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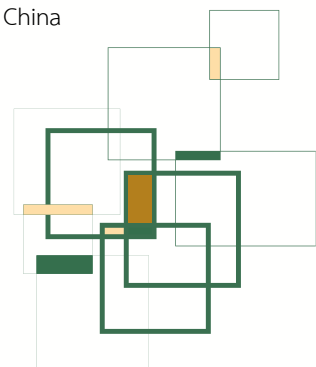
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About the Journal

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Asian Arts and Society Journal is an academic journal focused on disseminating works related to the arts. It emphasizes various fields such as journalism and communication, film and theater, design arts, dance, performing arts, and music. This journal highlights topics related to the changes of factors that impact the quality of life and society, aiming to create new knowledge and develop high-quality academic research for the benefit of society. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of expanding the academic role in society at large and the development of universities as sources of knowledge derived from the research of faculty, researchers and students, in order to advance towards a knowledge-based society.

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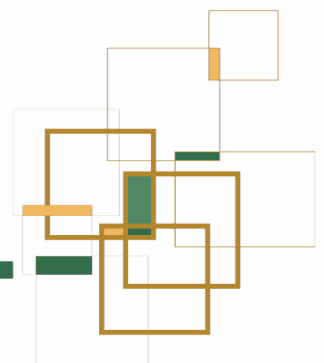
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Editor's Introduction

Asian Arts and Society Journal is an academic journal dedicated to the dissemination of rigorous research and scholarly inquiry in the broad field of arts and culture. Embracing interdisciplinary perspectives, the journal provides a platform for studies spanning architecture, visual arts, performing arts, music education, cultural communication, creative industries, and emerging technologies. Through these diverse approaches, we seek to advance knowledge, encourage critical dialogue, and contribute to sustainable cultural and social development.

This issue brings together six articles that collectively examine the dynamic and symbiotic relationships between art, culture, society, and technology across different regional and disciplinary contexts. The contributions explore how artistic traditions are preserved, transformed, communicated, and reimaged in response to modernization, globalization, and digital innovation.

The first article, “The Tale of the Venerable ‘Alī: Transmission, Development, and Changes of Persian Hamza-nama Narrative in the Central Javanese Wayang Golek Cěpak Rod Puppetry,” turns our attention to the performing arts of Indonesia. The study investigates wayang golek cěpak, a traditional coastal style of central Javanese rod puppetry, and highlights its unique Islamic repertoires. Drawing on a specific case study of the “Sahabat Ali” performance in the Pekalongan style, the article traces how the Persian epic Hamza-nama was absorbed into Javanese literature and integrated into this popular puppet theater, illustrating the historical fluidities of cross-cultural narratives.

The second article, “The Fabric of Modernity: Place, Memory, and Materiality in Yin Xiuzhen’s Portable Cities,” offers a compelling interdisciplinary analysis within contemporary visual arts. The study unpacks Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen’s seminal, ongoing series Portable Cities, arguing that it serves as a critical methodology for responding to global modernity. In an era marked by cultural homogenization and the erosion of local distinctiveness, the artist crafts miniature urban landscapes from city residents’ donated clothing inside standardized suitcases. Examining the suitcase as an active “worldmaking” apparatus, the author demonstrates how these works forge a resilient sense of belonging and place-making out of shared material heritage and personal memory amidst displacement.

The third article, “Cultural Inheritance and Technical Innovation of Mongolian Plucked Instruments from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of the Quintet ‘Daru Laga under the Blue Sky’,” shifts the focus to the modern transformation of ethnic music. Contemporary Mongolian instrumental composition increasingly seeks to integrate traditional cultural heritage with modern compositional techniques. Moving beyond conventional technical analysis, this study examines an original Mongolian-themed plucked quintet—featuring a unique instrumentation of liuqin, pipas, and zhongruan—across three dimensions: technical innovation, cultural significance, and performance execution. By contextualizing the work within Ordos Mongolian wedding customs and nomadic spiritual essence, the research provides a robust theoretical and practical framework for the global dissemination and preservation of ethnic chamber music.

The fourth article, “Rooting Dance Education in Primary and Secondary Schools: A Practical Examination of the Psychosomatic Value of Shanxi ‘Xiaohua Opera’,” addresses the aesthetic and therapeutic potential of traditional arts within basic education. In response to the psychological stress and emotional challenges faced by contemporary students, the study examines the integration of a local folk dance from Shanxi Province, “Xiaohua Opera,” into school curricula. Utilizing a mixed-method approach and drawing upon dramatherapy and dance/movement therapy (DMT) theories, the research demonstrates how participatory group dancing releases physical tension, fosters cultural identity, and mitigates social anxiety. The author advocates for a paradigm shift in dance education, moving away from competition toward inclusive, healing-focused practices—offering fresh insights into the sustainable, active preservation of traditional heritage.

The fifth article, “A Review and Future Prospects of Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons,” provides a systematic evaluation of public relations and organizational communication in China. Over forty years have passed since the establishment of China’s spokesperson system in 1983, corporate spokespersons have faced distinct developmental challenges compared to their government counterparts. As Chinese firms navigate an accelerating globalization process amidst shifting global economic conditions, the corporate spokesperson’s role in disseminating information, guiding public opinion, and managing crises has become increasingly vital. Grounded in a historical perspective, this article systematically synthesizes existing scholarly literature and explores potential areas for theoretical and practical innovation in the new era.

The final article, “From Tradition to Modernity: An Analysis of the Stylistic Evolution of Shanxi Piano Music,” offers an in-depth exploration of the instrumental regionalization of Chinese folk music. Shanxi’s rich folk music resources have long provided vital materials for creating nationalized piano music. Employing musical morphological analysis and an interdisciplinary approach, the study outlines a century of development wherein local traditional music has been integrated with Western compositional techniques. The author charts this evolution across three historical stages—native transplantation, Chinese-Western integration, and pluralistic innovation—and analyzes its stylistic laws through melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture. The findings delineate the artistic leap from oral folk transmission to formal notation, offering valuable theoretical reference for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

Together, the six articles in this issue illustrate the evolving landscapes of artistic practice, cultural heritage, education, communication, and technological innovation. We warmly invite our readers to engage with these contributions, which are available in both print and online formats, and we hope that this collection will inspire further research and dialogue at the intersection of arts and society. We look forward to accompanying you in future issues as we continue to explore the diverse and changing expressions of culture and creativity.

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The Tale of the Venerable ‘Alī: Transmission, Development, and Changes of Persian *Hamza-nama* Narrative in the Central Javanese *Wayang Golek Cepak* Rod Puppetry

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Abstract

Wayang golek cepak as a *Pasisir* or northern coastal style of central Javanese rod puppetry, same as its *golek menak* counterpart in the southern coast of this island, have been always identified with its Islamic repertoires, rather than the more popular Hindu-originated *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which became an integral part of the much widely recognized *wayang purwa* performances. Besides recounting the tales of 16th century Javanese Muslim saints (*wali sanga*) and local chronicles (*babad*), the *wayang golek*, both *cepak* and *menak*, were originally said to take the *Menak* tales as its main repertory. The *Menak* tales used in *wayang golek*, however, adapting a much loose form of the Persian epic *Hamza-nama*, which has been absorbed to Javanese literature through various ways. This article will try to trace the influences of *Hamza-nama* in this popular puppetry, studying the case of a performance with the story “*Sahabat Ali*” or “*Sayidina Ali*” in Pekalongan style *wayang golek cepak*.

Keywords: *Hamza-nama*; Islam; Java; rod puppetry; *wayang cepak*; *wayang menak*

1. Introduction

The world of *wayang* puppetry as a “national theatre” of Java -- borrowing Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ (1817) terminology -- is nearly identical with Hindu-derived *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics. Although it is said that some of Javanese *walis* using the medium to preach Islam, certainly in its esoteric *tasawuf* form rather than the stricter *fiqh jurisprudence* -- a method that will be much popular in later centuries -- but those Indian epics still prevails as its main themes. Nevertheless, the *Sĕrat Cĕnthini* text which composed around 1814-1815 AD in Java by Surakartan court poets --almost all of them were from *santri* or devout Muslim scholars origin -- claimed that these Hindu stories are only used for allegories, while the essential meaning on the *wayang* performances still refers to Sufistic values (see Kamajaya, 1985[VII]). While the ideas of the Islam-Hindu synthesis as the nature of modern *wayang* performances widely accepted in inland Java, particularly promoted by the *Kratons* or courts in this area, the “independent” regions of *Pasisir* (coastal Java) develop their own cultural statements, embracing the much explicit form of Islamic tales such as *Menak* and *Ambiya*, which dealt with the stories of Middle Eastern prophets, kings, and heroes, as the ideal role model for the Muslims, rather than Hindu kings and warriors which were viewed as *kafir* (infidels) by some parts of *Pasisir* Javanese Muslims, which

are more devout in *fiqh* compared with their inland fellows. This made the wayang golek with their Islamic stories (before the rise of Sundanese *wayang golek purwa* in mid-1800s) found their fertile locus in both northern and southern coasts of Java, which gained their political and cultural independence particularly after Javanese War (1825-1830 AD), where the Dutch colonial government dismissed their status as tributary *mancanagara* regencies to central Javanese *Kratons* (see Houben, 1994).

Albeit the fact that Kangjeng Ratu Pakubuwana, the queen consort of Pakubuwana I (1708-1719) herself that sponsored the translation and adaptation of *Menak* tales along with the other Islamic tales such as *Yusuf* (the Tale of Prophet Joseph) and *Iskandar* (the Tale of Alexander the Great) to the courtly Javanese literature (Sudewa, 1995; see also Ricklefs, 1998), the *Menak*-themed puppetry never been popular in the courtly artistic life. Traditional chronicles such as *Sastramiruda* recorded that the *wayang menak* was notorious for its reputation in bringing ill fate to their sponsors and aficionados, a thing that prevented Javanese kingdom during the reign of Pakubuwana II (1726-1742 in Kartasura; 1745-1749 in Surakarta) to adopt this *Pasisir* performance as courtly art (Sajid, 1971; Kusumadilaga, 1999). This belief prevails in Surakarta, but not in Yogyakarta since Hamengkubuwana IX (1940-1988) decided to adapt *wayang golek menak* stories in the form of dance drama (*wayang wong golek menak*) (Wijanarko, 1991). However, the *wayang golek menak* itself performed regularly in the *Kraton* for tourists' spectacle until today (2025), but never in ritual significance like *wayang purwa* does.

On the other side, the life of *wayang menak* in *Pasisir*, although being suppressed by the much popular performances such as spectacular format of *wayang purwa* or modern entertainments like *dangdut* music or pop concerts, still survived in the basis of their supporters. The former Urut Sewu region in Kebumen, particularly in Ambal and Mirit districts serves as the estuary of southern-style *wayang golek menak*; while in the north coast of Java, its *wayang golek cepak* counterpart still enjoyed a wide reception from its audiences, spreading vast from Batang regency in the easternmost to Subang in West Java as the westernmost locus of this performance. In 1950s to 1970s, there was also an enclave of *wayang menak* performance in Cimindi, Bandung, under the name of *wayang bendo*. But in the first quarter of this century, however, its popularity has drastically decreased. Both of this *wayang menak* style are expected to come from a single source: while Pekalongan *wayang cepak* puppeteers clearly recognize their relationship with larger *Menak*-based *wayang golek* culture in Tegal and Cirebon, Kebumen *wayang golek menak* puppeteers found their performance obscurely connected with Tegal in some cases. Bambang Suwarno, a Surakarta *wayang purwa* puppeteer and former apprentice of the late Sindu Jotaryono (d. 1980s), a prominent *wayang golek menak* puppeteer from Kebumen, claimed that before nowadays the performances used Yogyakarta-style *Bondhet Mataram* as musical repertoire for the first act, the older puppeteers would use *Bondhet Tegal* (Tegal-style *Bondhet* melodies) or *Bondhet Keningkiran* (interview November 2025). The late Sunarto Sindu, son of Sindu Jotaryono, also acknowledged this connection in the case of pointed *groda* crowns, which are similar to Tegal's *wayang cepak*, instead of the curvy one which much alike "courtly" style of *wayang purwa*. Hence, it could be temporarily implied that both Kebumen and Pekalongan style of *wayang golek menak* or *cepak* have been interconnected each other in the past, since they shared a common ancestor from the old cultural centre of *Pasisir* in Cirebon and Tegal, which has a long history back to the early development of Islam in 16th century Java (see Petersen, 1993; Sunarto, 2009).

Figure 1

Old Central Javanese Wayang Golek Puppets from Early 20th Century, the Collection of Museum Radyapustaka Surakarta.



Note. The pointed groda crowns of the first, third, and fifth wayang figures from the left, showing the traces of their Pasisir origin. The second figure from the left, however, has the curved groda as courtly Javanese wayang purwa. Photographed by Rudy Wiratama (2014).

The main repertoires of both *wayang golek menak* traditions in north and south coasts of Java are revolved around the *Menak* epic, a loosely adapted tales about the life and deeds of semi-legendary Amir Ambyah or Wong Agung (“the Great Man”) Jayengrana, who was partly based on historical Hamza ibn ‘Abdul Mutallib (d. 625), the paternal uncle of prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, who was ardently supported this religion and martyred in the battle of Uhud. The tales themselves were not originally Javanese inventions, but sourced from Persian *Qissa-i Amir Hamza* or *Hamza-nama*, which made its way to Java through its 16th century Malay adaptation, and then absorbed to the local culture both in the form of *Pasisir* and courtly literary receptions produced in 17th to 19th century (Ronkel, 1895; see also Purbatjaraka, 1941). Apart from the critical reviews about its historicity, the *Hamza-nama* or *Qissa-i Emir Hamza*, later defined by Philippus van Ronkel as “the Amir Hamzah romance”, came into the audience as a result of complex intertwine between history of Islam in the prophet’s age (*sirah nabawiyah* or *tarikh*), epics adapted from Persian *Shahnameh*, the change and development of the later hagiography of 9th century rebellious Hamza (*Maghazi Hamza ibn ‘Abdullah*), and even some other romances developed in Persian environments such as the Alexander romance (*Sikander-nameh*) and others. The Javanese adaptation of Hamza-epic, called as *Menak*, according to Purbatjaraka and Ronkel, experienced a further development: a page from Malay *Amir Hamza*, can be adapted tenfold in its Javanese version, while the Malay version itself could be larger than the *dastan* version of Urdu and Persian language. This development not only changed the face of

the *Hamza-nama* to *Menak* that is closer to “Javanese” sense, but also accommodate the aspirations of the poets, while injecting the local fictional universe sourced from indigenous *Panji* to even Indic *Bharatayuda* into it, enriching the text in all aspects.

The adventurous life of legendary Hamza, as well as historical one, ended abruptly with his death (and also all of his remaining seventy comrades). While in canonical history it happened in the battle of Uhud, but the romance version has it happened in the great war between huge *kafir* armies of Sassanian Persian and *devs* with the Muslim warriors of Madinah, involving the aid from Muslim *jinns* under Qorayshi’s (in Javanese: Kuraisin or Purwaisin, the only daughter of Hamza) command. In the Javanese tradition, there were any report of the local *dhalang* (puppeteer) who dared to play this episode, since they are very frightened with the consequences (Petersen, 1993). They also argued that, according to the Sunni belief they embrace, the active presence of prophet Muhammad as the second main protagonist along with the venerated *sahaba* (companions) made the performance impossible, since the *ulama* (clergymen) prohibit them from doing so. Even Sindu Jotaryono himself reported by Sunarto never did the concluding stories from *Menak*, beginning with the *Jaminambar* episode, in which prophet Muhammad has born, to avoid his direct personification through any puppets. Interestingly, in the *pakēm* or handbook of each *dhalangs*, this episode has always been written. Sunarto himself declared that after the death of Jayengrana or legendary Hamza, there are still a part of *Menak* stories that categorized as *Menak Ngēsam* (literally means “the Levant Menak”), which took the settings in the Caliphate age, involving the offsprings of *Menak* heroes, a thing that Sunarto compared with *wayang madya* or *wayang gēdhog* as the performances of post-Mahabharata tales (Sunarto, interview 2020). However, the *Menak Ngēsam* stories are less popular, and there are only a few of the *wayang golek* puppeteers who recognized this genre. The other *dhalangs* of *wayang menak* use the other stories such as *Babad* (Javanese historical chronicle) or even improved stories (*Menakpang*) rather than the *Ngēsam* tales, to give variations for their audiences. A prominent senior *wayang golek* puppeteer from Kebumen, the late Ki Basuki Hendropriayitno, even performed the *sirah* version of the *sahabas* following the popularity of a Qatar television series *Omar* (2012) which was broadcasted in Indonesia. Thus, it broadened the perspective of *Menak* repertoire used in *wayang golek*, not only from legendary “history” based on Persian literature, but also from a much canonical history accepted by modern-progressive Muslims in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, in the northcoast Java, even that the performance of *Menak* stories diminished along with the rise of *Babad* tales as the preferred repertoire of *wayang golek cēpak* in the much syncretized *abangan* territories, the story of Baginda Ali (the Venerated ‘Ali), Sayidina Ali (Our Master ‘Ali), or Sahabat Ali (‘Ali the Companion) still enjoyed popularity as a choice for the performances held in *Lēgēna* or *Apit* (communal feasts between Shawwal and Dhu’lhijjah months) or other rituals involving *wayang golek menak* in the region of Batang and Pekalongan regencies. This *lakon* or repertoire, along with its variations, said to be passed orally for generations, despite of criticisms it received from the growing progressive Muslims, both from *Ahlussunnah waljama’ah* and Salafi Sunni sects. It recounted the heroic deeds of ‘Ali (ibn Abu Talib), cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, and hence also a nephew of both legendary and historical Hamza from his paternal lineage. The synopsis of the *lakon* Baginda Ali could be sum up as follows:

The *kafir* king of Mesir (Egypt), Raja Kandak, who has the amulet *Kalarukmin*, which somehow came to his possession from the late Amir Ambyah after his death in Lakat, dreamed of his throne drowning in a severe flood came from the East. Then, he addressed an oracle to explain his odd dream, since Egypt has never experienced this kind of flood before. The oracle prophesied the fall of Egypt in the hand of a prophet came from Mecca, which located eastwards of this



kingdom. Enraged of the fact that the prophet came from an illiterate background from a small tribe in Arabia, Raja Kandak commanded two of his vassals, Isbandar and Iskiyan (or Taskin) to besiege Mecca and catch Muhammad, dead or alive. The army departed from Egypt and begin to attack the Holy City. Two of Muhammad's loyal generals, Umar and Usman, failed to stop the rampage of Egyptian army, retreats. A celestial beast, *pěksi burok* (literally means "the Buraq bird") enter the battle and vanquished a large number of Egyptian army. The commanders of Egyptians then bring the amulet *Kalarukmin*, caused *pěksi burok* to flee. The Muslim army seek for the new commander, but their strongest general, Ali, is laying sick in his residence, with his wife *dewi* Fatimah faithfully take care of him. The mysterious man then come to the presence of Ali, delivering the news about the retreat of Muslim warriors, while prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakar (usually the prophet not being portrayed directly), being surrounded and outnumbered by *kafir* army, took a shelter in an unknown cave. The enraged Ali then jumped off his bed, got his horse ready, and took his venerable sword *Dul-pakar* (*Dhu'l Faqar*) to the battlefield. With all of his bravery, Ali wiped out many *kafir* armies, although the later party deployed more and more reinforcements, which make Ali exhausted. He then noticed a house in the middle of battlefield, where an old woman is cooking a *jěnan* (porridge). Being hungry, Ali ask for the porridge from the old woman, who voluntarily give it to him. Ali tried to eat the hot porridge with full efforts, but never succeed. The old woman then suggested Ali to start eat the porridge from the side instead of the middle of the bowl. Ali found that the porridge is easier to eat and finished a full bowl of it. Inspired with the old woman's suggestion, Ali then attacked the *kafir* army from the outermost front, and finally he captured their generals. The amulet *Kalarukmin* then confiscated and presented as war booty to the prophet, while these three generals of *kafir* army surrendered and accept Islam as their religion (as retold by Aditya Sabda Anindhita, a *wayang golek* puppeteer from Pekalongan, in interview on 7th December, 2025)

This story of Baginda Ali, then, showed an intertwine between the *Menak* world, represented only by the appearance of ex-Amir Ambyah's amulet, *Kalarukmin*, with the *sirah* world represented by the portrayal of prominent *sahabas* of the prophet: Ali, Umar, Usman, and sometimes also Abu Bakar. In past times, even the prophet himself also portrayed in puppet, borrowing the figure resembling Vishnu-incarnated Prabu Rama from *Ramayana*. This practice, however, existed in the Sunni-dominated region of Pekalongan until 1970s, and abandoned after some of senior *dhalangs* or puppeteers embraced the more orthodox form of Islam and even performed *hajj* pilgrims to achieve the title "Ki Haji"-- two of them are the popular Haji Rochim and Haji Tori (Toriquir-Rahman)-- which made their societal level equal to Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul 'Ulama's "Kyai Haji" or Muslim preachers. This made these local *kyais* and even Hadrami-descent *habaib* able to access the puppetry environment and suggested some changes, include the prohibition of portraying the prophet, fixing the *wayang golek cěpak* performance to be fit and relevant with recent conditions of contemporary Islam practiced in the local surroundings. Despite of this drastic change in Pekalongan's society, the story of Baginda Ali survived, but also left them --the puppeteers, audiences, and *kyais*-- puzzled: Aditya, a young popular *dhalang wayang golek cěpak* from Doro district, Pekalongan, has ever asked by the *ulamas* about what literature used as the source of this rod puppet performance, since there is no stories resembling the events in this *lakon* in any *sirah* or *tarik* texts. Besides, the absence of Jayengrana and his popular comrades such as Lamdahur, Umar Maya, Umar Madi, or Maktal, made the *lakon* hardly connected with the series of *Menak* tales, and finally, out of distress, he can only replied that this *lakon* is the mixtures between "*Arab kaliyan Jawa*" (Arabic and Javanese) tales, without referring to any textual traditions.

Questions arise from this case, since there is a problem in solving whether this *lakon* is came from *Menak* tradition or else. These questions are concerning about (a) how does the story of Sahabat Ali connected both with Persian *Hamza-nama* and Javano-Islamic textual roots through its narrative concepts? (b) how is the transmission, developmental, and change process of the Amir-Hamzah romance-originated story to an independent *lakon* in the world of central Javanese *wayang golek cĕpak*? And last but not least, (c) what is the position of the *lakon* Sahabat Ali in the middle of the Central Javanese audience today?

This article will answer this problem through literary and performance approaches as an effort to detect the hypotetized influence of *Hamza-nama* and *sirah nabawiyah* or *tarikh* texts in the *lakon*. This will also answer the other questions potentially rise from this problem, which is “how did this *lakon* eventually created” through the perspective of Javanese belief and *wayang* dramaturgy.

2. Discussions

Locating the Role of *Menak* and Ali in the *Menak* Text The earlier writers and scholars in the field of Javanology, beginning with Raffles in his famous work the *History of Java*, suggested that the influence of Arabic (or more appropriately: Islamic) literature to the Javanese language and poetry is depicted as “has made but little or no inroad to the language” and “exclusively confined to matters of religion” (Raffles, 1817), while in the other chapter he also cited the parts of *Jowar Manik* as an example of “modern Javanese romance” without noticing that the work came as the Javanese adaptation of Malay *Hikayat Jauhar Manikam*, which came from the Persian origin (see Pane, 1987). Raffles’ statement, however, not including the *Amir Hamzah* romance --or *Menak* in some Javanese contexts, as a prominent literary works of the age, compared with the *Bratayuda* and other *jarwa* texts that received lengthy highlights on Raffles’ writings.

Later prominent scholar such as MC Ricklefs, on contrary with the previous Western writers that less appreciated the Javanese Islamic literature, addressed the cross-cultural nature of the works from the Mataram era (1586-1677 AD) and still greatly appreciated in the early reign of Pakubuwana II (1726-1742 AD) of Kartasura (Ricklefs, 1998). He noted that some well-known literary works in this era, *Caritanira Askandar* (The Story of Alexander) and *Yusup* (the Story of Joseph) denotatively mentioned their foreign origins: from Arab or Persian to Malay world, then transmitted further to *Giri Kadaton* in coastal East Java, and finally brought into Mataram’s cultural landscape. The *Menak*, on the other hand, also bearing the similar indication. While some people can directly connect the Javanese name Amir Ambyah into Malay *Amir Hamzah* as identical with Persian-Urdu *Amir Hamza*, Purbatjaraka stated that deeper into the structure, the traces of the cultural translation from the Persian origin to Malay adaptation and then Javanese renderings still can be clearly found in the *Menak* texts, mainly in the Kartasura and Yasadipura versions (Purbatjaraka, 1941).

Apart from the discourse about how did the *Menak* narrative reached the heart of central Java, faraway from its Persian origin, the Javanese story of legendary Hamza almost has been started from the same point with its *dastan* counterpart: from retelling of the events regarding his birth in Mecca from the family of Abdul-Muntalip the son of *Bagendha* Asim (‘Abd-al Mutallib ibn Hashim), together with his paternal cousin Umar Maya, who will be a loyal comrade during his entire adventure in the future. Gifted with outstanding strength and martial skills, he gradually transformed from a single warrior to a respected warlord with many kings and knights as his comrades with the epithet Wong Agung Jayengrana or “The Victorious Great Man of the Battle”. His career increased until he attracted the attention of Zoroastrian king Nusirwan, the king of *Mĕdayin* (derived from “Mada’in”, Arabic rendering for Ctesiphon, Sassanid’s capital) himself,

who, despite giving his daughter Muninggar as Jayengrana's bride, refused to accept the offer of his son-in-law to embrace the so-called *Agama Ibrahim* ("Abraham's Religion"). He was eventually joined the campaigns of Muhammad the prophet, and ending his life with his martyrdom against the ambush of king Lakat and *Jěnggi*, who will be defeated in the future by the hands of Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and practically also Hamza's nephew, who was seen as the ideal replacement from the later in the term of Muslim warriorhood (see Resowidjojo, 1941; Pritchett, 1991; also Petersen, 1993).

From the summary above, it can be implied that in the *Menak* world, there are two prominent protagonists serves as ideal example for Javanese-Islam knightly nobles (*satriya*), one of them is Hamza, along with his Javanese epithets Jayengrana or Wiradimurti (the Manifestation of Bravery), and the second is *Bagendha* (the Venerated) Ali, who is also recognized in the text as Ali Murtala (from the Arabic Murtadha or Persian Murteza which means "the Blessed One"). Jayengrana, bringing his Abrahamic faith, acted as a hero who paved the way for the last prophet. He "cleaned" this way with destroying the kingdoms of sorcery (in Persian *dastan* termed as *tilismat*, a word that further absorbed by Javanese of *Talsamat*), kingdoms of devils and cannibals (*běkasakan* and *buta*), and also minimizing the domains of the *kafir* rulers. The territory of Jayengrana's sovereignty, according to *Menak* text, spreading wide covering both historical and mythological realms such as *Sarandip* in Srilanka, *Jamintoran* in Central Asia, to *Parangakik* in Palestine and also China. However, the *padhalangan* or puppeteer's exegesis on this may be vary, since Sunarto Sindu also stated that the bizarre world of *Jaminambar* could be located in America, or the kingdom with robotic army of *Mukadam* (in the *Menakpang* or "branch" *Menak* story of *Rěngganis* romance) could be the present Japan (see Petersen, 1993). In the other hand, the brief presence of *Bagendha* Ali Murtala in the last volume of *Menak* text of Yasadipura and Malay *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* represented a continuum of Jayengrana's achievements in securing the Islamic "dynasty", while in the historical accounts the descendants of historical 'Ali (called as 'Alawy or *Ahlilbayt*) rarely achieved political supremacy while being oppressed by the ruling dynasty such as the Umayyads, or only positioned as a supernatural symbol by some other dynasties, without giving them access to the *Realpolitik*. Javanese belief viewed this differently, by placing Ali as their remote ancestor from the *paněngěn* (literally means "the right-side" genealogy). They also placed the Mahabharata heroes and Hindu kings as their ancestors from the *pangiwa* (literally means "the left-side" genealogy), which guaranteed the legitimacy of the Mataram dynasty from the all sides, surpassing the other lineages in the Javanese power contestation (Jaques, 2006; see also Padmasusastra's 1902 *Sajarah Dalěm*). Thus, it can be temporarily stated that in the *Menak* world, Jayengrana represents guardian of the past, while Ali Murtala viewed as the prophet's future successor, both in religious (*wahyu wilayah*) or political authority (*wahyu kukumah*), but not in the term of the prophethood (*wahyu nubuawah* or *nurbuwah*).

