



The Singing Techniques of Traditional Chinese Yu Opera in Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

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Received 06/05/2024

Revised 09/05/2024

Accepted 25/06/2024

Abstract

Background and Aims: Traditional Chinese Yu Opera, a culturally significant art form, embodies unique singing techniques that offer rich insights into the social and cultural dimensions of China. This research aims to investigate the singing techniques of traditional Chinese Yu Opera from sociological and anthropological perspectives.

Materials and Methods: The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis, ethnographic observation, and expert interviews. Extensive literature reviews provided a theoretical foundation, while fieldwork included observing performances and conducting interviews with Yu Opera artists and cultural experts. This comprehensive methodological framework aimed to capture the nuances of singing techniques and their socio-cultural implications.

Results: The research findings highlight that Yu Opera's singing techniques are not only artistic expressions but also potent cultural symbols that reflect and influence social structures and values. Detailed analyses of performances, particularly the opera "Mulan", revealed how these techniques convey cultural narratives and facilitate social interaction, aligning with sociological theories of cultural capital and anthropological views on cultural transmission.

Conclusion: This study underscores the importance of Yu Opera's singing techniques as cultural texts that extend beyond mere performance, serving as vehicles for social cohesion and cultural continuity. The findings advocate for enhanced educational programs and interdisciplinary research to preserve and understand traditional arts like Yu Opera, ensuring their relevance in contemporary society.

Keywords: Yu Opera; Singing Techniques; Cultural Transmission; Sociological; Anthropological

Introduction

Traditional Chinese Yu Opera, with its rich cultural heritage and unique performance style, stands as a testament to the enduring traditions of Chinese performing arts. Among its many facets, the singing techniques employed in Yu Opera play a pivotal role, serving as the expressive backbone that brings the stories to life on stage (Rao, 2017; Feng, 2020; Zhang, 2024). This research delves into the intricate world of traditional Chinese Yu Opera singing techniques, focusing on sociological and anthropological perspectives to unravel the cultural, social, and human dimensions embedded within these musical expressions (Yan & Yifei, 2019; Wright, 2021; Wu, 2022; Liu & Chonpairot, 2024).

Yu Opera, originating from the Henan province of China, boasts a history spanning centuries, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Chinese society. Yu Opera has captivated audiences for generations with its distinctive vocalizations, melodic intonations, and emotive storytelling. Central to the art form are the singing techniques, meticulously honed over time and passed down through generations of performers. These techniques not only define the musicality of Yu Opera but also serve as carriers of cultural narratives, reflecting societal norms, values, and sentiments (Snelson, 2016; Volpp, 2020; Lam, 2022).

Despite the historical and cultural significance of Yu Opera singing techniques, there exists a gap in comprehensive understanding from sociological and anthropological viewpoints. While previous studies have explored the musical aspects of Yu Opera, there remains a need to delve deeper into the socio-cultural contexts that shape and influence these singing techniques. Questions arise regarding how these techniques evolve, how they mirror societal changes, and how they contribute to the preservation or adaptation of cultural identity within a rapidly changing global landscape (Yao, 2021; Lu & Sornyai, 2024).

This research holds immense significance in several dimensions. Firstly, it contributes to the academic discourse surrounding traditional Chinese performing arts, specifically focusing on the nuanced



aspects of Yu Opera singing techniques (Yu & Jia, 2016; Wu, 2023). Secondly, the findings of this research can offer valuable insights to practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts of traditional Chinese Yu Opera. Understanding the sociological and anthropological underpinnings of singing techniques can enhance the appreciation, interpretation, and transmission of this art form, ensuring its continued relevance and vitality in contemporary times (Tsioulakis & Hytönen-Ng, 2016; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018).

Furthermore, from a broader perspective, the research contributes to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. By unraveling the intricacies of Yu Opera singing techniques through sociological and anthropological analysis, the research aids in safeguarding intangible cultural assets, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, and fostering a deeper appreciation for the diversity of human expression (Alexander, 2020; Qiu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). In essence, this research endeavors to explore the depths of traditional Chinese Yu Opera singing techniques, unraveling their sociological and anthropological dimensions, and paving the way for a more profound understanding and appreciation of this rich cultural heritage.

