



Opera as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Community Strategies for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This study examines Huai Opera, a traditional performing art of Jiangsu Province, as an intangible cultural heritage facing both historical resilience and contemporary challenges. The objective is to examine community-based strategies for the sustainable preservation and development of Huai Opera as an intangible cultural heritage. The research was conducted in Yancheng and Huai'an, two key cultural hubs where Huai Opera maintains strong roots. Three key informants, senior performers, a young actor, and a museum researcher, were selected to represent intergenerational and institutional perspectives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and archival analysis and were analyzed thematically across three domains: historical development, community practices, and contemporary strategies. The results identify four historical stages: embryonic, formation, reform, and institutionalization, while highlighting the coexistence of state-owned troupes with limited resources and private troupes with uneven quality. Audience analysis reveals an aging demographic with limited youth engagement; however, schools, festivals, and community clubs are emerging as key bridges for revitalization. Policies such as the Yancheng Huai Opera Protection Regulations and innovations like digital archives, VR museums, and social media fan communities demonstrate practical tools for sustaining interest. The study recommends strengthening educational integration, enhancing financial and policy support, and promoting cultural tourism to ensure intergenerational transmission and community participation. These findings contribute to broader discussions on balancing authenticity and innovation in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Huai Opera, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Community Engagement, Digital Innovation, Cultural Preservation

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Introduction

Huai Opera, a traditional performing art from the Jianghuai region of Jiangsu Province, has long served as a mirror of local life, community values, and cultural identity. Emerging from folk storytelling, ritual practices, and regional dialects, it developed into a distinct operatic form with unique vocal styles, role systems, and repertoires that embody the character of Jiangsu's people (Tian et al., 2021; Ye, 2024). More than just a form of entertainment, Huai Opera reflects moral lessons, collective memory, and communal cohesion, weaving artistic expression with social functions. Its historical journey from simple folk performances in village gatherings to fully staged productions in professional troupes illustrates how cultural practices adapt to social, economic, and political changes while retaining their regional essence (Li, 2024; Liao, 2024).

Despite its historical richness, Huai Opera faces critical challenges that threaten its survival today. The rapid modernization of society, together with the dominance of digital media and shifting cultural preferences, has weakened the traditional audience base. State-owned troupes are experiencing resource shortages and aging performers, while private troupes, though numerous, often struggle with uneven quality and limited artistic depth (Ma, 2019; Reed, 2018). Younger audiences are less engaged, preferring fast-paced and interactive entertainment forms such as online games, films, and pop music. The result is a widening generational gap that threatens to jeopardize the transmission of this art form. Without deliberate and sustainable efforts to address these challenges, Huai Opera risks fading into obscurity, leading to an irreparable loss of cultural heritage for both Jiangsu Province and China more broadly (Chen, 2025; Gray, 2024; Hung, 2023).

The objective of this research is to examine community-based strategies for the sustainable preservation and development of Huai Opera as an intangible cultural heritage. Specifically, it aims to identify and analyze how communities, as active participants and custodians, can support the transmission and revitalization of this operatic tradition. The research objectives are twofold: first, to investigate the historical development of Huai Opera and the challenges it currently faces; and second, to explore practical strategies for ensuring its sustainable future. Guiding this study are two central questions: What are the key historical developments and contemporary challenges of Huai Opera in Jiangsu Province? And how can community-driven strategies, including education, digital promotion, and cultural tourism, contribute to its long-term preservation and growth?

The scope of this study focuses on Huai Opera as practiced and preserved in Jiangsu Province, particularly in Yancheng and Huai'an, where its cultural roots and contemporary activities are most prominent. While the research emphasizes local contexts, its findings have broader implications for the preservation of other regional operas and intangible cultural heritages facing similar challenges in modern societies. The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution: academically, it fills a gap in research on Huai Opera, which has received less scholarly attention compared to more prominent forms such as Peking Opera; practically, it offers actionable insights into how community strategies can bridge the divide between tradition and modernity. By situating Huai Opera within the broader discourse of intangible cultural heritage, the research underscores the importance of empowering communities as the

foundation for sustainable cultural preservation.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are twofold

1. To investigate the historical development of Huai Opera and the challenges it currently faces
2. To explore practical strategies for ensuring its sustainable future.

