

# Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera: A Review of Current Research, Challenges, and Future Directions

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**Abstract:** Chinese opera, an essential component of Chinese culture, is gaining global recognition for its cross-cultural communication. This study delves into its historical context, notable international cases, influences of media and technology, communication challenges, and strategic approaches, aiming to provide a coherent overview, identify challenges, and propose future research directions in the field. Challenges include narrow research scopes, insufficient empirical studies on communication outcomes in diverse cultural settings, and deficiencies in digital and innovative practices. Future research can propel digital communication advancements and delve into local community psychological dynamics, cultural identities, and cross-cultural educational initiatives concerning Chinese opera.

**Keywords:** Chinese Opera; Intercultural Communication; Communication Media; Communication Strategies.

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## 1. Introduction: Theoretical Foundation and Historical Background

Since the modern era, Chinese opera has been used as a general term for traditional Chinese theater, including Song and Yuan Southern Opera, Yuan and Ming Zaju, Ming and Qing Chuanqi, as well as modern Peking opera and all local operas [1]. As a comprehensive art form, Chinese opera embodies the essence of traditional Chinese culture. With globalization, cultural exchanges have become more frequent, making the intercultural communication of Chinese opera a focal point in academia and the arts.

### 1.1. The Relationship between Culture and Communication

To discuss the intercultural communication of Chinese opera, it is necessary first to clarify the relationship between opera as a culture and its communication. Traditional schools emphasize that culture precedes communication, shaping its modes; ethnic cultural schools argue that although related, culture and communication are relatively independent and distinct. Not all communication has cultural significance, nor can all cultures be communicated. Constructivist schools posit that communication precedes culture, being the essence of society, and can transform and create culture [2]. Some scholars also suggest that culture and communication are isomorphic, meaning "culture is communication, and communication is culture" [3, 4].

Many domestic scholars currently agree with the isomorphic view. Ju [5] stated that the essence of culture is communication, without which there would be no culture; communication is the realization of culture. Guo [6] further pointed out that without communication, there would be no cultural inheritance, value addition, or reconstruction. Huang [7] believed that culture and communication are two sides of the same coin; culture promotes communication, and communication fosters cultural development. Duan and Song [8] discussed their relationship in the context of cultural endogenous power. From their interaction perspective,

communication is both the essence and realization of culture, manifesting as the transmission and exchange of cultural symbols and information. From the temporal and spatial dimensions, their relationship is also reflected in the diffusion of information over time and social cohesion over space.

In summary, in the context of intercultural communication, culture and communication are homogeneous and isomorphic, mutually penetrating. On one hand, communication is the essence of culture, as culture is gradually formed and constructed through communication; on the other hand, communication is the realization of culture, as its content involves the transmission and exchange of cultural symbols and information. Culture is the culture of communication, and communication is the communication of culture, highlighting their close and complex relationship.

### 1.2. Concept of Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera

Intercultural communication is a branch of communication studies. The academic community currently defines intercultural communication mainly in three ways: interpersonal interactions and behaviors between people from different cultural backgrounds, communication in which the encoding and decoding of information are conducted by individuals or groups from different contexts, and communication as a symbol exchange process due to the differences in symbol systems of the participating parties [9]. This study refers to intercultural communication as "communication between people with different cultural perceptions and symbol systems, significant enough to alter the communication event" [10].

Generally, communication studies address two main issues: the composition of human social interaction systems and the content and changes resulting from interactions. The intercultural communication of Chinese opera involves placing Chinese opera within the context of intercultural communication, including the internal system centered on opera (interactions between opera, actors, audience, and media) and the cross-regional, cross-cultural external system. The content includes the symbols and meanings carried in

visual images like stage performances and opera films, as well as the visual symbols and meanings carried in written media like scripts, advertisements, and reviews [11]. Therefore, this paper defines the intercultural communication of Chinese opera as "the study of the phenomena, basic characteristics, and laws of opera exchanges between people with different cultural perceptions

### 1.3. Historical Progress of Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera

Early dissemination of Chinese opera mainly occurred through two channels: textual dissemination and the migration of Chinese laborers. During the Southern Song Dynasty, shadow puppetry gradually spread to South Asia, Egypt, Persia, Turkey, France, England, and Germany [12]. In the 13th century, Marco Polo introduced Yuan Zaju in his book "The Travels of Marco Polo." In the 14th century, Chinese performed miscellaneous operas for Vietnamese royalty, marking the earliest recorded overseas Chinese opera performance [13].

