



A Comparative Study of The Northern and Southern Styles of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Aotonomous Region, China

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Abstract. Zhuang Opera is deeply rooted in the traditions, beliefs, and lifestyles of the Zhuang people, yet it faces numerous challenges in the context of globalization and modernization. In 2006, Zhuang Opera was recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage of China, offering an opportunity for its preservation. However, it continues to struggle with issues such as talent shortages, regional fragmentation, and the erosion of traditional practices. This study compares the two primary regional styles of Zhuang Opera—Northern and Southern—analyzing differences in dialects, musical styles, vocal techniques, instrumentation, and performance practices. Through fieldwork, interviews with practitioners, and detailed comparative musical analysis, the study reveals how these stylistic variations reflect the cultural values of the Northern and Southern traditions of Zhuang Opera. It also provides guidelines for the future development of Zhuang Opera, aiming to contribute to its preservation and revitalization while ensuring its continued significance in the cultural life of the Zhuang people.

Keywords: Comparative study, Guangxi Zhuang Aotonomous Region, Northern and Southern styles, Zhuang Opera.

1. BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The Zhuang ethnic group, the most populous among China's ethnic minorities, is renowned for its hard-working nature and proficiency in singing and dancing. This rich history, culture, and belief system of the Zhuang people have fostered the development of Zhuang opera. In the 1990s, the incursion of Western culture and advanced technology posed a significant threat to the preservation of Zhuang opera. However, this changed in 2006 when China announced its first batch of national-level 'intangible cultural heritage' lists, which included six Zhuang items: Napo Zhuang folk songs, Zhuang songs, Zhuang operas, Zhuang bronze drum customs, Zhuang three-tone folk songs, and Po Ya songbooks. The recognition as 'intangible cultural heritage' offered Zhuang Opera a vital lifeline. Thanks to the concerted efforts of government departments, heritage bases, and inheritors, Zhuang opera has experienced a significant revival. (Gaomin,2015)

Born in the production life of Zhuang people in Guangxi, Zhuang opera is an art form developed on the basis of Zhuang folk songs and dances, which reflects the culture, psychology and aesthetics of the Zhuang people, and had an irreplaceable position in the spiritual life of Zhuang people with high artistic value. However, today, with the globalisation of knowledge, the development of Zhuang opera is not optimistic, and there is already a situation of a shortage of talent. Although its development status has improved since being listed as an intangible cultural heritage, research on Zhuang Opera remains insufficient. (Liao Mingjun, 2008)

For this reason, how to protect and develop on Zhuang Opera is an urgent issue at present. It is crucial to explore the current status of the development of Zhuang Opera, and it is also crucial to explore the differences between the two main classifications of Zhuang Opera: the Northern Style Zhuang Opera and the Southern Style Zhuang Opera, and then to propose how to preserve this art form. Given these considerations, the topic warrants comprehensive and detailed research.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To study the current status of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.
- To compare the Northern and Southern styles of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.
- To propose guidelines for the transmission and preservation of Zhuang opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

3. RESEARCH BENEFIT

- How is the current state of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region?
- What is the differences between the two types of Zhuang in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region?
- How is Zhuang opera should be preserved and transmitted in the future in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Zhuang Opera, as the most beloved form of traditional theater among the Zhuang people, has garnered substantial scholarly attention. Research on its historical origins, transmission, vocal styles, and repertoire has

made significant strides. A comprehensive review of existing studies not only provides essential theoretical guidance for the preservation and development of Zhuang Opera but also serves to critically examine previous research gaps, contributing to a more refined theoretical framework.

Key Research Contributions:

Zhou Zulian (2022) In *Investigation and Research on the Music of Tianlin Zhuang Opera* employed a combination of literature review, fieldwork, and music analysis to examine the musical origins, social context, and performance styles of Tianlin Zhuang Opera. The study highlights how its content, form, and performance practices influence the socialization and aesthetic orientation of Tianlin's Zhuang people, shedding light on the opera's formation process and internal motivations.