The Persian and Urdu *dastans* often modelled the character of Hamza from the other epic, who was the legendary version of Alexander the Great in *Sikandarnamah* text. In the *dastan* of Amir Hamza or *Hamza-nama* itself, Hamza also portrayed with the epithet *sikandar-e-tsaani* or "the Second Alexander", referring to the similarity of events experienced (in conquering the East and West hemispheres, or in Javanese known as *Masrikmahrib*, from Arabic words *masyriq* and *maghrib*) by the hero with this Parsi-Greek-Macedonian legendary monarch (Pritchett, 1991). Aside of this identification, van Ronkel argued that the story of legendary Hamza copied the biography of *Shahnameh*'s Rustam in many aspects, i.e. his encounters with various *divs* --which translated as *jin kafir* in both Malay and Javanese versions-- and also the abundant tales dealing with *razm* (warfare), *bazm* (luxuries), *tilism* (magic or sorcery), and *ayyari* (espionages), which



formed the entire typical Persian epic. While the fabulous Persian Rustam did not made his way to the interest of Javanese readers, except a brief mention of him in *Menak* as the ancestor of antagonist Kistaham (Gustahm in Persian), a general of Nusirwan, the legendary Alexander the Great (Askandar Dilkarnaeni) succeed in entering the realm of Javanese literature, given that his achievement as the *rajadiraja* (Malay) or *shahanshah* (Persian) is congruent with the idea of Javanese *susuhunan* (literally “one who must placed above the head”, or simply means “emperor”). The Javanese rendering of *Sikandarnamēh* itself, called as *Iskandar Jawi* or *Caritanira Askandar*, specially commissioned in 1729 by the queen dowager Kanjēng Ratu Balitar or Ratu Pakubuwana, consort of the late Pakubuwana I (1708-1719) to spiritually support the reign of his newly installed grandson king, Pakubuwana II (1726-1742 Kartasura; 1745-1749 Surakarta) who was also entitled as *susuhunan* instead of the Hindu-Javanese styled *prabu* like his shortly reigned father, Prabu Amangkurat Jawi or Amangkurat IV (1719-1726) (see Ricklefs, 1998). Jayengrana himself, entitled as Sultan, not Sunan, somewhat never destined as the progenitor of Javanese kings and nobles like Ali did, since the Persian *dastan* and Malay *hikayat* recounted about his total loss of sons and grandsons, as well as his comrades except ‘Amr ibn Umayyah (Umar Maya) before the battle of Lakat or Uhud. The Javanese *Menak* of Yasadipuran mentioned that Jayengrana, who shed his illustrious epithets and using the name *Sayidina* Ambyah during his *sahaba* period, only left an almost unpopular nine-year-old grandson named Sahid, who didn’t join the last *Menak* battle due to his underage condition (see *Menak Lakat* vol. 1). Events of his later life was never exposed after the death of his grandfather, as the focus of *Menak* shifted to Ali as “the second Hamza”. The other account on the later offspring of Hamza depicted in the *Menak Purwakandha* episode in a distant prophecy told by the hermit *Seh Tartus* or Kakim MahribinMaridin (the Wise Man of the West) to Isnaningsih, Jayengrana’s consort from Burudangin (in Malay: Barda’i or Azerbaijani origin), concerning the later’s defeat after blinded by Masrukakim, sorcerer of the antagonist Samasrawi or Matari Akbar. Tartus’prophecy was recorded on the 32nd canto of *Dhandhanggula* metre below:

33. malah ing dalu kongsi akèpi | alon umatur anèng ing marga | dhuh gusti dèn wingit anggèr
| kula supênèng dalu | tinarima lampah sang dèwi | tulung prang tulung pangan | benjing-
benjingipun | prapta ing kiyamat sugra | ratunipun raka paduka sang aji | Prabu Tasangsulngalam ||

34. angingoni turun Pusêr Bumi | malah salin sarengate pisan | panutup nabi turune | inggih
ingon saking Rum | kang amanjing ing Mekah benjing | ing Rum dadi satunggal | tèmbe ratunipun
| tan liyan kang darbe têdhak | amung kangjêng raka paduka sang aji | lawan têrah paduka ||

35. gilir-gilir datan wontên malih | sami rukun trahing raka tuwan | ingkang ngriyini ratune |
Ngusmanjop tampinipun | praptanipun turun sang dèwi | dadose sapangandhap | ngratoni tanah
Rum | amiji ingon mring Mèkah | duk samana pinacak Kakim Waridin | munggèng ing kitabira||

Translation:

33. Even in the night, he dreamed (because of the abundant aid from Burudangin to help the Arab army)| then he (Maridin) told (Isnaningsih) softly on the way| “Your Majesty, please keep it secret|for I have dreamed last night| that God pleased with your deed| helping Arab army with reinforcements and food| in the future| until the arrival of *kiyamat sugra* (“small apocalypse”, which is a monarch’s death)| the king will be still your elder brother| Prabu Tasangsulngalam||

34. [he will] fed the descendants from *Puser Bumi* (“the Centre of the Earth”, which is Mecca)| even after the change of the religion | to the descendant of the Last Prophet| still be fed by the Rum| who will conquer the Mecca in the future| [and] it will be united with Rum| and the kings| are certainly the offsprings|[who came] only from your elder brother the king| and also your progenies||

35. Both of them shifted time by time| they will be harmonious with each other| and the first to become king| will be Ngusmanjop, as he will receive [the boon]| he will come from your lineage| so until the generations| his progeny will rule the land of Rum| and supplying the food for Mecca”| then [the prophecy] was written by Waridin the Wise| into his book|| (*Yasadipura I, Menak Purwakandha* vol. II, Balai Pustaka Edition, 1935:67)

Although it is clear that Yasadipura's *Menak* emphasize the forthcoming of the future kings of Rum from Jayengrana's lineage through Isnaningsih, the Rum-Azerbaijani princess, but the indications are obscure: when Mahribin or Waridin or Maridin prophesied about the future of Tasangsulngalam, one of the comrades of Jayengrana, in the battle against Purwakandha, he stated that he will be the king of Rum or Burudangin after this battle. The future kings of Rum, who are the offsprings of Tasangsulngalam, will maintain a good relationship with the Meccans, and even the Rum will be a permanent ally and supporter of Muslims. Then in the distant future, the day will come for Ngusmanjop, a descendant of Jayengrana and Isnaningsih, to reign this long-established kingdom to continue this tradition. The name of Ngusmanjop itself was a strange and unpopular name in Islamic history, even in the Javanese renderings. But in the older published version of Yasadipura's *Menak* by Van Dorp (1929), the name Ngusmanjop written as Ngusman Jokan, which reminded us to the title Johan, “champion” in Malay (see vol. V: 289). Thus, if we read this epithet as Javanese spelling of ‘Utsman Johan (Uthman the Champion), so it could be an equivalent with Turkish *Osman-gazi*, which was an epithet of first Ottoman king, Osman I (1299-1323). Following this opinion, it is understandable that Javanese poets never placed Jayengrana as their king's *luluhur* or noble ancestors, because his actual role is as the *cikal-bakal* (founder) of a distant kingdom of Java, which is Ottoman Turkey as a continuation of semi-legendary Rum or *Ngěrum*. The Javanese tradition, which believed in the binary system of everything, viewed the existence of Rum as a “*sabrang Islam*” or non-Javanese Islamic entity “that should be there” to be a counterpart of the Islamic Javanese to keep the harmonious world both in *Masrik* and *Mahrib* realms. The Javanese *jangka* (prophecies) texts themselves also stated that the Rum kings will eventually come to Java before the end of time, to restore the harmony in Java after the “non-Islam non-Javanese” entities, named as *Nusapřnggi* or *Sřnggi* intervened the political life of Javanese and flipped the proper social order upside-down, against the Islam and Javanese values.

The role of ‘Ali, on the other side, reflected the other source for Javanese legitimacy on Islamic kingship. Through the line of Husain ibn ‘Ali, the second son of this fourth Rashidun caliph, the lineage connected to Javanese kings and nobles via his descendant Syekh Jumadil Kubra and then several *walis* from Walisanga. Different with Hamza with his worldly achievements, ‘Ali portrayed in the *Menak* text as a much esoteric depiction of a Muslim *satriya*. While he also has some vassals, two of them are Raja Kopah (king of Kufah, Iraq) and Raja Babil (king of Babil, Iraq), but he was never depicted in a glorious manner like Hamza or Jayengrana. Although the *Menak* text imagined the Javanese standards of *satriya* for ‘Ali, such as his noble residence with *dalěm kasatriyan* layouts, furnished with *kori* (gates), *pura* (castle), and other buildings, but the luxuries of the “*kraton Madinah*”, which is the residence of the prophet, his family, and his companions was no match with the Jayengrana's Kuparman or Nusirwan's Mědhayin. During the plot of *Menak Lakat* episode of Yasadipura's *Menak* (which the older *Menak Kartasura* didn't include), the significant role of ‘Ali increased: a sudden mention of mighty ‘Ali, compared with the other three sahabas which are Abu Bakar, Ngusman, and Ngumar as the *kadeyan* (companion) of the prophet, referred to a typical stratification of Javanese *Panji* texts, appeared in the conversation of the king Jěnggi with his vassal Bardanas. After the *Menak* text losing its central protagonist in the middle of second volume of *Menak Lakat*, then the position was suddenly replaced with the presence of Ngali Murtala, the cousin and son-in-law of



the prophet, and also an ancestor of both Arabian *auliya* (saints, sometimes rendered in Indic-Javanese style as *pandhita* or “priests”) and Javanese post-Hindu kings and nobles. The similar view on ‘Ali’s characteristics also found in the Persian and Malay versions of this Hamza-epic, but rather showed in different degrees: in the Persian manuscript of *Qissa-i Amir Hamzah* from Munich and Dresden collection, van Ronkel reported that no mention of ‘Ali as the main hero in the concluding part of this epic, since Qoraishah (Javanese Kuraisin) took the revenge of the last enemy of Hamza. In the Persian and Urdu version, the role of the last antagonist was attributed to the mother of Pur-e-Hind, an Indian prince who slain by Hamza in the last battle against Persian Hurmuz, son of Naushervan. Van Ronkel further noticed that there is a genuine Malay additions to the Hamza-epic, which could not be found in neither of two Persian *Qissa* manuscripts examined by him. The additions comprises more than one-seventh portion of Malay *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*, and mainly recounted about the last events of the epic, beginning from the journey of Badi’uz-Zaman (Javanese Iman Suwangsa) to Zemin Turan (Javanese Jamintoran), to the lengthy passages about the war in Zemin ‘Ambar (Jaminambar) and the last days of Hamza and his comrades. After the death of Hamza and his horse Ashqar-Diuzada (Javanese *Sĕkardiyu* or *Sĕkarduwijan*), then in the *tjaritera* (episode) number 91, the story about the ill ‘Ali appeared, adapted in Javanese *Menak* as the final episode of the epic, adding the marriage between him and Kuraisin, which entangled two branches of Hashimite legitimacy, laying a foundation for other *hikayats* such as *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyah* and so on.

Hence, in the Javanese *Menak*, the role of Jayengrana and Ali Murtala could be identified as a complementary on each other. Their roles on the *Menak* world, each deals with a different sides of Islam from Javanese eyes: while Jayengrana represents the past, legendary, and distant nature of Islam, which inevitably came from “*sabrang*” realm but not as a part of a demonized “*sabrang*” classifications in the other Javanese literary works, the figure of ‘Ali represents a more esoteric, spiritual, and ascetic side of Islam, in which Javanese believe as congruent with the Hindu-influenced *sĕkti* or opulent nature that an ideal *satriya* should be. This view also echoed on the *Wedhatama* as one of Javanese classic, where the figure of Mataram’s founder, Panĕmbahan Senapati (r. 1589-1601) was depicted not in term of his military success, but rather, Mangkunagara IV (r.1853-1881) as the text’s composer stressed the focus of this part of the didactic-moralistic text on the asceticism and esoteric path that Senapati took to achieve not only political triumph over his opponents, but also harmonious relationship with the other people (*amamangun karyenak tyasing sasama*). This Javanese idea, of course, is very popular as a major theme of *wayang* performances in all genres, in which the knights with ascetic qualities (*satriya pinandhita*) such as Arjuna or Rama considered as the most exemplary model for the contemporary nobles, rather than the others who depended on physical strength and temperamental nature such as Baladewa or Bhima, although the later were also highly appreciated.

This point of view led us to the further discussion about the forming of *lakon wayang golek cĕpak* about “the venerated ‘Ali” (Bagendha Ali) in the ecosystem of central Javanese rod puppetry, observed from the perspective of the Javanese symbolic interactionism and the more pragmatic *wayang* dramaturgy that will be explained below.

The *Lakon* “Bagendha Ali” Nowadays: Cultural Bargain in a Changing Society The story of Bagendha Ali that circulates on the environment of Javanese *wayang golek cĕpak* in coastal Pekalongan area -- in the middle of the increasing performances of *lakon babad* -- has proven to be a part of *Menak* stories, although many puppeteers who performed this were unaware about the source of the tale, while the other popular *Menak* stories such as *Menak Lare* or *Raden Iman Suwangsa* still enjoyed by northern coastal Java’s audiences with full consciousness of its Persian or Middle Eastern nature instead of local history. But in the other hand, the *Menak* characteristic

of this *lakon* has been diminished with the absence of key characters such as Jayengrana, Umar Maya, Umar Madi, or the antagonists duo Nusrwan and Patih Bestak, which made the audiences and even the puppeteers themselves hardly recognize (*pangling*). Nevertheless, the presence of the prophet (*Kanjeng Nabi*), his prominent companions (*sahabat*), and particularly the significant role of Bagendha or *Sayidina Ali* signifies the era of the post-*Menak* Islamic tales, which also recounted in the *Menak* edition of *Yasadipura I*.

Resowidjojo (1941) stated that there are at least two type of *Menak* texts published in the early 20th century Java. The first type, which stated as *Menak ingkang sampun limrah* (the “common” text of *Menak*) consists of eleven volumes, started from *Menak Lare* to *Menak Talsamat* (without *Menak Lakat*). The second type, which Resowidjojo addressed as *Menak Bale Poestaka*, published in twenty-four volumes, started with the pre-Hamza stories of *Menak Sarehas*, and ended with the *Menak Lakat*. The first *Menak* category, although not being mentioned in Resowidjojo’s Register, might be the Van Dorp’s edition which consisted of seven published volumes. The last reprint of Van Dorp’s version was preceding the *Bale Poestaka* edition almost a decade, while it was claimed by Tashadi (et.al., 1993) that the later version was also use the Van Dorp’s publishing source, and that both of these published editions *Menak* has been further “censored from religious contents by the Dutch”. Besides the “major” *Menak* texts distributed in the early 20th century Javanese reader sourced from *Yasadipura*’s rendition, there were also the other versions of *Menak*, from the Kartasura’s *Menak* from 1715 to mid 19th century *Menak Suryanglẽmbara* from Yogyakarta origin. Outside the Javanese *Kratons*’ scriptoria, *Menak* texts also produced in many regions other than Pasisir. Some *Menak* manuscripts came from peripheral Central and East Java with *wayang*-ized imagery, such as the British Library’s *Menak* (MSS Jav 45) from Grobogan, or the *wayang purwa*-style illustrated *Menak* manuscript from Mpu Tantular Museum, Sidoarjo (see Lutfi, et.al., 2019). Even in the 1980 interview with Pusat Kesenian Jawa Tengah (PKJT--Central Java Art Centre, now Taman Budaya Jawa Tengah or Central Java Cultural Park), Sindu Jotaryono, a popular *dhalang* of southern-style *wayang golek menak*, stated that he acquired his *lakons* from a *pegon* (Javanese-Arabic)-scripted manuscript of *Menak*, while two major versions aforementioned are both written in standard Javanese script (*aksara wyanjana* or *hanacaraka*) (the late Sunarto Sindhu stated that his *pakẽm* or handbook copied from Kedu region, in the heart of central Java). Therefore, this also indicates the existence of other variants of *Menak* in the Javanese contexts through various channels of transmission, implying the further narrative variations in each versions, that represented in the vast range of performances, including the *wayang* stories.

The story of *Sayidina Ali* itself showed the influence of *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* through the presence of Raja Kandak and his brother, Raja Isbandar (or Raja Bedr in *hikayat* version) as the antagonists of the story, with the presence of Ali as the main hero, replacing the deceased Amir Ambyah from the preceding *Lakat* episode. On the other hand, it also has a clear similarity with Javanese *Menak* narrative with the presence of mysterious old woman cooking the porridge, who turned out as the disguise of Gabriel, giving Ali the hint to overcome the massive Egyptian armies. The motif of ‘old woman cooking the porridge’, somehow also entered the memories of the Javanese through a similar folktale, altering the identity of Ali with Raden Mas Said (future Mangkunagara I), and the Raja Lakat and Jenggi’s alliance with the Dutch Company troops (*Kumpeni*), in the context of his guerilla 1749-1757 (Pranoto, 2000). This *wayang golek* story, however, also developed contextually in the changing cultural context of coastal Java with its strengthening *santri* culture, especially from the Nahdlatul Ulama movement. Some parts of this story, that once considered as *baku* (main, important), are forcibly eliminated, whether it has a

connection with *Menak* texts or not. The parts which are abandoned by modern *wayang golek* puppeteers are:

(a) The tale of Prophet's retreat: the classical *wayang golek* performances still recognized this part, which recounted the events directly happened after the ambush of Lakat and Jenggi that caused Ambyah's death. The prophet, being surrounded and outnumbered by the *kafir* army, retreated to a small cave with the accompaniment of his aide-de-camp Bu-Bakar or Abu Bakar (Abu Bakr as-Siddiq). There, the infidels who tried to search the Prophet once not expected that Muhammad will hide in the cave, but the house-lizards (*cecak*) giving them hint that he was inside. Being curious, one of an infidel throws a rock inside, causing one of Prophet's teeth to fall, but since there was any human sound from the cave, they convinced that nobody is residing inside, and they left. From that time, then there is a *sunnah* (tradition) of killing houselizards, for this reptile repeatedly betray the prophets since the time of Abraham (see Qushayri, 1975). The Prophet fainted, and Abu Bakar cried for all the misery they suffered. Gabriel came to the cave and told Abu Bakar about God's displeasure upon Muhammad's over-dependency to his uncle Ambyah, so He punished the Muslims with a bitter defeat. After Abu Bakar sent his repentance to God, Gabriel disappeared (*muksa*) with a message that the Muslims are forgiven, and He promised that they will be victorious in the next battle under Ali as the army's commander. The following story are same with the entire Yasadipura's version, minus the appearance of Kuraisin with her commanders (Asal-asil, Sadat-satir, etc.) from Ngajrak, the only *Menak* characters which survived until the end of the epic.

(b) The tale of Ali and the Moon: in the Pekalongan version of Sayidina Ali story, after Ali inspired by the old woman's suggestion on finishing the porridge from bowl's edge instead of its center, he immediately left her. The old woman then infuriated with Ali's act, and cursed him to experience a sorrow death, crushed by the earth. But Ali, on the other side, answered the curse with an oath, that after his death, his soul will reside on the full moon, then the *dhalang* narrates that Ali's words will become true, because his image always appear on the moon's surface every *purnamasidi* (full moon).

Both of those tales are abandoned nowadays by present *wayang golek* puppeteers from Pekalongan. The main factor of this change, was certainly a fear of blasphemy (*pelecehan agama*) in the *dhalang*'s circle if they keep them in the Sayidina Ali story's performance, as in those episodes, the Prophet and Ali did their own mistakes. However, the first tale was explicitly written both in Malay *hikayat* and Javanese *Menak* traditions, exhibiting the clear Persian *dastan* root that also recounted this event. The tale of the Prophet and Abu Bakar retreating into a cave and the fall of Prophet's tooth, according to the *sirat* or *tarik* tradition which are now widely studied along with the growing Islamic traditional orthodoxy through the development of *pesantren* (Islamic traditional school) and the role of *kyai* (Javanese Muslim clerics) and *mubaligh* (preachers), did not have any connections with the events around the death of "historical" Hamza. Instead, it dealt with the Prophet's journey to seek refuge from the Quraish-controlled Makkah to a more conducive Yathrib in the south --now called as Madinah-- which happened three years earlier (Razwy, 1995). The event of this refuge, known as *hijra*, followed by a decisive battle of Badr, in which seventy *sahabas* (companions) of the Prophet martyred and historical Hamza served as one of the prominent commanders, before a year later the battle of Uhud, which inspired the story of *Menak Lakat*, happened. In this first battle, which did not explicitly mentioned in any *Menak*, *hikayat*, and *dastan* traditions, Ambyah won, but he lost seventy of his subjects --who were formerly kings and knights from the realms of *Menak* universe. The similar number of the Muslim casualties from the Badr and first part of Ambyah's campaign shows the source of this tale, and it also signed the transition of the *Menak* to *Ambiya* universe, where the title of Jayengrana and

Wong Agung did not used again, but the Javanese *Menak* copyists, one of them was Yasadipura, uses the new, *sirat*-based name Sayidina Ambyah, as the other characters in this episode also bearing the same title instead of Javanese *Prabu*, *Raden*, or Malay-inspired *Raja*.

The martyrdom of seventy subjects of Ambyah, despite of its close similarity with the depiction of the battle of Badr, clears the narrative path of the main character, who shifted from legendary to historical context. All of the prominent characters from the *Menak* stories, such as Maktal, Umar Madi, and Lamdahur, vanquished in this episode, but they experience unwritten death beneath the layers of the Yasadipura *Menak* text, although their demise were explicitly recounted in its *hikayat* version. In the oral *wayang golek* stories from Kebumen, their death was considered to be happen in the Jaminambar episode, where almost all of Jayengrana's subjects dead with no bodies left during a brutal battle with cannibal troops of king Rabusamawati, except Lamdahur and Umar Maya, who are being forcibly excluded (in Javanese, “*dibanjut*”) from the *Menak* universe through the role of *Bagendha* Kilir (the mythological prophet Khidhr) as the text's *deus ex machina* (Rusiyanto alias Redi Siswoyo, interview 2025). Thus, this Kebumen version of Jaminambar episode also considered as a *lakon gawat* (“dangerous” story) that was believed to bring a bad omen both for the performers or the sponsor's family life.

The second tale dealing with the story of ‘Ali and his image on the full-moon, on the other side, while did not recognized in any *Menak* tradition, but dealing with both *sufi*-branch of Sunni sects and Shi'i beliefs. Although it is also not canonically stated in *Sunnah* tradition through reliable oral records (*hadith sahih*), but some *Sufi* orders, such as Naqshabandiyya -- which also widely spread in the basis of *Nahdliyyin* (the followers of Nahdlatul Ulama movement) in coastal Java, this tale was known partially in a different context: the statement of the “Ali's image on the moon” viewed in a symbolic term, where ‘Ali and the Prophet's hidden esoteric knowledge he inherited represented with the ‘black sphere of the moon’, and Abu Bakar (predecessor of Naqshabandiyya *sufi* masters or *Murshids*) represented the ‘white sphere of the moon’, not as ‘Ali's opposite but rather to complement the ‘full moon’, which represented the light of the Prophet (see the lyric of popular *qasida* entitled *Thala' al-Badr*, ‘the Rise of the Full Moon’). Meanwhile, the Shiite tradition, especially in South Asia, some of the Shi'i believe that every full moon, they can see the Arabic letters spelling his name. Two of this tales are less known in the present Pekalongan *wayang golek* puppeteers and audiences, but at least it showed indications of its changing society and their view about the *wayang golek* tales and its connection with the local Islamic context.

The changing society of Pekalongan's *wayang golek* audiences gradually become alienated from the *Menak* tales and its derivatives, as shown by the changes within the *lakon* Sayidina Ali itself. Besides they are not aware that this popular *lakon* came from a larger *Menak* corpus with some local changes, the *dhalangs* themselves, even they have a certain *pakem* or handbooks regarding this *lakon* in the old-fashioned style, choose to negotiate their performance to adapt with the religiously formalized society, so they don't need to have an open conflict with them, which could also led to the loss of both cultural and financial supports to guarantee the sustainability of this rod-puppetry traditions. Ditya Aditya (alias Sabda Anindhita, the stage-name he received after finishing his *nyantrik* or informal apprentice time in Solo, Central Java), the young *dhalang* who become a main informant of this case aforementioned above, preferred to cut some scenes that can raise serious criticism in the middle of his orthodox audiences. The scene of Abu Bakar and the Prophet, also the sequence of Bagendha Ali's vow, practically deleted from the performance, as well as the Prophet's depiction in a figure of noble refined king, due of the more strict values implemented in modern Muslim *santri*

Being spared from religious burden after cutting two controversial subplots above, the *lakon* Sayidina Ali or Sahabat Ali, then changed from a conclusive episode of lengthy *Menak* repertoires once enjoyed in the coastal Java to a mere fantasy tale came from the middle of nowhere, almost parallel with the *wayang purwa*'s *carangan* or "branch story" concept. It also means that this *lakon* is now considered as a regular repertoire (*lakon biasa*) which can be performed in secular events, even with the addition of the presence of stage comedians (*pelawak*), who often shared flirtatious jokes with the guest singers (*penyanyi bintang tamu*) or the troupe's female vocalists (*waranggana*), dancing and singing popular *dangdut* songs while the puppeteer take a short break before he begin to recount the story of Muhammad the Prophet and his companion again after this intermezzo.

