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The institutional reconstruction of Puzhou Opera of Shanxi Province under the impact of population floating in China

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ABSTRACT

Population floating from rural areas to cities in China has significantly disrupted the traditional environment for local performing arts. Consequently, the tradition of Puzhou Opera, which is practiced in Shanxi province, China, faces a critical turning point: this mass movement has created an institutional vacuum in the transmission of the art form, as traditional patronage and ritual support systems dissolve. In response, the art genre is relocating its ground, finding a new operational base within a university. However, this transition raises a fundamental problem: how does a rural heritage survive inside a modern academic institution? Based on seven years of ethnographic fieldwork (2017–2024) at Yuncheng University, this article tracks the specific mechanics of this institutional reconstruction. Key interventions include formalizing oral traditions into a curriculum, integrating veteran artists as co-mentors, and expanding the theater's reach through digital platforms. These steps have effectively created a structural framework that sustains the transmission for new performers. While digital platforms help reach audiences, they also threaten to compromise the authentic style of the art. Ultimately, this case offers a broader lesson in cultural sustainability: even as their rural habitat dissolves, traditional arts can persist by transplanting themselves into institutional and digital ecosystems.

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1. Introduction

Puzhou Opera (*Puju* 蒲剧) stands as one of North China's most ancient local opera forms. According to Yang (2015), the genre is distinguished by its emotive, high-pitched vocal techniques and a rigorous system of physical stunts—most notably *Lingzigong* (翎子功, hat-wing skills) and *Rankougong* (髯口功, beard skills)—which demand extraordinary technical precision. As Mackerras (1983) observes in his historical analysis, these regional theatrical traditions are not merely performances but are deeply woven into the local social fabric. For centuries, its survival hinged on a very specific ecological niche: a tight-knit web of merchant funding, village rituals, and stable farming life. This system was more than just entertainment; it was the structural cohesive force holding agricultural society together. However, today, that foundation has largely dissolved. Rapid modernization and mass migration are the main causes. As people vanish from villages and head for cities, the opera's old world is falling apart. This study examines how Puzhou Opera responds to this crisis by moving its home from rural soil into the university. It is argued that this is not just a move for survival—it is a deliberate project to build an 'artificial ecosystem' to replace what has been displaced from its traditional rural context.

China's modernization is not just about the growth of gross domestic product; it is a total overhaul of the social map. Historically, this geography was what Fei (1948/2020) called an 'earthbound' (*xiangtu*

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乡土) society—a world where Puzhou Opera stayed rooted in villages that rarely moved. However, this paradigm shifted significantly after 1978, when the *hukou* (户口) system loosened its grip. Since then, China has witnessed millions of people drifting from the countryside to the cities in a ‘population floating’ (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) wave in the whole country. As Xiang (2018) points out, this mass movement acts like a wedge, prying people away from their home soil and breaking the traditional social ties that kept local arts alive. Today, this demographic shift has resulted in ‘hollowed-out’ villages (Sun et al., 2011) populated primarily by ‘left-behind’ elderly and children. As illustrated in Figure 1 (see Section 4.1.1), this sharp increase in rural labor mobility explains the rapid dissolution of the traditional rural audience base. Expanding on this, it is crucial to recognize what Stock (2018) identifies as the non-portable nature of certain musical heritages during social upheaval. Puzhou Opera possesses an inherent ‘spatial dependency’; its existence is structurally tied to the traditional events like the village temple fair (*miao-hui* 庙会) and the physical ancestral stage. Consequently, the floating population cannot simply ‘carry’ the opera into urban environments. For Puzhou Opera, this is a structural dilemma: the music practice is still tied to the rural life and the local soil, but the people—the performers and the fans—have already moved to the city.

This demographic shift was further compounded by a simultaneous decline in the opera’s economic structure. As Qu et al. (2022) point out, the loss of rural population inevitably triggers a decline in both organizational and cultural systems. In the past, local troupes survived on a stable ritual market—supported by the community’s economic surplus—centered around temple fairs and life-cycle ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. However, as rural labor migrates and the collective economy weakens, this traditional revenue stream has significantly decreased. To provide an objective measure of this decline, Table 1 illustrates the sharp contraction of the traditional performance market. As documented by Fu (2010), the number of state-run theatrical organizations plummeted from over 3500 in 1980 to

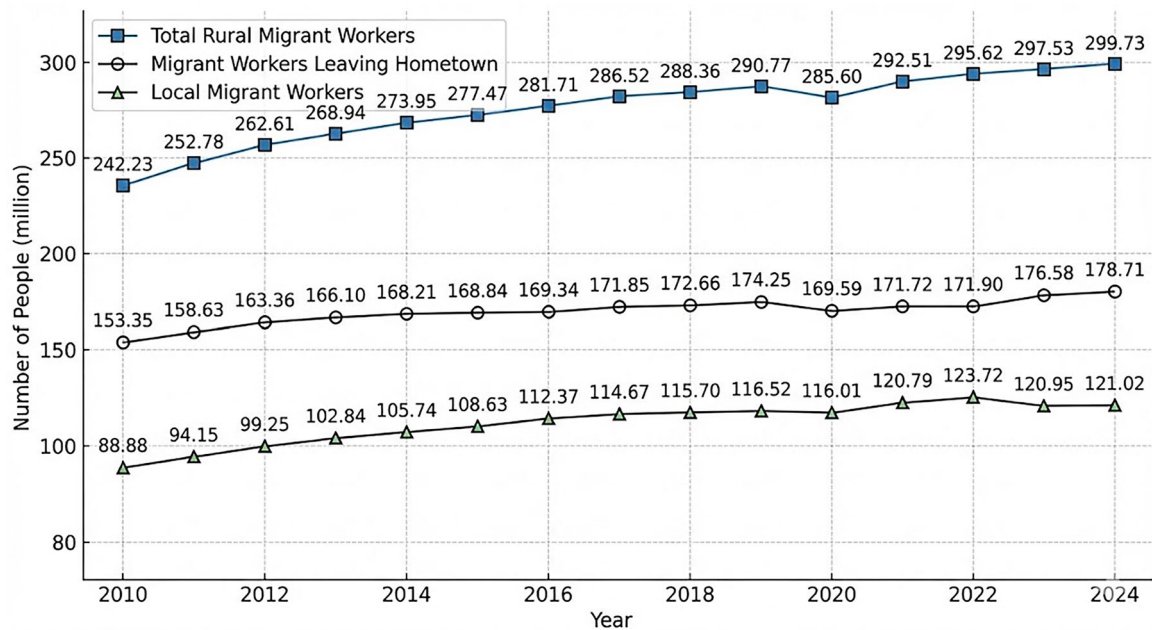


Figure 1. Rural labor mobility in China (2010–2024). Source: Compiled by the author based on the Annual Migrant Worker Monitoring Survey Reports (2010–2024) published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2015–2025).

