

From Margins to Operatic Ecology: Reframing Small-Scale Folk Opera in Chinese Opera Studies

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ABSTRACT

Chinese opera studies have long been shaped by analytical frameworks derived from major, institutionalized genres, resulting in the systematic marginalization of the numerous localized operatic traditions commonly referred to as small-scale folk opera. Despite constituting most of China's operatic landscape and sustaining everyday cultural life in rural and peripheral communities, these forms remain under-theorized and inconsistently classified across disciplines. Existing research on localized opera and folk performance is extensive but fragmented, distributed across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, heritage studies, and digital humanities, with limited conceptual integration. This article addresses this gap by advancing an interdisciplinary reconceptualization of Chinese small-scale folk opera as an operatic ecology rather than a residual or subordinate category of "non-major" opera. Drawing on empirical studies and theoretical scholarship across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, heritage studies, and digital humanities, the study synthesizes three analytically stable dimensions: performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context, to establish a coherent framework capable of integrating diverse localized traditions without erasing regional specificity. By reframing small-scale folk opera as a relational cultural system defined by its modes of production, transmission, and social embeddedness, the article clarifies persistent empirical problems identified in the literature, including transmission failure, ineffective preservation strategies, and the limitations of technologically driven dissemination. The proposed framework contributes a shared conceptual vocabulary for interdisciplinary research and provides a theoretical foundation for context-sensitive approaches to education, heritage policy, and digital intervention aligned with lived performance practice. This reconceptualization positions small-scale folk opera not as marginal, but as analytically central to understanding the diversity and sustainability of Chinese operatic traditions.

Keywords: Chinese small-scale folk opera; operatic ecology; conceptual framework; performance scale; cultural transmission; intangible cultural heritage; community-based performance

INTRODUCTION

Chinese opera constitutes one of the most internally diverse theatrical ecosystems in the world, encompassing more than 360 distinct operatic forms shaped by China's vast linguistic, geographic, and socio-cultural heterogeneity (Stock, 2012). While scholarly and institutional attention has traditionally converged on a limited canon of so-called "major" operas, such as Peking Opera, Kunqu, Yue Opera, and Cantonese Opera, this emphasis obscures the structural reality that the overwhelming majority of Chinese operatic traditions belong to what regional scholarship commonly identifies as small-scale folk opera (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Chen & Woramitmaitree, 2024). These localized forms, numbering well over three hundred, constitute the everyday operatic life of rural and peripheral communities, yet remain systematically under-theorized within mainstream opera studies. This imbalance is not merely quantitative but epistemological. Dominant frameworks in Chinese opera scholarship are largely derived from genres characterized by professionalized troupes, standardized

repertoires, urban venues, and sustained state or market patronage (Stock, 2012). In contrast, small-scale folk operas are typically transmitted through semi-professional or community-based performers, rely on fluid repertoires adapted to ritual calendars and local events, and operate within economies of reciprocity rather than commercial circulation (Zhao & Husain, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024). As a result, these forms are frequently positioned as peripheral, transitional, or “pre-operatic,” rather than conceptualized as analytically distinct operatic systems with their own aesthetic logics, transmission mechanisms, and social functions.

Recent literatures have begun to challenge this canonical bias by foregrounding localized operatic and folk music traditions as central components of China’s cultural ecology (Zhao & Husain, 2024; Ping et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2024). Cross-disciplinary research on Nuo opera in Guizhou demonstrates that such forms function simultaneously as ritual practice, social infrastructure, and cultural memory system, mediating relationships between belief, community cohesion, and historical continuity (Zhao & Husain, 2024). Ethnographic studies of Dong small songs similarly reveal how localized performance traditions adapt dynamically to socio-cultural change while retaining core identity functions, complicating static preservationist narratives (Ping et al., 2024). Meanwhile, qualitative analyses of Qin’an Xiaoqu expose recurring structural vulnerabilities, declining inheritor populations, weak institutional linkage, and fragmented educational transmission, which are shared across many small-scale genres (Qiu et al., 2024). Despite these advances, meta-analytical research reveals persistent structural limitations in the field. Bibliometric mapping of Chinese folk music research highlights weak interdisciplinary integration, fragmented collaboration networks, and an absence of systematic conceptual classification for localized traditions (Jiang & Jiang, 2025). While thematic attention has expanded toward intangible cultural heritage, digital preservation, and dissemination technologies, these developments have not been matched by equivalent progress in theoretical synthesis. Consequently, small-scale folk opera continues to be examined primarily through isolated case studies, heritage reports, or region-specific documentation, rather than situated within a coherent analytical framework.