This phenomenon shows us how did the *Menak* texts survived in the collective memory of Pekalongan's *wayang golek* environment, but at the other side it lost its core narrative along with the increasing interest of the much local *lakon babads*, which are closer to the modern viewer primordially. Nowadays, the range of *lakon babad* are expanding, not only in the term of canonic *babad* such as the story of Walisanga, kings of Majapahit and Mataram, and also some historical local figures who had a relationship with larger chronicles, such as Jaka Bahu from Pemalang or Martalaya from Tegal, both of them served as the loyal officers of Mataram during the era of Sultan Agung (1613-1645) and Amangkurat I (1646-1677). The further expansion of the *lakon babad* also recounted the stories about a particular village's founding fathers (*cikal bakal*), or minor heroes against Dutch or British colonial forces, such as the story of Rasmadi, a young village hero who attacked British garrison in Semarang. Those indicates two trends in the context of *wayang golek menak* or *cepak* in north coast Java: while on a side it abandoned the much *Kraton*-centered narratives due to the loose connection maintained by the Javanese regencies with the old palaces, as a result of decentralization policy by the Netherlands-Indies government post Java War (1825-1830) and also the effect of *Otonomi Daerah* (Regional Autonomy) implemented by the late President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), on the other side it also reflected the post-globalized situation of Muslim society in Java, along with the formalization of Islamic institutions motored by the local scholars, *kyai*, and organizations, which ensured an easier access to canonical version of *tarikh* or *sirat* texts to study then the old-styled renderings of Islamic legendary-history in the form of *hikayat*, *Ambiya*, or *Menak* genres, which in turn changed the perception about the events surrounding prominent figures in the beginning of Islam, such as the change in viewing the heroic Hamza simply as historical "Hamza ibn 'Abdul Mutallib" instead of South- and Southeast Asian favorite "Amir Hamzah" or "Wong Agung Menak Jayengrana", and also the changing perceptions on 'Ali as "the Successor" (*khalifah*) and "the Saint" (*wali*), which moved from esoterical context to a much denotative political terms, referring to his office in the last years of Rashidun caliphate (632-661). But even though, the hagiographic aspects of early prominent figures in Islam still prevails in a rather different way: while the traditional depiction of the *sahaba* ("companions", first-generation Muslims), *tabi'in* ("followers", the second generation), *tabi'i at-tabi'in* ("those who follows the followers", the third generation), or even the Prophet himself with all of his family (*Ahlil-Bayt*, "the Inhabitant of the House") became gradually unknown to the modern Javanese readers, the other narrative which glorify those figures, which came in the form of *Maulid* or *Qasida* texts, gained wider audience in this changing society. Some of them are the popular *Maulid al-Barzanji* and *Qasidat al-Burdah*, which is now regularly recited during some events dealing with rites of passages, replacing the position of *Macapat* texts containing the story of Yusuf (Joseph the Prophet), *Ambiya* (Stories of the Apostles), or even *Menak* tales and its derivatives such as *Renggani*s and the other *Menakpang* or *Menak baku* fragments.

As per the changing focus of the life of Javanese Muslims from an esoterical *sufi* and *tarekat* concerns to a more formalized aspects of the religion, the source of Islamic literatures also moved from the vibrant landscapes of Persian *dastans*, Malay *hikayats*, and Javanese *macapats*, towards the west to the Arabian classics of *sirat*, *tarikh*, *maulid*, and *qasidas*, which now also becoming core subjects in the studies of Islamic literature in major Indonesian universities. The scarcity of studies about the connection between *Nusantara* (archipelago) literature with the global encounters experienced through its development and the lack of multidisciplinary approach in viewing its influence in the social and cultural context, including the art and performance made it much understandable on why did the echoes of the once popular Persian *Hamzanama* faded away in the middle of the post-globalized Java today.

3. Conclusion

It can be clearly concluded that the *lakon* Sayidina Ali or Sahabat Ali in the Pekalongan-style *wayang golek cĕpak* was an excerpt from a larger *Menak* corpus, taking the place after the death of the main protagonist, Wong Agung Jayengrana, who was well-recognized both as historical Hamza ibn ‘Abdul Mutallib or the legendary Amir Hamzah. This episode of the Persian-Islamic epic, though sourced from the *dastan* version of *Hamzanama*, but also involved the Nusantara ingenuity in expanding the text, bringing the legendary battles between Amir Hamzah with the semi-fictitious *kafir* into the historical military campaigns involving Hamza during the Madinah reign of Prophet Muhammad (622-632), enriching the text with the presence of venerable ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib, which viewed not only in the Shiite but also in the part of traditional Sunni sects, mainly those who are related with the *sufi* traditions, as a legitimate heir of Muhammad’s esoterical knowledge, parallel with the concept of Javanese *satriya*, who is not only equipped with martial prowess as a part of his physical opulence (*kasĕkten lahir*) but also the spiritual virtues (*kasĕkten batin*) as a mean to reach the harmony of the cosmos.

The *lakon* Sayidina Ali, while losing its connection with literal *Menak* traditions as a result of the paradigm shifting of Javanese Muslims from a much esoteric form to a more institutionalized interpretation, proven itself to be a frame which also accommodates the changing society: in one side it must adapt with the emerging new class of Javanese *santri*, and in the other side it also have to fit the narrative with the nature of *wayang golek* in the northern coast Java as a part of secular performing arts. The forms of its adaptation, however, risking the loss of understanding about the *lakon* as a conclusive part which marked an end of a fantastic *Menak* era to a mysterious story that raised questions from its modern Muslim spectators, since they are unfamiliar with the *Menak* corpus as its hypogram or with the world of Persian-Malay-Javanese clique of Islamic literature.

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The Fabric of Modernity: Place, Memory, and Materiality in Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities*

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen's seminal series, *Portable Cities* (ongoing since early 2000s), arguing that it constitutes a critical artistic methodology for responding to the conditions of global modernity. In an era defined by accelerated mobility, cultural homogenization, and the erosion of local distinctiveness, the series—featuring miniature urban landscapes crafted from city residents' donated clothing and encased within standardized suitcases—transcends mere representation to perform active cultural work. Through the integrated lenses of media studies, formal analysis, memory studies, and place theory, this study examines the suitcase not as a passive container but as a portable heuristic device or "worldmaking" apparatus. The analysis sequentially unpacks four interconnected operations of this device: (1) functional rupture transforming the suitcase from mundane object to "thing" and mixed-media ensemble; (2) formal collision between global form and local materials generating specific narrative structures; (3) performative archiving materializing social frameworks of memory; and (4) place-making as praxis forging belonging from shared material heritage. The conclusion posits that *Portable Cities* offers a resilient model for negotiating displacement, challenging homogenizing globalization by asserting the agency of the local, the worn, and the handmade.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese art; globalization; installation art; material culture; media theory; memory studies; place-making; portable cities; thing theory; Yin Xiuzhen

1. Introduction: Materializing Displacement

In an era characterized by unprecedented global mobility, accelerated urbanization, and pervasive cultural homogenization, fundamental human experiences of place, memory, and community are undergoing profound transformation. The contemporary individual navigates a paradox: physically more connected than ever, yet often experientially adrift in a world where local distinctiveness is eroded by standardized landscapes (Augé, 1995; Lippard, 1997). It is within this critical juncture that the work of Chinese artist Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963, Beijing) emerges as a significant material and conceptual intervention. Her seminal series, *Portable Cities* (ongoing since the early 2000s), in which she constructs abstracted urban models from clothing donated by city residents and presents them within standardized suitcases, serves as a powerful aesthetic lens through which to examine the core tensions of global modernity.

1.1 Research Problem and Objectives

The central problematic that *Portable Cities* engages is the crisis of emplacement in a world of flux. This study addresses three specific research questions:

RQ1: How does Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series reconfigure urban perception and sensory engagement with the idea of the city?

RQ2: Through what formal mechanisms does the series organize, structure, and present social memory and urban experience?

RQ3: How does the series construct a new form of belonging or "portable place" that responds to conditions of displacement and mobility?

Based on these research questions, this study has four objectives:

Objective 1: To analyze how the suitcase in *Portable Cities* functions as a refunctioned medium that transforms urban perception from visual spectacle to multisensory encounter (addressing RQ1).

Objective 2: To examine how the standardized suitcase form collides with local material forms (clothing) to generate distinct narrative structures for organizing social memory (addressing RQ2).

Objective 3: To investigate how the series operates as a performative archive that materializes, preserves, and reenacts collective memory through fabric and bodily practice (addressing RQ2).

Objective 4: To demonstrate how the series constitutes an active practice of "place-making" that forges belonging from shared material traces rather than fixed geography (addressing RQ3).

These four objectives correspond sequentially to the four theoretical frameworks applied in this study: media and perception theory (Section 4), formal analysis (Section 5), memory studies (Section 6), and place theory (Section 7).

1.2 Argument and Scope

This article argues that Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* constitutes a sophisticated artistic practice that actively remediates the conditions of contemporary displacement. Through its innovative engagement with specific materials and forms, the series performs critical work across four interconnected domains: it reconstitutes urban perception through media, choreographs social experience through form, archives collective life through memory, and rebuilds a sense of belonging through place. Yin Xiuzhen's response to displacement is neither purely nostalgic nor merely symbolic. Instead, she engineers a tangible, portable system—a process this study frames as the *material remediation of displacement*. Her practice transforms the very agents of dislocation—the mass-produced suitcase, the discarded garment, the experience of transience—into foundational elements for constructing new modes of perception, memory, and attachment.

The scope of this study is limited to Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series (2000–present), with focused analysis on three case study versions: *Portable City: Jiayuguan* (2008), *Portable City: Shenzhen* (2008), and *Portable City: Stuttgart* (2010). These three versions were selected for comparative analysis based on their representativeness of different urban typologies (historical frontier city, globalized megacity, European industrial-cultural hub) and the availability of published visual documentation. The study does not claim to exhaustively analyze all versions in the series but rather uses these three cases to illustrate the formal and conceptual operations identifiable across the series as a whole.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing Scholarship on Yin Xiuzhen

Yin Xiuzhen has emerged as a significant figure in contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s, yet scholarly attention to her work remains less extensive than that accorded to her male contemporaries such as Ai Weiwei or Zhang Huan. Wu Hung (2010), in his survey of contemporary Chinese art, positions Yin's work within a broader discourse on urbanization and memory, noting her distinctive use of worn clothing as a material that "carries the imprint of lived experience" (p. 187). Melissa Chiu (2011), writing for the Asia Society, identifies Yin's practice as exemplifying a "domestic turn" in Chinese installation art, wherein traditionally feminine crafts (sewing, mending) are deployed to address macro-level social transformations.

Barbara Pollack (2010) offers one of the earliest detailed readings of *Portable Cities*, interpreting the series primarily through the lens of diasporic identity and the experience of Chinese migrants. Pollack argues that "the suitcase becomes a metaphor for the artist's own displacement, carrying fragments of home into an uncertain elsewhere" (p. 93). Claire Roberts (2012) extends this analysis by examining the series' engagement with cartographic traditions, suggesting that Yin's fabric cities function as "anti-maps" that privilege intimate, bodily knowledge over abstract spatial representation.

While these existing studies have established foundational interpretations of Yin Xiuzhen's work, they have generally focused on individual themes—migration, domestic labor, memory—without developing an integrated theoretical framework that explains how the series operates simultaneously across media, form, memory, and place. Furthermore, existing scholarship has not systematically applied thing theory (Brown, 2001) or formal analysis (Levine, 2015) to *Portable Cities*, nor has it engaged with the memory theorist Rebecca Schneider's (2011) work on performance remains. The present study aims to address these gaps by developing a multi-framework analysis that reveals the interconnected operations of the suitcase as a "portable heuristic."

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Integration and Tensions

This study draws on four principal theoretical traditions, each corresponding to one research objective. However, these traditions are not without potential tensions, which require acknowledgment.

Media and thing theory (Brown, 2001; McLuhan, 1964) provides the analytical vocabulary for understanding how the suitcase shifts from functional object to contemplative "thing." Brown's framework is compatible with McLuhan's medium theory insofar as both attend to how material forms shape perception. However, Brown's focus on the moment of functional rupture ("when the drill breaks") emphasizes disruption, whereas media studies often emphasizes continuity and extension of the senses. This study reconciles this tension by treating the suitcase's rupture from travel function as precisely the condition that enables its new perceptual function as a mixed-medium apparatus.

Formal theory (Levine, 2015) offers tools for analyzing how the suitcase as a "whole" collides with local material forms. Levine's insistence on forms as "political" and "social" aligns well with memory studies, but her emphasis on the contingency of formal encounters (forms "often fail to impose their order") stands in potential tension with Nora's (1989) emphasis on *lieux de mémoire* as stable, ritualized sites. This study addresses this tension by arguing that the suitcase operates as a *mobile* lieu de mémoire—its stability is not fixed location but rather the standardized, recognizable form that travels.

Memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989; Schneider, 2011) provides the richest theoretical field, but also the most significant internal tension. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* emerged from his diagnosis of modernity as having destroyed *milieux de mémoire*—lived, spontaneous memory environments. Schneider (2011) fundamentally challenges this diagnosis, arguing that memory is never "lost" but always remains performatively available. The Stuttgart

version of *Portable Cities* (analyzed below) materializes precisely this tension: the suitcase operates as a Nora-esque site for deliberate memory conservation, yet the fabric's tactile traces and the act of sewing enact Schneider's "performance remains." This study does not resolve this tension but argues that the work itself holds it productively in suspension.

Place theory (Lippard, 1997) offers a synthesis of the preceding frameworks. Lippard's concept of "making place" as an active, material practice integrates media (place is mediated experience), form (place has organizing structure), and memory (place is memory-filled). Lippard's work is explicitly political, critiquing global capitalism's homogenizing effects—an orientation that aligns with the present study's critical commitments but distinguishes it from purely formalist or phenomenological approaches.

2.3 Positioning within Globalization and Chinese Contemporary Art Discourse

This study is situated within a broader scholarly conversation on how contemporary Chinese artists have responded to globalization. Scholars such as Wu Hung (2008), Gao Minglu (2005), and Wang Hui (2011) have examined how Chinese artists from the 1990s onward engaged with (and resisted) the art world's globalization, often through strategies of "appropriation," "political pop," or "cynical realism." Yin Xiuzhen's practice differs from these dominant modes: she neither appropriates Western icons nor engages in overt political critique. Instead, her work belongs to what art historian Julia Andrews (2012) terms "materialist memory practice"—an approach that prioritizes everyday materials, bodily labor, and vernacular experience over discursive or iconographic strategies. The present study positions *Portable Cities* within this alternative genealogy, arguing that its significance lies precisely in its refusal of both nationalist nostalgia and globalist abstraction.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Type and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology characteristic of art historical and visual culture research. The approach is theory-driven close reading: the artwork is treated as a complex visual and material text that can be analyzed through the systematic application of multiple theoretical frameworks. This methodology is appropriate given the research questions, which ask *how* the work operates (interpretive) rather than measuring *how much* or *how often* (quantitative).

3.2 Case Selection Criteria

Three versions from the *Portable Cities* series were selected for focused analysis:

Version	Year	Selection Rationale
Portable City: Jiayuguan	2008	Historical frontier city; represents "rhythmic" formal structure; available high-quality documentation
Portable City: Shenzhen	2008	Globalized megacity; represents "network" formal structure; available high-quality documentation



Portable City: Stuttgart	2010	European industrial-cultural hub; incorporates sonic archive; extends comparative typology
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These three cases were selected to maximize comparative variation along the dimension of urban typology (historical/peripheral, globalized/central, European/post-industrial). The study does not claim these three are "representative" in a statistical sense but rather that they illustrate the range of formal operations within the series.

3.3 Data Sources and Analytic Procedure

Data sources for this study include:

1. **Published visual documentation:** Images of the three case study works, sourced from exhibition catalogues (Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, 2010), museum websites, and online archives (URLs accessed October-December 2024)
2. **Artist statements and interviews:** Published interviews with Yin Xiuzhen (Chinese and English sources)
3. **Secondary scholarship:** Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on Yin Xiuzhen's work (see Section 2.1)
4. **Theoretical literature:** Canonical and recent works in media theory, formal analysis, memory studies, and place theory

Limitation acknowledgment: Direct, in-person observation of *Portable City: Stuttgart* was not possible for this study. Analysis of this version therefore draws on published descriptions, exhibition documentation, and the work's listing on the Mercedes-Benz Art Collection website. Where analysis of this version is based on secondary sources rather than primary visual analysis, this is explicitly indicated.

The analytic procedure followed four stages:

Stage 1 (Description): Each work was described in terms of its formal elements (size, materials, color, texture, internal structure) and sensory dimensions (visual, tactile implied, auditory where documented).

Stage 2 (Formal Analysis): Each work was analyzed for its arrangement of elements—rhythms, hierarchies, networks, wholes—following Levine's (2015) formal vocabulary.

Stage 3 (Theoretical Interpretation): Each work was interpreted through the four theoretical frameworks (media, form, memory, place), with attention to how the frameworks illuminate different aspects of the work.

Stage 4 (Synthesis): Findings from the three case studies were synthesized to identify common operations across the series and to articulate the "portable heuristic" model presented in the conclusion.

3.4 Researcher Positionality

The author is a scholar of contemporary Chinese art based in Thailand. This position enables access to Asian scholarly networks and publications but carries the potential interpretive bias of approaching a Chinese artist's work from outside both Chinese and Euro-American art historical traditions. This positionality has been managed by: (a) citing both Chinese and Western scholarship on Yin Xiuzhen where available; (b) relying on published artist statements rather than assuming interpretive authority; and (c) acknowledging where English-language documentation preferentially

privileges certain works (e.g., Stuttgart) over others (e.g., less-documented versions). No claim to "native" or "insider" interpretive authority is made.

4. The Suitcase as Refunctured Medium: Reconstructing Urban Perception

In this section, I address Research Question 1 (how *Portable Cities* reconfigures urban perception) by analyzing the suitcase's transformation from functional object to perceptual medium.

4.1 From Object to Thing: The Suitcase's Functional Rupture

Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series provides a classic case for examining how a "thing" transcends its functionality and transforms into a "medium" carrying complex cultural meanings. The core of this transformation lies in the shift of the central carrier—the suitcase—from an everyday utensil to an art installation. This perfectly exemplifies Bill Brown's (2001) concept of "thingness" in his influential "Thing Theory."

Brown argues that the dimension of the "thing" emerges when the everyday function of a commonplace object is suspended or interrupted, causing us to see it not as a transparent, handy tool but as an entity with its own presence. He states: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us—when the drill breaks, when the car stalls" (Brown, 2001, p. 4). Yin Xiuzhen's suitcase undergoes precisely such a "stalling." It is no longer used for travel; the functionality of its handle, locks, and wheels is suspended. It is fixed, opened, and displayed, becoming a self-referential container. At this moment, the viewer no longer considers "how to pack it" but is forced to consider "what it means as a suitcase." This focus on the object-in-itself constitutes the critical shift from "object" to "thing."

4.2 Mixed-Media Apparatus and Perceptual Restructuring

Following functional suspension, the suitcase evolves into a dense "mixed media" installation. It integrates fabric (old clothes), sound (city recordings in some versions), lighting, and constructed forms. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) argued, "the medium is the message"—the form of mediation reshapes perception. The viewer cannot obtain a panoramic, bird's-eye view of the city model from outside; they must lean in, bend down, and gaze into this intimate, internal miniature world.

This intimate, fragmented mode of viewing subverts the macro, rational perspective common in modern urban planning. Instead, it invites the audience to piece together a highly subjective, body-based urban cognition through tactile associations (the texture of the clothing) and, in some versions, auditory memories (environmental sounds). The suitcase thus transforms the city from a visual spectacle into a multisensory, embodied field of experience.

Brown (2001) links the exploration of thingness to the experience of modernity, arguing that aesthetic attention to "things" stems from the fragmentation of experience and the proliferation of commodity culture. Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* directly responds to this modern predicament. In the tide of globalization, urban landscapes tend toward homogenization, and personal memories face the threat of dissolution into abstract information flows. The artist rescues "things" on the verge of being abstracted or discarded and rematerializes them into a tangible, sensible "thing"—the city model inside the suitcase. This model is not an accurate reproduction but rather a "thingly" existence reconstructed from memory fragments, sensory impressions, and personal narratives. With its strong material presence, it resists the prevalent tendencies toward abstraction and dematerialization in modern experience.



5. Forms, Travel, and the Reorganization of Memory

In this section, I address Research Question 2 (formal mechanisms for organizing social memory) by analyzing how the suitcase functions as a traveling formal "whole" that collides with local material forms.

5.1 The Standardization and Travelability of Form: The Suitcase as "Whole"

Caroline Levine (2015) defines a "whole" as a form that "draws a boundary, separating inside from outside" (p. 56). The most superficial unifying form of the *Portable Cities* series is precisely the standardized hard-shell suitcase. It constitutes a physical and conceptual "whole," drawing a clear boundary for each work. Levine argues that part of sociopolitical power involves "enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries—like the nation-state, the bounded individual, and the walls of the family home" (p. 56). The suitcase is a miniature, mobile "restrictive container," mimicking and condensing the conditions of globalization wherein individual and local identities are simultaneously protected and segregated.

This form possesses strong "travelability." It traverses global cities; its globally circulating logistical nature is itself a material metaphor for globalization. As Levine (2015) uses the "daily schedule" to illustrate how social forms travel from monastery to prison, factory, and school (p. 7), the suitcase form has "traveled" from commercial travel to contemporary art. No matter how the content changes, the "whole" form of the suitcase remains constant, ensuring the series' recognizability. However, this standardized shell precisely highlights the "local" differences contained within it, preparing for a collision of forms.

5.2 The Collision and Reorganization of Forms: Comparative Analysis

Levine's (2015) most valuable insight is that forms "do not impose their order in any simple way" (p. 16). When multiple forms meet, "multiple shapes, patterns, and arrangements, overlapping and colliding, generate the complex and unpredictable social landscape" (p. 17). In *Portable Cities*, when the suitcase "whole" travels to different cities and combines with locally collected clothes, what Levine describes as "strange encounters" occur (p. 16). This collision is not simple filling but profoundly reorganizes social experience and memory.

Case 1: *Portable City: Jiayuguan* (2008) – Rhythm as Historical Solidification

Jiayuguan is a vital pass at the western end of the Great Wall, bearing national history and frontier memory. The interior model presents a compact, sturdy, even somewhat squat structural feel. Fabrics with period characteristics (old military uniforms, work clothes) are organized into a stable, repetitive, defensive "rhythm" through their colors (army green, navy blue). Levine argues that rhythm is "a form of time, interval, and repetition" (p. 53), and that institutional rhythms produce social effects. Here, the suitcase's enclosed space solidifies and encapsulates this historical, institutional rhythm. The memory organized is collective, monumental; the viewer senses weight and solitude shaped by historical periodicity. The suitcase functions as a "time capsule," preserving and sealing a defined, cyclical grand narrative.

Image 1

Portable City: Jiayuguan



Note. From *Portable City: Jiayuguan*, by Yin Xiuzhen, 2008, Sohu (https://www.sohu.com/a/546084376_12350389). Copyright 2008 by Yin Xiuzhen.

Case 2: *Portable City: Shenzhen* (2008) – Network as Pluralistic Juxtaposition

Shenzhen is a super-hub of globalization, characterized by plurality, fragmentation, and high-speed flow. The corresponding version presents a drastically different internal morphology: intensely mottled colors, materials ranging from silk to denim, building forms of varying heights lacking a clear central structure. This manifests not a single "rhythm" but the "network" form in Levine's theory—a loosely connected formation of heterogeneous nodes (Levine, 2015, p. 113). Levine suggests that understanding social reality may require "not telling a story of a succession of separate institutional forms... but attending to the multiple nodes where forms encounter one another" (p. 118). The personal stories carried by clothes donated by Shenzhen residents are juxtaposed and collide within the suitcase's limited space. The suitcase's function here is not "solidification" but "compression" and "juxtaposition." The method of organizing memory is decentralized, nodal, mimicking the social network experience of the city itself.

Image 2

Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City: Shenzhen, 2008



Note. From *Portable Cities* by Yin Xiuzhen, by iGNANT, 2014
(<https://www.ignant.com/2014/05/07/portable-cities-by-yin-xiuzhen/>).

Case 3: *Portable City: Stuttgart* (2010) – Eclecticism and Sonic Archive

Portable City: Stuttgart extends Yin Xiuzhen's investigation into urban identity and collective memory. Utilizing the same formal vehicle of the standardized suitcase, the work engages not in reproducing stark political divisions but in curating an eclectic ensemble of iconic local architecture—the Hauptbahnhof, Staatsgalerie, and Mercedes-Benz Museum. As noted by the Mercedes-Benz Art Collection (2010), this miniature city is "brightly colored" and "makes no pretense of being a to-scale reproduction," prioritizing a subjective, memory-shaped impression over topographic accuracy.

Image 3

Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City: Stuttgart, 2010



Note. From *Yin Xiuzhen: Portable City: Stuttgart 2010*, by Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, n.d. (<https://www.mercedes-benz.art/en/artwork/yin-xiuzhen-portable-city-stuttgart-2010/>).

Source acknowledgment: The following analysis of the Stuttgart version draws on published documentation from the Mercedes-Benz Art Collection website (accessed December 2024) and Claire Roberts' (2012) discussion of the work, as direct in-person observation was not possible for this study.

This version reframes the concept of "memory archaeology." Instead of excavating historical fault lines, Yin collects fragments of personal life—pieces of clothing from Stuttgart residents—and sews them into new textile forms. These "souvenir textile items" become vessels of intimate, embodied memory, contrasting with the public, monumental memory represented by the architectural models. The suitcase's interior thus becomes a site where private memory (clothing) and public identity (architecture) are fused into a "not necessarily coherent ensemble" (Mercedes-Benz Art

Collection, 2010). This incoherence acknowledges that a city's identity is not a unified narrative but a layered, sometimes contradictory collection of experiences.

The Stuttgart iteration introduces a crucial multi-sensory dimension: sound. The documentation notes that "one hears the sounds of the great city rising out of the suitcase" (Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, 2010). This archival of sound transforms the work from a static, visual memory-container into a dynamic, immersive sonic archive. The boundary between inside (the suitcase's intimate world) and outside (the city's noisy reality) is perforated, making memory ambient and enveloping.

Finally, the work carries an implicit critique. The "painstakingly handmade" sculptures from old clothing stand in direct contrast to "industrial mass-produced textiles," alluding to poor labor conditions in global manufacturing (Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, 2010). Thus, the suitcase's "portable city" is not just a souvenir of Stuttgart but also a quiet monument to slow, conscientious making in a world of rapid consumption.

5.3 Summary: The Suitcase as Laboratory for Formal Collision

Through Levine's formal theory, the suitcase in *Portable Cities* is far more than a passive container. It is an active laboratory for formal collision. The standardized suitcase "whole" travels globally, colliding with local materials and the social forms they carry. Urban memory is not a pre-existing, fixed entity waiting to be loaded; it is reorganized and constructed in real-time within a specific formal container through the interaction, collision, and competition of forms.

6. Fabric as Site of Memory, Embodied Reenactment, and Reconstructed Community

In this section, I extend the analysis of Research Question 2 by examining how memory is encoded, preserved, reenacted, and reconstructed within fabric. The analysis engages three memory theorists: Halbwachs, Nora, and Schneider.

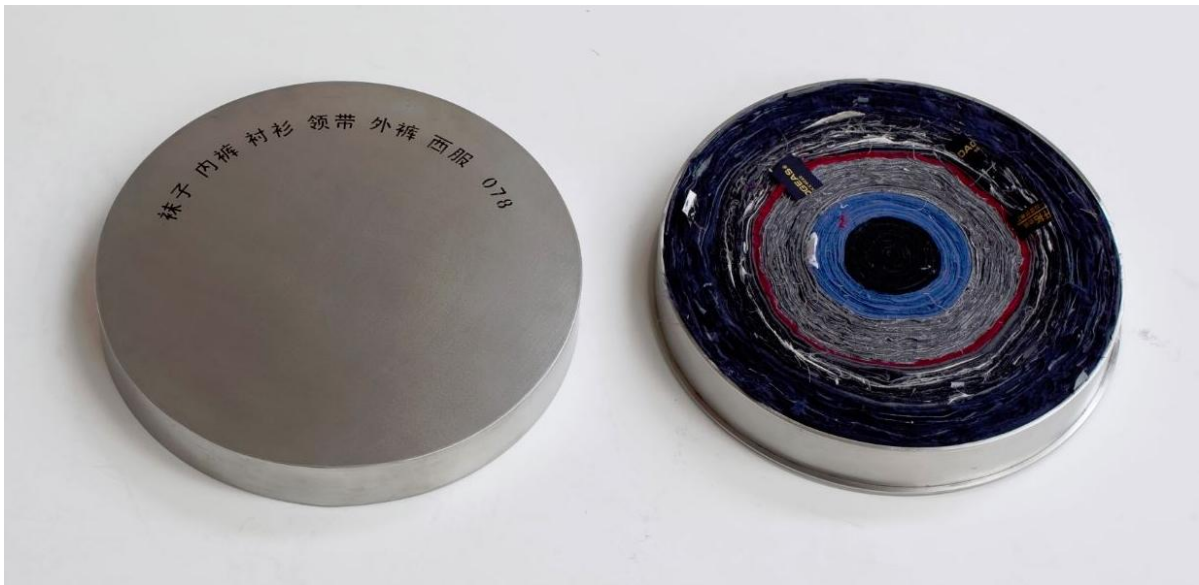
6.1 Clothing as the "Social Framework" of Memory

Yin Xiuzhen's insight that old clothing serves as a person's "second skin" addresses the social nature of memory. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) fundamentally challenges the notion that memory belongs purely to the individual psychological sphere, observing: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories... The collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, adapting the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" (pp. 38, 40). He further elaborates: "Memory relies on a 'framework,' constituted by the various social groups to which we belong" (p. 53).

