

Contemporary Communication and Audience Development for Regional Chinese Opera

Han Yuchen

Xinxiang University, Xinxiang, Henan 453003, China

Abstract: Regional Chinese opera has developed distinctive artistic forms based on local dialects, vocal styles, and regional ways of life, and its continued survival and development depend on a stable audience. Digital media have expanded the reach of Chinese opera but have also created problems such as fragmented content, inadequate artistic interpretation, and difficulty converting online attention into theater attendance. Regional Chinese opera should establish a differentiated and tiered system of content provision that connects stage performances, school education, community activities, and online communication. It should also improve audience-data management and outcome evaluation, gradually developing a pathway through which audiences progress from initial exposure to aesthetic understanding and sustained participation.

Keywords: regional Chinese opera; arts communication; audience development; digital media; Chinese opera education

Introduction

Regional Chinese opera is a composite art form that has gradually developed through the languages, music, folk customs, and social life of particular regions. Its vocal styles, performance conventions, costumes, and stories are closely connected with local cultural memory. It performs multiple functions, including artistic appreciation, social education, festival ritual, and the construction of local identity. As population mobility accelerates, entertainment options increase, and the environments in which local dialects are used continue to change, some regional opera forms are losing their traditional rural performance spaces, while the age structure of their established audiences is also changing.

Digital media provide new conditions for the communication of regional Chinese opera. Short videos, online livestreaming, digital ticketing, and online archives reduce barriers to initial engagement. Classic arias, instructional demonstrations by performers, and behind-the-scenes rehearsals can now reach audiences across geographical boundaries. However, a wider communication reach does not automatically create stable audiences. Some users focus only on makeup, costumes, or technically demanding movements while lacking an understanding of vocal systems, narrative backgrounds, and performance conventions. A gap also persists between online viewing and attendance at live performances.

At the end of 2024, China had approximately 22,000 performing arts troupes employing 419,000 people. Performing arts troupes administered by culture and tourism authorities staged 385,000 performances during the year

and recorded 310 million domestic audience attendances ^[1].

Although the performance market therefore has a substantial audience base, regional Chinese opera must still address problems involving communication content, arts education, and the development of sustained relationships with audiences. Examining the connection between contemporary communication and audience development has practical significance for the living transmission of regional opera forms, the development of performance companies, and the provision of public cultural services.

1. The Internal Relationship Between the Communication of Regional Chinese Opera and Audience Development

1.1 Artistic Attributes and Communication Characteristics of Regional Chinese Opera

Stage performance is the primary form through which regional Chinese opera exists. Performers create characters through singing, recitation, acting, stylized movement, and combat techniques, accompanied by instrumental music. Audience viewing, responses, and evaluations constitute an important part of the performance process. The transmission of Chinese opera involves more than the preservation of scripts, musical notation, and audiovisual recordings. It also encompasses performers' control of rhythm, emotional expression, and interaction with audiences, all of which are developed through stage practice.

Regionality is a defining characteristic of regional Chinese opera. The names of opera forms, vocal styles, and performance practices are usually connected with local languages and ways of life. Dialect can strengthen a sense of

familiarity among local audiences but may create barriers to understanding for non-local audiences and younger people. Some traditional works involve historical allusions, ethical concepts, and established performance conventions. Without adequate interpretation, first-time audiences may remain at the level of sensory appreciation.

The communication of regional Chinese opera is also characterized by liveness and transmission through direct instruction and embodied practice. Digital technologies can record and distribute performances but cannot fully reproduce the acoustic layers of a theater, performers' breath control, or the emotional responses of an audience. Fu argues that the performance techniques of Chinese opera must be tested through continuous performance and that stage practice is essential to its living transmission ^[2]. Contemporary communication should therefore preserve the central role of stage performance while using digital media to provide guidance and expand reach.

1.2 Fundamental Objectives of Contemporary Audience Development

Audience development refers to the gradual improvement of the public's willingness to engage with Chinese opera, ability to understand it, and degree of participation through arts communication, knowledge-based interpretation, experiential activities, and public services. Its target groups include young people, ordinary residents, tourists, online users, and established opera enthusiasts. These groups differ in their artistic knowledge and viewing needs.

