

# Operatic Figures in Jiangnan Woodcarving Art of the Qing Dynasty: A Case Study of Dongyang “Knife-Horse” role

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**Abstract:** “Knife-Horse”-- martial role are a decorative carving theme commonly found in Dongyang operatic woodcarving. They are frequently applied to Qinfang beams in traditional architecture, and can also occasionally be seen in components like Queti brackets, Timu blocks, Taohuan panels, as well as various types of furniture. The subject matter of these carvings is often drawn from classic operatic works such as Romance of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Generals of the Yang Family, and The Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties. In terms of craftsmanship, multiple carving techniques are typically employed, including high relief, bas-relief, and semi-round carving. Through exquisite technique, these works vividly depict characters’ expressions, movements, and dramatic scenes.

**Keywords:** Dongyang Woodcarving of China; “Knife-Horse” Role; Operatic Themes; Bas-relief; Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance

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## 1. Introduction

Dongyang woodcarving is a treasure of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, and among its many forms, operatic woodcarvings are truly awe-inspiring. The exquisite artistry in the “Knife-Horse” figure motifs renders characters with remarkable lifelikeness.

Operatic woodcarving can be seen as a way of preserving intangible cultural heritage through tangible cultural forms. When Dongyang woodcarving artisans create “Knife-Horse” role, they must deeply understand the plot, character traits, stage aesthetics of the opera, and other elements of intangible cultural heritage. This creative process is itself a form of learning and internalizing traditional culture. These artisans are not only inheritors of carving techniques but also active disseminators of operatic culture. This complementary mode of cultural transmission facilitates the joint preservation of intangible heritage. However, systematic research focused on operatic themes—especially “Knife-Horse” role—is still relatively limited.

This article explores the “Knife-Horse” role in Dongyang woodcarving of the Qing dynasty through an in-depth study of related character stories, carving techniques, and compositional design. These skills not only showcase the artistic sophistication of Dongyang woodcarving but also provide valuable technical references for the continued transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

## 2. Themes of “Knife-Horse” role

During the Qing Dynasty, the themes of operatic woodcarvings became rich and diverse, encompassing a wide array of theatrical works. Among them, Dongyang operatic woodcarvings held a significant position due to their unique artistic appeal<sup>[1]</sup>. A distinctive feature of Dongyang operatic carvings is the depiction of “Knife-Horse” role—characters portrayed in scenes of horseback combat and martial displays<sup>[2]</sup>. These themes are primarily drawn from classic opera stories rich in equestrian and battle imagery, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Generals of the Yang Family*, and *The Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*. The abundance of scenes involving horse-riding warriors, spearplay, and weaponry in these stories provides ample material for dynamic and vivid artistic expression. These carvings effectively bring to life scenes of ancient warfare and the heroic spirit of legendary role, reflecting popular tastes in folk art and bearing significant artistic value and culture connotation<sup>[3]</sup>.

Among these operatic themes, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* occupies the majority. Numerous carvings inspired by it can be found in the ancient architectural sites of Dongyang, such as Shende Hall and the Luzhai residence in Xiachengli Village, as well as the Bamianting in Huangshan Village, Yiwu. Examples include *Hanging the Seal and Returning Gold* carved on Taohuanban (see **Figure 1**), *The Three Heroes Battle Lü Bu* carved on Qinfang beams (see **Figure 2**), and *The Battle of Puyang* (see **Figure 3**). Within these Three Kingdoms-themed “Knife-Horse” carvings, the character Guan Yu is especially prevalent. Due to his well-known appearance and his revered traits of loyalty and righteousness, depictions of Guan Yu are found throughout architectural elements—Qinfang beams, Queti brackets, and Taohuan panels—either as standalone role or as part of dramatic scenes.



**Figure 1.** “Knife-Horse” Figure Woodcarving from Shende Hall, Dongyang (Image source: Photographed by the author)

*Hanging the Seal and Returning Gold* (Figure 1) is carved on a Taohuan panel using the bas-relief technique. On the left is Guan Yu, and on the right are the two Madame sisters-in-law. The scene is taken from Chapter 25 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Luo Guanzhong during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties<sup>[4]</sup>. In this episode, Cao Cao attempts to win over Guan Yu by offering him a generous amount of gold and an official seal. However, Guan Yu, determined to reunite with Liu Bei, hangs the seal in the main hall, piles the silver and gold in the corridor, bids farewell to Cao Cao, and escorts the two ladies on his departure.



