

Aesthetic Value and Cultural Philosophy in Opera: A Cross-Era Perspective

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Abstract: The evolution of Chinese opera can be broadly categorized into three distinct stages: the exploration phase (1919-1944), the foundation phase (1949-1955), and the ongoing period of deep development (post-1955). Our study explored various aspects of Chinese opera, from participant demographics to historical influences and the evolving nature of aesthetics. The analysis of participant data revealed a diverse group of individuals interested in Chinese opera, with composers, directors, singers, and musicologists represented. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) operas explored themes of loyalty, duty, and family obligation, reflecting the dominant Confucian ideology. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) shifted towards stories celebrating the emperor and Manchu cultural elements. Republican Period (1912-1949) operas mirrored social unrest with themes of social justice and rebellion. Finally, the People's Republic of China (1949-present) initially focused on socialist ideology and the working class, but later embraced national identity, historical narratives, and even a return to traditional themes alongside contemporary social commentary. Overall, this study provides a foundation for future research on Chinese opera, particularly regarding audience engagement with the art form's ongoing evolution.

Keywords: Opera, Ming Dynasty, Qing Dynasty, Era, China, and Cultural Philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

China has a rich and longstanding indigenous operatic tradition (Wang & Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2023). In the mid-20th century, this established art form began a period of significant transformation, heavily influenced by Western operatic genres. This confluence culminated in the emergence of modern Chinese opera (*geju*) during the 1950s. The emergence of Chinese opera in the 1920s cannot be viewed in isolation from the confluence of two key movements: the introduction of Western opera during the New Culture Movement and the concurrent emphasis on promoting vernacular Chinese (Xiang, 2023). Interpreted through the lens of adaptation theory, the birth of Chinese opera can be seen as a response to the evolving cultural landscape of the era. The adoption of vernacular Chinese as the operatic language served the dual purpose of promoting the language itself and fostering the development of a distinct domestic culture. Furthermore, reception aesthetics offers a framework to analyse audience reception of

this new art form, potentially revealing the success of these efforts to localize Western cultural influences. The evolution of Chinese opera can be broadly categorized into three distinct stages: the exploration phase (1919-1944), the foundation phase (1949-1955), and the ongoing period of deep development (post-1955). During the initial exploration stage, operatic narratives were heavily influenced by the themes of revolutionary struggle reflecting the social context. This period also witnessed significant efforts to nationalize artistic forms by drawing inspiration from Western operatic traditions.

Reception aesthetics represents a significant shift from traditional literary analysis, which often prioritized the author and the work itself (Weimann, 2022). This theory emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the artwork and the audience as the core focus of analysis. Key concepts within reception aesthetics, such as "expectation," "effective history," and "concretization," demonstrate the influence of Heidegger's "fore-structure" and "hermeneutical horizon." Additionally, these concepts resonate with Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" and Ingarden's notion of "schematization." It can be argued that these philosophical underpinnings, particularly Gadamer's exploration of the essence of art and aesthetic understanding, significantly influenced the formation and development of reception aesthetics. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, both traditional and modern Chinese opera witnessed a period of institutionalization (Hunter Gordon, 2023; Ong, 2020). This state-led initiative served a dual purpose: strengthening national identity and bolstering the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party's rule. The government established dedicated opera houses for each of China's estimated 360 operatic styles and allocated substantial public funding to sustain productions. Notably, these productions also underwent a shift in content and style, reflecting the influence of the Stanislavsky method (Haili, 2016; Mackerras, 2008).

The exploration period of Chinese opera (1919-1944) witnessed the embedding of rich historical and cultural connotations within its operatic and vocal elements. These connotations manifested through various aspects, including the portrayal of stage characters, the content of scripts, and the overall narrative (Zhou & Liu, 2011). Drawing heavily on historical figures and allusions, Chinese opera established a unique identity. Furthermore, it displayed a sophisticated approach to operatic techniques. This period's development model can be characterized by the simultaneous processes of learning from advanced Western vocal practices and adapting these influences to create a distinctly Chinese operatic style (Scollan &

Gallagher, 2015). Building upon philosophical hermeneutics, we can argue that the understanding and interpretation of artistic creations like opera, with their inherent subjectivity based on individual audience reception, ultimately contribute to the ongoing exploration of artistic truth and essence.

Chinese opera is understood as a composite art form comprised of poetry, music, and action (Ambrogio, 2018). Unlike everyday plays, opera features minimal spoken dialogue, relying primarily on a combination of singing and instrumental accompaniment. Dance elements may also be incorporated. It is a large-scale dramatic production that seamlessly integrates singing, acting, music, facial expressions, dance, set design, and painted backdrops. From the perspective of the nature of the object, Chinese opera art is a comprehensive artistic aesthetic activity, which includes not only the literary attribute of the story script, but also the vocal art attribute of the singing performance. The opera script, as Ambrogio highlights, should not only determine the story frame (Ambrogio, 2018), but also set the characters' relationship and characteristics, the rhythm of lyrics or poems, and the connection and presentation of stage scenes (Bzinkowski et al., 2022; Trejo & Kojouharov, 2020).