Literature Review

Chinese opera is not only a form of artistic expression but also a living archive of cultural identity and social history. In Jiangsu Province, operatic traditions such as Kunqu, Xi, Yangzhou, and Huai Opera showcase the diversity of regional performance practices shaped by geography, commerce, and folk customs. Among them, Huai Opera reflects the voices of ordinary people most vividly, with its roots in folk storytelling, ritual practices, and local dialects. Its narratives, characters, and performance styles reveal the everyday experiences of the Jianghuai community while preserving shared cultural values (Chen & Woramitmaitree, 2024; Li & Gong, 2024; Qing & Wang, 2025).

The meaning of the literature on Huai Opera lies in understanding how performance serves as a cultural bridge between the past and the present. Theories of ethnomusicology emphasize studying music in its cultural and social context, making Huai Opera more than an art form; it is also a reflection of community life. Musicology contributes to our understanding by tracing the historical development of music and analyzing vocal techniques, melodic structures, and performance systems. Meanwhile, perspectives from Chinese and Western music analysis allow for a deeper exploration of how Huai Opera's unique soundscape has evolved while still resonating with traditional aesthetics (Siwen et al., 2024; Waterman, 2019; Williams, 2020).

Earlier studies have documented the historical development of Huai Opera, tracing its transformation from folk performances to a structured operatic genre. Research highlights how cultural exchanges, urbanization, and migration influenced its repertoire and role systems, while modern innovations introduced instruments and new singing techniques. Scholars have also explored the challenges facing Huai Opera in the digital age, noting issues of aging audiences, uneven troupe development, and limited youth participation. Preservation strategies studied in the past include school-based education programs, government policies, and the use of digital archives, which collectively stress the importance of sustaining Huai Opera through both top-down initiatives and grassroots engagement (van Schalkwyk et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2025).

This research draws on the reviewed literature, focusing on Huai Opera as an intangible cultural heritage that necessitates community-based strategies for its sustainable preservation. Insights from ethnomusicology inform the analysis of Huai Opera as a cultural practice deeply embedded in daily life, while musicology guides the examination of its artistic features. Studies on education, policy, and digital innovation provide practical models that can be adapted to the Huai Opera context. By building on these foundations, this research aims to identify concrete strategies that empower communities as active custodians, ensuring that Huai Opera remains a

living tradition within Jiangsu Province.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study highlights four interconnected dimensions that balance innovation and community involvement in the preservation of Huai Opera. Educational Integration represents the innovative embedding of Huai Opera into school curricula and community learning programs, ensuring that younger generations develop cultural appreciation and performance skills (Wei et al., 2024). Digital Promotion emphasizes the use of online platforms, digital archives, and interactive technologies to expand access and create strong community engagement through innovative approaches (Chigwada et al., 2025). Traditional Performances, though characterized by lower innovation, remain essential for maintaining authenticity, cultural continuity, and direct community participation (Zhang, 2024). Finally, cultural tourism enhances the visibility of Huai Opera by linking performances with festivals, tourism, and cultural products, thereby strengthening community presence, even with limited innovation (Pan, 2024). Together, these four dimensions form a holistic model that situates Huai Opera as both a cultural heritage and a community practice, ensuring its sustainable preservation and development in contemporary society, as shown in Figure 1.

