

Nanjing Baiju: Balancing heritage and innovation in contemporary China

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Abstract

This study examines the modernization of traditional Chinese Baiju opera while preserving its original essence through an exploration of its history, characteristics, and adaptation to contemporary trends. The research uses qualitative methods such as literature review, case studies, and surveys, with limitations including reliance on existing literature and subjective audience feedback. Findings reveal a balance between traditional authenticity and contemporary influences, shedding light on a generational gap in audience acceptance and extending to a broader discussion of preserving traditional arts in a globalized context.

Keywords: Nanjing Baiju Opera, modern musical trends, dynamic interaction, Traditional music protection.

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1.0 Introduction

The Nanjing Baiju Opera, a quintessential representation of Jiangnan's cultural heritage, has endured over centuries, embodying the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity. This study aims to draw on theories of cultural resilience and adaptation to unpack opera's evolutionary trajectory and explore how it has embraced contemporary trends while retaining its essence. The primary purpose of this study is to illuminate the dynamics of traditional cultural preservation amid the impact of modernization through the lens of Nanjing Bai Opera. Objectives include: (1) tracing the historical evolution of Bai Opera, emphasizing its cultural significance; (2) studying contemporary strategies adopted for its survival and relevance, including the formulation of cultural policies; innovations by creators and performers; esp. Communication methods among young people, etc.; (3) Proposing a sustainable development model for traditional art in the development of modern culture.

By achieving these goals, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of acculturation that contributes to the broader discussion on conserving this territorialized niche intangible cultural heritage.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Past Research on Nanjing Baiju Opera

Over the years, countless scholars and researchers have delved into the rich historical and cultural significance of Nanjing Bai Opera. Their research has revealed various aspects of this traditional art form, providing valuable insights into its origin, development, and

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impact on Chinese society. A prominent research field focuses on tracing the historical roots of Nanjing Baiju (Xue, 2016). Scholars have explored ancient literature, archaeological discoveries, and oral traditions to reveal their earliest forms and influences (Chen W & Yang, 2019). These investigations found that this traditional Chinese opera style can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when it became a popular form of entertainment for elites and ordinary people (Pan & Shi, 2018). Another critical aspect of research is the evolution of Nanjing Baiju over time. They analyzed how dynasties and social changes influenced their repertoire, performance techniques, costumes, and musical accompaniment (Huang et al., 2010). Scholars have identified different periods in the development of this opera style by studying old scripts, music scores (Liu, F&Liu, Y.W., 2010), and other historical records (Wang, 2016; Zhao, Y. 2017).

In addition, researchers also explored the social and cultural impact of Nanjing Baiju on Chinese society (Liu, 2016). They studied its role in shaping gender roles and social norms through character depictions and storylines, as well as how this art form served as a platform for political or social criticism during the turbulent times of Chinese history (Chen, 2017).

When discussing the evolution and significance of Nanjing Baiju, we must recognize the diversity of academic views. For example, some scholars believe that the traditional aspects of Bai opera should remain unchanged to maintain its authenticity and cultural heritage [1]. On the contrary, others advocate integrating contemporary elements into performance, believing that it is crucial for the sustainability of art forms in the digital age [2]. These different views emphasize the continuous discussion on the balance between the protection and innovation of traditional performing arts.

Although the literature provides a comprehensive overview of the historical importance and modern challenges of Nanjing Baiju, there needs to be a clear gap in the empirical study of systematically evaluating the impact of modernization efforts on audience acceptance and participation. Specifically, there needs to be more research to test how young audiences view these changes and whether they affect their interest in and involvement in Baiju. In addition, the role of digital media in popularizing Baiju outside China and its impact on global cultural exchanges have not been fully explored.

