Research Articles

The Semiotic Value of Hunan Opera's Musical Development in the Modern Context

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Abstract

Hunan Kunchang Opera is a fusion of Kunchang art and local culture, creating new symbols through sound and melody. This art form flourished but declined before being revived in the 20th century and listed as a cultural heritage in 2006 to affirm China's identity and diversity. The objective of this research is to explore the semiotic value of Hunan Opera in music and to explore ways to develop the musical symbol system of Hunan Opera in accordance with the cultural context and times. This research adopts a mixed-methods research approach, using qualitative research as the main method and supplemented by quantitative research. The data collection methods included the study of ancient literature and documents, non-participant observation, fieldwork, and interviews. The participants in the qualitative research included 6 opera teachers and 4 music experts, and the samples in the quantitative research included 325 students from 5 opera institutions and companies in Hunan Province. The results show that Hunan Opera is not only an entertainment performing art, but it is also a cultural symbolic system that integrates language, music, and performance to communicate the identity and values of the Hunan community. Adaptations of local melodies, rhythms, and accents serve as

symbols connecting performers and audiences. Hunan Opera has also adapted to globalization through education, integration with contemporary music, and the use of digital technology. Therefore, development approaches emphasize digital preservation, the creation of a new generation, creative format adjustments, and the linkage of the creative economy. Future research should examine youth perspectives, compare with other opera genres, experiment with technologies, and develop community models to sustainably preserve and extend the symbolic value of Hunan Opera.

Keywords: Musical Semiotic, Hunan Opera, Chinese Opera, Perspective of Music

Introduction

Hunan Kunqu Opera is an important branch of Kunchang art that spread to Hunan Province during the Ming Dynasty around the 16th century. Its characteristics reflect the dynamic fusion of national art and local culture, adopting Chenzhou dialects alongside Zhongzhou melodies, resulting in what critics have called "country music" and "spicy Kunchang." This transformation aligns with Lotman's (1990) semiotics of culture theory, which posits that artistic sign systems are not static, but rather adapt through translation across cultures. Thus, Hunan Kunchang Opera not only inherits the aesthetic beauty of its origins in Kunchang but also creates new signs that reflect the strengths and social realities of Hunan itself. Studying this performing art through the framework of musical semiotics, as suggested by Tarasti (1994), helps to reveal that melody, rhythm, and pronunciation serve as "musical signs" that convey multi-layered meanings, addressing social, spiritual, and personal identities.

Historically, Hunan Kunchang Opera was at its peak, with over 500 performance stages throughout the province serving as a cultural medium for all walks of life. However, socio-economic changes, coupled with the influence of modern art in the 20th century, led to its decline in popularity, and it almost disappeared from local society. The revival initiated in 1955 and the establishment of the Hunan Kunchang Opera Troupe in 1964 constituted a process of constructing a "cultural memory" within the framework of Assmann (2011), which emphasizes preserving, transmitting, and restoring the values of the past in the present

context. Another significant event was the inscription of Hunan Kunchang Opera as an intangible cultural heritage in 2006, reflecting its policy recognition and the creation of its symbolic value at the national and international levels. This registration is not only a conservation measure but also highlights the need to analyze Hunan Kunchang Opera as a "cultural sign system" that has implications for the construction of China's overall cultural identity and diversity.

The concept of Perspective of Musical Semiotics arises from the application of semiotics framework to the study of music, which considers music not just sound or aesthetic expression, but a "sign system" with cultural meaning and function (Tarasti, 1994). Semioticians of music hold that melody, rhythm, song, and manner of expression can all function as "signs" that reflect people's social, historical, and spiritual contexts (Monelle, 1992). Understanding music as a sign system must consider both diachronic (changes over time) and synchronic (persistence in the same period) dimensions, according to Lotman's (1990) cultural semiotic framework, which describes art and music as areas where translation takes place between cultures. This approach is also related to the theory of musical narrativity, which sees music as able to tell stories or create meaning structures on the same level as literature (Tarasti, 2002). Therefore, the study of Perspective of Musical Semiotics looks at music not only as a sound object. Rather, it is a cultural mechanism that connects creators, performers, and audiences through a complex and diverse network of symbols.

