

THE SOUND, FUNCTION, AND IDENTITY OF
ZHUHU IN YANGXIN TEA-PICKING OPERA
WITHIN A CHANGING CULTURAL
LANDSCAPE

DUAN CHENGYAO

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CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

DUAN CHENGYAO

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformation of the zhuhu, the leading bowed string instrument in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, through the integrated lens of musical structure, performative function and cultural status. The aim is to understand how the zhuhu, once central to melodic leadership and emotional modulation, has shifted to a subordinate position under the forces of modernization, institutional reform and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policy. The research adopts an ethnographic methodology that combines fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024 with performance observation, semi-structured interviews and score analysis. Findings show a marked decline in the zhuhu's improvisational agency and its reduction to a standardised accompanist, reflecting broader shifts in performance ecology and policy-driven aesthetics. At the same time, the zhuhu retains symbolic potency rooted in local expressive traditions and collective ensemble memory. The study concludes that the zhuhu is not a fading legacy but a dynamic cultural agent whose musical, performative and symbolic dimensions can be reconfigured within the contemporary ICH landscape. Theoretically, the study offers an integrated analytical model for minor accompaniment instruments in Chinese opera and provides empirical insights for revitalising regional performance systems.



BUNYI, FUNGSI DAN IDENTITI ZHUHU DALAM OPERA MEMETIK TEH YANGXIN DALAM LANDSKAP BUDAYA YANG SEDANG BERUBAH

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka transformasi zhuhu, iaitu instrumen gesekan utama dalam Opera Memetik Teh Yangxin, melalui lensa bersepadu struktur muzik, fungsi persembahan dan status budaya. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana zhuhu, yang dahulunya berperanan penting dalam kepimpinan melodi dan modulasi emosi, telah beralih kepada kedudukan yang subordinat akibat pemodenan, pembaharuan institusi dan dasar warisan budaya tidak ketara (ICH). Kajian ini menggunakan metodologi etnografi yang menggabungkan kerja lapangan antara tahun 2023 hingga 2024 dengan pemerhatian persembahan, temu bual separa berstruktur dan analisis skor muzik. Dapatan menunjukkan penurunan ketara dalam agensi improvisasi zhuhu dan perubahan fungsinya kepada pengiring yang menyeragam, mencerminkan perubahan lebih luas dalam ekologi persembahan dan estetika berasaskan dasar. Pada masa yang sama, zhuhu mengekalkan keampuhan simboliknya melalui kaitannya dengan tradisi ekspresif tempatan dan memori kolektif ensembel. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa zhuhu bukan warisan yang semakin lenyap, tetapi agen budaya dinamik yang dimensinya dari segi muzikal, performatif dan simbolik boleh dikonfigur semula dalam landskap ICH kontemporari. Dari segi teori, kajian ini menawarkan model analisis bersepadu untuk instrumen iringan minor dalam opera Cina dan memberikan pemahaman empirik bagi menggiatkan semula sistem persembahan serantau.





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- H Annotated Lyrics of “Celebrating Longevity with Qiaomai Mo”

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

My engagement with the zhuhu (主胡), an essential bowed string instrument in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, began unexpectedly through an online performance encounter. In 2020, while watching a livestreamed performance of Enchou Ji,(《恩仇记》) via an online platform, I was immediately captivated by the presence of a bright and penetrating bowed timbre that stood out prominently from the ensemble texture. As a conservatory-trained erhu (二胡) performer, I soon realized that this sound did not come from the gaohu (高胡) in the conventional sense, nor from a standard regional



form of the regional erhu. Upon further investigation, I confirmed that the instrument was the zhuhu (主胡), a leading melodic instrument widely used in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. The zhuhu originated from the earlier chahu (茶胡) and gradually evolved, alongside the development of the genre, into the core instrument of the wenchang (文场, referring to the accompanying ensemble dominated by silk-string and plucked instruments).

This listening experience redirected my academic focus from the familiar terrain of classical erhu performance to the sonic practices of regional Chinese opera, thereby initiating a sustained period of field research and ethnomusicological inquiry into the zhuhu. Through decades of stage practice, the zhuhu has long transcended its function as a mere sound-producing tool. It operates as a cultural agent deeply embedded in theatrical structure, emotional expression, and performative collaboration. Through rhythmic modulation, melodic contouring, and expressive coloring, it serves as an irreplaceable sonic axis in the overall dramaturgical construction of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. However, with the ongoing transformation of social structures, shifting audience aesthetics, institutional standardization of performance mechanisms, and regulatory interventions under the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policy regime, the zhuhu's function and status have undergone a marked transformation. It has gradually shifted from being the primary lead in the wenchang ensemble to serving as an auxiliary instrument in standardized orchestration. This transition, though seemingly technical,





reveals deeper structural tensions within the cultural fabric of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera.