Table 1. Indicators of traditional market decline for local operas.

Indicator	Timeframe	Data/outcome	Source
State-run theatrical organizations	1980	> 3500 troupes	Fu (2010)
State-run theatrical organizations	2003	< 2600 troupes	Fu (2010)
Average performance revenue (county level troupes)	Early 2000s	< CNY 400 per show	Chen (2009)

fewer than 2600 by 2003. Concurrently, local county-level troupes faced severe financial strain, with average performance revenues dropping significantly (Chen, 2009).

The authors' observation in the field has confirmed this decline: today, rural performances are often attended only by a dwindling group of 'white-haired elders', a stark visual marker of the rupture in inter-generational transmission. Faced with the disintegration of its traditional survival mechanisms, Puzhou Opera is forced to seek a new institutional path. Therefore, Yuncheng University (运城学院) in Shanxi province, with its centralized resources and stability, has become a controlled institutional space capable of addressing the dual crises of audience loss and economic instability. Ultimately, the overarching research question of this study is: How can a traditional local opera, having lost its natural rural habitat due to mass population floating, achieve institutional reconstruction and cultural sustainability within a modern academic setting? To explore this transformation, this study examines how this university has rebuilt its institutional support system, transformed oral traditions into academic courses, and utilized digitalization within this new framework.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Traditional musicological and historical perspectives*

Current academic discourse on Puzhou Opera remains firmly situated within of musicology and history. The seminal research of Mo (1981), alongside the expansive documentation by Chen (2009), has provided a detailed account of the genre's origins, while Yang (2015) has analyzed its vocal techniques and classic repertoire with great precision. In these narratives, however, Puzhou Opera is frequently conceptualized as a self-contained aesthetic entity—a 'text' whose internal logic is preserved even as its external social environment is treated as a mere static backdrop. While these contributions are fundamental to the authors' grasp of the art's evolution, they offer a somewhat fragmented perspective on its pragmatic endurance. Specifically, they often overlook a critical question regarding how this tradition can be sustained, given that its primary social carrier—the rural community—has undergone such a severe and irreversible decline.

2.2. *Merchant patronage system and institutional vacancy*

A significant gap exists in current scholarly understanding of the economic and institutional structures that historically sustained this art form. Earlier studies frequently categorized Puzhou Opera as a 'folk' art purely rooted in agrarian life; however, more recent historical inquiry reveals a far more intricate economic foundation: the 'Merchant Patronage System'. Zhang (2014) identifies the rise of Shanxi merchants (*Jinshang* 晋商) as the primary catalyst for the opera's trans-regional dissemination, arguing that the migration of these merchants created a network where cultural identity moved in tandem with capital. Supporting this view, Chai (2008) observes that the prosperity of local opera was structurally dependent on the economic surpluses generated by these commercial networks rather than simple subsistence farming.

This historical realignment sheds light on the precise nature of the current crisis. China's modernization did more than just relocate people to urban centers; it effectively dismantled the specific merchant-supported framework that served as the opera's economic base. Additionally, it is imperative to recognize that this economic dislocation was preceded by profound political interventions. As Clark et al. (2016) extensively documented in their analysis of the Cultural Revolution, the trajectory of Chinese performance arts has been continuously and heavily shaped by state cultural policies and ideological shifts. The transformation of regional operas is never merely an organic social process, but rather a direct consequence of institutional reconstruction.

Much of the contemporary literature on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) remains preoccupied with 'preservation' as an abstract ideal, yet it frequently misses the concrete reality of this 'institutional vacancy'. Once the patron class declined, state-led collectives weakened, and rural hubs hollowed out, the old 'master-apprentice' (*Shi-Tu* 师徒) system lost its essential organizational ground. This study moves to

address this theoretical gap by reimagining the university not just as a school, but as a vital ‘institutional container’. The authors argue that this academic pivot represents a fundamental transformation in the survival logic of Puzhou Opera, replacing a dissolved social structure with a formalized, scholarly framework.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and field site

This study utilizes a qualitative, ethnographic framework to investigate the institutional transformation of Puzhou Opera. The primary research locus is Yuncheng University (YCU) in Shanxi Province. Located in the *Hedong* (河东) region—the historical cradle of the opera—YCU stands as the only higher education institution in the area to grant specialized bachelor’s degrees in this discipline. Consequently, rather than viewing YCU as a mere school, this research treats it as a critical ‘institutional field’. This site was selected to observe the direct interaction between traditional folk practices and formal academic standardization. This single-site approach facilitates a granular examination of how a controlled academic environment is engineered within a specific regional culture.

3.2. Authors’ positionality and reflexivity

The rigor of this methodology relies heavily on the primary author’s insider positionality. The primary author, having served as a faculty member at Yuncheng University since 2002, brings over twenty-four years of professional immersion within the local cultural and educational apparatus. This longevity provided direct access to internal mechanisms—from the high-level drafting of policy files to the daily nuances of classroom pedagogy. It should be noted that while the primary author conducted the on-site fieldwork, the co-authors contributed to the theoretical framing and data analysis, ensuring a collaborative and critical approach to the empirical findings.

Similar to the embedded research logic of Hutchinson (2016), this insider positionality allowed the primary author to capture the ‘daily friction’ that remains invisible in formal official reports. For instance, the primary author documented firsthand the practical challenges of traditional masters—holders of oral wisdom—as they attempted to adapt fluid heritage into 45-minute university slots. This embeddedness permitted access to witness the critical discussions in meeting rooms where curriculum standards were debated. This perspective is indispensable for documenting the structural tensions and adjustments that a detached external observer would likely overlook. However, to mitigate the potential bias inherent in institutional affiliation, the authors implemented a reflexive protocol. Regular peer debriefing among the co-authors and continuous cross-checking against external historical records were employed to maintain analytical distance and avoid uncritical promotion of the university’s initiative.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The recruitment and core data-gathering stage was conducted between early 2021 and September 2024, a timeframe authorized by the institutional approval (Ref: JKEUPM-2020-375). Although the broader scope of the longitudinal fieldwork began as early as 2017, it was during this post-approval window (2021–2024) that the specific interviews and participant sessions analyzed here were officially executed and documented. This timeframe bridges the foundational observations with the post-approval data collection. To achieve this, the authors employed a triangulated approach as follows:

Semi-structured Interviews: In-depth dialogues were conducted by the primary author with approximately 45 key participants. This cohort included national-level inheritors—most notably *Jing Xuebian* (景雪变)—alongside institutional administrators and students. These conversations focused on the lived experience of ‘artistic migration’ from stage to classroom.

