

Peking Opera: The Evolution Process of Media Iteration and International Dissemination

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Abstract

Peking Opera, as the culmination of Chinese opera art and a world-class intangible cultural heritage, carries the thousand-year-old cultural heritage and national spirit of China. Over the course of more than two hundred years, the evolution of media technology has formed a deep interrelationship with the inheritance, innovation and international dissemination of Peking Opera: the change of media forms has reshaped the artistic presentation paradigm and dissemination logic of Peking Opera, while Peking Opera has also adhered to its cultural core and completed its form evolution in the process of adapting to the media environment. This paper, taking technological evolution as a clue, divides the history of Peking Opera dissemination into four stages: traditional theater, mechanical replication, radio and television, and digital and intelligent new media. It systematically analyzes the differences in the artistic characteristics, dissemination mechanisms and audience structures of Peking Opera under each media form, dialectically explains the opportunities and practical predicaments brought about by media transformation, and distinguishes the acceptance characteristics of overseas Chinese audiences and foreign audiences. Based on the theory of cross-cultural communication and digitalization of intangible cultural heritage, this study examines the inheritance path and aesthetic evolution of Peking Opera culture driven by media, objectively points out the limitations of this study, and proposes development strategies from the three dimensions of civilizational mutual learning, technological empowerment, and value dissemination, providing theoretical references and practical paradigms for the tradition-preserving innovation and global digital dissemination of traditional Chinese opera.

Keywords

Media iteration; Peking Opera art; International dissemination; Digitization of Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Peking Opera was born in 1790 during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty. It combines the vocal styles of various types of operas such as Hui Opera, Han Opera, Kunqu Opera and Qin Opera, and builds a stereotyped performance system centered on "singing, recitation, acting and martial arts". It is a comprehensive stage art with aesthetic, narrative and cultural symbolic values. In

the social changes since modern times, innovations in media technology have continuously altered the context in which art exists, and Peking Opera has undergone systematic changes in its dissemination boundaries, audience circles, and forms of expression. Media and art are not a one-way carrier dependency relationship, but a dialectical relationship of mutual shaping and dynamic balance: media broaden the dissemination space for Peking Opera, and the artistic characteristics of Peking Opera in turn restrict the production and presentation form of media content.

Media iteration refers to the dynamic process in which information dissemination carriers, dissemination models, and dissemination logics upgrade in sequence along with technological revolutions. This paper divides this process into four progressive stages: physical space media, mechanical replication media, mass radio and television media, and digital and intelligent new media. Media iteration not only changes the spatiotemporal rules of information transmission, but also reconstructs the production form, reception mode and value expression of art. International communication falls within the category of cross-cultural communication, specifically referring to a series of activities such as performances, distributions, and exchanges of cultural content that cross national boundaries and are targeted at audiences of different cultures. In the context of this article, the international dissemination of Peking Opera encompasses two major audience groups: overseas Chinese communities and foreign native audiences. Due to differences in cultural backgrounds, these two groups have distinct reception logics and aesthetic orientations. This paper presents three core research questions: First, how did the media iterations at different historical stages influence the development of Peking Opera from three dimensions: communication mode, artistic form, and audience structure? Second, what communication predicaments have various media created while promoting the internationalization of Peking Opera? Third, in the context of digitalization and globalization, how can Peking Opera strike a balance between upholding tradition and innovation to achieve long-term, high-quality international dissemination? Based on these questions, this paper sorts out the coupling relationship between the evolution of media and the dissemination of Peking Opera in stages, compares the acceptance differences among different audience groups, dialectically analyzes the pros and cons of media transformation, and then explores the inheritance of the core of Peking Opera culture and the modern transformation of the aesthetic system driven by media. Finally, in combination with cutting-edge digital technology and international communication theory, targeted development paths are proposed, and the research deficiencies and future expansion directions are explained. This study aims to clarify the inherent laws of Peking Opera dissemination and provide theoretical support for the modernization transformation and global export of China's fine traditional culture.

2. Peking Opera Dissemination: The Evolution of Media Iteration

In the modern era of the transformation of material media, the flourishing of Peking Opera is closely related to the intervention of material media (Jian, 2026). The more than two-hundred-year history of Peking Opera's dissemination is essentially an evolution that relies on media technology to break through the limitations of time and space and continuously expand its cultural influence. Four key media iterations have advanced step by step, and each new medium has achieved breakthroughs in terms of dissemination scope, artistic form, and audience structure, while also giving rise to new problems. This section, based on media forms, combines communication theory with the perspective of audience stratification to analyze the development characteristics, communication effects, advantages and limitations of each stage one by one.

