

Life and Work of Zhang Baoying in Yu Opera in China

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Abstract. The research objective of this paper is to explore the life, development stages, and works of Zhang Baoying in the context of Henan opera (Yu opera). It aims to outline Zhang Baoying's life, analyze the development stages of her artistic career, categorize her works, and explore the spirit embedded in her creations. Using qualitative research methods, specifically field investigations and literature review, this study focuses on analyzing the development stages of Zhang Baoying's Yu opera career and her representative works from different stages. The data were collected and recorded using descriptive and analytical methods in accordance with the research objectives. The findings reveal that the development of Zhang Baoying's Yu opera went through a process of learning tradition, inheriting tradition, innovating and breaking through, and forming a unique style. The female roles played by Zhang Baoying in her works take on multiple roles within the family—mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. Through her actions, she interprets the essence of family ethics, showing deep affection for her children, unwavering loyalty to her husband, and filial respect toward her parents-in-law. She maintains the harmony and stability of the family and becomes the guardian of family ethics. With great wisdom and a sense of the greater good, she encourages her son to join the army and fight enemies, reflecting the patriotic feelings of a woman. Zhang Baoying's artistic creations have greatly enriched the singing style of the female roles in Yu opera, forming a unique artistic vocal style that holds an important place among the many female roles in the opera.

Keywords: China, Life, Work, Yu Opera, Zhang Baoying.

1. BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Yu Opera is also known as Henan Acura, Backing Mountain Roar, High key, Henan Bangzi, etc. The name Yu Opera originated in the 1930s. The name of Yu opera started in the 1930s of the twentieth century, and was commonly used in the 1950s. It is mainly popular in the province of Henan and parts of Shandong, Hebei, Anhui, Jiangsu and Hubei. Yu Opera is one of the most important types of Chinese Opera, and has always been very popular among the people.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Xi opera female roles formed five major schools, namely: Chen (Suzhen) School, Chang (Xiangyu) School, Cui (Lantian) School, Ma (Jinfeng) School, and Yan (Lipin) School. Cui Lantian, a well-known Xi opera actor from China, founded the Cui School with its unique style. She is famous for her ability to portray tragic characters and outstanding skills in tragic performance, thus being called the "creator of tragic beauty". Cui Lantian's singing range is wide, simple and beautiful, deep, mellow, and delicate, and is much loved by people.

Zhang Baoying is the No. 1 among the top 10 famous female opera performers in Henan Opera, and a representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage at the national level. As the first disciple of Cui Lantian, she has made unremitting efforts to inherit and develop the Cui School. She has carried forward the tradition and developed it further, gradually forming her own unique performing style, which is known as the "new Cui School".

Under the guidance and support of Cui Lantian, Zhang Baoying received the authentic art of the Cui School and widely absorbed the nutrients of other sister arts. The performance art of different schools influenced her, and she developed outstanding skills in singing, recitation, acting, and dancing under the guidance of different schools and masters. While ensuring the authentic and comprehensive inheritance of the Cui School art, she was also constantly exploring performance techniques, learning the advantages of other arts, and borrowing performance vocabulary from related arts. Her singing not only embodied the charm of the Cui School art but also had new forms of expression and personal features. In the 1960s, Zhang Baoying gradually grew into an outstanding figure in the second generation of Cui School art. During this period, she gradually matured her performance style by portraying a series of characters with different personalities in modern dramas. She was another popular Cui School actress who was deeply loved by the public after Cui LanTian. She followed Cui LanTian for 40 years, inherited the foundation of the predecessors, dared to innovate, and absorbed diverse elements. She was not only an outstanding inheritor of the Cui School art but also formed her own unique performance style. She created a distinct personal singing style and accumulated a batch of themed dramas with distinctive styles. She also cultivated and supported a group of disciples who followed and learned her singing style. Zhang Baoying's Caihuang Opera art adapted to contemporary culture and was coordinated with modern society, achieving creative transformation and development in the new era, endowing the Cui School art with vivid artistic charm. Currently, Zhang Baoying has 65 disciples. In October 2021, the Caihuang Opera film starring Wu Huixia, Zhang Baoying's disciple, had its premiere and achieved great success.

This article aims to provide reference on how to preserve and inherit traditional arts such as Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera art in modern society. In addition, the article has explored Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera art

from different disciplinary perspectives and layers, enriching the cultural theory of Yu Opera research to some extent.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 To investigate the life of Zhang Baoying in Yu Opera in China.
- 2.2 To classify the work of Zhang Baoying in Yu Opera in China.

3. RESEARCH BENEFIT

- 3.1 By examining Zhang Baoying's life and musical characteristics, it can serve as a cultural archive to help the next generation get closer to their roots and recognize the important role of Yu Opera in society.
- 3.2 By sorting and categorizing Zhang Baoying's works, we can contribute to the protection and dissemination of her works.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of academic papers, there are 13 single papers, which have been retrieved through journal search. Zhang Baoying's works are rich and diverse, including the traditional four famous plays of the Cui School as well as her own creations. From her works, one can see the process of her inheritance, innovation and development. Her diction is accurate and clear, and she pays attention to expressing the inner emotions of the characters when singing. As she herself said, "One should sing with the heart, let the emotion lead the voice and convey the emotion through the voice." Zhang Baoying's singing becomes more and more enjoyable and thought-provoking the more one listens to it, especially her proficiency in singing the "rolling white" style. (Yang Qi, 2009) Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera art possesses the beauty of restraint, the beauty of passion, the beauty of authenticity and the beauty of transformation. (Guo Shuxin, 2009) Zhang Baoying's singing is rich and mellow, full of genuine emotion. Her performance is reserved and elegant, transcending the mundane. She has devoted herself to studying and inheriting the artistic tradition of the Cui School. Based on this tradition, she has boldly innovated and, despite her advanced age, has carried forward the art of the Cui School. (Cheng Haiyun, 2007)

In the field of academic dissertations, according to the search system, the only master's thesis currently available is "A Study on the Art of Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera Performance" (Song Shaokun, 2022). The thesis provides a brief overview of the music of Henan Yu opera and describes Zhang Baoying's artistic career. It focuses on the characterization and singing style of Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera performance art, and also discusses Zhang Baoying's achievements in Yu Opera and her contribution to the inheritance and development of Yu Opera music.

