Rise and Fall:

Audience Participation and Market Economy in Traditional Chinese Opera

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Bachelor of Science, Illinois Wesleyan University, 2018

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Pittsburgh

2021

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Throughout Chinese history, traditional opera has encountered peaks and valleys. Although the status of the art and performers has been long controversial, the most significant factor that determines the destiny of traditional Chinese opera is actually the vitality of its market. My thesis seeks to tackle the role of market and audience participation in different stages of the development of Peking Opera, delineating the tripartite relationship between political interference, audience participation, and technological development. Within Henry Jenkins' theoretical framework of media convergence, I investigate collective intelligence, participatory culture, and contemporary fan culture vis-à-vis digital media that has been contextualized in traditional Chinese opera and its economic impact. I also explore the reactions and responses of the opera industry in China under the new norm of COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 period.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my committee members, Dr. Kun Qian, Dr. Charles Exley, and Dr. Song Shi, for their strong support and valuable suggestions on my research and writing. Thank you, Dr. Qian, for your encouragement and inspiration for my studies and life at the University of Pittsburgh. Your warm support helped me get through some of my hardest times. The transition from mathematics to humanities has been difficult for me, but I was fortunate to take Dr. Exley's Sources and Methods in East Asian Studies course in the first semester to identify the gap and to equip myself with mindsets in humanities research. I am also extremely grateful to Dr. Shi for your valuable suggestions in media and communication studies, without which I could not have formulated the current thesis.

I would also like to thank Haihui Zhang and Yu-Lien Lotus Liu for their kindest mentorship. In my two years working at the East Asian Library, not only did I gain expertise in library service and digital humanities, but I also experienced personal leadership growth. I will always remember your advice in my future study and work.

My special thanks go to the Asian Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh for the generous China and Chinese Studies Tuition Remission Scholarship for two consecutive years, without which I would not be able to complete my graduate study.

I would also like to acknowledge my interviewees for taking the time to discuss fan culture in traditional Chinese opera. Many have been volunteering time and energy to manage fan forums to popularize traditional opera. Your work is deeply appreciated, and your constructive input and opinions are of great significance to my thesis.

1.0 Introduction

In the late 20th century, traditional Chinese opera seemed to be doomed to fade out of the marketplace, unable to compete with the popularization of film, television, and diverse forms of pop culture. Due to elongated singing and historical plots, traditional opera could be considered as being incompatible with the modern fast-paced lifestyle and tastes of the younger generation. The past decade, however, has witnessed a change in the demographics of audiences of this traditional art. More and more young people go to the theater to watch traditional performances and participate in the transmission process via various modes. They learn to sing and perform traditional opera as amateurs and are deft in producing opera-related content that has been widely viewed using digital media tools. However, collisions between properly appreciating the old-fashioned art and new modes of engagement have initiated a series of heated discussions.

Public opinion indicates that a sense of appropriateness is needed to different groups in how to engage with performances or interact with performers. Much attention was drawn to what was considered unconventional in the field of traditional art. On 2018 New Year's Eve in Xi'an China, near the end of the performance, hundreds of audiences brought green glow sticks to the theater and waved their glow sticks to support the featured performer Zhang Yunlei (张云雷). In the final encore, as both a crosstalk performer and singer, Zhang Yunlei sang his signature song, an arranged traditional ballad, and the audiences waved their glow sticks to the rhythm of the music. Controversy arose almost immediately in news and comments regarding the potential contradiction between crosstalk as a traditional theatrical genre and glow sticks as a symbol of popular culture. Three questions were contentiously discussed in newspapers and social media:

Who were holding the glow sticks? Were they interested in the crosstalk performance at all? Would the gesture of bringing glow sticks to the theater be an impairment of the traditional art?

Regarding the event above, an article titled "Waving Glow Sticks in Crosstalk Performances? Crosstalk Performers Who Want to be Idols Should Simply Switch Careers" in *Beijing News* offers a rather cynical view to the phenomenon, arguing that different art forms require different atmospheres of appreciation and criticism and describing the behavior of waving glow sticks in a crosstalk performance to be nondescript (Wu). Another commentary on PingWest addresses both the advantages and the disadvantages of the new form of audience engagement. Identifying the group who waved glow sticks as the fans (fensi, 粉丝) of Zhang Yunlei himself, the article mentions that most fans do not know much about theatrical conventions and thus are likely to initiate inappropriate or untimely interactions that are often disruptive to a performance. On the other hand, the author acknowledges the positive influence on the popularity of the traditional art form that was once only of interest to a relatively small group (Zhuan). In an interview with a pair of crosstalk performers, Meng Hetang (孟鹤堂) and Zhou Jiuliang (周九良), they explicitly distinguished fans from audiences by stating that "fans are interested in performers and *xianbai'r* (闲白儿), things that are not related to the performance, while audiences (guanzhong, 观众) do not know much about the performers and only come to the theater to enjoy the show." Furthermore, when asked about their future careers when confronted with the unprecedented commercialization in the field, they described their goal as "turning fans into audiences." (Meng & Zhou)

Although criticism from the press or public opinion is prevalent targeting interactions involving fans in the field of traditional Chinese opera, new modes of engagement nevertheless infuse vitality into the marketplace of traditional opera, which is the most significant factor that

determines the destiny of the art. On the other hand, as audience participation has long been an indispensable component in the development of traditional opera, the contextualized fan culture is not a completely novel form but an extension of the traditional mode situated in the age of information. In my thesis, I wish to tackle the role of market and audience participation in different stages of the development of Peking Opera, delineating the tripartite relationship between political interference, audience participation, and technological development. I argue that the high-cultural status of traditional Chinese opera is actually a discursive construct in the modern period, which in effect deprives it of active audience participation and market vitality, lifeblood of innovation, and longevity of values. The development of market economy and digital media in recent years nevertheless provides unique conditions for traditional opera' revival. Borrowing Henry Jenkins' theory of media convergence, I hope to show how newly emerged fan culture vis-à-vis digital media brings new modes of audience participation and economic involvement, shedding fresh light on the future of traditional opera.

The following sections will be organized as follows: first, I will trace the genealogy of political interference of traditional opera, arguing that its contemporary high-cultural status is a politically constructed concept deeply intertwined with the past historical contexts, which directly affected audience participation. Second, I delineate various modes of audience participation and the impact vis-à-vis media technology, in particular, film and theatrical productions, archives and collections, creation and re-creation, and interaction and communication. Third, I focus on the economic impact of fan culture, analyzing site selection, gifts and monetary support from audiences, and celebrity endorsements. In the last section, to resonate discussions in the context of COVID-19, I summarize the difficulties faced by public and private troupes and their responses respectively, seeking to shed light on the opera industry in the future.

2.0 The Historical and Political Context of Audience Participation in Traditional Opera

A closer look at the abovementioned dichotomy between audiences and fans reveals another duality between artists and performers which ultimately mirrors the conflict of high art versus low art. Such identifications originate from an interplay between the market of traditional Chinese opera, political interference, and the self-awareness and social cognition of performers. I suggest that the status of traditional opera has always been determined by market forces, yet its uplifted status as a national art in modern times is by and large an artificial construct shaped by social elites and political forces.

In general, discussions around the status of the art and performers of traditional Chinese opera can be divided into five periods, namely, the Qing Dynasty, late Qing to May Fourth period, Second Sino-Japanese War period, Maoist era, and Post-Mao era. According to Jia, "the invisible hand" that serves as a driving force for the development of traditional Chinese opera includes three aspects, namely, the trend, needs, and spirit of the times (Jia, 2). To further investigate the underlying pattern, it is thus necessary to contextualize each stage of development in its own spatial-temporal background.