By the 17th century, Chinese opera troupes were well-received in the Thai court, and French King Louis XIV's envoy witnessed Chinese drama performances in Thailand [14]. During this period, European theater often incorporated Chinese cultural elements, with British "heroic dramas" often drawing from Chinese themes. Italian and French artists used Chinese objects as backdrops, combining Chinese opera costumes and props to create Sino-European theatrical hybrids known as "Chinese opera."

In the 18th century, Europe showed great interest in Chinese opera, particularly in translating, adapting, and critiquing Yuan Zaju "The Orphan of Zhao," marking the earliest textual dissemination of Chinese opera to the Western world and initiating Sino-Western theatrical exchanges [15]. In the 19th century, with large-scale Chinese labor migration, Chinese opera spread further in the Americas and Southeast Asia. In 1852, a Guangdong troupe named HONG TOOK TANG performed the first Chinese opera in San Francisco, with 123 actors [16]. In 1860, a Chinese theater troupe performed for Napoleon III in Paris. In the 20th century, renowned opera artists like Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu performed and conducted research abroad, actively promoting opera dissemination.

Since the 21st century, the communication of Chinese opera overseas has increasingly targeted the general public. Various cultural and arts festivals and institutions like Confucius Institutes have conducted opera-themed lectures and teaching experience courses, enhancing the international presence of Chinese opera.

## 2. Research on Representative Cases of Chinese Opera Intercultural Communication

### 2.1. Mei Lanfang's Performances in Japan and the United States

In the 20th century, Mei Lanfang's performances in Japan and the United States marked a peak in the intercultural communication of Chinese opera. Scholars mainly study the reasons for his successful performances and the psychological motivations behind the communication. Wu [17] and Fu [18] argue that Mei Lanfang's performances in a colonial context reflected a complex interplay of national identity and the

aspiration to assert cultural worth within Western-dominated cultural landscapes. Mei's ability to resonate with Western audiences, as noted by Zhou [19], stemmed from the perceived alignment between Peking opera's artistic essence and ancient Western theatrical traditions, facilitating a profound cultural identification among spectators.

Zhou and Yuan [20] highlighted external factors such as robust economic backing, strategic media campaigns, and evolving perspectives within Japanese academia as instrumental in Mei's successful reception in Japan. Internally, Mei Lanfang's mastery in refining social dramas through exquisite artistry, coupled with shared performance aesthetics between Chinese and Japanese theater, transcended linguistic, national, and ideological barriers. Yang [21] underscored how Mei Lanfang's global influence exemplified cultural exports shaping audience perceptions through live performances, elevating the international standing of Chinese opera while setting a precedent for future cross-cultural exchanges.

Scholars attribute Mei Lanfang's success in Japan and the United States to several key factors. Firstly, his performances in these countries demonstrated a complex interplay of national identity and the assertion of cultural value in Western-dominated cultural spheres. Secondly, Mei Lanfang resonated with Western audiences due to perceived similarities between the essence of Peking opera and ancient Western theatrical traditions, fostering a deeper cultural identification. Additionally, external factors such as substantial economic support, strategic media campaigns, and evolving academic perceptions in Japan played pivotal roles in his successful reception. Internally, Mei Lanfang's mastery of social drama through exquisite artistic skills, combined with shared aesthetic principles in Chinese and Japanese theater, transcended linguistic, national, and ideological barriers, deepening audience understanding and appreciation.

Overall, Mei Lanfang's global performances exemplified the depth of Chinese opera's artistry and cultural richness, contributing significantly to cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding between East and West.

