

An Investigation of Gender in the Transmission of Traditional Opera in Zhejiang: A Case Study of Wuju Opera and Yue Opera

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of ongoing efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, traditional opera in Zhejiang—an important carrier of Jiangnan culture—faces multiple contemporary challenges, including talent shortage, market limitations, and innovation constraints. This study focuses on two representative Zhejiang opera genres, Yue Opera and Wuju, approaching them from a gender perspective. It investigates the historical formation of gender roles within these genres and examines gender imbalances in their contemporary transmission. Drawing on gender empowerment theory, the study analyzes the gendered characteristics in talent cultivation, repertoire creation, and performance promotion across different opera types. Finally, it proposes targeted strategies to optimize the transmission of these operas, offering practical guidance for their sustainable development in Zhejiang.

Keywords: Traditional opera; Gender roles; Cultural transmission; Yue opera; Wuju opera; Intangible cultural heritage

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1. Introduction

Zhejiang's traditional opera culture has a long and profound heritage, with Yue Opera and Wuju standing out as its two most influential genres^[1-2]. Yue Opera, known for its distinctly feminine aesthetics, delicate emotional expression, and predominantly female performance tradition, was included in the first batch of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2006^[3]. Wuju, by contrast, integrates multiple vocal systems such as Gaoqiang and Kunqu, featuring a bold, vigorous, and martial performance style. Historically dominated by male performers, it likewise constitutes a key project in Zhejiang's intangible cultural heritage protection efforts^[4].

With ongoing shifts in the broader socio-cultural landscape, both genres are encountering significant challenges in their contemporary transmission^[5]. Yue Opera, despite its advantage of being female-centered, still exhibits gender imbalances in areas such as playwriting, directing, and administrative leadership. Wuju,

constrained by traditional gender divisions, continues to see low participation of female performers and a limited range of female role types. Introducing a gender perspective into the investigation helps not only to clarify the structural gender differences embedded in the transmission of these two opera forms, but also to explore how gender empowerment may break through long-standing developmental barriers. Such an approach provides new avenues for strengthening the sustainable inheritance and revitalization of traditional opera in Zhejiang^[6].

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Gender studies in the transmission of traditional Chinese opera

Existing scholarship on gender in traditional opera transmission tends to focus on the gender characteristics of individual genres—for example, the widely discussed “female-centered tradition” of Yue Opera—while comparative studies on gender differences across multiple genres within the same region remain relatively scarce. Prior research has noted that gendered divisions of labor in opera transmission are often closely tied to the stylistic orientation of the genre: “soft” or lyrical genres tend to be dominated by female performers, whereas “vigorous” or martial genres are more likely to be led by male practitioners. Such stylized gender-role binding, while historically rooted, may restrict the potential for diversified development within each genre and hinder flexible talent cultivation in the contemporary cultural landscape.

2.2. The applicability and value of gender empowerment theory

Gender empowerment theory emphasizes promoting equal participation among different genders through more equitable resource allocation, enhanced gender awareness, and supportive institutional mechanisms. When applied to the study of Zhejiang opera, this theoretical lens provides a valuable framework for addressing the structural gender issues embedded in each genre. For instance, it helps explain the paradox in Yue Opera, where women constitute the majority of performers but hold comparatively limited power in creative or managerial positions; similarly, it highlights the constraints in Wuju, which remains male-dominated despite an increasing demand for female participation and diversified role types. The theory not only offers pathways for resolving these imbalances but also supports the exploration of complementary strengths across genres, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable model for the transmission of Zhejiang’s traditional operatic art.

3. A comparative analysis of gender role characteristics in Yue opera and Wuju opera

3.1. Yue opera: Female dominance accompanied by structural gender imbalance

3.1.1. Female advantage in on-stage performance

Since the rise of all-female Yue Opera troupes in the 1920s, prominent female artists such as Yuan Xuefen and Mao Weitao have become the driving forces behind stylistic innovation, artistic refinement, and the creation of signature roles. Their contributions helped shape iconic narratives—including *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Lu You and Tang Wan*—thereby solidifying a gendered transmission pattern in which women constitute the central artistic body of Yue Opera.

