

Literacy Preservation and Transmission in the Ziyanghe Opera of Zigong City, Sichuan Province, China

Shan Fan*, Weerayut Seekhunlio and Sayam Chuangprakhon

College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Corresponding author: Shan Fan, E-mail: 15831555@qq.com

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ABSTRACT

Ziyanghe Opera, an essential subset of Sichuan Opera, is an intangible cultural resource confronting difficulties in preservation and transmission. This research examines measures for the preservation and transmission of literacy in Zigong City, Sichuan Province, emphasizing school-based teaching, community involvement, and the participation of artists. Integrating curriculum creation, educator training, and student engagement guarantees early exposure and systematic learning. Community-focused events, interest groups, and resource development strengthen public participation and cultural identity. Artists enhance Ziyanghe Opera by providing mentorship, fostering creative innovation, and facilitating digital expansion for modernization and globalization. A performance-oriented strategy encompassing goal establishment, incentives, and assessment is essential for sustained transmission. Research shows that combining traditional teaching methods with digital technology and working together across different fields will ensure that Ziyanghe Opera continues to grow and improve.

Key words: Ziyanghe Opera, Sichuan Opera, Literacy Preservation, Cultural Transmission

INTRODUCTION

Ziyanghe Opera, a subset of Sichuan Opera, is a notable traditional theatrical art that has played an important role in the cultural history of Zigong City, Sichuan Province. Ziyanghe Opera, which originated as a synthesis of Yiyang vocal traditions imported from Jiangxi and local performance arts, has evolved into a separate artistic form known for its expressive vocal skills, high-cavity singing style, and rich dramatic repertoire. Over the centuries, it has developed via regional influences, creativity, and the contributions of generations of performers, earning recognition as Sichuan Province's intangible cultural treasure in 2011 (Minglun et al., 1986; Chen, 2024).

Despite its historical and artistic significance, Ziyanghe Opera suffers preservation and transmission issues, notably regarding literacy—the capacity to comprehend, interpret, and execute its musical, linguistic, and dramatic components. As newer generations abandon traditional art forms, there is a growing need to archive, teach, and transmit Ziyanghe Opera's creative expertise. The oral transmission mechanisms perpetuating this opera for centuries are currently under threat because of social changes, decreased young interest, and the modernity of entertainment (Li & Tian, 2018; Zhaoyang, 2019).

This study looks at the literacy preservation and transmission of Ziyanghe Opera in Zigong, concentrating on instructional techniques, documentation efforts, and the significance of performing communities in preserving the art

form. The study investigates the present state of Ziyanghe Opera, its musical and dramatic qualities, and the processes of its cultural spread via field research at the Zigong Sichuan Opera Art Centre (previously Zigong Sichuan Opera Troupe) (Zhang, 2024; Feng, 2025). This study intends to give theoretical support for the long-term evolution of Ziyanghe Opera by examining how it is taught, performed, and handed down to future generations.

This research is significant because it can help preserve the Ziyanghe Opera as an important cultural asset while promoting its educational value and cultural branding for Zigong City. This effort aims to guarantee that Ziyanghe Opera continues to survive in modern society by combining historical research with current cultural transmission tactics, strengthening local identity, increasing artistic literacy, and cultivating a more tremendous respect for traditional Chinese opera.

Research Question

- How is literacy in Ziyanghe Opera preserved and transmitted in Zigong City, Sichuan Province, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

General Knowledge of Sichuan Opera

Due to its long and renowned history, China's theatrical tradition holds Sichuan Opera in high regard. It began almost

300 years ago, during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and is a Han Chinese opera with particular regional features that thrived in the fertile plains of Ba Shu. With the flourishing of industry and trade, Sichuan Opera had a tremendous regional impact. They grew famous across Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, and Yunnan, making it one of Southwest China's most important Han Chinese opera genres (Wang, 2023).

