

# The Role and Social Function of Maoqiang Chinese Opera in Transmitting Cultural Heritage through Education

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Received: February 4, 2024

Accepted: March 28, 2024

Online Published: June 24, 2024

doi:10.5539/jel.v13n5p139

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v13n5p139>

## Abstract

This research investigates the transmission of Maoqiang opera, focusing on the iconic repertoire “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” and its role in preserving cultural heritage in the Shandong Peninsula. The objective is to investigate the role and social function of Maoqiang Chinese opera in transmitting cultural heritage through education. The research site encompasses various academic institutions and community-based events in Jiaozhou City, where key informants, including Maoqiang opera practitioners and local authorities, provide insights into the transmission process. Data analysis involves qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, to elucidate the multifaceted role of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” in cultural transmission. Methodologically, the research employs a mixed-methods approach to capture the complexity of Maoqiang opera transmission and its societal impact. The research results highlight the enduring legacy of Maoqiang opera and the effectiveness of incorporating traditional repertoire into educational curricula, fostering an appreciation for intangible cultural heritage among diverse audiences. Suggestions for future research include exploring innovative transmission strategies, leveraging digital media, and strengthening collaboration between cultural institutions and educational stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Maoqiang opera, cultural transmission, Chinese opera, educational outreach, cultural heritage

## 1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is the bedrock of societal identity, embodying the collective memories, traditions, and values that bind communities together. In the face of globalization and technological advancement, the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage have become paramount concerns (Reeves & Plets, 2015; Fatorić & Seekamp, 2017; Mahmood & Popov, 2023). Traditional art forms, such as Chinese opera, stand as timeless embodiments of cultural identity and artistic expression. Among these, Maoqiang opera, rooted in rural Chinese traditions, holds a special place, representing a rich tapestry of music, drama, and storytelling (Zhou, 2021; Tan, 2024; Zhang, 2024).

Amidst the rapid pace of modernization, traditional art forms like Maoqiang opera face the risk of marginalization and loss. As younger generations gravitate towards digital media and globalized pop culture, a pressing need arises to revitalize and preserve these cultural treasures (Liu, 2013; Tosi, 2023). As custodians of knowledge and culture, educational institutions play a crucial role in this endeavor. However, integrating traditional art forms into educational curricula poses significant challenges, requiring a nuanced understanding of pedagogical strategies, cultural dynamics, and community engagement (Zheng, 2021; Liu, 2023).

At its core, this study addresses the fundamental question: How can Maoqiang opera be effectively integrated into educational contexts to transmit cultural heritage to future generations? This question encapsulates a broader inquiry into the role of traditional art forms in fostering cultural literacy, promoting intergenerational dialogue, and nurturing a sense of cultural identity. By examining the role and social function of Maoqiang opera within the educational landscape, this study aims to provide insights into practical strategies for cultural preservation and transmission (Yun, 2023; Homhuan & Sensai, 2024; Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024).

The significance of this study extends beyond academic inquiry, encompassing practical implications for educators, policymakers, and cultural practitioners. By elucidating the transformative potential of Maoqiang opera in educational settings, this study offers practical guidance for integrating traditional art forms into curricula and academic programs (Allern et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Yun, 2023). Moreover, by highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics and institutional barriers that shape the transmission of cultural heritage, this research informs

advocacy efforts to promote cultural diversity and inclusion (Aktürk & Dastgerdi, 2021; Giglito et al., 2022; Sonrum & Worapun, 2023; Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024).

In summary, the role and social function of Maoqiang Chinese opera in transmitting cultural heritage through education represents a compelling yet understudied area of inquiry. This research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural preservation, educational innovation, and community engagement by investigating this intersection. Through its interdisciplinary approach and practical orientation, this study aims to provide actionable insights for preserving cultural heritage and promoting cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world.

## **2. Research Objectives**

To investigate the role and social function of Maoqiang Chinese opera in transmitting cultural heritage through education.

## **3. Literature Review**

Cultural heritage transmission through educational institutions has garnered increasing attention from scholars and policymakers alike. This section explores the role of traditional art forms, academic theories, and community engagement in the context of Maoqiang Chinese opera.

