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Local Inheritance and Innovation of Chinese Acrobatic Technology: Take Wuhan's "Flying Trapeze" as a Case

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Abstract: This study uses Wuhan's "Flying trapeze" project as a case study to explore innovative pathways for China's 3,600-year-old acrobatic art in modern society. Facing challenges such as intangible cultural heritage preservation and aesthetic diversification, Wuhan acrobatics has achieved innovation in transmission models by transitioning from a family-apprentice system to formally organized troupes for institutionalized inheritance; it has deepened its cultural connotations by integrating Chu-style cultural elements (e.g., plum blossoms, phoenix totems) and local Wuhan cultural characteristics; and it has revolutionized artistic expression through narrative transformation, technological empowerment, and cross-disciplinary integration. Despite pressures from talent gaps and market demands, Wuhan acrobatics' systematic innovations demonstrate effective strategies for the contemporary development of traditional Chinese performing arts.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; inheritance and innovation; flying trapeze

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1. Introduction

Chinese acrobatic art has a history of more than 3,600 years and is a national intangible cultural heritage originating from labor and life, with "thrilling, dangerous, strange and difficult" as its artistic characteristics. In the face of modern social changes and aesthetic improvement, traditional acrobatics urgently need innovative development, and are changing from "emphasizing skills over art" to a new form of equal emphasis on skills and integration with science and technology. Theaters and troupes across the country are actively exploring innovative paths, and the Wuhan "Trapeze" project integrates traditional aerial skills with modern technology, which is a vivid case of the modern transformation of traditional performing arts. This study discusses the survival and development strategies of traditional art in modern society by sorting out its historical context, inheritance mode and innovative practice, and provides reference for related fields.

2. Research Background of Wuhan "Flying Trapeze"

As an important part of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, Chinese acrobatic art has a long history of more than 3,600 years and is an intangible cultural heritage that originated from labor and life. In 2006, Chinese acrobatics was recognized as part of the national intangible cultural heritage, and its protection, inheritance, and innovative development have received growing attention. Chinese acrobatics has long made remarkable achievements in the field of international competition and commercial performances. According to records, Chinese acrobatic art has won more than 300 medals in major acrobatic competitions domestically and internationally.

However, with the rapid changes in the modern social environment and the continuous improvement of the aesthetic level of the public, Chinese acrobatic art is facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The inheritance mode, expression form and dissemination mode of traditional acrobatic skills urgently need to keep pace with the times for innovative transformation and creative development. Contemporary acrobatic art is shifting from the traditional 'emphasis on skills over art' to a new form that equally emphasizes artistic expression and technological integration.

In this context, acrobatic troupes across the country have explored innovative development paths, such as "Pioneer" created by the Shenyang Acrobatic Troupe, which has successfully realized the cross-border integration from "technique" to "art", and Zhoukou, Henan Province, has continued to make efforts through "acrobatic +" to create a development model that integrates the whole industry chain such as tourism park development, equipment manufacturing, and talent training [1].

As a city with a long cultural history and abundant artistic resources, Wuhan possesses significant potential for cultural innovation. It is in this context that the Wuhan "trapeze" project came into being, which not only adheres to the superb skills of traditional aerial acrobatics, but also integrates modern scientific and technological elements and artistic expression techniques, becoming a vivid case of local inheritance and innovation of Chinese acrobatics.

3. The Historical and Cultural Context of Chinese Acrobatics and Wuhan "Trapeze"

3.1. The Historical Origin and Development Context of Chinese Acrobatics

The germination of Chinese acrobatics first appeared in the Neolithic Age, the Qin Dynasty formed "wrestling drama", and the Han Dynasty developed the "Hundred Opera" system, which developed rapidly in the Tang Dynasty. In the Song Dynasty, acrobatic art moved from the court to the folk, creating many programs. Since the reform and opening up, Chinese acrobatics have continued to innovate in program creativity, theme evenings, acrobatic dramas, etc., and actively participated in international competitions, and is known as the "world's acrobatic power" [2].

3.2. The Formation and Regional Cultural Characteristics of Wuhan's "Trapeze"

Wuhan acrobatics began during the Qing Daoguang period, when folk acrobats from Tianmen, Hubei Province and other places gathered in the Houhu area of Hankou to perform their skills, gradually forming a class club and entering the stage performance. After the opening of Hankou People's Park in 1919, its Yonghe Hall became an acrobatic performance center, attracting acrobatic classes from all over the country to perform on stage, providing conditions for the inheritance and development of Wuhan's trapeze. In 1953, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe was officially established, integrating the forces of the Wuchang District Acrobatic Troupe and the Jiang'an District Folk Art Acrobatic Troupe, Wuhan Acrobatics is a traditional cultural expression formed by absorbing the essence of acrobatics from various schools on the basis of Jingchu folk acrobatics, with strong Chu style art characteristics.

