

STAGING YUAN ZAJU: ADAPTATION OF AUTUMN IN THE HAN PALACE (汉宫秋) IN XINCHANG DIAOQIANG OPERA

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Abstract: Drawing on Susan Bennett's reception theory (Bennett, 2003), this paper adopts a spectator-oriented qualitative approach to explore *Diaoqiang's* adaptation of *Autumn in the Han Palace* (汉宫秋). As one of the oldest surviving theatrical forms, dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), *Diaoqiang* is often described as a living fossil of Chinese opera and is especially renowned for its capacity to stage classical repertoires such as *Autumn in the Han Palace*. Focusing on stage arrangements, extra-daily bodily movements, and the soundscape of this adaptation, this paper argues that the *Diaoqiang* troupe seeks to balance the pursuit of archaeological reconstruction, as theorised by Pavis (2013) with contemporary audience reception. Rather than treating *Diaoqiang* merely as a means of preserving the classical canon, this paper draws attention to the troupe's efforts to engage modern audiences, a perspective frequently overlooked in existing scholarship. This study concludes that the *Diaoqiang* troupe is committed to negotiating the tension between traditional conventions and contemporary audience reception by introducing their own interpretative elements into gaps in the original text, thereby making the classic more accessible to contemporary spectators.

Keywords: *Diaoqiang*; Yuan zaju; classics; reception; adaptation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Grammy-nominated composer Du Yun brought a regional opera form that is in decline to international attention at the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 6 February 2019, as part of the *Future Tradition, Revamping Disappearing Folk Arts and Regional Operas Project in China*. Her work was inspired by Xinchang Diaoqiang Opera (新昌调腔), one of the oldest surviving theatrical forms, dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD). In Zhang Dai's *The Dream Recollections of Tao An*, there is an early reference to *Diaoqiang* (调腔), noting that “Zhu Chusheng, a female opera singer, is renowned for her *Diaoqiang* performance.” This reference implies that *Diaoqiang* had already been established in Xinchang and had a burgeoning influence across eastern Zhejiang, encompassing Shaoxing, Xiaoshan, Shangyu, Yuyao, Shengxian, and Ninghai by that time.

The *Diaoqiang* troupe preserves a corpus of 159 late Qing-period libretto manuscripts in local archives. In 2006, *Diaoqiang* was listed in the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List for preservation. The *Diaoqiang* repertoire is generally classified into three main categories: the traditional, including adaptations of Yuan *zaju*, *Nanxi* (南戏, Southern Theatre), and Ming-Qing *chuanqi* operas, the topical, and the *Monk Mulian Series*. *Diaoqiang* is especially renowned for its capacity to stage classical texts, most notably *Autumn in the Han Palace* and *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. This study focuses on *Diaoqiang*'s adaptation of *Autumn in the Han Palace* through a close reading of staged movement, vocal transformation, and musical accompaniment, based on a recorded performance.

Autumn in the Han Palace (破幽梦孤雁汉宫秋) is a Yuan *zaju* written by Ma Zhiyuan, one of the most influential playwrights of the Yuan Dynasty. The play recounts the love story between the Han Emperor and Wang Zhaojun, whose lute performance wins the emperor's affection. However, they are forcibly separated when the Mongol khan demands to marry Wang Zhaojun as the price of political peace. After bidding farewell to the emperor, Wang Zhaojun drowns herself in despair instead of heading north with the Mongol soldiers. The emperor, on the other hand, repents the loss of her in the Han Palace, and later encounters her soul as a wild goose in his dream. The *Diaoqiang* troupe chooses to stage the episode “Bidding Farewell” which carries the emotional and dramatic core of the narrative.

In recent years, a growing number of Yuan *zaju* have been adapted for contemporary performances. For instance, *Autumn in the Han Palace* has been adapted into a variety

of performing arts such as Cantonese opera, Peking opera and Kunqu opera, demonstrating its strong adaptability. Among these forms, *Diaoqiang* is the oldest performing form, and it evokes a particular interest in this paper for its pursuit of what the French semiologist Patrice Pavis calls “archaeological reconstruction”. This concept refers to the representational ideal of a classical work (Pavis, 2013, p. 207), that seeks to *echo* the original text while largely disregarding the actual circumstances of contemporary reception.

In spite of this, the troupe leader Ding Lihong notices that *Diaoqiang* struggles to compete with more established forms such as Peking opera or Jingju, Kunqu opera and even Western theatre. This raises key questions about how *Diaoqiang* negotiates the tension between historical fidelity and contemporary performance. Accordingly, this study explores: What are the specific ways in which *Diaoqiang*'s adaptation of *Autumn in the Han Palace* transforms the original Yuan *zaju* text? To what extent does this adaptation remain traditional, and where does it depart in order to reach its contemporary audience? Drawing on a recorded performance, this paper offers a qualitative analysis of a regional opera that is in decline, distinguishing the performing conventions the troupe uses in staging the classic itself and uncovering how staged performance, vocal techniques, and musical arrangements narrate the text. Finally, this paper aims to explore why the *Diaoqiang* troupe insists on engaging in “archaeological reconstruction” despite the difficulties encountered in contemporary performance contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The Adaptation of Autumn in the Han Palace*

Autumn in the Han Palace, written by Ma Zhiyuan in the late 13th century, is based on the well-known story of Princess Zhaojun's journey going beyond the frontier. Although the play is believed to have circulated widely during the Yuan dynasty, the irretrievability of its original performance details and related historical materials prevents a full reconstruction of its early reception. (Wang, 2018, p. 178). Despite this limitation, this *zaju* continued to have an impact on later generations. It is mentioned that in 1682, Yu Jinquan arranged for the renowned Yu troupe to perform at a literati gathering, presenting *The Beauty and Peach Blossoms*, *The Story of Washing Gauze*, and *Autumn in the Han Palace*, among others. (Wang, Ding, & Gu, 2004, p. 232).