2.2 Modern Creative Developments in Nanjing Baiju Opera

Recently, the academic attention to the modernization and creative development of Nanjing Baiju has been emphasized in many studies. In particular, the work of Chen and Yang (2019) is a pioneering contribution in this field because it explores the integration of Bai Ju and contemporary pop music. Their analysis revealed the challenges and innovative approaches needed to adapt Baiju Opera to modern contexts, particularly in engaging younger audiences (Zhang & Chen, 2016; Xue, 2016). Publication trends show a surge in interest peaking around 2011, followed by a decline post-2019, indicating a gap in exploring Baiju Opera's fusion with popular music genres (Publication Trends, 2000-2023, see Figure 1). However, practical music creation has seen an increase in incorporating Baiju elements in popular music, reflecting a modern reinterpretation and potential pathways for its evolution and relevance to contemporary society.

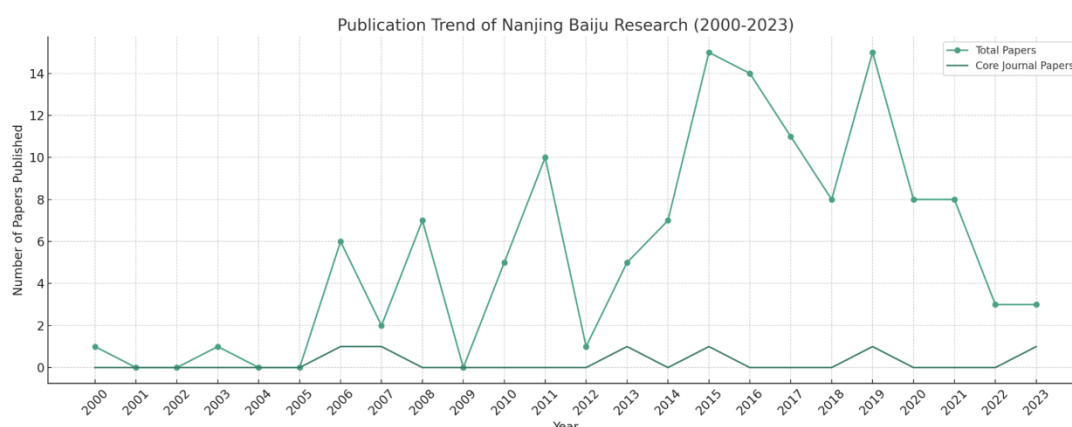


Fig. 1 The publication trends in Nanjing Baiju Opera research from 2000 to 2023 (Source: CNKI, December 2023)

3.0 Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative research methods to explore the integration of Nanjing Baiju and modern music trends since 2000. During the research process, we employed various methods, including literature review, case studies, structured music analysis, and audience perception surveys, to understand this subject comprehensively. The literature review segment utilizes references such as "Discussion on the Artistic Features and Cultural Value of 'Nanjing Baiju' in Nanjing Local Opera" by Wu Ge and Wan Xiumei (2006) and "Interpretation of the Artistic Features and Causes of Nanjing Baiju" by Xue Lei (2023), ensuring factual completeness through rigorous citation.

The review of historical documents helps us understand the traditional charm and style characteristics of Nanjing Baiju, while contemporary documents such as Wu Ge's thinking on the development of local music education curriculum -- Taking the inheritance of 'Nanjing Baiju' art as an example '(2008) and lixinzhu and chenyunxian's from folk songs to intangible Cultural Heritage -- the

transformation and development of Nanjing Baiju since the 20th century (2019), It is helpful to understand the integration of this traditional art form and the trend of modern music. The case study discusses how Nanjing Baiju skillfully integrates into contemporary music works.

These cases provide vivid narrative depth and let us feel the existence of Nanjing Baiju in contemporary music. By analyzing the musical elements of Nanjing Baiju in these works, we have carefully studied the selected works (Jasmine) to determine the changes of the traditional Baiju Bureau repertoire in each period to adapt to the development of the times and regions. This analysis method enables us to understand the conventional elements in modern music creation more accurately. We also conducted an audience survey on the acceptance of the integration of Bai Ju and pop songs through a questionnaire survey (November 15, 2023, to December 1, 2023), with samples drawn from students, faculty, and their families at the School of Music and the School of Drama and Film at Communication University of China, Nanjing. Combining these research methods provides us with a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of Nanjing Baiju in modern music.