This study seeks to unpack the cultural mechanisms and structural conditions underlying such a transformation. How has the zhuhu shifted from a structurally dominant role to a functionally subordinate one within the dual contexts of globalization and modernity? Under the institutionalized framework of national ICH preservation policies, where the opera has transitioned from a "living tradition" to a form of "theatricalized protection," does the zhuhu still retain its capacity to sustain community affect, local identity, and musical cohesion? Can it continue to evoke cultural memory and aesthetic resonance among contemporary audiences?



Guided by these concerns, this study is structured around three central research questions: What musical features and structural characteristics define the zhuhu in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera? What functional roles does the zhuhu fulfill during live performance? How has its cultural status evolved, and what structural mechanisms have driven this transformation? These questions correspond to three interrelated analytical dimensions: the musical substance, the performative function, and the symbolic status of the zhuhu. Rather than treating these dimensions as isolated concerns, this study views them as an integrated analytical pathway that traces the zhuhu's transformation through "sonic structure, performative agency, cultural redefinition." This tripartite



framework, substance, function, and status provide the core conceptual thread running through Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this research.

I argue that the zhuhu's shifting status is not merely a matter of sonic reconfiguration, but rather a complex process of negotiating local cultural identity and reconstituting social function. It serves as a lens through which to examine broader questions about the survival and reinvention of regional Chinese opera in the contemporary era. By focusing on this specific instrument, the present study contributes a concrete and deeply contextualized case to the field of ethnomusicology, while also offering theoretical insights into the cultural reorientation of ICH-designated performance traditions.

This chapter is organized into eight sections to establish the theoretical and structural foundation of the study. Section 1.2 outlines the research background from the perspectives of globalization and ethnomusicology, situating the zhuhu within broader cultural transformations. Section 1.3 presents the research problem, tracing its roots in both practice and scholarship. Sections 1.4 and 1.5 articulate the research objectives and specific research questions. Section 1.6 discusses the theoretical and practical significance of the study. Section 1.7 defines key concepts and analytical terms. Finally, Section 1.8 offers a chapter summary and introduces the literature review in Chapter 2.



1.2 Research Background

Amid the ongoing processes of globalization and modernity, traditional musical cultures are undergoing unprecedented disruption and transformation. As a vital component of China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH), regional operas not only embody localized historical memory and cultural identity, but also face tangible challenges of deactivation and decontextualization under the pressures of new media technologies, shifting aesthetic sensibilities, and state-driven cultural policies (Barz & Cooley, 2008).



The global trend of cultural homogenization has provoked growing concerns over the silencing of local expressive forms. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) argues that when intangible cultural heritage becomes absorbed into institutional frameworks, it often transforms into what she terms “heritage as performance”—a mode in which traditional arts shift from community-based practices to formalized displays. This museological turn not only alters how traditions are transmitted, but also redefines the social functions and cultural positioning of music within its originating community.

Within the ethnomusicological tradition, musical instruments are not simply tools of sound production; they are material embodiments of social roles, affective relations, and cultural structures (Kartomi, 1990; Bates, 2012). The musical functions





of a leading instrument often correspond to its symbolic status within the broader cultural system. This cultural embeddedness—a condition in which musical practice is deeply integrated within specific social relationships, cultural meanings, and institutional frameworks (Granovetter, 1985)—renders instrumental transformation a form of “social history in sound” (Dawe, 2003). It is precisely from this perspective that the present study examines the functional and status transformations of the leading melodic instrument within a traditional musical system.

It is worth noting that changes in the status of leading instruments represent a cross-cultural phenomenon observable in diverse musical traditions worldwide. In Japan, the fue (笛) of Noh theatre evolved from a structural leader during the Muromachi period (1336–1573) to a decorative accompaniment in modern staged productions (Malm, 2000). In India, the tabla (塔布拉鼓) in Kathak dance transformed, after the colonial era, from an improvisational interlocutor into a fixed rhythmic executor (Walker, 2014). In Spain, the guitarra (吉他) of Flamenco shifted during the mid-twentieth century from vocal accompaniment to an independent art form, leading to a fundamental reconfiguration of both its function and cultural status (Washabaugh, 2012).

These international cases indicate that the transformation of leading instruments is a universal phenomenon within the global transition of traditional music. However,





the specific trajectories and cultural mechanisms underlying these transformations vary across regions and traditions. In Peking Opera, the jinghu (京胡) functioned as the structural leader of vocal melody in the early twentieth century, allowing instrumentalists to adjust accompaniment flexibly in response to performers' vocal conditions. Yet, with the advent of recording technology and performance standardization, the space for improvisation gradually diminished (Wichmann, 1991). In Cantonese Opera, the gaohu (高胡), reformed by Lü Wencheng in the 1920s, achieved technical innovation but also experienced a functional bifurcation in modern ensembles, shifting from theatrical accompaniment to solo performance, thereby weakening its original collaborative role with actors (Stock, 1996). In Yue Opera, the zhuhu (主胡) similarly shifted from an improvisational collaborator to a score-bound executor following the establishment of the troupe system in the 1950s (Jiang, 2009).

