

Applying Media and Virtual Approaches to the Institutionalization of Puzhou Opera

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Abstract

Puzhou opera, also known as *Puju*, originated in Puzhou in ancient China, which is now renamed as Yuncheng city, Shanxi province. *Puju* has been recorded since the Yuan dynasty and has become one of China's most important operas because of its long history and influence on surrounding opera styles. This article explores challenges related to the institutionalization of *Puju* and how to use the modern technology of virtual media to ensure the sustainable development of traditional opera. In addition, as an insider of Yuncheng University, the researcher explored the application process of virtual media in promoting the institutionalized development of *Puju* and how to realize the learning, preservation, and inheritance of education and modern technology. To summarize, this study investigates the existing problems and challenges in using this virtual and media approaches and applies the media through virtual approach in the institutionalization of *Puju* to expand audiences and provide a new dissemination of opportunities.

Keywords: Puzhou opera, Chinese local opera, virtual media, institutionalization, sustainable development

1. Introduction

The institutionalization of folk music is not uncommon, as it often involves the integration of traditional musical expressions into formal structures and practices within society (Le Gargasson, 2020). This article examines the institutionalization of *Puju* of China in the digital age, highlighting the significant role played by virtual media in shaping its evolution. Through an examination of virtual platforms and online communities, the study explores how engagement with digital technologies has contributed to the institutionalization of *Puju*, transforming traditional practices, and expanding it to a wider audience. By harnessing the power of virtual media, *Puju* has embraced new opportunities for its preservation, promotion, and audience engagement. This article also introduces the application of the virtual media approach used in the *Puju* major of Yuncheng University, and its influence on the development of this program to *Puju*. For example, the curriculum of the *Puju* major incorporates several virtual media methods, as well as the career options of students after graduation. By exploring the problems and challenges of *Puju* within this virtual media mode, this study hopes to assist in the sustainable development of *Puju*.

The research problems are in the inheritance and preservation of *Puju*, including three aspects below: (1) the aging of the audience and the serious ruralization; (2) the mode of transmission and preservation is single. The education mode of the ordinary school cannot help the transmission and preservation of *Puju*; and (3) the survival of the performers is difficult, and a large number of performers and staff are seriously lost.

This ethnomusicological study examined the traditional *Puju* and explored the applying of media and virtual approach in the process of institutionalization, investigating the development of *Puju* from the two perspectives of sustainability and institutionalization. The research includes two perspectives, data were generated through fieldwork, interviews, and observation, and the development of this opera was reviewed, and current data and trends in the reception of Puzhou performances was observed during the study with reference to reports, writings, and analyses in the literature. Besides, the research also involved observations of performances and teaching at Yuncheng University that is one of the main venues of this research. Aims to explore its features of innovation and development and the practical effect of system changes from different disciplines. This article explores the series of institutionalized development background. Since the 21st century, *Puju* has taken a virtual media approach to solve some of the problems in its development.

1.1 History of Puzhou Opera

Chinese operas can be classified into five categories in terms of *Qiang* [腔], which includes the *Kun Qiang* [昆腔] of the south, the *Yi Yang Qiang* [弋阳腔] of Jiangxi, the *Liuzi Qiang* [柳子腔] of the Shandong, the *Bangzi Qiang* [梆子腔] of the west, and the *Pihuang Qiang* [皮黄腔]. *Puju* is a type of *Bangzi Qiang* (Huang, 2000).

Chinese operas are divided into local and national operas. Local operas refer to operas associated with specific regions, such as *Yuju* [豫剧] of Henan province, *Qinqiang* [秦腔] of Shaanxi province, and *Pingju* [评剧] of Hebei province, in contrast to national operas, such as Peking opera, which are well known and popular in more regions (Cai, 2008). *Puju* originated in Puzhou [蒲州] located in Yuncheng city [运城], Shanxi province [山西]. It is also called *Puju* [蒲剧], Puzhou Bangzi [wooden clappers], or Luantan [乱弹]. Puzhou Bangzi, together with the Zhonglu Bangzi, the Beilu Bangzi, and the Shangdang Bangzi, are known as the four Bangzi of Shanxi Province (Duan, Xiang, & Zhang, 1955).

Puju appeared after the Yuan opera died out in the Yuan dynasty [1271–1368] and was popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties. This is the earliest record of the development of *Puju* (Chen, 2009). Around the end of the Ming Dynasty (1600 – 1644) and the beginning of the Qing dynasty [1644 – 1722], a type of local opera became popular in Puzhou, Tongzhou [同州] located in Dali county [大荔], Shaanxi province, and Shaanzhou [陕州] located in Sanmenxia county [三门峡], Henan province. At first, people called it Luantan, also known as Bangzi, because it uses jujube wood for the wooden clappers to accompany the singing at the festival (Chang, 1952). During the Qing dynasty, the dramatist Kong Shangren [孔尚任] recorded *Puju* in his book ‘*Pingyang Zhuzhi Ci*’ [平阳竹枝词] (Zhang & Kang, 1983). It is evident from the remains of opera stages and historical documents that *Puju* was very popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties. For example, in Hejin county of Yuncheng city, there were more than 100 stages to perform *Puju* during the Qing dynasty (Xing & Li, 1993).