3.1.2. Gender gaps in backstage and leadership roles

Despite the dominance of female performers on stage, men still constitute a disproportionately high ratio in key backstage and institutional positions, including scriptwriting, directing, and troupe administration. The limited presence of women in creative decision-making restricts the diversity of thematic perspectives and reduces the representation of female voices in repertoire development and cultural management.

3.2. Wuju opera: Female absence within a historically male-dominated tradition

3.2.1. Male-centered historical transmission

Owing to its stylistic emphasis on martial performance and robust vocal techniques, Wuju has historically been sustained by male performers. Many of its major vocal systems—such as Hui Opera and Luantan—were transmitted along male-dominated apprenticeship lineages. Female performers, by contrast, were historically confined to supporting roles such as dan (female) characters and had limited access to core role types or advanced training opportunities.

3.2.2. Contemporary challenges for female performers

In modern Wuju troupes, the proportion of female actors remains relatively low, and their role assignments often remain restricted to gentle or ornamental character types such as qingyi or huadan. Their participation in central role categories—such as wusheng (martial male leads) or laosheng (older male roles)—continues to be limited. This reveals an evident gender bias in talent cultivation and restricts the spectrum of female artistic development.

3.3. Summary of shared features and key differences

3.3.1. Commonalities

Both genres reflect the enduring influence of traditional gender norms and exhibit role-type fixation shaped by historically gendered expectations. In both Yue Opera and Wuju, women remain underrepresented in creative, managerial, and decision-making domains.

3.3.2. Differences

Yue Opera benefits from a strong female presence on stage but demonstrates backstage gender imbalance, especially in creative leadership. Wuju, conversely, retains a male-dominated performance tradition and thus requires the expansion of opportunities, training channels, and role diversity for female performers.

4. Investigation of gender issues in the transmission of Zhejiang opera

4.1. Research methods and participants

This investigation adopts a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The survey covers professional opera troupes across all 11 prefecture-level cities in Zhejiang—including Yue Opera and Wuju troupes—along with opera-related educational institutions such as Zhejiang Vocational Academy of Art and grassroots intangible cultural heritage transmission sites. A substantial number of valid questionnaires were collected, and in-depth interviews were conducted with performers, playwrights, cultural inheritors, and other key practitioners in the field.

4.2. Analysis of core issues

4.2.1. Gender bias in talent training

Yue Opera Training Programs: Many curricula remain centered on “female-role performance,” resulting in a low proportion of male students. Male trainees are often steered toward backstage or technical positions, which further reinforces gendered pathways within the field.

Wuju Training Programs: Training resources are heavily oriented toward male-coded roles such as wusheng (martial male roles) and laosheng (older male roles). Female students have limited opportunities to engage in martial performance training, leading to unequal access to skill development and performance pathways.

4.2.2. Gender constraints in repertoire creation

Yue Opera: Among newly created works in the past five years, most continue to revolve around traditional “scholar-and-beauty” narratives. Themes addressing women’s modern identities, professional challenges, or autonomy remain significantly underrepresented.

Wuju: Recent repertoire shows a continued dominance of male hero narratives, with female characters often positioned as supportive or secondary figures. Their lack of narrative agency reflects persistent structural constraints in scriptwriting and thematic development.

4.2.3. Gender-based labeling in performance promotion

Yue Opera Promotion: Marketing efforts typically highlight its “feminine lyrical beauty,” while the artistic strengths of male performers receive relatively limited visibility, further narrowing public perception of the genre.

Wuju Promotion: Publicity materials tend to emphasize “masculine strength and vigor,” resulting in fewer promotional resources for female performers and reinforcing the stereotype that Wuju is inherently male-oriented.

5. Inheritance optimization strategies from a gender empowerment perspective

5.1. Constructing a gender-equal talent development system

To fundamentally reshape the gender dynamics within traditional Chinese opera, a systemic reform in talent cultivation is paramount. This begins within the walls of professional opera academies. It is proposed that specialized courses such as “Gender Equality and Role Breakthrough” be integrated into the core curriculum. Beyond institutional training, establishing a cross-genre talent exchange program is crucial. This initiative would facilitate collaborations such as pairing a Yueju playwright (often female and skilled in crafting nuanced emotional narratives) with a Wuju director (often male and experienced in structuring dynamic, action-driven plots). Such partnerships are designed to dismantle the entrenched gender-based thinking that can become isolated within a single opera tradition, fostering a more fluid and innovative creative environment.