2.1. Traditional Theatre Media: Live Immersive Experiences and the Shaping of the Art System

The development of the commodity economy and the rise of the middle class in the late Qing Dynasty gave rise to specialized performance spaces such as tea gardens and opera houses, and physical theaters became the only medium for the dissemination of Peking Opera. The medium has three core characteristics: on-site, regional, and interactive. The communication activities are strictly confined to the physical space, and the communication mode is the immediate face-to-face interaction between the actors and the audience. The artistic expression is entirely dependent on the stage presentation of the actors' "four skills and five methods". Constrained by the minimalist stage form of "one table and two chairs", Peking Opera relied heavily on stylized performance to construct virtual time and space, which also led to the gradual formation of a rigorous and mature system of performance, singing, costumes and facial makeup.

In terms of international exchanges, traditional theaters have pushed Peking Opera to embark on early explorations of offline cross-border performances, and the characteristics of audience differentiation have begun to emerge. At the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, Peking Opera artists were the first to perform in Japan and Southeast Asia where Chinese communities were concentrated, and quickly gained recognition from Chinese audiences by relying on the context of the same cultural origin; Mei Lanfang, a Peking Opera performer, achieved great success in his 72-day visit to the United States, which could be said to be the first time that the aesthetics of Chinese opera performance caused a sensation in the Western world. This visit was a large-scale practice of Peking Opera's formal dissemination to audiences of different cultures in Europe and America (Zou, 2025). The audience in Europe and America focused more on visual symbols such as costumes, makeup and physical performance, and had limited understanding of the historical implications and traditional ethics behind the plays; overseas Chinese, on the other hand, pay more attention to the singing, the plot and

cultural resonance. Overall, at this stage, the international dissemination of Peking Opera was relatively small and it was still a niche exchange between the folk and the art world.

2.2. Mechanical Reproduction Media: Breaking Through the Limitations of Time and Space and the Static Retention of Artistic Content

Mechanical reproduction media such as wax cylinders, records and films, which were brought about by the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century, enabled the mass reproduction and permanent preservation of artworks, completely breaking the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional theaters and becoming an important turning point in the dissemination of Peking Opera. According to the sensory dimension of communication, it can be divided into two categories: auditory media represented by records and wax cylinders, which focus on the recording and dissemination of Peking Opera singing, and promote the refinement and standardization of the singing system; the audio-visual media, represented by silent and sound films, preserve the images of stage performances. In 1905, China's first film, "Dingjun Mountain", officially initiated the development of the integration of Peking Opera and film and television.

From a theoretical perspective, mechanical replication has transformed Peking Opera from a "one-off live performance art" into a "transmissible and replicable audio-visual product", greatly expanding the possibility of cross-regional dissemination. But the single audio under this medium could not present the visual aesthetics of the stage, early silent films lacked the core of the singing, and with the rough picture and sound quality of the audio-visual technology at that time, it was impossible to fully reproduce the comprehensive art form of Peking Opera. In the international arena, overseas Chinese regarded records and Peking Opera films as a means to maintain their cultural identity and express their local sentiments, and actively explored plays and singing styles; foreign audiences, on the other hand, are often driven by curiosity and view them as specimens of foreign cultures, with their perception remaining superficial. Constrained by technology and overseas distribution channels, the international dissemination of Peking Opera in the era of mechanical replication has been limited and has never achieved a large-scale dissemination effect.

2.3. Radio and Television Media: Mass Dissemination and the Steady Increase of International Influence

In the middle of the 20th century, radio and television became mainstream mass media. With the characteristics of low threshold, wide coverage and linear dissemination, they broke down the barriers to viewing and performing brought about by region, class and wealth, and promoted Peking Opera to transform from an elite theater art to a popular culture for all. Radio has built an all-domain auditory

communication network, and various opera columns, singing segments on demand, and interpretation programs by famous artists have entered thousands of households in urban and rural areas, reshaping the way people come into contact with Peking Opera. Radio has greatly extended the range of human auditory reception, continued the unique value of "sound" as the basic means of human communication, and marked that mass media have truly broken through the limitations of time and space. It established a "modern way of hearing" and shaped China's modern way of communication and the habit of using mass media (Zhou, 2025). Television, on the other hand, achieved simultaneous audio and video dissemination, fully recreating the stage audio-visual effects and further enhancing the visual narrative ability and artistic appeal of Peking Opera.