These Chinese cases parallel the global patterns discussed above but also reflect distinctive institutional dynamics. After 1949, Chinese opera underwent a structural transformation from folk-based caotai ban (grass-stage troupes, 草台班) to state-run performance institutions. During this process, performances transitioned from living improvisation to standardized formalization, fundamentally reshaping the functions of leading instruments. This institutional transformation provides essential context for understanding the position of the zhuhu in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. The following section will trace the historical development of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and the





evolving role of the zhuhu within it.

Yangxin Tea-picking Opera is a regional opera tradition performed primarily in Yangxin County, Hubei Province, as well as in neighboring areas such as Tongshan (Hubei), Ruichang, and Wuning (Jiangxi). Its origins can be traced back to the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods of the Qing Dynasty. According to *The Chronicle of Chinese Opera: Hubei Volume* (1993), the genre was originally known as Nanheqiang (Southern River Tune, 南河腔) and shares a common lineage with the tea-picking operas of Tongshan and Wuning. Formed through the integration of tea songs, mountain songs, dan drum performance, lantern opera, and Huangmei tea-picking melodies, the tradition is marked by its folk roots and stylistic openness. Due to regional variation, the term Nanheqiang was used to distinguish it from Beiheqiang (Northern River Tune, 北河腔), or Eastern Huagu Opera, which was performed north of the Fushui River. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the genre was formally named "Yangxin Tea-picking Opera," and in 1965 the Yangxin County Tea-picking Opera Troupe was officially established, with Nanheqiang recognized as the stylistic core of the genre (Chinese National Academy of Arts, 1998).

The genre integrates elements from lantern theatre, single-drum plays, mountain songs, tea songs, and Huangmei tea-picking melodies to form a distinctive banshi variant (板式变化体) vocal system. Its main vocal styles (zhengqiang, 正腔) include





Beiqiang, Hanqiang, Siping, and Tanqiang, while the auxiliary styles (caqiang, 彩腔) include Dengdiao, Daoqing, and Xiaoqū, featuring strong narrative, folk, and lyrical qualities (Chinese Academy of Arts, 1998, p. 774).

By the late Qing and early Republican periods, Yangxin Tea-picking Opera had developed a relatively mature system of folk performance. As recorded in the Yangxin County Gazetteer (1993), during the Guangxu era, there were over 200 performance troupes in the county—including both tea-picking and Han opera groups—with more than 2,700 active performers. The local saying “In the south, Han opera by day and tea-picking by night; in the north, three people make a troupe” reflects the vibrant performance ecology of the time. Regular performance competitions with troupes from neighboring areas such as Tongshan and Wuning further fostered regional exchange and stylistic hybridization. The Hubei Folklore Gazetteer (2012) also documents the expression “one opera stage in Xiaowan, multiple stages in Dawans,” underscoring the genre’s strong community support and aesthetic vitality.

Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Yangxin Tea-picking Opera underwent a systemic transition from informal hulongban (ad hoc folk troupes, 呼拢班) to formalized professional troupes. In 1965, the official troupe was founded, and the genre was institutionalized under the name “Yangxin Tea-picking Opera.” Concurrently, its accompaniment system shifted from percussion-dominated





wuchang to string-dominated wenchang ensembles, forming a new instrumental triad of gaohu (zhuhu), erhu, and pipa. Within this configuration, the zhuhu emerged as the central melodic instrument, responsible for guiding vocal lines, shaping emotional expression, and controlling rhythmic flow. This established a structural linkage of “instrumental direction, vocal elaboration, dramatic completion” that continues to define the genre’s performance practice (Chinese National Academy of Arts, 1998).

However, under the influence of modernized stage systems, Yangxin Tea-picking Opera has increasingly detached from its ritual-folk origins, shifting toward a standardized, institutional model of troupe-based production and theater-based presentation (Hubei Folklore Gazetteer, 2012). Within this transformation, the zhuhu’s functional role has also undergone significant change: it has moved from an improvisational, orally transmitted lead instrument to a notation-dependent, fixed-role accompanist. Its musical agency has diminished, and its symbolic power as a cultural signifier has been correspondingly weakened.

Although Yangxin Tea-picking Opera was inscribed on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008, its living transmission continues to face major challenges. Troupe activity has sharply declined, generational gaps in transmission have widened, and its audience base has aged significantly. There is no formal system for training zhuhu performers, and young people lack accessible pathways for learning the



instrument or cultivating identification with its cultural meanings. As a result, the traditional musical aesthetics that once shaped the genre now face the risk of disappearance.

