



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Meihu Opera Troupes in Preserving Cultural Heritage in Rural

Jin Nan¹, Puxia Li^{2*}

^{1,2} School of Art, Krirk University, Bangkok, Thailand

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 19, 2024 Accepted: Dec 16, 2024	Meihu Opera (眉户戏) is a regional form of Chinese opera that emerged in the Jin Nan district of southern Shanxi Province. It embodies the ideals, historical experiences, and linguistic diversity of rural communities. Meihu Opera, despite its extensive historical significance as a cultural cornerstone, is presently confronting significant challenges stemming from modernisation, urbanisation, and evolving cultural sensibilities. This research examines the efforts of Meihu Opera troupes to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (ICH) amidst rapid socioeconomic transformation. This study contextualises Meihu Opera within the realm of intangible cultural heritage scholarship and cultural sustainability, utilising a qualitative research design that includes semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival research. The findings indicate that Meihu Opera troupes function as both preservers of heritage and catalysts for innovation, altering narratives, utilising digital media, and collaborating with educational institutions to maintain relevance. Nonetheless, these initiatives are impeded by insufficient institutional support, financial constraints, and a declining audience, especially among younger demographics. An analytical comparison with Pu Opera reveals substantial deficiencies in state funding and policy interventions, emphasising the necessity for targeted strategies that recognise the unique attributes of grassroots cultural expressions. This study enhances theoretical discussions regarding the interplay between local cultural agency, heritage policymaking, and community-led adaptation measures by connecting the preservation problems of Meihu Opera to worldwide discourses on intangible cultural asset safeguarding.
Keywords Meihu Opera Intangible cultural heritage Traditional opera Modernity Cultural sustainability Heritage policy values	
*Corresponding Author 253103051@qq.com	

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing significance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in global cultural discussions, the conservation of regional arts and performances has emerged as a vital focus of academic research. This revitalised interest is driven by frameworks like UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2020), which underscore the significance of preserving traditions that encapsulate community identity, history, and innovation. Traditional Chinese opera forms provide valuable case studies for understanding how local communities preserve cultural continuity in the face of modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation (Baranovitch, 2019). Meihu Opera (眉户戏), a relatively under-researched regional genre from the Jin Nan district of southern Shanxi Province,

illustrates the difficulties and opportunities associated with preserving grassroots cultural expressions (You, 2015).

Meihu Opera, which began as folk melodies and oral stories, has developed over generations into a dramatic form closely connected to rural existence (Caiqin & Chuangprakhon, 2022). Its repertoire, embodying the collective memories, ethical principles, and linguistic variety of its community, functions as a cultural archive for the agricultural rhythms of the region. This art form is increasingly threatened by population changes, urban migration, and the widespread impact of globalised media (Crane, 2016; Demos, 2013). These alterations have interrupted conventional transmission channels, decreased audience figures, and lessened the art's perceived significance among younger demographics.

Notwithstanding its cultural importance, academic research has largely been on more renowned Chinese opera forms, such as Kunqu or Peking Opera, frequently overlooking grassroots traditions like Meihu Opera (Qiu & Chuangprakhon, 2023). The deficiency in the literature is particularly concerning, as lesser-known traditions can offer essential insights into how local groups manage cultural homogenisation. The adaptive measures utilised by these communities underscore the resilience and vulnerability of ICH at the grassroots level. In Meihu Opera, resilience is demonstrated by rural troupes that surmount financial limitations, an ageing performer demographic, and diminishing audience engagement through narrative innovation, digital outreach, and partnerships with educational institutions (Ford, 2019).

The difficulties encountered by Meihu Opera also overlap with wider policy discussions. Although China's cultural policy frameworks ostensibly prioritise the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), grassroots forms frequently get inconsistent institutional backing in contrast to more economically successful or state-aligned traditions. Pu Opera, a regional genre, receives advantages from established state-sponsored training programs and increased visibility, highlighting systemic discrepancies in cultural governance (Chen & Huang, 2023). These disparities illustrate a wider pattern in ICH policymaking, wherein community-led initiatives often encounter difficulties in obtaining the necessary funding and acknowledgement to maintain their practices (Eichler, 2020).

Table 1: Meihu Opera vs. Pu Opera

Aspect	Meihu Opera	Pu Opera
Audience	Declining, primarily rural and older demographics	Broader, includes urban audiences
Funding	Insufficient funding, reliance on community contributions	State-backed funding and sponsorship
Policy Support	Limited institutional support	Strong government advocacy
Digital Engagement	Emerging, driven by social media and livestreaming	Moderate, established digital presence
Training Programs	Minimal, occasional collaborations with local schools	Structured, state-sponsored training programs

This study aims to investigate the roles, problems, and adaptive tactics of Meihu Opera troupes in Jin Nan. This qualitative study examines how these troupes manage the contradictions between tradition and innovation, local agency and institutional limits. This study specifically seeks to:

Examine the cultural and social roles of Meihu Opera in rural Jin Nan.