Dialectically speaking, the advantages of radio and television dissemination are very significant: low dissemination costs and a large audience base, truly achieving the popularization of Peking Opera among the general public. But its media attributes also bring new problems. The linear one-way mode deprives the audience of the right to make their own choices. To fit screen size and broadcast duration, television broadcasts often compress the stage arrangement and cut the play segments, resulting in impaired stage presence and the integrity of the work. Relying on the popularization of radio and television and the national layout of cultural exchanges with foreign countries, the international dissemination of Peking Opera has entered a steady development stage. In 1990, the English Peking Opera "Da Gua Yuan" made its debut at the Asian Games Art Festival and embarked on a tour in Southeast Asia and East Asia, becoming a landmark case of Peking Opera going global after the reform and opening up. During this period, overseas dissemination was mainly through official cultural exchanges and art festival performances, and Chinese people in Southeast Asia and East Asia remained the core audience; foreign audiences in Europe and the United States are mostly passive viewers of the event and have a relatively weak willingness to engage actively. The regular overseas performances by professional troupes have continuously enhanced Peking Opera's reputation in the international art world, gradually making it a symbolic representation of Chinese culture recognized overseas.

2.4. Digital and Intelligent New Media: Technology-Empowered Communication and Cross-Cultural Reach

In the 21st century, digital and intelligent new media such as the Internet, artificial intelligence, VR/AR, short videos and live streaming have restructured the global communication ecosystem. Unlike the one-way output model of traditional media, new media has four major characteristics: decentralization, real-time interaction, fragmentation and globalization. Overseas social platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have become the core battlefields for Peking Opera to go global. Lightweight short videos ranging from 15 seconds to 3 minutes extract visual highlights such as

facial makeup, body movements, and costumes to fit the fragmented viewing habits of overseas users; bilingual live streaming enables backstage visits and real-time interaction, bringing Chinese and foreign audiences closer together; 3D, VR/AR technology creates immersive viewing scenes, while AI technology restores classic images, intelligently pushes and innovates content, enhancing communication efficiency in all aspects. Digital and intelligent new media have opened up new tracks for the global dissemination of Peking Opera, but they have also exacerbated the problem of artistic deconstruction. Under the guidance of platform traffic, visual and entertaining content has become mainstream, while core artistic content such as dialogue and singing has been marginalized. Short videos dissect complete plays, undermining the integrity of Peking Opera's narrative system and programmatic art; fragmented content also makes it easy for foreign audiences to form one-sided and stereotyped perceptions. At the audience level, overseas Chinese prefer complete plays and classic arias, continuing traditional aesthetics; young foreign audiences abroad are keen on imitating visual symbols such as makeup and body movements in Peking Opera, creating a cross-regional cultural trend.

3. Inheritance and Transformation of Peking Opera Culture in the Context of Media Iteration

The continuous renewal of media forms not only changes the dissemination path of Peking Opera, but also promotes the systematic evolution of its cultural system in three dimensions: core adherence, aesthetic expression, and inheritance mode. For more than two hundred years, Peking Opera has been based on traditional conventional culture, completed aesthetic innovation in the process of adapting to the media environment, and improved the inheritance system with the help of modern technology, forming a development pattern of "upholding tradition as the root and innovation as the wings". The key to each classic work finding its place in the cultural heritage of history and constantly releasing enlightening words in the face of social changes lies in the fact that the work has reached the same ideological depth and spiritual height as the human heart and soul (Dai, 2025). The reason why excellent works of art can transcend the ages lies in the fact that the spiritual connotations they carry can resonate emotionally with audiences of different eras, which is also the fundamental reason why Peking Opera has endured through media changes.

3.1. Adherence to the Cultural Core: The Continuation of the System and Traditional Values

The stylized system is the artistic foundation of Peking Opera and the core identifier that distinguishes it from other stage arts, covering all dimensions of norms such as performance, singing, facial makeup, costumes, and stage, and is the crystallization of the artistic practice of artists throughout the ages. The performance paradigm of

singing, reciting, acting and fighting, which embodies traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts, ethical ideas and humanistic spirit, and the art of facial makeup symbolizing characters' personalities through colors and patterns together constitute the unique artistic language of Peking Opera. Traditional Peking Opera plays draw on historical allusions, folk tales and classical literature, and incorporate the moral principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith, as well as the spirit of family and nation and loyalty and righteousness. In a century of overseas dissemination, this value system, rooted in Chinese culture, has become a spiritual bond that transcends language and cultural barriers. During the century-long overseas dissemination of Peking Opera, overseas audiences have not only been able to understand Peking Opera, but most of them have also been very fond of Peking Opera stories. While understanding the plots, they have also developed an interest in traditional Chinese customs, beliefs, ideas, etc (Lu, 2025). No matter how the medium has evolved, Peking Opera has always adhered to the core of programmatic art and traditional spirit, which is the core prerequisite for maintaining cultural independence and achieving cross-cultural communication.

