

An Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics and Cultural Connotations of the Large-Scale Modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera——Taking the National Art Fund-Supported Play Village Moon Shines on the Returned as an Example

Shuanghui Yu

School of Art, Jingchu University of Technology, Jingmen 448000, Hubei, China

Corresponding author: Shuanghui Yu (e-mail: ysh20251008@163.com)

ABSTRACT Since China's reform and opening up, rapid urbanization has contributed to the decline of rural economies and rural spiritual cohesion. To support rural revitalization, the Jingmen Municipal Art Theater created the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned. Rooted in the folk culture of the Jiangnan Plain, the opera focuses on new countryside construction and centers on Zheng Shishan, a second-generation migrant worker who returns to his hometown to start a business. The main plot follows his difficult process of rural construction, while the secondary theme concerns the reconstruction of rural spirit. The narrative interweaves capitalist erosion, secular temptation, and the ethical framework of implicit gentry culture, producing a dramatic and aesthetically appealing structure. As a rural realist work, the opera eulogizes the new era and conveys the main melody of the times through the distinctive tune of Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera. The work achieves aesthetic resonance by combining local operatic form, rural realist narration, and contemporary cultural values, demonstrating the artistic vitality and cultural significance of modern regional opera in rural revitalization discourse.

INDEX TERMS jingzhou flower drum opera, village moon shines on the returned, artistic characteristics, cultural connotations, rural revitalization

I. INTRODUCTION

CHINESE classical opera, as a comprehensive embodiment of folk art, is regarded as a treasure of the Chinese nation's culture and the most deeply rooted and brilliantly blooming flower in the garden of traditional culture [1]. As an important part of China's excellent traditional culture, Chinese opera, together with the tragedies and comedies of ancient Greece and the Sanskrit operas of ancient India, is known as the "three ancient theatrical cultures in the world". However, the ancient Greek tragedies and comedies and ancient Indian Sanskrit operas have successively declined in the long course of history; only Chinese opera, after going through several ups and downs, still remains vibrant today. With its unique vocal charm, rich ideological content, diverse artistic techniques, and strong artistic appeal, Chinese opera has left a profound

mark in the history of Chinese literature and art along with the development of the times and the progress of human civilization, becoming a shining pearl in the treasure house of world culture and art.

According to incomplete statistics, there are about 300 opera genres in China, among which Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera is one. Rooted in the rich folk cultural soil of the Jiangnan Plain, Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera is full of strong local flavor. Originating in the Qing Dynasty, it was initially popular in Tianmen and Mianyang (now part of Xiaogan City) in Hubei Province, with a long history and abundant cultural resources, paralleling the region's long heritage in traditional arts, where weaving and embroidery techniques embody the local cultural identity and are rich sources for modern manufacturing innovation [2]. Since the 1990s, the Jingmen Municipal Art Theater of Hubei

Province has always adhered to the original aspiration and mission of "promoting local opera and adhering to the creation of high-quality works", focusing on the current situation of rural areas and the living conditions of farmers, and continuously conducting artistic exploration on rural development. It has created the "Changhu Trilogy" of modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera, including Lotus Shoal, Dragon Boat Festival Riot, and Waiting for the Husband for Twelve Months. After the "Changhu Trilogy", to implement the spirit of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Jingmen Municipal Art Theater and the Hubei Flower Drum Opera Protection and Inheritance Center of Jingmen City co-created a rural poetic opera—the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned. As a companion piece to Waiting for the Husband for Twelve Months, its premiere coincided with the 40th anniversary of reform and opening up and the comprehensive advancement of the rural revitalization strategy. With rural realism as its theme, the opera eulogizes the new era, showcases new styles, conveys the main melody of the times through the tune of Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera, highlights the awakening of people and the progress of the times, effectively promotes the process of rural revitalization, and plays a crucial role in building a harmonious society and realizing the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation [3]. It has won high praise from both the audience and experts in the opera field, which is the result of the painstaking efforts and hard work of opera practitioners. This reception reflects its successful artistic execution.

II. CREATION BACKGROUND OF THE LARGE-SCALE MODERN JINGZHOU FLOWER DRUM OPERA VILLAGE MOON SHINES ON THE RETURNED

Since the reform and opening up, the wave of modernization has swept across China, and the rapid development of urbanization has brought two major predicaments to rural areas: first, the rural economy has been increasingly declining—young people have flocked to cities, production resources have concentrated in urban areas, rural areas have gradually become "hollowed out", and economic development has faced great difficulties; second, the rural spirit has been gradually fading—since 1840, with the arrival of urban civilization characterized by industrialization, the old rural spirit has clashed with the new urban civilization, leading to changes in production methods and the continuous damage, disruption, and deconstruction of the traditional rural spirit [4]. To realize the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out in the report of the 19th

National Congress of the Communist Party of China: "We will advance the rural revitalization strategy. Following the general requirements of developing rural industries, improving rural living environments, promoting rural culture, ensuring effective governance in rural areas, and increasing rural incomes, we will speed up the modernization of

agriculture and rural areas."

