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# The Preservation and Inheritance of Gui'er Opera in Huaiji①

# -- Based on the Oral History Research of Xu Dewei, Municipal Non-Genetic Inheritance Inheritor

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### **Abstract**

Gui'er Opera is a local theatre of Qiaotou Town, Huaiji County, Guangdong Province, one of the 13 theatre types in Guangdong Province, which has been compiled into the Chinese Opera Journal. Guangdong Volume. In 1996, Qiaotou Town was awarded the title of "Township of Gui'er Opera of Folk and Ethnic Culture" by the Provincial Department of Culture. 2006, Gui'er Opera was announced by the Zhaoqing Municipal People's Government as the first batch of representative items of municipal intangible cultural heritage. In 2007, it was announced by the People's Government of Guangdong Province as one of the second batch of representative items of provincial intangible cultural heritage, and Xu Dewei is now the representative inheritor of this item at the municipal level. Based on the oral interview with Xu Dewei during the fieldwork, we interviewed and organised the knowledge of Gui'er Opera by recording his life experiences such as the history of learning the art and passing on the art, with the aim of understanding the historical lineage of the development of Gui'er Opera and broadening the field of Gui'er Opera research. Explore the economic, political, cultural and ecological values of Gui'er Opera that contribute to rural revitalisation. From the dimensions of enriching the spiritual life of the masses, improving their economic income, and enhancing their moral concepts, we will examine the effectiveness of the protection and development of Gui'er Opera in promoting rural revitalisation, and find out the dilemmas faced by the protection and development of Gui'er Opera in the context of the revitalisation of the rural cultural and tourism industry, so that we can not only provide a new approach to the inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage, but also provide a new point of entry and a realistic cultural path for the comprehensive realisation of rural revitalisation.

## **Keywords**

Xu Dewei, Non-Genetic Inheritors, Gui'er Opera, Oral History Research.

#### 1. Introduction

Excellent traditional culture is constantly buried in the rapid development of modern science and technology, local culture is gradually dusty, and many kinds of intangible cultural heritage are either not recognised or gradually dying out, and mankind has missed a valuable resource. The provincial intangible cultural heritage of Huaiji Gui'er Opera, as a representative of Zhaoqing's excellent traditional culture, has a weak research base and a lack of information. This study focuses on the oral history of the inheritors of the Gui'er Opera, interviews on the historical origin and development of the Gui'er Opera, as well as interviews with Gui'er Opera

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practitioners, farmers, staff of cultural and tourism departments, and grass-roots cadres, and an interview outline was designed, based on which we fully understood the farmers' awareness of and interest in the intangible cultural heritage of Gui'er Opera as a representative of the rural areas. As well as by analysing the content of the interviews, we analyse the current situation of the protection and use of Gui'er Opera and the practice of promoting rural revitalisation under the background of rural revitalisation, summarise the value implication of Zhaoqing's intangible cultural heritage in rural revitalisation, including the cultural value, ecological value, economic value, etc., and the dilemma faced by Gui'er Opera in promoting rural revitalisation. As well as in the context of rural revitalisation, the current situation of the protection and use of Gui'er opera and the practice of promoting rural revitalisation. Through the field research, as a first-hand information, we fully understand the dilemma faced by Gui'er Opera in promoting rural revitalisation, and analyse the reasons for its emergence, and put forward a few representative and in line with the protection and development of local intangible cultural heritage in Zhaoqing City and the rural development of the modern road to promote.

# 2. Collation of the Oral History of Xu Dewei, Inheritor of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Gui'er Opera

Interview: 29 June 2023

Interview location: Cultural Station, Qiaotou Town, Huaiji County

Interviewee: Xu Dewei, Representative Inheritor of the Municipal Intangible Heritage of Gui'er

**Opera** 

Interviewers: Wang Jiana, Zheng Yixuan, Zeng Qiongjuan, Deng Zhengheng, Gao Weimin

#### 2.1. Career in the arts

I ask: Leader Xu, it's an honour to meet you! We came to visit you today to learn something about Gui'er Opera and the specific measures for rural revitalisation. First of all, can you introduce your personal learning situation?

