



The Development and Transformation of Changsha Xiang Opera in China

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Abstract

Background and Aim: In China, there are challenges faced by Changsha Xiang Opera in terms of protection and development before and after the implementation of intangible cultural heritage policies. The aim of the research is to analyze the status of Xiang Opera before the policy implementation and to understand the specific impacts of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies on its protection measures.

Materials and Methods: This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review with qualitative data collected through focus group interviews. The literature review analyzed the historical background, performance forms, and development trajectory of Changsha Xiang Opera, drawing on scholarly articles, government documents, and historical records. Focus group interviews were conducted with 14 participants in Changsha City, China. The interviews explored their perspectives on the challenges facing Xiang Opera, the impact of ICH policies, and strategies for sustainable development. The study is grounded in Cultural Ecology Theory, examining the interplay between Xiang Opera.

Results: The results show that before the implementation of intangible cultural heritage policies, Changsha Xiang Opera faced significant challenges, such as a break in its transmission and a loss of audience. Following the policy implementation, government support notably improved the opera's survival space, through measures such as government funding, educational integration, artistic innovation, and media exposure. The opera has achieved a balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring innovation while preserving its artistic essence.

Conclusion: With the support of intangible cultural heritage policies, Changsha Xiang Opera has successfully integrated tradition with innovation, injecting new vitality into its development. To ensure its sustainable future, further strengthening of policy implementation and maintaining a balance between traditional artistic characteristics and modern innovation are essential.

Keywords: Changsha Xiang Opera; Intangible Cultural Heritage Policies; Development and Transformation; Focus Groups

Introduction

China has a rich tradition of regional drama, encompassing a diverse range of performance arts with different regional styles and melodies. Among these, Peking Opera, the national drama, is well-known, alongside numerous regional operas. Each regional opera has its unique style and expressive form, showcasing the diversity and profound cultural heritage of China's various regions (Chen, 2022). These regional operas include Changsha Xiang Opera, the focus of this study. As a representative of the local opera arts of Hunan, Changsha Xiang Opera boasts a long history and a rich cultural foundation. It integrates valuable elements of Chinese opera culture, such as singing, reciting, acting, and combat, into a unified performance art form. However, with the acceleration of modernization and the diversification of mass entertainment, traditional opera art faces significant challenges in both inheritance and development. Changsha Xiang Opera is no exception, facing a crisis of transmission, particularly before the implementation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policies, when it encountered considerable developmental difficulties. According to Yu (2019), before the implementation of these policies, the development of Xiang Opera was constrained by multiple factors, including the aging audience, the younger generation's lack of interest, insufficient financial support, and an incomplete transmission mechanism. As early as 2003, scholar Fan Zhengming pointed out that the emergence of new forms of mass entertainment, such as movies, television, karaoke, and sporting events, was leading to fewer people attending theaters (Fan, 2003). Fan (2003) also pointed out in his research that the predicament of folk opera is not unique;





drama, opera, ballet, and even film also face crises in their survival and development. Twenty years later, today's new media platforms like live streaming and short videos, as well as traditional performance arts like stand-up comedy, talk shows, and improvisational performances, continue to draw away potential theater audiences. But the issue returns to Changsha Xiang Opera, a folk treasure that has been passed down for hundreds of years, and the predicament it faces not only threatens the survival of Xiang Opera but also has a potential impact on the transmission and development of its cultural value.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, theater troupes transitioned from traditional opera bands to structured performance groups. Initially comprising about 37 troupes, with only the Dongting Xiang Opera Troupe affiliated with the People's Liberation Army (Jiao & Yan, 2005), the art form underwent significant transformations. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Xiang Opera experienced dramatic changes: the number of troupes fluctuated from 21 in 1955 to just 8 by 1960, with the Cultural Revolution delivering a near-devastating blow to the art form (Zhang, 2016). Since 2005, the Chinese government has implemented a series of intangible cultural heritage protection policies, marking the official launch of ICH preservation efforts. These policies aim to strengthen the protection of intangible cultural heritage through legislation, financial support, talent cultivation, and promotional activities, facilitating its sustainable development. The successful inclusion of Xiang Opera in the ICH protection program is not only a recognition of its artistic value but also reflects the government's emphasis on the inheritance and development of this traditional art form (National People's Congress of China, 2008). This initiative represents respect for the historical and cultural foundation of Xiang Opera and highlights the protection of local cultural characteristics.

