

The Inheritance and Protection of Tibetan Opera Masks

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Abstract: Tibetan opera is a crystallization of the outstanding traditional culture of the Tibetan people and a part of humanity's intangible cultural heritage. Influenced by Tibet's geographical location, Tibetan opera has preserved ancient, complete, and ethnically distinctive masks, reflecting the Tibetan people's devotion to Buddhism and their hopes for good fortune. The iconic masks used in the opening incorporate Tibetan auspicious symbols, containing rich connotations, reflecting auspicious culture, and possessing historical and cultural value. Their production process is intricate, and the materials are rare, giving them artistic and collectible value. With the passage of time, Tibetan opera masks have been continually refined but also face opportunities and challenges. On one hand, designs need improvement, and small souvenirs should be developed to retain cultural connotations and attract attention; on the other hand, due to the scarcity of inheritors, the government should implement preferential measures to cultivate successors to prevent gaps in inheritance. Meanwhile, modern technology can be used to innovate traditional craftsmanship, design assembly lines, and produce portable souvenirs to promote inheritance and development. The inheritance and protection of Tibetan opera masks require the joint efforts of society, implementing comprehensive measures to achieve innovative transformation and creative development, ensuring better preservation and transmission of this cultural heritage.

Keywords: Tibet; Tibetan opera masks; inheritance; protection

1. The Origin, Development, and Characteristics of Tibetan Opera Masks

1.1 Historical Development of Tibetan Opera Masks

Existing Tibetan historical documents do not record the exact origin of Tibetan masks; currently, their origins can only be inferred from Tibetan archaeological artifacts and related murals. One of the top ten archaeological discoveries in 1991, the Qu Gong Site in Qu Gong Village, northern suburbs of Lhasa, is the highest-altitude ancient cultural site in China to be scientifically excavated. Based on two ceramic sculptures unearthed at this site, it is inferred that Tibetan masks originated around the late Neolithic period. These two ceramics feature sculptural decorations, where animal shapes were first modeled and then attached to the surface of the pottery. The animal figures include a monkey and a bird. The monkey face applique was affixed to the surface of black sand-tempered pottery, vividly depicting the eyes, nostrils, and mouth punctured with a stylus; the bird head was attached to brown sand-tempered pottery, hollow inside, with eyes punctured by a stylus, slanted markings on the top of the head and beak, although the beak is now damaged. The monkey and bird patterns on these ceramics represent the embryonic forms of Tibetan masks.

In 1985, during a survey in the administrative center of Ritsang District, Rutog County, Ngari Prefecture, about 1.5 kilometers southeast at an altitude of 4,380 meters, nearly forty groups of rock paintings were discovered, known as the Renmudong Rock Paintings. Many of these paintings depict "dance and ritual scenes," dating back over 1,300 years, belonging to the pre-Tubo or early Tubo period. From the 3,000-year-old Qu Gong culture to the Renmudong culture around the 8th century, it can be seen that during these 2,000 years, masks were mainly zoomorphic, with no evidence of masks depicting gods, spirits, or humans.

During the 7th century Tubo period, some clues about masks can be found in Tibetan historical records. According to *The Chronicles of Tibetan Kings* (Xizang Wangtong Ji), in the early 7th century, when Songtsen Gampo promulgated the "Ten Virtues Law," he "ordered performers to wear masks, sing, dance, leap, sometimes depicting yaks, lions, or tigers, performing drum dances and slow dances, presenting their skills in sequence" to celebrate the occasion. From this, it can be inferred that the performers wearing masks were not merely dressing up as yaks, lions, and tigers, but were also very likely performing corresponding zoomorphic dances.

In the mid to late 8th century, Trisong Detsen, to promote Buddhism, built Samye Monastery in present-day Zhanang County, Tibet, the first Tibetan temple housing the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. According to folklore, during construction, local spirits and demons caused disruptions. Padmasambhava summoned Cham dancers to perform and created the Vajra Dance to subdue the malevolent spirits. Records from the late 14th century in *The Chronicles of Tibetan*

Kings describe songs and dances performed during the consecration and completion of Samye Monastery. The 17th-century text *The Feast of the Wise* provides even more detailed accounts. From these records, it is evident that zoomorphic dances and drum dances were performed. The Cham dance, created by Padmasambhava, evolved from the combination of Tibetan zoomorphic dances and ritual dances, and the masked esoteric ritual dances performed at Samye Monastery spread widely with Buddhism.