Objective

To investigate the singing techniques of traditional Chinese Yu Opera from sociological and anthropological perspectives.

Literature review

This literature review will delve into various research theories and perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, and human dimensions inherent in traditional Chinese Yu Opera's singing techniques, elucidating its profound significance and evolutionary trajectory within contemporary contexts.

1. Sociological Insights into Yu Opera Singing Techniques

Sociological theories provide a framework for understanding how Yu Opera's singing techniques are embedded within broader social structures and cultural contexts. For instance, the sociological perspective of cultural capital, as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, can be applied to analyze how proficiency in Yu Opera singing techniques confers status and prestige within the cultural hierarchy of Chinese society. Sociologists may also explore the role of Yu Opera performances in fostering social cohesion, reinforcing collective identities, and transmitting cultural values across generations. Additionally, symbolic interactionism offers insights into how singers and audiences interpret and negotiate meanings through vocal expressions, gestures, and stage performances in Yu Opera, contributing to the construction of shared cultural narratives and identities (Haili, 2016; Susam-Sarajeva, 2016).

2. Anthropological Perspectives on Traditional Chinese Opera

Anthropological theories provide an anthropocentric lens for studying the cultural dimensions of traditional Chinese opera, including Yu Opera. Cultural anthropologists may employ ethnographic methods to investigate the rituals, symbolism, and social functions of Yu Opera performances within specific communities. They may analyze how singing techniques in Yu Opera embody cultural norms, rituals, and symbolic representations, thereby serving as a medium for cultural transmission, identity formation, and social cohesion. Anthropological perspectives also emphasize the embodied practices of performers, the sensory experiences of audiences, and the interplay between artistic expressions and everyday life in Yu Opera performances (Lee, 2016; Lo, 2017).

3. Cultural Transmission and Artistic Innovation

The study of cultural transmission and artistic innovation in Yu Opera singing techniques involves examining how traditional practices evolve and adapt within changing cultural landscapes. Sociologists and anthropologists may study the processes of knowledge transmission from master performers to apprentices, exploring how singing techniques are taught, learned, and transformed over time. Researchers may also investigate how Yu Opera adapts to contemporary audiences, technologies, and artistic trends while preserving its cultural authenticity and historical roots. This interdisciplinary approach sheds light on the

dynamic nature of cultural heritage, artistic expression, and creative adaptation in Yu Opera (Chan, 2018; Yao et al., 2023; Zeng & Maneewattana, 2024).

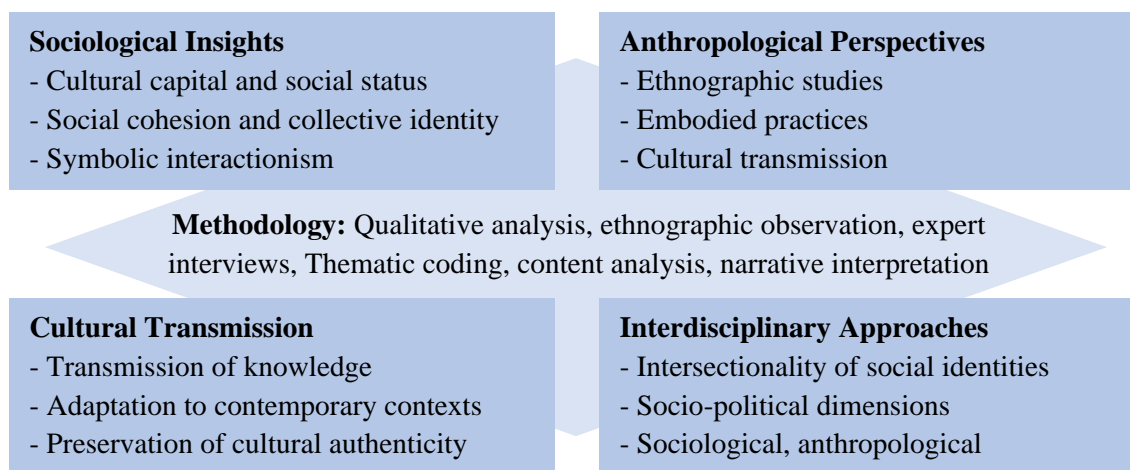
4. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Yu Opera Singing Techniques

