

# The study of knowledge and preservation of songming lantern opera in Kunming, Yunnan province, China



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**Abstract** The objective focuses on the study of knowledge and the preservation of Songming lantern opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, utilizing qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations. It unearths the historical significance of this art form, spanning from the Qing dynasty's Qianlong era to 1912, reaffirming its profound cultural roots within Yunnan. By identifying distinguished performers like Wenping Yang and Guoqiong Li, the research sheds light on the individual contributions that have shaped this traditional opera. Additionally, it observes the contemporary cultural adaptation known as "Lantern Opera Square Dance" in the Songming region, marking the opera's resilience and adaptability in the 21st century. Furthermore, the study traces the evolution of musical elements within Songming lantern opera, notably the shift from percussion to string music, providing valuable insights into its musical development. These findings collectively contribute to a richer understanding and preservation of Songming lantern opera, a vital component of Yunnan's cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** preservation, knowledge, yunnan, songming lantern opera

## 1. Introduction

Songming County is situated in the central region of Yunnan Province and the northeastern area of Kunming City. It is renowned for being the birthplace of lanterns. Upon consulting pertinent sources, the researcher determined that an accurate definition of the Songming lantern opera concept has yet to be established. The Songming lantern opera is a form of intangible cultural heritage that pertains to traditional drama. It is widely produced and enjoyed in the vicinity of Songming County, Kunming City, Yunnan Province, and its surrounding regions (Yang 2006).

Songming's traditional lantern activities are very prosperous, according to historical records, more than 200 villages have lantern activities. In addition to the performances during the Lantern Festival, Songming lantern opera is also performed in various temple fairs for a period of 1-2 months. The performance of Songming lantern opera has various forms. The folk custom is divided into two parts: "group field" and "sitting field" (Bu 2018).

The 1995 edition of Songming County Annals records that Songming is one of the birthplaces of Yunnan Lantern Opera. According to an investigation, as early as the Tang Dynasty, there was a lantern festival in the Song and Ming dynasties. In 2011, Guoqiong Li and Yunde Wang, the inheritors of Songming lantern opera, conducted a survey of 162 natural villages and 476 folk artists in the Songming area and collected more than 50 works from the census in four years. They annotated the Songming lantern opera with images that comprehensively, scientifically, and fully reflected the content and form of the opera. This provides auxiliary materials for the research on Songming lantern opera (Li 2012). The Songming lantern opera is a traditional form of Chinese opera that originated in the Songming County of Yunnan Province. It encompasses elements such as melodies, compositions, lyrical expressions, choreography, biographical accounts, and photographic records of performances. It has practical and academic relevance (Yang 1995).

Through the above introduction, we can see that Songming lantern opera has a variety of cultural manifestations and rich content, mostly classified as folk songs and dances or traditional drama, and mainly has the following characteristics:

- 1) A strong ritual with a complete set of rituals and customs.
- 2) Strong singing and dancing are good at collective singing and dancing.
- 3) Closely related to folk customs, such as Lantern Festival customs.
- 4) The number of participants is very large and loyalty is high (Kuang and He 2022).

Based on the above analysis and field investigation, the researcher believes that the concept of Songming lantern opera can be explained as follows:



Songming lantern opera is a branch of "Yunnan Lantern Opera", Yunnan Lantern Opera has a long history and has influenced other national dramas due to its unique heritage, moral propaganda, and art-tasting temperament (Jin 2016), which exist and spread in Songming County and its surrounding areas. It is a kind of traditional drama intangible cultural heritage based on the corresponding folk customs, which embodies the unique production and life style, concept, belief, and value orientation of the local people through the performance forms of rap, singing and dancing, and opera, and then achieves the purpose of entertaining gods, entertaining people, and educating people (Yang 2006).

From the preceding discussion, the primary objective of the researcher is to delve into the study of knowledge and the preservation of Songming lantern opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. These challenges arise from the disruption of traditional cultural and artistic practices in the aftermath of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, notably during the turbulent era of the Cultural Revolution, which led to the suspension of regular performances of this culturally rich art form. Furthermore, the encroachment of Western pop music culture after China's reform and opening-up in 1978, along with an aging audience demographic and declining market demand, has presented formidable obstacles. Consequently, the central focus of this study is to explore strategies aimed at fostering greater awareness, knowledge dissemination, and preservation initiatives for Songming lantern opera, with the ultimate aim of reigniting its appreciation and relevance among a wider and more diverse audience.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employs qualitative research and ethnomusicology in conjunction with preliminary research from the study and collects academic materials, textbooks, reports, concepts, theories, and articles from numerous publications relevant to it. Additionally, the researcher conducted a study that analyzed fieldwork data from key informants, casual informants, and general informants. The research subjects are split as follows:

Step 1: Use Songming lantern opera documentation, data, theories, and research as a point of reference for studying and conducting research.