The first government-interfered dispute between high culture and low culture in traditional Chinese opera was known as *hua ya zhi zheng* (花雅之争). Starting from the reign of Emperor Kang Xi of the Qing Dynasty, the competition lasted for more than one hundred years. Huabu (花部) opera, represented by Peking opera and local opera, had been criticized by Yabu (雅部) admirers who loved Kun opera (kunqu, 昆曲) for being "vulgar and horrible, regardless of tunes, and lack of rhythm." (Wang, 22A) The market showed a clear preference towards Huabu opera

because of its explicit expressions and large audience base, but the Qing government started to interfere as supporters of Yabu consisted of mainly scholar-officials and the elite class. In 1779, as Wei Changsheng (魏长生), a famous Qinqiang (秦腔) performer, toured in Beijing, his performances achieved great success, and the troupe was soon banned by the Qing government (Jia, 12). Qinqiang performers were forced to learn Yabu opera or face deportation from Beijing otherwise (Jia, 12). Almost two decades later in 1798, the Qing government issued another ban on Huabu opera performances (Jia, 13). These government acts, however, turned out to be largely ineffective for the following reasons. First of all, the bans did not reduce the enthusiasm of audiences. Secondly, the bans only targeted Huabu opera performances in Beijing. As China is known for vast expanses and complex topography, differences in customs, dialects, economy, and so forth gave birth to various genres and subgenres of traditional Chinese opera. The opera market in most regions was in fact not affected. Thirdly, the opera industry in the 18th century was of no major significance and hence did not take much weight in the whole market. Although there were specific provisions issued, it was not regarded as a national concern.

By the end of the 19th century, reforms and westernization movements pushed traditional Chinese opera to another stage. Prior to that time period, opera performers were considered to be a type of entertainer and had low social status before Chinese intellectuals sought to implement new genres, themes, and thoughts in literature and art. Theorists represented by Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Liu Yazi (柳亚子) put forward a series of proposals for opera reformation, including founding specialized publications on opera, creating and publishing new opera scripts, actively organizing performances of "fashion opera" (时装戏) and "current-affair opera" (时事戏), and so forth (Sun, 114). Liang published an article in 1902 advocating that "if one wishes to reform a country, one must first start with reforming its novels." (Liang, 24) Under the pseudonym San Ai

(三爱), Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) wrote in 1904 that "a theater is a school for everyone, and a performer (xizi, 戏子) is a teacher for everyone." (Chen, 1) Literature and art gradually became didactic tools that were used to distribute new ideas of enlightenment. Accordingly, many intellectuals proposed that opera performance should be regarded as a legitimate occupation, if not a respected one. In the latter part of his article, Chen mentioned that,

> People in the world should be distinguished by good and evil in conduct, not by occupation. Moreover, it is only in China that opera performance is regarded as a cheap occupation and is not allowed to be treated as equal to others. Western countries have long been treating opera performers as scholars and intellectuals. Since opera performance has a lot to do with customs and education of a country, one must treat it seriously… Even if one traces the origin of traditional Chinese opera, it was not a cheap occupation. Ancient sages often learned rhythms themselves. (Chen, 2)

With its intrinsic affective powers and distinctive characteristics, Peking Opera soon became a cultural symbol of China that attracted international attention. Opera performances were politicized when confronting diplomatic affairs. Two of the iconic events that directly involved Japan-China cultural relations were exemplified by the change of attitude of Mei Lanfang, one of the best-known opera performers (Wichmann-Walczak, 202). He was warmly welcomed and highly acclaimed during his first performance tour to Japan in 1919, but he refused to perform for the Japanese during their occupation of China less than twenty years later (Wichmann-Walczak, 202). Gestures like this were regarded as acts of political protest and hence placed opera performers in the frontier of national defense. Accordingly, the social status of opera performers was further improved in the semi-colonial society. In 1930, Mei Lanfang and his troupe visited the United

States. To reduce the indisposition brought by language and cultural differences, Mei adjusted the programs to focus on acrobatic performances that demonstrated acting skills instead of presentations of skills of singing and speech (Rao, 145). The performance achieved great success, and Chinese opera became well-known on the stage of world theater.

Starting from the second Sino-Japanese War, traditional Chinese opera gradually became a robust tool extending nationalism. In 1938, the first modern Peking Opera *Songhuajiangshang* (松花江上), adapted from a traditional repertoire, *Dayu shajia* (打渔杀家) was performed at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, in memory of the first anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (Ren, 103). Since then, adapted repertoires began to appear in higher education curriculum, further lifting the political status of traditional opera. Meanwhile, many local governments and organizations started to issue additional regulations on traditional opera. In 1941, for example, the Shandong Association of Artists initiated an experimental Ping Opera troupe with the following three guidelines. Firstly, the troupe was supposed to choose scripts that were of educational significance in reality. Secondly, in accordance with educational requirements, old scripts needed to be adapted to carry the positive message that promoted unity, individual liberation, and fighting against class enemy, and eliminate the negative side of feudal ethics. Thirdly, the troupe should create new historical opera to cooperate with the army recruitment (Ren, 263). One year later in 1942, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) gave a speech at the Yan'an Art Forum mentioning that "it is necessary to competently make literature and art a part of the entire apparatus of revolution as a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people, fighting and destroying the enemy (Mao, 2)." However, traditional Chinese opera was considered as "a product of the feudal system that is detrimental to the Chinese nation" (Ren, 102). Therefore, as a countermeasure, more government-owned troupes were founded to produce adapted scripts that were in line with the values promoted

by the government. As a result, instead of the past consumer-oriented marketing, policies and propaganda set a clear direction and strong preference in terms of the theme, topic, and style of performance, indicating significant changes in the operating mode of the entire opera industry.

Upon the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated a series of campaigns known as Xiqu Reform. During the following decades, the fundamental relationship between traditional Chinese opera and prevalent ideology was maintained despite the vacillations of theater policies brought about by political wrestling (Fan, 28). Consisting of three components, to reform repertory (gaixi, 改戏), to reform practitioners (gairen, 改人), and to reform organization (gaizhi, 改制), the Xiqu Reform indeed strengthened the control on personnel and administrative issues, but reformers experienced difficulties in handling the rich traditional repertory of Peking opera (Fan, 32). During the 1960s, due to intraparty conflicts in the CCP regime and CCP leaders' direct involvement in the regulation of opera, the government's control of the opera industry reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. Assigned to state-owned troupes, carefully selected scripts were meticulously revised, rehearsed, and some of them were successfully recognized as "model revolutionary works" while the performing troupes that originally created the model works were now "model troupes" (Fan, 72). The eight best-known model works included five model Peking operas, two dance dramas, and one piece of symphonic music. With strong support from the government, model works were spread over the nation and across multiple media forms in a timely manner, achieving national dominance and a near-monopoly status. Regular market competition was broken, and many private troupes gradually disappeared. Meanwhile, the fate of traditional opera performers was drastically polarized. On the one hand, many outstanding opera practitioners were categorized as the "Rightists (youpai, 右派)" listed in the "Five Black Categories (heiwulei, 黑五类)", forced out of

stage, and in some cases even faced severe victimization. On the other hand, those who "chose the right side" became highly respected artists and served for state-owned troupes that provided a fixed wage regardless of evaluations from the general audience.

