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# The Further Inheritance of the Traditional Chinese Opera Performance “Pingdiao Tooth Jugglery” in Ninghai, Zhejiang Province, China

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## Abstract

This article on The Further Development of the Traditional Chinese Opera Performance “Pingdiao Tooth Jugglery” in Ninghai, Zhejiang Province, China has the objectives of presenting the background, the significance, the current situation, and its inheritance problems acquired from the study of documents and related research. By using the methods of indirect observation, interview and discussion, and combining with some contemporary media records and reports, the main problems faced by “Tooth Jugglery” at present are as follows: 1) the popularity is not very high; 2) There are many problems in inheritance; 3) Inheritors are facing the problem of shortage; 4) Public aesthetic acceptance is not high. This paper discussed the problems above and provided views and suggestions for the solution of its better inheritance and development in the future through the collection and analysis of the existing literature and data.

**Keywords:** Tooth Jugglery, Ninghai Pingdiao, inheritance

## 1. Background and Significance

As an art of changing through the mouth, “Tooth Jugglery” is a characteristic performance of Ninghai Pingdiao, an ancient local opera in Zhejiang Province, China. It originated in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. It first appeared in the performance of its traditional play “Jinlian Slains the Dragon” (金莲斩蛟), which has a history of more than 100 years.

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Ninghai Pingdiao was formed in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty, and prevailed in the late Qing and early Republic of China. It has a history of more than 400 years. In the rich traditional repertoire, after hundreds of years of inheritance and practice by the Pingdiao artists, it has formed the unique performance skills represented by the “Tooth Jugglery”. So far, “Tooth Jugglery” has become a unique performance skill with distinctive artistic characteristics of Ninghai Pingdiao, and has gradually formed its unique performing program. As an independent performing skill, “Tooth Jugglery” has formed a symbiotic relationship with Ninghai Pingdiao after being absorbed by it. The audience likes to watch its performance most, and it has gradually developed into a flat art brand.

The “Tooth Jugglery” of Ninghai Pingdiao is as famous as the “Face Changing” performance (变脸) of Sichuan Opera which has the reputation of “West Face and East Tooth” in China. The inheritance of “Tooth Jugglery” has gone through six generations, and each generation can perform this skill at least 1-3 years of hard and torturous training and practice. To grasp this kind of skill, the requirements for actors are extremely high, which results in a very small number of nowadays actors as a whole. When performing, actors need juggle 6-10 tusks of the jaw bones buckteeth from male pigs with a weight of more than 200 kg in their mouth at the same time. The performance changes of biting, licking, swallowing and spitting are combined with singing, reading and playing to show the heart feelings and emotions of the characters in the play, which also show a kind of rough and wild beauty. In addition, the number of teeth in the actor's mouth will continue to change and adjust with the performance of the plot.



Figure 1 “Tooth Jugglery”





Figure 2 “Tooth Juggler”



Figure 3 “Tooth Juggler” “Jinlian Slains the Dragon”

The highest level of the “Tooth Juggler” performance is that the actor has to perform ten to twelve teeth in the nasal cavity and mouth at the same time. Only after the Ninghai Pingdiao “Tooth Juggler” performers perfectly perform the role of “One-Horn Dragon” in the play “Jinlian Slains the Dragon” (金莲斩蛟), can they truly understand and master this skill. On May 20, 2006, Ninghai Pingdiao was selected into the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Directory in China. In 2011, it won the “Mountain Flower Award” in the First China National Stunt Art Competition. It was the highest award of Chinese folk literature and art, which undoubtedly makes the “Tooth Juggler” art known to more people, and also provides an important guarantee for its protection, development and inheritance.



From the above information, we can feel that Pingdiao “Tooth Jugglery” is not only a performance, but also a culture and art. “Art comes from life and is higher than life”. It is the embodiment of Ninghai regional culture which also carries the long-term wisdom of Ninghai people, and also shows their attitude and yearning for having a better life, and their spirit of being able to bear hardships. In recent years, with the promotion of mainstream Chinese TV media and other media live broadcasting platforms, “Tooth Jugglery” has reappeared in people’s vision and attracted more and more attention.

For the future of traditional Chinese opera art, local traditional opera is like a treasure, which is very important for the protection and inheritance of the Chinese traditional performing art. It is of great significance to protect and inherit the Pingdiao “Tooth Jugglery” performing art for the study of Ninghai’s regional folk culture, and it is also of great value to the study culture and art of Chinese traditional opera. The objective of this paper is to discuss the current situation and further inheritance of Ninghai Pingdiao “Tooth Jugglery” performance.

## **2.Current Situation of “Ping Tune Tooth Jugglery”**

There are not many academic studies on “Tooth Jugglery” in the performing arts circles. Most of the existing articles are reports on “Tooth Jugglery” and media interviews with contemporary inheritors. Although with the publicity of new media and the reports of China Central Television and other mainstream news media, “Tooth Jugglery” is no longer as strange as before, which has also begun to enter the public’s vision through television, the internet and other media channels. Many people may not know Ninghai Pingdiao, but they may have heard of “Tooth Jugglery”. However, it is undeniable that there are still many problems in its further inheritance and development.

In recent years, China’s major TV stations and national media have frequently reported on “Tooth Jugglery”, which makes it well-known at home and abroad. In China, although it has the same reputation and status as the “Face Changing” performance of Sichuan Opera, also not as famous as it for the public. Some audiences who know the “Tooth Jugglery” do not know that the traditional play “Jinlian Slains the Dragon” of Ninghai Pingdiao. A large part of the audience has neither heard of nor seen this kind of performance until now. Many other audiences think it is not aesthetic so that they do not like it. Also, for some people they think it is a kind of torture to the actors, and they will feel terrible, etc. Therefore, to sum up, for many reasons, it has not become a household name in nowadays China’s social level, nor will it have a high reputation like other major mainstream operas.

