



On the Artistic Features of Jiangxi Regional Folk Dance “Gannan Tea-picking”

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Abstract: Hakka tea-picking dance is the representative of the folk dance in Jiangxi province. In 2006, Gannan tea-picking opera is listed as “non-material cultural heritage” in China. From the date of its birth, it has been influenced by the local songs and opera, producing a unique form of art performance. After a few hundred years of spread and development, Gannan tea-picking dance has remained alive. Compared with other Han nationality folk dances, Gannan tea-picking dance is the most interesting and humorous one, and it’s the best one simulating all kinds of animal images. There are “three unique performing skills”, namely squatting step, fan flowers, single sleeve. There are two kinds of simulation: animal simulation and modal simulation. Regardless of its form, action, props or expression, it is very close to the life of Hakka ethnic group. It is a kind of dance art form full of regional vernacular style and unique characteristics of Hakka ethnic folk.

Keywords: tea-picking dance, three unique skills, artistic characteristics

1. Introduction

Gannan, the southern part of Jiangxi Province, bordering western Fujian and northern Guangdong, is a lucky place for the birth, development and prosperity of Hakka culture. The Hakka culture, which originated in Ganzhou in Jiangxi Province, developed in Longyan City in Fujian Province and prospered in Mei County in Canton Province, is the witness of the confluence of the Yellow River culture, the Yangtze River culture and the Pearl River culture. Gannan folk dance can be said to be the symbol of this Hakka culture in folk culture.

Gannan tea-picking opera is a local opera formed on the basis of folk songs and dances. It not only preserves a large number of folk songs and dances, but also accumulates the dance forms created by artists in previous dynasties, which are popular with the masses. Gannan tea-picking dance is the most beautiful flower in Hakka culture and art. It has rich cultural heritage and strong local characteristics, and it reflects the folk art of people’s working life and love life. It originates from the labor and life of tea farmers and is closely related to the development of tea gardens in mountainous areas of Southern Jiangxi. Tea-picking opera further expanded into a pure movement and a pure dance performance form, namely “Gannan tea-picking dance”.

There gradually appeared “three unique performing skills” in “Gannan tea-picking dance”: squatting step, fan flowers, single sleeve. It presents us with its local characteristics and unique artistic expression.

2. The historical origin of “Gannan tea-picking dance”

Originating from Jiulong Mountain, Anyuan County, Southern Jiangxi Province, tea-picking dance originates from folk tea picking labor and Hakka folk life. With a history of more than 300 years, it is a kind of unique dance art widely spread and developed in southern Jiangxi. Known as “the cradle of Hakka people”, southern Jiangxi is the habitation of Hakka people and the birthplace of Hakka culture. Hakka people work here all the year round. This area is graceful, with four distinct seasons, which provides a good natural environment for the development of planting industry. Abundant rainfall and suitable climate laid a foundation for tea planting. Then, local Hakka tea farmers planted tea, picked tea, processed tea, drank tea, and sold tea; tea garden gradually became prosperous; tea trade followed. With the appearance of tea trade, there gradually appeared three stages of development: tea-picking song (song), tea basket lantern (dance) and three-role class (opera).^[1] In the beginning, Hakka tea farmers would sing a duet with each other when they were working in the mountains. After that, it gradually became a folk song unique to Hakka people. Then, it was added with the labor tools and tea-picking movements during tea-picking. Tea-picking opera further extended into pure movement and pure dance.

Historical records began in the Jiajing period (1522 A.D.—1566 A.D.) of Ming Dynasty. *Records of Gannan Prefecture* contains, “Song Dynasty, royal tribute fanning tea; Ming Dynasty, Royal Tribute tea bud 11 pounds”^[2], indicating that the earliest production of local tea is in Song Dynasty. In the Ming Dynasty, the mass production of tea cake

was too fine and required huge manpower material resources, and thus Zhu Yuanzhang abolished tea tribute system, only permitting the tea bud tribute. The increasing demand for tea bud led to the growth of tea-picking labor force. From the Ming Dynasty on, brewing tea with buds became more convenient and tea was gradually integrated into the daily life of ordinary people. This reform of the system laid the foundation for the emergence of Hakka tea picking and dance opera in southern Jiangxi.

In the year of Daoguang Jiachen (1844 A.D.) in the Qing Dynasty, in Shicheng County of Jiangxi Province, there was Mr Xiong Shufu's biography, "In the year of Wanli Yingtian in the Ming Dynasty (1576 A.D.)... If you sit full and drink half your wine every morning, you must sing rice planting and tea-picking songs, and sing with your family."^[3] It can be seen that during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, Hakka people used the entertainment way of singing tea-picking songs to relieve their fatigue during labor. It can be seen that tea-picking songs were produced by farming.