In the limited number of monographs on Zhang Baoying that have been published, the book "New Cui School Art Theory - A Study of Zhang Baoying's Stage Art" published by Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House in 2019 is a new achievement. The book establishes the Cui School second-generation inheritor Zhang Baoying's new Cui School singing style. It comprehensively expounds on the characteristics of new Cui School art from the perspectives of the formation and development of Zhang Baoying's new Cui School art, the aesthetic characteristics of Zhang Baoying's new Cui School art, the inheritors of Zhang Baoying's art, Zhang Baoying's art activities chronology, and the inheritance path and characteristics of Zhang Baoying's stage art, as well as the aesthetic scope and cultural connotation of new Cui School art, and introduces the inheritors of new Cui School art.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research method to collect a large amount of data through field work and categorize the collected data so as to obtain useful information.

5.1. Observation Method

Researchers use sensory and auxiliary tools to directly observe the research object based on a certain research purpose, research outline, or observation table, in order to obtain data. Following Zhang Baoying's performances and listening to his plays has been a constant companion throughout the fieldwork process, and is also an important channel for me to learn, observe, and communicate. Through "listening and watching", I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the research object, and then through "learning", I gradually integrated myself into the research object, trying to place myself inside the bureau to experience and realize.

5.2. Literature Retrieval Method

Literature search, analysis and organization according to the purpose and needs of the study.

5.2.1. Step 1: Data Collection

A Secondary Data: The researcher read a large number of books, academic journals and research papers to obtain a large amount of secondary material. Haiyang music, refers to the form and content of music related to the sea. By reading these documents, we can learn more about the history, musical characteristics of Haiyang popular

songs. We read many different books and articles to find out the meaning and categorization of haiyang songs. We also took a closer look at the development of Haiyang popular songs since their creation and compiled numerous related songs to analyze so that we could further summarize the common musical characteristics of these songs. The ideas in these papers allow us to ask new thoughts and questions about the cultural history of Haiyang pop songs and how they can be better created in the future.

B Primary Data: The researchers, based on the AnYang Cui Art Research Institute as the main research site, conducted a large amount of analysis on works and literature, and selected important interview subjects from Zhang Baoying herself, experts, scholars, and artists in the field through in-depth research and investigation. Based on their previous field investigation experience, they conducted further research by following the leads provided by the interview subjects.

5.2.2. Step 2: Recording Data

Research papers, field interviews, and surveys were invaluable resources gathered from several sources for our project. Each discussion centered on basic topics such as the history of Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera art, its creative characteristics, and contemporary works in this genre. During the field interviews, we were able to gain a better understanding of Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera art through in-depth conversations with several influential figures, especially researchers, creators, and performers in this field. The narratives of these individuals not only helped us to better understand Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera art, but also stirred up the determination and hope to preserve and develop it.

5.2.3. Step 3: Preparation and Analysis of Data

The gathered data was systematically organized and categorized to facilitate the smooth execution of the research goals. Each piece of information underwent thorough examination and validation; the research team dedicated substantial effort to personally verifying the accuracy of each detail. We understood that ensuring the integrity of the data was essential to laying a solid groundwork for the study's findings. Consequently, before releasing the data, we continually double-checked to ensure every detail was precise, thereby providing a reliable basis for the subsequent phases of the research.

5.2.4. Step 4: Summarize, Discuss Results, and Present Data

The researchers consolidated their results and conducted a detailed analysis and discussion on the project's objectives. They then transformed these findings into a comprehensive manuscript, which was submitted to a prestigious international academic journal for publication.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

Based on fieldwork and related data research, we have drawn the following conclusions about the development of Zhang Baoying's Yu Opera in China.

6.1. The life of Zhang Baoying in Yu Opera in China

6.1.1. Background of the Rise of Zhang Baoying's Singing Art

6.1.1.1. Cui School

In the early development of Yu Opera, distinct character categories such as the "four students" and "four flower faces" emerged, eventually evolving into the "five students, five dan, five flower faces" by the 1930s. The Dan role gained prominence with the expansion of urban theaters and a rise in female performers. Cui Lantian, a prominent Danjiao artist, drew on techniques from past masters like Zhou Haiyan and Zhang Qingguan, particularly their nasal vocal style, which helped shape the tragic tone of her singing. In 1956, Cui Lantian's artistry was recognized as a distinct school, now known as the "Cui School." Alongside other major schools like "Chen," "Chang," and "Yan," Cui's influence contributed to a golden era for Danjiao performance. Zhang Baoying, who began studying under Cui in 1959, adopted her innovative methods and developed a distinct vocal style that further advanced the Dan role in Yu Opera.

6.1.1.2. Zhang Baoying's Childhood Life and Early Education - Before 1955

Zhang Baoying was born on November 3, 1940, in Fangcheng County, Henan Province, with her family hailing from Changge County. Her father, Zhang Wenyu, worked as a farmer and a printer of woodblock New Year prints. Growing up in a large family with five siblings, Zhang was surrounded by a vibrant cultural atmosphere. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the family returned to Chengguan Town in Changge County, where Zhang was captivated by local opera performances, including Yue opera, Henan opera, and Yu opera. Despite her father's strong objections, Zhang felt a deep pull toward the stage and would often rush to performances whenever she heard the sounds of gongs and drums, feeling a strong connection to the art.

