

## **The Inheritance and Development of the Ciming Opera**

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**Abstract:** Ciming Opera was introduced into Pingtan, Fuqing and other places from Yuyao, Zhejiang Province in the middle of the Ming Dynasty. It is a local opera that integrates Kun, Yi and Yuyao dialects, and is a local opera with the co-existence of Zhengzi (official sound) and white characters (Ping speaking). Its performance form has a unique style. Ciming Opera was once brilliant from the early to the middle period of the Qing Dynasty, and was deeply loved by the local people. However, with the development of The Times, the influx of other operas impacted Ciming Opera. The performance stage decreased sharply, and the number of viewers decreased, which led to the decline of Ciming Opera. It's significant to analyze the inheritance and development of Ciming Opera under non-genetic inheritance. It is expected that this paper can contribute some beneficial reference and enlightenment to the prosperity and development of local opera culture.

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage; Ciming Opera; Inheritance and Development; Ciming Puppet Opera; Ciming Line Opera

### **1. Introduction: The Origin and Historical Evolution of the Ciming Opera**

As a vital component of Chinese opera, local operas possess distinctive regional characteristics and cultural depth. They not only preserve local history, culture, and folk traditions but also convey values and strengthen cultural identity through artistic expression, playing a significant role in international cultural exchanges. Preserving and developing local operas is crucial not only for maintaining cultural diversity but also for advancing regional cultural development and enhancing national cohesion. Ciming Opera,

one of Fujian Province's local operas, features a unique stage performance style with vocal tones as delicate as ink wash paintings [1]. In January 2022, it was included in the seventh batch of Fujian Province's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, challenges such as limited audience reach, an aging lineage of inheritors, and insufficient content innovation—driven by societal changes and the impact of new media remain pressing issues that demand attention [2].

Ciming Opera, also known as "Ciming Puppet Opera," was originally called "Gaoqiang" and originated in the coastal regions of Fuqing and Pingtan. Since it features Gaoqiang singing accompanied by dialogue in the local dialect, performers emphasized clear articulation of lyrics and phrases to ensure comprehension by audiences, hence the name "Ciming Opera." It exists in two performance forms: human actors (called "Ciming Opera") and puppet shows (called "Ciming Line Opera"). With a history spanning over three centuries, this art form is primarily popular in central and eastern Fujian. During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Ciming Opera flourished, with troupes numbering sixty to seventy members, earning the title "Da Ban." In the mid-Qing period, Peking Opera gained popularity in eastern Fujian due to its use of local dialects [3]. After the 1911 Revolution, the rise of Min Opera led to the decline of Ciming Opera as troupes dwindled. Upon the introduction of Peking Opera to Fujian, Ciming Opera adapted by incorporating numerous Peking Opera repertoire pieces, adding instruments like the jinghu, erhu, suona, flute, and pipa, and replacing traditional front-stage solo singing with combined vocal techniques of falsetto and chest voice. By the 1920s, some performers transitioned to puppet shows while continuing to sing in Ciming Opera melodies, giving rise to what became known as "Ciming Line Opera."

To sum up, the historical evolution of Ciming Opera illustrates the entire process by which this traditional regional opera declined from its peak under various internal and external pressures. It began with the flourishing of the Daban troupe in its early stages, then gradually incorporated new theatrical genres and refined performance techniques to survive. Ultimately, disasters and political turmoil led to the dissolution of the troupes and the loss of historical records, plunging the preservation of this artistic form into severe difficulty.

## 2. The Artistic Characteristics of Ciming Opera

The linguistic diversity of Ciming Opera, its rich repertoire of lyrics and musical patterns, distinctive play genres, varied character portrayals, and uniquely crafted puppet figures are key factors contributing to the popularity of this theatrical form.