This fragmentation is further intensified by disciplinary compartmentalization. Ethnomusicological studies privilege melodic structure, vocal technique, and instrumentation, often bracketing social function (Chengyao & Abdullah, 2024). Anthropological and ethnographic research foregrounds ritual meaning, embodiment, and identity negotiation, yet frequently resists comparative generalization (Dong et al., 2025). Heritage and education studies focus on safeguarding and literacy transmission but often adopt preservationist models that risk reifying living practices into static curricular objects (Sun & Karin, 2024; Chen & Woramitmaitree, 2024). Emerging digital and immersive technology research prioritizes dissemination efficiency and user acceptance, sometimes conflating visibility with cultural transmission (Jiang et al., 2025). What remains absent across these literatures is a shared conceptual vocabulary capable of distinguishing small-scale folk opera as a coherent analytical category rather than a residual remainder of “non-major” opera (Born, 2010; Jiang & Jiang, 2025). Existing classifications rely inconsistently on regional provenance, ethnic affiliation, musical structure, or heritage status, producing typologies that are locally descriptive but theoretically incommensurable. Without conceptual alignment, the cumulative knowledge produced across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, and digital humanities remains additive rather than integrative.

This article addresses this gap by advancing an interdisciplinary reconceptualization of Chinese small-scale folk opera grounded in three analytically stable dimensions: performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context. Rather than proposing a purely musicological or region-based taxonomy, the study synthesizes insights from past empirical research and broader heritage scholarship to reposition small-scale folk opera as a foundational operatic ecology defined by its modes of production, transmission, and social embeddedness. By doing so, the article reframes these traditions not as marginal survivals of rural culture, but as dynamic, adaptive systems that challenge the dominant urban-institutional paradigm of Chinese opera studies. Through this conceptual intervention, the study contributes to opera studies, folkloristics, and cultural heritage research by offering a framework capable of integrating localized diversity without erasing specificity. More importantly, it establishes a theoretical foundation upon which sustainable preservation, education, and digital intervention strategies can be meaningfully aligned with the lived realities of community-based performance traditions. In an era marked by rapid modernization, demographic shifts, and technological mediation, such reconceptualization is essential if small-scale folk opera is to be understood and sustained, as a living cultural practice rather than a disappearing artifact.

Conceptual Framework: Reclassifying Chinese Small-Scale Folk Opera

This section develops the conceptual framework through which Chinese small-scale folk opera is reclassified as an operatic ecology, articulating its core analytical dimensions and their relational logic.

Rationale for a New Conceptual Framework

Existing scholarship on Chinese opera relies heavily on classificatory systems derived from major, institutionalized genres, where scale of production, professionalization, and state recognition function as implicit indicators of artistic legitimacy (Stock, 2012; Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). While such frameworks are effective for analyzing canonical forms, they are structurally inadequate for addressing the analytical complexity of localized operatic traditions that operate outside institutional norms. As a result, small-scale folk operas are frequently subsumed under residual categories, such as “local opera,” “folk theatre,” or “ritual performance”, without clear conceptual boundaries, producing terminological ambiguity and theoretical inconsistency across disciplines (Jiang & Jiang, 2025). To address this limitation, the present study advances a relational conceptual framework that defines Chinese small-scale folk opera not by exclusion from major forms, but by positive analytical criteria grounded in empirical scholarship across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, and heritage studies. This framework is intended to function as a heuristic model rather than a rigid taxonomy, enabling comparative analysis while preserving regional specificity.

