Peking Opera Facial Makeup as a Cultural Symbol: A Thematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) is an important visual element of traditional Chinese theatre and a distinctive cultural symbol reflecting historical traditions, aesthetic conventions, and cultural values. Although previous studies have examined its visual characteristics, symbolic meanings, cultural significance, and contemporary applications, relevant discussions remain dispersed across different research perspectives. This review aims to synthesise existing literature on Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol, focusing on its visual representation, cultural meanings, transmission, and contemporary transformation.

A thematic literature review approach was adopted to identify and analyse relevant academic publications retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Using English and Chinese search terms, the selected literature was analysed and organised into five themes: historical and cultural foundations; visual representation and symbolic meanings; cultural meaning, identity and values; cultural transmission and social engagement; and contemporary transformation and reinterpretation.

The findings suggest that Peking Opera facial makeup constitutes a dynamic cultural symbol system in which historical traditions, visual conventions, cultural values, and social practices are interconnected. Its cultural meanings continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted through cultural transmission, social engagement, and changing sociocultural contexts. Digital technologies and creative design also offer new possibilities for cultural representation while raising questions about cultural continuity.

This review provides an integrated Cultural Studies perspective and develops an interconnected thematic framework for understanding the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup. It also offers a conceptual reference for future research on the representation, interpretation, transmission, and transformation of traditional cultural symbols.

Keywords: Peking Opera Facial Makeup; Cultural Symbols; Visual Representation; Cultural Transmission; Cultural Transformation

INTRODUCTION

Background Of the Study

Peking Opera, also known as Jingju, is one of the representative forms of traditional Chinese performing arts. It integrates singing, recitation, acting, and martial arts, forming a highly stylised theatrical tradition (Li, 2010, 2012). Its artistic expression encompasses not only music and performance techniques but also costumes, bodily movements, stage conventions, and facial makeup. Through singing, recitation, stylised movements, and martial arts, Peking Opera combines music, dance, drama, and visual arts into a comprehensive performance system characterised by distinctive symbolic and aesthetic conventions (UNESCO, n.d.). Peking Opera emerged through the historical development and integration of different Chinese theatrical traditions,

gradually establishing its distinctive performance conventions, character systems, and aesthetic characteristics (Xu, 2012). In recognition of its historical and cultural significance, Peking Opera was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010. UNESCO (n.d.) describes it as a comprehensive performance art that conveys stories concerning history, politics, society, and everyday life through an integration of artistic and symbolic elements. Its continued recognition as intangible cultural heritage highlights its significance within traditional Chinese cultural expression and the importance of safeguarding its transmission.

Among the various artistic components of Peking Opera, facial makeup, commonly referred to as lianpu, represents one of its most recognisable visual characteristics. Unlike ordinary cosmetic decoration, Peking Opera facial makeup follows established conventions involving colours, lines, patterns, and facial structures to represent theatrical characters and their distinctive characteristics. Xu (2012) identifies facial makeup as an important component of Peking Opera's artistic presentation, closely associated with its character systems and performance traditions. Its visual characteristics are also closely connected to the symbolic conventions of traditional Chinese theatre, through which audiences can identify different character types and interpret their dramatic identities. Moon (2009), in a study examining the symbolic meanings and characteristics of Beijing Opera makeup, found that facial patterns and colours function as communicative elements that help audiences understand characters' personalities and dramatic situations. These characteristics demonstrate that facial makeup is not simply an ornamental feature but an established visual convention embedded within the theatrical and cultural system of Peking Opera.

The cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup can be further understood through its symbolic and visual dimensions. Its colours, lines, and patterns communicate meanings associated with character attributes, moral qualities, and social relationships. Chen and Li (2016) examined the cultural and aesthetic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup and identified how its visual elements represent characteristics such as loyalty, wickedness, righteousness, and evilness. Their study also demonstrated the potential of these symbolic elements for contemporary cultural and creative design. Similarly, Wang et al. (2016) examined Peking Opera Painted Faces as a form of cultural-based visual expression, explaining that facial colours, patterns, and symbolic structures communicate information about the backgrounds, characteristics, and emotional conditions of theatrical characters. Their research further highlighted the relationship between visual representation and the communication of cultural meanings. Taken together, these studies suggest that Peking Opera facial makeup operates as a structured visual language through which cultural knowledge and symbolic meanings are communicated.

From a broader cultural perspective, Peking Opera facial makeup can therefore be understood as more than a collection of traditional visual patterns. It represents a cultural symbol situated within particular historical, social, and aesthetic contexts. Its symbolic meanings are associated with traditional values, theatrical conventions, collective cultural knowledge, and established ways of interpreting characters and their identities. Furthermore, UNESCO (n.d.) highlights the symbolic use of colours and patterns in Peking Opera facial makeup to portray characters' personalities and social identities, demonstrating the relationship between visual expression and cultural representation. The transmission of Peking Opera through master–student training, oral instruction, observation, and imitation also illustrates how its artistic conventions and cultural knowledge are maintained across generations. Consequently, examining Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol requires consideration of its historical foundations, visual characteristics, symbolic meanings, and broader cultural significance.

Peking Opera Facial Makeup as a Cultural Symbol

The cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup lies not only in its visual forms but also in the connections established between visual signs and cultural concepts. From a cultural studies perspective, signs are not merely visual markers that convey fixed information. Rather, they acquire meaning within specific historical and sociocultural contexts and are understood and communicated through socially shared knowledge and practices. Hall (1997) argues that representation is a significant process in the production of meaning, through which cultural meanings are constructed by means of language, signs, and systems of representation. Therefore, Peking Opera facial makeup should not be regarded merely as an artistic form with decorative and

aesthetic value, but also as a visual cultural symbol involved in the production and communication of cultural meaning.

Within the cultural context of Peking Opera, facial makeup establishes connections between specific visual conventions, theatrical characters, moral evaluations, and social concepts. These connections do not derive solely from colours or patterns themselves but gradually develop through long-standing theatrical practices, cultural conventions, and audiences' shared understanding of the relevant signs (Moon, 2009). For example, certain facial makeup designs can evoke associations with particular character traits or moral attributes because these visual representations have been repeatedly used and interpreted within the theatrical tradition, gradually acquiring relatively stable cultural meanings. Therefore, the symbolic meanings of facial makeup are grounded in traditional cultural conventions but also need to be understood in relation to specific character identities, plots, and performance contexts.

From a semiotic perspective, Peking Opera facial makeup also demonstrates the relationship between visual forms and cultural meanings. Barthes' (1972) discussion of signs and myth suggests that cultural signs communicate not only surface-level information but may also embody particular sociocultural ideas and value systems. Applying this perspective to Peking Opera facial makeup makes it possible to examine how its visual representations extend beyond the depiction of theatrical characters and become associated with cultural concepts such as loyalty, integrity, power, identity, and moral evaluation. However, these meanings are not fixed labels that exist independently of context; rather, they are formed through specific cultural traditions and processes of social interpretation.

At the same time, the meanings of cultural symbols do not necessarily remain unchanged. As social environments, media forms, and cultural practices evolve, traditional symbols may enter new contexts of communication and acquire different interpretations (Chen & Li, 2016). The extension of Peking Opera facial makeup from the traditional theatrical stage into visual design, cultural exhibitions, and other contemporary artistic practices illustrates how traditional cultural symbols can be represented and transformed across different contexts (Wang, 2016). Therefore, research on Peking Opera facial makeup should not only consider its traditional symbolic meanings but also examine how these meanings are reinterpreted and expressed in different cultural settings.