**Figure 2.** “Knife-Horse” Figure Woodcarving from the China Woodcarving Museum in Dongyang (Image source: Photographed by the author)

*The Three Heroes Battle Lü Bu (Figure 2)* is carved on a Qinfang beam using the high-relief technique. On the far left is Liu Bei, and to the right are Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, and Lü Bu, respectively. The scene is taken from Chapter 5 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, also by Luo Guanzhong. It depicts the fierce and unmatched warrior Lü Bu during the time when Dong Zhuo held dictatorial power and various warlords rose up to oppose him. To resist Lü Bu, the three sworn brothers—Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei—engage him in a desperate battle at Hulao Pass. Guan Yu charges in first to confront Lü Bu, followed closely by Zhang Fei, and finally Liu Bei joins with his sword. The three attack Lü Bu from all sides, and though formidable, Lü Bu ultimately retreats due to being outnumbered.



**Figure 3.** “Knife-Horse” Figure Woodcarving from the China Woodcarving Museum in Dongyang (Image source: Photographed by the author)

*The Battle of Puyang (Figure 3)* is carved on a Qinfang beam using the high-relief technique<sup>[5]</sup>. From left to right, the role are Lü Bu, Dian Wei, Xiahou Yuan, and Li Dian. The scene is taken from Chapter 5 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Luo Guanzhong in the late Yuan to early Ming dynasty. It tells the story of the confrontation between Cao Cao and Lü Bu at Puyang. After Lü Bu seizes control of Puyang, Cao Cao leads his army to recapture it. Ji Ling, the Prefect of Puyang and Lü Bu’s subordinate, leads troops to resist the attack, and both sides become locked in a prolonged standoff. After several days of fierce fighting and facing shortages of food and supplies, Lü Bu decides to abandon Puyang, and a temporary truce is reached.

In addition to this, other notable works include *Battle between Song and Liao Dynasties* from the *Generals of the Yang Family* story found in the Huangshan Bamianting, *Qianqiu Pass* inspired by *The Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*, and *Conquest of the Southern Tang* derived from Wu Opera and Hui Opera traditions. Each of these pieces vividly portrays dynamic “Knife-Horse” role through exquisite craftsmanship and lively modeling, representing outstanding examples of Dongyang woodcarving with both artistic and cultural significance.

### 3. Carving Techniques of “Knife-Horse” role

In the field of Dongyang operatic woodcarving of the Qing Dynasty, the carving techniques used for “Knife-Horse” role exhibit remarkable diversity. Among them, high relief, bas-relief, and semi-round carving are widely employed. High relief is known for its pronounced depth, often reaching more than five centimeters. This technique uses dramatic variations in height to create a strong sense of three-dimensionality, effectively conveying the spatial layering and depth of complex scenes. Bas-relief, by contrast, achieves its artistic effect through more restrained and subtle execution. The raised areas typically do not exceed half the thickness of the wood, and often are even shallower<sup>[6]</sup>. By cleverly compressing spatial depth, this technique condenses intricate visual content into a relatively flat surface, demonstrating a refined aesthetic charm. Semi-round carving, positioned between relief and full sculpture, retains part of the background while projecting key elements of role or objects in a semi-three-dimensional form. This technique excels in rendering “Knife-Horse” role, making characters appear more vivid and lifelike while preserving harmony within the overall composition. It enhances both the expressive power and visual impact of the artwork.

Whether in actual operatic performances or in individual illustrations from opera prints, scenes are typically composed of three to five characters—an arrangement well-suited for direct carving onto Qinfang beams. As a result,

operatic woodcarvings on Qinfang beams often have identifiable dramatic references, and “Knife-Horse” role carved with operatic allusions are frequently located on these beams. For example, *The Three Heroes Battle Lü Bu* (Figure 2) and other “Knife-Horse” carvings found on Qinfang beams are typically executed using high-relief techniques. Because Qinfang beams provides a convenient surface for carving, “Knife-Horse” role placed here often use high relief to prominently depict each character. At the same time, incised-line techniques are used to finely render facial expressions, capturing facial features such as eyebrows, eyes, and lips with varying line thickness, curvature, and sharpness to vividly express emotions and character. Pierced carving may be used to portray details in the characters’ costumes. To create contrast with the role, the background is usually rendered in bas-relief, providing visual depth and emphasis.