### 2.2. Bai Xianyong's Youth Version of "The Peony Pavilion" Tour

Bai Xianyong's adaptation and international tour of "The Peony Pavilion" among Western audiences offer another compelling case study in the global dissemination of Chinese opera. Scholars attribute its success to meticulous text adaptation, innovative marketing strategies, and the seamless integration of traditional opera aesthetics with contemporary theatrical norms. Bai [22] articulated his tour's motivation as addressing "cultural anxiety and homesickness," aiming to cultivate a shared cultural identity among Chinese diaspora through the preservation and promotion of Kunqu opera. Zhang and Huang's [23] analysis emphasized how textual adaptations streamlined narratives, enhanced accessibility through language refinement, and enriched performances with expressive gestures, optimizing emotional narratives and character dynamics.

Strategically, Wang [24] outlined marketization efforts leveraging media events, celebrity endorsements, and scholarly discourse to enhance visibility and credibility. Yao [25] and Chen [26] highlighted the successful fusion of traditional Kunqu opera aesthetics with modern visual culture and commercial operations, catering to contemporary artistic sensibilities and international audience expectations. In conclusion, Bai Xianyong's tour not only revitalized interest

in Kunqu opera but also introduced innovative models for its global propagation. By blending traditional art forms with modern theatrical practices and strategic marketing, Bai's initiative not only preserved cultural heritage but also forged new pathways for international cultural exchange in the performing arts.

### **2.3. Zhang Huoding's Performance in New York**

In 2015, Zhang Huoding, a prominent Peking opera artist, achieved significant acclaim with her performance in New York, marking a notable milestone in the international dissemination of Chinese cultural arts. Cheng [27] attributed her success to several key factors, emphasizing the high caliber of her performances, the integration of comprehensive educational lectures, vigorous promotional efforts, and innovative collaboration models. These aspects collectively contributed to what Cheng termed the "Zhang Huoding phenomenon," highlighting its multifaceted impact on cross-cultural exchange.

Liu, Li, and Zhang [28] further underscored the effectiveness of Zhang Huoding's approach in promoting intercultural communication through personalized strategies tailored to engage diverse audiences. They noted how her performances not only showcased the unique aesthetic spirit of classical Chinese opera but also resonated deeply with Western audiences through universally appreciated themes and meticulously curated repertoire selections. Fu [29] emphasized Zhang Huoding's personal charisma and unwavering commitment to her artistic integrity, positioning her as a role model for aspiring young artists navigating the complexities of contemporary cultural exchange. Fu's insights underscored the importance of authenticity and individuality in transcending cultural boundaries and fostering genuine artistic appreciation across global audiences.

Hu [30] synthesized the broader implications of Zhang Huoding's New York performance for intercultural communication, advocating for the strategic selection of repertoires that bridge cultural divides and resonate universally. Hu highlighted the significance of audience-oriented educational initiatives, such as detailed lectures accompanying performances, which enhance audience anticipation and understanding of Peking opera's rich cultural heritage. Overall, Zhang Huoding's successful debut in New York not only elevated her status as a global cultural ambassador but also provided invaluable lessons in effective cross-cultural communication through the arts. Her approach exemplifies how personalized, educational, and strategically promoted performances can foster deeper cultural understanding and appreciation on an international scale, setting a benchmark for future endeavors in promoting Chinese opera worldwide.

### **2.4. Summary**

In conclusion, the analysis of the intercultural communication cases of Mei Lanfang, Bai Xianyong, and Zhang Huoding revealed several key research directions and findings: First, high-quality artistic performances are crucial for promoting cultural identification and enhancing international status. Second, text adaptation and market strategies are essential for the successful intercultural communication of traditional opera. Additionally, high-quality performances, extensive promotion, and collaborative promotion models significantly increase the acceptance and

impact of opera internationally. Finally, selecting repertoires with universally appreciated themes, promoting artistic personalization, and well-planned cultural exchange activities effectively overcome cultural differences and language barriers. These studies provide valuable experience and theoretical support for the intercultural communication of opera.