Against this background, issues related to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers have become the focus of attention, and exploring a Chinese solution for the construction of a new countryside has been included in the important agenda. In response to the call of the Party, the Jingmen Municipal Art Theater of Hubei Province is based on the current situation, focuses on rural revitalization and people's livelihood, centers on the theme of "second-generation rural migrants returning to their hometown to start a business and give back to their native place", re-examines rural land, rural economy, rural ecology, and rural ethics, and strives to reflect rural issues, tell rural stories, express the emotions and aspirations of villagers, depict rural characters, advocate the spirit of local sages, and pursue a modern vision of rural construction through the local opera genre of Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera. Thus, the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned came into being—it inherits the rural tradition of thousands of years, responds to the modern demands of rural revitalization, and explores the development of the rural economy and the reconstruction of the rural spirit. As shown in Figure 1.

III. CREATION AND PRODUCTION OF THE LARGE-SCALE MODERN JINGZHOU FLOWER DRUM OPERA VILLAGE MOON SHINES ON THE RETURNED

The primary creation of the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned was undertaken by a core creative team led by Hu Yingming, a national first-class screenwriter and renowned playwright. Through their concerted efforts, they created a drama with profound ideology, careful artistry, and sophisticated production. Adhering to the artistic principle of "the unity of content and form in truth, goodness, and beauty", The director of Village Moon Shines on the Returned is Wang Guosheng, a national first-class director, and the assistant director is Song Xianqin, a national second-class actor from the Jingmen Municipal Art Theater. Adhering to the creative concept of "sincerity, simplicity, and returning to nature", these creative team members also made multiple trips to Jingmen for field research to highlight the simplicity and authenticity of Village Moon Shines on the Returned. They repeatedly deliberated, polished, and revised the work, ensuring that every detail was handled meticulously and flawlessly.

The secondary creation (stage performance) of the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned is led by Luo Tao, a national first-class actor and winner of the Wenhua Performance Award, Zeng Ju, a national first-class actor and winner of the Plum Blossom Award, and Chen Qinfang, a national first-class actor, with the joint performance of Wang Shuoyan and Li Jing, national second-class actors. Among them, Luo Tao plays the protagonist Zheng Shishan, Zeng Ju plays the female lead Wang Dahua, Chen Qinfang plays the second



FIGURE 1. The Large-Scale Modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned

female lead Wang Qiuhua, Wang Shuoyan plays Zheng Laogen (Zheng Shishan's father), and Li Jing plays Zheng Ya (Zheng Shishan's blind uncle). All of them are well-known actors from the Jingmen Municipal Art Theater, who have played leading roles in many large-scale excellent operas, vividly portrayed the personalities of the characters, and won the love of the audience. They form a performance team with rich performance experience and highly developed performance skills, and through their highly effective performances, they have presented the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned with a high degree of fidelity to the audience.

IV. THEME AND CONTENT OF THE LARGE-SCALE MODERN JINGZHOU FLOWER DRUM OPERA VILLAGE MOON SHINES ON THE RETURNED

The large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned is based on real people and real events in life. The real person is Zheng Xiong, a deputy to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and Secretary of the Party Committee and Village Director of Hushan Village, Huji Town, Zhongxiang City, Hubei Province; the real event is the typical story of Secretary Zheng Xiong's poverty alleviation work. The protagonist Zheng Shishan in the opera is modeled on Secretary Zheng Xiong. Through the use of typification techniques, the opera not only focuses on the current background of the times but also delves into the historical depths of the ancient rural customs. From a new perspective, it combines some of Secretary Zheng Xiong's deeds and entrepreneurial concepts and makes necessary artistic adaptations in accordance with the laws of art.

The plot of Village Moon Shines on the Returned closely follows the pulse of the times and centers on "Zheng Shishan, a second-generation rural migrant, returning to his hometown to start a business". Zheng Shishan is a successful entrepreneur who left Hushan Village to develop in the city. He has been busy with his business in the city for many years and has become "urbanized", representing modern