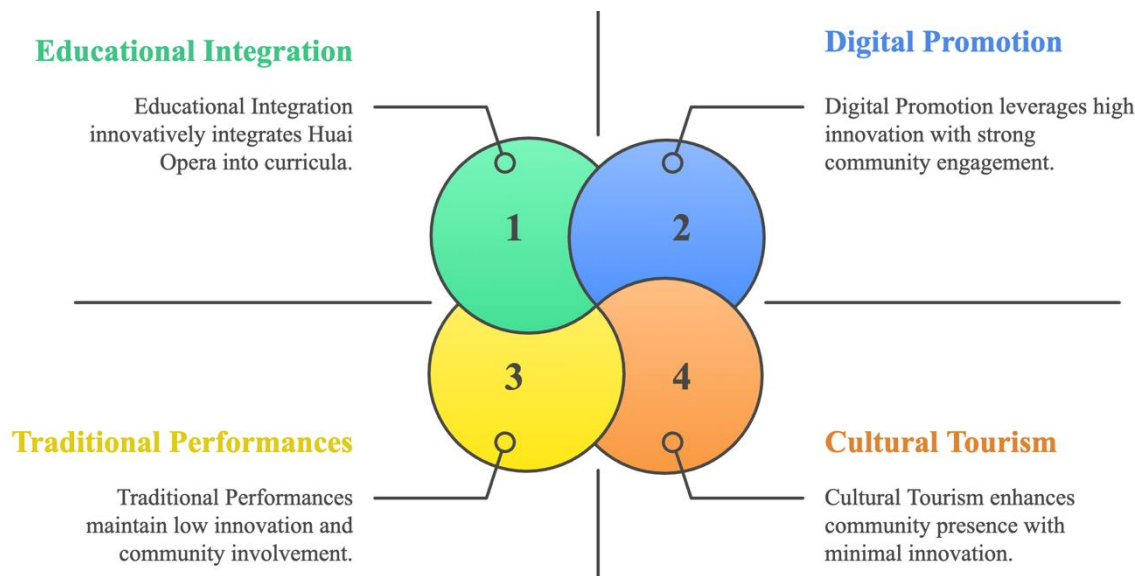


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

The methodology combined fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation (Harvey, 2021; Lareau, 2021) in Jiangsu Province, with a focus on locations where Huai Opera remains culturally significant. Yancheng and Huai’an were selected as the core research sites because of their historical role in the art form’s origin, transmission, and present-day revitalization efforts.

1. Research Sites

The research was situated in two primary locations: Yancheng City and Huai'an City. Yancheng is widely recognized as a hub of Huai Opera development, with long-standing ties to performance troupes, cultural institutions, and community-based heritage activities. Huai'an, meanwhile, holds deep historical connections to early forms of the opera and continues to serve as an important center for regional performances and community identity. Together, these sites provide a comprehensive lens for examining both historical continuity and contemporary challenges.