Participant Observation: Hundreds of hours were spent by the primary author in ‘dual-mentorship’ classrooms, documenting the interplay between traditional masters and academic instructors. Observations were also extended to ‘virtual stages’, where students navigated digital audience engagement.



Figure 2. An audience of the ‘gray-haired generation’ at a rural performance in Xia’ao (下凹) Village. Source: Photograph by the primary author, 2021. Note: Faces have been digitally blurred to protect individual privacy.

To ensure the evidence remained grounded and objective, interview transcripts were cross-checked against an extensive corpus of YCU’s internal archives. This included a systematic review of seven years of actual teaching syllabi, administrative policy files, and the 2023 graduate employment reports from the university’s Career Services Center. By integrating these official records with observational field notes, the authors were able to verify the often-hidden tension between the fluid nature of oral transmission and the rigid demands of academic standardization.

For data analysis, the authors utilized an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to interpret the raw narratives. Following transcription and anonymization, the data underwent a two-stage coding framework. First, initial open coding was applied to identify specific behavioral markers, such as ‘clashes in pedagogical style’ or ‘moments of institutional compromise’. Subsequently, these initial codes were aggregated and distilled into broader analytical themes, allowing the authors to map out how the new pedagogical framework actually functions on a daily basis. Consequently, this triangulation between on-the-ground observations and the formal documents provided a level of validity that external observations alone cannot achieve.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Adherence to the ethical protocols authorized under Ref: JKEUPM-2020-375 was fundamental to the study’s design. Securing the trust and permission of every participant was a prerequisite before any data entry began. To meet these standards, the authors employed a bifurcated consent strategy. When dealing with the rural cohorts in Shanxi, the conventional paper-based protocol was replaced. This was a deliberate methodological decision. In practice, in the informal sociality of a village, a physical contract functions as a barrier that raises suspicion and disrupts the natural flow of the interview. To maintain field rapport, the primary author relied on verbal permissions, which were subsequently documented in field journals—ensuring a verifiable audit trail while avoiding the formality of a written signature in an informal setting.

Additionally, the authors confirm that no minors (under the age of 18) were involved in the research sessions. Regarding visual data, written informed consent was obtained for all individuals appearing in images (e.g. Figure 2). To safeguard participant privacy, all facial features in the published photographs have been de-identified through blurring.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The crisis of traditional habitat: demographic, economic, and structural dissolution

A large amount of population floating from rural to urban areas has not only emptied the villages but also dismantled the specific socio-economic structure that sustained Puzhou Opera. This section analyzes

how population floating triggered a systemic decline within the natural habitat of this genre. Specifically, the following sections will explore this crisis from three perspectives: the demographic hollowing of the traditional audience base, the disintegration of the merchant–ritual economic foundation, and the resulting rupture of the master–apprentice transmission system. These changes fundamentally undermined the internal ecology of the troupes, thus necessitating external institutional intervention.

4.1.1. Rural hollowing: the demographic crisis

The survival of Puzhou Opera has historically relied on the stability of rural communities in southern Shanxi. In the traditional model, a village is not only a residential unit but also a space with cultural cohesion, and opera plays the role of a ritual center in this context. However, the large-scale outflow of rural populations has disrupted this foundation. Drawing on Xiang's (2018) analysis of mobility, this movement acts as a disruptor that concentrates resources in urban centers while depleting the periphery. This phenomenon is theoretically articulated as rural hollowing. According to Sun et al. (2011), this process is characterized by a dual loss: the depletion of the resident population and the spatial decay of the village center.

As Figure 1 shows, the number of rural workers leaving their hometowns has been steadily increasing. This structural shift is driven by the profound transformation of China's economic landscape. New official data shows that the total floating population rose to almost 300 million in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBS], 2024), even though it rose and fell during the pandemic. More than 178 million people work in locations that are not in their hometowns. This demographic change has accelerated the hollowing process, creating a major crisis in audience reception.

The sustained demographic shift illustrated above confirms the structural detachment defined by Fei (2016) as 'Leaving the Rural' (*Litu* 离土). In this context, Wang (2020) notes that the rural population is increasingly settling permanently in urban areas, rather than circulating back. This departure of the youth effectively severs the chain of informal cultural education. As Li and Zhao (2024) argued, this massive floating population removes the youth demographic that once constituted the future audience of the opera, leaving the traditional transmission mechanism without a successor.

During fieldwork in rural Yuncheng, this change was clearly observable. At a temple fair performance in *Xia'ao* (下凹) Village, the vibrant, multi-generational crowd of the past had disappeared. Instead, the space was occupied almost exclusively by the 'gray-haired generation'—elderly villagers left behind by the floating population.

The absence of youth in the audience visually confirms the demographic crisis of Puzhou Opera (Figure 2). A distinct scene from the fieldwork captures this decline: unlike in modern theaters where seats are provided, these elderly patrons arrived hours early, bringing their own seating and carrying their own small wooden stools to claim a spot near the stage as observed during the fieldwork in 2021. While their devotion to the opera remains untouched, their presence highlights a structural vulnerability: they are the primary remaining demographic for this physical tradition. Consequently, as the youth leave the rural for the city, Puzhou Opera loses the intergenerational link essential for its survival in the village.

4.1.2. Disintegration of the ritual economy

The demographic hollowing described above inevitably triggers a secondary, yet equally severe, economic impact. Fieldwork evidence suggests that as the rural social fabric dissolves, the historical funding mechanisms—once dependent on merchant capital and community ritual cycles—have faced a profound structural breakdown. Puzhou Opera historically relied on a specific economic structure defined by the close relationship between merchant capital and rural spending. Unlike modern arts funded by state subsidies, the opera's economy was embedded in the commercial activities of *Jinshang* and the ritual life of local communities. However, the breakdown of this dual support system is the core economic crisis the genre faces today.

The Severing of Merchant Commercial Networks. The trading routes of Shanxi merchants served as the primary channels for the dissemination of Puzhou Opera in traditional rural society. According to Wang and Dai (2023), the pattern of transmission was linked to the flow of money. For example, merchants from Shanxi carried their hometown opera to towns along the Grand Canal and built stages in

guild halls to promote performances. These merchants gave the troupes the money they needed to pay for costumes, travel, and building the stage. In exchange, the opera served as a way for people to connect and gain business status.

Consequently, this connection created a specific economic system where the prosperity of the opera was directly linked to the commercial success of the *Jinshang* group. Zhang and Niu (2024) identify that this 'merchant road' (*Shanglu* 商路) effectively became the 'opera road' (*Xilu* 戏路). This allowed Puzhou Opera to expand beyond its dialect region. However, with the modernization of China's economy and the historical decline of the traditional merchant guilds, this inter-provincial network was severed, confining the opera back to a shrinking local market.