Zhang Yi (2010) In *Jingxi South Road's The Characteristics of Vocal, Zhuang Opera* examined four different plate styles and thirteen different vocal styles. Zhang examined how tonal traits, melodies, ornamentation, and language factors contribute to the unique creative identity of South Road Zhuang Opera.

Sun Jie (2011) In *The Twelve Flowers Tune and Zhengtong Zhengban* were among the musical genres studied in *The Artistic Forms of North Road Zhuang Opera Music*. He maintained that North Road Zhuang Opera's distinctive features—such as its melodic color and lyric structure—reflect the Zhuang people's cultural mindset and aesthetic values, highlighting the opera's great artistic merit.

Yang Danhua (2013) In *the opera's singing techniques* were divided into traditional, modern, ethnic, recitation, and formal approaches in *An Analysis of the Singing Methods of Zhuang Opera*. With an emphasis on how these techniques are anchored in the Zhuang vernacular heritage, Yang underlined that comprehending them is essential to enjoying Zhuang Opera's complete artistic depth.

Huang Shouheng (2015) In *the North and South Roads of Zhuang Opera* were examined for rhyme patterns and rhyme section usage in *The Differences and Similarities of Rhyming Characteristics Between the North and South Roads of Guangxi Zhuang Opera*. His study revealed the regional variations in Zhuang Opera's poetic forms and emphasized the impact of regional folk songs on the rhyme schemes.

Wang Yan (2024) In the study "*Diffusion Pattern of the 'Pingban' Singing Voice of South Road Zhuang Opera*," the distinctive spread of the "Pingban" singing style in that particular genre was looked at. In addition to setting this style apart from other opera genres, Wang's research suggests possible directions for innovation, which will help Chinese opera singing continue to evolve.

Sun Ting (2016) in *the preservation and dissemination of Guangxi Zhuang Opera's Acting Techniques* addressed issues like the dominance of a single melodic mode, an aging audience, and a sluggish rate of artistic advancement. She suggested a number of preservation tactics to conserve Zhuang Opera's heritage, such as fostering cultural innovation, strengthening ecological conservation, integrating university resources, and guaranteeing the continuation of inheritors.

Guo Shanshan (2018) In *the research on the Integration and Development of Guangxi Zhuang Opera Art* examined the creative elements and historical evolution of Zhuang Opera, emphasizing its dissemination strategies, thematic substance, and generational transmission. Guo offered methods for incorporating Zhuang Opera into more comprehensive cultural and historical contexts, guaranteeing its continued existence as an intangible cultural treasure.

The knowledge of the musical traits, performance techniques, and cultural roles of Zhuang Opera has greatly increased as a result of these investigations. However, to better address the difficulties of maintaining and advancing Zhuang Opera in a time of globalization, future research should adopt a more multidisciplinary approach, namely merging ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and history. To maintain Zhuang Opera's long-term relevance and viability, its development will need to be balanced, incorporating both modern innovation and traditional traditions.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

A multifaceted, multidisciplinary strategy that incorporates viewpoints from musicology, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology will be used to accomplish the goals stated in this study. A systematic comparison of Guangxi's Northern and Southern Zhuang opera will be conducted as part of the study, employing techniques such as musicological analysis, fieldwork, and literature evaluation.

5.1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework Development

The initial phase in this research will be a thorough review of the body of literature already written about Zhuang opera, with an emphasis on studies about the genre's contemporary situation in Guangxi and the stylistic distinctions between Northern and Southern Zhuang opera. By creating a theoretical framework, this stage seeks to lay the groundwork for the analysis that follows.

5.2. Fieldwork and on-Site Research

This dissertation will use fieldwork to gather primary data through firsthand observations of performances and rehearsals in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the history and present state of Zhuang opera. Three important Guangxi regions—Nanning, Jingxi, and Tianlin—will be the focus of the fieldwork.