Changge County, where Zhang spent her early years, was a cultural hub with a rich history of local crafts and a thriving opera scene. Known for its convenient transportation and flourishing artistic environment, the county played a key role in Henan's cultural landscape. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949

brought about significant societal changes, which in turn opened up new opportunities for the growth of Chinese opera, including Yu opera.

At the age of 11 in 1951, Zhang Baoying worked at the Three Elephants Cigarette Factory in Changge. She joined the factory's propaganda team, performing songs and plays that promoted patriotic ideals. During the early 1950s, as Yu opera troupes were being restructured into state-run, collective organizations, the number of such troupes in Henan tripled by 1952. In 1953, after the closure of her factory, Zhang joined the Changge County Mass Yu Opera Troupe.

In 1955, at the age of 15, Zhang's father, who had initially opposed her interest in opera, finally accepted her passion. To fund her journey to Zhengzhou, where Cui Lantian's troupe was recruiting students, Zhang sold 20 pounds of grain. This marked the beginning of Zhang Baoying's formal training in opera and set her on the path to becoming a renowned Yu opera artist.

6.1.1.3. A Twist of Fate - The Beginning of a Professional Actor's Career

In 1955, after an initial examination at the old Henan Theater, Zhang Baoying met the examiner Cui Lantian. Although her voice was not exceptional, Cui saw Zhang's hardworking spirit and potential. Believing she was a promising talent, Cui accepted her as a student at the Anyang City Yu Opera Troupe, with a probationary period of three months, providing her with food, housing, and clothing. Zhang practiced daily and focused on cultural studies.

After two years, the student team began performing, with Zhang gaining recognition for her dedication. She sent part of her small allowance home to her mother and continued to excel. Her teachers, impressed by her perseverance, began to give her larger roles, including knife and horse dancers like the White Lotus Fairy, Mu Guiying, and Bai Suzhen. Zhang also participated in the modern play Breakthrough, which dealt with conflicts in scientific research and production. Zhang's strong voice and commitment made her a standout in the troupe, and her development into a promising Yu opera artist was well underway.

6.1.1.4. Bole and the Thousand-Mile Horse

In May 1958, Henan's Yu Opera Troupe No. 3 premiered Chaoyang Gully, a modern opera that quickly gained popularity. Zhang Baoying, playing the heroine Yinluan, was given the opportunity by Cui Lantian to perform alongside her. Zhang's dedication impressed Cui, who began nurturing her talent. This marked the start of Zhang's deep connection with the Cui School. Cui's guidance was pivotal in Zhang's development, and she understood that learning from her teacher required both practice and performance. This experience laid a strong foundation for her future success in Yu Opera.

6.1.2. Succession Period - 1959 to 1976

Zhang Baoying, one of the top ten famous Dan roles in Yu opera, became a prominent figure in the industry. Through her bold innovations, building upon Cui Lantian's legacy, she developed a unique style, significantly influencing the art of Yu opera's Dan roles.

6.1.2.1. Formal Apprenticeship

Following the success of the modern Yu opera Chaoyang Gully in 1958, Henan opera experienced significant growth. In 1959, during the three reforms (reforming people, system, and opera), Henan's opera education system was formalized, and the Henan Opera School, established in 1956, played a key role. This era also saw the emergence of numerous talented performers, and on August 23, 1959, Cui Lantian officially took Zhang Baoying as her apprentice, marking the beginning of Zhang's journey in the Cui School.

Zhang's first collaboration with Cui was in Touring Turtle Mountain, where Cui meticulously guided her through every aspect of performance, from vocal techniques to body movements. Zhang practiced rigorously, and soon earned praise from her teachers, peers, and the audience. During this period, Cui also taught Zhang Hidden Boat and Five Halls of Justice, as well as the role of Chen Miaoshan in Peach Blossom Nunnery.

While Zhang initially mimicked Cui's style, Cui encouraged her to find her own voice and technique. As part of her development, Cui sent Zhang to study with Ma Lanyu, a renowned Qin opera singer, at the Northwest Opera Institute in Xi'an. There, Zhang refined her vocal and performance skills. Her portrayal of Red Plum Tale (adapted from Touring the West Lake) earned her widespread recognition and established her as a rising star in the troupe. In 1960, she recorded her first album with the China Record Society in Shanghai.



Figure 1: Cui Lantian tutoring Zhang Baoying in acting (1960).
Source: Qi Yang (2024).

In 1960, following Zhang Baoying's success in *The Red Plum Tale*, Cui Lantian cast her in *The Red Guards of Honghu Lake*, a role that solidified her fame. Cui also played a supporting role, offering her strong backing. By 1962, Zhang had risen to prominence as a leading actress, performing in *The Tale of the Fragrant Pouch* and *The Three Weeping Temples*, receiving high acclaim from Tian Han.

6.1.2.2. Frustration

Zhang Baoying encountered challenges in her career, including two memorable missteps. One occurred during a *Cosmic Front* performance in Wuhan, when she accidentally collided with a chair during a dramatic scene. Although her co-actor quickly salvaged the moment, it served as a valuable lesson for her. Another incident took place during *Honghu Red Guard*, when her pants got caught while drawing a gun, nearly causing her to trip. These moments highlighted the importance of meticulous preparation. Now, before each performance, Zhang ensures she arrives early, thoroughly checks every detail, and takes time to reflect on the play, understanding that true growth comes from learning through setbacks and experience.

