

Literacy Preservation and Transmission of Taowan Xia in Sizhou Opera, China

Jiaojiao He*, Wenzhe Liu, and Khomkrich Karin

College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Corresponding author: Jiaojiao He, E-mail: jiaojiaohe.msu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transmission and preservation methods of Sizhou Opera, a traditional folk art from Anhui Province, via the committed efforts of national intangible cultural heritage inheritor Taowan Xia. We used ethnomusicological theory and qualitative fieldwork methods, including interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation, to investigate how Taowan Xia incorporates Sizhou Opera into various cultural contexts, including schools, communities, families, and festivals. The findings indicate that her work adopts a multifaceted approach: integrating Sizhou Opera into educational curricula, utilizing digital platforms for outreach, preserving oral traditions through master-apprentice and familial instruction, and incorporating performances into social and ritual events. To present a complete strategy for preserving intangible cultural assets and give significant insights into the sustained resuscitation of regional operatic traditions within contemporary Chinese culture.

Key words: Sizhou Opera, Taowan Xia, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Transmission, Opera Education, Folk Opera Preservation

INTRODUCTION

Sizhou Opera is one of the four principal traditional operatic genres in Anhui Province, China, with a history exceeding two centuries. Distinguished by its profound cultural origins, intricate vocal methods, and strong connections to local folk traditions, it was formally designated as a national intangible cultural treasure in 2006. Notwithstanding its historical and artistic significance, Sizhou Opera presently has substantial issues regarding inheritance, performance sustainability, and generational continuity. These issues are particularly urgent in light of fast urbanization, the decline of rural cultural environments, and a decreasing interest among younger demographics (Fuquan & Karin, 2021; Jiang et al., 2020; Haiyan, 2019).

In this context, individual artists have been crucial in preserving and conveying cultural history. Taowan Xia, born in 1963 in the Yongqiao District of Suzhou City, is a significant player in the preservation and promotion of Sizhou Opera. Taowan Xia, acknowledged as a national intangible cultural heritage inheritor, has significantly contributed to the performance, instruction, and promotion of the Sizhou Opera. Her lifetime commitment, expertise in vocal techniques and character interpretations, and participation in cultural events represent the ongoing transfer of classical operatic knowledge and talents (Feng, 2025). Her contributions extend beyond performance; they include a pedagogical framework that preserves the oral-aural legacy while adapting to modern educational and cultural contexts (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023; Yang & Theerapan, 2024). This research seeks to investigate the methods by which

operatic literacy—encompassing repertory knowledge and performative subtleties—is conserved and conveyed through Taowan Xia's contributions. It emphasizes the significance of individual agency in cultural sustainability by examining instructional techniques, repertoire selection, and creative philosophy (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024; Wu et al., 2024). The study will examine the artistic attributes of Sizhou Opera, its voice traits, and the contextual importance of its performance traditions.

This study aims to elucidate how classical operatic knowledge is preserved in contemporary settings through anthropological observation, interviews, and performance analysis. This provides insights into the wider conversation on the preservation of intangible cultural assets, especially with Chinese local operas. This work adds to the recording and promotion of Sizhou Opera while exemplifying the intersection of individual mastery and cultural transmission in preserving endangered creative traditions in modern China.

Research Objective

- To study literacy preservation and transmission of Taowan Xia in Sizhou opera, China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

General Knowledge of Sizhou Opera

Sizhou Opera, one of the four major operatic traditions of Anhui Province, is a vibrant local art form with over

200 years of history. Originating from northern Jiangsu's folk tunes like "Lihu Opera" and "Taiping Song," it evolved through improvisation and regional influences into a unique style that blends the boldness of northern opera with the softness of southern tones. Officially recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, Sizhou Opera features colorful singing styles, free-form compositions, and a strong connection to northern Anhui's rural culture. Its repertoire includes over a hundred traditional and adapted plays, with distinctive vocal techniques such as Yi Xin tone and coloratura. The performance style incorporates folk dance forms and is characterized by lively rhythms, dramatic footwork, and expressive body language (Guo, 2023; Huang & Song, 2022).

Historically, Sizhou Opera developed through oral transmission without written scores, and its early performances were spontaneous and community-driven. With the institutionalization of opera troupes in the mid-20th century, the opera gained structure, modern repertoire, and formalized training. Musically, it employs a wide array of traditional Chinese instruments, evolving from simple setups like the handmade willow leaf pipa to fuller ensembles, including Liuqin, Erhu, and percussion. The opera is marked by vivid dialectal expression, improvisational singing, and dynamic stage presence, all of which reflect the cultural essence and life of the Huaibei people. Despite facing challenges in modern times, Sizhou Opera remains a vital representation of Anhui's folk traditions and artistic spirit (Law & Ho, 2011; Li et al., 2022).

