

Transmission of Shangqiu Siping Diao through Chinese Opera Education for Cultural Sustainability

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Abstract

In the face of rapid modernization and declining public engagement, Shangqiu Siping Diao—an endangered regional opera tradition in Henan Province, China—has experienced critical challenges to its continuity. This study aims to investigate the transmission of Shangqiu Siping Diao through Chinese opera education in order to promote cultural sustainability. Conducted in Liangyuan District, Shangqiu City, where the Siping Diao Theatre Troupe and Art Research Centre are located, the research employed a qualitative methodology grounded in ethnomusicology and arts education. Seven informants were purposively selected, including three key informants who are nationally recognized opera masters and four general informants who are young students or performers engaged in formal training. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis, then analyzed thematically to identify educational strategies and their cultural impact. Results reveal a three-phase developmental trajectory: promotion (2006–2011), innovation (2012–2021), and stabilization (2022–2025), demonstrating how educational integration has revitalized this art form. Initiatives such as school-based opera creation, incorporation of representative repertoires like *Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai*, and community outreach performances have enabled generational transmission and fostered cultural identity among youth. The study suggests that combining traditional pedagogy with digital media and public engagement strengthens cultural sustainability. This model may be applied to other regional operas facing similar threats.

Keywords: Shangqiu Siping Diao, Chinese opera education, cultural sustainability, traditional music transmission, Henan Province

1. Introduction

Shangqiu Siping Diao, a unique traditional opera form in China, faces threats from modernization and shifting cultural interests. With declining public interest and limited performance and training opportunities, Siping Diao is at risk of decline. However, through Chinese opera education integration, new pathways are emerging to preserve and revitalize this regional art form (Li, 2024; Liu, 2022; Shang & Wang, 2024). This research explores how education serves as a bridge between generations, sustaining cultural identity and heritage while adapting Siping Diao to a contemporary context.

1.1 Introduce the Problem

As digital media, pop culture, and global entertainment continue to dominate the cultural scene, traditional operatic forms like Siping Diao struggle to find a place in contemporary life. With fewer apprentices entering the field and a dwindling audience base, this once-vibrant art form faces an urgent need for revitalization. Compounding the issue is the generational gap between current performers—many of whom are aging—and potential learners, who often lack exposure or access to traditional music training. The sustainability of Siping Diao is therefore threatened by structural and societal changes that weaken its transmission channels (Danesi, 2018; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Liu & Karin, 2022). This research addresses the question of how Siping Diao is being preserved and transmitted in the face of such challenges, with a particular focus on education as a key vehicle for its revival.

1.2 The Importance of the Problem

The decline of traditional arts like Shangqiu Siping Diao has far-reaching implications beyond the performance stage.

At stake is not only the survival of an opera genre but also the continuity of cultural identity, regional history, and collective memory. Siping Diao embodies the stories, dialects, moral values, and social customs of local communities. Its extinction would represent a cultural rupture, especially for the people of Henan Province. Education offers a vital strategy for bridging the gap between tradition and modernity (Chung, 2022; Hautsalo & Westerlund, 2023; Jian et al., 2024). Schools, training institutes, and community-based learning initiatives can serve as platforms to pass on operatic knowledge while also modernizing its appeal. The importance of this issue lies in the need to maintain a living connection between the past and present—between older master performers and the younger generation—so that the legacy of Siping Diao can be carried forward in a changing world. In this way, education does not merely serve a pedagogical role; it becomes a means of cultural preservation and innovation (He et al., 2025; Mykhailyshyn et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2024).

1.3 Relevant Scholarship

In recent years, growing academic attention has been given to the role of education in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, especially in the field of traditional music and opera. Educational initiatives have been shown to effectively promote cultural literacy, creative expression, and cross-generational dialogue (Pan, 2024; Shih & Tseng, 2025). Although many traditional arts have benefited from school programs, university courses, and community outreach activities, much of the focus has remained on more widely known opera genres, such as Peking Opera or Kunqu. The case of Shangqiu Siping Diao, however, has received comparatively little scholarly exploration, despite its rich history and regional importance (He, 2022; Lam, 2022; Su, 2023; Xu, 2024). This study addresses that gap by examining the specific educational practices used to sustain Siping Diao between 2006 and 2025. It explores how formal and informal learning environments—including vocational colleges, theatre workshops, school partnerships, and online platforms—have contributed to the revitalization of this art form.

