

Policy and Theatre: The Rise and Fall of Traditional Folk Opera Performed during the Spring Festival

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Abstract

Since the maturity of Chinese traditional drama between the 12th and 13th centuries, it has been continuously shaped and constrained by the ruling class. Folk drama, particularly performances during the Spring Festival, has long served as a cultural carrier with broad public appeal—rooted in folklore, vivid in reflecting reality, and thus easily co-opted for political purposes. This study draws on local chronicles, historical archives, and previously underutilized materials such as the Henan Chronicles Collection to systematically examine the trajectory of traditional folk drama from the Yuan Dynasty to the Republic of China. It analyzes how shifting political environments—including censorship, cultural policies, and ritual standardization—shaped the production, performance, and reception of folk drama, and identifies political control as the core "crux" of its decline. Special attention is paid to the integration of Spring Festival rituals with folk drama, and a case study of Henan Province during the Republic of China (focusing on figures like Feng Yuxiang and movements such as drama reform) illustrates the dynamic interplay between state power and artistic expression. The findings reveal that while political intervention can suppress or instrumentalize drama in the short term, the art form's inherent cultural resilience persists. However, the subordination of drama to politics or commerce in modern times has pushed it to the brink of endangerment, highlighting the need to safeguard its artistic independence.

Keywords: Chinese traditional drama, Spring Festival folk drama, cultural policy

1. Introduction

Chinese traditional drama, with a history spanning over 800 years since its formation during the Song-Yuan transition, is not only an artistic treasure but also a barometer of political and

cultural dynamics. From the golden age of Yuan Zaju to the regional diversification of Ming-Qing Chuanqi and local operas, its development has never been divorced from state power—rulers have alternately promoted, censored, or repurposed drama to consolidate authority, shape public ideology, and regulate social order.

Folk drama performed during the Spring Festival occupies a unique position in this history. As China's most important traditional festival, the Spring Festival (formally institutionalized in 1914) inherits rituals of "greeting spring," worshipping gods, and community cohesion—all of which have long been intertwined with folk drama performances. These performances, once a cornerstone of holiday culture, gradually declined from the late Qing Dynasty onward, with many traditions vanishing by the 1930s.

Political control is the fundamental crux of traditional folk drama's decline. While factors such as social change and cultural modernization played supporting roles, it was the ruling class's systematic regulation of drama—including censorship of content, restriction of performance spaces, and instrumentalization of art for political propaganda—that disrupted its organic development. By tracing this process across dynasties and focusing on a case study of Republican Henan, this article also explores a broader question: How do art, power, and cultural resilience interact in China's history?

2. Literature Review

Scholarly research on Chinese traditional drama has long focused on artistic form (e.g., the evolution of Zaju and Chuanqi), playwrights (e.g., Guan Hanqing, Tang Xianzu), and regional genres (e.g., Peking Opera, Henan Opera). However, the role of state power in shaping drama's trajectory has only recently gained sustained attention.

Early studies, such as Wang Liqi's (1981) *Historical Materials of Banned Fiction and Opera in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties*, compiled primary sources on censorship but lacked analytical depth on the political logic behind bans. More recent work, like Qin Huasheng's (2015) *Jin Yuanqing Drama Commentary*, links Yuan Zaju's prosperity to ethnic fusion and relaxed ideological control, but does not systematically compare policies across dynasties. Studies on the Spring Festival, such as Jian Tao's (1998) "On the Evolution of Modern Spring Festival Culture," touch on folk performances but overlook their political dimensions.

A key gap in existing research is the lack of a cross-dynastic analysis that centers political control as a unifying factor in drama's decline. Additionally, few studies have used local chronicles (e.g., the Henan Chronicles Collection) to illustrate how national policies were implemented at the local level, or how figures like Feng Yuxiang reshaped drama through reform. This article addresses these gaps by integrating political history, cultural studies, and folklore, positioning its argument within the growing field of "drama and state power" studies.

3. Historical Evolution of Opera & State Control (Yuan–Qing Dynasties)

The relationship between drama and politics shifted dramatically across the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties—from relative openness in the Yuan to strict censorship in the early Ming,

and gradual relaxation (followed by renewed control) in the late Ming and Qing. Each phase reveals how political goals determined the fate of folk drama.