Determine the structural and demographic obstacles impacting its sustainability.

Examine the tactics utilised by troupes to adjust to evolving socio-economic circumstances.

Examine the institutional backing for Meihu Opera in contrast to that of Pu Opera to elucidate systematic inequalities in cultural governance.

This study situates the preservation of Meihu Opera within the broader contexts of ICH scholarship and cultural sustainability, contributing to theoretical questions regarding the relationship between local agency, resource allocation, and global cultural policy. Moreover, it provides pragmatic insights into the formulation of context-sensitive strategies for preserving grassroots traditions, highlighting the necessity for egalitarian, community-oriented policies that acknowledge the inherent worth of varied cultural expressions. This research, centred on Meihu Opera, elucidates the intricacies of cultural preservation in China and participates in global discussions over the future of intangible heritage amid fast transformation.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Meihu Opera originated during the Qing Dynasty, evolving from local folk melodies, street performances, and itinerant musicians who provided entertainment at festivals and community events (Clark, 1984; Holm, 1980). The genre developed into a robust theatrical tradition by incorporating aspects of regional dialects, moral parables, and historical themes. Its strong connections to agricultural cycles and rural life rendered it a distinctive cultural manifestation of rural sensibility. In contrast to urban-centric or imperial operatic traditions, Meihu Opera flourished as a grassroots art form, renowned for its flexibility to the linguistic and cultural diversity of its local audience (Chen & Sensai, 2023). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the art form saw partial standardisation, resulting in the establishment of official troupes that broadened its influence and safeguarded its fundamental repertoire.

The communal aspect of Meihu Opera facilitated robust cultural engagement inside and between rural communities. Performances frequently functioned as events for social assemblies, during which knowledge, ideals, and artistic methodologies were exchanged. Travelling troupes were instrumental in these encounters, disseminating regional variations of the art form and cultivating a sense of cultural cohesion among adjacent villages. The exchanges extended beyond singers; local artisans crafted intricate costumes, props, and stage designs, while musicians infused many regional influences into the operatic compositions, enhancing its auditory diversity (Archer, et al., 2010).

Throughout its growth, Meihu Opera participated in interregional cultural exchange. As troupes journeyed to perform at festivals in adjacent provinces, they frequently assimilated artistic components from various operatic traditions, resulting in a hybrid form that preserved its local identity while integrating outside influences. Certain vocal styles and instrumental arrangements in Meihu Opera exemplify interactions with Pu Opera and Qin Opera, illustrating the permeable boundaries between regional genres (Chen & Sensai, 2023). These exchanges enhanced the art form, facilitating its evolution while preserving its foundations in Jin Nan's rural culture.

Educational interactions have aided in the preservation and dissemination of Meihu Opera. Local educational institutions and cultural organisations regularly engaged seasoned performers to facilitate workshops, enabling young aficionados to acquire the sophisticated intricacies of the art form. These programs enabled the transfer of knowledge between generations, guaranteeing the continuation of Meihu Opera as a vibrant tradition. Cultural festivals that celebrate traditional opera offer platforms for artists and spectators to participate in cross-cultural interactions, enhancing mutual respect and understanding of various regional arts (Wu, 2018).

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Meihu Opera encountered novel obstacles stemming from urbanisation, demographic shifts, and the swift evolution of digital media. These changes resulted in a progressive decrease in conventional rural audiences, as younger generations were increasingly impacted by global cultural trends. Nonetheless, these alterations also allowed new opportunities for cultural interchange. Digital channels enabled Meihu Opera to extend its reach

beyond conventional regional confines, presenting the art form to urban youth and global audiences. Collaborations with practitioners of various regional operas have broadened its cultural repertory, illustrating Meihu Opera's enduring capacity to adapt and flourish in a dynamic environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research builds upon the conceptual frameworks of intangible cultural heritage preservation and cultural sustainability. The UNESCO (2020) Convention designates community participation, transmission, and flexibility as essential components of effective safeguarding. Researchers have suggested that the preservation of intangible cultural heritage necessitates not only documentation but also dynamic approaches wherein communities consistently re-negotiate the interpretations and obligations associated with their traditions (Bendix et al., 2013; Hafstein, 2018; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). The situation of Meihu Opera illustrates this dynamic negotiation: to remain culturally pertinent, troupes must preserve essential artistic attributes while embracing modern narratives and frameworks.