Since its establishment, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe has performed extensively internationally, showcasing its blended skills and artistic style to diverse audiences worldwide, and its blended skills and gorgeous style have fascinated countless overseas audiences. Wuhan acrobatics is not only a business card of Chinese cultural exchanges, but also continues to promote the exchange of Chinese and foreign acrobatic arts through windows such as the Wuhan International Acrobatic Art Festival.

4. The Skill Inheritance Context and Localization Characteristics of Wuhan's "Trapeze"

Wuhan's "trapeze" inheritance is not a one-way concept. With the development of the times, its inheritance has also shown the characteristics of multi-level and integration. The

inheritance context of Wuhan's "trapeze" is very clear, from the traditional inheritance between master and apprentice, and then to the current innovation of industry, education and research, reflecting the vitality in the inheritance process. One of the most distinctive features is the localization imprint: memory innovation is rooted in Jingchu culture (such as plum blossoms and phoenixes) and actively responds to Wuhan's urban spirit, making full use of Wuhan's unique natural geography. Therefore, the inheritance of Wuhan's "trapeze" is a dynamic cultural practice, which is both traditional and innovative, both Wuhan and world-oriented.

4.1. The Inheritance of Wuhan "Flying Trapeze" from Family Master and Apprentice to National Troupes

The inheritance of Wuhan's "trapeze" has a long history of family master-apprenticeship. Wu Weimin, the national intangible cultural heritage inheritor, was born in an acrobatic family, and three generations of his family were engaged in acrobatic performances, and he has been in the art for more than 60 years and is a representative of the family inheritance. This model focuses on practice, so it lays a deep foundation for the inheritance of skills.

In 1953, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe was established, and the inheritance also moved towards the road of institutionalization and systematization. The acrobatic troupe adopts the model of "troupe leading the class" to systematically cultivate talents, and has inherited the ninth generation of actors so far. The youngest trainees enter the training at the age of 6 to systematically learn the skills and ensure the inheritance of the norms.

In order to cope with the disconnection of talents, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe has also innovated the mechanism in the inheritance. In 2012, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe established the Innovation and Research Department and the Prop R&D Department to be responsible for the research and development of new programs and props. This inheritance is no longer a simple imitation, but a collaborative innovation process of teaching and development. This mechanism has created opportunities for many young actors, such as creating "Wave Boat" for post-00s actor Lu Guoxiang, so that he can grow rapidly and make a name for himself on the international stage [3].

4.2. Cross-Level Integration and Creative Inheritance of the New Generation

The new generation of "trapeze" inheritors have also injected new vitality into it. Its outstanding representative is Xu Guolei, a student from Wuhan University, who integrated his love of water sports with the national intangible cultural heritage "fire pot skills" to create a shocking performance of "water and fire flying in the sky", and finally appeared on the stage of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala in 2025. His inheritance reflects a new model of interest, independent innovation, market acceptance, and cultural dissemination. He led the team to conduct commercial performances across the country, realizing the value appreciation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage skills in contemporary society, and showing the distinctive characteristics of the new generation of inheritors.

4.3. Localized Cultural Representation of Wuhan's "Trapeze" Skills

The repertoire creation of the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe draws inspiration from Jingchu culture, combining mythology, history and modern acrobatics. The narrative core of "Phoenix Theory", which has been widely praised, comes from the story of the Yangtze River civilization. Another representative program "Hanmei Shuying. Skills on the Pole" integrates elements of plum blossoms and local characteristic Chinese opera, highlighting the in-depth excavation and artistic refinement of the essence of regional culture. These works make high-altitude skills go beyond simple "show-offs" and become an important carrier for inheriting and disseminating local culture.

At the same time, the creation of "flying trapeze" skills also closely echoes the urban spirit of Wuhan. The original acrobatic drama 'City of Heroes', which integrates acrobatics, singing, and dancing, celebrates collective resilience and civic spirit through performance. The play not only shows the narrative ability of acrobatics, but also strengthens the resonance of art and the city at the same frequency, so that the "flying trapeze" carries the weight of the times.

4.4. The Inheritance and Cross-Border Integration of Wuhan's "Trapeze"

Both the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe's repertoire and Xu Guolei's 'Water and Fire Flying' integrate multiple art forms, including music, dance, drama, and Chinese opera. This integration enriches the artistic expression and emotional appeal of acrobatics, better meets the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences, and promotes the modern transformation of acrobatic art [4].

5. Innovative Practice and Exploration of Wuhan Trapeze in the Contemporary Context

While adhering to the essence of traditional skills, the "trapeze" of the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe actively innovates, and through repertoire innovation, skill research and development and communication methods, acrobatic art is revitalized in contemporary times.