Audience development can be divided into three levels. The first is initial exposure, in which short videos, public-interest performances, and school activities reduce unfamiliarity. The second is the development of understanding, in which guided appreciation, subtitles, plot summaries, and performance experiences help audiences recognize the characteristics of an opera form. The third is sustained participation, in which audiences are encouraged to purchase tickets, join enthusiast communities, attend training, or participate in volunteer services.

Audience size is not the only objective. Regional Chinese opera must also cultivate stable audiences who understand its artistic conventions, respect its cultural traditions, and are willing to attend over an extended period. As audiences' aesthetic competence develops,

creators and performers receive more specific social feedback, transforming arts communication from a one-way presentation into a continuous exchange.

2. Changes in the Contemporary Communication Environment of Regional Chinese Opera

2.1 Continued Expansion of the Performance Market and Public Cultural Spaces

Public cultural institutions, community cultural activities, and arts-access programs provide essential spaces through which ordinary audiences can encounter regional Chinese opera. Professional theaters present complete works, while cultural centers, communities, and rural stages can organize opera excerpts, lectures, and experiential activities. Schools perform an introductory arts-education function for young people. Together, these spaces form a public communication network for regional Chinese opera.

Table 1. Key National Data on Performing Arts and Performance Venues, 2023–2024

Indicator	2023	2024
Number of performing arts troupes nationwide	18,000	22,000
Employees of performing arts troupes	385,000	419,000
Performing arts troupes administered by culture and tourism authorities	—	1,890
Annual performances by these troupes	—	385,000
Domestic audience attendances for these troupes	—	310 million
Number of performing arts venues nationwide	3,060	3,516
Performances at venues administered by culture and tourism authorities	—	105,000

Indicator	2023	2024
Audience attendances at these venues	—	52.486 million

Table 1 shows that performing arts troupes, practitioners, and performance venues all operate on a substantial scale. These data cover multiple forms of performing art and cannot be treated as statistics relating exclusively to regional Chinese opera. They nevertheless reflect the performance market and public cultural infrastructure within which regional opera operates. Performance companies need to establish a stable frequency of performances across existing venues, community cultural spaces, and arts programs so that audience development does not remain limited to festival presentations or one-off activities.

2.2 Digital Media Transforming How Audiences Encounter Chinese Opera

Traditional communication of Chinese opera relied mainly on theaters, radio, television, and audiovisual products. Audience access was closely tied to scheduled performance times. Mobile platforms have enabled on-demand viewing, immediate interaction, and user sharing. Through edited arias, demonstrations of makeup and costume, rehearsal recordings, and explanations by performers, regional Chinese opera can enter the public's everyday information environment.

Zhao argues that social media have created new conditions through which regional Chinese opera can connect with audiences, integrate communication participants, and expand spaces of transmission^[3]. Performers can present artistic content directly, while audiences can comment, share, and produce derivative content. The actors involved in communication have expanded beyond performance companies and professional media to include performers, enthusiasts, schools, and ordinary users.

Platform-based communication also changes the pace and structure of content. Complete opera productions are often lengthy, whereas online content emphasizes immediate attraction and short duration. Performance companies need to adapt presentation methods to the characteristics of each medium while avoiding the reduction of Chinese opera to displays of costume, popular musical mashups, or spectacles of technical virtuosity. Short-form content is suitable for generating interest, while long-form video, livestreaming, and theater performances remain necessary for providing a

complete artistic experience.

2.3 New Aesthetic Demands Arising from Young People's Cultural Consumption

Young audiences encounter traditional culture through increasingly diverse channels. Chinese-style popular music, traditional clothing, video games, film and television productions, and cultural variety programs may all serve as points of entry into Chinese opera. Young people value visual quality, interactive experiences, and individualized expression and are also willing to share their cultural consumption through social media.

These aesthetic changes create opportunities for cross-sector collaboration. Chinese opera can be combined with animation, film and television, music, and cultural and creative design, adapting vocal styles, stylized movements, and costume elements for different platforms. Cross-sector expression must clearly identify the cultural origins of Chinese opera elements and preserve the distinctive vocal and performance conventions of each opera form rather than borrowing only superficial symbols.

Young audiences are not inherently resistant to traditional Chinese opera. Their difficulties arise mainly from barriers of knowledge, language comprehension, and limited opportunities for exposure. Plot introductions, subtitles for dialect performances, backstage visits, and experiences of stylized movement can reduce the difficulty of an initial encounter. Audience development should respect young people's habits of reception while guiding them toward a gradual understanding of the complete aesthetic structure of Chinese opera.