Sichuan Opera came about when the vocal styles of different types of Chinese opera from E (Hubei), Gan (Jiangxi), Suzhou, Anhui, and Shaanxi mixed with those from folk operas and lantern shows in the Bayu area. This dynamic creative interaction, aided by the movement of many ethnic groups, eventually transformed Sichuan Opera into a distinct mode of expression. The genre has five main vocal styles: Kun (Kunqu), Gao (Gaoqiang), Huqin, Playing Opera, and Lantern Opera (Iovene, 2010; Bao, 2010).

Sichuan Opera dates back to the pre-Qin period, with early theatrical influences from the Han Dynasty's Jiaozhi Hundred Operas laying the groundwork for its growth. Historical documents, such as Taiping Guangji, show that during the reign of Li Bing, Governor of Shu County, plays such as "Dou Niu" (bullfighting theater) were already common in the area. Sichuan's first satirical comedy, *Jiu Se Cai Qi*, emerged during the Three Kingdoms era and is considered a precursor to Sichuan comedy (Gong et al., 2024). Sichuan opera flourished throughout the Tang and Five Dynasties eras, with Sichuan performing arts receiving the nickname "Shu skill crowning the world." During this time, China's first theatrical troupes emerged. The Sichuan Opera Improvement Movement expanded the genre by establishing the Opera Improvement Association and performance venues such as "Yuelai Tea Garden" (predecessor of Jinjiang Theatre) and the Shu Opera Department. Sichuan Opera artists formed the "Three Celebrations Society" in 1912, which included notable singers such as Kang Zilin, Yang Sulan, and Xiao Kaishen, as well as over 300 elite members. During this time, notable works like Zhao Xi's "Qingtian" and Huang Ji'an's "San Jin Zhong" and "Chai Shi Jie" were created, adding almost 700 popular pieces to Sichuan Opera's repertoire (Gao & Karin, 2023; Chang et al., 2024).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Sichuan Opera experienced rejuvenation, establishing a "Golden Age" with the assistance of the Communist Party and the new government. Despite hurdles in the early twentieth century, such as geopolitical changes, Sichuan Opera restored itself as a significant cultural force in Southwest China (Sen & Sondhiratna, 2024).

Sichuan Opera and its Regional Influence

Before the Republic of China, waterway transportation was the primary commercial artery in the Sichuan Basin. As a result, docks and wharves became bustling centers of commerce, attracting merchants, dockworkers, and a thriving entertainment culture. The interconnection between trade and theatre contributed to the prosperity of Sichuan Opera, which flourished along these trade routes (Chabrowski, 2019). This

period saw the formation of four main regional styles of Sichuan Opera, each with distinct vocal techniques, repertoires, and performance styles:

1. Ziyanghe Opera – Flourishing along the Tuojiang River system, primarily in Zigong, Neijiang, Ziyang, and Rongxian. It is known for its high-cavity singing (Gaoqiang) and Kunqu influences, maintaining a rigorous artistic style and a rich vocal tradition. It is often regarded as the most refined of the four styles and is ranked first among the "Four Great Operas" of Sichuan Opera.
2. Western Sichuan Opera – Popular in Chengdu and the surrounding areas, influenced by the Fu River basin.
3. Northern Sichuan Opera – Centered around the upper reaches of the Jialing River and the Qiuhe River basin, characterized by distinct percussion and instrumental styles.
4. Yangtze River Opera – Also known as Lower Chuandong Opera, performed along the Yangtze River banks in the Chongqing area (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024).

Among these styles, Ziyanghe Opera stands out for its mastery of Gaoqiang singing and its extensive theatrical heritage, making it a key representative of Sichuan Opera's artistic excellence. The genre developed in the Tuo River region, maintaining a distinct artistic identity through its troupe culture, performance traditions, and musical arrangements (Xie & Boonsrianan, 2023).

