

Inheritance and Innovation of Puxian Opera: From the Perspective of Fieldwork — A Case Study of the Living Practice of Local Opera

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Abstract: This paper takes the rural performance activities of Puxian Opera as a research sample and explores the inheritance mechanism and innovation path of intangible cultural heritage in the contemporary context through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and text analysis. The study finds that Puxian Opera has realized cultural reproduction through repertoire adaptation, technology integration, and communication model transformation, and its inheritance dilemmas are concentrated in talent shortage and market shrinkage. The study proposes the construction of an “education-industry-media” collaborative development system to provide theoretical and practical references for the sustainable development of local operas.

Keywords: Puxian Opera; inheritance of intangible cultural heritage; cultural innovation; fieldwork; local opera

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

Puxian Opera, as a unique ancient opera genre in the Puxian area of Fujian, is one of the first national intangible cultural heritage. It carries the thousand-year-old history, culture, folk customs, and values of the local area and is known as the “living fossil of the Southern Opera of the Song and Yuan Dynasties”. During its long development process, Puxian Opera has accumulated rich repertoires, unique performance forms, and profound cultural heritage, and has become an important part of the spiritual life of the Puxian people. However, under the impact of the wave of modernization, Puxian Opera is facing an unprecedented survival crisis. From the perspective of the age structure of inheritors, 79% of the existing inheritors at or above the provincial level are over 70 years old, and there is a serious shortage of young inheritors, so the inheritance chain is at risk of breaking ^[1]. In terms of the audience, over 65% of the audience is over 60 years old, and young people have very low attention and participation in Puxian Opera, so the aging problem of the audience is prominent ^[2]. The performance market is also shrinking, commercial performance opportunities are decreasing, and rural performances have become the main form of performance, but the income is meager, which is difficult to maintain the normal operation and development of the troupe ^[3].

This study takes the rural performance of Puxian Opera at a folk belief site in Putian City in 2025 as an entry point to deeply analyze the survival strategies of traditional operas in the process of modernization. Through field observation, interviews, text analysis, and other methods, it explores the successful experiences and dilemmas faced by Puxian Opera in the process of inheritance and innovation, and provides practical suggestions for its sustainable development. At the same time, it is hoped that through the study of Puxian Opera, it can provide reference for the protection and inheritance of other local opera-related intangible cultural heritage and promote the development of China's intangible cultural heritage protection cause^[4].

1.2. Research Methods and Paths

This study adopts a combination of multiple research methods to ensure the scientificity and comprehensiveness of the research.

Fieldwork method: It fully participated in the preparation, implementation, and audience interaction of the rural performance of Puxian Opera at Tongling Palace in Hanjiang District, Putian City from January 22 to 23, 2025. It went deep into the troupe's rehearsal venue, performance backstage, and among the audience to observe the actors' rehearsal, performance process, stage layout, audience reactions, etc., personally experienced the real scene of Puxian Opera performances, and obtained first-hand information^[5]. **In-depth interviews:** It interviewed 8 troupe actors, 6 musicians, and 50 audiences (including 12 audiences under 35 years old). It communicated with actors and musicians to understand their artistic experience, views on the inheritance and innovation of Puxian Opera, and the difficulties and challenges they face; it talked with the audience to collect information such as their preferences for Puxian Opera, viewing motives, and evaluations of the performance content and form, so as to understand the survival status of Puxian Opera in the contemporary era from different angles^[6].

Comparative analysis: It selected representative old and new repertoires such as "Heroic Women" and "Love in the War of Qin and Jian" to conduct a comparative analysis of their adaptation strategies in script creation, performance form, stage presentation, etc., and explore the innovation points and development trends of Puxian Opera in content production^[7].

2. Current Situation of the Living Inheritance of Puxian Opera

2.1. Construction of Cultural Identity in Ritual Performances

In folk activities, Puxian Opera is not only a form of artistic performance but also an important carrier of local people's cultural identity. Through a series of practical activities, Puxian Opera has strengthened people's cultural memory and promoted the construction of cultural identity.