Li (2015) believes that *Puju*'s second stage of development started during the outbreak of Second World War [1939 – 1945] in China to the founding of the People's Republic of China. In the 1930s, people started to refer to Puzhou clapper opera as *Puju*. *Puju* performers left their hometowns because of the war and formed new troupes in other cities. During this period, *Puju* was performed in every major city in northwest China and surrounding areas (Chen, 2014). As a result, *Puju* began to influence other opera styles in different cities and increased its popularity. This integration encompassed various aspects, including music, scriptwriting, singing styles, and acrobatics, resulting in a unified and distinctive style of *Puju*.

After the war, *Puju* went through a special period of institutionalization from 1966 to 1976 when all traditional operas were institutionalized and unified standards were required. For example, the storyline, script, singing, costumes, and stage design were all required to fit the political context (McGrath, 2010). Many *Puju* performers and troupes were compromised during this restricted period of institutionalization. These limitations include not allowing traditional repertoire to be performed, and performances need to be limited to specific content. Many performers are not even allowed to perform. This also had a great influence on later *Puju* to regain audience reception. Until the 1980s, *Puju* began to return to the mainstream opera market, and went through a third development. It was also during this period that China embarked on economically oriented reform measures, which in many ways influenced the institutionalized development of *Puju*. This includes China's floating population as result of the household registration system, the intervention of government policy for local operas, the reform of local opera troupes, and the changes of education system.

1.2 Background to the Institutionalization of Chinese Traditional Music

Zucker (1987) put forward the idea of institutionalization in organizations. He believed that institutionalization was a regular and organized mode of action. The institutionalization of traditional music began long before the digital age through activities such as academic research, cultural heritage preservation, festivals, and commercialization. As Zucker (1977) explains, institutionalization is an ongoing process in which cultural practices become formalized and objectified over time. It implemented for a culture to continue, transmission from one generation to the next had to happen, and the degree to which that transmission had to happen was directly related to the degree to which it was institutionalized. The degree to which that transmission had to be maintained was directly related to the degree to which it was institutionalized and the persistence of a culture after transmission and maintenance had occurred depends on change. The changes by institutionalization that are the pros and cons of this implementation.

However, with the appears of a greater variety of music, especially the emergence of popular music, traditional music has become non-viable in the commercial market (Howard, 2016). This requires specific movements, institutions, and countries to help with traditional music. In China during late 1980s, the emergence of film and television music, popular music, and exposure to other cultures had a significant impact on Chinese local opera

and many local opera troupes began to disappear (Xie, 2011). Therefore, several institutional changes were implemented to help traditional music, including government intervention, financial support, and the involvement of the educational system. For instance, in the 1990s, primary schools of *Puju* enrolled students for free and offered certain living subsidies (Jing Xuebian, personal communication, 2022).

This process in traditional music accelerated in the 21st century. It was at this time that the advent of the digital age provided a new platform for traditional music, continuing the institutionalization of traditional music that had begun earlier. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) point out, organizations tend to imitate similar organizations in fields that are considered more legitimate or successful. Thus, as Lyon and Wells (2012) explain, the development of traditional music in the digital realm builds on earlier institutionalized practices.

With advances in digital media, traditional opera has adopted virtual methods for cultural preservation, creative enhancement, and to gain a wider audience. These methods include digitizing and establishing databases of traditional opera texts and recordings, such as tape, film, and television archives to preserve and disseminate this art form. The development of virtual media has had a significant impact on traditional opera, making it a more attractive and expanding communication ways with different audiences.

The fusion of virtual media with traditional music provides opportunities for the spread and development of traditional Chinese opera. Colleges and universities have also contributed to the institutionalization of local theatre by incorporating digital communication and multimedia courses, including Western theatre, into their curricula. Before this, although the traditional Chinese opera developed, the traditional *Shitu* [师徒] teaching mode is still used in school education. For example, the single teaching mode in the *Shitu* model means that a teacher only teaches a few students rather than all the students. The teaching model is not standardized, which leads to relatively simple teaching content, so this model seriously limits the spread of traditional music. Therefore, in the development of institutionalization, many reforms have been carried out to transform this limited teaching mode.

In terms of audience acceptance and communication, virtual media is helping traditional Chinese opera in two ways: the online live streaming of performances and audiences communicating on social media. Through social media, the communication between the actors and the audience has expanded, gradually moving from the traditional custom of quietly seated audience to a more communicative audience (Lin, 2021; Bennett, 1997).

Recently, the intersection of traditional operas and virtual media has gained significant attention in drama, film, and television. This synergy fosters the integration of various disciplines and facilitates mutual development. The enhancement of virtual media in traditional opera has introduced new possibilities and advancements to the discipline, benefiting both sides in their continuous evolution.

1.3 Characteristics of Puzhou Opera

Puju has a long history and a deep tradition in performing arts, classified based on roles, it encompasses various character types including *Xusheng* [须生], *Laosheng* [老生], *Xiaosheng* [小生], *Zhengdan* [正旦], *Xiaodan* [小旦], *Laodan* [老旦], *Dahualian* [大花脸], *Erhualian* [二花脸 or *Jing* 净], and *Sanhualian* [三花脸 or *Chou* 丑]. The characteristics are free and forthright with many acrobatic effects. One notable example is the use of fire-breathing effects.