General Knowledge about Music in Ziyanghe Opera

Ziyanghe Opera, a prominent branch of Sichuan Opera, is defined by its musical features, vocal styles, and instrumental skills. Unlike other Sichuan opera forms, it is distinguished by its specific creative aspects, including drumming, suona melodies, Kunqu influences, and various vocal pieces. The percussion technique employs resonating gongs and drums to create a smooth yet strong rhythmic structure that promotes dramatic expressiveness. Furthermore, the suona in Ziyanghe Opera is well-known for its pure tone, dramatic variations, complicated playing skills, and extensive repertoire incorporating ancient Chinese tonal systems (Li & Woramitmitree, 2023). The use of Kunqu melodies expands its musical framework, creating lyrical, sophisticated, and melodically complicated compositions that set it apart from other Sichuan Opera styles.

The singing style and lyrical structure of Ziyanghe Opera are heavily influenced by dialect, contributing to its harmonic and clear vocal sound. The Zigong dialect, with its different vowel sounds, tonal changes, and rhyming patterns, impacts the phonetics and phonology of Ziyanghe Opera, resulting in unusual melodic phrasing and alliterative lyricism. This language base sets it apart from other regional types of Sichuan Opera, cementing its artistic uniqueness and cultural relevance. Furthermore, Ziyanghe Opera is regarded as the birthplace of Sichuan Opera's Gaoqiang singing style, which arose before the Qing Dynasty's Qianlong Period. It has maintained classic high-cavity (Gaoqiang) songs via unique musical advancements and enlarged and enhanced their performance applications (Wang & Thotham, 2024).

Over ages, prominent composers like Luo Xingzhou and Li Shanglin established standardized gong and drum rhythms that corresponded to the melodic frameworks of each song. Unlike other Sichuan Opera classes, which are focused on tonality or emotional expression, Ziyanghe Opera's seven-category system is centered on vocal melody and singing skill. While the existing study emphasizes its historical relevance and musical depth, more investigation is required to assure its continuous preservation and transmission in contemporary culture. Improving educational initiatives, documentation efforts, and performance opportunities will be critical to preserving Ziyanghe Opera as a living intangible cultural resource and reaffirming its place in Sichuan's operatic legacy (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023).

Research Theory

Ethnomusicology offers a theoretical framework for comprehending the maintenance and transfer of literacy in Ziyanghe Opera, emphasizing oral tradition, performance practice, and cultural sustainability. The oral-aural transmission mechanism, fundamental to Sichuan Opera, depends on master-apprentice pedagogy, physical performance, and communal engagement. This research utilizes performance ethnography and historical analysis to investigate how performers assimilate musical patterns, dialectal influences, and theatrical norms within the broader framework of intangible cultural heritage (Morgenstern, 2018). This study used participant observation and interviews to examine the contributions of local opera troupes and educational institutions in preserving Ziyanghe Opera. Ethnomusicological literacy theory emphasizes the relationship between language proficiency and musical understanding, specifically on the phonological and rhythmic frameworks of the Zigong dialect (Tang, 2021; Lawson, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology grounded in ethnomusicological theory to investigate the preservation and transmission of literacy in Ziyanghe Opera in Zigong City, Sichuan Province, China. The study combines fieldwork, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to offer an in-depth knowledge of the tactics employed to preserve this intangible cultural legacy.

Field Research and Participant Observation

Field research was performed at significant locations, including the Zigong Sichuan Opera Art Center, educational institutions, community cultural centers, and opera performance venues. Participant observation recorded pedagogical techniques, community engagement, and artist-directed transmission practices. Participation in concerts, rehearsals, and training sessions offered direct insights into learning and transmission processes.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were performed with a varied cohort of stakeholders, comprising:

- Opera heirs and practitioners comprehend conventional pedagogical approaches and creative interpretations.
- Educators and cultural policymakers evaluate the role of educational institutions and governmental activities in preservation.
- Students and community people, to assess involvement levels and impressions of the cultural value of Ziyanghe Opera.

Examination of Documents

Historical records, governmental regulations, scholarly research, and curricular materials about Ziyanghe Opera were examined to contextualize its development, problems, and current transmission initiatives. Local archives, published research, and digital media platforms were analyzed to assess the influence of new technologies on heritage distribution.

