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Preserving Han Opera in Wuhan: Educational, Institutional, and Artistic Strategies for Cultural Transmission

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Abstract

Han Opera, an essential element of Wuhan's regional character and a prominent genre in Chinese traditional theater, confronts considerable obstacles in preservation and transmission due to contemporary social changes. This research analyzes the development of Han Opera's instrumental ensemble, educational frameworks, institutional structures, and creative practices to evaluate current methods and provide sustainable solutions for its cultural preservation. The research employs fieldwork, interviews, and historical analysis to delineate the evolution of band structure, underscore the significance of key accompanying instruments, and assess the efficacy of educational programs and institutional improvements. The results highlight structural problems such as decreasing troupe sizes, inadequate youth involvement, and restricted repertoire creativity. The report recommends strategic recommendations focused on improving arts education, rejuvenating performing ensembles, cultivating creative innovation, reconstructing talent pipelines, and broadening cultural platforms. This project seeks to enhance the continuing vitality of Han Opera in Wuhan by merging traditional elements with modern educational and technical methods, thus contributing to more extensive discussions on preserving intangible cultural heritage in the 21st century.

Keywords: Han Opera, Wuhan, Cultural Transmission, Chinese Opera, Music Education, Preservation, Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

Han Opera originated in the Qing Dynasty's Jiaqing and Daoguang eras and grew from local folk performances into a polished art form distinguished by expressive singing, regional dialect, rich narrative substance, and complex emotional expression. Han Opera was formerly extremely popular and influential on a regional and national scale, and it had a significant effect on other Chinese opera genres, notably Peking Opera, which included many of its artistic and melodic aspects (Zhang, 2021; Chen, 2024; Chen, 2013).

Despite its illustrious history and 2006 designation as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage of China, Han Opera has significant obstacles in transmission and preservation. Urbanization, modern entertainment options, and altered cultural tastes have all decreased public awareness and audience involvement. Meanwhile, the institutional structures and educational paths that formerly enabled its growth struggle to adapt to modern circumstances. A shrinking number of professional troupes, aging actor populations, and a lack of systematic talent development have all jeopardized the viability of this operatic institution (Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Feng, 2025). However, fresh attempts have developed in recent years to resuscitate Han Opera in

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Wuhan—the genre's cultural heartland—via creative educational programs, legislative assistance, community participation, and artistic reinvention. These projects indicate a rising realization of the importance of developing long-term strategies that maintain ancient traditions and make them relevant to future generations and a wider modern audience (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Tang, 2021).

This study looks at the current situation of Han Opera in Wuhan, concentrating on three key aspects of cultural transmission: educational systems, institutional frameworks, and creative innovation. It investigates how regional schools and colleges, opera troupes, cultural groups, and government agencies work together to preserve the operatic tradition. The study will examine Han Opera's musical qualities, role in cultural identity, and adaptations using case studies, interviews, and repertoire analysis. This paper seeks to uncover viable preservation measures and make tangible recommendations to preserve Han Opera's continuous life and transmission in the 21st century.

Literature Review

General Knowledge of Han Opera

Han Opera, formerly called Chu Tune and then renamed Han Tune, is one of China's most significant regional operatic traditions, boasting a history exceeding 400 years. Originating from traditional performance traditions during the Qing Dynasty, it developed into a refined art form distinguished by the Xipi and Erhuang vocal systems. It is profoundly embedded in Wuhan's languages and cultural heritage and neighboring areas (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). Over time, Han Opera evolved into four principal schools—Jinghe, Xianghe, Fuhe, and Hanhe—and significantly influenced other regional operas, notably Guangdong Han Opera and Peking Opera. Its creative attributes encompass pronounced voice inflections, varied plate styles, and vibrant character representations. Although the genre thrived in China and Southeast Asia, particularly in Hankou during the 1920s and 1930s, its popularity has diminished in contemporary times (Zhaoyang, 2019; Li & Woramitmaitree, 2023).