The two main musical instruments in *Puju* are the *suona* and percussion. *Puju qupai* (repertory) is subdivided into *suona* and *sixian* (string music) *qupai*. *Suona qupai* (repertory) is very rich with more than 200 types, while there are more than 70 types of *Sixian qupai*. Percussion also includes more than 100 sets and combination. The singing is mainly in the style of *Bangzi* [梆子], *Kunqu* [昆曲], *Chui Qiang* [吹腔], and folk ditties (Du, 1993).

Wen Wu Chang [文武场] refers to the opera orchestra, generally known as the scene, and is divided into *Wen Chang* [文场] and *Wu Chang* [武场]. *Wen Chang* is primarily accompanied by the *huqin* [胡琴, also known as *jinghu* 京胡], a bowed string instrument, along with plucked string instruments and wind instruments, combining elements of playing, plucking, and blowing. *Wu Chang* is dominated by drum plates, followed by small and large gongs. In recent years, through continuous transformation, both opera bands had added *pipa* [琵琶], *zhongruan* [中阮], *yangqin* [扬琴], and a variety of Western orchestra instruments, making the *Wen Wu Chang* more magnificent and effective in rendering the stage atmosphere, strengthening the rhythm of the drama, and enhancing the performance and singing.

The introduction of Western instruments into traditional Chinese opera took place during the era of *Yangbanxi* [样板戏] in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s (Kong, 2008). Its purpose was to experiment and expand the sonic effects of the accompanying instruments used in traditional Chinese opera (Yang, 2020). As a representative of modern Chinese opera, *Yangbanxi* witnessed the incorporation of Western musical instruments into

accompanying orchestras due to the involvement of professional composers (Wang, 1999). Production teams included composers with a background in Western composition theory and Peking opera composers. The group was led by composer Xi Qiming [奚其明] in 1967, and Peking opera composer Shen Liqun [沈利群] joined in 1969 to make revisions (Qin, 2008). These composers introduced Western orchestral instruments, intertwining them with traditional Chinese Opera accompaniment instruments, thus forming a novel orchestral accompaniment mode at that time. One notable example is the Peking opera ‘*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*’ [智取威虎山] in 1967 (Mittler, 2003). During the scene titled ‘*On Tiger Mountain*’, the composers, led by Xi Qiming, skillfully blended Western orchestral instruments like violins, trumpets, French horns, trombones, and flutes with traditional Chinese instruments such as the *jinghu*, Peking opera *luo* [京剧锣], *yueqin* [月琴], and *banhu* [板胡] (Kong, 2008). Because of *Yangbanxi*, *Puju* also began to add Western instruments such as the violin, viola, and cello. In addition to the *suona* [唢呐], Western percussion, such as the drum kit and timpani, also became important accompaniment instruments. In terms of categories formed by name, there are 60 or 70 sets of *Puju* percussion music; rhythms are divided into four types: slow, medium, fast, and loose (Yu, 2021).

1.4 Innovative Development of Puzhou Opera

A notice from the General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China on “Supporting the Inheritance and Development of Traditional Opera” was issued by the Central Government of the People's Republic of China in 2015. The notice focuses on conducting a comprehensive study on local opera genres. The survey was conducted from July 2015 to June 2017. The results of the survey revealed that as of 17 July 2015, there were a total of 348 surviving opera genres in China—38 opera genres were recorded in Shanxi, making it the most numerous. However, many operas are disappearing. Twenty-four operas disappeared during the past thirty years (1985–2015), and 17 operas are declining (General Office of the State Council, 2015).

Many performers have left local opera troupes because salaries cannot support their living expenses. Since local opera audiences have always been older adults in the countryside, this category of audience will eventually not be able to afford the tickets. Performers cannot get paid precisely because the lack of a younger audience willing to buy tickets for a performance. Many studies have shown that the main reason is that the fast-paced modern culture causes younger audiences to become impatient with opera, which has a much slower pace (Li, 2023).

To promote local opera, the government conducted a census of Chinese local operas, and also encouraged the popularization and marketing of opera through the media. By engaging media and virtual approaches, local opera is being promoted to expand its social influence through various innovative methods, with the main approach including films and television.

This policy requires the cooperation and support of opera art performance groups and universities. This also applies to the trend of engaging media and virtual approach in the institutionalization of these folk genres, in which the policy requires local opera to combine with school education. The main approach for the institutionalizing process is to encourage opera art performance groups to cooperate with schools and colleges, which could indirectly involve students in learning (practice) this genre and serve as a talent training base.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many colleges and universities in China began to set up local opera majors to train opera talents to sustain the genre. This includes the programs at the National Academy of Chinese Opera, Zhejiang Conservatory of Music, Jilin University of Arts, and Lanzhou University of Arts and Sciences. Yuncheng University's *Puju* major program was established in 2017 with the support of public policies in combination with local colleges and universities.