Over time, the play has been widely adapted across various regional operas, including *Diaoqiang*, *Yuyao qiang*, *Taizhou luntan*, Sichuan opera, Kunqu opera, Henan opera,

and Huangmei opera. In the modern era, it has also been adapted for *Huaju* (话剧, Spoken Drama), most notably in Gu Haiqing's three-act play of 1934 and Hong Shen's one-act play of 1937.

The play further extended its reach beyond China in the early 20th century. As shown in **Figure 1**, it was translated by the French musicologist and sinologist Louis Laloy (1874–1944), whose adaptation, *Le Chagrin dans le palais de Han*, was performed at the Théâtre des Arts on 2 June 1911. (Lo, 2017, p. 33). Shortly thereafter, from 19 March to April 1912, *The Flower of the Palace of Han* was staged at the Broadway Little Theatre by Charles Rann Kennedy (1871-1950) as illustrated in **Figure 2**. According to *The New York Times* (17 March 1912), the play consisted of five scenes, with Miss Matthison appearing as Wang Zhaojun and Frank Reicher as the Emperor (see **Figure 3**; Times, 1912).

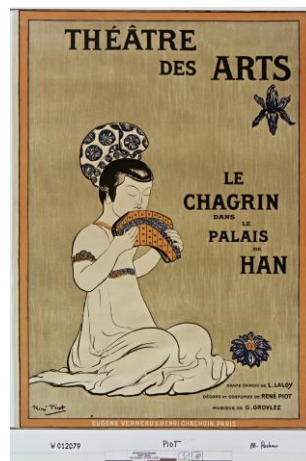


Figure 1: Theatre poster of *Le Chagrin dans le palais de Han* by René Piot (1911).

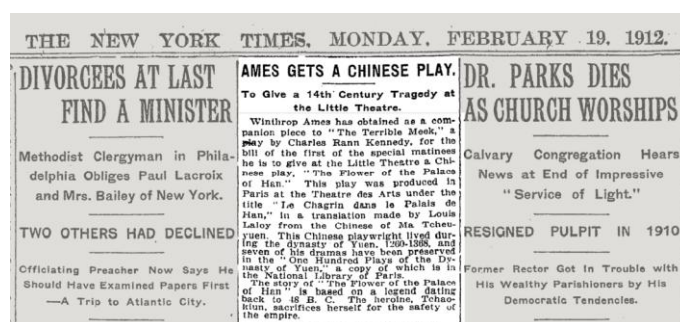


Figure 2: A news article of *The Flower of the Palace of Han* published in The New York Times (19 February 1912).



Figure 3: Photograph of Frank Reicher in *The Flower of the Palace of Han* at the Little Theatre, published in *The New York Times* (17 March 1912).

Focusing on the Xinchang *Diaoqiang* tradition, a significant milestone occurred in 1963 when the *Diaoqiang* artist Zhu Caixing performed and recorded *Autumn in the Han Palace*, after which Fang Rongzhang transcribed the score. The recording, the transcribed score, and a handwritten libretto dated 1892 are all preserved in the archives of the Xinchang *Diaoqiang* Opera Troupe (Shi, 2008, p. 124). The play was later included in the *Selected Traditional Operas of Zhejiang*, alongside works such as *The Story of the Lute*, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, and *The Story of the White Rabbit*, which further expanded its circulation and visibility. These materials provide a concrete foundation for examining how *Diaoqiang* opera is realised on stage today.

Existing studies have concentrated largely on tracing the adaptation lineage of *Autumn in the Han Palace* across different regions, genres, and cultural contexts. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how the play is faithfully represented or reconstructed within contemporary theatrical contexts. In particular, there is a scholarly gap concerning the performance techniques and conventions of the play, as well as its engagement with present-day spectatorship.

2.2 Ways to Play Old Texts

The question of how to restore and stage older plays has been widely discussed within theatre studies. From a comparative perspective, William Shakespeare's works have generated extensive discussion in Western theatre, as the number of traditional

productions is nearly matched by those that boldly rewrite the scripts. (Schoch, 2021; Bennett, 1996). Studies of Shakespearean performance demonstrate that attempts at pure restoration are often dismissed as “the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever was seen,” as troupes are inevitably influenced by contemporary theatrical practices and audience expectations. These types of adaptations have persisted for a significant period (Schoch, 2021). A theatre actress and scriptwriter Emily Smith (2024), shared insightful thoughts on performing Shakespeare today, noting, “the heart of these works are stories about love, power, betrayal, and ambition – themes as relevant now as they were in the 16th century – they just need to be presented in different or more modern ways to be accessible”. Without a doubt, the accessibility of older plays to contemporary audiences is a key rationale for rewriting old scripts.

Such debates provide a useful comparative lens for examining similar issues in Chinese opera traditions. While Chinese opera has likewise preserved a rich repertoire of classical texts, it faces challenges in restoring the distinct aesthetic and performative constraints. In the case of reproductions of classic texts, Pavis (2013, pp. 212-213) proposes six methods, namely archaeological reconstruction, historicization, *récupération*, *mise-en-scène* of possible meanings, vocalising the text, and the return to myth. Pavis emphasises that several methods are normally used within a single production. Clearly, the *Diaoqiang* troupe adheres to the principle of archaeological reconstruction, an approach that seeks to stage plays exactly as they were first performed based on available historical knowledge as the troupe is especially renowned for staging some of the most faithful classical *zaju* in China. Such *mise-en-scène* prioritises archival accuracy over the gap between reconstruction and the contemporary spectator’s horizon of expectations.

By way of comparison, the recent production of *Autumn in the Han Palace* by the Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre, starring Yuan Guoliang and Zhang Yuanyuan, was staged in January 2024. This version adopts a *récupération* approach. The original text is treated as raw material awaiting the processes of actualisation, modernisation, adaptation, and rewriting necessary to bring the classical play into contemporary relevance. In addition to adapting the singing to the Kunqu style, adding vocal parts for supporting characters, and shifting the narrative focus from the emperor to Zhaojun, this version incorporates modern backdrops and stage props to enhance the staging.

