The literacy of Evolution of Sichuan Opera: Musical, Theatrical, and Media Transformations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical evolution and contemporary transformation of Sichuan opera, focusing on how mass communication media—including radio, television, and digital platforms—have influenced its musical, theatrical, and cultural development. As one of China's most dynamic regional opera traditions, Sichuan opera has experienced substantial changes across five distinct periods shaped by socio-political and technological shifts. The qualitative research design combines document analysis with fieldwork, incorporating interviews with performers, lyricists, and media professionals. Data were collected through structured observations and interviews, followed by descriptive analysis to trace the opera's transformation from its 17th-century origins to its current digital presence. The findings illustrate a nuanced interaction between media innovation and traditional performance practices. For instance, while radio broadcasts in the 20th century helped broaden Sichuan opera's audience reach, they also reduced the visual and spatial dimensions of performances, impacting audience perception of costume and gesture. Similarly, the emergence of television introduced new visual storytelling techniques but also prompted concerns about dialectal consistency as performances were tailored for broader audiences. In the 21st century, digital technologies such as high-definition recording and social media platforms have reinvigorated audience engagement, exemplified by the popularity of livestreamed Sichuan opera performances that integrate virtual characters. However, these innovations raise concerns about cultural authenticity and the potential erosion of traditional aesthetic values. The study concludes that the future sustainability of Sichuan opera depends on its ability to strategically integrate new media while preserving core artistic and cultural values. This research contributes to the broader discourse on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in an increasingly digitized and globalized world.

Key words: Sichuan Opera, Traditional Chinese Opera, Media Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The status and function of future mass communication media for traditional Chinese opera broadcast radio and TV have been a topic of great interest in recent years. With the rapid development of digital media, there has been an increased demand for new ways of consuming traditional opera content. Radio and television have been the primary mass communication media for traditional Chinese opera broadcasts in the past, but this is now changing. The emergence of new digital media platforms has enabled the development of new and innovative ways of consuming traditional opera content. Streaming services such as YouTube, iQiyi, and Tencent Video have enabled the distribution of traditional opera content to a much wider audience. Social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat provide an accessible platform for users to share and discuss traditional opera content with their friends and family. In addition, the development of virtual reality technology has opened the potential for traditional opera to be experienced in a much more immersive manner. By using VR platforms, users can now experience traditional opera performances in a much more immersive manner. This could lead to a much broader audience for traditional opera because of an enhanced experience. The main objective of this study is to explore the potential roles and functions of broadcast radio and television in the context of traditional Chinese operations. This study seeks to anticipate how modern media technologies can be integrated to enhance the promotion, preservation, and presentation of traditional Chinese opera to wider audiences.

The primary goals of this study might include envisioning the future of Chinese traditional operations and how they can adapt to and benefit from modern mass communication media. The study also seeks to identify the specific functions and roles that mass communication media can assume within the realm of traditional Chinese operations, such as

broadcasting performance, educational content, archival preservation, and interactive engagement.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the academic discourse on the evolution of traditional Chinese opera in the context of broadcast media, filling a gap in existing literature on how radio and television influenced Sichuan opera's musical transformations and audience engagement. Second, the study offers practical benefits by informing cultural policymakers and media practitioners about effective strategies for revitalizing Sichuan opera in Chengdu. By analyzing past and present dissemination methods, the findings can help develop new approaches to integrate traditional opera with contemporary media platforms, ensuring its continued relevance.

Moreover, this study addresses the concerns of Sichuan opera practitioners who seek to preserve the authenticity of their art while adapting to modern consumption habits. Through stakeholder interviews and audience analysis, the research will provide recommendations for enhancing public interest in Sichuan opera, potentially increasing viewership and attendance.

By examining the integration of radio and television, this study aims to investigate how these platforms can help Sichuan opera reach a wider and potentially global audience, bridging geographical and cultural gaps. Additionally, this research might explore how mass communication media can contribute to the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural heritage, allowing Chinese Traditional Opera to thrive in the modern digital age. Finally, the research might delve into practical strategies, challenges, and potential opportunities for implementing these envisioned changes in the broadcast radio and television landscape.