Traditional opera were brought back to the market after the "Reform and Opening Up" period in 1978. An increasing national awareness about cultural industries relieved the stiffness of the long-frozen opera market created by the Cultural Revolution. According to Jiang et al., multiple efforts to open up got China involved in the processes of globalization, modernization, and marketization (Jiang et al., 12). Policies were issued to support small-scale enterprises and entities of diverse ownership. With substantial financial input from both central and local authorities, theaters have been built in many cities across the country and projects have been initiated to subsidize traditional opera. However, in the first two decades after 1978, the effects of the series of government policies in the traditional opera industry were not as significant as in other cultural industries. Firstly, neither traditional master-apprentice teaching or training in professional schools had been fully resumed. Hence, a gap in the personnel of opera practitioners appeared. Secondly, the popularization of television brought more diverse entertainment into people's daily life. The novelty of new media forms soon earned itself a market dominating position.

Cancellieri and Turrini use the metaphor "the phantom of opera" to describe the economic and political effects on the opera industry, vividly portraying their extensiveness, perpetuity, and permeability. When separating the two factors, a significant impact of political interference on market economy can be perceived in Chinese opera. On the one hand, political interference changed the precarity of opera practitioners from facing market competition to the fear of creation and innovation. Gill and Pratt summarize examples of missing affective features that do not involve affirmative feelings as "the fatigue, exhaustion and frustration that are well documented

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in studies of cultural work, the fears (of getting left behind, of not find work), the competitiveness, the experience of socializing not simply as pleasurable potential, but as a compulsory means of securing future work, the anxiety, insecurity and individualized shame that are endemic features of fields in which you are judged on what you produce" (Gill & Pratt, 15-16). With fixed wages and relatively secure employment, many affective experiences that are constructive to the development of the opera industry are eliminated. Incentive for creation and innovation is often lost if not largely discouraged by political censorship.

On the other hand, the implementation of governmental policies would experience multiple lags. By comparing to automatic stabilizers that function without any deliberate intervention by the authorities, John Due listed three types of time lags that are commonly associated with discretionary policies, the recognition lag between the time identifying the issue and making changes in policy, the decision lag between the time action is proposed and action is taken, and the effect lag that exists between the time action is taken and an effect is recognized (Due). Thus, the current situation in the traditional opera market is to a large extent the lagged effect of the combination of post-Mao and opening-up policies. Although the government tried to revitalize traditional opera through legislation, the effect was not significant. Especially for Peking opera, while people's impression of it has been a national symbol, it is now also facing competition from other art genres and has seen a decline in its popularity.

It is precisely the entangled effects of political interference that raise multiple controversies since the classification of high art or low art for traditional opera has been politically constructed. As traditional opera is now regarded as a Chinese cultural symbol and a growing number of subgenres have been listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China since 2006, superiority can be observed among some opera audiences,

especially when fan culture "intrudes" into traditional art genres. In general, the nomenclature of audiences for traditional Chinese opera admits great ambiguity throughout history. The word "piaoyou (票友)" is a collective term referring to amateur performers who reside outside the traditional master-disciple lineage or have not received professional training in opera performance or accompaniment. Guanzhong (观众), the general audiences, covers a rather wide range of people who are willing to go to the theater to see a traditional opera performance. This is a term only appeared in the first half of 20th century alongside the promotion of popular arts and performers. In recent years, another group "fensi (粉丝)", the transliteration of "fans", has been identified. As fan culture becomes an integral part of the Chinese entertainment industry in the recent decade, controversy arises when such a massive influx flows into the traditional theatrical forms. Commonly associated with commercialized productions that draw attention to the appearance of performers and their personal lives, fan culture is regarded separately from the talent and the art itself.

The boundary between fans and audiences, however, cannot be clearly divided. In a conversation with one of the hosts of a *chaohua* (超话), a fan forum feature of Sina Weibo, of a Beijing opera performer, when the interviewer asked about her opinion on the distinctions between fans and audiences, she stated that there was in fact no significant difference among the nomenclature of audiences, mentioning that in early years, audiences of famous opera performers were almost as excited. She added that the common behavior of throwing gold and silver jewelry to the stage in the past was not that different from contemporary fans' behaviors in essence. Another interviewee, however, claimed that "the community of opera enthusiasts is not as discordant as fan communities of other popular art… the fans in our *chaohua* follow the rules and

the fan culture is quite harmonious here." Although identifying members in the *chaohua* as fans, she nevertheless distinguishes fans of Peking Opera from those of other popular art forms.

Although modes and manifestations differ in such a collision between traditions and innovations, audiences of traditional Chinese opera have always possessed a strong desire for interaction both in and out of the theater. Evidenced by the more than 300 opera genres in China, it is a fact that people are willing to watch, to create, and to perform opera even if they are not professionally trained or the performing conditions are primitive. The current disputes over new modes of engagements and the dichotomy between fans and audiences are thus essentially conflicts between ancient and modern iterations that are closely related to the development of media. The criticism and censure caused by emerging and conservative forms, according to Zhao, is a common phenomenon in the history of Chinese opera (Zhao, 46). However, regardless of methods of engagement, active audience participation serves as an indispensable role to the vitality of the opera industry. And new media also brings new possibilities in reimagining the market for traditional opera.

3.0 Audience Participation and Media Technology

Audience participation in the traditional Chinese opera industry has taken on different forms since its early beginnings. Despite the fact that the social status of early audiences varied drastically from high-ranked officials and soldiers to businessmen and peasants, the audience group that worked as the driving force of the opera industry was mainly the literati. However, it is worth noting that the increasing popularity of opera did not change the fact that people working in the opera industry possessed relatively low social status. Many prestigious families had explicitly banned their family members from performing or even watching opera. For example, in *Zheng shi gui fan* (Rules of the Zheng Household) it was mentioned that "chess, games, opera, insects, and birds could bewitch one's mind and made him listless… hence the Zheng's descendants should stay away from all of the above." (Zheng, 21A)

Nevertheless, such restrictions and stereotypes did not undermine people's enthusiasm for opera. Throughout the Song and Yuan dynasties, opera enthusiasts formed professional or amateur playwright associations (shuhui, 书会) and worked closely with famous troupes (Zhao, 9). Ma Zhiyuan (马致远), for instance, was a member of the *Yuanzhen shuhui* (元贞书会) located in the capital of the Yuan dynasty (Wang, 68). They produced both new scripts and adaptations of well-known plays that were popular at the time. One of the common characteristics of the playwrights was that, although receiving orthodox education, they did not pursue official positions through the regular imperial examination system but instead devoted time to creating scripts and interacting with opera performers and troupes. While their life choices could have been affected by multiple

factors including wars, misfortunes and more, the fact that they were able to earn a living by producing opera scripts indicated a dynamic audience basis and a substantial market demand.

Over the past century, rapid development of media technology has transformed traditional opera from a single commodity to a general type of content. Jenkins has precisely defined such phenomenon of "media convergence" as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want." (Jenkins, 2) With the development of digitization technology of visual and audio materials, many resources that were archived in libraries or personal collections have now become available online, and activities are no longer confined to actual theaters. Such a transition on the one hand reduces the time and economic cost of obtaining information. On the other hand, results of keyword search and recommendations based on big data also change the way people perceive information from proactive searching to browsing and shopping. In the case of traditional Chinese opera, sufficient information allows people to participate in opera-related activities in different ways.

While media diversity to some extent intensifies market competition, it is not the root reason for the decline of traditional opera. Instead, the development of opera has always benefited from media technology. In light of media convergence, Jenkins proposes a theoretical framework of the coexistence corporate convergence and grassroots convergence. While corporate convergence is a top-down corporate-driven process in which media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels in different media, grassroots convergence is a bottom-up consumer-driven process in which consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers (Jenkins, 18). Because of the long history and large audience base

of traditional opera, opera-related content is common in multiple media forms that cross-fertilize each other in terms of presenting the content from different perspectives. When tracing back to the time period when media technology was first introduced to China, it is evident that potential consumers of traditional opera spanning all classes attracted investors and entrepreneurs to initiate new projects. Among them, films and productions are typical examples that deliver opera or opera-related content to mass audiences.