Folk Rituals and the Loss of Traditional Support. Folk rituals and local beliefs provided the second financial foundation. Historically, performances were a vital part of repaying the gods (*Choushen* 酬神) during temple fairs. As analyzed by Hu and Qiao (2024) through historical diaries, conducting opera performances to honor local deities was a mandatory obligation for wealthy families and merchant groups. The money spent on opera was seen as a ritual investment to ensure future safety and prosperity, rather than just a transaction for leisure.

However, changes in rural society have broken this system. The modern market economy has largely replaced the traditional ritual economy. Fieldwork data shows that while rural temple fairs still exist, their function has shifted towards simple commodity exchange, and the merchant patrons are gone. The economic consequence is substantial. Chen (2009) notes that during the early 2000s, county-level troupes had far fewer chances to perform and earned less than CNY 400 per show on average. Fu (2010) also adds that the number of state-run theatrical organizations went down from more than 3500 in 1980 to less than 2600 in 2003. The genre effectively lost its economic lifeline when this natural rural system fell apart.

4.1.3. Structural failure of traditional transmission

When the ritual economy fell apart, the transmission system stopped working. Because the rural performance market contracted, a Puzhou Opera performer could not make a living. This reality caused a break in the way talent is produced, forcing the genre to switch from a market-based model to one that relies on state intervention. **Breakdown of the Vocational School Model.** Embedded inside Yuncheng University, the Yuncheng Cultural Arts School (运城市文化艺术学校) was historically the primary training ground for new performers. It operated a comprehensive training system that recruited students from the primary school level (starting from Grade 3) through to vocational secondary education. This model combined the traditional *Shi-Tu* system with formal vocational education. Nonetheless, even this formal structure could not withstand the market failure indicated in Section 3.2. Interviews conducted during the 2022 fieldwork reveal the fundamental reason for this failure: basic salaries for troupes are often insufficient to sustain a livelihood, forcing professionals to engage in *zouxue* (走穴)—an informal performance market—to survive. This unstable reality has destroyed the appeal of the profession for local youth.

Because of this, the school is having a hard time staying open because increasingly fewer students are signing up. To attract any applicants, the school has resorted to waiving all tuition, accommodation, and meal expenses. This strategy has primarily attracted a few 'left-behind children' (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) from rural areas, whose families view the school as a form of social welfare rather than a promising career path.

Therefore, the inherent educational limitations of the master-apprentice model have exacerbated the economic pressure. Szego (2002) notes that closed educational systems based on conservative imitation have a hard time changing when the cultural and economic ecosystems around them alter. In the traditional *Shi-Tu* system, knowledge was seen as a familial asset, hence constraining its dissemination. The fact that this vocational school struggles to operate shows that the whole natural process of talent reproduction has structurally failed to satisfy the needs of modern society.

State-led institutional integration: A significant, top-down restructuring of the institution was implemented to correct this systemic decline. In December 2020, the local government joined five struggling cultural groups to form the new Shanxi *Puju* Arts Research Institute (山西省蒲剧艺术院). These groups were the Yuncheng *Puju* Troupe, the Youth Troupe, the Yuncheng Arts School, *Pujingyuan* Theater, and

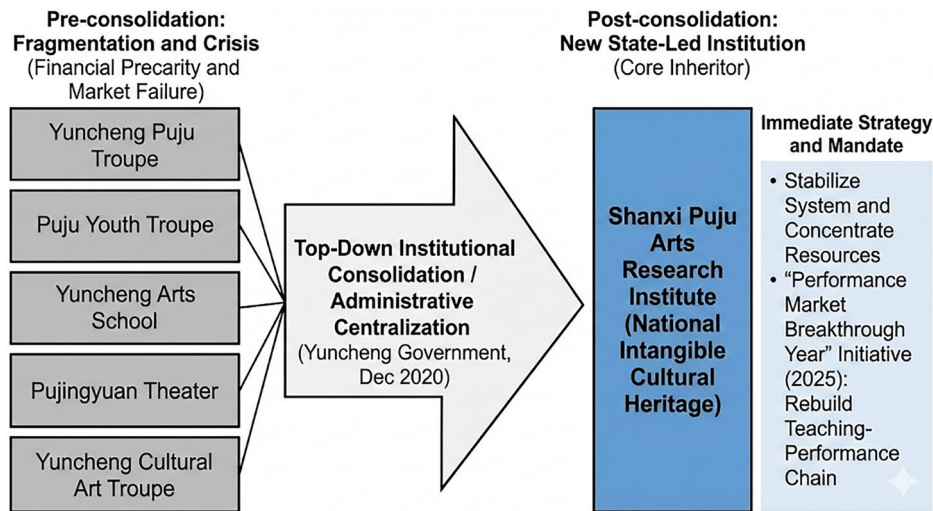


Figure 3. State-led institutional consolidation as a response to crisis (source: created by Pang Linlin based on fieldwork data).

the Yuncheng Arts Troupe (Figure 3). This state-run group became the core inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage and was given the duty of keeping the system stable during a crisis.

This integration initiative represents a key government intervention in the case of market failure. As Bo (2022) pointed out, by integrating scattered and competing units into a unified institutional framework, the government aims to concentrate resources and enhance efficiency. The urgency of this intervention is reflected in the agency's immediate strategy: After the leadership was determined in September 2024, the 'Performance Market Breakthrough Year' program was launched in 2025, aiming to comprehensively rebuild the entire chain from the teaching process to the performance process through administrative measures.

The transfer of power from artists to administrators: This reliance on state support has led to a complete transformation of the power structure. In the traditional art system, power was centered around the artists. The top performers, who were highly skilled and had great market appeal, held the most power because their artistic talents directly translated into performance opportunities and income for the troupes.

However, as the troupe lost its revenue source based on audiences and turned to relying on government subsidies, the transfer of power shifted from the main actors to the troupe administrators and officials from the government's cultural departments. These administrative roles are crucial for obtaining funds and following cultural policies. Therefore, administrative and economic factors began to override purely artistic factors. This transformation was consolidated through the establishment of national funding platforms, such as the China National Arts Fund (National Arts Fund, 2014). In this new ecosystem, authority stems from the ability to navigate the complex funding application system and launch projects that align with the country's cultural goals, rather than merely relying on artistic performance abilities on stage. Consequently, with the disintegration of the natural rural system, Puzhou Opera urgently requires a formal academic environment to re-embed its displaced talent and resources. This structural necessity paves the way for the University to intervene as a new institutional platform.