Analytical Dimension I: Performance Scale

The first defining dimension concerns performance scale, understood not merely as audience size but as the structural organization of production. Major operatic forms are typically sustained by large, professionalized troupes, standardized role systems, fixed repertoires, and long-term institutional support. In contrast, small-scale folk operas are most often performed by semi-professional or amateur practitioners, frequently drawn from the same communities in which performances take place (Zhao & Husain, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024). Performance scale in this context is characterized by:

- Flexible troupe composition
- Context-dependent repertoire selection
- Adaptive performance duration
- Minimal reliance on fixed staging infrastructure

This flexibility allows small-scale operas to respond dynamically to local ritual calendars, seasonal festivals, and community needs, reinforcing their functional embeddedness rather than theatrical autonomy.

Analytical Dimension II: Institutional Embedding

The second dimension concerns institutional embedding, referring to the degree and nature of external organizational support shaping the opera’s production and transmission. Major operas are embedded within conservatories, state troupes, heritage institutions, and market-driven performance circuits. Small-scale folk operas, by contrast, rely primarily on community-based patronage, informal apprenticeship systems, and localized knowledge transmission (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Dong et al., 2025). While many small-scale operas have been incorporated into intangible cultural heritage (ICH) frameworks, existing research demonstrates that heritagization often introduces tensions between bureaucratic standardization and organic community practice (Qiu et al., 2024; Sun & Karin, 2024). Institutional embedding, therefore, is not binary but exists along a continuum, where increased policy visibility does not necessarily translate into sustainable transmission. This framework treats institutional embedding as a variable condition, allowing analysis of how policy intervention reshapes performance logic, pedagogy, and social function without assuming institutionalization as an inherent marker of artistic advancement.

Analytical Dimension III: Functional Context

The third and most distinctive dimension is functional context, which differentiates small-scale folk opera from major forms at the level of purpose rather than aesthetics. Whereas institutional opera is primarily oriented toward artistic display, commercial entertainment, or cultural representation, small-scale folk opera is frequently embedded in ritual efficacy, communal cohesion, and local identity formation (Zhao & Husain, 2024; Ping et al., 2024). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that these operas operate within:

- Agrarian rituals
- Temple fairs and calendrical ceremonies
- Life-cycle events (healing, exorcism, commemoration)
- Community storytelling practices

Drawing on structuration theory, performance is conceptualized here as a reciprocal process, where local “placeness” shapes operatic form while performance simultaneously reproduces spatial identity and social memory (Zhu et al., 2025). In this sense, function is not an external context but an internal organizing principle of the operatic system.

Integrative Model: Small-Scale Folk Opera as Operatic Ecology

Taken together, these three dimensions, such as performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context, constitute an operatic ecology rather than a hierarchical subtype. Small-scale folk opera is thus reconceptualized as a relational system, defined by interaction among performers, community, space, and socio-historical conditions. This ecological framing resolves several persistent problems in the literature as argued from Born (2010), Jiang & Jiang (2025) and Qiu et al. (2024):

- It avoids rigid genre of taxonomies that obscure internal variation.
- It enables interdisciplinary dialogue without methodological reductionism.
- It accommodates both continuity and transformation within living traditions.

Importantly, this framework aligns with findings from bibliometric analyses showing that the absence of conceptual synthesis, not empirical scarcity is the primary limitation in current research on Chinese folk opera (Jiang & Jiang, 2025). Next, Figure 1 illustrates this operatic ecology, highlighting the interdependence of performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context as relational dimensions rather than hierarchical variables.

