

# *The Living Inheritance and Moving Progress of Contemporary Cantonese Opera from the Perspective of Communication*

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**Abstract:** Between July 3 and July 28, 2023, Television Broadcasts Limited released the Hong Kong drama *Unchained Medley*, which used a small village in the countryside and Cantonese Opera as the backdrop for the drama. It tells a tragic and touching story of human-ghost love between pop musician Ivan Zhang and the female ghost Wan Lau Fong (Cantonese transliteration is used). Artistic elements in *Unchained Medley - Cantonese Opera* is an ancient form of traditional Chinese theater, a local performing art that employs Cantonese as the language of performance, singing, acting, reciting and traditional folk music, along with distinctive stage costumes and abstract forms. When reviewing Chinese and English papers published between 2019 and 2023, research on the analysis of Cantonese opera primarily focused on the transformation of performance forms and the creation of Cantonese opera repertoire content. However, there needs to be more in living inheritance with Cantonese Opera. This paper utilizes James W. Carey's 'The Ritual View of Communication' as a theoretical framework. The article mainly adopts methods such as literature review, case studies, and comparative analysis to elucidate the significance and complex dilemmas surrounding the vibrant communications of Cantonese opera in the post-COVID world. It then consolidates and summarizes research experiences related to the protection and universal transmission of Cantonese opera in every aspect, laying the foundation for the in-depth development of Cantonese opera research.

**Keywords:** Cantonese opera, living heritage, digital humanities, intangible cultural heritage, dramatic intangible heritage

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Traceability of Global Cantonese Opera

Since the 19th century, research on Cantonese opera has been carried out in Chinese and overseas Chinese settlements in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, as well as in regions such as Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macao, and Guangxi where Cantonese is the main language. From the 1980s to now, a new generation of Cantonese opera scholars such as

Ng, Wing Chung [1], Vincent, and Nancy Yun Hwa Rao [2] has emerged in overseas academic circles. They have explored issues related to social and cultural history, such as the overseas spread and development of Cantonese opera, as well as the history and function of Chinese theaters. Leveraging their advantageous geographical locations, they have relied on available materials within their environments and applied their professional academic training to investigate the phenomenon of the local Cantonese opera's spread and its benefits. Scholars from different countries in the field of traditional Chinese theater, including Issei Tanaka, Barbara E. Ward, Taro Hatano, and other [3], have adopted anthropological research methods to explore Cantonese opera. This has propelled the study of Cantonese opera into an interdisciplinary research frenzy, opening up new paradigms and horizons for the field.

## **1.2. The Development Status of Cantonese Opera in Mainland China**

As a country with significant cultural heritage, China has conducted extensive research on the artistic transmission of Cantonese opera, the performance style of dramatic characters, and the appreciation of its works. Against the backdrop of the times since the outbreak of COVID-19, the author conducted a search on the China Knowledge Network for articles related to the theme of "Inheritance of Cantonese Opera" from 2019 to 2023 and found 693 relevant articles [4]. Among the existing studies, Chinese scholars have approached the topic of Cantonese opera inheritance and protection from various perspectives. These categories include summarizing the protection experiences of Cantonese opera's artistic heritage, addressing the dilemmas of its inheritance, and exploring recent achievements in digitalized non-legacy preservation. A representative paper from the years 2020 to 2023 is "Ten Years of Conservation Experience in the Art of Cantonese Opera" by Wang Kui, director of the Institute of Opera Research at the China Academy of Art. This study condenses the author's experiences preserving and researching Cantonese opera from 2009 to 2019. From a macroscopic perspective, Wang argues that the current systematic structure of Cantonese opera as an art form has matured. He suggests that specialized preservation efforts centered on Guangzhou have developed a certain methodology, and creating new repertoire enhances the genre's ability to evolve in a modern context. Wang's paper offers a comprehensive and detailed account of the current state of Cantonese opera and its practical applications. Simultaneously, the paper provides a complete and detailed account of the concrete practices involved in preserving the cultural heritage of Lingnan music. This indicates that Cantonese opera has been thoroughly documented and maturely preserved in its artistic expression.