Interdisciplinary approaches integrate sociological, anthropological, and cultural studies perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of Yu Opera's singing techniques. Scholars adopting such approaches may analyze the intersectionality of social identities, cultural meanings, and artistic expressions in Yu Opera performances. They may also examine the socio-political dimensions of Yu Opera, including its historical contexts, ideological influences, and representations of power dynamics within narratives and performances. By bridging disciplines, researchers gain insights into the multifaceted nature of Yu Opera as a cultural practice, artistic tradition, and social phenomenon, contributing to a nuanced and holistic analysis of its singing techniques (Lawson, 2020; Gordon, 2023; Chen & Woramitmaitree, 2024).

This literature review combines new sociological and anthropological views with studies on cultural transmission and artistic innovation. These research theories provide a solid foundation for investigating the cultural, social, and human dimensions of Yu Opera singing techniques within the broader context of sociological and anthropological inquiry.

Conceptual Framework

Utilizing a comprehensive review of existing literature and a mixed-methods approach, the study seeks to unravel the complex interplay between individual artistry and collective cultural dynamics. The conceptual framework for this study is structured around key components, each representing a thematic area derived from the literature review and the methodological approach.



Methodology

The methodology employed in this research combines qualitative analysis, ethnographic observation, and expert interviews to comprehensively investigate the singing techniques of traditional Chinese Yu Opera from sociological and anthropological perspectives. The study involves detailed steps to gather data, analyze performances, and interpret the socio-cultural significance of Yu Opera singing techniques.

Step 1: Literature Review: Conduct an extensive review of scholarly articles, books, and relevant literature on traditional Chinese opera, Yu Opera, sociological perspectives on performing arts, and anthropological studies of cultural practices. This step provides a theoretical foundation for understanding Yu Opera's cultural context, historical development, and artistic techniques.

Step 2: Fieldwork Preparation: Prepare for fieldwork activities by identifying key Yu Opera performances, venues, and practitioners for observation and data collection. Develop a research plan outlining the objectives, research questions, data collection methods, and ethical considerations.

Step 3: Ethnographic Observation: Attend live Yu Opera performances and rehearsals to observe singers' vocal techniques, stage presentations, gestures, costumes, and interactions with audiences. Take detailed field notes, record audio/video samples (with permission), and capture the nuances of singing styles, emotions conveyed, and cultural symbolism portrayed.

Step 4: Expert Interviews: Conduct semi-structured interviews with experienced Yu Opera performers, directors, scholars, and cultural experts. Gather insights into the historical evolution of Yu Opera singing techniques, pedagogical practices, cultural meanings attributed to vocal expressions, and the socio-political dimensions of opera performances.

Step 5: Data Analysis: Transcribe and analyze field notes, interview transcripts, and audio/video recordings using qualitative analysis methods such as thematic coding, content analysis, and narrative interpretation. Identify recurring themes, patterns of cultural expression, stylistic variations in singing techniques, and the socio-cultural contexts shaping Yu Opera performances.

Step 6: Interdisciplinary Synthesis: Integrate findings from sociological and anthropological perspectives to create a holistic understanding of Yu Opera's singing techniques. Explore connections between vocal expressions, cultural identities, social interactions, and historical narratives embedded in opera performances.

Step 7: Theoretical Framework: Apply sociological theories (e.g., cultural capital, symbolic interactionism) and anthropological concepts (e.g., cultural transmission, symbolic anthropology) to interpret the research findings and contextualize the socio-cultural significance of Yu Opera singing techniques.

Step 8: Reporting and Dissemination: Compile the research findings into a comprehensive report, including an analysis of singing techniques, cultural interpretations, theoretical insights, and recommendations for preserving and promoting Yu Opera heritage. Present the research outcomes through academic publications, conference presentations, and community outreach initiatives to contribute to the field of sociological and anthropological studies of performing arts.