5.2. Promoting gender-diverse repertoire creation

The content performed on stage must evolve to reflect and promote gender diversity. This requires targeted support for new playwriting that challenges traditional gender archetypes. For Yueju, which already excels

in portraying female perspectives, the focus should be on deepening this strength by commissioning and producing works centered on “Female Power.” This involves creating new plays based on pioneering historical female figures from Zhejiang, such as the revolutionary heroine Qiu Jin. This entails creating original scripts or adapting existing ones to feature complex female characters in leading martial roles, showcasing their strength, courage, and physical prowess. By doing so, Wuju can actively deconstruct the stereotype that high-level martial performance is the exclusive domain of male actors, thereby expanding its thematic range and modern relevance.

5.3. Implementing differentiated performance promotion

Marketing and audience outreach strategies must be tailored to highlight and amplify these gender-empowering innovations. For Yueju, a deliberate campaign could involve curating “Male Artist Feature Performances.” The promotional material, especially on short-video platforms like Douyin, should strategically highlight clips of male actors excelling in traditionally female Dan roles or bringing a newfound robust physicality to certain characters, attracting attention through the skillful subversion of expectations. For Wuju, the strategy should center on launching “Female Wusheng Showcases.” This approach not only celebrates their skill but also serves as a direct and engaging method to attract younger, digitally-native audiences who appreciate authenticity and breaking barriers.

5.4. Integrating gender education with cultural dissemination

Long-term sustainability requires seeding gender awareness in the next generation of both practitioners and audiences. A powerful method is to integrate adapted versions of classic Yueju and Wuju repertoires into primary and secondary school aesthetic education curricula. This goes beyond mere appreciation; it involves interactive “role-swapping” workshops. In these sessions, female students could learn and perform excerpts from a demanding Wuju warrior role, while male students could explore the expressive depths of a Yueju Dan role. Through this embodied practice, students experientially learn that artistic expression and character traits are not inherently tied to biological sex. This early education fosters a more inclusive mindset, cultivating a future audience that appreciates traditional opera free from gender bias and ensures a more equitable talent pipeline for the art forms themselves.

6. Case studies: Gender practices of representative troupes

6.1. Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe (Yue Opera)

This troupe has broken the stereotype of female characters as “weak and delicate” through productions such as *Kong Yiji* and *The Story of Spring Qin*. Simultaneously, it has promoted female participation in directing and playwriting, with the proportion of female creative staff gradually increasing. This provides an exemplary model for gender empowerment in Yue Opera.

6.2. Shanghai Yue Opera Theatre Artistic Creation Studio (Yue Opera)

Focusing on the adaptation of the Yue Opera classic *The Orphan of Zhao*, the studio has used thematic and repertoire innovation as a starting point to actively promote “joint performances by male and female actors.” These joint performances more vividly convey the generosity, nobility, and tragic grandeur of the production.

6.3. Zhejiang Wuju Opera Art Research Institute (Wuju Opera)

In recent years, the institute has launched productions like Palace Brocade Robe, which feature strong female core characters such as “heroic female generals.” It has also established a “Female Martial Arts Training Program” to cultivate female performers for martial male roles. Some graduates of this program have become lead actors in the troupe, effectively expanding the career development space for female performers in Wuju Opera.

7. Conclusion

Moving forward, a multi-faceted approach is required to advance gender equality and sustainability in Zhejiang opera. This includes deepening comparative studies on gender dynamics between Yue and Wuju Opera, establishing a “Zhejiang Opera Gender Inheritance Database” to track gender representation trends, and exploring complementary gender-based strengths—such as blending Yue Opera’s female-led creative expertise with Wuju’s male-dominated performance techniques. Through coordinated efforts in research, data, and practice, a new paradigm of gender-inclusive and collaborative development can be achieved for Zhejiang opera’s future.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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