (WANG, 2013, p. 258). Besides folk festivals, there will be performance on the birthday of local Spirits, “Every year 9th January on lunar calendar, the light and candle is brilliant, through night as bright as daytime. A stag is built in front of the (YueDi) Temple to play opera more than ten days. Women come here to pray, and the audience is blocking” (ZHOU, 1962, p. 157).

Although initially the folk acted as ceremony, but gradually become an integral part of people’s daily lives. The great Geographer Xu Xiake described the flourish of the opera play in the western Guangdong province in his dairy, “Arriving at the back door of the Wang city, there was acting opera, the audience hold the gate so crowded that could not get in” (XU. 1998, p. 228). A historical records shows that a fire accident was caused by the crowd of the audience, “In the 20th April of Qing dynasty Daoguang Emperor, people built a stage to play opera in front of the official office in Guangzhou, the place was very narrow and too much seats were set. When the people burnt wood to boil water, the left fire turned bigger and bigger, more than one hundred and forty thousand people was killed in this accident” (YING, 2011, pp. 101-102). An county chronicle records that, there was a dutiful son who “takes his father to watch play everyday afternoon and back evening, forty years with delay” (ZHENG, 2001, p. 86). Playing opera became popular all over the country in Ming and Qing dynasty. And acting repertoires include deities and immortality, ghosts and magic, heaven and hell, and even folklore, historical stories, and the people’s daily life, all these can be adapted into playing. Therefore, religious, historical and cultural ideas and virtue, and thus penetrate into the minds of the Chinese people.

Before the years of Shunzhi Emperor, the court’s attitude to folk performance was not so strict. In the fourteenth year of Shunzhi (1657), cheating in the imperial examination occurred in the southern China. Due to the spread of the play, this accident was widespread, triggering the vigilance of the court. Meanwhile, the theater has a potential function to subvert the social order, the government also terrified this. Started from the reign of Emperor Kangxi, folk drama activities were strictly prohibited, but could not really banned them. In the reign of Emperor Qianlong, an extremely big disputation was happened between villages and officials caused by the ban

of the acting. “(The twenty-third year of Qianlong Emperor, an official named Zhang Binzuo was beaten by the villagers because of battering acting, who tried to ban the play” (ZHAO, 1977, p. 1585). In the reign of Daoguang Emperor, the court theater performance revived. According to the historical record, “In the time of Daoguang, the emperor Xuan’s mother still survived. In his mother’s birthday, the emperor will play to entertain her” (ZHANG, 2007, p. 21). During the time of reign of Emperor of Tongzhi, “Emperor Mu loved acting but was not good at it, therefore, he always played some unimportant role... one of the imperial concubine played a role called Sansao Lee, and the emperor played the kitchen god emperor, wearing black robes, handed playing allegro, accompanying for Li Sansao to amuse themselves” (ZHANG, 2007, p. 21). Play opera was so popular that the emperor and his concubine to sing and act, so frequently that “the palace will play opera in the first and middle day every month” (YU, 1913, p. 174). From then, we can see the prevalent of the theater in the Qing Dynasty court.

Tie Guantu was probably written in the reign of Shunzhi. Judging from the name, we can see this play has the meaning of Karma and destiny cycle. This name is derived from a legend about an “iron crown Taoist”. It is said that in the time of Tai Emperor of Ming, there was a man named Zhang zhong, who always failed in the imperial examination. Then, he met a Spirit, who taught him Taiji and mathematics, after that, he could foretell things. He used to wearing an iron crown, so was called Sir Iron Crown. Then he was recommended by Deng Yu to Emperor Ming Taizu, and said, “Since you can prophet, just tell the future of our country frankly.” The Taoist “recited the dozens of words, all those turned into reality, and what he said was written into a play named *Tie Guantu*” (Zhai, 2013, p. 719). This play described the event in the late Ming dynasty, especially portrayed a national hero Li Guozheng, who was very loyal and died for Ming Dynasty.