Results

Yu Opera's performance scene that highlights musical elements is a dynamic and captivating aspect of this traditional art form. The scene encompasses a rich tapestry of musical elements that enhance the overall experience for the audience. In this performance scene, various musical elements come together to create a harmonious and immersive experience. The use of traditional accompaniment tunes, including sauna, transverse flute, and silk string tunes, adds depth and texture to the musical composition. These instruments contribute to the rhythmic clarity and melodic intricacies that are characteristic of Yu Opera, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Yu Opera performance

Source: Shan Dong, from fieldwork in November 2023



Furthermore, the lyrics of Yu Opera, characterized by rhythmic patterns like "three three four" and "two two three," add lyrical depth and narrative richness to the musical elements. The combination of singing and narration in prose-style sentence patterns, such as the "rolling white" in the Flying Plate, creates a compelling storytelling aspect within the musical performance. Overall, the Yu Opera performance scene, highlighting musical elements, is a vibrant and multifaceted experience. It combines traditional instruments, vocal techniques, and lyrical storytelling to create a captivating journey for the audience, showcasing the artistry and cultural significance of Yu Opera.

1. The Singing Techniques of Traditional Chinese Yu Opera

Traditional Chinese Yu Opera, also known as Yuju, holds a distinctive place among the country's rich cultural heritage, particularly for its unique singing techniques. This study delves into the intricate aspects of Yu Opera's singing techniques from sociological and anthropological perspectives. By examining the nuances of sound production, words in singing, and lubricating tune, this research sheds light on the artistic intricacies that define Yu Opera's musical expression. Each aspect contributes to the vibrant tapestry of Yu Opera, showcasing not just a performance art form but also a reflection of historical, linguistic, and cultural dimensions unique to China. The table below presents an overview of these singing techniques, encapsulating the essence of Yu Opera's musical heritage, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of Singing Techniques in Yu Opera

Aspect	Description
Sound Production	Yu Opera, belonging to folk music, employs the national singing method with distinct Chinese characteristics. It emphasizes singing in the oropharyngeal cavity, blending oral and head cavity resonances, resulting in a sweet timbre with a mix of true and false sounds.
Words in Singing	The singing style of Yu Opera incorporates the Henan language's characteristics, including tone, language potential, and intonation. The Zhongzhou rhyme system reflects northern Chinese dialects, adding regional flavor and authenticity to performances.
Lubricating Tune	This technique, prevalent in Yu Opera, encompasses decorative sound cavity, strength sound cavity, speed change processing, and tone cavity. It serves as a fundamental artistic expression method, enhancing vocal dynamics and nuances within performances.
Individual Singing Styles	Each actor in Yu Opera possesses a unique singing style, contributing to the art form's diversity. The Chang School, for instance, not only preserves but also innovates Yu Opera's singing artistry, demonstrating continuous practice and artistic breakthroughs during performances.

2. The Singing Techniques of Selected Musical Works in Yu Opera "Mulan"

In examining selected musical pieces from the Yu Opera "Mulan," comprising 11 scenes with Hua Mulan featured in 5 of them, a profound exploration of singing techniques unfolds. Chen Baizhen, portraying Mulan, adeptly employs diverse singing styles inherent in Yu Opera, seamlessly intertwining melodious variations with the characters' intricate emotions and thoughts. Central to "Mulan" is the frequent use of the 28-tone piece, delicately sung by Hua Mulan with nuances ranging from subtle euphemism to soft lyricism, occasionally transitioning to robust and unrestrained tones. This dynamic range captures the essence of Mulan's character, embodying both the demureness of a woman and the commanding presence of a military leader. This amalgamation of contrasting elements, blending rigidity with softness, and showcasing interdependent yet complementary attributes, contributes significantly to the widespread appeal of Yu Opera's singing style, resonating deeply with audiences and highlighting the enduring popularity of this art form.

One of the standout segments in "Mulan" is the captivating singing piece "Shui shuo nv zi bur u nan". This scene portrays Mulan's encounter with fellow soldiers during her journey to join the army, where she endeavors to inspire camaraderie, correct attitudes, and boost morale, all conveyed through her powerful and emotive singing. This classic rendition not only embodies Mulan's brave, generous, and elegant persona but also serves as a poignant example to delve into the intricate singing techniques distinctive to Yu Opera, as shown in Figure 2.

shui shuo nv zi bu ru nan

yu ju 《hua mu lan》 mu lan chang duan



da da da da cang lai cai yi cai cang da bu tai cang da

liu da ge jiang(a) hua, li tai

pian, shui shuo nv zi xiang qing xian. nan zi da zhang

dao bian, guan, nv zi fang zhi zai jia yuan. bai tian qu zhong

di, ye wan lai fang mian, bu fen zhou ye xin qin ba huo gan, jiang shi men

cai neng you zhe chi he chuan. ni yao bu xiang xin na qing wang zheshen shang kan,

za men de xie he wa, hai you yi he shan, qian zhen wan xian ke dou shi ta men bian na!

you xuduonvying xiong, ye bagong lao jian, weiguo sha di shi dai dai chuying

xian, zhe nv zi men na yi dian er bu ru er nan hei hei!