3. Problems Facing the Communication and Audience Development of Regional Chinese Opera

3.1 Fragmented Communication Weakening Artistic Integrity

Short videos can rapidly present compelling arias and performance movements but may separate them from character relationships, narrative structure, and emotional development. Audiences may become familiar with a single line of an aria without understanding the work or the characteristics of the opera form. Some accounts repeatedly use similar clips, leaving differences in vocal style and regional culture among opera forms inadequately represented.

A tendency toward entertainment-oriented content can also distort artistic understanding. To attract attention,

some content places excessive emphasis on performers' appearance, costumes, makeup, and unexpected contrasts while providing little explanation of vocal techniques, performance conventions, or historical background. Chinese opera then becomes temporary visual material, while its artistic foundations and local cultural meanings are weakened.

Ni argues that new-media communication must maintain a balance among the artistic foundations of Chinese opera, contemporary aesthetic expression, and communication outcomes and that creative transformation must remain grounded in cultural understanding^[4]. Regional performance companies should participate directly in digital content production, organize and interpret information about their repertoires, and improve the professional quality of online communication.

3.2 Disconnection Between Communication Popularity and the Accumulation of Stable Audiences

Online views, likes, and topic popularity reflect only some dimensions of communication performance. Whether users continue learning about an opera form, watch a complete performance, or participate in offline activities after encountering a short video also depends on ticket prices, access to performance information, transportation to venues, and the difficulty of understanding the repertoire. Some performance companies lack clear pathways for converting audience interest into continued participation. Their social media accounts, ticketing systems, theater activities, and membership services operate separately.

School-based Chinese opera programs may similarly be organized as isolated events. Some schools arrange only a single performance without providing subsequent course-based explanation, practical experience, or continued exposure. Standardized performances may also fail to consider differences among age groups. When primary school pupils, secondary school students, and university students receive the same form of explanation, the effectiveness of arts education is limited.

There are also insufficient spaces for exchange between established opera enthusiasts and young audiences. Traditional audiences possess extensive knowledge of repertoires and performers but may not be comfortable using digital platforms. Young users are skilled in online expression but possess limited knowledge of Chinese opera. When performance companies fail to

connect these groups effectively, audience experience cannot be transmitted and online attention cannot be consolidated into stable communities.

4. Pathways for Developing a Contemporary Communication System for Regional Chinese Opera

4.1 Establishing Differentiated and Tiered Content Provision

Communication strategies for regional Chinese opera should provide different content according to audiences' existing knowledge. For first-time audiences, content may introduce characters, costumes, plot summaries, and classic arias. For audiences with an established interest, it may provide guided introductions to works, comparisons of vocal styles, performer interviews, and rehearsal records. For specialist audiences and researchers, performance archives, scripts, musical notation, and academic lectures can be made available.

Short-form online content should perform a guiding function. Each short video can clearly explain one characteristic of a vocal style, one form of stylized movement, or one relationship between characters and provide information on how to view a complete performance. Performance companies can organize content into series progressing from introductory to advanced levels, reducing fragmented publication and providing audiences with a relatively clear pathway toward understanding an opera form.

Digital materials must also be systematically organized. Historical recordings, videos, scripts, and performers' oral accounts possess archival value. During digitization, metadata should identify the opera form, title, performers, date, and version. Preservation, public communication, and arts education can then draw on the same resource base, improving the efficiency with which content is used.

4.2 Connecting Stage Performance with Digital Communication

Stage performance remains the primary means of presenting regional Chinese opera in its complete form. Digital communication can provide guidance before a performance, supplementary engagement during it, and continued exchange afterward. Before a performance, companies can release background information, character relationships, and introductions to major arias to help new audiences prepare. During the performance, subtitles,

appreciation guides, and programs can be provided. Afterward, discussions with performers, reviews of selected excerpts, and online conversations can extend the influence of the experience.

Livestreaming and video recording should respect the rhythm of stage performance. Camera work can present facial expressions and details of movement while preserving the stage space, instrumental accompaniment, and audience response. Editing should avoid excessively frequent cuts that disrupt the integrity of stylized movements. Important productions can be recorded in complete, highlights-based, and educationally annotated versions to serve different audiences.