The contrasting instances above show the tension in staging classical texts. In practice, these reproduction methods are usually used in combination, and most productions

attempt to negotiate a middle ground between them. In the case of *Diaoqiang*, its strong emphasis on archaeological reconstruction raises a vital question: How can a performance focused solely on historical authenticity remain intelligible and meaningful to contemporary audiences? To answer this, it must be examined through the lens of the spectator. While Pavis categorises strategies for staging the past, his framework overlooks how these reconstructions are perceived and interpreted by present-day audiences. To bridge this gap, it is necessary to turn to Susan Bennett's reception theory, which emphasises the active role of the spectator in constructing meaning based on their cultural and historical context.

Bennett's theory helps address the aforementioned question, arguing that the meaning of a classical play is not fixed within the performance itself. Rather, it emerges through the interaction between the performance and each generation of spectators, shaped by their own cultural, historical and experiential horizons.

2.3 The Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on the adaptation history of *Autumn in the Han Palace* and broader debates on staging classical texts, existing studies have tended to focus on textual dissemination or on production strategies that demonstrate distinct adaptation methods. There is a significant lack of attention to how archaeological reconstruction-oriented performance practices are experienced and interpreted by contemporary spectators. This gap is especially evident in the case of *Diaoqiang*, where its emphasis on preserving the most faithful traditional forms raises questions about contemporary accessibility and relevance. By bringing Pavis's concept of archaeological reconstruction into dialogue with Bennett's reception theory, this paper examines how the *Diaoqiang* troupe maintains its commitment to archaeological reconstruction while fostering the engagement of modern audiences.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since *Diaoqiang* was listed in the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List nearly 20 years ago, it has gained a far-reaching reputation for preserving the "purest" form of zaju performance and is often celebrated as a living fossil of Chinese opera (ezhejiang.gov.cn, 2020). However, as Eric Hobsbawm argues in *The Invention of Tradition*, older forms of community and authority structures, and consequently the traditions associated with them, were unadaptable and became rapidly unviable (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2000, p. 5).

In this light, the Xinchang Diaoliang Opera Troupe's pursuit of what Patrice Pavis terms "archaeological reconstruction", refers to an effort to bring past *zaju* performances to life as faithfully as possible. However, the troupe must contend with a lack of documentation and historical materials, as well as the pressure to remain relevant in the contemporary market. The distance between the classical text and contemporary audiences creates a fundamental tension, suggesting that any attempt at reconstruction inevitably involves the invention of 'new' traditions to adapt old ones. Such reconstruction largely relies on spectators shaped by present-day aesthetic tendencies and performance contexts to interpret the performance within contemporary relevance.

Bringing these perspectives together, this paper examines how *Diaoliang's* adaptation of *Autumn in the Han Palace* negotiates the delicate balance between the ideal of archaeological reconstruction and the practical demands of contemporary reception. It is guided by the following research questions:

- i. How does the troupe negotiate between historical authenticity and modern spectatorship?
- ii. Through what performative strategies, specifically, stage arrangement, bodily movement, as well as vocal and musical performance, are these tensions articulated or resolved?

By exploring these questions, the paper aims to analyse the process of performance reinterpretation, through which tradition is reshaped for contemporary relevance.

4. METHODOLOGY

Positioning the researcher as a contemporary spectator, this paper draws on Susan Bennett's reception theory, which emphasises the spectator's active role in constructing theatrical meaning (Bennett, 2003, p. 1). Before proceeding, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of the spectator and the audience. Unlike audience reception, which primarily relies on empirical data such as interviews, surveys, or archival records, the spectator, according to Gaylord (1983, p. 136) and Balme (2015, p. 47), refers to an individualised and ideal recipient equipped with psychological, cognitive, and emotional competencies, as well as knowledge of aesthetics and reception theory. By approaching the performance from a micro-perspective, the spectator uncovers the underlying meanings and significance of the stage performance. Rather than collecting empirical data through interviews or surveys, this paper approaches reception as an interpretive and reflexive process, in which meaning is generated through informed viewing shaped by prior knowledge and experience of Chinese opera. In other words, this approach allows the spectator to create their own

text of the classical canon. The responses nonetheless require examination against structural elements found in the play or text.

As such, this paper utilises a model of the spectator's theatrical experience that relies on two frames, initially proposed by Gaylord (1983, p. 136) and later extended by Bennett (2003, pp. 1-2). In *Theatre Audiences*, Bennett divides the theatrical frame into two and describes the outer frame, which encompasses both audience and performers, as a cultural construct. Within this frame, the spectator is influenced by factors external to the performance, specifically the social and cultural context, and the expectations they bring to the event. Meanwhile, the inner frame refers to the playing space where the actual theatrical performance occurs; it is here that the spectator experiences the 'fictional stage world' (Bennett, 2003, p. 139). Grounded in this framework, this paper transforms these theoretical concepts into an analytical tool to examine the performance of *Autumn in the Han Palace* presented by the Xinchang Diaoqiang Opera Troupe.

Specifically, the framework in **Figure 4** presents the adapted model of the spectator's theatrical experience, showing how the source text, *Autumn in the Han Palace*, undergoes a process of archaeological reconstruction (Pavis, 2013) and is transformed into an actual performance through three specific elements: stage arrangement, bodily movements, and vocal and musical performance. However, as shown in the integrated framework below, significant challenges arise in the process of archaeological reconstruction when the inner frame interacts with the outer frame. In particular, the troupe must negotiate the tension between preserving the original play and maintaining its appeal for contemporary audiences. Spectators may encounter difficulties in decoding the symbolic conventions of traditional *Diaoqiang* performance, and ethical dissonances may arise between ancient moral ethics and the emotional values of twenty-first century audiences. Accordingly, this paper adopts a qualitative approach grounded in performance analysis and interpretive reading to examine how the Xinchang Diaoqiang Opera Troupe responds to overcome these challenges.

