

# An Interpretation of the Artistic Characteristics of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, a Representative Folk Dance in Shanxi Province, China

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## ABSTRACT

Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi is one of the representative folk yangge in Shanxi Province. It is a performance folk dance. The characteristics of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi can be summarized as one small, two flowers and three plays. By small, mean that the performers are mostly young and lively actors, the scripts are short and sharp, and the rhythm is brisk; the so-called flowers refer to the graceful postures of the dancers, who dance gracefully with colorful fans in their hands. During the performance, the stage seems to be in full bloom, full of visual beauty; The so-called drama refers to a complete plot and vivid and humorous dialogues, which can not only allow the audience to appreciate the charm of art, but also feel the beauty and happiness of life. This form of song and dance is flexible and can display its unique artistic appeal in a small space. It can also be organized into a large dance team to participate in parades and performances at major festivals, fully demonstrating its wide adaptability and strong appeal (He, 2024). With the advent of the information age, many performers have consciously learned the artistic performance form of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi by drawing on popular software and creative courses from their peers. However, what see is no longer an original performance with a pure flavor and style (Ma, 2024). Therefore, the work of sorting out folk dances is not entirely limited to the external forms of things, but requires more understanding of the lives of local people. On the basis of geographical environment and cultural background, we should look beyond the appearance of things and obtain the significant artistic characteristics with cultural connotations. Therefore, this study collected data by adopting field work and literature reading methods in ethnographic research methods. Analyze the three historical development stages of Shanxi's representative folk dance Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, and find out the artistic characteristics and rich cultural connotations behind Shanxi's representative folk dance Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. Promote more relevant people to understand Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. Call for better inheritance and promotion of Shanxi culture and Shanxi folk dance culture.

**Keywords:** Shanxi representative folk dance; Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi; salient features

## INTRODUCTION

Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi was formed in Zuoquan County, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province. The origin can be traced back to Wenshehuo in Liaozhou Shehuo. Zuoquan County in 596 AD was called Liaozhou. Shehuo is an ancient folk custom, and its origin is usually closely related to ancient religious sacrificial ceremonies. Over time, it has gradually evolved into a unique folk cultural activity that has been passed down to this day. Wenshehuo is an activity performed in the form of song singing (Hou, 2017). Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi is very popular in various areas of Jinzhong. After years of accumulation, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi went through three important stages before the

new era (1978). The elegant singing style of Wenshehuo is cleverly absorbed with the melodious accompaniment of stringed instruments. Its unique elegance is blended with the lively, cheerful and humorous style of Choushehuo. Chou She Huo is a comprehensive art form that integrates singing, dancing and drama performance. Among them, the clowns in Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi also have their own unique style characteristics, with large movements, exaggerated and rough performances, and most of the time they perform funny and strange stories (Chen, 2018). It was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list in November 2014 and has a very rich historical heritage and cultural research value (Kang, 2021).

The word representative folk dance is translated from the Russian word "Народный характерный танец". In terms of its meaning, any dance that is representative, has a unique national style and local color, or is peculiar to people in a particular industry should be called representative folk dance (Dance School Construction, 1957). There are many kinds of folk dances in Shanxi Province, with more than 230 kinds recorded. The artistic characteristics of these dances can be summarized as follows. 1. There are many kinds of props and costumes; 2. The dance movements are ingenious and varied; 3. There are various performance forms. (Shangguan, 2022). However, how to analyze the most distinctive folk dances among the many folk dances in Shanxi Province that can represent the regional cultural characteristics of Shanxi Province? The book 'History of Shanxi Dance' explains that the selection of the most representative folk dances in Shanxi Province should follow the following characteristics, 1. Originated from Shanxi Province; 2. The dance performance form and culture are relatively well preserved; 3. It has typical characteristics (Tian, 2004). According to the literature of many dance scholars, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has experienced hundreds of years of development, comprehensively embodies the characteristics of Shanxi folk dance, and is representative of Shanxi folk art (Sun, 2022; Wang, 2021 & Wu and Shen, 2020). Therefore, this paper analyzes the three historical stages of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi through field research in ethnographic research method. More clearly sort out the significant artistic characteristics and cultural connotations behind Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. Help more dance scholars understand Shanxi's representative folk dance Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi.

