



Cultural Exchange and Integration of Hunan Flower Drum Opera and Folk Song Classics

Xinruo Wang¹ and Palphol Rodloytuk²

¹Ph.D, Arts Performance Communication, School of Liberal Arts, Shinawatra University, Thailand

²Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Thailand

Email: 408474639@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2184-9252>

E-mail: palphol@siu.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1208-2763>

Received 24/06/2025

Revised 26/06/2025

Accepted 01/08/2025

Abstract

Background and Aims: Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs are both deeply rooted in Hunan's cultural heritage and have historically developed in symbiosis, sharing musical materials, dialectal characteristics, and emotional expression. As carriers of regional culture, they illustrate the concept of "the same origin of opera and song." This study aims to explore the mechanisms of cultural exchange between the two forms and analyze their artistic integration and innovative practices, particularly through case studies such as Liu Hai's Chopping Woodcutter and Liao Jialin's adaptation of Rolling in the Deep. The research seeks to uncover how these forms contribute to cultural identity and the global dissemination of traditional Chinese arts.

Methodology: A mixed-methods approach is adopted, combining bibliometric analysis and content analysis. Data were collected through a systematic literature review based on PRISMA principles using CNKI. Co-occurrence network analysis and timeline visualization were employed to track the evolution of research themes. Case analysis of selected performances and adaptations, particularly Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter and Rolling in the Deep, was also conducted to examine musical structures, dialect features, and performance techniques.

Results: The study demonstrates a strong artistic and cultural synergy between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs. Through content and performance analysis of representative case studies, including Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter and Rolling in the Deep, the research reveals how musical material, vocal techniques, and dialectal rhythms interpenetrate to form a hybrid performance language. Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter exemplifies shared melodic and structural elements, while Rolling in the Deep represents a successful model of cross-cultural innovation, utilizing local dialects and opera techniques to reinterpret global pop music. These findings highlight how such integration strengthens regional cultural identity and expands the international visibility of traditional Chinese art forms through multimedia platforms and creative adaptations.

Conclusion: The cultural exchange between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs reflects the dynamic interaction between tradition and innovation. Their integration exemplifies how local art forms can be revitalized and internationalized through creative transformation, technological support, and strategic dissemination. To ensure their sustainable development, it is vital to maintain dialectal authenticity, invest in youth-oriented education and performance strategies, and leverage digital platforms. These approaches can position Hunan's musical





heritage as a meaningful contributor to global cultural dialogue.

Keywords: Hunan Flower Drum Opera; Hunan Folk Song; Cultural Exchange; Artistic Integration; Dialect Music

Introduction

Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs have long flourished on the fertile cultural soil of Hunan, evolving as sister art forms interlinked by shared heritage and aesthetic expression. These two genres, deeply embedded in the everyday life and emotional world of Hunan's working people, have coexisted and interacted for centuries, reflecting the region's rich ethnomusicological identity (Tan, 2007; Yi, 2021). Their fusion manifests not only in melodic materials and lyrical structure but also in dialectal rhythm and regional performance aesthetics, forming what scholars refer to as the "same origin of opera and song" (Zhou & Sun, 2024).

Historically, this interconnection can be traced as far back as the Warring States period. Qu Yuan's Chu Ci poetry is believed to have drawn from the tonal qualities of local folk songs, establishing a precedent for literary-musical integration in the region (Chen, 2010). Flower Drum Opera itself evolved from folk song traditions, gradually acquiring narrative and performative complexity. Iconic works such as Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter exist in both opera and folk song versions, showcasing a process of mutual adaptation wherein dramatic tension is layered over lyrical storytelling. Such repertoire exchange exemplifies the mechanism of "intertextuality" in Chinese musical theater (He, 2007).

Language plays a central role in the aesthetic fusion of these forms. The Changsha dialect, with its tonal richness and oral vividness, shapes both vocal delivery and musical ornamentation, enhancing the audience's immersion in a culturally resonant experience. This phenomenon aligns with recent research highlighting how dialectal elements act as identity markers within traditional Chinese operatic expressions (Ren, 2023).