4.0 Findings & Discussion

The historical development and current situation of Nanjing Baiju, a traditional Chinese performing art form with a unique performance style, can be traced back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. It originated from the leisure activities of Nanjing Yunjin workers, who composed and sang songs in a simple and rustic form. By the end of the Qing dynasty, Nanjing Baiju peaked, widespread among the people of Nanjing (Wu & Wan, 2006, P186).

4.1 Overall analysis

The development of Nanjing Baiju Opera can be divided into three periods of prosperity and decline, each closely related to the social, political, and economic environment. The first period of prosperity occurred during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), with Nanjing Baiju gaining promotion due to its involvement in the silk industry and mass cultural and entertainment activities. The second peak occurred in the early Qing Guangxu period (1871–1908) due to the re-establishment of the trade route between China and Mongolia, leading to a revival in the silk industry and increased activity in Nanjing Baiju art. The third period of prosperity was during the early Republic of China (1912-1949), marked by the spontaneous singing activities of Nanjing Baiju artists, especially during the warlord period. The first period of decline followed the fall of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, leading to the destruction of Nanjing City and its detrimental impact on Nanjing Baiju. The second decline occurred in the late Qing and early Republic of China due to the overthrowing of the feudal imperial family and the closure of state-owned silk-weaving factories. The third decline was after the "September 18th Incident", resulting in devastating impacts on the silk industry and almost leading to the extinction of Nanjing Baiju (Xue, 2006). Nanjing Baiju is facing the threat of gradual extinction due to the decline of the traditional Yunjin industry and modern industrialization. However, efforts to rescue and protect Nanjing Baiju have been made by the Nanjing municipal government and cultural departments, with the establishment of the Nanjing Workers' Baiju Experimental Opera Troupe. Despite the challenges, Nanjing Baiju still maintains a certain vitality among older adults, who continue to pass on this art through gatherings and singing performances.

Nanjing Baiju Opera is renowned for its rich collection of historical stories and folk tales, playing a significant role in preserving and inheriting the cultural heritage of the Nanjing area. The traditional repertoire of Nanjing Baiju is rich in content, including various historical narratives and folk stories, enriching the cultural landscape of Nanjing and artistically depicting the local folk customs and social reality. Nanjing Baiju often focuses on local news, anecdotes, and themes that reflect social reality, highlighting Nanjing's unique social customs and folk art charm. In addition, Nanjing Baiju continues to incorporate new elements into its traditional repertoire to reflect the changes and development of the times and maintain its vitality and modernity. Table 1 shows the diversity of themes and texts in Nanjing Baiju's plays, reflecting different aspects of daily life.

Table 1. Nanjing Baiju Repertoire Overview

Traditional Repertoire	Category	Description
Ji Fang Ku	Folk Life	Reflects the hardships of machine workers
Cai Lu Hao	Folk Life	Reflects folk life
Cai Xian Tao	Weddings and Funerals	Suitable for weddings and funerals
Xiao Shang Shou	Weddings and Funerals	Ideal for weddings and funerals
Jin Ling Bian Di Jing	Scenic Beauty	Reflects the scenery of the Nanjing area
Si Shi Ba Duan Jing	Scenic Beauty	Reflects the scenery of the Nanjing area
Nan Jing Feng Su Jing	Customs and Folklore	Reflects the customs and folklore of Nanjing
Wang Lao Tou Pei Cha Hu Gai	Customs and Folklore	Reflects the customs and folklore of Nanjing
You Ju Chang Fu Yan	Modern Creations	Reflects modern social life
Shi Da Zi Cun Chang	Modern Creations	Reflects modern social life
She Qu Nian Nian Xin Qi Xiang	Modern Creations	Reflects modern social life