## METHODOLOGY

The ever-changing social culture has prompted major changes in the research on cultural issues in anthropology and sociology. Among them, the importance of qualitative research is becoming more and more prominent. As a representative method of qualitative research, fieldwork has attracted the attention of many scholars. From an anthropological perspective, field research is often defined as ethnographic research. This type of research records cultural phenomena through field visits, and the results obtained can also be called ethnography. In the field of dance research, ethnographic research methods have a profound impact on the study of dance culture. Since anthropology attracted everyone's attention in the 1950s, the dance popular in a certain region from the perspective of dance anthropology is not just about body movements and external forms, but more about exploring the cultural connotations behind the dance in this region. Therefore, dance ethnography research methods play a central role in dance culture research (Wang, 2020).

The researcher of this paper will use dance ethnography research methods to go deep into the Zuoquan County area of Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province. First, through field research, go to Zuoquan County, Shanxi Province, especially the villages where Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi is popular. Observe the performance of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi and record the dance movements, music, costumes and other details. Communicate with dancers, inheritors, audiences, etc. to understand their experiences and opinions. Film the performance process and record the dance movements and performance environment. It is convenient for researchers to have a clearer grasp of the relevant information on the performance of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, a representative folk dance in Shanxi. Secondly, will use the literature reading method in ethnography. By reading relevant books and documents, will collect information about the history, culture, social background, origin, development and current situation

of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, a representative folk dance in Shanxi. Thirdly, be familiar with the theoretical framework of dance ethnography, such as body language, cultural symbols, social functions and other related information. Finally, write a paper, which includes introduction, research methods, data analysis and discussion, and conclusion. Combine text and pictures to fully display the research results on the artistic characteristics of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, a representative folk dance in Shanxi.

## DISCUSSION

In everyday contexts, the core meaning of the word folk is unofficial, usually outside the authority system. However, as an academic term, folk is widely used in many disciplines, but its connotation varies significantly from different disciplinary perspectives (Jia, 2020). Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, a representative folk dance of Shanxi, has undergone two transformations. Before the new era (1978), its entire development process had three stages. The issue of the transformation of folk dance not only involves methodological and teleological discussions on how and why to transform it, but also touches on the fundamental question of whether folk dance can be transformed. If folk dance is transformed, will the dance part of folk dance be affected and will it lose its original roots? After investigation, the researchers found that from a theoretical and practical perspective, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has indeed undergone political-led transformation, but this transformation did not break it from folk tradition. First of all, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi is a highly relative concept. Under the guidance of the mainstream, authority and official, folk culture will exist accordingly. It's just that in different contexts, the specific content it points to will be different. Secondly, the artistic phenomenon of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has always been governed and influenced by political discourse, which is not only a Chinese political tradition, but also a long-standing Chinese cultural tradition. Finally, almost all arts have their own laws of development, are always in dynamic change, and are inevitably affected by many factors. Therefore, it is unrealistic for a folk art to always maintain a fixed appearance. Therefore, the two transformations of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi are two successful transformations based on the inheritance of the most primitive folk culture. Next, the researchers analyzed the most prominent artistic features of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi through the phenomena before and after the two transformations.

### Initial stage

In its initial stage, due to the influence of Shanxi merchant culture and feudal superstition, although Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi had many closed-minded ideas, the influence of the art form in the community fire culture still became an important activity in the local people's festive life, which made sufficient preparations for its subsequent transformation and promotion.

