

An Investigation of the Development History of Northeastern Errenzhuan in China

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Abstract. As a significant branch of Chinese folk art, Northeastern Errenzhuan carries profound historical accumulation and embodies the distinctive characteristics of Northeast folk culture. Against the backdrop of accelerating modernization and the influx of diverse cultures into the Chinese market, systematically mapping its developmental trajectory holds urgent academic value and practical significance for protecting this important intangible cultural heritage and understanding its artistic essence. This study employs literature review and case analysis methods, focusing on the evolutionary characteristics of Northeastern Errenzhuan during China's modern and contemporary historical stages, and delving into the transformation of its artistic form and social functions. The research points out that the value of Northeastern Errenzhuan's traditional repertoire as classical art needs to be cherished and inherited, while its adaptation to the contemporary wave of marketisation and entertainment constitutes a crucial space for its survival.

Keywords: Northeastern Errenzhuan, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Developmental History

1. Introduction

As a national intangible cultural heritage, Northeastern Errenzhuan originated in the black soil region, embodying rich local cultural characteristics and folk sentiments. Its development reflects the historical changes in Northeast of China and its humanistic artistic spirit. Existing researches more focus on its artistic ontology and specific historical periods, leaving significant research gaps. The lack of a holistic historical examination of Northeastern Errenzhuan from the perspective of long-term social change has limited researchers' understanding of the vitality of Northeastern Errenzhuan art and its relationship to the social-cultural environment. This study aims to reveal the interactive between Northeastern Errenzhuan's artistic form and its social environment over the past century, and deeply analyze how this artistic form has flexibly developed and persisted to this day under the influence of multiple factors such as the political environment, economic development, and cultural policies. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating historical research methods with sociological theory, and combining a literature review to conduct a long-term, multi-dimensional comparative study, striving to construct a vivid and comprehensive panorama of the development of Northeastern Errenzhuan.

The purpose and core significance of this study lie in providing a linear narrative of Northeastern Errenzhuan's journey from rural folk songs to the modern stage, offering historical insights for its

future development, summarizing its resilient adaptability and innovative pathways forged through centuries of challenges, and further hoping to provide academic reflection on how to safeguard cultural roots and revitalize traditional art in the fast-paced era.

2. Literature review

Existing academic achievements on Northeastern Errenzhuan primarily concentrate on three research directions.

First, research on the artistic ontology of Northeastern Errenzhuan. Scholars such as Wang and Tian have conducted in-depth analyses of its vocal styles, performance conventions, repertoire classification, and aesthetic characteristics, laying the theoretical foundation [1]. The second research focus is on periodized history and phenomena studies. Scholars like Ma and Geng have emphasized examining specific periods, such as the purification and standardization of repertoire during the early “Drama Reform” post-1949, the revival of theater Northeastern Errenzhuan after the Reform and Opening-up, and its industrialization and entertainment-oriented transformation propelled by television and the internet in the new century, along with the ensuing “debate between refinement and vulgarity” [2]. The final research focus concerns the cultural value and preservation of Errenzhuan. Scholars like Li Wei and Sun Hongxia, from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage protection, focus on its cultural ecology, inheritance difficulties, and preservation strategies [3].

Despite these substantial achievements, significant gaps remain. The primary deficiency lies in the relative weakness of cross-era perspectives, the lack of comparative analysis of Northeastern Errenzhuan’s variations across different historical stages, and the absence of a complete historical narrative.

3. Development history and characteristic analysis

3.1. Embryonic stage: mid-late Qing Dynasty to early republic of China (1912-1949)

3.1.1. Socio-cultural soil for the emergence of Northeastern Errenzhuan

During the mid-late Qing Dynasty, economic and cultural prosperity fostered diverse emerging local operas. Besides political and economic factors, the inherent developmental patterns of folk performing arts and the ethnic distribution pattern of mixed Manchu and Han populations in Northeast China were also key factors for its emergence. The wave of migration from within Shanhaiguan (Guandong) surged, bringing large numbers of Han Chinese from the Central Plains into Northeast China. This broke down the original cultural isolation and facilitated cultural intermingling. This migration not only brought popular Central Plains folk art forms but also profoundly influenced Han immigrant culture through local Northeast ethnic music, dance, and storytelling arts (such as Khitan Dance, Pengpeng Song, Daola, Dalianxiang and other folk songs) [4]. After 1860, the population of Northeast China increased to two or three million, expanding entertainment demand and further accelerating the region’s artistic development, hastening the formation of Northeastern Errenzhuan art [4].

