

## The Reflection of Liang Qichao's Concept of Chinese Traditional Opera in Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions

Ren Lingyu<sup>1</sup>, Ahmad Kamal Basyah Sallehuddin<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Film, Theatre & Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kampus Puncak Perdana, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Email: renlingyu12345@163.com

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Film, Theatre & Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kampus Puncak Perdana, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Email: akamalbasyah@uitm.edu.my

### ABSTRACT

As a pioneer of the modern Chinese traditional opera reform movement, Liang Qichao's Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions deeply embodies his opera concepts and political ideas. This study aims to explore the reflection and practical value of Liang Qichao's traditional opera concepts in this work. Through literature analysis and text interpretation, this paper analyzes the audience-centered creative philosophy, script structure innovation, language innovation, realistic stage art, and political ideology expression in the play. The findings show that the work adopts Cantonese opera to fit the audience, breaks the loose structure of traditional opera with a six-act system, uses dialects and foreign words boldly, and applies realistic stage design. It also reflects Liang Qichao's advocacy of constitutional monarchy and patriotism. It is concluded that this work promotes the modernization of Chinese traditional opera and provides a new path for opera to spread political ideas and promote social reform.

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (\*):

Ahmad Kamal Basyah  
Sallehuddin  
(akamalbasyah@uitm.edu.my)

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the literature on Liang Qichao's opera reform. It is one of few studies investigating his opera ideas in Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions, documenting art innovation and political ideology integration.

## 1. Introduction

Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was a famous politician, thinker, writer, and scholar in modern China and was one of the leaders of the Hundred Days' Reform (Jiao, 2018). Liang Qichao was a pioneer in the reform movement of Chinese traditional opera. In his article *On the Relationship between Fiction and Mass Governance* (1902), he specifically presented his logical thinking on the relationship between Chinese traditional opera and

the masses (Wei, 2024). In addition, Liang Qichao also commented on *The Peach Blossom Fan*, and he had a great love and emphasis on Chinese traditional opera.

Meanwhile, Liang Qichao also went to other countries to watch Western-style theatres. In the autumn of 1903, when Liang Qichao travelled to the United States, he was deeply impressed by the Roman-style theatre at the University of California, Berkeley. He also gave high praise to Western student drama performances (Zhong, 2017). Liang Qichao's understanding of both Eastern and Western theatre allowed him to express his thoughts in the form of theatre. It also presents his plays in many different forms.

### 1.1. Objectives

- i. To clarify the concrete manifestation of Liang Qichao's opera reform concepts in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*.
- ii. To analyze the artistic innovation and political ideological connotation of the Chinese traditional opera.
- iii. To reveal the value of the work in promoting the modernization of Chinese traditional opera.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars have mainly studied Liang Qichao's opera reform theory, the political thoughts in his works, and the artistic characteristics of his operas. Most studies focus on his reform propositions and ideological connotations, but lack a systematic exploration of the integration of his opera concepts, artistic innovation and political ideas in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. This study fills this gap.

Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera works demonstrate his profound concept of Chinese traditional opera and innovative thinking on Chinese traditional opera art. Liang Qichao has created a total of four Chinese traditional opera works, including *Dream of Robbery*, *New Rome*, *The Story of Heroes*, and *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. Among them, *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is a Cantonese opera created by Liang Qichao for the Yokohama Datong School in Japan. It was serialized in *New Fiction* from August to October 1905 (Chen, 2019). *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is the only work created by Liang Qichao that has been performed. The main description is about General Ban Chao of Dingyuan, who was ordered to garrison in the Western Regions for more than 30 years. When he returned home triumphantly, he had already transformed from a young warrior to a white-bearded older man (Zhong, 2017). Through this work, Liang Qichao demonstrates his profound contemplation on the art of Chinese traditional opera, including innovation in Chinese traditional opera forms, understanding of the social functions of Chinese traditional opera, and how to convey and strengthen political and social concepts through Chinese traditional opera. The creation and performance of *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is not only a concrete practice of Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera concept but also a powerful proof of his attempt to inspire the public and promote social progress through the platform of Chinese traditional opera. Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera works and Chinese traditional opera concepts have profoundly influenced the development of Chinese traditional opera. He used opera as a platform to convey new ideas, enlighten the people, and promote social progress. His practice and theory of opera improvement still have important historical and cultural value today.