## **1.3. Market Preparation**

Due to the need to control and manage the floating population during public health incidents, the Guangzhou Cantonese Opera Theater canceled more than 90 spring performances during the pandemic [5]. They expanded their digital purchase and dissemination channels for Cantonese Opera, uploading Cantonese Opera videos on WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, Bilibili, and other social platforms to attract a younger audience. However, upon investigation, it is evident that the full potential of Cantonese opera in new media communication has yet to be realized. Taking the video website Bilibili as an example, the column with the highest attention dedicated to Cantonese opera has only received 228 likes. Additionally, only four uploaders have received personal authentication. The official account with the highest level of attention belongs to the well-known Cantonese opera singer Zeng Xiaomin, boasting 44 video works and 64,000 fans. In contrast, the official account of "Peking Opera Cat" on Bilibili alone has 301,000 followers, with channels related to Peking Opera garnering over 100 million views. Cantonese opera, on the other hand, needs more user engagement and popularity, as seen in prominent promotions.

#### 1.4. The Building of Talents

In 2023, scholars Xie Wenyan and Wen Yao analyzed the contemporary preservation challenges facing Cantonese opera, focusing on talent cultivation in their work titled “The Preservation of Righteousness and Innovation in Cantonese Opera” [6]. They used an interview with Ou Kaiming, a representative inheritor of Cantonese opera, as a starting point. They highlighted the arduous process of learning opera, limited treatment options, and the elimination of institutionalized quotas in Cantonese opera theaters, among other factors. These issues have resulted in a shortage of young Cantonese opera performers, making it challenging to preserve this non-heritage art form. The primary income source for Cantonese opera performers is determined by the ticket sales rate at theater performances. On the online ticketing platform of the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Theatre, ticket prices range from RMB 50 for a third-class ticket to RMB 180 for a VIP ticket. Analysis of seat selection data reveals that most of the audience chooses the RMB 50 third-class seats, while other ticket price options receive limited attendance, ranging from one-fifth to one-fourth of the theater’s capacity per performance. According to information available on the official WeChat public platform of the Guangzhou Cantonese Opera Theatre [7], ticket prices for Cantonese opera productions such as “Hu Bu Gui” staged by the Southern Theatre of Guangzhou vary from first-class to fifth-class tickets, with prices ranging from RMB 30 to RMB 180 each. Similar pricing patterns are observed for productions like “Bi Hai Maniac Monk.” However, attracting audiences to Cantonese opera through lower ticket prices has not achieved the traditional profit-making objective of “making small profits and selling more.”

#### 1.5. The Pitfalls of Innovation

In her book, “Listening Practice and History: Sound, Erasure,” American scholar Nancy Yunhwa Rao [8] discovered that in the late 1870s, San Francisco had four simultaneous Chinese theaters. However, Cantonese opera underwent significant changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, resulting in limited sources for scholars to understand nineteenth-century performance practices and repertoire fully. Despite the availability of lyric books containing classic poems and scripts of traditional Cantonese opera, their connections to the performance practices of that period, which heavily relied on improvisation, remain poorly understood and require further investigation. Creative concerns about Cantonese opera have persisted since the Republic of China era. As early as 1937, Jane Siew Kiong pointed out in her work, “The Shortcomings and Improvement of Cantonese Opera,” that writers were trapped in a repetitive cycle. The faster new operas were produced, the quicker they became obsolete because they all followed the same old “routine operas.” These routine operas featured recurring themes such as the talented man in despair, the young lady having a passionate love affair, scholars returning home, scholars achieving glory, scholars being sent to Beijing for exams, and joyful reunions. These stereotypes were so familiar to the audience that after seeing them a few times, they lost interest in attending further performances. In recent years, to connect with younger audiences and create an aesthetic distance, some Cantonese operas, like “Princess Wen Cheng,” have introduced Mandarin versions with recitations and musical-style vocal techniques. However, this departure from the local narrative has led to a negative viewing experience for some viewers.