In contrast, a piece like *Hanging the Seal and Returning Gold* (Figure 1), carved on a Taohuan panel, makes use of shallow relief techniques due to limited material thickness of the panel. Although the role are not as three-dimensional as those in high relief, the detailed rendering remains vivid, creating an effect reminiscent of a scroll painting etched onto the surface of a door.

Unlike the “Knife-Horse” role carved on Qinfang beams, which are primarily based on operatic storylines, “Knife-Horse” role on Timu blocks typically feature a smaller number of characters and are executed mainly using semi-round carving, often combined with pierced carving to create three-sided sculptural effects (Figure 4). In this example, two pairs of role are rendered using semi-round carving, with meticulous attention to the details of their costumes, showcasing rich textures and fabric patterns. The spatial relationship between the role and the background behind them is handled using pierced carving, allowing visual separation and depth. This technique not only brings the characters to life with dynamic expressions and postures, but also enhances the three-dimensional quality of the composition through the layered, overlapping arrangement of foreground and background elements.

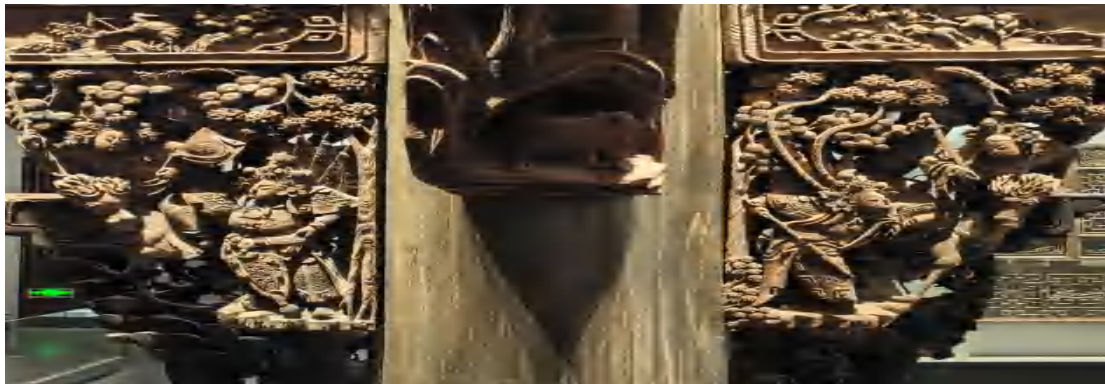


Figure 4. “Knife-Horse” Figure Woodcarving from the China Woodcarving Museum in Dongyang (Image source: Photographed by the author)

## 4. Form and Composition of “Knife-Horse” role

### 4.1. Stylistic Characteristics

In Dongyang operatic woodcarvings of the Qing Dynasty, “Knife-Horse” role exhibit distinctive stylistic features. These role are typically portrayed with robust, muscular builds, creating a powerful and imposing visual effect. In terms of proportions, “Knife-Horse” role often follow a “three-heads-proportion” design—meaning the body height is roughly three times the head height—lending the role a theatrical quality while emphasizing physical strength and musculature. Facial features are also stylized: “Knife-Horse” role commonly have square-shaped faces, large eyes, and thick eyebrows. These traits are deliberately exaggerated by skilled woodcarvers to create vivid and expressive facial expressions that highlight unique demeanor of each character. The relatively large head size allows for intricate detailing of facial features, making the expressions and emotions of the “Knife-Horse” role especially vivid and eye-catching. This contributes to the unique artistic charm and expressive force of Dongyang “Knife-Horse” role.

In the folk tradition of crafting operatic woodcarvings, artisans often observed the facial expressions, movements, and

costumes of opera characters by watching different performances—even multiple renditions of the same play by different troupes. Some craftsmen would even sketch small drafts while watching<sup>[7]</sup>. To satisfy the emotional and aesthetic needs of the people, they used operatic themes as decorative subjects, selecting representative moments from each drama and capturing them in wood. In doing so, they effectively “froze” theatrical action into wood carving<sup>[8]</sup>.