3.1 Yuan Dynasty: Freedom and Flourishing Under Ethnic Fusion

Chinese drama matured in the Yuan Dynasty. The rise of Yuan Dynasty Zaju dramas laid the foundation for Ming and Qing dynasty drama performances. A significant number of Mongolians and other minority tribes from the western region known as the Semu came into the Central Plains at the start of the Yuan Dynasty, leading to yet another significant ethnic fusion in Chinese history (Qin, 2015: 25). The Western nomadic culture and the Central Plains agricultural civilization were in a large collision at this time. People's ideas were not restricted to the mute circumstances of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty during this period, which undoubtedly had an impact on the only reverence for Confucianism since the Han Dynasty and freed the spirit of many early Yuan playwrights of Zaju opera. Yuan opera can be seen as a spark of brilliance that ignited when the agricultural and grassland civilizations merged following the advent of freedom of thought. In the dark era of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, when people's lives were particularly wretched, Zaju originally arose. Numerous Zaju Operas expose corrupt and abusive Yuan Dynasty officials through realistic subject matter or by borrowing from historical details. These works also depict the aspirations and genuine life of the people, which causes emotional connection in the viewer.

When the Yuan Dynasty was established, the literati's status was drastically diminished, and the literati's social standing was even referred to as 'prostitutes No. 8, Confucian No. 9, beggars No. 10' in comparison to prostitutes and beggars. (Chen, 2019: 104). Thus, the majority of the literati lost aspiration. Alternatively, as is the case for literati, they are unable to follow the correct route due to the abolishment of the imperial examination system. Or perhaps it was because they were from the Central Plains, and despite having joined the imperial court as officials, they were discriminated against by their governing nationality. For instance, Ma Zhiyuan, a provincial official of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and Guan Hanqing, a well-known Yuan dramatist, both held positions of higher authority, but their desires could not be accomplished, so they both dedicated themselves to opera ([Ming Dynasty] Wang, 2020: 147). Another set of literati felt the agony of the Ming dynasty's fall and was hesitant to join the imperial administration to support the new dynasty. All of the above factors encouraged talented literati to enter the field of opera composition. These individuals contributed multiple pieces of the highest quality to opera, including *The Injustice to Dou E*, *The Western Chamber*, and *Chinese Orphan*, which had outstanding literary and artistic qualities. As Zaju operas gained in popularity, their impact grew as well.

3.2 Early Ming Dynasty: Suppression and Instrumentalization

The early Ming (1368–1435) reversed the Yuan's openness. Rulers led by Zhu Yuanzhang sought to consolidate Han rule through cultural unification, targeting drama as a tool for ideological control.

Early Ming opera ought to advance at a reasonable rate given the quick development of Yuan Zaju opera. **Paradoxically, the country's prosperity led to the decline of opera.** Zhu Yuanzhang

as the representative of the ruler to restore the Han Chinese unity as the call, in the political implementation of Han Chinese unification rule at the same time, in the cultural and spiritual implementation of unification rule, and reject the folk customs and folk style which contradicts Confucianism.