#### 1.6. Audience Research

Researching the audience group of Cantonese opera poses complex challenges, including its extensive history, limited data samples, and evolving communication environment. Compared to the thriving rural markets, the Cantonese opera market in major cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen appears relatively deserted. From a microscopic perspective, according to calculations by the Guangzhou

Cantonese Opera Theatre, the number of hardcore viewers of Cantonese opera viewers is estimated to be around 3,000 to 5,000. Considering Guangzhou's population of 15 million, the fixed consumer group for Cantonese opera constitutes only a minuscule fraction, according to just three-thousandths of the city's population. Scholars such as He Xiangjun and Lin Kaiwen, in their book "Supplement, Integration, and Connection: The Realistic Choice for Embracing Youth in Cantonese Opera," propose that the dissemination of Cantonese opera follows a pattern of "pan-centered and scattered dissemination." Differences in social mechanisms, cultural backgrounds, and contexts among Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hong Kong, and Macao Special Administrative Regions weaken openness and discourse interaction, preventing the formation of a cohesive community of leading industry organizations. This situation has contributed to the decline in the Cantonese opera audience. In recent years, the Cantonese opera film "Legend of the White Snake: Love," which gained popularity globally through social media platforms, managed to gross 23 million yuan at the box office.

## **2. Post-Covid Practices**

### **2.1. The Ritual View of Communication**

In his work, "Communication as Culture," [9] James W. Carey developed the concept of a "ritual view" of communication. According to Carey, communication is a ritual activity that sustains social relations and social life. Its aim is to construct and sustain a cultural world that is orderly, meaningful, and capable of governing and accommodating human behavior while conveying information and content. While James W. Carey does not delve into the specific elements that constitute this field and serve its purpose, he highlights the attributes that enable ritualized communication. Firstly, communication needs to be a social endeavor, requiring the participation of both transmitters and receivers. Secondly, communication is representational, involving symbolic participation. Consequently, the symbolic system formed through communication becomes a representation of reality.

Unlike other scholars who interpret communication primarily as a means to transmit information with control techniques and methods serving as auxiliaries, Carey explores the significance of communication at a macroscopic, profound, and fundamental level. He views communication as the study of the social process through which meaningful symbolic forms are created, understood, and utilized. Applying Carey's theoretical framework to Cantonese Opera, we can deconstruct its core elements that contribute to its limited communication impact. In the context of Carey's theory, the entire process of Cantonese opera performing, despite integrating new contexts, elements and updated communication methods, primarily serves the function of transmitting the story's information. It lacks consideration for fostering cohesion and maintaining collective memory. Consequently, this short-term behavior fails to shape transient audience viewing habits or elevate to the level of cultural complexity. It falls short of transforming simple viewing into a lasting cultural practice that fosters common, harmonious, and enduring stability in behavior.

Considering the existing communication practices of intangible cultural heritage both at home and abroad, the living transmission of Cantonese opera can be enhanced through perspectives such as symbolic communication, technological innovation, cross-media integration, and mimetic symbiosis.

### **2.2. IP Linkage - Participatory Culture for Emotional Connection**

In the ritualistic view of communication, the participation of both the transmitter and the recipient is an indispensable element in forming a communicative field. This condition is made possible by the rise of contemporary participatory culture. For example, on January 6, 2022, the official account of the game "Proto-God" uploaded the PV of its new character, Yun Sumire, on the video website Bilibili

(the music video of the ACGN work, *The Divine Damsel of Devastation*). The character “Yun Sumire” in the animation skillfully incorporates traditional Chinese opera art into the nature and related story background. This resulted in the creating a Cantonese opera dichotomy video on Bilibili, generating a buzz. As of September 2023, the dichotomy video has garnered 4.532 million views and over 400,000 likes. Supported by a creative ecosystem within a favorable environment, the practice of second creation, facilitated by popular games, offers an excellent opportunity for the art of opera to connect with younger audiences.