OBJECTIVE

- To study the Evolution of Sichuan Opera: Musical, Theatrical, and Media Transformations

Sichuan Opera in the Context of Chinese

Chinese traditional opera is a comprehensive art form that integrates singing, acting, recitation, and martial arts, with a history spanning over a thousand years. Various regional styles have developed across China, each with distinct musical structures, vocal techniques, and performance aesthetics. These opera styles serve as significant carriers of Chinese cultural heritage, reflecting local customs, dialects, and artistic traditions. According to Mackerras (1990, p.12), "Chinese opera is not a single entity but rather a collection of diverse theatrical traditions that have evolved over centuries, each embodying unique regional characteristics". The following are some of the most influential Chinese traditional opera styles, Peking Opera (Jingju, 京剧), which emerged in the late 18th century during the Qing Dynasty, is the most globally recognized Chinese opera style. It is characterized by stylized movements, elaborate facial makeup, and a rich combination of singing, recitation, and acrobatics. According to Wichmann (1991, p.64), "Peking Opera is an art of synthesis, combining speech, song, and highly choreographed

movement to convey meaning beyond the literal text". The instrumentation mainly features the jinghu (a two-stringed fiddle) and suona (a double-reed wind instrument).

Kunqu Opera (Kunqu, 昆曲), dating back to the Ming Dynasty (14th–17th century), is one of the oldest forms of Chinese opera. Recognized for its poetic and refined nature, Kunqu influenced many later opera styles. UNESCO declared Kunqu Opera a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001.

Yue Opera (Yueju, 越剧), originating in Zhejiang Province, gained widespread popularity in the early 20th century. Unlike other forms dominated by male performers, Yue Opera became famous for its female-led performances. Goldstein (2007, p.145) noted that "Yue Opera's gentle melodies and lyrical style provide a stark contrast to the more powerful and dramatic techniques of other Chinese opera forms, making it especially appealing to contemporary audiences". Its themes often center on romance and literary adaptations.

Cantonese Opera (Yueju, 粤剧) is a major opera form in southern China, particularly in Guangdong and Hong Kong. It blends elements of Peking Opera with local musical traditions and is known for its expressive singing style, colorful costumes, and martial arts sequences. Liao (2013, p. 78) observed that "Cantonese Opera combines regional musical idioms with dramatic storytelling, offering a visually and aurally engaging theatrical experience". The use of gongs, drums, and string instruments heightens its dramatic intensity.

Sichuan Opera (Chuanju, 川剧), originating in Sichuan Province, is famous for its dynamic performance techniques, such as face-changing (bianlian, 变脸) and fire-spitting. Its lively, comedic style and strong regional dialects make it distinct from other Chinese operas. Zheng (2014, p. 112) stated that "Sichuan Opera's vibrant energy and interactive performance techniques distinguish it as one of the most engaging forms of traditional Chinese theatre". The music combines local folk melodies with traditional opera instrumentation. Each of these opera styles represents a unique cultural legacy and continues to evolve in response to modern influences while maintaining its traditional artistic elements. Their survival and adaptation highlight the resilience of Chinese opera as a living art form.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology to investigate how traditional Chinese opera—specifically Sichuan opera—is integrated into modern broadcast media in Chengdu, China. The research sought to understand the cultural and communicative shifts in presenting traditional opera through radio and television.

Participants were divided into two main groups: (1) professionals such as opera artists, lyricists, scholars, and media personnel selected based on expertise and at least five years of experience, and (2) general audience members of the Sichuan Opera Troupe selected through convenience sampling. This approach ensured diverse perspectives from both creators and consumers of traditional opera.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, direct observation, and content analysis. Interview topics covered the history and evolution of Sichuan opera, its current status in mass communication, the impact of media on audience engagement, and future prospects for digital integration.

The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative approach, allowing for open-ended discussions that captured rich and nuanced perspectives from participants. Using inductive thematic analysis, the research identified key patterns and insights related to the broadcast of traditional opera in modern media. This approach offered a well-rounded understanding of the cultural, artistic, and technological challenges and opportunities associated with bringing traditional opera to contemporary media platforms.

RESULTS

The evolution of Sichuan Opera alongside its musical, theatrical, and media transformations is discussed in this section. Sichuan opera, one of China's most vibrant and dynamic regional opera forms, has evolved significantly over the centuries through changes in musical structure, instrumental adaptation, costume innovation, and performance techniques. While rooted in traditional folk theater, Sichuan opera has continuously adapted to shifting cultural, political, and technological landscapes. The following sections explore its development across historical periods, focusing on the interplay between artistic transformation and media integration.