Step 1: Research Locations

This study will be conducted in the following locations in Guangxi:

1) Nanning: The Guangxi Zhuang Opera Troupe is situated in the capital of Guangxi Province.



Figure 1: Research Site - Nanning City, Location of the Guangxi Zhuang Opera Troupe
 Source: <http://Guangxi.tianditu.gov.cn>

- 1) Jingxi: The Southern Zhuang Opera's center area.
- 3) Tianlin: The Northern Zhuang Opera's center area.

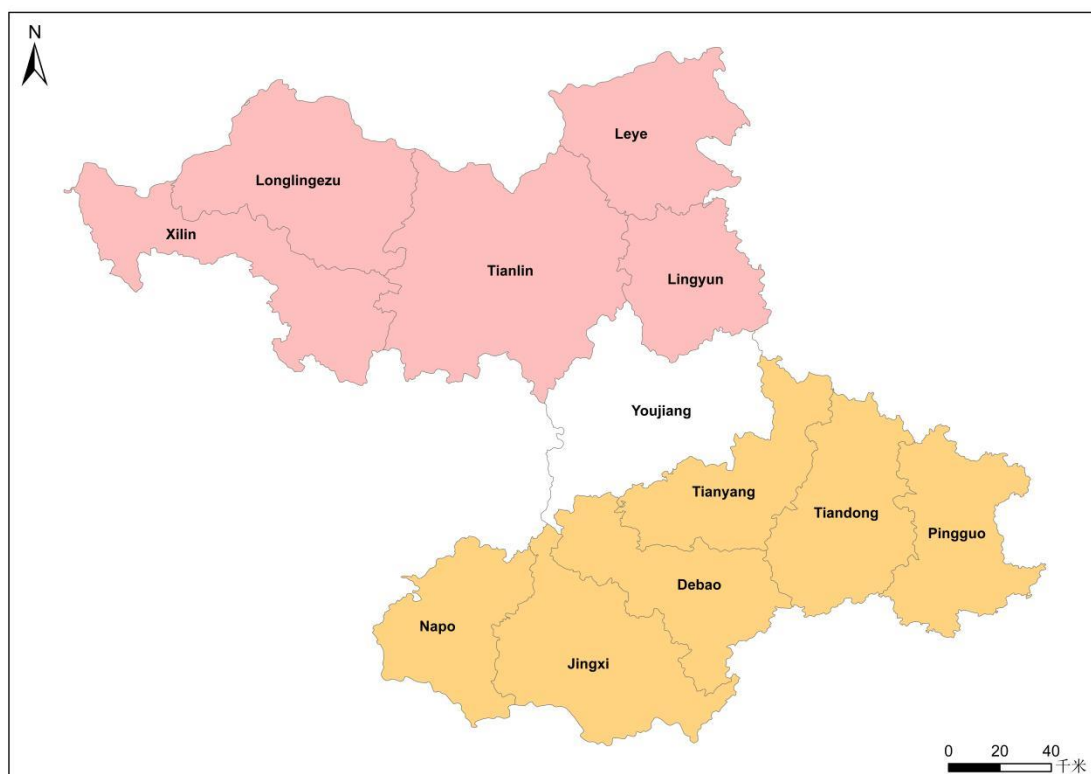


Figure 2: Research site Baise City, the northern region of Baise is home to the majority of the Northern Zhuang Opera, while the southern region is home to the Southern Zhuang Opera.
 Source: Chen Wenying, 2023.

Step 2: Observations of Performances and Rehearsals

This study will use participatory observation to record local opera troupes' rehearsal and performance procedures. Information will be collected on a number of performance elements, including staging, musical accompaniment, lyrics, and voice styles.

Step 3: Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

The development of Zhuang opera will be better understood through in-depth interviews with important practitioners from both the Northern and Southern traditions. The goal is to acquire knowledge about each style's development and contemporary trends from a variety of angles.. Criteria for selecting interviewees include:

1. Twenty years or more of experience in the field.
2. Known as exemplary figures in the Zhuang opera community.
3. People who have won important honors or made noteworthy contributions to the growth of Zhuang opera.

