

THE CURRENT STATUS AND TRANSMISSION DYNAMICS OF BEIJING QU OPERA IN CHINA*

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Abstract

Beijing Qu Opera is a vital cultural emblem of the Chinese capital and the city's only indigenous operatic genre. The purpose of this study is to investigate the contemporary survival mechanisms and transmission strategies of Beijing Qu Opera and to provide a strategic roadmap for its sustainable development as a dynamic urban cultural emblem. To address this, the study employs qualitative research, including document analysis and in-depth interviews with five informants. The findings reveal that the genre operates in a complex environment, balancing the preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) with commercial viability. This is evidenced by spatial innovations that expand performances from traditional theaters into historical guild halls and urban cultural landmarks, alongside a successful joint training model with the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. Such dynamics mitigate the generational talent gap, maintaining an employment rate of over 95% among new performers. The study concludes that synergy between national policy support, spatial innovation, and talent cultivation is essential for sustainable development. By

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evolving from singing stories to performing stories, Beijing Qu Opera continues to reflect the capital's authentic spirit and contemporary urban identity.

Keywords: Transmission dynamics, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Ethnomusicology, Urban cultural landscape

Introduction

Beijing, the illustrious capital of China, boasts a profound historical heritage spanning more than 3,000 years and has served as the heart of Chinese civilization across numerous dynasties. While the city has long been synonymous with the world-renowned Peking Opera, it is a significant historical irony that this prestigious genre was not a native creation of the city itself but rather a national synthesis developed within the capital's imperial environment (Luo et al., 2025; Ouyang, 2024). For centuries, despite its status as a cultural epicenter, Beijing lacked a truly indigenous operatic form that originated directly from the soil of its local neighborhoods and the voices of its common people. This cultural void was only addressed approximately a century ago with the emergence of Beijing Qu Opera, which stands today as the capital's first and only truly indigenous theatrical genre, embodying the city's authentic spirit and linguistic nuances (Haili, 2016; Zhang & Natayakulwong, 2024).

The artistic genesis of Beijing Qu Opera is deeply rooted in the rich tradition of Quyi, or local narrative singing forms, which flourished in the teahouses and alleys of Old Beijing. It was created by combining different folk performance styles, especially the *Bājiǎogǔ* (octagonal drum), a rhythmic instrument of the Manchu people, and the *Dānxián Páiziqu* (single-string ballad), which provided the music and structure for this new type of performance (Haiping, 2015; Li, 2021). The transition from mere storytelling to a full-fledged operatic stage was a monumental shift in Beijing's cultural history, marked by the shift from narrative singing to representational acting. This evolution was formally

recognized in 1952 by the esteemed writer Lao She, who officially named the genre Beijing Qu Opera following the groundbreaking success of his play *Willow Well* (Liu Shujing), thereby cementing its status as a vital component of the city's intangible cultural heritage (Liu, 2016; Wang & Yingde, 2023).

Despite its undeniable cultural significance and its role as a living cultural gene of the capital, Beijing Qu Opera currently finds itself at a precarious crossroads. In the contemporary era, the genre faces a range of severe challenges stemming from rapid urbanization and the pervasive influence of globalization. The traditional cultural contexts that once nourished this art form are gradually fading, as the younger generation increasingly gravitates toward diversified modern entertainment options and digital culture (Fan, 2018; Wang & Moonswan, 2024; Wu, 2023). This shift has led to a shrinking audience base, a widening talent gap in succession, and an increasing difficulty in creating new works that resonate with the modern urban lifestyle while maintaining traditional integrity. Without a systematic intervention, the unique phonetic-melodic relationships and the specific Beijing flavor inherent in this opera risk being lost to time.

While mainstream operas have received extensive academic attention, musicological and sociological research into the specific survival mechanisms, transmission strategies, and audience demographics of Beijing Qu Opera remains notably insufficient (Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Schuller, 2024). Despite its cultural importance, there is a lack of systematic studies examining its current transmission mechanisms and survival strategies. Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine how the genre reconciles its status as a safeguarded Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) asset with the necessity for market-driven sustainability (Bortolotto & Ubertazzi, 2023; Scovazzi, 2023).