4.2. From folk to academic: mechanisms of institutional reconstruction

The modernization process is forcing traditional performing arts to gradually move away from their original community settings and enter the formal academic system. This global trend makes universities the key places for protecting and innovating intangible cultural heritage (Binbin et al., 2024; Logan & Wijesuriya, 2015). According to this model, higher education has become the main driving force for the transformation of Puzhou Opera in China (Xiang, 2017). This aligns closely with Stock's (2023) observations on new directions in Chinese music research, which highlight how institutional hybridization within

state-sponsored academies has become the definitive survival strategy for regional genres losing their historical socio-economic anchors.

Integrating the opera into Yuncheng University is therefore more than a mere preservation effort; it represents a systematic reshaping of its cultural transmission and pedagogical models. The University provides a stable institutional framework that formalizes training, introduces interdisciplinary resources (Knight et al., 2013; Millar, 2019), and redefines career pathways for performers. This academic institutionalization acts as a direct response to the crisis of audience loss (Xiang, 2018) and the disintegration of the traditional master-apprentice system (Chen, 2009; Wang & Guo, 2022).

In response to the dissolution of the natural habitat, Yuncheng University has emerged as the central agent of institutional reconstruction. By functioning as a new institutional platform, the University replaces the fragmented transmission of the past with a systematic academic structure.

4.2.1. Curriculum design as an institutional solution

This transition from oral instruction to academic education requires a fundamental adjustment to the teaching methods of Puzhou Opera. Unlike the flexible and master-centered approach of the past, the University requires a standardized teaching system to ensure that students fully master the relevant skills. This institutional solution is implemented through two key aspects: the establishment of a broad interdisciplinary framework (Section 4.1.1) and the strategic integration of digital technology into daily teaching (Section 4.1.2).

In 2017, the bachelor's degree program in Puzhou Opera was launched at Yuncheng University, marking a significant shift in transmission logic. It moved beyond the single-skill, master-apprentice model and instead constructed a cross-disciplinary system aimed at connecting traditionally separate fields. The course systematically combines traditional vocal performance and stylized movement training with modern disciplines, including Western drama theory, music theory, and media applications. This structure consciously creates a renewed academic environment where the art form can relate to other disciplines and contemporary media platforms (Schippers, 2015). This design reflects the argument that, for traditional music to survive and innovate within an academic context, interdisciplinary and multicultural curricula are a necessity.

One of the core features of this framework is the integration of students from diverse backgrounds through a series of shared courses and mandatory cross-training. This teaching strategy has been validated by its outcomes; students have received national recognition in events such as the China Campus Theatre Festival and the 'Lihua (梨花) Cup'. The success in these forums is not only an artistic achievement but also a proof of the adaptability of the new assessment system model. As universities incorporate non-academic and practical fields, they must address the tension between traditional academic indicators and performance-based achievements, and create new spaces to recognize and legitimize project-based work (Baltaru, 2019). The recognition of these student projects on the national platform indicates that they have successfully addressed this institutional challenge.

The program integrates digital technology as a core component of its pedagogical design. This is exemplified by the creation of a modular, cloud-based teaching platform, the Puzhou Opera Instructional Resource Module, which addresses practical challenges such as limited practice time and access to reliable examples. The core components of traditional training have been divided into separate digital teaching modules. This process requires close cross-departmental collaboration between performance trainers and digital media technicians. This use of a virtual learning environment is not merely a technical supplement; it functions as a platform for the collaborative construction of knowledge between students and instructors (Dillenbourg et al., 2002).

This digital infrastructure makes possible innovative teaching methods that were impossible under the traditional model. For instance, the system supports a task-based feedback design. Students can record their practice sessions, upload them for review, and compare them with master demonstrations. This forms a dual feedback loop, which enhances self-directed learning and enables faculty to provide more targeted guidance.

Figure 4 illustrates how this curriculum bridges the gap between disciplines. It uses a cross-training approach. Students with a media background do not only study theory; they are required to learn

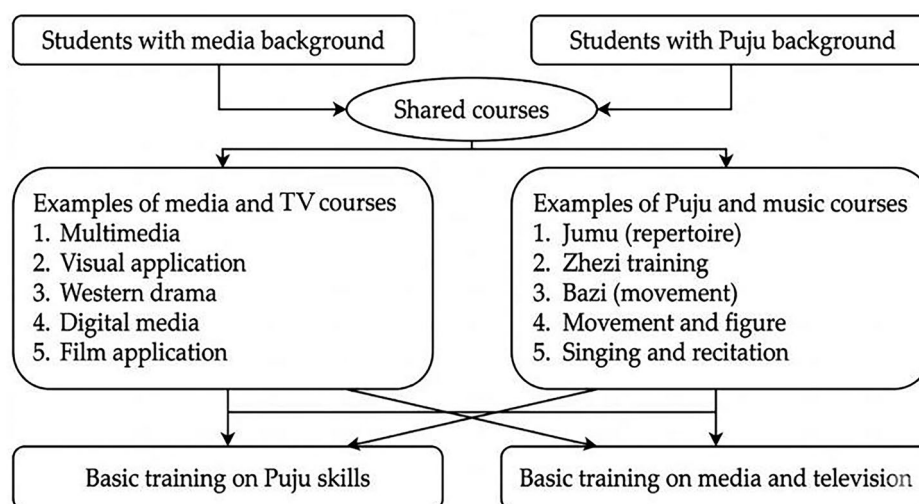


Figure 4. Curriculum model for interdisciplinary Puzhou Opera education. *Note.* The diagram illustrates the cross-training requirement where media students (left) and *Puju* students (right) engage in shared theoretical courses before swapping practical disciplines—media students are required to learn opera skills, and opera students are required to engage in media production training.

practical Puzhou Opera skills. At the same time, traditional opera students must learn digital media production. This ensures that every graduate understands both the art form and the technology used to broadcast it.

As the model demonstrates, the curriculum is intentionally designed to force interaction between students from different backgrounds. By channeling both groups through a common core and then requiring them to engage in the other's foundational training, the program structurally dismantles the silos inherent in traditional, single-track arts education. This design is the foundational mechanism through which the University fosters interdisciplinary performers capable of navigating both traditional and contemporary media landscapes, a process that relies not just on curriculum but also on the pedagogical guidance of its instructors, as is discussed next.

4.2.2. *The dual-mentorship system: a hybrid pedagogical model*

The main problem lies in how to reconcile the professional skills of the traditional apprenticeship system with the standardized, curriculum-oriented standards followed by universities. The traditional apprenticeship system is highly effective in imparting certain operational skills, but it often lacks a broader theoretical framework or a standard method for measuring outcomes. The authority of this model is based on individuals, and knowledge is imparted through direct imitation. The introduction of the academic mentorship system fundamentally alters the students' cognitive and creative processes. This transformation is one of the characteristics of the institutionalization of folk music; in the process of integrating oral transmission into formal academy-style education, it changes the performance methods and creates new forms of artistic authority (Hill, 2005).