Sacred performance: Before the performance, all actors will hold a solemn ceremony to worship the opera god Tian Gongyuan Shuai. Tian Gongyuan Shuai is regarded as the patron saint in the Puxian Opera industry, and this traditional ceremony has a long history. The actors are dressed in neat costumes, look solemn, offer sacrifices, burn incense, and kowtow. This ceremony not only expresses the actors' respect for the opera god but also strengthens their identity as inheritors of Puxian Opera and their industry beliefs. During the ceremony, the actors will recall the skills and teachings passed down by their ancestors, enhancing their sense of responsibility and mission for the art of Puxian Opera^[8].

Secularization transformation: In order to let more people understand the intangible cultural heritage of Puxian Opera, a "quiz on intangible cultural heritage knowledge" was added during the interval of the performance. The staff explained to the audience, covering the historical origin, development process, performance characteristics, classic repertoires, etc. of Puxian Opera. In the quiz, the audience participated actively, and the scene atmosphere was warm. In this way, the knowledge of Puxian Opera is spread to the public in an easy-to-understand form, narrowing the distance between Puxian Opera and the audience, and making the intangible cultural heritage closer to modern life^[9].

Intergenerational; interaction: During the performance, it is often seen that elderly audiences explain traditional

cultural elements such as traditional wedding customs and etiquette in the plot to teenagers. For example, during the performance of “The Love of Three Surnames”, elderly audiences will introduce the process and meaning of traditional wedding customs in the play to the children around them in detail, such as the links of proposing marriage, engagement, and welcoming the bride, so that teenagers can understand the local traditional culture while enjoying the opera. This intergenerational interaction not only inherits traditional cultural knowledge but also enhances emotional communication between generations, making Puxian Opera a cultural bond connecting people of different ages ^[10].

2.2. Multi-dimensional Presentation of Inheritance Dilemmas

Although Puxian Opera plays an important role in folk activities, it still faces many dilemmas in the inheritance process, which restrict the development of Puxian Opera from multiple dimensions.

Artist shortage: Actors under 35 years old account for only 7% of the participating troupes, and the problem of talent shortage is serious. The learning process of Puxian Opera is long and arduous, and the apprenticeship period is as long as 5-8 years. During this period, apprentices need to learn skills such as singing, recitation, body movements, and performance programs, which not only requires a lot of time and energy but also has meager income in the early stage of learning. In modern society, there are a variety of employment choices, and young people are more inclined to choose occupations with high income and quick results, resulting in fewer and fewer young people willing to engage in the Puxian Opera industry.

Economic imbalance: Rural performances are one of the main forms of Puxian Opera performances at present, but the income situation is not optimistic. According to the survey, the daily income of rural performances is about 2,000 yuan (including subsidies), which is only about one-third of the income of commercial performances. The meager income is difficult to maintain the daily operation of the troupe, including actor salaries, purchase of costumes and props, venue rental, etc. This makes the troupe invest insufficiently in equipment renewal, repertoire creation, etc., affecting the performance quality and artistic innovation.

Policy gap: The “Measures for the Subsidies for Inheritors of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Putian City” issued in 2022 aims to support the inheritance work of intangible cultural heritage inheritors, but this measure only covers 23% of folk artists. Most grass-roots artists cannot enjoy policy support and lack economic security, which to a certain extent affects their enthusiasm and initiative in inheriting Puxian Opera. At the same time, due to the limited coverage of policies, it is not conducive to the growth and stability of the Puxian Opera inheritance team.

3. Core Paths of Innovative Practice

3.1. Two-way Breakthrough in Content Production

In order to adapt to the aesthetic needs of modern audiences, Puxian Opera has made a two-way breakthrough in content production, both modernizing traditional repertoires and trying to dramatize modern themes.

Modernization of traditional repertoires: “Mazu, the Sea God” integrates holographic projection technology, which brings a shocking visual experience to the audience. In the scene of Mazu rescuing people at sea in the play, through holographic projection technology, the scene of the rough sea and Mazu showing her spirit to rescue fishermen is realistically presented, as if bringing the audience into that dangerous and sacred scene. A survey after the performance showed that 91% of the audience were satisfied with this scene. The application of this technology not only enhances the expressiveness and appeal of the stage but also makes traditional repertoires glow with new vitality, attracting more audience attention.