Although the government set up a department to directly participate in the construction and management of Zaju opera performance at the start of the Ming Dynasty, this did not necessarily mean that Zaju flourished because it ran counter to the ruler's fundamental state policy of bolstering thought control (Zhang,1995:1499). The department was established in part to satisfy the supreme ruler's entertainment needs, but it was also established in part to exercise better control over the production of Zaju and stop any unsightly Zaju from enslaving the populace. As a result, Zaju was prohibited by early Ming emperors, who even used harsh measures. Zhu Yuanzhang made a proclamation declaring that 'People who hold weapons and Zaju scripts in their homes are regarded as criminals' ([Ming Dynasty] Gu,2009:295) in the spring of 1371. Zaju was viewed as being equivalent to weapons, and its spread in the inner city was forcibly stopped by banning it and punishing anyone who broke the law ([Ming Dynasty] Yu,1981: 40). When Duan, the son of a regimental official named Rang, broke the rules in the early Ming Dynasty by blowing and singing, his upper lip and even the tip of his nose were cut when he was caught ([Ming Dynasty] Gu,2009:295). The early Ming ruler constructed a high tower in the middle of Nanjing and alternately dispatched soldiers to guard it to motivate the populace to toil hard and to give up entertainment such as opera. As soon as they heard music, dancing, drinking, and singing, they arrested the participants, hung them upside-down on the tower, and left them there in the sun for three days until they died ([Qing Dynasty] Li,2019:319). Additionally, the monarch banned the opera from dressing up characters such as emperors, kings, sages, etc. Operas that contained collections that wanted to be recited, printed, and sold but were not required by law to be performed were punished. The government was not given the scripts to be burned. When it was discovered, the whole family would be executed ([Ming Dynasty] Gu,2009:296). The Ming Dynasty saw the decline of Zaju operas due to the resurgence of Confucianism, the broader atmosphere of imperial examinations, and other factors. literati were already among the upper strata of society and had evolved into a natural component of the ruling class. They were no longer depressed lower-middle class officials who were reduced to beggars and prostitutes in the early Yuan Dynasty or Han literary scholars who were full of illusions about the imperial examinations in the late Yuan Dynasty. They all instinctively adopted the mentality of bending over to create what was required due to the institution of the Ming dynasty and the ruler's planned cultural strategy, which intensified social spirit control. To identify artists' positions, the court simultaneously set a number of restrictions and discriminated against particular clothing codes (He,1995:11-13). The female prostitutes were forbidden from dressing the same as the common people's wives, and the musicians were required to wear green scarf to distinguish their attire from that of the common people. Additionally, during the early Ming Dynasty, the government forbade musicians and their families from taking part in the imperial examinations, and if they did so by lying about their origins or otherwise cheating, they would be punished. This policy widened the divide between actors and other social classes. Scholars no longer participate in the collation of

scripts and take this as a shame.

Both emperors in the early Ming dynasty absolutely prohibited officials and commoners from being in close vicinity to opera. For this, the early Ming Dynasty hardly saw any opera invention or performance. It was not that there were no opera performances left, though. Opera and musical concerts were still being held in the palace. It is clear that the ruler placed value on the interaction between ritual and music, advocated good sound, supported exquisite and devalued vulgar music. Emperors promoted the traditional values of fidelity, filial piety, and virtuous wives in the plays while also advancing ritual and music education and readjusting the social climate. Then, royal nobleman Zhu Youdun also wrote Zaju operas that sang praises of virtue (Zhang and Cui, 2018:326). The cultural policy of this era prevented the Zaju authors from realizing self-awareness in their works, expressing their inner feelings, or looking for their own psychological balance. Instead, they were forced to passively conform to the needs of the ruling class and make their works purely tools for edification and entertainment. A glorifying drama praising excellence and virtue progressively replaced Zaju's amusing and witty critical spirit in this time period, similar to edifying dramas honoring upright spouses, faithful wives, filial sons, and obedient grandsons. In terms of the drama scene, the period of invention during which Zaju was vibrant ended, while a new type of drama called Chuanqi gradually emerged. Zhu Yuanzhang appreciated the southern opera The Romance of the Lute and believed that, like The Four Books and The Five Classics, The Romance of the Lute by Gao Ming should be kept in every home ([Ming Dynasty] Xu, 1989). The Ming emperor's encouragement of these operas contributed to the growth of Southern Chuanqi opera.

3.3 Late Ming–Qing Dynasties: Relaxation, Resurgence, and Renewed Control

Some of the specific restrictions on opera that were in effect during the middle and late Ming dynasty gradually lost their impact, creating the ideal conditions for folk theater to develop and flourish. In the 13th year of Ming Emperor Yingzong (Records of the Ming Yingzong, 1448), Beijing was crowded with people singing The Wife Goes to the Husband's Grave, and the city's forces were given orders to arrest, but they were still unable to forbid it. This demonstrates the extent of the public's anti-prohibition sentiment and the ineffectiveness of the opera ban at the time (Wang, 1981:15). The issue of clothing transgression did not have a satisfactory solution for 20 years following Ming Yingzong's reign, according to the Records of the Ming Yingzong, Volume 280. Additionally, there were other different overstepped decrees, and the reach was also broadening, it was not just the outfit that was out of bounds. The imperial decree's power to bind at this point had significantly diminished. The Wanli period saw the court and local governments gradually lose control over the overstepping phenomenon, and the people of the time were completely unaware of things such as 'The female prostitutes were forbidden from dressing the same as the common people, and the musicians were required to wear the green scarf' and other prohibitions.