Each collected garment in *Portable Cities* is a miniature, concrete "social framework." The artist deconstructs and recombines frameworks from different individuals—a worker's uniform, a housewife's scarf, a student's jacket. This process illustrates Halbwachs's core argument about memory reconstruction: "The collective memory is not a given, rigid framework, but a continuous process of reconstructing the past... always evoked and rebuilt in the present" (p. 40). Individual traces do not vanish but are integrated and encoded into a new collective narrative sequence guided by the artist as the present-day "organizer" of memory.

Image 4

Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City: Stuttgart, 2010



Note. From *Yin Xiuzhen: Portable City: Stuttgart 2010*, by Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, n.d. (<https://www.mercedes-benz.art/en/artwork/yin-xiuzhen-portable-city-stuttgart-2010/>).

6.2 The Suitcase as a "Site of Memory"

Pierre Nora (1989) proposes the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). In traditional, slow-paced *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory), memory was "lived, spontaneous, unself-conscious, always present" (p. 8). However, the acceleration of modernity has shattered this environment: "We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" (pp. 7, 12). Consequently, memory must be deliberately preserved and located: "Memory is no longer lived; it can only be housed in sites" (p. 13).

Each suitcase in *Portable Cities* constitutes a miniature, standardized *lieu de mémoire*. Nora points out that the nature of these sites is "mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound up with life and death, with time and eternity" (p. 19). The suitcase embodies this hybridity: it is both the most intimate, ordinary travel tool and a display case encapsulating an abstract city model. When viewers bend down to gaze into the urban landscape within the suitcase, they perform a modern memory ritual, attempting to anchor a vanishing sense of "place" amidst flow and dispersal.

6.3 The "Performance Remains" of Fabric and the Reenactment of Memory

Rebecca Schneider's (2011) theory provides a crucial dimension for understanding the agency, materiality, and corporeality of memory in Yin Xiuzhen's work, supplementing the potentially static tendencies in Nora's theory. In *Performing Remains*, Schneider challenges the document- and static image-centered view of archives, proposing that memory can be retained and transmitted through bodily, gestural, and material repetitive behaviors—"performance remains." She asks: "What if we consider historical reenactment itself as a form of remains?" (p. 2).

Tension acknowledgment: As noted in Section 2.2, Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* and Schneider's "performance remains" stand in potential tension. Nora emphasizes deliberate, ritualized sites for conserving memory in an age that has lost organic memory environments; Schneider argues

that memory is never lost but always remains performatively available. The present study does not resolve this tension but argues that Yin Xiuzhen's work holds it productively in suspension. The suitcase operates as a Nora-esque site—a deliberate container for memory—yet the fabric's traces, the act of sewing, and the viewer's embodied engagement enact Schneider's performance remains.

Yin Xiuzhen's creative process materializes this theory. First, the act of sewing itself is a profoundly embodied, repetitive reenactment of memory. Schneider (2011) posits that reenactment is "not about going back in time but about how time crosses, how the past touches us in the present" (p. 31). The artist's actions of touching, unraveling, washing, and sewing each piece of fabric are not merely "making" art but reenacting the bodily memory of care, connection, and collective labor inherent in weaving. This constitutes "a transmission of body to body across time" (Schneider, 2011, p. 35).

Second, the old clothing itself is "performed matter"—the direct trace of bodily acts. Schneider writes: "Performance remains... suggest that acts can leave traces, and these traces can be reactivated by further acts" (p. 100). The wear, mends, and fading on garments are precisely the "traces" left by the body in the long "performance" of life. Yin does not attempt to repair or conceal these traces but preserves them as core aesthetic elements. When she sews a piece of fabric worn through at the elbow into a miniature building's wall, she "reactivates" this bodily trace.

Third, the work's invitation to embodied audience participation completes the social cycle. In works like *Collective Unconscious* (2007), viewers are invited to enter inside. Schneider (2011) views participation as a crucial historical methodology: "To reenact is to engage in a historical mode of knowing that is embodied, haptic, and proximate" (p. 40). The experience challenges linear, singular historical narratives, allowing the past to entangle and converse with the present through matter and body.

Image 5 and 6

Yin Xiuzhen's Collective Unconscious, 2007



Note. From *Yin Xiuzhen's Collective Unconscious*, by Public Delivery, 2024
(<https://publicdelivery.org/yin-xiuzhen-collective-unconscious/>).

6.4 Summary: Fabric as Memory Theater

Through the triple lens of Halbwachs, Nora, and Schneider, Yin Xiuzhen's fabric art emerges as a multi-layered, active memory theater. Following Halbwachs, she confirms that "society in each era reconstitutes its past according to its dominant currents of thought." Responding to Nora's diagnosis of the disappearance of the *milieu de mémoire*, she creates a portable *lieu de mémoire*. And through Schneider, she activates the traces in fabric as "body archives" through embodied sewing labor and viewer participation. Memory is neither a static archive nor a purely mental construct; it is a continuous, material, bodily-participatory social practice.

7. Portable Places: Local Materials and the Re-creation of Belonging

In this section, I address Research Question 3 (how the series constructs a new form of belonging) by analyzing *Portable Cities* as an active practice of "place-making."

7.1 Theoretical Lens: Lippard on "Making Place"

In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy R. Lippard (1997) offers a diagnosis of "placelessness" under globalization and a prescription for art. She states that "sense of place" is "a feeling of belonging to a place, a sense of attachment to the visible markers that root you, that connect you to the environment and thus to history" (p. 7). However, "global capitalism has produced a homogenized landscape in which local distinctiveness is systematically erased in the name of development" (p. 5). Lippard refuses to view "place" as a static, romanticized object of nostalgia, instead understanding it as a dynamic, political field that can be actively constructed.

She makes a crucial distinction: "Space is abstract, place is concrete. If space is a place that can be measured, place is a space that is filled with meaning" (Lippard, 1997, p. 10). Meaning is generated through layered experience: "Place is a mixture of experience, memory, and desire. It is the latitude and longitude of a life map, filled with human history and memory, both personal and social" (p. 10). Lippard calls on artists to "make place" through deep engagement with specific contexts, leading to "different collective visions of place" that are open, participatory, and that "care about, challenge, involve, and consult the audience" (p. 285).

7.2 Practical Analysis: *Portable Cities* as Triple Action of "Making Place"

Portable Cities exemplifies Lippard's art of place-making through three sequential actions.

First, the ritualistic collection of old clothing as samples of a place's "strata." Yin rejects ready-made construction materials or standardized maps, turning instead to residents' worn clothing. Lippard emphasizes that "knowledge of place is specific, sensory, and experiential" (p. 33). Old clothing absorbs the wearer's physique, occupation, habits, and even the city's climate. It is the direct product of long-term interaction between body and local environment. The artist's process of residency and collection in each city constitutes a form of anthropological participation—a sampling of that place's social fabric.

Second, the critical reconstruction of local form within the suitcase. Collected local fragments are not displayed in their original state but undergo deconstruction and re-suturing. Yin's use of the standardized, globally circulating hard-shell suitcase as a container visualizes the tension between the global and the local: the homogenizing shell of globalization envelops unique local content. The act of sewing imposes order and meaning; the artist does not replicate the city's physical appearance but

weaves heterogeneous fabric fragments into a new, perceptible whole. This echoes Lippard's (1997) view that "artists can reveal the hidden layers and latent meanings of a place by selecting, isolating,

Third, the interactive activation of a sense of place for the viewer. Lippard (1997) argues art should create "a situation in which the audience can shift from being passive consumers to co-producers of meaning" (p. 286). When viewers bend to gaze into the miniature landscape, the fabric's texture and familiar colors may trigger their own memories. This process of recognition and association constitutes the viewer projecting their own experience into the work's network of meaning. Through this interaction, *Portable Cities* successfully connects its place-sense—originating from a specific city—with the broader, fluid experience of contemporary individuals, fulfilling Lippard's vision that "the best local art is at once rooted in its specific context and able to speak outward, touching universal human experiences... about memory, loss, identity, and belonging" (p. 288).

7.3 Summary: Anchoring Belonging in Motion

Through Lippard's lens, *Portable Cities* is not a nostalgic emotional outburst but a cultural practice of genuine critical energy. It offers a new imagination of belonging for a "multicentered," fluid era. At a time when the physical "hometown" is increasingly blurred, *Portable Cities* suggests that belonging can be built upon the creative transformation and sharing of a common material cultural heritage. The suitcase filled with a fabric city becomes an emotional anchor—a new type of place-attachment that is flexible, elective, and forged by emotion and memory, capable of accompanying the individual through physical dispersal and migration.

8. Conclusion: The Suitcase as World — Synthesis and Implications

8.1 Synthesis: The Operative Logic of the Portable Heuristic

The analysis demonstrates that *Portable Cities* functions through an integrated, fourfold logic:

Media-Thing Refunctioning (Section 4): The standardized suitcase shifts from functional object to contemplative thing (Brown, 2001). This refunctioned medium restructures urban perception from distant spectacle into intimate, multisensory encounter.

Formal Collision and Choreography (Section 5): The suitcase acts as a traveling "whole" that captures and stages collisions between forms (Levine, 2015). It actively choreographs the social and mnemonic logic of each city—rhythm for Jiayuguan, network for Shenzhen, eclectic ensemble for Stuttgart.

Performative Archiving (Section 6): The collected clothing constitutes a performative, tripartite memory model: clothing materializes Halbwachs's social frameworks; the suitcase institutionalizes Nora's *lieux de mémoire*; and the acts of sewing and viewing enact Schneider's performance remains.

Place-Making as Praxis (Section 7): The series culminates in a Lippardian act of "making place" through ethnographic collection of local matter, critical reconstruction of form, and participatory activation of meaning.

These four operations are not sequential steps but simultaneous, interdependent forces. The suitcase-as-thing enables formal collision; collision organizes performative archiving; archiving supports place-making; and place-making returns us to the suitcase as a meaningful thing.

8.2 Core Contributions

Artistic Model for Negotiating Displacement: Yin Xiuzhen's work offers a materialist strategy for the diasporic or mobile condition. It rejects both rootless abstraction and passive nostalgia, proposing that identity and belonging can be actively assembled, carried, and repaired through the careful stewardship of mundane materials that bear social traces.

Challenge to Dominant Narratives of Globalization: The series critiques the homogenizing narrative of globalism by insisting on the stubborn particularity of local clothing embedded within the global form of the suitcase. The global experience is shown to be one of incessant negotiation, collision, and re-suturing at the level of everyday life and personal memory.

Expansion of Memory and Archive Frameworks: By centering the worn garment and the act of sewing, Yin Xiuzhen's practice challenges text- and document-centric archival models. It advocates for the body, the trace, and the gesture as legitimate sites of historical knowledge and transmission.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the analysis is limited to a single artist's series. While the "portable heuristic" model developed here may be transferable to other artists working with materials of displacement (e.g., Doris Salcedo's furniture sculptures, Song Dong's *Waste Not*), the study does not empirically test this transferability. Future research might apply the fourfold framework to comparative case studies.

Second, the study relies primarily on published visual documentation rather than direct, in-person observation of all works. As noted in Section 3.3, analysis of *Portable City: Stuttgart* draws on secondary sources. Future research with direct access to the work might extend or revise the analysis presented here.

Third, the study focuses on the *Portable Cities* series (2000–present) but does not examine Yin Xiuzhen's broader oeuvre, which includes works such as *Collective Unconscious* (2007), *One Sentence* (2011), and *Trojan* (2010–2011). Whether the fourfold logic applies equally to these works remains an open question.

Fourth, the study does not address reception. How do viewers from different cultural backgrounds—Chinese, German, American—respond to the Stuttgart version? Does the work's meaning shift depending on the viewer's own experience of displacement? These questions require empirical audience research beyond the scope of this interpretive study.

Fifth, the study does not engage with the economic dimensions of the work's production and circulation. Yin Xiuzhen's works are collected by major institutions (MOMA, Mercedes-Benz Art Collection); how does this institutional framing affect the work's critique of globalization? This economic question merits future research.

8.4 Final Reflection: The Agency of the Soft and the Slow

In a world that often privileges the new, the hard, the fast, and the virtual, *Portable Cities* asserts the agency of the soft, the old, the slow, and the handmade. The power of the work stems from its commitment to the secondary, the discarded, and the time-intensive labor of care (stitching). In doing so, it performs a subtle politics. It suggests that resistance to alienation and displacement may lie not in grand opposition but in the meticulous, caring acts of recollection (gathering), re-composition (sewing), and portable stewardship (carrying).

Ultimately, Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable Cities* series provides not only an analysis of contemporary life but a proposal for living within it. Each suitcase is a compact theory of resilience, demonstrating that worlds can be built from fragments, that places can be woven from stories embedded in cloth, and that home is not merely a location to which one returns but a practice one carries and continually renews. The suitcase, therefore, is not just a world in miniature; it is a manual for world-making in an age of flux.

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Appendix: List of Works Discussed

Work Title	Year	Medium	Dimensions (approx.)	Location/Collection
<i>Portable City: Jiayuguan</i>	2008	Used clothing, suitcase, sound	Variable	Artist's collection
<i>Portable City: Shenzhen</i>	2008	Used clothing, suitcase	Variable	Private collection
<i>Portable City: Stuttgart</i>	2010	Used clothing, suitcase, sound	70 x 50 x 25 cm	Mercedes-Benz Art Collection
<i>Collective Unconscious</i>	2007	Used clothing, wood, metal	Variable (bus-sized)	Multiple exhibitions
<i>One Sentence No. 53</i>	2011	Used clothing, thread, spools	Variable	Mercedes-Benz Art Collection



Cultural Inheritance and Technical Innovation of Mongolian Plucked Instruments from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of the Quintet "Daru Laga under the Blue Sky"

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Abstract

Contemporary Mongolian instrumental compositions exhibit a developmental trend characterized by the integration of traditional cultural heritage with modern compositional techniques. Plucked ensemble music, as a vital vehicle for ethnic chamber music, plays a pivotal role in the creative transformation and innovative evolution of traditional folk music. "Under the Blue Sky: Darulagha" is a representative original Mongolian-themed plucked quintet featuring a unique five-part instrumentation comprising liuqin, three pipas, and zhongruan, seamlessly blending Ordos Mongolian folk culture, traditional musical elements, and contemporary compositional approaches. This study transcends conventional technical analyses by examining three core dimensions: innovations in modern compositional techniques, systematic interpretation of cultural significance, and refined multi-part performance execution. It systematically examines the work's tripartite structure, innovations in ethnic modes, and the application logic of aleatory music techniques, while uncovering its embedded Mongolian wedding customs and nomadic spiritual essence. Drawing on practical ensemble performance experience, the study establishes core performance methodologies for technical control, timbral integration, and multi-part musical dialogue. This research enriches the theoretical framework of Mongolian plucked chamber music, providing robust theoretical and practical foundations for in-depth research and global dissemination of similar ethnic instrumental works, thereby facilitating the preservation and innovative development of ethnic music within the international artistic landscape.

Keywords: Creative techniques; cultural heritage; perspective of intangible cultural heritage; plucked instrument quintet; "Under the Blue Sky: DaRuLaGa"

1. Introduction

With the professionalization, modernization, and internationalization of China's ethnic chamber music, instrumental works rooted in regional ethnic cultures and folk traditions have become the core driving force behind the innovative development of traditional folk music. Yu Ping & Wang Guanghui (2022) noted in their paper "Analysis of Combinations 'and the Disciplinary Construction of Chinese Folk Dance (Part II)" that Mongolian music holds a significant position within China's ethnic minority music system due to its unique modal characteristics, rhythmic patterns, and profound cultural heritage. In recent years, numerous composers have endeavored to integrate traditional Mongolian musical elements with Western

modern compositional techniques, breaking away from the conventional approach of merely replicating melodies. This has resulted in a substantial body of instrumental works that combine ethnic depth with contemporary artistic qualities, effectively promoting the living inheritance and iterative innovation of Mongolian traditional music.

The plucked string quintet "Under the Blue Sky: Darulaga," composed in 2017 by Li Channing—a doctoral graduate in composition from the Central Conservatory of Music and faculty member at Inner Mongolia Arts University—won an award at the Central Conservatory's National Traditional Instrumental Music Competition that same year. Regularly performed and promoted by professional ethnic orchestras, this work stands as an innovative classic of contemporary Mongolian-themed plucked chamber music. Departing from conventional ensembles like pipa or ruan quartets, it features a unique five-part vocalization system comprising a high-pitched liuqin, three mid-range pipas, and a low-mid-range zhongruan, achieving comprehensive coverage across the high-, middle-, and low-frequency ranges of Mongolian plucked instruments. This creates rich sonic layers, filling a critical gap in the repertoire of Mongolian-themed plucked quintets within Chinese chamber music.

In terms of creative philosophy, the work abandons the traditional Mongolian instrumental music's grand narrative model centered on grassland landscapes and nomadic life. It takes the Ordos Mongolian wedding headdress "Darulaga" as its core cultural symbol, integrating folk aesthetics, humanistic emotional depth, and modern musical composition. The work preserves traditional musical elements such as the Mongolian pentatonic Yutiao mode, Surden rhythm, and long melodic phrases, while incorporating innovative techniques like the modern ternary form structure, polyphonic textures, and aleatory music composition, achieving a harmonious balance between preserving traditional cultural heritage and advancing contemporary artistic innovation.

Current academic research on this work primarily focuses on fundamental performance techniques and superficial artistic characteristics, adopting relatively narrow perspectives that lack in-depth exploration of the underlying logic of modern compositional techniques, the metaphorical connotations of cultural symbols, and collaborative performance strategies for polyphonic ensembles. The work's academic and social dissemination value in the innovation and preservation of ethnic music remains inadequately elucidated. Building upon master's-level research findings, this paper extends the study by focusing on compositional techniques, cultural context, and ensemble performance practice—to transcend the limitations of singular technical analysis. The study connects cultural background with musical analysis and performance practice. This work not only deepens existing scholarship but also provides references for the analysis and performance of similar works for contemporary Mongolian plucked-string chamber music composition, performance, and international dissemination.

2. The Origins of the Work's Creation and Its Cultural Connotation System

2.1 Creative Background and the Composer's Creative Philosophy

Composer Li Channing possesses both a solid foundation in Western composition techniques and a profound accumulation of traditional Chinese folk music creation. He has long dedicated himself to innovative research on integrating China's traditional art culture, regional folk customs, and modern symphonic composition techniques. In recent years, his creative focus has centered on the innovative preservation of Mongolian grassland music culture, aiming to revitalize the contemporary artistic vitality of traditional grassland music through modern, standardized compositional language.

The creative inspiration for "Under the Blue Sky: Daruga" stemmed from the composer's field research on traditional Mongolian wedding customs in Ordos. During the investigation, the



intricate craftsmanship, luxurious materials, and profound emotional significance of the Daruga—specific ceremonial headdress for Mongolian brides in Ordos—deeply moved the composer artistically. Departing from conventional grassland cultural themes, this work employs folk handicraft accessories as its focal point, achieving a musical transformation of material folk culture. Zhao, Y. (2024). A study on the formation logic of Ordos Mongolian women's traditional costume characteristics based on affair theory. The dissertation notes that the Daruga is the most elaborate and representative ceremonial headdress in Ordos Mongolian traditional attire, comprising an band, rear ornament, side pendants, tassels, and other components inlaid with precious materials such as red coral, agate, turquoise, and silver. Its exquisite craftsmanship and symmetrical aesthetic design exemplify the exceptional mastery of traditional Mongolian folk handicrafts.

In Ordos 'traditional folklore, the Darulaga is not merely a decorative item for wedding ceremonies but also the most important dowry for Mongolian women during marriage. In the ancient era when grassland transportation was isolated, women who married far from home found it difficult to return; thus, the exquisite head ornaments became a spiritual anchor for their longing for their homeland and concern for their loved ones, endowing these seemingly cold handicrafts with warm humanistic sentiment. The composer integrated the crisp clinking sounds of the ornaments' beads and jade, the graceful dance movements of grassland maidens, and the vast grassland landscapes into his musical composition, blending folk aesthetics, humanistic emotions, and natural scenery. This approach transcended the traditional Mongolian instrumental music's singular expression of grandeur and heroism, creating a nuanced, layered artistic expression that harmonizes scenery, objects, and emotion.

2.2 A Hierarchical Cultural Content System for the Work

"Under the Blue Sky: Darraga" is not merely a simple reproduction of traditional Mongolian musical melodies, but rather a multifaceted ethnic chamber music piece that integrates material folk culture, nomadic spiritual traditions, and humanistic emotional dimensions. Its cultural content exhibits a clear three-tiered structure, the very foundation of the work's distinctive artistic charm.

The first layer embodies the material and folk cultural essence. Utilizing musical language as its medium, the work transforms the visual and dynamic beauty of the Dara Laga headdress—a Mongolian intangible cultural heritage craft—into an auditory art form. The piece's punctual textures, crystalline overtones, and layered rhythms vividly recreate the crisp clinking of beads and jade within the headdress and the swaying motion of its tassels in dance poses. This achieves a visual musical representation of Mongolian costume and craft culture, leveraging artistic works as a medium to expand the dissemination channels for Ordos' lesser-known folk accessory traditions and promote the preservation and popularization of ethnic traditional craftsmanship.

The second layer embodies the cultural essence of grassland nomadism. The work fully inherits the core aesthetic characteristics of Mongolian nomadic music, using the traditional pentatonic Yudiao mode as its tonal framework while incorporating distinctive Mongolian musical elements such as the Surden rhythm and cohesive long-form melodic phrases. Through interwoven high and low vocal parts and dynamic combinations of rhythmic density, it evokes the vast, ethereal, and profound natural landscape of the grasslands, embodying the traditional nomadic philosophy of harmony between humans and nature, and reflecting the musical character of Mongolian grassland culture.

The third layer embodies the cultural connotation of humanistic emotions. The work uses traditional Mongolian wedding scenes as an emotional vehicle to construct a dual emotional dimension. On one hand, it vividly portrays the lively scenes of grassland maidens celebrating their weddings with singing and dancing, creating a festive and enthusiastic folk atmosphere; on the other hand, it subtly conveys the tender and profound longing of Mongolian women who marry far

from home and miss their homeland. This dual emotional expression transcends the traditional Mongolian music's singular aesthetic focus on rugged grandeur, endowing the work with sincere and gentle humanistic warmth.

3. In-depth Analysis of Modern Creative Techniques in Artistic Works

Yuan Yuan (2024). In her essay titled "Wang Jianmin's Erhu Rhapsody: Telling China's Stories and Narrating Ethnic Chapters," she discusses the innovative development of contemporary ethnic instrumental music, emphasizing that its core lies in the organic integration of traditional ethnic musical genes with Western modern compositional techniques, rather than superficial melodic patchwork or element accumulation. "Under the Blue Sky: Daraga" builds upon the traditional musical characteristics of the Mongolian people, establishing a modern compositional framework that combines a "traditional cultural core with a modern structural framework." This paper employs musical form analysis to conduct an in-depth examination of the work's tripartite structure, the transformation of ethnic modes, the polyphonic texture composition, and the innovative application of aleatory music techniques, thereby clarifying its artistic innovation value in the field of ethnic chamber music composition.

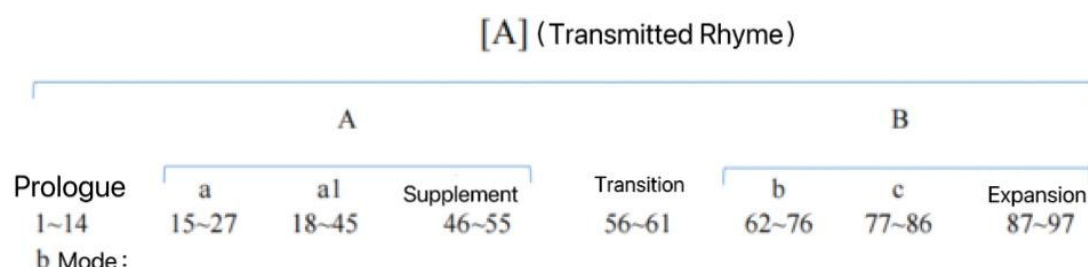
3.1 Innovative Application of the Parallel Three-Part Structure

The work employs a standard ternary parallel form structure, divided into three functional sections: Section A (introduction), Section B (lyricism), and Section C (expression). Each section is clearly defined and logically coherent, breaking away from the fragmented and improvisational patterns characteristic of traditional folk music. Grounded in the unified pentatonic Yu mode, the composition creates rich musical contrasts through variations in rhythm, tempo, harmony, and texture, establishing a complete musical progression of "introduction–development–climax–conclusion."

Section A (measures 1–97) serves as the thematic exposition, centered on the B minor mode. The section comprises an introduction, two parallel musical phrases, and transitional phrases, featuring a expansive and lingering rhythm dominated by a punctual texture. Grounded in the traditional Mongolian Surden rhythmic motif, it conveys a rich grassland folk character and introduces the core musical theme for the first time. In its phrase structure, the section draws inspiration from the fluid, continuous phrasing of Mongolian long songs, minimizing the rigid structural divisions characteristic of Western traditional music, thereby allowing the music to develop naturally and align with the free-spirited aesthetic of grassland music.

Figure 1

Structural diagram of the plucked instrument quintet "Daru Laga Under the Blue Sky" [Part A]

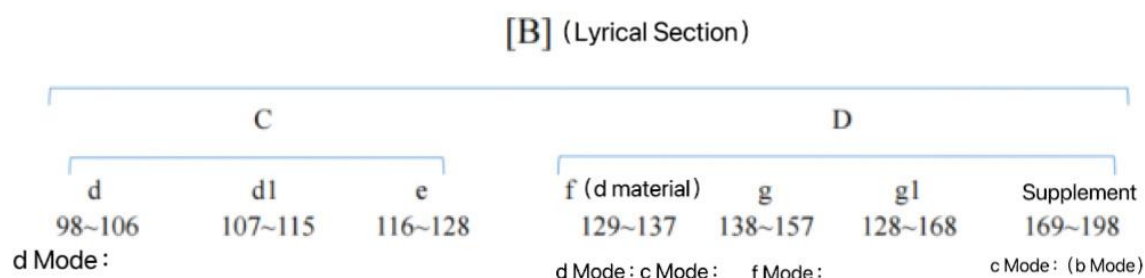


Note. Performed by Author (2026).

Section B (measures 98–198) constitutes a contrasting lyrical development section, shifting to the D minor key. Compared to Section A, this section features a significantly faster tempo and more complex harmonic functions, replacing the punctuated melodic texture of Section A with a linear melodic structure. Through polyphonic octave layering and harmonic filling techniques, it creates a warm and delicate lyrical atmosphere. The section employs a triadic contrast structure, achieving progressive emotional development through repeated modulations and return to the original key, resulting in richly layered musical expression that forms a striking artistic contrast with the simple, pure grassland character of Section A.