By the latter half of the 10th century, Tibet entered the “Later Propagation Period,” during which Buddhism became localized, giving rise to numerous indigenous sects. Early Cham dances from Samye Monastery were reformed by different sects, resulting in a rich variety of masks with exaggerated shapes. French Tibetologist Étienne de la Vaissière referred to Cham as “masked dances” due to the use of masks by performers, noting that they were primarily used in disaster-averting rituals. Through Cham mask performances, Tibetan mask art developed from the simple zoomorphic masks into masks representing gods, spirits, animals, and humans. Once masks entered monasteries, their forms and craftsmanship advanced rapidly.

When crafting religious masks, strict regulations govern the shape, proportions, and color categories; any deviation is considered a fault or sin. After completion, masks of deities must undergo a “consecration” ceremony (*kaiguang*) presided over by a living Buddha or high-ranking lama before being used. This ritual primarily “requests that the deity infuse the mask with wisdom and blessings, so that the divine essence truly enters the symbolic representation. The mask, now imbued with divinity, can bestow wisdom and blessings on the virtuous and intimidate or repel evil spirits and malevolent beings.”

Around the 14th century, Tang Dongjiebu, while constructing iron-chain bridges, absorbed elements from folk song-and-dance performances, Cham rituals, and mask arts to develop the White-Mask Tibetan Opera. In his later years, he returned to his hometown and created the Blue-Mask Tibetan Opera on this foundation, advancing the art of Tibetan opera masks. Tibetan opera masks shifted Tibetan mask art from portraying the divine world to depicting human society, directly representing human virtues and vices, beauty and ugliness. From the 17th century to the early 20th century, Blue-Mask Tibetan Opera matured, and its mask art reached its peak. Unlike the rigor of religious masks, Tibetan opera masks emphasized entertainment, with more casual and freeform craftsmanship. Folk opera troupes across Tibet made masks without strict regulations, allowing for subjective variations. For example, masks of the Skeleton God or Wrathful Vajra Deity in Tibetan opera were more freely decorated and colored than their counterparts in monastery Cham performances, reflecting a stronger secular and entertaining flavor. Even the same character could have noticeably different masks across troupes. Tibetan Opera Songs and Dances lists different forms of masks for characters such as Hajang and the Rakshasi Queen, noting that the colors of the Rakshasi Queen’s subordinates’ masks vary among troupes. In summary, Tibetan opera mask production is freer and more subjective, reflecting the evolution of Tibetan mask art from religious, monastic purposes to folk, secular entertainment.

1.2 Characteristics of Tibetan Opera Masks

Tibetan opera masks are colorful, diverse in shape, and abundant in variety, which enriches the visual appeal and mystical charm of traditional square performances. The main characteristics of Tibetan opera masks are as follows:

First, the color of the Wemba mask symbolizes the opera genre and its school. Tibetan opera is divided into White-Mask Opera and Blue-Mask Opera. The classification is based on the color of the Wemba mask in the opening scene: a white goat-skin mask represents White-Mask Opera, while a deep blue mask represents Blue-Mask Opera. In the later period, the Shannan Zhaxi Xueba school modified the Wemba white mask with a yellow putty base for the face, making the yellow Wemba mask the symbol of this school.

Second, mask colors indicate the social status of characters. Tibetan opera uses mask colors to reflect the identity and rank of characters: red masks are worn by kings and loyal ministers; black masks by scheming ministers and sorcerers; blue masks by fishermen and hunters; yellow masks by high-ranking monks; green masks by female roles. This system embodies a unique Tibetan color language.

Third, mask colors convey character traits. Masks exaggerate and generalize features through color and shape to highlight personalities. Red symbolizes intelligence, courage, loyalty, and integrity; black, purple, and brown signify treachery, malice, and brutality; white represents purity, kindness, and wisdom; green denotes cleverness, kindness, and compassion; black-and-white masks imply cunning and duplicity; the nine-headed Rakshasi Queen’s purple-black mask reflects fierceness and deep sinfulness. Mask colors emphasize personality traits and contain moral judgments, praising truth, goodness, and beauty while criticizing falsehood, evil, and ugliness.