Regardless of the play’s original intention, from the perspective of the reception theory, we can see that new meaning different from the author’s will be represented in the process of the dissemination of the text. *Tie Guantu* is quite popular in the transformation time of Ming and Qing Dynasty, being acted throughout the city and countryside. It is said that when this play was showed in Huang village of Dongguan city in Guangdong province in the early year of Shunzhi Emperor, some county gentries there felt guilty for the former Ming Emperor and sleepless whole night after they came back. For the intelligentsia, the *Tie Guantu* can arouse their subjugation grief, then, how the ordinary people’s feeling like when they watched the play? Professor Wu Renshu once tried to survey the mentality of the public by examining two Current Event Drama “Liang Xumei” and “Wanliyuan”, he points out, “The people living in the south of Yangzi River dislike the local official and military officer, and they hate the local officials in the early Qing Dynasty” (WU, 1999, pp. 1-48). To the Qing regime and the shaving hair order issued, they do not resist that because they are alien. They got more resentment because the oppression of the local officials. Obviously, it is different between the ideology of the ordinary people and the scholar’s.

The *Tie Guantu*, like the previous two plays, also reflects the people’s hate to the corrupt officials. Especially they show distinct emotions to the “loyalists” and “traitor”. They sang high praise for Gongzhen Lee, who insisted on fighting the enemy and martyred for his country. On the contrary, the relatives of the emperor Kui Zhou made use of the nation’s calamity as a chance to accumulate wealth, they hated him to the bone. In the *Tie Guantu*, the rebels was always called “bandits”, showing that people have no good impression on the rebels, but feel pain about the loss and unsteady caused by the uprising.

In the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of Republic, the reformists launched a drama improvement to refine the people. Drama was lifted from level of the subculture in traditional society to the status of educating people. *Tie Guantu* was rediscovered and transferred into a popular melodrama *Lingering Regret at the End of the Ming* (*Mingmo Yihen*). This play is a repertory in New Stage in Shanghai, become a powerful tool to propaganda and enlighten people, and promote the emergence of nationalism.

***Mingmo Yihen* (明末遗恨) and the Construction of the Nationalism**

According to the theater advertising of the Shen-Nespaper, *Mingmo Yihen* was performed as early as 1909, there were show advertisements till to 1940s. Surveying the performance advertising in Shen-Nespaper from 1915 to 1917, the statistics proved that *Mingmo Yihen* had been showed eleven times in 1915. And the whole play of *Mingmo Yihen* need several days to play up, we can see that play was shown quite frequently and very popular at that time. The change of the title hinted that the play would discard the causal destiny, and present the pain of subjugation. So, what is the specific difference between them? As far as we can tell from surviving material, a piece of the script can be found in the newspaper, such as a period libretto of Liu Yizhou, a famous actor at that time.

No wonder that the king's country is unstable, only to hear crying along the way.

Neither is that Lee Chuang's troops are too hard, nor is the civil and military refused to loyalist.

This is too much sin in the imperial family, so it planted the seeds of subjugation.¹

Liu Yizhou is an actor of the New Stage, this script was wrote by him and published in Shen- newspaper in 1924. The 1909 version might be wrote by Boxin Yao, who was an important person in Shanghai Autonomy Movement. A theater review mentioned that, "Mingmo Yihen, namely *Tieguan Tu*, once performed only in Kun opera, and was adapted into Jing opera by Yao Boxin to help promote revolutionary."² The whole *Mingmo Yihen* we can see today was published in Picture Daily from 1909 to 1910. There are together forty-three acts.³ Meanwhile, the new drama, such as *New Camellia*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Polish Subjugation Miserable* were published together. All these dramas were the repertories of the New Stage. Obviously, these plays formed intertextuality, using the subjugation and genocide tragedy of other to wake people's patriotism.

There are more than ten acts in the Qing Dynasty edition of the *Tie Guantu* Such as "Defense the Gate" "Kill traitors", "Say goodbye to the mother", "Arrows" "Borrowing Money" "Kill Tiger" "Ask Map" "Watch map", "Barracks" "Night Music" "Cried the Temple" (WANG, 1930). There are forty-three more acts than the Qing edition in the "Picture Daily", and some content was abolished. For example, in the Qing Dynasty edition, there are "Asking map" and "Watching Map", but having no these in Picture Daily. In the act of Asking Map, a Taoist priest came out singing: "The heaven operates a circulation, just as moon has crescents and loop... Since Hongwu Emperor, two hundred and seventy years passed, the destiny so, when will be tested by *Tie Guantu*" (WANG,

¹ "Liu Yi Zhou New-made four drama records," "Shen-newspaper" local news 3, January 24, 1924, the fifth page, the eighteenth edition.