To resolve this problem, Yuncheng University has set up a system with two mentors. In this system, each student receives an academic mentor and a traditional master to help them. This has made the teaching environment more diverse, integrating various forms of authority and knowledge systems. The university's evaluation method also reflects this balance; the final evaluation of students is usually based on two equally weighted components: the research paper assessed by the academic mentor and the performance evaluated by the master. This structure is not intended to replace one system with another, but rather aims to create a collaborative environment where the integration and inspiration between practical training and theoretical exploration can be achieved, generating new insights in the space where practice and new ideas converge (Augsburg, 2017).

One major limitation of implementing this mixed model lies in the strict requirements for academic qualifications. The university's formal regulations on faculty credentials have set up a structural barrier for most traditional masters, as the authority of these experts stems from family heritage and actual

Table 2. A comparison of traditional and academic pedagogical models.

Feature	Traditional <i>Shi-Tu</i> model (folk logic)	University academic model (institutional logic)
Teaching Focus	Lineage-based specialization (Focuses on the master's specific style).	Comprehensive stylistic training (Mandates coverage of multiple styles).
Planning	Implicit and flexible (No written plans; relies on oral intuition).	Explicit and structured (Requires annual syllabi and reviewable objectives).
Authority	Personal discretion (Curriculum determined solely by the master).	Institutional regulation (Follows formal schedules and standardized content).
Curriculum	Performance-centric (Practical skills only; no theory).	Integrated theory-practice (Combines skills with theoretical coursework).
Transmission	Oral/aural memory (Direct imitation without scores).	Literate documentation (Uses standardized musical notation).

achievements rather than formal education. This reflects a core principle of institutional theory, namely that existing organizational elements (such as recruitment standards) have a high degree of stability and are not easily changed because they are regarded as legitimate and reasonable (Zucker, 1987). This institutional rigidity makes it difficult to fully incorporate non-academic, practice-based experts into the formal faculty structure, a phenomenon that strongly resonates with Tan's (2021) critique of academic privilege and 'lane-policing'. In this context, formal credentialing inadvertently marginalizes embodied, grassroots expertise, subordinating the folk master to the administrative logic of the university.

Despite these cumbersome administrative obstacles, the program managed to implement the 'dual mentor system' as an alternative solution. This university has created a dynamic learning environment where multiple types of authority can exist by giving each student an academic advisor and a traditional master to help them. To ensure that this collaboration was structurally effective, the final assessment consisted of two equally weighted components: a research paper reviewed by academic faculty (accounting for 50%) and a live performance judged by the masters (accounting for 50%). This design enabled the university to recognize the contributions of the masters while not forcing them to follow the traditional academic model (Augsburg, 2017).

Although universities have adopted contract-based positions as a temporary solution to this structural obstacle, this approach is still not stable enough. These short-term arrangements often lack stability and corresponding compensation, making it difficult to retain highly qualified traditional masters. This highlights the long-standing problem of fully integrating their expertise into the rigid structure of higher education. The contradiction between the demand for practical knowledge and the formal requirements of the academic community is a major obstacle that must be continuously addressed during the institutionalization process. The fundamental differences between the traditional oral transmission model and the new academic program at Yuncheng University are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 illustrates a transition that is not merely procedural but epistemological. The transition from a teaching model centered around masters and focusing solely on practice to one with a formal curriculum system implies a fundamental change in the way artistic knowledge is defined and verified. In the past, knowledge was imparted and learned through direct imitation, while university curriculum systems redefined it as a structured theoretical framework and standardized skills that could be documented, evaluated, and certified. This structural transformation forms the theoretical basis of the dual-mentor system, and as an operational mechanism, it is used to address these cognitive differences.

4.2.3. From performer to graduate: redefining career pathways

The program fundamentally changed the career identities of the graduates and awarded them formal academic certificates. This certification process served as an important bridge connecting to the formal cultural sector. According to employment data (Yuncheng University Career Services Center, 2023), the vast majority of the graduates are now engaged in related fields, including local opera companies, cultural enterprises, and public institutions. This high degree of alignment with the labor market is an important manifestation of the social impact that this program has had in the regional art and cultural heritage sectors (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007).

The program's impact extends beyond job placement to include substantial creative and scholarly production. From 2017 to 2023, the joint efforts of faculty and students resulted in the production of over 30 theatrical works, nearly 20 competitive grants, and more than 50 research papers. These

Table 3. Key performance indicators of the Puzhou Opera Program (2017–2023).

Metric	Outcome	Data source
Annual student enrollment	Increased from 15 (2017) to ~35 (2023)	Yuncheng University Student Office
Graduate employment rate	> 90%	Yuncheng University Student Office
Related-field employment rate	~ 65%	Yuncheng University Student Office
Creative works produced	> 30	Yuncheng University Music Department
Competitive grants awarded	~ 20	Yuncheng University Music Department
Academic papers published	> 50	Yuncheng University Music Department

achievements indicate that this university has transformed from a mere talent training base to a center for innovation and critical inquiry. These accomplishments validate the effectiveness of this academic model as a sustainable mechanism for preserving the Puzhou Opera tradition.

The data in Table 3 supports the notion that academic institutionalization can evolve into a significant mechanism of cultural adaptation. The continuous increase in student enrollment and the high employment rate indicate that this program has successfully created a feasible career development path, directly addressing the talent succession crisis. The large number of creative works, funded projects, and academic publications demonstrate that this university has become a center for knowledge dissemination and innovation. These quantifiable achievements affirm the University's role in building a sustainable institutional model for Puzhou Opera, a process whose innovative outputs will be examined in the following section.

Despite the success in training, a structural asymmetry remains in the institutional reconstruction. While the University effectively functions as a production center for talent, it has not yet evolved into a market intermediary. Currently, there is a critical gap: the academic system lacks a professional performance agency mechanism. Unlike traditional theater troupes that have internal market connections, today's graduates are confronted with a fragmented market and lack an intermediary organization as a buffer.

Establishing a professional performance agency system has been regarded as a crucial next step to connect graduates with the market, manage their careers, and ensure the viability of the talent cultivation system created by the university (Hu, 2019; Huang, 2017). Although universities have successfully reconstructed the training environment, the market environment is still underdeveloped. Therefore, future institutional work must focus on standardizing this agency mechanism to ensure that the cultural capital cultivated on campus can be effectively transformed into professional resilience in the open market.