6.1.2.3. Learn From All the People's Strengths

In 1962, Zhang Baoying, under the mentorship of Cui Lantian, sought to study with the acclaimed Chen Suzhen. At the time, Chen was relatively overlooked by the opera community, but Zhang's visit to learn *Cosmic Front* left a lasting impression on her. Chen Suzhen imparted to Zhang the complexities of emotional expression, particularly in *Cosmic Front*, where Zhang's portrayal of Zhao Yanrong's shifting emotions—from doubt to anger—was exceptional. Chen advised Zhang that "acting crazy" in certain scenes should vary with each performance and also encouraged her to broaden her literary knowledge, recommending the study of Tang and Song poetry, as her character was meant to be cultured and well-read.

Zhang Baoying's admiration for Chen Suzhen runs deep, as Chen not only taught her the intricacies of *Cosmic Front*, but also instilled in her a strong sense of artistic commitment and perseverance. In addition to learning from Chen, Zhang also absorbed influences from Qinqiang, Yueju, and other regional operas, which enriched her abilities in singing, acting, and dancing. Her extensive travels across China in the 1960s broadened her artistic perspective, further shaping her style. She played prominent roles in several modern operas, including *The Spark of Ludang*, *The Tale of the Red Lantern*, and *Li Shuangshuang*. By 1965, Zhang had emerged as a leading figure in Henan Opera, widely recognized for her performances alongside Ma Jinfeng.

6.1.2.4. Ten Years of Cultural Revolution —A Nightmare

The Cultural Revolution, which began on May 15, 1966, thrust Zhang Baoying into a harrowing ordeal. Once an emerging star in the world of opera, she was labeled a "revisionist seedling" and a "capitalist wife," subjected to public humiliation. Her husband was accused of being on the "capitalist road to power," and both of them endured harsh persecution by the rebels, who confined them to a "cow shed" for criticism. Despite being pressured to divorce her husband and sever connections with her mentors, Zhang Baoying faced immense hardship. The turmoil occurred during her prime years as an actress, stifling her career, yet also testing her resilience.

While she contemplated leaving and leading a simpler life, Zhang was forced by the rebels to participate in

propaganda plays such as *The Tale of the Red Lantern*, *Shajiabang*, and *Taking Tiger Mountain by Force*. Amidst the constant fear of making mistakes and the pervasive tension, acting became a form of escape for her. During this turbulent time, Zhang Baoying remained a central figure in her troupe, playing a key role in the cultural life of Anyang. Her journey became closely intertwined with the fate of traditional Chinese opera, as she navigated the political storm.

6.1.2.5. Another Blow

After the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Baoying began to recover from the trauma of political persecution and prepared to return to the stage. However, she encountered a significant setback: vocal cord nodules, also known as "laryngeal muscle weakness," caused by prolonged stress, excessive singing, and mental exhaustion. Her voice weakened to the point where she struggled to produce sound, leading her to fall into despair. At one point, she even contemplated leaving her career for a simpler life.

Despite this, Zhang Baoying's resolve was unwavering. She sought medical treatment in Beijing and Xi'an, revisiting the vocal techniques taught by Cui Lantian and exploring folk song methods. In Zhengzhou, she consulted vocal coach Yu Lifang, who helped her refine her technique. Through a combination of physical therapy, medication, and consistent practice, Zhang was able to restore the clarity and strength of her voice, emerging from this challenge with renewed confidence and resilience.

6.1.3. Beginning Period -1977 to 1984

The period between 1977 and 1984 marked a pivotal phase in Zhang Baoying's artistic growth, during which she began to develop a unique style. Her performances in the film *Pao Qing-Tian* and the revamped traditional play *Selling Miao Lang* became landmarks, illustrating her evolving artistic perspective. In these roles, Zhang introduced innovative singing techniques and implemented comprehensive reforms across various aspects of Yu Opera, including costumes and makeup. Her groundbreaking work played a key role in advancing the *Danjiao Qingyi* style, eventually leading to the creation of a new school within Yu Opera—Cui School.

Her artistic evolution mirrored the wider cultural transformation in China during the late 1970s and early 1980s, driven by the reforms and opening-up policies. As the arts flourished in this period, Zhang Baoying, influenced by the era's revitalization, not only continued the legacy of Cui Lantian but also carved out her own distinctive artistic path.

6.1.3.1. Reform in the Literary and Artistic Circles

In 1979, the opera film *Bao Qing Tian*, based on the traditional Yu opera *Qin Xianglian*, represented a pivotal moment in Zhang Baoying's career. The film made substantial changes to the original play, reworking both its script and music, as well as adjusting the performance style. With Cui Lantian serving as the art director, the project marked a key shift in Zhang's artistic approach. She embraced a fresh aesthetic that combined traditional elements with innovative techniques, aiming to make classical opera more appealing to modern audiences. *Pao Qing Tian* caused a major stir not only in China but also in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, firmly establishing Zhang as a prominent figure in the opera film industry.

The 1979 National Congress of Literary and Artistic Workers marked the complete recovery of China's arts scene after the Cultural Revolution. During this period, Yu Opera experienced a resurgence, with traditional plays like *Mulan* and *Qin Xianglian* being revived. This cultural revival brought newfound recognition and visibility to artists such as Cui Lantian, with Zhang Baoying playing a key role in the movement, resulting in a significant resurgence in her own career.

6.1.3.2. The Rise of the "Individual Actor's Genre"

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Yu Opera was largely categorized into various regional styles. However, following the revolution, there was a significant shift towards individual performers shaping the direction of the art form. This transition became especially apparent in the 1980s when several leading Yu Opera actresses began to break free from traditional regional influences and develop their own distinctive approaches.

The Yu Opera Genre Reporting Performance in Zhengzhou, held in March-April 1980, marked a pivotal moment in the rise of individual artistry. Zhang Baoying, along with celebrated actresses like Chang Xiangyu and Ma Jinfeng, emerged as a key representative of this new wave. During this performance, Zhang's portrayal in *Peach Blossom Nun* helped cement her growing fame, further amplified by media coverage that placed her among the greats of the genre.