urban civilization. Zheng Shishan originally thought that the city would be his future direction, but he was called back home by his father (a former village head) during the Mid-Autumn Festival. His return on the night of the full moon provides an opportunity for the integration of urban civilization and rural civilization. When Zheng Shishan sees that his hometown is still as dilapidated as before—especially when he witnesses the poverty and hardship of his first love Qiuhua's family—he, driven by the collision of emotions and reality and at the request of his father Zheng Laogen, decides to return to the village, run for village director, and lead the villagers to lift themselves out of poverty and become prosperous. Just as Zheng Shishan is about to realize his grand plans, some seemingly calm but actually undercurrent rural conflicts—conflicts between the Zheng and Wang clans, between poverty and face-saving, and between backward concepts and development—tied him down deeply, becoming "obstacles" on his entrepreneurial path and bringing him another test in life. However, Zheng Shishan is not afraid; with the wisdom and broad mind of a successful entrepreneur, he resolves these conflicts one by one, employing a strategic blend of economic restructuring, political action, and ethical compromise. The dramatic mechanisms for conflict resolution are three-fold: First, addressing the conflict between poverty and backward concepts is achieved through a decisive political and economic mechanism. Shishan runs for village director, establishing the necessary political authority. He then executes the critical economic and development compromises outlined in his grand blueprint, starting with re-surveying and reclaiming mismanaged land (the "first pot of gold") and attracting outside investment, thereby providing a clear, evidence-based path away from poverty and outdated practices. Second, the deep-seated Zheng-Wang clan conflicts are dramatically resolved through an ethical compromise centered on forgiveness and moral leadership. This is most powerfully demonstrated in the climax of Scene 4, where Shishan, despite Wang Dahua's past attempts to obstruct him and even dig up his ancestral

tomb, immediately prioritizes her rescue when she is in danger. This act of unconditional broad-mindedness and virtue disarms the clan rivalry and paves the way for social integration. Third, the conflict between face-saving and genuine development is resolved through spiritual and cultural reconstruction. Shishan consciously integrates the socialist core values with the traditional gentry-era virtues found on the bluestone, replacing the outdated, face-saving morality (which often perpetuates poverty) with a new, communally-focused spiritual foundation, realizing a modern "spiritual return to the hometown". This comprehensive approach allows him to launch a battle against poverty, embark on a difficult entrepreneurial journey, and finally works with the villagers to build a new rural civilization and a vision of common prosperity, helping the village get rid of poverty, move towards modernization, and fulfill his aspiration of "returning to revitalize the hometown" [5].

However, this paper acknowledges that the opera's swift and ultimately successful resolution relies heavily on the idealized, exemplary conduct of the protagonist. This dramatic choice to prioritize Zheng Shishan's "wisdom and broad mind" as the primary driving force for resolution is consistent with the opera's positioning as a modern "main melody" work. The opera's intent is to actively promote the state's rural revitalization agenda, requiring an optimistic and didactic narrative structure. By centering the resolution on a heroic moral leader, the opera fulfills its ideological goal to inspire positive action and provide a hopeful, albeit simplified, model for overcoming complex, systemic rural challenges, thereby endorsing the narrative's commitment to a feasible path to common prosperity.

V. ANALYSIS OF THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS AND CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE LARGE-SCALE MODERN JINGZHOU FLOWER DRUM OPERA VILLAGE MOON SHINES ON THE RETURNED

The large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned was selected as a funded project in the Large-Scale Stage Plays and Works category of the National Art Fund in 2018, a key stage art creation project of Hubei Province in 2018, and included in the list of key national stage art creation works in 2019. It also represented Hubei Province as the closing performance at the National Grassroots Opera Troupe Gala to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing, and was selected as the opening work of the National Excellent Stage Art Exhibition on Poverty Alleviation in 2020. These achievements fully prove that the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned possesses significant quality, with high academic value, strong artistic appeal, and substantial aesthetic value. As shown in Figure 2.

A. FOLK BALLADS AND SLANG HIGHLIGHT THE CHARACTERISTICS AND CHARM OF FOLK CULTURE

1) The Role of Folk Ballads in Dramatic Structure and Staging

The large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned consists of six scenes. The work's overall dramatic structure balances traditional narrative with lyrical interjection, using the folk ballads as the primary form of arias and emotional recitative. The pacing is deliberately measured, emphasizing spiritual reflection over fast-moving action. The opening scene adopts a combination of realistic and freehand techniques to create a poetic atmosphere: a weathered bluestone at the village entrance, an earthen kiln in the village, a full moon, and an old man (Zheng Laogen) standing and looking into the distance, eagerly waiting for his son Zheng Shishan's return. The set design employs minimal, highly symbolic visual elements, with the use of the full moon providing a recurring motif of nostalgia and completeness. As shown in Figure 3.

The weathered bluestone, earthen kiln, bright full moon, and lonely old man on the stage are all real elements in rural life, while also carrying a cultural symbol—the gentry culture. Together, they form a vivid picture of rural life. The stage's lighting design, focusing on the moon, contrasts the warm domestic setting with the coldness of the old man's isolation, amplifying the emotional stakes of Zheng Shishan's potential return. The bleak ballad of Zheng Ya (Zheng Shishan's blind uncle) comes from afar: "On the 15th of the eighth lunar month, the moon is full; the old father weeps as he waits for his son. How many times have I made phone calls? My eyes are worn out from waiting..." The lyrics are simple yet elegant, complementing the plain and slightly melancholic rural scene, creating a profound, beautiful, and somewhat sad atmosphere. Musically, the ballad is underpinned by the orchestra, whose use of traditional regional instruments, characteristic of Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera, establishes the specific cultural setting and melancholy tone from the very first moments of the opera. Though not gorgeous, the ballad is full of charm and makes people feel a sense of intimacy.