Step 2: Choose the main study areas, in which Songming is located in the center section of Yunnan Province, China, with a suitable geographical position. It is a vital transportation hub in Yunnan Province. Following the "Yuan Dynasty," a great number of Han people relocated here, and Han culture was extensively diffused and penetrated with the local Songming culture of the time, combining a large number of new art forms.

Step 3: This document's key informants were all Songming folks who had grown up in the Songming region. Second, they were key players in the Songming lantern opera, including Wenping Yang, the music performer and inventor of the Songming lantern opera, Guoqiong Li, the inheritor of the Songming lantern opera dance and Juncai Qi, the playwright and successor of the Songming lantern opera.

Step 4: The research tools used for this study were structured interviews and in-depth interviews. Unstructured interviews are free-form discussions in which there are no right or wrong answers. Observation is used to observe the overall state of the study participants using a combination of participatory and non-participatory observation.

Step 5: Data collection in this study is conducted through a combination of on-site work and the examination of written documents. Field investigation constitutes a primary research method and encompasses various techniques, including interviews, video recordings, questionnaires, and the systematic collection and analysis of relevant written materials. The researcher conducted two visits to Songming County to conduct on-site surveys specifically focused on Songming lantern opera. During these visits, three key informants were selected for in-depth interviews, namely Mr. Wenping Yang, Ms. Guoqiong Li, and Mr. Juncai Qi. Also actively observed live performances, meticulously recording and filming elements such as script, singing, dancing, and instrumental music. Additionally, the process involved the collection and organization of the local Songming lantern opera repertoire, a valuable resource for analyzing the evolution and development of this performance art.

Step 6: Data analysis plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of valuable insights into Songming lantern opera. The collected data is categorized in alignment with the study's specific objectives and further divided into historical and contemporary resources. The historical dataset encompasses details surrounding the inception and evolution of Songming lantern opera, including its cultural origins and the development of its distinct style. In line with the study's overarching purpose, this research delves into aspects such as the cultivation of knowledge and the preservation of Songming lantern opera, as well as the establishment of its unique musical characteristics. Additionally, the analysis explores strategies for promoting and disseminating the growth of Songming lantern opera based on its rich historical context, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of this cultural tradition.

Step 7: A summary was provided that presented the research findings and grading criteria for the papers related to the assigned topics. The provided data was comprehensive, and subsequent evaluations were conducted.

## 3. Results

The past development and preservation of Songming lantern opera remain a topic of debate within academic circles, as a definitive consensus has yet to be reached. There isn't a consensus yet because different scholars hold different perspectives.

Researchers have compiled the history of Songming lantern opera by combining histories and transmissions of knowledge literacy and preservation from inheritors, folk artists, and the general public with local historical literature. Representative views on the origin of this opera have been derived from this process.

### 3.1. *The Origin Legend of Songming Lantern Opera*

The Legend of the Tang Dynasty Origin is a narrative that has been transmitted through generations within the confines of Songming County. As per the legend, Emperor Xuanzong purportedly experienced a dream in which he traversed to the netherworld and received instruction on conducting a ritual in the mortal realm. Upon awakening, Emperor Xuanzong proceeded to instruct the musical composition he had envisioned during his slumber to the individuals residing within the palace, subsequently mandating its dissemination throughout the entirety of the nation. Consequently, subsequent generations bestowed upon Emperor Xuanzong the epithet of "Deity of Lanterns". Typically, within each Songming lantern opera troupe, there exists a tablet that serves as a commemoration of Emperor Xuanzong.