The development of contemporary Chinese opera witnessed a fascinating synthesis of Western operatic performance practices and the established traditions of Chinese operatic singing. This artistic fusion resulted in the integration of bel canto and traditional vocal techniques. Bel canto, a renowned Western vocal technique, is primarily associated with Italian, German, and other European languages (known for their open vowel sounds). This technique aligns well with the pronunciation habits and vocal characteristics of these Western languages due to its emphasis on clear, ringing tones (Roy & Bayo, 2011). However, the distinct pronunciation patterns of Chinese, characterized by a higher concentration of closed vowels, led some early Chinese opera composers to believe that bel canto might not be well-suited for the domestic operatic landscape.

The recent surge in China's construction of grand opera houses, designed by internationally renowned architects, reflects a broader cultural phenomenon. These magnificent structures, often referred to as "starchitect" projects (Mackerras, 2013), serve as a physical manifestation of the country's evolving artistic landscape. While a definitive record of all opera venues in China is yet to be established, Victoria Newhouse's research on the global trend of new opera house and concert hall architecture offers valuable insights. However, her primary focus on technical aspects necessitates further exploration of the artistic

programming and structural features of these newly built Chinese theaters. A key characteristic of these contemporary opera houses in China lies in their multi-functionality. They often host a diverse range of artistic programs that extend beyond traditional opera. Furthermore, their architectural design frequently incorporates smaller theaters and cultural spaces, creating a comprehensive artistic hub. Current estimates suggest that approximately 50 Chinese theaters stage operas or hybrid musicals (Giordano, 2017). Among these, the Beijing National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA), Shanghai Grand Theatre, Guangzhou Opera House, Hangzhou Grand Theatre, and Tianjin Opera House stand out as the most prominent.

1.1 Rationale and Objective

Opera's enduring appeal necessitates examining its evolving aesthetic value and cultural philosophy across eras. This study investigates how historical and social contexts have shaped operatic expression, aiming to elucidate the interplay between aesthetics and embedded philosophies. Analysing these shifts will provide a clearer understanding of opera's ability to reflect and respond to its surrounding culture.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design and Participants

Our study adopted qualitative methods to investigate the evolving aesthetic value and cultural philosophy within Chinese opera. The research team purposively recruited 25 participants from the China National Peking Opera Company, including composers, directors, singers, and musicologists. These individuals were chosen for their extensive experience and diverse perspectives within the Peking Opera tradition. Through semi-structured interviews, the study explored how historical and social contexts have shaped artistic decisions, aesthetic choices, and underlying philosophical themes within Chinese opera.

2.2 Textual Analysis

Our textual analysis focused on examining opera librettos (scripts), music scores, and critical reviews from various eras of Chinese opera. For instance, analysing the libretto of the classic Kunqu opera "The Peony Pavilion" (Mudan Ting) from the 16th century, known for its focus on love and defiance of societal norms, could be compared to a contemporary

work like "The White-Haired Girl" (Bai Mao Nü) from the mid-20th century, which emphasizes social justice and revolution. By examining these and other renowned Chinese opera texts alongside their corresponding music scores and critical reviews, the study sought to illuminate the evolving aesthetic value and cultural philosophy embedded within the art form.

2.3 Historical Analysis

Our historical analysis examined into historical documents, social commentaries, and artistic trends to contextualize the cultural environment surrounding distinct periods of Chinese opera. This involved examining official records, literary works, and philosophical treatises to understand the prevailing social values and artistic movements that influenced operatic expression. For instance, analysing government decrees and cultural critiques during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) could shed light on the emphasis on Confucian ideals and historical narratives within Peking opera during that era. Similarly, studying social commentaries and artistic movements during the Republican period (1912-1949) could reveal the influence of Westernization and social reforms on the development of new operatic themes and styles.

2.4 Interviews

We employed semi-structured interviews conducted in five groups of five participants each. Lasting approximately 20-30 minutes, these interviews focused on gaining insights from opera professionals within the China National Peking Opera Company. A series of ten open-ended questions explored the participants' artistic decision-making processes, their interpretations of aesthetics and philosophy within Chinese opera, and how these aspects have evolved throughout their careers. This approach allowed for in-depth discussions and diverse perspectives from composers, directors, singers, and musicologists, enriching the understanding of the dynamic relationship between artistic vision and cultural context within Chinese opera.

2.5 Data Analysis

Our research team employed thematic analysis and coding techniques using NVivo software to identify recurring themes and patterns within the collected data. This process involved analysing information from textual analysis, historical documents, and interview transcripts. By comparing

and contrasting data from these diverse sources, the researchers aimed to identify connections between aesthetic choices, embedded cultural philosophies, and the historical context surrounding different eras of Chinese opera.