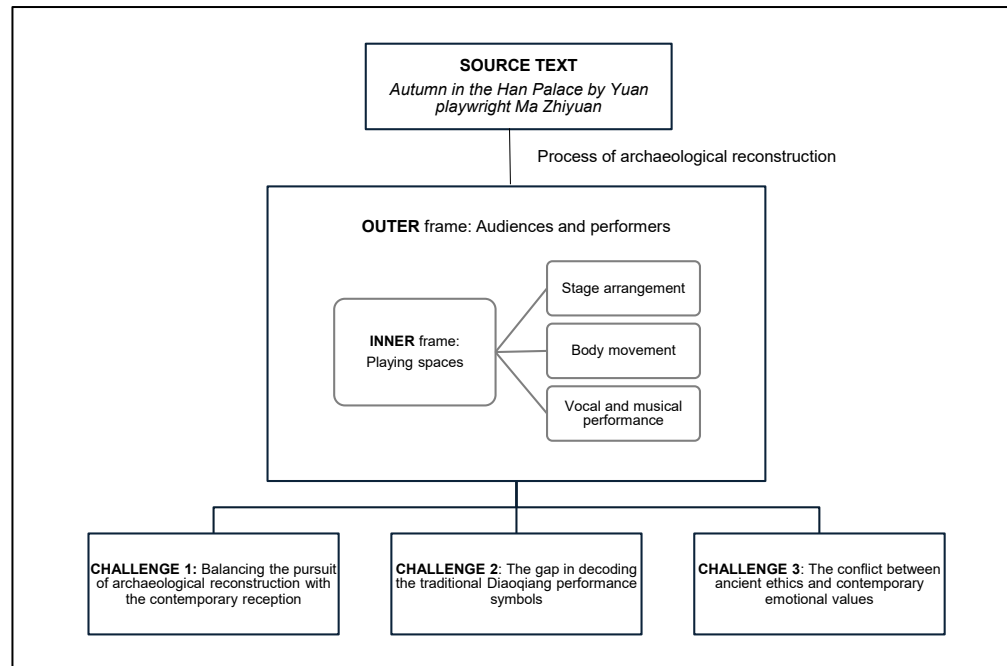


Figure 4. The adapted model of the spectator's theatrical experience.

The primary data for analysis consist of two recorded performances of *Autumn in the Han Palace* by the Xinchang Diaoyang Opera Troupe, both retrieved from the online video-sharing platform Bilibili. The first recording, recorded at the Nanjing Museum Old Teahouse on 30 December 2018, features a smaller stage that allows for close observation of the actors' bodily movements and facial expressions (Ma, 2021). The second recording, recorded on a larger stage, offers a panoramic view that clearly reveals formations and spatial arrangements, which are essential for analysing their staged formations (Ma, 2020). Both recordings are productions by the Xinchang Diaoyang Opera Troupe. They were selected based on several criteria: the completeness of the performance documentation, the clarity of audio-visual quality, and the contrast in stage scale, which facilitates comparative analysis across different performance conditions.

Methodologically, both recordings were analysed through close viewing and comparative performance analysis. Each recording was viewed multiple times, with initial viewings aimed at familiarising the spectator with the overall structure of the performances, followed by detailed observations focusing on specific performance elements. These include stage blocking (performer positioning and formation movement), bodily movement (gesture, posture, and choreographed techniques), as well as vocal and musical performance (singing techniques, rhythmic delivery, and interaction with instrumental accompaniment). Through comparative analysis, the paper identifies recurring patterns and variations across different stage conditions. Attention was given to how stage scale influences the articulation of movement and

stage blocking. In addition, to ensure transparency and reproducibility, the video sources are documented with full bibliographic references and their access links are in the References section.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1. The Stage Arrangement or *Mise-En-Scène*

Traditional Chinese opera stages use minimal physical stage props, instead, relying on the actors' movements to animate the scenic environment. In fact, the empty space on stage reflects what Pavis terms an "archaeological reconstruction" of staging practices, through which traditional Chinese opera pursues an art of omission. As Ye observes, this stage constitutes a virtual space-time, a realm of free possibility. (Ye, 1997, p. 46). Contemporary *Diaoqiang* performances, as evidenced by video recordings, largely preserve this convention when staging traditional plays (see **Figure 5**).

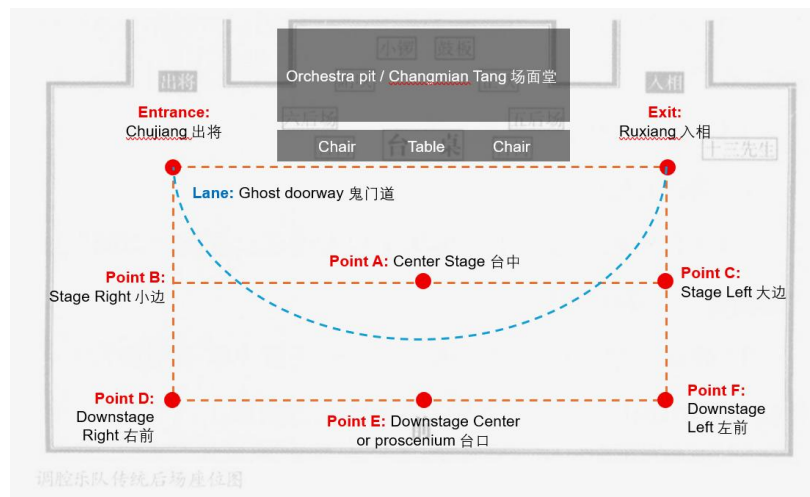


Figure 5. *Diaoqiang* stage

In *Diaoqiang*, the stage is organised into two primary zones. The first is the acting area extending to the apron, where actors perform most of their action. This area is traditionally equipped with a table and two chairs, and the principal stage props placed upstage. Behind these, at upstage centre, is the orchestra pit, known in *Diaoqiang* terminology as the *Changmian Tang* (场面堂), often visible to the audience, which provides live musical accompaniment throughout the performance.

Despite the minimal physical setting on stage, *Diaoqiang* actors make full use of the table and chairs to create a virtual scenography, such as simulating city walls or strolling along streets and alleys. At the rear of the stage, doorways are located on the

left and right, known respectively as Chujiang (出将) and Ruxiang (入相), which serve as conventional entrances and exits and help signal shifts of scene. Although the *Diaoqiang* stage utilises few stage elements, the absence of realistic scenography, or what Chiang defines as “blankness in aesthetics”, encourages the spectator to actively transform the bare space into an imagined environment.