Sizhou Opera, a historically rich form of Anhui's local opera, currently faces multiple challenges threatening its preservation and development. The shrinking performance market, aging audience base, and diminished transmission of traditional practices have led to declining vitality. Modern entertainment and aesthetic shifts have marginalized Sizhou Opera, with younger generations showing limited interest. Traditional transmission, once reliant on community-based oral methods and family lineage, is hindered by a lack of innovative talent, outdated management systems, and insufficient resources. Although the opera has undergone stages of growth, particularly after governmental recognition and support post-2006, problems such as aging transmitters, outmoded repertoires, and underdeveloped stage procedures remain pressing. Moreover, losing original performance styles and unique body techniques once integral to Sizhou Opera, such as "flower field" dances and detailed footwork, marks a significant cultural gap in its current practice (Shi & Nicolas, 2023; Tang, 2021).

General Knowledge of the Singing Techniques of Sizhou Opera

The vocal skills of Sizhou Opera are characterized by expressive liberty, extensive vocal range, and dynamic emotional expression. Female vocalists frequently employ a potent and elevated vocal technique termed the "pull tune," necessitating exceptional vocal control and integrating authentic voice with falsetto to attain clarity, brilliance, and dramatic intensity. The vocalization often originates from the posterior nasal

cavity and is regulated via the oral cavity, resulting in robust tone depth and resonance. This technique allows the actors to convey the opera's exuberant and vivacious essence effectively. Moreover, substantial interval leaps—typically four to eight degrees—constitute a significant melodic characteristic, producing pronounced pitch contrasts and amplifying the opera's emotional intensity. Treble passages are commonly employed and need robust vocal projection, particularly in demonstrating the "Yangqiang" singing technique (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Huang & Thotham, 2024).

The vocal performance of Sizhou Opera highlights rhythmic flexibility and tone diversity. The "Yixin key" style enables performers to modify pitch, pace, and dynamic expression at will, according to the character's emotions, narrative requirements, and individual vocal capabilities. Rapid segments such as "Lianbanqi" compel vocalists to uphold clarity and accuracy among stringent rhythms and syncopated patterns, augmenting performances' vibrancy and effectiveness. The "Leide key," another hallmark approach, showcases an extensive tonal range, diverse melodic shapes, and intricate rhythmic components, including dotted and syncopated notes. Grace notes like glissando and trill enhance the expressiveness of performances. Combining authentic and falsetto vocal techniques and significant variations in rhythm and melody makes Sizhou Opera's vocal artistry both technically challenging and artistically captivating (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Zhang, 2024; Gong et al., 2024).

Research Theory

This study uses ethnomusicology theory to examine the preservation, transmission, and evolution of the Sizhou Opera within its cultural and social frameworks. This research investigates how Sizhou Opera embodies regional identity and adapts to modernization via an analysis of its musical structures, voice techniques, oral traditions, and performance practices. The research employs fieldwork methods, including interviews, participatory observation, and performance analysis, to examine the roles of transmitters, audience engagement, and the effects of cultural policies, establishing a framework for the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage in modern society (Jones, 2003; Nettl, 2005; Wang, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology grounded on ethnomusicological techniques to examine the transmission and preservation of Sizhou Opera as exemplified by the efforts of Taowan Xia. The study incorporates fieldwork, interviews, and performance analysis to provide a comprehensive knowledge of the transmission, adaptation, and preservation of Sizhou Opera in modern culture.

Field Research and Participant Observation

Fieldwork was performed in Suzhou, Anhui Province, where Sizhou Opera persists as a vibrant cultural institution. We conducted participant observation by visiting performances,

seminars, and training sessions facilitated by Taowan Xia. This approach offered insight into pedagogical procedures, voice methodologies, and community involvement in Sizhou Opera.

Comprehensive Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were performed with Taowan Xia, alongside students, community members, and Sizhou Opera specialists. The interviews concentrated on transmission techniques, preservation problems, and prospective innovation tactics. Responses were recorded and evaluated to discern reoccurring themes and salient findings.

Performance and Musical Examination

The research further encompasses a musical and performance analysis of specific Sizhou Opera compositions. This entailed analyzing voice approaches, melodic frameworks, rhythmic motifs, and stage choreography. Comparisons were conducted between conventional performances and current versions to evaluate the influence of contemporary elements on the opera's style and presentation.