### Background

During the feudal society, Zuoquan County was located in a remote mountainous area with extremely inconvenient transportation, and local people often expressed their emotions through singing and dancing. During the Lantern Festival, people gradually formed a folk tradition of getting rid of all kinds of diseases under the guidance of community fire activities. In the late Qing Dynasty(1911-1912), community fire festivals were extremely popular in Liaozhou (the old name of Zuoquan). This is Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, which is mainly used to pray for wealth and peace. At the same time, the Shanxi merchants' courtyards in the Jinzhong area were extremely prosperous during this period, which had a profound impact on the development of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. Jinshang is the abbreviation of the commercial culture of Jinzhong City. The prosperity of its commercial activities has driven the economic development of Jinzhong area and promoted the formation and prosperity of domestic and foreign trade markets. Research has found that Jinzhong has the earliest banknote exchange in China, Rishengchang Banknote Exchange, which pioneered China's national

banking industry. In addition, there is Weifenghou Banknote Exchange, which was reorganized into Weifeng Commercial Bank in 1916, becoming the only financial institution in China's financial history that was transformed from a banknote exchange. The prosperity of these commercial and financial activities provided a rich cultural and economic foundation for the development of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi.



Figure1. China Bank Museum (Source: Chen Donghui, 2024)



Figure2. China's first banknote exchange (Source: Chen Donghui, 2024)

Local merchants and bureaucrats were keen on opera activities in their spare time. They raised opera troupes and built stages, which provided important material foundation and performance space for the development of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, thus promoting the continuous expansion of the influence of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. However, during this period, the status of women was extremely low. They were strictly confined to the compound and could not go out at will. According to the literature, it is speculated that women were strictly restricted from performing on stage at that time. Due to the traditional social concept that it is against etiquette for women to show their faces in public, men imitate women in their performances (Collection of Research Papers on Opera Genres in Jinzhong Cultural Ecological Protection Area, 2020). Therefore, men dressing as women became the original form of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, and this performance form was originally formed by the male masses for spontaneous entertainment. Although the content and form of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi in its initial stage were partially unable to adapt to the needs of the next stage of development, many excellent works were born after a long period of accumulation. The expression form and narrative framework of folk dance were familiar to the general public, which prepared the conditions for the next period.

### Performance style in the initial stage

During this period, relatively mature artistic performances had been formed. In the 'Liaozhou Chronicles', the connection between Zuoquan XiaohuaXi and Shehuo is vividly recorded. On the 15th day of the first lunar month, the Lantern Festival, the streets and alleys are full of red lanterns, and the whole village is immersed in a festive and peaceful atmosphere. The village committee team will also carefully build the Nine-bend Yellow River Lantern, attracting many villagers to come and watch. Every household is also busy steaming rice cakes



to offer to the gods, praying for good weather and good harvests in the coming year. On the night of the 15th day of the first lunar month, the Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi kicked off with the guidance of the community fire. Two little boys were carefully dressed up as characters in the story, wearing colorful costumes and closely following the dance steps of the community fire. With the harmonious accompaniment of the band, they will also chant a few prayers full of beautiful wishes, making the whole performance full of solemnity and sacredness. On the 16th day of the first lunar month, every household would go out together. Guided by the community fire, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi would go through the streets and alleys, spreading joy and blessings to every corner. (Liaozhou Chronicle, 1673). During this period, it mainly played the role of folk entertainment. It did not rely on superb singing or superb dancing skills to attract audiences, but focused more on expressing the emotions of the grassroots people. Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi is characterized by interesting plots and humorous performance styles. Although it has some vulgar content and vulgar sentiments, these characteristics have won it the love of the general public and become an important way for the common people to entertain themselves (Chinese Dance Records, Shanxi Volume, 2009).

According to the recollections of veteran artists, the performance form of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has a unique style and tradition. Each show usually stars two boys around twelve years old as the little boy and the little girl. Regardless of the content of the performance, the costumes and makeup are relatively fixed. The male characters wear a young man's hat with a hero ball in front, a pomegranate or peach pattern painted on the bridge of their noses, a sky blue or black top, a white slit skirt tied around the waist, and black ox-nose shoes. The female characters wear a flower crown or a phoenix crown, plum blossoms painted on their cheeks, and a satin dress and red embroidered shoes, or choose clothes according to the actual situation.