3.1 Films and Productions: Products of Large Audience Base

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, many industries in China were influenced by a series of Westernization movements. New sources of entertainment appeared as technology of phonography and photography was introduced to China. By 1904, Columbia Gramophone's talent scout Fred Gaisberg and his coworkers realized the potential profit of producing Beijing opera records in China's high-end market and set off to China (Xu, 13). One year later in 1905, the first film made in China, *Dingjun Mountain* (Ding jun shan, 定军山), consisted of extracted scenes from a Peking Opera performed by Tan Xinpei (谭鑫培) (Teo, 290). Since such a landmark event carried great political, economic, and technological significance, especially in the crucial time period when China was facing competition with Western countries, the content of the film must have been carefully considered. Zhou has analyzed the "consciousness of creativity" (chuangzuo zijuexing, 创作自觉性) of the director Ren Qingtai (任庆泰) from three perspectives (Zhou, 122). First of all, in the choice of subject matter, the popularity of Peking opera had been affirmed and the genre fit the taste of indigenous Chinese audiences. Secondly, in

terms of film content, the director chose action scenes to avoid boredom to accommodate the silent setting and primitive camera language. Lastly, regarding the director's personal preferences, Ren chose Tan Xinpei to star the film as Tan was extremely popular in the field of Peking opera. Audiences were already familiar with his performance, which also made up for the film's quality defects to a certain extent.

The development in media technology exposed traditional Chinese opera to a wider range of audiences. Opera was no longer confined to theaters or tea houses and achieved international impact for the first time. Opera audiences were granted choices in principle despite the tremendously expensive film tickets early on. Meanwhile, noticing the expanding market, some opera enthusiasts started to explore the possibilities of incorporating Chinese opera with other media forms. In recent decades, in addition to the traditional genre of opera film, more films with opera elements are released, among which the most well-known ones include *Rouge* (1987, Stanley Kwan), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, Chen Kaige), and *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014, Tsui Hark).

More media forms and devices have been accessible and affordable for audiences of traditional Chinese opera as radios, cable televisions, DVDs, and portable music devices became prevalent. In 1985, a recording project was initiated known as *Yinpeixiang* (音配像). The project added images of contemporary performers to the soundtrack of preserved audio recordings of early opera masters. Audiences can thus obtain both visual and audio experiences when appreciating historical records. Furthermore, traditional opera are also common on radio programs. According to the statistics generated by CSM Media Center in 2015, six radio programs were found in 36 cities, consisting of an average market share of 3.42%. It is by virtue of the substantial audience base of traditional opera that these large-scale projects and productions can be implemented.

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In addition to films and productions, opera enthusiasts usually participate in collecting and archiving scripts and short biographies or anecdotes of famous performers. The popularity of the Internet has significantly diversified forms of opera-related content and hence expanded audience participation. Evidenced by archives and collections of traditional opera, not only do projects not have to be carried on by large enterprises, but opera enthusiasts now can also work on the same project despite spatiotemporal differences.

3.2 Archives and Collections: From Individual to Collective

The earliest opera bibliography appeared in *Wu lin jiu shi* (Tales of Wulin) by Zhou Mi (周密) in late Southern Song (Li, 2). Although not a specialized opera bibliography, the volume included 280 Song *zaju* repertoires, which was a reflection of the popularity of opera as well as people's passion towards involving in not only the creation but also the dissemination process. Different from bibliographies of other genres, most early traditional Chinese opera bibliographies were produced based on personal collections, and hence the works were hardly comprehensive depending on collectors' personal interests. Furthermore, as Chinese opera consisted of diverse subcategories, structures of bibliographies varied in terms of methods of classification, formats, and abstract writing styles.

Bibliography compilation for traditional Chinese opera continued in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties until the 1950s. The first specialized Chinese opera bibliography, *Lu gui bu* (The ghost book) composed by Zhong Sicheng (钟嗣成) in the Yuan dynasty, included not only entries of opera, but also short biographies of playwrights and the author's personal commentaries. In 1602, Lü Tiancheng (吕天成) proposed two rating systems to classify 192 repertories in *Qu pin*

(Music Appreciation). Opera bibliographies composed in the Qing dynasty included *Han shan tang qu pu* (Song books of Hanshantang) by Zhang Dafu (张大复), *Qian qing tang shu mu* (Qianqingtang collection bibliography) by Huang Yuji (黄虞稷), *Ming ye shan fang shu mu* (Mingyeshanfang collection bibliography) by Shen Fucan (沈复粲) among others. (Ni, 115, 135, 138) In the early 20th century, Wang Guowei (王国维) composed *Qu lu* (Music record) that was described as "rich in description and strict in style" (Ni, 2). From the 1930s to the 1950s, Fu Xihua (傅惜华) has composed multiple opera bibliographies for public library collections. These bibliographies are often used for more than reference. Zhong Sicheng mentioned in the preface that he "fears that the names of those who are well-known for their work today might be forgotten in the future" (Zhong, 4), indicating how much people value outstanding playwrights and performers.

The utilization of the internet has transformed the compilation process from individual effort to collective contribution. As a result of grassroots convergence, resources are centralized and become accessible to a larger range of audiences. The *Collection of Peking Opera*, for example, is a web-based repository that aims to digitize both ancient and contemporary scripts for reference purposes. Initiated by an opera enthusiast under the pseudonym Xiaodouzi (Little Bean, 小豆子) in December 2000, the repository is one of the earliest text digitizing projects both in the field of traditional Chinese opera and in Chinese-language sources as a whole. The main textual source is a facsimile reprint of *Xi kao da quan* (戏考大全) by Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, which was originally published in the early years of the Republic of China. As the project expands, scripts from other sources are included as well such as public and private collections, audio recordings, and some Kun opera scripts. In addition, the website also provides memorabilia in the field of traditional Chinese opera and short biographies of performers. Users may query

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specific scripts, master-apprentice relationships, schools of performance, and so forth through the website.[1]

These online archives are of great significance to the popularization of traditional opera. First of all, people who are willing to participate in the archiving process naturally form a community with an extended network, enlarging the potential audience base. Secondly, the archives usually consist of variations of the same script performed by different schools, which are essential for the training of professional and amateur performers. Thirdly, since many genres of traditional opera are sung in dialects or variations of dialects, audiences who are not familiar with the particular genre may have difficulties in recognizing the lyrics. As very few theaters provide subtitles for opera performances, online archives are a convenient resource to refer to when watching a performance in a theater.

A community-based interaction system is incorporated into the project. Anyone can participate in the digitization process voluntarily by contacting Xiaodouzi through his email address or other social media accounts listed on the website. One will receive a scanned copy of the particular play he or she requested and send it back to Xiaodouzi as a plain text file after finishing the input process. The scripts are entered manually for the following reasons. First of all, standard optical character recognition techniques might not apply primarily due to the difficulties in transforming right-to-left vertical writings to left-to-right horizontal texts. Secondly, the varied print qualities of the original sources cannot guarantee the accuracy of the OCR results. Thirdly, to make the project accessible to the general public, traditional Chinese characters need to be simplified during digitization. On the webpage of the table of contents, serial numbers for internal

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[1] Collection of Peking Opera 中国京剧戏考. http://scripts.xikao.com/. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

usage, titles and alternative titles, title and volumes of textual sources with special notes on collectors are listed. A color code marked by different symbols is used to indicate the status of the digitization process. Inside each script, the texts are divided into different sections including major characters, a plot introduction, reference information, links or titles of related scripts, and the actual content of scripts. Large-scale collaboration on the Internet has accelerated the progress of the project by a large proportion. By January 22, 2021, a total of 1,246 scripts of 1,006 titles have been digitized, accounting for approximately 56% of the project. According to the statistics provided on the website, 337 individuals under pseudonyms have contributed to the project and the character count reaches 9.96 million.[2]

In discussing collective intelligence through which virtual communities leverage the combined expertise of their members, Jenkins mentions that new forms of community are emerging that are defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments (Jenkins, 27). The use of open-ended crowdsourcing quickly expends the influence of online archives and collections. Furthermore, not only does the involvement of the internet increase the efficiency in terms of project completion, but it also facilitates a series of creational and re-creational works that demonstrate originality and individuality. In the next section, I will introduce the proactive engagement of opera enthusiasts utilizing new media technology.