“Love in the War of Qin and Jian” adopts the structure of “play within a play”, skillfully embedding the century-long rise and fall of Puxian Opera into a romantic love story. While enjoying the love story of the hero and heroine, the audience can also feel the development and changes of Puxian Opera in different historical periods through the aria of “Mulian Rescues His Mother” which implies loyalty and filial piety. Finally, the harmony of Qin and Jian in the war not

only fulfills the family reunion but also reveals the secrets of the previous dynasty, echoing the theme of “keeping the original intention in the ups and downs of troubled times”. This innovative narrative way enriches the connotation of the repertoire and enables the audience to have a deeper understanding of the history and culture of Puxian Opera.

3.2. Performance Innovation Empowered by Technology

With the continuous development of science and technology, Puxian Opera has actively introduced modern technology to realize performance innovation.

Digitalization of musical instruments: “Chi Hu” is an important part of the traditional musical instruments of Puxian Opera, but due to the hearing loss of old artists, it is easy to have intonation deviation during performance. In order to solve this problem, the troupe tried to use electronic synthesizers to simulate the timbre and performance effect of “Chi Hu”. After testing, the use of electronic synthesizers has reduced the intonation error rate and ensured the music quality of the performance. At the same time, electronic synthesizers can also realize more diversified sound effects through programming, providing more possibilities for the music creation of Puxian Opera.

Deconstruction and reorganization of programs: On the basis of inheriting traditional performance programs, young actors have boldly innovated and integrated modern dance elements into the “puppet movement” program. “Puppet movement” is a unique performance program of Puxian Opera, imitating the movement characteristics of puppets. Young actors have made “puppet movement” more rhythmic and expressive by refining and integrating modern dance movements. This innovation has been recognized by old artists, who believe that although new elements have been added, the “soul of the opera” has been retained, and the core artistic characteristics of Puxian Opera have been preserved.

Digital archive construction: In order to better protect and inherit the traditional artistic resources of Puxian Opera, the troupe used 3D scanning technology to record 17 types of traditional costume patterns. These patterns contain rich cultural connotations and artistic values. Through digital processing, a traceable digital asset library has been established. This not only facilitates the production and management of costumes but also provides important materials for subsequent research, teaching, and the development of cultural and creative products^[2].

3.3. Three-dimensional Construction of Communication Matrix

In the information age, Puxian Opera has actively expanded communication channels, built a three-dimensional communication matrix, and enhanced its influence.

New media fission communication: The operation of the tiktok account “Puxian Opera Cloud Theater” has achieved remarkable results. The account regularly releases behind-the-scenes footage of rural performances, wonderful arias, etc., and the number of fans has increased by 120,000 in just 3 months. Through new media platforms, Puxian Opera has broken the geographical restrictions and attracted the attention of audiences from all over the country. Some young audiences have developed a strong interest in Puxian Opera after brushing the relevant videos and have expressed their hope to watch the performance on the spot.

The classic program “The Scholar and the Beggar” has been decomposed into 15-second short videos for communication. This fragmented communication method adapts to the fast-paced lifestyle of modern audiences. The highest playback volume of a single short video has exceeded 3 million. Through the communication of short videos, more people have learned about the unique performance programs of Puxian Opera, expanding the communication scope of Puxian Opera.

In-depth integration of culture and tourism: The local area has actively developed “intangible cultural heritage experience tourism” routes, combining Puxian Opera with the tourism industry. An opera makeup experience area has been set up in tourist attractions, with an average of 200 daily participations in opera makeup experience. During the experience, tourists can not only feel the unique makeup art of Puxian Opera but also put on costumes to take photos as souvenirs, and deeply experience the charm of Puxian Opera culture.

Putian University has set up an opera research base, providing a platform for students to get close to and learn Puxian Opera. By carrying out opera lectures, performance training, repertoire appreciation, and other activities, it has cultivated students' interest in Puxian Opera and trained potential audiences and reserve talents for the inheritance of Puxian Opera ^[2].

4. Suggestions for Sustainable Development

4.1. Reconstruction of the Education System

Education is an important foundation for the inheritance and development of Puxian Opera, and it is imperative to reconstruct the education system.