2. Applying the Media and Virtual Approaches

2.1 Background to Engaging the Media and the Virtual

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual media involvement was important in various music fields as it is today. The importance of this approach is reflected in various aspects such as dissemination, learning, and preservation (Partti & Karlsen, 2010; Ruthmann, 2012; Waldron, Horsley & Veblen, 2020).

There are two different views on the expression of Chinese opera in films. Gao (2005) defined Chinese opera films as a combination of traditional Chinese opera and film artistic approaches. This provides a modern means for publicity, dissemination, retention, and recording of China's traditional opera styles. Gao believes that Chinese opera films have two main functions: to record the opera in its original setting and present the opera in a film-like setting where many *Puju* elements will need to be changed, such as makeup, music, and costume. Xu, Fu, & Cui (2005) explained the difference between filmmaking and acting on stage in terms scene recording, the use of scenery and real scenery, and how to combine the forms of opera expression.

Another result of the integration of a more virtual approach, is the massive transformation of live *Puju* live

performances into a virtual media platform. *Puju* began to experiment with media in 1959 with the production of the first opera film, which was also the first *Puju* film in Shanxi province. At that time, Changchun Film Studio made a film of Guan Hanqing’s most representative work, *Dou E Yuan* (窦娥冤, also known as *Snow in Midsummer*). More than 100 Chinese Operas applied for the filmmaking, but *Puju* was chosen because Guan Hanqing was from Yuncheng, Shanxi province, and *Puju* is the local opera of Yuncheng, Shanxi Province.

After the film was successfully produced, it aroused a great response from audiences and became very popular at that time, with a box office record of more than ten consecutive performances in one day and even extra performances at night to satisfy the demand. However, both the film and actors were affected by the advent of the Cultural Revolution. During that period, the film could not be shown. China’s reform and opening-up policy since 1997 has encouraged the revival of culture and art. Many programs were launched to fund the development and innovation of local music culture. Changes in the institutionalization led to changes in the development of *Puju*, and the first *Puju* film was produced and released in 1997. This was the first successful application of a media approach to the institutionalized development of *Puju* in China.

With the advancement of social network communication, such as Weibo and WeChat, *Puju* has gradually changed from live performances to a network broadcast mode. The network broadcast mode accelerated during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2020, local troupes in Yuncheng have broadcast weekly performances under the arrangement and coordination of the Youth *Puju* Troupe. Performances are still held in theatres for small audiences; however, the largest audiences still watch the performances through multimedia (TV shows, streaming, and social media platforms). Although the performances were still free, audiences have started to grow, and online performances of these troupes are getting higher view counts. In addition, some performers can get extra economic benefit through the view counts. This growth in viewership suggests that many opera lovers prefer to watch performances on virtual media. Local opera, such as Yue opera, has become very popular in China since 2023 through the spread of virtual media, and performers have also started earn advertising revenue and other extras.

2.2 Engaging the Media and Virtual Approaches Through Higher Education Institutions

Puju, one of the oldest operas in Shanxi Province, has also recognized the need for innovation and development. As a result, the government and Yuncheng University (the only local university in Yuncheng) have implemented institutional reforms and initiatives to support *Puju*’s development. Yuncheng University offers opera, film, and television majors, which is a comprehensive program that could support the institutionalization of this traditional genre. The wide range of subjects also provide opportunities for traditional opera as a single discipline to absorb knowledge and integrate with other disciplines.

The virtual media approach has become increasingly significant in the institutionalization of *Puju*. This research was conducted based on the experience of the researcher as an insider and lecturer at a university. As an insider, the scope of the researcher’s work at Yuncheng University includes a review of the teaching progress and content of *Puju*. In addition, the researcher participated in the research of traditional *Hedong* (a Yuncheng local culture) music at the Yuncheng University Local Music Research Institute. Additional interviews were conducted in 2022 with teachers, performers, staff, and the students of *Puju*. *Puju* performers in Shanxi Province have played a crucial role in driving this progress. The virtual approach has also gained popularity in the *Puju* industry in Shanxi Province. The interviews conducted with *Puju* actors, teachers, and company staff shed light on the emergence of a new institutional pattern through virtual media.

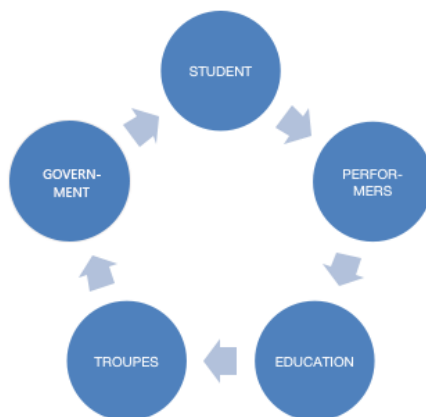


Figure 1. Inner Cycle Model

Before digital media became involved in the development of *Puju*, the institutionalization of *Puju* was based on an inner cycle model that consists of roles within and outside the university (Figure 1). The inner cycle model starts with the role of the student, in which they start to be learning *Puju* at the *Puju* institutions of Yuncheng. Students are arranged into different group where they serve not only as troupe members, but also as staff, and gradually develop into a variety of government association members and leaders. However, due to the inner circulation pattern, the institutionalization of *Puju* faces some challenges, one of which is that it inhibits change and innovation. In practice, this inner circulation pattern has proven difficult to alter, making it challenging for new individuals and events to enter the circle. Despite continuous encouragement and financial support from the government to foster development in the opera industry, changes have been limited due to the rigid existing institutional structure. As a result, *Puju* in Shanxi Province experienced a period when policy changes and innovations did not resonate with audiences.