Notably, the decline in the status of the zhuhu exhibits a pattern of dual marginalization: it has long been neglected in academic research and simultaneously faces a survival crisis in performance practice. This dual marginalization not only undermines the zhuhu's cultural-symbolic function but also threatens the integrity of the overall musical system of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. It is precisely within this dual context of historical evolution and contemporary challenge that the research gap and practical crisis surrounding the zhuhu become increasingly evident, necessitating a systematic academic response.

1.3 Problem Statement

Yangxin Tea-picking Opera is an important regional theatrical form popular in Yangxin County, Hubei Province, as well as in neighboring Tongshan County and Ruichang and Wuning in Jiangxi Province. The genre exhibits strong local and folk characteristics. In 2008, it was inscribed on the national Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) list. Its vocal system comprises main styles (zhengqiang, 正腔) such as Beiqiang, Hanqiang,



Tanqiang, and Siping, reflecting aesthetic traits ranging from high-pitched intensity to delicate lyricism. Within the wenchang accompaniment ensemble, the zhuhu functions as the central melodic instrument, performing multiple tasks including guiding the melody, controlling rhythm, and supporting vocal lines (The Gazetteer of Chinese Opera: Hubei Volume, 1991, p. 114; Chinese Academy of Arts, 1998, p. 774).

In traditional performance practice, the zhuhu fulfills a complex set of responsibilities at the musical-structural level, leading melodic lines, regulating rhythmic flow, and reinforcing vocal expression. In terms of performance behavior, it connects performers' gestures and vocal emotion, forming a performance logic that can be described as “drawing the melody with the bow, guiding the emotion with sound.” Particularly in the early folk huluo troupe system, zhuhu performers needed high improvisational skill and deep stylistic understanding, taking structural and emotional leadership over the entire musical performance, thereby demonstrating the instrument's intrinsic properties and functional characteristics in the operatic context.

However, with the gradual institutionalization of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and the shift of performance mechanisms toward standardized theatre formats and recording-oriented modes, the stage status of the zhuhu has changed significantly. On one hand, the adoption of written scores and standardized orchestration gradually transformed the zhuhu into a “fixed melodic executor.” On the other hand, the





collaborative rapport and emotional interplay between the instrument and the performers have been significantly compressed, weakening the instrument's original function as a structural leader. This transformation signifies not only a change in operational practice but also a reconfiguration of the zhuhu's role from a "systemic axis" to a "marginal accompanist."

A more critical concern is the dual marginalization currently faced by the zhuhu. At the academic level, existing research has largely focused on vocal classification and repertoire documentation, with little attention to the organizational mechanisms and cultural functions of the wenchang ensemble. Research on the zhuhu as the central melodic instrument remains largely absent. At the practical level, the number of troupe-based zhuhu performers has sharply declined, the age profile is skewed toward the elderly, and traditional skills are at risk of disappearing. Young people have limited pathways for learning and cultural identification, and the social and symbolic functions of the zhuhu continue to diminish. This dual marginalization not only reduces the survival space of the instrument itself but also threatens the integrity of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera's musical system and the sustainability of its cultural transmission.

Although some scholarship has addressed vocal classification, historical development, and ICH policy practices related to Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, systematic research on the zhuhu's role, function, and status transformation as the





leading wenchang instrument remains lacking. Most existing studies focus on vocal structures and repertoire documentation, rarely examining the internal mechanisms through which the zhuhu guides melody, shapes emotion, and advances rhythm within the musical organization. Likewise, its symbolic role in community cultural memory, local identity construction, and cultural expression has been largely overlooked. This research gap not only obscures the significance of the wenchang system's key component but also limits a deeper understanding of the reconstruction of regional opera under contemporary performance mechanisms.

Furthermore, most existing studies adopt an internal perspective, lacking dialogue with global ethnomusicological theory. As discussed earlier, the transformation of leading instruments is a widespread cross-cultural phenomenon, but the specific trajectories and cultural mechanisms differ across regions. The evolution of the zhuhu in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera reflects both the common challenges faced by Chinese regional opera in modernization and the unique cultural logic of the Tea-picking Opera system in the Hubei–Jiangxi region. Yet, existing scholarship has not situated the zhuhu within this broader theoretical framework, failing to systematically reveal its trajectory from “musical organizer” to “cultural signifier” or to explore its redefinition and cultural negotiation in the context of globalization and institutionalization.





Therefore, the evolution of the zhuhu's intrinsic characteristics, functional system, and status in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera reflects the internal developmental logic of the genre while being shaped by institutional transformation, audience culture, and cultural policy. This study addresses this theoretical gap and cultural tension by integrating Merriam's (1964) Tripartite Model of Music, Rice's (2001) Dynamic Path Theory, and DeNora's (2000) Music as Social Practice framework, situating the zhuhu within a three-dimensional analytic framework of "musical ontology—performance function—cultural status." Through this lens, the study systematically examines its evolutionary trajectory and investigates how it illuminates the continuity and cultural repositioning of Chinese regional opera in the contemporary context.