² Bianbian: "The script • *Lingering Regret at the End of the Ming*," "Shen-newspaper • Drama Review", May 1, 1913, the tenth edition.

³ "Picture Daily", "world drama" Column: "Mingmo Yihen", April 29-6 20, 1910, No. 247 to No. 299.

1930, p. 198). In the acts of *Watching Map* the Taoist sang out: "My master left this drawing and told to protect it. For more than two hundred and seventy years, nobody have opened it. Now, the fate of Ming dynasty will end, this picture would also appear" (WANG, 1930, p. 198). *Picture Daily* abandoned those two plays, and highlighted the acts such as "Cried Temple" and "Kill Tiger" to render the grudge and encourage people's patriotism.

The famous perform team of The New Stage is also reasons of the flourish of *Mingmo Yihen*. Pan Yueqiao acts Emperor Chongzhen, Xia Yurun acts Li Guozhen, Seven Lights (Mao Yunke) acts Concubine Fei, Tuberose acts Empress Zhou, and Yueshan Xia acts Kui Zhou. They acted vividly about the subjugation of the monarch's sadness, loyal dead section, traitor evil country, and the Concubine's patriotic. Each performance will stretch the audience's emotion, "All audience were silent," and "tears drop down".⁴ A "Play Investigation" sang high proud of it: "This drama is the most concentrating and impressive one, first rehearsal two years ago and I went to watch. I reminded that a Mr. Yang made a poet at the present, 'Can sell one's country let alone friends, cannot donate the gold not mention devoting one's life'.⁵ Demonstrating that people was moved and full of grief, and was very famous at the moment." At that time, Due to the late Qing government's secret diplomacy and the undeveloped communication, the public was unaware of the interior and external general situation. The dramas were handed down in the form of spoken-language, to expose the ills of society, played an important role to enlighten the people of the lower class and promote the emergence of the modern nationalism.

This play was very popular among the people, and therefore we can see the different mentality between the substratum and elitism. As we mentioned earlier, *Tie Guantu* reflects that people mostly hated the social unrest made by the bandits, and the corrupt officials who fished people. There is less racial isolation and prejudice. The situation is also similar in the late Qing Shanghai. Because of The Sword Society Uprising and Taiping Movement, lots of people moved into the surrounding settlements to avoid of battle, resulting in the doubled population of the concession. The mentality of the people at the late Qing Dynasty and end of Ming Dynasty has the continuity. Gramsci was talking about the spread of religious consciousness, he pointed out that in reality, many factors affect the spread will vary according to the level of social groups and cultures of these different social groups and Calvary (Gramsci, 2000, p. 250). That is, to the elite, nationalism was produced as a kind of "pure" knowledge, however, the spread of this concept in the private sector, not in such a form, which requires a combination with the daily life. "The mass themselves can only take philosophy as a religion to experience" (Gramsci, 2000, p. 250). If the elite reformers cannot realize this, their mentality and the lower classes' is extremely fractured. Just as Terry Eagleton pointed out "Culture is always dissatisfied with those 'who construct systems, faction of school, forcing people to religion' ... doctrines must give way to poetry, literature must get rid of dogma" (Eagleton, 1999, pp. 8-9).

The Reformists and revolutionary nationalism, initially all carrying a color of racism. Just as Qichao Liang said: "In the past centuries, people raised to resist and refused to live under the ruler of other nation, it is because of the nationalism in their mind" (LIANG, 1999, p. 459). The Revolutionaries distinctly raised the flag of anti-Manchu, for example Chen Tianhua said in *Meng Huitou (The Tide)*, "This world is divided into five

⁴ Advertisement, "Shen-newspaper" May 13, 1935, supplement of the local.