Contemporary studies of music and opera are no longer limited to analyzing sound structure or melody, but have expanded into the dimension of musical semiotics, which views music as a "sign system" that reflects cultural, social, and identity meanings (Tarasti, 1994). This perspective allows for the perception that sound, rhythm, song, and performance form are not merely aesthetic elements but also communication mechanisms that relate to creators, performers, and audiences (Monelle, 1992). When this analytical framework is applied to Hunan Opera, a local opera rooted in Kunchang and developed in Hunan society since the Ming Dynasty, it helps to understand this art form as a "cultural sign system" (Lotman, 1990) that integrates artistic beauty with local linguistic contexts and lifestyles. Research from this perspective therefore not only highlights the uniqueness of Hunan Opera but also reflects the process of adaptation and transmission of cultural values in contemporary Chinese society.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the semiotic value of Hunan Opera's musical compositions.

2. To explore ways to develop Hunan Opera's musical symbolic system in accordance with its cultural context and era.

Literature Review

Symbols, as an object or entity concept, have a long-standing tradition. Literally speaking, it is a set of marking systems with a certain degree of identification or a clear sense of form, commonly applied in the fields of language and vision. Its expression can be either image, words, posture, modality, etc., carrying human ideographic activities. However, as a discipline that studies symbols, its emergence and development are still relatively immature compared to the practice of symbols. The origin of modern Western semiotics can be traced back to the late 19th century, where Saussure's semiotics and Pierce's phenomenological semiotics, as representatives of the two main schools of semiotics, jointly laid the foundation for their respective disciplines. Due to practical and actionable analytical methods and a broad theoretical perspective, semiotics quickly expanded to other fields of humanities, gradually evolving into a practical activity with a general methodological nature. Therefore, many disciplines such as film semiotics, social semiotics, and media semiotics have emerged, and giving rise to music semiotics in response to this theoretical process.

The emergence of music semiotics theory When did semiotics, as a specialized theoretical research system, originate? The study of symbols began in the philosophical community of Europe, while modern systems of semiotic theory began in the early 20th century in the West. Swiss linguist Saussure (1980) proposed his own structuralist semiotic theoretical system in his book A Course in General Linguistics, stating that language symbols are composed of "signifier" and "signified", laying the initial theoretical foundation for the development of semiotics. American philosopher and logician Pierce, as another important founder of semiotics, proposed pragmatic semiotic system in numerous academic documents (mostly later compiled), elaborating on the logical relationship and connection process between "symbols", "objects", and "interpretive terms". Subsequently, debates between the two main groups of logical positivists and supporters of linguistic philosophy began. Saussure's

semiotic theory originated from linguistics, and his binary semiotic view first dominated the Western academic community; Pierce's semiotic theory is closely related to logic, emphasizing the meaning and interpretation process of symbols, which is more general and universal. Therefore, it gradually gained attention from the world in the later period. After that, many other scholars have also made contributions to the development of semiotics. Danish linguist Yelmslev wrote books such as Introduction to Linguistic Theory (1962) and founded "Linguistics"; Russian linguist Jacobson was the pioneer of the term "structuralism". They both inherited and developed Saussure's structural linguistics theory system. French writer Roland Barthes is also a supporter of structuralist semiotics and has written important works such as Principles of Semiotics (1988). American philosopher Charles Morris is one of the founders of modern semiotics, who developed his semiotic theory based on Pierce's theory and referred to it as the "science of behavior" (Introduction to Psychology, 2007). French philosopher Foucault was a post structuralist who proposed his own discourse theory, examining the relationship between discourse and power from a sociological perspective. In addition, there are many scholars, including Levy Strauss, the founder of French structuralist anthropology, Greimas, the Lithuanian structuralist linguist who proposed the "symbolic matrix". Amberto Eco, the Italian semiotics scholar who wrote The Non-existent Structure, Revelation and Synthesis, and The Name of the Rose, as well as the American semiotics scholar Sibiok who expanded semiotics to the biological filed. Regarding the semiotic theoretical achievements of numerous scholars, Li Youzheng, former vice president of the International Semiotics Society, believes that there are four supporters of semiotic theoretical system who are widely known today, namely the Saussure in Switzerland, Pierce in the United States, Greimas in France, and Eco in Italy. Semiotics originated from linguistics, anthropology, and even phenomenology, and its development benefited from the progress of multiple disciplines, and its theoretical achievements subsequently penetrated into the research of many other disciplines. In China, the definition of semiotics was first proposed by Zhao Yuanren in his Outline of Semiotics in 1926. However, in the following decades, semiotic concepts and vocabulary did not appear again in domestic literature. In the 1980s, scholars in China gradually began to study semiotics, with works such as Xu Zhiming's (1981) Saussure's Language Theory, Cen Qixiang's (1980) Swiss Famous Linguist Saussure and His Masterpiece A Course in General Linguistics, and Wang Yin's

(2013) Further Discussion on Saussure and Philosophy of Language, which focused mainly on Saussure's semiotics."