Teachers and students from Yokohama Datong School in Japan performed the performance of *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. This school was not an overseas Chinese school founded by the Chinese government at that time but an educational institution for overseas Chinese children jointly founded by reformists (such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao) and revolutionaries (such as Sun Yat Sen and Chen Shaobai) (Satoshi, 2008). As one of the founders of the school, Liang Qichao's performance this time can showcase many of his Chinese traditional opera concepts. He attempted to influence and inspire overseas Chinese children and promote social progress and cultural heritage.

### 3. Method

This study adopts literature analysis and text interpretation. By collecting and sorting out relevant literature on Liang Qichao and his opera creation, and interpreting the text of *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*, it systematically combs the artistic innovation and ideological connotation of the work.

### 4. Findings

*Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* showcases Liang Qichao's concept of Chinese traditional opera in five aspects.

#### 4.1. Choose a type of Chinese traditional opera that matches the audience's appreciation habits

Liang Qichao did demonstrate an audience-centered creative philosophy when choosing the form of Chinese traditional opera. In Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera works *Dream of Robbery*, *New Rome*, *The Story of Heroes*, and *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*, *Dream of Robbery*, *New Rome*, and *The Story of Heroes* adopt Chuanqi opera forms, while *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* adopts Cantonese opera.

Chuanqi opera mainly prevailed during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). It is a further development of Southern Opera in the Song Dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Jiajing of the Ming Dynasty to Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, Kunqu, Yiyang, Qingyang, and other theatrical genres mainly focused on singing legendary scripts. These legendary works, such as *Washing the Silk*, *Peony Pavilion*, *Clear Loyalty Score*, *Eternal Palace*, *Peach Blossom Fan*, etc., are all classic works in the history of Chinese traditional opera. Chuanqi opera has a wide audience due to its compact plot, delicate character portrayal, detailed division of roles, and the use of palace tunes to distinguish musical genres in music (Fu, 2023). When Liang Qichao created *Dream of Robbery*, *New Rome* and *The Story of Heroes*, there was no specific audience group, and they were published in magazines. Chuanqi opera has become an important part of the history of Chinese traditional opera due to its profound historical background, extensive audience base, rich classic works, and innovation and development in artistic form. Liang Qichao chose the form of Chuanqi opera for his creation in order to make his works better understood and accepted by audiences across the country.

*Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* was performed, and this performance had a specific audience. Although the performance was held in Japan, Yokohama Datong School was founded by overseas Chinese businessmen from Guangdong. The school's members are mainly from Guangdong and also teach in Cantonese (Wang, 2000). Faced

with such an audience, Liang Qichao chose Cantonese opera, a familiar genre among Guangdong people, to cater to the audience's appreciation habits and cultural background. Liang Qichao is from Xinhui, Guangdong, and understands Cantonese (Zuo, 2014). Therefore, using Cantonese opera as a form of creation can better utilize one's language advantage and create works that are more closely related to the audience's life and culture. Through this creative approach, Liang Qichao successfully integrated his theatrical works with the cultural background of the audience, making his works more vivid and closely related to their actual life experiences.

Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera works always focus on the audience when choosing Chinese traditional opera genres. He flexibly selects suitable Chinese traditional opera forms for creation based on the actual situation and needs of the audience. This audience-centred creative philosophy enables his works to resonate better with the audience and achieve the expected dissemination effect. Cantonese opera, as an important genre in his creations, fully embodies his profound understanding of audience needs and respect for local culture.

#### **4.2. The structural improvement of the Chinese Traditional Opera Script**

Liang Qichao's literary creation is indeed not confined to the original literary forms of China, and his innovative attempts in the field of Chinese traditional opera are particularly outstanding. Qian Xuantong (1887-1939), a modern Chinese philosopher, philologist, and advocate of the New Culture Movement, once stated that Liang Qichao was a representative figure in the creation of new literature in recent times (Dong, 2017). Liang Qichao is also making innovative attempts at traditional Chinese opera. Although *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* adopts the form of traditional Chinese opera, it differs from traditional Chinese opera in that it includes improvements to the structure of the opera script.

*Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is one of the earliest Chinese traditional opera scripts to adopt a staged approach (Lian, 1991). Prior to this, Cantonese opera scripts were divided into two types: theatrical plays and outline plays. Theatrical plays has a script, mainly derived from popular plays such as Song and Yuan Dynasty Southern Opera, Yuan and Ming Dynasty Zaju, Ming and Qing Dynasty Chuanqi, including Kunshan opera, Yiyang opera, and Pihuang opera, which are among the four major vocal styles of traditional Chinese opera. An outline play is a play without a written script, only an outline. It was passed down orally and personally by artists throughout history, passed down from generation to generation (Yu, 2005). In Cantonese opera, which developed from the vocal style, the playwright first selects the musical instruments he deems suitable for the theatrical requirements of the play and then fills in the lyrics (Rong, 1984).

*Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* breaks the limitations of traditional Cantonese opera's stage plays and outline plays and adopts a staged form. The whole play is divided into six acts, namely "expressing aspirations", "departure", "pacifying the barbarians", "memorial", "military discussion", and "triumph". This structural change has made the plot of the script more concentrated, and it has undergone significant changes from the traditional literary system that follows the principle of non-fixed time and space. *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* innovates on the basis of traditional Cantonese opera forms. It not only retains the singing style of Cantonese opera but also adds a recitation part, making the characters' movements closer to the

style of drama and reducing the formulaic movements in Chinese traditional opera. These changes not only reflect Liang Qichao's inheritance of traditional Cantonese opera but also demonstrate his conscious transformation and innovation in artistic expression, promoting the development of modern Chinese traditional opera (Zhong, 2017). This improvement not only reflects Liang Qichao's inheritance of traditional Cantonese opera but also demonstrates his conscious transformation and innovation in artistic expression. Through this transformation, Liang Qichao made profound changes in ideological themes, zeitgeist, artistic expression, and other aspects, promoting the development of modern opera. The creation and performance of *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is not only a concrete practice of Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera concept but also a powerful proof of his attempt to inspire the public and promote social progress through the platform of Chinese traditional opera.

Chinese traditional opera often has a loose structure. Liang Qichao attempted to compress the plot in "Ban Dingyuan Ping Western Regions" to make it more compact and fast-paced to adapt to the viewing habits of modern audiences.

In the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese traditional opera performances often adopted the Liantaiben Play. Liantaiben Play is a unique form of Chinese traditional opera creation and performance, characterized by the continuous performance of a complete large-scale drama. Although each performance is a whole, it has its independence, which is quite similar to the broadcasting method of modern TV dramas. During the Northern Song Dynasty, the continuous performances of the Liantaiben Play could already be staged for several days. In the Qing Dynasty, the Sanqing Troupe, one of the four major Huizhou troupes, was famous for its ability to perform the entire Three Kingdoms opera continuously. During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, many theatrical genres attracted audiences by performing Liantaiben Play, which played an important role in promoting the prosperity and development of theatre. Taking the famous Chinese traditional opera "The Peony Pavilion" as an example, the performance of "The Peony Pavilion" at the Shanghai Kunqu Opera House in 2022 took two days and three performances, with a total length of 8 hours (Zhuge, 2022).

However, *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* only has 6 acts, which makes the dramatic conflicts in the play more concentrated. The popular new-style dramas should have influenced Liang Qichao's episodic mode in Japan at that time. At that time, Japanese new-style dramas mostly consisted of around 5 to 6 acts, with additional subplots within each act (Zhong, 2017). Liang Qichao fled to Japan in October 1898 after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, which was the coup d'état launched by Empress Dowager Cixi on September 21, 1898. During his time in Japan, he had extensive exposure to and reading of Japanese books and ideas. In his 1899 travelogue *Journey to Hawaii*, he mentioned that he was fond of writing in the Japanese language. Moreover, the article *Inspiration of Mount Defusu* was compiled in *Journey to Hawaii*. The *Inspiration* has been changed to ancient Chinese literature as the main tone, with slight deletions and citations replaced with ancient Chinese classics. In addition, Liang Qichao also wrote the *Postscript* for Huang Zunxian's *Japanese National Chronicles* (Shi, 2024). It can be seen that Liang Qichao knew both the Japanese language and Japanese literature. Liang Qichao's understanding of Japanese literature is also reflected in his Chinese traditional opera works.