4.3. Extending the stage: digital innovation and audience reconnection

As mentioned earlier, the institutional framework provided by this university has become an important incubator for innovation. It enables Puzhou Opera to go beyond the traditional preservation stage and enter a dynamic revitalization process, seeking new meanings through cross-industry collaboration and digital media. This process reflects a broader convergence culture, where the logic of old media and new media collide, giving rise to new forms of cultural production and reception (Jenkins, 2006). This section analyzes the primary strategies of this innovation. It first explores the historical and contemporary relationship between this opera and screen-based virtual media. Then, it examines the phenomenon of virtual stages emerging through social media, which fundamentally alters the way audiences participate. Finally, it also explores the broader challenges and opportunities that these digital futures entail.

4.3.1. Screen media and early remediation

The adaptation of Puzhou Opera to the media of film and television was one of the earliest forms of institutional innovation, occurring earlier than its inclusion in the academic field. The 1959 version of the film *The Injustice to Dou E* marked a significant shift, transforming the originally ritualistic or community-oriented performance format into a culturally recognized product approved by the state, aimed at large-scale dissemination. This re-creation process required numerous aesthetic compromises; the narrative rhythm, film composition, and expression techniques all changed the traditional stage techniques, shifting the focus of opera from folk rituals to ideological information (Li, 2022; Zhang, 2020).

These early film and television works were top-down institutional tools that utilized modern technology to standardize and disseminate a unified cultural narrative.

This model dominated by the state imposed significant ideological constraints on artistic creation. During the opera reform movement of that era, each theater troupe was required to eliminate any content that was regarded as feudal superstition or reactionary, and to prioritize the creation of works with revolutionary and patriotic themes. The adaptation of *Puju* repertoires during this time was therefore heavily influenced by political directives, with traditional stories often being substantially altered to fit the dominant ideological style (Wang, 2023). While this institutional backing provided national visibility and resources that were previously unavailable, it also fundamentally changed the opera's relationship with its own traditions, tying its development directly to the state's political and cultural objectives.

Although early film adaptations achieved success as a systematic project, they have always faced the inherent aesthetic challenges of transforming a live art form into a broadcast medium. The unique atmosphere of the stage, the interaction between actors and the audience, and the improvisational elements specific to traditional opera are often weakened during the process of film adaptation. This creates a fundamental contradiction between stage aesthetics and the conventions of film. Chinese opera films were defined through this combination, attempting to integrate traditional performances with film artistic techniques. However, this fusion is not a simple blending; it is a complex balancing of artistic priorities.

The practical challenges faced by this adaptation are significant. Research on *Puju* films shows that bringing it to the screen requires substantial alterations to core artistic elements, including singing style, makeup, and costumes, to adapt to the realism and intimacy of the camera (Fan, 2013). The transition from a three-dimensional stage to a two-dimensional screen requires difficult choices to be made between studio sets and the use of real landscapes. The result is often a one-way, non-participatory viewing experience that records the opera but fails to reproduce its live vitality. This model was later challenged by the rise of interactive digital media.

4.3.2. The virtual stage and participatory audiences

Social media and interactive digital platforms are helping virtual stages become more popular. The changes they make are more profound than those that come from screen adaptations. These new media are different from movies and television because they are inherently interactive and capable of hosting live performances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid rise of many short-video platforms has become an important way to share intangible cultural heritage (Lin, 2021). For Puzhou Opera, platforms like Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou are no longer merely promotional tools but have become the main performance venues, especially for attracting young audiences with a digital-native background (Yang, 2023).

The observational data indicates that live streaming on these platforms functions differently from early screen adaptations. Instead of a one-way broadcast, it establishes a direct feedback loop. Since the intense stage routines prevent them from interacting with the screen mid-performance, actors review these live comments and metrics immediately after the broadcast to understand viewer preferences. More importantly, the primary goal of this digital presence extends beyond collecting small virtual tips. Getting noticed on these apps frequently opens doors outside the local troupe. Directors sometimes cast popular opera singers in television dramas and films based on their online traffic. When these actors appear on screen, curious young viewers follow them back to the live theater. A clear precedent is the recent boom in *Yueju* (越剧, Yue Opera). After a few performance clips went viral, physical venues suddenly filled with young ticket buyers, forcing troupes to add more city performances. Puzhou Opera practitioners are attempting to replicate this exact route. They treat the digital space as a stepping stone to physically refill their empty theaters.

Yuncheng University successfully promoted this trend by strategically integrating these virtual venues into its teaching system. The school actively encouraged students to become digital content creators, using their personal social media accounts to build a following and share Puzhou Opera content. Additionally, the university developed its own digital platforms, such as the 'Pujingyuan Weekend People's Theater' live streaming service, which is both a public performance venue and a practical training base. This reflects the school's conscious adoption of strategies for creating and occupying virtual cultural

spaces, and it represents the broader trend in the field of drama education of using digital tools to overcome the limitations of physical stages (Kuksa, 2009).

The introduction of virtual stages has significantly changed the way audiences participate, transforming passive observers into active participants. In this new environment, audience engagement is no longer a personal consumption behavior; instead, it is a public participation display carried out through likes, comments, and content sharing. This forms an interactive feedback loop between performers and audiences, which cannot be achieved in the traditional one-way broadcasting model of movies and television. Some media theorists have stated that audiences are no longer merely passive viewers of performances; they are now active participants in creating cultural experiences (Liu, 2020).

This new relationship conforms to the interactive model of cultural experience. This university put this principle into practice by incorporating the data of the audience (such as comments and platform analysis data) into the formal course evaluation, making the audience's reactions an integral part of the learning process. Therefore, the concept of cultural community itself has also undergone a transformation; it is no longer restricted by geographical boundaries but is instead restructured within the digital network. This transformation requires a framework of 'virtual ethnomusicology' to study how this community changes when cultural dissemination moves online (Widodo, 2025).

4.4. Opportunities and constraints in digital futures

4.4.1. The potential for new economic and dissemination models

The virtual media methods not only offer tremendous opportunities for the development of Puzhou Opera, but also provide new and more sustainable economic and dissemination models. These new models can be understood from the perspective of cultural intermediaries. In this model, cultural products are actively shaped and disseminated by intermediaries and platforms to connect them with new markets and audiences. For instance, the combination of Puzhou Opera with local tourism exists as a form of cultural intermediary, creating new performance environments and sources of income (Li, 2013). This approach enables opera to be integrated into cultural tourism products, attracting audiences who might not go to regular theaters to watch performances.