The primary interviewees for this study will be:

- Huang Zhiyuan, a key figure in the transmission of Zhuang opera.
- Liao Mingjun, an expert in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in Guangxi.
- Ha Dan, A well-known member of the Guangxi Zhuang Opera Troupe.

5.3. Comparative Musical Analysis

This section provides a focused comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between Northern and Southern Zhuang operas by examining four key elements of music and performance:

1) Story

The study explores how the music in Northern and Southern Zhuang operas complements the structure of the libretto and reflects cultural characteristics. Northern Zhuang opera often emphasizes more personal and intimate storytelling, while Southern Zhuang opera focuses on grand, epic themes.

2) Singing

By comparing vocal styles, the study highlights the contrast between the soft and lyrical vocal expressions of Northern Zhuang Opera and the powerful and vigorous vocal techniques of Southern Zhuang Opera. It further explores how these differences in singing align with the narrative styles of each tradition.

3) Language

Through an analysis of linguistic features, the study examines dialectal differences and subtle linguistic nuances, emphasizing how regional language characteristics shape the cultural identity of Northern and Southern Zhuang Opera while enhancing their emotional and cultural expressions.

4) Musical Instrument

By comparing the instrumentation and musical styles, the study highlights the distinct features of Northern and Southern Zhuang operas. Northern Zhuang opera primarily employs string instruments and softer tones to express subtle emotions, while Southern Zhuang opera utilizes a more diverse range of instruments to create a sense of grandeur.

5) Performance

The research compares stage presentation, choreography, and costume design in both traditions. Northern Zhuang opera emphasizes elegant and refined movements that highlight emotional depth and character development. In contrast, Southern Zhuang opera is characterized by dynamic and exaggerated gestures that convey a sense of grandeur. The symbolic cultural significance of costumes and stage settings is also analyzed.

5.4. Data Analysis and Processing

Data analysis will use qualitative research techniques, mainly content analysis to arrange and examine fieldwork materials including performance videos, observation notes, and interview recordings in a methodical manner. This procedure will concentrate on determining the salient artistic characteristics of Zhuang operas from the North and the South.

5.5. Innovation and Practical Significance of the Study

The following features of this research demonstrate its innovation:

Cross-Regional Comparison of Zhuang Opera: This study is the first to do a systematic artistic comparison between Zhuang operas from the North and the South, highlighting the unique qualities of each style and how they reflect regional cultural identities.

Integration of Culture and legacy: The research offers important practical insights by addressing cultural values and the difficulties of transmitting cultural legacy in addition to analyzing artistic forms.

Suggestions regarding policy: In light of the research findings, this study will make policy proposals that will benefit Zhuang opera's transmission and preservation from an academic and social standpoint.

6. RESULTS

Zhuang Opera, as an important cultural heritage of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, carries rich ethnic spirit and cultural value. Through a comparative analysis of the Northern and Southern styles of Zhuang Opera, we have revealed the unique characteristics in music, language, and performance between the two styles, and proposed specific measures for their preservation. With efforts in education, documentation, government

support, and community participation, Zhuang Opera can continue to thrive in modern society, maintaining its vital role in cultural transmission.

7. CONCLUSION

This study conducted a comparative analysis of the Northern and Southern styles of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China revealing their unique characteristics in music, language, and performance. It further examined the current state of Zhuang Opera's transmission and preservation, identifying associated challenges. The key findings and conclusions are summarized below:

- The current status of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China

The transmission of Zhuang Opera primarily relies on oral tradition, the continuation of vocal and performance techniques, and master-apprentice teaching methods. However, the rapid pace of modernization and the declining interest among younger generations have posed significant challenges to its preservation. Urgent issues include the preservation of traditional repertoires, the training of new inheritors, and the protection of the cultural environment.