Development of Music Semiotics Theory Saussure and Pierce founded semiotics and laid the foundation for this discipline, In continuous development, Cassier and Susan Lange's anthropology -- a theoretical system of artistic semiotic emerged. It integrates culturology, anthropology, and semiotics, standing out in modern Western aesthetic theory, creating a new method for studying humanity and its culture. In addition, there is the proposal and construction of music semantic semiotics theory represented by Taslatti.

Cassier and Susan Langer's Anthropology - A Theoretical System of Artistic Semiotics. Cassier was the culmination of 20th century semiotic philosophy, and the cultural symbols he found were unique and had a profound impact in the 20th century. He proposed a new definition of human beings from the perspective of cultural anthropology, which is that "humans are symbolic animals". The foundation of human cultural philosophy is that humanistic culture is a system of symbols, and humans are the animals that create symbols, and constantly develop and improve this system in their development process. Subsequently, Cassier was curious about why humans created symbols, that is, what is the meaning of the existence of symbol systems? Thus, his semiotic research journey began. Susan Lange inherited and developed Cassier's semiotic thought, and her discourse on artistic semiotics, semiotics, and aesthetic thought made her one of the important representatives of Western semiotics and aesthetics. She defines art as "the creation of human emotional symbol" and believes that art represents not only "signified" but also "signifier".

Music Semantic Semiotics Music semantic semiotics developed as a branch of semiotics and semantics in the early 20th century. Starting from the 1950s, musicologists led by Susan Lange began to study the semantic connotations reflected by various musical elements and components in musical works. In the 1980s, Tarasti combined relevant theories of semantics to form a basic music semiotics theoretical system for analyzing music semantics, enabling later music theorists to further explore the mysteries in music works.

The Study of the Development of Music Semiotics Theory in China In China, the discussion on semiotics is very early: Zhouyi has begun to use the method of creating semiotics systems by drawing images from objects and observing images; Confucianism has constructed

the semiotics system of rites and music as well as the theory of rectifying names; and there are also the semiotics thought of speech and meaning in Zhuangzi as well as the discourse on name and actuality of the Ming and Mohist schools, which are a large treasure trove of China's classical semiotics thought. The Chinese word "semiotics" was proposed by Zhao Yuanren in 1926 in a long article entitled "Outline of Semiotics". The real scale of contemporary semiotics research in China started only in the 1980s. In more than 20 years, China has completed the process of systematic introduction, dissection, digestion and gradual application of western semiotics, and has made good progress in several major directions, including the study of the basic theory of semiotics, the study of linguistic semiotics, the study of semiotics application, the study of the semiotics of culture and art, and the study of the semiotics of literature.

Application and Research of Music Semiotics With the development of music semiotics, the study of music semiotics by scholars in China has gradually moved from the theoretical stage to the application stage. In China, the real contemporary semiotic research in the field of music semiotics began in the 1980s, and the long article Sign, Semantic Theory and Modern Music Aesthetics by Mr. Yu Runyang in 1985, a leading researcher of music aesthetics, published in Music Research, opened the door to the research of music semiotics in China. On the situation in today's academic world, the author has searched all the major academic search websites and visualized and analyzed the collected literature.

Application of Folk Music Throughout the research on music semiotics in traditional folk music, the research perspectives are relatively rich. There are both studies and reflections on music signs for Chinese traditional music and music semiotic interpretations specific to a particular musical culture.

The Application of Western Music. At the level of the application of music semiotics to Western music, only a small number of scholars in the academic world have partially explored it, although there are also some research results. However, compared with the research on music semiotics of Chinese traditional music, it is slightly insufficient.

Other Applications of Music Semiotics At present, in addition to the above two levels of the application of music semiotics to Chinese folk music and Western music, there is also a part of the research results of the perspective is more diffuse and peculiar, and the areas involved are also relatively rich and novel.