The lantern opera showcases two ceremonies, namely receiving the lantern god and sending the lantern god, which are conducted at the commencement and conclusion of the performances. Additionally, the performers perform the "Inviting the God" song during these ceremonies. The legend of Song dynasty origin is rooted in the historical existence of Yuantong Temple, situated in Xiaojie Town of Songming County, which was constructed during the Qingyuan era of the Song dynasty (1195–1201 AD). The temple features a pre-existing stage adorned with a couplet that captures the essence of performers donning theatrical personas and the animated ambiance of the audience observing the spectacle from below the stage. The Legend of Ming Dynasty Origin is grounded on historical evidence that during the Hongwu era of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang deployed a force of 300,000 soldiers and their dependents to Yunnan province, surpassing the indigenous population by a considerable margin. The significant influx of immigrants facilitated the introduction of the artistic culture from the Central Plains region, which subsequently fostered the exchange and integration of the Central Plains culture with the local culture. The Songming lantern opera came into existence during this particular era.

### 3.2. *Songming Lantern Opera from the Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty to 1912*

The Songming lantern opera, which thrived from the Qianlong Period of the Qing dynasty until the year 1912, represented a period of notable prosperity within the theatrical arts during the Qianlong era. Large villages with more than 100 households established lantern associations, also referred to as lantern opera performance groups. The successful lantern opera productions resulted in a growing desire among the audience for permanent performance spaces, which subsequently gave rise to the establishment of lantern houses. The majority of the lantern houses situated in Songming were constructed during the Qing dynasty and are characterized by their single-story architecture, comprising three rooms. Certain structures are designed with a second level, which provides an elevated platform for performances or presentations.

The preservation of buildings associated with Songming lantern opera has been limited due to natural or historical factors. However, the historical presence of this art form can still be traced through extant sites and inscriptions. The edification of the lantern house facilitated the convergence of numerous Songming lantern opera troupes and exerted a propulsive influence on the advancement of Songming lantern opera.



**Figure 1** The building in which the Songming lantern opera was in the past staged (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/WcLxvxE3jCQuxisA6-5arA>).

### 3.3. *Songming Lantern Opera from the Founding of the Republic of China to 1949*

The Songming lantern opera underwent a transformation from rudimentary forms of amusement involving singing and dancing to elaborate theatrical productions during the period spanning from the establishment of the Republic of China to the year 1949. The number of characters gradually increased, and the social content reflected in the performances also became more diverse. Representative plays such as "General Cai E in Yunnan" praised positive figures, promoted progressive cultural ideas, and carried a certain educational significance. The migration of performance venues from rural fields to urban stages facilitated the emergence of Songming lantern opera, which exerted a significant social impact and nurtured numerous exceptional folk performers. Nonetheless, as a result of constraints imposed by historical and societal factors, the field had not yet initiated the process of professionalization. The main performances remained primarily in the form of folk entertainment during Spring Festival activities and temple fairs.



**Figure 2** Da Bu Gang's performance in Songming County (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/WcLxvxE3jCQuxisA6-5arA>).

#### 3.4. Songming Lantern Opera from the Founding of New China to the 21st Century

The Songming lantern opera has garnered governmental recognition since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The year 1956 marked the establishment of the Songming County Lantern Opera Troupe, which received backing from the regional authorities. Numerous amateur groups have surfaced in diverse regions, and over 90 amateur art propaganda teams are executing Songming lantern opera across the county. Educational institutions and organizations have also established amateur propaganda groups. The present study focuses on the transmission of knowledge literacy and preservation of Songming lantern opera.

Songming lantern opera has made significant progress in several aspects, including creation, creative genres, performance, singing, makeup, costumes, props, stage art, lighting equipment, and music. In terms of creation, both professional and amateur creators have produced nearly a hundred large, medium, and small plays, which have had a significant influence both within and outside the province. In terms of creative genres, various types of plays have emerged, including modern plays reflecting modern life and newly edited historical plays reflecting historical figures and events. The conventional performance pattern has been disrupted with the integration of various strengths from other opera arts, thereby enhancing the performance techniques in terms of their efficacy. In terms of singing, scientific vocalization methods have been adopted, new attempts and developments have been made in makeup, costumes, and props, modern stage lighting equipment has been gradually applied, and outstanding musicians and performers have been trained.