Despite its historical importance and classification as a national intangible cultural treasure in 2006, Han Opera still has significant obstacles in preservation and transmission. Factors include modernity, the reduction of professional troupes, dwindling audiences, and restricted educational outreach, which have led to its marginalization. Ongoing study, a resurgence of interest in regional cultural identity, and initiatives by institutions and researchers have underscored the rich musical history and the necessity for innovative preservation techniques. Current efforts focus on revitalizing Han Opera via educational reforms, institutional backing, artistic innovation, and the incorporation of digital and multimedia resources to captivate new generations and guarantee the preservation of this cultural heritage (Lee & Wong, 2017).

Music in Han Opera

Han Opera, a quintessential manifestation of ancient Chinese opera, integrates a profound and unique musical system grounded on the extensive legacy of Chinese traditional music. It utilizes the national pentatonic scale system, prioritizing melodic contour rather than harmonic complexity, and embodies the tonal subtleties of the Chinese language and regional dialects, particularly the Wuhan dialect. The music exhibits unrestricted alternation among pentatonic modes, distinctive harmonic progressions, and diverse cadences influenced by labor songs, folk melodies, and regional vocal traditions (Yu & Leung, 2019). Instruments such as the jinghu, erhu, pipa, and suona are essential for accompaniment, while musical techniques like "tuoqiang"

(melodic padding) demonstrate the dynamic interaction between vocals and instrumental assistance (Xuelai, 2023; Yang et al., 2015). These components converge to create an evocative and emotive soundtrack that supports the dramatic and character-centric essence of Han Opera.

The harmonic and vocal attributes of Han Opera have historically evolved due to internal innovation and foreign influences, particularly from Peking Opera and Western vocal methodologies. Artists like Chen Bohua initiated changes by incorporating scientific vocal training and decorative methods, therefore enhancing the expressive capacity of Han Opera (Chang, 2007; Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023). The evolution of its accompanying techniques, including modifying jinghu fingerings and implementing seven-tone scales, demonstrates an ongoing adjustment to changing aesthetic and performance requirements. Han Opera music, as a holistic art form, is intrinsically linked to its vocalization, performance, and theatrical techniques, with its preservation and ongoing evolution closely connected to the cultural, historical, and social context of Wuhan and Hubei Province (Chen, 2013).

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative research design based on an ethnographic technique to investigate the various ways utilized to conserve Han Opera in Wuhan. The research focuses on educational systems, institutional structures, and creative activities that contribute to the cultural transmission of Han Opera. Fieldwork was carried out between March and December 2024 at prominent Wuhan institutions such as the Wuhan Han Opera Theater and the Hubei Arts Vocational College. The study approaches used were semi-structured interviews, participant observations, document analysis, and performance documentation.

Study Objectives and Design

This study seeks to uncover practical, educational, and structural techniques for the long-term transmission of Han Opera. The research gives a comprehensive insight into Wuhan's Han Opera environment by combining interviews with senior performers, instructors, and students with firsthand observations of rehearsals, performances, and instructional activities.

Data Collection and Tools

Data were collected through four primary tools:

- Semi-structured Interviews – Conducted with key informants (actors, educators, students, and administrators) selected for their professional experience and contribution to Han Opera.
- Field Observation – Performed during rehearsals, performances, and classes to document pedagogical techniques, performance styles, and use of traditional instruments.
- Archival Research – Included reviewing scripts, score books, historical documents, and published research on Han Opera.
- Questionnaires – Distributed to gather perceptions of opera students and practitioners regarding the current state and challenges of Han Opera.

Data Analysis

This study's data analysis used a thematic and comparative method to evaluate qualitative data gathered from fieldwork, interviews, archival materials, and performance observations. The purpose was to uncover repeating patterns, linkages, and obstacles in the preservation and

transmission of Han Opera in Wuhan, with a focus on educational, institutional, and artistic settings.