Since “Knife-Horse” role were carved by artisans who watched operas for inspiration, their costumes and props reflect strong theatrical characteristics. The role are typically dressed in stage costumes seen in Chinese opera, reflecting the traits of different historical periods and character roles. During carving, great attention is paid to the depiction of costume patterns, folds, and other details, adding richness and refinement to the artworks<sup>[9]</sup>. However, the representations often differ slightly from the original texts. For instance, Lü Bu is commonly depicted with a pheasant feather plume in his headpiece (**Figure 2**). Operatic props also frequently accompany the role, serving as symbolic attributes. For example, a character holding two swords would suggest Liu Bei; the Green Dragon Crescent Blade signifies Guan Yu; and the Fangtian Huaji (halberd) is associated with Lü Bu. These elements help identify the characters and their personalities, allowing viewers to infer the story being depicted. In **Figure 1**, the left character holds a Green Dragon Crescent Blade, has a long beard and phoenix-like eyes, and rides a warhorse while shielding two women on the right—indicating that the scene is *Hanging the Seal and Returning Gold* from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In **Figure 2**, four main characters are shown, with three engaging in battle against one. This aligns with the famous scene *The Three Heroes Battle Lü Bu*. A closer look reveals that, from left to right, the role hold the following weapons: Twin Swords, the Eighteen-Foot Serpent Spear, the Green Dragon Crescent Blade, and the Fangtian Huaji. These correspond respectively to Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, and Lü Bu. Combined with Lü Bu’s iconic pheasant-feather headdress, the scene is clearly identifiable. In **Figure 3**, four characters are shown in chaotic combat. Lü Bu, with his feathered headdress, and Dian Wei, wielding a halberd and a spear, suggest the scene is *The Battle of Puyang* from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The two characters on the right, each holding a single sword, represent Xiahou Yuan and Li Dian. Their identities can also be deduced from their costumes<sup>[10]</sup>. In opera, costume styles often indicate the rank and importance of a character<sup>[11]</sup>. The woodcarved “Knife-Horse” role reflect this in detail: Lü Bu and Dian Wei, both key generals, wear armor with flags on their backs; Xiahou Yuan, of secondary importance, wears only armor without flags; and Li Dian, of lesser rank, is dressed in regular clothing.

In “Knife-Horse” figure motifs, warhorses are an indispensable element. They are depicted as strong and agile, with exaggerated muscular contours, flowing manes, and vibrant energy, brimming with life. In traditional opera performances, real horses are not used<sup>[12]</sup>. Instead, symbolic methods are employed—such as representing horses with riding crops—and performers rely on a rich vocabulary of dance movements, including circular steps, spins, rein-pulling gestures, whip-waving, and dramatic poses of various heights, to vividly simulate scenes of galloping on horseback. As a result, woodcarvers, guided by the operatic narrative, imagine and dramatize the horses when sculpting<sup>[13]</sup>. The horse role in “Knife-Horse” woodcarvings are thus exaggerated and animated in form, typically rendered as large as the human role, which greatly enhances the visual tension and dynamic energy of the scene.

## 4.2. Compositional Characteristics

In Dongyang operatic woodcarvings of the Qing Dynasty, “Knife-Horse” figure compositions exhibit a wide variety of forms. In areas such as the Qinfang beams, which offer ample space for multiple role, compositions typically include group scenes of 3 to 5 characters, with some even reaching up to 13 role. In contrast, smaller components like Queti brackets often feature single-character compositions, occasionally expanding to 2 or 3 role.