1. Formation and Early Development (Late Ming to Early Qing Dynasty, 17th Century)

Sichuan opera emerged during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties as a fusion of multiple regional operatic traditions brought to Sichuan by migrants. This period saw the establishment of five major vocal styles—Gaoqiang (高腔), Kunqiang (昆腔), Huqin Qiang (胡琴腔), Tanxi (弹戏), and Dengxi (灯戏)—which formed the foundation of Sichuan opera's diverse musical expression (L. Zhang, 2015). Among these, Gaoqiang, characterized by its high-pitched and unaccompanied singing, was the dominant vocal form, often supported by bangqiang (help voice), a technique in which the chorus echoes or reinforces the lead singer's melody.

The instrumentation during this era was relatively simple, relying primarily on percussion instruments such as large gongs, drums, small gongs, and horse gongs. String accompaniment was minimal, typically limited to a two-string fiddle, which provided a rhythmic and harmonic foundation for vocal performances (Wang, 2018). Costumes remained relatively plain, closely following traditional Ming dynasty opera attire, as performances were primarily conducted by itinerant troupes in outdoor settings (Huang, 2019). The absence of formal theaters and media distribution meant that Sichuan opera relied solely on live performances for transmission and preservation.

2. Artistic Refinement and Theatrical Expansion (Mid to Late Qing Dynasty, 18th–19th Century)

By the mid-Qing Dynasty, Sichuan opera had developed a distinctive performance style with a well-established repertoire. The period also marked the emergence of signature theatrical techniques, including early face painting and the famous face-changing (bianlian) technique, which later became one of Sichuan opera's defining features (Zhao, 2021). The vocal and instrumental styles were further refined, with the introduction of localized instruments such as the Sichuan erhu (a two-stringed fiddle), which added greater melodic complexity and emotional depth to performances (Li, 2017).

During this period, the influence of Qing palace aesthetics was evident in costume design, as performers began incorporating elaborate garments adorned with cloud shoulders, water sleeves, and other decorative elements (Xu, 2023). The face-painting technique also became more standardized, with specific color schemes and patterns symbolizing different character archetypes. Despite these artistic advancements, Sichuan opera remained largely confined to tea-house performances and traveling theater troupes, as radio and television had yet to emerge as distribution channels.

3. Early Modernization and the Influence of Broadcast Media (Early 20th Century)

The early 20th century marked a turning point in Sichuan opera's development as external influences, particularly from Peking opera, began shaping its musical and theatrical conventions. Huqin Qiang (胡琴腔) rose in status, reflecting the increasing use of stringed instruments in accompaniment, and there were early attempts to incorporate Western musical elements, such as the violin, though these efforts were largely unsuccessful (Chen, 2022).

This period also witnessed the first significant integration of media into Sichuan opera's dissemination. In the 1920s, Chongqing Radio Station broadcast Sichuan opera performances for the first time, marking the genre's transition from a purely live theatrical form to an auditory experience accessible to broader audiences (Huang, 2019). The commercialization of opera troupes led to more flamboyant costume designs, and some productions experimented with modern clothing to appeal to contemporary tastes. Face-changing and fire-spitting techniques became defining features, attracting national attention and solidifying Sichuan opera's reputation as a highly visual and dynamic art form (W. Zhang, 2015).

4. Standardization, Political Reform, and Media Expansion (Mid to Late 20th Century)

The mid-to-late 20th century saw extensive government intervention in Sichuan opera's development. During the National Theatre Reform movement, efforts were made to standardize opera scores and scripts, ensuring greater consistency in performances across different troupes (Zhao, 2021). The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) led to the politicization of Sichuan opera, with traditional storylines being replaced by revolutionary themes that aligned with state ideology. Many classic works were banned or restructured, significantly altering the genre's content and artistic direction (Li, 2017).

Despite these challenges, Sichuan opera continued to expand its presence in mass media. Sichuan People's Radio began regular opera broadcasts in the 1950s, providing a lifeline for traditional opera during periods of political upheaval (Wang, 2018). By the 1980s, televised Sichuan opera

performances gained national recognition, with The Legend of the White Snake featuring face-changing techniques being staged at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala (Huang, 2019). The 1990s saw further growth, with the filming of Sichuan opera dramas bringing the art form to new audiences beyond traditional theatergoers.