Figure 2 Sheet music, shui shuo nv zi bur u nan

Source: Shan Dong, transcription from fieldwork in November 2023

In examining the selected musical pieces from Yu Opera's "Mulan," an exploration unfolds within the sociological and anthropological dimensions of performance art. The narrative structure, character

portrayal, and emotive resonance inherent in traditional Chinese opera intersect with societal values, gender roles, and cultural norms, offering a rich tapestry for analysis.

The rendition of "Mulan" spans across 11 scenes, with Hua Mulan's presence in 5 pivotal moments characterized by substantial singing segments. Chen Baizhen's portrayal of Mulan showcases the adept utilization of diverse singing styles inherent in Yu Opera, seamlessly blending nuanced tonality with the characters' specific emotional landscapes. Particularly prominent is the utilization of the 28-tone piece, where Mulan's singing oscillates between delicate euphemism, soft lyricism, and occasional bursts of vigorous expression. This nuanced delivery encapsulates the multifaceted nature of Mulan's character, from embodying the "shy" demeanor of a boudoir girl to exuding the authoritative aura of a military leader. Such artistic duality, characterized by a harmonious blend of rigidity and softness, mirrors broader societal ideals and perceptions, contributing to the widespread resonance of Yu Opera within the cultural milieu.

The analytical spotlight converges on two classic singing sections, namely "shui shuo nv zi bur u nan" These segments serve as cultural artifacts reflecting not only the brave, generous, and elegant image attributes associated with Hua Mulan but also as mirrors reflecting the intricate singing techniques endemic to Yu Opera. Through these musical vignettes, societal constructs surrounding gender equality, moral persuasion, and collective morale find expression, underscoring the sociocultural significance embedded within traditional Chinese operatic performances.

The renowned singing piece "Shui Shuo nv zi bur u nan" from the classic drama "Mulan" encapsulates nuanced sociological and anthropological dimensions within its narrative fabric. Set against the backdrop of Mulan's journey to the army, this scene unfolds a societal dialogue on gender roles, personal conviction, and moral persuasion, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3 The break breathing of a selected piece of Mulan
Source: Shan Dong, transcription from fieldwork in November 2023

Mulan's encounter with fellow soldiers, particularly her interaction with Liu Zhong, serves as a microcosm reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender equality and individual agency. Through compelling singing techniques inherent in Yu Opera, Mulan's aim to persuade Liu Zhong towards attitude correction and morale enhancement emerges as a potent sociological narrative. This piece of music explores cultural norms, societal expectations, and the transformative power of personal conviction through its emotional depth, tonal variations, and thematic resonance. It does this by giving a nuanced view of the sociocultural dynamics at play in traditional Chinese opera performances.

The strategic inclusion of the lining word "ho ho" serves as a linguistic device, infusing the tone with a specific emotive nuance. This deliberate tonal modulation is emblematic of Mulan's evolving character,



transitioning from a girlish timbre to a resolute and confident expression mirroring her "masculine" image. The synchronized alignment of breath dynamics with this tonal embellishment reflects a deeper integration of character portrayal and societal commentary. The shift in resonance focuses on the chest signifies a perceptible departure from previous tonal registers, symbolizing Mulan's embrace of her "male" persona. A steadier breath goes along with this tonal evolution, lending Mulan's vocal delivery a sense of security and authority. The incorporation of moist accents further enhances the singing's vibrancy and boldness, accentuating Mulan's portrayal as a resolute and courageous figure challenging societal gender norms.

In essence, Hua Mulan's transformative singing techniques in this segment not only depict a narrative of personal empowerment but also resonate with broader sociological and anthropological discourses surrounding gender identity, societal expectations, and individual agency within traditional Chinese operatic performances.