3.2. Aesthetic System Transformation: Artistic Adaptation to Modern Media

The activity of emerging media has formed a new stage of communication power, which has greatly enriched the channels and means of cultural dissemination and accelerated the speed of cultural dissemination, especially adding a touch of fresh vitality and vigor to the dissemination of traditional culture (Yi, 2024). To adapt to the dissemination logic of new media such as short videos and live streaming, Peking Opera creation has made targeted adjustments: extracting classic segments and iconic movements, simplifying complex procedures, and creating lightweight content, blending elements of pop music, modern dance, film and television narrative to create new repertoire, and optimizing stage design, costumes and makeup to enhance visual impact. This kind of innovation is not a subversion of tradition, but a modernization of aesthetics while retaining the core: on the one hand, lowering the viewing threshold to attract young local audiences; on the other hand, it breaks down the barriers of understanding in cross-cultural communication through popularized and interesting expressions. The media-driven aesthetic transformation has enabled Peking Opera to break out of the niche circle of traditional theater and complete a voice update for contemporary society and global audiences.

3.3. Upgrading of the Inheritance Model: The Integration of the Traditional Master-Apprentice System and Digital Technology

The inheritance of skills is the core guarantee for the sustainable development of Peking Opera. In the traditional context, Peking Opera passed on its skills through

the model of master-apprentice transmission and oral instruction, while professional opera schools achieved the systematization and standardization of talent cultivation, forming a three-generation succession pattern of the old, middle-aged and young, ensuring the continuation of core skills such as performance, singing and costume production in their original form. The popularization of digital intelligence technology has built a new digital path for the inheritance of Peking Opera skills and has become a powerful supplement to the traditional inheritance model. Technologies such as VR and 3D modeling can provide digital preservation and immersive teaching of classic plays, costumes and performance movements, breaking through time and space limitations. Some studies have used Maya and ZBrush tools to create 3D models of Mu Guiying's stone carvings and combined them with virtual reality animation technology to allow people to experience the charm of Mei School art in an immersive way, thereby enhancing interactivity, initiative and engagement in the dissemination of Mei School art culture and promoting the positive dissemination and development of intangible cultural heritage (Li, 2023). Another study focused on the inheritance of Peking Opera costumes and developed an immersive display system of Peking Opera costumes using virtual reality (VR) technology. Although digital technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and artificial intelligence have been widely used in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, effective digitalization should prioritize content authenticity, knowledge transmission, and emotional connection rather than simply pursuing technological novelty (Su, 2025). This supports the theory that the digitization of intangible cultural heritage must be human-centered rather than purely technology-driven (Yan, 2025). Traditional manual inheritance ensures the charm and vitality of the skills, while digital technology enables the permanent preservation and universal teaching of cultural resources. The combination of the two builds a "tradition + modernity" composite inheritance system, laying a solid foundation for the long-term development of Peking Opera.

4. Future Development Path: Global Dissemination from the Perspective of Upholding Tradition and Innovation

The previous text, based on the historical context, sorted out the intrinsic connections between media iteration and the dissemination and cultural evolution of Peking Opera, and summarized the core conclusions of existing research. Before delving into the analysis of future strategies, we first objectively present the limitations of this study: First, this paper focuses on the division of macro media stages and does not conduct detailed case studies for different countries and regions, and the analysis of regional communication differences is not deep enough; Second, there is a lack of quantitative data to support the audience behavior and communication effect of new media communication, and qualitative analysis is more

prominent; Third, there are limited discussions on practical issues such as the localization of Peking Opera overseas and the translation of cross-cultural texts. The above deficiencies can serve as the main directions for further research.

In an era of global cultural diversity and the continuous upgrading of digital technology, opportunities and challenges coexist for the inheritance and international dissemination of Peking Opera. Combining international cutting-edge theories such as cross-cultural communication and digitalization of intangible cultural heritage, this paper constructs the future development path of Peking Opera from three dimensions: civilizational mutual learning, technological empowerment, and value transmission.