Fourth, Tibetan opera masks reflect the Tibetan people’s devout Buddhist faith. In Blue-Mask Opera, the Wemba mask uses symbolic designs representing the “Eight Auspicious Tibetan Treasures,” forming patterns that symbolize boundless divine power. These masks reflect the Tibetan people’s reverence for Buddhism and their hopes for blessings from the Buddha.

The iconic masks used at the opening of performances incorporate auspicious symbols, representing the artistic expression of Tibetan auspicious culture and demonstrating aesthetic tastes and performance rules influenced by religion.

In summary, Tibetan opera masks, through their distinctive color language and symbolic patterns, make the characters' personalities vivid and prominent. The divine attributes and religious sentiments inherent in Tibetan opera characters are primarily expressed through these exquisite masks.

2. Cultural Connotations and Contemporary Value of Tibetan Opera Masks

2.1 Cultural Connotations

2.1.1 Tibetan Mythology and Religious Beliefs

Tibetan mythology is ancient and mysterious, characterized by imaginative richness and artistic exaggeration. It reflects the Tibetan people's understanding of the world from multiple perspectives while also expressing their spiritual civilization. Tibetan myths can be categorized into creation myths, species myths, and production myths. The deities and spirits depicted in these stories have had a profound influence on the design and appearance of Tibetan opera masks. Most masks are creatively modeled after these mythological figures and religious entities, fully embodying the Tibetan people's reverence and awe for deities and spirits. When worn during performances, the masks personify these figures. Additionally, some masks represent animals, which are often considered incarnations of humans or gods.

2.1.2 Art and Aesthetics

Tibetan opera masks possess high artistic value in terms of craftsmanship, color, and design. Their unique shapes, vibrant colors, and bold style create a strong visual impact. Protecting and preserving these masks can enhance public appreciation for art and enrich cultural life. According to *The Origin of Things*, Tibetan opera mask art originates from Tibet's primitive shamanism and totem worship, reflecting the early Tibetan mindset and aesthetic consciousness. The masks are imaginative, brightly colored, and diverse in shape, influenced by ethnic and religious traditions, and carry a sense of primordial mystery. They provide visual enjoyment in performances, while their craftsmanship and materials — such as goat leather and felt — display Tibetan cultural heritage. Carefully designed and handcrafted, the masks exhibit both folk and secular artistic elements. Facial decorations and painted colors express different emotions, clearly convey character traits, and showcase the unique style and cultural charm of the Tibetan people.

2.2 Contemporary Value

2.2.1 Historical Value

The Tibetan people have a long history and rich cultural traditions, being one of China's ancient ethnic groups, traceable to the "Ancient Zhangzhung Civilization." The Zhangzhung culture has profound influence and has significantly shaped various aspects of Tibetan society. Tibetan opera originated during the construction of Samye Monastery under King Trisong Detsen, where performers combined Tibetan folk dances with Buddhist stories into pantomime-style ritual dances. Later, the founder Tang Dongjiejie integrated Buddhist scriptures and mythological tales, creating a performance art form that combined singing, dancing, and characterization. Tibetan opera gradually evolved from a simple ritual dance into a more dramatic form. Masks became a vital prop in Tibetan opera, carefully designed and crafted, with different colors representing distinct character traits—for example, white signifies kindness and gentleness, yellow denotes wisdom—reflecting the Tibetan people's creativity and imagination. Tibetan opera masks encapsulate the cultural values of the Tibetan people, expressing reverence for deities, admiration for warriors, and fear of spirits.

2.2.2 Cultural Value

Tibetan opera masks are representative of Tibetan culture and serve as an important medium for intercultural exchange. Displaying and promoting these masks can enhance understanding of Tibetan culture, fostering cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication. Cultural diversity reflects the evolution of human civilization and represents a collective human treasure. Tibetan opera masks, rich in ethnic minority characteristics, exemplify China's cultural diversity. Unlike some ethnic groups that underwent "Sinicization" and lost parts of their heritage, Tibetans have maintained their unique cultural identity. Across China, many performance arts incorporate masks, such as Nuo opera, traditional Chinese opera masks, and historical artifacts like Liao Dynasty golden masks or Shang Dynasty bronze masks. Tibetan opera masks, with their long history and continuous inheritance, highlight cultural diversity while preserving the Tibetan ethnic identity.