### 2.1 Linguistic Features

The vocal styles of Ciming Opera combine two distinct melodies: the "Bai Zi Qiang" and the

"Zheng Zi Qiang." The "Bai Zi Qiang" emerges from blending various vocal styles: including Siping Qiang, Kun Qiang, and Pi Huang Qiang with the local dialect, while the "Zheng Zi Qiang" is based on Mandarin. A hallmark of Ciming Opera's singing lies in its extensive use of "yin" (also called "gunchang"), a style that blends elements of both spoken and sung music [4]. This technique is particularly effective in emotional scenes of lamentation, possessing strong expressive power. It stands as one of the opera's most distinctive musical features and a key reason for its enduring popularity among audiences.

### 2.2 Musical Features

The musical patterns in Ciming Opera are highly diverse, varying according to the characters' emotions and the specific scenes depicted [5]. These patterns are categorized into seven types: Shuidiao, Kuodiao, Beidiao, Jietou, Baiziqiang, Zhengziqiang, and Yindiao. The applicable scenarios for different musical forms are shown in the table 1.

**Table 1. The Musical Patterns in Ciming Opera**

Type	Scenario	Characteristic
Shuidiao	Unfortunate Experiences and Sorrowful Emotions	Slow-paced
Kuodiao	Majestic and Awe-inspiring Portrayal of Heroes	Unrestrained and Exuberant
Beidiao	Melancholy, Homesickness and Gloom	Lingering and Poignant
Baiziqiang	Joyful and Cheerful Scenes	Lively-paced
Zhengziqiang	Peaceful Scenes	Soothing-paced
Jietou	Bridge	Follow the plot
Yindiao	Prologue	

### 2.3 Repertoire Type

Ciming Opera boasts a unique repertoire, which can be categorized into four types: Yuan and Ming Southern Opera Legends, Ming and Qing Immortal and Taoist Stories, Ming and Qing Serial Theater Works, and Qing Dynasty Luan Tan and Ping Jiang performances. These plays demonstrate the audience's reverence for religious beliefs, highlighting the entertainment and educational functions of the Ciming Opera.

### 2.4 Performance Format

The performance style of Ciming Opera is distinctive. A horizontal cloth hangs at the stage opening, with the script displayed behind it for performers unfamiliar with the script to read during the show [6]. A screen is placed in

the center of the stage, while the string actors stand behind it, holding puppet control rods to operate the puppets. The cast typically consists of four or five performers playing various roles. The instrumental accompaniment primarily features percussion instruments such as gongs, drums, cymbals, clappers, and bangzi clappers; later, influenced by Peking Opera and Min Opera, additional instruments like flutes, suonas, erhus, and trombones were incorporated.

The Ciming Opera features seven main character types: Sheng (male lead), Dan (female lead), Jing (painted face male), Mo (elderly female), Chou (clown), Tie (supporting female role), and Wai (external male role). Each category includes further subtypes. Later, as the performance style became simplified, these roles were

standardized into archetypal categories such as "Baishan," "Shuaizhu," "Momo," and "Pojiao." Characterizations in literary and martial scenes should each possess distinct characteristics: literary scenes emphasize expressing inner emotions, while martial scenes focus on action sequences.

### **2.5 Puppetry Craft**

The string-operated stage mechanism of Ciming Opera is called the "Jiatou." The materials used for the operating rod and strings differ from those in other regions; the main rod is the thickest among all rod components, measuring approximately 18 cm in length. Four small holes are drilled into the main rod to accommodate the strings and crossbars [7]. The strings on both the crossbars and the main rod attach to different parts of the string puppet. The performer controls the raft attached to the middle section of the main rod using the thumb and middle finger of the right hand, enabling the puppet to move forward and backward, while the remaining movements are executed with precision using the fingers of the left hand [8].

As a variant of puppet theater, Ciming Opera differs in its performance style from other puppet shows, with Quanzhou string puppets serving as a prime example. Also known as "suspended-string puppets," these puppets share similarities with Ciming Opera's puppet manipulation techniques but exhibit notable distinctions. For instance, Quanzhou string puppets are more intricate, allowing precise control over facial expressions and finger joints, whereas Ciming Opera puppets employ traditional strings—specifically seven strings—to operate the puppets, earning the latter its name "Seven-String Opera." In terms of performance style, Quanzhou string puppets emphasize puppet movements, while Ciming Opera focuses more on theatrical conventions.