Xiang Opera originated from the Yiyang tune in the Ming Dynasty, with a history of over 600 years. It integrates elements of Kunqu and Pihuang operas, forming a multi-tune system that includes Gaoqiang, Low Paizi, Kunqiang, and Luantan, with standardized Changsha dialect as the stage language, featuring six tones with unique pitch variations (Hu, 2014). From the more than one thousand operas during the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty to the 682 operas preserved after the founding of New China, Xiang Opera has showcased rich content through its various tunes, and under the protection of ICH policies, it continues to thrive through traditional inheritance, the adaptation of historical plays, and the creation of modern dramas (Cheng, 2004). This research primarily examines two aspects: first, an investigation into the changes and transformations in the performance art forms and survival space of Changsha Xiang Opera; and second, an analysis of the current state of the Xiang Opera industry, aiming to build a sustainable development model that both promotes local cultural revitalization and drives economic growth.

This research, employing literature review and focus group methods, is expected to produce significant impacts on two levels: first, by delving into the performance forms and survival spaces of Xiang Opera, it will provide decision-making support for governments and cultural institutions to protect and develop Xiang Opera, helping to establish more effective ICH protection strategies; second, the findings will contribute to increasing the opera's visibility and appeal, promoting cultural tourism and the performing arts industry, thus stimulating local cultural revitalization and economic growth; third, this study will enhance the social recognition and cultural value of Xiang Opera, fostering greater public attention and support, and providing a theoretical foundation for traditional education and talent cultivation in Xiang Opera, ensuring its sustainable development. This research has practical value for government cultural departments, Xiang Opera performance troupes, cultural tourism industries, and related educational institutions, capable of promoting local cultural revitalization and economic growth.



Figure 1 The Distribution Map of Xiang Opera Theater in Hunan Province, China.
Note: (Author, 2025)

Objectives

1. To study the transformation and survival space of Changsha Xiang Opera, China;
2. To develop a sustainable development model for Changsha Xiang Opera, China.

Literature review

This study, grounded in Cultural Ecology Theory and China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies, explores the concept and development of Changsha Xiang Opera. It investigates and analyzes the changes and transformations in the performance forms and survival space of Xiang Opera in Changsha. Furthermore, the study aims to conceptualize and analyze the successful model of the Xiang Opera industry, to revitalize local culture and stimulate economic growth. In alignment with the research topic and objectives, the researchers conducted a comprehensive literature review.

1. Cultural Ecology Theory

Cultural Ecology Theory, first proposed by American anthropologist Julian H. Steward in 1955, represents a significant research area in human geography (Steward, 1955). This theory aims to elucidate the corresponding relationships between different ecological environments and cultural types, as well as how various cultures adapt to different ecological environments. Cultural ecology, primarily established by Steward, focuses on studying the process of human adaptation to the environment. Steward was the first to introduce ecological principles into cultural studies, systematically demonstrating the causal relationships between culture and environment, and subsequently developing concepts such as "cultural core" (Xia, 1997).

When studying Chinese traditional theater, particularly the development and transformation of Xiang Opera, Cultural Ecology Theory provides an important perspective. As a regional opera form, the evolution of Xiang Opera has been influenced by multiple factors, including regional culture, social changes, and audience demands (Xie et al., 2025). Through Cultural Ecology Theory, we can analyze how Xiang Opera adapts to maintain its cultural characteristics while achieving innovation in the context of modernization and globalization (Li & Chen, 2025). This theoretical foundation helps us understand the interaction between Xiang Opera and other art forms such as modern drama, as well as its adaptability in contemporary society (Wang et al., 2024).

2. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Policies

According to UNESCO (2003), "intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and is constantly



recreated by communities in response to their environment, interactions with nature, and historical contexts. It includes various domains such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and traditional craftsmanship. Xiang Opera is recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) due to its rich historical significance, unique artistic expressions, and cultural practices that are integral to the identity of the Hunan province in China. Originating in the Ming Dynasty, Xiang Opera incorporates local dialects, folk music, and traditional performance styles, making it a vital part of Hunan's cultural landscape (Wang et al., 2024).