Subsequently, Zheng Ya's folk ballads appear throughout the opera, effectively functioning as a lyrical chorus that provides narrative commentary and regulates the emotional tempo of the dramatic action. When the protagonist Zheng Shishan is about to appear, Zheng Ya's ballad is heard: "Yaoguzi (a local term for a young girl) is engaged; where is the grand bridal sedan chair? The bride waits for the lotus-decorated sedan; the sedan waits for the wedding dress..." Here, the lines "The bride waits for the lotus-decorated sedan; the sedan waits for the wedding dress" express the expectation for the protagonist Zheng Shishan's appearance and the longing for his return to the hometown.

After Zheng Shishan learns about the misfortunes of his first love Qiuhua from his father Zheng Laogen, he expresses his desire to visit her. As it is getting late, Zheng Laogen leads his son Zheng Shishan off the stage. At the end of the scene, Zheng Ya sings again: "On the 15th of the eighth lunar month, the moon is full; I weep as I wait for the



FIGURE 2. The National Art Fund-Supported Play Village Moon Shines on the Returned



FIGURE 3. Zheng Laogen Waiting for His Son Zheng Shishan's Return

return..." Accompanied by the bleak song, the lights fade. The reuse of the ballad about the old father weeping while waiting for his son on the Mid-Autumn Night adopts a frame structure (beginning and end echoing), which not only reaffirms the theme but also brings the first scene to a satisfying conclusion, using lyrical repetition to achieve a potent emotional climax before moving to the next act.

In the second scene, which takes place in Qihua's courtyard, the emotional intensity shifts as Qihua takes center stage with her aria, Qihua sings *Across a Mountain and a River*, expressing her memories of her first love and her current difficult life. Then, Zheng Ya's ballad is heard: "The sorghum leaves are crisp; lovers meet. Separated by the bluestone, tears flow endlessly..." The lines "The sorghum leaves are crisp; lovers meet" rhyme at the end, making them catchy and serving as an introduction to the meeting of the two former lovers. The line "Separated by the bluestone, tears flow endlessly" expresses the regret and sorrow for their separation. Amidst the song, Qihua's first love Shishan walks over hesitantly and stops in front of the courtyard. This use of a ballad to bridge the physical gap

between characters and foreshadow their emotional reunion is a key dramatic device.

In the third scene, after Zheng Laogen and Wang Dahua have a fierce quarrel, Zheng Ya's ballad is heard: "Hemp stalks can't be used to build bridges; rush pith can't be used to fire kilns. The girl walks across the bridge; it sways unsteadily, making me twist my waist..." Here, the lines "Hemp stalks can't be used to build bridges; rush pith can't be used to fire kilns" imply the irreconcilable conflict between Zheng Laogen and Wang Dahua. The subsequent lines "The girl walks across the bridge; it sways unsteadily, making me twist my waist" are humorous and witty, vividly portraying Wang Dahua's bold and careless personality. By interjecting humor immediately after a moment of high dramatic conflict, the opera uses the ballad to control the emotional catharsis and provide immediate, character-driven commentary.

In the fourth scene, when Wang Dahua leads people to dig up the Zheng family's ancestral tomb and slips and rolls down the mountain, Zheng Shishan's first reaction upon learning the news is to rescue her. At this moment, the

lights dim, and Zheng Ya's ballad is heard: "An egg has two yolks; calling father on one side and mother on the other..." Here, the line "An egg has two yolks" describes Zheng Shishan's "dual standards" in dealing with people—though he has a grudge against Wang Dahua, he does not hesitate to rescue her when she is in danger of slipping and rolling down the mountain. Dramatically, this serves to pause the action and refocus the audience on the protagonist's moral dilemma, highlighting the underlying theme of forgiveness and community cohesion.

These ballads, rooted in the folk culture of Jingchu and echoing over the countryside across time and space, not only preserve the traditional rural history and culture and are full of rural charm but also convey the ancient heritage to the audience, showcasing the charm of cultural inheritance.