3. RESULTS

The study consisted of 25 individuals with diverse backgrounds. Age-wise, the distribution was fairly balanced across categories, with the 31–40-year-old range having the highest frequency (7 participants, 28%) (see Figure 2). In terms of gender, there was a slight skew towards males (15 participants, 60%). Roles were well-represented, with Singers (8 participants, 32%) being the most common, followed by Directors (7 participants, 28%), Composers and Musicologists (5 participants each, 20%) (see Figure 1).

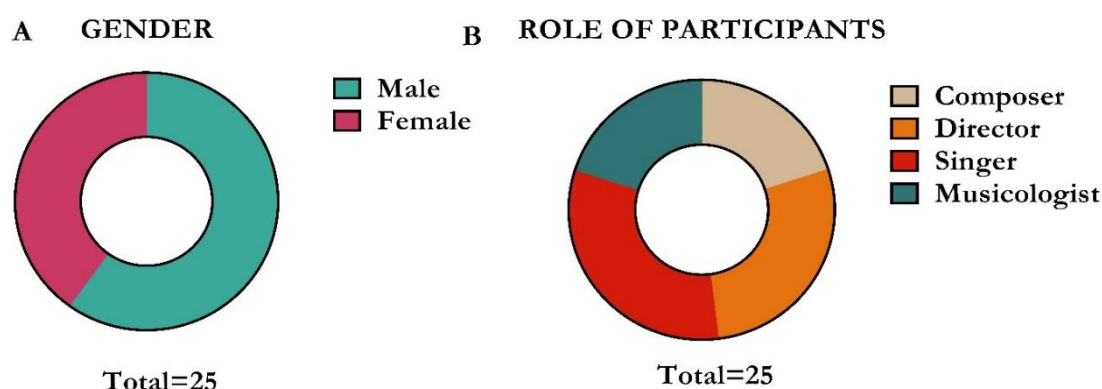


Figure 1: The Distribution of Participants based on Gender (Male/Female) and the roles of participants (Composers, Directors, Singers and Musicologists).

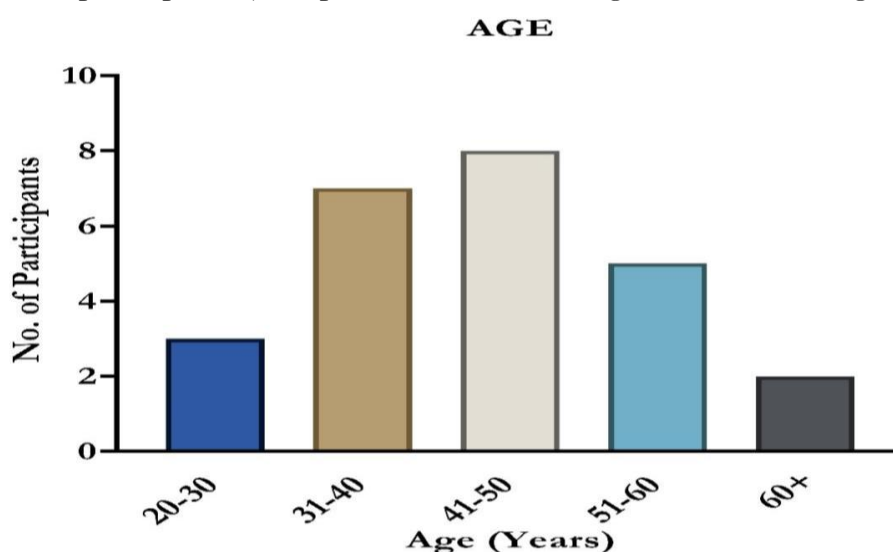


Figure 2. Column Chart distribution of the number of participants based on age groups in years.



Figure 3. A word cloud of the focus themes in Opera Librettos from Textual Analysis.

In Table 1 and Figure 3, our textual analysis examined four operas: "The Peony Pavilion" (16th century) explored themes of individual expression and defying societal norms, particularly regarding female autonomy. "The White-Haired Girl" (20th century) focused on social justice and revolution against oppression. "Romance of the Western Chamber" (13th century) centered on love and sacrifice between star-crossed lovers. Finally, "Farewell My Concubine" (18th century) presented a tragic love story set against historical turmoil.

Table 1: Textual Analysis of Thematic Focus in Opera Librettos

Opera	Era	Focus
The Peony Pavilion	16th Century	Individual Expression and Defiance of Social Norms: The libretto explores the protagonist's desires and challenges societal expectations, particularly regarding female autonomy and romantic love.
The White-Haired Girl	20th Century	Social Justice and Revolution: The narrative emphasizes the struggle against oppression and the fight for a better life. Themes of class struggle and societal inequality are prominent.
Romance of the Western Chamber	13th Century	Love and Sacrifice: The libretto portrays the enduring love between two star-crossed lovers who defy obstacles and societal disapproval. Themes of loyalty, perseverance, and the power of love are central.
Farewell My Concubine	18th Century	Tragedy and Historical Events: The story revolves around a love triangle set against the backdrop of historical turmoil and political intrigue. Themes of loss, betrayal, and the impact of war are prevalent.