1.4 Hypotheses

This study is grounded in the hypothesis that Chinese opera education plays a crucial role in the effective transmission of Shangqiu Siping Diao. It assumes that when structured educational programs are implemented—ones that combine technical training, cultural context, and performance opportunities—students are more likely to engage with and sustain traditional opera (Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Leung, 2015; Oliva, 2015). A second hypothesis suggests that integrating new media technologies into the educational process increases the accessibility and appeal of Siping Diao for younger audiences. By blending traditional teaching with digital dissemination methods, educators and performers may create a dynamic model of cultural transmission that is both respectful of tradition and responsive to modern interests (Aagaard & Lund, 2019; Bao et al., 2024; Onwuatiegwu & Paul-Mgbeafulike, 2023).

1.5 Research Objective

To investigate the transmission of Shangqiu Siping Diao through Chinese opera education in order to promote cultural sustainability.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Shangqiu Siping Diao is transmitted through Chinese opera education, with a specific focus on cultural sustainability. Guided by ethnomusicological and arts education approaches, the study sought to understand how traditional opera forms are passed down through formal education systems, community practices, and intergenerational learning (Bresler & Stake, 2017; Zhang & Sornyai, 2025). Data collection took place between February 2024 and July 2025. Research methods included interviews, observations, and document reviews.

2.1 Research Site

The primary field site was Liangyuan District, Shangqiu City, Henan Province, where the Shangqiu Siping Diao Theatre Troupe and the Siping Diao Art Research Centre are based. These institutions represent the core spaces where educational activities, performances, and cultural transmission of Siping Diao take place. The research also extended to affiliated educational settings, including vocational and technical colleges and local schools, where opera training and outreach programs are implemented. These locations reflect both the formal and informal dimensions of opera education.

2.2 Informants

Seven informants were selected using purposive sampling to provide insights across generational and professional lines.

- Three key informants are senior opera artists and nationally recognized inheritors of Shangqiu Siping Diao, each with decades of experience in performance and pedagogy.
- Four general informants are young performers or students engaged in structured opera education and training programs.

The selection criteria included experience in opera performance or education, involvement in transmission activities, and availability for extended interviews and follow-ups. This range of informants allowed for a comprehensive understanding of traditional knowledge transfer, institutional support systems, and learner experiences.

2.3 Research Steps

The research followed a multi-phase process:

2.3.1 Tool Preparation: Interview questions and observation templates were drafted based on the research objective and refined through expert consultation to ensure relevance and clarity.

2.3.2 Fieldwork and Data Collection:

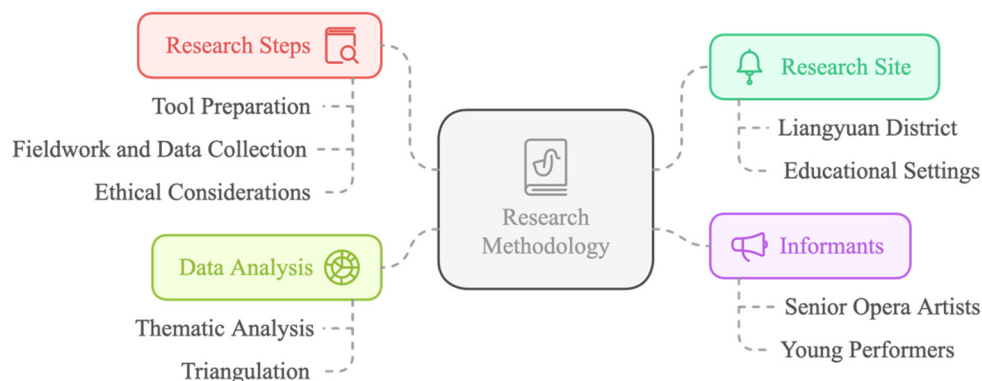
- Interviews with all informants were conducted in person at the theatre troupe or educational institutions, focusing on their experiences with opera teaching, learning, and community outreach.
- Observation sessions were conducted during rehearsals, public performances, school workshops, and training programs to examine transmission practices in action.
- Document and Archival Review included syllabi, lesson plans, opera scripts, government policies, and published repertoires relevant to Siping Diao.