Based on the above discussion, this study understands Peking Opera facial makeup as a visual cultural symbol characterised by historical and cultural foundations, social conventions, and dynamic processes of interpretation. This understanding helps shift the research focus from describing the external visual features of facial makeup towards examining its cultural meanings, symbolic interpretations, and processes of meaning communication. It also provides a conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis of cultural representation, meaning-making, and cultural transmission in existing studies of Peking Opera facial makeup.

Research Problem and Rationale

Although Peking Opera facial makeup has received attention in studies of traditional Chinese theatre, visual symbolism, and cultural design, existing research approaches the subject from different disciplinary perspectives and focuses on particular aspects of its cultural significance. Some studies examine the symbolic meanings and visual characteristics of facial makeup, including the relationship between colours, patterns, and theatrical characters (Moon, 2009; Wang et al., 2016). Other studies investigate its potential application in contemporary creative practices, such as fashion design and visual communication (Chen & Li, 2016; Wang, 2016). More recently, research has also explored the use of digital technologies to support the preservation and generation of Peking Opera facial makeup images (Yan et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate the diverse research interests surrounding Peking Opera facial makeup, but they also reflect different ways of approaching its visual, symbolic, cultural, and technological dimensions.

Despite these contributions, the existing body of research appears to be distributed across several areas of inquiry. Studies focusing on visual symbolism tend to examine the formal characteristics of facial makeup and their associations with theatrical characters, while design-oriented research places greater emphasis on the adaptation and application of traditional visual elements in contemporary contexts. Meanwhile,

technology-oriented studies investigate digital reconstruction, image generation, and the preservation of visual resources. Although these approaches provide valuable insights, their findings are often presented within specific research contexts. Consequently, there is a need to examine how these different perspectives collectively contribute to an understanding of Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol, particularly in relation to its visual representation, cultural meanings, social interpretation, and processes of transformation.

Furthermore, the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup should not be examined solely through its established visual conventions or traditional symbolic associations. As a cultural symbol, its meanings are also connected to the historical and social contexts in which it is represented, interpreted, and transmitted. While existing studies have addressed aspects of its symbolic meanings and contemporary applications (Moon, 2009; Chen & Li, 2016), a broader synthesis is needed to explore the relationships among these research dimensions. Such a synthesis can help clarify how existing scholarship understands the cultural meanings of facial makeup, how these meanings are communicated through different forms of representation, and how traditional visual symbols are reinterpreted in contemporary cultural contexts.

In response to these concerns, this study undertakes a thematic literature review of Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol. Rather than focusing exclusively on its artistic features or practical applications, the review brings together relevant literature to identify major research themes, examine the ways in which cultural meanings have been conceptualised and represented, and evaluate how these meanings are interpreted and transmitted across different contexts. Through thematic synthesis, the study aims to provide a more integrated understanding of existing research, identify areas that require further investigation, and suggest possible directions for future studies on the cultural significance and contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup.

Research Gaps and Objectives

Existing studies on Peking Opera facial makeup have explored various aspects, including visual symbolism, cultural meanings, contemporary design applications, and digital technology development. These studies provide valuable foundations for understanding the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup. However, existing research generally approaches the subject from different disciplinary perspectives, and there remains a need to further synthesise and examine the connections among these research areas.

First, in terms of research perspectives, existing literature separately examines the visual characteristics, symbolic meanings, design applications, and digital development of Peking Opera facial makeup. However, how these different research perspectives collectively contribute to understanding Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol requires further examination.

Second, regarding the relationship between visual representation and cultural meaning, some studies primarily focus on the colours, lines, patterns, and designs of facial makeup, while others explore its symbolic meanings and cultural values. The relationship between visual forms and cultural meanings, as well as how these visual signs acquire meaning within specific cultural contexts, requires further thematic synthesis.

Third, in relation to cultural interpretation and transmission, existing studies have addressed the expression of traditional symbolic meanings and the application of facial makeup in contemporary design and digital technology. However, how cultural meanings are understood, communicated, and reinterpreted across different sociocultural contexts requires further investigation.

Finally, regarding contemporary transformation, previous studies have explored the applications of Peking Opera facial makeup in fashion design, visual communication, and digital technology. Nevertheless, how traditional cultural symbols are represented, adapted, and transformed across different fields, and how these practices relate to their traditional cultural meanings, requires further integrated discussion.

Based on these research gaps, this thematic literature review aims to examine and synthesise existing studies on Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol. The specific objectives of this review are:

1. To examine the historical and cultural foundations of Peking Opera facial makeup as a traditional visual cultural symbol.

2. To synthesise existing research on the visual representations and symbolic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup, including the cultural associations of its colours, patterns, and designs.

3. To explore how the cultural meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup are interpreted, communicated, and transmitted across different social and cultural contexts.

4. To examine how Peking Opera facial makeup is represented, adapted, and transformed in contemporary cultural and creative practices.

5. To identify major research gaps and propose directions for future research.

METHODOLOGY

Literature Search Strategy

This study adopts a thematic literature review approach to examine existing research on Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol. The literature analysis is organised around five main themes: historical and cultural foundations, visual representation and symbolic meanings, cultural interpretation and social meaning, cultural transmission, and contemporary transformation.

Relevant literature is retrieved from three academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Both English- and Chinese-language publications are considered, with the search period covering 2020 to 2026. Various combinations of keywords are used, including “Peking Opera facial makeup,” “Peking Opera painted faces,” “Jingju lianpu,” “facial makeup symbolism,” “cultural symbols,” “cultural representation,” “cultural transmission,” and “traditional Chinese opera.” Chinese search terms include “京剧脸谱,” “脸谱文化,” “文化符号,” “象征意义,” and “文化传承.”

Inclusion Criteria：

The literature included in this study must directly focus on Peking Opera facial makeup and address at least one or more of the following aspects.

1. Visual features, forms, and patterns of facial makeup: Studies examining the visual forms, facial structures, lines, patterns, and formal characteristics of Peking Opera facial makeup.

2. Colours and symbolic meanings of facial makeup: Studies investigating the use of colours, colour combinations, and their associated symbolic meanings.

3. Cultural symbols and cultural connotations of facial makeup: Studies exploring the cultural meanings, traditional concepts, and cultural connotations embodied in Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol.

4. Cultural identity and value expression: Studies examining the role of Peking Opera facial makeup in expressing character identity, personality traits, values, and cultural identity.

5. Dissemination, transmission, and digital transformation of facial makeup: Studies addressing the cultural dissemination, heritage transmission, digital preservation, digital presentation, and transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup through contemporary design and media.

This study primarily includes peer-reviewed academic journal articles, review papers, and peer-reviewed conference papers directly relevant to the research topic. Academic books, earlier theoretical works, and other relevant scholarly publications are used as supplementary sources according to their relevance to the research topic.