In the article The Embodiment of Musical Signs in Landscape Architecture Design by scholar Wang Luzhen in 2022, it is stated that with the improvement of economic level and the improvement of living standard, contemporary people's demand for the living environment does not only lie in the completeness of the living function, but also requires that it can satisfy a certain spiritual demand, and under this trend, the spiritual function of many urban landscape architectures has become more prominent, and the designers have implemented relevant initiatives in creating the auditory environment besides putting sufficient efforts on visual environment. The music signs in the piano, as both visual and auditory effects of the environmental signs, play an important role in landscape architecture design. As pointed out in Music Theme Landscape Design edited by Li Min, music symbols have been closely related to landscape design since ancient times, whether it is natural music symbols or humanistic music symbols, which to a certain extent realizes the combination of visual aesthetics and auditory aesthetics in landscape design, and can bring visitors a more prominent spiritual experience. The author believes that there are three main aspects of music symbols in landscape design: one is the application of humanistic music symbols. The application of music symbols in landscape garden design has diversified characteristics, of which the obvious one is the design and application of humanistic music symbols. The second is the application of natural music symbols. Natural music symbols are formed with the help of natural sound, with musical aesthetic characteristics of auditory symbols, such as sound of wind, rain and water, animal calls and friction between plants, etc., are the formation of natural music symbols source. The third is the application of visual music symbols. Music symbols are not only pure auditory symbols, such as Music Theme Landscape Design in the music theme landscape can often be seen in the music visual symbols, such as sculpture design modeled on musical notes, music as the theme of the pavilion and other building design, as well as note for the design of plants, cobblestone pathway paving and so on.

Scholar Shan Wenxuan's article, Emotional Expression of Movie Music Signs Based on Aesthetics Perspective--Taking FangHua as an Example in 2021, argues that film and television music is an important means of expression in modern movies, and the perfect combination of it and the picture makes the movie reach a new artistic realm and gives people spiritual support. At the same time, people's choice of music can reflect their aesthetic thoughts. The

reason why music can be widely popular and loved by people in the world is that people can feel the existence of emotions from music, and the relationship between music signs and emotions is complex and hides an inseparable link. Music signs have a strong artistic charm as the music that runs through a film to reflect the theme of the film, summarize the basic mood of the film or portray the character of the main character.

In the movie Fang Hua, music signs are used to highlight the emotional communication and conflicts between people, the conflicts between people in the process of social development, and the conflicts between the social environment and people, etc. The music is used to hit people's hearts and sublimate the theme of the movie. Hegel once said: "Tragedy is not caused by mere personal reasons, but it is an ultimate result of the conflict between two substantial moral points of view." The movie Fang Hua goes to the tragedy in the contradiction and conflict, which brings people to think about the social environment and destiny, and has high artistic value. The music signs in the movie are not just melodies, but also containers for their time and years. He Xiaoping and Liu Feng are the main characters in the drama, and they bear each other's pain, which is the core of the film's theme line. The multiple appearances of musical signs lay the foundation for the film's musical narrative approach, which interlockingly restores the film's main theme, making it a model for the successful combination of film and musical signs, as well as a classic work of China's literary film soundtracks.

Zeng Fanyi's article, The Mode and Innovation of Popular Music Signs Transmitted by Cell Phone Media in 2019, argues that since the day of its birth, the cell phone media has been inseparable from swiftness, personalization, and multimedia, and with the development of information technology, it has gained a wide range of influences. As a product of modern industrial culture, popular music has popularity and mass, which is highly compatible with the communication characteristics of cell phone coal media, and thus the dissemination of popular music symbols through cell phone media tends to be mainstreamed.

Scholar Cai Jiali's article, Study on the Ideographic Function of the Music of Coco from the Perspective of Semiotics in 2018, argues that in the process of the semiotics concept of "one-sidedness" used to interpret the music in Coco, and the principle is that the audience, when perceiving the music of the film, will be guided by the meaning framework of the film

text itself, and the meaning of the music symbols will be interpreted in the light of its own meaning framework, they are directed to gather the possible meaning of the music symbols, so as to realize the five functions of the film music's ideograph, such as expressing the character's emotion, marking the clues of the plot, characterizing the characteristics of the space and time, rendering the mood of the atmosphere, and highlighting the tone of the theme.

Zhang Yun's article, Semiotic Interpretation of Music Communication Media in 2015, discusses that music communication is a bridge for mutual communication and interaction of music and culture in human social life, and is one of the basic ways of artistic and cultural communication. The two concepts of music semiotic form and music communication medium are analyzed from the temporal qualities that music shows in the process of communication. This article, based on the theories of music semiotics and music communication, provides a detailed analysis of the two main types of music communication: natural communication and technological communication. It also applies semiotic analysis to the symbols, media, and information involved in the mass communication of music. In this article, the author boldly makes the assumption that the information dissemination process of music is a musical activity using symbols as media. Because of its own characteristics of music, the medium of music symbols as a symbol of music symbols, its communication qualities have not changed, still auditory as the form of symbols, and the change in the means of communication media is essentially an enrichment of the symbol form.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach serves as the primary method to explore the semiotic perspectives of Hunan Opera, particularly in terms of musical symbol systems, historical development, musical characteristics, and aesthetic values. The quantitative approach is used to support and validate the qualitative findings through empirical data. This

design enables a comprehensive understanding of Hunan Opera as both a cultural and musical symbolic system, as well as the relationships among creators, performers, and audiences.