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the contemporary survival mechanisms and transmission strategies of Beijing Qu Opera and to provide a strategic roadmap for its sustainable development as a dynamic urban cultural emblem. By evaluating policy support, training programs, and innovative artistic ideas like immersive theater, this research aims to uncover the potential for creative transformation. Ultimately, the study advocates collaboration between traditional essence and modern innovation to secure a sustainable future for Beijing Qu Opera in the 21st century, ensuring that this shining pearl of Chinese opera continues to provide future generations with a tangible link to Beijing's authentic historical memory.

Literature Review

The systematic literature review of Beijing Qu Opera indicates that its development is not merely a chronicle of artistic transition but a profound reflection of the social and cultural metamorphosis of the Chinese capital. By synthesizing historical records and contemporary academic discourse, this section establishes the theoretical foundation and the general patterns of Chinese opera that define the genre's unique identity in the modern era.

1. General Characteristics of Chinese Opera

Regarding the general knowledge of Chinese opera, it is widely recognized as a highly stylized and comprehensive stage art centered on four foundational disciplines: singing, reciting, acting, and fighting. It serves as a hybrid art form that integrates music, dance, martial arts, and fine arts into a unified aesthetic. Within this broader framework, Beijing Qu Opera distinguishes itself by moving away from traditional stylized conventions to embrace a more realistic performance style, deeply rooted in the everyday life and linguistic nuances of Beijing's residents. While previous studies focus on the historical development of these aesthetic

traits, this realistic approach allows it to resonate more authentically with contemporary audiences and reflect current social issues (Silva, 2024; Yan, 2025; Zifei et al., 2024).

2. Theoretical Framework

In terms of the theoretical framework, this research employs ethnomusicology as the primary macro-perspective to analyze the genre's contemporary status. This framework emphasizes the role of music within culture, allowing the researcher to examine the interaction between musical structures and their sociocultural contexts. By following the music-culture-human paradigm, the study explores how the art form functions as a sociocultural construct that reflects the capital's identity, social rituals, and urban transformations (Huang, 2025; Takao & van Orden, 2022). However, while these theoretical models effectively map the relationship between music and identity, few address the specific economic pressures of the "ICH-market" duality.

3. Contemporary Context and Evolution

The contemporary context of Beijing Qu Opera reveals its unique position as a relatively young genre that evolved from Manchu folk narratives and singing traditions, specifically the octagonal drum and single-string ballad. Scholars have noted that the genre successfully transformed "singing stories" into "acting stories," thereby maintaining a distinctive Beijing flavor through the precise use of the local dialect (Fu et al., 2024; Xiaobin & Ku Wing, 2025). This evolution marks a critical shift from a static narrative to dynamic performance, yet the literature remains largely descriptive of this transition.

4. Challenges and Transmission

Existing literature highlights the severe challenges the genre faces as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) item amidst the pressures of globalization and a diversifying entertainment market, including diminishing audience interest and competition from modern entertainment forms (Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2025; Zabulis et al., 2025). Recent scholarly discourse has increasingly focused on the

genre's survival mechanisms and transmission strategies in the 21st century. The transition to troupe-run training and collaborative undergraduate programs with the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts is recognized as an essential strategy for maintaining the continuity of the artistic echelon. Furthermore, studies on artistic innovation suggest that integrating immersive staging is a strategic response to regain market vitality. Nevertheless, a critical gap remains, while current research identifies these challenges, few studies provide a comparative analysis of which specific transmission strategies yield the highest long-term retention rates for new performers.

Methodology

1. Research Design and Qualitative Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Ethnomusicology to investigate the contemporary status of Beijing Qu Opera in Beijing, China. The methodology integrates systematic document analysis with intensive fieldwork to understand the mechanisms of interaction among policy support, artistic innovation, and cultural identity. By bridging the gap between historical records and live performance observations, the research provides a multi-dimensional perspective on this living cultural gene of the Chinese capital.

2. Informant Selection and Justification

The selection of informants employed purposive sampling to ensure the highest degree of professional credibility and historical depth. Although the sample size focuses on five primary informants, this is justified by their irreplaceable professional stature and roles as key stakeholders in the genre's survival, ensuring informational power over sheer volume. The researcher classified informants into three distinct levels: Key, Casual, and General to capture a holistic view of the genre's creation, management, and transmission among the younger generation. The categorization is detailed in Table 1:

Table 1 Categorization of Research Informants

Category	Selection Criteria	Qualification	Role
Key Informant	Irreplaceable professional stature and historical witness	Chief Composer	Primary shaper of modern musical characteristics
	Concrete creator and innovator of artistic management	Deputy Head	Holistic understanding of developmental context
Casual Informant	Extensive stage experience and expertise in music theory	Principal Actor	Direct practical experience in vocal design
General Informant	Relevance in education and potential for future transmission	Student / Young Actor	Represents the reserve talent and future heritage
	Engagement in academic theatre programs	Undergraduate Student	Perspective on current talent cultivation

3. Data Collection and Ethical Statement

The research utilized a comprehensive set of academic and technical tools to ensure rigorous data collection. Document analysis was conducted via national databases, including CNKI, Wanfang Data, and VIP Information. During the fieldwork phase, professional-grade recorders were employed for semi-structured interviews, guided by a protocol focusing on transmission challenges and survival

strategies. Furthermore, Sibelius software was used to transcribe melodic structures.

Ethical considerations were strictly maintained throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews, and their participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Personal data has been handled with confidentiality to protect the professional integrity of the informants.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was employed to process the collected data. This involved a multi-stage coding process: initial open coding of interview transcripts and field notes, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between categories, and finally selective coding to develop overarching themes such as ICH-Market Duality and Spatial Innovation.

Data analysis further employed triangulation to validate the findings. By cross-referencing documentary evidence with thematic results from interviews and field observations of both traditional and immersive performances, the study ensures a reliable interpretation of the genre's survival mechanisms. This systematic approach clarifies the paper's logical argumentation, enabling an organic integration of music ontology and socio-cultural interpretation.

Results

The comprehensive investigation into the current status of Beijing Qu Opera reveals a complex and resilient ecosystem where historical legacy directly informs contemporary survival strategies. As the only indigenous opera genre in the Beijing region, it currently navigates a dual reality: the mandate of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation and the necessity of market-driven survival. To address the first research objective on historical development and the second

on current mechanisms, the following sections detail findings on its historical trajectory, performance landscape, and institutionalized transmission models.

1. Historical Trajectory and Evolution

The current status of Beijing Qu Opera is the result of a deliberate and systematic evolutionary process that transformed folk narrative singing into a formal regional opera. These findings link to the objective of documenting the genre's artistic origins. This trajectory is characterized by three distinct periods of development:

1.1 The Formative Period (1940s–1950s): This stage was marked by the critical transition from narrative style to representational style. Originally derived from Manchu folk arts such as *Bājiǎogǔ* and *Dānxián Páiziqu*, folk artists began exploring dramatized performances in the Chaichang format, which divided storylines among multiple roles. This evolution indicates that the genre's birth was a response to a specific cultural void in the capital, leading to its official naming by writer Lao She in 1952.

1.2 The Maturation Period (1960s–1980s): This phase was defined by the institutionalization of professional troupes and the establishment of two primary thematic directions: Qing-era costume dramas and modern realist plays. Works such as *The Case of Yang Naiwu*, *Xiao Baicai*, and *Tears of Zhenfei* became artistic peaks, establishing a performance style rooted in everyday life.

1.3 The Innovation Period (1990s–Present): Faced with a shrinking market in the 1990s, the genre achieved artistic breakthroughs through modern stage aesthetics. The 1995 premiere of *Opium Pipe* reversed the troupe's precarious situation, winning numerous national awards and initiating a new era of Jing-style innovation.



Figure 1 The Evolution of Beijing Qu Opera: From Folk Roots to Modern Stage

Figure 1, presented as a timeline, illustrates the strategic trajectory of Beijing Qu Opera as it transitioned from a folk narrative art form to a professionalized theatrical system. The interpretation of this figure reveals that the genre's survival is not accidental but driven by a consistent pattern of structural adaptation. The visual evidence confirms that the genre's survival has been driven by its ability to maintain Beijing-style cultural roots while progressively adopting modern stage aesthetics and institutional standards. This historical progression underpins the current dual-track model of preservation and commercial innovation, indicating that innovation is as much a part of the genre's DNA as tradition.

2. Current Performance Landscape

In alignment with the research objective to analyze contemporary survival strategies, Beijing Qu Opera currently exhibits a dual characteristic: it preserves intangible cultural heritage while pursuing market-driven survival, operating within a unique niche.