Xu Dewei (hereinafter referred to as Xu) answer: I am a native of Libu Village, Xu Feng Village Committee, Qiaotou Town, Huaiji County, and I have been learning Gui'er Opera with the old artists, grandfathers, uncles and uncles of my village since I was 12 years old, and I am 63 years old this year. There used to be a Gui'er Opera troupe in every village, but now there are fewer of them, only Heguitang. 2006, Gui'er Opera was announced by Zhaoqing Municipal People's Government as the first batch of representative items of municipal intangible cultural heritage, and in 2007, it was announced by Guangdong Provincial People's Government as the second batch of representative items of provincial intangible cultural heritage, and I became the inheritor of the project. Now I am also the troupe leader.

I ask: Can you introduce the genealogy of Gui'er Opera?

Xu answer: The Gui'er Opera has a history of more than 120 years since its formation at the end of the Qing Dynasty. The earliest is from Qiaotou Town Xu Xian Village Xu Ming and the first generation of inheritance, later by the Xian Weiquan, Xu Zhixiang second generation of inheritance, and then Xian Yongnan, Xu Yongfeng and other five people of the third generation of inheritance, Xian Jiehe and Xu Sungxing and other six people of the fourth generation of inheritance, Xu Zhaofeng and other three people of the fifth generation of inheritance. All of these inheritors are from Xu Xian Village, Qiaotou Town, and all of them adopt the village clan master transmission method. The fifth generation of inheritors they are now seventy or eighty years old.

### 2.2. The origin and spread of Gui'er Opera

I ask: How did the Huaiji Gui'er Opera come about? Where do you think it originated?

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Xu answer: Gui'er Opera originated in Qiaotou Town, Huaiji County. Qiaotou Town is located in the south of Huaiji County, forty-two kilometres from the county town. East neighbour Yonggu Town, south of Poetry Cave Town, north of Liangcun, Dagang Town, the western border Fengkai County. The town of fourteen village committees, two hundred and twelve natural villages, covering an area of 213 square kilometres, with a population of 56,000 people, is the seat of the provincial scenic Yan Yan. The language belongs to the Guangzhou dialect family of native languages, and a small number of people speak Hakka and Biao (a kind of Zhuang-Dong language family). Since its formation, Gui'er Opera has been less influenced by the civilisation of the metropolis and has shown its own distinctive characteristics. The development of Gui'er Opera is in a very slow state, due to its geographical location, regional language and other reasons, not valued by successive officials and governments, and not well supported, resulting in its vicissitudes, ups and downs, and a long period of time in a self-sustaining and selfdestructive situation. Nevertheless, Gui'er Opera is the crystallisation of the previous generations of artists, in different historical periods, have played the role of self-entertainment, pleasing the crowd to teach people, and passed down from generation to generation, in the vast Chinese opera family, occupies its own, a small place.

I ask: How many phases has Gui'er Opera gone through so far?

Xu answer: According to the Zhishu records and the old artists survey overview, experienced three stages, the Qing Dynasty Tongzhi to the Guangxu years, for the gestation period, there are "August song" "Night song" "Play the New Year's Eve " "Dancing in springtime". The first stage ranged from a single person singing "Wuji Buying Chai" to two or three people playing "A Lousy Selling Pigs" and other programmes. After 1908, under the influence of Cantonese Opera, the long plays with many characters and strong storylines, such as "Shan Bo Ying Tai" and "Five Tigers Ping Xi", were performed. The second stage of the opera was the formation and development of the "Tea Picking Tune" and the reformed "Ma'er Tune" (the current Gui'er Tune) with gongs and drums as accompaniments. In the 1940s, Gui'er Opera was performed more frequently, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was in its prime. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Gui'er Opera was in its peak, and then went into a downturn during the Cultural Revolution, and then flourished again in the late 1970s; in the Spring Festival of 1979, the Gui'er Opera performed in more than 30 performances, which was a very large-scale performance.

I ask: In the fieldwork, it was found that Huaiji Gui'er Opera is very popular among the middle-aged and the elderly, what kind of state is it in the circulation of the folk?