Following the success of the Zhengzhou performance, Zhang and her troupe took their performances to Beijing, where she starred in productions such as *Chen Sanliang Crawling in the Hall*, *Peach Blossom Nunnery*, and *Three Weeping Temples*. These performances, which were broadcast on television, significantly increased her popularity, establishing her as a dominant figure in Yu Opera.

By this time, Zhang had emerged as a key leader in the next generation of Yu Opera artists. She played a central role in both the revival of traditional works and the innovation of the genre. The 1980s were a

transformative decade for her, during which she contributed significantly to the establishment of the "Cui School" and helped elevate Yu Opera to unprecedented artistic heights.

6.1.3.3. Assistance from Opera Workers

Zhang Baoying's artistic development was not only shaped by her personal efforts but also by the support of several key figures in the opera world. Prominent opera professionals such as scriptwriter Yang Lanchun, composer Wang Jixiao, and Xing Baojun played crucial roles in her career. The opera film *Bao Qing Tian*, directed by Yang Lanchun and composed by Wang Jixiao, marked a pivotal turning point in her artistic journey. The production underwent significant revisions, including adjustments to the script and music, maintaining its traditional essence while incorporating a more modern approach. For example, Yang Lanchun replaced outdated metaphors with vivid, dynamic imagery, while Wang Jixiao introduced innovative musical elements, such as the guzheng, which enhanced the dramatic atmosphere.

Throughout this transformation, Zhang's mentor Cui Lantian provided valuable guidance, encouraging her to innovate while remaining grounded in the principles of the Cui School. Wang Jixiao also urged her to develop the genre based on her strengths, helping Zhang refine her artistic style. Through her performance in *Bao Qing Tian*, Zhang began to find a balance between tradition and innovation, marking a new phase in her artistic creation.

Another significant work, *Selling Miao Lang*, was revitalized through adaptations by Yang Lanchun and Wang Jixiao. The revised version featured a more cohesive structure, deeper emotional impact, and a blend of Chinese and Western musical elements. Zhang's exceptional performance brought new energy to the play, making it a celebrated part of the Cui School's legacy.

6.1.4. Maturity- 1985 to 1995

In 1985, Zhang Baoying became the head of the Anyang City Yu Opera Troupe, determined to preserve and develop the artistic traditions of the Cui School. She not only established strict management regulations for the troupe but also actively organized rehearsals for new works, including the costume drama *Qin Xianglian's Back Turn*. Despite numerous external opportunities, Zhang focused on nurturing the troupe's talent and committed to advancing the legacy of Yu Opera.

Qin Xianglian's Back Turn, written by Hou Shuqin, Fu Yusheng, and Gao Lianshan, and directed by Li Bonyin, tells the story of the reconciliation between the families of Qin Xianglian and Huanggu after 18 years, transforming hatred into kinship. Zhang Baoying played the role of Qin Xianglian, using her vocal techniques to convey deep emotion through sobbing, whispering, and expressive intonation. Under the guidance of teachers Wang Jixiao and Xing Baojun, she skillfully applied the Cui School's scattered boards technique, combining emotional depth with variations in pitch, which enriched her performance. The play won first prize at the first Henan Provincial Drama Competition and became a key representative work of Yu Opera.

Zhang Baoying's performance in *Qin Xianglian's Back Turn* showcased her mastery of the Cui School's crying techniques, blending intricate emotional nuances into her singing. This innovation not only advanced the development of Cui School's art but also solidified her prominent position in Chinese opera. In November 1986, after performing *Peach Blossom Nun*, she received high praise from Hu Ke and Chen Gang, who recognized her unique contribution to Chinese opera.

During her tenure as the head of the Anyang City Yu Opera Troupe, Zhang Baoying led the troupe on tours to various provinces, including Hebei, Shandong, Anhui, Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan. She focused on nurturing young talent and improving the overall performance standards of the troupe. Over ten years, her artistic skills were honed, and she gained valuable experience in management. In May 1987, Zhang led the troupe to Beijing for the first time, performing major works such as *Selling Miao Lang*, *Peach Blossom Nun*, *Cosmic Frontier*, and *Qin Xianglian* at prominent venues. Her outstanding performances earned wide acclaim, and she was praised by the Chinese Theatre Association for revitalizing the troupe and advancing the art form. In the same year, Zhang won first place in the Yu Opera competition in Zhengzhou, establishing her unique style within the Cui School.

Zhang's contribution to Yu Opera was further solidified through her role as Sun Shulin in *The Story of Finding a Child*. Known for her mastery of the Qingyi role, she successfully ventured into the old Dan role, demonstrating her versatility. This performance, particularly after being adapted into the TV opera *The Three Advancements*, received widespread praise for its depth and artistry. Critics commended her ability to innovate while preserving the essence of traditional Yu Opera.

In 1994, Zhang won the gold medal at the 93 Today's Top Ten Chinese Yu Opera Talent Selection Contest, cementing her status as a leading figure in the field. Her new style, which blended the traditional Cui School with modern elements, garnered widespread recognition for its innovation. Zhang's artistic vision and leadership played a crucial role in the development of the Cui School, making her a key figure in the modernization of Yu Opera.

In April 1994, Zhang's pure singing and innovative Cui School style were praised when she won the gold medal at the 93 Today's Top Ten Chinese Yu Opera Talent Selection Contest. Her artistic practice contributed significantly to the development of Henan opera's Dan vocal arts and led to the creation of a new Cui School style.

that merged tradition with innovation.

In November 1995, Zhang led the Anyang City Yu Opera Troupe on a 34-day exchange tour to Taiwan, performing in nine cities. The troupe showcased classic Cui School works such as Peach Blossom Nun and Bao Qing Tian, receiving enthusiastic applause and media attention. The performances, known for their pure sound and Henan dialect, created a "Yu Opera sensation" in Taiwan.