Composed in the Tongzhi period (1862—1874) in the Qing Dynasty, *Gan Zhou Prefecture Topography* contains, "Kowloon tea, out of Anyuan Mount Jiulong Zhang, in Yongzheng the 5th years (1727), the governor Wang Shisheng paid tribute... sixty pounds."^[4] In late Ming Dynasty, because of the mass production of tea, tea trade prosperity and a closer link between merchants, there emerged the "market". And tea-picking songs were spread to foil the lively atmosphere of the festival. The local Hakka people, with their own labor tools such as fans, carrying tea basket, singing and dancing, formed the wonderful tea basket lantern. For example, in the records of Gan County (a county in South Jiangxi), the Queen Mother preached to Xiabang Township people from "Li Clan spectrum", "On the eve of picking tea garden festival, there is the tradition of tea-picking songs, tea lantern dance"^[5]. With the development of tea picking songs and tea basket lantern dance, three-role class has gradually come into people's sight. On the basis of the tea basket lantern dance, new performance forms appeared, such as "Sisters Tea-picking"^[6], two sisters holding tea baskets, singing and dancing, and tea boys holding paper fans, looking funny and cute, interweaving with short steps, which was the prototype of the "three-role class", laying a fogle for the later "two female roles and one buffoon". With the vigorous development of tea culture and economy, the performance form of "three-role class" is gradually formed. The tea picking lantern dance in Jiulong Mountain area of Anyuan County is the first one added into "three-role class". It changed the farming culture, which was confined to Hakka performances, and created some collective performances of love, labor and life in the early years, reflecting the broad picture of life at that time. For example, "Tea picking on Jiulong Mountain" gradually led to the development of opera.

In Qianlong years (1771—1799) of the Qing Dynasty, Chen Wenrui's *Nan An Bamboo Poetry* records, "sing songs in fields to entertain the romantic young guys, all day sing tea-picking songs till the last tea-picking day"^[7]. In the Reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, tea-picking songs and dances reached its peak, with its unique humor and simple style. More than 100 programs were accumulated, mainly showing farm work in the mountains, rural life, love between men and women, neighborhood chores, business hawkers and so on. Plots are rich, but anything has ups and downs, so the development of the Hakka tea-picking dance is not exceptional either, because the dance moves simulate animals and work too much. Most of the musical plays give priority to chores of life, and the upper classes think it is not graceful. However, Gannan tea-picking dance spirit never dies. Although it has been suppressed, plain Hakka people still preserved some operas.

3. The formation of the "Gannan tea-picking" dance style

The roles of tea-picking dance contain female roles and buffoons. From the formation of the "three roles club" in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties to the eve of liberation (1949), it maintained the situation of "three-role operas" (one buffoon and two female roles). The unique "Tea-picking from Jiulong Mountain", although all roles are complete, it is not difficult to see that, in addition to the buffoons and female roles, other roles are mimic from other well-known dramas, not mature enough. Buffoons and female roles still occupy a dominant position in the play. The buffoons and female roles experienced hundreds of years of practice, and were tempered and enriched constantly. Through the long-term creation and development of artists, Hedong and Hexi formed two different schools with their own characteristics in performance. The dance movements of the Hexi school have a large jump range and many patterns, and many movements are influenced by martial arts. The Hedong school, on the other hand, is smooth and steady, with a graceful body dance of tall and middle pile. The young female role in picking tea is industrious, simple and clever rural maiden. The performance is sweet and graceful, simple and generous.

In the early stage of tea-picking dance, only two sisters went up the mountain to pick tea, singing "December tea", and sometimes singing "Four seasons tea". In order to win the audience's favor, artists often put the "December tea" from December back to the first month, namely "Reverse tea-picking". The sisters held tea baskets, singing and dancing, and tea boys waving paper fans and taking squatting steps, called "tea lantern" or "tea basket lantern", also known as "Sisters tea-

picking”. This is the formation of Gannan tea-picking opera and the prototype of the “three-role class”.