2.3.3 Ethical Considerations: All participants were informed about the study's purpose, and verbal consent was obtained. Confidentiality was maintained, and identities of the informants were anonymized in reporting.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited to identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allowed for a detailed understanding of how Shangqiu Siping Diao is transmitted through educational practices. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and collected documents were carefully reviewed and coded based on emerging themes relevant to opera education and cultural sustainability. Themes were first identified through open coding and later refined into axial codes representing recurring motifs such as pedagogical techniques, intergenerational mentorship, curriculum content, and student engagement strategies.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, findings were cross-referenced across multiple data sources, including interviews with practitioners and students, field observations, and archival documents. This triangulation process ensured a comprehensive view of the transmission mechanisms of Siping Diao within formal and informal educational settings. The results of this analysis helped reveal the strategies that contribute to sustaining cultural heritage through opera education in contemporary China. Figure 1 illustrates the sequential steps of the research process, including participant selection, data collection phases, and triangulation points.



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Figure 1. Research methodology for Shangqiu Siping Diao Transmission

3. Results

Through fieldwork, interviews with performers and educators, and an analysis of archival and visual materials, the results demonstrate how Siping Diao has evolved from a localized performance tradition into a vibrant educational and cultural force. The findings are structured into six thematic areas: phased development and educational integration, stage classification, opera creation in education, pedagogical outcomes, the role of representative repertoire, and community engagement.

3.1 Phased Development and Education Integration

The developmental journey of Shangqiu Siping Diao from 2006 to 2025 demonstrates a clear trajectory in which education became a central mechanism for cultural preservation and sustainability. This progression can be understood through three distinct phases. Each reflects a unique set of strategies and institutional developments. These phases mark how traditional opera moved from grassroots protection to formalized educational programming, increasingly aligning with cultural sustainability goals.

3.1.1 The promotion period (2006-2011)

Shangqiu Siping Diao was officially recognized as part of China's first batch of national intangible cultural heritage, boosting its revival. However, educational efforts were unstructured, relying on informal mentorships between elderly performers and young enthusiasts. This stage was marked by passion but also fragility, with few systems in place to ensure continuity. Educational activities were mainly community performances, workshops, and intergenerational exchanges. Despite this, it laid the cultural groundwork for later educational initiatives.

3.1.2 The innovation period from 2012-2021

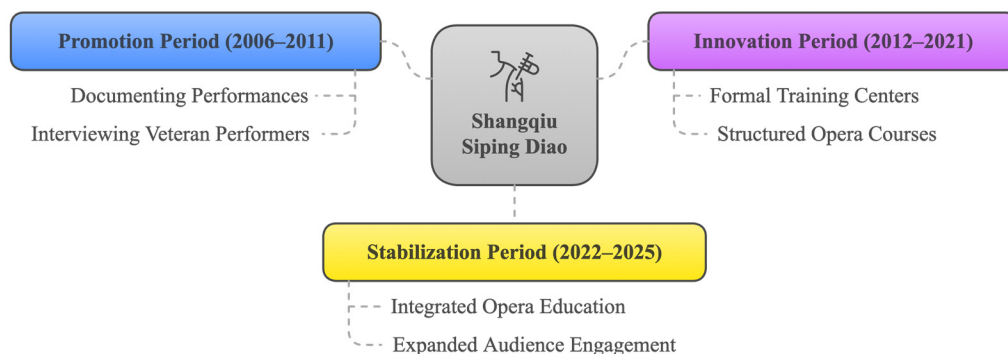
Saw a shift towards formalized opera education, with local institutions collaborating with the Shangqiu Siping Diao Theatre Troupe to create targeted programs in opera history, vocal training, performance staging, and repertoire study. This period saw a renewed sense of renewal, as traditional arts were brought into classrooms and rehearsal halls, curriculum materials were developed based on traditional repertoires, and student troupes formed for rehearsals and public performances. Theaters became both entertainment venues and centers of instruction, marking a critical transition from a folk tradition into an academic discipline supported by local policy and educational frameworks.

3.1.3 The stabilization period (2022-2025)

Educational programs were integrated into local schools and training centers, and stable funding maintained teaching staff and student recruitment. Young performers expressed confidence in their future careers, highlighting the opera's increasing respect and visibility. Modern dissemination methods, such as livestreams and online lectures, made teaching practices more adaptable. The expansion of repertoire within schools allowed students to create and perform new works alongside traditional plays. The integration of education and performance ensured the opera's growth and resonance with new generations.

3.2 Stage Classification and Timeline

The developmental journey of Shangqiu Siping Diao between 2006 and 2025 can be best understood through a three-phase framework. This classification, illustrated in Figure 2, is not only chronological but also reflects significant shifts in educational engagement, policy support, and cultural strategy. Each phase marks a transformation in how Siping Diao has been preserved, taught, and promoted through Chinese opera education.