As Wang stated, “About two hundred years ago, during a relatively stable period of Qing Dynasty rule, to accelerate the development of the Northeast, the court relocated large numbers of residents from within Shanhaiguan to this vast, wind-swept plain. On rainy or snowy days, or before sleeping, people would sit cross-legged on the scalding-hot ‘Guan Dong’ kang (a traditional heated brick bed

in Northeast China), smoking strong 'Hamatou' (a type of local tobacco), drinking fiery liquor, tossing out 'Geda Hua' (pithy phrases), cracking 'Qiaopi Ke' (witty remarks), expressing their longing for loved ones and resentment against social injustice through laughter, scolding, and cursing. Countless anonymous folk artists composed these casual conversations and emotions into small tunes and songs, and this might well be the embryonic form of Errenzhuan" [5].

3.1.2. Early performance methods of Northeastern Errenzhuan

Northeastern Errenzhuan during this period was a fusion of multiple art forms. Besides absorbing characteristics of Lianhualao (Lotus Fall) and Northeast Yangge dance, it also widely incorporated expressive techniques from arts like Zhuchiwen, Manchu tunes, Bajiaogu (octagonal drum), Zidishu (bannerman tales), and Dalianxiang. Benefiting from its improvisational, flexible, and humorous nature, early Northeastern Errenzhuan performances were primarily "gathering people spontaneously", performing wherever they gathered, "differing from later theater stage performances. It was a folk art deeply rooted in the lives and labor of the people on the Northeast black soil. Its performance venues spanned village entrances, threshing grounds, and squares, and its content was always closely connected to ordinary people. The performance procedure then was simple and flexible. Using the sky as the curtain and the earth as the stage, illuminated by candlelight, a single table served multiple purposes (e.g., prop, symbolic space). The performance began with the band "Da Tong" (playing to attract an audience). Once "the gongs and drums sounded and people gathered", someone would maintain order, calling out "Riders watch the lanterns, seated ones watch the play". After opening the arena, each pair (Dan - female role, Chou - clown role) would first sing "Xiao Mao" (short, independent, complete folk songs or ditties), or the Chou role alone might perform "Shuo Shi Touzi" (a prologue recited solo by the Chou actor) or recite "Xiao Shu" (a longer rhythmic verse recited rhythmically, similar to kuaiban or doggerel). Artists often improvised during the main performance section by adding various skills (e.g., special feats). In terms of musical accompaniment, besides the bamboo clappers and jade clappers held by the performers, according to recollections of old artists, the suona (Chinese horn) and banhu (banhu fiddle) had already begun to be used during this period.

3.1.3. Limitations on the growth of Northeastern Errenzhuan

From the late Qing to the early Republic of China, the development of Northeast Errenzhuan encountered multiple obstacles, mainly manifested in social turmoil, cultural suppression, and the inherent limitations of the art form itself. Firstly, the Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War, and warlord conflicts led to the near-collapse of social order in Northeast China. Artist groups were forced to migrate frequently, performance venues closed, and their living space was severely compressed. Furthermore, audiences at the bottom could not afford entertainment. Opera troupes earned meager incomes, struggled to maintain scale, and artistic innovation stagnated. Secondly, Errenzhuan faced suppression from cultural policies.

The Qing government and subsequent local governments of the Republic of China often labeled Northeastern Errenzhuan as vulgar and obscene plays, repeatedly issuing bans to suppress it. For example, In the 33rd year of Guangxu (1907), the Fengtian Police Headquarters explicitly banned the performance of 'Bengbeng' (an early name for Northeastern Errenzhuan) in city tea houses on the grounds of vulgar lyrics and obscene tunes, detrimental to public morals [6].