In “Knife-Horse” carvings, group scenes of 3–5 characters often adopt a combination of scattered perspective and overlapping spatial arrangement (**Figure 2**). This compositional approach skillfully incorporates multiple characters into a single frame while maintaining each figure’s individuality in expression and posture. Unlike single-subject compositions, every character in a group scene is meticulously sculpted, showcasing nuanced facial expressions and dynamic bodily movements. These become multiple focal points for the viewer’s attention. For example, one figure may be in a combat stance wielding a weapon, while another waves a flag to rally the troops—each with distinct expressions and gestures, all

functioning as narrative protagonists. This layering contributes to the richness and depth of storytelling within the image. For background rendering (Figure 1), woodcarvers often employed simplified carving techniques, using generalized lines and planes to create a sense of depth and dimensionality. Elements such as rocks, trees, clouds, and flowing water are stylized and used sparingly, serving to enhance the three-dimensional and spatial quality of the scene. These simplified backgrounds also heighten the theatricality of the woodcarving, creating a stark contrast with the finely carved role and making the main subjects stand out more vividly. This deliberate sculptural strategy, with its clear distinction between primary and secondary elements, not only highlights the details and emotional depth of the main characters, but also uses simplified, blurred backgrounds to recreate the unique spatial atmosphere of traditional opera stages. Since opera backdrops are also typically flat and stylized, this treatment allows viewers to concentrate more fully on the characters' expressions and movements, thereby experiencing the vivid theatrical scenes and exquisite artistry embodied in operatic woodcarving.

In operatic woodcarving, for multi-figure compositions featuring up to 13 characters (Figure 5), backgrounds are typically omitted, and a radial composition is adopted. This compositional method centers around a leading general figure, who is intricately carved to emphasize his commanding presence and heroic spirit. The general's armor, weaponry, and facial expression are rendered with meticulous detail and fluid lines, making him the visual and narrative focal point of the scene. Surrounding role, by contrast, are more roughly carved, using simplified lines and planar shapes with minimal detail. This deliberate reduction in intricacy creates a clear visual hierarchy, allowing the viewer's gaze to naturally expand outward from the central figure. The result is a composition that feels both stable and well-ordered. This distinction between primary and secondary carving—contrasting fine detailing with rough simplicity—further enhances the sense of depth and dimensional layering in the piece. The absence of a background also directs greater focus to the relationships and spatial dynamics among the characters. Through variations in posture, gesture, and arrangement, the scene achieves an internal dynamic balance. This visual balance adds not only depth and tension to the composition but also more effectively conveys the narrative and interpersonal drama of the operatic moment. Ultimately, this approach allows viewers to more clearly experience the rich storytelling and artistic brilliance embedded in operatic woodcarving.

Single-figure compositions often adopt a full-frame layout. In this format, the character is carved with exceptional precision—from facial expressions to the textures of the clothing—striving to capture the subject's spirit and intricate detail. The figure occupies the entire frame, with exquisite craftsmanship making the central image vividly lifelike, as if it might step out from the carving. Although the background is minimal, it typically includes just a few carefully chosen elements—such as distant mountains, drifting clouds, flowers, plants, or architectural outlines. These subtle additions serve to highlight the main figure and enhance the sense of spatial depth and dimensionality within the composition<sup>[14]</sup>.



**Figure 5.** “Knife-Horse” Figure Woodcarving from Zunxing Hall, Dongyang (Image source: Photographed by the author)

## 5. Conclusion

As a product of the fusion between traditional craftsmanship and operatic culture, “Knife-Horse” role in Dongyang operatic woodcarving of the Qing Dynasty possess both artistic and cultural significance. They not only demonstrate the

exceptional skill of Dongyang woodcarvers but also play a vital role in preserving and transmitting traditional Chinese opera<sup>[15]</sup>. This study has explored the rich meaning behind these role through an in-depth analysis of related character stories, carving techniques, and compositional forms.

The carving techniques employed—such as pierced carving, bas-relief, and high relief—each offer distinct visual effects and contribute to the layered dimensionality of the works. In terms of form, the carvings balance exaggeration and realism. The role's appearances strongly reflect their character traits, while the warhorses are powerful and agile, harmonizing with the human role to create dynamic and tension-filled compositions. Compositionally, most works focus on a small group of characters. Through the skillful arrangement of size, perspective, and the interplay of solid and void, the works achieve clear spatial hierarchy and heightened artistic impact.

In summary, “Knife-Horse” role in Dongyang woodcarving of the Qing Dynasty not only highlight the technical mastery of the craft but also serve as vital carriers of traditional operatic culture. This art form has endured through centuries, acting as a bridge between past and present. Looking ahead, greater efforts should be made to preserve and pass down this traditional craft, so it may be revitalized in the modern era and continue to contribute to the inheritance and development of China's outstanding cultural heritage.

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## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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