Exclusion Criteria：

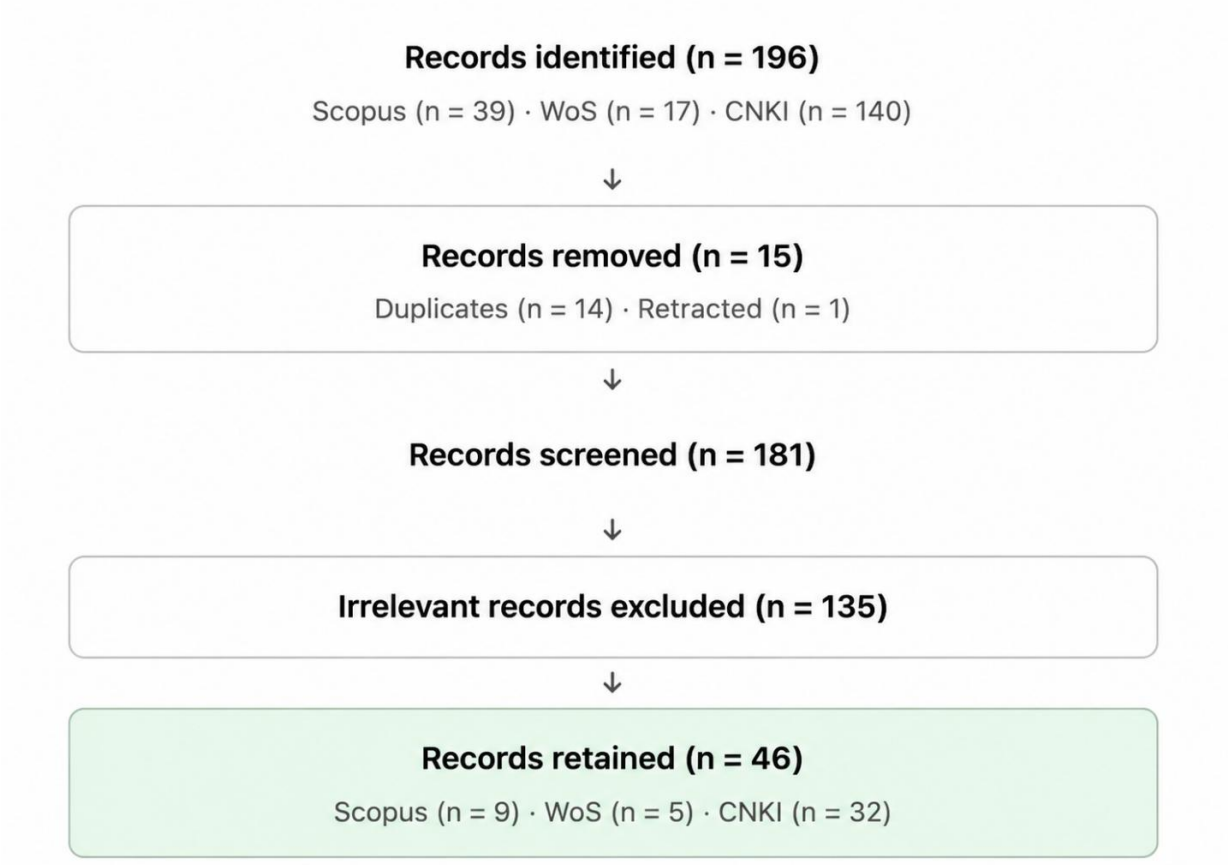
Publications meeting any of the following conditions are excluded.

1. Studies not directly related to Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu).

2. Non-academic materials, duplicate records, and retracted publications.

Following the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the relevant publications were retained for subsequent thematic analysis. The discussion focuses on synthesising the main findings of different studies and identifying common patterns and research trends in the literature. Selected studies examining the broader theatrical and cultural context of Peking Opera were also used as supplementary references to support the theoretical discussion and historical background of this study. The results of the literature search and screening process are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Literature Search and Screening Process



Thematic Analysis and Analytical Framework

This study employs thematic analysis to organise, interpret, and synthesise the selected literature. Thematic analysis provides a flexible approach to identifying recurring patterns and key concepts across different studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this review, the analysis focuses on how existing research discusses the historical, visual, symbolic, cultural, and contemporary dimensions of Peking Opera facial makeup.

Previous studies have examined Peking Opera facial makeup from different perspectives. Moon (2009) discussed its symbolic meanings, visual patterns, and role in communication between performers and audiences. Wang et al. (2016) explored its visual and symbolic features as a form of non-verbal expression, while Chen and Li (2016) examined the cultural meanings of facial makeup and its application in contemporary fashion design. These studies demonstrate that Peking Opera facial makeup can be examined not

only as a visual art form but also as a cultural symbol involving representation, communication, and transformation.

Based on the central research question and objectives of this review, the selected literature is organised into five preliminary themes: historical and cultural foundations; visual representation and symbolic meanings; cultural meaning, identity and values; cultural transmission and social engagement; and contemporary transformation and cultural representation. The analytical framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature Analysis Framework

Theme	Research Focus	Contribution to the Current Study
Historical and Cultural Foundations	Historical development, theatrical traditions, and cultural background of Peking Opera facial makeup	Establishes the historical and cultural context for understanding facial makeup as a cultural symbol
Visual Representation and Symbolic Meanings	Colours, patterns, lines, facial structures, and their symbolic associations	Explains how visual elements communicate symbolic meanings
Cultural Meaning, Identity and Values	Cultural values, character representation, moral associations, and social meanings	Examines how facial makeup represents and communicates cultural meanings and values
Cultural Transmission and Social Engagement	Cultural communication, heritage transmission, audience engagement, and social participation	Explores how cultural meanings are communicated, shared, and transmitted
Contemporary Transformation and Cultural Representation	Contemporary design, digital media, visual communication, and cultural reinterpretation	Examines how traditional facial makeup is represented, adapted, and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts

The framework provides a basis for examining Peking Opera facial makeup beyond its visual characteristics. It considers the relationships among historical context, symbolic representation, cultural meaning, transmission, and contemporary transformation. The five themes serve as preliminary analytical categories and may be refined according to the patterns and findings identified during the literature analysis. They guide the organisation and discussion of the literature in Chapter 3.

THEMATIC REVIEW

This chapter presents a thematic review of existing literature on Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol. Based on the analytical framework established in Chapter 2, the discussion is organised into five major themes: historical and cultural foundations; visual representation and symbolic meanings; cultural meaning, identity and values; cultural transmission and social engagement; and contemporary transformation and cultural representation.

These themes provide different but interconnected perspectives for understanding Peking Opera facial makeup beyond its visual and artistic characteristics. The chapter examines how facial makeup has developed within its historical and cultural context, how its visual elements convey symbolic meanings, how it represents cultural values and identity, how its meanings are transmitted through social and cultural practices, and how it is

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represented and transformed in contemporary contexts. Through the synthesis of relevant studies, this chapter identifies major research perspectives, common findings, and differences in existing scholarship.

Historical and Cultural Foundations

Peking Opera, also known as Jingju, developed in Beijing during the Qing dynasty through the interaction and integration of different regional theatrical traditions. Its formation was closely associated with the historical and sociocultural environment of the period, particularly the exchange of theatrical practices from different regions of China. Through its historical development, Peking Opera gradually established a distinctive system of performance conventions, artistic forms, and stage presentation (Rolston, 2021; Dogorova & Han, 2025). Therefore, the emergence and development of Peking Opera facial makeup should not be regarded as an isolated visual art phenomenon, but rather understood in relation to the broader formation of Peking Opera as a theatrical tradition.

Within the performance system of Peking Opera, characters are generally classified into four major role categories: Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou. These categories represent different character types and are distinguished by their respective conventions of costume, facial appearance, movement, and stage presentation. Sheng generally represents male characters, Dan represents female characters, Jing refers to painted-face roles that often portray characters with distinctive personalities, while Chou represents comic or clown characters (Xu, 2012).