To attract audience willing to pay for tickets to see traditional opera in a theatre is the main challenge. The disappearance of traditional music, especially local opera, is exacerbated by the fact that local opera cannot get economic benefits. Many performers do not get salaries that support their daily lives. Many performers have left troupes, and many troupes have been forced to close. To have a good commercial market is important for these local opera troupes. But *Puju* has been developed based on the inner cycle model, and there is no new approach to make this model change. The interviews confirmed that a large proportion of troupe performances were free, funded by the government or institutions. A small number are performed at rural funerals, generally the choice of older rural audiences, in which the kind of audience are limited to older members of the community. The intervention of universities and virtual media is to explore approaches to solve this problem.

Contemporary performers and troupes chose to use virtual media to spread and perform, and even explore new applications. This requires skills and knowledge on how to use virtual media. Therefore, an educational system is needed to help performers to use virtual media methods for the institutional development of *Puju*. Yuncheng University is experimenting with virtual media courses in its *Puju* program to develop a new method for the application of virtual media in the development of *Puju*.

The curriculum of *Puju* major in Yuncheng University was established in 2017, jointly founded by the Yuncheng Youth *Puju* Troupe, Yuncheng *Puju* Art Institution, and Yuncheng University. The original purpose of establishing the *Puju* major was to break this inner cycle model, because it hindered the development and innovation of *Puju*. The university's major program encompasses both traditional *Puju* and multimedia subjects. It aims to address the challenges faced by traditional opera in terms of audience reception and provide diverse multimedia channels for the audiences to access the *Puju* of Shanxi province.

Although integrated learning is challenging, the program allows students majoring in *Puju* and students majoring in film and television to interact and communicate through their shared courses. This learning approach brings a lot of new knowledge and culture to both *Puju* students and virtual media students, helping students of two different majors achieve a certain balance in different knowledge viewpoints.

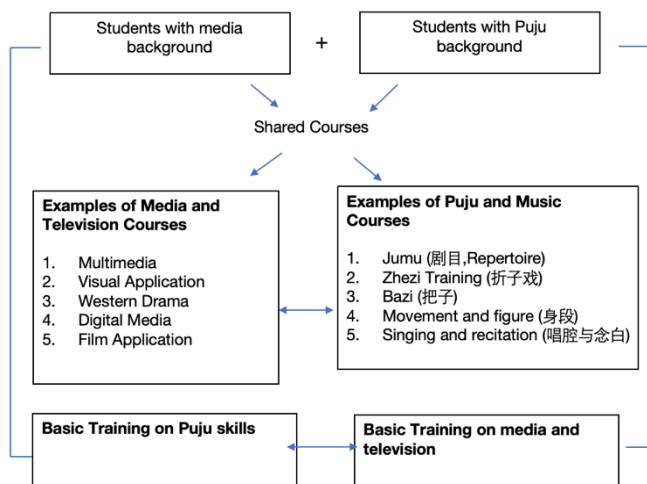


Figure 2. Curriculum Model

Students from both disciplines are required to complete shared courses, including courses in media, *Puju* and

music. Those with a *Puju* background receive basic training in media and television, while those with media background receive basic training in *Puju* skills. Among the media courses, the students learn how to use different software such as Flash, Photoshop, and Corel Video Studio. Assessment includes graphics and image processing, computer animation design, and digital video production. To fulfil the graduation requirement, all students must complete a *Puju* project and put on a public performance, which can be either contemporary or traditional *Puju*. *Puju* practitioners are invited to watch and evaluate each participant's performance. Usually, there are at least three on the panel to assess the performance. This assessment standard also requires virtual media students to complete the content of the *Puju* opera course and to meet the standard of *Puju* opera. In general, unlike *Puju* students learning virtual media courses, it is more difficult for virtual media students to learn the *Puju* courses.

The media and virtual approach allow students at Yuncheng University to learn how to use virtual media in *Puju* to expand the dissemination of *Puju* through different media and reach larger audiences through virtual media. The integration of virtual media and Western drama has indirectly also affected the performance of traditional *Puju*, stage modeling, and makeup. For example, this could be observed in the course on *Puju* figures [*shenduan* 身段]. Students are taught different movements, expressions, and voice intonations to adapt to the differences between live theatre performances and virtual media. The course on *Puju* makeup also conducted based on the two performance modes. For example, theatre performances and media recordings require different makeup methods. The makeup for theatre performances requires deeper colour contrast so that the audience can experience the emotions expressed by the makeup [*lianpu* 脸谱].

In short, Yuncheng University's innovative programme that integrates *Puju* and virtual media majors to break the inner cycle model of *Puju* solve some of its challenges through new disciplines and technologies.