As a kind of lantern program, tea-picking song and dance interacted with various folk songs and dances, influenced each other and absorbed the rich artistic nourishment from them, which played an immeasurable role in the development and innovation of tea-picking song and dance. It was especially deeply influenced by Taoist dance. “Ashram” is extremely popular in Southern Jiangxi Province, with a set of more perfect performance skills and full of life interest content. Dances such as washing, dressing, mirroring, crossing a bridge, walking up a mountain, dancing, boating, husking, treadmills, shafting, dancing and dancing were all taken up by tea-picking dance. As a result of laying a solid foundation in performance skills, the corresponding content is also constantly enriched, not limited to the performance of “tea”. After the increase of female roles and so on, expressive force becomes stronger. At this time, there were such plots as opening tea gardens, cooking tea, serving tea, selling tea, sending tea down the mountain, etc., which comprehensively reflected the life of tea farmers. The large-scale song and dance “Picking Tea on Jiulong Mountain” (the predecessor of “Tea Boy Opera Master”) began to develop into a drama. By the Reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (prosperous period of tea-picking and singing), more than 100 programs had been accumulated. These programs mainly focus on tea life: some show rural life and love between men and women; some show small business hawker, small hand industry; others are visiting relatives and friends, playing and teasing, and so on. Most of these programs are short and pitiful, with vivid performance, euphemistic and touching tunes, and humorous and funny performances.

In the heyday of tea picking in Southern Jiangxi, there were more than 30 professional clubs. However, due to the long-term restrictions and oppression by the feudal rulers, the performance was nearly be banned, until the eve of liberation, there were only Zhu Guangming, and Li Jiujiao two clubs. A few idle artists, from time to time came to Zhu and Li to cooperate. Of the remained 70-80 programs (in fact, many of them are known only by their names rather than their content), only over 50 have been performed regularly.

After the Liberation in 1949, this depressed camellia, obtained new life afresh. Not only the towns and villages resumed frequent activities, professional clubs have also entered the urban cultural center. Prefectures and counties (cities) have successively set up clubs, which have cultivated a large number of artistic talents and continuously excavated, sorted out, created and performed many excellent programs.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, the specialized dance workers, in response to the call of the government, for the protection of cultural organized staff to South Jiangxi and produced new dances: “Three Cups of Wine” “Flowers” and “Dove-tone Spring Outing”, which won the first prize in the contest “China Six provinces and One City Dance Creation”. Then in 1997, another dance was awarded the first prize for origination for “Music and Dance Festival in Jiangxi Province”, namely, “The Long Red Suspenders”, which also won the award for outstanding new play. With the emergence of tea-picking dance works, Hakka tea-picking dance gradually formed, and gradually become an independent system, under the leading of old artist Chen Binmao and the President of the Beijing Dance Academy. Hakka tea-picking dance, as a regional folk material, finally entered into the dance class of Beijing Dance Academy, a top university in our country. At this point, there is no doubt that the Hakka tea-picking dance in southern Jiangxi province has become a dance with unique styles and characteristics.

Now, the “Gannan tea-picking dance” has been set up as a compulsory course in colleges and universities in Jiangxi. After teaching students by words and actions, the Hakka tea picking dance in South Jiangxi will surely become more and more prosperous. As more and more Hakka tea picking dances in Southern Jiangxi are performed all over the country, now the hakka tea-picking dance in Gannan has gone out of Jiangxi province to the whole China and even the world. Hopefully it could be known by more people in the near future.

4. The style features of the “Gannan tea-picking dance”

Compared with other han folk dances, the tea-picking dance in Gannan is the most interesting, humorous and vivid dance. It has “three performing skills”, also known as “three wonders”, namely squatting step, fan flower, single sleeve and two kinds of simulation namely animal simulation and modal simulation, Gannan tea-picking dance performance pays attention to humorous performance temperament.

4.1 The shortest cut is the best cut

The squatting step is one of the basic movements of the male actors in the Gannan tea-picking dance, and it is also a unique performance skill. In terms of performance, “male short female tall, male walk female shake” is the basic form of tea picking dance. The “squatting step” is the basis for the male character’s dance move. There are high pile, middle pile, short pile, with ever-changing actions, but the squatting step is the core. The key is “bending”. Each movement is

performed in a half-squat or full-squat position. Annual spring tea-picking season, the tea-picking boys and girls take their baskets to work. Because the tea trees are small, girls can only bend down to pick, and the tea must be poured into the basket. At this point, the tea boys must squat, and the girls pour the tea into the basket. Thus, the work of life of “weight and squat, climbing to pour, tea pouring was lower, pedal-driven vehicles to plunge into” slowly evolve to the body characteristics of the squatting step.