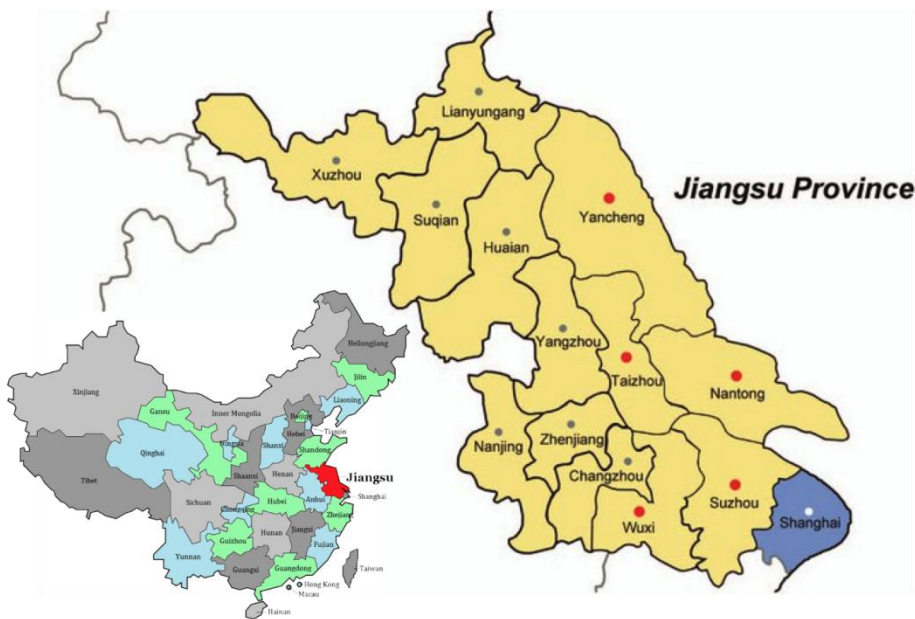


Figure 2. Map of the Research Site

2. Key Informants

The study involved three key informants, selected based on their expertise, active involvement, and recognized contributions to the preservation and promotion of Huai Opera. Each informant represented a distinct dimension of the opera's heritage: mastery of traditional repertoire, emerging performance talent, and the integration of academic and practical approaches through museum work. This triangulation of perspectives ensured a balanced view of traditions, present practices, and future directions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Key Informants

Informant Type	Expertise	Role in Huai Opera Preservation
Senior Performer	Decades of experience, heritage inheritor	Transmission of traditional repertoire and artistic innovation
Young Actor	Early-career performer	Represents vitality and generational continuity of Huai Opera

Informant Type	Expertise	Role in Huai Opera Preservation
Museum Researcher	Academic and practitioner	Documentation, cultural promotion, and performance practice

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The collected data were organized and thematically analyzed, focusing on three main themes: historical development, community practices, and contemporary strategies for sustaining Huai Opera. This process allowed the research to identify not only the challenges facing the tradition but also community-driven pathways for its revitalization, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collection and Analysis Approach

Method	Application	Outcome
In-depth Interviews	Conversations with performers, researchers, and practitioners	Insights into practices, challenges, and strategies
Participant Observation	Attendance at live and community performances	Understanding audience engagement and repertoire adaptation
Archival Analysis	Review of historical records and documents	Reconstruction of Huai Opera's historical trajectory

Results

The findings of the study on Huai Opera focus on its historical development, current situation, audience and community engagement, and the role of policy and innovation. The results are drawn from field observations, archival materials, and interviews with key informants. Together, these findings provide a comprehensive view of Huai Opera as both a historical art form and a living intangible cultural heritage, while also addressing the research objective of examining community-based strategies for sustainable preservation and development.

1. Historical Development

The historical trajectory of Huai Opera reflects a complex process of cultural development shaped by community traditions, economic conditions, and social interactions. Analysis of oral accounts and archival records confirms that the opera's development can be divided into four distinct stages: the embryonic period (16th–19th century), the formation period (1860s–1911), the reform period (1912–1949), and the prosperity and institutionalization period (1949–present).

During the embryonic period, Huai Opera evolved from local folk-art traditions, including Mentanci and Xianghuoxi. Informants explained that these forms were tied closely to rural rituals, salt-merchant patronage, and temple fairs. Community performances were informal but deeply connected to the lives of farmers and workers, embedding Huai Opera in

local social fabric.

The formation period saw the convergence of folk practices with theatrical influences from neighboring operas. This stage was characterized by the gradual professionalization of performers and the establishment of a recognizable role system. According to one informant, the opera began to “move from the village square to the stage,” signaling the transition from a community ritual to a structured cultural performance.

The reform period during the Republican era marked the entry of Huai Opera into urban centers, particularly Shanghai. The informants highlighted this era as one of innovation, with new instruments, such as the erhu, introduced to accompany singing. Musical experimentation, including the creation of La Diao and free-tune styles, reflected both the influence of urban audiences and the need to maintain the opera’s emotional expressiveness. This period also demonstrated Huai Opera’s ability to adapt to socio-political changes, as troupes performed plays with patriotic themes during wartime.