2.3 The Structure and Courses in a *Puju* Major at Yuncheng University

Before the *Puju* major at Yuncheng University was established, the development of *Puju* had always involved educational institutions. Before the 1970s, Puzhou practitioners [performers and musicians] were trained traditionally through the *Shitu* (师徒) learning mode. In 1973, the Yuncheng Secondary Opera School [the present Shanxi *Puju* Art Academy] was established and began to recruit *Puju* students from the third grade of primary school. The six-year training program and teaching approach at educational institutions in professional schools were more liberal and flexible than the 'orally transmitted' approach before the 1970s.

However, even in professional educational institutions, *Puju* learning still follows some elements of the *Shitu* teaching mode. For example, students are asked to kowtow to the master and promise that they will not change the master's performance teaching and performance methods in the future, nor will they learn from others and spread the master's teaching. Although these students can learn more from other courses, *Puju* itself has not changed and remains rather rigid because of the characteristics of *Shitu* learning. Therefore, through the study of professional secondary schools, the students continue to honor the traditional preferences of older audiences, and did not adjust the music, lyrics, scenes, stories, and communication methods of *Puju* to attract new audiences.

The undergraduate Puzhou program lasts four years and includes modules in *Puju*, film, and television. This program is designed to solve problems related to *Puju* learning and inheritance through the teaching resources and management of Yuncheng University. Enrolled students are not only students studying *Puju*, but also students studying Western drama, virtual media, film, and television. Under the program, students from these different media backgrounds learn the same basic curriculum as well as other different media and genres of drama. This curriculum system is positive in its current stage of development in terms of the number of enrolments.

The introduction of digital media courses at Yuncheng University had a certain impact on the development of *Puju*. In addition to helping *Puju* overcome the limitations of the inner cycle model, it also increases the possibility of more innovation and development in the institutionalization of *Puju*. As the highest authorities in the music-education field, colleges and universities play a crucial role in the institutionalization process, which involves establishing new systems in evaluation, music theory, curriculum, and enhancing the quality of *Puju*.

In 2017, Yuncheng University introduced a new way to innovate and develop *Puju* by opening a major program in *Puju*. In the first year, ten students enrolled for the *Puju* program. The curriculum of this major offer comprehensive courses such as multimedia applications, Western music theory, piano, vocal music, introduction to Philosophy, Western drama theory, and Chinese opera theory. The curriculum seems very comprehensive. Yuncheng University also provides supplementary courses in psychology, practice, and career guidance.

Through these course arrangements, the Yuncheng University has allocated considerable resources and time to

give students exposure to a wide range of non-*Puju* courses. The integration of these courses allows students to explore and perform *Puju* from different perspectives.

When the program or degree was originally created, it provided career opportunities for special groups of Puzhou performers. In the past, performers could only attend secondary schools and obtain secondary school diplomas. With the rapid institutionalization of *Puju*, there are certain requirements in terms of educational background for hired practitioners. Many performers were excluded from institutionalized development because of their low academic qualifications. Coupled with the lack of local opera performers, there was an urgent to resolve the problem of performers needing academic qualifications to be hired to teach in this *Puju* program. The *Puju* program at Yuncheng University was an attempt to address this problem. An undergraduate degree helps these performers to continue to work at the *Puju* institution, which offers a fixed salary.

The diversification of *Puju* courses is aimed at solving the problems of a single target audience. The audience for traditional *Puju* in the past has always been a specific group, such as older adults and people living in rural areas. When institutionalized, it underwent innovation and modernization. Training in the use of advanced equipment, especially virtual media, attracts and increases the variety of audience members. This is also a very important part of the *Puju* institutionalization process.

The establishment of sustainable development in education institutions also includes the cooperation of several practice institutions at Yuncheng University. For example, in the Youth *Puju* Troupe, students participated in troupe performances and publicity practices through virtual media. These practical courses contribute to the sustainable development of *Puju* courses in higher education and *Puju* institutionalization.

2.4 Content and Process in Puzhou Program

In the process of the institutional development of *Puju*, the virtual media approach is conducive to the sustainability of *Puju*. Through the cooperation of *Puju* troupes, educational institutions, and Yuncheng University, *Puju* troupes have gradually begun to extend from the inside, increasing the possibility of further development. *Puju* troupes and performers are also exploring the application of media approaches for the development of *Puju*.

Jing Xuebian [景雪变, born February 1960], one of the initiators of the *Puju* program, spent her career experimenting with digital media techniques to expand the development of *Puju*. Jing is the leader of the Yuncheng Youth *Puju* Troupe and vice president of the Yuncheng *Puju* Art Institution (2002–2023, former Yuncheng Opera Culture School). On 3 April 2016, her acting in the *Puju* film ‘*Mountain Village Mother*’ won her the Best Actress award at the 13th World Ethnic Film Festival in Los Angeles. This was the first *Puju*, an ancient Chinese opera form, to win an international award. In the same year, the film won the Outstanding New Film Award at the 25th China Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival in Tangshan, Hebei province, making it the most prominent drama film at the festival (Fan, 2013).