2.2.3 Social and Educational Value

Originating in ancient times and developing over centuries, Tibetan opera masks embody rich historical and cultural information through their craftsmanship, design, and performance forms. Protecting and transmitting these masks allows for the preservation and dissemination of Tibet's historical and cultural heritage. The historical, cultural, and artistic information

contained in Tibetan opera masks can serve as educational material for the public, facilitating education in history, culture, and aesthetic appreciation. By promoting awareness, these masks enhance public recognition and pride in local culture. As a form of human cultural heritage, Tibetan opera masks are valuable for research in anthropology, folklore, and the arts. Studying their craftsmanship, performance techniques, and cultural connotations provides deeper insight into ancient Tibetan society, religion, and customs.

3. Analysis of the Development of Tibetan Opera Masks Using SWOT

3.1 Strengths of Tibetan Opera Mask Development

3.1.1 Unique Cultural Advantage

Compared with other types of masks, Tibetan opera masks possess a uniquely rich cultural heritage. In the 14th century, Tang Dongjiejie developed the White-Mask Tibetan Opera by integrating folk songs and dances, the art of Cham masks, and existing White-Mask Tibetan Opera techniques. In his later years, after returning to his hometown Riwuqi, he created the Blue-Mask for the character Wenba based on the White-Mask style and established the first Blue-Mask Tibetan Opera lineage, known as Jiongba Tibetan Opera. Tibetan opera masks come in various types, including Wenba, human characters, deities, demons, and animals, reflecting Tibetan customs, psychology, and the deep influence of Tibetan Buddhism.

In recent years, cultural tourism in Tibet has flourished. Tourists visiting Tibet not only admire the blue skies, white clouds, sacred mountains and lakes, historic sites, and exquisite architecture, but also hope to take home souvenirs with distinct Tibetan cultural characteristics. Beyond common souvenirs such as local snacks, fridge magnets, and postcards, Tibetan opera masks, as symbols of historical culture, embody rich Tibetan cultural meaning while integrating local folk customs, giving them unparalleled cultural value.

3.1.2 High Collectible Value

Tibetan opera masks are exquisitely crafted, with different colors and shapes carrying distinct cultural meanings. Most masks are handmade, using specific white goat hair for facial hair, and small accessories such as shells or gold ornaments are carefully selected with strict requirements for shape and size. From material selection to production, the process is meticulously controlled. Due to their unique craftsmanship, Tibetan opera masks have a long preservation period compared with other products and possess significant cultural and collectible value.

3.2 Weaknesses of Tibetan Opera Mask Development

3.2.1 Limited Understanding of Mask Culture

Tibetan opera is performed in the Tibetan language and, unlike widely known operas such as Peking Opera, Yu Opera, or Huangmei Opera, its audience is relatively small, limited mainly to those who understand Tibetan. Many tourists, although interested in Tibetan opera, cannot fully appreciate its rich content due to the language barrier. Without understanding the profound meanings embedded in Tibetan opera masks, their commercial value diminishes significantly, making them less competitive compared to other products. This is similar to classical literature in Europe or ethnic cultural arts — without knowledge of the language, history, and cultural context, it is difficult to grasp the essence of the art.

3.2.2 Large Size and Portability Issues

Tibetan opera masks are designed to be worn by performers on stage, making them relatively large. This restricts their potential as souvenirs, as tourists often prefer unique, compact, and easily portable items to take home. Although the masks are crafted with exquisite materials, their size makes them inconvenient for most visitors, limiting their commercial appeal. With increasing income and rising expectations for tourism purchases, the conflict between the masks' large size and consumers' preference for small, portable souvenirs is a significant factor affecting their marketization.

3.2.3 Long Handcraft Production Cycle

All Tibetan opera masks are handmade, involving complex procedures. The process starts with preliminary design and drawing, careful material selection, and full hand-stitching. Small decorative items are then meticulously attached, followed by additional finishing touches such as adding hair or beards. Materials such as yak hair and shells are strictly chosen, and structural and decorative designs must be hand-executed. The production cycle is long: a finely detailed mask may take about a month, simple character masks require one week to a month, and special clay or wood masks may take several months with repeated painting and filling. The lengthy production time and high craftsmanship cost pose disadvantages in the competitive market, where only a niche segment of collectors appreciates them. The mismatch between the slow handcrafting process and the fast pace of modern market demand limits mass production potential.