2.1 Institutional Centralization and Survival Mechanisms: The Beijing Qu Opera Troupe remains the sole professional entity responsible for the genre's creation, performance, and archival documentation. This indicates a high-risk, high-focus survival model where the troupe's health is synonymous with the genre's existence. Its operation relies heavily on policy support and a public cultural service system, where revenue from ticket sales is supplemented by government-purchased services.

2.2 Spatial Innovation and Cultural Landmarks: To counter the de-stylization that sometimes hinders its visual identity, the genre has actively expanded beyond traditional theaters into historical guild halls, cultural landmarks, and even pedestrian streets. This strategy suggests that the genre is moving from a staged art to an environmental experience, transforming the opera from a traditional theatrical art into an urban cultural landscape. As noted by a Key Informant (Deputy Head) regarding these spatial shifts:

"In recent years, the Beijing Qu Opera Troupe has focused on reviving classic productions... we are actively exploring innovations in performance formats and have already implemented immersive Teahouse performances... aiming to expand performance spaces and enhance audience experience."

2.3 Repertoire Dynamics and the Dual-Track Model: The current market exhibits a dual-track characteristic: public welfare performances provide the foundation for cultural outreach, while commercial tours of classic intellectual properties (IPs), such as Teahouse, achieve market breakthroughs. This indicates that Lao She functions as a critical brand anchor for the genre's commercial viability.

3. Transmission and Talent Cultivation

To fulfill the objective of examining transmission mechanisms, a synergistic and professional education model has been implemented to address the generational talent gap.

3.1 The Joint Training Model: Since 1999, the Beijing Qu Opera Troupe has collaborated with the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts to establish undergraduate programs dedicated to the genre. This data suggests that formalizing the master-apprentice relationship into an academic degree is the primary factor in its modern survival.

3.2 Employment Stability and Artistic Continuity: Graduates of these commissioned training classes enjoy a high employment rate of over 95%. This exceptionally high rate indicates a successful closed-loop system between academic supply and professional demand, which is vital for maintaining the continuity of the genre's unique Beijing-style vocal identity. Reflecting on this evolution, a Key Informant (Chief Composer) noted:

"The most significant development... lies in its vocal music and musical composition... achieving an artistic transformation from singing stories to performing stories."

This shift from narrative to drama is the key analytical finding regarding the genre's modern identity.

Conclusion of Results: The current status of Beijing Qu Opera is defined by a multidimensional operational system that integrates resident performances, national tours, and cultural-tourism experiences. These findings confirm that while the genre relies on policy support, its innovative spatial strategies and institutionalized talent training have created a sustainable, albeit centralized, path forward.

Discussion

The investigation into the current status and transmission dynamics of Beijing Qu Opera reveals a complex ecosystem that successfully balances historical legacy with modern survival strategies. This finding is consistent with the literature regarding the genre's evolution, particularly its unique transition

from singing stories to acting stories, which allowed it to maintain a distinctive Beijing flavor while adopting a representational theatrical style (Fu et al., 2024; Xiaobin & Ku Wing, 2025). While previous studies by Silva (2024) and Yan (2025) emphasize the aesthetic shift toward realism, this study further demonstrates that this realism is the primary driver of the genre's contemporary marketability compared with more stylized traditional operas. The research results on institutional centralization within the Beijing Qu Opera Troupe underscore the dual reality of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation and market-driven sustainability, a challenge echoed by Scovazzi (2023) and Bortolotto & Ubertazzi (2023).

Furthermore, the spatial innovation observed in the results, where performances expand beyond traditional theaters to urban cultural landmarks, aligns with the ethnomusicological theoretical framework employed in this study. This approach emphasizes music within culture, examining the interaction between musical structures and their sociocultural contexts (Huang, 2025; Takao & van Orden, 2022). However, a critical contradiction emerges: while immersive Teahouse productions in historic districts enhance cultural authenticity, they are often constrained by limited audience capacity and high production costs. By integrating performances into the city's physical landmarks, the genre reinforces its identity as a living cultural gene of the capital (Zhang & Natayakulwong, 2024). This strategy effectively addresses the threats posed by globalization, as noted by Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti (2025), yet it raises questions about whether such boutique performances can truly scale to meet the needs of a mass audience.