(Source: Liu, F., & Liu, Y W.,2010)

In a specific case, the classic tune "Xianhua Diao" of Nanjing Baiju Opera gradually evolved into the well-known Chinese song "Mo Li Hua." "Mo Li Hua" has undergone significant changes in artistic style and instrument usage through different historical periods. The

original "Xianhua Diao" captivated audiences with its strong folk characteristics, primarily using traditional Chinese instruments such as erhu, pipa, and dizi. However, as time passed, the adapted "Mo Li Hua" versions gradually incorporated music elements and styles from different regions(Liu,2016).

Throughout this process of adaptation and evolution, "Mo Li Hua" not only retained the original melody and lively rhythm but integrated new music elements and stylistic features, making this song more colorful and diverse. See Table 2.

Table 2. Evolution and Characteristics of 'Fresh Flowers Tune' to 'Jasmine Flower' Across Different Periods				
Version	Period	Stylistic Features	Instrumentation Changes	Style Changes
Xianhua Diao	Late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China	Fresh and beautiful, with a gentle melody, a fast rhythm, and a rich sense of life.	Traditional ethnic instruments such as erhu, pipa, and flute.	The original version Uses local dialects and pronunciation habits, with content based on local legends and folktales.
Mo Li Hua (Jiangsu Version)	1950s	The melody is beautiful and smooth, the rhythm is fast and light, and it has the charm of the Jiangnan water town.	Erhu, flute, dulcimer, and other ethnic instruments are added with string and percussion.	Utilized commonly used instruments from the Nanjing area and rearranged the music's rhythm and melodic progression.
Mo Li Hua (Northeast Version)	1960s	The rhythms are fast and powerful, the melodies are full of ups and downs, and it has the charm of the Northeastern Errenzhuan.	Banhu, Suona, gongs, drums, and other ethnic instruments are combined with electro-acoustic instruments.	Combined with the characteristics of the Northeastern Errenzhuan, it forms a unique style.
Mo Li Hua (Modern Version)	Contemporary	Integrates various musical elements with beautiful melodies, fast and powerful rhythms, and a modern feel.	Modern instruments like electronic synthesizers, guitars, and drums combine traditional instruments.	Innovation is based on tradition, incorporating modern musical elements like electronic instruments.

4.2 Audience Acceptance and Cultural Influence

A survey was conducted to assess audience reactions to the modernization of Nanjing Baiju Opera across different age groups. The survey results in a data table indicate that younger audiences (20-40 years old) are more accepting of modernization, whereas older groups (61-70 years old) disagree with modern creative works. This data helps us understand varying attitudes toward integrating traditional art and contemporary elements among different age demographics. These data show the different attitudes toward integrating classic art and modern elements among other age groups—fig. 4.