A course taught by Jing, Opera Role-Building, focuses on how to distinguish traditional opera role-building in digital media. Her main ideas include the development of *Puju* through digital media. She also hired a professional *Puju* makeup teacher to explain the different makeup techniques applied in digital media (Jing, personal communication, 2022).

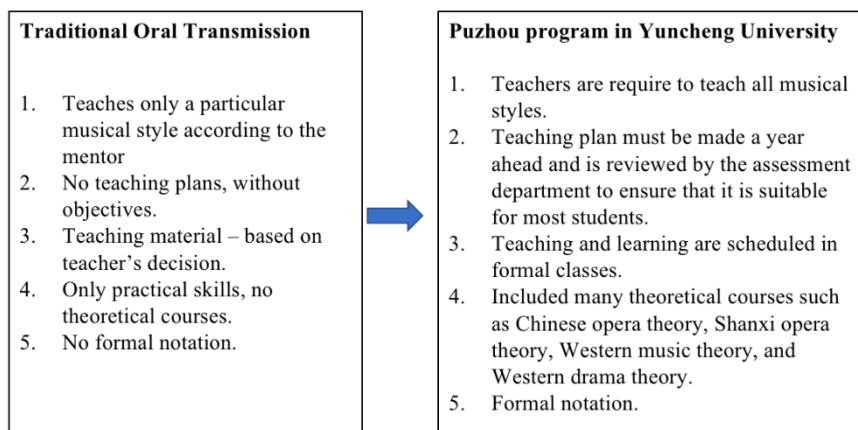


Figure 3. Changes in Teaching Modes

As *Puju* began to enter higher education, in addition to using film, media, and virtual approaches, the curriculum combined Western music theory and drama to equip graduates with multicultural ideas. For example, the inclusion of Chinese and Western musical instruments in *Puju* has gradually expanded, including the gradual addition of Western instruments such as cellos, violins, and brass instruments.

Figure 3 shows the differences in teaching methods before and after *Puju* was introduced in Yuncheng University. Although the teaching of *Puju* has started in middle and secondary schools for a long time, the teaching methods have not changed much. After entering Yuncheng University, *Puju* began to introduce formal teaching planning and teaching content because of the mandatory institutionalization requirements of the university. Institutionalized development in education is one reason young performers are given more opportunities for innovative development.

The addition of a virtual media approach enabled students to acquire a wider range of skills during the learning process. This also helped students to collaborate with the music industry outside the university. This is evident in the ‘*Romance of the Western Chamber*’ [西厢记], performed in February 2022. The Pujingyuan Weekend People's Theatre, a virtual media network broadcast project jointly organized by Yuncheng University and Pujingyuan Theater serves two purposes: to promote *Puju* and provide an opportunity for students to perform publicly with the ‘*Romance of the Western Chamber*’. The show mainly engages young actors, who were mostly undergraduate students at Yuncheng University. In addition, comedic expressions are added to the performance, and recitations are delivered in Mandarin.

Another example is *Gua Hua* 挂画 [hanging a painting] of *Puju*, where this performance uses the acrobatic movements known as ‘stilt skill’ [跷功] and ‘chair skill’ [椅子功]. It features a student from Yuncheng University, Du Lina, who is also a *Puju* practitioner. She participated in two Chinese Central Television [CCTV] operas in 2018 and 2022. In her performance, changing from theatre to multimedia and virtual stage requires an adjustment in facial expression. For example, in theatre performances, facial expressions are more exaggerated to express emotions because the distance between the audience and the stage is large. In media performances, facial expressions must be more subtle rather than exaggerated. Both projects involved more instrumental music than the traditional version. There is not much difference between musical Instruments used in theatres and media performances.

Therefore, students learn through a combination of virtual media courses and *Puju* courses and then through practice in *Puju* troupes, which makes *Puju* learning sustainable. In addition, the problem of innovative learning and economic benefits for young performers is the first problem to be solved for sustainable development of *Puju*. These challenges of *Puju* are investigated and solutions to the sustainability problems of other local opera are always being explored.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Career Prospects of the *Puju* Program

The undergraduate program provides the opportunity for training and learning and increases awareness of *Puju* from a more holistic approach, thus enabling students to equip themselves with specific skills. Many students also choose to pursue master's degrees related to opera, such as scriptwriting, stage design, and directing. Trained in these major courses, some *Puju* graduates also apply more media and virtual approaches to help themselves gain more attention from social media and online performances.

With official degree certificates issued by the university, many of these students secure jobs in government. This indirectly conserves the genre on an ongoing basis. Those with a film and television background are involved in graphic/stage design, direction, and production in Puzhou performances.

Welfare also exists for *Puju* practitioners. Acrobatic training during the process of learning *Puju* results in many long-term injuries among *Puju* performers. Their work must be halted because of the severity of their injuries. The study at Yuncheng University allows students to venture into other professions, such as photography, media, and the virtual work of *Puju*. These programs help performers to continue working in fields related to *Puju* and develop their professionalism.

To date, only about 40 students have graduated. In general, the results show that the program has been a great help for those who have completed their studies, especially young performers desperate to seek jobs.