1.4 Research Objectives

This research is guided by the following research objectives:

RO1: To analyze the music characteristics of zhuhu in the of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera.

RO2: To examine the functions of the zhuhu in the performance of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera.

RO3: To explore how the changing status of the zhuhu shapes the development of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and its cultural significance.



1.5 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives stated above, paramount research questions in this study are:

RQ1: What are the music characteristics of the zhuhu in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera?

RQ2: What are the functions of the zhuhu in the performance of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera?

RQ3: How does the changing status of the zhuhu shape Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and its cultural significance?

1.6 Research Significances

This study conducts a systematic investigation of the zhuhu in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, focusing on its musical characteristics, performance functions, and status transformation. It carries both theoretical and practical significance. By conducting a cross-dimensional analysis across “musical ontology—performance mechanism—cultural status,” this research not only enriches the theoretical understanding of regional opera music systems but also responds to practical challenges encountered in intangible cultural heritage preservation, local cultural reproduction, and the contemporary adaptation of traditional performing arts.



1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

Approaching the zhuhu through the three dimensions of “musical ontology—performance function—cultural status,” this study provides systematic insight into the instrument’s structural properties and cultural role in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, with four main theoretical contributions:

1. Filling a gap in the study of local wenchang instruments

Within ethnomusicology, regional opera wenchang systems have long been marginalized, and systematic studies of leading instruments’ performance mechanisms and cultural functions are scarce. Existing scholarship tends to focus on instruments from central genres such as jinghu and gaohu, leaving the zhuhu—a locally adapted instrument in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera—underexamined in terms of structural features, performance logic, and cultural role. By centering on the zhuhu, this study reveals its organizational function within the vocal system and its role in expressing local stylistic identity, thereby filling a geographic and typological gap in wenchang research.regional style. In doing so, it addresses a typological and geographical blind spot in the study of Chinese wenchang systems.

2.Constructing a tripartite analytical framework

This research integrates Merriam’s (1964) Tripartite Model of Music, Rice’s (1987)





Dynamic Cultural Path Theory, and DeNora's (2000) Music as Social Practice framework, situating the zhuhu within the context of socio-cultural transformation. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes a theoretical model of the zhuhu as a "sound organizer + stage function coordinator + local cultural symbol," providing a systematic explanation of the interactive mechanisms between sound, behavior, and culture, and expanding the theoretical boundaries of ethnomusicology in understanding functional systems of regional instruments and cultural identity construction.

3. Providing a Chinese case for the global discourse on traditional music transformation

By situating the zhuhu within a comparative framework alongside traditions such as Japanese Noh (fue, 笛), Indian Kathak dance (tabla, 塔布拉鼓), and Spanish Flamenco (guitarra, 吉他), the research reveals both the distinctive pathways and shared challenges faced by Chinese local operas in the course of modernization. This cross-cultural comparison offers new theoretical insights for understanding the dynamics of musical change in a global context.

4. Enriching perspectives on local culture within the ICH discourse

As a nationally designated form of intangible cultural heritage, Yangxin Tea-picking Opera represents a culturally significant synthesis of narrative, emotion, and locality. Through a focused examination of the zhuhu, this study enhances scholarly





understanding of the genre's musical language while also addressing broader issues of how regional performing arts reconstruct cultural identity and aesthetic value in contexts shaped by globalization and institutionalization.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

At the practical level, this study's systematic examination of the zhuhu's functional system and cultural positioning offers five key contributions:

1. Enhancing performance quality and rehearsal practices in local troupes

As a core melodic carrier that bridges vocal lines and emotional expression in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, the zhuhu plays a crucial role in shaping the expressive logic of “guiding emotion through sound and coordinating voice through the bow.” By reconstructing the performative knowledge and structural guidance embedded in zhuhu playing, this study provides practical insights for improving repertoire arrangement, optimizing rehearsal design, and strengthening musical synergy between instrumentalists and actors.

2. Providing pedagogical tools for local opera education and youth training

In response to ongoing challenges such as skill attrition, generational discontinuity, and





declining youth engagement, this research synthesizes zhuhu-related performance principles and stylistic techniques based on fieldwork and documentary analysis. The study translates embodied “craft knowledge” into transferrable “educational experience,” offering new methodological resources for the revitalization of traditional opera pedagogy.

3. Offering a cultural value assessment model for ICH policy-making

The analytical framework proposed in this study—comprising sonic status, cultural identification, and institutional regulation—provides a novel lens for policymakers to evaluate the socio-cultural functions of traditional instruments. The cultural significance of the zhuhu lies not only in its artistic expressiveness, but also in its ability to activate community resonance and reinforce local identity. These aspects offer strategic insights for policies related to cultural revitalization and the integration of ICH into community life.