The period of prosperity and institutionalization after 1949 established Huai Opera as a recognized genre under state cultural policies. National and provincial troupes were formed, and professional systems of training and performance were standardized. Informants emphasized the importance of this era, as government support not only preserved classical repertoires but also promoted new works aligned with modern themes.

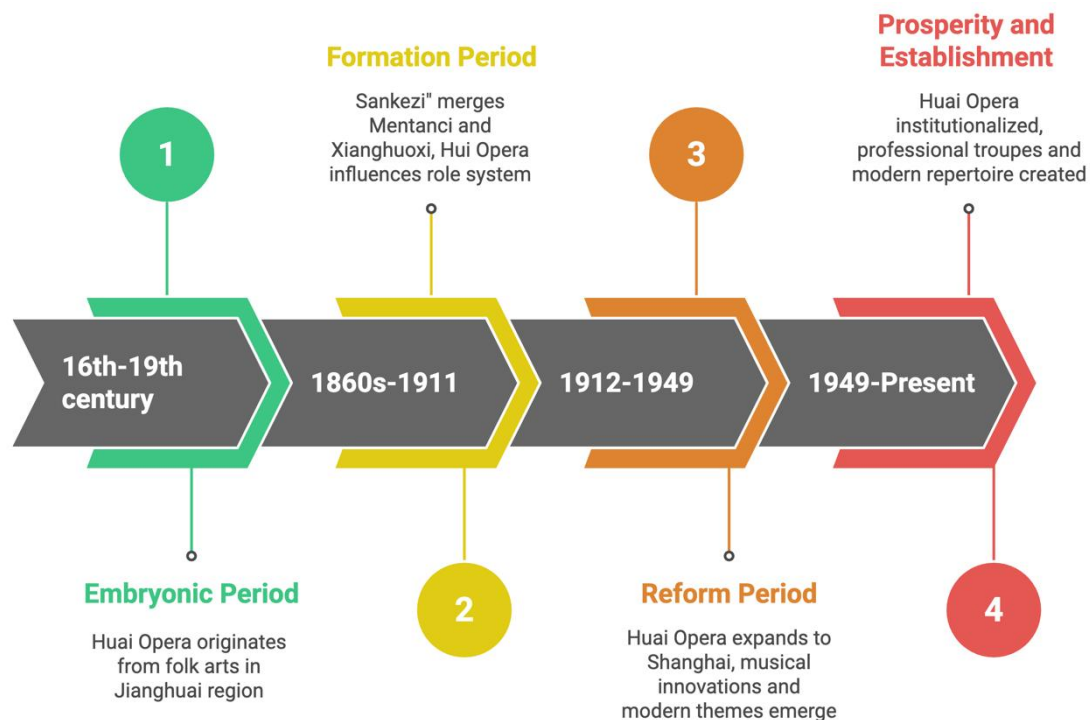


Figure 3. Historical Development Timelines

Figure 2 illustrates these four stages of development in a timeline format, capturing the milestones of Huai Opera’s transformation. This visualization illustrates the transition from folk origins to institutionalized art, highlighting how Huai Opera’s resilience is grounded in its

capacity to adapt across diverse historical contexts.

2. Current Situation

The current state of Huai Opera is shaped by the coexistence of state-owned and private troupes, each with distinct strengths and challenges.

State-owned troupes, such as those in Yancheng and Huai'an, retain the responsibility of safeguarding the opera's artistic quality and cultural significance. However, they are increasingly constrained by limited funding, aging performers, and difficulty in recruiting young talent. One informant noted that *"the youngest actors in some troupes are already in their thirties, leaving a large gap between the masters and the next generation."* This situation has placed pressure on the continuity of artistic traditions.

Private troupes, in contrast, have expanded rapidly, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Their numbers surpass those of state ensembles, and they contribute significantly to the accessibility of performances. However, informants agreed that the artistic quality among private groups varies widely. Some prioritize commercial entertainment over heritage preservation, resulting in simplified performances and a reduction in musical rigor. Still, their flexibility and grassroots presence make them vital in maintaining local interest and everyday access to Huai Opera.