Through this concentrated dramatic conflict and episodic structure, Liang Qichao not only demonstrated his innovative spirit in theatrical creation but also reflected the response and acceptance of Chinese society to the trends of the time.

### 4.3. The Use of Foreign Language and Dialects Vocabulary

The change in wording is also a prominent feature in the script of *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. In the Chinese traditional opera script, he used more colloquialisms, dialects, and foreign language vocabulary. The use of these words is not entirely based on the story background of *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is a historical story set in the Han Dynasty of China (202 BC-220). In the script, Japanese and English were added, and terms such as national anthem, civilization, democracy, the law of the jungle, the world of nations, civilized countries, colonial countries, army academies, glasses, whiskey, bread, 400 trillion compatriots, nationals, and the world appeared (Ying, 1980). This innovative wording not only demonstrates his intention to promote new knowledge and inspire people's intelligence but also reflects his broader goal of promoting social and political change through cultural reform. Through this unique language practice, Liang Qichao integrated educational significance into Chinese opera, especially advocating the spirit of martial arts and cultivating students' artistic interests, thus promoting the development of Chinese drama in the 20th century.

The dialogue in the script that does not conform to the prescribed situation will have an impact on the audience's appreciation. Liang Qichao chose to use vocabulary that did not conform to the prescribed situation to express the content, partly because the performance venue was a Chinese school in Yokohama, Japan (Zhong, 2017). On the other hand, for Liang Qichao, showcasing his political beliefs is more important than telling the story clearly in the script. In *The Origin of Yokohama Chinese Datong School in Japan*, Liang Qichao advocated for the use of Western and Japanese as universal learning and encouraged students to travel to the East for further studies. These reading experiences have brought Liang Qichao much shock, and when it comes to language and writing improvement, there are two main points: first, to streamline the text. In terms of writing style, we should simplify complexity, transform elegance into vulgarity, promote new knowledge, and inspire people's wisdom (Shi, 2024). Liang Qichao's propositions and practices not only reflect his profound understanding of language and writing reform but also his broader goal of promoting social and political change through cultural reform.

This situation is not only reflected in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. Liang Qichao had situations in his script creation where the characters' lines did not match their backgrounds, especially when using non-Chinese words (such as English words). The use of English words in Liang Qichao's scripts is not an isolated case but a unique phenomenon in his literary creation. For example, in *Dream of Robbery*, Liang Qichao used English words, which was particularly prominent in the Chinese social context at that time (Liang, 2011). At that time, the education situation in China reached 17995 schools and 1300739 students in 1908. This indicates that in China at that time, the number of people receiving education was gradually increasing. However, it is also a very small part of the total population. In 1908, there were 1.28 million students. In the well-educated areas of Beijing and Tianjin, the enrollment rate of school-age children is only 3.2081% (Zhang, 2018). This data reflects the limitations of education popularization in China at that time and also indicates that the use of English words and

other dialogue in Liang Qichao's script that does not match the background of the characters may be a reflection of the social education situation at that time or a need for artistic creation, rather than solely based on the real background.

Based on this educational situation, there are not many people who can understand and comprehend English. Nevertheless, Liang Qichao still added foreign language vocabulary to the script, possibly because his target audience was a small number of educated intellectuals at the time. This is also one of the reasons why Liang Qichao's script was not performed. The performance *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* was held at a Chinese school in Japan. So, although there may be English and other foreign language words, students can understand their meanings. From the foreign vocabulary in the play, it can be seen that the audience of Liang Qichao's Chinese traditional opera was not ordinary Chinese people but a small number of educated intellectuals at that time. This concept also led to fewer theatrical performances by Liang Qichao.