### *3.1 Traditional Art Forms and Cultural Transmission*

Traditional art forms, such as opera, serve as repositories of cultural heritage, embodying centuries-old traditions, beliefs, and values. In the Chinese context, opera has long been revered as a quintessential art form that reflects the nation's rich cultural tapestry (Zhang et al., 2022; Xiao, 2023). Maoqiang opera, originating from rural Anhui province, holds particular significance as it encapsulates the folk traditions and customs of the region. Through its music, storytelling, and theatrical performances, Maoqiang opera transmits cultural values and narratives from generation to generation (Xiang, 2020; Han, 2023).

### *3.2 Educational Theories and Cultural Pedagogy*

Educational theories offer valuable insights into the intersection of cultural transmission and pedagogy. Constructivist theories, such as Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, emphasize the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning. According to Vygotsky, cultural artifacts, including traditional art forms, mediate learning, enabling individuals to internalize cultural knowledge and practices (Calamoneri et al., 2022; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023). Similarly, Freire's critical pedagogy underscores the importance of dialogic engagement and cultural critique in education. In the context of Maoqiang Chinese opera, these theories suggest that active participation and critical reflection are essential for meaningful cultural transmission within educational settings (Van Oers, 2012; Bovill, 2020).

### *3.3 Community Engagement and Cultural Revitalization*

Community engagement plays a pivotal role in preserving and revitalizing traditional art forms. UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage framework emphasizes the importance of community-based approaches to safeguarding cultural practices. Within this framework, educational institutions catalyze community involvement in cultural preservation initiatives. Academic programs can promote intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage by fostering partnerships between schools, local communities, and cultural practitioners while ensuring its relevance and accessibility to contemporary audiences (Migone, 2020; Hayajneh & Cesaro, 2022; Rassi, 2022; Lu & Qian, 2023).

The reviewed literature underscores the multifaceted nature of cultural transmission through education and the significance of traditional art forms like Maoqiang Chinese opera. Drawing on educational theories, cultural pedagogy, and community engagement frameworks, this study investigates the role and social function of Maoqiang opera in transmitting cultural heritage within academic contexts. This research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural preservation, educational innovation, and community development by synthesizing theoretical insights with empirical evidence.

## **4. Methodology**

The methodology employed in this research is designed to comprehensively investigate the role and social function of Maoqiang Chinese opera in transmitting cultural heritage through education. A mixed-methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve this objective. The methodology encompasses the following components, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The methodology component

Methodology	Description
Literature Review	A comprehensive review of existing literature on Maoqiang Chinese opera, cultural heritage transmission, and the integration of traditional arts into educational settings is conducted. The literature review informs the development of research questions, theoretical frameworks, and the identification of gaps in knowledge that this study aims to address
Quantitative Survey	A structured survey instrument is developed to collect quantitative data from educators, students, and community members involved in or impacted by Maoqiang opera education initiatives. The survey includes questions pertaining to participants' demographics, exposure to Maoqiang opera, perceptions of its cultural significance, and attitudes towards its incorporation into educational curricula
Qualitative Interviews	Semi-structured interviews are conducted with key stakeholders, including Maoqiang opera performers, educators, students, and community members. The interviews explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and insights regarding the role and social function of Maoqiang opera in cultural heritage transmission through education
Participant Observation	Researchers engage in participant observation during Maoqiang opera performances and educational activities. Observation allows for the direct observation of interactions between performers, educators, and students, as well as the cultural content being conveyed. Field notes are taken to document observations, interactions, and contextual factors relevant to the research objective
Data Analysis	Quantitative data collected through surveys are analyzed using statistical software to generate descriptive statistics, inferential tests, and graphical representations. Qualitative data from interviews and participant observations are analyzed using thematic analysis techniques
Integration of Findings	Quantitative and qualitative findings are triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role and social function of Maoqiang Chinese opera in cultural heritage transmission through education. Convergent, complementary, or divergent findings from different data sources are identified and synthesized to develop a nuanced interpretation of the research findings

From Table 1, Through the methodological approach outlined above, this research investigates the multifaceted role of Maoqiang Chinese opera in transmitting cultural heritage within educational contexts, contributing to theoretical understanding and practical implications for educational practice and policy.

## 5. Result

### 5.1 The Role of Maoqiang Chinese Opera

The significant insights into the multifaceted role of Maoqiang opera mainly focus on its renowned repertoire, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng.” The findings are categorized into three main aspects: Role of Maoqiang Opera, Artistic Significance, and Awards and Recognition.