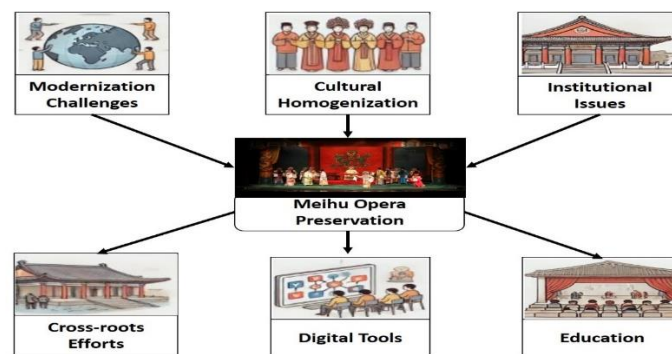


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for Preserving Meihu Opera: Challenges and Strategies

Theories of cultural sustainability (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015; Soini & Dessein, 2016) propose that intergenerational participation, community agency, and robust institutional frameworks are essential for the enduring preservation of local traditions. In contexts where state policies and funding are inconsistent, grassroots movements are sidelined, requiring bottom-up approaches that leverage local knowledge and social networks. This analytical framework offers a more refined perspective on Meihu Opera troupes' endeavours to balance authenticity with innovation, tradition with digital mediation, and collective memory with evolving cultural preferences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The intricacies of Meihu Opera's cultural context were documented through a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Fieldwork was performed in the rural communities of Jin Nan, focussing specifically on individuals who actively engage in Meihu Opera troupes. The data collection process comprised 25 comprehensive interviews with troupe leaders, performers, cultural officials, educators, and local audience members. The interviews concentrated on assessments of Meihu Opera's cultural importance, anticipated dangers, adaptation methods, and policy interactions.

The participant observations encompassed eight Meihu Opera performances and three rehearsals, facilitating comprehensive analysis of performer style, narrative structure, audience responses, and backstage dynamics. Archival study involved examining historical manuscripts, policy documents, and reports from regional cultural bureaus to contextualise contemporary issues. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was an analytical approach that involved categorising transcripts and field notes to identify repeating patterns associated with cultural significance, sustainability challenges, and adaptive processes. The triangulation of interviews, observations, and historical data enhanced

the dependability of the conclusions. An evaluative comparison of Pu Opera data from recent studies (Tuckett, 2005) establishes a foundation for analysing institutional support and strategic discrepancies. Informed permission, confidentiality, and respectful interaction with practitioners were ethical concerns implemented to ensure the research met norms of academic integrity and cultural sensitivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meihu Opera troupes serve as vital cultural stewards, safeguarding and advancing the traditions of rural Jin Nan. Performances serve as a conduit for conveying moral ideals like filial piety and social solidarity, while also acting as stores of historical memory and language variation (Zhu, 2024). These traits have enhanced its significance to older generations and strengthened its function in the building of community identity. This study demonstrates that the meanings attributed to these performances are not fixed; they are perpetually negotiated and modified by practitioners in reaction to current difficulties.

Interviews with troupe members disclosed intentional initiatives to update the repertoire by integrating contemporary themes such as environmental stewardship, migration narratives, and evolving gender roles. These thematic alterations aim to appeal to younger audiences while preserving the opera's conventional moral principles. This adaptability corresponds with the assertion of Hafstein (2018) and Adell et al. (2015) that the persistence of ICH relies on its ability to be reinterpreted and localised, hence maintaining its significance in contemporary settings.

Contrary to the belief that younger generations dismiss traditional art forms, some interviewees noted a burgeoning interest among urban-raised youth who discover Meihu Opera via web clips or livestreamed performances at cultural festivals. This exposure, referred to as a "cultural anchoring point" (Miles, 2014; Czerwonka, 2017), highlights the capacity of digital media to connect disparate generations and locations. Nonetheless, these links are intermittent and unable to replace active community engagement and strong institutional backing. Digital exposure alone cannot cultivate the profound cultural involvement essential for preserving ICH.

The viability of Meihu Opera is hindered by systemic limitations, such as insufficient finance, inadequate facilities, and a diminishing talent pool. Performing groups face challenges in sustaining clothing, musical instruments, and stage apparatus owing to inadequate financial resources. Numerous performers express dissatisfaction with the absence of organised training programs and job prospects, which intensify generational disparities and dissuade youth from considering opera as a vocation (Van Liemt, 2014). The issues are exacerbated by rural depopulation, as educated youth relocate to urban areas, thereby diminishing the traditional audience base.

Although China's cultural policy ostensibly prioritises the protection of intangible cultural heritage, actual execution demonstrates considerable inconsistencies. Cultural officials consulted for this study acknowledged that although regulations and frameworks are in place, fragmented management and insufficient budget hinder their successful implementation. These findings align with international criticisms of ICH policymaking, emphasising the disparity between policy objectives and local implementations (Maags, 2020; Van Zwanenberg, 2008). In the absence of focused, context-specific interventions, even the most well-intentioned frameworks may inadequately address the distinct requirements of grassroots cultural expressions such as Meihu Opera.