## **3. Research on Media of Chinese Opera Communication**

Media serves as crucial carriers of messages, facilitating the intricate process of communication within the realm of Chinese opera. Understanding the diverse perspectives of media in opera research is essential for comprehending its intercultural communication dynamics. This section explores various media used in opera communication, delineates models of communication, and discusses the effects and implications of traditional and modern media on opera dissemination.

### **3.1. Media in Opera Communication**

Chinese opera utilizes a spectrum of media to convey its rich cultural heritage and artistic expressions. According to Wu [31], these media include archival records such as computer-generated 3D animations for preservation, visual promotional materials like advertisements and images in newspapers and magazines for publicity, and artistic reconstructions through opera films, TV series, and animations for broader dissemination. Each medium plays a distinct role in transmitting opera's narratives and aesthetics across different cultural contexts.

### **3.2. Models of Opera Communication**

The communication of Chinese opera can be categorized into primary and extended forms, as proposed by Wang [32]. Primary communication involves foundational activities like script reading and segment appreciation, while extended communication expands to encompass live performances, historical and biographical knowledge, actor anecdotes, and other supplementary opera information. Lin and Ma [33] further distinguish between text-based communication and stage-based communication, highlighting the dual nature of how opera content is conveyed and interpreted. Dai and Lin [34] introduce a nuanced model for intercultural communication media in opera, categorizing them into time-biased hot media (e.g., live performances), time-biased cold media (e.g., archived recordings or actor interviews), space-biased hot media (e.g., live broadcasts or related textual analyses), and space-biased cold media (e.g., written scripts or librettos). This classification underscores the diverse formats through which opera engages with its audience, both temporally and spatially.

### **3.3. Effects of Communication Media**

The impact of media on opera communication spans traditional and modern platforms. Traditional media such as opera films, TV series, and animations are pivotal in preserving and disseminating opera's cultural essence, leveraging visual and auditory elements to attract international audiences. In contrast, modern digital platforms including Weibo, WeChat, and YouTube provide expansive avenues for global opera dissemination, facilitating real-time interactions and broadening audience reach. Emerging

multimedia technologies like Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) offer immersive opera experiences, enabling audiences to engage interactively with opera narratives and performances. These innovations enhance audience participation and deepen appreciation for opera's artistic nuances in virtual environments.

In conclusion, the integration of diverse media types, coupled with strategic communication models, not only amplifies opera's international presence but also enriches cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. This comprehensive approach ensures that Chinese opera continues to evolve as a vibrant cultural heritage cherished worldwide.

## **4. Research on Barriers and Strategies in Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera**

### **4.1. Barriers to Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera**

Scholarly investigations into the barriers affecting the intercultural communication of Chinese opera reveal multifaceted challenges that impede its global dissemination and understanding. Xu [35] underscores the intrinsic cultural essence as a fundamental barrier, highlighting the complexities in translating opera's cultural nuances across different audiences. Liu [36] examines historical barriers, noting early challenges of cultural identity and acceptance between China and the West, which have evolved into contemporary issues such as market access, aesthetic differences, and language barriers. Li, Chen, and Chen [37] emphasize the current lack of deep audience engagement and the low marketization levels of Peking opera abroad, indicating ongoing difficulties in bridging cultural gaps and fostering sustained interest. Liao's [38] historical perspective on Chinese opera in the English-speaking world further elucidates the enduring challenges faced centuries ago, emphasizing cultural barriers and the gradual process of overcoming them.