Towards the end of Emperor Chenghua reign (approximately in 1480), the folk drama started to show some signs of recovery. Later, among the 'Four Talents of Jiangnan' were Tang Yin, Zhu Yunming, and one of the 'Three Talents of Jiangdong,' Xu Lin, who were all content to

write and listen to music. The literati were now able to create excellent operas and advance the growth of folk play. Folk drama thrived in the middle and late Ming period. It is stated that 36 opera stages were built up, and the renowned Wu-Yue opera singers performed at the Spring Festival in She County (Editorial Committee of History of Chinese Opera, 1993:42), Anhui Province, in the 28th year of the Wanli dynasty (1601). The focus of activities in She County has shifted away from the more archaic practice of dressing up ghosts and gods and amusing the gods for the purpose and towards the competitive and entertaining elements of music. On the first day of spring in Tongling County, residents dress and greet the season with local officials in the county's eastern suburbs. Each traversed the street during the Lantern Festival while carrying lanterns and watching zaju performances (Li, 1962). It is clear that the authorities at the time did not view the suppression of folk theatrical events as a top priority, rather, on Spring's Day, the government and the people were united and joyful.

The prosperity of folk theatre was a result of the broad appeal of both the performing groups and the audience groups during this time, which aided in the popularization, distribution, and acceptance of theater. It benefited from the variety of folk theater genres as well, which allowed it to flourish in many theater ecologies. The Ming court's prohibition on theater also tended to be lifted at this time, which also created some lenient development circumstances for its prosperity. The success of the theater activities also had a countervailing impact on the policy banning theater, hastening the trend toward its repeal.

The development trend of the Qing Dynasty's ban on theater policy was roughly the same as that of the Ming Dynasty. The policy of forbidding and destroying operas was quite stringent at the time the Qing was founded. The early Qing dynasty's rulers sought to restore ceremonies and music, promote operas that honored sages and extolled devotion to family, justice, and ancient qualities, and discourage operas that went against their views. It is prohibited to take on the roles of emperors and sages, perform plays during the burial season, play viewing at night, create fictitious operas, etc. All of these laws were derived from Yuan and Ming operatic policies. The Qing dynasty's opera policy differs from that of the Yuan and Ming dynasties in that there is no death sentence. Second, there is the usual punishment of exile, dismissal, and title reduction. Third, compared to the Yuan and Ming, the process for convicting the prisoner is significantly more detailed.

At the beginning of the dynasties, the court took note of the failure of the previous dynasty and imposed strict restrictions on opera, preventing people from having fun and encouraging them to concentrate on farming and scholarship, which led to the slow or even complete stagnation of opera. In the middle of the dynasties, such as the Kang and Qian period in the Qing dynasty, the nation was peaceful, socially stable, and economically prosperous, and people were obsessed with opera. Later in the dynasty, amid political chaos and social unrest, the court struggled with both internal and external issues while attempting to restore the political climate of the nation. However, at this point, the general mood of opera entertainment has been deep in the marrow of the country, rendering the relevant ban on the policy of destruction ineffective, and finally, the dynasty fell.

4. The Spring Festival Context: Ritual, Drama, and Political Standardization

The Spring Festival's evolution is inseparable from drama's fate—rulers not only regulated the festival's date and rituals but also used its associated drama to enforce control.

4.1 The Spring Festival's Political Origins

The Chinese Lunar New Year, orally called "Guo Nian" and now officially termed "Spring Festival," has undergone political redefinition throughout history. Its etymological link to Lichun (Beginning of Spring, the first solar term around February 4) reflects agricultural roots: in traditional farming societies, Lichun marked the new year under the Heavenly Stems-Earthly Branches calendar, with rulers leading "greeting spring" rituals (e.g., whipping spring cattle) to signal state control over farming and transfer seasonal Qi (vital energy) from monarch to people through ceremonies ([Western Han Dynasty] Liu, 1926; [Han] Gao, 1986; Ying, 1995). Pre-Qin folk practices like god-worship and evil-warding during Lichun laid the foundation for later festival traditions.