Methods

The research employs multiple methods to achieve its objectives, including:

1. Literature study to review relevant academic works, ancient documents, and previous research.

2. Historical analysis to examine the development and transformation of Hunan Opera.

3. Music analysis to investigate musical structures, styles, and symbolic meanings.

4. Non-participant observation of live performances.

5. Fieldwork conducted in selected opera institutions and companies.

6. Musical aesthetics study to interpret artistic values and symbolic representations.

These methods provide a multidimensional framework for analyzing Hunan Opera from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Population and Sample

The population of this study includes individuals involved in Hunan Opera education and performance. The sample consists of: 325 students from five institutions and opera organizations in Hunan Province: Hunan Vocational College of Art, Hunan Kunqu Opera Troupe, Hunan Qi Opera Theater, Hunan Opera Theater, and Hunan Huagu Opera School; 6 opera teachers with professional experience in teaching and performance; 4 experts/professors from universities and music academies specializing in music and opera studies. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience in Hunan Opera.

Research Instruments

The research instruments used in this study include:

1. Questionnaires for collecting quantitative data from student participants.

2. Semi-structured interview guides for experts and opera teachers.

3. Audio and video recordings for documenting performances and observations.

4. Document analysis of ancient texts and academic literature related to Hunan Opera.

These instruments were designed to ensure the validity and reliability of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Data Collecting

Data collection was conducted through several procedures:

1. Reviewing recent literature and historical documents related to Hunan Opera.

2. Observing live opera performances through non-participant observation.

3. Conducting interviews with experts and opera teachers.

4. Distributing questionnaires to student participants.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected systematically to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research objectives.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved:

1. Content analysis to interpret qualitative data from interviews, observations, and documents.

2. Statistical analysis to analyze questionnaire data.

3. Data triangulation (cross-validation) to ensure the validity and reliability of findings.

The analysis focuses on interpreting the formation and dissemination of Hunan Opera musical symbols and constructing a framework for understanding its aesthetics, history, and cultural significance. The results are therefore reliable, comprehensive, and applicable to the sustainable inheritance and development of Hunan Opera as an important cultural heritage.

Research Results

The semiotic value of Hunan opera in music

1. Studying Hunan Opera through Musical Semiotics

1.1 Social background: Hunan Opera, particularly Kunqu Opera in the Hunan region, has its origins in the late Ming and Qing Dynasties, when performing arts and music flourished

and spread throughout various regions of China. This performing art form did not remain static but adapted to the social and political context of Hunan, a region characterized by both geography and culture. The music in Hunan Opera is not only melodious but also reflects the social and political dynamics of the time. Significantly, the adaptation of local dialects, such as Chenzhou Mandarin and the fusion of Zhongzhou rhymes, distinguishes Hunan Opera from its Kunqu Opera prototype in Jiangnan. This adaptation reflects the Hunan community's efforts to assert their linguistic identity and individuality through performing arts. These vocal and linguistic markers are thus social codes that indicate class, culture, and power structures in society.

1.2 Customs and language: Hunan Opera uses local dialects and expressions to convey its stories, which serve as cultural codes that audiences can interpret. The dialogues and singing on stage are not merely storytelling tools, but also serve as social codes, reinforcing the Hunan identity in every phrase uttered by the performers. Audiences with similar cultural backgrounds can perceive and interpret these significantly. The rich tones and emphasis on tones in the local dialect symbolize the personality and identity of the people of the region.

1.3 Aesthetic beauty: Kunqu Opera has been hailed as the "Orchid in the Garden of Operas" for its graceful and refined style. However, upon its arrival in Hunan, Kunqu's character was modified and combined with a robustness, becoming known as "Spicy Kunqu," reflecting the harmony between delicacy and emotional power. Audiences can interpret these elements as both aesthetic beauty and vibrant social energy.

1.4 Method of inheritance and display: Hunan Opera has been passed down through a system of master-disciple training and the establishment of specialized schools. In the early 20th century, the Kunqu School was established to train and produce a new generation of performers. In the 1950s and 1960s, the government played a key role in the revitalization and preservation of Hunan Opera, establishing troupes and supporting training. Although the performing art form had suffered a "dormant period" for more than 80 years, the revival of Hunan Opera has been likened to a "golden phoenix" rising from the ashes and soaring once more.

2. Musical elements and cultural roots of the Hunan community

The musical elements in Hunan Opera not only create artistic beauty but also serve as a cultural code reflecting the roots of the Hunan community. Key elements include melody, rhythm, vocalization, and instrumentation.