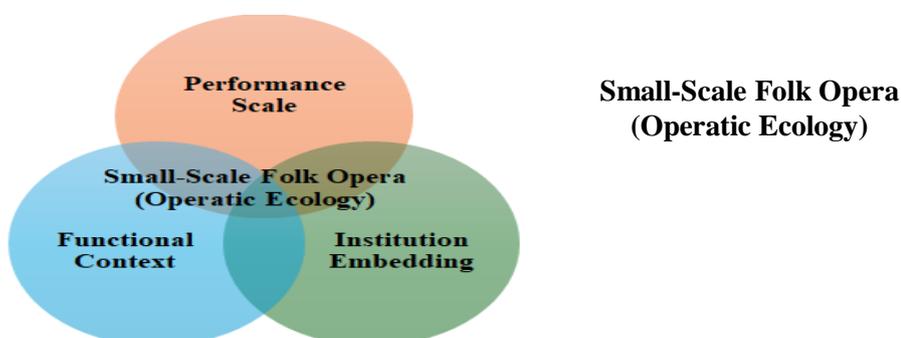


Figure 1. Conceptual model of Chinese small-scale folk opera as an operatic ecology emerging from the interaction of performance scale, institutional embedding and functional context.

(Source: Authors)

As illustrated in Figure 1 above, small-scale folk opera is conceptualized as an operatic ecology emerging from the interdependence of performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context rather than from any single determining factor.

Applying the Operatic Ecology Framework: Analytical Illustrations

To demonstrate the analytical applicability of the proposed operatic ecology framework, this section provides illustrative analyses of two representative small-scale folk opera traditions frequently discussed in the literature: Nuo opera in Guizhou and Qin'an Xiaoqu in Gansu. These cases are not intended as exhaustive ethnographic studies, but as focused analytical examples showing how the three dimensions: performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context, operate in practice and offer insights that conventional classificatory approaches often overlook. The following analytical illustrations demonstrate how the operatic ecology framework functions as an interpretive tool rather than a descriptive classification system.

Case 1: Nuo Opera (Guizhou Province)

Nuo opera, widely practiced in parts of Guizhou, exemplifies a form of small-scale folk opera deeply embedded in ritual and belief systems. Existing studies consistently highlight its function as a medium of exorcism, ancestral communication, and cosmological mediation, rather than as a form of theatrical entertainment in the conventional sense (Zhao & Husain, 2024). From the perspective of performance scale, Nuo opera is typically performed by small, community-based troupes composed of semi-professional or ritual specialists. The structure of performance is highly flexible, with roles, duration, and repertoire adapted to specific ceremonial contexts rather than standardized theatrical conventions. This aligns with the framework's characterization of small-scale opera as structurally adaptive and context responsive. In terms of institutional embedding, Nuo opera occupies a relatively low to moderate position along the institutional continuum. While certain forms have been recognized within intangible cultural heritage (ICH) frameworks, such recognition has not consistently translated into stable institutional support or sustainable transmission structures. Instead, performance continuity remains largely dependent on local communities, ritual practitioners, and informal apprenticeship systems.

The most defining dimension, however, is functional context. Nuo opera operates primarily within ritual settings, including exorcistic ceremonies, temple festivals, and communal rites aimed at maintaining spiritual and social order. Here, performance is not an autonomous artistic act but an integral component of a broader cosmological system. The meaning and value of the opera cannot be understood independently of its ritual function. When analyzed through conventional classification systems, such as genre, region, or musical structure, Nuo opera is often categorized ambiguously as "folk theatre" or "ritual performance." However, the operatic ecology framework reveals that such labels fail to capture its relational structure, where performance scale, institutional conditions, and functional purpose are interdependent. The case of Nuo opera thus illustrates how the framework enables a more coherent understanding of operatic forms that operate outside institutional theatre paradigms.

Case 2: Qin'an Xiaoqu (Gansu Province)

Qin'an Xiaoqu represents another form of small-scale folk opera, characterized by its localized performance practice and increasing vulnerability within contemporary cultural contexts. Qualitative studies of Qin'an Xiaoqu highlight challenges such as declining numbers of inheritors, weak institutional support, and fragmented transmission pathways (Qiu et al., 2024). In terms of performance scale, Qin'an Xiaoqu is typically performed by small groups or semi-professional performers within community settings. Performances are often informal and adapted to local events, lacking the standardized staging and professional infrastructure associated with major operatic forms. This reflects the flexible and context-dependent nature of small-scale opera production.