4. Strengthening the visibility and cross-sector dissemination of local culture

This research enhances public awareness and aesthetic appreciation of both Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and zhuhu artistry. Its findings support the development of regional cultural promotion strategies, heritage performance design, and media-based dissemination, facilitating the zhuhu’s entry into broader cultural spaces and creative industries.



5. Expanding interdisciplinary entry points through sound-based cultural inquiry

As a concentrated manifestation of regional sonic culture, Yangxin Tea-picking Opera—and the zhuhu in particular—offers a valuable auditory lens for investigating phenomena such as dialectal phonology, folk performance practices, and local identity in the Hubei-Jiangxi border region. The case study presented here may serve as a point of entry for interdisciplinary collaboration across ethnolinguistics, cultural anthropology, and performance studies. This sound-based inquiry also lays the groundwork for the key terms and conceptual definitions to follow in Section 1.7.

1.7 Terms of Definition

This study employs several core terms drawn from Chinese opera studies and ethnomusicology. While many of these terms have established usage in existing literature, they take on specific contextual meanings within the performance practices of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera due to regional variation and genre-specific conventions. To ensure terminological consistency and analytical clarity throughout the dissertation, key terms are defined as follows:



1.7.1 Zhuhu

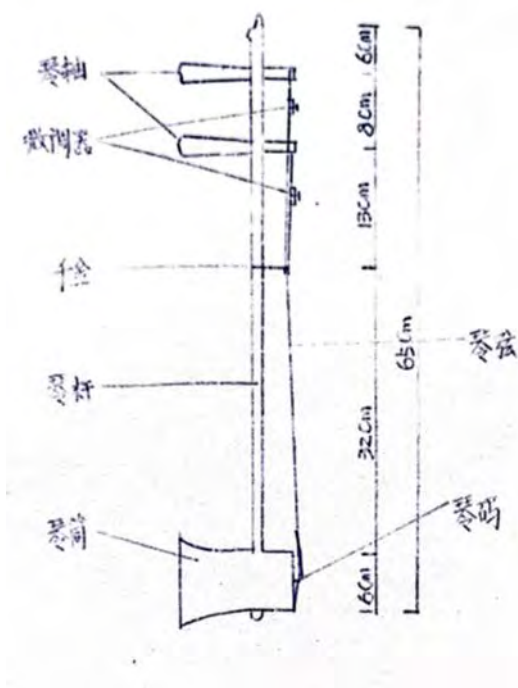
Zhuhu is a general term in Chinese operatic music referring to the leading bowed string instrument within the wenchang ensemble. Across different opera genres, zhuhu takes on various names and forms—for example, the jinghu (京胡) in Peking Opera, the gaohu (高胡) in Cantonese Opera, and the banhu (板胡) in Henan Opera. Although their structures differ, these instruments share core functions: guiding the vocal line, organizing rhythmic flow, and shaping the dramatic mood.

In this study, the term zhuhu specifically refers to the leading bowed string instrument in the wenchang ensemble of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, encompassing both the chahu (茶胡) used during the traditional period (see Figure 1.1) and the modified gaohu adopted in contemporary performances (see Figure 1.2). Despite their structural and timbral differences, both instruments have served, in different historical stages, as the melodic lead of the wenchang system, maintaining an intimate interactive relationship with the vocal performance through the principle of “yi hu yin qiang” (以胡引腔, “the fiddle guides the vocal line”).