Geographically, Huai Opera remains strongest in Yancheng, Huai'an, and Taizhou, with Shanghai still recognized as an important historical hub of modernization. Table 3 below outlines the distribution of troupes across different regions, highlighting the balance between institutional preservation and community-driven practice.

Table 3. Distribution of Huai Opera Troupes

Region	State-Owned	Private	Remarks
Yancheng	2	25+	Strong community involvement, grassroots festivals
Huai'an		15+	Historical repertoire preservation
Taizhou	1	10+	Smaller scale but active rural troupes
Shanghai	1	Few	Historical significance, declining presence

This current landscape demonstrates a dual system: institutionalized but resource-limited troupes on one hand, and vibrant but inconsistent private troupes on the other. Together, they reflect both the strengths and vulnerabilities of Huai Opera's contemporary condition.

3. Audience and Community Engagement

Audience analysis reveals a demographic imbalance that poses risks to the opera's long-term sustainability. Most dedicated audiences are middle-aged and elderly individuals who grew up with traditional operatic culture. Informants emphasized that these audiences retain strong emotional connections to the repertoire and dialects of Huai Opera, making them the primary supporters of live performances.

In contrast, younger generations show limited engagement, preferring fast-paced entertainment such as digital games, pop music, and social media content. Informants consistently described this generational gap as the most pressing challenge to the transmission of Huai Opera. As one noted, *“If young people see opera as outdated, the chain of inheritance will be broken.”*

Despite these challenges, community-driven initiatives have emerged as promising strategies for youth cultivation. Schools in Sheyang and Jianhu Counties have introduced Huai Opera clubs, curriculum-based training, and community workshops. These programs enable children to experience the art form at an early age, fostering familiarity and reducing the perception of opera as distant or irrelevant. Festivals and local cultural events also provide platforms where families can come together to enjoy performances, thereby strengthening intergenerational appreciation.

The role of amateur troupes, student societies, and community clubs is equally significant. They act as grassroots custodians, ensuring that participation extends beyond professional troupes. Table 4 below summarizes community engagement initiatives observed in Jiangsu Province.

Table 4. Community Engagement Initiatives for Huai Opera

Initiative Type	Example Activity	Target Group	Impact
School Programs	Huai Opera clubs, singing courses	Students	Cultivates early exposure and appreciation
Local Festivals	Weekend stages, heritage showcases	Families, general public	Encourages intergenerational participation
Community Clubs	Amateur troupe rehearsals	Opera enthusiasts	Maintains grassroots vitality
Student Societies	University cultural groups	Young adults	Promotes research and creative adaptations

These initiatives highlight how community engagement serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, providing practical pathways to engage youth while maintaining connections with older audiences.

4. Policy and Innovation

Policies and innovations are critical in shaping the trajectory of Huai Opera’s preservation. At the legislative level, the Huai Opera Protection Regulations introduced in Yancheng provide institutional guarantees for funding, talent training, and community projects. Informants highlighted the tuition-waiver policy for students specializing in Huai Opera as an essential incentive that reduces economic barriers for young learners.

Financial support from government programs has enabled troupes to stage new productions, preserve traditional repertoires, and expand outreach. Provincial collaboration, such as the annual Huai Opera Performance Month, has further raised public awareness by providing a consistent platform for performances across Jiangsu.

Innovation, particularly digital innovation, has played a transformative role. Initiatives such as the Zhonghua Huai Opera App and VR-based opera museums have created accessible archives and immersive experiences for new audiences. Informants observed that digital tools not only preserve historical performances but also attract youth through interactive formats. Social media platforms have given rise to amateur fan communities who share clips, discuss performances, and even remix opera themes into new content.

These technological advancements complement community efforts, demonstrating that sustainability depends on a blend of top-down support and grassroots participation.

Table 5 summarizes the combined policy and innovation measures identified in the study.