Regarding institutional embedding, Qin'an Xiaoqu remains weakly supported by formal institutions. Although it may be included in heritage preservation initiatives, such inclusion often emphasizes documentation and symbolic recognition rather than sustained structural support. As a result, institutional interventions frequently fail to address the underlying conditions necessary for long-term transmission. The dimension of functional context further clarifies the challenges faced by Qin'an Xiaoqu. Traditionally, its performances are embedded in community storytelling, local festivities, and everyday cultural practices. However, as these social contexts

shift due to urbanization, migration, and changing cultural preferences, the functional basis of the opera becomes increasingly unstable. This erosion of context directly affects participation, relevance, and continuity.

Through the lens of the operatic ecology framework, the decline of Qin’an Xiaoqu can be understood not simply as a problem of insufficient preservation efforts, but as a structural misalignment between institutional interventions and the ecological conditions of performance. Efforts that focus solely on formal education or digital documentation address institutional embedding, but often neglect performance scale and functional context, thereby limiting their effectiveness.

Analytical Implications

Taken together, these two cases demonstrate that the operatic ecology framework provides a systematic means of analyzing small-scale folk opera as relational systems rather than isolated cultural artifacts. By examining how performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context interact, the framework reveals patterns that remain obscured under conventional classification approaches.

First, it highlights that functional context is not peripheral but foundational, shaping both performance structure and transmission mechanisms. Second, it shows that institutional recognition alone does not guarantee sustainability, particularly when it is not aligned with community-based practices. Third, it demonstrates that flexibility in performance scale is a defining strength rather than a limitation, enabling adaptation to changing social environments.

Most importantly, the framework allows for comparative analysis across diverse traditions without reducing them to rigid categories. Rather than asking whether a form belongs to a predefined genre, the operatic ecology approach asks how it functions within a network of social, institutional, and performative relationships. In doing so, it provides a more nuanced and integrative basis for understanding the diversity and resilience of Chinese small-scale folk opera. To further clarify the analytical contribution of the proposed framework, Table 1 below provides a direct comparison between conventional classification approaches and the operatic ecology model.

Table 1. Comparison between conventional classification and operatic ecology framework

Analytical Aspect	Conventional Classification Approaches	Operatic Ecology Framework
Basis of classification	Region, genre, musical structure, or heritage status	Relational dimensions: performance scale, institutional embedding, functional context
Treatment of small-scale folk opera	Peripheral, residual, or “non-major” category	Structurally central component of operatic systems
Analytical focus	Descriptive categorization of forms	Dynamic interaction between performance, institution, and function
Functional role of performance	Often secondary or implicit	Core analytical dimension shaping meaning and practice
Flexibility in analysis	Limited; relies on fixed typologies	High; accommodates variation and transformation
Interdisciplinary integration	Fragmented across disciplines	Integrative across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, and heritage studies
Capacity for explaining sustainability	Weak; focuses on documentation and classification	Strong; explains transmission, decline, and adaptation through ecological alignment

As shown in Table 1, the operatic ecology framework offers a more flexible and integrative approach, enabling the analysis of small-scale folk opera as dynamic relational systems rather than static categories.

Implications for Research and Preservation

By stabilizing small-scale folk opera as an analytical category, this framework provides a foundation for:

- Comparative studies across regions and ethnic groups
- Integrated education–heritage–performance research
- Context-sensitive digital and pedagogical interventions

Rather than treating small-scale folk opera as an endangered remnant requiring rescue, this framework positions it as a dynamic cultural system whose sustainability depends on aligning analytical models with lived practice.

Current Research Landscape And Structural Gaps

This section critically reviews the existing research landscape to identify structural limitations that have hindered the conceptual integration of small-scale folk opera studies.