Despite this, stage arrangement, positional shifts and actor formations are also essential components in structuring stage space. This dynamic is particularly evident in the “Seven Brothers” aria, at which point Zhaojun has already departed for the frontier while the emperor prepares to return to the Han palace. The emperor moves from the downstage area (point E) to stage left (point C), then ascends onto the table at the upstage centre. In this context, the table signifies an elevated position, allowing the emperor to stand tall and see farther. Meanwhile, the procession of soldiers and Zhaojun through the Ghost Doorway creates a layered spatial relationship. Three soldiers enter first, followed by Zhaojun and a final soldier who uses two flags to simulate a chariot, with Hatun bringing up the rear. As shown in **Figure 6**, although the leading characters appear physically close on stage, vertical differentiation produces a perceived emotional and geographical distance.



Figure 6. Video footage, timestamp 00:25:46

A comparison between the two recorded performances further reveals how reconstruction is adapted to accommodate different stage scales. On a larger stage, as seen in the second recording, the troupe utilises the expansive space to create a more dynamic visual composition. For instance, during Hatun’s entrance, he first walks around the stage in a few circles to perform his *lingzi* skills, a basic technique in traditional opera involving the wielding, shaking, and rotating of long pheasant feathers. Following this, he moves to the centre stage for his formal appearance. These introductory movements effectively embody Hatun’s character and his dominant power in the narrative, expressing his ambition and confidence through purely physical means.

The additional 15-second *lingzi* performance is a subtle adaptation for the larger stage, designed to capture the spectator’s attention. Rather than simply preserving form, the troupe enhances both visual narrative and audience engagement by adjusting the duration and scale of movement.

Group blocking (*qunti diaodu*, 群体调度), one of the notable features of this performance, refers to coordinated movement involving three or more performers, often employed for walk-on roles (*longtao*, 龙套) such as soldiers, eunuchs, and palace maids. (Yan, 2008, p. 57) Although the original text of *Autumn in the Han Palace* provides no specific movement instructions for these walk-on actors, the troupe arranges their choreography based on the conventions of Chinese opera. The procession demonstrates considerable flexibility in both blocking and static positioning. Nevertheless, the movements are not improvised but closely adhere to conventional formations, resulting in an aesthetically ordered stage composition. The following table (Table 1) outlines the core stage formations of the walk-on roles:

Table 1: Stage formations of walk-on performers.

Timestamp	Walk-ons	Formations	Description
00:00:35	4	Small procession (<i>xiao baidui</i> , 小摆队)	The small procession is used in more intimate scenes, such as meetings in the commander’s tent. Soldiers enter the stage and stand in orderly formation on both sides.
00:02:04	4	Oblique line and exit (<i>tuimo xiehutong yu woxia</i> , 推磨斜胡同与窝下)	The soldiers walk around the stage and stand in an oblique line near the exit, with Hatun leading the departure. This formation signifies that they are following Hatun to the next destination.
00:04:45	10	Grand procession (<i>da baidui</i> , 大摆队)	The grand procession is a solemn and majestic formation in which eunuchs and palace maids enter the stage in pairs, preceding the emperor.
00:06:57	10	Standing in a horizontal line	The eunuchs and palace maids stand in a horizontal line near the

		(<i>guihou zhengyizi</i> , 归后正一字)	upstage area, facing the audience, while the emperor and Zhaojun perform at centre stage.
00:18:24	10	Rushing off the stage (<i>yiwu xia</i> , 一窝下)	The eunuchs and palace maids rush off the stage in disorder, signifying an emergency evacuation.
	4	Entrance with apprehension formation (<i>qinzhu shang</i> , 擒住上)	The soldiers seize Zhaojun using an apprehension formation. After circling her several times, they stop while two soldiers strike a “bow-and-arrow” pose.
00:19:00	4	Apprehension formation and paired exit (<i>qinxia yu chougupai duixia zuhe</i> , 擒下与抽骨牌队下组合)	The soldiers squat into a horse stance, simulating the act of riding. They then escort Zhaojun slowly from centre stage towards the exit.
00:25:40	4	Running across the stage (<i>paoguo shang, paoguo xia</i> , 跑过上, 跑过下)	The soldiers move along the Ghost Doorway (also known as the Running Lantern Path, <i>zouma deng guidao xian</i> 走马灯轨道线). Three soldiers lead the formation, followed by Zhaojun and another soldier who uses two flags to simulate a chariot.
00:30:32	8	Entrance and standing in a horizontal line (<i>zhengyizi shang</i> 正一字上)	The eunuchs and palace maids enter the stage in a line and stand near the upstage area as the emperor prepares to return to the Han palace.

Two contrasting formations are particularly significant in articulating underlying narrative relations. The troupe uses the “Small Procession” and “Grand Procession” to stage a host-guest relationship between the Han dynasty and the northern forces. Four northern soldiers enter the stage in a small procession, evoking a nomadic atmosphere of a long march. In contrast, the ten-person grand procession, moving in a solemn and hierarchical line, serves as a majestic symbol of the Han dynasty. For much of the play, the walk-on performers stand in a horizontal line near the upstage area. Their static

and orderly formation allows the audience to focus on the protagonists. By varying the density and rhythm of the walk-on formations, the troupe transforms textual details into physical stage language, allowing the spectator to perceive differences through the formation.

Throughout the play, the troupe choreographs group blocking in strict adherence to established conventions. On the one hand, this reinforces the principle of archaeological reconstruction by preserving traditional formation systems. On the other hand, the use of these traditional formations allows the troupe to maintain a dynamic visual rhythm and achieve narrative efficiency, compensating for the absence of static scenery. From the perspective of spectator reception, such stylised formations provide cues for the spectator to read and decode the performance, as Chinese opera conventions have long developed into a mature, historically shared framework for both performance and appreciation. A knowledgeable spectator does not merely watch the shapes form on shape; they decode them instantly as signs of military tension or spatial transition.