Xu answer: Yes, now most of the people who can sing Gui'er Opera are old people, usually over 50 years old will be interested in it, and most of them will watch it every time it is performed. The old people can understand what we sing because the story is so good and vivid, and some of them will be moved to tears when they watch it. Young people can't understand because they don't have the experience of the previous generation. It is difficult for young people to enjoy watching Gui'er Opera. The younger generation likes to watch singing and dancing. Many young people don't know Gui'er opera, and they don't even know how to sing Gui'er opera tunes. 20 years ago when Gui'er opera was about to disappear, Ms. Chan Pui Shan, a passionate acquaintance from Hong Kong, helped to set up a Gui'er opera training course to enroll secondary school students, to cultivate their interest in Gui'er opera and to teach them how to play Gui'er opera musical instruments, to teach them Gui'er opera tunes, and to train them to be proficient in stage performance fundamentals. After the master's careful teaching, students practice hard, learn the "beggar and the scholar" the play, many times by the Yan Yan scenic area and Qiaotou Golden Swallow Plaza's invitation to perform, by the general public's favourite. But the good times did not last long, after the students graduated, many of them left Huaiji, so there is a role vacancy, it is difficult to maintain long-term. 2007, led by the Qiaotou town Lianfeng Primary School teacher Kong Fanying, apply to the government, the use of the form of advertisements to the community to recruit the Gui'er Opera enthusiasts to re-establish the

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Gui'er Opera troupe, but also to use the relationship between relatives and friends, then recruited from the Xu'an, Xinxing, Baofeng, Yanwang and so on ten village committees 21 people. At that time, 21 people were recruited from ten village committees, including Xu'an, Xinxing, Baofeng, Yanwang, etc., with young people accounting for 28% of the total and middleaged actors accounting for 23%. I was also a member of the troupe at the time, and we developed a programme of activities and rules and regulations for our activities, clarifying the nature of the troupe and understanding the importance of family support. Sometimes when rehearsals lasted a whole day, the actors themselves brought rice and vegetables from home, and ate a meal at noon, so as not to waste time running back and forth. At that time, the county cultural bureau leader Luo Shaoshan and Zhou Rukun, the old director of the research, also put forward valuable guidance on the development of Gui'er Opera. In 2008, Gui'er Opera also went to the countryside one after another dozens of performances, but also went to the county to participate in the Harmonious Star Performing Arts Competition took the excellent prize. Our troupe was also named the county's outstanding art groups.

I ask: Your group is called "He Gui Tang", may I know the origin of this name?

Xu answer: In 2007, Huaiji County Cultural Affairs Bureau Director Zhou Rukun came to Qiaotou on the Gui'er Opera research to help the troupe named, meaning that I hope that the actors from all directions to get along with each other and create harmony. From then on, "He Gui Tang" became the name of the troupe, which was gradually favoured by the villagers.

I ask: can you tell us about the development of your current group?

Answer: In 2007, we started to establish the Gui'er Opera "He Gui Tang", when the troupe was first founded, there were only 7 or 8 members, "He Gui Tang" members come from the east, west, south, and north, not from a brigade, Qiaotou Town has 13 brigades, the actors and actresses came from each brigade and were called from each brigade. Why is Gui'er Opera so popular with the audience? It is a habit in our countryside - it is performed in every village during festivals, and there are at least 30 to 40 performances every year. He Gui Tang sometimes travelled to the county town, to Zhaoqing and to other cities to take part in performances, which later became a provincial intangible cultural heritage. Now there are 14 or 15 performers, all over 50 years old, and no young people are willing to do it, they all go out to work, and will continue to expand next.

I ask: You just said you have 30 to 40 performances a year, where do you usually perform? Is there any funding for the performances?

Answer: In the forties and fifties, we went to the countryside to perform, and after Gui'er Opera was listed in the provincial intangible cultural heritage, we would go to the campus to perform, and last semester, Huaiji County Cultural Centre organised a troupe to perform at the junior high school, so that the students could feel the atmosphere of Gui'er Opera. The students were quite excited. There are also the usual festival jiao-festival performances, which go to every village and township. We are invited to perform at festivals such as weddings and new homes. This is a custom in rural areas. During the Chinese New Year, from the first day of the year to February or March, we will distribute invitations and give each other lucky money. For one night's performance, we can receive two to three hundred yuan, or even more than a thousand yuan.

I ask: what are the usual activities of the theatre company besides performances?