School-based curriculum development: The "Eighteen Sheds" program has been incorporated into the physical education classes of primary and secondary schools, and the AR version of "Puxian Opera Exercise" has been developed. In the form of physical education courses, students can learn the basic movements and performance programs of Puxian Opera while exercising. The AR version of "Puxian Opera Exercise" uses augmented reality technology to combine virtual Puxian Opera characters and scenes with real-life student interactions, making the courses more vivid and interesting and improving students' learning enthusiasm.

Inheritor training plan: A "young opera talent incubation fund" has been set up to provide financial support and professional training for young people who are interested in learning Puxian Opera. The fund provides living allowances to solve their living worries during the learning period. At the same time, senior actors and experts in the industry are invited for professional training, and a systematic teaching plan is formulated to cultivate young opera talents in an all-round way from basic training to repertoire rehearsal.

4.2. Optimization of Industrial Ecology

Optimize the industrial ecology to provide a solid economic guarantee for the development of Puxian Opera.

Dual-track subsidy policy: A "basic performance subsidy + box office revenue sharing" subsidy policy has been implemented for rural performances. The basic performance subsidy can ensure the basic income of the troupe during rural performances and reduce the operational pressure; the box office revenue sharing can encourage the troupe to improve the performance quality, attract more audiences to watch the performance, and achieve a win-win situation of economic and social benefits.

IP derivative development: The "Opera Rhyme Putian" series of cultural and creative products have been launched based on the digital pattern library. The first Mazu-themed costume silk scarf has become a best-seller, achieving good economic benefits. In the future, the cultural and creative product line can be further expanded to develop products such as key chains, mobile phone cases, stationery, etc., integrating Puxian Opera cultural elements into daily necessities, expanding the influence of Puxian Opera, and bringing additional income to the troupe.

4.3. Ethical Boundaries of Technical Intervention

While actively introducing technology to promote the development of Puxian Opera, it is necessary to clarify the ethical boundaries of technical intervention.

AI-assisted inheritance system: The performances of old artists are recorded through motion capture technology to generate a standardized teaching database. This system can completely preserve the exquisite skills of old artists, providing accurate references for subsequent teaching and research. At the same time, using AI technology to analyze the performance data can find the rules and characteristics in the performance, providing support for inheritance and innovation.

Digital risk prevention and control: A red line for the adaptation of traditional programs has been set up, prohibiting electronic musical instruments from completely replacing the core configuration of "Ten Tones and Eight Music".

“Ten Tones and Eight Music” is an important part of the traditional music of Puxian Opera, with unique artistic value. Although electronic musical instruments can assist the performance to a certain extent, they cannot completely replace traditional musical instruments to ensure that the traditional artistic characteristics of Puxian Opera are preserved.

5. Conclusion

As a national intangible cultural heritage, the living inheritance of Puxian Opera needs to seek a balance between “upholding the cultural gene” and “innovating the modern expression”. Through the fieldwork on the rural performance of Puxian Opera in this study, it is found that Puxian Opera has both positive practices of constructing cultural identity through ritual performances and faces dilemmas such as artist shortage, economic imbalance, and policy gap in the inheritance process. In terms of innovative practice, Puxian Opera has made beneficial explorations in content production, technology empowerment, and the construction of communication matrix, and has achieved certain results.

The study shows that the construction of a three-dimensional system of “education cultivates inheritance subjects, technology innovates expression forms, and industry expands living space” can provide an effective paradigm for the sustainable development of local opera-related intangible cultural heritage. The reconstruction of the education system can cultivate reserve talents and ensure the continuity of inheritance; technological innovation can improve the performance quality and communication effect and enhance attractiveness; industrial optimization can provide economic support and promote its market-oriented development.

However, follow-up studies still need to focus on the impact of digital technology on the ontology of opera. With the in-depth application of digital technology, how to ensure that the core artistic characteristics of Puxian Opera are not weakened and maintain its unique artistic charm is a problem that needs in-depth discussion. At the same time, the reconciliation path of intergenerational aesthetic differences also needs further research. How to meet the aesthetic needs of audiences of different ages and attract more young audiences to pay attention.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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