5.1. Narrative Transformation and Repertoire Creation

The Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe has broken through the model of focusing on skills over art, focusing on short program presentation. Since 2003, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe has actively explored the creation of acrobatic dramas and used acrobatics to tell stories. From "Heroes in the World" with the theme of "Heroes of the World", to "Dream Nine Songs" relying on literary classics to enhance internal unity, and then focusing on Wuhan's urban life "Jiangcheng" and anti-epidemic theme "City of Heroes", the story and drama of acrobatic dramas have been enhanced. The problem of skills and art was solved. In particular, the light and shadow illusion acrobatic drama "Phoenix Says", which will be created in 2024, draws inspiration from the Yangtze River civilization and Jingchu culture.

5.2. R&D and Innovation of Skills and Props

Skill is undoubtedly at the heart of acrobatics. In 2012, the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe took the lead in establishing the representative innovation program "Sail Chasing Dreams. "Wave Boat" originates from the classic "Wave Bridge". Through prop innovation and technological breakthroughs, many difficult movements have been created, such as "four-person continuous flipping", "six-person continuous flipping", "three-week self-falling bridge", etc., which enhance the ornamentation of acrobatics.

5.3. Technological Empowerment and Stage Innovation

"Phoenix Says" shows the empowering role of science and technology in acrobatic art. The play uses gorgeous light and shadow technology to present a dynamic immersive space, forming a delicate visual effect, making the actors seem to be shuttling through the picture, which further enhances the audience's sense of presence and experience. In addition, "Phoenix Says" also explores the integration of acrobatics and musicals for the first time in the domestic acrobatic industry, designs distinctive singing passages for the characters, and strengthens the beauty of aesthetic experience and imagery in the alternation of auditory and visual [5].

6. Challenges, Reflections, and Future Prospects for the Local Inheritance and Innovation of Wuhan's "Trapeze"

6.1. The Core Challenge of Inheritance

Wuhan's "trapeze" is facing the serious problem of lack of talents. Due to evolving social and lifestyle factors, fewer young people are pursuing acrobatic training, presenting challenges for talent recruitment, and it is very difficult to recruit students. On the other hand, many actors retired at the age of 30 due to physical wear and tear and life pressure, but the supply of backward talents is difficult to keep up. Although the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe improves the comprehensive quality of actors and solves worries through the combination of "cultural classes + professional training", the lack of talents is still a problem to be solved.

In the era of new media and diversified entertainment, traditional studio models face evolving audience engagement patterns. According to the survey, the public's cognition of acrobatics mostly stays on the surface characteristics such as "thrilling" and "difficult", and its cultural connotation and artistic value have not been fully disseminated [6].

6.2. Reflection on Innovative Practice and Current Limitations

Although the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe has developed many eye-catching new programs through technological innovation, how to avoid form over content and ensure that technical means serve artistic expression still needs to be explored. There is a view that the integration of the plot of some plays with the acrobatic ontology is still not close enough.

Innovation in repertoire requires significant investment, but market returns are uncertain. However, how to find a balance between catering to the audience's tastes and adhering to the ontology of acrobatic art, and avoiding excessive commercialization to dilute artistic quality is a topic that needs to be constantly reflected [7].

6.3. Future Development and Prospects

The innovation of Wuhan's "trapeze" is a systematic project, which needs to face practical challenges such as talent, communication, and market on the premise of respecting the fundamentals of traditional skills, and achieve creative transformation and innovative development through multi-dimensional strategies such as science and technology, education, and internationalization. Its future is not only about the survival of a troupe, but also the epitome of whether the excellent traditional Chinese culture can be reborn in contemporary times [8,9].

7. Conclusion

Wuhan's "flying trapeze" finally took Jingchu culture and Yangtze River culture as the core of creation. For example, "Phoenix Says" starts from the high-altitude program that the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe is good at, cleverly integrates the image of the phoenix totem in Chu culture, places Jingchu culture in the context of the Yangtze River civilization to structure the script, and integrates the magnificent magic of the "Classic of Mountains and Seas" and Qu Yuan's spirit of search. These works not only show superb skills, but also convey the unique regional cultural spirit and philosophical connotation through artistic expression, making them a living carrier for the dissemination of Yangtze River culture and Jingchu culture.

Despite the brilliant achievements of Wuhan's "flying trapeze", its future development still faces challenges, such as the sustainability of the talent pool ("Concerns about the physical demands of acrobatics have contributed to a shrinking pool of young practitioners"), the increasing diversification of the audience's aesthetic needs, and the competitive pressure under the new situation of international cultural exchanges.

In short, the future development of Wuhan's "flying trapeze" can only maintain its vitality and vitality and continue to write a brilliant chapter in the Chinese and even world

acrobatics arena under the premise of adhering to the foundation of skills and deeply rooted in cultural blood, embracing the changes of the times with an open and inclusive attitude, and continuing to promote creative transformation and innovative development.

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