Examination of Archival and Digital Media

Relevant historical documents, digital recordings, and social media information were evaluated to comprehend the documentation and promotion of Sizhou Opera. The examination of Taowan Xia's utilization of online platforms like Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou aimed to evaluate the influence of digital media on cultural transmission and audience involvement. By integrating these methods, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of Taowan Xia's preservation strategies and offers insights into how Sizhou Opera can be sustained in the modern era.

RESULTS

Entering the Campus

Ms. Taowan Xia emphasized that with the rapid advancement of science, technology, and media, newer forms of artistic expression have increasingly dominated the entertainment landscape, pushing traditional arts like Sizhou Opera to the margins of everyday life. To address this challenge and enhance the opera's relevance in modern society, she has introduced Sizhou Opera into educational settings. In primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, she has established Sizhou Opera interest groups and associations, developed specialized teaching materials, and systematically taught foundational knowledge, vocal techniques, and performance skills. Regular campus performances are organized to spark student interest. Furthermore, by collaborating with professional opera academies, Ms. Taowan Xia has helped establish targeted training programs and professional courses to ensure the formal education and systematic cultivation of future opera talent (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Teacher taowan xia introducing sizhou opera to the campus –

Source: Jiaojiao he, 2024 fieldwork

Reaching the Community

Ms. Tao further shared that since Sizhou Opera's successful inclusion in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2006, efforts to promote it have grown. Yet, the audience base remains limited in today's diverse artistic landscape. To combat this, she regularly organizes performances in communities, rural areas, and urban theaters under the initiative "Sizhou Opera into Ten Thousand Homes." These activities aim to increase exposure and accessibility, allowing wider audiences to enjoy and appreciate the art form. In addition, she utilizes modern media platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou to share performance highlights, tutorials, and short educational videos to engage younger audiences and increase digital visibility (Figure 2).

Master-Apprentice Transmission

Ms. Tao noted that the transmission of Sizhou Opera follows two traditional paths: the master-apprentice model and family inheritance, both common in preserving Chinese folk operas. She mentors students through hands-on instruction, tailored teaching approaches, and long-term training plans. Rituals such as teacher-apprentice ceremonies are held to foster a sense of duty and cultural continuity. Additionally, she works to document the oral histories of veteran artists, preserving their techniques and experiences in textual and visual formats. These artists are also supported through initiatives that ensure their well-being and promote their ongoing involvement as cultural mentors (Figure 3).

Cultivating the Younger Generation

To secure the future of Sizhou Opera, Ms. Tao organizes specialized training courses for teenagers interested in the performing arts. These programs aim to foster early appreciation and skill development in Sizhou Opera. Moreover, she encourages innovation by integrating modern music elements—such as pop accompaniment—and updated stage techniques to enhance the opera's expressive appeal and



Figure 2. Taowan xia engages with the community through performances

Source: Jiaojiao he, 2024 fieldwork



Figure 3. Taowan xia mentoring students in the art of sizhou opera

Source: Jiaojiao he, 2024 fieldwork

resonance with contemporary youth. This strategy broadens its relevance and bridges the gap between tradition and modern aesthetic sensibilities (Figure 4).

Preserving the Original Ecology of Sizhou Opera

In recent years, the economic demands of the cultural market have occasionally resulted in the distortion or shallow modification of Sizhou Opera, compromising its originality. Taowan Xia underscores the necessity for ecological conservation techniques that protect the opera's unique regional characteristics, established melodic structures, and improvisational lyrical customs. She asserts that Sizhou Opera is predominantly conveyed verbally, with certain pieces devoid of written scores and modified spontaneously based on the context and environment. To mitigate the risk of cultural erosion, contemporary technology like audio and video recording has to be extensively employed to capture performances, encompassing vocal delivery, facial expressions, gestures, and contextual elements. Lyrics and backstories must be documented, translated, and annotated in writing to enhance future research and distribution. Taowan Xia advocates for



Figure 4. Taowan xia training young performers

Source: Jiaojiao he, 2024 fieldwork

governmental assistance for proficient artists, establishing digital repositories, and utilizing online platforms and media channels—such as cinema, television, and documentaries—to enhance the art form's visibility and broaden public accessibility.