Fragmentation Across Disciplinary Silos

Despite the expanding volume of research on Chinese folk opera and intangible cultural heritage, the existing literature remains structurally fragmented, limiting its cumulative explanatory power. Studies are typically conducted within discrete disciplinary silos, such as ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, heritage studies, or digital humanities. Hence, each producing rich, domain-specific insights yet rarely converging into a shared analytical framework (Born, 2010; Jiang & Jiang, 2025). Ethnomusicological research prioritizes musical morphology, vocal technique, and instrumental configuration, often abstracted from the social environments in which performance is embedded (Chengyao & Abdullah, 2024). Anthropological and ethnographic inquiries, by contrast, foreground ritual meaning, embodiment, and identity negotiation, yet frequently resist comparative generalization beyond localized contexts (Dong et al., 2025). This compartmentalization produces a literature characterized by depth without integration. As a result, knowledge accumulation remains additive rather than synthetic, with limited dialogue across disciplines concerning how musical structure, social function, pedagogy, and institutional forces interact within a single operatic ecology. Bibliometric analyses further confirm that interdisciplinary collaboration remains weak and uneven, particularly in research concerning localized and small-scale traditions (Jiang & Jiang, 2025). Without a shared conceptual vocabulary, findings across disciplines remain theoretically incommensurable, inhibiting the development of cumulative models capable of explaining sustainability, transformation, or decline.

Over-Representation of Major and Institutional Opera

A second structural limitation concerns the persistent over-representation of major, institutionalized operatic forms within both academic research and cultural policy discourse. Canonical genres such as Peking Opera, Yue Opera, Kunqu, and Cantonese Opera continue to dominate scholarly attention due to their professionalized infrastructures, standardized repertoire, and strong alignment with state heritage frameworks (Stock, 2012; Lam, 2018). While this focus has generated substantial historical and analytical depth, it has also produced a distorted representation of China's operatic ecology. Small-scale folk operas, despite constituting most operatic forms are most often treated as peripheral case studies, illustrative examples, or endangered remnants rather than as analytically central systems (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024). This imbalance reinforces a hierarchical taxonomy in which institutional scale and policy recognition function as implicit markers of artistic legitimacy. Consequently, the diverse performance logics, transmission mechanisms, and functional orientations of localized operas remain under-theorized, obscuring how the operatic landscape operates beyond urban and state-supported centers.

Transmission Research Without Structural Integration

A substantial body of research addresses the transmission and preservation of folk opera through education and literacy initiatives. However, this literature frequently isolates pedagogical intervention from the broader performance ecology in which transmission occurs. Studies on school-based literacy, curriculum integration, and formal instruction document recurring challenges, curricular rigidity, generational disengagement, and institutional mismatch, yet often treat these issues as technical or administrative problems rather than structural ones (Chen & Woramitmaitee, 2024; Sun & Karin, 2024). Qualitative investigations into community-based transmission consistently reveal that effective continuity depends on informal apprenticeship, ritual participation, and embedded social practice rather than formalized instruction alone (Qiu et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2025). However, existing research rarely integrates these findings into a unified model that accounts for how educational systems interact with performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context. As a result, preservation strategies are frequently implemented in isolation, contributing to repeated cycles of intervention that improve visibility without ensuring long-term sustainability.

Technological and Policy Interventions Detached from Cultural Logic

Recent scholars increasingly explore the application of digital technologies, such as virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and multimedia platforms, to the dissemination and preservation of traditional opera. While these approaches demonstrate potential for enhancing access and audience engagement, they also expose a conceptual slippage between dissemination and transmission (Jiang et al., 2025; Bryan-Kinns & Li, 2024). Increased visibility does not necessarily translate into sustained cultural practice, particularly when technological interventions are designed without reference to local performance ecologies. Similarly, heritage policies and digitization initiatives often prioritize standardization, documentation, and branding, inadvertently reshaping performance logic to align with institutional or market demands rather than community needs (Zhao & Husain, 2024; Zhou & Saearani, 2025). Without an analytical framework that foregrounds functional context and community agency, technological and policy interventions risk reproducing a model of “preservation without participation,” where cultural forms are archived but socially disconnected from their original environments.