Through this comparative analysis, the study highlights the cultural and artistic significance of Zhuang Opera and its regional variations. To address the challenges of transmission and preservation, it is essential to integrate traditional practices with modern solutions. Measures such as fostering creativity in production, enhancing public education, and strengthening policy support are crucial to ensuring that Zhuang Opera continues to serve as a vital symbol of Zhuang cultural identity and thrives in contemporary society.

- The differences between the two types of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China

The study identifies significant differences between the Northern and Southern styles of Zhuang Opera in terms of story, singing, language, musical instruments and performance styles:

Table 1: The comparison between Southern Style and Northern Style Zhuang opera.

Aspect	Northern Style Zhuang Opera	Southern Style Zhuang Opera	Comparison
Story	based on Zhuang folk tales, but the stories tend to be more diverse and complex, involving richer social backgrounds and historical elements.	Based on traditional Zhuang folk tales, with simple and direct plots that emphasize human nature and moral ethics; often portrays themes of heroism, loyalty, courage, love, and family.	Both draw from Zhuang folk stories, but Southern Zhuang Opera focuses on simpler, more straightforward plots, while Northern Zhuang Opera delves deeper into historical and social contexts.
Singing	Includes styles like Zhengdiao and Hey Yadio, characterized by softer, more delicate tones with a variety of forms.	Includes styles like Pingdiao, Pinggao, Mayou Pingban, and Tandiao, which are varied, gentle, and rhythmically strong.	Both styles have distinct local characteristics, with Hey Yadio in Northern Zhuang Opera focusing on regional dialects, while Southern Zhuang Opera emphasizes rhythm and musical expressiveness.
Language	Uses a stricter rhyming pattern, alternating between waist-foot and foot-foot rhyme, with most styles requiring waist-foot rhyme.	Primarily uses waist-foot rhyme, with flexible rhythms. The final line avoids foot-foot rhyming and uses waist-head or waist-foot rhyme instead.	Southern Zhuang Opera's rhyme structure is more flexible and variable, while Northern Zhuang Opera tends to follow a more standardized rhyming structure, with frequent alternation between rhyme types.
Musical instruments	Primarily uses instruments like Maguhu, Huluhu, and Yueqin, with deeper, more layered tones.	Mainly uses instruments like Qinghu, Zhuhu, and Xiaosanxian, which produce bright, clear sounds with a folk character.	The musical instruments reflect the distinct regional characteristics: Southern Zhuang Opera tends to use clearer, brighter sounds, while Northern Zhuang Opera favors richer, more grounded tones.
Performance	Follows the traditional roles of Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou, with subtle movements and facial expressions to convey emotion.	Also uses Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou, but the Chou (clown) role is more emphasized and exaggerated in Northern Zhuang Opera.	Both forms use similar role configurations, but Northern Zhuang Opera places more emphasis on exaggerated performances, especially in the Chou role, compared to the more refined performance style in Southern Zhuang Opera.

- Guidelines for the transmission and preservation of Zhuang opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

1) Reforming the Language of Zhuang Opera

Zhuang Opera's linguistic identity is central to its cultural authenticity, but adaptations can enhance accessibility for broader audiences.

Region-Specific Approaches: In areas like Jingxi and Tianlin, retaining local dialects is essential to preserve cultural heritage and maintain strong community connections.

Adaptation for Broader Appeal: For performances in cities like Nanning, incorporating the Guangxi dialect (Gui-Liu) while preserving traditional singing styles can balance authenticity with inclusivity.

2) Strengthening Creative Production

Modernization with Tradition: Introduce modern elements like updated stage designs and lighting to engage contemporary audiences while maintaining the opera's traditional music and performance frameworks.

Targeted Productions: National troupes should focus on appealing to diverse audiences with innovative approaches, while regional troupes should prioritize traditional productions to deepen local engagement.

3) Cultivating Talent

Protecting Traditional Artists: Provide financial, social, and artistic support to ensure that master artists, such as Zhang Qinyin and Bi Kejian, can pass on their knowledge.