⁵ Athletes of Wuxia: *Lingering Regret at the End of the Ming* "Shen-newspaper • play test", November 13, 1911", Declaration the second page, third edition.

continents and China is the top in Asia. The mainland has eighteen provinces. The Northeast was once ruled by the former Jin, and now Manchuria. The Manchuria stole our country in the chaos of the late Ming, change the name into the Qing Empire” (CHEN, 2008, p. 19). In the *Jingshi Zhong* more is exhaled, “Long live China, long live Han race” (CHEN, 2008, p. 87). “Zou Rong’s also said in *Geming Jun*,” China is the Chinese people’s China, our compatriots are required to think of our own Han Blood, and does not allow dissimilar people encroach on our Chinese right” (LIU, 2015, p. 971). When the elites tried to improve the folk culture with their own ideological standards, they often repressed the folk sounds, which are not always in a written language and often based on oral language. And the theatrical performance is one of the most important forms. When Duara discussing the Chinese nationalism problems, he pointed out: “Only emphasizes the print capitalism promotes the common destiny of the imagination, and synchronization, to ignore the complex relationship between written language and spoken language” (Duara, 2009, p. 52). Theatrical performance reflects the positive oral culture, and reflected the people’s ideology. After Qing entering the Shanhai Barrier hundreds of years, the Manchus in fact has been assimilated by the Han culture, it became assimilated into the Han culture. These narrative has always existed, that is differ from the narrative of the Manchu and Han Race Struggle, but it has not been listening, being overwhelmed by the sound of the written word.

The New Stage is the first western-style theater that built by Chinese people, located in Nan Market, here is the domain of the Chinese community. Compared to the concession theaters, the New Stage and their series of measures reflects the color of nationalism. By way of limited company the New Stage established in Nine Acres in Shanghai. It is outside the nominal “Zhenshi Company”, meaning to revive the south area of the city (Chinese Domian) economy. It was then renamed “Enlightened Company”, containing the meaning of enlightenment. Besides the opera actor Pan Yueqiao and Xia Brothers, the initiator of the New Stage including businessmen and officials such as Yaobo Xin, Yijie Zhang, and Pingshu Li, who was active in the political field from 1905 to 1914. These business men and scholars operate a rather formal, local autonomy movement lasted a decade, and having great impact. Pingshu Li is Shanghai autonomy leader, Manyun Shen, served as Minister of Finance in Shanghai Military Government, the two men also are the shareholders of the New Stage, and they put a new stage as the ideal space to operate their aim of autonomy.

The reformers reformed in all aspects of theater, actors, and business methods and so on, then would discipline the audience. They set up a stage according to the Japanese style, and built a new turntable stage and stepped seats. To elevate the status of performers and change the name “Lingren” (Mummer player) into “Yiyuan” (Actor). They abolished the traditional “Servers” system, and take a ticket system. In addition, they pursued to create a new “national” people, focused to guide the audience to learn modern civilized behavior, and to create a new “national Person.”⁶ In the era of teahouse, the audience could chat as drink tea, and hot towels would be served to the audience, a variety of snacks and small traders selling the shuttle, crowded and noisy. “Jiao Hao” (Encore) was a way for actors to communicate the audiences in teahouse era, however, in the new theater, the audience is only allowed to clap at the right time. The separation of the stage representation and the social reality down stage was achieved by the lighting settings. Lighting is focused on the stage, and the audience area is dark, and their attention will focused on the show. The common experience between the performers and

⁶ On the New Stage’s reform and the transformation of the society, see Cuxiu Lin, *The Voice of the City: Teahouse and the transformation of the social culture. The Journal of East China Normal University*, Volume 3, 2011.

audiences was maintained not through the communication but through the show's contents. From the perspective of Foucault's Micro-power, this is the discipline to the people, so as to form a new national ideology and behavior. Ming era is the era of victory of folk culture, folk performs in festival had no strict stage, the audience was also an actor. In the new stage, it separated the actors and audiences successfully. Art is raised to a high status, and far and far from the ordinary life.

Conclusion: Culture Hierarchy

In the process of modernization, the performances in festival have been much different from the folk acting with the characteristic of the carnival in the traditional society. Starting from the Republic, the folk festival atmosphere gradually weakened, and some festivals emergence such as the "National Day", which was set up by the government. Such official holiday, just as Baxtnh pointed out:" All that cannot allow the people to deviate from the existing world order, then, cannot create any second life. Instead, they sanctified the existing system, legalized, and immobilized" (Lee, 1998, p. 11).