### **3. The Function of Ciming Opera**

As a local opera form, Ciming Opera serves multiple purposes: providing entertainment for audiences, educating the public, and embodying people's aspirations for a better future. Local opera builds upon the stylized performance traditions of Chinese opera while incorporating distinctive regional folk customs. As a form of local opera, Ciming Opera is an inevitable product of specific social production

and living conditions; it reflects societal life and economic activities, with its primary functions including entertainment, education, and ceremonial purposes.

#### **3.1 Entertainment Feature**

Chinese opera primarily features mythological and legendary themes, with its content detached from real life, integrating human life scenarios into theatrical music and dance to provide entertainment and relaxation. As a form of Chinese opera, Ciming Opera possesses an entertainment function [9]. In ancient China, entertainment options and media were quite limited, making Ciming Opera—the fusion of vocal and facial techniques with regional characteristics—the optimal choice for public entertainment. Moreover, its simple theatrical language and exquisite singing melodies cater to aesthetic preferences at various levels.

#### **3.2 Educational Function**

Through artistic refinement, drama brings the virtues and vices, beauty and ugliness of life to the stage [10]. Viewers unconsciously immerse themselves in the characters' stories, achieving a subtle educational impact. As a traditional folk art form, Ciming Opera not only reflects local cultural characteristics and the public's artistic sensibilities but also transforms audiences' aesthetic perspectives through its depictions of truth, goodness, and beauty during performances.

#### **3.3 Ceremonial Function**

The ceremony is an indispensable activity for the people of China in their daily lives [11]. It not only enriches the spiritual and cultural life of the public but also strengthens their sense of cultural identity and belonging. Ciming Opera primarily employs puppet performances and plays a vital role in averting disasters and attracting blessings. Therefore, it is also referred to as the "Opera of Rituals."

### **4. The Current Situation and Crisis of Ciming Opera**

Ciming Opera has been preserved since the Qing Dynasty [12]. The survival of Ciming Opera relies on familial inheritance and mutual support among artists. In recent years, the opera has received support from local governments for its development. However, it

remains precarious due to a shortage of talent, outdated repertoires, and high entry barriers for audiences.

#### **4.1 The Current Situation**

With government support, the art form now operates a training center and mobile performance vehicles. The training center displays the puppets, musical instruments, and scripts used in Ciming Opera performances, while heritage artists practice daily and analyze the scripts there. The mobile performance vehicles enable artists to conduct public welfare shows in nearby towns, promoting the art form and helping more people discover, learn, and preserve Ciming Opera.

Currently, Ciming Opera is passed down exclusively within families. While this single transmission method largely preserves its unique artistic style and regional characteristics, it also risks leading to its extinction. Moreover, the learning costs for Ciming Opera performers are disproportionate to the rewards they receive.

#### **4.2 The Current Crisis**

##### **4.2.1 Talent shortage**

Currently, there are few folk artists specializing in Ciming Opera, and the average age of surviving performers exceeds fifty years. This talent gap severely hinders the preservation and development of the art form. The situation stems from the younger generation's limited interest in traditional opera, coupled with insufficient funding and inadequate promotion for Ciming Opera. The art form now faces a critical shortage of successors [13].

##### **4.2.2 Theatrical clichés**

The traditional repertoire of Ciming opera was immensely popular among the public in the last century, when entertainment options were scarce. However, in today's multicultural and new-media-dominated era, public interest in traditional opera has waned [14]. Moreover, its formulaic performances fail to resonate with modern audiences—particularly younger viewers. Consequently, Ciming opera struggles to keep pace with contemporary trends; its lack of innovation results in clichéd plots and diminished appeal, directly hindering its dissemination and development in contemporary society.