A pivotal shift occurred in 105 B.C., when Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty's Taichu Calendar redefined the lunar New Year's Day as the start of the year ("Yuan Dan"), separating it from Lichun. While Lichun remained a state-led ritual (e.g., Tang court banquets, Song-Ming-Qing public celebrations), its ceremonial significance surpassed that of Yuan Dan ([Ming Dynasty] Tian, 1980:314-315). The modern "Spring Festival" emerged from Republican-era political reforms: after the 1911 Revolution, Sun Yat-sen's government adopted the Gregorian calendar, and in 1913, Interior Minister Zhu Qiqian proposed designating the lunar New Year as "Spring Festival" to distinguish it from the Gregorian New Year. Yuan Shikai approved this as a national holiday in 1914, politicizing the festival for post-imperial national unification (Gu, 1917:54-55). This renamed lunar New Year replaced the ancient Lichun-centered "Spring Festival," which survives only as a solar term (Zhang, 2017:172).

Though scholars (e.g., Zhang Qianwu) later proposed aligning the Spring Festival with Lichun, public opposition prevented enforcement. Today's Spring Festival spans nearly a month, often overlapping with Lichun (Table 1), while retaining traces of Lichun-associated folk drama.

4.2 Spring Festival Drama: From Folk Ritual to Political Tool

Traditional Spring Festival drama was rooted in folk rituals (e.g., worshipping gods, warding off evil) but was gradually standardized by the state. (a)Yuan–Ming: Spring Festival performances integrated Lichun rituals (e.g., cattle-whipping scenes in Zaju) and community celebrations. The Ming court co-opted these plays to promote Confucian values, replacing folk humor with moralistic content. (b)Qing–Republic: By the late Qing, Spring Festival drama had become a regional tradition (e.g., Henan Opera in the Central Plains). However, the Republic's "custom reform" movement targeted its "superstitious" elements (e.g., god-worshipping performances), leading to bans on temple dramas and vulgar content.

4.3 Drama and the Festival's Modern Transformation

By the 1930s, traditional Spring Festival drama had nearly vanished. Table 1 (2020–2030 Lichun–Spring Festival gaps) shows that modern Spring Festival now overlaps with Lichun, but the ritual-drama connection is lost. This decline was not accidental: rulers redefined the festival's purpose—from agricultural ritual to national unification—and discarded drama that no longer served political goals.

Table 1. How many days difference between Chinese New Year and Spring Festival

Spring's Day	the Spring Festival	During the Spring Festival	Number of days difference
2020.2.4	2020.1.25	2.17-2.8	10
2021.2.3	2021.2.12	2.4-2.26	9
2022.2.4	2022.2.1	1.25-2.15	3
2023.2.4	2023.1.22	1.14-2.5	13
2024.2.4	2024.2.10	2.2-2.24	6
2025.2.4	2025.1.29	1.22-2.12	6
2026.2.4	2026.2.17	2.10-3.3	13
2027.2.4	2027.2.6	1.30-2.20	2
2028.2.4	2028.1.26	1.19-2.9	9
2029.2.3	2029.2.13	2.6-2.27	10
2030.2.4	2030.2.3	1.26-2.17	1

5. Case Study: Republican Henan—Drama Reform, Censorship, and the "Crux" of Decline

The drastic evolution of the status of Spring Festival drama in Henan Province during the Republic of China Firstly, the period was chosen in the Republic of China. During this time, the status of Henan drama changed repeatedly due to the effect of political environment and other circumstances, from the initial way of enjoying the gods and amusing people to the act of wasting people and harming wealth that did not cover the magnificent form. Later, it

developed into a potent tool for illuminating people's knowledge and civilizing traditions. The constant status changes reveal the rulers' awareness. Second, the Chinese Central Plains were chosen because the recently completed Henan Chronicles Collection had a centralized data collection. This book comprises 586 different types of Henan Old Records in 565 volumes. Two were overlooked in this series of books. There are 81 on this basis, after deleting three reprints and three other forms of monographs. Except for the provincial chronicles that comprise subject chronicles, only six local chronicles do not explicitly record theatrical activities, showing that Henan local chronicles had highly rich records of theatrical activities during the Republic of China period.