Answer: The members of the troupe mainly rehearse and perform in addition to performances, and it usually takes us about a month to rehearse a play.

### 2.3. Procedures and music of Huaiji Gui'er Opera performances

I ask: what are the characteristics that make your Gui'er Opera so popular? What procedures does it have? Where do all these procedures come from? What are the specific plays?

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Xu answer: Gui'er opera is a local theatre in Huaiji, "Gui'er" means "nobleman", to perform in the village, meaning the arrival of the nobleman, praying for the village to be prosperous, rich and powerful. It has evolved into its present form through folk songs and raps. The songs are sung in local folk tunes and expressed in the Qiaotou dialect, but the dialogue is in the Guangzhou dialect, making it possible to use two dialects in one play. The performance is accompanied by gongs, drums, cymbals and suona. The costumes of the performances include foot-long shirts and old-fashioned hats for the male actors and Qing-style long shirts for the female actors. Sometimes there are not enough actors of each gender, and the roles are intertwined between men and women. The Gui'er Opera is performed in the form of a song, with a single tune that runs throughout the show, and simple percussion, which is linked to the form of the performance, giving it a simple, rustic and rich flavour.

Our repertoire consists of costume plays as well as recent plays that have been adapted and innovated. Most of the costume plays are historical stories and folk legends, such as "The Crossed Chai", "The Beggar and the Scholar", "Five Rats Haunting Tokyo", "The Civet Cat Swaps the Prince" and so on. Modern theatre, such as "Paste Spring Poems", "The White-haired Girl", "Red Plum Welcomes Spring" and so on. There is no division of scenes; the script is sung in seven-character lines, according to the local sound rhyme level, divided into upper and lower sentences, a group of four sentences, while the third and fourth sentences are repeated after the tune of the first two sentences, the last sentence is repeated again as a closing sentence, the structure is relatively simple.

I ask: What are the differences between your Gui'er Opera and other theatre styles in the province?

Answer: The main difference is the language: Gui'er Opera speaks vernacular when playing and sings in the local dialect of Qiaotou, which is a characteristic of one type of theatre that uses two languages, unlike Cantonese Opera, which uses Cantonese for all of its performances. Secondly, there is the movement of the hands and feet, Gui'er Opera through a number of shallow movements to replace the language, so that the audience will understand the meaning of the actors want to express at a glance, if all the singing, the older generation of the countryside may not be able to understand.

I ask: what are the roles of your Gui'er Opera?

Answer: Gui'er Opera role line is basically Sheng, Dan, Chou three lines, Sheng line set up Wen Sheng, Wu Sheng, Dan line set up Dan, old Dan, Chou line (locally known as "Za Jiao") set up male Chou, female Chou (mostly for the matchmaker), and other lines are not set up. I have played "Beggar Scholar" in the Jia Banxian.

I ask: What are the general themes of your performances? Do you have a fixed script?

Answer: There is a script for it. Such as reading a novel and then editing and organising it yourself. We put out a play every year and go to each village in Qiaotou Town to perform it. Marriages and entries will be performed to match the theme of the play. The tunes are made up and the melodies are composed by myself. For newcomers, I will teach the movements orally.

I ask: Have you written any of your plays about rural revitalisation? How do you think your Gui'er Opera can play a role in helping rural revitalisation?

Answer: There is a script for rural revitalisation, which takes about ten days to write. In 2022, Rural Revitalisation Task Force has contacted us and asked us to perform it.

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Gui'er Opera "Fraudulent marriage" Qiaotou Town He Gui Tang

**Figure 1.** Cover of Gui'er Opera script

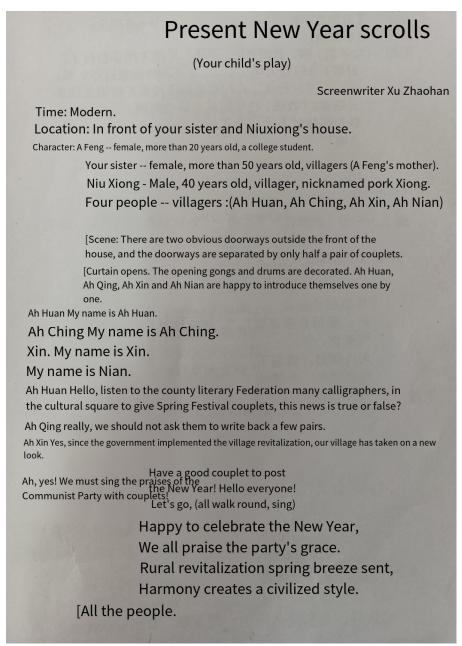


Figure 2. Village revitalisation in Gui'er Opera scripts

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### 2.4. Inheritance and difficulties of the Gui'er Opera

I ask: Have you ever thought of innovating Gui'er theatre to be closer to young people, for example, in terms of script and performance? Or how do you think about the inheritance of Gui'er Opera?