The use of Cantonese is indeed a major feature in Liang Qichao's script *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. At that time, Cantonese opera was not mainly based on Cantonese, but it mainly used the "opera studio Mandarin". This kind of "opera studio Mandarin" is the Yongzhou Mandarin with Cantonese flavor used in Chinese traditional opera stage performances, originating from the localization process of Pihuang opera after it entered Guangdong and Guangxi. According to Mr. Ouyang Yuqing's article *On Cantonese Opera*, initially, Cantonese opera used Guilin Mandarin for singing and speaking. However, over time, Cantonese opera gradually incorporated local folk songs and Cantonese pronunciation. After about a hundred years of development, Cantonese opera became the Chinese traditional opera of Cantonese people. During the reign of Emperor Tongzhi (1862-1875), Cantonese opera had already begun to incorporate Cantonese into the official language of opera houses, gradually increasing to the point where lyrics (rhymes) were also added to Cantonese (Ouyang, 1990). *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* is in the early stages of this transformation process and can use Cantonese extensively, as well as local folk music such as the Loong Boat song and the ditty *Dressing Table*. Although it follows the convention, the lyrics of the main characters, such as court figures, are still in Mandarin (Li, 2007).

Compared to works of the same period, a breakthrough has been made in the language of Cantonese opera. It incorporates a large amount of Cantonese in the language, making the work more closely related to the daily life and cultural background of audiences in the Guangdong region. Liang Qichao believes that the popularity of colloquial language is the biggest key to the progress of literature. In the fifth act of *Military Talk*, the dialogues were all in Cantonese, and local folk music elements such as the *Loong Boat song* and the ditty *Dressing Table* were integrated. This bold attempt was extremely rare in Cantonese opera works at that time (Xu, 2013). Liang Qichao's approach not only breaks the traditional language convention of Cantonese opera, which mainly uses Mandarin but also reflects his understanding of the importance of colloquial language in literary progress. Through this linguistic and stylistic innovation, Liang Qichao not only opened up new paths for the development of Cantonese opera but also provided valuable experience and inspiration for later Cantonese opera creation.

The changes in dialogue language in Liang Qichao's *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* are indeed based on the special educational environment and language background of Yokohama Datong School in Japan. The drama was created for a concert at Yokohama Datong School, and the audience was mainly Japanese students from

Guangdong, so Cantonese was extensively used in the play. These students and teachers all have a Cantonese language background, and the use of Cantonese can make it easier for them to understand and resonate. At that time, Cantonese opera was still in the era of Mandarin, using stage Mandarin, which was close to Mandarin, for singing. However, Liang Qichao fully utilized Cantonese dialects in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*. This innovation was several years earlier than the "Zhishi Ban", an improved new theatre group organized by revolutionary party members in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the aim of promoting revolution, which attempted to use Cantonese (Li, 2007). In addition, the play also features characters named after Cantonese homophones, which enhances the comedic effect of the drama and makes the language more colourful. Therefore, compared to the "opera studio Mandarin", Guangdong people are better able to understand Cantonese, which is also one of the important reasons why Liang Qichao used Cantonese in the play.

Liang Qichao's script *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* innovatively incorporates folk sayings, dialects, and foreign language vocabulary, not only demonstrating his intention to promote new knowledge and inspire people's wisdom but also reflecting his broader goal of promoting social and political change through cultural reform. The language used in the script, especially the extensive use of Cantonese, broke the traditional language conventions of Cantonese opera while reflecting Liang Qichao's reflection on the current education situation and positioning of the intellectual audience at that time.

#### 4.4. Realistic Stage Art

The use of realistic stage art in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* reflects Liang Qichao's bold attempt at innovation in Chinese traditional opera. In Act Five, *Military Talks*, Liang Qichao breaks away from the abstract and symbolic stage design commonly seen in Chinese traditional opera by setting up specific camping scenes and dressing characters in modern military uniforms and instead adopts more realistic sets and costumes. This realistic technique makes the stage effect more vivid and intuitive, enhancing the audience's sense of immersion and the authenticity of the theatre (Zhong, 2017). This kind of real-life stage is not the same as the setting of Chinese traditional opera. The stage design of Chinese traditional opera is usually characterized by simplicity and symbolism, with one table and two chairs being the most classic representative. This design is not only widely used for its simplicity and flexibility but also carries profound cultural and artistic connotations. In Chinese traditional opera, one table and two chairs can represent different scenes and contexts, such as indoor, outdoor, study, living room, etc., implying different environments and backgrounds through actors' performances and small changes in props. This type of one table and two chairs is actually a general synonym for the use of tables and chairs in Chinese traditional opera stages. It is a representative symbol abstracted and summarized from real life (Zhou, 2003).