The tunes used in the performances are mostly local popular ditties, usually one for each play. The singing content covers historical legends as well as interesting stories in life, especially the flirting plots between men and women are more common. For example, embroidering a purse with music, pinching garlic sprouts, and touring the garden all express the love story between men and women through the coordination of music and dance. Since there are usually only two performers, the venue is small. During the performance, the instruments of the civil and martial arts are placed on both sides, and a table is placed in the middle of the back of the venue. Two actors enter the stage from both sides of the table. The dance movements are relatively simple, and the actors hold folding fans as auxiliary props and return to their original positions after the performance. At this time, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi is a relatively simple rap form, which is influenced by opera in terms of performance, costumes, makeup and music.

To sum up, in its embryonic stage, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi was influenced by literary and social gatherings and operas. It sang short stories with the purpose of entertainment to attract audiences and cater to capitalists. By singing easy-to-understand small stories and small events, and performing them physically, the characters and plots run through the program, thus forming its formal characteristics of a combination of song and dance.

### **Salient features in the initial stage**

1. Features of character image narrative. In the performance of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, the character images and narrative characteristics are very distinct, which is inseparable from the profound influence of Wenshehuo. The actors carefully dressed up as characters with different personalities and identities, vividly showing the interaction between the characters and the advancement of the plot, and presented the story vividly to the audience. These plots are all derived from the daily lives of local people, and the characters are all played in their true colors, endowed with unique personalities by life. Their words, deeds, and actions drive the development of the story. The audience seems to be immersed in the story, experiencing the joys, sorrows, anger, and happiness in the story with the characters, and deeply feeling the charm of the story.

2. Exaggerated movements characteristics. The exaggerated movements are a vivid reflection of the inheritance and innovation of Chou Shehuo's artistic style in its development process. On stage, the clown actors display their unique performance style through exaggerated body movements and rich facial expressions, such as posing, slapping others' buttocks, and deliberately provoking the audience. This style not only instantly attracts the audience's attention, but also creates a warm and cheerful performance atmosphere, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in it and feel the unique artistic charm.

3. Love theme rendering features. In its initial stage the content and themes of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi mostly revolved around the emotional world between men and women. From the shyness and ignorance of first love, to the passionate love, to the mutual support over the years, these love stories full of life constitute the core theme of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi performances. It vividly shows people's yearning, pursuit and persistence for love at that time, allowing the audience to have a strong emotional resonance while enjoying the performance.

### Anti-Japanese War Stage

During this period, it became inevitable to transform the old literature and art to serve the war of resistance and politics. Under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party's literary and artistic guidelines, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi began an important turn and embarked on a path of transformation that met political and artistic standards.



Figure 3. Representative folk dance of Shanxi - Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. (Source: Sohu, 2017)



Figure 4. Representative folk dance of Shanxi - Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. (Source: Sohu, 2017)

### Background

After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, during the Yan'an Rectification Movement in the 1940s, transformation became a high-frequency word in the field of literary and artistic work. In 1942, Mao Zedong delivered his Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, in which he clearly proposed that literature

and art should serve the people and the workers, peasants and soldiers. After that, Yan'an quickly launched the New Yangge Movement and the New Storytelling Movement. The core of these two movements lies in the transformation and utilization of old literary and artistic forms, that is, on the basis of retaining the old forms, giving them new content, making them literary and artistic forms that propagate revolutionary ideas and serve the masses (Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Volume 3, 1991). In such an era, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi became an important target of literary and artistic transformation because it combines multiple elements of song and dance performances. During the transformation process, the costumes, props and dance postures of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi were transformed. These transformations not only enhanced the artistic expression of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, but also made it more in line with the requirements of the times, becoming an important literary and artistic form to promote anti-Japanese ideas and inspire people's fighting spirit.