Since 2005, the Chinese government has implemented a series of policies aimed at the protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), marking the formal initiation of efforts to safeguard this vital aspect of cultural identity. The State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage" in March 2005, which established a framework for recognizing, respecting, and promoting ICH across society (State Council, 2005). This policy emphasizes a government-led approach while encouraging social participation, ensuring that various stakeholders are involved in the protection and transmission of cultural heritage (Wang, 2011). The focus on ICH protection is driven by the need to address the challenges posed by globalization and rapid socio-economic changes that threaten traditional practices and knowledge systems. The policy aims to create a comprehensive protection system that not only preserves endangered cultural expressions but also promotes their revitalization and transmission to future generations (Zhang, 2019). By establishing a national inventory system and providing financial support for ICH projects, the government seeks to foster an environment where intangible cultural heritage can thrive and be appreciated by all segments of society.

In this study, the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) system for Changsha's Xiang Opera refers specifically to the period after 2006, as Xiang Opera was listed in the first batch of provincial intangible cultural heritage in May 2006 and subsequently included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage in June 2008. The ICH system brought new policies to Xiang Opera and provided space for its continued survival; hence, this article focuses on the system from 2006 to the present. After Xiang Opera was designated as ICH, the government implemented a series of policies and began allocating special protection funds, establishing a targeted system for protecting and rescuing Xiang Opera. Additionally, a team dedicated to protecting and preserving Xiang Opera was formed. The government initiated social protection coordination, mobilizing various sectors of society and coordinating work across different areas. In school education, traditional opera content was appropriately incorporated into the curriculum.

3. Changsha Xiang Opera

The following content about Xiang opera is derived from the Xiang Opera Anthology edited by Wei (2015). During the Ming Dynasty, Changsha became a political and cultural hub, while Xiangtan thrived as a commercial center, attracting merchants from various regions. This development fostered the flourishing of local theatrical performances. Over time, imported theatrical styles, such as those from Jiangxi, integrated with local folk art and dialects, giving rise to Changsha Xiang Opera. This regional opera features four main vocal styles: *Gaoqiang* (High Pitch), *Low Paizi*, *Kunqiang*, and *Luantan*(Mix), all performed using the Changsha dialect.

The Gaoqiang style evolved from the Yiyang tune, characterized by grand, powerful melodies. The Low Paizi style is known for its slow, solemn delivery, accompanied by traditional instruments like the suona and flute. Kunqiang, which entered later, was initially popular in the early Qing period but gradually declined. Luantan, introduced in the Qing Dynasty, became an integral part of the opera during the reign of Emperor Qianlong.



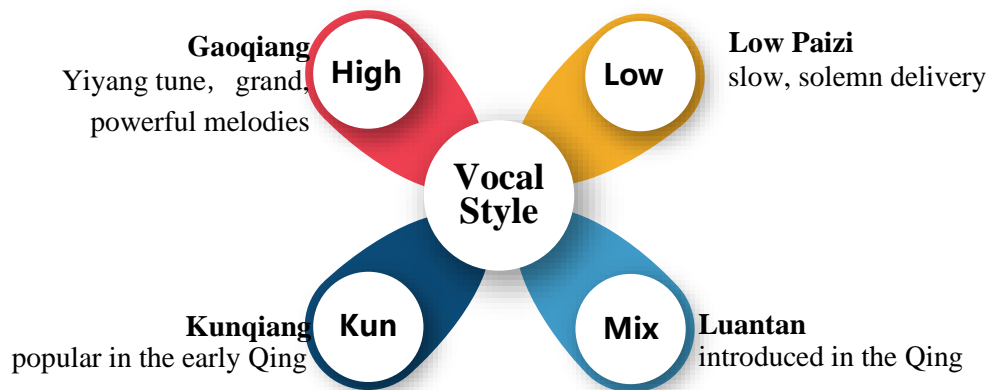


Figure 2 Vocal Styles in Xiang Opera
Note: (Author, 2025)

Xiang Opera performance roles are categorized into *Sheng* (male roles), *Dan* (female roles), *Jing* (painted face roles), and *Chou* (clown roles). The *Sheng* roles include *Laosheng* (older male), *Xiaosheng* (youth), and *Wusheng* (military roles). The *Dan* roles consist of *Qingyi* (young women), *Huadan* (lively young women), and *Wudan* (female warriors). The *Jing* roles are robust, often portraying fierce warriors or powerful characters, and the *Chou* roles focus on comedic or mischievous characters.