In Table 2, across eras, operatic language and artistic choices have evolved significantly. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) favoured elegant, poetic language rich in symbolism and allusion, with stage design emphasizing the same. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) shifted towards a more direct, narrative-driven language with elaborate costumes and sets. The Republican Period (1912-1949) saw increased vernacular use and experimentation with Western musical elements. Today's operas utilize diverse language and integrate technology and multimedia for a broader audience and enhanced engagement

Table 2: Textual Analysis of Changes in Language and Artistic Choices Across Eras

Era	Language	Artistic Choices
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)	Elegant, Poetic: The librettos employed sophisticated literary language rich in imagery and allusions to classical Chinese literature and philosophy.	Emphasis on symbolism and allusion: Stage design and acting relied heavily on symbolic elements and subtle gestures to convey meaning. Costumes were often elaborate but understated, emphasizing elegance and character portrayal.
Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)	More Direct, Narrative-Driven: The language became more direct and focused on advancing the plot.	Elaborate costumes and stage sets: Visual spectacle gained importance, with elaborate costumes and ornate sets depicting historical grandeur or mythical settings.
Republican Period (1912- 1949)	Increased Vernacular Use: The rise of spoken drama influenced operatic language, incorporating more everyday speech alongside poetic flourishes.	Experimentation with Western musical elements: Composers began incorporating elements of Western harmony and orchestration to create a richer musical soundscape.
Contemporary Era	Diverse (reflecting audience): The language caters to a broader audience, incorporating elements of both traditional and contemporary Chinese dialects.	Integration of technology and multimedia: Modern productions utilize projections, special effects, and even multimedia elements to enhance storytelling and audience engagement.

In Table 3, our historical analysis revealed a clear link between social context and operatic themes. The Ming Dynasty's (1368-1644) Confucian ideals translated into operas emphasizing loyalty, duty, and historical

narratives of virtuous rulers. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) focused on consolidating Manchu rule, reflected in operas celebrating the emperor and adapting existing works.

The Republican Period (1912-1949) saw social unrest mirrored in operas advocating social justice and rebellion. Finally, the People's Republic of China (1949-present) initially promoted socialist ideology through operas, shifting later to national identity and a recent return to traditional themes alongside contemporary social commentary

Table 3: Influence of Historical Context on Operatic Themes

Historical Period	Social Context	Emphasis in Opera
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)	Confucianism as dominant ideology, emphasis on social order and filial piety.	Themes of loyalty, duty, and family obligation. Historical narratives celebrating virtuous rulers and righteous officials.
Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)	Consolidation of Manchu rule, emphasis on historical narratives and cultural assimilation.	Focus on stories celebrating loyalty to the emperor and the glory of the Qing Dynasty. Adaptation of existing works to reflect Manchu cultural elements.
Republican Period (1912-1949)	Social and political turmoil, rise of revolutionary ideals.	Operas with themes of social justice, rebellion against corrupt officials, and calls for modernization.
People's Republic of China (1949-Present)	Early emphasis on socialist ideology, later focus on national identity and cultural revival.	Operas promoting revolutionary struggles, socialist ideals, and the heroism of the working class. Recent years see a resurgence of traditional themes and historical narratives alongside contemporary social commentary.

In Table 4, government policies significantly influenced the development of Chinese opera. The Qing Dynasty's (18th century) establishment of opera academies and patronage of Peking opera led to its flourishing and standardized practices. However, the Republican Period's (early 20th century) suppression of traditional opera due to its perceived association with feudalism caused a decline in popularity.

The People's Republic of China's (1950s-1960s) promotion of "model operas" with limited artistic freedom censored traditional works. Fortunately, a post-Cultural Revolution relaxation of censorship and renewed focus on cultural heritage (since 1960s) has resulted in a resurgence of traditional styles and experimentation with contemporary

themes

Table 4: Government Policies and their Impact on Opera Development

Period	Government Policy	Impact on Opera
Qing Dynasty (18th Century)	Establishment of imperial opera academies and patronage of specific operatic styles (e.g., Peking opera).	Flourishing of Peking opera and standardization of performance practices.
Republican Period (Early 20th Century)	Suppression of traditional opera by some factions due to perceived association with feudalism.	Decline in popularity of some operatic styles, rise of spoken drama as a more progressive art form.
People's Republic of China (1950s-1960s)	Campaign to promote "model operas" reflecting revolutionary ideology.	Censorship of traditional works, creation of new operas with limited artistic freedom.
People's Republic of China (Post-Cultural Revolution)	Relaxation of censorship and renewed focus on cultural heritage.	Resurgence of interest in traditional opera styles, experimentation with contemporary themes and adaptations.