Liang Qichao believes that the freehand expression in Chinese traditional opera cannot make the audience feel the real situation, which echoes Jiang Guanyun's (1865-1929) viewpoint. Jiang Guanyun, who co-initiated the organization of the Political News Society with Liang Qichao and advocated constitutional monarchy, published an article titled *China's Theatre Industry* in the March 1905 issue of the *New People's Daily*. He quoted criticism from Japanese newspapers on the format of Chinese theatre, pointing out that Chinese theatre still used old methods to depict war, using knives and guns to fight, and

the war scenes were like child's play, which could not cultivate people's understanding of modern warfare. This shows that Jiang Guanyun has also begun to agree that the aesthetics of Chinese traditional opera is out of place and that reform is needed. Liang Qichao's depiction of modernized troops in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* can be seen as a response to such criticism. In the third act of the play, the audience saw members of the army assassinating the Xiongnu envoy with guns, and those who repelled the pursuers also carried guns instead of traditional martial arts scenes with swords. These changes were clearly influenced by Jiang Guanyun (as well as Japanese media). Through this modern portrayal of war scenes, Liang Qichao attempted to make Chinese traditional opera more realistic, enhance the audience's sense of reality, and promote the modernization reform of Chinese traditional opera (Zhong, 2017).

Liang Qichao's use of realistic stage art in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* reflects his bold attempt at innovation in Chinese traditional opera. Breaking away from the abstract and symbolic stage design of traditional opera and instead adopting more realistic scenery and costumes enhances the authenticity of the drama and the audience's sense of immersion.

#### **4.5. The Response of Liang Qichao's Political Ideology in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions***

Liang Qichao demonstrated his profound academic localization tendency and practical application in the introduction and localization of political theory in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is not just a simple translation of Western political theories. He constantly incorporates his insights while introducing these theories and closely connects them with the actual political changes in China. Liang Qichao emphasized the combination of theoretical introduction and practical application, which reflects his profound understanding and practice of academic localization. He advocated not to be a slave to the old Chinese learning, not to be a slave to the new Western learning, with the aim of promoting the localization and development of Chinese social sciences. In the field of political science, Liang Qichao is considered one of the important pioneers of Chinese political science. He not only introduced and studied the academic ideas of Western political scientists but also wrote and published political science works with Chinese characteristics, becoming a pioneer in the construction of Chinese political science. His work is not only theoretical exposition but also focuses on the need for practical political change, and this practical thinking runs through his political theory and practice (Wu, 2023). Through these works, Liang Qichao demonstrated his efforts to integrate Western political theory with China's reality, as well as his important role in promoting Chinese political science and political change.

Liang Qichao's political ideology is reflected in *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*, which conforms to his advocated concept of political fiction, that is, fictional literature that can stimulate readers to engage in political and social reforms. Liang Qichao believes that political novels can effectively promote the enlightenment and enlightenment of society. He emphasizes the practicality of political novels and believes that at the beginning of various changes in Europe, many righteous people expressed their political opinions through novels. Therefore, political novels play an important role in social progress. In Liang Qichao's view, the motivation for creating political novels is to "use the words of novelists to initiate national political thought and stimulate their patriotic spirit" (Zhong, 2017). *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* tells the story of Ban Chao pacifying the Western Regions, showcasing patriotic thoughts and the pride

of soldiers, which is closely related to Liang Qichao's political ideology. Liang Qichao analyzed the reasons for China's weakness in his political thoughts, and he believed that one of the most important reasons was that the Chinese people took adventure as the great precept and softness as the good man. He emphasized the importance of the spirit of martial arts, believing that it is the key to improving national quality and recasting the national soul (Li, 1988).