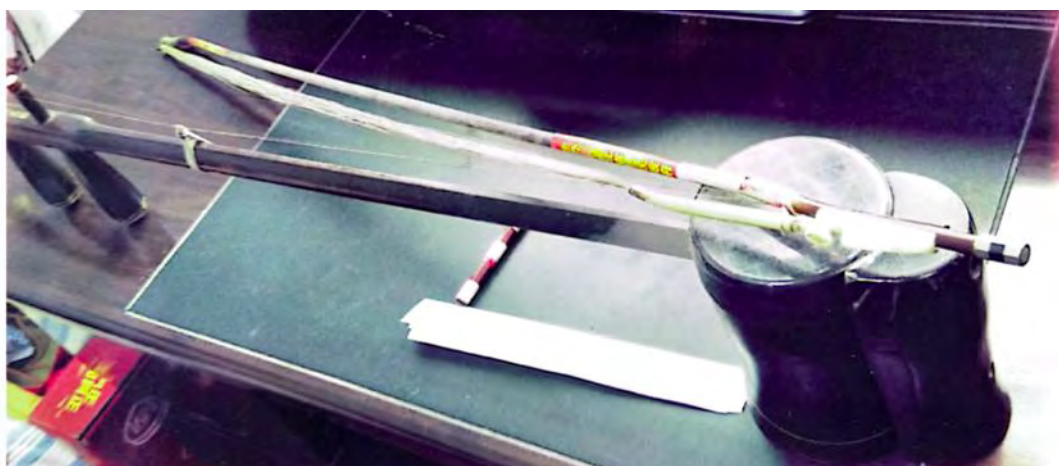


**Figure 1.1**

Traditional Chahu used in early Yangxin Tea-picking Opera

**Figure 1.2**

Modern gaohu serving as the current standard zhuhu





1.7.2 Wenchang and Wuchang

Wenchang and wuchang constitute the fundamental system of instrumental division in traditional Chinese opera music. This classification, rarely found in other global performance traditions, reflects the distinctive organizational logic of Chinese operatic music. Wenchang primarily consists of string and plucked instruments responsible for melodic expression and emotional coloring, including the zhuhu (主胡), erhu (二胡), pipa (琵琶), and yueqin (月琴). Wuchang, in contrast, is dominated by percussion instruments that control rhythm and enhance dramatic tension, such as the guban (鼓板), daluo (大锣), and xiaoluo (小锣).



In Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, wenchang is also referred to as the “soft ensemble” (软场, ruanchang), composed mainly of the zhuhu, erhu, and pipa, which are responsible for emotional shaping and vocal coordination. wuchang, known as the “hard ensemble” (硬场, yingchang), consists of instruments such as the tanggu (堂鼓), daluo, xiaoluo, and maluo (马锣), serving to reinforce rhythmic intensity, particularly in scenes involving movement or conflict. Within the wenchang, the zhuhu occupies a leading position as the “melodic axis,” coordinating rhythm and connecting musical structures. Detailed analyses of these ensemble functions and performance structures are presented in Chapters 4 and 5.





1.7.3 Fanhxian

Fanhxian, literally meaning “reverse stringing,” does not refer to retuning the instrument in the conventional sense, but rather denotes a distinctive expressive technique found in Chinese opera and folk music traditions. It involves the intentional transference of specific pitches—without altering the instrument’s tuning setup—to a different string, often shifting them an octave higher or lower to achieve a more dramatic or coloristic effect. This “reverse bowing” approach disrupts the standard linear fingering sequence and allows for increased timbral penetration and theatrical expressiveness.



In Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, fanhxian is frequently employed on the zhuhu during accompaniment passages. The instrument typically uses a fixed tuning of g_1-d_2 , and the fanhxian technique enables the performer to shift tonal regions and enhance the speech-like quality of the phrasing. As one of the core stylistic devices in the opera’s instrumental language, fanhxian contributes significantly to its distinctive sonic identity. Detailed analysis of this technique, including notated examples, is provided in Section 4.3 of Chapter 4.





1.7.4 Yin, Rou, Chuo, and Zhu

Yin, rou, chuo, and zhu constitute the core ornamental and mimetic techniques used in zhuhu performance in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. These embellishments exemplify the opera's deep-rooted tradition of musical language and emotional expressivity, bridging sonic gesture and theatrical affect. While they function as ornamentation on the surface, they are main tools for shaping timbre, conveying emotional structure, and amplifying dramatic intensity.

Yin

Yin involves subtle finger sliding or oscillation on a stopped string to produce continuous microtonal fluctuations. This technique mimics vocal vibrato, tremolo, or an inward moaning effect, and is typically employed in long-held notes or emotionally heightened passages. In Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, yin often appears in climactic scenes or introspective soliloquies, serving as a key expressive device to evoke a “human voice” quality and maintain emotional fluidity.

Rou

Rou is executed by applying light vibrational pressure or circular finger motion at the stopping point of the string, creating a delicate and nuanced tremolo. This technique resembles the subtle quivering found in spoken language and is often used in tender or





introspective musical moments. In practice, rou is frequently combined with yin to enrich the expressive contour of the melodic line, enhancing the emotional layering and linguistic quality of the music.

Chuo

Chuo refers to an upward glissando from a lower pitch to a higher one. It is most often used at the beginning of a phrase or as a transition between melodic units. The smooth, ascending pitch glide lends fluency and embellishment to the line. In narrative terms, chuo functions as a motivic lift or emotional escalation, often signaling a rise in dramatic tension or a shift in character state. It serves a transitional role, guiding the listener from one affective or structural unit to the next.



Zhu

Zhu is the downward counterpart to chuo, involving a glissando from a higher to a lower pitch. It is typically used at the end of phrases or to resolve emotional intensity. This downward inflection creates a sense of release, closure, and structural punctuation. In Yangxin Tea-picking Opera, zhu is often deployed at the end of lyrical segments or emotional cadences, enhancing the perception of finality and dramatic cohesion.

Together, these four techniques constitute the expressive and phonosemantic system of the zhuhu, reinforcing its human-like, speech-oriented musical character.





They are integral to the instrument's ability to synchronize with vocal phrasing and intensify emotional delivery. A detailed discussion and score-based analysis of these techniques is provided in Section 4.4 of Chapter 4.

1.7.5 Function, role, and status

This study distinguishes three interrelated but conceptually distinct terms: function, role, and status.