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Figure 2. Three-stage classification of Shangqiu Siping Diao from 2006-2025

3.2.1 The promotion phase (2006-2011)

Efforts centered on rescuing a fading tradition. With the opera being listed as part of China's national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, local governments began documenting performances, scripts, and musical structures. Informants recalled how veteran performers were interviewed and recorded to prevent loss of knowledge. While formal education initiatives were not yet in place, this stage laid critical groundwork by archiving materials that would later be used for teaching.

3.2.2 The innovation phase (2012-2021)

Brought a shift from passive preservation to active education. Through partnerships between the Siping Diao Theatre Troupe and local vocational institutions, formal training centers were launched. This phase saw the introduction of structured opera courses that taught singing, stage performance, and historical context. Informants emphasized that the involvement of schools provided young learners with professional platforms and mentorship, significantly increasing student participation. Expanded educational access during this phase is clearly reflected in the timeline of activities.

3.2.3 The stabilization phase (2022-2025)

Focused on sustaining these efforts. Continued investment in infrastructure, regular performances, and broader outreach ensured that the earlier gains would not dissipate. Opera education became embedded in both formal and informal learning environments, while audience engagement extended beyond traditional circles. As shown in Figure 2, the timeline reflects how each stage not only influenced the trajectory of the opera's revival but also corresponded directly with evolving educational strategies that now anchor the cultural sustainability of Shangqiu Siping Diao.

3.3 Educational Output Through Opera Creation

During the innovation period of Shangqiu Siping Diao (2012–2021), Chinese opera education played a transformative role in creating new repertoires that not only enriched the cultural legacy of the genre but also significantly enhanced educational practices. As illustrated in Figure 3, several large-scale productions were developed during this time, including *The Family of Grudges* (2012), *Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai* (2013), *Jiang Jie* (2019), and *Zhi Qu Wei Hu Shan* (2019). These works were not only artistic accomplishments but also deeply embedded in educational strategies. Students from affiliated institutions were directly involved in the creative process, which included scriptwriting, character development, costume design, musical arrangement, and full-stage performance.

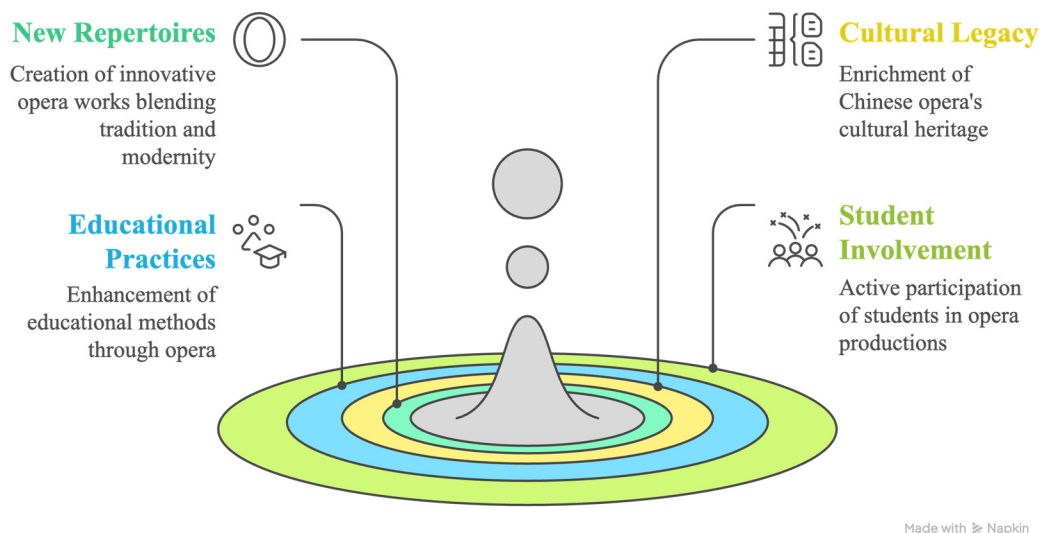


Figure 3. New Large Opera Works in Shangqiu Siping Diao from 2012 to 2021

These educational initiatives served multiple purposes. They revitalized the Siping Diao tradition by introducing storylines that bridged historical themes with contemporary relevance, thereby making the opera more relatable to modern audiences. Simultaneously, the collaborative nature of production allowed students to engage holistically with the opera form—gaining insights into its structural, musical, and dramatic components. Interviews with educators and key informants from the troupe emphasized how this process fostered a strong sense of cultural

identity and practical competence in students. By treating opera creation as a pedagogical tool, these productions helped sustain the tradition through generational transmission, creative innovation, and immersive educational practice.