2) Folk Slang Reflects the Characteristics and Charm of Folk Culture

In the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned, folk slang—colloquial expressions with dialectal features and a strong sense of daily life—can be found everywhere. These folk slangs are easy to understand, catchy, and full of local characteristics, summed up by the common people in their daily lives. For example, "Ni lang mo chang da" means "Sir, please cease singing" (where "Ni lang" is a respectful term for "you" in the local dialect, and "Mo chang da" means "don't sing anymore"); "Ming nian tian ge ya dai ya dai ge ba" means "May you be blessed with a son next year"; "Zhen shi nao ke xiang pian le" means "You are seriously mistaken in your thinking" (where "nao ke" refers to "head"); "Wo ji shi hai pa guo ta de" means "When have I ever feared him?" (where "ji shi" means "when"); "Ge da ge zi mai xin di" means "Conceal your worries in your heart" (where "ge da" refers to "worries"); "Ku mei shi lie?" means "Why are you weeping?"; "Mo rang mama zhao ji" means "Do not cause your mother anxiety" (where "mo" means "don't"); "Zhe Hushan cun qiong de ding dang xiang" means "Hushan Village is utterly destitute" (where "qiong de ding dang xiang" is an idiom meaning "extremely poor"); "Shuo de qing qiao" means "That is easily said"; "Sheng cheng de xiang, wu de jiang, ren ming" means "One's destiny is as immutable as one's appearance and fermented sauce; resign yourself to fate!"; "Gei wo Wang jia chang chang lian" means "Bring prestige to the Wang family" (where "chang chang lian" means "bring honor"); "Mo bu shi hu lao zi ba?" means "Are you not deceiving me?"; "Wei mei shi yao song zhe hao de jiu wo he?" means "Why gift me such excellent wine to drink?" (where "wei mei shi" means "why"); "Ni zen me jiu gebozhou wang wai guai lie?" means "Why are you showing bias towards outsiders?" (where "ge bo zhou wang wai guai" is an idiom meaning "favor outsiders"); "You me ban fa?" means "What recourse is there?"; "Ge po shi tou liu zhe me yong sha?" means "What is the utility of retaining this fractured stone?" These dialectal slangs are full of "rural flavor" and "life

atmosphere", embodying a strong rural sentiment. Though simple and unpolished, they are vivid, down-to-earth, and have a solid mass foundation, strong expressiveness, and appeal.

B. THE STYLE OF JINGCHU AND THE ENDORSEMENT OF IMPLICIT GENTRY CULTURE

Jingmen and Zhongxiang in Hubei Province are important birthplaces and concentrated areas of Chu culture. Chu culture is an excellent cultural heritage created by the ancestors of Jingchu over the long course of history, characterized by a "marvelous, strange, and brilliant" style. It embodies the folk beliefs, values, social ideals, and moral pursuits of the ancestors of Jingchu [6].

Since ancient times, the people of Jingchu have been mainly engaged in agricultural culture—they work hard during the busy farming season and are good at singing and dancing during the slack season. In the context of the opera, the term 'implicit gentry culture' is defined not by historical land ownership or political power, but as the enduring ethical and moral framework—or 'scholarly values'—that the traditional gentry were expected to uphold as community moral arbiters. The opera implicitly endorses this moral dimension of the gentry tradition, contrasting its values of virtue and responsibility with the secular temptation of modern capitalism. In the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned, the Zheng family has a tradition of "valuing both farming and reading". Zheng Shishan's grandfather, described as a traditional gentry figure with Confucian culture, established a codified set of rural rules for the community, reflecting the gentry's historical role as the local ethical authority. The specific characteristics of this culture implicitly endorsed by the opera include:

1. Moral Stewardship and Virtue: The insistence on "establishing the foundation with virtue," stipulating that villagers should abide by moral ethics and do more good deeds, is a direct endorsement of the gentry's commitment to community moral health.

2. Social Order and Accountability: Advocating for "correcting mistakes with rules" and defining specific transgressions against justice and agreements demonstrates the gentry's historical role in providing a local governance and social order structure.

3. Etiquette and Community Harmony: Promoting "regulating behavior with etiquette" and "mutual assistance in times of need" highlights the gentry's focus on fostering a civil, mutually supportive, and harmonious rural society. This ethical structure is materialized in the opera: Immersed in the tradition of "valuing both farming and reading," Zheng Shishan's grandfather always adhered to the traditional rural spirit. He carved the rural rules and conventions—"encouraging virtue and career, correcting mistakes, interacting with etiquette, and helping each other in hardships"—on the back of the bluestone guarding the ancestral temple, making it a permanent physical embodiment of the gentry's

moral legacy. This bluestone thus becomes a carrier of the culture of local sages and gentry, safeguarding and inheriting the roots of Chu culture and the deep-seated nostalgia [7].

In addition, the people of Chu worshipped witches and phoenixes and believed that "all things have souls". That is, the people of the State of Chu not only worshipped witchcraft and the phoenix (regarding the phoenix, a symbol of auspiciousness and happiness, as a divine symbol) but also believed that all things in the world have souls and vitality. This belief originated from the primitive religious concept of the people of Chu, who believed that all natural phenomena were controlled by gods and that witchcraft was needed to communicate and dialogue with the gods to obtain their protection and guidance. Therefore, in *Village Moon Shines on the Returned*, when the protagonist Zheng Shishan was young and weak and often ill, he was "adopted" by the bluestone guarding the ancestral temple as a "godfather" to seek divine protection. While carrying cultural symbols, the bluestone also serves as a fulcrum of the stage and the origin of symbols, cleverly promoting the development of the opera's plot. During the scientific development of *Hushan Village*, the dispute over whether to move the bluestone or not triggered an emotional conflict and integration. Faced with numerous obstacles, Zheng Shishan did not back down; he resolutely moved forward, taking the traditional rural rules and conventions carved on the bluestone as a spiritual contract to reunite the scattered hearts of the villagers. Finally, he placed the "red-draped" bluestone in the village square. "People leave, but roots remain; the stone is moved, but its soul stays"—the rural rules and conventions are engraved on the stone as a permanent record! As shown in Figure 4.