Performance companies can also connect online platforms with ticketing, membership, and activity-registration systems. Users who view an aria should be able to locate information about the complete performance conveniently, while livestream audiences can receive information about theater activities. Communication can contribute to audience accumulation only when online exposure, knowledge acquisition, and offline attendance form a continuous relationship.

4.3 Strengthening Contemporary Expressions of Local Cultural Content

Contemporary expressions of regional Chinese opera should remain grounded in the characteristics of the opera form itself. Dialect, vocal style, and performance conventions constitute the core of its identity and should not be substantially weakened merely to accommodate market preferences. Innovation can focus on subject selection, stage rhythm, visual design, and interpretive communication, allowing traditional artistic forms to establish connections with contemporary life.

New productions can address local history, contemporary life, and ordinary people while using the performance methods of the opera form to tell present-day stories. The revision of traditional works should respect their established artistic structures and make only careful adjustments to sections that are excessively long or difficult to understand. Playwrights, performers, musicians, and Chinese opera researchers should participate jointly in adaptation.

Interpretation of local culture should also be strengthened. Communication content can explain connections between an opera form and local dialect,

folk customs, architecture, and history. When audiences recognize Chinese opera not only as a form of performance but also as a form of regional cultural memory, they can develop a deeper sense of cultural identification.

5. Mechanisms for Implementing Audience Development for Regional Chinese Opera

5.1 Improving Coordination among Schools, Communities, and Theaters

School-based Chinese opera education should provide age-appropriate content. At the primary school level, activities can focus on facial makeup, costumes, percussion rhythms, and simple stylized movements, emphasizing interest and participation. At the secondary school level, they can incorporate plot interpretation, classic arias, and knowledge of local culture. At the university level, programs can include repertoire appreciation, practical performance, and thematic research.

Introducing Chinese opera into schools should move beyond one-off viewing toward a combination of courses, practical experiences, and performances. Performance companies can work with schools to develop curricula on regional Chinese opera, train arts teachers, establish student societies, and provide works suitable for school performance. After completing foundational study, students can attend a professional performance in a theater, thereby forming a more coherent learning process.

Communities connect performance companies with residents. Cultural centers, community centers, and rural cultural spaces can organize public-interest performances, enthusiast activities, and instruction by performers. Professional theaters, meanwhile, provide high-quality productions and systematic guided appreciation. Schools cultivate initial interest, communities maintain routine exposure, and theaters provide in-depth experiences. Together, these three spaces create a pathway for audience development.

5.2 Establishing Audience-Data Management and Communication-Evaluation Systems

In compliance with personal information protection requirements, performance companies should organize data on ticket purchases, activity registration, membership participation, and online interaction to understand audience age, geographical distribution, viewing frequency, and repertoire preferences. Data analysis can be used to optimize performance schedules, ticket pricing, content

production, and activity arrangements. Companies should not collect excessive information unrelated to the provision of artistic services.

Communication evaluation should distinguish among reach, understanding, and conversion. Views and page visits reflect the reach of content. Completion rates, the quality of comments, and knowledge-based questions can indicate the degree of understanding. Ticket purchases, repeat attendance, course registration, and community participation demonstrate the development of stable relationships. A single traffic metric cannot fully evaluate the effectiveness of audience development.

Jiang argues that social media have transformed the cultural ecology of traditional Chinese opera and that its communication requires coordination among multiple actors^[5]. Performance companies, schools, media platforms, cultural institutions, and opera-enthusiast organizations can share information about activities and educational resources and regularly evaluate communication outcomes. Evaluation findings can then inform adjustments to content and services, gradually improving audience retention and depth of participation.

Conclusion

The contemporary communication of regional Chinese opera concerns both the social visibility of individual opera forms and whether their artistic traditions can gain new interpreters and participants. Digital media expand opportunities for initial exposure, while theaters, schools, and communities remain essential spaces for the formation of aesthetic experience. A communication system must connect short-form content, complete performances, knowledge-based interpretation,

and practical experience and avoid equating online popularity with successful transmission.

Audience development is a long-term undertaking. Regional Chinese opera companies must establish tiered content systems for different groups, maintain a balance between artistic integrity and contemporary expression, and improve school education, community activities, theater services, and audience-data management. Only when members of the public progress from incidental exposure to active learning and from one-time viewing to sustained participation can regional Chinese opera establish a stable social foundation and continue to realize its value in contemporary cultural life.

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