4.1. Mutual Learning of Civilizations: Building a Two-Way Interactive Cross-Cultural Communication Ecosystem

An advanced form of cultural communication is mutual learning among civilizations. The global dissemination of Peking Opera should not be a one-way cultural export, but a process of equal exchange and mutual empowerment between Chinese and foreign arts. On the one hand, based on its own cultural foundation and relying on global mainstream media platforms, create stratified content tailored to the differentiated needs of overseas Chinese and foreign audiences. For Chinese audiences, focus on classic plays and in-depth cultural interpretations; for foreign audiences, focus on visual aesthetics and popular storytelling expressions to achieve precise communication. On the other hand, actively draw on the creative ideas, stage design and dissemination experience of Western operas, musicals and modern dramas, organically integrate foreign artistic elements into Peking Opera creation, and enhance the international adaptability of the work. Promote artistic integration with an open and inclusive attitude, allowing Peking Opera to enrich its forms and expand its influence through exchanges.

4.2. Technology Empowerment: Balancing the Value of Tools with the Digital Upgrade of Art

Advances in digital technology are enhancing cross-cultural communication, transforming the way culture is disseminated, and providing people with new experiences of intangible cultural heritage (ICH; Yi, 2025). Cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and VR/AR are important tools for upgrading the dissemination of Peking Opera. In the future, it is necessary to promote the application of technology throughout the entire chain of content production, dissemination and distribution, and the inheritance of skills. On the one hand, use deep learning models to optimize the production and intelligent recommendation of short video content of intangible cultural heritage, solve the problem of content homogeneity, achieve personalized recommendation and optimization of dissemination paths, and address the pain points of short video

dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (Ni, 2025). On the other hand, generative AI is used to create innovative designs of artistic elements such as facial makeup and stage design, expanding the boundaries of artistic expression. Such models can automatically generate facial-makeup images with the unique stylistic features of Peking Opera, producing new designs that retain the aesthetic and symbolic integrity of the original art form while providing opportunities for customization and style variation (Ge, 2025). At the same time, the artistic bottom line must be maintained, avoiding the negative effects of technology and media: a reasonable combination of lightweight short videos and complete full-length play content, avoiding excessive dissection of the art system; and controlling the degree of entertainment to safeguard the programmatic art and spiritual core of Peking Opera. Let technology serve art, not alienate the essence of art.

4.3. Value Transmission: Demonstrating Cultural Confidence through National Art

Peking Opera is an important carrier of China's fine traditional culture, and its international dissemination is also an important way to shape the national cultural image and demonstrate cultural confidence. It is necessary to deeply explore the contemporary values such as the sense of family and nation, the concept of harmony and the spirit of craftsmanship contained in Peking Opera plays, and combine the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind to convey China's propositions of peace, inclusiveness and win-win through artistic language. Integrating Peking Opera into the national education system and the foreign cultural diplomacy system will not only enhance the cultural identity of Chinese people around the world, but also strengthen the emotional connection between Chinese and foreign people through art as a bond. Peking Opera can thus become an important vehicle for conveying the Chinese spirit and promoting the diversity and coexistence of world cultures.

5. Conclusion

Over the course of more than two hundred years, the evolution of media has always been closely linked to the fate of Peking Opera. From live performances in traditional theaters, to the retention of mechanically replicated content, to the popularization of radio and television, and the global dissemination of digital and intelligent new media, each media upgrade has continuously expanded the boundaries of Peking Opera's dissemination and expanded its audience base; but at the same time, problems such as the weakening of the sense of presence, the disassembly of the art form, and the entertainment of the content have emerged. In the course of continuous adaptation and adjustment, Peking Opera has developed a logic of "adhering to the core and adapting to the times", and its stylized art system and traditional values have remained unshaken. At the international dissemination

level, overseas Chinese and foreign audiences, due to their different cultural backgrounds, have formed differentiated acceptance logics, which also determines that the overseas dissemination of Peking Opera must follow the path of stratified and precise dissemination. As a world-class intangible cultural heritage, the global practice of Peking Opera is not only a direct manifestation of the vitality of Chinese traditional culture, but also a vivid microcosm of exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese and foreign civilizations. Looking to the future, media technology will continue to change and global cultural exchanges will become even deeper. Peking Opera can only continue to thrive in the new era by upholding tradition while pursuing innovation: taking traditional skills and cultural values as its foundation, digital technology as its means of communication, mutual learning among civilizations as its direction, and balancing the essence of art with the rules of media, local culture with an international perspective. Let Peking Opera, this Eastern art treasure, take root on the world stage and contribute Chinese wisdom and strength to the development of global cultural diversity.

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