### **Performance style in the Anti-Japanese War**

During this period, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi was reinvented in terms of costumes, props, and character settings. Costumes were no longer limited to simple clothes in daily life, but people began to wear brightly colored clothes or clothes that matched the character's personality traits. At the same time, the feature of men dressing as women was gradually eliminated during this period. Women took to the stage, and the performers included all kinds of roles, including men, women, young and old. Many people engaged in reform and promotion have made outstanding contributions to the reform and improvement of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, among whom Comrade Huangfu Shuyu is particularly outstanding. As a local intellectual, Huangfu Shuyu was well aware of the characteristics of Zuoquan folk songs and Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. He further integrated and transformed folk songs with Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, making Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi more typical. In the early period, many of the traditional programs of Xiaohua Opera were about love between men and women in the old society, and contained many vulgar words and actions. The revolutionary content during the Anti-Japanese War put forward new requirements for Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, which required Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi to reflect the new life, sing about new people and new things, give full play to the advantages of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi in singing and dancing, and better serve the Anti-Japanese War, production and various central tasks. In 1943, Huangfu Shuyu led his comrades to carry out an attempt to transform the Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi at the No. 2 Folk School in Siping Village, and observed the performance at a meeting of the Rural Entertainment Committee, which was a great success. This transformation has changed the old Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi into three forms, as follows. 1. The old scenes and steps were transformed to create new scenes that fit the background of the War of Resistance. For example, the traditional street performance scenes were transformed into scenes reflecting the War of Resistance, and the production and life of the people during the war were shown through the performances of the actors, thus stimulating the audience's enthusiasm for the War of Resistance. 2. The children's dance movements are combined with the tunes of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, which not only sings repeatedly but also adds children's jumping and bouncing movements. This form shows the positive image of children in production labor through lively performances, and enhances the fun and appeal of the performance. The scenes are a mixture of old and new forms, presented with the help of a story, and adding necessary props and effects, such as horse whips, donkey heads, etc. This form shows the life scenes of people during the Anti-Japanese War through specific stories and vivid props, making the performance closer to life. This transformation experience was regarded as an advanced example and promoted in various regions, playing an important role in anti-Japanese war propaganda and literary and artistic innovation. As mentioned in an article, in the early stage of transformation, using old forms to perform new content was not effective. Later, simple dance movements were added, and people did not like it. The experience of transformation shows that the old model must be replaced by new creation rather than blind cancellation (Shanxi Literature and Art Historical Materials, 1959).

Making Military Shoes, an outstanding work from the Anti-Japanese War period, is a carefully re-staged masterpiece. It not only inherits the iconic trembling rhythm of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, but also incorporates the

dynamic features of jumping, kicking, etc. This work is original in dance language and emotional expression, especially in the use of props, showing extraordinary innovation. It breaks the inherent pattern of traditional Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi using fans as props, and boldly uses white insoles and tools for making insoles as core props, giving them profound symbolic meaning. The insoles are not only a microcosm of the hard work of Taihang women, but also carry the emotional sustenance of a special era. During the war-torn years, it symbolized a wife's endless longing for her husband who was defending the country on the front line, and it also embodied the people's deep gratitude to the people's army. Through this seemingly ordinary prop, the work skillfully incorporates the deep friendship between the people and their soldiers into every stitch and thread, allowing the emotions to be sublimated and inherited in the interpretation of the dance. To sum up, the Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi of this period was in line with the times and the people, and got rid of the dregs of the past low-level vulgarity and feudal superstition. With its fresh and healthy thoughts and art, it inspired people's hearts, encouraged their fighting spirit, cultivated their souls, and made great contributions to the victory of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.