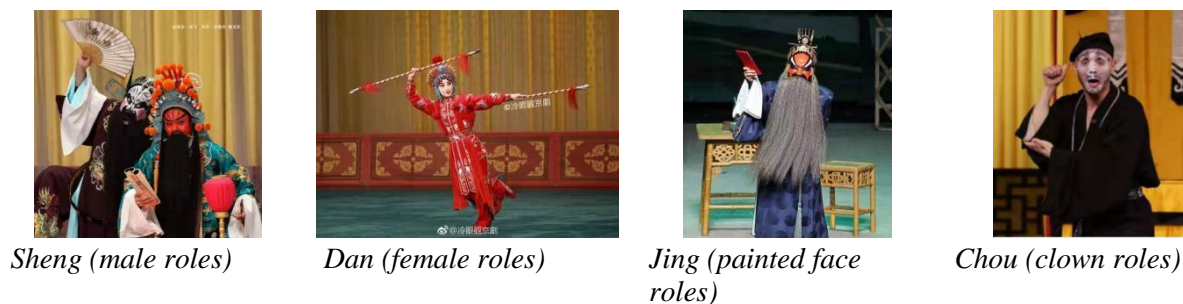


Figure 3 Categorized Roles in Xiang Opera
Source: (Hu,2014)

According to cultural anthropologists, "cultural ecology theory" posits that humans are not only biological beings but also products of culture, with physiological functions evolving based on cultural evolution. Culture serves as both a product of human civilization and a means for humans to adapt to their external environment. Thus, the nature and characteristics of culture are closely linked to human ecological environments, where cultural phenomena and differences arise from choices made to adapt to natural conditions and levels of productivity (Pan, 2025). Cultural ecology examines the relationship between humans and their natural environment, focusing on how the environment influences cultural development and vice versa. This framework will be applied in the study of Xiang Opera's development, exploring its origins and evolution through local ecological factors such as geography and climate, as well as social structures and values that impact its transmission (Pan, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

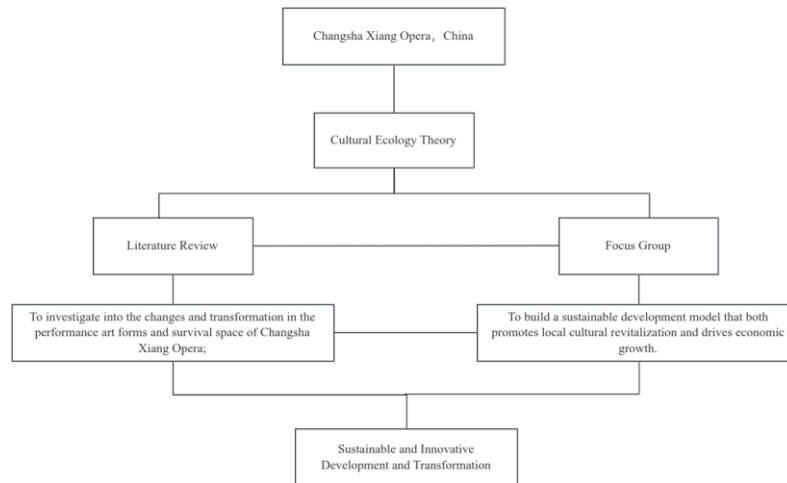


Figure 4 Conceptual Framework
Note: (Author, 2025)

Methodology

This study is qualitative research aimed at understanding the transformation of the performance forms of Changsha Xiang Opera, to identify the successful models that have enabled its survival and development nowadays.

1. Data Collection

The study uses a focus group method to gather views from experts in related fields. Through group discussions, the researchers collect and analyze the shared perspectives to reach conclusions for the future development of Changsha Xiang Opera. The participants were informed that the discussions were audio-recorded and were asked for their consent to allow the researchers to transcribe the interviews and possibly engage in follow-up cooperation. To ensure a comfortable and open atmosphere, the researchers initially used a formal interview approach in quiet settings. Instead of solely relying on formal interviews, they engaged with participants through informal conversations in casual settings.