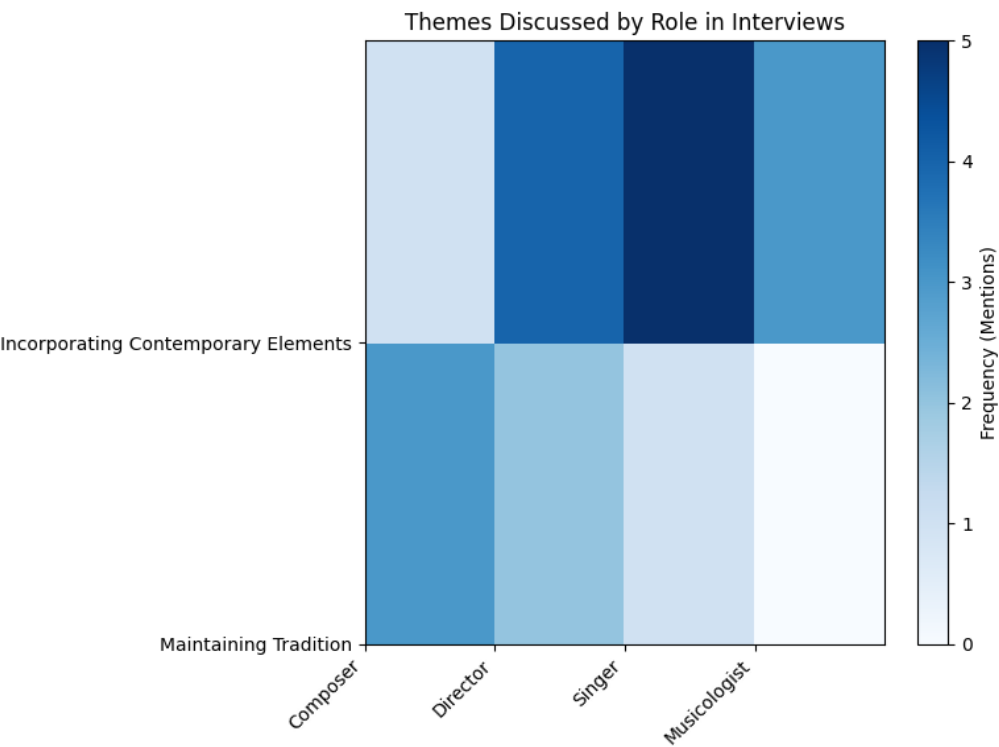


Figure 4: A heatmap of the themes discussed by the roles of various participants during the Interviews.

In Table 5 and Figure 4, Our interviews revealed contrasting viewpoints on aesthetics. Some participants, like a composer and director (quoted), stressed preserving traditional elegance, symbolism, and musical styles, believing young audiences should appreciate the foundation before

embracing contemporary interpretations. Others, including a singer and musicologist (quoted), advocated incorporating contemporary elements like technology, diverse music, and themes to stay relevant and attract younger audiences.

Table 5: Perceptions of Evolving Aesthetics in Chinese Opera

Theme	Participant Quotes	Description
Maintaining Traditional Aesthetics	* "The essence of Chinese opera lies in its time-tested beauty. We must preserve the elegance and symbolism for future generations." (Composer) * "Young audiences need to appreciate the foundation of traditional operatic forms before embracing contemporary interpretations." (Director)	Some participants emphasized the importance of maintaining core aesthetic elements like elegant costumes, symbolic gestures, and traditional musical styles.
Incorporating Contemporary Elements	* "Opera needs to evolve to stay relevant. Integrating new technologies and themes can attract younger audiences." (Singer) * "We can experiment with contemporary music and stage design while staying true to the core stories and values." (Musicologist)	Other participants highlighted the need to incorporate contemporary elements like multimedia technology, diverse music choices, and themes that resonate with modern audiences.

In Table 6 and Figure 5, examining the challenges of balancing tradition and innovation in Chinese opera, participants acknowledged the strain of maintaining heritage while incorporating modern elements (e.g., director's quote). Some, like a composer, expressed concern that innovation might detract from the opera's essence. However, others, like a singer and musicologist (quoted), offered solutions. They suggested reinterpreting stories for contemporary audiences and using technology to enhance storytelling without sacrificing artistic integrity

Table 6(a): The Balancing Act: Tradition vs. Innovation

Theme	Participant Quotes	Description
Challenges of Balancing Tradition and Innovation	* "Finding the right balance between preserving the heritage and catering to modern tastes is a constant struggle." (Director) * "Some innovations feel like gimmicks that detract from the true essence of opera." (Composer)	Several participants acknowledged the difficulty of striking a balance between honoring traditions and incorporating new elements. Concerns were raised about losing the core essence of Chinese opera in pursuit of contemporary relevance.