Ultimately, the *Diaoqiang* troupe's stage arrangements demonstrate how minimal props and conventional formations are mobilized to construct symbolic meaning rather than literal scenery. Their strategies reveal that archaeological reconstruction is not just about preserving form; it actively engages the spectator's interpretation through shared cultural symbols of classical performance, recalibrating historical authenticity to remain intelligible and resonant for modern spectators.

5.2. The Extra-Daily Bodily Movements

The bodily techniques employed in *Diaoqiang* performance can be understood through Eugenio Barba's concept of the "extra-daily", which refers to scenic behavior found predominantly in codified Eastern performance forms. This technique requires actors to move on stage in ways that are contrary to daily habits, while remaining controlled, in order to create a heightened theatrical situation on stage. In Chinese opera, the extra-daily movement is achieved through exaggerated and stylised gestures to attract the audience's attention and emphasise the message of the movement (Chiang, 1993). These bodily movements are specifically designed to intensify expression and enhance perceptibility. The "four skills and five methods" (sigong wufa 四功五法), foundational techniques of *xiqu* performance, constitute a codified system of bodily signs, akin to what Roland Barthes describes as a system of codes awaiting interpretation.

This is evident again in the contrasting entrances of Hatun, the Northern envoy, and the Han emperor, where their emotion is externalised through bodily movement. Hatun wears a *lingzi* (翎子) (**Figure 7**), particularly in larger stage productions, performing *lingzi* techniques in front of soldiers standing at the sides of the stage. He circles the stage while manipulating the pheasant feathers in rhythmic gestures, then stops at centre stage to make an appearance and recite his lines. His expansive bodily movements and technical skills amplify his presence and suggest his dominant status in the narrative. In contrast, the emperor enters with his head bowed and in measured pace, appearing preoccupied. Upon seeing Zhaojun, he approaches her in a few quick steps, then takes a few steps back; the hesitation reveals his conflicted feelings about Zhaojun's departure. His movements embody the tension between political focus and intimate attachment. Rather than being directly expressed through dialogue, the actors convey the subtle emotions directly to the audience through "extra-daily bodily movement", while the movements themselves remain aesthetically stylised.

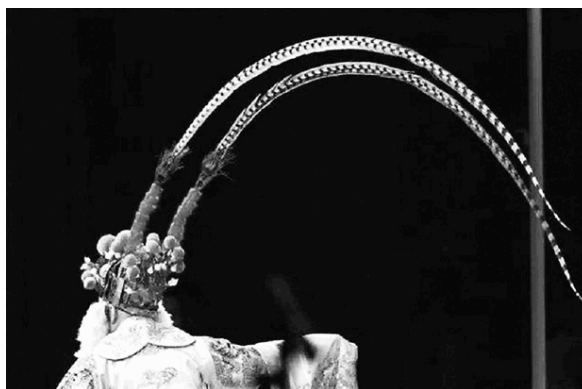


Figure 7: *Lingzi* is often worn by male martial roles, also known as *wusheng* (武生).

The strategic calibration of the "inner frame" is further evident in the *Diaoqiang* troupe's introduction of an additional two-minute farewell scene, which is absent from the original text but serves as a proactive negotiation with modern spectatorship. This scene heightens the dramatic conflict through intense physical confrontation and symbolic action. When the emperor embraces Zhaojun before their parting, Hatun interrupts with a sudden, booming, and rough voice from the *Ruxiang* door. The stage composition is disrupted. Hatun and the soldiers separate the couple and seize Zhaojun using an apprehension formation. As the emperor rushes to her aid, Hatun seizes his dragon robe amid the chaos and casts it aside, throwing the emperor towards stage right. The dragon robe here, representing Han authority and dignity, is stripped of its power through the act of physical desecration. By externalising power relations through embodied action, this additional scene can be seen as the boldest stroke of the entire performance, layered with expressive emotion and political

implications. It demonstrates that archaeological reconstruction is not merely a faithful reproduction but involves selective augmentation to appeal to modern audiences.

The emperor's response to Zhaojun's abduction once again exposes his powerlessness, shifting the focus from apparent chaos to his inner turmoil. Remaining in a fallen stance at stage right, he trembles towards the exit. His despair is codified through the single-leg kneeling step (*dantui guicuobu*, 单腿跪蹉步), a strained ground movement across the stage, as he attempts to chase after them but fails. He then stands up and returns to stage right in quick steps. Upon seeing the discarded dragon robe on stage, symbolising his humiliation, he is overwhelmed by emotion. He takes a few steps back, flutters his sleeves, and shakes his headwear. Accompanied by the rhythm of the *guban*, gongs, and cymbals, he takes a rightward backstep (*you cuobu*, 右蹉步) towards the proscenium and stomps. Twice, he touches his forehead, murmuring, "I can no longer be the Emperor of the Han dynasty. I can no longer be the Emperor of the Han dynasty!", the modern spectator does not require naturalistic exposition. Instead, from the perspective of reception, its meaning is derived directly from the tightly controlled variations in movement, tempo, and vocal intensity.

At the same time, the boundary between classical convention and the actor interpretation is clearly visible during the performance of the aria "Wild Geese Falling" (雁儿落). When the imperial secretary and minister return onstage, the emperor accuses them of being useless. He then staggers back several steps due to his overwhelming emotion following his emotional outburst, mimicking a sudden onset of dizziness due to excessive grief and anger that can increase heart rate and blood pressure. This subtle movement is a realistic imitation of dizziness and, as Yu Zhenfei (1979, p. 64) notes, is a kind of *free action* within *established conventions*.

In the fictional world on stage, actors use extra-daily scenic behavior, but they must maintain consistent bodily language to effectively engage the spectator. As Okuş (2020, p. 25) suggests, consistency is necessary to make the fictional meaningful. From a reception perspective, this consistency enables spectators to recognise and interpret the symbolic system of extra-daily movement. Within the framework of archaeological reconstruction, performative flexibility, such as slight variations in timing, emphasis, and performance, is still allowed. Actors can incorporate their own interpretations into their roles through bodily movements, and this unpredictability sustains the vitality of live performance; to some extent, improvisation is what makes the live performance charming.