Performance-Based Analysis

A performance-based approach was used to assess the effectiveness of transmission strategies, including:

- School-based education initiatives include curriculum development and student participation in performances.
- Community engagement activities, including festivals, workshops, and digital outreach efforts.
- Artist-led innovation, examining mentorship programs, interdisciplinary collaborations, and the integration of new media.

Data Analysis

The gathered qualitative data underwent theme analysis to discern principal problems, optimal methods, and prospective avenues for the preservation and transmission of the Ziyanghe Opera. The triangulation of data sources guaranteed the quality and trustworthiness of the conclusions.

RESULTS

School-Based Preservation and Transmission

As an important branch of Sichuan opera, Ziyanghe Opera carries rich historical and cultural values. To effectively protect and pass on this intangible cultural heritage, incorporating the Ziyanghe School into the school education system is a key measure to ensure its continuation. The following are guidelines for school-based preservation and transmission:

Curriculum and teaching material development

The education department should organize experts to develop teaching materials related to the Ziyanghe Opera, covering its historical background, artistic characteristics, classic repertoire, and performance techniques. Knowledge of the Ziyanghe Opera should be incorporated into the art programs

of primary and secondary schools to ensure that students can come into contact with and learn about this traditional culture. Encourage schools to develop curricula incorporating regional characteristics and enriching teaching content.

Teacher training and faculty building

Regular teacher training is organized, and inheritors of the Ziyanghe Opera, artists, and opera experts are invited to lecture to improve teachers' professionalism and teaching ability. Encourage teachers to participate in relevant academic conferences and seminars to broaden their horizons and exchange teaching experiences. Establish Ziyanghe Opera teaching awards to motivate teachers to participate actively in teaching and research.

Cultivation of students' interests and practical activities

Encourage schools to set up Ziyanghe Opera interest groups or opera clubs to provide a platform for students to learn, communicate, and display. Regularly held campus opera cultural festivals and organized students to participate in Ziyanghe Opera repertoire rehearsals, performances, and competitions to enhance students' participation and practical ability. Use campus radio, the school newspaper, and other media to promote the knowledge of Ziyanghe School and create an intense cultural atmosphere of opera (Figure 1).

Teaching facilities and resources

Schools should be equipped with the corresponding teaching facilities for opera, such as costumes, props and sound equipment, to create a favorable learning environment for students. Establish an opera-teaching resource library, including videos of classic operas, audio materials, teaching courseware, etc., for teachers and students to access and learn. Strengthen the cooperation with opera troupes and inheritance bases to provide students with field visits and learning opportunities.

Evaluation and incentive mechanism

Establish a teaching evaluation system for Ziyanghe Opera, incorporate students' learning achievements into the scope

of academic evaluations, and motivate students to participate in learning actively. Establish scholarships, excellent repertoire awards, and other incentives to recognize students with outstanding performance in the study and inheritance of Ziyanghe Opera. Teachers and schools are recognized and rewarded for making exceptional contributions to the inheritance of Ziyanghe Opera.

By taking these steps, the Ziyanghe Opera can be passed on and enjoyed by more people on campus. Students can also gain cultural confidence and artistic literacy, and the groundwork can be laid for the long-term growth of this intangible cultural heritage.

Schools are important places for cultural transmission, so they should develop and implement specific guidelines. These guidelines include incorporating traditional culture into the curriculum and passing it on through classroom teaching and extracurricular activities. Communities, cultural institutions, and other organizations encourage schools to collaborate to promote cultural heritage preservation and transmission.

The Zigong Sichuan Opera Art Centre has permanently attached importance to team echelon construction, with a strong team consisting of the old, the middle-aged, and the young. It continues to innovate based on abiding by the correct principles. Recently, the Zigong Sichuan Opera Art Centre has been actively carrying out activities such as Sichuan Opera Monthly Performance and Sichuan Opera in Schools and has also used new communication methods such as short videos to promote Sichuan Opera (Figure 2).