### **2.3. Maintaining Sentiment-NFT Technology Maintains Original Stories**

For audiences who prefer to engage with the original stories and plots, digital technology’s scene restoration and its ability to enhance the audience’s “sense of presence” fulfill this task. In March 2023, the Digital Creative Alliance collaborated with Zeng Xiaomin, the representative project inheritor of Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage. They obtained authorization to digitally transform and cast stills from [*Graceful Curls* - Zeng Xiaomin, a famous Cantonese Opera artist] and [*Feng Guan Xia Phi* - Zeng Xiaomin, a famous Cantonese Opera artist] into digital artworks for sale. The data for each flow of artworks was recorded and stored on the blockchain, ensuring non-replicability and non-temperability. This solved the problem of protecting rights faced by the art industry. Once the artworks were made available, they sold out immediately and were well-received and verified by the market. This success represents a notable attempt to digitize the traditional industry. Another area of progress in digital preservation involves the restoration of the classic Cantonese Opera piece “*Imperial Daughter Flower*” by CTC Lab, a new digital non-heritage media art team. The team extracted six sections of the play and used AI technology to visualize the figurative forms and iconic elements of the opera. They employed Midjourney to generate plots corresponding to the story of each act and scene and then depicted abstract images with emotional colors. The images were placed in natural settings, facilitating a cross-temporal dialogue between classical and contemporary art. Both of these practices preserve the spirit of the art while honoring the actors and stories of Cantonese opera.

### **2.4. Cross-media Integration - Film Art Constructs Ritual Space**

Communication needs to occur within a specific space and time and under the premise of integrating the metaphor of “ritual”, cohesive communication activity cannot be separated from the element of “space.” Space serves as the prerequisite for the display of rituals. For instance, in the Cantonese opera film *White Snake*, while maintaining elaborate costumes and styling, the special effects, which constitute more than 90% of the film, are employed to enhance the spatial texture. This creates a unique sense of ceremony and a temple-like atmosphere. With smooth editing rhythms, the program’s sense of scene ceremony is significantly amplified. As of May 9, 2022, the film has grossed 23,006,000 Yen, totaling 594,000 theatre viewings [10]. The superb performances of Cantonese opera actors, combined with the refined presentation of images, have garnered praise not only from Cantonese-speaking audiences but also from those who do not speak Cantonese. Audiences have appreciated the rich texture of the images and the unique presentation of theater culture.

### **2.5. Idol Formation - Symbiotic Relationship with Mimetic Fans Helps Revive Traditional Theatre**

In Japan, a country with a similar cultural background, there is a rich idol culture and market. Kabuki is a typical Japanese national performing art and one of Japan’s traditional performing arts, classified as an important intangible cultural property in Japan. Kabuki, as a form of traditional Japanese performing arts, is an important intangible cultural property in Japan. Since its launch in 2006,

“Takizawa Kabuki ZERO,” a fusion of Kabuki elements with music, has been widely acclaimed. The project, initiated by former Janis Vice President Hideaki Takizawa, combines the special Janis “nurturing system” for idols with rigorous training for Kabuki actors in acting skills. It utilizes multi-channel distribution through documentaries, social media platforms, and movie production. Since 2019, Heart Bridge Kabuki Hall has consistently sold out upon its launch. According to statistics, the cumulative box office for the last release was 2.09 billion yen, with 475,165 viewers [11]. This project has not only contributed to the profitable debut of the Japanese idol group Snow Man but has also helped young audiences understand Kabuki performances and related knowledge, breaking the traditional theatre’s boundaries. A parallel system integrating actors and theater has also gained traction in the UK and other countries, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between business success and a theater renaissance.

### 3. Conclusion

Cantonese opera actor Leung Sing-Po, known as the “King of Chou role” in Cantonese opera, once said in an interview with Radio Television Hong Kong, “Cantonese opera has much potential. As long as we take this matter seriously and deal with the basic skills in the field of drama practically, Cantonese opera will usher in a new era. Entering the second half of the public health incident, the development of global Cantonese opera continues to be a major significant project with both challenges and opportunities. In the development of Cantonese opera and its derivative cultures, localities should make use of digital technology, revitalize nameplates, and integrate IP to conserve and revitalize historical and cultural heritage. Effectively linking cultural creativity and design services with the vast and profound Lingnan historical and cultural resources to create and preserve the ecology of cultural development while nurturing and supporting the inheritors of non-heritage culture. It can be foreseen that to address the limitations of the creative development of Cantonese Opera, the viewing experience of cultural consumers should be placed in a position of urgent consideration. Through the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture, its forms of expression and modes of dissemination should be made more compatible with contemporary culture and harmonized with modern society.

### Author Contributions

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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