Figure 2

Structural diagram of the plucked instrument quintet "Daru Laga Under the Blue Sky" [Part B]

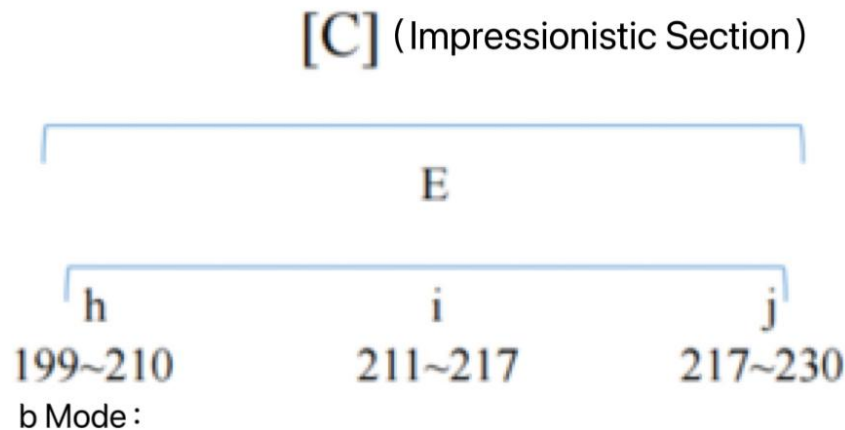


Note. Performed by Author (2026).

Section C (measures 199–230) serves as a free-flowing concluding passage, returning to the core B minor mode and establishing tonal coherence throughout the piece, thereby enhancing its overall musical unity. This section breaks away from traditional compositional constraints of fixed measures and rhythms by innovatively incorporating modern aleatory music techniques, allowing free variations in pitch and dynamics across all voices. Through random collisions of high-pitched clusters and dynamic changes in volume from distant to close, it evokes the vastness of a wind-blown grassland, elevating the artistic conception through expansive musical language and combining traditional Mongolian musical materials with aleatory techniques.

Figure 3

Structural diagram of the plucked instrument quintet "Daru Laga Under the Blue Sky" [Part C]



Note. Performed by Author (2026).

3.2 The Modern Transformation of Ethnic Modes and Rhythms

Modes and rhythms serve as the core symbolic carriers of ethnic music. Traditional Mongolian instrumental works predominantly employ a single fixed mode, featuring simple harmonic structures and monotonous rhythmic variations, resulting in limited artistic expressiveness. "Under the Blue Sky: Darulaga" adopts the most representative pentatonic Yudal mode of the Mongolian tradition as its core compositional framework, adapting traditional Mongolian modal materials within a contemporary compositional framework while preserving the essence of traditional modes.

Figure 4 explained in terms of modal design, the work transcends the traditional limitation of single-mode composition in grassland music. Building upon the B-Dur mode, it achieves seamless transitions between multiple modes—including D-Dur, C-Dur, and F-Dur—through skillful modulation and transposition techniques. This results in rich tonal layers and musical tension, creating greater tonal contrast. Moreover, all modal variations are grounded in the traditional Mongolian pentatonic scale system, consistently preserving the distinctive characteristics of ethnic music and achieving an organic integration of traditional charm with contemporary richness.

Figure 4

Measures 15–21 of the Plucked Instrument Quintet "Daru Laga Under the Blue Sky" Performed by Li Chaning

Note. Photograph provided by Mr. Li Chaning and reproduced with permission.

In terms of rhythmic design, the work inherits the classic rhythmic motif of the Mongolian Surden folk rhythm—"longer beginning, shorter end"—which permeates the entire piece, preserving the unique rhythmic beauty of grassland folk music. It also incorporates the characteristic 6/8 compound time signature of modern chamber music, creating alternating variations in rhythmic density and tempo. The layered structure—comprising the slow, punctual rhythm in Section A, the smooth, linear rhythm in Section B, and the free, improvisational rhythm in Section C.expands the rhythmic language of traditional Mongolian instrumental music of traditional ethnic music, endowing the work with modern rhythmic flexibility and achieving an innovative development of traditional ethnic rhythmic language.

3.3 Innovative Integration of Polyphonic Textures with Chance Music Techniques

Han, J. (2023). Modern French music in dialogue with Mongolian folk songs: A performance study of F. Angelès's China Theme Fantasy—The Beautiful Grassland, My Home (Master's thesis, Taiyuan Normal University).The dissertation highlights that the single linear melodic texture represents a fundamental structural limitation in traditional Mongolian instrumental composition, whereas modern ethnic chamber music centers on multidimensional and three-dimensional textures.The work employs a unique five-part ensemble configuration featuring the liuqin, three pipas, and zhongruan,forming a layered polyphonic texture.

Figure 5 explained in terms of texture arrangement, the high-pitched liuqin establishes the core melodic line with its bright and transparent tone, guiding the overall musical direction; the three medium-pitched pipas layeratively execute the thematic melody and provide harmonic

embellishment, enriching the musical mid-range auditory layers; the low-pitched zhongruan delivers stable bass support, solidifying the overall harmonic framework. Each vocal part is clearly defined yet harmoniously integrated, creating a three-dimensional auditory effect characterized by "clear high notes, full mid-range tones, and profound low bass." Building on this foundation, the work innovatively employs polyphonic techniques such as supporting counterpoint, harmonic superposition, and rhythmic displacement and overcoming the structural monotony inherent in traditional grassland music's single-melodic composition.

Figure 5

Measures 98–104 [B] of the Plucked Instrument Quintet "Daru Lhaga Under the Blue Sky" Performed by Li Chaning

The musical score is for five instruments: LIUQIN, PIPA 1, PIPA 2, PIPA 3, and ZHONG RUAN. The tempo is marked as ca. 100. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The LIUQIN part starts with a rest, followed by a series of chords marked 'p' and 'mp'. PIPA 1 and PIPA 2 also have rests followed by chords marked 'p' and 'mp'. PIPA 3 has a rest followed by a series of notes marked 'mp'. ZHONG RUAN has a series of notes marked 'mp'.

Note. Photograph provided by Mr. Li Chaning and reproduced with permission.

Figure 6 explained the innovative application of C-section aleatory musical techniques stands as the most prominent feature of this modern composition and represents a pioneering attempt in Mongolian-themed plucked instrument works. Unlike traditional folk music, which adheres to fixed scores and performance conventions, the aleatory passages break free from rigid rhythms and standardized notes, allowing performers to freely adjust dynamics and tempo according to the overall musical atmosphere. The random interplay of polyphonic sounds captures the natural, spontaneous beauty of grassland breezes. This avant-garde compositional approach perfectly embodies the vast and evocative imagery of the grasslands, achieving a cross-disciplinary fusion of traditional folk themes with Western modern compositional techniques.

Figure 6

Measures 217–210 [B] of the Plucked Instrument Quintet "Daru Lhaga Under the Blue Sky"
 Performed by Li Chaning

The musical score is for a quintet of plucked instruments. The first system (measures 217-210) shows the LIU QIN playing a melodic line starting on a high note, followed by PIPA 1, PIPA 2, and PIPA 3. The ZHONG RUAN part is mostly silent. The second system (measures 211-214) shows a more complex texture with all instruments playing. The LIU QIN and PIPA parts have various dynamics and articulations, including a 7-measure rest for PIPA 1 in measure 213. The ZHONG RUAN part has some notes in measures 213 and 214.

Note. Photograph provided by Mr. Li Chaning and reproduced with permission.

4. Practical Application of Multi-Part Collaborative Performance and Refined Technical Interpretation

The artistic value of compositional techniques is ultimately realized through precise performance interpretation. The unique five-part structure and diverse modern compositional techniques of "Under the Blue Sky, Da Rula Ga" impose exceptionally high demands on performers' technical mastery, timbral integration, and multi-part coordination abilities. Unlike the personalized expression of solo performances, instrumental ensemble music embodies the principle of "harmony in diversity" —preserving each instrument's distinctive timbre while achieving cohesive ensemble sound. Drawing on the work's compositional logic and extensive stage rehearsals and performance experience, this article establishes a refined multi-part performance framework across three dimensions: layered control of right-hand core techniques, left-hand timbral refinement, and collaborative ensemble dialogue.

4.1 Hierarchical Control and Timbre Adaptation of Right Hand Core Techniques

The right-hand playing techniques in the piece primarily include plucking, finger rolling, sweeping, and hybrid sweeping—corresponding respectively to the piece's punctual texture, linear melody, and climactic emotional passages. The layered and differentiated application of these techniques creates a rich and diverse auditory landscape, precisely aligning with the work's emotional fluctuations and artistic conception.

The plucking and lifting technique serves as the core technique in presenting the theme of Section A, playing a central role in recreating the folk aesthetic ambiance. The punctate sounds produced by these techniques mimic the crisp texture of colliding pearls or jade in Daru head ornaments, which is crucial for shaping the work's folk character. In ensemble performances, differentiated control across sections is essential: The first pipa carries the core melodic theme, executed with light string contact and force applied at the front edge of its soundboard, resulting in a clear, transparent tone that aligns with the dynamic beauty of the swaying ornaments; the second and third pipas, along with the zhongruan accompaniment section, uniformly employ the double-lifting technique, producing balanced, soft tones that minimize volume disparities between sections and achieve seamless integration of multiple sound sources. All sections adhere to a 6/8 time signature, highlighting the distinctive rhythmic charm of Mongolian folk music and highlighting the traditional rhythmic character of the work in Section A.

The rolling finger technique serves as the core foundation for expressing the linear melody in Section B, achieving the artistic breakthrough of "connecting points into lines" in plucked instruments. The lyrical melody of Section B is constructed through the overlapping rolling finger techniques of the liuqin and pipa, creating a prolonged and soft linear sonic texture. During performance, it is essential to maintain uniform rolling finger density and consistent dynamics, avoiding sudden volume changes and noise interference. The high-pitched liuqin rolling fingers produce clear and sustained tones that support the main melody, while the pipa rolling fingers deliver warm, restrained tones that serve as a tonal foundation. Their octave superposition yields a rich, mellow auditory effect, expressing the lyrical character of the passage. The alternating use of plucking and rolling finger techniques organically combines punctual dynamism with linear continuity, enriching the dynamic layers of musical expression.

The sweeping strumming and mixed sweeping strumming techniques are primarily employed in the allegretto climactic sections of the piece to depict the vibrant and festive atmosphere of a grassland wedding filled with singing and dancing, representing the most technically demanding segment for ensemble performance. Full-part sweeping strumming requires consistent technical standards: expanding the string contact area, applying focused and steady force to achieve a rich yet clear tone while avoiding loose or insubstantial timbre. For dynamic markings on the score, the actual performance involves moderately reducing volume, adjusting extremely strong or strong dynamics to medium-strong or medium-weak levels—thus preserving the musical tension of the climactic sections while preventing audio clutter caused by overlapping strong passages across multiple voices. Mixed sweeping strumming demands precise control of rhythmic accents; the high-pitched liuqin employs forceful and penetrating sweeping strumming, while the pipa part enhances musical dynamism through rhythmic accents. The combination of these two techniques creates a multi-layered, enthusiastic folk celebration scene.

4.2 Artistic Interpretation of Left-Hand Timbre Refinement Techniques

The left-hand fingering technique is central to enhancing the timbre and emotional depth of plucked instruments, and it is also key to shaping the distinctive character of Mongolian music. The composition primarily employs two left-hand techniques—strumming and overtones—which respectively serve to enrich the emotional expression in lyrical passages and elevate the artistic conception in the concluding sections, aligning seamlessly with the work's overall emotional structure and compositional logic.



The vibrato technique permeates the lyrical long notes in Section B, serving as the core technique for creating the warm and delicate character of Mongolian grassland music. Given the distinct melodic roles of each voice part, vibrato control requires differentiated treatment: the accompaniment employs subtle, light vibrato with gentle string vibration, softly enhancing the tone of long notes without overshadowing the primary melody; the core melody of the first pipa utilizes extensive vibrato to enrich harmonic layers and amplify the melody's lyrical depth and emotional impact. During ensemble performance, all performers must maintain consistent vibrato frequency and amplitude, precisely coordinating with right-hand finger rolling and string rolling techniques to avoid technical misalignment or rhythmic discordance, ensuring harmonious integration of multi-voice long notes and endowing the grassland music with its distinctive, lingering charm.

The overtone technique serves as the core performance vehicle for the C-section, an accidental musical passage, playing a pivotal role in elevating the work's artistic conception. The concluding section employs an interplay of three-pitch overtones and arpeggio textures from the pipa to evoke the ethereal ambiance of a star-studded night sky over the grasslands and the distant whisper of wind, demanding exceptional performance precision. During execution, the left hand must precisely locate the overtone points to ensure pure, transparent tones free from interference; upon plucking the strings, the right hand should swiftly lift the fingers to preserve ample overtone resonance. The remaining voices provide gentle accompaniment, accentuating the ethereal and lingering timbre of the overtones. Through a harmonious blend of solid and ethereal sound effects, the performance achieves a seamless emotional transition from vibrant folk scenes to the expansive poetic imagery of the grasslands, faithfully capturing the composer's original intent of expressive creation.

4.3 Multi-partite Fusion Coordination and Musical Dialogue Mechanism

The core artistic value of the quintet plucked instrument lies in the symbiotic collaboration among multiple vocal lines. The work's three-dimensional polyphonic texture demands performers to transcend the isolated soloistic mindset, cultivating an integrated auditory perception and a sense of collaborative dialogue—a key innovative aspect that distinguishes this study from traditional single-technique analyses.

First, the balanced integration of tonal layers. The Liuqin, pipa, and zhongruan each possess distinct tonal characteristics: the Liuqin is bright and clear, the pipa is warm and full-bodied, while the zhongruan is deep and substantial. During ensemble performance, the tonal balance must be dynamically adjusted according to the section's function: in Section A (the folk scene segment), the distinctive timbres of each instrument are emphasized to enrich auditory depth; in Section B (the lyrical segment), instrumental tonal differences are minimized, with unified playing techniques and string-playing logic achieved for optimal tonal harmony; in Section C (the expressive segment), the contrast between ethereal high notes and resonant low tones is highlighted to create a vast, three-dimensional musical space.

Second, the dynamic dialogue and seamless transitions between vocal parts. The composition extensively employs compositional techniques such as thematic continuation, mutual resonance, and layering, demanding exceptional real-time interaction and seamless coordination from performers. In the thematic transition sections, immediately after the conclusion of the first pipa melody, the liuqin part precisely carries forward the melodic line with unified breathing and synchronized rhythm, achieving seamless part transitions and a smooth musical progression. Within the free-rhythmic aleatory passages, performers dynamically adjust dynamics and sound density in response to the overall musical atmosphere, employing synchronized breathing and eye contact to create a layered, lingering musical effect that maintains rigorous musical logic and overall coherence.

Third, the unified expression of overall rhythm and emotion. Ensemble performance requires all performers to share a unified understanding of the work's cultural essence and emotional trajectory, maintaining consistent breathing rhythm and emotional intensity. In celebratory and vibrant passages, each voice part exhibits tight rhythms and rich emotional depth, evoking a lively folk atmosphere; in gentle and lyrical sections, the performance is relaxed and unhurried, highlighting delicate humanistic sentiments; in the expressive concluding passages, the performance is ethereal and lingering, achieving a perfect fusion of technical skill and artistic conception. Through meticulous collaborative performance by all members, the work's artistic narrative—encompassing its folk storytelling, emotional expression, and artistic elevation—is fully realized.

5. The Artistic Value and Social Communication Significance of the Work

5.1 Innovative Academic and Artistic Value

The plucked quintet *Under the Blue Sky: Daru Laga* demonstrates several distinctive features in the creation and performance of contemporary Mongolian chamber music. In terms of instrumentation, the work adopts a five-part ensemble consisting of liuqin, three pipas, and zhongruan. Compared with more common plucked ensemble settings, this combination expands the range and timbral contrast of the ensemble and creates a clearer division between melodic, harmonic, and bass functions.

In terms of compositional technique, the work combines Mongolian musical materials with contemporary compositional methods. Traditional elements such as pentatonic modal writing, folk rhythmic patterns, and long melodic lines are retained, while modern structural organization, polyphonic texture, and aleatory passages are also incorporated into the composition. These techniques increase the textural variation and structural flexibility of the work while maintaining its ethnic musical character.

From the perspective of performance practice, the piece places relatively high demands on ensemble coordination, especially in tone balance, rhythmic synchronization, and interaction among different parts. Based on the structural characteristics of the work, this study summarizes several practical issues related to rehearsal and ensemble performance, including timbral adjustment, articulation control, and coordination between leading and accompanying voices. These observations may provide references for the performance and study of similar plucked ensemble works.

5.2 Folk Culture Preservation and Its Value in International Communication

As an exemplary vehicle for the living preservation of ethnic minority folk culture, "*Under the Blue Sky: Daruga*" holds significant value for social dissemination and cultural inheritance. Centered on the lesser-known Ordos Mongolian Daruga headdress culture and wedding customs, the work transforms these niche intangible cultural heritage elements into accessible artistic expressions through musical artistry. By transcending the geographical limitations inherent in traditional folk traditions, it facilitates widespread dissemination of Mongolian traditional handicrafts and wedding customs through stage performances and academic research, thereby enhancing public awareness and ensuring the living preservation of ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, the works balance ethnic cultural characteristics with contemporary public aesthetic demands, possessing exceptional artistic appeal and stage presentation value. They can be widely applied in professional stage performances, university ethnic music education, and ethnic cultural promotion and education. Against the backdrop of global artistic integration, such ethnic instrumental compositions—combining the profound heritage of China's traditional culture with modern international artistic standards—effectively facilitate the international dissemination of

Mongolian musical culture and even China's ethnic music traditions, showcasing the unique charm of China's ethnic minority cultures on the global art stage.

Furthermore, through in-depth analysis of the works, this paper summarizes an innovative development path for ethnic instrumental music characterized by "cultural empowerment—technique innovation—precise interpretation," providing replicable practical experiences for the contemporary innovative preservation of traditional ethnic music. This contributes to the sustainable development of China's ethnic music through both inheritance and innovation.

6. Conclusion

Under the Blue Sky: Daru Laga is a contemporary Mongolian plucked ensemble work based on Ordos Mongolian cultural materials. Through the use of modern compositional techniques and multi-part ensemble writing, the work combines traditional musical elements with contemporary chamber music language. Its three-part structure, modal design, polyphonic texture, and aleatory passages reflect the composer's attempt to explore new approaches to Mongolian instrumental composition while retaining recognizable ethnic musical characteristics.

In addition to its musical structure, the work also reflects aspects of Mongolian folk culture, particularly wedding customs and the symbolic meaning associated with the Daru Laga headdress. These cultural elements are integrated into the musical design of the piece and contribute to its expressive character. At the performance level, the coordination between different instrumental parts, balance of timbre, and control of ensemble texture are important aspects of the interpretation of the work.

Based on previous studies, this paper examines the relationship between compositional technique, cultural context, and ensemble performance practice in Under the Blue Sky: Daru Laga. Through analysis of the musical structure and performance characteristics of the work, the study discusses several features of contemporary Mongolian plucked chamber music and its development in recent years.

For contemporary ethnic instrumental composition, the use of traditional musical materials together with contemporary compositional approaches remains an important direction for further exploration. Works such as Under the Blue Sky: Daru Laga provide examples of how traditional cultural elements may continue to be presented within modern chamber music contexts.

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Rooting Dance Education in Primary and Secondary Schools: A Practical Examination of the Psychosomatic Value of Shanxi “Xiaohua Opera”

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Abstract

Background: In the exam-driven basic education of today, primary and secondary school students face multiple mental health challenges, including academic stress, emotional dysregulation, identity confusion, and insufficient peer interaction. Dance, as an embodied art integrating physical, emotional, cultural, and social dimensions, offers unique potential for psychosomatic well-being and is increasingly recognized in aesthetic education. Dramatherapy and dance/movement therapy (DMT)—two complementary creative arts therapies—have demonstrated effectiveness in helping children and adolescents externalize emotional distress through action-based, non-verbal methods (Mohanani & Menon, 2017; Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023).

Objective: This study looks at a local folk dance from Shanxi Province, “Xiaohua Opera,” and asks whether it can be used in school dance classes to help young people. The goal is to move dance education away from performance and competition toward a more inclusive, healing-focused practice.

Methods: The study used a mix of methods: reviewing past research, 60 hours of classroom observation across three schools, semi-structured interviews with 25 people (school leaders, teachers, parents, and students), case studies of 12 students, and three rounds of action research. The theories used include aesthetic education, dramatherapy, DMT, and adolescent psychology. Ethics approval and informed consent from schools and parents were obtained before data collection.

Results: Three main benefits appeared. First, the dance helped students release physical tension and manage emotions. Second, it gave them a stronger sense of cultural belonging and self-worth. Third, group dancing improved their social skills, trust, and reduced social anxiety.

Conclusion: With changes in curriculum goals, teaching materials, class formats, evaluation methods, teacher roles, and long-term planning, Xiaohua Opera can become a regular, low-cost tool for psychosomatic support in schools. A comparison with Teochew opera (Ngiew) in Thailand shows that without active efforts to engage the young generation, traditional arts fade. The lesson is clear: make it participatory, not just preserved.

Keywords: Aesthetic education in primary and secondary schools; Cultural identity; Psychosomatic regulation; Shanxi Xiaohua Opera

1. Introduction

China's basic education has improved in many ways, but exams still control most of what happens in schools. Students in primary and middle schools often feel stressed, anxious, and unsure about themselves. They sit too long, move too little, and talk less face-to-face because of digital devices and competition. Dance, as a body-based art, could help. But in practice, dance classes are still seen as something for shows and for talented students, not for everyone's mental health.

The Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & General Office of the State Council, 2020) says clearly that aesthetic education should “serve all students” and help them grow through beauty. That is not what is happening now.

Shanxi “Xiaohua Opera” is a folk dance from the border area of Shanxi and Hebei. It has bright rhythms, easy movements, fans as props, and a strong group feel. It comes from daily life and festivals, so it naturally helps people let out feelings, feel connected to their culture, and enjoy being together. Putting this dance into schools could make aesthetic education more meaningful.

There is already good research on dramatherapy for young people. Mohanan and Menon (2017) showed that dramatherapy helped an older adult move into a nursing home with less distress by using action-based methods. A recent review found that dramatherapy for children and teenagers mostly happens in schools (71%) and is more often for adolescents than younger children (Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023). Mohanan (2018) wrote about “therapeutic presence” and how it relates to stage presence, suggesting that drama-based action methods work beyond clinical settings. These ideas fit well with what we are trying to do: using a folk dance as a form of therapeutic presence in the classroom.

This study asks: what can Xiaohua Opera do for students' minds and bodies? And how can we actually make it part of school life?

2. Research Design and Methods

The study used several methods on purpose, to get a fuller picture.

(1) Looking at past research

I read work on aesthetic education, dramatherapy, DMT, folk dance, and adolescent mental health. The field agrees on some things: dramatherapy works through role-play and storytelling inside a safe space (Mohanan & Menon, 2017; Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023); DMT reduces stress through rhythmic movement (Payne, 2017); folk dance carries cultural memory (Shay, 2002); and Chinese school aesthetic education often fails to use local resources well (Wang, 2022). What is not yet solved is how to fit folk dance into everyday classes without extra burden, how to measure its effects, and—maybe most important—how to make young people actually want to do it. I also used international studies (Hanna, 2015; Koch et al., 2019) for a broader view.

(2) Watching classes

I spent 60 hours over three months (January to March 2026) in two county primary schools and one children's art center in Shanxi. That is 20 hours per place. I watched students' postures, facial expressions, how they joined in, and how they talked with each other. I wrote down what

looked different between regular classes and dance activities. I also noted common signs of stress. All watching happened in regular classrooms, so the setting was real, not fake.

(3) Talking with people

I did semi-structured interviews with 25 people: 4 school administrators, 6 classroom teachers, 5 dance teachers, 6 parents, and 4 students (one from grades 3, 5, 7, and 9). I picked them on purpose because they were involved in dance or arts activities. Each talk lasted 25 to 40 minutes, and I recorded with permission. I asked about current dance teaching, students' feelings, what they thought of folk dance, and what got in the way. I tested the questions with two teachers first. Interviews happened in private rooms during school hours. I wrote up notes within 48 hours.

(4) Looking closely at a few students

I chose 12 students (6 from primary, 6 from middle school) who showed clear signs of psychosomatic trouble—for example, hunched backs, often anxious, or staying away from others. They took part in Xiaohua Opera rhythm exercises, group formations, and emotion-expression tasks over eight weeks. I used video and notes to track changes, then analyzed them using DMT, dramatherapy, and developmental psychology ideas.

(5) Action research cycles

I ran three cycles, each four weeks long: design → do → watch → think → redesign. First cycle: basic rhythm and body waking up. Second cycle: added emotional expression and short improvisation. Third cycle: added cultural stories and group performance. Each cycle had two 40-minute classes per week. The goal was to make a model that ordinary county schools could use.

(6) Trustworthiness of the findings

To make the study more reliable, I used the same observation and interview guides for everyone. A second person coded 20% of the video records, and we agreed 89% of the time. I also used four different sources of data (observations, interviews, cases, action research) to check each other. I went back to five participants to see if my interpretations made sense to them. Three months of work and repeated cycles also helped.

(7) What the study could not do

The study has limits. The sample is small (25 interviews, 12 case students) and only from Shanxi, so do not generalize too much. There was no control group, so I cannot say for sure that Xiaohua Opera caused the changes. I was both teacher and observer, which might have biased what I saw. Three months is not long enough to know if the benefits last. And I did not use standard psychological scales. Future studies should do better on these points.

3. Theoretical Discussion: Dramatherapy, Dance/Movement Therapy, and Why Xiaohua Opera Is Special for Young People

(1) How dramatherapy and DMT come together

Dramatherapy uses drama and theatre elements inside a therapeutic relationship. DMT uses movement to connect mind and body (Payne, 2017). One focuses on role-play and story, the other on posture and rhythm. But in real practice, they overlap a lot. Both create a safe space. Both use action more than words. Both work well for children and teenagers who cannot easily say what they feel (Ougrin, Carr & Lau, 2023).

Mohanani and Menon (2017) showed this clearly with an older adult moving into a nursing home. The key mechanisms—externalizing inner struggles in a safe space, playful expression,

bypassing verbal defenses—work just as well for teenagers in school. Mohanan (2018) later explored “therapeutic presence” and its link to stage presence, using ideas from Grotowski and Barba. He argued that drama-based action methods build therapeutic presence even outside clinics. That matters for us: when a teacher leads Xiaohua Opera with real attention and kindness, the classroom itself becomes a therapeutic space.

(2) What makes Xiaohua Opera good for young people

Xiaohua Opera sits right between dramatherapy and DMT. Unlike professional dance, which demands perfect technique and often makes students anxious, Xiaohua Opera started as a folk activity. Its movements—twisting, swaying, flicking, turning—are playful, not technical. The fans add a theatrical touch; students can “step into” a character without the pressure of acting.

This drama-infused quality is what sets Xiaohua Opera apart. Students do not need to get the steps right. They just need to be joyful, relaxed, and part of the group. In dramatherapy language, Xiaohua Opera gives a safe dramatic boundary (Mohanani & Menon, 2017). Inside that boundary, they can let out academic stress, peer conflicts, and identity worries through movement, not by talking about them. The cheerful music and open body movements create what Mohanan (2018) called therapeutic presence—a space where students feel seen, held, and allowed to express without being judged.

For a generation that spends hours on screens and often lacks embodied social skills, this low-threshold, high-engagement format works well. No training needed. No expensive gear. No selection. It is basically a drama-based action method hiding inside local cultural heritage—therapy that does not call itself therapy.