C. PROFOUND THEME HIGHLIGHTS THE NOBLE ASPIRATION

1) The Title Implies the Theme: An Integrated Thematic Analysis

The large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera *Village Moon Shines on the Returned* represents not only the return of people but also the return of nostalgia. Its title is a rich thematic compound, moving beyond literal definition to establish the core tension and resolution of the drama. The individual characters are interwoven to form an allegorical statement about rural revitalization. "Xiang" (meaning "village" or "hometown") functions as the thematic setting and foundational cultural matrix. As an agricultural country, China is one of the birthplaces of ancient agricultural civilization. The origin of China's agricultural civilization can be traced back to the concept of "men plowing and women weaving", with a long history. The regional diversity, historical inheritance, and rural folk nature of agricultural civilization not only endow Chinese culture with important characteristics but also are important reasons why Chinese culture has been able to continue and thrive. After thousands of years of accumulation, the Chinese rural spirit, which is isomorphic with agricultural culture, reflects the excellent

traditional culture of the Chinese nation. In the opera, Xiang represents the endangered spiritual and physical landscape that the protagonist, Zheng Shishan, seeks to save from capitalist destruction and spiritual decline.

"Yue" (meaning "moon") serves as the primary aesthetic and emotional motif. As a symbol in Chinese literary works such as Tang poetry, Song ci, Yuan qu, and novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the "moon" appears everywhere. It creates a strong poetic atmosphere, subtly touches people's hearts, and carries the aesthetic psychology of the Chinese people, connecting with the deepest emotion of the Chinese people—nostalgia. Dramatically, the full moon of the Mid-Autumn Festival in the opening scene is the catalyst for Zheng Shishan's return, acting as a light of conscience and an ancient symbol of completeness and family reunion that draws the "urbanized" man back to his roots.

"Zhao" (meaning "shine") and "Huan" (meaning "return") are the central action verbs that articulate the opera's core message. "Zhao" implying "care" and "protection", conveying the spiritual light and the beauty of implication brought by the moon's shining and protection. This symbolizes the external, guiding force—the state's mandate for revitalization and the enduring traditional morality (the "implicit gentry culture")—that illuminates the path forward. "Huan" refers to the return to a rural area where people live in harmony with nature, society, and each other (represented by the concept of "harmony between man and nature"), and the return to the divinity of Chinese traditional culture. The concept of Huan (return) is multifaceted, encompassing Zheng Shishan's physical return, the return of capital, and the ultimate "spiritual return to the hometown," which is the reconstruction of rural ethics and values.

"Ren" (meaning "people") anchors the entire concept in human agency. It not only refers to those who return to their hometown or the current villagers but also can transcend geographical boundaries and refer to the Chinese people as a whole. The title, therefore, unites the collective memory (Xiang) with the spiritual ideal (Yue), the active guidance (Zhao), and the human commitment to renewal (Ren and Huan), summarizing the opera's function as an ideological and aesthetic model for rural revitalization.

2) The Theme Is Highlighted Through the Contradiction Between Destruction and Salvation

The large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera *Village Moon Shines on the Returned* also highlights its theme through the contradiction between destruction and salvation. In the first scene, Wang Dahua appears on the stage alone. Though the stage seems empty, it expands and enriches the stage time and space through dramatic techniques such as singing and off-stage dialogue. The extensive use of "blank space" (a technique often used in Chinese poetry and painting) leaves room for the audience's imagination of the "image beyond the image". At the wedding, Wang Dahua's "son-in-law" tells her: "Giving 200 yuan to each person is nothing." As shown in Figure 5.



FIGURE 4. Zheng Shishan Placing the Red-Draped Bluestone in the Village Square



FIGURE 5. Wang Dahua Giving Red Envelopes to Villagers at the Wedding

This "son-in-law", who is "ostentatious and wealthy", is "rich but old". However, "he has an ulterior motive"—he wants to curry favor with the villagers through this opportunity to enter Hushan Village and occupy the rural resources. As shown in Figure 6.