5. Digital Innovation and Globalization (21ˢᵗ Century to Present)

In the 21ˢᵗ century, Sichuan opera has embraced digital technology while seeking to preserve its traditional essence. Electronic music fusion has introduced new sonic possibilities, and high-quality digital recordings have helped archive the original high-chamber (Gaoqiang) vocal style for future generations (Xu, 2023). Digital technology has also been employed to simulate the sound of traditional instruments, ensuring their preservation in modern productions (Chen, 2022).

Costume design has also evolved, incorporating 3D-printed headpieces and LED light-emitting garments, blending tradition with modern spectacle. Media platforms have further expanded Sichuan opera's reach, with CCTV documentaries in the 2000s providing historical insights, and social media platforms like TikTok (Douyin) and Bilibili in the 2010s making face-changing performances accessible to younger audiences worldwide (Zhao, 2021). Most recently, in the 2020s, virtual characters have been introduced to perform Sichuan opera, reflecting the genre's continued adaptation to digital culture and technological advancements (Li, 2017).

At the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century, the advent of high-fidelity microphones and audio processing equipment allowed Sichuan Opera artists to perfect their vocal techniques for amplified performances. This development led to more delicate vocal expressions in Sichuan opera, thus reducing the need for exaggerated projection.

In the mid-2000s, some productions began to incorporate electronic synthesizers and Western orchestral elements to modernize the sound of Sichuan opera. This shift is particularly evident in television broadcasts and stage performances aimed at a younger demographic.

From the 2010s to the present, the emergence of digital platforms and online streaming media has further transformed the sound of Sichuan opera. Many artists have adapted their performances for recorded media, balancing traditional instrumental arrangements with synthesized backgrounds to appeal to contemporary musical aesthetics.

In conclusion, the formation and changes of Sichuan opera were deeply influenced by social culture, waves of immigration, and the performance environment. As a five major vocal styles, Sichuan opera was gradually finalized in the Qing Dynasty, and its changes were attributed to two key factors, namely, the intermingling of immigrant cultures and the flourishing of commercial performances. (Li, 2018) points out that the wave of immigrants in the Qing Dynasty brought opera forms from different regions, prompting Sichuan opera to absorb foreign elements and form the unique "five-chamber fusion" system. At the same time, the popularity of tea-houses as the main performance venues made Sichuan opera more secular and marketable, and the content of its performances closer to the lives of citizens

(Wang, 2010). During this period, Sichuan opera was gradually standardized in terms of scripts, music and performance styles, laying the foundation for its status as a major local opera.

In a traditional tea-house, the performance of Sichuan opera is not purely audio-visual entertainment but a highly interactive social activity characterized by local culture. (Fu, 2015) emphasizes that the uniqueness of tea-house opera lies in the experience of watching and performing at the same time, where the audience is so close to the actors that they can applaud and comment at any time and even influence the rhythm of the performance. In addition, the staging of Sichuan opera relies on "one table and two chairs", and the audience needs to imagine the space of the play through the actors' programmed movements and helpings (Liao, 2006). This mode of performance reinforces the centrality of vernacular dialogues, high voice and help voice, and percussion accompany, making Sichuan opera both aurally and visually recognizable.

In the mid-to-late twentieth century, the rise of radio brought the first challenge of "de-visualization" to Sichuan opera. Unable to rely on facial expressions, stances, or stage sets, Sichuan opera underwent significant adaptations in broadcasting. Zhang (2012) found that radio opera tended to choose musical and narrative excerpts, while martial arts scenes were marginalized. In addition, the improvised accompaniments of the "High voice" tended to be fixed due to the limitations of recording technology, and the percussion rhythms were simplified to fit the length of the broadcasts (Fu, 2015). While expanding its reach, Sichuan opera at this stage also lost some of the flexibility of live performance, resulting in a nostalgia for the "tea-house flavor" among older listeners, while newer listeners may find it difficult to understand the plot due to the lack of visual aids.

The intervention of the television medium has caused Sichuan opera to face the problem of "performance re-mediatization". As (Liao, 2006) points out, the language of the camera (e.g., close-ups, editing) breaks the "panoramic" viewing habits of Sichuan opera, prompting the actors to adjust their makeup and movements to fit the screen. In addition, television opera programs often use subtitles, narration, and other aids to lower the viewing threshold, but they may also weaken the dialectal flavor of Sichuan opera (Zhang, 2012).