Table 6(b): The Balancing Act: Tradition vs. Innovation

Theme	Participant Quotes	Description
Strategies for Achieving Balance	* "We can update stories without losing their core values. Modern adaptations can showcase the enduring power of these narratives." (Singer) * "Innovation should complement tradition, not replace it. Technology can enhance storytelling without overshadowing the artistry." (Musicologist)	Participants also offered suggestions for achieving this balance, such as reinterpreting traditional stories for contemporary audiences and using technology to enhance the operatic experience without compromising artistic integrity.

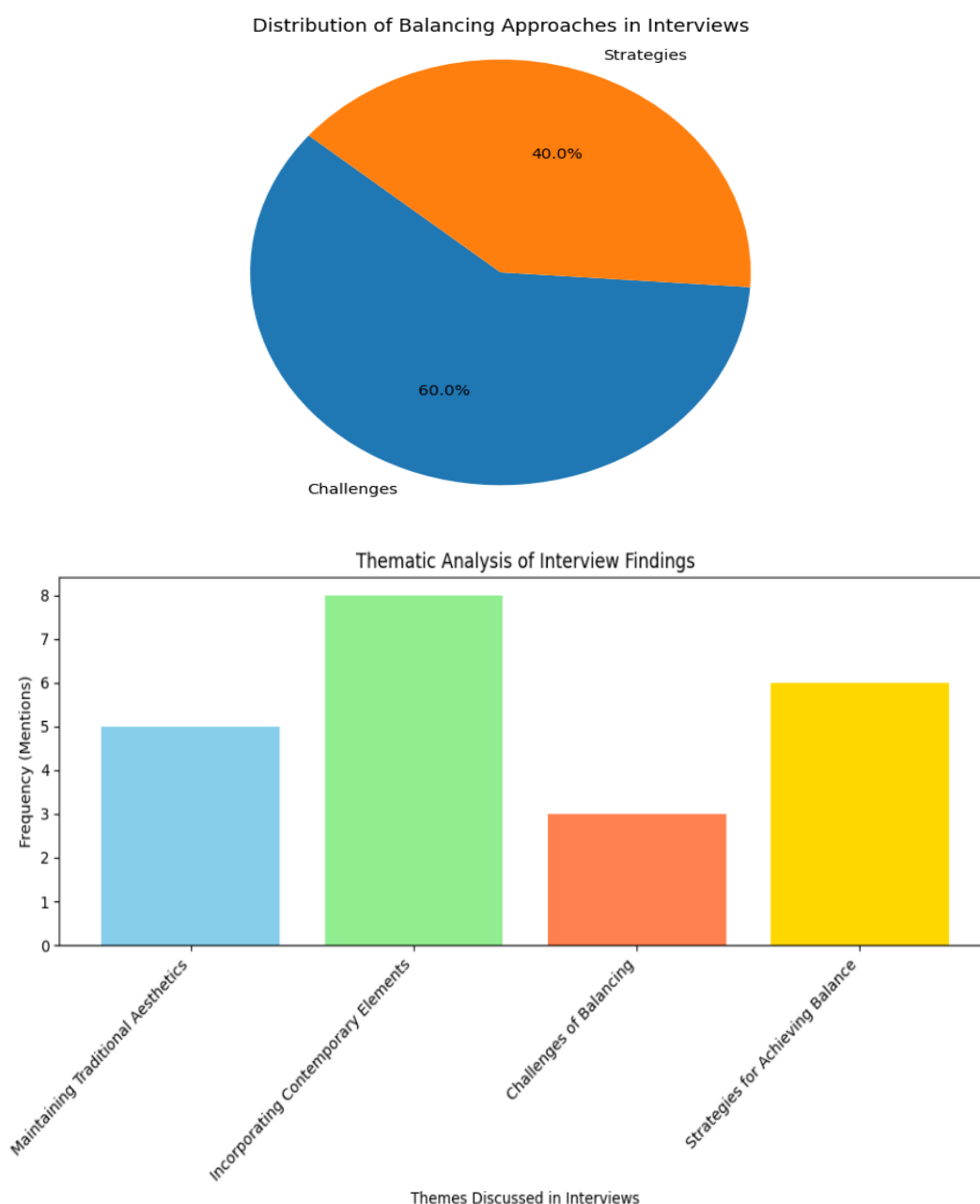


Figure 5: A Pie Chart Distribution of the Balancing Approaches in Interviews (A) and a bar chart distribution of the thematic analyses.