This wealthy and arrogant son-in-law recklessly plans a "large-scale development": mining phosphate ore in the mountains and building a fertilizer factory by the lake, dreaming of "digging out a golden baby with one shovel". The consequences of building factories and destroying farmland will be the pollution of the clear lake water and the complete destruction of the beautiful natural ecological environment of the village. Modern capital is invading the countryside in a sudden "barbaric" way. This deeply grieves Zheng Laogen, a former village head, who has a sincere affection for the mountains, rivers, plants, and creatures in this land. He cannot tolerate the corruption of people's hearts and the destruction of the ecology in the countryside under the erosion of money. Therefore, Zheng Laogen urges his son Zheng Shishan to return to his hometown to save it—a

request that is both urgent and practical.

Zheng Shishan is among the first generation of rural migrants who went to the city to start businesses during the wave of wealth creation in the 1990s. After going through the cruel and arduous struggle in the city, he completed the primitive accumulation of capital. In his aria in the first scene, Zheng Shishan sings: "Fortunately, my enterprise has matured; I have hired professional managers to take charge. Finally, I can take time off on the Mid-Autumn Night to chat with my old father about the past." This line shows that Zheng Shishan is a thoughtful and capable successful entrepreneur. However, Zheng Shishan was born in the countryside—his ancestral tomb, old house, and even his first love all remain there. The countryside is the foundation of his character and emotions, and the deep-seated blood connection with the countryside still exists in his heart. As shown in Figure 7.

During this return, the bright moon, green mountains, old friends, and the old house awaken Zheng Shishan's affection for his hometown. In his aria *Walking to the Field* and



FIGURE 6. Wang Dahua Courting Villagers with Red Envelopes at the Wedding



FIGURE 7. Zheng Shishan and His First Love Qiuhua in Their Youth

Taking a Look in the second scene,

Zheng Shishan sings: "Walking to the field and taking a look, my nostalgia is endless! The familiar ridges and furrows, the dear lakes and fields, and my childhood playmates—none of them have the vitality they once had." When Zheng Shishan sees the gradual desolation and poverty of the countryside and witnesses his first love Qiuhua living a difficult life in the village due to illness, his heart trembles, and he then decides to stay and save the countryside. Zheng Laogen's aria in the third scene confirms Zheng Shishan's mental journey: "I tried to persuade him, but he wouldn't listen; after going around, he changed his mind when he saw Qiuhua! He took the initiative to take on the heavy responsibility, determined to lead everyone to build our hometown."

Subsequently, Zheng Shishan uses a series of advanced entrepreneurial management concepts to tailor a grand blueprint for rural reform, showcasing a beautiful future of a beautiful and charming village with innovative development. As shown in Figure 8.

Starting with land—the most basic and crucial element in rural areas—Zheng Shishan re-surveys the land, reclaims the land lost to rural "local tyrants", and takes it as the "first pot of gold" for the construction of the new countryside. Through village relocation and land consolidation, as well as attracting investment, he establishes a modern rural economy. While enriching the material life of the village, he still maintains the natural and ecological beauty of the countryside. However, how can an ideal village have only a new "shell" without a spiritual core? To reconstruct the rural spirit, Zheng Shishan integrates socialist core values with traditional virtues to eliminate rural bad habits and re-establishes the rural spirit of "encouraging virtue and career, correcting mistakes, interacting with etiquette, and helping each other in hardships". By combining modern civilization with traditional virtues, he fills the gap in the "soft power" of the new-era countryside and realizes a modern "spiritual return to the hometown". This is a successful practice of Zheng Shishan in repaying his ancestors and his roots through the construction of the new countryside.

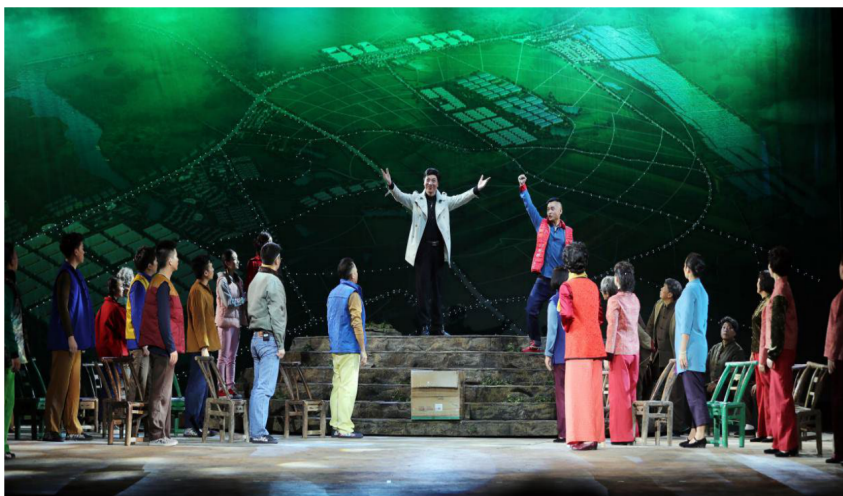


FIGURE 8. Zheng Shishan Drawing a Grand Blueprint for Rural Reform

D. THE MAIN ROLES EACH HAVE THEIR OWN CHARM AND VITALITY

The charm of opera art lies in the vivid portrayal of the characters' personalities and images, and whether the characters in the opera can leave a deep impression on the audience. Wang Guowei, in his literary criticism work *Critique of the Ci of the Human World*, pointed out that the most wonderful part of literary and artistic works lies in the "unity of meaning and image" and the "unity of the actor and the role". In the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera *Village Moon Shines on the Returned*, the portrayal of the main roles achieves the "unity of meaning and image" and the "unity of the actor and the role", which is undoubtedly a successful aspect of the opera.