Another key problem affecting the development of “Tooth Jugglery” is the scarcity of actors that facing the dilemma of dating. In fact, it is not just “Tooth Jugglery”, many other traditional Chinese opera performances will encounter such problems in the development process. Traditional performances often have very difficult performing skills and high requirements for actors. Sometimes, actors may not be able to achieve a perfect performance effect even after a long and arduous training, such as “Tooth Jugglery”.

At that time, “Tooth Jugglery” was highly praised by the central government of China and successfully applied for the world heritage, but it did not attract many successors. Mrs. Qiaoping Xue, an actress of the Pingdiao inheritance center in Ninghai County, Zhejiang Province, which is the sixth generation of this current unique skill. To some extent, she is also the most well-known one for today. She said that during her long and arduous training, she wanted to give up for many times, but she

finally insisted on it, so that she could still achieve good results today. She always has a firm ideal in her heart, that is, as the inheritor of the performing art of “Tooth Juggling”, so she has the responsibility and obligation to inherit and carry forward this unique skill.



Figure 4 Mrs. Qiaoping Xue and Her Performance

The practice of “Tooth Juggling” has continued to this day. It has also gone through the process of passing on male actors to female actresses. Undoubtedly, the difficulties have increased. In addition, in addition to the lack of successors, the lack of repertoire, actors and the gradual weakening of the influence of the troupe have seriously restricted the inheritance and development of Ninghai Pingdiao. In addition, the teeth used by “Tooth Juggling” players are all natural real teeth taken from animals. Natural teeth cannot guarantee perfect growth. It is not easy to find a new pair of teeth, which brings new problems in the selection and protection of teeth.

### 3. Further Inheritance suggestions for Pingdiao “Tooth Juggling”

The greatest feature of intangible cultural heritage is that it is inherited by people. To protect the art of “Tooth Juggling”, we must first protect the inheritors of the art of playing with teeth. Inheritors have an indispensable role. The protection of inheritors is inseparable from the policy support of the state. Only with the protection of the state, can this art be protected and inherited. As Mrs. Qiaoping Xue said in the media interview, she hoped that “Tooth Juggling” could be like the “Face Changing” (变脸) that be concerned and liked by more and more people, so that could let them join in the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

As a category of regional culture, the genetic value of Ninghai Pingdiao lies in its unique artistic characteristics and performance style. “Tooth Juggling” is a unique performance skill in Ninghai Pingdiao and is a unique Kung Fu created by Ninghai Pingdiao artists. Therefore, both the actors themselves and the relevant staff of the cultural department should first have a sense of cultural confidence. Only when you have confidence, can you have the motivation to publicize and drive others’ attention.

Secondly, we should pay attention to the entertainment of traditional drama. Most Chinese traditional opera performances pay attention to the expression of traditional values. They have complete story changes, and often cooperate with some difficult performance skills. Therefore, while inheriting the beautiful values carried by the traditional operas, which the Chinese people have always believed in and adhered to, how to better meet the aesthetic needs of the audience is also a common problem that actors and dramatists need to consider in the future. Taking Pingdiao "Jinlian Slains the Dragon" as an example, many audiences think that its plot setting can meet the curiosity of the audience. If traditional artists can recreate the performance according to the specified situation of the story, and let the skills and plot be truly combined, we can say that the performance will be advanced with the times. And presumably, the audience will continue to have a sense of freshness.

The key to the good inheritance of "Tooth Jugglery" lies in the inheritor. An outstanding inheritor should be able to make cultural choices and cultural innovations in inheriting traditions, which also have to play an important role in the inheritance, protection, continuation and development of intangible cultural heritage. So, the inheritor could be respected and recited by the people of one side. How to raise public awareness and interest in "Tooth Jugglery"? How to make "Tooth Jugglery" no longer restricted by the development of Pingdiao dialect? How can the audience have a more comprehensive understanding of intangible cultural heritage protection through the "Tooth Jugglery"? These are all issues that inheritors need to seriously consider in contemporary times.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Through the collection and analysis of the existing literature and data, using the methods of indirect observation, interview and discussion, combined with some contemporary media records and reports, we can find that Ninghai Pingdiao "Tooth Jugglery" performance not only shows the traditional performing skills of Chinese opera, but also inherits the unique artistic skills and concepts of Pingdiao opera. Ninghai Pingdiao has the function of understanding history and is a living historical carrier; As an art, "Tooth Jugglery" is the creation and cohesion of a different kind of beauty; As a cultural gene, it is an indispensable part of constructing the cultural diversity of drama performance. As China's intangible cultural heritage, "Tooth Jugglery" is directly, vividly and effectively inheriting human culture. To solve the current crisis of survival, development and inheritance, the key is to deal with the relationship between inheritance and innovation.

First of all, we should restore the tradition, which is the basis of the further inheritance; Secondly, it is necessary to activate the tradition, which is the driving force of inheritance. As an intangible cultural heritage project, "Tooth Jugglery" has the memory value, aesthetic value, genetic value, academic value and economic value of culture and art. Its inheritance work has the dual participation and help of the government and society. Only when the government, civil society, society, inheritors and other parties work together to rescue, support and protect, can the performing art of "Tooth Jugglery" be better discovered, recognized and accepted in contemporary society, the status of inheritors of "Tooth Jugglery" become better and better, and the "Tooth Jugglery" skill will never be lost.



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