### **4.2. Strategies for Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera**

In response to these barriers, scholars propose diverse strategies aimed at enhancing the intercultural communication of Chinese opera. Sun [39] advocates for a comprehensive approach that combines practical live performances with theoretical translation and promotional efforts, aiming to deepen global appreciation and understanding of opera. Zhu and Pan [40] suggest leveraging Confucius Institutes as platforms for promoting opera overseas, capitalizing on educational and cultural exchange opportunities. Ling [41] proposes strategies for promoting Yue opera through diversified communication subjects, innovative translation methods, and integration of various communication channels to broaden its appeal. Huang and Tian [42] explore the use of WeChat public accounts to transform cultural resources into cultural capital, enhancing opera's visibility and engagement among diverse audiences. Wang [43] advocates for a strategic approach to cultural outreach, emphasizing the importance of cultural confidence, branding classic works, organizing specialized opera festivals, and adopting market-oriented strategies tailored to different international audiences. Zhao [44] introduces community-

based and personalized content production strategies for new media platforms, aiming to engage opera enthusiasts and challenge stereotypes through unique content creation. Wu and Qiu [45] focus on ecological strategies for promoting Sichuan opera, emphasizing innovation rooted in local folklore, the preservation of aesthetic elements, and leveraging emerging media for sustained dissemination efforts.

### **4.3. Synthesis and Conclusion**

The synthesis of these perspectives highlights that while barriers to intercultural communication of Chinese opera persist, strategic interventions focusing on translation, cultural confidence, diversified communication methods, and community engagement can mitigate these challenges. Future research should continue to explore innovative approaches that integrate traditional artistic values with contemporary media technologies, fostering a deeper global appreciation for Chinese opera's cultural richness and artistic legacy.

In conclusion, addressing barriers through strategic initiatives not only enhances opera's international visibility but also contributes to broader cultural exchange and mutual understanding on the global stage. By embracing these strategies, Chinese opera can transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, ensuring its enduring relevance and appreciation in diverse cultural contexts.

## **5. Analysis of Intercultural Communication of Chinese Opera**

### **5.1. Research Overview**

Currently, research on the intercultural communication of Chinese opera primarily focuses on developed regions such as North America and Europe. The primary studied genres include Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera, while regional operas like Cantonese opera have received comparatively less attention. This selection of research objects and scope reflects the cultural influence and market demand in these regions, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen research on the intercultural communication of regional operas. Moreover, research focuses have shifted over time. Early research concentrated on the history of Chinese opera communication, Chinese opera performances overseas, and translation studies. In recent years, research has gradually shifted towards the study of communication modes or approaches, such as the communication of a certain genre's "operatic road" or the communication of opera versions, barriers and strategies for intercultural communication of opera, opera and mass media, and derivative cultural products of opera.

### **5.2. Research Deficiency**

Despite significant progress in current research, there are still some shortcomings. Firstly, there is an undue concentration on specific genres such as Peking opera and Kunqu opera, while local operas like Cantonese opera have been relatively understudied in terms of their cross-cultural communication. This gap is indicative of a broader need to diversify research focus across different regional operatic traditions within China.

Secondly, empirical studies on the effectiveness of communication strategies and audience reception are insufficient. There is a notable lack of in-depth analyses concerning audience preferences, responses, and demands across diverse cultural contexts. Understanding these

dynamics is crucial for tailoring communication approaches that resonate effectively with global audiences.

Thirdly, the theoretical and empirical exploration of how Chinese opera adapts and evolves in cross-cultural contexts is underdeveloped. There is a deficiency in comprehensive studies examining how opera maintains its cultural authenticity and artistic integrity while adapting to new cultural environments. This includes investigations into the dynamics of cultural adaptation, translation, and interpretation that occur during cross-cultural transmissions.

Moreover, while there is emerging research on digital communication and innovative practices, further exploration and refinement are necessary. Current studies often focus on the use of digital platforms for dissemination without adequately addressing challenges such as digital access inequalities or the impact of digital mediums on the preservation of traditional operatic forms and aesthetics.

Addressing these gaps requires a nuanced approach that integrates interdisciplinary perspectives. Future research should aim to not only broaden the scope of studied opera genres but also deepen analyses of audience engagement and the socio-cultural impacts of cross-cultural adaptations. This entails exploring innovative methodologies that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the complexities of opera's reception and transformation in diverse global contexts.