Among these four role categories, Jing is most closely associated with Peking Opera facial makeup. Also known as Hualian (painted-face roles), Jing is characterised by relatively complex facial patterns, in which colours, lines, and graphic arrangements contribute to the visual presentation of theatrical characters. As illustrated in Figure 2, facial makeup is primarily associated with Jing and represents one of its most distinctive visual characteristics. However, facial painting is not exclusive to Jing. Chou performers also use recognisable facial makeup, typically featuring a small white patch around the bridge of the nose and the eye area. In comparison, Sheng and Dan generally adopt more naturalistic or simplified facial appearance styles (Xu, 2012). Thus, although different role categories have their own conventions of facial appearance, Jing represents the most prominent and characteristic application of facial makeup in Peking Opera.

Figure 2. The Four Major Role Categories in Peking Opera



Peking Opera facial makeup is not only a visual form used in theatrical character representation but is also closely connected to traditional Chinese theatrical culture and its historical development. Wei (2021) examines the traditional cultural connotations embodied in Peking Opera facial makeup, providing a cultural perspective for understanding its relationship with traditional Chinese culture. From a comparative perspective, Wang and Zhou (2023) examine the similarities and differences between Japanese Kabuki Kumadori and Chinese Peking

Opera facial makeup, drawing attention to facial decoration within two distinct theatrical traditions. Similarly, Wang (2021) compares Tibetan Opera masks with Peking Opera facial makeup, exploring these two forms of facial representation within different theatrical and cultural contexts. Together, these studies extend the discussion beyond the internal performance conventions of Peking Opera and provide a broader context for understanding facial makeup in relation to different theatrical traditions.

Nevertheless, these studies approach the subject from different perspectives, and their explanatory contributions have certain limitations. Research focusing on the traditional cultural connotations of Peking Opera facial makeup helps reveal its cultural significance. However, an emphasis on cultural meaning alone may not fully explain how such meanings are expressed through specific visual forms and theatrical practices. Meanwhile, cross-cultural comparative studies help identify the distinctive characteristics of Peking Opera facial makeup in relation to other forms of theatrical facial decoration. However, similarities in external patterns or facial decoration do not necessarily indicate shared cultural origins, symbolic systems, or performance functions. Comparisons based primarily on visual appearance may therefore overlook the distinct historical backgrounds and cultural contexts of different theatrical traditions.

Based on these studies, this review argues that the historical and cultural foundations of Peking Opera facial makeup should be understood through two interrelated dimensions. First, its development is rooted in the historical formation of Peking Opera, particularly its role classification system and stage performance conventions. Second, as a visual form embedded with traditional cultural meanings, facial makeup requires interpretation within its specific theatrical and cultural context. Rather than treating facial makeup merely as an external form of character decoration, this review emphasises the relationship between its visual forms and cultural meanings. It also argues that cross-cultural comparisons should be grounded in an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of the respective theatrical traditions. Accordingly, Peking Opera facial makeup is not only a distinctive visual component of the traditional Peking Opera performance system but also an important entry point for understanding traditional Chinese theatrical culture and its forms of visual expression. This historical and cultural background provides a foundation for the subsequent examination of the visual characteristics and symbolic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup.

Visual Representation and Symbolic Meanings

Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) constitutes a distinctive visual symbolic system in which colours, lines, patterns, and facial structures interact to communicate character characteristics and dramatic meanings. Unlike naturalistic facial makeup, lianpu employs stylised and exaggerated visual forms to distinguish theatrical characters and convey relevant information to audiences. Xu (2012) explains that Peking Opera facial makeup incorporates diverse patterns through the use of different colours and lines, enabling performers to portray and distinguish characters through recognisable visual conventions. Similarly, Wang et al. (2016) regard Peking Opera facial makeup as a form of non-verbal visual expression, suggesting that its facial patterns and colours communicate information about characters' backgrounds, personality traits, and emotional states. Their study further examines the relationship between the visual forms of facial makeup, facial movement, and emotional expression, broadening the understanding of its visual functions. These characteristics demonstrate that lianpu is not merely decorative but functions as a visual language for character identification and meaning communication within the Peking Opera performance system.

Colour is one of the most recognisable elements of this visual symbolic system. Different colours are traditionally associated with particular character traits and moral qualities. As illustrated in Figure 3, red is commonly associated with loyalty and courage, black is often linked to integrity and uprightness, while white is frequently associated with cunning or treachery. Other colours, including blue, green, and yellow, also carry specific symbolic associations within established facial makeup conventions (Moon, 2009; Xu, 2012). These colour associations enable audiences to identify certain character characteristics through visual cues.

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Figure 3. Classic Examples of Peking Opera Facial Makeup: Colours, Lines, Structures and Character Meanings

Facial Makeup	Colour (Main)	Lines (Features)	Structure (Design)	Cultural Meaning (Character Traits)
	**Red** • Represents loyalty, courage, and righteousness.	• Bold and powerful lines. • Clear and forceful contours, with upward extension that creates a dynamic effect.	 • Symmetrical and full-face design. • Emphasises the eyes and eyebrows.	• A symbol of loyalty, righteousness, and integrity. • Represents a brave and loyal character with a strong sense of morality.
	**Black** • Represents uprightness, firmness, and boldness.	• Thick and strong curved lines. • Dynamic and powerful patterns with strong expressiveness.	 • Exaggerated and forceful design. • Broad patterns covering the face.	• Represents a frank, brave, and upright personality. • Conveys strength, decisiveness, and straightforwardness.
	**White** • Often associated with cunning, ambition, and treachery.	• Smooth and flowing lines with delicate curves. • Emphasises the eyes, nose, and facial contour.	 • Balanced and refined design. • Characteristic facial patterns with curved lines.	• Commonly portrays a cunning, shrewd, and ambitious character. • Often used for characters with complex or controversial moral traits.
	**Blue** • Represents bravery, courage, resilience, and decisiveness.	• Curved and flame-shaped lines. • Rhythmic and decorative contours.	 • Symmetrical and layered design. • Combines smooth curves with sharp forms.	• Conveys bravery, initiative, and a rebellious spirit. • Often used for heroic characters or roles with a strong and distinctive personality.

Research on the colours of Peking Opera facial makeup has gradually expanded from descriptions of traditional symbolic meanings to the quantitative analysis of visual semantics. Yang et al. (2021) investigate Peking Opera facial makeup by extracting colour information from facial makeup images and constructing a colour system. They employ clustering and binning methods to quantify colour characteristics and explore the semantic patterns conveyed by individual colours and different colour combinations. By connecting the visual properties of colours with semantic expression, their study provides a more systematic analytical approach to understanding the organisation and meanings of facial makeup colours. Meanwhile, Wang (2026) examines theatrical colour visual coding through a comparison of Peking Opera and Khon, placing colour expression within a cross-cultural context. These studies broaden the understanding of facial makeup colours from two different perspectives: quantitative analysis and cross-cultural comparison. However, the visual properties of colours should not be equated directly with their symbolic meanings in traditional culture. The former primarily concerns colour characteristics, combinations, and visual expression, whereas the latter involves cultural conventions and processes of meaning interpretation. Therefore, the symbolic meanings of facial makeup colours should not be understood as entirely fixed or context-independent codes; rather, they need to be interpreted in relation to specific characters, pattern combinations, and theatrical performance conventions.