Finally, troupes mainly relied on walking or horse-drawn carts to travel between rural areas, resulting in a very narrow scope of activity. Coupled with dialect differences within Northeast

China, this hindered its widespread dissemination across regions, long remaining popular only in parts of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Additionally, to cater to the tastes of the lower-class audience, some repertoires inevitably contained coarse slang or erotic metaphors, easily inviting mainstream moral criticism. Squeezed by turbulent times and mainstream culture, Northeastern Errenzhuan artists, though unable to shed the social label of “lowly itinerant art”, were forced to root themselves deeper in the folk soil. This forged a resilient character that enabled its survival amidst adversity and absorption of diverse nourishment, crucial for its future endurance.

3.2. Eking out a living in the cracks: period of Puppet Manchukuo rule (1932-1945)

3.2.1. Historical background

During the Puppet Manchukuo period, the people of Northeast China suffered enslavement and persecution under Japanese puppet rule. Northeastern Errenzhuan artists became a vulnerable group at the bottom. The Japanese puppet regime attempted to enslave the people through education, while Northeastern Errenzhuan became an invisible vehicle for popular resistance against the colonizers. Consequently, Northeastern Errenzhuan faced brutal suppression.

3.2.2. Artistic restrictions and resistance

The Japanese colonial period was the darkest era Northeastern Errenzhuan experienced. As artist Cheng marked this historical period as “giving no way to live” in his memoirs. Due to Japanese suppression and the downgrading of public consumption levels, making a living through Errenzhuan became extremely difficult. Cheng even considered becoming a monk at the Shengfo Temple south of Xinhui Tiegou, but finding he needed a guarantor, he had no choice but to rely on singing for food [7].

Artists with backbone engaged in difficult resistance. Wang also suffered Japanese persecution. He was captured and became a forced laborer while performing in Dunhua. Witnessing the atrocities of colonialism, he created Laborer’s Lament based on the suffering of laborers. Later, he was beaten by the Japanese for singing Ahn Jung-geun Assassins Ito Hirobumi which praised the anti-Japanese hero, but he never stopped resisting [7].

3.3. Great transformation: early PRC to pre-reform and opening-up period (1949-late 1970s)

3.3.1. Historical background

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Planned and Step-by-Step Manner proposed that “beneficial to the masses, harmful to the masses, and harmless to the masses” be the censorship criteria for old operas, marking the beginning of China’s opera reform [8] The “Three Reforms” (reform of actors, reform of plays, and reform of system) gradually unfolded and deepened.

3.3.2. The transformation of Northeastern Errenzhuan

During this period, it still used small troupe system but made many adjustments to adapt to the urban environment. It abandoning the traditional “pointing system” (where audiences requested specific acts) and imitating large operas by adopting a “we perform, you watch” format. It once tried to adopt the “trial listening” method. The audience watched the performance first and then paid, or

paid multiple times. In terms of publicity, it borrowed from large-scale operas, emphasized the number of “highlights” in the performance, and relied more on the actors’ special skills, eyes, etc.

Due to the high mobility of actors, troupe discipline was relatively loose. Unlike Peking Opera, Pingju Opera and other operas with more detailed role divisions. Errenzhuan actors can mostly play both female and clown roles, so they are less dependence on troupes and more difficult to management.

The “Directive on Opera Reform Work” (the “May Fifth Directive”) issued in 1955 clarified the core of the “Three Reforms” [7]. Under this guidance, the “three reforms” were fully implemented in the Errenzhuan field. Northeastern Errenzhuan artists improved their ideological level through literacy classes. Borderline content in the traditional Northeastern Errenzhuan repertoire was revised. New play creation advanced under the principle of “Let a hundred flowers bloom; weed through the old to bring forth the new”. The system reform mainly involved abolishing the small troupe system. Artists registered locally and were incorporated into local opera troupes or teams, achieving a structural transformation from the folk sphere into state-run institutions.

3.4. Great changes under the marketization wave: post-reform and opening-up to present (late 1970s-)

3.4.1. Social-cultural soil for Northeastern Errenzhuan’s iteration

Jilin Province pursued the policy of “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend,” striving for a reasonable layout of troupes and a rich variety of repertoire [9]. By the 1990s, state-run art troupes had shrunk back to holding their ground, becoming experimental bases for Northeastern Errenzhuan innovation and research. Mainstream folk Northeastern Errenzhuan performance troupes declined. Folk Northeastern Errenzhuan during this period mostly operated in rural areas, later gradually moving into cities, where its form began to change, evolving into today’s privately-run theatre Northeastern Errenzhuan.