Table 5. Policy and Innovation Measures Supporting Huai Opera

Strategy Type	Key Example	Outcome
Legislative Support	Yancheng Huai Opera Protection Regulations	Stable funding, talent pipeline
Financial Incentives	Tuition waivers for Huai Opera students	Encourages youth enrollment
Provincial Collaboration	Huai Opera Performance Month	Expanded visibility and performance opportunities
Digital Archives	Zhonghua Huai Opera App	Preserves 210 classic plays and video resources
VR Museums	Virtual opera experiences	Provides immersive cultural access
Social Media Engagement	Fan communities and short videos	Broadens reach to younger demographics

The findings reveal that Huai Opera has a deep historical foundation, as reflected in four primary stages of development, illustrated in Figure 3. However, its contemporary survival depends heavily on community involvement and innovative strategies. While state-owned troupes safeguard authenticity and private troupes ensure accessibility, audience demographics remain skewed toward older generations. Community initiatives in education and festivals, supported by policies and digital innovation, offer promising strategies for bridging generational gaps and ensuring the opera's sustainable future.

In summary, Huai Opera's resilience stems from the integration between community-driven practices and institutional support. By embedding itself in education, embracing digital

platforms, and linking with cultural tourism, Huai Opera can continue to thrive as an intangible cultural heritage, maintaining its role as both an artistic tradition and a living expression of Jiangsu's community identity.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Huai Opera embodies the interconnection of cultural expression, community identity, and social continuity as highlighted in previous scholarship. The historical trajectory reconstructed through archival analysis and informant testimony resonates with theories of ethnomusicology, which emphasize the contextual and adaptive nature of musical practices (Waterman, 2019; Williams, 2020). The four developmental stages, embryonic, formation, reform, and institutionalization, not only with Li's (2024) observation of opera adapting to socio-economic changes but also illustrate how cultural resilience is rooted in community participation and regional traditions. This consistency reinforces the argument that Huai Opera is a living heritage shaped by both historical contingencies and communal practices (Chen & Woramitmaitree, 2024).

At the same time, the current challenges identified in this study underscore gaps between theoretical expectations of continuity and practical realities. While musicological perspectives highlight the structural richness and artistic depth of Huai Opera, the findings reveal uneven quality in private troupes and declining engagement among younger audiences, reflecting concerns raised by Ma (2019) regarding the commercialization of traditional opera. This inconsistency suggests that while Huai Opera has historically adapted to changing circumstances, its survival in the digital era demands more deliberate strategies to bridge generational divides and sustain artistic integrity.

The study's results also support theoretical principles of cultural sustainability, which stress the importance of integrating heritage into education, tourism, and digital innovation (Pan, 2024; Wei et al., 2024). Community-driven initiatives in schools and festivals exemplify the practical applications of these principles, confirming Yan et al.'s (2025) assertion that grassroots engagement is crucial to sustaining folk traditions. Furthermore, innovations such as VR museums and mobile apps demonstrate that blending traditional authenticity with technological platforms can attract new audiences, consistent with Reed's (2018) and Chigwada et al.'s (2025) findings on digital culture.

In conclusion, the study's findings are broadly consistent with theoretical frameworks that view intangible cultural heritage as both adaptive and rooted in the community. However, they also highlight inconsistencies in practice, particularly the tension between commercial viability and cultural preservation. Addressing these challenges requires reinforcing community participation, strengthening educational integration, and leveraging digital innovation to ensure Huai Opera remains a dynamic and sustainable tradition for future generations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to support the sustainable preservation and development of Huai Opera:

1. Educational Integration: Introduce Huai Opera into school curricula, community workshops, and youth training programs to strengthen intergenerational transmission.
2. Policy and Innovation: Enhance financial support for troupes, encourage tuition incentives, and utilize digital platforms such as apps, VR, and social media to broaden outreach.
3. Community and Cultural Tourism: Promote performances through local festivals, cultural tourism, and grassroots clubs to increase public participation and cultural visibility.

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