In addition to colour, lines and patterns are important elements in constructing the visual characteristics of Peking Opera facial makeup. Different arrangements of lines, combinations of shapes, and decorative patterns create recognisable facial designs and contribute to the representation of theatrical characters. Wang et al. (2016) examine facial makeup as a structured visual expression system, focusing on the information conveyed through facial features and their visual representations. Lu (2025), through a comparison of the modern applications of facial makeup patterns and colours in Peking Opera and Sichuan Opera, connects visual forms with meaning expression and provides a comparative perspective for understanding the interaction between patterns and colours. The inclusion of these two theatrical traditions also suggests that the use of visual elements needs to be understood within their respective theatrical traditions, rather than having their cultural meanings determined solely by external visual similarities. These studies indicate that the visual meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup are not determined by any single element but emerge through the combined interaction of colours, lines, patterns, and facial structures. Therefore, an analysis of its visual language should consider the relationships among different visual elements rather than simply classifying individual colours or patterns.

Nevertheless, the symbolic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup should not be reduced to a simple one-to-one relationship between visual appearance and moral character. Xiao Shu and Mohd Yusof (2020) critically examine the traditional Chinese notion that inner essence determines outward appearance, pointing out that the representation of facial makeup may also reinforce the assumption that morally positive characters possess attractive external appearances, whereas negative characters are portrayed with unattractive appearances. This observation suggests that facial makeup is not merely a set of established visual conventions but may also reflect particular cultural concepts and value judgements. Considered alongside the aforementioned studies on colour semantics, emotional expression, and cross-cultural visual coding, existing research can be seen to approach the meanings of facial makeup from different perspectives, including visual identification, quantitative colour analysis, and cultural comparison. However, these perspectives require further integration. In particular, analysing colours, lines, and patterns separately may overlook the relationships among different visual elements and the influence of dramatic contexts on the interpretation of symbolic meanings.

Based on the above studies, this review argues that the visual representation and symbolic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup constitute a visual meaning system formed through the interaction of colours, lines, patterns, and facial structures. These visual elements not only provide audiences with cues for identifying theatrical characters but also convey meanings associated with traditional culture, character traits, and value systems. Rather than treating facial makeup as a system of fixed visual codes, this review emphasises that its cultural meanings should be understood through the relationships among visual elements, theatrical performance conventions, and specific cultural contexts. Accordingly, Peking Opera facial makeup is not merely an aesthetic visual form but also a cultural symbol through which cultural meanings are represented and constructed.

Cultural Meaning, Identity and Values

The cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) extends beyond the representation of theatrical characters and their moral attributes. It is also closely associated with the expression and construction of traditional Chinese cultural identity. As a highly recognisable visual element of Peking Opera, facial makeup not only conveys specific character traits and theatrical conventions but has also gradually become an important visual marker for identifying and representing traditional Chinese theatrical culture (Xu, 2012; Wang et al., 2016). However, regarding facial makeup as a representation of Chinese cultural identity does not mean that its cultural meanings are singular or universal. The identity-related meanings embodied in facial makeup need to be understood in relation to specific historical contexts, social perceptions, and cultural interpretations.

From a broader perspective on cultural identity, Révész (2020) points out that Peking Opera has played an important role in China's nation-building process. Its development and the cultural and political functions it has served in different historical periods have made it more than a form of traditional theatrical art; it has also become an important medium involved in the construction of China's national cultural image. This perspective reveals the relationship between traditional theatre and national cultural identity. However, the study primarily focuses on the national cultural significance of Peking Opera as a whole, rather than specifically examining how facial makeup contributes to the formation of individual or collective identity. Therefore, the identity-representational function of Peking Opera facial makeup as a visual symbol requires further examination through its specific visual forms and cultural interpretations. The cultural identity associated with Peking Opera as a whole should not be directly equated with the meanings conveyed by facial makeup.

Hall's (1997) discussion of cultural representation provides an important perspective for understanding this issue. According to Hall, cultural meanings are not passive reflections of existing realities but are continuously constructed through processes of representation. From this perspective, Peking Opera facial makeup should not be regarded merely as a visual marker of an established cultural identity. Rather, the cultural identity it represents is also closely related to how people recognise, interpret, and assign meanings to these visual symbols. This suggests that the cultural identity meanings of facial makeup are not entirely predetermined by traditional symbolic conventions but acquire significance through specific processes of cultural interpretation.

The study by Santana and Feng (2022) on the early presentations of Peking Opera in Brazil further demonstrates that audiences' understanding of Peking Opera is influenced by their existing cultural knowledge and familiarity with Chinese theatrical conventions. Due to a lack of relevant cultural background knowledge, some audience members found it difficult to fully understand the distinctive performance symbols and aesthetic expressions of Peking Opera. This finding suggests that cultural symbols do not possess a single, universally established meaning independent of their interpreters. Rather, their comprehensibility is closely related to the cultural backgrounds and existing knowledge of their audiences. Nevertheless, the study primarily examines cross-cultural audiences' understanding of Peking Opera and does not directly investigate the relationship between Peking Opera facial makeup and audience identity. Therefore, how the influence of cultural background on symbolic interpretation is further associated with the recognition and expression of cultural identity remains insufficiently explored.

Overall, existing studies have examined the cultural significance of Peking Opera from the perspectives of national cultural identity, cultural representation, and cross-cultural understanding. However, limited attention has been given to how Peking Opera facial makeup, as a specific visual symbol, participates in the construction of cultural identity, as well as how different individuals interpret its identity-related meanings based on their own cultural experiences. In particular, a potential difference may exist between the relatively established symbolic conventions of traditional theatre and individuals' subjective interpretations of these symbols. Therefore, individuals' understanding or identification with the cultural identity represented by facial makeup cannot simply be assumed based on its established cultural symbolic meanings.

Based on the above discussion, this review considers Peking Opera facial makeup to be both an important visual representation of traditional Chinese theatrical cultural identity and a symbolic medium through which cultural meanings are constructed and interpreted. Its identity-related significance involves not only the established symbols associated with traditional culture but also the ways in which individuals recognise, understand, and reinterpret these symbols. Accordingly, research on Peking Opera facial makeup should move beyond merely confirming its traditional cultural identity and pay greater attention to the relationship between the collective cultural meanings embodied in these symbols and individuals' interpretations of them.

Cultural Transmission and Social Engagement

Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) is an important component of traditional Chinese theatrical heritage. Its transmission depends not only on the preservation of traditional visual forms but also on the continuation of the cultural knowledge and practices associated with them. Dai et al. (2025) examine the cultural learning experiences of backstage participants in Peking Opera and indicate that active participation in theatrical practices can contribute to participants' understanding and internalisation of traditional cultural values. Their study suggests that cultural transmission takes place not only through stage performances for audiences but also through individuals' direct involvement in theatrical traditions. This demonstrates that the continuity of traditional opera requires not only the preservation of its artistic forms but also the continuation of relevant knowledge and skills through ongoing cultural practices.

The transmission of traditional opera also involves interactions among practitioners, cultural institutions, and communities. Fu and Choatchamrat (2024), in their study of Jinghe Opera in Hubei Province, highlight the importance of practitioners, institutional support, and community participation in sustaining traditional opera practices. Although their research focuses on a regional opera form rather than Peking Opera, it provides a comparative perspective for understanding the continuation of traditional Chinese theatrical heritage and the challenges it faces. These studies suggest that cultural transmission depends not only on the preservation of artistic forms but also on the continued participation of relevant social groups and the maintenance of cultural knowledge through social practices.