Notwithstanding these institutional impediments, Meihu Opera troupes have employed inventive techniques to acclimatise to the evolving cultural milieu. Digital channels, including social media and video-sharing websites, have become potent instruments for broadening audience engagement. Livestreamed performances at festivals enable troupes to engage with expatriate populations and urban youngsters, promoting cultural continuity. Nonetheless, as Hafstein (2018) observes, although

digital tools can improve exposure and accessibility, their enduring efficacy in fostering profound audience participation is still questionable.

Educational initiatives have demonstrated considerable potential in facilitating intergenerational transfer. Through collaboration with local schools, troupes have incorporated Meihu Opera into extracurricular programs and interactive workshops. Observations of these programs indicated enthusiastic student participation, implying that early exposure to cultural practices can foster lifelong enjoyment and engagement (Hammond, 2014). These initiatives correspond with international best practices in ICH preservation, wherein education functions as a vital instrument for promoting cultural sustainability (Meissner, 2021).

In addition to education and digital outreach, new collaborations with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), tourism agencies, and cultural groups indicate the promise of multi-stakeholder frameworks. These alliances can create alternative financial sources, enhance the promotion of Meihu Opera via marketing initiatives, and enable cultural exchange programs. These networks, however nascent, underscore the significance of decentralised, community-oriented strategies in diminishing dependence on erratic state action (DeFilippis et al., 2010).

The juxtaposition of Meihu Opera and Pu Opera reveals notable differences in institutional backing and resource distribution. Pu Opera advantages stem from established training programs, prominent performers, and enhanced government support, indicating a privileged hierarchy within the cultural industry (Jiang, 2024). This mismatch highlights the overarching systemic imbalances that marginalise obscure traditions in favour of those more compatible with governmental branding or economic viability.

These disparities are not exclusive to Meihu Opera. Global patterns reveal that ICH preservation initiatives frequently favour specific traditions to the detriment of others (Stefano, 2021). Policymakers must acknowledge the inherent worth of smaller-scale cultural forms and create customised support systems that address their unique demands and limitations.

The Meihu Opera case provides valuable insights into the intricacies of intangible cultural heritage preservation. Sustainable safeguarding necessitates more than mere recordkeeping or sporadic funding; it requires systematic actions that harmonise local agency with institutional assistance. Policymakers must implement a sophisticated strategy that encompasses fair budget allocation, sustainable career trajectories for artists, and infrastructural enhancements to preserve grassroots traditions. This corresponds with global appeals for inclusive heritage governance that empowers communities and tackles structural obstacles (Zhu, 2021; Labadi, 2022).

Future studies may investigate the influence of regional tourism policies and inter-regional collaborations on the sustainability of Meihu Opera. Comparative analyses with comparable grassroots movements in Asia, Africa, or Latin America may provide significant insights into common issues and inventive solutions. Furthermore, examining the function of international cultural collaboration in enhancing the visibility of under-represented ICH forms may create new opportunities for global discourse.

The preservation of Meihu Opera necessitates a comprehensive strategy that incorporates education, digital innovation, and community collaborations within a conducive policy environment. This tradition can persist as a vital representation of cultural identity, enhancing both China's cultural variety and global discussions on the future of intangible heritage.

CONCLUSION

The presence of Meihu Opera in rural Jin Nan illustrates the difficulty of preserving intangible cultural heritage amid social changes, technological progress, and regulatory uncertainty. Meihu Opera troupes have endeavoured to preserve their heritage while adapting to evolving cultural preferences

through the use of digital media, educational initiatives, and thematic modifications. Their endeavours, however, are constrained by structural limitations, financial deficiencies, and insufficient institutional backing. The comparative analysis, shown by Pu Opera's more favourable conditions, underscores significant structural problems in cultural policy and funding distribution.

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on ICH protection by demonstrating that grassroots traditions require not only identification but also tailored, context-specific strategies. Sustainable support for Meihu Opera must extend beyond local organisations and digital activities; it necessitates policies that recognise the inherent value of smaller cultural forms, ensure equitable financial avenues, and create enduring pathways for the development of performers. Future research may examine the interplay between national cultural policies and local heritage practices, the influence of global tourism in attracting new audiences, or cross-regional collaborations that promote intercultural exchange and innovation in the protection of intangible heritage.

This study emphasises that safeguarding intangible cultural assets involves not only documenting history but also enabling individuals to choose their cultural futures. Incorporating these forms into the school curriculum, fostering community-driven digital strategies, and establishing regulatory frameworks to rectify disparities among traditions can all facilitate the flourishing of Meihu Opera and other grassroots forms as dynamic expressions of cultural identity.

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