Furthermore, the project-oriented and collaborative nature of the digital environment has facilitated the formation of new artistic and economic partnerships, and these partnerships also play a role as cultural intermediaries. As an institutional hub, the university facilitates cooperation between students, faculty, local governments, and media enterprises. These collaborative projects not only create innovative artistic works but also provide students with practical experience in project management and cross-departmental collaboration. The value of such collaborative artistic projects has been proven to be significant, as they can stimulate new creative vitality and provide young artists with valuable professional skills and networking resources (Priest, 2024). This forms a virtuous cycle, where artistic innovation and professional development mutually promote each other, laying the foundation for more resilient cultural infrastructure.

4.4.2. The risk of artistic authenticity in a digital environment

These digital virtual innovation methods also pose significant challenges to the originality and authenticity protection and transmission of art. A major concern is that the shift to digital virtual media may weaken or dilute the core aesthetic features of Puzhou Opera. Some experienced actors have expressed their concerns, stating that excessive reliance on digital training and screen-based performances may undermine the naturalness of live performances and their unique body language characteristics. This reflects a broader contradiction in the process of institutionalizing traditional heritage: the goal of protecting traditional culture sometimes erases the inherent artistic chaos and spontaneity of traditional forms (Benzecry, 2014; Viainon, 2025).

This risk is particularly severe on short-video platforms, as the algorithms tend to favor short and visually stimulating content, which can provide immediate satisfaction. This puts a great deal of pressure on the performers, forcing them to focus more on the difficult movements or exaggerated expressions, while neglecting the crucial delicate vocal techniques and complex narrative elements that are essential in this art form. The formal teaching of traditional music often faces such a dilemma: on the one hand, it needs to be standardized in the curriculum; on the other hand, it needs to protect diverse and unique

performance styles (Cotter, 2013). Therefore, the long-term challenge for Puzhou Opera lies in finding a balance point, being able to utilize these new digital tools while not allowing them to dominate the aesthetic content and achieving a balance that enables wider dissemination while protecting the original artistic core of this art form.

4.5. Limitations of the study

All ethnographic data in this study was collected exclusively at Yuncheng University by the primary author. While observing a single institution made it possible to track everyday pedagogical conflicts in real time, the conclusions are inevitably bound to this specific regional context. Different provinces offer varying degrees of financial and administrative support to local theaters. Consequently, the institutional survival mechanisms seen in southern Shanxi cannot simply be generalized to all endangered Chinese operas. Beyond geographic limits, the timeline of digital adoption presents another constraint. Although the fieldwork spanned seven years, the use of short-video platforms for Puzhou Opera is still a very recent phenomenon. The current data cannot prove if these virtual audiences will eventually buy tickets or sustain the art form in the long run. Future field studies will need to track these digital platforms over a longer period to see if the engagement lasts.

Finally, the institutional model itself carries an inherent limitation regarding artistic authenticity. While the university provides a necessary survival framework, the structural tension between academic standardization and the raw, spontaneous aesthetics of grassroots performance remains largely unresolved, presenting a continuous challenge for heritage preservation.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the institutionalized development of Puzhou Opera by Yuncheng University, arguing that this academic integration is a direct response to the severe crisis caused by the large-scale population floating of rural populations to cities in China. Because the art form historically possessed a strict 'spatial dependency' tied to rural temple stages, it could not organically migrate alongside the displaced populations. Therefore, this research positions this process as not merely a preservation act, but rather a manifestation of traditional art forms seeking new survival and renewal methods through institutional reconstruction and cultural resilience (Parolin, 2024). The analysis traces the transformation of this opera genre from its traditional rural environment to the new institutionalized platform, demonstrating how academic institutionalization has become a key strategy for planning its future in a modern society.

The ethnographic evidence first elaborated on the disintegration of the traditional ritual ecosystem of Puzhou Opera, highlighting three main impacts brought about by population mobility. First, it led to the loss of young audiences and the shrinking of the rural performance market. Second, the contraction of this market triggered the disruption of the master-apprentice transmission model, causing a crisis in talent transmission. Third, it changed the internal power structure within the opera community, shifting power from artists to managers and ultimately to state-funded project platforms. In response to this systemic crisis, the university became a new institutional platform. The analysis shows how its interdisciplinary courses, the mixed dual-mentor system, and the redefinition of career paths have effectively stabilized this art form and cultivated a new generation of performers.

Beyond physical curriculum design, this study explores the innovative approaches brought about by the foundation of this new system. This includes adapting Puzhou Opera into a performance format suitable for screen presentation. Of equal significance is the rise of the virtual stage on social apps. Data indicates a shift in the audience's role: they are no longer just watching but actively building the culture. However, a tension exists here. Broadening the audience base brings a specific danger—it threatens to compromise the authentic aesthetic standards that define the art form.

In conclusion, rather than uncritically promoting a universal blueprint, this study aligns with Stock's (2023) discussion on the hybrid sustainability of regional music, this study evaluates the complex challenges of how traditional arts can survive the squeeze of urbanization (United Nations, 2015). The Puzhou Opera case demonstrates a clear path: by combining university resources with digital expansion, the art form can build a controlled institutional space to replace the natural one displaced by rural decline. In this capacity, higher

education institutions emerge as vital cultural intermediaries, successfully bridging the gap between traditional folk apprenticeship and formalized academic training. This institutional expansion serves as a critical buffer. As the traditional village venues decline, the ecosystem survives by taking root within university walls and digital networks. The question now is one of longevity. Future scholarship must examine the long-term sustainability and durability of this model, particularly regarding the creation of professional brokerage systems to link graduates with the market (Hu, 2019; Huang, 2017). Additionally, long-term observation is required to understand how screen-based interaction reshapes artistic practice. Addressing these issues will provide a clearer map for the trajectory of traditional arts in a rapidly changing China.

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Artificial intelligence statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Google Gemini for the purpose of language polishing, grammatical correction, and reformatting references to meet APA 7th edition guidelines. Following the use of this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Linlin Pang**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft. Thank you very much for your time and kind assistance; **Fung Chiat Loo**: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Ow Wei Chow**: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

The research project 'Innovative Process and Institutionalization in Puzhou Opera' received formal ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) on 23 January 2021 (Reference No.: JKEUPM-2020-375).

Informed consent

Consent to Participate: The overall research project received formal ethical approval from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. For rural participants, the consent was administered verbally to maintain ethnographic rapport and respect cultural sensitivities. For future reference, each participant's verbal consent was formally recorded both at the beginning of the interview audio files and verbatim in the primary author's field notes prior to the commencement of data collection. No minors were involved in this research.

Consent to Publish: Written informed consent was obtained from all individuals appearing in the images (Figure 2) for the publication of these details in an academic journal. All efforts have been taken to de-identify individuals through facial blurring to protect their privacy.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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