Regarding the dissemination of Peking Opera facial makeup among younger generations, Huang Chen (2023) investigates the design of an interactive system for children based on Peking Opera facial makeup. Taking facial makeup colours as the starting point, the study combines traditional colour symbolism with children's colour cognition characteristics. Through colour experiments and interactive system design, it explores ways of introducing children to and familiarising them with Peking Opera facial makeup culture. The study also

incorporates cultural knowledge and visual symbols associated with facial makeup into a digital interactive system, providing design ideas and practical references for the digital transmission of Peking Opera facial makeup to children. This research suggests that children can be regarded not only as recipients of traditional cultural dissemination but also as participants who can encounter and explore Peking Opera facial makeup through forms of engagement suited to their cognitive characteristics. However, the study primarily focuses on the design of a digital interactive system and the presentation of colours. How children understand, express, and interpret the cultural meanings of facial makeup through actual artistic activities remains an area requiring further investigation.

Overall, existing studies have examined the preservation and transmission of Peking Opera facial makeup and related theatrical traditions from the perspectives of traditional theatrical practices, social participation, digital resource development, and interactive design for children. These studies provide an important foundation for understanding approaches to the cultural preservation and dissemination of Peking Opera facial makeup. However, existing research has placed relatively greater emphasis on the preservation of cultural resources, digital presentation, and modes of dissemination, while comparatively less attention has been given to how people understand the cultural and symbolic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup through direct artistic participation. Therefore, the cultural transmission of Peking Opera facial makeup should not only focus on preserving and disseminating its traditional visual forms and associated cultural knowledge, but also consider how audiences understand and construct its cultural meanings through active participation.

Contemporary Transformation and Reinterpretation

With the development of contemporary design concepts and digital technologies, Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) has gradually extended beyond traditional theatrical stages into new cultural contexts, including digital media, virtual experiences, and creative design. The colours, lines, patterns, and character images of traditional facial makeup are being recombined and presented in new ways, allowing for more diverse forms of visual expression. However, this transformation involves more than changes in visual media and technological approaches. It also raises an important question: when Peking Opera facial makeup is separated from its original theatrical context and introduced into new application environments, to what extent are its traditional cultural meanings preserved, and how are they transformed?

Existing studies have primarily explored the contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup from the perspectives of digital interaction and visual reproduction. Zhou et al. (2023) designed a virtual character experience system for intelligent Peking Opera facial makeup, exploring ways of presenting traditional theatrical culture in digital interactive environments. Zhang et al. (2021), on the other hand, employed depth vision technology and three-dimensional modelling techniques to achieve real-time personalised modelling of Peking Opera facial makeup. Both studies have expanded the digital presentation of traditional facial makeup, although their research focuses differ: the former emphasises virtual experiences and interaction, whereas the latter focuses on visual modelling and personalised presentation. These studies demonstrate that digital technologies can change both the forms in which Peking Opera facial makeup is presented and the ways in which people encounter traditional visual symbols. However, technological interactivity and visual reproduction do not necessarily mean that users understand the cultural and symbolic meanings embodied in facial makeup. Therefore, innovation in digital presentation needs to be distinguished from the understanding of cultural meaning.

The application of artificial intelligence has further expanded the visual transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup. Zhang and Shi (2024) investigated a style transfer method for transforming human facial images into Peking Opera facial images. Shen et al. (2024) employed a conditional generative model to generate facial makeup with different styles and character features. OperaGAN, proposed by Ma et al. (2025), integrates the style transfer of opera facial makeup with complex headwear, enabling the generation of more comprehensive theatrical visual representations. Ge et al. (2025) used generative artificial intelligence to produce personalised Peking Opera facial makeup based on textual descriptions. Although these studies adopt different technological approaches, they collectively reflect a development trend in which Peking Opera facial makeup is shifting from relatively stable traditional visual forms towards digital visual resources that can be recombined, generated, and individually modified.

However, from a cultural studies perspective, this trend also warrants further examination. The visual forms of traditional Peking Opera facial makeup are closely associated with theatrical characters, role types, and their cultural symbolism. When facial makeup is transformed into digital images that can be freely generated and modified, its visual elements may gradually become detached from their original theatrical conventions and cultural contexts. Although artificial intelligence can reproduce or recombine the colours, lines, and patterns of facial makeup, visual similarity does not necessarily demonstrate that its traditional cultural meanings have been fully preserved. Particularly in the process of personalised generation, traditional symbols may be recombined and given new forms of visual expression. However, whether these changes alter their original symbolic relationships still requires analysis within specific cultural contexts.

It is worth noting that existing technological studies and cultural studies differ in their primary research concerns. The aforementioned studies mainly focus on image generation, style transfer, model performance, and visual presentation. Their findings demonstrate the potential of these technologies for the digital reproduction of Peking Opera facial makeup, but they do not directly explain how users understand these transformed cultural symbols. Therefore, the quality of digital image generation or visual presentation alone cannot determine whether traditional cultural meanings have been effectively conveyed. This does not mean that technological research lacks value; rather, it indicates that a gap remains between its research objectives and the investigation of cultural meaning, which requires further connection.

Furthermore, the contemporary transformation of traditional Peking Opera elements is not limited to facial makeup images. Zeng et al. (2025) employed motion capture and digital morphogenetic design to transform stylised movements in Peking Opera performances into three-dimensional visual forms. Although this study primarily focuses on bodily movements rather than facial makeup, it demonstrates how digital technologies are transforming different artistic elements of Peking Opera into digital resources that can be independently presented and redesigned. This transformation expands the forms of expression available to traditional theatrical elements while raising a broader question: when originally interconnected theatrical elements are separately extracted and applied in new media environments, how are their cultural connections with the original theatrical form preserved or reconstructed? This question is particularly relevant to understanding the cultural meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup when it is separated from its traditional performance context.

Overall, existing studies have demonstrated the contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup and related theatrical elements through digital interaction, three-dimensional modelling, artificial intelligence generation, and digital design. Collectively, these studies indicate that traditional theatrical visual symbols are acquiring increasingly diverse forms of expression and application contexts. However, existing research remains relatively focused on technological implementation and visual innovation, while providing insufficient explanation of the relationship between visual transformation and changes in cultural meaning. In particular, when the visual elements of traditional facial makeup are extracted, recombined, or individually modified, whether their original symbolic meanings are preserved, transformed, or assigned new interpretations remains an issue requiring further investigation.

Therefore, this review argues that the contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup should not be understood merely as the technological conversion of traditional visual forms into digital media. Rather, it should also be regarded as a process through which cultural symbols are re-presented and reinterpreted within new sociocultural contexts. Future research should therefore examine not only visual innovation but also the relationship between traditional symbolic meanings and contemporary visual expressions, as well as how different individuals understand and interpret redesigned facial makeup symbols. This perspective may contribute to a deeper understanding of the contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup and the changing cultural meanings associated with it from a cultural studies perspective.

DISCUSSION

Synthesis of Major Thematic Findings

The synthesis of the five themes indicates that Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) is not merely a traditional theatrical art form, but a dynamic cultural symbol system closely associated with historical development,

cultural meanings, social transmission, and contemporary practices. The five themes reveal different dimensions of the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup and demonstrate that its meanings do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are formed, maintained, and transformed through historical traditions, sociocultural contexts, and ongoing cultural practices.