On one hand, the reformers make use of the folk culture to educate the public, on the other hand, they looked down on the folk culture and spoken culture. In 1912, an author whose pen named Xuanlang reviewed and criticized the Operatic actors did not read much and should go to school immediately:

The operatic actor in Shanghai can read poems and books, the former is Xiaonong Wang, and now only Yizhou Liu. However, *The New Camella* and *The Sorrow in later Ming Dynasty* compiled by Liu, has been low to the folk one, not so elegant as "*Peach Blossom Fan*," "*Partition Poland*" "*Partisan Monument*"....Famous Actor such as Yueqiao Pan, Ruquan Zhao, Yunke Mao, though can act well on the stage using wonderful words, however, they are not able to write. Most of the left actors are illiteracy, the operas they learned most by spoken.⁷

In the early Republic Shanghai, local folk art from all over the country played in theaters day and night. They made use of sound and light of new technologies, adding scenery, using dialect, and being touted by public audience. This performance style developed with urbanization was called "Civilized Drama." But as early as before the Revolution, civilization play was criticized by the reformers for having no script and taught by spoken. But these are precisely the characteristic of folk theater. Professor Jiang Jin in the study of Yueju, which was originated in the countryside in Sheng County in Zhejiang Province noted that most local opera from the mid-Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, are verbal and theatrical performances as the center of spoken. There are two features, namely road games and Scenario (Mubiao System). Road act was the performance depended on the actor's improvisation in rural areas in general. The Mubiao, referring to a sketch and talking-story teacher to assign roles to play. Often they would write the order of the play and actors with a brush to on paper, posted in the background to remind actors (JIANG, 2013, pp. 104-118). This verbal and theatrical performances is the main characteristic of popular culture, was criticized in the early Republican by the elite reformers.

Besides dictating, there were no strict imitation in the tune in the Early Republic Theater. Early Republican Shanghai had lots of immigrants, a number of dialect. Immigrants usually like the show for their hometown. For example, Dungen Wang said in drama "Ezhou Blood": "Shaoshan Fan inserts a short Tanhuang (Suzhu Opera), although words is superficial, but really close to Shanghai people that cannot understand Beijing Mandarin.

⁷ XUAN, Lang. (1912). *The Actors should go to school*. Shen-newspaper • Drama Review (10th ed.)

Women and children are listening well and understand”⁸. The modern urban culture was coming into being in early Republic of China. Various local cultural generated integrally in urban space, reflecting diversity and creativity. The local opera, with strong folk color, adapted to this new trend, and shifted to a kind of urban performances, the actors and the audience try to explore the modernity of the national drama. However, in the trend of the New Culture Movement, all these had been branded the label of “traditional” and backwards. In the Amateur Drama Movement in the 1920s, the elite launched a fierce attack towards the play like the Civilized Drama:

The public used to watching Huagu Xi, Didu Xi, Babgzi Xi, cannot stimulate their vices fun unless they see these, should we learned the “Civilized Drama Actors” play a few more prodigal slut style of play, to cater to their psychology? ... I am most distressed, is the audience of civilized drama, intermediate often many young students!⁹

This phenomenon of cultural hierarchy is not unique. In the United States, the Shakespeare drama were popular one in the nineteenth-century, but it came into university laboratory and into the elite cultural circles the twentieth century (Levine, 1988). During the course of the New Culture Movement, Social Darwinism became mainstream discourse among Chinese intellectuals, this concept of linear evolution and development has also been used for classification of culture. The result of the combination of the linear evolution of the modernity concept to survive and enlightenment discourse, is a lots of mass entertainment culture loved by people, such as culture and a variety of local opera drama, have been labeled as “backward”, and “barbaric”, while modern drama and Jing opera were elevated to a higher position depended on the political power.

Since the text is filled with data and written records on the drama and opera, which created a legend that the Modern Drama and Beijing Opera as a national drama are the illusion of the mainstream culture in the twenty century theater. In fact, the Jing Opera just popular in the male elite circle, and the modern drama is the intellectuals’ entertain and narcissistic, it never won a large number of underlying audience. For example, in the isolated Shanghai period, Modern drama or opera performances could not get more audiences than the Civilized Drama. In the local area, could not get more audiences than Yuejv opera and Ping Opera. However, the hierarchy of the culture has come into being and have influence until now.

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⁸ Wang, Dungeng. (1912). *Ezhou Blood*. Shen-newspaper • Drama Review (9th ed.).

⁹ Chen Dabeai ed: “*The Amateur Drama*,” according to the Morning News Agency 1922 edition copy, page 36. Included into the “Books of the Republic,” Vol. IV, 63, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore, 1989.

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