Figure 5. Representative folk dance of Shanxi - Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi Making Military Shoe. (Source: He Yunan, 2024)

### Salient features of the Anti-Japanese War stage

1. Characteristics of character image. During the War of Anti-Japanese War, the characters of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi were reshaped closely around the theme of the war of resistance, deeply reflecting the spirit of the times of the national resistance. Anti-Japanese fighters and guerrillas became the protagonists of performances during this period. With their upright postures and firm eyes, they showed their bravery, fearlessness, perseverance and courage. Through stage performances, the image of anti-Japanese fighters set a heroic example for the audience to defend their country and inspired the people's patriotic enthusiasm and determination to fight the war. At the same time, traditional folk roles have also been given new connotations. For example, the village girls are no longer just weak images, but holding weapons, with a brave look in their eyes. Their performances show the situation of the whole nation being a soldier in the war of resistance, inspiring more people to join the anti-Japanese and national salvation movement. This role transformation not only enriches the characters of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, but also deeply reflects the historical reality of the extensive mobilization of society at that time and the participation of the whole nation in the war of resistance. Through the reshaping of these character images, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi became an important form of literary and artistic propaganda during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, which not only boosted the morale of the people, but also consolidated the anti-Japanese strength of the people across the country.

2. Movements characteristics. The performances during this period became vigorous and powerful, with brisk rhythms and an emphasis on uniformity, in order to demonstrate the power of the masses and their determination to resist Japan. In terms of specific movements, a large number of neat and powerful stomping



and jumping movements have been added, showing the people's anger towards the invaders and their strong will and determination to fight. For example, the traditional Husuobu developed into the more graceful and stretched Sandianbu, and its trembling knees to drive the jumping and kicking movements became more prominent during this period. In addition, the action form of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has also undergone important changes. The development from the traditional male disguised as a woman to the action-rich twist is a key move in the innovation of action form. The twisting movement mainly relies on the waist and hips of the trunk to swing the body left and right. This movement is common in folk dances and is mostly performed by women. Its application completely changed the performance pattern of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, breaking the stereotyped performance mode of men dressed as women in the old society. It allowed girls to take the stage of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, greatly expanding the performance movement language. This innovation not only enriched the artistic expression of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, but also provided valuable experience for the subsequent development of folk dance.

3. Props characteristics. During the Anti-Japanese War, the props of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi were endowed with distinct anti-Japanese colors and symbolic meanings. Props with strong revolutionary symbolic meanings, such as red tasseled spears, broadswords and five-star red flags, became important elements on the stage along with traditional fans and scarves. Holding these props, the actors demonstrated the Chinese nation's heroic spirit of not fearing strong enemies, fighting bravely and being indomitable through vivid assassination and defense movements. At the same time, fans and scarves, as traditional props of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, also assumed the important mission of reflecting the red culture during this period. Compared with the early stage, the dancing force and amplitude of the fans have been significantly enhanced, and the movements are more rapid and powerful. Through the carefully choreographed dance movements, the actors wave the fans and scarves like battle flags, creating a warm and tense battle atmosphere. This unique form of artistic expression not only enhanced the effect of anti-Japanese propaganda, but also made the audience deeply feel the urgency and sense of mission of the war of resistance, inspiring people to unite and fight together to fight against foreign enemies and defend their homes.

### Liberation Period

During the War of Liberation, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi continued to be transformed and developed. Xiaohua Opera still played an important role in this period. Since Zuoquan was a rear base, it provided extremely favorable conditions for the promotion of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi throughout the county.



Figure 6. Li Mingzhen, a veteran artist of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, performs (Source: Baidu Encyclopedia, 2017)