The legend about the squatting step passed down by the elder artists is very specific: “tiger head, carp waist, hands in Crescent Moon, the step is light, waist and abdomen firm, knee fixing three piles”. This reflected the movement posture of short step and essentials. “Tiger head, carp waist” is the upper part of the body in the squatting step. “Tiger head” means that the chin is slightly lowered through the “twist” strength of the neck, just like when the tiger is ready to hunt for food, his eyes fixed on the front, so as to highlight the tiger's state of concentration and strengthen the inner spirit contained therein. “Carp waist” is a vivid metaphor of carp image, emphasizing the movement of the abdominal muscle in tight state, so as to avoid the loose waist, so that the middle waist maintain steady control. The “hands in Crescent Moon” is the gesture language. The vivid image refers to the curved shape of the arms stretching out to the fingertips, as well as the sense of space between the arms half embracing the circle, which is coordinated with the tiger’s head and integrates the spirit into the eyebrows. “Light step” emphasizes muscle control in the legs while the knees are relatively relaxed. Clown is “Toad leg, dog tail, three-section waist, dust pan back, thrush jumping frame, thief-like hand and foot, walk with tight kneel, with squatting step”.

In short, the head should be bright, the waist should be full of charm, the hands should be soft, and the feet should be light.

4.2 Ingenious fan flowers

Dance moves in Hakka tea-picking dance are “fan flowers”, with rich local colors, from all previous artists’ practice and experience. The “fan” action is lively and interesting, in all forms, with high skills and its unique style. The senior artists often said, “tea-picking without fan, equivalent to eating without chopsticks.”^[8] The formula of “fan flower” is: “five fingers of flower to the sky, four fingers of flower to the front, three fingers of flower to the four sides, and two fingers of flower to shake the front”, which circled, pressed, grasped and shook over the belly.

Fan flower action roughly has the following several types: “pictographic action, virtual movement, mood, movement, special action, modelling action”^[6]. In order to grace as the above several types of basic movements, artists are required to deal with the five relationships: “non-traumatic and round, narration and rhyme, firm with soft, static with move, continuous and intermittent and combined with each other”. The fan flower is lively and interesting, worth learning.

The senior artists summed up the action form of fan flowers as “over head like sunflower, on ground like rolling watermelon, hand dance like running water, left and right like hanging on the moon”^[6]. Dance performance is funny, in myriad forms, like flowers in full bloom. The dance movements of fan flowers are vivid and interesting, mainly imitating the daily life and the forms of animals and plants, such as “dragon, phoenix, lion, chicken, duck, dog, cat, wolf, tiger, monkey, frog, turtle, dragonfly, butterfly, flower and bird, etc. The dance movements formed include “dragon head and tail” “cock pecking rice” “a bulldog” “yellow dog stretching its back” “hungry wolf searching for food” “cat washing his face” “turtle crawling on sand” “skimming water” and “thrush jumping” and so on^[6]. These dance movements are all the nature of animals, and people imitate them in an especially funny way. For example, in the traditional play “Opposite flowers”, “Dragon Head and Phoenix Tail” turn the fan quickly in front of the forehead with the right hand, with the head slightly shaking and the feet stepping faster, which can be used as a metaphor for the image of the dragon. Other vivid and interesting forms include “cock pecking rice”, which compares the fan to cock. The fan tip imitates the beak of a chicken, and the fan sticks to the arm and hits the ground from top to bottom, making it light and lifelike. “Hungry wolf seeking food”: the palm up in front of the forehead, from the inside to the outside draw a fan, press the fan over the forehead, with the vivid image of the hungry wolf, which can be seen as the imitation of human nature. Working people’s life is mainly in the field, during which we can see the vivid and interesting images of plants and animals, which are gradually replaced by the tea picking and dancing by the working people, to relieve the tiredness in the farm work, and the working people feel at ease in imitation. These simulated movements have a sense of reality in life and conform to the laws of nature. Some funny dance movements lay the foundation for the humorous style and characteristics of tea-picking dance.

The dance movements of fan flowers are in a variety of forms, such as “turning up fans to grasp butterfly, turning down fans to smell flower”^[6], which is a dialogue between tea farmers and butterflies and wild flowers in the natural fields. Literally, it can depict the scenery of the first bud opening and colorful butterflies flying in the fields at that time, which is very interesting, shoveling the fan up the hills, cutting the fan down the hills, turning the fan up-looking, pressing the palm fan down-looking^[6]. Shoveling and cutting, turning and pressing are very ingenious combination with the real life. “Slow

step with picking fan, quick step with rubbing fan, twist step with embracing fan, jump step three with hitting fan, catch with the fan behind^[6]. For different paces, fans can be used in different methods. “Drinking tea with flat fan, hot day with fan under head, stir-fried tea with rubbing hand fan, lantern with shelter fan, embroidery with dust pan fan, etc.” are used to describe the labor tools, which is interesting and unique.^[6] The tea farmers go to the fields, passing the small bridge and the stream. When they come back, it may be late at night. They use different fan methods to describe the hardships of the road. “Delight windmill fan, joyful tossing fan, proud swing fan, natural and romantic fan, anger folding fan, meditation fan, sorrowful fan and salute fan”^[6]. Different emotions are vividly expressed with the fan flowers, impressive and interesting. The abundance of fan flowers is determined by the variety of props and has become a stylized action in the art of tea picking and dance. And these 30 kinds of fan flowers, with implied meaning and abstract thinking, the combination of the real and the virtual, vivid and interesting. Later, the old artists improvised the arrangement of these 30 kinds of fans in different situations, making “fan flowers” an indispensable and important part of Hakka dance in Gannan district, and promoting the development of regional folk art in the society at that time.