3.4.2. Changes in performance form

After the Reform and Opening-up, the adaptation of traditional repertoire made significant progress, focusing more on artistry and entertainment. For example, the Jilin Provincial Cultural Bureau Opera Research Office alone compiled and adapted nearly 200 traditional Northeastern Errenzhuan plays, promoting 30 of them across the province [7]. Furthermore, small folk troupes became increasingly numerous during this period. They typically performed traditional Errenzhuan, even attracting the attention of authorities.

After the implementation of the household responsibility system in rural areas, some folk artists established “cultural specialty households,” some formed small troupes or Northeastern Errenzhuan bands, performing from village to village. Some small troupes performed plays like “Huang Aiyu Visits the Grave” and “Blind Man Watching Lanterns” unchanged. The former underground or semi-underground folk performances now had the name “cultural specialty households” and were performed openly. These small troupes, alongside the official troupes, formed two parallel strands of Northeastern Errenzhuan’s recovery, marking its gradual revival in a pluralistic environment.

4. Discussion

4.1. Challenges

Entering the 21st century, with the emergence of various streaming media, Northeastern Errenzhuan entered a period of inheritance discontinuity. Young people's awareness of Northeastern Errenzhuan continues to decline, and traditional culture faces the dilemma of potentially having no successors. This phenomenon reflects the social psychology of the excessively rapid pace of updating in the entertainment industry and the waning public attention to intangible cultural heritage and traditional culture. Fewer and fewer audiences consciously choose to appreciate Northeastern Errenzhuan in their leisure time. Second, Northeastern Errenzhuan faces a bottleneck in content innovation, with conflicts arising between traditional repertoire and modern aesthetics. Some troupes, catering to the market for economic benefit, emphasize comedic performance while weakening vocal skills, diluting the artistic value of Northeastern Errenzhuan. Finally, the current dissemination channels for Northeastern Errenzhuan have significant limitations. Under the impact of new media, Northeastern Errenzhuan still relies heavily on offline theater performances, and content on short video platforms is mostly fragmented comedic clips, unable to showcase the artistic essence of Northeastern Errenzhuan.

4.2. Future directions

In response to the challenges, countermeasures should be implemented. First, concerning inheritors, Northeastern Errenzhuan should focus on digital inheritance and dissemination, establishing a database of recorded traditional repertoire, developing VR immersive theaters, and utilizing short video platforms for Northeastern Errenzhuan live streaming. Second, Northeastern Errenzhuan creative teams should promptly innovate their creation mechanisms, adopting modernized creative models to expand the audience base and enhance viewer loyalty. Third, provincial governments in Northeast China should deeply integrate culture and tourism, developing immersive cultural-tourism performance projects to revitalize Northeastern Errenzhuan through tourism.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examines the developmental history of Northeastern Errenzhuan through tourism from the mid-late Qing Dynasty to the present. Northeastern Errenzhuan has traversed four stages: cultural fusion during Qing immigration, political oppression under Puppet Manchukuo, institutionalized reconstruction during the early PRC's Drama Reform, and the marketization wave post-Reform and Opening-up. Its success lies in rooting itself in folk emotional expression, flexibly absorbing diverse artistic nourishment and in contemporary times, carving out new survival space through theatricalization and entertainment-oriented transformation.

This paper also has several main limitations. First, it lacks field investigation. It failed to obtain first-hand data through artist interviews or audience surveys, leaving explanations of the survival status and creative motivations of contemporary folk troupes unsupported. Second, contemporary samples are limited. There is insufficient exploration of how new media platforms (e.g., short videos, live streaming) are reshaping Northeastern Errenzhuan's communication ecology. Third, the theoretical perspective is singular. Future research directions should deepen interdisciplinary integration, combining oral history, digital humanities technologies (e.g., VR theater reconstruction),

and cultural consumption theory to explore intergenerational differences in the aesthetic reception of Northeastern Errenzhuan.

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