2. Participant Selection

The research focused on selecting Xiang Opera troupes and performance artists from Hunan province who have direct relationships with opera performance models and possess the most direct knowledge and attitudes about the art form. Participant selection criteria included: 1) Personnel from local Xiang Opera troupes; 2) Artists with direct involvement in Xiang Opera performances; 3) Scholars who have studied Xiang Opera. Additionally, the gender of the participants was carefully balanced to ensure consistency.

3. Research Instrument Validity

This research primarily employed expert review to validate research instruments, using the following criteria to select expert reviewers. Selection Criteria for Experts) At least 30 years of research experience in Xiang Opera; 2) Published at least 10 academic papers or monographs related to Xiang Opera; 3) Age 45 or above, with academic rank of Associate Professor or higher.

The researchers presented the research tool (consisting of 5 questions) to selected experts for validity assessment using the Index of Congruence (IOC) method:

- | | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| -1 point means | the Question is inappropriate |
| 0 points means | Neutral |
| 1 point means | the Question is appropriate |



Questions scoring between 0.33 and 1.00 are considered valid and suitable for data collection. For questions scoring below 0.33, which are deemed invalid, researchers must revise them based on expert feedback. This iterative process continues until all five research questions achieve the necessary validity, with the ultimate goal of ensuring the research instrument's reliability and appropriateness through rigorous expert evaluation.

4. Data Analysis

The original discussion was conducted in Chinese, and the researchers compiled the spoken texts as Chinese responses. These were subsequently translated into English using a translation tool. The researcher manually transcribes the oral focus group discussion, converting it into text form. The transcribed and organized text is then cleaned by removing irrelevant content, such as filler words like "um" and "ah." The text is segmented according to different questions, and each respondent's statements are labeled to facilitate the identification of key responses. These key answers are marked with response keywords, which are then coded. Finally, suggestions are summarized based on the analysis.

The table below provides detailed information about the participants involved in the focus groups:

Table 1 Basic Information of Focus Group Participants

Participants	Gender	Education	Position	Duration (minutes)	Location
CFH01	Male	Bachelor	Personnel	60 minutes	face-to-face
CM02	Female	Master	Personnel		
CYP03	Male	Bachelor	Artist		
HXX04	Male	Bachelor	Artist		
LHW05	Female	Bachelor	Artist		
LZ06	Female	Master	Artist		
LDF07	Female	Bachelor	Artist		
WL08	Male	PhD	Administrator		
WWB09	Male	PhD	Scholar		
WYG10	Male	PhD	Scholar		
WJ11	Male	PhD	Administrator		
XJ12	Female	Bachelor	Artist		
TBH13	Female	Bachelor	Artist		
ZDB14	Male	PhD	Scholar		

(The first three letters of participants correspond to the Pinyin initials of the first and last name.)

The session begins with the facilitator introducing the purpose of the discussion and the structure of the session, and emphasizing confidentiality and consent. Participants are then invited to share their observations on the current state of Xiang Opera, discussing its strengths and weaknesses, the challenges it faces in terms of audience engagement and sustainability, and their personal experiences with the art form. The facilitator will guide the group to propose ideas for enhancing the relevance and development of Xiang Opera in the contemporary context. Finally, the discussion will be summarized, and participants will be asked for feedback on the session to improve future focus groups. The session will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify key themes and offer actionable recommendations for the sustainable growth of Xiang Opera.

Results

Table 2 summarizes the responses from a focus group discussion aimed at identifying key areas for the sustainable development of Changsha Xiang Opera, including the integration of artistic innovation and tradition preservation, marketing promotion, talent cultivation, government support, and boosting visibility.