The Community-Based Preservation and Transmission of Ziyanghe Opera

The community is critical to maintaining and transmitting Ziyanghe Opera, acting as a hub for cultural engagement, education, and creative continuity. The following measures emphasize community involvement, resource growth, and talent nurturing to protect this intangible cultural legacy.



Figure 1. Ziyanghe opera performance in schools
Source: Shan Fan (2024)



Figure 2. The zigong sichuan opera art center
Source: Shan Fan (2024)

Developing an opera-friendly community atmosphere

To incorporate Ziyanghe Opera into everyday community life, public venues like community centers, parks, and cultural hubs should include opera bulletin boards that explain the company's history, artistic characteristics, and historical repertoire. Regular cultural events and public performances may increase exposure and involvement. Furthermore, using community radio, WeChat groups, and local social media platforms to communicate opera-related information contributes to a strong cultural climate that maintains public interest (Figure 3).

Organizing opera activities

Community-led opera competitions, knowledge contests, and interactive seminars at Ziyanghe Opera may promote active engagement and increase people's cultural literacy. Establishing opera interest groups or community opera societies offers an organized environment for learning and sharing talents. Furthermore, engaging experienced performers and inheritors to teach and coach community members may dramatically improve their performance.

Developing and using opera resources

A community opera resources database may be created, combining historic performance footage, audio archives, and instructional tools for self-study. Encouraging community engagement in scriptwriting, costume design, and prop manufacturing promotes a stronger connection to the art form and increases its cultural value. Collaboration with local opera companies and cultural organizations may allow citizens hands-on learning and field trips, further cementing opera enjoyment in the community.

Developing future generations of opera

Setting up opera scholarships and bursaries may encourage young people to undertake Ziyanghe Opera training. Workshops and training courses, taught by experienced artists and inheritors, may help to develop a new generation

of performers. Documenting oral histories and performance approaches in the archival records of major inheritors will offer excellent instructional tools for future students, assuring transmission continuity.

Establishing a sustainable community opera industry

Encouraging citizens to engage in opera performances, tourist programs, and historical activities may help Ziyanghe Opera's economic viability. Creating an opera industry fund may help finance activities like script creation, rehearsals, and professional performances. Collaborations with local governments and cultural ministries may help obtain policy and financial support, allowing for long-term development.

Preservation and Transmission of Ziyanghe Opera via Artist Engagement

Artists have a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the Ziyanghe Opera, which is essential for its survival and cultural continuation. This study identifies essential techniques for artist preservation, talent development, and artistic innovation to improve the creative transformation and distribution of intangible cultural resources (Figure 4).

Dissemination of skills and artistic innovation

Artists are the principal custodians of Ziyanghe Opera's creative heritage. This research emphasizes the need to enhance conventional performing approaches while promoting the development of current and locally inspired repertoires. Collaborations with opera inheritors and performers are essential for preserving the essence of Ziyanghe Opera while encouraging innovative interpretations that align with contemporary audience expectations. Enhancing communication networks among artist-inheritors has shown efficacy in preserving the distinctive artistic character of Ziyanghe Opera.

Mechanisms for talent development and dissemination

Research indicates that organized mentoring programs, opera training courses, and institutional scholarships substantially



Figure 3. Ziyanghe opera monthly performance activity
Source: Shan Fan (2024)



Figure 4. National leaders with performers of zigong sichuan opera art center
Source: Shan Fan (2024)

Table 1. Performance-based preservation and transmission strategies for ziyanghe opera

Guideline	Key Actions	Performance Metrics
Protection & Dissemination Goals	- Set audience, performance, and media targets; create an evaluation system.	- Measurable engagement growth; regular performance reports.
Publicity & Promotion	- Use media channels; collaborate with tourism & cultural sectors.	- Increased visibility; stronger cultural tourism impact.
Incentives & Rewards	- Recognize contributors; establish an incentive system.	- Greater participation; sustained cultural preservation.
Monitoring & Evaluation	- Regular assessments; refine strategies based on findings.	- Continuous improvement; published evaluation reports.

enhance the cultivation of a new generation of opera performers. Fostering mentor-apprentice connections and offering financial incentives for emerging performers contribute to preserving Ziyanghe Opera's musical and theatrical literacy. Incorporating opera education into formal training programs enhances transmission channels, ensuring that new performers possess technical proficiency and cultural understanding.