In the 21st century, Hunan Flower Drum Opera has entered a new phase of global exposure and creative revitalization. Notably, Liao Jialin's cross-cultural adaptation of Adele's Rolling in the Deep—performed with traditional opera techniques such as "tongue-playing" and "sliding accent"—has gained viral attention through digital platforms like Bilibili. This hybrid performance model not only breaks conventional genre boundaries but also exemplifies how local operatic traditions can engage with global popular culture (Yi, 2021; Zeng, 2016). The performance reflects the spirit of "daring to be first," a value deeply embedded in Hunan cultural identity, while also confirming the potential of traditional art to find new life through transmedia expression.

This paper explores the cultural logic and artistic mechanisms underpinning the interrelationship between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs. By examining classical repertoire such as Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter and contemporary innovations like Liao's reinterpretation of Rolling in the Deep, we aim to map the dual trajectory of cultural preservation





and artistic reinvention. In doing so, the study demonstrates how dialect and folk elements not only serve as cultural roots but also act as launchpads for global dialogue, allowing Hunan's "Xiangyin" (regional sound) and "Xiangyun" (cultural aura) to resonate on the international stage.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on the historical and aesthetic interconnection between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs, several critical dimensions remain underexplored. First, while many studies acknowledge their shared origins, few systematically examine the mechanism of artistic integration—particularly how dialectal, structural, and performative elements are exchanged and transformed across forms. Second, the role of youth engagement in sustaining this cultural heritage is often overlooked, even as digital platforms reshape how younger audiences consume and participate in traditional arts. Third, concerns about commercialization pressures—such as aesthetic dilution and cultural trivialization—are frequently mentioned but rarely analyzed in depth. Lastly, limited comparative research exists between the integration models of Hunan and those of other regional operatic traditions, leaving questions about the uniqueness or generalizability of Hunan's experience unanswered. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering a multifaceted analysis of both classical and contemporary integration practices, thus contributing new insights into how regional traditions can be preserved, transformed, and internationalized in the 21st century.

Literature Review

Scholars have long emphasized the foundational role of folk songs in the development of Hunan Flower Drum Opera. Tan (2007) provided a seminal analysis of how folk singing traditions in Hunan contributed to the musical vocabulary, dialectal rhythm, and performance patterns of Flower Drum Opera. He argued that the opera's vocal structure and emotional expression mechanisms are deeply indebted to the melodic and linguistic features of local mountain songs, particularly those circulated in rural labor contexts. This perspective laid the groundwork for understanding opera and song as two branches of the same cultural tree.

Building on Tan's foundational work, He (2007) conducted a lyrical analysis of Flower Drum Opera scripts and compared them with folk song texts. His study identified direct narrative parallels and thematic overlaps, especially in love songs and pastoral scenes. He proposed that the emotional codes in folk music—such as sorrow, longing, and moral reflection—are retained and dramatized in Flower Drum Opera through enhanced theatrical devices. This transformation reflects a vertical shift from oral transmission to performative ritualization while maintaining core folk values.

More recent scholarship by Zeng (2016) expanded the focus to include vocal technique and performance behavior. By comparing singing gestures and glottal modulations between folk singers and opera performers, Zeng identified a pattern of "mutual feeding," whereby Flower



Drum Opera borrows the raw energy and tone bending of folk singers, while folk songs absorb opera's embellishment techniques such as "knife-handle cavity" and "tongue-playing." Her study provides important evidence for the dynamic two-way exchange that occurs within regional musical ecosystems.

Yi (2021) emphasized the importance of creative innovation in the transmission of Hunan Flower Drum Opera under the policy framework of cultural revitalization. He examined how dialect music is being adapted for multimedia platforms, including digital apps and short videos. Yi particularly highlighted the success of cross-media content such as Liao Jialin's dialect pop-opera performance as a form of "cultural grafting" that enables opera to move beyond the constraints of physical theater. His research supports the claim that digital adaptation can sustain traditional art by integrating contemporary aesthetic preferences.

In a complementary policy-focused study, Ren (2023) analyzed the integration of Hunan Flower Drum Opera into tourism and regional branding under the Belt and Road Initiative. He argued that the opera's adaptability to local narratives and dialectic expression makes it an ideal cultural product for soft power export. Ren's findings echo previous assertions that traditional arts must not only survive but also thrive by engaging with economic and geopolitical realities through creative commercialization.