Table 2 Synthesized Theme of Focus Group Discussion

Synthesized Theme of Focus Group Discussion		
Response	Theme	Suggestion
Q1-How can we excavate and integrate Xiang Opera's artistic resources to support the development of its industry?		
Response	Theme	Suggestion
CFH01: We need to create an Xiang Opera Resource Center to gather and protect materials, making sure its heritage is preserved.	Government Support	Creating a resource center is critical to protecting and supporting Xiang Opera's artistic heritage.
LZ06: We should team up with media outlets to broadcast Xiang Opera performances, helping them reach a wider audience."	Media Promotion	Partnerships with media can expand Xiang Opera's reach to a broader, more diverse audience.
CYP03: We should integrate Xiang Opera resources into tourism development, creating cultural tourism products.	Tourism Integration	Tourism development linked to Xiang Opera creates new opportunities for cultural and economic growth.
CM02: Collaborating with universities to research Xiang Opera will give the art form intellectual depth and new perspectives."	Talent Development	Digital tools offer accessibility and preservation for future generations of Xiang Opera enthusiasts.
WJ11: Create a platform for Xiang Opera performances that integrates both traditional and modern adaptations.	Artistic Innovation	Innovating within the tradition allows Xiang Opera to remain relevant to contemporary audiences.
Q2- How should the Xiang Opera industry position itself in the market and develop effective strategies to meet market demands?		
Response	Theme	Suggestion
CM02: Artistic expressions need to evolve to connect with contemporary tastes, including lighting, augmented reality, and sounds that are in nowadays' taste.	Artistic Innovation	Incorporate elements from contemporary performing arts to keep the younger generation engaged, while respecting traditional performance styles.
LZ06: We could introduce branded Xiang Opera merchandise or even digital collaborations with fashion or tech companies.	Boosting Visibility	Create a series of branded Xiang Opera merchandise and explore collaborations with designers and tech companies to produce interactive digital content.
WYG10: Let' s get schools involved—make Xiang Opera part of the curriculum to introduce students to its cultural significance.	Education Integration	Partner with schools to integrate Xiang Opera into local education, including performances, study modules, and workshops to foster an early appreciation.





Synthesized Theme of Focus Group Discussion

Response	Theme	Suggestion
TBH13: Through policy support to boost the private sector to invest more in Xiang Opera, especially in performances that appeal to younger audiences.	Policy Support	Encourage private sector investment in Xiang Opera, particularly in performances aimed at younger or international audiences.
LHW05: Leverage Xiang Opera as part of Hunan's cultural tourism package. Integrating it into the tourist experience could expose it to a global audience.	Tourism Integration	Create specialized cultural tours, offering visitors an immersive experience in Xiang Opera culture.

Q3-How can we strengthen the training and inheritance of Xiang Opera talent to ensure the sustainable development of this art form?

Response	Theme	Suggestion
CFH01: Strengthen Xiang Opera talent training through specialized schools and workshops.	Talent Development	Developing specialized schools and workshops can ensure a continuous flow of trained talent in the Xiang Opera community.
LHW05: Encourage Xiang Opera troupes to partner with local schools to provide hands-on learning experiences.	School Partnerships	Local schools partnering with Xiang Opera troupes can give students hands-on experience, increasing engagement.
WL08: Cultural tourism tied to Xiang Opera can offer performers more job opportunities and raise the art form's profile.	Tourism Integration	Cultural tourism creates jobs while raising the profile of Xiang Opera among a broader audience.
WJ11: A public relations campaign could help Xiang Opera attract international interest and raise its visibility abroad.	Public Visibility	Public relations campaigns can enhance Xiang Opera's reputation and help attract international interest.
LDF07: We need scholarships for students who want to pursue Xiang Opera as a career, giving them a chance to thrive.	School Partnerships	Local schools partnering with Xiang Opera troupes can give students hands-on experience, increasing engagement.

Q4- What policy measures can the government take to support the revitalization and promotion of the Xiang Opera industry?

Response	Theme	Suggestion
CFH01: Government-backed funding for performances and educational programs is vital to keep the industry thriving.	Government Support	Government funding is crucial to ensuring sustainable financial support for performances and educational initiatives.
ZDB14: We could set up an official body to promote Xiang Opera events and manage	Boosting Visibility	An official body dedicated to promoting Xiang Opera can streamline efforts and create a unified strategy for outreach.