6.1.5. The Inheritance Period of Zhang Baoying's Singing Art - 1996 to Present

In 1996, Zhang Baoying left the Anyang City Yu Opera Troupe and became the vice-principal of the Anyang School of Culture and Art. She focused on nurturing the next generation of Yu Opera talent, and under her leadership, the school developed rapidly, providing excellent teaching facilities. Her opera students consistently achieved great results, including winning second place in provincial art competitions.

After 2003, Zhang Baoying faced significant personal losses, including the deaths of her mother, husband, and mentor Cui Lantian. Despite these tragedies, she turned her grief into strength, continuing to devote herself to the preservation and development of the Cui School of Yu Opera.

Zhang's dedication to the art was recognized in 2008 when she was named a "Representative Inheritor of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage of Yu Opera" by the Ministry of Culture. She traveled widely to teach and promote the Cui School, including in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. For ten consecutive years, she topped the "Most Popular Opera Performers" list in China.

As a teacher, Zhang Baoying has mentored over 65 students, including outstanding disciples like Wang Xiumei, who achieved great success under her guidance. In 2016, Zhang focused on training two young actresses, Zhang Xiuli and Wu Huixia. With her guidance, they made significant progress and received national funding for professional training. Their final performance in 2018 demonstrated Zhang's enduring influence and the continued success of the new Cui School.

As both an artist and educator, Zhang Baoying's dual role ensures that the unique vocal style and artistic traditions of the Cui School of Yu Opera will be passed down and continue to thrive.

Table 1: Life Timeline and Representative Works.

Period	Representative Works
Succession Period - 1959 to 1976	Modern Work: 'Red Detachment of the Honghe Lake' Traditional Work: 'The Red Plum Blossom', 'Cosmic Front', 'The Fragrant Pouch'
Beginning Period - 1977 to 1984	Traditional Work: 'Judge Bao Qingteng', 'Chen Sanliang climbed the courthouse', 'Peach Blossom Pavilion'
Maturity - 1985 to 1995	Traditional Work: 'The Story of Qin Xianglian', 'The Selling Seedling Man', 'The Search for the Lost Child'

6.2. The Work of Zhang Baoying in Yu Opera.

Zhang Baoying's repertoire can be classified into modern, traditional, and transplanted works, reflecting her diverse artistic range. Yu Opera, as China's largest local opera, has a rich heritage, covering themes from history, myths, legends, and real life. The Ministry of Culture's "three parallels" policy in 1960 advocated for the simultaneous development of modern, traditional, and new historical operas. Traditional Yu operas, often based on historical events, folk legends, and moral values like loyalty and filial piety, form the core of the genre. These plays are known for their straightforward storytelling, emotional resonance, and accessibility to a wide audience.

6.2.1. Modern Work

6.2.1.1. Modern Plays Played by Zhang Baoying

6.2.1.1.1. Modern Plays

During her career, Zhang Baoying performed numerous modern plays, significantly shaping her singing skills. Between 1959 and 1976, a period of rapid growth in Yu opera's modern theater, she starred in works like Chaoyang Gully, Li Shuangshuang, The President's Daughter, Spark of the Ludang, and Red Lanterns. Among these, Honghu Red Guard (1960) was her most iconic role. In this play, Zhang portrayed Han Ying, the brave and resourceful female protagonist. The story, set in 1930, follows Han Ying's leadership of the Red Guard in the fight against local enemies, highlighting her loyalty and courage. The play was a huge success, running for 20 consecutive performances in Zhengzhou, and cemented Zhang's reputation. Her performance in Honghu Red Guard remains one of her most celebrated roles.



Figure 2: Styling of the model theater stage color car “The Red Lantern” (1969).
Source: Qi Yang (2024).

6.2.1.1.2. Sample Plays

Zhang Baoying performed several model operas during the Cultural Revolution, a period defined by the promotion of revolutionary themes. In 1968, as part of the “model opera” movement, she participated in works like *Shajiabang*, *Taking Tiger Mountain*, *Cuckoo Mountain*, *The White-haired Girl*, and *Ode to the Dragon River*. In 1974, she played Sister-in-law Hong in *Hongyungang*, a modernized opera, which toured Henan, Hebei, and other regions for three consecutive years. These roles reflected the era’s focus on class struggle while incorporating Yu Opera’s aesthetics.

6.2.1.1.3. Analysis of Female Image in Zhang Baoying's Modern Plays

In Zhang Baoying's modern plays, female characters are depicted as awakened and rebellious, challenging traditional gender roles and gaining independence through participation in social labor. These characters include intellectuals, young women in new China, laboring women, and revolutionary figures. In *Li Shuangshuang*, one of her most influential roles, Zhang portrays a female commune member who fights against selfishness and injustice. *Li Shuangshuang*, originally a housewife, dedicates herself to collective interests, taking action against unfair practices like theft and labor credit disputes. Her transformation from a domestic figure to a champion of socialist values reflects her empowerment and the evolving role of women in society. The play's adaptation enhances dramatic conflict, emphasizing her courage and commitment to the collective.

6.2.2. Traditional Work

6.2.2.1. Classification of Traditional Work

The core values of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness are central to Yu opera's classic plays. These plays draw from several themes: (1) Patriotism and national heroes, such as *Hua Mulan* and *Mu Guiying*, celebrate sacrifice for the nation. (2) Loyalty vs. treachery, praising righteous officials, as seen in *Guillotine Case* and *Fire Burning Zidu*, highlight justice and fairness. (3) Folk life and family values, exemplified in *Catching the Flower Boat* and *Mai Miaolang*, emphasize filial piety and love. (4) A few mythological plays, like *Mountain of Flowers* and *Fruits*, explore humanity's desire for a better life. These works often contrast good and evil, spreading traditional ethical values to the audience.