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[2] Statistics-Collections of Peking Opera, https://scripts.xikao.com/statistic. Accessed 22 Jan. 2021.

3.3 Creation and Re-creation: Proactive Engagement

Jenkins uses the term participatory culture to describe active participation in media consumption and production in contrast to older notions of passive media spectatorship (Jenkins, 3). In the case of traditional opera, a large number of opera-related content are produced by opera enthusiasts. In addition to the aforementioned playwrights who participate in creation and adaptation of traditional opera, new media and digital technology now provide a wide range of audiences with opportunities to engage in creation and re-creation through various original and creative modes. As portable photography equipment becomes popular and affordable, some audiences would bring cameras or video cameras to the theater to take pictures or record part or all of the performance. Behaviors like these are generally prohibited in public troupes as they typically assign the task to professional photographers and provide official video records. In the case of private troupes, however, the copyright is somehow a "grey area." Hence, photography is usually permitted since when audiences share the photos and videos through online platforms, they serve as an advertisement that ultimately benefits the troupe.

Figure 1 Search Result from Youku

Figure 2 Search Result from Bilibili

Meanwhile, since simple editing of media content can be performed via computer or even

a smart phone, opera enthusiasts are able to produce original opera-related content using available

sources online. Fanvids, or "fan-made music videos," are a type of fan generated content that are

popular among opera audiences. According to Trombley, fanvids tend to emulate the frantic pace of ordinary music videos, but with a much stronger narrative or thematic throughlines, seeking to convey a point or tell a story (Trombley, 3). As a form of "fannish engagement and media literacy," such cultural appropriation demonstrates great originality and creativity of individual video makers (Freund, 284). Fans edit and reassemble video clips of their beloved performers, for example, to create short videos as means to attract wide publicity for the opera performers. Compared to a complete recording of an opera performance, fanvids are short and concentrated. Audiences are able to see highlights of different performances in one video. If they are interested in one or some clips, they will then go to a theater or search for complete recordings of the performances.

A fanvid titled "*Rangjiu*"(让酒), using the same title as the background music, is composed of clips of a Peking opera performer Tao Yang (陶阳) by one of his fans @王小豆啊. Clips inside the video include his television interviews, stage performances, shots of backstage preparation, and childhood documentaries. The 4'47" video is a summary of Tao Yang's art career from age 5 to age 22 when the video was produced.[3] To improve the audiovisual experience for audiences, the clips are organized to fit in both the context of the lyrics and the rhythm of the background music. Multiple video editing effects are applied including split-screen, fast and slow motion, and fade in and out. The video was posted in March 2019 on Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing website primarily focusing on games and animation. By Oct 20, 2020, it had received 27 thousand views, 1308 likes, 1642 favorites, 132 reposts, 86 regular comments, and 319 scrolling comments, demonstrating great popularity.

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[3]Fanvid "*Rangjiu*", https://www.bilibili.com/video/av47276037/. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

Another type of fan work that is common among opera audiences is peripheral products. Talented fans draw caricatures using digital drawing tools and print the drawings on badges, bookmarks, postcards, and so forth. Some of the drawings are realistic, and others are in the "Chibi style," in which characters are drawn in an exaggerated way to highlight certain characteristics. Fans who make peripheral products usually distribute them in the hallway of the theater before the performance starts. Sometimes the products are given out for free, while other times creators hand them out for an exchange of another product.

Figure 3 Fan Works Collected by Me

While participatory and interactive options vary, not all audience engagements lead to tangible or intangible products. Inside the theater, audiences are constantly receiving signals from performers and at the same time giving feedback to them. Now social media gradually extend the basic signal-feedback mechanism beyond the theater. Similar for communication among audiences, it both contributes to the theater atmosphere and generates evaluations and criticism through discussions on multiple topics. Such information exchanges guarantee a mutually

beneficial relationship that on the one hand enlarges audiences' appreciation for art, and on the other hand helps performers to reflect on their skills and make improvements.

3.4 Interaction and Communication

Three types of audience-performer interaction are often observed in traditional Chinese opera. The first one is in-theater reactions during performances. Common forms include the shout of approval (jiaohao, 叫好) and the shout of disapproval. The explosive sound of "hao" usually occurs when a famous performer first enters the stage, after a performer strike a stylized pose (liangxiang, 亮相), or after an extraordinary performance of a piece of singing, speech, or acrobatics. The shout of disapproval, in contrast, occurs when performers make mistakes on stage. Theatrical conventions like these can now be achieved virtually with new media technology, among which the "overlaid commentary" feature has been implemented in multiple video platforms. Originated from the Japanese term *danmaku*, it is a comment function that was first used on anime websites. Audiences can post comments that either flow by or stick to the screen. The comments shown on the screen can appear in different colors, sizes, and positions. By posting real-time thoughts at a specific spot on the timeline, audiences are able to demonstrate their reactions both synchronously and asynchronously.
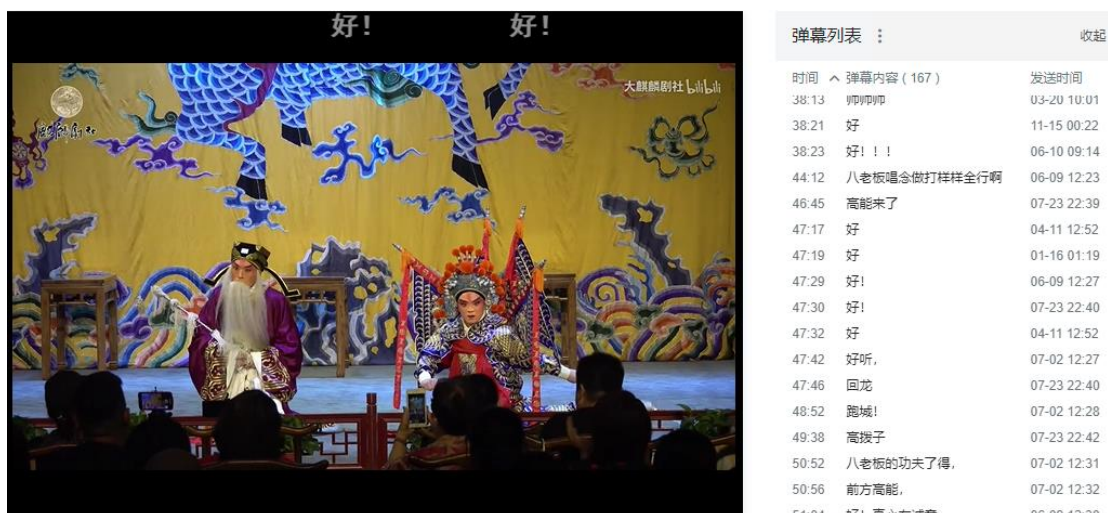
Figure 4 Overlaid Comments of "hao"

The second type of interaction is the professionalization of opera audiences. Commonly referred to as *piaoyou* (票友), literally meaning "ticket friend", this group of audiences are amateur performers who did not receive professional training. In the past, local residents often participated in performances and instrument playing, and sometimes even formed amateur troupes to perform during festivals and ceremonies. Li Dou mentioned in Volume 5 of *Yang zhou hua fang lu* that "the Huabu opera at Juncheng were all performed by local people." (Li, 75) Although "singing techniques, costumes, and props were extremely primitive", the enthusiasm of people participating in the performances was evident (Li, 76). Some *piaoyou* even take opera performing as a lifelong career due to pure obsession with the art and become well-known, and many have achieved great success in revolutionizing singing and performing techniques including Jin Xiushan (金秀山), Sun Juxian (孙菊仙), and Yan Jupeng (言菊朋). Some of them have created unique styles or even established new schools. Moving to the Era of Information, many professional opera performers have posted tutorial videos or articles online. Thus, more opportunities are provided for opera enthusiasts to pursue singing and performing techniques.