Thematic analysis:

- Education and Training Practices (for example, curriculum design, student engagement, and teaching techniques)
- Institutional Roles and Policies (e.g., financing mechanisms, operational models, government participation)
- Performance creativity, repertoire selection, and musical instrumentation are some examples of artistic elements.
- Challenges and Limitations (such as audience reduction, performer attrition, and modernization demands)

Comparative Analysis:

- Comparing historical resources (e.g., scores, screenplays, theatrical records) with current performance and education approaches.
- Analyzing the evolution of band configurations and instrumentation utilization during different times.
- Comparing traditional and current repertoire styles and audience engagement tactics
- Comparing the institutional success of historical institutions like the Wuhan Han Opera Theater to modern teaching approaches at Hubei Arts Vocational College

Triangulation and Validation.

The study assured validity by combining data from many sources, including interviews, field notes, archive texts, and visual evidence. This multi-source verification improved the trustworthiness of interpretations and reduced bias. Feedback loops involving key informants were also utilized to corroborate findings and resolve uncertainties.

Results

Evolution of Band Organization and Instrument Configuration

The instrumental ensemble of Han Opera in Wuhan represents a critical aspect of the genre's artistic identity and transmission. As with its vocal performance and staging, the accompaniment band of Han Opera has undergone gradual development, adaptation, and standardization. While the earliest Han Opera ensembles were small, often consisting of just three or four members using flutes and wind instruments such as the suona and long pole, the integration of the Qin cavity tradition introduced new instruments like the kūhú (later transformed into the huqin) and yueqin, forming what became known as the wen-wu six-piece ensemble—two musicians in the civil (wen) section and four in the martial (wu) section.

By the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty, the civil ensemble (wenchang) had evolved into a three-part structure composed of yueqin, pipa, and huqin, each supported by auxiliary instruments including suona, flute, and cymbals. The martial ensemble (wuchang) consisted of percussionists managing hall drums, dangluo, large and small gongs, and cymbals. The growing complexity of the band led to the formal division into the “Four Major Pieces” of each section,

indicating a higher degree of specialization. The ensemble was relocated from behind the stage to the right wing, marking a shift toward theatrical standardization. This traditional configuration remained largely intact until the founding of the People's Republic of China, when modern reform further shaped the structure and size of Han Opera bands.

Principal Accompanying Instruments

To preserve the artistic authenticity of Han Opera, it is crucial to comprehend the structure and purpose of its instrumentation. Han Opera ensembles are generally categorized into two primary segments: ethnic orchestral instruments and percussion. The orchestral component consists of three primary categories: bowed strings, plucked strings, and wind instruments. Principal string instruments encompass the erhu, yueqin, and sanxian, whilst predominant wind instruments comprise the suona, hai di (little suona), and zhudi. Various auxiliary instruments, including gaohu, banhu, yangqin, pipa, and sheng, augment timbral richness. One of the most famous instruments is the long pole, a brass wind instrument characterized by a loud, piercing tone initially employed in dramatic contexts such as battles or executions. However, it is now virtually obsolete.

The percussion section, essential for martial scenes, comprises instruments such as side drums (bian gu), hall drums (tang gu), Yun Ban, gongs (daluo, xiaoluo, fengluo), and cymbals (bo). The side drum is the principal rhythmic regulator, while the hall drum intensifies tension during ceremonial or belligerent sequences. The yunban gives syncopated accents to enhance vocal performance, while the daluo produces profound, resonant tones that vary significantly depending on the striking location. The bo and xiaoluo, distinguished by their differing pitches and timbres, enhance the dramatic texture of the performance and frequently emphasize specific emotional signals or character actions (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Tang Gu

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024



Figure 2. Yun Ban

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024

Each instrument serves a technical purpose while also enhancing the distinct auditory character of Han Opera. The meticulous coordination between voice and instrument, especially between the jinghu and the vocalist, requires extensive training and sensitivity, highlighting the necessity of thorough education in both instrumental skill and vocal coaching. The preservation of Han Opera's instrumental history is intrinsically linked to its educational and institutional tactics and must be prioritized in cultural policies, academic curricula, and intergenerational transmission programs (Figure 3).



Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024

Educational Challenges and Initiatives

The educational frameworks about Han Opera are inadequate and inconsistently applied across various age demographics and institutions. Primary education efforts, such as incorporating opera clubs in primary schools and promoting opera appreciation courses, demonstrate potential in fostering early interest. Nonetheless, excitement wanes at the secondary and university levels owing to scholastic constraints, social stigma, and insufficient exposure to traditional arts. Higher education institutes, such as Hubei Arts Vocational College and Central China Normal University, provide limited yet significant platforms for Han Opera instruction. However, the markedly low student participation in opera-centric programs indicates a disparity between academic structure and the cultural preferences of adolescents (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Han Opera Score Book

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024



Figure 5. Han Opera Notation Score

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024

Han Opera practitioners and educators advocate for the systematic integration of Han Opera into national and local school curriculum as a prerequisite for rejuvenation. In addition to technical instruction, young learners should be instructed to comprehend the cultural, historical, and social importance of Han Opera to cultivate emotional connection and identity-based enjoyment (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Students of the Academy of Opera

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024

Institutional Development and Structural Constraints

Institutional attempts, including converting the Wuhan Han Opera Theatre into a public benefit institution, indicate a trend toward state-sponsored preservation. The Han Opera Inheritor System has returned several classic artists and repertoires to the stage, encouraging both seasoned and new performers. However, the protective system is mostly personality-driven and

lacks long-term viability without more institutional investment, planning, and policy reinforcement. Furthermore, reducing the number of professional Han Opera troupes from over 20 to one or two in the province highlights a structural support deficit. These troupes frequently face financial restrictions, limited performance opportunities, and declining public engagement and cannot invest in innovation, marketing, or talent development. Government efforts to support such troupes, whether through subsidies, policy directives, or cultural incentives, are often underused or inconsistently administered.

Artistic Strategies for Cultural Transmission

The artistic preservation and restoration of Han Opera requires thoughtful, innovative techniques that blend tradition and innovation. Han Opera's future as an art form entrenched in centuries of cultural evolution depends on its capacity to keep its traditional nature while also appealing to modern audiences. Artistic cultural transmission methods must address three key aspects: performance innovation, repertoire development, and audience involvement (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Exhibition of Han Opera

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024

Innovation in Performance Practice.

Performance is the heart and soul of Han Opera. However, as society and aesthetics evolve, traditional staging and acting approaches may struggle to captivate and excite today's audiences. As a result, developing innovative performance practices is critical. Renowned singers such as Chen Bohua have already paved the path by honing vocal skills and mixing expressive aspects from Peking Opera and Western vocal arts, combining tenderness and intensity to enhance musical expression. These attempts demonstrate that innovation does not mean abandoning tradition, but rather complementing it with modern sensibilities (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Han Opera Performance

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2024

Repertoire Development and Script Modernization

The stifling of fresh script production is a fundamental impediment to Han Opera's survival. While traditional dramas like Yu Zhou Feng and Erduimei remain staples of the canon, an overreliance on heritage works has hampered the art form's relevancy. New scripts that address contemporary issues such as social justice, migration, gender roles, and environmental conscience can reinterpret Han Opera in terms of modern principles and help it engage with a broader audience, particularly urban youth.