The protagonist Zheng Shishan in *Village Moon Shines on the Returned* is a "Xiaosheng" (a young male role type in Chinese opera). Zheng Shishan has successful entrepreneurial experience and capital accumulation in the city, but he never shows off. His return to his hometown to start a business and revitalize it demonstrates his courage to take responsibility and his foresight. His affection for his elderly father is as deep as blood, his love for his first love Qihua is pure and sincere, and his handling of the grudges with Wang Dahua shows his broad-mindedness. Through his mellow, pure, and resounding singing, handsome movements, and generous and delicate performance, Zheng Shishan is portrayed as an idealistic, ambitious, affectionate, and responsible village director with a broad mind and a kind heart.

The character Wang Dahua is cast in the traditional 'Caidan' (female comic role) archetype, and is portrayed as outspoken, assertive, and dramatically contentious. Her character is defined from the moment she appears on the stage through a few movements, lines, and sections of singing. Wang Dahua is money-oriented—she marries her daughter Xiaohua to an ill-intentioned boss who is wealthy but old. She is competitive and tries every means to obstruct the Zheng family's actions. She even arrogantly leads people

to dig up the Zheng family's ancestral tomb, ending up "like a plucked chicken". Fearing criticism from the villagers due to her vanity, she is forced to walk at night. Through her exquisite performance, Wang Dahua is vividly portrayed as a profit-driven, assertive, scheming, and shrewish village woman.

The second female lead Wang Qihua in the opera is a "Qingyi" (a virtuous female role type in Chinese opera). Qihua has experienced the beauty of first love, the pain of separation, and the suffering of illness after her husband's death, but she views all these with a calm attitude and emotion, maintaining inner peace. Qihua possesses the kindness of a woman like "the greatest goodness is like water"—she behaves in accordance with her conscience and does not fight with others for interests. With her clear singing and standardized performance of "hand, eye, body, method, and step" (the basic skills of Chinese opera performance), she vividly portrays a sacred female image, embodying the aesthetic pursuit of "calmness" and "purity".

The portrayal of the characters in the entire opera is detailed and expressive. Each of the main roles has its own charm and vitality, leaving a strong impression on every audience. What the audience cannot forget—dare not forget—is their hometown, which gave birth to and raised them. This is the enduring charm of the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera *Village Moon Shines on the Returned*.

VI. CONCLUSION

The large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera *Village Moon Shines on the Returned* begins with a bleak image, presenting a unique charm—broad and vigorous, vast and profound—allowing people to feel the depth and shock in the endless flow of time. The affectionate call and release of the local accent and nostalgia, the rural spirit carried by the weathered bluestone, the path of rural revitalization guided by spirit, and the "spiritual return to the hometown" on the road to wealth creation—these are the eternal

memories left by Village Moon Shines on the Returned. The opera extensively uses folk ballads and slang from the Jiangnan Plain to highlight the characteristics and charm of folk culture; the strong style of Jingchu reflects the depth and breadth of Chu culture; the profound theme highlights the noble aspiration; and the main roles each have their own charm and vitality. All these are important cultural symbols reflecting the aesthetic value of the opera. It can be said that the large-scale modern Jingzhou Flower Drum Opera Village Moon Shines on the Returned not only maintains the simple and fundamental character of traditional opera but also embodies the aesthetic connotation of Chinese opera aesthetics—"the greatest way is simple, and the greatest goodness is plain," an aesthetic principle equally celebrated in the industry's pursuit of simple, high-quality material integrity that showcases the intrinsic beauty and purity of the fabric. Its critical success and artistic quality establish it as a significant cultural production that advocates for and reflects the spirit of the rural revitalization process. While direct, measurable evidence of causation is beyond the scope of this analysis, the opera serves as a potent ideological model, raising crucial public awareness of the ethical and practical challenges of contemporary rural China and promoting the moral frameworks necessary for community renewal. This cultural intervention thus contributes to the national agenda and deserves further study as an exemplary artistic response to a socio-political imperative.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Shuanghui Yu designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Shuanghui Yu conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version to be published. Shuanghui Yu participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

Fund Project: Key Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Research of Hubei Provincial Department of Education in 2024, "Research on the Protection and Inheritance of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Jingzhou Huagu Opera under the Background of Digital Empowerment" (Project Number: 24D041)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not applicable.

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