Another means that is commonly used to facilitate audience-performer interaction is social media. Many famous performers have public social media accounts and would share performance information or information about their daily lives. The use of social media brings a series of psychological effects. Horton and Wohl proposed the concept of "parasocial interaction" in 1956, defining it as "a one-sided mediated form of social interaction between the audience and media characters" (Liebers&Schramm, 5). When contextualizing the concept in the digital era, it can be observed that the pattern is prevalent in social media. The sharing nature of social media creates an impression that media characters' lives are tangible to users. By interacting with performers in the comment area or via private message, a sense of intimacy with celebrity figures is brought to the audiences.

In terms of community-based communication, the platforms used by opera audiences are mainly group chats and fan forums. Normally, the group chat is a more private form which can be joined by invitation only. In some cases, agents of performers or representatives of performers' official accounts directly initiate group buying of tickets that allows fans to reserve better seats before the official sale date. Furthermore, there are multiple fan forums on different social media in which fans post pictures, videos, or ticket information and initiate discussions on a specific performance or the art in general. Audiences in the same forum usually share common interests in specific performers or opera genres. Ranked first in activity level in the field of traditional Chinese opera, the chaohua of Tao Yang, a fan forum on Weibo, was established in July 2017. By October 7th, 2020, the chaohua of Tao has 109 thousand members, 30 thousand posts, and 440 million

views.[4] According to one of the current hosts @林绾想听董小宛, the initial intention of creating a chaohua forum for Tao Yang was to create a place for young audiences to communicate since the troupe to which Tao belongs were popular among younger generations and chaohua of other performers had been created as well. Similarly, @潇湘龠, a host of the chaohua of a prestigious Peking opera performer Li Shengsu, said during an interview that she wished to have a platform to share and communicate more with friends who liked Peking opera and Li. When asked about her opinions regarding the relationship between rising fan forums and the traditional art, @潇湘龠 elaborated,

> [Such fan forums] at least have a positive impact on the development of traditional art. A new social platform like chaohua is a gathering place for young fans and opera enthusiasts. People could share pictures, articles, videos, and so forth to discuss with each other. All these activities can help people to develop a deeper understanding of Beijing opera and the performers. The like-minded group would meet to watch opera and discuss common interests within a good atmosphere. The number of fans of chaohua is growing day by day. This shows that there are more and more people who like Master Li Shengsu and Peking Opera. Viewing from the current situation, it is a good start. (Xiao)

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[4] Chaohua of Tao Yang, https://weibo.com/p/100808679fbf44506a857329f5108eb2e47226/super_index. Accessed 7 Oct. 2020.

On the other hand, some interviewees also shared their concerns with the integration of fan culture into traditional art. While acknowledging the popularization of traditional opera brought by social media, one interviewee mentioned that,

> On social media platforms, disadvantages and shortcomings will also be infinitely magnified. Compared with the fan culture of idols that has been systematized, fan culture is a rather new attempt for traditional opera practitioners and audiences. Proper guidance and organization of fans is exactly what is scarce in the traditional art industry. Without the guidance of a professional team, the result may be contrary to expectations. (Cao)

From the perspective of opera practitioners, these virtual communities serve as exceptional sources for market research. The demographics of opera audiences is different from that of ten years ago. Under the trend of globalization and cultural communication, tastes of younger generations usually shift swiftly. When competing with other art genres, it is crucial for practitioners of traditional Chinese opera to discuss what has changed and what can be innovated. Over the past decade, many productions of "new Peking Opera" have emerged. Some of them are adapted from Western literature and drama, while others combine modern sound and light technology with traditional theatrical conventions. In 2019, Qilin Peking Opera Troupe performed an adapted Peking Opera *Three Trials of Galileo* using Peking Opera techniques to present the story of Galileo and his daughter Maria arguing with the Pope and verifying Galileo's Leaning Tower of Pisa experiment. It was an audacious experiment since some lines in the opera were sung in English. Although some innovative works faced severe criticism towards cultural disposition in the incompatibility between exotic plots and indigenous art, these activities nevertheless increase the market vitality and the enthusiasm for creation.

It is worth noting that, however, the virtual interaction and communication is not a perfect substitute for in-theater experience, and vice versa. In a 2012 article examining the contemporary situation of the market operation of the opera industry, Liu claimed that the performance of Chinese opera in the form of TV programs was at a bottleneck stage due to various alternatives for audiences, relatively low profits, and the lack of real-time atmosphere that was found in actual theaters (Liu, 68). However, with the embark of opera-related content on online platforms and alternative interaction methods, many of the above issues have been resolved. The pervasiveness of the Internet does not pose a threat to in-theater performances. Instead, the development of media technology brings traditional opera to a broader range of audiences, offering more diverse methods of engagement and a more active market.

4.0 Economic Impact of Fan Culture

Traditional opera is deeply connected to commercialization from the very beginning. With a series of complementary industries, traditional opera has been engaged in dynamic interactions among multiple stakeholders. Commonly regarded as the earliest mature opera genre in China, the mixed opera of Song (Song zaju, 宋杂剧) was performed at open-air entertainment centers called *goulan* (勾栏) and *wasi* (瓦肆) in Dongjing (present Kaifeng) and Lin'an (present Hangzhou), capitals of Northern Song and Southern Song, respectively (Zhao, 1). These centers served not only as performance venues and marketplaces but also places for communication among troupes, playwright associations, and audiences. During the Ming and Qing Dynasty, more troupes performed in teahouses and large restaurants where a three-facet stage was constructed (Zhao, 88). High-ranked government officials and wealthy businessmen sometimes booked an entire floor to watch an opera performance while enjoying an exquisite meal. If a restaurant or teahouse possessed great reputation, the large customer flow would bring the troupe a considerable amount of profit. Alternatively, sites where a famous troupe resided would also increase the popularity of surrounding business. In 2020, the famous crosstalk troupe Deyunshe announced that a new branch theater was going to be constructed in Ji'nan, Shandong. Shortly after the announcement, a bubble tea chain store opened near the designated site for the theater using the name of the troupe as its location reference, even though the theater was not built yet. Although more and more modern theaters appear in recent decades, traditional theaters still maintain the structure of a dining place where four to six chairs are placed around each table, and audiences may order tea, nuts, or dry

fruits during a performance. Similarly, famous theaters and adjacent hospitality industries tend to profit more together than apart.