Formal Education: Expand Zhuang Opera programs in universities and integrate it into school curricula in key regions like Jingxi and Debao, following the successful model of Tianlin County.

Professional Training: Establish structured training within troupes to nurture young talent and ensure generational continuity.

4) Enhancing Social Awareness and Institutional Support

Government Recognition: Secure institutional backing by incorporating Zhuang Opera into intangible cultural heritage frameworks, ensuring policy and financial support.

Community Engagement: Partner with media, schools, and cultural organizations to increase public awareness through performances, festivals, and digital platforms like social media.

5) Promoting Interdisciplinary Research and International Collaboration

Research Synergy: Foster collaboration between ethnomusicologists, historians, and cultural anthropologists to explore Zhuang Opera's musical and social dimensions.

Global Exchange: Engage in international academic networks and cultural forums to raise global awareness of Zhuang Opera while learning from best practices in heritage preservation.

8. DISCUSSION

This study provides valuable insights into the transmission, preservation, and cultural significance of Zhuang Opera in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The following discussion will analyze the research findings and their alignment with relevant theoretical principles, culminating in a comprehensive conclusion. The current status of Zhuang Opera and the comparison of its Northern and Southern styles have been central to this research.

The study successfully explored the present state of Zhuang Opera, the similarities and differences between the Northern and Southern styles in terms of story, song, musical instruments, and performance, as well as feasible strategies for its transmission and preservation. It effectively revealed the diversity and intricate artistic characteristics of Zhuang Opera as a traditional art form while analyzing the cultural and social factors influencing its transmission. The research objectives were fully achieved. These findings not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural value of Zhuang Opera but also provide theoretical support and practical references for its sustainable transmission and preservation. This study aligns with various theoretical principles in the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology. It emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural heritage, which is consistent with the principles of cultural preservation.

9. SUGGESTIONS

This section suggests a number of approaches for the continued study, preservation, and sustainable growth of Zhuang Opera based on the analysis of Southern and Northern Zhuang Opera.

9.1 Historical and Evolutionary Aspects of Zhuang Opera

1) A study should be conducted on the origins and development of Zhuang Opera from the past to the present.

2) A comparison between Zhuang Opera and other Chinese folk performances, such as Yue Opera or Peking Opera, should be undertaken.

3) Research should explore the influence of historical events, such as China's cultural reform policies, on the transformation of Zhuang Opera.

9.2 Artistic Styles and Unique Characteristics

1) The characteristics of singing, dancing, and performing in Zhuang Opera should be studied.

2) The relationship between Zhuang Opera and the folk music of the Zhuang ethnic group (e.g., the use of traditional instruments) should be explored.

3) The role of colors and costumes in Zhuang Opera performances should be investigated.

9.3 Cultural and Social Dimensions

1) The role of Zhuang Opera in promoting and preserving the cultural identity of the Zhuang people should be studied.

- 2) The performance of Zhuang Opera in festivals or significant rituals of the Zhuang community should be explored.
 - 3) The response of modern audiences to Zhuang Opera in a changing social context should be examined.
- 9.4) Preservation and Promotion of Zhuang Opera
- 1) Strategies for preserving Zhuang Opera in the era of globalization should be studied.
 - 2) The impact of digital media and technology on the dissemination of Zhuang Opera should be investigated.
 - 3) The roles of local and international governments in supporting Zhuang Opera as an Intangible Cultural Heritage should be analyzed.

Acknowledgements:

This research project was financially supported by the College of Music, Mahasarakham University. The research team would like to thank the College of Music, Mahasarakham University for seeing the importance of studying this research in Zhuang Opera, was recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage of China, it is something that shows the greatness of Chinese culture. It is like a performance that can clearly reflect the way of life, arts, culture, customs, and traditions of the ancient Chinese people that have been practiced and passed down, and are very important and related to the beliefs of the Chinese people up until the present.

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