3.4 Educational Timeline and Pedagogical Outcomes

From 2012 to 2021, the educational integration of Shangqiu Siping Diao followed a clearly structured timeline that connected opera production with progressive pedagogical development. As shown in Figure 4, each major opera creation during this period was accompanied by a specific educational initiative—such as workshops, training sessions, and mentorship programs—designed to align students’ learning with the operatic content being developed and performed. The earlier years emphasized traditional stories and singing styles, allowing students to build foundational knowledge through imitation, repetition, and guided performance.

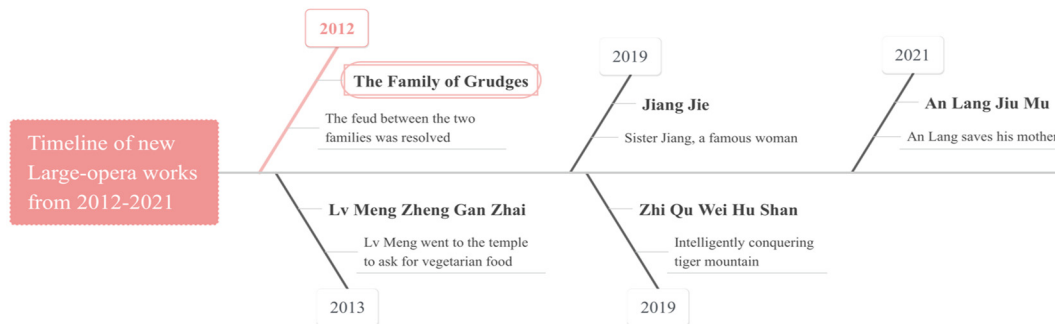


Figure 4. Timeline of New Large Opera Works from 2012-2021

As time progressed, newer opera works began incorporating contemporary social themes, such as justice, loyalty, and national memory, which encouraged students to reflect critically on the operas’ relevance in modern society. This evolution marked a shift in pedagogy—from rote learning to a model that emphasized interpretation, expression, and innovation. Informants from educational institutions and performance troupes noted that this layered teaching approach enabled students not only to gain technical skills in performance, music, and staging but also to internalize a deeper appreciation for cultural heritage. Student reflections collected during interviews highlighted a strong sense of pride and identity in learning Siping Diao, as well as a heightened awareness of the importance of cultural preservation. This educational model, blending theory, practice, and creativity, has thus contributed significantly to the long-term sustainability of Shangqiu Siping Diao through the younger generation.

3.5 Representative Repertoire in Teaching

In the context of Chinese opera education, *Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai* has proven to be one of the most effective teaching pieces for the transmission of Shangqiu Siping Diao. As seen in Figure 5, this opera stands out in both its artistic merit and pedagogical value. Its storyline—centered on resilience, filial piety, and moral virtue—offers an ideal narrative framework for engaging students not only in performance but also in ethical reflection. The characters are relatable, and the emotional arc of the story provides ample opportunity for expressive singing and acting, making it suitable for students at different skill levels.



Figure 5. New large opera, “Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai”

Educators noted that the vocal lines in *Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai* are both melodic and technically achievable, which allows learners to gradually build confidence and stage presence. The structure of the opera, with its alternating solo and ensemble sections, also offers a balanced learning experience that integrates group coordination with individual expression. According to instructors interviewed during the fieldwork, this piece serves as a bridge between classroom theory and public performance, helping students understand how historical narratives can be brought to life through traditional art forms.

The opera's repeated use across training modules and public showcases underlines its importance in curriculum design. It functions not only as a tool for teaching performance techniques but also as a cultural vessel, reinforcing the values and identity embedded in *Siping Diao*. Through regular rehearsal and staged interpretations, students internalize both the musical form and its cultural significance, making *Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai* a key element in sustaining the tradition through education.

3.6 Community Engagement and Dissemination

Community engagement has become a cornerstone in the educational transmission of *Shangqiu Siping Diao*, serving not only as a means of performance but as a vital strategy for fostering cultural sustainability. As illustrated in Figure 6, student performers frequently participate in community-based events held in public squares, schools, elder care centers, and local cultural halls. These performances create immersive learning environments where students can move beyond classroom rehearsal to interact directly with diverse audiences.