#### 5.1.1 Role of Maoqiang Opera

Maoqiang opera, particularly the repertoire “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” holds a significant social role and influence in the Shandong Peninsula. It has been deeply cherished by the local community for over two centuries, becoming a cultural cornerstone synonymous with Maoqiang opera itself. The repertoire’s popularity spans generations, with widespread recognition of its lyrics and melodies among the populace. Moreover, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” has adapted to modern media platforms and continues to attract diverse audiences, solidifying its enduring relevance and social status.

#### 5.1.2 Artistic Significance

“Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” is a quintessential example of Maoqiang opera’s artistic brilliance. Its intricate musical composition, rich lyrical content, and captivating performances imbue it with a unique charm and appeal. The repertoire seamlessly integrates local music styles with compelling narratives, captivating audiences with melodic beauty and emotional depth. Characterized by vivid storytelling and cultural richness, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” has earned acclaim as a classic masterpiece of Chinese opera, celebrated for its enduring artistic legacy and cultural significance.

#### 5.1.3 Awards and Recognition

“Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” has garnered prestigious awards and widespread acclaim within the Chinese opera community. Notable accolades include recognition in national competitions and inclusion in esteemed publications and audio-visual productions. Its performances have earned accolades such as the “Five One Project” award and the Gold Award of the Top Ten Hua Dan. Additionally, the repertoire has been featured in prominent documentaries, television broadcasts, and audio recordings, cementing its status as a cherished cultural treasure

and a source of pride for Maoqiang opera enthusiasts.

These findings underscore the enduring legacy and multifaceted significance of Maoqiang Chinese opera, particularly exemplified by the iconic “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage through educational endeavors.

### 5.2 Social Function

The transmission of any opera genre hinges on exceptional repertoire, with outstanding traditional pieces serving as the cornerstone of opera transmission. Given the societal and artistic significance of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” it assumes a pivotal role in transmitting Maoqiang opera, bearing the responsibility of heritage preservation. In the face of evolving times, the transmission of Maoqiang opera confronts unprecedented challenges. The importance of exemplary traditional repertoire like “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” becomes evident in this context. With its distinctive artistic characteristics, rich lyrics, and captivating performances, this repertoire possesses a strong stage presence and garners acceptance from a broad audience, including young individuals and teenagers.

#### 5.2.1 Transmission Functions for Adolescents

To facilitate the transmission of Maoqiang opera as an intangible cultural heritage, governmental bodies and Maoqiang opera practitioners emphasize expanding educational outreach. Consequently, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” representing a quintessential Maoqiang opera piece, has begun permeating educational institutions, serving as a conduit for students of all ages to engage with Maoqiang opera. Boasting a compelling storyline, vibrant characters, intricate lyrics, and dynamic performances, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” effortlessly captures children’s hearts, igniting their interest in learning, particularly when compared to more solemn Maoqiang opera productions, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Explaining the lyrics to primary school students

Source: Changqing Song, from fieldwork in July 2023.

In recent years, the Jiaozhou Municipal Education Bureau, in collaboration with the cultural department, has continued to implement the initiative “Maoqiang Opera into the School,” introducing exemplary Maoqiang opera repertoire to education that preserves and protect heritage inheritors and Maoqiang opera performers are invited to schools to impart the art of Maoqiang opera to students of all ages. Over the past two decades, Zhang Meixiang has steadfastly ventured into school campuses to perform for students and teach them the intricacies of Maoqiang opera. She has been invited by primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions to instruct students of various age groups. Throughout this process, the repertoire most frequently performed and taught by Zhang Meixiang to students is “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng.”

Children are drawn to this piece’s playful lyrics and melodies, sparking their interest in Maoqiang opera. Zhang Meixiang places particular emphasis on enlightening primary school students. As part of the Jiaozhou Municipal Government’s “Opera into the Campus” initiative, Zhang Meixiang has conducted classes at several primary schools, including Jiaozhou Fu’an Primary School, Sanlihe Primary School, and the Fifth Experimental Primary School in Jiaozhou City, teaching young students how to sing Maoqiang opera. Alongside Zhang Meixiang, other Maoqiang opera performers, such as Liu Yongxia, have also visited numerous primary schools to instruct children in the art form.

According to Zhang Meixiang's oral testimony, the cornerstone of Maoqiang opera transmission lies in nurturing an appreciation for the art form from childhood. Many parents enroll their children in Maoqiang opera classes, with students as young as seven years old participating. The repertoire "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" is particularly well-received among younger students, who readily engage with its lyrics and enthusiastically embrace the performance aspect, leading to high learning efficiency.