In 1898, Liang Qichao fled to Japan after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, and his thoughts went through a process from moderate to relatively radical. During his time in Japan, he was exposed to more Western knowledge and began to advocate for civil rights, promote the New Citizen doctrine, and vigorously criticize authoritarianism. Liang Qichao's political ideology also underwent a transition from a constitutional monarchy to a republican system during this period. However, after Liang Qichao visited the United States in 1903, his thoughts underwent significant changes. He was disappointed with democratic politics during his inspection of the United States, which is related to his perception of the country. Liang Qichao believes that although the political system in the United States has some good aspects, overall, it does more harm than good. This visit led him to re-examine the advantages and disadvantages of republican and constitutional monarchy, ultimately causing his ideas to retreat from advocating for revolution and implementing democratic republicanism to the circle of bourgeois reformists. Liang Qichao's political stance shifted from advocating a republican system to a constitutional monarchy, indicating that he began to believe that a republican system was inferior to a constitutional monarchy (Liang, 2007).

*Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* reflects Liang Qichao's political ideology of constitutional monarchy. In the play, there is a specific plot describing the emperor awarding flags to the class leaders, which not only demonstrates respect for imperial power but also reflects Liang Qichao's recognition of constitutional monarchy. Liang Qichao believed that under a constitutional monarchy, the power of the monarch is limited, and the rights and obligations between the government and the people are clearly defined through the constitution. In the play, the emperor awarded the flag to Ban Chao, symbolizing the emperor's trust in Ban Chao and support for his military actions. This corresponds to the role of the monarch in the constitutional monarchy advocated by Liang Qichao. That is, as a symbol of the country, the monarch exercises his duties through the power granted by the constitution (Liang, 1980). The expression of his political ideology through Chinese traditional opera has also been shown in other works of Liang Qichao. Liang Qichao published three Chinese traditional opera works in 1902, namely *Dream of Robbery*, *New Rome*, and *The Story of Heroes*. During this period, Liang Qichao advocated for a republican political system. Taking *Dream of Robbery* as an example, the protagonist in this play makes up to live in the same era background as Liang Qichao. He hopes to wake up fellow citizens by imitating the French writer Voltaire. Because Voltaire successfully awakened the French people by creating novels and plays. Liang Qichao expressed his hope to inspire the people and promote social change through literary creation in *Dream of Robbery* (Liang, 2011).

## 5. Conclusion

Liang Qichao's contribution to the field of Chinese traditional opera is not only reflected in his advocacy for opera improvement but also the expression and dissemination of his political ideas through the creation of Chinese traditional opera. He emphasized the social function of Chinese traditional opera, believing that it is an important tool for

spreading new ideas and enlightening the people. Liang Qichao's ideas on Chinese traditional opera creation and improvement propelled the development of Chinese theatre in the early 20th century, making Chinese traditional opera an important carrier for spreading new ideas and promoting social change.

Liang Qichao's contribution to the field of Chinese traditional opera is reflected not only in his advocacy for opera improvement but also in the expression and dissemination of his political ideas through the creation of Chinese traditional opera. He emphasized the social function of Chinese traditional opera, believing that it is an important tool for spreading new ideas and enlightening the people. Liang Qichao's ideas on Chinese traditional opera creation and improvement propelled the development of Chinese theatre in the early 20th century, making opera an important medium for spreading new ideas and promoting social change. *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions* not only reflects Liang Qichao's profound understanding and innovative spirit of Chinese traditional opera art but also deeply reflects his political philosophy and sense of social responsibility. This play uses Cantonese opera, a local genre, to make the work closer to specific audience groups, demonstrating Liang Qichao's audience-centered creative philosophy. Structurally, it breaks the loose pattern of Chinese traditional opera and adopts a staged approach, making the plot more compact and lively to adapt to the viewing habits of modern audiences. In addition, the bold use of foreign language and dialect vocabulary, as well as realistic stage art in the play, are Liang Qichao's breakthroughs in Chinese traditional opera forms, aimed at making opera more realistic, enhancing its educational and inspiring functions for the public.

Most importantly, this play deeply reflects Liang Qichao's political ideology, especially his support for a constitutional monarchy and emphasis on patriotism. It shows how he used Chinese traditional opera as a tool to spread political ideas and stimulate people's political participation and enthusiasm for social reform. Through *Ban Dingyuan Pacifies the Western Regions*, Liang Qichao not only promoted the modernization of Chinese traditional opera art but also provided new possibilities for the role of opera in the social and political fields.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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