Strategic Guidelines for Sustainable Development

The research culminates in a set of strategic guidelines designed to address the challenges outlined above:

- **Strengthening Education:** Embed Han Opera in national and provincial education systems through curriculum integration, extracurricular clubs, and digital resources. Establish performance-based learning modules and national competitions to promote engagement.
- **Revitalizing Institutions:** Enhance the operational capabilities of existing troupes through stable funding, performance subsidies, and modern infrastructure. Formalize partnerships between cultural and educational institutions to institutionalize the preservation mission.
- **Fostering Artistic Innovation:** Encourage the development of new repertoires through grants, residency programs, and collaborative platforms. Invest in research initiatives that connect traditional themes with contemporary social narratives.
- **Rebuilding the Talent Pipeline:** Launch nationwide talent identification programs in schools and communities. Offer scholarships, apprenticeships, and professional development tracks for aspiring performers, musicians, and playwrights.
- **Expanding Cultural Platforms:** Reopen and renovate historical venues like People's Paradise to function as hubs for traditional arts. Utilize social media, live streaming, and augmented reality to reach new audiences.

Discussion

The preservation and transmission of Han opera. Han Opera's integration into school curricula has produced varied consequences. Pilot initiatives in Wuhan's primary schools indicate potential, since younger children have a natural curiosity and receptivity to ancient art forms when introduced to engaging, age-appropriate activities. However, interest declines dramatically in junior and senior high school, as pupils are more lured to global pop culture while being confined by academic obligations (Wang, 2023; An et al., 2025). This tendency highlights the urgent need for novel instructional practices that not only make Han Opera more accessible but also promote a true feeling of cultural pride and identity (Chang et al., 2024). Educational institutions must incorporate operatic appreciation more completely into music and arts instruction, including teacher training programs and more engagement with opera artists.

On an institutional level, the conversion of Wuhan Han Opera Theatre into a publicly supported cultural preservation unit is a notable structural accomplishment. This transition from performance-driven operations to heritage-focused tasks allows for long-term planning, archiving, research, and strategic outreach (Chabrowski, 2019). Nonetheless, institutional systems remain vulnerable. The "hot outside, cold inside" phenomenon, in which external policy and academic attention outpace interior commitment from artists and practitioners, emphasizes improved coordination. Institutions must safeguard and archive Han Opera and foster creative enthusiasm and accountability among performers, musicians, and directors (Chen & Seekhunlio, 2024; Yuan & Bhengsri, 2024). Furthermore, government policies supporting Han Opera must go beyond symbolic gestures and provide long-term funding, performance subsidies, and media support to create a robust infrastructure around the opera's cultural environment.

Artistically, creativity develops as both a problem and a requirement. Han Opera's artistic tradition is rich in substance, vocal expressiveness, and historical repertory, but its incapacity to innovate has resulted in cultural stagnation (Chang, 2007). While certain performers and composers, such as Chen Bohua, have experimented with vocal and structural elements, the majority of modern Han Opera productions depend largely on conventional texts and performance approaches (Lau, 2007). Without the development of fresh, thematically relevant works that resonate with current viewers, the art form faces extinction (Xie & Punvaratorn, 2024). The conversation about creative preservation must thus broaden to include active support for scriptwriting, composer development, and audience engagement activities that represent modern social ideals while retaining the genre's core (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024).

Conclusion

Han Opera, emblematic of Wuhan's cultural legacy and a fundamental aspect of Hubei's creative history, is encountering unparalleled problems in contemporary times. Notwithstanding its designation as a national intangible cultural treasure, challenges like diminishing institutional support, inadequate educational integration, and a depleting skill pool jeopardize its viability. The study indicates that although conventional performance methods and musical frameworks are vibrant and unique, their dissemination is obstructed by insufficient exposure for younger generations, financially constrained opera companies, and an excessive dependence on antiquated repertoires that do not captivate modern audiences.

A concerted strategy encompassing education, institutional change, and artistic innovation is needed for the continuity and renewal of Han Opera. Enhancing opera education across all tiers, reinvesting in troupe infrastructure, and updating repertoire are essential for captivating

performers and viewers. Furthermore, using digital channels and reinstating cultural sites such as the People's Paradise can enhance appreciation and accessibility. The survival of Han Opera relies on perceiving it not only as a historical artifact but as a dynamic art form capable of evolution and inspiration, functioning as both a repository of heritage and a medium for future cultural expression.

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