On January 29, 2024, during the Spring Festival concert in Jiaozhou City, Zhang Meixiang, Liu Yongxia, and Xue Mei, three generations of apprentices, joined primary school students from Fu'an Primary School in Jiaozhou City on stage to perform "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng." This multi-generational performance showcased individuals aged 7 to 74, demonstrating the successful integration of "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" into school education and highlighting its role in cultural transmission, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Three generations of artists and primary school students performed

Source: Changqing Song, from fieldwork in July 2023.

Liu Yongxia (2023) highlighted the Jiaozhou Municipal Government's significant emphasis on nurturing young talents in Maoqiang opera, utilizing "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" as a focal point for various initiatives. In July 2023, the Jiaozhou Cultural Center organized the fifth installment of the intangible cultural heritage summer camp under "Looking for Little Inheritors," with "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" as the central theme. Liu Yongxia, serving as an expert, mentored over 100 teenagers during the camp, providing intensive training over 30 days. The culmination of this effort was a graduation performance wherein the young participants showcased a segment of "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng." The captivating content of this opera piece resonated deeply with the children, fostering a genuine fondness for the play. Consequently, the organizers identified promising talents among the participants for further specialized training. This successful endeavor underscores the role of "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" in nurturing the next generation of Maoqiang opera inheritors, affirming its inherent capability for cultural transmission among youth, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Jiaozhou Cultural Center's 5<sup>th</sup>

Source: Changqing Song, from fieldwork in July 2023.

### 5.2.2 Transmission Function for Other Age Groups

Local authorities have introduced Maoqiang opera into early childhood education settings as part of the transmission efforts. For instance, in Binhai New Village Kindergarten, located in the Qingdao West Coast New Area of Shandong Province, Zhao Meirong Guan Deng has been integrated into the early childhood education curriculum. Through activities such as appreciating suitable plays like Zhao Meirong Guan Deng, the kindergarten aims to instill children's interest in Maoqiang opera from a young age, augment their understanding of local opera, and identify talented individuals among them. An illustrative event took place on March 21, 2023, at Binhai Xincun Kindergarten in Qingdao's West Coast New Area, where Maoqiang opera actors performed a segment of "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" for the kindergarten children, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Zhang Meixiang was teaching kindergarten children

Source: Changqing Song, from fieldwork in July 2023.

Furthermore, apart from its impact on the younger generation, "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" also holds significant importance in the dissemination among adults and the elderly. The transmission of local opera extends beyond nurturing and developing the next generation's talents; it also involves reaching out to individuals of all age groups, thereby contributing to the broader societal promotion of local opera. Among adult enthusiasts of Maoqiang opera, many developed their fondness for the genre through "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng" and are keen to learn its singing passages. Ms. Zhang Meixiang (2023) emphasized that she teaches many adult students, particularly females, the art of singing "Zhao Meirong Guan Deng," and through her guidance, numerous students have been able to perform the entire repertoire smoothly, encompassing its full version of over 30 minutes. In Jiaozhou City, Maoqiang Opera boasts a significant following among elderly enthusiasts, prompting the local government to regularly organize Maoqiang Opera events within the community, with the audience predominantly comprising senior citizens, as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Zhang Meixiang was teaching students from the University

Source: Changqing Song, from fieldwork in July 2023.

Since 2002, Zhang Meixiang has been employed as a teacher at Jiaozhou University for the Elderly. Throughout her tenure, she has been dedicated to instructing elderly learners in the intricacies of Maoqiang opera at the Institute for the Elderly. Over time, Zhang Meixiang noticed a particular fondness among her elderly students for “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng.” Often, they would eagerly request her to perform select passages from the opera. Recognizing the enthusiasm surrounding this piece, Zhang Meixiang incorporates “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” into her teaching materials, utilizing it to engage and inspire elderly enthusiasts in their exploration of Maoqiang opera.

### 5.2.3 Transmission Function in a New Stage and New Media

As a quintessential repertoire of traditional Maoqiang opera, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” transcends the confines of conventional theater performances, extending its reach through various contemporary channels such as theatrical evenings, television, and emerging digital media platforms. In recent years, government initiatives to foster cultural industry development have catalyzed a surge in theatrical productions across society, spanning official government-sponsored events, commercial showcases, and community-based cultural outreach programs. Within this landscape, these theatrical occasions serve as vital conduits for transmitting Maoqiang opera. Among the diverse array of performances held throughout the Shandong Peninsula, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” stands out as a recurrent and celebrated feature, with its concise yet compelling 7-minute rendition capturing the hearts of audiences. Its widespread recognition and resonance have bolstered its popularity and galvanized increased involvement in endeavors to safeguard and perpetuate this invaluable cultural heritage, as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Liu Yongxia sang at the Large-scale theatrical evening

Source: Changqing Song, from fieldwork in July 2023.