Summary of Gaps and Positioning of This Study

Taken together, the current research landscape is characterized not by a lack of empirical data, but by a lack of conceptual integration (Born, 2010; Jiang & Jiang, 2025). Disciplinary fragmentation, canonical bias toward major operas, isolated transmission studies, and technologically driven interventions detached from cultural logic collectively hinder the development of a coherent understanding of small-scale folk opera as a living system. Existing approaches tend to address symptoms decline, invisibility or pedagogical failure, without engaging in the structural conditions that shape how these traditions function and endure.

This study responds to these limitations by repositioning small-scale folk opera as an operatic ecology defined by the interaction of performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context. By synthesizing insights across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, and heritage studies, the framework advanced here provides an analytical lens capable of integrating localized diversity without erasing specificity. In doing so, it establishes a foundation for research and preservation strategies that align conceptual models with lived practice, enabling more sustainable, context-sensitive approaches to safeguarding China’s diverse operatic traditions.

DISCUSSION

Reframing Chinese Small-Scale Folk Opera As An Operatic Ecology

This discussion synthesizes the conceptual framework and literature review to demonstrate how an ecological reconceptualization resolves persistent theoretical and practical limitations in the study of Chinese small-scale folk opera.

From Canonical Bias to Ecological Reality

Sections 1.0 and 3.2 demonstrate that Chinese opera scholarship remains shaped by a canonical bias toward major, institutionalized forms, despite evidence that small-scale folk operas constitute the majority of China’s operatic landscape (Stock, 2012; Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). This imbalance is structurally produced, as

academic legitimacy has historically been aligned with professionalization, standardization, and state recognition, marginalizing forms sustained through community-based systems of production and transmission (Lam, 2018; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024). The framework proposed in Section 2 addresses this limitation by rejecting institutional scale as a primary marker of analytical significance. Instead, it reconceptualizes small-scale folk opera as an operatic ecology, emphasizing the relational interaction between performers, community, space, and function. This perspective aligns with empirical findings from ritual-based opera traditions, where forms such as Nuo opera sustain cultural vitality through their embeddedness in religious and communal life rather than institutional infrastructure (Zhao & Husain, 2024). The issue, therefore, is not the marginality of small-scale opera, but the inadequacy of existing analytical models to account for its structural logic.

Fragmentation as a Structural, Not Methodological, Problem

The lack of cumulative theoretical development in small-scale folk opera research is not due to insufficient empirical work, but to structural fragmentation across disciplines (Born, 2010; Jiang & Jiang, 2025). Ethnomusicological studies emphasize musical structure and performance technique, often detached from social context (Chengyao & Abdullah, 2024). Anthropological research foregrounds ritual meaning and identity but tends to resist comparative generalization (Dong et al., 2025). Education-focused studies prioritize literacy and curriculum integration, frequently abstracting performance from its ecological conditions (Chen & Woramitmitree, 2024; Sun & Karin, 2024). The result is a body of knowledge that is rich but discontinuous, producing parallel insights rather than integrated explanation. The operatic ecology framework addresses this limitation by introducing shared analytical dimensions, performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context, that remain legible across disciplinary boundaries. Rather than privileging a single methodological perspective, the framework functions as an integrative lens through which diverse findings can be interpreted within a unified relational system.

Transmission Failures Revisited: Beyond Literacy and Formal Education

A recurring concern across the literature is the decline in the transmission of small-scale folk opera despite increased policy attention and educational initiatives. These challenges are often attributed to technical or pedagogical issues, such as lack of standardized curricula or declining student interest (Sun & Karin, 2024; Chen & Woramitmitree, 2024). However, such explanations address symptoms rather than structural conditions. Empirical studies consistently show that effective transmission depends on functional embeddedness, including participation in ritual cycles, community events, and informal apprenticeship systems (Qiu et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2025). When educational interventions are introduced without alignment to these contexts, they tend to produce symbolic preservation rather than sustained practice. The operatic ecology framework clarifies this misalignment by demonstrating that transmission is not solely an educational issue, but an ecological process shaped by the interaction of performance scale, institutional conditions, and functional context. Accordingly, formal education should be understood as a complementary mechanism that must be aligned with community-based systems of practice to be effective.