4. What I Saw: Students’ Problems and How Little Art Education Helps

In many county schools, exams still run everything. Long hours of sitting give students hunched backs, curved spines, and tired muscles. They hardly move, so their coordination, rhythm, and sense of space do not develop well. Emotionally, stress turns into worry, irritation, and sadness. Most have no way to let those feelings out and just hold them inside. Psychologically, teenage years are when identity forms, but without stable cultural support, some students feel lost and bad about themselves. Socially, competition and online life mean less face-to-face talk, weaker teamwork, and less sense of belonging.

Meanwhile, dance education sits at the edge. Classes get squeezed out. There are not enough teachers or space. When dance does happen, it is about performances and competitions for a few talented kids. The content is copied from fixed dances, not connected to local life or culture. Dance is seen as an extra activity, not as a way to handle emotions, build character, or pass on culture.

Cai Yuanpei (1983) said to “replace religion with aesthetic education,” meaning art should help emotions, clean the heart, and perfect personality. That idea is still fresh. Dance works on body, emotion, mind, and social life all at once. Bringing dance back—from the edge to the center, from the few to everyone, from performance to daily life—is not just a reform goal. It is a real answer to what students need.

5. Theoretical Basis: DMT, Dramatherapy, and What Folk Dance Can Do in School

(1) Basic ideas from DMT

DMT says mind and body are not separate. How you stand, move, breathe, and feel all affect

each other. Pushed-down feelings show up as tight muscles, shallow breathing, or a closed body. The other direction also works: open, natural, rhythmic movements help release bad feelings, make you feel better inside, and bring back balance (Payne, 2017). DMT values non-verbal expression, which is especially useful for teenagers with complicated inner lives.

(2) Dramatherapy in schools

Dramatherapy adds the idea of a safe dramatic boundary. Students can “try on” different emotions and roles without real-life risk (Mohanani & Menon, 2017). For teenagers who are figuring out who they are, this is valuable. Mohanani (2018) also said therapeutic presence—a quality of focused, kind attention—can be built through drama-based action methods and can move beyond therapy rooms into schools. When a teacher leads Xiaohua Opera with genuine presence, noticing non-verbal cues and staying non-judgmental, the classroom becomes a therapeutic space.

(3) Adolescent psychology

Erikson (1968) said teenagers’ main job is to build an identity, including a stable sense of self and values. Cultural identity, group belonging, and positive emotions help a lot. Folk dance carries local history and collective memory, helping teenagers feel rooted. Dancing in a group builds peer trust and belonging, which supports positive personality growth.

(4) Why folk dance fits education

Folk dance comes from daily life. It is easy to join, engaging, rich in meaning, and collective. Professional dance training is for the few; folk dance is for everyone (Shay, 2002). Xiaohua Opera has light movements, clear rhythms, and simple fans. No advanced skills or special studios needed. That makes it perfect for inclusive aesthetic education.

6. Three Psychosomatic Benefits of Xiaohua Opera

(1) Physical release and emotional guidance

The main moves—twisting, swaying, flicking, turning—are not too big, have clear beats, and feel bouncy. They stretch the limbs, relax muscles, and undo the stiffness from sitting too long. From a DMT view, rhythmic movement improves breathing, lowers sympathetic nervous system activity, and helps the body shift from tension to relaxation (Koch et al., 2019).

The happy music and open body movements give a natural, wordless way to express feelings. Students do not have to perform perfectly. They can just let go of pressure, bad moods, and worries. From what I saw in class, students who regularly did these activities had more stable moods, better focus, and a more positive state of mind. That matches the emotional regulation effect I was looking for.

(2) Cultural identity and belonging

Xiaohua Opera carries Shanxi’s local culture. Its movements, music, and stories show local life, values, and spirit—hard work, cheerfulness, strength, and acceptance. Bringing it into school is not just teaching steps; it is passing on culture and building identity.

As students learn the dance, they slowly learn its history and meaning. They start to feel familiar with and proud of their local culture. A stable cultural identity helps them know themselves better, feel more self-worth, and worry less. Erikson (1968) would say cultural belonging gives important support to identity formation.

(3) Social connection and personality growth

Xiaohua Opera is highly collective. It needs formation changes, eye contact, and group

coordination. This creates a natural non-verbal social space. When dancing together, students watch and adjust to each other. That breaks down interpersonal walls and builds cooperation and trust.

The friendly, easy atmosphere reduces social anxiety and loneliness. When a group finishes a dance together, they feel achievement and belonging. That makes them more friendly, open, optimistic, and cooperative. The communication skills and emotional habits they learn can carry over into daily study and life, helping social development and healthy personality growth.

7. Keeping Young People Interested: A Comparison with Teochew Opera in Thailand

(1) What Thailand's Teochew opera (Ngiew) teaches us

Teochew opera, called ngiew in Thai, used to be very popular in Thailand. Professional troupes even performed for the royal family. Now the audience is mostly elderly Thai Chinese. Sometimes there are more actors on stage than people watching (China Daily, 2024). Only about 30 troupes remain. The pandemic made things worse, cutting yearly performances from 300 to fewer than 100 (People's Daily, 2022).

Why? Audiences are aging and no young people replace them. Digital entertainment pulls kids away. Performance skills are not passed down. Young people see Teochew opera as old-fashioned and irrelevant. An 81-year-old founder of the Thai-Chinese Dramatic Arts Institute is trying to translate operas into Thai and start a school in Bangkok (China Daily, 2024). That is admirable, but it focuses on preservation as a spectacle, not participation—not making the art a lived, embodied practice for young people.

This matters for Xiaohua Opera. If we present it as a cultural relic to be admired from a distance, it will fade the same way.

(2) Six strategies to make Xiaohua Opera appealing to young people

From my action research cycles and classroom observations, here is what works:

First, keep the door wide open. No dance experience, no expensive costumes, no tryouts. Tell students and parents clearly: joining is what counts, not how well you perform. Xiaohua Opera's folk origins already make it accessible; just do not add barriers.

Second, lead with the therapeutic feel, not cultural duty. Students get interested when they feel less stressed, in a better mood, and having fun together—not when told “this is your heritage.” In my classes, students who were indifferent at first got engaged after experiencing the joyful, tension-releasing effect. Teachers should start with embodied experience, not historical lectures.

Third, use drama-based action methods. The fans, the group formations, the playful gestures—these can become improvisation games where students make up their own short sequences or “tell a story” through dance. That turns imitation into creation, which teenagers love. Mohanan's (2018) therapeutic presence also means the teacher's attitude—playful, attentive, non-judgmental—is as important as the steps.

Fourth, let students lead. In my action research, students who learned the moves first were asked to lead small groups. Peer teaching boosted engagement a lot. Students took more risks and showed more emotion with peers than with me alone. Schools could have “Xiaohua Opera student ambassadors” for break-time activities.

Fifth, use digital platforms the right way. Digital tools cannot replace moving together, but short videos, student-made content, and online sharing of group performances can extend the fun. The rule: digital as supplement, not substitute.

Sixth, make performances celebratory, not competitive. A yearly Xiaohua Opera Culture Day, school assemblies where each class shows a short dance, inter-school “sharing festivals” (not competitions)—these give a sense of achievement without the anxiety. When it is about sharing, not ranking, reluctant students join in.

(3) What this means for both countries

The contrast between Xiaohua Opera’s potential and Teochew opera’s decline shows a simple truth: traditional arts survive not by being preserved but by being re-embedded in young people’s daily lives. What makes Xiaohua Opera different from Teochew opera in Thailand is not artistic quality but format: it is school-based, low-threshold, and therapeutic, not a professional stage tradition. For Teochew opera to survive, it may need a similar shift—from spectacle to participation, from stage to classroom, from relic to lived practice. And for Xiaohua Opera, the Thai lesson is a warning: without deliberate strategies to engage the young, even the richest heritage will fade.

8. Making It Happen: Practical Pathways for Schools

(1) Change course goals: from performance to mind-body education

Old dance courses were about fragments, performances, and competition. An inclusive dance curriculum needs three kinds of goals:

- Physical: better posture, coordination, exercise habits, less fatigue, stronger body.
- Emotional/mental: help students recognize, express, and manage feelings, release stress, accept themselves—so dance becomes a daily emotion tool.
- Cultural/social: deeper understanding of local culture, cultural identity, better communication, group belonging.

This shifts dance from expert training to universal art education, and from outcome to process.

(2) Build a grade-by-grade curriculum

Because students at different ages have different needs, the curriculum should go step by step:

- Grades 1–3: game-like rhythm, clapping, stomping, simple fan games. Focus on body awakening and fun imitation.
- Grades 4–6: add emotional expression and short sequences (10–15 minutes) for daily release, calm-down, and communication.
- Grades 7–9: cultural understanding and creative expression. Include history, meanings, local stories. Simple choreography and group dance to move from imitation to self-expression.

(3) A low-threshold, everyday class model

To solve the problems of limited space, time, and teachers, try this lightweight model:

- Use regular classrooms. Mostly standing and upper-body moves.
- Combine one weekly 40-minute class with 3–5-minute break-time activities.
- A simple routine: body wake-up → feel the rhythm → main learning → share and relax.
- A supportive atmosphere: no negative criticism, no comparing people, only positive words to keep the space psychologically safe.

(4) Non-competitive, growth-oriented evaluation

To avoid adding more pressure, stop scores and ranks. Instead:

- Record participation (attendance and attitude).
- Ask students to describe their body and heart feelings.
- Keep a “Dance Growth Portfolio” that tracks long-term changes in physical, emotional, and

social areas.

(5) Change what teachers do: from skill coach to therapeutic facilitator

Teachers should shift from teaching techniques to supporting mind-body development:

- Watch carefully: spot quiet, still, or sad students and offer gentle help.
- Build therapeutic presence: following Mohanan (2018), pay focused, kind attention to non-verbal cues. Make a safe space where emotions are welcome, not seen as problems.
- Lead softly: use encouraging words, not corrections that shame.
- Connect home and school: share videos and growth notes with parents so they understand and help.

(6) Make long-term plans, not one-off events

To avoid being a short project, put these in place:

- Put folk dance in the school's annual plan.
- Start open dance groups that anyone can join, no skill needed.
- Hold a school-wide Xiaohua Opera Culture Day about sharing, not competing.
- Mix with other subjects: Chinese, music, moral education.
- Train homeroom teachers in basic rhythm guidance so dance becomes part of daily management.

These pathways move dance from “festival decoration” to a real part of campus life.

9. Ethics

Because the study involved minors (ages 6–15), I got ethics approval from the School of Music, South China Normal University (approval no. SCNU-MUSIC-2025-014). Before collecting data, I got informed consent from the two participating county primary schools and from the legal guardians of all students. I also got assent from the students themselves, using language they could understand. Everyone knew they could stop at any time with no consequences. All data was anonymized. No identifying information appears here. The dance activities were part of regular PE or arts classes, not extra stress.

10. Conclusion

This study asked what psychosomatic value Xiaohua Opera could have in primary and secondary schools. The answer from the data: three clear benefits—physical release and emotional regulation, cultural identity and belonging, and social connection through group dance. Those findings come directly from what I saw and heard in the field (Sections III, V, VI). Students' mood, self-confidence, and cooperation did improve after they took part.

The theory I used—dramatherapy (Mohanani & Menon, 2017; Mohanan, 2018), DMT (Payne, 2017), and adolescent psychology (Erikson, 1968)—helps explain why. Xiaohua Opera gives a safe dramatic boundary where students can act out academic stress and identity worries through playful movement instead of words. The idea of therapeutic presence (Mohanani, 2018) also shows how a teacher's attentive, kind facilitation turns an ordinary classroom into a therapeutic space.

The limits I listed in Section I(VII)—small sample, no control group, possible observer bias, no long-term follow-up, no standardized scales—mean these results are preliminary, not final. Future studies should do better.

On the practical side, Section VII gives six pathways schools can actually use. Schools that try

them can expect better student mental health and also a revival of local culture.

Finally, the comparison with Teochew opera in Thailand (Section VI) is both a warning and a chance. If we present Xiaohua Opera as a relic to be preserved, it will die out. If we embed it in school life as a therapeutic, participatory, drama-infused practice—joyful, easy to join, and immediately good for you—it can thrive. For Thailand's Teochew opera, the lesson goes the other way too: re-imagining traditional performance as an embodied therapeutic practice in schools might be a path to survival. As aesthetic education reform continues, local folk dances in China, Thailand, and elsewhere can use their cultural energy to support young people's whole development—and make dance a normal, daily, lively part of school life.

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A Review and Future Prospects of Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

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Abstract

Since the establishment of China's spokesperson system in 1983, over 40 years have passed, leading to the emergence of three main categories of spokespersons: government, corporate, and institutional. While government spokespersons have evolved steadily, corporate spokespersons have faced a "high start, low finish" situation. In recent years, Chinese firms have made extraordinary resolve and investment in globalization, coinciding with changes in China's and the world's economic conditions. Corporate spokespersons are a crucial component of the growth process of modern organizations since they not only disseminate company information but also guide public opinion and manage crises. To gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the overall development of research on corporate spokespersons within Chinese academia over the years, this study, grounded in a historical perspective, systematically reviews and synthesizes existing scholarly literature on the topic. It also seeks to explore the extended value and potential areas for innovation in the study of Chinese corporate spokespersons within the context of the new era. In doing so, the study aims to provide useful references and insights for current theoretical and practical research in related fields.

Keywords : Academic history; Chinese spokesperson; Corporate communications; Corporate spokesperson

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the new century, spokespersons have become a significant focus of research and application within academia and industry in China. Compared to the central role of government spokespersons, there is still substantial room for improvement in the visibility, promotion, and application of corporate spokespersons in Chinese society. With the globalization of China's economy and the increasing complexity of corporate communication, there have been changes in communication strategies, media landscapes, and organizational dynamics. This environment requires corporate spokespersons not only to manage public relations crises skillfully but also to engage in brand management and stakeholder communication actively. At the same time,



the rise of social media and digital platforms has introduced new dimensions to the practice and application of corporate spokesperson roles.

The research problems and objectives of this study are mainly reflected in the following aspects: first, to trace the historical development of “spokespersons” and “Chinese corporate spokespersons”; second, to review and organize existing studies related to corporate spokespersons in China. By providing a relatively comprehensive analysis of the formation and transformation of this role in China, the study seeks to address both the practical value and the existing gaps of this system in contemporary applications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Formation and Development of Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

2.1.1 Early Exploration and Initial Practice

In the academic community, there are two primary opinions on the spokesperson's origins. According to one theory, the first government press conference occurred in February 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War. The Japanese government had forbidden foreign media from reporting from the front lines, which led to many negative reports published by foreign media. To rectify this, the Japanese side in Changchun, China, called a meeting of journalists in July of that year to discuss the war's progress. Academics regard this event as the world's earliest government press conference and gave rise to the first spokesperson (Cai, 2008). Another interpretation holds that spokespersons began in the United States. According to Glenn Bloom and others' book *Effective Public Relations*, Andrew Jackson was the first president in American history to formally adopt the word "spokesperson". It wasn't until 1857, when the twenty-fifth President McKinley took office, that the government started paying the president's publicists. Following that, William Howard Taft, who served as president, held two news conferences every week, progressively standardizing the spokesperson position. In the 1950s, the United States established the Office of the Press and spokesperson in the White House, effectively establishing the spokesperson as a political structure. Since then, other countries have followed suit, establishing their spokesperson systems. Using the president's private secretary as a "spokesperson" dates back to the 1820s (Yang, 2005). In 1934, *Jing Daily (Shanghai)* stated: "We cannot but believe that the term spokesperson is a trick learned from other countries." Existing research indicates that the origin and development of the Chinese spokesperson system were influenced to some extent by the Western spokesperson system and that the term "spokesperson" could already be found in major newspapers and magazines during the Republic of China period to refer to a person who expressed opinions on behalf of a governmental body or an organization (Zhou & Xia, 2023).

2.1.2 The Process of Institutionalization and Standardization

In February 1983, the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Central Leading Group of Foreign Propaganda jointly issued the "on the implementation of the establishment of a spokesperson for the press system and to strengthen the work of foreign journalists" document. This demands that the Ministry of Overseas Affairs and State Council ministries with a substantial number of overseas contacts adopt a consistent system. The document required the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all State Council departments with more foreign contacts to establish a standardized system for releasing news on a regular or irregular basis, indicating the gradual beginning of China's spokesperson system from that point forward, with the



first regular press conference held on March 1 of that year. Qian Qichen is considered to be China's first spokesperson (Li & Tang, 2023). The Central Leading Group for Foreign Propaganda released the Provisional Regulations on the Work of the Spokesperson in November of the same year, emphasizing the significance of the position and outlining the qualifications, responsibilities, and duties of the spokesperson in addition to the objectives, targets, and structure of press releases. The All-China Journalists Association had announced on April 23 of that same year that a spokesperson system would be established in China. The Information Office of the State Council was founded in January 1991, and it became the department in charge of official news releases. At the start of the reform and opening-up period, when people had limited access to information, state ministries and governmental organizations at all levels appointed spokespersons and accelerated the establishment of the corresponding institutional framework, allowing the spokesperson to develop quickly.

China's corporate spokespersons were first attempted in 2001, and as China's market economy improved, businesses began to rely on the government spokesperson system to establish corporate spokespersons (Yang, 2007). Some Chinese businesses have expanded to meet the demands of the global market since China joined the WTO. This means that traditional methods of information release and public relations are insufficient to meet these demands, particularly for businesses that control vital sectors of the national economy like transportation, energy, and the chemical industry, where social responsibility is highly valued and receives significant attention from the public. The Jilin petrochemical explosion, tainted milk powder, and other notable events at the start of the new century caught some Chinese enterprises in a vortex of bad news. These enterprises were not good at responding to similar emergencies, which led to gossip. The government and enterprises realized how urgent it was to establish a corporate spokesperson as a result of the frequency of these crises and bad news. In 2001, Lenovo took the lead in establishing a corporate spokesperson (Feng, 2014), which offered institutional support for the company's worldwide brand creation, paving the path for China's corporate spokesperson system. In 2003, China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) issued the Interim Measures for the Administration of Press and Publicity Work of the State Council's SASAC, which standardized the press release mechanism of central enterprises and established a spokesperson for the central enterprises' press (Feng, 2014). In August 2004, the SASAC and the State Council's Information Office co-organized the first training for big central enterprise spokespersons. The China Spokesperson Club was founded in December 2005 to organize regular salons, trainings, and summits for corporate spokespersons, and to offer professional services to spokespersons from the Fortune 500, China's top 500 corporations, and high-growth organizations in China. On April 22nd, 2006, the Center for International Communication Studies at Tsinghua University and Weiming Communications co-organized the "First China Spokesperson Forum" and picked the "First Top 10 Corporate Spokespersons in China" during the event. The Chinese Government's Regulations on the Disclosure of Information, promulgated in 2008, marked a further advance in China's spokesperson system. The First Top Ten Chinese Corporate Spokespersons Award Ceremony was held on June 27, 2009, at People's Daily, with the topic "Innovating Wealth Mode in the Information Age and Enhancing Enterprises' Right to Speak". On June 26, 2010, the Second Top 10 Chinese Corporate Spokespersons Selection Activity resumed, with the addition of "Top 20 Press Conference Service Providers" to the list. The subsequent organization of these events is not only



a recapitulation and exchange of the construction and implementation of Chinese corporate spokespersons during the development period, but also a meaningful dialogue and communication between Chinese corporate spokespersons and corporate press conference service providers (Xinhua News Agency, 2010).

2.1.3 Stable Growth and Challenging Obstacles

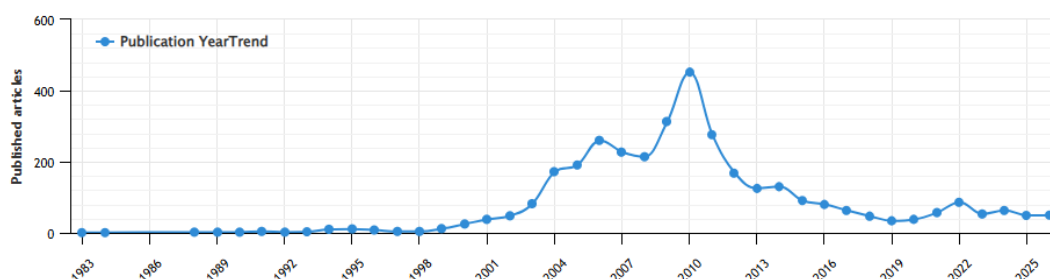
2023 is the 40th anniversary of the creation of China's spokesperson system. The directory of spokespersons for central state organs and localities currently includes 272 people, of whom 158 are in central government departments and 114 are at the local level. These individuals represent relevant ministries and commissions of the central government and state organs, as well as party committees and the governments of all provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities), according to data released by the State Council of China's Information Office in February 2023 (Zhang, 2023). The implementation and continuous improvement of China's spokesperson system demonstrates that China has made remarkable progress in the areas of government affairs disclosure, service-oriented government construction, and the protection of the public's right to know and supervise, all of which have played an important role in promoting Chinese society's economic development and image construction. However, Gao and Sun (2005) editors of the book *"News Release and Spokesperson Practice,"* said that: "There are approximately 40,000 spokespersons at all levels of government in the United States." In addition to government offices, there are full-time spokespersons for big and medium-sized businesses, international firms, and so on. Even in tiny firms with few employees, there are part-time spokespersons. This demonstrates that, in comparison to the United States, where this system has been in existence for over 160 years, China's spokesperson system still confronts significant challenges, particularly in the establishment and growth of corporate spokespersons.

2.2 Research Overview: A Review of Chinese Corporate Spokesperson Research

In China, the development of corporate spokespersons has been significantly shaped by government spokespersons, which emerged first. This spokesperson system is now essential for effective communication between the government and the public and has been adopted by large state-owned enterprises, though few private and foreign-invested companies have followed suit (Li, 2021).

Figure 1

Publication Trends in CNKI Research on “Spokespersons” (1983–2025)

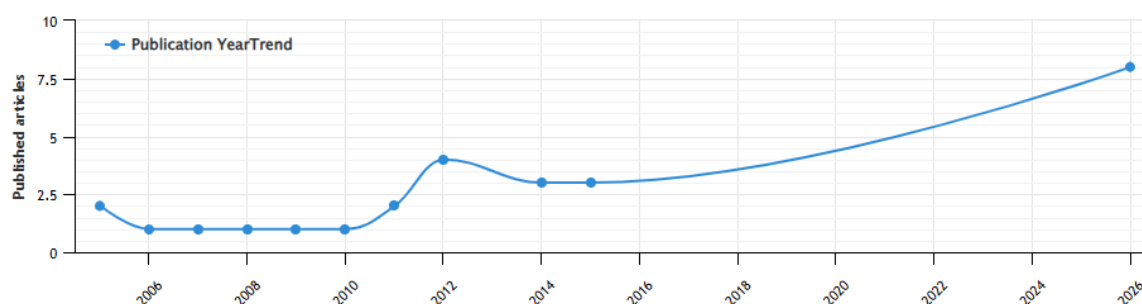


Note. The graph depicts the number of articles published by Chinese academic circles on spokespersons between 1983 and 2025. The data is from the CNKI (China Academic Journals Database).

Since the SARS outbreak in 2003, research on spokespersons has gained traction in Chinese academia, focusing on both government and corporate roles. A study using CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) shows over 4,369 publications related to "spokesperson" as of March 2026, with notable growth from approximately five studies per year before 2000 to around 130 per year from 2000 to 2025. The peak was over 450 publications in 2010, but the numbers have declined since, with 86 articles published in 2022.

Figure 2

Publication Trends of CNKI Studies on “Corporate News Spokespersons” (2005– 2026)

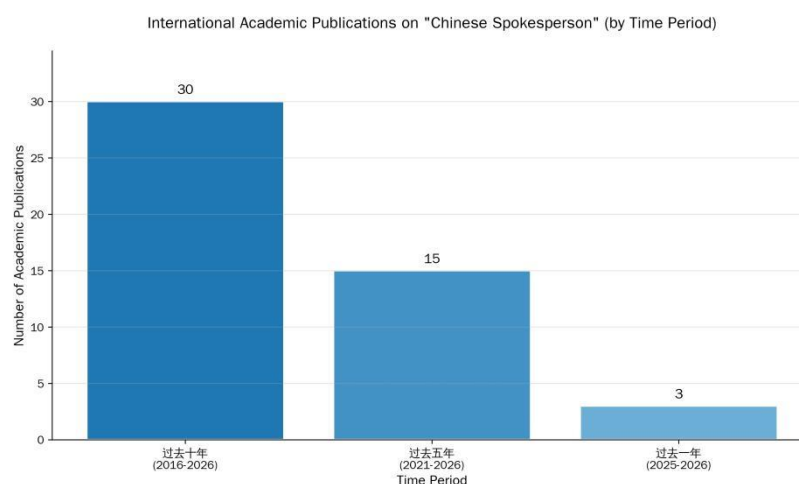


Note. The graph depicts the number of articles published by Chinese academic circles on corporate spokespersons between 2005 and 2026. The data is from the CNKI (China Academic Journals Database).

Although more enterprises have recognized the importance of corporate spokespersons in the past two decades, academic research on this topic remains limited. Existing studies mainly address the roles and responsibilities of corporate spokespersons, lacking deeper analysis of their practical operations and effectiveness. A search for "corporate spokesperson" in CNKI reveals only 20 publications, primarily from 2005 to 2015, indicating a need for more comprehensive research in this area.

Figure 3

Publication Trends of “Chinese Spokesperson” Research in EBSCO Discovery Service (2016–2026)



Note. The graph depicts the number of articles published by International academic circles on Chinese spokespersons between 2016 and 2026. The data is from the EBSCO Discovery Service.

This study uses “Chinese Spokesperson” as the search term in the EBSCO Discovery Service database. As of March 31, 2026, 60 relevant documents were identified after excluding news-related publications, including magazines, academic journals, and trade publications. Over the past decade, 30 publications have addressed this topic, with 15 in the last five years and 3 in the past year.

Refining the search term to “Chinese Corporate Spokespersons” yielded six relevant publications. Existing studies have primarily focused on topics such as the role of sports celebrities (Wang, 2011), the impact of product-harm crises on spokesperson strategies (Wang & Wang, 2014), and consumers’ responses to CEOs during crises (Laufer et al., 2018). A limited number of studies have also examined the discourse and rhetorical strategies employed by Chinese spokespersons.

While international research on Chinese spokespersons is extensive, the limited application of corporate spokesperson systems in China restricts further academic progress. As globalization continues and the Chinese corporate environment evolves, more international scholars are encouraged to explore this area. Overall, this study concludes that existing research mainly concentrates in the following areas.

2.2.1 Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

Definition of corporate spokesperson. A fundamental method of disseminating information, the spokesperson system is currently in use in the majority of nations (Zhang, 2001). Spokesperson is a concept in public relations (Peng, 2004). In a similar vein, He (2004) contends that the spokesperson system is one of the important contents of public relations. To start, there are differing opinions among Chinese academics regarding the title of spokesperson. According to Zou (2005), "In other countries, the spokesperson (i.e., spokesperson) is not called 'news'; however, the spokesperson for each department is called 'News Spokesperson' in China. Why add the word 'news'?" to be investigated. He believes that calling someone a spokesperson is more appropriate than adding the term "news," as the primary duties of a spokesperson are to communicate government policies, opinions, and ideas, of which news is only a tiny part. Some scholars have approached this issue from the standpoint of news communication, contending that once the government releases its position and claims, they acquire news value and, as such, can legitimately be referred to as spokespersons in the context of news communication (Wang, 2007). A spokesperson is a full-time (or part-time in the case of smaller departments) press release officer appointed or designated by the state, a political party, or a social organization, according to Liu Jianming's Dictionary of Publicity and Public Opinion (1992). The spokesperson's duties include holding press conferences or meeting with individual journalists at prearranged times to release news or explain the department's positions in response to questions from the media on behalf of the department in question. They are also in charge of addressing queries from the media on behalf of the respective departments. Zhao (2003), previous head of the State Council's Information Office, stated that "a spokesperson is not a person, but a system." Wikipedia's definition of a spokesperson is more thorough, a spokesperson, also known as a spokesperson or press officer, is a public relations professional who speaks on behalf of other natural or legal people (such as a corporation, government, or other organization), publicizes the situation, and responds to journalistic queries.