In conclusion, while existing research provides a foundational understanding, advancing knowledge in these areas is essential for informing effective policies and strategies aimed at preserving and promoting Chinese opera's cultural heritage on a global scale. By addressing these research gaps, scholars can contribute meaningfully to the discourse on cultural preservation, cross-cultural communication, and the evolving role of digital technologies in artistic communication.

## **5.3. Future Directions**

### **5.3.1. Exploration of Digital Communication**

As digital technologies continue to evolve, there is a growing interest in exploring the impact of digital communication on Chinese opera. Future studies should engage in empirical research to analyze the effectiveness of opera's presence on social media platforms, demonstrating how digital strategies can effectively expand its global influence. Furthermore, investigating the specific modes of digital communication and their advantages and challenges will provide insights into optimizing digital platforms for opera's promotion.

### **5.3.2. Innovative Modes and approaches of Communication**

Future research should actively explore innovative modes and approaches in cross-cultural communication of Chinese opera. For instance, adopting a new communication model like "cross-cultural co-creation" to find a better way to show the quintessence of Chinese Opera. The innovative models of communication can immerse audiences in the cultural richness of opera, thereby enhancing its communicative impact.

### **5.3.3. Local Community's Psychological Dynamics and Cultural Identity**

Investigating the evolving psychological dynamics and cultural identity within local communities is essential for understanding the reception and preservation of Chinese opera. As societal values evolve, there is a critical need to

examine how these changes influence the perception, appreciation, and preservation of traditional art forms such as Chinese opera. By exploring the psychological aspects of audience engagement and cultural identity formation, researchers can illuminate how Chinese opera resonates with contemporary audiences while maintaining its cultural authenticity and relevance.

### **5.3.4. Cross-Cultural Education of Chinese Opera**

The integration of Chinese opera into international educational frameworks presents a compelling opportunity to enhance cultural understanding and appreciation among foreign students. Research into effective strategies for incorporating Chinese opera into curricula abroad is pivotal. This includes developing interdisciplinary courses that combine elements of musicology, theater studies, cultural anthropology, and performance arts. Such an approach not only deepens theoretical understanding but also cultivates practical skills through hands-on learning experiences, such as stagecraft workshops and collaborative productions. Evaluating the impact of these educational initiatives on students' cultural awareness and cross-cultural competence is essential for refining pedagogical approaches.

Specifically, international education activities could include opera festivals, workshops, Summer camps, Winter camps and lectures. These activities serve as platforms for mutual learning and appreciation, promoting cultural diversity and global harmony. Case studies documenting successful cultural exchanges can provide valuable insights into how these initiatives enrich participants' understanding of Chinese opera while also facilitating its adaptation in various cultural contexts. Emphasizing interactive formats that encourage audience engagement and participation enhances appreciation for opera's aesthetic and historical significance.

In summary, the future of research in Chinese opera's global communication presents several promising avenues that can contribute significantly to its preservation and enhancement. Embracing digital technologies can expand opera's global reach via platforms like social media, while innovative models such as cross-cultural co-creation and VR/AR integration can enhance its appeal and relevance worldwide. Understanding evolving local community dynamics and fostering cross-cultural education will further ensure opera's preservation and appreciation across diverse audiences.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper reviewed the theoretical foundation, historical background, representative cases, media and technology, barriers, and strategies of intercultural communication of Chinese opera, presenting the main findings and conclusions. Current research shows significant progress in the research subjects and scope, evolution of research content, communication effects and evaluation, exploration of digital communication, and innovative communication models. However, research still faces limitations in subjects and scope, insufficient empirical studies on dissemination effects, and a need for further exploration of digital dissemination and innovative practices. Therefore, future research should further expand subjects and scope, deeply explore the intercultural communication of local operas. Moreover, the future of research in Chinese opera's global communication holds promise through exploration of digital communication

avenues, Innovative Modes and approaches of Communication, understanding local community dynamics, and enhancing cross-cultural education. These efforts collectively contribute to the enrichment and sustainability of Chinese opera on the global stage.

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