Technology, Visibility, and the Illusion of Sustainability

The increasing use of digital technologies in opera preservation has expanded access and visibility yet also highlights a critical distinction between dissemination and transmission (Jiang et al., 2025; Bryan-Kinns & Li, 2024). While digital platforms can enhance exposure, they do not necessarily sustain cultural practice, particularly when detached from local performance contexts. Research shows that digitization and heritage policies often prioritize standardization and representation, potentially reshaping performance logic to fit institutional or market expectations rather than community needs (Zhao & Husain, 2024; Zhou & Saearani, 2025). This results in what may be described as visibility without vitality. The ecological framework provides a basis for evaluating such interventions by shifting the analytical focus from exposure to alignment. The critical question is not whether technology increases visibility, but whether it supports or disrupts the relational conditions that sustain performance within its social and cultural environment.

Integrative Mapping: What Sections 1.0–3.5 Have Established

Taken together, the preceding sections establish four core claims:

- Small-scale folk opera is structurally central, rather than marginal, to China’s operatic landscape (Stock, 2012; Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024).
- Existing research is extensive but fragmented, limiting cumulative theoretical development (Born, 2010; Jiang & Jiang, 2025).
- Transmission challenges arise from structural misalignment, rather than lack of intervention (Qiu et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2025).
- Technological and policy initiatives remain insufficient without alignment to performance scale and functional context (Jiang et al., 2025; Zhao & Husain, 2024).

The operatic ecology framework synthesizes these insights into a coherent analytical model, demonstrating that sustainable research and preservation require integrative, context-sensitive approaches grounded in the relational dynamics of performance practice.

CONCLUSION

This article addressed a persistent gap in Chinese opera studies: the conceptual marginalization of small-scale folk opera despite its structural centrality, cultural significance, and functional vitality. While existing scholarship has generated extensive empirical insights, it remains fragmented across disciplines, canonically biased toward institutionalized forms, and constrained by preservation models that prioritize visibility over lived practice. By synthesizing research across ethnomusicology, anthropology, education, heritage studies, and digital humanities, this study demonstrates that the primary limitation in the field is not empirical scarcity, but the absence of a shared analytical framework. Small-scale folk operas have frequently been examined as isolated cases or endangered artifacts, rather than as coherent systems governed by distinct logics of production, transmission, and social function. In response, this article advances a relational conceptual framework that reclassifies small-scale folk opera as an operatic ecology defined by the interaction of performance scale, institutional embedding, and functional context. This approach moves beyond residual definitions and establishes positive analytical criteria for understanding localized operatic traditions in a comparative yet context-sensitive manner. The discussion shows that this framework clarifies key challenges in the field. It explains the limitations of canonical models, reframes transmission as an ecological rather than purely pedagogical process, and provides a basis for critically evaluating technological and policy interventions. Importantly, it positions education, digitization, and heritage policy as relational strategies whose effectiveness depends on alignment with community-based performance systems. By repositioning small-scale folk opera from the margins to the analytical center of opera studies, this study contributes a new lens for understanding operatic diversity and sustainability. The implications extend beyond the Chinese context, offering insights for broader debates in cultural heritage and folkloristics concerning the relationship between institutionalization and lived practice. Future research may apply this framework to comparative studies across regions and cultural traditions, or to examine how different configurations of institutional embedding affect sustainability outcomes. Methodologically, the study highlights the importance of integrating structural musical analysis with ethnographic and contextual approaches. Ultimately, understanding small-scale folk opera requires a shift from classification toward relational analysis. This article provides an integrative analytical foundation for advancing research and practice toward more context-sensitive, sustainable, and theoretically coherent approaches to the study of localized operatic traditions.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable.

Consent To Participate

Not applicable.

Consent To Publish

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