Synthesized Theme of Focus Group Discussion

Response	Theme	Suggestion
outreach efforts more effectively.		
LZ06: Subsidies for schools offering Xiang Opera-related courses would help future generations learn and practice the art.	Government Funding	Subsidies for educational institutions can foster the next generation of Xiang Opera practitioners.
HXX04: The government could introduce laws that promote Xiang Opera in cultural exchanges to give it international exposure.	Tradition Preservation	Policies that promote cultural exchange can help Xiang Opera gain international recognition and increase cross-cultural interactions.
TBH13: Tax breaks for organizations sponsoring Xiang Opera events could attract more business involvement and support.	Government Support	Tax breaks for sponsors will encourage more organizations to support Xiang Opera events and performances.

Q5- How can modern media and other channels be utilized to increase the visibility and influence of Xiang Opera?

Response	Theme	Suggestion
LHW05: Use virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) to create immersive Xiang Opera experiences for audiences.	Artistic Innovation	Immersive technologies like VR and AR can offer an innovative way to experience Xiang Opera, attracting tech-savvy audiences.
HXX04: Produce documentary films and behind-the-scenes content to raise awareness about Xiang Opera's history and performances.	Tradition Preservation	Documentaries and behind-the-scenes content are great for educating audiences about Xiang Opera's rich cultural heritage.
LDF07: A dedicated app or website for Xiang Opera would help fans access information, performances, and updates easily.	Digitization	A dedicated website or app will serve as a hub for information, events, and digital content related to Xiang Opera.
WWB09: Host online interviews with Xiang Opera performers, directors, and researchers to provide deeper insights into the art form.	Media Promotion	Online interviews will allow audiences to connect with the people behind the performances, increasing their interest and understanding.
CYP03: Partner with influencers and content creators to showcase Xiang Opera's cultural significance and artistry.	Media Promotion	Influencers and content creators can bring fresh perspectives to Xiang Opera, engaging new audiences and sparking curiosity.





The above table was manually transcribed and synthesized by the researcher, selecting the most relevant responses from 14 interviewees under each question. The suggestions were further summarized to form a sustainable model for the development of Xiang Opera in China.

Discussion

4. Innovation and Inheritance of Xiang Opera

Previous research on Xiang Opera development has largely focused on its historical evolution, artistic characteristics, and inheritance issues (Wei et al., 2021). However, this study reveals clear innovative trends in the performance style of Changsha Xiang Opera. By incorporating modern elements such as high-tech stage design and contemporary music, Xiang Opera has maintained its traditional performance characteristics while enhancing audience interaction and appeal (for example, using modern lighting and sound effects in the performance of "The White Snake Legend"). These innovations have enriched Xiang Opera's performance forms and made it more contemporary.

Similar trends of blending tradition with innovation are observed in other Chinese opera forms, such as Cantonese Opera. Cantonese Opera, recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, has successfully incorporated modern technologies like augmented reality and live streaming to engage younger audiences (Li & Romainoor, 2024). Additionally, strategies that balance tradition with innovation, engage local communities, and leverage digital technologies are crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability of traditional Chinese operas in modern society (Chen, 2024). These approaches not only preserve the core traditions of the art form but also enhance its appeal globally. For Xiang Opera, adopting similar strategies could be crucial in maintaining its cultural significance while adapting to contemporary tastes.

5. Living Space and Challenges

The survival of Xiang Opera depends on its ability to adapt to changing socio-cultural environments. Cultural Ecology Theory offers a framework for understanding how traditional Chinese operas like Xiang Opera adapt within changing sociocultural landscapes by examining the interplay between cultural practices and their environmental, social, and economic contexts (Chen, 2024; Zeng & Maneewattana, 2024).

This study finds that Changsha Xiang Opera's performance space has expanded from traditional stages to modern theaters and even online platforms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote audience interaction was achieved through online streaming and short videos, providing new development opportunities (Wei et al., 2021). However, it simultaneously faces challenges in balancing commercial and artistic interests, as well as achieving long-term development through policy support and market operations. These issues require further in-depth exploration to ensure Xiang Opera's sustainability in modern society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the transformation of Changsha Xiang Opera's performance forms primarily reflects the deep integration of traditional and modern elements. Driven by intangible cultural heritage policies, Xiang Opera artists have explored innovative approaches, incorporating modern stage technologies, lighting effects, and creative performance techniques into traditional practices. This fusion has allowed Xiang Opera to retain its original charm while adapting to the contemporary era. The transformation is a result of multiple factors, including social and economic development, which have created a material foundation and market demand for cultural innovation. Technological advancements, such as the use of modern stage techniques and multimedia, have enriched the performance experience and brought new possibilities to Xiang Opera.