4. DISCUSSION

Our thematic analysis revealed contrasting viewpoints on the evolving aesthetics of Chinese opera. Some participants emphasized the importance of maintaining traditional elements like elegant costumes, symbolic gestures, and musical styles. Others felt that incorporating contemporary elements like multimedia technology, diverse music choices, and themes that resonate with modern audiences is crucial for the art form's survival. Encouraging innovation among opera creators is crucial for the development of the art form (Chen, 2016). High-quality operatic works should possess four key qualities: reflecting the contemporary spirit with practical significance, vivid imagery, rich connotations as the highest form of art representing the current era; demonstrating innovation and contributing to artistic progress while inheriting the characteristics of traditional operatic forms; possessing a unique artistic expression and appeal with high artistic value and vitality, and finally, achieving a balance between artistic merit and popular appeal, embodying the unity of social and economic benefits while adhering to social responsibility. To achieve this, playwrights and composers require support in their creative practices. This includes fostering a relaxed creative environment, providing preferential treatment, and ensuring themes and styles resonate with the Chinese public's aesthetic preferences, all with the ultimate goal of producing excellent works that not only uphold national traditions but also thrive in the modern market. Encouraging innovation in opera creation necessitates navigating the relationship between inheritance and development (Trevisan, 2021; Yicong, 2022).

The opera "The White-Haired Girl" is considered a landmark achievement in the artistic development of Chinese opera and vocal music. Produced during the Anti-Japanese War and subsequent struggles, the work reflects the social darkness of the period while embodying the aspirations of the military and the people. Compared to previous operas, "The White-Haired Girl" breaks new ground in its literary aesthetics. This is evident in the depth of its thematic connotations, the fresh portrayal of characters, the use of language that showcases the artistic and national character of the drama and poetry, and the heightened dramatic tension within its scenes. Written by He Jingzhi and Ding Yi with music by Marco, Zhang Lu, Qu Wei, Huan Zhi, Xiang Yu, Chen Zi, and Liu Chi in 1945, "The White-Haired Girl" draws inspiration from the folk legend of the "White Haired Fairy." This innovative ethnic opera seamlessly integrates poetry, song, and dance. Its structure reflects traditional ethnic opera's

method of scene division, allowing for diverse and flexible scene changes. The language of the opera inherits the established traditions of both singing and spoken dialogue within Chinese opera. Musically, the work utilizes melodies from northern Chinese folk music, while also incorporating elements and expressive techniques from operatic music.

The aesthetic experience of Chinese opera and vocal music unfolds through a dynamic dialogue between the audience (comprehender) and the performance itself (understood). However, the aural component – the actual soundscape of the opera – is an integral element that contributes significantly to the overall aesthetic impact. Furthermore, the historical context in which operas are created and performed shapes their aesthetic qualities. "The White-Haired Girl" exemplifies this interplay of aesthetics. It embodies innovative musical and vocal elements that contribute to its overall aesthetic impact. The opera achieves a remarkable synthesis between literary and musical aesthetics, establishing a new standard within Chinese opera. Traditionally, Chinese vocal music art has emphasized the importance of a unified performance that seamlessly integrates singing, spoken dialogue, martial arts movements, and dance. This aesthetic principle continues to influence the development of contemporary Chinese opera. Consequently, new operas often demand a high level of artistry from performers, requiring them to achieve a harmonious blend of vocal technique, rhythmic movement, and expressive acting.

Our examination of operatic librettos revealed a clear link between the era and thematic focus. Operas from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) explored themes of individual expression and defiance of social norms, reflecting the dominant Confucian ideology. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) saw operas celebrating loyalty to the emperor and historical narratives, aligning with the consolidation of Manchu rule. The Republican Period (1912-1949) experienced social turmoil reflected in operas advocating social justice and rebellion. Finally, the People's Republic of China's (1949-present) operatic themes mirrored the shift from socialist ideology to national identity and cultural revival. Government policies also significantly impacted opera. The Qing Dynasty's patronage of specific styles like Peking opera led to its flourishing. However, the Republican Period's suppression of traditional opera and the People's Republic of China's focus on "model operas" during the Cultural Revolution resulted in a decline in artistic freedom. Fortunately, a post-Cultural Revolution relaxation of censorship has seen a resurgence of interest in traditional styles and experimentation with contemporary themes. Traditional Chinese operatic singing techniques, rooted in the genre's established practices,

offered a more natural fit for the pronunciation of Chinese language. This approach resonated with the existing aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese vocal music, which have long emphasized the harmonious interplay between music and poetry, a concept embraced by both audiences and creators (Roth-Lange, 2014). A defining characteristic of modern Chinese opera lies in the skillful fusion of the "national singing method" with the operatic script and its poetic elements. Scriptwriters meticulously craft lyrics that adhere to specific rhyme schemes, incorporating both level tones and oblique tones (tones that rise or fall in pitch) for a nuanced effect. Composers and vocal coaches, in turn, prioritize vocal techniques that achieve harmonic resonance with these tonal variations. For instance, the opera "Wang Zhaojun" exemplifies this intricate relationship between script and singing. The libretto strictly follows the tonal and metrical requirements of classical Chinese poetry, as evident in lines like: "Look back at the pipa, the mountains and rivers of my country will always be heartbroken" and "Look at the pipa in two stacks, the grass and flowers are long." This meticulous attention to both poetic form and vocal delivery contributes to the overall aesthetic experience. "Wang Zhaojun," a landmark opera staged in 1930, holds historical significance as the first entirely Chinese-created opera. Composed by Zhang Shu and premiered at the New Oriental Theater, the work marked a turning point in the formal development of Chinese opera. It ushered in an era of professionalism, with dedicated personnel and enhanced technical capabilities becoming crucial elements for subsequent Chinese operatic productions.