In addition to the relationship between traditional opera and other surrounding industries, it is also a tradition for opera enthusiasts to support their beloved performers with gifts of various value, sometimes even with cash. A Chinese idiom *yishifumu* (衣食父母) was used to describe the relationship between audiences and performers, literally meaning "parents that offer food and clothing." During the time when opera performance was a disreputable occupation, performers usually had unstable income and hence relied on audiences' support for food and clothing. Although the situation has changed as is the 20th century, similar conventions remain for audiences to show their appreciation to the performers. An article from *Sanliujiu huabao (Sanliujiu Pictorial)* in 1941 indicated that, in early 20th century, it was common for wealthy opera enthusiasts to purchase costumes for performers, advertise for performances, or book high-class box seats. In some cases, performers would receive extremely expensive gifts such as silver ingots, gold bars, and jewelries. For famous opera performers, these economic interactions account for a major portion of their income, far more than the stipend they received from the troupe.

Although the monetary contribution can be substantial, most of these activities were initiated by individuals without systematic organizations. Different from the traditional agency that mainly relies on business connections and the reputation of the performer, more diverse operating models are now implemented in the opera industry. Liang and Shen point out that China's media and entertainment companies are beginning to embrace the creative powers of their fans, and are seeking new ways to develop, invest in, and nurture their fan community (Liang & Shen, 331). Among various marketing strategies, the integration of cultural and creative industry is commonly employed by contemporary agencies. In January 2021, Qilin Peking Opera Troupe

launched a series of creative products including desk calendars, canvas bags, amulets, folders, and postcards, with pictures, caricatures, and logos.[5] With fans as targeting consumers, the newly emerged industry gains a competitive advantage from the efficiency, effectiveness of the idiosyncratic mix of resources and handicrafts or art (Peris-Ortiz et al., 2).

Figure 5 Creative Products

As fan clubs have become prevalent in recent decades, supporting activities for performers are more structured and more diverse. In general, three types of supporting activities are organized by hosts of fan forums or organizers of fan clubs. First of all, some fan clubs would arrange group buying opportunities for tickets or other products. For example, a post in the chaohua of Li Shengsu on March 18, 2021 mentioned that they will provide autographed CDs for opera enthusiasts who cannot be physically present at a performance. The second type is fundraising activities that are usually held before a performance. The collected fund would either be used to purchase flowers, food, and gifts for the performer, or produce "customized supporting packages" of peripheral

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[5] Weibo Post, https://m.weibo.cn/2261722561/4619442468161633. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

products to give or sell to opera enthusiasts. For the 2nd anniversary of Qilin Peking Opera Troupe in 2018, a total of 3,169 *yuan* was raised to purchase a display board, two flower baskets, two bouquets, a fruit basket, 250 key chains, and 300 fans.[6] Thirdly, since these fundraising activities are designed to be non-profit, profit from the sale or surplus of the fund is commonly used for charitable activities. Charitable organizations that recently received donations from fan clubs of traditional opera include China Siyuan Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, Shanghai Changyi Foundation, and the National Quintessence Charity Special Fund.

The involvement of social media also raises the issue of economic impact. Hutchinson has proposed the following three parameters to measure the social media influence: the number of people they can reach, brands they have collaborated with, and times they have been mentioned in media (Hutchinson, 2). A similar algorithm is applied to quantify the activity level of fan forums. Milne and McDonald have proposed a scheme of fan identification of three discernible levels: low identification (social fans), medium identification (focused fans), and high identification (vested fans) (Milne & McDonald, 15). For traditional Chinese opera, although the broad audience base is diverse in age, gender, and occupation, the driving force of the market is the popularity of specific performers and troupes. The most outstanding performers of a genre are commonly referred to as *jue'r* (角儿) and receive the most attention. Such a performer-centered appreciation is determined by the performance characteristics of traditional Chinese opera repertoires that are highly technical and vary drastically in artistic styles and technical levels (Zhang, 122). As a result, most fans of traditional opera can be classified as "focused fans," who not only consume an artist's products, but also spend money and time on tracking an artist's personal information and follow their big

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[6] Weibo Post, https://m.weibo.cn/2261722561/4276320357159750. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

events (Liang & Shen, 333). Therefore, it is not surprising that the fan forums with the highest

activity level are those of individual performers rather than a genre.

Table 1 Statistics of Fan Forums in Tieba and Weibo

Genre	Forum Name	Media	Views	Posts	Members	Rank	Fans of Personal Account
Peking Opera	陶阳云圣	Weibo	440M	30K	109K	1	1.23M
Peking Opera	陶阳云圣	Tieba		87379	7207		
Peking Opera	王珮瑜	Weibo	580M	68K	38K	2	1.61M
Peking Opera	王珮瑜	Tieba		14583	4933		
Peking Opera	张火丁	Weibo	82.266M	9244	12K	3	N/A
Peking Opera	张火丁	Tieba		27827	4400		
Peking Opera	迟小秋	Weibo	57.255M	11K	9388	4	N/A
Peking Opera	迟小秋	Tieba		22824	2592		
Peking Opera	李胜素	Weibo	100M	11K	14K	5	56125
Peking Opera	李胜素	Tieba		64527	17258		
Yue Opera	王君安	Weibo	45.646M	7053	5287	8	N/A
Yue Opera	王君安	Tieba		2159928	231094		
Peking Opera	于魁智	Weibo	25.327M	3321	6294	10	4512
Peking Opera	于魁智	Tieba		30635	15076		
Peking Opera	单仰萍	Weibo	75.515M	12K	7695	12	N/A
Peking Opera	单仰萍	Tieba		59527	15626		
Peking Opera	吴凤花	Weibo	9.946M	3270	2176	13	65737
Peking Opera	吴凤花	Tieba		89592	20323		

According to statistics generated in October 2020, forums of opera performers that ranked

top can reach hundreds of millions of views. Among the fan forums with high activity level, most

are forums for Peking Opera performers and some are forums for performers of Yue Opera, a local

opera that is popular in Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shanghai. Furthermore, famous opera performers

are sometimes invited to opera-related shows, programs, and activities that are outside the theater, indicating great potential for advertisement and celebrity endorsement. In April 2018, a young Peking Opera performer Tao Yang was invited for an interview by a fashion magazine *VogueMe*. In the same year, another well-known Peking Opera performer, Wang Peiyu (王珮瑜) became an ambassador of a stationery brand *Chenguang*. The brand considered her as a fit for the company philosophy, "fusion of tradition and trend," since Wang had participated in multiple variety shows and had been regarded as a representative figure in the promotion of Peking Opera. The series of products employed Peking Opera theme using the concept of the four roles in traditional opera, *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, and *chou*, in the design of a stationery set including a notebook, a bookcase, a bookmark, a pen, an eye mask, and a tape.

Research on variables that affect the buying intention of consumers of a celebrity endorsed product shows that potential variables include fashion involvement, media exposure, celebrity scandal, source credibility, and possible moderating variables (e.g., personality traits and celebrity-consumer connection) (Min et al., 16). Keller concluded the rationale behind celebrity endorsement strategies as that a famous person can draw attention to a brand and shape the perceptions of the brand, by virtue of the interferences that consumers make based on the knowledge they have about the famous person (Keller, 279). In the case of performers of traditional opera, because of the large audience base and the perception of opera as a "cultural symbol," opera performers as celebrity endorsers have natural advantages in aesthetics and trustworthiness. Therefore, by cooperating with appropriate brands, a win-win situation can be created.

Generally speaking, the development of digital media and video sharing platforms create new modes of media convergence in opera-related content and contemporary fan culture. For its flexibility (audiences are not confined in theater space to enjoy any performance), editability

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(videos can be produced and edited by fans), singularity (people can choose to follow their idols anywhere anytime), and communicability (through social media and fan forums), digital media provides a unique infrastructure for audience participation and economic exchange. This infrastructure then extends to the form of virtual theater during the COVID-19 pandemic, which manifests great potential for the sustainability of traditional Chinese opera.