Taken together, the troupe's stylized gestures and choreographed postures transform physical movement into narrative symbolism, conveying emotional states without relying on realistic action or props. Techniques such as circling, bow-and-arrow poses, and horse stance embody conflict, capture and resistance, allowing spectators to decode meaning through convention. In this way, bodily movement becomes a key site where archaeological reconstruction intersects with modern reception.

5.3. The Soundscape of *Diaoqiang* Performance

Sound is one of the major elements of *Diaoqiang* performance, and is structured through three interconnected elements, namely vocal singing, musical accompaniment, and offstage sound. These elements together construct the narrative and emotional atmosphere of the scene. This section examines each of these sound elements in turn.

Solo singing is a defining feature of *zaju*, traditionally assigned to a single protagonist according to the conventions of *moben* (末本, a play where the male lead performs all arias) or *danben* (旦本, a play where the female lead performs all arias). *Autumn in the Han Palace* was originally a *moben* play, in which the emperor is responsible for solo singing. Although many later adaptations, such as Huangmei opera, Cantonese opera, and even recent Kunqu opera, rarely adhere to this convention, they often redistribute the singing roles among multiple actors or shift vocal focus to Zhaojun. Consequently, the emperor is frequently reduced to a foil for Zhaojun rather than remaining the sole vocal figure. Nevertheless, the *Diaoqiang* troupe adheres to the principle of archaeological reconstruction, faithfully preserving the convention of a single soloist. By maintaining the emperor as the sole singer throughout the performance, the troupe preserves the original dramaturgical structure and intent of the *zaju* form.

Although the *Diaoqiang* performance retains the *zaju* convention of solo singing and most of the lyrics from the original text, it introduces strategically placed spoken lines within sung passages, to make the classical lyrics less obscure and more comprehensible to contemporary audiences. For instance, during the aria "Triumph Song", the troupe inserts a line between the emperor's singing lines.

"TRIUMPH SONG" (*De Sheng Ling* 得胜令)

EMPEROR [*sings*]:

Can none of you be a pillar of the nation?
Years spent feeding iron-clad men on the frontier.
You attend me day and night,
yet my wife, who shared my hardships, has been cast away!

MINISTER: Let us draw our swords and fight!

EMPEROR [*sings*]:

Speak not to me of swords and spears,
my heart trembles like a startled deer.
Today the empress goes north,
how can a man still hold himself upright?

This insertion does not interrupt the musical flow and original lyrics; rather, it speaks to the spectator by proposing another means of declaring war against the Northern force. The emperor's hesitation exposes a paralysing fear born of ongoing military conflict, a vulnerability that might otherwise remain subtextual within the play. By adding this single line, the troupe provides a contemporary perspective that helps the spectator grasp the tension quickly.

On top of singing solo, the troupe is also renowned for its ability to stop the audience in their tracks, with the performance being always intense and captivating due to the masterful control of rhythm by the *guban* player. The musical characteristics of *Diaoqiang* are often summarised as “not relying on string and wind instruments, using gongs and drums to mark the rhythm, one person initiating the singing and others responding” (Shi, 2008, p. 28). In other words, *Diaoqiang* music relies less on harmonic development and more on rhythmic articulation, with the actor initiating the vocal line and the musicians providing responsive accompaniment. Typically, *Diaoqiang* performance consists of a band of six musicians:

Table 2: Musical instruments used in *Diaoqiang* performance.

Instrument player	Function
Guban (鼓板)	The guban player, who performs both the <i>bangu</i> and <i>paiban</i> clappers, functions in a role similar to a concertmaster in a Western orchestra. This musician is responsible for leading the tuning, cueing musicians for tempo and dynamics, and remaining in sync with the actors on stage.
Small gong (小锣)	The xiaoluo player can be understood as an associate concertmaster, stepping in for the <i>guban</i> player when necessary and assisting in leading the ensemble. The <i>xiaoluo</i> also serves to mark the rhythmic phrasing and divisions of the aria.

Zhengchui (正吹)	“Zhengchui” refers to the lead player in the string and wind section, who is responsible for playing <i>dizi</i> (笛子), <i>dalu</i> (大锣), and providing vocal accompaniment (<i>bangqiang</i> , 帮腔).
Fuchui (副吹)	“Fuchui” acts as the associate to this lead player and is responsible for playing <i>banhu</i> (板胡), <i>zhangu</i> (战鼓), <i>dabo</i> (大钹), and providing vocal accompaniment.
The Fifth (五后场)	The fifth person in the ensemble plays large cymbals or <i>dabo</i> (大钹), <i>erhu</i> , and provides vocal accompaniment.
The Sixth (六后场)	The sixth person plays small cymbals or <i>xiaobo</i> (小钹), <i>pubo</i> (普钹), <i>yueqin</i> (月琴), and provides vocal accompaniment.

Relying on only six musicians, the ensemble provides a strong rhythmic backbone for the performance, emphasising body movement, dialogue, and combat scenes. Through their rendering of *qupai* (曲牌, tune matrices), they could build the emotional atmosphere, whether to emphasise the feelings of sorrow, tension, or hesitation, and ensure that the music remains closely attuned to the characters and context of the scene.

Within the musical accompaniment system, repetition through backing vocals (*bāngqiāng*, 帮腔) plays a crucial role in building dramatic and emotional momentum. The *bāngqiāng* style can be traced back to *Nanxi* (南戏), the earliest form of Chinese opera that emerged in southern China, and later to Yiyang opera. Today, this technique is used in various regional operas (*difangxi*, 地方戏), including Sichuan, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Chaozhou opera. *Bāngqiāng* is not only performed as vocal accompaniment but can also function as a “voice-over” or as a character’s monologue. However, the *Diaoqiang* troupe uses this technique specifically for lyrical and emotive purposes. In the aria “Plum Blossom Wine”, repeated phrases (bolded below) are echoed by the ensemble.

“Plum Blossom Wine” (*Mei Hua Jiu*)

EMPEROR [*sings*]:

.....