## Background

During the War of Liberation, Zuoquan County shouldered the key mission of the rear base (Liu, 2021). During this period, Zuoquan Xiaohua Opera, through transformation and innovation, became an important literary and artistic form to publicize the idea of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and inspire people's fighting spirit, making positive contributions to the victory of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The performance form has gradually evolved from twisting to jumping. Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has gradually weakened the cultural attributes of traditional opera and firmly moved towards the direction of dance development. This transformation is not only an innovation in artistic form, but also a positive response to the needs of the times (Jia, 2020). Through the development of dance, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has further enhanced its artistic expression and appeal, making it closer to the lives of the people and better serving the social needs of the new era. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi ushered in its most prosperous period. On the one hand, it gained a lot of experience under the influence of the transformation during the Anti-Japanese War. On the other hand, old artists boldly explored and boldly innovated the creation model and ideological core of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, endowed it with profound revolutionary connotations, and promoted Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi to become more political and fashionable. In 1953, the first national music and dance observation conference of veteran artists of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi was held, which marked the gradual entry of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi into the national stage. In the 1990s, influenced by the Yellow River Trilogy dance drama, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi was frequently performed on stage. For example, the work Washing Clothes won the 10th Star Award. Thanks to the prominent status of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, Zuoquan County was named the Hometown of Chinese Folk Art for two consecutive years in 1995 and 1996 (Jia, 2020).

## Performance style in the Liberation period

Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has undergone musical transformation by introducing the board cavity structure, which has greatly enriched the expressiveness of the music. The flexible body language vividly presents the unique splendor and beauty of the countryside, helping Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi to firmly join the ranks of Shanxi folk dances and become a distinctive and representative folk dance of the province. For example, the dance work Rice Planting Dance is a lively and classic performance, in which the prop fan plays a key role. The green fan is given new vitality. When the fan is open, it symbolizes the vast land. When the fan is closed, it looks like green seedlings. The dancing colorful fans symbolize the vitality of life and silently convey the dancers' emotions, allowing the audience to feel endless joy when appreciating the fan dance. A group of youthful girls, in the vibrant pastoral scenery, with fans waving left and right and bright smiles against the backdrop, vividly symbolizes the beautiful scene of tilling, sowing and harvesting (Wang, 2021).

For example, the use of the fan in the work Picking Peppercorns is not only beautiful, but also symbolizes a stick for picking peppercorns when it is closed, and a basket for peppercorns when it is opened. When it is waved, it fully expresses the unspeakable joy of the Zuoquan girls when they see the fragrant peppercorns all over the hillside. Whether the fan is open or closed, it can be used as a prop for Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi to express its plot content. Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi Picking Peppercorns is a portrayal of the simple and natural folk life in Zuoquan. With its smart dance posture and lively and happy mood, it shows the beautiful yearning of Zuoquan people for life and their love for life. The original music of picking peppercorns was a one-part singing song with only one interlude. After the adaptation, it became a variation that retains the strong Zuoquan minor style. In addition to the prelude, there are four singing songs and nine interludes, among which a solo dance is added. When the dance movements with a certain plot reach a climax, the music changes from 2/4 beat to 6/8 beat, and the dance movements also become a more jumping fast three-step (also known as jumping step). This is a breakthrough development of the dance movements of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi along with the innovation of music (Wang, 2024).



Figure7. In 1961, the Jinzhong Cultural Troupe performed the Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi Picking Peppercorns. (Source: Wang Sihui, 2024)

### Salient features of the liberation period

1.Character image characteristics. During this period, the characters of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi became more diverse. During the liberation period, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi not only featured heroic anti-Japanese fighters and guerrillas, but also many new characters gradually appeared. These new characters were created to comply with the social policies of the time and to demonstrate everyone's spirit in building a new China. For example, the worker characters are dressed in work clothes, with a look of concentration and determination in their eyes. The workers swing hammers, operate machines, and build dams on the stage, with particularly powerful movements. At first glance, they are tough guys in industrial production, and the sense of power is overwhelming. The roles of farmers are also very interesting. They wear simple clothes and hold farm tools such as hoes and sickles in their hands. Their faces show their love for the land and their expectation for a good harvest. The farmers imitate the scenes of working in the fields on the stage, making people feel like they are back in the real fields. There are also intellectuals, holding books in their hands. They convey the power of knowledge on the stage. They are like cultural messengers of that era, using their knowledge and wisdom to contribute to the new China. Together, these roles vividly show the spirit of hard work of people from all walks of life during the liberation period.