Xu answer: There is nothing innovative, the accompanying instruments have not changed, nor has the singing style. However, the content of the performances develops with the times, combining the old with the new. Gui'er Opera has a history of more than 120 years of inheritance, but the real implementation of the inheritance problem, there is still a great deal of difficulty. Some people like Gui'er Opera, but the income is too low to keep them, and recruiting new performers is a major problem.

I ask: Did you just say that "He Gui Tang" needs to continue to expand? How do you plan to do that?

Answer: There should be at least 30 people to expand the platform. We are old and about to retire, the next generation needs to take over. So now we want to recruit 40-year-old younger actors, junior high school education, the principle of voluntary, enthusiasts can come to sign up, for the record, will be "He Gui Tang" inherited from generation to generation.

I ask: what support does the county now have for your Gui'er Opera?

Answer: Yes, first of all, the venue support, Huaiji County Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Centre, on the ground floor there are about 200 square feet of open-air cultural theatre, the first floor has a rehearsal room, recording studio, and the rehearsal space of the cultural station, and occasionally will organise us to go to the performance. In 2010, with the care and support of the county cultural centre, a number of musical instruments, props and costumes were repurchased. The annual declaration and work summary will be submitted to the cultural centre. Costumes, props, sound equipment is also supported by the county cultural center. 2020 October in the special funds set aside 20,000 yuan as labour costs to organize the "He Gui Tang" Gui'er opera troupe for the "drama into the countryside, into the school" tour activities, a total of eight performances; In addition, seminars and exchanges have been held, such as in July 2020, when the Urban Culture Institute of South China Normal University came to conduct research and exchanges, and in December, when Zhaoqing College and the Municipal Cultural Centre came to conduct research at the heritage site.

I ask: what support does the city now have for Gui'er Opera?

Answer: Zhaoqing City, specifically set up non-heritage office responsible for the city's intangible cultural heritage heritage, popularity, publicity and other work, since the Gui'er opera declared municipal non-heritage success, the city's non-heritage centre will be sent every year to review the inheritance of Gui'er opera. In addition to the Municipal Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre, the Huaiji County Cultural Centre and the Huaiji County Government have been carrying out different degrees of protection, research and performance of Gui'er Opera, and the troupe, since its establishment, has created and performed several hundred performances and produced more than ten scripts.

I ask: How much does it cost to run a theatre company for a year? Does the theatre company pay its actors?

Answer: There is no salary. The county cultural hall would give funds when they organised tours, four or five shows a year. We go to the countryside and send invitations for three to four hundred yuan a night. For more than ten people, it's only a few tens of yuan per person for one night. A few thousand yuan a year, the performance of the vehicle costs, sometimes we are losing money.

I ask: Are you experiencing any difficulties or problems at the moment?

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Xu answer: the recurrence of the new crown epidemic in the past two years, affecting the normal development of the project's performance activities, the current protection is still mainly dependent on the government's input, the lack of protection professionals, the professional quality of the staff has to be improved. Now that the costumes are old (some of them have been used for five or even ten years), we have applied for funding, and may have funding in the second half of the year, mainly for the purchase of costumes. Every year, the traditional "June 6 Juggling Rock Festival" tourism activities are organised by the tourism and cultural departments to arrange theatre performances, which also requires financial support. Specifically, for example, after the actors rehearsal at night, if there is drinking water and snacks will be better. I hope that the relevant departments to protect Gui'er Opera of this intangible cultural heritage as a long-term task, regular allocation of funds for activities to support associations to learn and perform Gui'er Opera. Let it be passed on and be able to contribute to the construction of the countryside.