First, the historical and cultural foundations provide an essential context for understanding Peking Opera facial makeup. The findings of Theme 1 indicate that the formation and development of facial makeup are closely connected to the historical evolution and theatrical traditions of Peking Opera. Its cultural significance therefore cannot be fully understood independently of its historical and performative context. This suggests that historical foundations not only explain the development of Peking Opera facial makeup but also provide the necessary context for understanding its cultural meanings and subsequent transformations.

Second, Themes 2 and 3 collectively reveal the relationship between the visual representation of Peking Opera facial makeup and the construction of cultural meanings. While Theme 2 focuses primarily on facial makeup as a visual symbolic system, Theme 3 further examines how these symbols are associated with traditional cultural values, social perceptions, and cultural identity. Taken together, these findings suggest that the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup cannot be explained solely through its visual forms, but must also be understood in relation to its historical and sociocultural contexts. This further indicates that cultural meanings are not entirely fixed but are closely associated with particular cultural traditions and processes of interpretation.

Third, Theme 4 extends the discussion from cultural symbols themselves to the social processes through which they are transmitted. Related studies indicate that the continuity of traditional theatrical culture depends not only on the preservation of artistic forms and cultural resources but also on the sustained participation of practitioners, cultural institutions, and social groups (Dai et al., 2025; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024). This finding suggests that cultural transmission is not simply the reproduction of established cultural content, but also involves the continuation, dissemination, and understanding of cultural knowledge through social practices. Therefore, the transmission of Peking Opera facial makeup requires attention not only to the preservation of traditional forms but also to how the cultural knowledge associated with them is understood and communicated.

Finally, Theme 5 highlights the influence of contemporary design and digital technologies on the traditional forms of expression of Peking Opera facial makeup. Related studies have explored the use of virtual experiences, real-time modelling, style transfer, and generative artificial intelligence to expand the presentation and application of facial makeup in digital environments (Zhou et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025; Ge et al., 2025). These developments demonstrate that traditional cultural symbols can continue to exist beyond their original forms of expression and acquire new modes of presentation through emerging technologies and media. However, when traditional symbols enter new application contexts, tensions may arise between their original cultural meanings and their new forms of representation. Contemporary transformation therefore involves not only changes in modes of presentation but also the continuation and reinterpretation of traditional cultural meanings within new sociocultural environments.

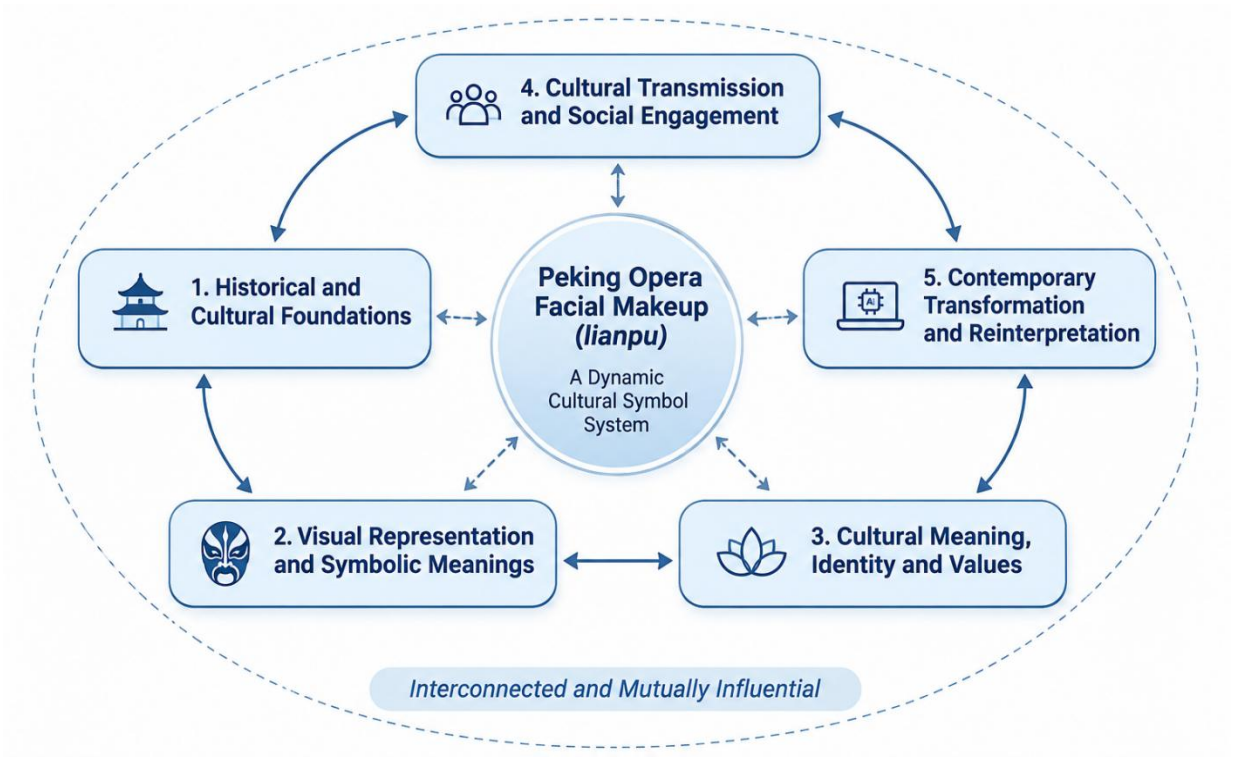
The synthesis of these five themes demonstrates that the historical foundations, visual representations, cultural meanings, social transmission, and contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup are not independent areas of research. Instead, they constitute interconnected dimensions of its cultural significance. Historical traditions provide the foundation for the formation of cultural symbols, while cultural meanings give these symbols their social and cultural value. Social participation influences their processes of transmission, and contemporary practices create new conditions for their continuation and reinterpretation. Together, these dimensions reflect the complexity of Peking Opera facial makeup as a dynamic cultural symbol system.

Table 2. Integrated Findings of the Thematic Review

Integrated findings	Related themes	Main interpretation
Historical foundations and symbolic formation	Themes 1 and 2	Peking Opera facial makeup is rooted in the historical development of Peking Opera and its traditional theatrical system.
Contextual construction of cultural meaning	Themes 2 and 3	The cultural meanings of facial makeup are closely associated with historical traditions, social values, and processes of cultural interpretation.
Social transmission of cultural knowledge	Theme 4	The continuation of Peking Opera facial makeup depends not only on preserving traditional cultural resources but also on sustained social participation and cultural practices.
Cultural continuity and contemporary transformation	Theme 5	Contemporary design and digital technologies expand the forms of expression of traditional facial makeup while raising questions about the continuity and reinterpretation of cultural meanings.

As presented in Table 2, the integrated findings of the five themes reveal different dimensions of the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup and the relationships among them. Together, these themes demonstrate that Peking Opera facial makeup is not a static traditional cultural object, but a cultural symbol system that continues to develop through historical processes, social transmission, and contemporary practices. Its cultural meanings are grounded in traditional theatrical heritage while also being reconsidered in response to changing forms of social participation and cultural expression.