2. Movements characteristics. The movements style of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi inherits the vigorous and powerful style of the Anti-Japanese War period, and incorporates more cheerful and agile action elements. The range of movements is further increased, and more rotations, jumps and other movements are incorporated to express people's eager anticipation and joy for the upcoming peaceful life. During this period, the previous thinking mode that emphasized drama was changed, and Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi developed into a more advanced art form. While responding to the social policies of the time, more emphasis was placed on the stage performance of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi. For example, in some performances celebrating liberation, actors would twist their waists and hips in a large range and rotate quickly to create a cheerful and lively atmosphere. At the same time, in order to fit the themes of the times such as the Great Production Movement, simulated labor production movements were also added, such as plowing, sowing, and harvesting. The movements were brisk and rhythmic, vividly showing the enthusiasm of the people to actively participate in production and construction, which not only retained the spirit of collective struggle, but also added a vision of a better life in the future.

3. Props characteristics. The props of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi during the Liberation Period were closely linked to the theme of the times. On the basis of retaining the props symbolizing the revolutionary spirit such as the red tasseled spear and broadsword during the Anti-Japanese War, a large number of props related to production and construction were added to make the character image more prominent. For example, the actors vividly show the agricultural production scenes by dancing with props such as hoes, sickles, and shoulder poles used by farmers; the workers show the vitality of industrial production by using wrenches and hammers. This will inspire people's expectations and enthusiasm for the country's future, and reflect the people's firm confidence in the country's future. The use of fans is even more extreme. The dancers hold fans in both hands while dancing. In Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi, fans have various symbolic meanings. For example, fans are used to simulate field work scenes, different dance movements symbolize different working postures, and different uses of fans are used to show different rice planting steps, movements and character mentalities. Veteran artist Li Mingzhen said that after long-term dance practice, a series of conventional fan vocabulary has been formed. For example, in the rice planting dance, the actors used plowing movements with butterfly fans, sowing movements with standing fans, and cheerful jumping movements with left and right arms alternately fanning up and down, vividly depicting the scene of a farmer happily farming (Dong, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Looking back on the long development process of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi from drama to dance, we can clearly see that it contains rich and diverse cultural connotations. In its initial stage, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi not only carried a deep remembrance of the natural scenery and historical culture, but also expressed a beautiful vision of eternal love and true family affection. During the Anti-Japanese War, the song praised the heroic spirit of hard work and tenacious resistance. During the liberation period, it expressed a deep attachment to a warm home and a happy life. Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi originates from life and sublimates life through artistic techniques. It keeps pace with the development of the times, abandons traditional routines and role-playing, and uses the most simple and authentic dance language to express inner emotions and thoughts. Liberating the body and dancing as the heart desires is the core of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi transformation from opera to dance.

Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has always been moving forward with its folk characteristics during its development. On the one hand, it retains a relatively healthy way of presenting traditional dances, and on the other hand, it transforms the old content and creates a large number of new programs that meet the requirements of the times through new choreography. Since the Anti-Japanese War, Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has been valued and supported by the Party's literary and artistic policies. With the joint efforts of literary and artistic workers and folk artists, a new Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has been created by exploring traditional folk art. Although it has stepped onto a higher stage, the classic programs of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi have been passed down from generation to generation. The local flavor, mass, life-like and realistic style have been continued. Therefore, the characteristics of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi in the folk have not changed.

The influence of Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has not diminished with the passage of time, but has become a classic in folk art. Through its unique artistic method, it served the war of resistance and political propaganda, effectively promoted the party's ideas, actively mobilized the masses, and contributed literary and artistic strength to the victory of the war of resistance. At the same time, it laid a solid foundation for the development of folk dance in Shanxi Province in later generations and pointed out the direction for the future. The development of innovative concepts and practices by Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi has brought new vitality to the ancient folk dance and left a significant mark in the history of the inheritance and development of Chinese national culture.



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