5.0 Challenge and Change: Coping with COVID-19

At the beginning of 2020, the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic became a threat to human beings worldwide. A series of actions have been implemented including mask wearing, social distancing and quarantine. Some businesses had strict limits on occupancy while others had been temporarily or permanently shut down. Traditional opera and theaters as non-essential business hence faced severe challenges in sustainability. During the first half of 2020, theaters and cinemas in China were mostly closed. When the pandemic was initially brought under control in mid-2020, theaters started to reopen intermittently depending on the local risk level. By the end of 2020, the limit of occupancy of theaters in Beijing was restricted to 75% (Liu).

In coping with new norms under COVID-19, many public troupes chose to initiate "virtual theaters," allowing audiences to watch real-time or recorded performances from home. Different from the regular recordings that can be found on video platforms, these virtual theaters are designed to possess additional features that purports to simulate the real theater experience as much as possible. The China National Peking Opera Company, for example, launched a virtual theater during the Spring Festival recess in 2021. Using special recording techniques, audiences were able to enjoy a high-quality performance with 4K/8K ultra-high definition. A commentary article on *Guangdian Toutiao (Headlines of Radio, Film, and Television)* summarizes features of the virtue theater with four "I"s, namely, interconnected, interactive, intelligent, and immersive (Zhang). The virtual theater is accessible and adaptable on multiple devices that are connected to the internet. In addition, a "cloud box" feature was implemented to allow family and friends to share a virtual space that simulate a box or a table in a real theater. Audiences could also make in-application purchase of virtual gifts to send to specific performers. Furthermore, to avoid boredom from still

scenes, the virtual theater provides eight visual perspectives including regular stage, tracking one performer, opera band, and so forth. Audiences could switch their viewing preference anytime during the performance.

Figure 6 Virtual Theatre

While virtual theaters seem like an acceptable alternative for entertainment of opera enthusiasts during COVID-19, their construction requires a team of experts including not only opera practitioners but also programmers for algorithms, website architecture, and user interface design. For small-scale private troupes, it is nearly impossible to afford such resources and laborers. Being away from theaters not only affect the income of private troupe performers, but more importantly, their media exposure also decreases. In response to the difficulties, many

performers utilize social media platforms to produce opera-related content and to interact with audiences. On Douyin, the Chinese version of Tiktok, for example, a heated tag named "who said that Peking Opera does not 'Tiktok'" initiated by some Peking Opera performers which became a trend. Some performers also make video blogs (vlogs) on their social media accounts documenting their life and training outside the theater.

John F. Kennedy once interpreted the word "crisis (weiji, 危机)" in Chinese as a combination of danger (wei, 危) and opportunity (ji, 机), reflective of its original connotation in Chinese (Kennedy). In response to the challenges and difficulties, opera practitioners have demonstrated great adaptability and creativity. Therefore, rather than treating virtual theaters and social meta tags as temporary substitutes, it is worth considering the innovations as complementary activities to the in-theater experience. Ticket prices for virtual theaters are usually 5% to 10% of those for regular theaters. Some performances are even free for access. In addition, virtual activities provide more flexible experiences in terms of time and location, and hence reduce both time cost and travel fees. Furthermore, with the help of digital technology, customized features allow audiences to pursue one or more aspects of a performance that they are most interested in. Therefore, I believe that a future direction of virtual engagement is to design user-friendly platforms that can both carry on the advantages of regular theaters and compensate for their disadvantages.

6.0 Conclusion

Traditional Chinese opera has encountered peaks and valleys in the past centuries. From empirical experience, it can be concluded that the main reason for the decline of traditional opera was its detachment from the market. Such a detachment on the one hand causes the audience to be unable to actively influence the art. On the other hand, opera practitioners do not have enough incentive to refine their skills and to produce creative work. Even entering the digital era, the root cause for the downturn of traditional opera is not the increasing competition but its forfeit from the market. In my opinion, the best way to preserve an art is not to list it as a heritage. Instead, change should be regarded as the normal state of art. If constantly shaped by free market and healthy competition, traditional opera can develop with time and maintain its exuberance.

To delve deep into the market requires maintaining a close relationship with consumers, in this case, audiences. While audience engagement has been an essential component of the opera throughout history, the modes and methods of engagement have never been consistent. With the development of media technology, the convergence of media leads to the divergence of content. Collective intelligence and participatory culture now provide more diverse, effective, and efficient modes of engagement. Audiences now have the opportunity to choose or invent their own way of interaction based on their interests and expertise. Since the spatiotemporal restrictions no longer exist and the time and economic costs significantly decrease, more and more audiences now are able to participate in opera-related activities, infusing great vitality to the market of traditional opera.

Over centuries of rise and fall, traditional Chinese opera nowadays faces the choice of maintaining tradition or seeking innovation. From my perspective, however, the two are not

contradictory. A famous Chinese saying goes, *jiuping zhuang xinjiu*, meaning "to fill an old bottle with new wine." As the "new wine," new modes of engagement and the involvement of social media serve as not an impediment but an opportunity to connect traditional opera with the new era and to enlarge economic impact. As I mentioned earlier, such a combination of community-based fan culture and traditional opera is still at a primitive stage. Therefore, it is natural that disputes and disagreements arise. In my thesis, while I do not seek to resolve existing controversies or declare any righteousness about the appropriate ways for audience participation, I hope to reveal the nature of the stratification of audiences and the long-standing juxtaposition between tradition and innovation. According to Pool, convergence does not mean ultimate stability, or unity (Pool, 53). Instead, it operates as a constant force for unification but always in dynamic tension with change (Pool, 53). In general, regardless of praise or criticism, as long as the process is dynamic, I look forward to a prosperous status in traditional Chinese opera in the future.

其声淫哇妖靡，不分调名，亦无板眼。（王骥德《曲律·卷二》）

The sound is vulgar and horrible, regardless of tunes, and lack of rhythm.

叫棋杵双陆词曲虫鸟之类皆足以蛊心惑志废事败口家予孙尝一切弃绝之。（郑太和《郑氏规范》）

Chess, games, operas, insects, and birds could bewitch one's mind and made him listless… hence the Zheng's descendants should stay away from all of the above.

皆当今显宦名公词章行于世者，恐后湮没姓名。（钟嗣成《录鬼簿》）

I fear that the names of those who are well-known for their work today might be forgotten in the future.

郡城花部，皆系土人。（李斗《扬州画舫录》）

The Huabu opera at Juncheng were all performed by local people.

音节服饰极俚。（李斗《扬州画舫录》）

Singing techniques, costumes, and props were extremely primitive.

欲新一国之民，不可不先新一国之小说。（梁启超《论小说与群治之关系》）

If one wishes to reform a country, one must first start with reforming its novels.

戏馆子是众人的大学堂，戏子是众人大教师。（三爱《论说·论戏曲》）

A theatre is a school for everyone, and a performer is a teacher for everyone.

世上人的贵贱，应当在品行善恶上分别，原不在执业高低。况且只有在我中国，把唱戏当作贱业，不许和他人平等。西洋各国，是把戏子和文人学士，一样看待。因为唱戏一事，与一国的风俗教化大有关系，万不能不当一件正经事做。… 就是考起中国戏曲的来由，也不是贱业。古代圣贤，都是亲自学习音律。（三爱《论说·论戏曲》）

People in the world should be distinguished by good and evil in conduct, not by occupation. Moreover, it is only in China that opera performance is regarded as a cheap occupation and is not allowed to be treated as equal to others. Western countries have long been treating opera performers as scholars and intellectuals. Since opera performance has a lot to do with customs and education of a country, one must treat it seriously… Even if one traces the origin of traditional Chinese opera, it was not a cheap occupation. Ancient sages often learned rhythms themselves.

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