The transmission dynamics, specifically the collaborative education model with the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, demonstrate a proactive institutional response to the generational talent gap. The success of this joint-training model is consistent with scholarly discourse on modernizing Chinese theatre education (Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Wu, 2023). Nevertheless, the findings reveal a potential limitation in this centralized model: the high

employment rate (over 95%) is dependent on a single professional troupe. Reliance on government-purchased services and national policy support may limit long-term sustainability if public funding priorities shift. Unlike the findings in Wang & Moonswan (2024), which identify digital culture as a primary savior for traditional arts, this study finds that, for Beijing Qu Opera, physical spatial innovation remains more impactful than digital dissemination at this stage.

In conclusion, Beijing Qu Opera remains a dynamic urban cultural emblem that embodies the authentic spirit of Beijing. The study confirms that the genre's contemporary status is defined by a multidimensional operational system, but highlights that the ICH-market duality remains a fragile equilibrium. By transforming folk narrative traditions into a formal regional opera, the genre has established a sustainable pathway, provided it can decrease its heavy reliance on state subsidies and continue to capture the interest of a digital-native generation.

Recommendation

The findings of this study provide a critical foundation for understanding the contemporary vitality and structural challenges of Beijing Qu Opera in the 21st century. As the genre continues to navigate the complex intersection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) status and the demands of a modern commercial market, a strategic approach is required to ensure its long-term viability. The following recommendations aim to bridge the gap between academic theory and professional practice, offering a roadmap for both scholars and practitioners to revitalize this unique indigenous art form while preserving its authentic Beijing-style cultural essence.

1. Practical Recommendations for Stakeholders

To translate research findings into actionable progress, the following practical measures are proposed:

1.1 For Policymakers: Government agencies should increase targeted funding for digital dissemination platforms and high-definition archival projects. It is recommended to transition from purely subsidy-based support to performance-incentive grants that reward troupes for successfully reaching younger demographics via social media and short-form video.

1.2 For Cultural Institutions: The Beijing Qu Opera Troupe and associated museums should formalize partnerships with urban planning departments to integrate Teahouse performances into permanent cultural-tourism circuits. This ensures that spatial innovation is not a one-off event, but a sustainable revenue stream linked to the city's historical landmarks.

1.3 For Performers and Educators: Performers should undergo specialized training in digital literacy and camera-acting to adapt traditional performing stories for global streaming audiences. Educators at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts should incorporate Cultural Entrepreneurship into the curriculum to prepare the next generation of artists for the dual-track model of heritage and market.

2. Theoretical Recommendations

Regarding theoretical and academic advancement, it is recommended that scholars broaden the conceptual framework for Beijing Qu Opera by incorporating the commercial auteur's identity. Future discourse should move beyond traditional musicological analysis to examine how artistic directors and composers negotiate the delicate balance between their subjective creative visions and the objective institutional requirements of state-sponsored systems, such as the National Arts Fund. This indicates a shift from a purely preservationist view to one of dynamic transmission, wherein the genre is analyzed as a flexible sociocultural construct rather than a static artifact (Bortolotto & Ubertazzi, 2023; Scovazzi, 2023).

Furthermore, researchers should explore spatial aesthetics more deeply, investigating how relocating traditional performances to urban cultural landmarks

alters the art form's ontological value for modern observers (Huang, 2025). This indicates that space functions as a narrative tool in immersive theater, effectively transforming the city's physical history into a live, interactive stage. By establishing a robust theoretical foundation for these innovative practices, scholars can provide the intellectual support the genre needs to continue evolving in a globalized era.

3. Future Research Directions

Future research directions should prioritize the impact of digital sharing and emerging technologies on the global diffusion of regional operas. Specifically, studies are needed to examine how short-form video platforms, high-definition live streaming, and virtual reality (VR) performances can address the threats posed by globalization and declining audience interest among younger demographics (Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2025; Wu, 2023). There is a critical need to understand how digital mediation affects the phonetic-melodic relationship and the "Beijing flavor" that defines the genre's authenticity.

Additionally, researchers should employ quantitative methods to conduct longitudinal surveys of audience reception and psychological engagement in immersive theater settings. Understanding the conversion rate from casual tourists to regular cultural patrons will provide a clearer picture of the genre's social resilience (Zabulis et al., 2025). Finally, a comparative analysis of Beijing-style realist aesthetics and other dialect-based regional operas, such as Cantonese or Jin Opera, would provide a broader understanding of how local cultural identity serves as a critical driver of social cohesion and artistic innovation (Yan, 2025; Zifei et al., 2024). Such research will be vital in developing evidence-based strategies for the international promotion of China's diverse operatic heritage.

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