She followed the northern men to the desolate wilderness,

I, with my imperial carriage, **return to Xianyang;**

Return to Xianyang, I

pass the palace walls;

Pass the palace walls and
circle around the cloister;
Circle around the cloister under
the faint moonlight;
The faint moonlight as
the night grows cold;
The night grows cold and
the cicadas cry;
The cicadas cry
behind the green gauze window;
Behind the green gauze window,
I try hard not to think of her.

When the emperor returns to the Han palace and is moved by the familiar sights, the ensemble's repetition of his final lyrics amplifies his expression of grief and sorrow. The call-and-response technique enables the spectator to experience the emperor's deepening sorrow.

Furthermore, offstage sound is another commonly used device in Chinese opera performance, most often employed for narration or voice-over. What distinguishes *Diaoqiang* is its use of the cries of wild geese as offstage sound, introducing a more evocative and symbolic auditory element. The cries of wild geese are a metaphor that has not yet appeared in this episode. In the scene where the emperor prepares to return to the Han palace, the distant cries of wild geese disrupt the silence. The emperor is startled. He pauses, listens, and walks around the stage in search of the source. His responses direct the spectator's attention towards something beyond the stage. Rather than relying on a visual representation of the wild geese, the troupe prompts spectator to engage in interpreting the scene through sound. The auditory cue functions as a trigger that draws on the spectator's familiarity with the classical wild-geese metaphor, evoking associations of loneliness and melancholy.

The emperor then sings the original lyrics: "Suddenly I seemed to hear the wild geese flying south, their cries loud and clear. Yet all I saw were cattle and sheep, it was only the sound of the carriage wheels bearing Zhaojun away." The troupe ingeniously introduces the vital metaphor from the source text without disrupting the performance flow. By creating the offstage cries of wild geese, the troupe sparks the audience's imagination, providing an immersive and engaging theatrical experience in which the spectator can hear the invisible and construct the missing visual landscape, thus becoming an active participant in the creation of its theatrical meaning. As Bernard Dort

(1982, p. 64) notes, theatre performance is a meaningful polyphony open to the spectator.

This analysis demonstrates that *Diaoqiang's* vocal delivery, instrumental accompaniment and offstage sound foreground the expressive power of soundscape in shaping audience interpretation. These strategies show how reconstruction is recalibrated for accessibility, balancing historical fidelity with the affective demands of contemporary spectatorship.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *Diaoqiang's* adaptation of *Autumn in the Han Palace* achieves a dynamic balance between the pursuit of archaeological reconstruction and the demands of contemporary reception. Moving beyond the dominant scholarly view of *Diaoqiang* as a “living fossil”, it demonstrates that the preservation of *Autumn in the Han Palace* or of *Yuan zaju*, is not necessarily a passive act of archaeological reconstruction, but a proactive negotiation between faithful representation and contemporary spectator expectations.

By placing Patrice Pavis's concept of archaeological reconstruction in dialogue with Susan Bennett's reception theory, this paper offers a spectator-oriented perspective on how Chinese classical performance navigates the tensions of adaptation. As Daniel Mesguich (2011, p. 115) explains, staging a classic involves not only the visible script but also an “invisible” layer shaped by its history, interpretations, and performance traditions (composé de la mémoire du texte visible, de son histoire, de sa poussière [gloses, commentaires, exégèses, mises en scène, voire effets des intimidations successives par lui apportées, etc.]). Thus, this paper argues that archaeological reconstruction-oriented performance cannot be understood solely at the level of staging strategies (the visible “inner frame”); it must also be examined through the interpretive processes by which meaning is produced in reception. (the invisible “outer frame”).

Methodologically, this paper adopts a spectator-oriented qualitative approach based on close analysis of recorded performances. By treating the researcher as a situated spectator, it proposes an alternative way of accessing reception without relying on interviews or survey data, instead foregrounding the perceptual and interpretive mechanisms embedded in performance itself.

In fact, the original text of *Autumn in the Han Palace* is not written down to the smallest detail, thereby allowing the troupe some flexibility to make minor adjustments in adapting the stage performance. Empirically, this paper focuses on three major

components of *Diaoqiang* performance. First, stage arrangement, or *mise-en-scène*, largely adheres to traditional stage conventions, using minimal props and structured stage blocking to sustain an aesthetically ordered composition on stage. Second, extra-daily bodily movements transform codified gestures into expressive signs, allowing actors to communicate emotional and narrative meaning within a shared cultural symbolic system of classical performance. Third, the *Diaoqiang* troupe constructs a multi-layered soundscape through solo singing, musical accompaniment, and offstage sound that guides the spectator's attention and enhances the accessibility of the classic for contemporary audiences. Taken together, these elements show that accessibility does not necessarily rely on radical rewriting, but on the calibration of performance codes that bridge the gap between faithful reconstruction and modern perception.

In the context of Chinese opera performance, including *Diaoqiang*, the narrative is no longer the primary focus of performance. Instead, the spectators attend closely to the actors' singing, acting, body movements, and other performative techniques. Over the centuries, the Xinchang Diaoqiang Opera Troupe has remained committed to the "archaeological reconstruction" of Yuan *zaju*. At the same time, the troupe seeks to engage modern audiences to maintain contemporary relevance. By shifting the analytical focus from textual dissemination or production strategies to the lived experience of contemporary spectators, this paper provides a new perspective to understanding how classics continue to generate meaning through their interaction with evolving spectatorship.

Future research may extend this approach by comparing *Diaoqiang* with other operatic forms, such as Ming-Qing *chuanqi* operas, or with more commercially oriented repertoires such as its *Monk Mulian* Series, to examine how different performance traditions negotiate similar tensions between convention and reception. Moreover, it would also be valuable to investigate how *Autumn in the Han Palace* is adapted in other forms of opera, exploring how different regional aesthetics, and staging conventions influence their interpretation. Further engagement with practitioners, including actors, musicians, and directors, would deepen the understanding of how interpretive decisions are made within contemporary performance practice. In this sense, the afterlife of Yuan *zaju* is found not in its preservation as a cultural artifact, but in its continual reconstruction through performance and spectatorship.

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