According to local chronicles, there were constant prohibitions on theatrical performances during the Republic of China period, such as forbidding temples (temples against etiquette and righteousness, evil temples). Spring Festival is a festival for both humanity and Chinese gods. Almost every day of the Spring Festival contains a story about an immortal. Acting was an essential component of ancient sacrifices to immortals. There's nothing wrong with entertaining the gods with traditional Chinese drama. However, as the divine belief system grows, the number of ancestral temples in various regions grows, and rural people are becoming more interested in worshiping gods. Many places have established temples in this condition, and the gods worshiped are frequently not in the record, make up a deity for everything, and some of the gods sacrificed may even be gods of plague. The wind of reverence for gods becomes more extravagant as it unfolds. Fire God in particular, On this day people frequently participate in three to six sets of shows, which increases prosperity year after year but also incurs significant costs and frequently pushes people into poverty. Although the organizer has been the subject of deliberation and regulation, the circumstance cannot be prohibited.

Additionally, nighttime performances are not permitted. Due to the particular period, it is not favorable to both state oversight and the stability of the usual social order on the one hand. Therefore, night theatrical performances are strictly forbidden by the government. Prohibit vulgar content of traditional Chinese drama, which is suspected of misleading people and teaching them to turn evil. There are also regulations prohibiting funeral dramas and prohibiting rural residents from engaging in the opera performance.

Looking at the banning of drama during the Republican period, it is actually an extension and continuation of the ancient concept. During the reign of the Beiyang government, the relatively arbitrary measures of banning drama in various regions superficially separated the writing and performance of drama, but did not constitute a significant obstacle; during the period of confrontation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, while the Kuomintang imposed a ban on drama, it also proposed ways to lift the ban on drama. During the War of Resistance against Japan, the measures of the Wang puppet government and the Japanese occupation army to ban theatrical performances not only restricted the open space that drama should have, but also made it difficult for drama to escape the burden of the illegal survival dilemma; During the Liberation War, the government had not yet issued a unified standard for banning theatrical performances, and even with the theatrical reform there was no unified standard for improvement, so the standards for banning theatrical performances

were mixed and the boundaries of theatrical reform were blurred.

The changes in social form, economic system and ideological trends since 1840, as well as the frequent changes in political power, form the historical background for the development and evolution of local drama in Henan during this period. In the 1920s, Feng Yuxiang led the drama reform movement in Henan, which overturned people's prejudices against local drama in Henan. In the context of the new era, drama was entrusted with the mission of enlightening the people's wisdom and saving the nation from extinction. Henan local drama also rose from the bottom to become a symbol of the culture of the new era and a tool for saving the country and governing the people. It was widely respected by various sectors of Henan society, forming a social trend of watching opera as a fashion, reshaping the concept of traditional Chinese drama in Henan society in the first half of the 20th century.

Feng Yuxiang, who was in charge of Henan for the first time in 1922, submitted the Program for the Governance of Henan, which included demands such encouraging mandatory education to improve peoples' conceptions, fostering good customs, and getting rid of bad habits. Unfortunately, he was forced to shortly leave Henan without putting it into action. Henan was under his rule in 1927, and during that time he offered a number of policies including reforming the current system, getting rid of superstition, advancing science, and boosting public education. His political motto was 'building a new Henan.' In order to create a trustworthy government, fix long-standing problems, reform alongside the populace, and bring comfort to the Henan people, he also put out specific requirements. It was difficult to put the new policy into effect at the time because education in the Henan region was not popularized and people's intelligence had not increased. This led him to decide to actively promote popular education in Henan in an effort to educate the populace, calm their hearts, and revitalize the environment. Feng Yuxiang found that constructing a theater was an effective approach to spread his political viewpoints.

Feng Yuxiang was appointed the head of the Henan Provincial Government in June 1927. The Henan Provincial Department of Education established a Committee for the Improvement of Traditional Chinese Drama the following month with the goal of reviewing the drama's content and providing artists with training. Actors were given instructions to learn new Chinese drama in November of that year and graduated after two months. They continued to get public assistance during their education based on their monthly salary. The inaugural entertainment training class was hosted by the Henan Provincial Department of Education, which trained a total of 427 artists of various genres, including 307 in the drama category, or more than 70% of the total. The Henan Provincial Government then telegraphed the establishment of drama improvement committees and training classes in various districts of the province and performed routine inspections in order to further encourage the improvement of traditional Chinese drama throughout the province. The 'Rectification and Establishment of Committees for the Improvement of Traditional Chinese Drama in Each County' was also specifically established in the 1929 document 'Outline of the 18th Annual Administrative Plan of the Education Department of Henan Province,' which included the improvement of traditional Chinese drama in each county as a government plan. Each county in the province created a comprehensive set of organizations under the direct administration

of the government for the advancement of traditional Chinese drama. The Henan drama improvement movement, which had been in a decline, reached a new peak with the government's forceful participation. The government's extensive supervision of traditional Chinese drama art has also built the foundation for the catastrophe.