2.1 Melody The melodies in Hunan Opera combine the delicacy of traditional Kunqu with the strength of local music, particularly Chenzhou folk songs and Qi Opera, creating melodies that reflect the connection to local communities and culture. These melodies give the audience a sense of belonging and symbolize the affirmation of cultural roots.

2.2 Rhythm The rhythms in Hunan Opera are more compact and forceful than those of the original Kunqu Opera, catering to the regional audience's taste for power and ferocity. These rhythms are coded to reflect the rhythm of people's lives in the community and have become part of the musical identity that is consistent with the character of the Hunanese people.

2.3 Vocalization Singing in Hunan Opera employs a strong local accent and a clear emphasis on intonation. This pronunciation style is not only a performance technique but also a symbolic code that conveys the Hunanese people's straightforward, strong, and sincere personality.

2.4 Communication between performers and audiences Communication in Hunan Opera is not limited to vocals, but also includes gestures and instrumentation, all of which serve as symbols that create a "cultural dialogue" between performers and audiences. Audiences are thus not merely recipients of messages, but also interpreters and participants in decoding cultural meanings, creating connections with real-life experiences.

3. Semiotic Dimension and Contemporary Meaning

In an era of globalization, Hunan Opera faces challenges from social changes, such as a decline in young audiences and a shrinking number of tropes. However, efforts to adapt and innovate have helped Hunan Opera retain its vitality and contemporary meaning. Projects such as "Kunqu Enters School" have introduced this performing art to young people, while experiments have also been made to integrate Hunan Opera with modern music, animation, and cultural tourism. These have made Hunan Opera a new symbol connecting the past and present and expanding the social space on a contemporary level.

A study of the semiotic dimension of Hunan Opera's music shows that music symbolizes the social background, language, and way of life of the Hunan community. Musical elements such as melody, rhythm, and singing serve as cultural codes that connect performers and audiences. Hunan Opera is not only a traditional cultural heritage but also a contemporary symbol that reflects the community's efforts to preserve and adapt its culture to the times. Therefore, analyzing Hunan Opera through a musical semiotic framework not only explains its musical structure or performance, but also reveals the symbolic relationship between music, culture, and society, which has persisted and changed along with the Hunan community.

Guidelines for the development of the Hunan Opera musical symbol system to be consistent with the context of the era

Hunan Opera was listed as an intangible cultural heritage of China in 2006. It is also an important area for musical semiotic study, as its music and performance are not only artistic communication, but also reflect a society's "cultural codes," such as language, ethnicity, beliefs, social relations, and shared values. Although Hunan Opera has a long history, it is currently facing several crises, including: (1) loss of successors: the number of older artists is decreasing, while the younger generation is less interested in learning or attending Opera; (2) lack of resources: limited budgets and personnel for arts management, resulting in an unsystematic conservation; (3) the impact of modern culture: the trend of commercial media, entertainment, and Western culture has led the younger generation to pay more attention to contemporary music and art; (4) social and economic changes: the rapid pace of urban life and competition in the cultural market have caused Opera to lose its social space.

To ensure that the Hunan Opera musical symbol system remains alive and responsive to contemporary society, the researcher has identified important approaches to developing the Hunan Opera musical symbol system in line with the context of the era, including:

1. Digital preservation, these include creating a digital database of old documents, songs, musical instruments, and performances; establishing a virtual museum and resource sharing platform to make information easily accessible to the public and researchers; and using advanced technologies such as virtual reality (VR/AR) and AI recognition to create immersive learning experiences.

2. Inheritance and generation building, this includes opening training courses in the form of schools, training centers, and community learning; organizing activities such as "Kunqu into Campus" to allow young people to experience performances and practice; developing a mentor-disciple system between older artists and new students to maintain the continuity of skills and spirit.

3. Creative development and content adaptation, it consists of adapting old plays to modern issues while maintaining the unique symbolic structure of the music; incorporating contemporary art such as rock music, hip hop, street dance, or modern stage techniques to attract a new generation of audiences; producing new works that connect with social issues such as urban life, love, and dreams to make the content easily accessible.

4. Creating a contemporary cultural identity, it consists of preserving its roots, such as the Chenzhou dialect and folk melodies, but adapting them to modern tastes; promoting international exchanges to popularize Hunan Opera art and create global value; making Opera a contemporary cultural symbol of Hunan that is in line with local identity and overall Chinese culture.

5. Social and economic integration for Hunan Opera to survive, it must be linked to social and economic development. This includes developing the cultural and tourism industries, using opera performance as a "cultural brand"; promoting the creation of the Hunan Opera Festival to attract audiences both domestically and internationally; and promoting government-private-community cooperation in investment and resource management.