Television has long served as China’s predominant medium of mass communication, wielding significant influence over cultural life. In the Shandong Peninsula, “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” has enjoyed extensive television exposure, emerging as one of the most frequently broadcast opera productions. Zhang Jian attested to the widespread television presence of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” noting its airing across various regional and national TV stations, including Jiaozhou TV, Qingdao TV, Shandong TV, and CCTV. Noteworthy broadcast milestones include the 1985 TV documentary recording by the Chinese Opera Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Arts in Qingdao, featuring Su Yanqin as Zhao Meirong in a 30-minute performance. Similarly, the CCTV opera channel’s “Famous Duan Appreciation” segment showcased Zhang Meixiang’s portrayal of Zhao Meirong in 2009, while the inclusion of “Dong Jing· Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” in a 2000 large-scale TV art film titled “Chinese Local Opera,” where Zhang Meixiang reprised her role, garnered acclaim by winning the “Five One Project” award from the Central Propaganda Department. This widespread television exposure on authoritative platforms like CCTV has significantly broadened the audience base, acquainting viewers nationwide with the artistry of Maoqiang opera. Such prominence underscores the pivotal role of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” in the cultural transmission landscape, particularly within televised media.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The discussion of the research findings on the role and social function of Maoqiang Chinese opera in transmitting

cultural heritage through education, mainly focusing on the role of the repertoire “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” sheds light on several important aspects. Firstly, the research highlights the significant social and cultural role that Maoqiang opera plays, particularly in the Shandong Peninsula. The enduring popularity and widespread recognition of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” underscore its status as a cultural cornerstone, cherished by generations, and adapted to modern media platforms to ensure its continued relevance and social impact (Aktürk & Dastgerdi, 2021).

Moreover, the research elucidates the artistic significance of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” within the realm of Maoqiang opera. Through its intricate musical composition, rich lyrical content, and captivating performances, the repertoire exemplifies the brilliance of Maoqiang opera, seamlessly integrating local music styles with compelling narratives (Allern et al., 2022). This artistic richness contributes to its acclaim as a classic masterpiece of Chinese opera, celebrated for its enduring legacy and cultural significance (Tan, 2024).

Furthermore, the discussion delves into the transmission functions of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” across different age groups, emphasizing its role in educational outreach initiatives. By permeating educational institutions and engaging students of all ages, the repertoire serves as a conduit for fostering an appreciation of Maoqiang opera and preserving intangible cultural heritage (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). The research highlights the effectiveness of incorporating traditional repertoire like “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” into educational curricula, igniting the interest of young learners and nurturing the next generation of opera enthusiasts (Sonrum & Worapun, 2023).

Moreover, the research findings underscore the adaptability of “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng” in reaching diverse audiences through various mediums, including theatrical performances, television broadcasts, and digital platforms (Zhang et al., 2022). This multifaceted approach to transmission ensures the broad dissemination and appreciation of Maoqiang opera, contributing to its preservation and cultural continuity (Giglietto et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the research on the transmission of Maoqiang opera, mainly through the repertoire “Zhao Meirong Guan Deng,” illuminates this traditional art form’s enduring legacy and multifaceted significance. Through its social, cultural, and artistic dimensions, Maoqiang opera serves as a vital conduit for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, ensuring its continuity in the face of evolving times. The research underscores the importance of educational outreach initiatives and the adaptability of traditional repertoire in engaging diverse audiences and fostering an appreciation for intangible cultural heritage. By embracing innovative approaches to transmission, such as digital media and community-based events, Maoqiang opera continues to thrive and resonate with audiences of all ages, reaffirming its status as a cherished cultural treasure.

#### **Acknowledgments**

Not applicable.

#### **Authors’ contributions**

Not applicable.

#### **Funding**

Not applicable.

#### **Competing interests**

Not applicable.

#### **Informed consent**

Obtained.

#### **Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal’s policies adhere to the Core Practices the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) established.

#### **Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

#### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.



### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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