Such outreach serves dual purposes: it allows students to develop stage confidence and contextualize their learning, while also enabling communities—particularly older generations—to reconnect with a cultural form they deeply value. Interviews reveal that many elderly attendees expressed emotional appreciation upon hearing familiar melodies, seeing the performances as a revival of fading memories. This emotional resonance establishes a feedback loop, encouraging students to take pride in their work and strengthening their sense of cultural responsibility.



Figure 6. In 2024 Shangqiu Siping Diao Community Performance

Furthermore, these community-centered activities serve as cultural bridges, connecting the younger generation with traditions that might otherwise feel distant. By embedding *Siping Diao* into local celebrations, public events, and educational festivals, the program raises broader public awareness of traditional opera in the face of rapid modernization. In this way, community engagement transforms education into a shared cultural act—linking performance, pedagogy, and preservation in a dynamic, living practice.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that Chinese opera education plays in the preservation and transmission of *Shangqiu Siping Diao*. Consistent with prior research on the value of arts education for intangible cultural heritage (Bresler & Stake, 2017; Leung, 2015), the phased development model—promotion, innovation, and stabilization—highlights a successful transformation of this regional opera from a declining tradition into a structured pedagogical and cultural enterprise. During the promotion period, informal mentorship and community performances served as early platforms for transmission. These efforts align with the observations of Liu and Karin (2022), who emphasized the importance of community-based preservation during the initial stages of cultural revival. This phase also corresponds with broader theories of cultural resilience, where continuity is maintained not merely

by institutional structures but through lived practices embedded in local memory systems, rituals, and performance traditions.

However, the transition to formalized education beginning in 2012 marked a pivotal shift, illustrating how academic support and institutional backing can elevate a folk art into an educational discipline. Drawing from theories of cultural sustainability, this transition signifies a shift from survival-based preservation to a generative process where tradition becomes a renewable educational resource. Rather than viewing cultural knowledge as static content, the innovation phase reframed it as co-constructed experience between teachers, students, and community practitioners. The integration of opera into school curricula and the involvement of students in the creative process during the innovation phase reflect theories of experiential and expressive arts learning (Oliva, 2015). Educational practices that included performance, scriptwriting, and vocal training promoted not only technical skill but also cultural understanding and identity formation. This is consistent with Shih and Tseng (2025), who found that intergenerational learning fosters emotional engagement and meaningful knowledge transfer. Additionally, the use of new operas like *Lv Meng Zheng Gan Zhai* as teaching tools illustrates how modern narratives and ethical themes can make traditional art more accessible to younger audiences—echoing Mykhailyshyn et al. (2018), who argued for innovation in pedagogical content as a strategy for sustaining heritage in contemporary education.

The stabilization period further demonstrates the alignment between policy support, digital dissemination, and student engagement. As observed in Bao et al. (2024) and Aagaard & Lund (2019), integrating digital platforms into traditional education enhances accessibility and audience reach. In light of music pedagogy theories emphasizing multimodal learning and technological adaptation, the incorporation of livestreamed performances, online lectures, and digital archives reflects a pedagogical recalibration that meets contemporary learners where they are—online, mobile, and interactive. Informants expressed that such tools not only attract wider audiences but also support remote learning and documentation—crucial for the long-term sustainability of a niche tradition.

Moreover, community outreach emerged as a key driver of both pedagogical outcomes and cultural engagement. Consistent with Pan (2024) and Chung (2022), community-based events provided performance contexts that encouraged students to internalize cultural values while deepening their commitment to heritage transmission. Elder audience members' emotional responses validate the social and mnemonic functions of opera performances, contributing to a cycle of shared cultural memory and renewed artistic pride. This dynamic aligns with cultural sustainability theory, which argues that the vitality of tradition is dependent not only on its ability to be taught but also on its relevance and resonance within the social fabric of the community.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study affirms that Chinese opera education, when strategically implemented across formal, informal, and digital platforms, can effectively revitalize endangered art forms like Shangqiu Siping Diao. It bridges generational divides, fosters artistic literacy, and promotes cultural sustainability. By embedding performance arts within pedagogical frameworks that reflect community realities and educational aspirations, opera education becomes a transformative tool—preserving the past while shaping cultural futures. Future research should examine longitudinal impacts on student identity, the role of teacher training in traditional arts education, and comparative models from other regional operas in China or globally. Exploring how digital technologies can further enhance immersive learning and cultural participation would also contribute to a more robust framework for heritage preservation in the 21st century.

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No additional data are available.

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