Specialized spokespersons are assigned by many government agencies and businesses; some also employ general managers or other senior managers or authorities. Furthermore, the representatives of many professional sports and entertainers typically serve as spokespersons.

Research on corporate spokespersons in journalism. The research on corporate spokespersons from the perspective of journalism has been performed largely along the lines of "the role of the media in news releases" and "the compatibility of roles between spokespersons and media people". According to Li (2007), China's spokesperson system is government-driven, top-down, and endogenous, as opposed to the Western "government-media" duality. The government is compelled to actively give more thorough and transparent information due to the market-oriented change in the economy and the media's pursuit of financial gain (Zhang, 2017). The media is a two-edged sword that may be used to both cause and control crises (Xu, 2008). The public's impression of a corporation influences its image in their minds. Some scholars start from mass communication theory, people in modern society are rarely able to experience everything, so the media primarily realizes their cognition through disseminating information to create a kind of "virtual environment" that helps people comprehend and perceive the world. In a similar vein, the public's opinion and perception of businesses are influenced directly by the information that these "virtual environment" corporations disclose (Yang, 2007). As a result, how to engage with the press and public opinion, particularly in crisis public relations, and how to create a favorable business climate for enterprises is a critical problem that many companies must address. Nowadays, there are around 3 billion cell phones with video capabilities around the globe, and others may point their mobile phones at the spokesperson and ask questions at any time, and then submit the films to social media sites that will live indefinitely (Kasprzak, 2020). In the face of such an open and diversified media environment, experts feel that for businesses to properly confront the public, deal with crises, and steer public opinion, spokespersons must become professionalized and deepen their business knowledge. According to Xu (2008), corporate spokespersons should have media expertise to deal with the media more effectively. Based on this, some scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of the roles that spokespersons and members of the media play, respectively. They have suggested that the former can optimize the information release strategy and increase the effectiveness of core information dissemination, while the latter can assist spokespersons in improving the acceptability and attractiveness of the information release in their on-the-spot performances. This will help to both promote the broad dissemination of information and help shape the spokesperson's charisma, personal charisma is extensively communicated, and it shapes the public image of the relevant departments (Lin, 2019).

Furthermore, some academics examine how corporate spokespersons handle crises from a new media standpoint. According to them, corporations must now embrace the Internet in the new media era. To that end, building a systematic network spokesperson system using the "online service mechanism, online supervision mechanism, online network management" will help corporations take the lead in dialogue and meet customers' informational needs (Sun, 2014). Additionally, some academics advise businesses to change the way they now disseminate information—which once came from many sources and was published at random—and make sure that all information is unified, reliable, and issued through an official corporate spokesperson (Yang, 2007). Corporate spokespersons must organize and carry out media campaigns as part of integrated marketing



communication to capture the public's attention and accomplish the purpose of product marketing. A comprehensive and all-inclusive summary of a set of strategies for spokespersons and enterprises coping with crises in the all-media era can be found in Zou's (2006) *How to Face the Media: A Practical Handbook for Government and Corporate Spokespersons*, Shi's (2014) *Spokesperson Practice Series: Press Releases and Media Relations Management in the Age of All-Media*, Li's (2021) *Running to Win the Crisis: A Guide to PR Self-Help in the All-Media Era*, and other works.

Research on corporate spokespersons in communication. First, corporate spokesperson and crisis communication. Crisis communication often focuses on crises that affect governments, businesses, organizations, the general public, and the media. Crisis communication aims to quickly disseminate relevant event information to internal and external audiences, as well as the media, and to communicate effectively with the public during the crisis (Liao & Li, 2024). As the frequency of crisis occurrences rises, the fundamental question of crisis communication must be addressed: how can we discover "life" and "turnaround" in the "crisis"? (Xiao, 2015). Following the SARS outbreak in 2003, the idea of crisis communication started to take hold in China, and Chinese academics got serious about studying it. The use of communication for crisis management has grown in significance due to the development in the quantity and complexity of crises as well as the ongoing improvement of communication media technologies (Liao & Li, 2004). Under the guidance of crisis communication theory, the Chinese government began to strengthen its response programs to public emergencies, and in September 2004, a resolution of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) emphasized the importance of perfecting the press release system and improving the rapid response and emergency response mechanism for reporting on major emergencies at domestic and overseas. In 2008, the Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan Province, China, received widespread media coverage, and the study of "crisis communication" became a fad in China (Wang & Hu, 2018). In addition to the political sphere, the business sector has begun to pay attention to crisis events that might have major consequences for company brands. Crisis communication is multidisciplinary, comprehensive, and practical, and academics describe it from several disciplinary viewpoints. Scholars with a background in management conducted most of the early research on crisis communication in Chinese academia. They thought of crisis communication as a unique kind of management activity, focusing primarily on how an organization selects its coping strategies following a crisis, such as what to say in public and what course of action to follow, this selection of strategies is a part of the management process itself (Wang & Hu, 2018). According to American communication scholar Kathleen Fearn-Banks, "Crisis communication is the communication between the organization and the public before, during, and after a crisis event" (Coombs, 2001). However, other scholars contend that studying crisis communication is studying communication in a unique setting. Most Western scholars characterize crisis communication in terms of public relations; however, Jonathan Bernstein notes that crisis public relations can also be referred to as crisis management or crisis communication. The distinctiveness of public relations stems from the fact that it communicates with the public in a timely and honest manner, which leads to the dissemination of information or methods that eventually help the stability and harmony of the environment in which the crisis event occurs. Scholars in media and communication focus on giving tactics and recommendations for dealing with crisis occurrences, such as particular spokesperson management approaches.



Accordingly, it is not difficult to see that, despite their diverse academic backgrounds, the researchers all share a common concern and underline the essential position and function of the news release and spokesperson in dealing with crisis occurrences. The spokesperson system has long been seen as a key component of modern government operations and a necessary instrument for the government to regulate and successfully manage society (He, 2004). From a crisis management standpoint, some academics view the corporate spokesperson as the central figure of corporate crisis public relations, which is emerging as a new function in contemporary corporate management, and as an information manager responsible for preserving and distributing the company image (Hao, 2010). Scholars have also tackled the topic of news releases in crisis communication. They have elaborated on the principles that apply to crisis news releases, outlined the necessary skills for the spokesperson, and offered theoretical counsel on crisis communication (Shi, 2008). According to Uriel Rosenthal, a crisis researcher at Leiden University in the Netherlands, a crisis is an occurrence that seriously jeopardizes the foundational principles and social norms of a system, necessitating the making of important decisions under time constraints and a high degree of uncertainty (Liu, 2001), and that in their role as the main person handling a crisis, spokespersons must be particularly aware of the language errors and communication barriers that may arise from their information processing and mental organization. The spokesperson must also be aware of the impact that time constraints have on their speech patterns when they deal with emergencies. Many experts use public relations theories to give organizations with solution solutions based on the "14-day rule" following a crisis (Wang, 2006). Huang, S., Du, G., & Shao, H. (2009) co-edited the book *Spokesperson Strategy in Corporate Crisis Public Relations*, which provides an in-depth interpretation of how to build a spokesperson mechanism to cope with crises, as well as the communication strategy of corporate spokespersons in crisis public relations.

Second, corporate spokespersons and oral communication. In terms of oral communication, Chinese scholars' research topics primarily include "agenda setting and discourse rhetoric (Zhang, 2017), the value of oral communication in the construction of self-consciousness (Lin, 2019), and the strategy of language literacy enhancement (Li, Wang, & Shi, 2024)," revealing a certain degree of academic rationality. Pan (2011) from the communication theory perspective, the spokesperson serves as the social opinion leader. According to some academics who have researched the communication role of corporate spokespersons, the spokesperson is responsible for distributing information about the company's authority and image to the public and serves as a mediator in the communication process between enterprises and society, media, and the public. In global interactions, communication is frequently hampered by power disparities, and improper rhetoric can lead to a communication quandary or even directly trigger a violent reaction, Zhang (2017) emphasizes the importance of communication ethics, particularly in oral communication, as the key to mediating such conflicts. In addition to oral communication, Jiang (2003) argues, based on logical judgment, that the inner and outer states of a spokesperson are interconnected and shape the spokesperson's communication image, which includes outward appearance, image, temperament, speech and behavior, ideology, and virtue, and that these elements form a whole.

Lin (2019) also investigated the two elements of self and personal in the oral communication work of spokespersons, pointing out that there is a non-synchronous relationship between spokespersons' state of self and their performance when they face the media and audiences. He



emphasized the constant change of the state of self and elaborated on the importance of self-communication, formed after constructing self-consciousness, for the spokespersons' management. Additionally, he examined the parallels and divergences between actors and spokespersons from the viewpoints of theater and film. He concluded that similar to actors, spokespersons may be fully engaged in oral communication during press conferences, displaying a public solitude that is akin to temporarily ignoring their existence. The distinctions are that spokespersons must be adaptable and sensitive to the feelings of their group, while actors must remain focused on their fixed roles on stage and are not required to consider the camera or the emotions of the audience. Spokespersons must respond flexibly to the media and the audience, adapting their performance to the circumstances. This is because the spokesperson's ego is derived from society, and they must flexibly choose or ignore their ego during the speaking process. In contrast, actors must focus on a fixed role on stage and are not required to consider the camera or the emotions of the audience (Lin, 2019). When performing in a theater, people expect the audience to take their portrayal seriously, whether they are communicating a particular social identity or playing a specific role. This expectation implies that people frequently present themselves "for the benefit of others," and what Goffman (2008) refers to as "for the benefit of others" for public relations spokespersons is the dissemination of social responsibility informed by both individual awareness and group cognition. This social responsibility is not only communicated verbally, but it also represents the organization's responsibility in society. To receive positive feedback after communicating individual needs, it is necessary to focus on the effective communication of social responsibility, which is dependent on the spokesperson's comprehensive cognitive construction of himself/herself. T. Ed Griffith, one of the most famous spokespersons in American history, emphasized that communication is a two-way street and that listening to and learning from the perspectives of others is more important than unilaterally promoting the company's point of view (Kasprzak, 2020). Donatella Giacometti, Executive Communications Strategist and Founder of CEO MEDIA COACH, Inc., says that spokespersons must adopt an "outside-in" approach to grasp what is essential to external audiences (stakeholders). The research mentioned above offers helpful advice on how spokesperson may boost their businesses and establish their positions.

Research on corporate spokespersons in management. The spokesperson system has changed from the classic publicity mode to the effect-oriented publicity management and enterprise communication due to the ongoing integration of news communication theory and enterprise management. A corporate spokesperson plays a crucial role in bridging the trust gap that exists between an organization, the general public, and its shareholders. They also have a significant impact on the operations and brand image of contemporary businesses. Scholars mainly explore the necessity, ways, and methods of establishing a corporate spokesperson system. Some scholars consider the corporate spokesperson to be the "lifeline" of the firm, viewing it as an essential and significant position in modern enterprise management (Xiao, 2015). According to Yang (2007), most businesses have limited or even incorrect knowledge of corporate spokespersons, and they have yet to develop a comprehensive idea of cognition and system construction, which directly impacts the function of the corporate spokesperson. The lack of an established organization for corporate spokespersons has resulted in a lack of capacity to deal with crises. At the same time, corporate spokespersons frequently rely on information from government authorities and the media,



while ignoring crucial objectives such as internal employees, customers, and partners. The efficacy of corporate spokespersons is impeded by inadequate funding, frequent changes in personnel, and inconsistent degrees of professionalism. The establishment of the spokesperson system for central enterprises is an important measure for central enterprises to further improve the modern enterprise management system, and it is also an inevitable requirement for central enterprises to take on the important task of creating a harmonious society. As a result, the formation and development of spokespersons in Chinese state-owned enterprises is more standardized when compared to private enterprises, this is because the spokesperson system for state-owned enterprises is protected (Yao, 2015). Zhou (2015) empirically analyzed from the dual perspective of violation penalties and agency costs that the establishment of corporate spokespersons improves the level of corporate governance, and in state-owned listed companies with poor governance levels, the spokespersons act as one of the most effective alternative mechanisms in the corporate governance environment. Therefore, a corporate spokesperson ensures the unity, clarity, and correctness of the enterprise's external perception, as well as the best approach to avoid information misunderstanding, protect the enterprise's reputation, and avert dangerous situations. Some scholars argue that corporations should constantly improve spokesperson training, push for the formation of a daily working mechanism, form a competent spokesperson team, and actively maintain excellent communication with media organizations.

Research on corporate spokespersons in political science. In China, the "mouthpiece theory" and "tool theory" of the press are considered the fundamental understandings of the interaction between media and politics (Li, 2007, p2). Chinese academics' research on the press release system has always been led by Marxist journalism, which explains the relationship between the press and politics primarily through the party principle of the media. "Propositions like "Journalism and the Party (Gan, 1982)," "Adherence to the Principle of Party Nature and socialist political direction (Cheng & Tong, 1993)," and "The Party Nature of Journalism (Hu, 1995)" have all been used to discuss the relationship between socialist journalism and politics. Because of this, some academics are concerned about the potential negative effects of appointing a spokesperson, particularly in light of the media's explosive growth and the theoretical underpinnings of its oversight of government operations. They fear that the installation of such a system could result in government control over media discourse (Yang, 2003). According to their basic beliefs—that media ownership determines the news system and that the government inevitably controls and uses the media to maintain a stable administration—some scholars began focusing on the relationship between media and politics in the late 1990s. These studies aim to adopt a universal viewpoint to scrutinize the relationship between media and politics, rather than limiting themselves to the particular relationship under a specific social system (Li, 1999). These studies provide an overall picture of the relationship between media and politics in China.

Following that, western academics began to pay more attention to the practical application of this research direction, with the spokesperson not only releasing information on behalf of the government but also influencing the public through the explanation of government policy, particularly during government crises. After numerous revisions to become the widely respected media public relations and press release-related staff of required reading in U.S. political and business circles, the U.S. Department of State organization wrote the classic reading "*Government*



Media Relations and Press Release - a spokesperson for the necessary manual." The U.S. Department of State authorized the Tsinghua University Press permission to publish it in China in 2005. Many Chinese academics also started to recognize that the research has to focus more on the practical side of things, and the study of spokespersons started to show some positive signs in the academic community under the government's support and welcoming atmosphere. Scholars from the fields of journalism, political science, communication, and law examined spokespersons during this period. They also looked at how press releases and the public's right to know related to each other, as well as how spokespersons at all levels of government are developed and assessed. Gao and Sun edited *News Release and Spokesperson Practice* (2005), Yang's *Theory and Practice of Spokesperson* (2005), Lang's *Spokesperson Practice* (2005), Zou's *Inside the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Strategies and Skills of Spokespersons Facing the Media* (2011), Gong's *Tutorial for Government Spokespersons* (2011), Pan's *You Are Also a Spokesperson* (2011), Wang's *Wang Xuming Speaks of Spokesperson* (2012), Zhang's *Study on the Language Style of Spokespersons* (2013), Zhang's *Handbook for Spokespersons* (2015), and Dong's *Guidelines for the Work of Spokespersons of Social Organizations* (2020), and a series of other authoritative works have sprung up to explore in depth the Chinese spokespersons. Due to space constraints, this study will not cover all of them.

2.2.2 Research Review

Research contributions. The study and use of corporate spokespersons have evolved from a small number to many, starting from scratch in Chinese academics and industry. Even though spokesperson research in China began relatively late, over the past 20 years, Chinese researchers have made significant strides and discoveries in the field, producing many representative and innovative research findings. Numerous exemplary and prospective study findings have surfaced. The academic community first examined the spokesperson from the viewpoints of political science, journalism, and communication, among other fields (Cai, 2008), it is now more inclusive of various fields like art, and the research topic has been expanded from the spokesperson's definition, practical approach, and significance to include the spokesperson's "agenda-setting and rhetoric" (Zhang, 2017) and "comparison of the systems of China and foreign countries" (Mi, 2019), oral communication's importance in the development of self-awareness (Lin, 2019), media literacy and governmental etiquette (Zhang & Fu, 2022), the strategy of enhancing language literacy (Li, Wang, & Shi, 2024), etc. These studies are very valuable academically because they encompass a multidisciplinary research paradigm in addition to illustrating the historical evolution of spokespersons in China and research mapping.

Insufficient research. As a collection of theories jointly promoted by various social humanities disciplines, it is still difficult to form a school of thought in the strict sense of the term, a strict and complete theoretical system has not been constructed, and existing researches lack theoretical systematicity and originality. Although some study findings have been obtained, there is still a lot of space for development in terms of research substance, theoretical depth, research viewpoint, research technique, and applicability to real-world issues. An overview of the research findings to date indicates that the Chinese academic community's understanding of corporate spokespersons is dispersed, lacking in systematicity, and primarily grounded in a list of opinions gleaned from observation and perception. It also lacks a theoretical explanation of Chinese corporate



spokespersons, as evidenced by the research on spokespersons that tends to be too broad and insufficiently deep, and by the literature's preponderance of theoretical explanations and practical issues over in-depth discussions of spokespersons. The practical operation is weak, and the majority of the literature concentrates on theoretical description. Furthermore, the study approach is singular, focusing primarily on the government's analysis of the spokesperson system while downplaying the significance of other groups including businesses, associations, and academic institutions. Li (2021) believes that the spokesperson system used by government agencies has been widely adopted in large state-owned enterprises. However, currently, the number of private and foreign enterprises, outside of central state-owned enterprises, that have established a spokesperson system remains very limited.

In particular, theoretical research has not yet caught up with practice, making it impossible to give timely and correct theoretical pulses as well as practical advice on the wide process of time. The primary significance of corporate spokespersons is their practical application, and many literatures rely too heavily on Western countries' experiences, failing to fully integrate China's own national development needs and considering their applicability and effectiveness in specific application scenarios. To offer a deeper dialogic environment for the growth of communication activities, academics should seek to produce new concepts, categories, and expressions that combine China and other nations (Xi, 2013). To provide a more diverse and interactive space for communication activities (Li, 2018, p79). The study of corporate spokespersons in Chinese enterprises is a time-consuming and continuously evolving task, which objectively imposes a more demanding and challenging theoretical mission in this field. Over the past decade, theoretical research and practical application regarding corporate spokespersons in China have significantly declined under market influence. This paper attempts to summarize the primary reasons for the disparity between the low attention given to corporate spokespersons and the high attention paid to government spokespersons in current research:

First, the difference in political systems plays a key role. The government implements strict control and management over the media and information dissemination. Government spokespersons play a central role in social governance, frequently communicating government policies and explaining government actions to the public and media. Their presence and level of activity are typically higher than those of corporate spokespersons.

Second, differences in organizational structures contribute to this disparity. Most Chinese companies typically handle press releases through public relations departments, marketing departments, or senior management rather than appointing dedicated spokespersons. This structural difference results in a relatively small number of corporate spokespersons. Additionally, the widespread use of social media has made information communication more convenient, further reducing the necessity for dedicated corporate spokespersons.

Third, there is a lack of legal safeguards. Unlike the government, the process of information disclosure for companies has not been incorporated into a legal framework. As a result, many companies do not perceive external information disclosure as necessary. For example, publicly listed companies with disclosure requirements must strictly comply with the regulations of stock exchanges, making the risks associated with spokesperson communication difficult to manage (Li, 2021).



Moreover, given the relatively short history of corporate spokespersons in China, some companies have yet to fully grasp their importance. This has led to issues such as poor market insight and a lack of up-to-date awareness and adaptability. Currently, there is a relative scarcity of organizations in China that can provide scientific guidance or professional training, as seen in Western countries, which has further hindered the development of corporate spokespersons in China.

3. The Contemporary Value and Future Prospects of Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

However, Chinese corporate spokespersons still lag behind in terms of institutional development and research depth, which has led some companies to handle crisis events inadequately and has prevented the strategic value of corporate spokespersons from being fully realized.

3.1 The Value of Corporate Spokespersons for Corporate Crisis Response and Strategic Communication

An increasing number of businesses and organizations today understand how important reputation is, particularly in the face of crises (Crijns, Claeys, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Additionally, preserving a company's reputation and achieving corporate brand communication are crucial tasks for the corporate spokesperson (Lv, 2020). The role of the spokesperson is also to participate in the selection of the company's communication strategy in times of crisis (Pravdová, 2021, p218). With the acceleration of China's enterprise reform process, various conflicts have also emerged. The corporate spokesperson serves as a critical measure for promoting the transformation of Chinese enterprises toward modern management systems and is the most effective approach for preventing crisis events. On May 21, 2023, Cathay Pacific flight CX987 from Chengdu to Hong Kong became embroiled in a controversy where several flight attendants were accused of verbally discriminating against passengers, mocking mainland Chinese travelers for not understanding English. The incident remained a trending topic in the news for several days, drawing widespread public attention. Within two days of the incident, Cathay Pacific issued four apologies to passengers. Initially, an apology was issued through social media but failed to effectively address the issue. Subsequently, under mounting public pressure, Cathay Pacific's Chief Executive Officer, Ronald Lam, and Director of Service, Mandy Ng, issued written statements, announcing the suspension of the involved crew members and the launch of an internal investigation, promising to announce the results within three days. Later, at the opening ceremony of the "Guangdong-Hong Kong Cooperation Week," CEO Ronald Lam publicly apologized in Mandarin to people and passengers from various regions. The succession of apologies from multiple senior executives underscores Cathay Pacific's recognition of the incident's gravity and its sensitivity to public opinion. Nevertheless, it also highlights a critical gap in the company's spokesperson strategy, which resulted in inadequate initial crisis management. This shortfall has inadvertently increased the opportunities for media to access and disseminate inaccurate information. However, the main role of the spokesperson is to gain control of the narrative (Pravdová & Imrecze, 2021: 218). A unified communication approach is essential to mitigating damage to the company. Therefore, the importance of a corporate spokesperson cannot be overstated. The spokesperson's role in ensuring transparency is crucial for transitioning Chinese state-owned and private enterprises from



traditional closed models to modern, open frameworks. This transition is also a key step in accelerating the internationalization process of these enterprises (Zhang, 2001).

3.2 The Significance of Corporate Spokespersons in Guiding Social Opinion and Crisis Management

The corporate spokesperson serves as a liaison between the company and the news media as well as the general public, they are also the face of the company's public relations division and its most senior management representative (Wang, 2004). Corporate spokespersons may effectively mediate disputes between the public and businesses by influencing public opinion. Yu (2004) states that the evaluation criterion for the spokesperson system is whether the current spokesperson system has lessened the information asymmetry in the public's perception of public affairs, allowing the public to have a more thorough and in-depth understanding of public affairs. With China's social and economic growth, there are a rising number of social disputes and crisis events. Corporate spokespersons who reveal corporate-related information to the public promptly may construct a positive image and so gain public understanding and support. The public's emotional swings must be promptly managed, particularly in the wake of a crisis occurrence, since unchecked emotions have the potential to seriously disrupt society or perhaps have irreversible effects. Sinopec was designated as a "hardest-hit area" for unfavorable public opinion in 2012, with 42.6% of the 550,000 pieces of information that were reported by the media being negative. This accounted for 18.7% of all bad public opinion in the SASAC. After that, negative public opinion declined for six years in a row as a result of SINOPEC's spokesperson system and ongoing efforts to build public trust. In 2017, the percentage of negative public opinion fell to 5.9%, an 86% decrease from the year before, significantly improving the company's standing in the eyes of the public. From a communication studies perspective, the role of a spokesperson is integral to controlling public discourse through agenda-setting (Yao, 2015). As providers of public goods, corporations are obligated to disclose relevant information to society. This practice not only aids the public in understanding and monitoring corporate operations but also fosters a favorable public opinion environment conducive to corporate reform and development. Taking the spokesperson system of central enterprises as an example, these spokespersons primarily issue information that has undergone rigorous verification to guide public opinion and facilitate communication and coordination between the government and society. In summary, official spokespersons play a crucial role in curbing the spread of misinformation by disseminating accurate and timely information through mainstream media channels.

3.3 The value of corporate spokespersons to corporate expectation management and competitiveness

The spokesperson system's formation is a reflection of China's increasing reforms in external communication and opening up (Zheng, 2023). China, one of the most significant economies in the world today, is experiencing a boom in international trade cooperation and is seeing an increase in consumer demand. In this regard, corporate spokespersons play a crucial role in marketing strategies and are essential to the advancement of contemporary businesses. The "Guidelines for Reputation Risk Management of Fund Management Companies (Trial)" (henceforth referred to as the "Guidelines") were released on June 17, 2022, by the China Securities Investment Funds Association. Fund management companies should establish a robust reputation risk management



system, appoint designated spokespersons, and enhance mechanisms for news management, public opinion monitoring and analysis, evaluation, accountability, and information retention (Liang, 2022). Through effective communication and expectation management, the corporate spokesperson can assist the business in creating unique competitive advantages. This will enable investors and the market to transact with the enterprise more accurately, and ultimately, the business will develop a strong cooperative model that upholds the rights and interests of its customers internally and fortifies its ties to the outside world. Simultaneously, it takes on the significant duty of clarifying the growth of Chinese businesses in the global arena, serving as a crucial portal to present China's consumer market and corporate image to the rest of the world (Zhang, 2023). In his report at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly stated the need to accelerate the development of a distinct Chinese discourse and narrative system to effectively tell China's stories, amplify its voice, and present an image of China that is credible, admirable, and respectable. He emphasized the importance of enhancing international communication capabilities and improving the overall effectiveness of global communication to ensure that China's international discourse power aligns with its comprehensive national strength and international status. This guiding principle sets a new direction for developing the spokesperson system for Chinese enterprises in the new era.

In summary, there remains considerable room for improvement in both the research and practical application of corporate spokespersons in China. Continued efforts are needed to deepen studies in areas such as cross-platform discourse mechanisms, crisis communication strategies, and the construction of international communication capabilities. Particularly in the era of artificial intelligence, how to advance this field from the dimension of “institutional development” toward that of “communication effectiveness and governance modernization” remains an important issue that warrants further in-depth exploration.

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From Tradition to Modernity: An Analysis of the Stylistic Evolution of Shanxi Piano Music

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Abstract

Shanxi is rich in folk music resources, which provide important materials for the regionalized and nationalized creation of piano music. Over the past century, rooted in the core of local traditional music and integrated with Western compositional techniques, Shanxi piano music has undergone three stages: native transplantation, Chinese-Western integration, and pluralistic innovation, forming an artistic style that combines northern regional temperament with modern aesthetics. This paper adopts music morphological analysis, literature research, comparative research, and interdisciplinary research methods to define the core concept of Shanxi piano music, sort out its development context, analyze the laws of stylistic evolution from four dimensions—melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture, distinguish the differences between folk oral transmission and piano notation, deepen the interpretation of cultural connotations, and complete citations in strict accordance with academic standards. Research shows that Shanxi piano music is a typical sample of the modern transformation of traditional folk music and the symbiosis of Chinese and Western musical cultures. Its creation model of "**rooted in locality, applied with modernity**" provides theoretical reference and practical enlightenment for the development of northern regional national piano music and the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage music.