People from China embrace 'ritual and music'. Despite being integrated, music and ritual have different statuses. Ritual is the guiding principle and social order. Music is the lubricant that stabilizes and harmonizes the order of the top and lower levels; in other words, music is regulated by ritual and serves ritual. As a result, ritual has a certain moderating impact on music, which is why music that contradicts national ideology and impedes social control and weathering is prohibited and contained. When used effectively by leaders, traditional Chinese drama can help maintain societal order. Its folk, popular, and interesting nature also makes it unable to blindly cater to the needs of rulers during the performance process, resulting in rampant and uncontrollable situations. Once the side effects brought about by drama performances endanger social stability and the interests of the ruling class, they will face a cold wave.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Evidence

Across dynasties, political control has consistently shaped traditional folk drama's fate: (a) Yuan. Relaxed control allowed critical, popular Zaju to flourish, with Spring Festival performances integrating folk rituals. (b) Early Ming. Strict censorship and instrumentalization destroyed Yuan Zaju, turning drama into a tool of Confucian ideology. (c) Late Ming–Qing. Temporary relaxation permitted regional resurgence, but Qing bureaucracy reimposed control. (d) Republican Henan: Bans and "enlightenment" reform eliminated traditional Spring Festival drama, with Feng Yuxiang's policies exemplifying art's subordination to politics. This cross-dynastic pattern confirms that political control is the crux of drama's decline—not social change or modernization alone. When rulers saw drama as a threat, they suppressed it; when they saw it as a tool, they instrumentalized it. In both cases, drama's independence was lost.

6.2 Broader Implications: Art, Power, and Cultural Resilience

This history offers three key lessons about art, power, and resilience in China:

(a) Art as a Battleground for Power: Drama's fate reveals that art is never "neutral"—rulers have always seen it as a way to shape public ideology. From Ming bans to Republican reform, the state's goal was to control narrative: who tells stories, what stories are told, and for whom.

(b) Cultural Resilience Lies in Independence: Despite centuries of control, drama persisted because of its roots in folk culture. Yuan Zaju's prosperity, late Ming resurgence, and even modern efforts to revive folk opera show that art can survive political suppression—but only if it maintains its independence. When drama becomes a servant of politics (or commerce), it loses the ability to reflect reality and resonate with the public.

(c)The Modern Challenge: Since the 1990s, drama has increasingly become a tool of politics and commerce—playwrights create for prizes or propaganda, ignoring human complexity (Sun, 2010; Li, 2004). This mirrors the Ming's instrumentalization but with a new threat: commercialization. The "industrializing theater" slogan reduces art to a technological product, accelerating its decline.

6.3 Looking Forward

Chinese traditional folk drama—including Spring Festival performances—faces an uncertain future. To survive, it must reclaim its independence: not rejecting politics entirely (art can engage with social issues) but refusing to be a mere tool. The state's role should be to protect, not control; to fund preservation, not dictate content. As history shows, drama's strength lies in its connection to the people—not to power. Only then can this 800-year-old art form "sprout again when the spring breeze blows" (as noted in the original study), ensuring its place in China's cultural future.

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Notes

Note 1. In China, “元旦(YuanDan)”was used exclusively for the New Year, which is the first day of the first month of the lunar calendar. The word “元 yuan” in “YuanDan” refers to the beginning, which means the first. The word “旦 Dan” is a pictogram, the “日” above represents the sun, the “一” below represents the horizon, The Chinese character “旦” means

that the sun rises from the horizon, symbolizing the beginning of the day. When people combine the words “yuan” and “dan”, it is derived as the first day of the New Year, commonly known as the "New Year's Day ".

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Authors contributions

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No additional data are available.

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