4.3 Unique single sleeve

In China’s traditional dance performance, sleeve is a more commonly used performance props, generally double sleeves, some symmetrical, some different length. In the tea picking dance in Gannan, the sleeves are different from those commonly seen in other operas. Instead, the left sleeve is lengthened to swing, in accordance with the right hand fan to match the body performance. They only dance with one-arm sleeve to form their own unique form of performance. Its art tips are shake dog tail, stand like hanging horse leg, walk like a snake, the dragon head and phoenix tail. The action of playing sleeve is very rich, including shaking, raising, brushing, throwing, swinging, winding, shaking, waving, holding, shaking, dragging, lifting, dusting, circling, grasping, avoiding, floating, rolling, winding and so on, and each action has its distinct meaning. It plays an important role in the performance style for lyricism, expression and combination of reality and virtuality.

4.4 Two types simulation features of “Gannan tea-picking dance”

Another mystery of the unique charm of “Gannan tea-picking dance” is its rich simulation of two kinds of movements, animal simulation and modal simulation. No matter tea picking artists care for animals and nature, or create with the passion for people and life, they all show that people in this red land tell endless praise for life with their unique wisdom.

Hundreds of simulated actions can barely be seen in Chinese folk dance. This cultural phenomenon has a lot of reasons: the Hakka culture, the interaction between the “soil culture” and Hakka culture, the precipitation of Confucianism and Taoism, Gannan alpine terrain, geographical advantages of three rivers, ancestors safety needs in wars and so on. In a word, the tea picking artists of generations by a kind heart, by a sleeve, by the shape of all kinds of animals, will turn plain life into a romantic and poetic one. Pictographic movements imitate animal and plant forms, such as dragon, phoenix, lion, chicken, duck, dog, cat, wolf, tiger, monkey, frog, tortoise, dragonfly, butterfly, flower and bird, etc. The movements include “dragon head and phoenix tail” “cock peck rice” “yellow dog stretch” “hungry wolf hunt” “cat wash” “turtle crawl” “dragonfly” “thrush jump” and so on. Gestures are “orchid hand” “chrysanthemum hand” “Buddha hand” and so on.

Virtual action, mimics daily life, such as up the hill, down the hill, open the door, close the door, upstairs, downstairs, carry the load, push the cart, pick up the tea, fry the tea, embroidery, dressing, sole, etc. Emotional action, one is the form of actors, the other is the full use of costumes and props, such as fans, sleeves, handkerchiefs, tea baskets, etc. A special skill is used to express the mood of a character in a special situation or atmosphere, such as “full-squat walking” “throw fan” “wheel flower” “turn fan flower” “windmill flower” “round sleeve” and so on.

Modeling movements, singing and dancing to the climax, are used to make the audience have a distinct visual image, “cool under the moon” “row by row”. It is these colorful and vivid moves and emotions that make the wisdom and creation of countless tea-picking artists wend their way between the artistic beauty of reality and virtuality, thus endowing the Gannan tea-picking dance with its unique connotation and beauty.

One of the biggest characteristics of this form of dance is that it shows the Hakka people’s hard-working, honest, enterprising and optimistic state of mind from different sides through extremely exaggerated, vivid and interesting dance movements and humorous and original local language.

5. Conclusion

Gannan tea-picking dance is formed and developed in the Hakka tea-picking. The first action originated in the process of labor, from one’s inclinations of dancing, with all actions very natural and optional, for relaxation, rest, entertainment,

without fixed programming and regularity, with great randomness and locality. The props used in the tea-picking dance are generally the bamboo baskets, back baskets, fans and other handy tools and daily life appliances. In terms of its dynamics, a large number of movements imitating animal can be seen, which cannot be separated from the natural ecology of Gannan, “full of hills and mountains”. The form, movements, props and expressions of the dance are very close to the life of the people in southern Jiangxi Province, and can reflect the life characteristics of the Hakka people everywhere. It is a form of artistic expression full of regional customs and unique ethnic folk features.

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