Discussion

The investigation of the singing techniques of traditional Chinese Yu Opera from sociological and anthropological perspectives reveals profound insights into the cultural and social dynamics embedded within this traditional art form. The findings of this research align well with existing theories on cultural transmission and social cohesion, offering a nuanced understanding that extends beyond mere artistic interpretation.

Firstly, the sociological insights into Yu Opera underscore the art form's role in reinforcing social structures and cultural hierarchies within Chinese society. This is consistent with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, where mastery of Yu Opera can be seen as a marker of social prestige and a medium for social mobility (Haili, 2016). Additionally, the role of Yu Opera in fostering social cohesion supports Durkheim's concepts of collective effervescence and social solidarity, which are vividly demonstrated during live performances and community engagements (Tsioulakis & Hytönen-Ng, 2016).

Secondly, the anthropological perspectives provide an in-depth look at how Yu Opera serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission and identity formation. This aligns with Geertz's interpretive anthropology, suggesting that Yu Opera is not just a performance but a cultural text that offers insights into the values, norms, and beliefs of the community (Lee, 2016). The detailed analysis of the opera "Mulan" illustrates how narratives are imbued with cultural meanings that reflect and reinforce gender roles and societal values, an interpretation supported by recent studies on narrative identity in traditional performances (Liu & Chonpairot, 2024).

The findings on Yu Opera's singing techniques underscore their significance as a form of cultural capital, echoing Bourdieu's framework, which highlights the social prestige and identity reinforcement these traditional arts provide (Haili, 2016). This aligns with Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, suggesting that Yu Opera performances strengthen social cohesion and cultural continuity (Tsioulakis & Hytönen-Ng, 2016). The practical implications of these findings are significant for cultural preservation and education. Integrating Yu Opera into educational programs can foster a deeper appreciation among younger generations, ensuring the transmission of these techniques and their cultural narratives. Moreover, promoting Yu Opera in cultural tourism can enhance public engagement and support, providing a sustainable model for preserving this intangible cultural heritage, which in turn strengthens the community's cultural identity (Chan, 2018).

Conclusion

This research contributes significantly to the understanding of traditional Chinese Yu Opera by highlighting its sociological and anthropological dimensions. The singing techniques of Yu Opera are not only artistic expressions but also rich cultural texts that offer insights into the social and cultural fabric of Chinese society. By examining these techniques through the lenses of sociology and anthropology, this study illuminates the deeper cultural narratives and social functions that Yu Opera fulfills. The findings suggest that Yu Opera, like many traditional arts, faces the dual challenge of preserving its cultural essence



while adapting to the changing cultural landscape. This necessitates a delicate balance between innovation and tradition, ensuring that the art form remains relevant and resonant for future generations. Moreover, the study advocates for enhanced cultural appreciation and educational initiatives that can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of traditional Chinese performing arts within both local and global contexts.

In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in studying traditional arts. By integrating sociological and anthropological perspectives, the study not only enriches our understanding of Yu Opera but also contributes to the broader discourse on the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring other traditional operatic forms in China, thereby broadening the scope of knowledge and application in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

Recommendation

1. Enhancement of Educational Programs

To ensure the continued relevance and transmission of traditional Chinese Yu Opera, educational institutions, especially those focusing on performing arts, should integrate comprehensive programs that focus on the sociological and anthropological aspects of Yu Opera. These programs should not only teach the technical singing techniques but also delve into the cultural, social, and historical contexts that give these techniques their significance. By doing so, students can develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of Yu Opera, which can foster a more meaningful engagement with this traditional art form. Additionally, partnerships with opera troupes and cultural organizations can provide practical exposure and mentorship, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

2. Promotion of Interdisciplinary Research Initiatives

There is a significant benefit in promoting interdisciplinary research that combines sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies to explore traditional arts like Yu Opera. Funding bodies and academic institutions should encourage and support research projects that examine the cultural dynamics of traditional performing arts through multiple lenses. Such research can enhance our understanding of how these arts function as social phenomena and cultural texts. Furthermore, findings from such studies should be disseminated through conferences, workshops, and publications to reach a broader audience, thus raising awareness and promoting the preservation of intangible cultural heritage like Yu Opera.

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