Keywords: Cultural connotations; Nationalization; Notation differences; Shanxi piano music; Stylistic evolution

1. Introduction

Located in the middle reaches of the Yellow River and on the Loess Plateau, Shanxi has accumulated rich traditional music resources such as folk songs, Bangzi opera, and folk wind and percussion music through its unique geographical environment and millennia-old agricultural civilization, serving as an important artistic carrier of Yellow River and Loess culture. After Western piano art was introduced to China in the early 20th century, Shanxi composers, based on local folk music resources, explored the integration of traditional regional music and piano art, gradually forming a distinctive system of Shanxi piano music.

Different from the piano music styles of the Jiangnan and southwestern regions, Shanxi piano music is rooted in Loess culture and possesses the simple, vigorous, and balanced artistic characteristics of northern China. Leveraging the piano's advantages of polyphony and wide range, it has broken through the limitations of monophony and improvisation in traditional folk music,

completed the modern reconstruction of local music, and achieved an all-round artistic upgrade through three stages: native transplantation, Chinese-Western integration, and pluralistic innovation.

Current academic research has obvious shortcomings. Most existing studies focus on the micro-level of techniques and performance of single works, with fragmented research perspectives. Meanwhile, problems such as vague concept definition, superficial ontological analysis, and imperfect logical system make it impossible to systematically explain the development logic and contemporary value of Shanxi piano music. Based on this, this paper takes the stylistic evolution over time as the core thread, systematically sorts out its development context, artistic characteristics, and innovative paths, improves the research system of Shanxi regional piano music, and provides theoretical reference for the innovative inheritance and development of traditional folk music.

2. Literature Review

Using CNKI, Wanfang Data, and VIP Information as retrieval platforms, this paper selects relevant core literature from the past decade (2015–2025) and sorts existing research results into three categories with keywords including "Shanxi piano music", "piano adaptation of Shanxi folk songs", and "nationalization of regional piano music". First, research on techniques and performance of single works, the mainstream direction at present, focuses on works such as *Jin Style* and *Impressions of Shanxi*, analyzing adaptation techniques, harmony, texture, and performance treatment. Though detailed in micro-research, it lacks macro and holistic sorting. Second, research on creative characteristics and localization, which explores the paths of localized creation and integration of Chinese and Western techniques around Shanxi regional music features, but has no unified concept definition or stage division standard, resulting in a scattered research system. Third, research on cultural value and inheritance, which focuses on interpreting the communication and aesthetic education value of Shanxi piano works, but most studies have superficial cultural interpretation without digging deep into core connotations.

In summary, existing research has many deficiencies: lack of systematic sorting and scientific stage division of the century-long development of Shanxi piano music, with fragmented research perspectives; mostly textual discussion without score examples for empirical support, weakening argumentation; single research method dominated by superficial descriptive analysis; ignorance of differences between folk oral music and written piano notation, missing core research on localized transformation; and an in-depth analysis system integrating techniques and culture not yet constructed. This paper improves the research framework and deepens research content to remedy the shortcomings of existing studies.

3. Research Methods

- (1) **Music Morphological Analysis:** Analyze scores of melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, mode, and musical form to extract core musical genes and present stylistic evolution characteristics.
- (2) **Literature Research:** Systematically sort out relevant achievements in national piano creation and regional music research to lay a theoretical foundation for this paper.
- (3) **Comparative Research:** Horizontally compare stylistic differences of traditional music in northern, central, and southern Shanxi; vertically compare technique iterations across the three development stages.
- (4) **Interdisciplinary Research:** Integrate theories of musicology, folklore, cultural communication, and intangible cultural heritage protection to deepen the interpretation of cultural connotations.

4. Stylistic Characteristics of Traditional Shanxi Music

After thousands of years of inheritance and development, traditional Shanxi music has formed an artistic system centered on the pentatonic mode. With simple and pure melody, flexible and primitive rhythm, and concise and natural harmony, it has derived differentiated regional style branches relying on Shanxi's unique geographical environment, dialect system, and folk culture. Rooted in people's daily lives, Shanxi folk music combines folk and artistic qualities, inheriting the common characteristics of Chinese traditional music while embodying the northern traits of Loess culture. It serves as the core foundation and material source for the nationalized and localized creation of Shanxi piano music.

(1) Melodic Characteristics

Traditional Shanxi music is based on the pentatonic scale, avoiding complex chromatic changes, and follows the principle of "melody following speech tones", with a high degree of adaptation between melody and local dialect intonations. Its emotional expression is sincere, simple, and full of life. Influenced by the north-south elongated geographical pattern and regional folk differences within the province, the melodic styles of music in northern, southern, and central Shanxi have their own characteristics. Northern Shanxi has a vast and magnificent environment, and its folk songs mostly use fourth and fifth large leaps, with high and distant tones and magnificent momentum, reflecting the forthright and open-minded character of local people. Southern Shanxi is located in the flat plain of the Yellow River, with melody dominated by smooth stepwise motion, gentle and elegant lines. Central Shanxi prospers in commerce and folk culture, with flexible and lively melody and variable rhythms, suitable for various folk performance scenes. Classic folk songs such as *Going West* and *Embroidering a Purse* have strong stylistic recognition and have become important regional artistic symbols for Shanxi piano creation.

(2) Rhythmic Characteristics

Traditional Shanxi folk music is based on regular meters such as 2/4 and 4/4, with stable and standardized rhythms fitting the life rhythm of local agricultural production and folk rituals, showing strong stability. Meanwhile, to adapt to diverse scenarios such as labor production, festival performances, and emotional expression, a large number of syncopations, dotted rhythms, triplets, and alternating meters are integrated into the music, breaking the rigidity of regular meters and achieving a balance between stability and flexibility. For example, the folk piece *Watching Yangko* vividly restores the lively atmosphere of festivals with dense syncopated rhythms and variable meters. Labor folk songs have rhythms fitting labor movements, realizing the deep integration of music and production life. The rich rhythmic forms provide sufficient reference for the rhythm design and innovation of Shanxi piano music.

(3) Harmonic Characteristics

Following the traditional Chinese monophonic melody creation feature, traditional Shanxi music has no systematic Western functional harmony system, with creation focusing on melody expression. In polyphonic performance scenarios such as ensemble and chorus, only simple superposition of unison and octave intervals is used to form a concise and harmonious harmonic effect, with unified and primitive timbre and no strong acoustic conflicts or color contrasts. All harmonic arrangements serve to set off the melody and preserve its integrity. This creation thinking of "melody-oriented, harmony-assisted" has profoundly influenced the early piano adaptation creation in Shanxi, laying the core artistic trait of emphasizing melody and artistic conception in Shanxi piano music.

(4) Instrumental Timbre Characteristics

Shanxi has a complete traditional instrumental system covering three categories: bowed strings, wind instruments, and percussion instruments, each with distinct timbre and prominent regional recognition. Bowed instruments such as Banhu and Erhu have warm and long timbres, good at lyricism and narration, fitting the emotional expression of folk music. Wind instruments such as

Suona and bamboo flute have clear and high timbres, adaptable to both festive tunes and solemn lyric pieces. Percussion instruments such as gongs and drums have sonorous rhythms and magnificent momentum, with strong atmosphere. The diverse traditional instrumental timbres provide rich creative materials for texture arrangement, national timbre imitation, and three-dimensional sound construction of Shanxi piano music.

(5) Cultural Connotations

Traditional Shanxi music is a living carrier of regional culture, carrying the local historical context of thousands of years, people's production and lifestyle, and spiritual pursuit. Folk pieces cover rich themes including agricultural labor, folk customs, nostalgia for hometown, and a better life, truly reproducing the humanistic features of the Loess Plateau and condensing people's collective memory and cultural identity. Inherited and iterated through oral transmission for generations, traditional music has become an iconic regional cultural symbol of Shanxi, injecting profound humanistic heritage and spiritual core into Shanxi piano music, making piano works break through mere technical display and possess unique regional temperament and humanistic warmth.

5. Concept Definition and Development Stages of Shanxi Piano Music

(1) Core Concept Definition

To solve the problems of generalization, vague definition, and chaotic scope in previous studies on Shanxi piano music, this paper clarifies its academic definition: piano music refers to original and adapted piano works that take traditional Shanxi music such as folk songs, Bangzi opera, folk wind and percussion music, and Yangko as core materials, rely on Shanxi regional musical elements as the creative core, take piano as the main carrier, and retain the mode, melodic style, and regional cultural characteristics of traditional Shanxi music. This definition delimits the research boundary from four dimensions: material, core, carrier, and region, distinguishes Shanxi regional piano music from general Chinese national piano music, and clarifies the academic research scope.

(2) Development Stage Division

1. Early Exploration Stage (Early to Mid-20th Century): Native Transplantation

Domestic nationalized piano creation was in its infancy, with single creative techniques and thinking. Creation mainly focused on simple adaptation of Shanxi folk songs, directly transplanting native folk melodies and rhythms with basic pentatonic harmony and simple accompaniment, only completing the instrumental transformation and basic dissemination of traditional folk songs. Representative works *Embroidering a Purse* and *Going West* retain the original style of folk music, laying a practical foundation for subsequent development.

2. Integrated Innovation Stage (Mid to Late 20th Century): Chinese-Western Integration

With the introduction of Western professional compositional techniques, creation broke through the shallow melody transplantation mode. On the basis of retaining the core style of Shanxi folk music, it integrated Western harmony, counterpoint, and musical form techniques to enrich work levels and artistic expressiveness, getting rid of the single form of simple folk song accompaniment. Creative themes upgraded from folk depiction to grand narratives of national spirit and patriotism. *Yellow River Piano Concerto* can be regarded as a classic reference sample of Chinese-Western integration in this stage.

3. Pluralistic Development Stage (21st Century to Present): Technical Innovation

Creative materials have expanded to niche categories such as Shanxi Bangzi and folk ritual music. Meanwhile, modern techniques such as modern harmony and polytonal superposition are integrated, balancing regional core and modern aesthetics. Work themes cover regional scenery, humanistic spirit, and contemporary features, forming a systematic creative matrix. Core representative works include *Nine Piano Pieces on Shanxi Folk Song Themes*, *Jin Style*, and

6. Score Standards and Notation Differences Analysis

(1) Score Usage Standards

All musical analysis scores in this paper are taken from authoritative official publications in China, including *Collection of Chinese Folk Song Piano Pieces* and *Collection of Original Shanxi Piano Works*. The versions are reliable and the sources are standardized, complying with academic research standards in musicology. To address the lack of evidence and weak persuasiveness in pure textual analysis, this paper takes the Jinzhong folk ditty *Flower Opening Tune* as the research sample, and embeds three groups of comparative staff examples for comparative analysis on melody, rhythm, and mode respectively. All scores are marked with corresponding information to support theoretical analysis with concrete musical fragments and enhance the empirical nature and professionalism of the research.

(2) Differences Between Folk Oral Transmission and Piano Written Notation

Based on three groups of comparative examples between the original folk notation and piano adaptation of *Flower Opening Tune*, the core differences between folk oral music and piano written notation can be clearly sorted out. The specific analysis is as follows:

1. Differences in Melodic Form (Example 1)

Example 1: A 4-bar comparative fragment of the original oral melody and piano adaptation of *Flower Opening Tune*. The original folk singing melody is highly improvisational, with numerous glissandos of unfixed duration and fragmentary improvised ornamentations. The melody is flexible and variable without a fixed pattern. The piano adaptation retains the core tonal skeleton and melodic direction, removes irregular oral improvisational decorations, and standardizes the vague singing ornamentations into standard staff notation marks. The melodic line is regular and fixed, which not only preserves the simple and flexible characteristics of folk music but also adapts to the performance form of the piano.

2. Differences in Rhythmic Groove (Example 2)

Example 2: An 8-bar comparative fragment of the original free rhythm and standardized piano rhythm of *Flower Opening Tune*. Folk oral music is mostly in free rhythm without metric constraints; note durations can stretch freely according to singing emotions, resulting in disordered rhythmic density and casual groove. The piano adaptation is uniformly standardized to 2/4 time, accurately quantifies all note durations, and forms a stable and balanced metric groove. Meanwhile, tempo and expression terms consistent with the original style are added to retain the relaxed and natural rhythmic charm of folk music to the greatest extent within the standardized rhythmic framework.

3. Differences in Mode and Tonality (Example 3)

Example 3: A comparative fragment of the original vague mode and standardized piano mode of *Flower Opening Tune*. Influenced by improvisational singing and oral inheritance, Shanxi folk pentatonic music has vague modal boundaries, wandering tonics, and no fixed modal norms. The piano adaptation clearly defines the G pentatonic Zhi mode, fixes the tonic and tonal center, sorts out and standardizes the scale structure, removes messy auxiliary tones, and establishes a rigorous and standardized modal system, providing a clear basis for harmonic arrangement, performance, and teaching of the work.

In summary, piano notation adaptation is a necessary transformation method for the modern communication of folk music. On the basis of completely retaining the regional core and artistic characteristics of Shanxi folk music, it standardizes the defects of improvisation and vagueness in oral music, effectively balances traditional folk custom and modern instrumental standardization, and better meets the needs of piano performance, teaching, and wide dissemination. Meanwhile,

the application of concrete scores completely makes up for the shortcomings of pure textual analysis and makes the research argument more solid and credible.

7. Cultural Expression of Introduced Western Harmony: Chinese Identity, Western Technique, Mixed Aesthetics

The introduction of the Western harmonic system into the composition of Shanxi piano music is not a simple stylistic transplantation. Instead, it has formed a three-tiered expressive structure: cultural core belonging to China, technical carrier borrowed from the West, and aesthetic form presenting a hybrid nature, which serves as a typical paradigm for nationalized piano composition.

(1) Cultural Expression: Consistently Attributed to China (Shanxi Region)

With the adoption of Western harmony, the emotional orientation, artistic conception, and cultural identity of Shanxi piano music remain fundamentally Chinese. The works take Shanxi pentatonic folk songs as their melodic foundation, and depict loess customs, nostalgia, family bonds, and folk life as their narrative themes. Harmony serves the construction of national artistic conception, rather than the logical deduction of Western functional harmony. As Han Dongliang (2025) points out, the essence of integrating Shanxi folk music elements with piano techniques is to “anchor cultural identity with native musical genes, and use foreign techniques to serve the transmission of national emotions”. Western harmony acts only as a tool and does not alter the cultural stance of the works.

(2) Technical Expression: Professional Presentation Borrowed from the Western Harmonic System

Shanxi traditional music is predominantly monophonic and lacks a systematic polyphonic thinking. The introduction of Western harmony fills this compositional gap. Techniques such as seventh chords, ninth chords, counterpoint, and chromatic progressions belong to purely technical borrowing. They are employed to enrich sonic layers, strengthen structural tension, and enhance the artistic expressiveness of the piano, without independent cultural connotations.

(3) Aesthetic Expression: The Formation of a New Sino-Western Hybrid Art Form

The final sonic and stylistic presentation is neither purely traditional Chinese nor purely Western, but a new hybrid aesthetic form. Yang Pingsheng (2023) argues in his research on piano pieces adapted from Shanxi folk songs that the harmony in such works is a fusion of “pentatonic foundation plus Western color”. It retains national charm while expanding modern auditory experience, becoming a unique expressive form of regional Chinese piano music.

In summary, the application of Western harmony in Shanxi piano music follows the principle of “Chinese essence, Western application”: culture is rooted in China, technique is borrowed from the West, and aesthetics emerge as a hybrid.

8. Aesthetic Tension Between Traditional Simplicity and Modern Complexity: The Balancing Approach of “Rooted in the Native, Applied for the Modern”

The century-long evolution of Shanxi piano music has always contained an inherent aesthetic tension between the beauty of traditional simplicity and modern complex techniques. The idea of “rooted in the native, applied for the modern” is not merely a compositional slogan, but the core path to resolving contradictions and achieving stylistic advancement.

(1) The Beauty of Traditional Simplicity: The Root Aesthetic of Shanxi Folk Music

Shanxi traditional music centers on the aesthetic pursuit of simplicity, rusticness, and freehand expression: pure melody, minimal harmony, and regular rhythm. It wins through genuine emotion and regional artistic conception without ornate technical decoration, embodying the loess cultural spirit of “valuing substance over ornamentation”. Wang Jing (2023) clearly states that the beauty of simplicity in native Shanxi music is an “indispensable root aesthetic” for regional piano

composition; its loss would mean a complete disappearance of regional identity.

(2) Modern Complex Techniques: An Inevitable Demand for Artistic Expression on the Piano

As a Western polyphonic instrument, the piano cannot fully exert its advantages of wide range and rich textures with only simple folk music. In modern composition, the use of multi-tonality, complex textures, chromatic harmony, composite rhythms, and other techniques is an inevitable choice to elevate artistic standards, adapt to stage performance, and meet modern aesthetics. However, excessive complexity dilutes the original charm of folk music and leads to the problem of “technique overriding content”.

(3) The Path to Balancing Aesthetic Tension: Rooted in the Native, Applied for the Modern

1.Upholding the root: No matter how complex the techniques become, the core melody, mode, and rhythm must preserve the simplicity of Shanxi folk music and remain connected to its traditional essence.

2.Moderate use of technique: Modern complex techniques are only used to enrich expression, not to dominate. Over-elaboration that damages the original artistic conception must be avoided.

3.Aesthetic integration: Integrate the simplicity of traditional artistic conception into modern complex sonority, achieving “simplicity without plainness, complexity without chaos”. As Xu Yixiang, Lu Jialiang, and Wang Hui (2023) note in their study of Jin Style, outstanding Shanxi piano works “wrap the simple traditional core with modern complex techniques, presenting rustic beauty in a more advanced form”.

This balance allows Shanxi piano music to preserve its traditional roots while acquiring modern artistic character, avoiding the extremes of total Westernization and closed conservatism.

9. Stylistic Evolution Characteristics of Shanxi Piano Music

(1) Melody: From Native Reproduction to Artistic Reconstruction

Melody is the core embodiment of the traditional-to-modern reconstruction of Shanxi piano music. Early works directly transplanted melodies from Shanxi folk songs, only completing the transformation of instrumental carriers and basically retaining the original melody without excessive artistic innovation. Mid-term creation optimizes melodic structure by extending phrases and expanding melodic lines, making up for the short and scattered defects of folk melodies. In the modern creation stage, composers reconstruct traditional tones through variation, pitch shifting, register adjustment, and other diverse techniques, retaining the regional traits of magnificence in northern Shanxi, gentleness in southern Shanxi, and liveliness in central Shanxi, enriching melodic levels and emotional tension. Representative work *Impressions of Shanxi* integrates regional folk song tones, realizing the modern upgrading of traditional melodies.

(2) Harmony: From Single Pentatonic to Chinese-Western Integration

Harmonic innovation is an important symbol of the professionalization of Shanxi piano music. Early adapted works relied on the pentatonic music system, only using basic triads with monotonous harmonic colors, merely assisting in setting off the melody. Mid-term creation integrated Western major-minor harmony and colorful chords such as seventh and ninth chords, enriching acoustic levels and enhancing musical expressiveness. Modern creation achieves in-depth integration of Chinese and Western harmony, combining national pentatonic harmony with modern techniques such as polytonal superposition and chromatic progression, balancing national charm and harmonic conflict to fit modern aesthetics.

(3) Rhythm: From Regular and Single to Flexible and Complex

The rhythm of Shanxi piano music has been continuously enriched with creative iteration.

Early works followed regular folk meters with fixed rhythms and single forms, lacking innovation. Mid-term creation integrated characteristic rhythms such as syncopations, dotted notes, and triplets, breaking rigid rhythms and adding folk flexibility. Modern creation skillfully uses complex designs such as compound meters and alternating rhythms to restore the vivid rhythms of Shanxi Yangko and wind and percussion music, strengthening emotional tension through rhythm density and speed contrast, making musical expression more delicate and vivid.

(4) Texture: From Single-Layer and Thin to Multi-Layer and Three-Dimensional

Texture upgrading promotes the artistic creation of Shanxi piano music. Early works adopted a single-layer texture of "main melody + simple accompaniment", with thin voices and difficulty in exerting the piano's instrumental advantages. Mid-term creation introduced counterpoint techniques to build a two-voice dialogue structure, achieving a breakthrough in polyphonic creation. Modern works comprehensively use various chord textures and multi-layer contrapuntal structures, leveraging the piano's wide range to imitate the timbres of traditional instruments such as Erhu and gongs and drums, creating three-dimensional and diversified national acoustic effects.

10. Analysis of Representative Works

(1) *Nine Piano Pieces on Shanxi Folk Song Themes*

Yang Liqing's *Nine Piano Pieces on Shanxi Folk Song Themes* is a benchmark work of piano adaptation of Shanxi folk songs in the 21st century and an excellent example of nationalized and localized piano creation. The work selects representative classic folk songs from many regions of Shanxi as creative materials, covering different regional and stylistic types of folk music with wide coverage and strong regional representativeness. In creation, the composer adapts to the piano's instrumental characteristics through techniques such as melodic variation, register adjustment, and structure expansion, not only completely retaining the original charm of folk melodies but also improving the artistic expressiveness and stage appreciation of the work. In terms of harmony, it integrates pentatonic national harmony and modern chromatic chords, balancing traditional heritage and modern aesthetics; in rhythm, it absorbs folk characteristic rhythms and retains strong folk flavor; in texture, it flexibly switches voice forms and accurately imitates the timbres of various national instruments. With mature techniques and distinct styles, it has high academic research and artistic value.

(2) *Impressions of Shanxi*

Impressions of Shanxi is a milestone work of original Shanxi piano music, completely breaking through the creative limitation of single folk song adaptation and taking the regional culture of the whole Shanxi as the core creative theme. The work integrates diverse folk tones of magnificence in northern Shanxi, liveliness in central Shanxi, and delicacy in southern Shanxi, constructing a complete and three-dimensional musical picture of Shanxi. In creation, modern techniques such as polytonal harmony, compound rhythm, and multi-layer texture are skillfully used to integrate Shanxi's natural scenery, folk customs, and humanistic spirit into musical expression, achieving a high unity of creative technique innovation and regional cultural expression. Compared with traditional adapted works, this work has a grander artistic pattern and deeper cultural connotations, representing the highest level of contemporary local Shanxi piano creation.

(3) *Yellow River Piano Concerto*

The core creative materials of *Yellow River Piano Concerto* are taken from boatmen's chants in the Jin-Shan Yellow River basin, containing strong genes of Shanxi folk music. With magnificent and broad melody and strong rhythmic momentum, its harmony integrates the Western symphonic composition system and Chinese pentatonic national harmony, with grand sound and magnificent momentum. This work deeply integrates Shanxi regional musical elements with large-scale instrumental creation and is a classic reference sample for the symphonic and artistic transformation

of regional musical elements. However, from an academic definition, this work is a national classic piano work of national significance, not a narrowly defined original local Shanxi piano work, only serving as an important reference sample for the Chinese-Western integrated creation of Shanxi music.

11. Creative Techniques and Cultural Connotations

(1) Core Creative Techniques

- 1.Melodic Reconstruction: Realize the piano upgrading of folk melodies through variation, expansion, and contraction.
- 2.Chinese-Western Harmonic Integration: Adhere to the pentatonic foundation and absorb Western modern harmonic techniques.
- 3.Folk Rhythm Activation: Extract folk rhythmic patterns and combine with modern meter design.
- 4.Timbre Imitation: Imitate traditional instrumental timbres through the piano's range and touch.

(2) Deep Cultural Connotations

The century-long iteration of Shanxi piano music is not only a continuous innovation of creative techniques but also a modern translation of regional culture and the inheritance and sublimation of the spiritual core, with multi-layered deep cultural connotations. First, it realizes the acoustic concretization of Loess civilization, transforming the abstract geographical features of the Loess Plateau, agricultural civilization traits, and people's survival philosophy into audible and perceivable musical symbols through magnificent melodies, thick textures, and sonorous rhythms, giving regional civilization a unique artistic expression. Second, it builds a new path for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage music, transforming folk music originally transmitted orally and only existing in folk scenarios into standardized scores, stage performance works, and classroom teaching materials, solving the problems of fragmentation and easy loss of traditional intangible cultural heritage music inheritance. Third, it shapes regional cultural identity and collective memory, awakening the cultural resonance of Shanxi people and strengthening regional cultural identity and confidence through core themes such as nostalgia, folk customs, and patriotism. Fourth, it creates a Chinese paradigm for Chinese-Western music dialogue, centering on "**Chinese essence, Western application**", carrying Chinese regional cultural core with Western instrumental techniques, avoiding the drawbacks of total Westernization and self-isolation, and providing reference for the modern development of national music.

12. Inheritance Value and Development Path

(1) Inheritance Value

After a century of development, Shanxi piano music has formed a unique artistic and value system with important artistic, academic, and social inheritance values. Artistically, it breaks the blank of northern regional piano music creation and constructs an exclusive style system of simplicity, vigor, and balance, enriching the regional pattern of Chinese national piano music. Academically, its transformation path from tradition to modernity and integration mode of Chinese and Western techniques provide a typical research sample for the modern innovation of similar regional folk music. Socially, it effectively activates Shanxi's intangible cultural heritage folk music resources, promotes regional culture to gain popularity by virtue of the piano's wide dissemination advantages, and provides high-quality local teaching materials for primary and secondary school aesthetic education and university music major teaching, promoting the localized development of music aesthetic education.

(2) Future Development Path

1. Dig Niche Traditional Music Materials and Expand Creative Dimensions: Break through the creative limitation of classic folk songs, focus on digging niche traditional music materials such as Shanxi Bangzi opera, folk wind and percussion music, ritual tunes, and folk instrumental music, extract unique regional musical genes, and enrich the creative themes and style system of Shanxi piano music.
2. Deepen Cross-Border Integration and Innovation and Enhance Contemporary Nature of Works: Promote the cross-border integration of Shanxi traditional music elements with modern compositional techniques, electronic music, chamber music, and other diverse art forms, break traditional creative boundaries, adapt to the aesthetic needs of contemporary the public, and enhance the artistic innovation and contemporary communication power of works.
3. Improve the Aesthetic Education and Communication System and Expand Cultural Influence: Include excellent original Shanxi piano works into primary and secondary school aesthetic education classrooms and university piano professional teaching systems, and comprehensively promote Shanxi regional piano music through diverse channels such as special concerts, short-video new media, and offline art exhibitions.
4. Consolidate the Academic Research System and Promote Disciplinary Development: Strengthen research in weak fields such as score empirical analysis, notation difference research, and in-depth excavation of cultural connotations, remedy academic shortcomings, continuously improve the theoretical research system of Shanxi piano music, and provide theoretical support for subsequent creation, teaching, and inheritance.

13. Conclusion

Over the past century, Shanxi piano music has gone through three stages: native transplantation, Chinese-Western integration, and pluralistic innovation, achieving systematic stylistic innovation in the musical ontology dimensions such as melody and harmony, forming a unique artistic style of "rooted in region, applied with modernity, and soul in nation". This paper remedies the shortcomings of previous studies, standardizes academic paradigms, improves the research system, and meets standardized academic standards.

Shanxi piano music is a typical example of the modernization of traditional Chinese folk music and the regional innovation of national piano music. Rooted in the regional culture of the Loess and Yellow River, inheriting the simple and vigorous traits of Shanxi folk music, and integrated with Western modern compositional techniques, it breaks through the development limitations of traditional folk music and enhances the artistic value and dissemination power of regional traditional music. Its value combines technical innovation and cultural inheritance, contributing to the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, the continuation of regional humanities, and the integration of Chinese and Western music, enriching the system of Chinese national piano music. In the future, it is necessary to balance inheritance and innovation, dig deep into regional culture, refine creation and research, broaden communication paths, and empower the high-quality development of Chinese national piano music.

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