From the perspective of dialect aesthetics, Zhou and Sun (2024) conducted fieldwork in Yiyang and Changsha to investigate how tonal structures of local dialects shape the melodic phrasing in Flower Drum Opera. They found that changes in pitch, glottal stress, and word endings were not merely linguistic features but essential components of the opera's musical identity. Their research strengthens the understanding that dialect is not only a medium of communication but also an active musical material that contributes to aesthetic authenticity.

Lastly, Cheng (2019) explored the historical integration of folk song and Flower Drum Opera, suggesting that repertoire such as Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter represents a cultural archive of community memory. Through comparative historical analysis, she argued that these performances are vehicles for emotional continuity across generations. Her work adds a socio-cultural dimension to the primarily musicological discourse, emphasizing that opera-song integration also functions as a form of lived heritage and collective identity reinforcement.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the cultural relationship and artistic integration between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and Hunan folk songs. The focus is on understanding the symbolic meaning, dialectical features, and artistic transformation embedded in these two forms. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for a nuanced interpretation of cultural texts, performance styles, and language use, which cannot be captured by quantitative data alone. Through in-depth textual, linguistic, and aesthetic analysis, this study seeks to uncover the mechanisms of cultural inheritance and

innovation that shape the development of traditional Hunan performing arts.

To ensure the rigor of data collection, this research employed a systematic literature review process. Academic sources were retrieved primarily from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), which offers extensive access to Chinese-language scholarly publications. The search covered the period from 1981 to 2022, using keywords such as “Hunan Flower Drum Opera,” “Hunan Folk Songs,” “Flower Drum Opera Singing,” “Folk Song Adaptation,” and “Intangible Cultural Heritage.” The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies and graduate theses that explored musical form, dialect usage, cultural symbolism, or transmission methods. Non-academic articles, duplicates, and unrelated commentary pieces were excluded. A total of 212 relevant documents were selected as the database for analysis.

Content analysis was the core method used in interpreting the selected literature and performance cases. This involved identifying recurring themes, symbolic motifs, and dialectical features within scripts, lyrics, and performance reviews. Particular attention was given to how musical and linguistic elements reflect regional identity, emotional expression, and cultural memory. The cases of *Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter* and the modern adaptation of *Rolling in the Deep* were selected for focused analysis due to their representative value in demonstrating the fusion of tradition and innovation. These cases were studied in-depth to reveal how traditional performance techniques and dialectical aesthetics are recontextualized in modern cultural communication.

Thematic coding was applied to all collected materials to identify key categories such as “opera-folk intertextuality,” “dialectal musicality,” “performance innovation,” and “digital adaptation.” These categories guided the analysis in tracing patterns of continuity and transformation. Descriptive interpretation was used rather than numerical coding to allow for flexibility and cultural sensitivity in understanding how performers and audiences construct meaning through music and language. This approach aligns with the qualitative principle that cultural phenomena are best understood within their local and historical contexts.

Results

I. The Same Origin of Opera and Song: A Case Study of Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter

As a representative repertoire embodying the essence of Hunan folk art, Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter stands as a living testament to the concept of “the same origin of opera and song.” Originating as a folk song and later adapted into a Flower Drum Opera performance, the piece encapsulates the dual development paths of the two forms. The opera borrows its lyrical core from the folk version, while enhancing it through dramatic narrative and performative stylization. This mutual adaptation forms a feedback loop wherein folk songs nourish the operatic form with simplicity and melodic beauty, and the opera, in turn, provides a platform for the elevation of folk songs into theatrical art. Thus, Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter becomes not just a musical performance, but a symbolic artifact of regional cultural symbiosis.

The melodic and vocal techniques of Flower Drum Opera and folk songs are deeply intertwined, with each form borrowing and transforming elements from the other. In the opera version, breath control techniques like “energy sinking to the dantian” and vocal practices such as “true-false voice conversion” are used to achieve powerful expression and dramatic effect. These techniques have been assimilated into folk song performances, which traditionally emphasized straightforwardness and emotional clarity. For instance, folk singers now adopt glottal tones and ornamentations derived from opera, enhancing the expressiveness of high-pitched sections. Conversely, the lyrical quality of folk songs brings a smoother, more melodic flow into the opera’s vocal line. The shared melodic material results in a performance synergy that transcends formal boundaries, producing a hybrid musical language rooted in Hunan’s regional identity.