6.2.2.2. Traditional Plays Played by Zhang Baoying

The traditional repertoire is central to Yu opera, cherished for its rich cultural heritage and unique style. Actors, including Zhang Baoying, reinterpret classic works based on their understanding of the characters, infusing them with personal style and innovation. Zhang, inheriting the art of the Cui School, specializes in *Qingyi* roles, portraying dignified, virtuous, and middle-aged women. Known for its singing, the Cui School's iconic repertoires, such as *Peach Blossom Nunnery* and *Pao Ching-Tian*, influenced Zhang’s own adaptations. Her work reflects a distinct performance style, shaping her unique repertoire through the re-creation of traditional plays.

6.2.2.2.1. Succession Period

Zhang Baoying’s traditional repertoire reflects the inheritance period of her career, with works such as *Peach*

Blossom Nunnery, The Three Weeping Temples, and The Story of the Fragrant Pouch. The Story of the Fragrant Pouch features Zhou Fenglian, a lively and outspoken heroine, portrayed delicately by the Cui School, emphasizing inner character rather than exaggeration. This play became a key work in Zhang's early career, performed in cities like Beijing and Tianjin. In addition to traditional plays, Zhang also performed transplanted works such as Red Plum Tale, Yang Suo Xing Lu, and Cosmic Front. Notably, Red Plum Tale is a Qin opera transplant, where Zhang, under Cui Lantian's guidance, mastered body performances and singing techniques. The play tells the tragic story of Li Huiniang, who, after being murdered by the villain Jia Sidao, seeks justice in the afterlife. These transplanted plays enriched Zhang's repertoire, shaping her singing style and artistic development, laying the foundation for her future creations.

6.2.2.2.2. The Formative Period

From 1978 to 1985, Zhang Baoying's singing voice matured, and her repertoire mainly consisted of traditional works, which she inherited from the Cui School. During this period, she performed Peach Blossom Nunnery, Chen Sanliang Climbing to the Hall, Selling Miao Lang, Bao Qingtian, and The Legend of Qin Xianglian. The latter was an adapted version of Qin Xianglian, focusing on the reunion of two families after 18 years, transforming enmity into kinship.

This era coincided with the "lifting of the ban" on costume dramas, following the reform and opening up of China. Audiences, eager for traditional plays, saw a resurgence in costume dramas, creating a significant social impact. Zhang Baoying's performances, particularly in the film *Bao Qingtian*, based on *Qin Xianglian*, gained national popularity. In 1978, the Ministry of Culture issued a report on resuming traditional plays, allowing for the re-staging of "excellent" works. This policy facilitated the revival of traditional opera, including Zhang's performances of Peach Blossom Nunnery, Selling Miao Lang, and *Qin Xianglian's Posterior*. These works became her representative pieces and continue to serve as models for students of the Cui School.



Figure 3: Stills from "After Qin Xianglian", Zhang Baoying as Qin Xianglian (1986).
Source: Qi Yang (2024).

6.2.2.2.3. Mature Period

As mentioned earlier, some new historical plays or adaptations of traditional plays also belong to the traditional repertoire in a broad sense, thus Zhang Baoying's new costume plays in the maturity period, such as "Qin Xianglian's Posterior Biography", "Hap Mirror Hatred", and "King Wen of Zhou and King Zhou of Yin", and her adaptations of the traditional play "The Search for a Child", belong to the traditional repertoire.

6.2.2.3. Female Spiritual Qualities in Zhang Baoying's Traditional Plays

Yu opera features many works praising virtuous wives, good mothers, filial women, and chaste women, reflecting the societal value placed on these roles in feudal society. Zhang Baoying often portrayed such characters, like in Peach Blossom Nunnery, Pao Qingtian, Miao Lang, Qin Xianglian, and The Search for the Children. These roles highlight the ethical qualities of love, loyalty, patriotism, filial piety, and chastity. The portrayal of virtuous wives and mothers not only reflects traditional Confucian values but also emphasizes their dedication to family and society, reinforcing moral ideals.

Maternal Glory

Zhang Baoying often portrayed strong, selfless maternal figures in traditional Yu operas. In *Pao Qingtian*,

she plays Qin Xianglian, a mother who endures hardships to reunite her family, reflecting the greatness of a mother's love. Despite her husband's abandonment, she raises her children with devotion and sacrifices everything for their well-being. Similarly, in *Selling Miao Lang*, Liu Yingchun's love for her son is shown through her sacrifice to save her father-in-law. In *The Search for a Son*, Sun Shulin's relentless search for her son highlights her unwavering maternal love. In *Qin Xianglian's Afterlife*, Qin's tireless efforts to raise her children, including teaching them values of loyalty and justice, showcase the profound wisdom and sacrifice of motherhood.

Moreover, Zhang Baoying also portrayed motherly love beyond biological connections. In *Peach Blossom Nunnery*, Dou, though not a biological mother, shows deep maternal affection for Su Baoyu, treating him as her own despite the complex family conflict. This care extends beyond maternal bonds, emphasizing universal themes of sacrifice, nurturing, and protection, illustrating the enduring power of motherhood in Yu opera.