3.2.4 Declining Number of Mask Artisans

According to Tibetan opera mask inheritor, Jia Yang Yixi, he first created masks in 1983 while working with the Tibet

Song and Dance Troupe. Over thirty years, he has made hundreds of masks, believing each handcrafted mask carries unique character, emotion, and life — qualities that machines cannot replicate. Tibetan art emphasizes emotional expression, and handmade masks convey a human touch close to the soul.

However, fewer young people are learning the craft today. In recent years, his workshop has recruited very few apprentices, and the few students trained can only mimic basic techniques, lacking creativity, resulting in a limited variety of masks that struggle to attract attention. Mastering the craft takes five to six years. Social influences discourage young people from pursuing this traditional art; interest in cultural heritage is low, and elders often prefer children to aim for more stable careers like civil service or teaching, viewing handicrafts as laborious, low-paying, and with little future. Consequently, the number of Tibetan opera mask artisans continues to decline.

3.3 Opportunities for the Development of Tibetan Opera Masks

3.3.1 Increased Attention Following Recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage

On May 20, 2006, Tibetan opera was approved by the State Council to be included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists. In 2009, it was further inscribed on UNESCO's "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." Since then, the central and local governments have strengthened efforts to protect Tibetan opera. Both the national government and the Tibet Autonomous Region government provide annual funding support. All six major Tibetan opera schools in Tibet have established inheritance centers, and the Department of Culture allocates at least 20,000 yuan annually to each troupe to improve their conditions. With increased government attention, the Tibetan opera-related industries have developed rapidly. However, Tibetan opera masks initially lacked a distinct tourism product concept and were weak in competitiveness, whereas Tibetan specialty products enjoyed strong reputations and a solid market foundation. Therefore, Tibetan opera masks should seize this opportunity to develop, cater to tourist demand, establish unique ethnic brands, and move toward industrialization. Failure to expand the market and build competitiveness could hinder the development of Tibetan opera mask products.

3.3.2 Government Support for Tourism and Mask Production

Tibet's economy largely depends on cultural tourism. Over the years, summer has attracted many tourists due to the cool climate and high oxygen levels in July and August, making Tibet a popular summer destination. During the Shoton Festival, Lhasa's Norbulingka and Longwangtan host Tibetan opera performances and folk culture displays, drawing visitors from outside the region. In contrast, winter sees harsh weather and inconvenient transportation, resulting in few tourists. In response, the Tibet Autonomous Region government has actively sought ways to attract off-season tourism, providing opportunities to develop Tibetan opera masks as tourist souvenirs. By slightly adapting the masks for this purpose, the market can align with government strategies and expand opportunities.

Recently, the Tibet Autonomous Region government established the Tibet Autonomous Region Mass Art Museum in Lhasa to protect and support the development of various folk cultures. Jia Yang Yixi, a master inheritor of Tibetan opera masks, works there. He has his own independent studio and a dedicated exhibition hall and has held multiple exhibitions of Tibetan opera masks both domestically and internationally. His efforts have significantly promoted the visibility and influence of Tibetan opera masks.

4. Conclusion

Based on the investigation and final analysis, industrializing Tibetan opera masks is the most effective approach for their protection and inheritance. Drawing on the successful industrialization experiences of other traditional cultural products in China, industrialization of Tibetan opera masks presents both a challenge and an opportunity, offering an alternative pathway for their preservation and transmission. In light of the current market, innovation in mask design—integrating traditional culture with contemporary trends—combined with effective utilization of government policy advantages, can actively promote the development of tourist souvenirs. As times change, traditional culture must adopt a series of adaptive strategies to continue attracting attention and engaging the public. Considering Tibet's external environmental factors, developing cultural tourism souvenirs is a promising approach: it not only attracts tourists and stimulates purchasing interest, thereby promoting economic growth, but also positively contributes to the dissemination and development of Tibetan ethnic culture, expanding the reach of Tibetan opera mask culture. By referencing successful transformation cases of traditional handicrafts elsewhere and taking into account Tibet's unique regional conditions and cultural characteristics, tailored protection and inheritance plans can be formulated. Creating distinctive ethnic cultural brands and promoting them effectively will make significant contributions to the protection, inheritance, and development of Tibetan opera masks.

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