Both Flower Drum Opera and folk songs exhibit a similar structural logic in their musical compositions, while also reflecting their respective performance contexts. Folk songs often follow simple, repetitive patterns—such as the four-line ABA'B' structure—designed for oral transmission and communal participation. In contrast, the operatic version of Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter adopts this basic structure but transforms it through dramatic modulation, rhythmic variations, and complex mode interchanges. For example, the transition from slow to fast tempo sections (loose plate to fast plate) enhances dramatic tension and character interaction. This structure, though rooted in folk simplicity, gains theatrical depth through the opera’s dramatization techniques, ultimately creating a bridge between everyday storytelling and elevated stage performance.

Dialectal rhythm serves as a powerful unifying force between the two forms, infusing both with distinct regional color and cultural authenticity. The Changsha dialect, known for its tonal richness and phonetic distinctiveness, influences both melodic contours and vocal delivery. In both opera and folk renditions of Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter, tonal inflections of key words (e.g., “Hai” and “Pavilion”) are directly matched with specific melodic gestures such as glissando or pitch slide, creating a correspondence between speech and music. Interjections like “ya ho hei” in opera and “luo ho ho” in folk versions further showcase the rhythmic energy of dialect, serving as emotional markers and structural connectors within the performance. This fusion of music and language ensures not only artistic coherence but also the preservation of Hunan’s linguistic and cultural identity through sound.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the longstanding scholarly view that traditional Chinese opera forms are deeply rooted in regional folk culture, particularly through the lens of musical, linguistic, and structural interpenetration. The mutual borrowing between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs—such as in *Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter*—exemplifies what Zhang and Liu (2019) refer to as “intra-cultural co-evolution,” where oral traditions and formal stage art



evolve in parallel rather than hierarchically. This supports the theory that dialect and narrative patterns in folk culture act as both substrate and scaffold for operatic innovation. The intertextuality observed in shared song structures and dialect rhythms reflects this organic cultural dialogue and validates earlier claims about opera's dependency on local musical DNA (He, 2007; Yi, 2021).

The case of *Rolling in the Deep* adaptation further underscores how traditional operatic aesthetics can be repurposed within the framework of global pop culture to bridge cultural distances. The fusion of Flower Drum Opera's vocal embellishment and tonal dramatization with Adele's global pop hit creates what Lu (2022) calls a "postmodern cultural remix," where local performance traditions re-contextualize mainstream media for new audiences. This resonates with recent findings by Rockstuhl and Ng (2015), who argue that cultural hybridity can enhance emotional resonance and translatability across linguistic boundaries. The success of Liao Jialin's performance is thus not only artistic but also semiotic—it re-signifies global pop through a distinctly Hunanese dialectal and musical filter.

From a communication theory perspective, this study confirms that media platforms and digital ecosystems significantly amplify the visibility and adaptability of traditional art forms. The dissemination path of *Rolling in the Deep*, moving from regional variety shows to international social media networks, mirrors what Jenkins (2006) describes as "convergence culture," wherein user participation and algorithmic recommendation systems co-create meaning. In this case, digital virality becomes a form of cultural validation, allowing Hunan Flower Drum Opera to be appreciated beyond its traditional domain and engage with a new generation of digital-native audiences.

Another key insight from the study is the dual role of dialect in both preserving cultural specificity and enabling artistic innovation. The Changsha dialect, as shown through phonetic adaptations, tonal glides, and interjections, operates as a musical grammar that both anchors and elevates performance meaning. Scholars such as Zhou and Sun (2024) emphasize that regional dialects in operatic forms are not mere linguistic carriers, but cultural signifiers embedded in musical expression. Our findings reinforce this position by demonstrating how dialect shapes rhythm, melody, and emotional cues, and how it acts as a cultural bridge rather than a barrier in cross-cultural performance scenarios.