3.2 Challenges and Limitations

Achieving standardized student qualities is challenging because of the diverse backgrounds of students. Students with a film and television background may not have the skills obtained by students with a background of *Puju*,

but the basic skills and knowledge acquired from the course enable them to understand the entire process of *Puju* from practice to stage. The only problem is that they cannot go in-depth into the *Puju* curriculum, because there are too many technical skills involved. Students with a *Puju* background are more exposed to technology and more innovative in their performances. Learning and training at a young age, specifically in *Puju*, can limit creativity. Through university courses and social activities, it is important to move out of the inner cycle model and stimulate learning and creativity in *Puju* so that the genre becomes more diversified. This is a challenge for students with a background in *Puju*. In addition, the shortage of teachers is also a problem, and when the *Puju* moves from the labor market to the capital market, the lack of access to capital inputs and earnings affects the willingness of new workers to enter the market (Gao, 2020). When online performances are free, it contributes economic challenges (Olson, 2014). Moreover, the Yuncheng University *Puju* major has been asked not to rely too much on government support; like other traditional types, the target audience of these performances are still limited. It is therefore difficult to rely only on the target audience, if the goal is to change the current economic problems.

3.3 Possible Solutions

The solution mainly lies in the audience reception and the implementation of policy. The dialect issue is one of the main reasons why young audiences do not like local operas. In October 1955, the resolution of the National Conference on Language Reform proposed that great efforts should be made to promote the standard Mandarin with the pronunciation based on Beijing dialect. In February 1956, the State Council issued an instruction to promote the use of the standard Mandarin (Cui, 2021). These policies had imposed severe challenges to the survival of many local dialects in China. Many young people rarely use dialects or even cannot speak their mother tongue, and many dialects are on the verge of extinction (Shi, 2023).

The similar issue applies to Yuncheng's *Puju*. Therefore, increasing the use of dialects and promoting their popularity is one of the solutions. This problem has already begun to receive policy and legal review in 2011. The Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China that came into effect on June 1, 2011, has enforced the protection of traditional oral literature and the language used as its carrier, and this provided a remedy for the gradual disappearance of dialects. However, to restore the use of dialects more quickly, more efforts are needed from various institutions in the actual implementation of the policy, such as schools, cultural departments, and folk cultural associations (National People's Congress, 2011).

Additionally, due to the rapid changes in policies during the institutionalization process, strengthening the implementation of policies is also a way to solve problems. *Puju* performers, staff, teachers, and students need to adapt to these policy changes in the institutionalization process where media and virtual approaches are widely used. For example, many policies provide resources, and funding supports for the virtual media methods of *Puju*, but these supports need to be understood and applied accordingly. Not only for the purpose of preservation and sustainability, the media and virtual approach also employed in pedagogy purpose of traditional music (Loo et al., 2016; Loo et al., 2022). In addition, while there are many media and virtual platforms that can help the dissemination and inheritance of *Puju*, students need to be familiar with and proficient in these virtual media approaches.

4. Conclusion

Rice (2013) believes that ethnomusicology cannot be defined with simplicity. First, ethnomusicology is the study of the diversity of world music on the basis of anthropology. This diversity includes the comparison of native and non-native music, the study of the culture, history, language, and methods behind music. In addition, ethnomusicology also includes the study of the musical culture and society of nations or human groups, as well as the process of the continuous development, fragmentation and reorganization of musical culture and society. In the process of institutionalized development of *Puju*, researchers found out that with the development of economic and industrial structure, the society and culture supported by music theory also began to change. The audience target of *Puju* began to change from the rural population to the urban population, and the market target began to change from the funeral and sacrifice market to the art performance market. Social and cultural changes have also forced the institutionalized development of *Puju* to require more innovative methods to adapt to this process of constant development, fragmentation and reorganization.

Stone (2015) argues that ethnomusicology is the study of music as human culture and experience, and therefore students should study adjacent multi-disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, musicology, or folklore, as well as those that influence and contribute to the discipline. Stone affirmed the importance of interdisciplinary learning and believed that the study of ethnomusicology really came from a variety of disciplines. Especially when there is a revolution in scientific research, musical culture must also produce new research procedures

under its influence.

Puju is facing an era of great cultural, social and scientific change. The urbanization of the population, the rapid development of science and technology, and the diversification of culture have forced *Puju* to adapt and change quickly. Under the background, the main objective of the research is how to use the diversification of science and technology and disciplines to help the institutionalized development of *Puju*. The initiative for institutionalizing *Puju* is to establish a standardized and systematic learning system for traditional music. A serious problem that local opera has been facing is that many traditional operas are disappearing. Engaging a media and virtual approach is a way to promote local opera. Implementing innovative practices helps to expand the social influence of local opera in film and television productions.

Nevertheless, institutionalization may result in contradictions. Where institutionalization has failed or stalled, hegemony is usually lacking. But when hegemony often controls the direction of a system, as a result, the originality of some genres is lost (Pedersen, 2002). The conventional approach to learning traditional genres has its own advantages but limits creativity (Hill, 2005).

In conclusion, the institutionalization of this genre is necessary to sustain traditional performances. It is hoped to achieve a balance between its authenticity, at the same time to gain more attention from the public, while having the challenge to face trends and styles that change quickly.

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