Artistic exchange and interdisciplinary collaboration

This highlights the advantages of multidisciplinary and cross-cultural creative contacts in broadening the scope of Ziyanghe Opera. Artists participating in national and international cultural exchange programs enhance this art form's worldwide awareness and appreciation. Furthermore, integrating components from several classic and contemporary performance genres—such as cinema, television, tourism, and digital media—has shown the capacity to enhance audience involvement and rejuvenate conventional forms (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

The preservation and transmission of the Ziyanghe Opera necessitate a comprehensive strategy that integrates educational institutions, community participation, and artist collaboration. A big part of Sichuan Opera is Ziyanghe Opera, which has a lot of historical and cultural value and needs organized efforts to ensure its survival and relevance (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). This study highlights the significance of formal education, community-based initiatives, and artistic innovation in preserving this intangible cultural heritage.

Education is essential for maintaining Ziyanghe Opera literacy by incorporating its history, performance methodologies, and artistic principles into the academic curriculum. Creating specific instructional materials, training educators, and forming opera clubs and interest groups guarantees pupils are exposed to traditional art forms early. Experiential learning opportunities, including involvement in opera rehearsals, performances, and contests, provide students with a tangible engagement with the artistic and cultural richness of Ziyanghe Opera (Li & Choatchamrat, 2024; Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024). Moreover, providing schools with essential infrastructure and digital resources creates an organized learning environment, cultivating a new generation of performers and scholars.

The community is an essential venue for preserving and rejuvenating the Ziyanghe Opera. The local populace remains actively involved in its preservation by fostering an opera-conducive cultural environment, establishing community-oriented learning centers, and organizing public performances and competitions. Community-oriented knowledge-sharing programs, including scriptwriting workshops, prop fabrication activities, and digital repositories, enhance the bond between communities and their cultural history (Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023; Yuan & Bhengsri, 2024). Collaboration with opera companies and cultural institutions offers chances for site visits, interactive engagements, and direct mentorship from seasoned performers, assuring the effective transmission of traditional skills.

Artists are the fundamental conveyors of Ziyanghe Opera's artistic and performing traditions, rendering their preservation and support imperative. Promoting cross-generational mentorship, professional development, and inter-industry collaboration guarantees that Ziyanghe Opera continues to be a vibrant and progressive art form. Through engagement in cultural exchanges and interdisciplinary initiatives, artists can present contemporary interpretations while preserving the fundamental spirit of Ziyanghe Opera (Wu et al., 2024; Zhang & Thotham, 2024). Moreover, integrating new media technologies, digital storytelling, and online platforms enhances accessibility, facilitating increased audience interaction on both national and international scales.

CONCLUSION

The practical preservation and transmission of the Ziyanghe Opera necessitate a collaborative endeavor among educational institutions, community organizations, and artists. Through structured educational programs, community-focused initiatives, and artist-led innovations, Ziyanghe Opera can thrive in traditional and modern cultural settings. Activities of the Zigong Sichuan Opera Art Center, like the Sichuan Opera Monthly Performance and Sichuan Opera in Schools, show how this cultural heritage can be widely shared positively.

Incorporating digital resources, interdisciplinary collaborations, and cultural tourism efforts will enhance Ziyanghe Opera's reach and impact. Strategic governmental policies, financial incentives, and international outreach initiatives will preserve the opera's cultural identity while enhancing its

accessibility to modern audiences. By harmonizing tradition with innovation, Ziyanghe Opera may establish a sustainable presence in local communities and the global performing arts arena, ensuring its enduring survival and cultural relevance.

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