Moreover, the revitalization of Changsha Xiang Opera has successfully contributed to local cultural and economic growth. Key to this success is the support from government policies, such as the inclusion of Xiang Opera in the national intangible cultural heritage list, which has provided legal and financial backing for its protection and transmission. Cultural events like the Xiang Opera Festival and other competitions have also expanded their audience and fostered greater public engagement. These efforts have increased the visibility of Xiang Opera and reinforced its cultural significance, while also stimulating local tourism

and the creative economy. Through these initiatives, Changsha Xiang Opera has set a model for the sustainable development of regional cultural heritage, offering valuable insights for the revival of other local operas.

Recommendation

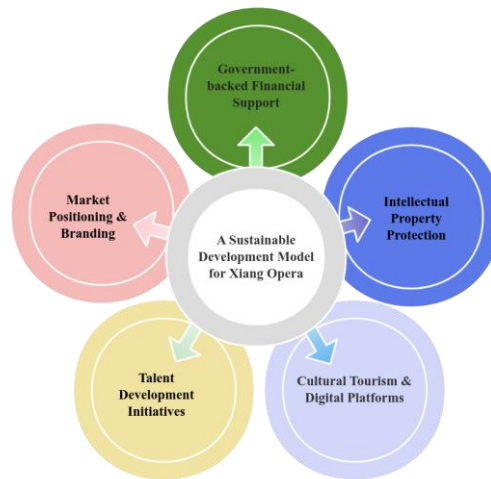


Figure 5 A Sustainable Development Model

Note: (Author, 2025)

1. Implication

To ensure the sustainable development and promotion of Changsha Xiang Opera, the government must establish specialized management institutions that incorporate cultural industry management and policy research. Drawing on these disciplines, the institutions can create effective operational frameworks, focusing on resource development, market management, and cultural policy. In particular, cultural policy research will provide crucial insights into formulating targeted protection strategies, such as fiscal subsidies, tax incentives, and talent development plans. The collaboration between these academic fields and the government can lead to comprehensive plans for branding, market expansion, and enhancing the opera's global presence. Through a systematic approach, Xiang Opera's market positioning can be solidified, and its long-term sustainability can be ensured.

Building on these foundations, a sustainable development model for Xiang Opera can be structured around key strategic initiatives. These include government-backed financial support, including subsidies for operational costs, innovation funds for new productions, and talent development initiatives. A comprehensive intellectual property protection framework should be put in place, safeguarding original works and ensuring the protection of performers' rights. Additionally, integrating Xiang Opera into broader cultural tourism and digital platforms will extend its reach and appeal, while partnerships with educational institutions can cultivate the next generation of Xiang Opera talent. Through these multi-faceted efforts, the government can foster the opera's resilience and growth in the modern era, ensuring its vibrant legacy for future generations.

2. Future Research

Future research should focus on audience preferences, expectations, and attitudes toward traditional and modern performance forms, as these factors are important indicators of the vitality of Xiang Opera. By gaining a deeper understanding of audience preferences, we can guide the selection of plays and artistic innovation, ensuring that performances meet audience needs. Additionally, studying audience expectations will clarify their demands regarding artistic quality and viewing experience, which is crucial for improving



the enjoyment and satisfaction of Xiang Opera. Exploring audience attitudes toward traditional and modern performance forms can help strike a balance between heritage and innovation, ensuring that Xiang Opera retains its traditional characteristics while evolving to meet the aesthetic needs of modern audiences. To achieve these objectives, future research can use methods such as surveys, in-depth interviews, and audience observation to collect data. Questionnaires can be designed to gauge audience preferences for various performance elements, while interviews can explore their attitudes toward innovation in Xiang Opera. Furthermore, analyzing audience feedback on social media can provide more comprehensive and diverse data, offering scientific evidence to support the future development of Xiang Opera.

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