# 3. Strategies for the Preservation and Transmission of The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Gui'er Opera

## 3.1. Active training of inheritors

Inheritors play an important role as the inheritors and disseminators of intangible cultural heritage. From the oral account of the inheritor Xu Dewei, we can appreciate that the development process of Gui'er opera cannot be separated from the efforts and promotion of the group of inheritors and folk artists. Their history of learning and passing on the art directly affects the composition of the style characteristics and morphological qualities of Gui'er Opera, and the social phenomena and life patterns mapped out from them can serve as good inspirations to lead researchers to explore the depths.

From the field survey, we can see that Huaiji Gui'er opera has the following characteristics: 1. Intangibility. Gui'er opera is inherited in the form of oral transmission, with the help of tangible things to show us its cultural connotations. 2. Dynamic activity. Whether it is inherited or performed, it expresses emotions, reveals thoughts and embodies values through people. With the help of costumes and props, through "singing, reading, sitting, playing and dancing", the characteristics of the art of opera are perfectly presented to the audience. 3. Diversity. Have their own regional non-heritage, reflecting their own local regional characteristics. 4. Inheritance. Traditional non-heritage project inheritors, are "teachers with students, the inheritor to help bring" the traditional apprenticeship system, generation after generation of predecessors to teach by word of mouth and ear to pass on the way. Only in the inheritance can they survive and develop, and if they stop the inheritance activities, it means death.

# 3.2. Using new media technology and virtual reality technology to innovate the conservation and development of Gui'er Opera

Gui'er Opera cannot be simply inherited, but should be transformed and developed according to the changes of the times. Those connotations and obsolete forms of expression with reference value should be transformed and given new connotations of the times and modern forms of expression to activate their vitality. We should also absorb the beneficial components of foreign cultures and integrate foreign cultures with the excellent traditional culture. New media technologies, such as the Internet, should be used to build a multi-channel, multi-level communication method.

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# 3.3. Integration of the development of Gui'er Opera with the rural revitalisation policy

On 16 October 2022, Xi Jinping proposed in the report of the Twentieth National Congress: comprehensively promote rural revitalisation. And non-heritage also has an important value and practical role in the process of the implementation of rural revitalisation strategy. The implementation of the rural revitalisation strategy also provides certain opportunities for the protection and development of non-heritage. Achievement of rural revitalisation must have cultural revitalisation, and the basis of cultural revitalisation is to strengthen the cultural confidence and cultural identity of the masses, especially the identity of the region's own excellent traditional culture, non-heritage is the symbolic genes of the charm of Chinese culture, with the improvement of the cultural quality of the farmers, the rural masses of the excellent traditional Chinese culture demand is growing, and the degree of love for the non-heritage is increasing day by day. Therefore, the government should make precise efforts, combined with rural revitalisation policy, to develop similar Huaiji Gui'er Opera these related to the life of the masses, the market potential, high value of the non-heritage projects, while supporting the survival of these difficult, to be revitalised traditional non-heritage projects, so that intangible cultural heritage can be passed on in a healthy and active way. At the same time to create regional non-heritage tourism brand, the development of regional non-heritage cultural and creative products, non-heritage to promote rural revitalisation.

#### 4. Conclusion

At present, rural revitalisation provides opportunities for the protection of intangible cultural heritage: tilted policy support, increasing demand for excellent traditional culture, expanding space for the development of intangible heritage, and a gradually maturing consumer market for intangible heritage. And the non-heritage in rural revitalisation also has value implication, become a party of the people's spiritual support, non-heritage mostly through oral transmission, or even no written records and passed down, it witnesses a certain region, a certain ethnic group of deep traditional culture and a long historical process. Take the subject of Gui'er Opera for example, the folk literature used is actually the myths and legends that have been passed down from ancient times, such as folk tales and myths and legends, all of which are themes that can be drawn on for folk literature and art creations. This kind of folk literature carries a rich history, reflecting the ancient historical and cultural traditions and the long history of folk culture changes, and bearing witness to the continuous flow from the traditional society to the modern society. Can make use of the Gui'er Opera non-heritage cultural resources, to create Huaiji characteristics of rural cultural industries, can promote the protection and development of non-heritage, to achieve the integrated development of culture and tourism.

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