The development of Hunan Opera's musical symbol system requires a musical semiotics interpretation, which views music as a social and cultural code. The key approaches are: (1) interpreting the musical code – rhythm, melody, language, and gestures must reflect meanings that are relevant to the times; (2) connecting the past and present – preserving traditional symbols but creating "new symbols" that cater to the tastes of the new generation; (3) creating a new social space – Hunan Opera must not be limited to the stage, but also expand to schools, museums, digital platforms, and online media; (4) adapting to global cultural dynamics – using musical symbols as a medium for international cultural exchange.

The "Guidelines for the Development of Hunan Opera's Musical Symbolism" are to ensure that Hunan Opera remains a living cultural heritage, not merely a museum treasure.

This development requires preservation, transmission, innovation, and integration, ensuring that Hunan Opera's musical symbolism not only survives but also sustainably communicates its cultural value to new generations and the global community.

Research Discussion

The findings of this study generate several important discussions concerning the semiotic interpretation, cultural inheritance, and contemporary development of Hunan Opera within the framework of musical semiotics and cultural studies.

1. Musical Semiotics and Interpretation of Hunan Opera

The results indicate that Hunan Opera embodies a complex and distinctive musical semiotic system, consisting of dialectal accents, melodic structures, rhythmic patterns, harmonic elements, and performance gestures. These elements function collectively as a culturally embedded "code of meaning," reflecting local identity and social context. This finding is consistent with the semiotic framework proposed by Nattiez (1990), who argues that music should be analyzed through both its immanent level (structural and sonic organization) and poietic/esthesic levels (production and interpretation within cultural contexts).

Applying this framework to Hunan Opera reveals that certain musical elements—such as localized melodies and Chenzhou dialectal inflections—operate as stable cultural "signs," while others, including orchestration and compositional techniques, can be adapted for modern contexts without compromising cultural identity. This aligns with broader perspectives in music semiotics, which view music as a dynamic sign system shaped by both structure and meaning (Monelle, 1992; Tarasti, 1994). Therefore, the sustainability of Hunan Opera depends on balancing preservation of core symbolic elements with adaptive innovation.

2. Ethnomusicology and Cultural Inheritance Perspectives

From an ethnomusicological perspective, the findings highlight that Hunan Opera must be understood not only as an artistic form but also as a cultural practice embedded in social life. This aligns with Merriam's (1964) tripartite model of music as concept, behavior, and sound, as well as Nettl's (2005) emphasis on music as a culturally transmitted system.

The study identifies key challenges, including a decline in successors and shifting audience preferences, particularly among younger generations. These findings support Nettl's (2005) argument that cultural transmission requires both technical training and cultural understanding. Consequently, effective preservation strategies should integrate performance practice with educational approaches that enhance cultural literacy. This dual approach ensures that Hunan Opera is not only technically preserved but also meaningfully understood by future generations.

3. Living Heritage and Institutional Protection

The study further demonstrates that institutional recognition, such as the inclusion of Hunan Opera in the national intangible cultural heritage list, plays a significant role in safeguarding this art form. However, gaps remain in terms of public participation and practical implementation. This reflects UNESCO's (2003) concept of intangible cultural heritage as "living heritage," which emphasizes active participation, continuous transmission, and contextual adaptation.

Additionally, the concept of "heritage as performance" proposed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) is particularly relevant. It suggests that cultural heritage should not be preserved as a static artifact but should remain dynamic and performative within contemporary contexts. The study's recommendation for developing digital archives, virtual museums, and audiovisual databases aligns with this perspective, as such tools enable both preservation and active engagement. These approaches also resonate with Lotman's (1990) view of culture as a dynamic semiotic system that evolves through communication and reinterpretation.

4. Cultural Transition and Cultural Marketing

The findings also reveal that globalization and modern cultural markets have significantly impacted the audience base of Hunan Opera. This is consistent with Smith's (2006) argument that heritage in the modern era must move beyond preservation toward active use and value creation.

The decline in traditional audiences suggests that Hunan Opera must adapt to contemporary cultural consumption patterns. Integrating opera into cultural tourism,

educational programs, and creative industries represents a practical strategy for enhancing its relevance and sustainability. Such approaches not only preserve cultural heritage but also generate economic and social value, thereby aligning with contemporary models of cultural development. Moreover, these findings echo earlier studies highlighting the challenges and necessary adaptations of Hunan Opera in modern society (Fan, 2003).