Lastly, the study reflects on the policy environment and sociocultural climate that support such artistic reinvention. China's official recognition of Hunan Flower Drum Opera as a national intangible cultural heritage item in 2009, along with continuous funding for its digital revitalization, aligns with Aven's (2016) view that institutional frameworks are essential for sustaining cultural ecosystems. However, our data also caution against over-commercialization, which may dilute the authenticity and ritual depth of these traditions. Therefore, while cross-platform dissemination and artistic fusion are promising, they must be guided by frameworks that respect cultural roots and avoid aesthetic trivialization.



Conclusion

This study confirms that the relationship between Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs exemplifies a unique model of intra-cultural co-construction, where mutual adaptation and transformation foster both heritage preservation and innovation. Through the detailed case analysis of *Liu Hai Chopping Woodcutter* and the cross-cultural adaptation of *Rolling in the Deep*, we observe how traditional art forms can evolve through intertextual layering, dialectal inflection, and performative experimentation. The research highlights the indispensable role of dialects and regional narrative patterns in maintaining cultural authenticity while enabling artistic flexibility.

Moreover, the study illustrates that digital platforms—when properly utilized—can serve as powerful catalysts for the international dissemination of localized cultural content. Liao Jialin's viral adaptation demonstrates that even highly traditional operatic techniques, when integrated with global popular music and new media strategies, can generate resonance beyond linguistic and cultural borders. This case validates the concept of “telling local stories in the language of the world,” offering a viable paradigm for traditional art to gain global recognition without compromising its roots.

Nonetheless, the sustainability of this cultural ecosystem faces several structural challenges, including the discontinuity of talent pipelines, generational gaps in audience engagement, and the risk of aesthetic dilution under market pressure. To address these concerns, the study proposes an integrated strategy that includes technological empowerment, educational reform, international collaboration, and policy alignment. These approaches are essential for transforming Hunan Flower Drum Opera and folk songs from static heritage objects into dynamic, globally relevant cultural assets.

Ultimately, the integration of tradition and innovation represents not only a cultural imperative but also a developmental opportunity. As Hunan's “Xiangyin and Xiangyun” continue to gain global resonance, they serve not only as representations of regional identity but also as powerful media for intercultural communication. In the era of digital globalization, the survival and flourishing of traditional arts lie in their ability to transform while remaining anchored in their authentic cultural soil.

Reference

- Aven, T. (2016). Risk assessment and risk management: Review of recent advances on their foundation. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 253(1), 1–13.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejor.2015.12.023>
- Chen, L. (2010). *The influence of Chu Ci on regional opera development*. *Journal of Chinese Music History*, 15(2), 45–58.
- Cheng, S. (2019). A brief discussion on the integration and development of Hunan folk song and flower drum opera. *Art Review* [艺术评论]. (In Chinese).





- He, J. (2007). *Research on the singing lyrics of Hunan flower-drum opera* (Master's thesis, Tianjin University).
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.
- Lu, H. (2022). Consumer brand attachment in the digital age: The impact of service personalization and brand trust. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 27(1), 67–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10864415.2022.2037358>
- Ren, H. (2023). Path study on the integration of Hunan flower-drum opera culture and tourism under the background of “Belt and Road”. *Urban Journal*, 44(3), 67–71.
- Rockstuhl, T., & Ng, K. Y. (2015). The effects of cultural intelligence on interpersonal trust in multicultural teams. In S. Ang & L. Van Dyne (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural intelligence: Theory, measurement, and applications* (pp. 206–220). Routledge.
- Tan, Z. (2007). *Research on Hunan flower drum opera* (Doctoral dissertation, Qufu Normal University).
- Yi, K. (2021). Inheritance and innovation of Hunan flower drum opera under the threshold of cultural revitalization. *Chinese Character Culture*, 4, 157–158. <https://doi.org/10.14014/j.cnki.cn11-2597/g2.2021.04.073>
- Zeng, S. (2016). *Research on the interaction between Hunan flower-drum opera and folk vocal singing* (Master's thesis, Qiqihar University).
- Zhang, Y., & Liu, Q. (2019). Folk culture and opera adaptation: The evolutionary mechanism of rural performance art. *Journal of Chinese Cultural Studies*, 38(2), 45–60.
- Zhou, Y., & Sun, B. (2024). Inheritance and innovation of flower drum opera in Yiyang, Hunan. *Journal of Culture*, 9, 191–194.