Throughout this particular era, despite certain advancements and discoveries in the accompaniment of Songming lantern opera music, there was a notable absence of comprehensive exploration and implementation regarding the utilization of indigenous lantern opera music as well as the generation of novel and inventive traditional lantern opera within their respective localities. The Songming lantern opera experienced restricted growth during this era as a majority of its adaptations and innovations were derived from lantern melodies originating from other localities. The evolution of Songming lantern opera underwent modifications in the latter part of the 1970s as a result of the nurturing of a cohort of exceptional lantern artisans. Throughout the course of the field research conducted on Songming lantern opera, two prominent individuals, namely teachers Wenping Yang and Guoqiong Li, emerged as the notable talents of the aforementioned opera. Their cultivation during this period proved to be instrumental in the subsequent advancement of lantern opera.

The Songming County Lantern Opera Troupe was disbanded in 1986, and some of the performers were transferred to the Songming County Cultural Center. During this period, some elderly artist performance teams and individual lantern opera performance teams emerged. Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new form of cultural entertainment has emerged in the Songming region called "Lantern Opera Square Dance". This is a group dance activity similar to calisthenics, created by extracting dance and music elements from Songming lantern opera. From 2013 to the present, Songming has held four Songming lantern opera square dance competitions.

Songming lantern opera and its theater share similar processes of survival and development, starting with "songs," then progressing to "dances" and "drama performances." String music development came after the emergence of percussion music in terms of musical forms. Rooted in the fertile cultural soil of Songming, Songming lantern opera has become an integral part of Yunnan's traditional culture and will continue to develop and spread.



**Figure 3** Sheng Shi Le Tian's performance in Songming (Wenping Yang).

#### 4. Discussion

The Songming lantern opera, deeply rooted in the fertile soil of Songming, boasts a rich history and a unique style that has seamlessly integrated into the broader tapestry of Yunnan lantern opera. Its enduring presence in this thriving region ensures its perpetual survival and development, making it an intrinsic part of the local culture. This observation resonates with the classification of Yunnan lantern opera into distinct categories by Lunyu Fang et al (1987), shedding light on the regional cultural characteristics of lantern dance. Similarly, Qun Wang's research (2003) on Yunnan lantern opera from a cultural inheritance perspective has significantly contributed by documenting classification, form characteristics, and musical elements, even though these may not entirely meet modern artistic sensibilities.

In the wake of China's "reform and opening up," the impact of Western culture on traditional lantern opera necessitated innovation. This transformation has been chronicled in the book, encompassing new works of Yunnan Lantern Opera, and aligns with the work of Qiong Xiao and Guiying Yan (2014) in safeguarding and perpetuating Yunnan Lantern Opera as an intangible cultural heritage while highlighting the challenges of media quality in preservation efforts.

The Songming lantern opera, a treasure trove of musical compositions and theatrical performances, is deeply intertwined with a rich knowledge base, aligning with the theoretical framework proposed by Wenping Yang (1995). Originating in Songming County, Yunnan Province, this traditional Chinese opera's hallmarks include the prominent use of lanterns, vibrant costumes, intricate makeup, and a distinctive vocal style. It is a vital component of Chinese cultural heritage, with music playing a pivotal role, encompassing elements such as melodies, compositions, vocal and instrumental pieces, choreography, biographical accounts, and photographic records, offering practical and academic significance.

Furthermore, it resonates with Ying Ba's (2014) analysis of the artistic features of Songming lantern opera song and dance, providing insights into historical dissemination, performance forms, and music forms. Additionally, there are intriguing beliefs surrounding ritual, echoing the studies conducted by Gengsheng Bai and Jun Wang (2012), which explore the idea that Emperor Xuanzong's dream led to a ritual to aid spirits in finding salvation, cementing his status as the "God of Lanterns."

Overall, this discussion underscores the multifaceted significance and cultural richness of Songming lantern opera while highlighting its continuous evolution in response to changing cultural dynamics.

#### 5. Conclusions

Songming lantern opera is a theatrical genre that originates from the Songming region of Kunming, located in the Yunnan Province of China. The performance incorporates a combination of musical, choreographic, and theatrical components. This cultural artifact represents the amalgamation of the communal knowledge and experience of the inhabitants of the Songming region, imbued with a hospitable and unreserved regional character that evolves in tandem with societal progress. Through intercultural exchange, individuals involved in folk arts are able to acquire knowledge from one another, resulting in a continuous enrichment of performance content and improvement of singing techniques. As a result, this form of drama has gained popularity among local communities.

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## Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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