5. Digital Technology and Data Heritage Protection

Finally, the study underscores the critical role of digital technology in preserving and transmitting Hunan Opera. The development of digital databases, audiovisual archives, and virtual platforms is consistent with UNESCO's (2003) recommendations for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through documentation and accessibility.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, digital archiving contributes to the preservation of both tangible and intangible knowledge, including performance practices, stylistic nuances, and contextual information (Nettl, 2005). Furthermore, the integration of metadata and open-access systems enhances the educational and social value of such resources, facilitating broader participation and engagement.

In this context, digital preservation not only reduces the risk of cultural loss but also supports the transformation of Hunan Opera into a more accessible and globally relevant cultural form. This reflects the evolving nature of cultural memory, as discussed by Assmann (2011), where preservation and reinterpretation coexist within modern technological frameworks.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that Hunan Opera, as a musical semiotic system, must be understood through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates semiotics, ethnomusicology, cultural heritage studies, and digital humanities. The findings suggest that sustainable development requires a balance between preservation and innovation, institutional support and community participation, as well as traditional practices and modern technologies.

Conclusion

A study of the semiotic value of Hunan Opera's music demonstrates that it is not merely an entertainment performing art, but also a cultural sign system comprised of linguistic,

musical, and performance codes, all of which play a role in communicating the identity of the Hunanese community at different times. The use of local dialects, adaptations of melody and rhythm, and straightforward singing styles all serve as symbols connecting performers and audiences, clearly reflecting the social structure, values, and identity of the Hunanese people. Furthermore, Hunan Opera's adaptations in the era of globalization, such as its introduction into schools, integration with contemporary music, and the use of digital technology, have transformed it into a contemporary sign, connecting the past and present and creating a new social space in line with the times. In terms of development, the Hunan Opera's musical sign system should incorporate four integrated approaches: (1) digital preservation, which stores information and dissemination through online platforms; (2) inheritance and generational development through education and practical training; (3) creative development, which adapts the script and performance formats to reflect contemporary social issues; and (4) linking with the creative economy and cultural tourism to enhance the sustainability of musical and performing arts heritage. For future research, Key recommendations are as follows: First, a study of the semiotic interpretation of Hunan Opera's music from the perspective of young audiences should be conducted to understand how young people perceive and interpret musical symbols in the context of contemporary media. Second, a comparison should be made between Hunan Opera and other opera genres, such as Jingju or Yue Opera, to analyze similarities and differences in musical and cultural codes. This will help broaden the theoretical framework of musical semiotics. Third, action research that experiments with the use of digital technologies such as VR, AR, or AI to inherit and communicate Hunan Opera will provide a new approach to assess its potential for creative development in practice. Finally, the economic and social dimensions should be considered, examining community management models and public policies that support Hunan Opera's existence as a true "living heritage." In summary, Hunan Opera is not only a traditional performing art but also a symbolic musical system that continues to move and adapt to contemporary society. Future research, both theoretical and practical, will ensure that this art form retains its value and can sustainably communicate with the modern world.

Research Suggestions

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research, practical application, and policy development concerning the sustainable preservation and development of Hunan Opera.

1. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should further expand the scope of musical semiotics in Hunan Opera by exploring: Youth perspectives and audience reception, particularly how younger generations interpret and engage with Hunan Opera in contemporary contexts; Comparative studies between Hunan Opera and other Chinese opera genres to identify similarities and differences in musical symbol systems and cultural meanings; Interdisciplinary approaches, integrating semiotics with digital humanities, communication studies, and cultural economics to deepen analytical frameworks; Experimental research on digital technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI), to explore new forms of performance, preservation, and audience interaction. These directions will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Hunan Opera within both national and global contexts.

2. Practical Suggestions for Cultural Inheritance

To ensure the effective transmission of Hunan Opera, the following practical recommendations are proposed: Strengthening education and training systems, combining technical skill development with cultural and semiotic literacy; Encouraging collaboration between educational institutions and opera organizations to create sustainable learning pathways for students; Promoting community participation through workshops, performances, and local cultural activities to enhance public engagement; Supporting the development of new creative works that retain core musical symbols while adapting to modern aesthetic preferences. These approaches will help bridge the gap between traditional heritage and contemporary society.

3. Policy and Institutional Suggestions

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that: Governments and cultural institutions should enhance implementation mechanisms for intangible cultural heritage protection, beyond formal registration; Increased funding and support should be allocated for research, education, and performance activities related to Hunan Opera; Policies should encourage cross-sector collaboration, linking culture with tourism, creative industries, and education; Evaluation systems should be developed to monitor the effectiveness of heritage preservation programs. Such measures will strengthen both institutional support and long-term sustainability.

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