The concept of extensibility is a core essence of Chinese opera vocal music art. Unlike readily attainable experiences, the artistic value and ultimate purpose of vocal music unfold gradually through ongoing interpretation and understanding. This iterative process necessitates active audience participation and the continual learning from past artistic experiences. As a dynamic art form, Chinese opera vocal music art inherently evolves alongside the changing social landscape during its creative process. The historical trajectory of modern Chinese opera exemplifies this characteristic extensibility. The genre traversed various stages, from Li Jinhui's pioneering exploration with children's song and dance dramas, to the foundational period marked by serious dramas and Yangge operas, followed by the mature stage epitomized by the national opera "The White-Haired Girl." Today, Chinese opera continues its journey through a phase of in-depth exploration. Each stage has yielded distinct artistic styles and thematic expressions of ideology. In the contemporary context, where many audience members haven't personally

experienced the historical periods depicted in operas, the art form faces the challenge of transcending temporal barriers. To bridge this gap, operas must effectively convey their content and emotions while continuously refining performance techniques and optimizing their ideological relevance through ongoing adaptation.

One of the core characteristics of vocal music art is its **intelligibility**. Unlike purely instrumental music, vocal music incorporates the element of language, enhancing its potential for conveying meaning to the audience. This departs from Immanuel Kant's formalist view, which emphasized the purely aesthetic and non-representational nature of music. Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory challenges this notion, arguing that all forms of music, regardless of their reliance on language, are inherently designed to convey ideological content. Therefore, both pure music and opera, with its sung text, function as carriers of meaning created by the composer/librettist. This intelligibility arises from the interplay of content and form, the connection between concrete musical elements and abstract ideas, and the unification of historical and realistic themes (Yang, 2021). Chinese opera exemplifies this concept by often utilizing historical narratives and characters to convey ideological messages. Modern Chinese opera and vocal music further explore two primary avenues of meaning-making. First, they commemorate historical events, heroes, and the struggles of the common people during tumultuous periods (e.g., operas like "Heroes" and "Liu Sanjie"). Second, they revisit and reinterpret elements of national culture and historical allusions (e.g., "Su Wu" and "Yu Tang Chun").

In our analysis, a key theme emerging from the interviews was the ongoing challenge of balancing tradition and innovation. Participants acknowledged the importance of honouring the heritage of Chinese opera while incorporating new elements to stay relevant. Concerns were raised about losing the core essence of the art form in the pursuit of contemporary appeal. However, participants also offered suggestions for achieving this balance. These included reinterpreting traditional stories for contemporary audiences and using technology to enhance storytelling without compromising artistic integrity. The current trend of prioritizing commercially successful pop music over opera creation is concerning. Opera's inherent complexity and demanding creative requirements necessitate a deep cultural understanding. This necessitates strengthening educational programs for opera creation teams, particularly within major music institutions. Notably, Chinese music education often prioritizes Western opera or analyses large-scale orchestral works over in-depth

exploration of Chinese opera itself (Chen, 2016; Wang & Karin, 2021). The current trend of prioritizing commercially successful pop music over opera creation is concerning. Opera's inherent complexity and demanding creative requirements necessitate a deep cultural understanding. This necessitates strengthening educational programs for opera creation teams, particularly within major music institutions. Notably, Chinese music education often prioritizes Western opera or analyzes large-scale orchestral works over in-depth exploration of Chinese opera itself. The scarcity of opera singer training programs in China stems from limited theater opportunities, a weak market economy, and low wages. This discourages talented individuals from pursuing opera careers, leading to a shortage of internationally recognized Chinese opera singers. However, initiatives like the Shanghai International Opera Center (established in 1988) offer a glimmer of hope. The center, led by renowned vocal instructors and artists, focuses on cultivating a new generation of opera talent, creating contemporary Chinese operas, promoting international operas, and fostering artistic exchange. European opera houses, despite centuries of existence, retain their classical status due to their enduring artistic value, not succumbing to fleeting trends. Similarly, Chinese opera needs to adapt to changing markets while preserving its core identity. Reinvigorating theater management through innovative approaches that cater to working-class audiences, particularly regarding ticket pricing, is crucial for the genre's survival.

5. CONCLUSION

Our study sheds light on the evolving landscape of Chinese opera, revealing the influence of historical context, government policies, and participant perspectives on aesthetics. While the current research provides a foundation, future studies could benefit from expanding the participant pool geographically and including contemporary experimental opera companies. Additionally, delving deeper into audience demographics and preferences would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the opera's future directions in an ever-changing cultural landscape.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shanxi Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Project: A Comparative Study of Shanshan Bowl and Bowl Tunes from the Perspective of Cultural

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