6.2.2.3.1. Resilience

Zhang Baoying frequently portrays virtuous wives and mothers in classic Yu operas, where the heroines bear the burden of raising children while their husbands are absent, either on journeys or in pursuit of the imperial exam. In *Peach Blossom Nunnery*, Dou faithfully waits twelve years for her husband Zhang Cai, reflecting her unwavering loyalty and perseverance despite the hardships of waiting. In *Selling Miao Lang*, Liu Yingchun, left alone to care for her in-laws, sacrifices her son to buy medicine for her father-in-law. When faced with even greater adversity, she shows immense strength and loyalty by protecting her family, enduring hardship with patience and persistence. Similarly, in *Bao Qingtian*, Qin Xianglian's deep affection for her absent husband, Chen Shimei, demonstrates her steadfast loyalty, as she searches for him even after his success. These roles highlight the traditional virtues of loyalty, sacrifice, and maternal devotion, with Zhang Baoying's portrayals embodying the moral ideals of dedication to family and unwavering commitment to duty in the face of adversity.

6.2.2.3.2. Wisdom and Tolerance

In *Pao Qingtian*, Qin Xianglian demonstrates courage and wisdom in confronting her husband's betrayal. After his ruthless rejection, she seeks justice by exposing his crimes and gaining support from Prime Minister Wang. In the sequel *Qin Xianglian After Story*, her character deepens, showing wisdom and tolerance. Initially reluctant to accept her enemy's daughter as her daughter-in-law, she ultimately puts aside personal grudges for the greater good, promoting harmony. Her ability to resolve conflicts with wisdom and sincerity transforms old feuds, highlighting her exceptional character and diplomatic skills.

6.2.2.3.3. Family and National Sentiments

In *Qin Xianglian's After Story*, Qin Xianglian embodies deep family loyalty and patriotism. Despite personal grievances, she prioritizes the country's interests, supporting her son to join the army and defending the nation. Her wisdom leads her to reconcile with the royal aunt, putting national harmony above personal grudges. Zhang Baoying's portrayal of Qin Xianglian reflects a woman's multiple roles—mother, wife, and daughter-in-law—upholding family ethics with love, loyalty, and respect. Her actions maintain family stability while demonstrating a strong sense of justice and devotion to both family and country.

7. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Zhang Baoying's artistic journey in Yu Opera is marked by a gradual evolution from learning tradition to making significant innovations, ultimately shaping a distinctive style. Her early years, from 1976 to 1984, were characterized by her deep immersion in the Cui School, particularly during the period when she emulated the style of Cui Lantian and learned from renowned opera masters. While she focused on mastering traditional techniques, innovation came later. Between 1977 and 1984, she worked with experienced mentors like Yang Lanchun and Wang Jixiao, bringing classics such as *Baotian* and *Selling Miao Lang* to life, showcasing impressive singing techniques.

In 1985, Zhang Baoying's appointment as director of the Anyang City Yu Opera Troupe marked a new phase in her career. She led the troupe to perform *Qin Xianglian's Back Turn*, a work that became a major success, winning the first prize at the Henan Provincial Drama Competition. This achievement marked a significant milestone in her career, as she successfully innovated within the Cui Pai tradition while also refining her own singing style. During this period, she also performed in *Searching for Children*, adapted from the traditional play *Eight Precious Soup*, which further demonstrated her growing artistic maturity.

While Zhang Baoying is widely known for her portrayal of Qingyi (the pure, virtuous female lead), she did not restrict herself to this role. She ventured beyond the conventions of the Cui School, playing a range of characters, including the elderly Sun Shulin in *The Story of Finding a Child*, showcasing her versatility and drawing a larger audience. Her ability to embody diverse roles not only strengthened her reputation but also enriched her understanding of character development in Yu Opera.

In 1996, Zhang Baoying transitioned from performance to education, becoming the vice principal of the Opera School. She dedicated herself to nurturing the next generation of Yu Opera artists, mentoring 65 students and influencing the "New Cui School Art." Her contributions to both performance and teaching have made her a

key figure in the continuing evolution of Yu Opera, with her art remaining beloved by audiences.

Zhang Baoying's contribution to the Dan roles of Yu Opera is invaluable, as she significantly enriched the art of singing for female characters. She skillfully navigated both modern and traditional repertoires, portraying female roles with depth and complexity. In modern works like *The Red Guard of Honghu Lake*, she portrayed Han Ying, a heroic revolutionary woman, highlighting the important role of women in the socio-political struggle. She also performed in iconic model plays like *Shajiabang* and *Wisdom Takes the Tiger Mountain*, which dealt with themes of social change and class struggle during the revolutionary period.

In her traditional roles, Zhang Baoying is particularly famous for portraying virtuous wives and mothers, characters who embody deep familial devotion, resilience, and wisdom. In plays such as *Peach Blossom Nunnery*, *Bao Qing Tian*, *Miao Lang*, and *Qin Xianglian*, her performances as mothers reflect not only a loving, nurturing spirit but also strength and perseverance in times of hardship. These women take on significant family responsibilities, often raising their children alone while remaining loyal to their husbands, even when separated.

Zhang Baoying's portrayal of Qin Xianglian in *Pao Qing Tian* stands out for her wisdom and determination. In the face of her husband's rejection, she does not succumb to despair but instead seeks justice with courage and intelligence, exposing her husband's wrongdoings. In *Qin Xianglian's Posterior*, her character transcends personal grievances, emphasizing a deep sense of righteousness and patriotism. She supports her son's decision to serve in the military to defend the country, demonstrating her loyalty to both family and nation. Her ability to resolve longstanding family feuds with wisdom and to prioritize national interests over personal grudges highlights her noble character.

Through her performances, Zhang Baoying not only portrays the idealized virtues of traditional Chinese women—loyalty, filial piety, and self-sacrifice—but also presents complex, multifaceted female characters who resonate with contemporary values. Her roles have enriched the expressive capacity of Yu opera, offering audiences a more nuanced understanding of female identity across different historical contexts. Zhang Baoying's work stands as a profound reflection of the social and cultural evolution of women's roles in Chinese society, making a lasting impact on the art form and leaving a significant legacy in Chinese opera.

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