##### **4.2.3 Language barrier**

The lyrics and dialogues of Ciming Opera are imbued with a distinct historical character. The use of archaic linguistic forms and dialectal features makes it difficult for contemporary audiences to comprehend their meaning. Fewer and fewer viewers can fully understand the lyrics of Ciming Opera, and this linguistic barrier significantly undermines both the audience's viewing experience and the opera's artistic dissemination [15].

#### **5. Recommendations for the Preservation and Development of the Ciming Opera**

In today's era of intertwined multiculturalism and the introduction of policies safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, for Ciming Opera to regain its vitality, it requires support from both the government and all sectors of society. Strengthen publicity efforts by reaching out to campuses, creating plays that reflect contemporary themes, and overcoming language barriers to ensure the successful preservation and development of Ciming Opera.

##### **5.1 Strengthen Publicity**

The primary role of publicity is to enhance public awareness and recognition of the promoted product. By disseminating specific information and concepts, it captures people's attention and interest, fosters desired attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately achieves the objectives set by the promoter. Leverage the strengths of networks, new media, magazines, and other platforms, utilizing digital information to promote details such as the current state of traditional opera preservation, participating artists, performance schedules, and cultural contexts. It allows people to understand the development of Ciming Opera more intuitively and conveniently. This approach encourages certain groups to engage with and learn from Ciming opera, thereby alleviating the shortage of successors in its inheritance.

##### **5.2 Performance Innovation**

Traditional drama requires reform, which is an inevitable demand of socio-economic development on cultural products. Without a doubt, Ciming Opera must innovate to meet the needs of diverse age groups and expand its influence. Ciming Opera boasts a rich repertoire of classic plays. Its inheritors must

create outstanding productions that align with contemporary public aesthetics, emphasizing emotional depth while preserving the core narratives and integrating technological innovations. For instance, visual lighting installations can illustrate puppet manipulation techniques, while incorporating electronic sound effects alongside the traditional "Mandarin Shuidiao" vocal style to enhance the emotional intensity of iconic scenes. Another example is the interactive "audience-operated puppetry" concept. Moving forward, Ciming Opera scripts should keep pace with modern developments, producing more excellent productions that meet public aesthetic expectations and carry contemporary relevance, thereby providing momentum for the opera's innovative evolution.

### 5.3 Society Coordination

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) constitutes a vital component of Chinese national culture, embodying the national spirit, historical legacy, and regional characteristics. Integrating ICH into primary and secondary school curricula not only facilitates the preservation and transmission of these precious cultural assets but also plays a significant role in fostering students' cultural confidence, holistic development, and innovative capabilities. Diverse ICH experience activities not only revitalize the campus cultural ecosystem but also sow seeds of cultural inheritance among young people, infusing new vitality into traditional crafts. Ciming Opera Troupe has entered some primary and secondary schools, but the number of performances is limited, making it difficult for students to comprehend the performances, and the language barrier is the primary reason why students struggle to fully engage. Therefore, it is necessary to expand opera language instruction and incorporate dialect training. Ciming Opera should not only be performed in schools but also made accessible to a broader audience. To address the challenges in understanding opera language, a "broad promotion" approach must be avoided; Instead, the focus should be on youth-oriented expressions, technology-enhanced experiences, and immersive contextual integration, transforming opera from a "museum art" into a "participatory cultural symbol."

### 6. Conclusion

Ciming Opera is the crystallization of the wisdom, dedication, and unwavering perseverance of its artists in central Fujian, reflecting the region's profound historical heritage and rich cultural essence. From its inception to maturity and subsequent revival, Ciming Opera has undergone innovations by generations of practitioners, establishing itself as one of the most important local operas in central Fujian. It embodies people's aspirations for a better life. Currently, the contemporary development of Ciming Opera faces challenges and difficulties; therefore, efforts must be made to preserve traditional narratives while infusing them with contemporary elements. In its preservation and evolution, the opera should also actively promote its unique regional characteristics. Through publicity efforts, the Ciming Opera has expanded its audience base and garnered greater social attention, shifting from family inheritance to widespread public learning, thereby ensuring its sustainable preservation and development.

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