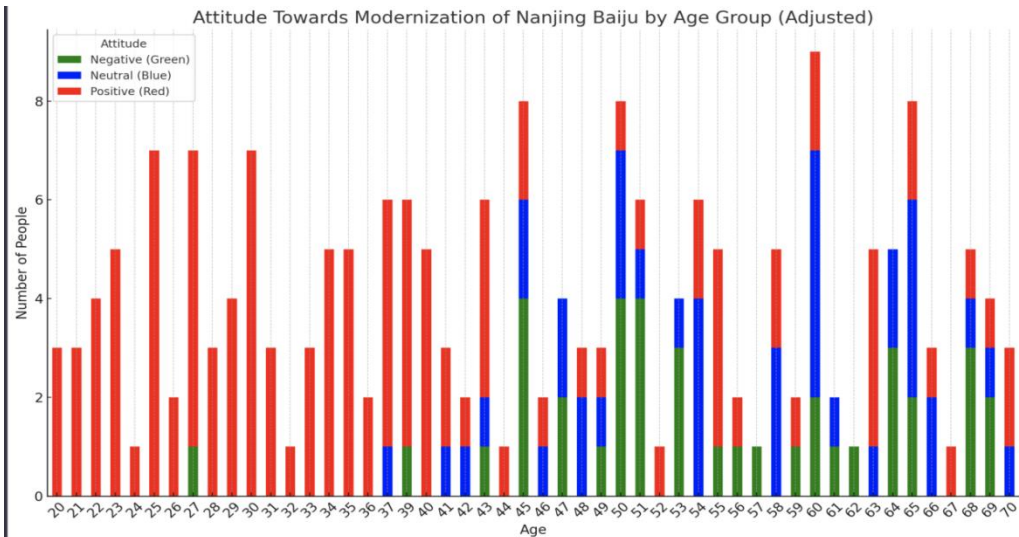


Fig.4.Audience Acceptance Survey Results (Souce: School of Drama, Film and Television and School of Music, CUCN, Dec 2023)

The revival of Nanjing Baiju Opera, a traditional Chinese art form, showcases a nuanced interplay of historical preservation and modern adaptation. Its fluctuating trajectory reflects the impact of socio-political changes on cultural practices. Contemporary interventions, while attracting a broader audience, especially the youth, also raise critical questions about maintaining the essence of Baiju. The study reveals a complex audience reception, where traditionalists seek to retain the original form, and the younger generation embraces modernity. This dichotomy underscores the importance of a balanced approach, where innovation coexists with tradition, ensuring Baiju's relevance in contemporary culture. Future endeavors in Baiju's evolution should focus on sustainable practices that honor its rich legacy while adapting to modern tastes.

5.0 Conclusion & Recommendation

5.1 Acknowledgment of Research Limitations

This study aims to explore the adaptation and preservation of Nanjing Baiju in modern society and, through qualitative analysis, comprehensively understand its challenges and opportunities. Although it provides new insights into the significance of Nanjing Baiju, it also has some limitations. Research heavily relies on limited literary resources and the views of specific groups and may only partially cover some relevant views. In addition, research methods tend to be qualitative analysis, and quantitative data analysis needs to be strengthened.

5.2 Retrospective Evaluation and Contribution

By investigating the historical background, current situation, and the role of Nanjing Baiju in contemporary culture, we have a profound understanding of the development path of Nanjing Baiju. It highlights the critical role of Nanjing Baiju in cultural protection and explains how it maintains its vitality and relevance through innovation in modernization. Through the analysis of policy promotion, technology application, social participation, and other aspects, this paper puts forward practical suggestions for the future development of Nanjing Baiju. It provides theoretical and experimental references for the modern adaptation of traditional art forms.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Practices

To promote the protection and development of Nanjing Baiju, the following measures are recommended:

- Strengthen education and public publicity: Through school education and social media platforms, improve the understanding and interest of the public, especially the young generation, in Nanjing Baiju.
- Integrating traditional and modern technology: Using digital media tools such as recording technology while preserving the artistic essence of Nanjing Baiju, we can improve the accessibility and communication efficiency of Nanjing Baiju's works.
- Promote cross-cultural exchanges and cooperation: introduce Nanjing Baiju to global audiences through international art festivals and exchange projects to promote cultural diversity and mutual understanding.

5.4 New Directions for Future Research

Future research should focus on the following areas:

- Audience acceptance and market analysis: Conduct more quantitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the acceptance and preferences of different groups towards modernization attempts of Nanjing Baiju opera.
- Application of recording technology in artistic preservation: Detailed exploration of capturing the essence of opera through high-quality recording technology and how this technology can enhance audiences' immersive experiences.

Through the conclusions above and recommendations, this study aims to offer practical guidance and strategic suggestions for the protection, dissemination, and innovative development of Nanjing Baiju opera, ensuring the smooth inheritance of this precious cultural heritage and its new radiance in modern society.

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