Figure 4. Thematic Framework



As illustrated in Figure 4, this review develops an interconnected thematic framework based on the synthesis of the five themes to provide an understanding of the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup. The historical and cultural foundations provide the context for its formation and development, while visual representation and cultural meaning constitute the core dimensions of its cultural symbol system. Social engagement and cultural transmission contribute to the continuation and dissemination of cultural knowledge, whereas contemporary design and digital technologies introduce new forms of expression and interpretation. The five themes are not arranged in a simple linear sequence but form a network of interconnected and mutually influential relationships. This framework highlights that the cultural meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup possess historical continuity while remaining open to reinterpretation and transformation within changing sociocultural contexts. Therefore, Peking Opera facial makeup is not only a traditional cultural symbol rooted in history but also a dynamic cultural symbol system that continues to develop through cultural transmission and contemporary practices.

Therefore, this review argues that understanding Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol requires an integrated perspective that extends beyond the examination of individual visual forms or artistic characteristics. Instead, it requires consideration of the interconnected dimensions of historical foundations, cultural meanings, social transmission, and contemporary transformation. This perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup and offers a basis for further exploring the continuity, dissemination, and reinterpretation of traditional cultural symbols in contemporary society.

Critical Evaluation of Existing Research

Existing studies have examined Peking Opera facial makeup from historical, visual, cultural, and technological perspectives, providing an important foundation for understanding it as a traditional cultural symbol. However, the synthesis of the five themes reveals several limitations in the existing literature, particularly regarding the connections between different research dimensions and the interpretation of cultural meanings.

First, although existing studies have given considerable attention to the visual characteristics and symbolic meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup, there remains a lack of integrated analysis of how visual symbols collectively construct cultural meanings within specific theatrical and sociocultural contexts. Some studies tend to examine individual visual elements or formal characteristics separately, while paying comparatively less attention to their relationships with historical backgrounds, theatrical traditions, and broader cultural meanings.

Second, previous studies have discussed the traditional cultural values and symbolic meanings associated with Peking Opera facial makeup, but comparatively limited attention has been given to how different groups understand, interpret, and reconstruct these meanings. From the perspective of Hall's (1997) theory of cultural representation, cultural meanings are not entirely fixed but are continuously constructed through processes of representation and interpretation. Therefore, research should move beyond examining established symbolic meanings to consider how different social groups understand and interpret traditional symbols within specific cultural contexts.

Third, recent technological studies have increasingly explored the digital reproduction and generation of Peking Opera facial makeup (Yan et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2024; Ge et al., 2025), demonstrating the potential of digital technologies for traditional cultural expression and innovation. However, visual reproduction at the technological level does not necessarily ensure the preservation of cultural meanings. How the cultural significance of traditional symbols is maintained, interpreted, or reconstructed during digital transformation, and how technological innovation can be balanced with cultural continuity, therefore require further investigation.

Overall, existing studies have established an important knowledge base for understanding the historical foundations, visual characteristics, cultural meanings, social transmission, and contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup. Nevertheless, there remains considerable scope for integrating these research dimensions. In particular, the relationships between visual representation and cultural interpretation, social

engagement and cultural transmission, as well as technological innovation and the continuity of cultural meanings, require more systematic examination. An integrated cultural perspective is therefore necessary to further understand the multiple meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol and its continuity and transformation across different sociocultural contexts.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on the thematic synthesis and critical evaluation presented in the previous sections, several directions can be proposed for future research on Peking Opera facial makeup as a cultural symbol.

First, future research could strengthen the integrated analysis of visual symbols and cultural contexts. Rather than focusing solely on the description of individual visual forms, further attention should be given to how different visual symbols are connected with traditional theatrical culture, historical backgrounds, and sociocultural contexts to collectively construct cultural meanings. This would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between visual representation and cultural significance.

Second, greater attention could be given to how different groups understand and interpret the cultural meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup. Through interviews, observations, and audience-based research, future studies could explore how people from different age groups and cultural backgrounds perceive, understand, and reinterpret the traditional cultural values represented by facial makeup. Such research would help explain how the meanings of cultural symbols are constructed through the processes of understanding and interpretation among different groups.

Third, future research could further examine social engagement and the practical processes of cultural transmission. In addition to investigating the roles of theatrical practitioners and cultural institutions in preserving and communicating traditional culture, researchers could extend their focus to audiences, younger generations, and local communities. This would help clarify how different groups participate in the transmission of Peking Opera facial makeup culture and develop their understanding of traditional cultural symbols through social engagement and cultural practices.

Finally, with the development of digital technologies and generative artificial intelligence, future research could further investigate the contemporary transformation of Peking Opera facial makeup through digital design, virtual exhibitions, and new media communication. Beyond examining technological applications in visual reproduction and innovative expression, research should also consider how digital transformation influences the cultural meanings of traditional symbols and how a balance can be maintained between contemporary innovation and cultural continuity.

Overall, future research on Peking Opera facial makeup should move beyond the separate description of visual forms, traditional meanings, and technological applications towards a more integrated examination of how cultural symbols are understood, transmitted, and reinterpreted across different sociocultural contexts. By strengthening the connections among visual representation, cultural meaning, social engagement, and contemporary transformation, future studies can expand the cultural interpretive perspectives of Peking Opera facial makeup and deepen understanding of the continuing development of traditional cultural symbols in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This thematic review has examined Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) as a cultural symbol through a synthesis of existing academic literature. By organising the literature into five interconnected themes, the review provides an integrated perspective on its historical foundations, visual and symbolic dimensions, cultural meanings, social transmission, and contemporary transformation. Rather than treating these aspects as isolated areas of inquiry, the review highlights their interrelationships in understanding the cultural significance of Peking Opera facial makeup.

The synthesis suggests that Peking Opera facial makeup should be understood not merely as a visual component of traditional theatre, but as a cultural symbol system whose meanings are rooted in historical and theatrical traditions and continue to be interpreted within changing sociocultural contexts. From the perspective of cultural representation, meanings are not simply inherent in visual forms but are constructed and interpreted through cultural processes (Hall, 1997). This perspective helps explain why the study of lianpu needs to consider not only its established symbolic conventions but also the ways in which its cultural meanings are communicated and reinterpreted. Research on cultural transmission further highlights the importance of social participation and practical engagement in sustaining traditional cultural knowledge (Dai et al., 2025; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024).

The review also identifies a growing intersection between traditional cultural symbols and contemporary technological practices. Recent studies on digital generation and transformation demonstrate new possibilities for representing and disseminating Peking Opera facial makeup (Shen et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025; Ge et al., 2025). However, technological reproduction should not be equated with the preservation of cultural meaning. The relationship between visual innovation and cultural continuity therefore remains an important consideration in the contemporary study of traditional cultural symbols.

The main contribution of this review lies in synthesising previously dispersed research within an interconnected thematic framework. By bringing historical, visual, cultural, social, and technological perspectives into a coherent analytical structure, the review offers a broader Cultural Studies perspective on Peking Opera facial makeup. The thematic framework presented in Figure 4 illustrates how these dimensions are interconnected and mutually influential. It represents a conceptual synthesis derived from the reviewed literature rather than an empirically validated model, and may serve as an analytical reference for further research on traditional cultural symbols.

Future research could further investigate how different social groups understand and reinterpret the cultural meanings of Peking Opera facial makeup, how participation contributes to cultural transmission, and how digital transformation influences the continuity and reinterpretation of traditional symbols. Greater attention to audience reception, intergenerational understanding, and contemporary cultural practices would help extend research beyond the analysis of symbolic forms towards a deeper examination of cultural meaning-making. Overall, this review provides a thematic foundation for further interdisciplinary investigation of Peking Opera facial makeup and other traditional cultural symbols, emphasising the importance of understanding their cultural meanings through historical continuity, social engagement, and contemporary reinterpretation.

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