Function refers to the specific musical tasks undertaken by the zhuhu in performance, such as melodic guidance, rhythmic control, and emotional expression. It is an operational-level concept that emphasizes what it does. Functional analysis has long been a classical approach in ethnomusicological research (Merriam, 1964).

Role denotes the symbolic identity of the zhuhu within the performance system and cultural recognition, such as “the leader of the wenchang” or “the representative of local sound.” It is a social-level concept that highlights what it is. The notion of role derives from sociological traditions (Goffman, 1959), focusing on the identity positioning and expected behaviors of social actors in specific contexts.



Status refers to the relative position and symbolic value of the zhuhu within the musical system and cultural structure. It is a structural-level concept that involves power relations, resource distribution, and cultural legitimacy. In this study, “the status of the zhuhu” specifically describes its transformation from a traditional melodic leader to a modern standardized accompanist.

The relationship among these three concepts is that function and role mutually shape each other, a change in function often leads to a redefinition of role, while status represents the manifestation of both within a broader sociocultural structure.

1.7.6 Cultural Embeddedness

Cultural embeddedness is one of the core theoretical concepts of this study. The term originates from the theory of embeddedness proposed by economic sociologist Granovetter (1985), which emphasizes that social actions do not occur in isolation but are deeply embedded within networks of social relations, cultural meanings, and institutional structures.

In ethnomusicology, cultural embeddedness refers to the deep integration between musical practice and its surrounding sociocultural system (Dawe, 2003; Bates,



2012). The more a musical form or instrument is embedded within a particular cultural context, the more inseparable its meanings and functions become from that context.

This study applies the concept of cultural embeddedness to describe the multi-layered embeddedness of the zhuhu in Yangxin Tea-picking Opera: Technical embeddedness: The tuning, register, and performance techniques of the zhuhu are closely aligned with the vocal system of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera. Social embeddedness: The performer of the zhuhu occupies a particular role and status within the troupe, directly linked to the overall organizational and performative structure. Cultural embeddedness: The timbre and expressive capacity of the zhuhu are deeply intertwined with local aesthetic traditions and cultural identity.



The transformation of the zhuhu's status can thus be understood as a process of restructuring embeddedness—as the original cultural context evolves, a highly embedded musical practice must undergo processes of dis-embedding and re-embedding to adapt and survive (Giddens, 1990).

1.8 Summary

This chapter systematically outlines the overall structure and core themes of the study, establishing its theoretical background, research questions, objectives, and significance,





thereby clarifying its academic orientation and cultural value.

First, from the perspective of globalization and ethnomusicology, the chapter traces the evolving role of Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and its leading bowed instrument, zhuhu, within local cultural contexts. By introducing comparative cases such as Japanese Noh, Indian Kathak dance, and Spanish Flamenco, the study situates the zhuhu within a shared global framework of traditional music transformation. This comparative perspective reveals a cross-cultural tendency for leading instruments to shift from “musical organizers” to “standardized accompanists.”



In articulating the research problem, the study identifies the zhuhu’s condition of “dual marginalization,” referring to its prolonged neglect in academic research and its weakening function and endangered transmission in performance practice. This argument moves beyond a linear narrative that equates tradition with inevitable decline and instead interprets the zhuhu issue within the structural dynamics of sociocultural transformation.

Subsequently, the chapter establishes three central research objectives and questions, focusing respectively on the zhuhu’s musical characteristics at the ontological level, its performance functions at the behavioral level, and the implications of its changing status for the operatic genre and its cultural system at the structural level.



This tripartite analytical framework—ontology, function, and status—integrates Merriam’s (1964) tripartite model of music, Rice’s (1987) theory of dynamic cultural processes, and DeNora’s (2000) theory of music in social practice. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a solid foundation for the empirical and analytical discussions in the following chapters.

This chapter also defines six sets of key terms: zhuhu, wenchang and wuchang, reverse tuning (fanxian), intonation techniques (yin, rou, chuo, zhu), function–role–status, and cultural embeddedness. These terms provide a unified conceptual framework for the theoretical analysis and field data interpretation in later chapters.

In terms of research significance, the study contributes from both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it fills a scholarly gap in studies of instrumental practice within local wenchang ensembles and provides a Chinese case that enriches global discourses on traditional music transformation. Practically, it offers actionable insights for performance optimization, talent cultivation, intangible heritage policy, and the dissemination of regional culture. This dual emphasis on theoretical rigor and practical relevance reflects the study’s commitment to integrating academic inquiry with contemporary cultural realities.



In conclusion, this chapter establishes the theoretical logic and analytical framework of the dissertation, serving as the foundation for subsequent empirical and theoretical explorations. The next chapter will present a comprehensive literature review on Yangxin Tea-picking Opera and related research fields, systematically examining domestic and international studies on the zhuhu, regional opera accompaniment systems, and their cultural functions, thereby clarifying the originality and necessity of this research within its theoretical and thematic contexts.