From tea-house to radio to television, each media transformation of Sichuan opera is a self-innovation, accompanied by the loss of traditional elements. The core contradiction facing contemporary Sichuan opera is How to utilize new media to expand its influence while retaining its essential aesthetic characteristics? The summary is provided in Table 1.

The key findings can be summarized as follows:

- Sichuan opera evolved through cultural fusion, political shifts, and media innovation.
- Tea-house performances emphasized interactivity and vernacular connection.
- Radio and TV broadened access but reduced dialectal and rhythmic flexibility.

Table 1. Historical development and media impact

Historical Period	Transformation Highlights	Media Role & Impact
Formation (17th Century)	Fusion of 5 vocal styles (Gaoqiang, Kunqiang, Huqin Qiang, Tanxi, Dengxi); Simple percussion and fiddle instrumentation; Open-air performances.	No media; reliant on live oral transmission.
Artistic Refinement (18th–19th Century)	Sichuan erhu added; Qing-influenced costumes; Emergence of face-changing techniques.	Live performances only; media absent.
Early Modernization (Early 20th Century)	Huqin Qiang becomes prominent; Early Western influences attempted; Focus on visual techniques like face-changing.	1920s radio broadcasts in Chongqing mark media entry.
Standardization & Reform (Mid–Late 20th Century)	Standardized scripts/music; Cultural Revolution shifts themes; Rise of televised performances.	1950s radio popularization; 1980s–90s TV exposure nationally (e.g., CCTV Spring Gala).
Digital Innovation (21st Century–Present)	Electronic music, 3D costumes, VR characters; Digital archiving of Gaoqiang.	Social media (Douyin, Bilibili); streaming expands reach globally.

- Each media era sparked both innovation and loss of tradition.
- Digital technologies provide promising but complex paths for global engagement and preservation.

DISCUSSION

The central challenge for Sichuan opera today is leveraging modern media technologies to broaden influence while preserving its essential aesthetic and cultural values. From teahouses to live streams, each media adaptation has introduced artistic compromises, such as the simplification of percussion rhythms for radio and the restructuring of visual staging for television.

1. Preservation vs. Modernization
   - Digital tools have proven effective in archiving high-chamber vocal styles, yet entertainment-first adaptations risk diluting core elements of the tradition.
   - The shift to digital platforms presents both an opportunity for preservation and a threat to authenticity as traditional staging is adjusted for new formats.
2. Audience Engagement and Immersive Experiences
   - Modern audiences, especially youth, are increasingly drawn to short-form videos and virtual content. Digital applications like the face-changing simulation app demonstrate the potential for engaging new viewers (ResearchGate, 2023).
   - However, the challenge lies in maintaining storytelling integrity while adopting these engaging formats.
3. Cultural Representation in Global Contexts
   - The globalization of Chinese opera opens avenues for cultural diplomacy and cross-cultural exchange, yet translation and adaptation can strip performances of regional nuances.
   - The integration of virtual characters and electronic soundscapes, while visually compelling, risks altering the artistic essence of traditional performances (Pioneer Publisher, 2023).
4. Policy and Educational Interventions
   - Institutional support remains vital in fostering a new generation of Sichuan opera artists. Policy initiatives that include funding, arts education, and media literacy can play a key role in ensuring the art form's longevity.
   - Incorporating Sichuan opera into educational curricula and promoting digital archiving projects can sustain cultural knowledge across generations.

Ultimately, the future of Sichuan opera lies in strategic hybridity—a deliberate fusion of tradition and technology. Only by embracing both can Sichuan opera continue to thrive as a living art form in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

Sichuan opera's evolution from a localized folk art to a nationally and globally recognized cultural symbol has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, social, and technological factors. Its transformation across five key periods—ranging from the fusion of vocal styles in the 17th century to the digitized, globalized performances of the 21st century—demonstrates its adaptive resilience. The art form has successfully incorporated changing musical structures, enhanced visual techniques, and embraced broadcast and digital media to remain relevant in modern Chinese society.

Radio and television served as pivotal channels for reaching broader audiences in the 20th century, but their limitations in conveying the opera's full sensory richness introduced challenges such as the loss of live interactivity and dialectal flavor. In the current digital era, Sichuan opera has embraced new opportunities through platforms such as TikTok and Bilibili, VR/AR, and AI-driven performance tools. Yet, these advancements also raise critical questions about the balance between innovation and authenticity.

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