Familial Preservation of Sizhou Opera

Taowan Xia fervently advocates the family's role in cultural preservation. She characterizes the family as the "primary institution" where affection for Sizhou Opera may be cultivated from a young age. Field interviews indicate that several artists and experts assert that a family's cultural milieu significantly impacts children's involvement with traditional opera. Parents are urged to familiarize their children with Sizhou Opera using consistent auditory exposure, engagement in local performances, and collaborative singing activities throughout everyday life and celebrations. Children may establish emotional and cultural connections with the opera by including songs with familial narratives and heritage. Engaging in activities like preserving family songbooks, establishing musical traditions, and documenting family performances can enhance cultural transmission. Parents should exemplify excitement for Sizhou Opera and motivate their children to study traditional instruments or engage in community activities. This method enhances familial connections while fostering cultural accountability in the youth.

Preservation via Social and Cultural Endeavors

Taowan Xia emphasizes integrating Sizhou Opera into public life and communal traditions outside the familial context. During fieldwork, she articulated that performing Sizhou Opera at religious rituals and social occasions has traditionally imbued the art form with spiritual meaning and educational merit. Diverse social circumstances may occasionally modify performance content, although festival celebrations provide a robust platform for organized and significant transmission. Incorporating Sizhou Opera into traditional celebrations such as the Spring, Dragon Boat, and Mid-Autumn

Festival enhances its cultural significance and fosters community involvement. Exhibitions like temple fairs, parades, and theatrical presentations can promote regional traits and garner extensive involvement. Conducting themed competitions, engaging talented performers for performances, and arranging cultural seminars invigorate the opera's visibility in public life. Customizing performances to align with festival themes—such as operas centered on reunion during the Mid-Autumn Festival—enhances the experience's relevance and accessibility. Multimedia marketing, encompassing short films, music CDs, and innovative cultural items (such as festival cards or apparel), facilitates audience expansion and aids in long-term preservation.

DISCUSSION

The preservation and transmission of Sizhou Opera, as demonstrated by Taowan Xia's work, emphasize the complicated confluence of tradition and modernity in protecting intangible cultural assets. Taowan Xia's comprehensive approach—based on community participation, formal education, and digital innovation—shows that a living tradition like Sizhou Opera requires cultural faithfulness and flexibility to current socioeconomic conditions. Her attempts to include Sizhou Opera in school curricula, organize community performances, and nurture emerging talent demonstrate a dynamic strategy beyond passive conservation (Wang & Chuangprakhon, 2023; Bao, 2010). It exemplifies what ethnomusicologists call "living transmission," in which cultural information is integrated into daily practice, education, and social interaction.

One of the study's key findings is the relevance of intergenerational transmission. Taowan Xia's emphasis on family-based education, master-apprentice mentorship, and youth training programs suggests that legacy sustainability relies heavily on the capacity to foster profound emotional and cultural ties at an early age. This method is consistent with ethnomusicological ideas that emphasize the importance of oral tradition and familial situations in preserving folk and traditional music systems (Chang et al., 2024; Li & Choatchamrat, 2024). Furthermore, Taowan Xia's preservation efforts are participatory, with students and community members actively engaging in performances, reinforcing a feeling of ownership and group identity, which is critical for the survival of any folk heritage.

Taowan Xia's preservation plan has become even more reliant on modern technologies, such as short-form movies, live streaming, and digital archives. These platforms enable more diffusion, documentation, and visibility, especially among younger audiences that consume cultural information predominantly through digital channels. While there are still worries about the over-commercialization and aesthetic degradation of traditional opera due to modern demands, Tao's example demonstrates that digital technologies may enhance rather than undermine cultural authenticity when utilized intelligently (Wang, 2023; Yang & Chonpairot, 2024). Her digital outreach initiatives align with worldwide trends in intangible heritage preservation, where accessibility and flexibility are critical to remaining relevant in an ever-changing media ecosystem.

Finally, the report highlights Sizhou Opera's ongoing issues, which include an aging performer base, inadequate finance, insufficient new repertoire production, and a lack of institutional backing. While Tao's contributions are an excellent paradigm for grassroots preservation, more significant structural adjustments are necessary to assure long-term viability (Hu, 2022; Feng et al., 2016). These include regulatory support, curricular integration in arts education, more significant investment in performance infrastructure, and interdisciplinary engagement with researchers, artists, and cultural organizations.

CONCLUSION

Taowan Xia's efforts to preserve and transmit Sizhou Opera emphasize the need to blend traditional and modern ways. Through education, community engagement, family involvement, and internet platforms, she has developed a dynamic paradigm for preserving this indigenous art form. Despite constraints such as elderly performers and restricted audiences, her efforts demonstrate that cultural heritage can endure when authentic and adapted to modern situations. To preserve Sizhou Opera's future, ongoing support from communities, institutions, and politicians is required.

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