

## Exploration of the Ways to Conserve and Improve *Caidiao* Opera Popularity among the New Generation

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### Abstract

This qualitative investigation examines the development of *Caidiao* opera and methods for increasing the popularity of *Caidiao* opera among the youth of Guilin, China. Data was collected from documents and field study from 2019 to 2020. Five informants from Guilin City, Guangxi Province acted as key data providers for the investigation. Results show that *Caidiao* opera was listed as part of the first batch of cultural products on the Chinese national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. Despite this, the traditional performing art is disappearing. Audiences under the age of 50 are unfamiliar with *Caidiao* and lack both interest and appreciation. The number of the audience members has naturally declined as the audience members age and are not replaced by younger fans. This cycle has contributed significantly to the decline of *Caidiao* opera. There is an urgent need to promote intangible cultural heritage among the youth of Guilin. This paper explores some ways that might be achieved.

**Keywords:** Conserve; Improve; *Caidiao* Opera; Popularity

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### Introduction

*Caidiao* opera is an organic part of the traditional culture of China, especially in Guangxi. *Caidiao* opera has a history of 300 years. The music of *Caidiao* opera includes both vocal and instrumental repertoires. It evolved from a combination of dance performances and local folk songs and ditties. The performance forms include one-person, two-person, three-person and multi-role opera. Performances include singing, acting, speaking and dancing. Performers perform with a hand fan, a handkerchief or a long waistband. Traditionally, the dramas reflect the sincere love between young men and women in rural areas and relate interesting aspects of their lives. In order to make the characters different and to increase the repertoire, the roles have become subdivided into much more nuanced characters. As one of the most traditional operas in Guangxi Province, *Caidiao* opera has a 'profound cultural and spiritual value' (Tang Jie, personal communication, 2019).

In recent years, the protection of local operas has become central to local government policy and, in 2006, *Caidiao* opera was listed among the first entries on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List published by the State Council of China (serial number and project name: IV-76 Caidiao Opera) (Peng 2014). From the perspective of cultural anthropology, *Caidiao* opera contains rich cultural genes, with strong local color and folk meaning (Ma 2010). Nevertheless, like many other local operas or folk music in China, *Caidiao* opera is still battling the impact of modern science and technology and the constraints of societal development. At present, in the context of globalization and modernization, traditional culture has been flooded by popular culture, and intangible cultural heritage has become endangered (Li, Wei and Xiaohua 2008). Newspapers, radio, television, movies, the Internet, mobile phones, and multimedia combining sound, light and shadow have distorted folklife, the spread of oral culture and the appreciation of traditional art.

Today, mainstream Chinese opera has caused smaller-scale traditional operas, such as *Caidiao* opera, to be overlooked. *Caidiao* is a kind of theater in Guangxi Province, originating from the traditional performing arts of rural Guilin. It is a lively and easy-to-follow expression of the lifestyle and customs of local ethnic minority people. Performers generally interchange singing and speaking throughout the show. *Caidiao* performances usually retell romances or reflect local admiration of nature. The art is also a mechanism for the inheritance of other traditional artforms, with its use of handcrafted Chinese fans and handkerchiefs as stage props.

This investigation therefore aims to explore ways to conserve and improve the popularity of intangible cultural heritage among newer generations through a case study of *Caidiao* opera.

### Research Objectives

1. To study the importance and urgency of *Caidiao* opera protection.
2. To study the ways to conserve and improve *Caidiao* opera's popularity among the new generation.

### Literature Review

Since the 1950s, theorists tend to agree that young people are affected by the instability brought by transition. Adolescence is particularly viewed as a 'liminal period of time, during which individuals break free from many of the features of childhood without yet fully adopting all of the characteristics associated with being an adult' (Hodkinson 2007). Stanley Hall saw this time as one of confusion and change (Hall 1904). The successful negotiation of this period is defined by cultural and socio-economic factors that, for sociologists like Talcott Parsons (1949), often lead to the development of 'youth culture'. According to Parsons, there is a severance that takes place in these formative years when young people break from the dependency on their childhood family to a more independent lifestyle. This is characterized by a rejection

of responsibilities in favour of 'having a good time', which acts as a coping mechanism through the upheaval (Parsons 1949). Not only this, young people consciously and intentionally reject the cultural practices of their parents (Cohen 1997).

In the West, the desire for youths to transform their own culture has been attributed to the growth in disposable income from the 1950s and 1960s (Osgerby 1998). There has been a time delay in the East due to the lag in social development, yet the spending power of young people in developing countries is on the rise. This has brought with it the 'targeting of young people by expanding culture industries' (Hodkinson 2007). Taking a variety of forms, including entertainment, music, fashion, televisions and, most recently, social media, the increasingly intimate relationship between adolescents and modern consumption has dominated recent scholarship. Increasingly, youth theorists have criticised the combination of a rise in consumption and a reduction of traditional class and community roles. These factors have, according to some, led to the decline of traditional cultures (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

This paper examines the relationship between one traditional Chinese opera and the youth audiences it needs to survive. Performing arts are aesthetic games in which the performer and the narrator (together with the playwright) summon the audience to participate in entertainment and leisure together and return to the root of national culture. The essence of the game is participation, and the purpose of participation is entertainment. The audience goes to the theater just to have fun. The basic function of opera is therefore to meet the entertainment needs of the audience (Chen 2003). This paper seeks to explore why *Caidiao* Opera is not meeting the needs of young people in Guilin.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative research study analyzes data collected from documents and field study. In the initial research phase, the authors studied academic articles, books and historical documents related to *Guangxi Wenchang*. The second research phase was conducted in the field and researchers collected data from interviews with one key informant, two casual informants and two general informants with knowledge of *Caidiao* opera in Guilin city, Guangxi province, China.

#### **A - Key Informant:**

Mrs. Tang Jie. She is a Chinese national second-class actress and the representative inheritor of the *Caidiao* opera intangible cultural heritage project in Guangxi Province. She has performed 60 years *Caidiao* opera. She was born in 1944 in Quanzhou County, Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. She has a high reputation in the northern part of Guangxi. She has performed almost a hundred *Caidiao* opera.

#### **B - Casual Informants:**

Mrs. Lai Dandan. She has performed *Caidiao* opera for more than 20 years until now. She was born in 1981 in Lipu County, Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. She

is an excellent *Caidiao* opera performer with rich performance experience and has won many awards in Chinese opera competitions.

Mr. Gong Yi. After his retirement, he often participated in *Caidiao* opera, *Guangxi Wenchang*, *Guijiu* opera and other traditional opera or "*Quyí*" performances (percussion accompany work). Because of the low income, fewer and fewer people are willing to work as the accompaniment of *Caidiao* opera. She was born in 1946 in Pingle County, Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China.

### C - General Informants:

Mrs. Gong Lianzhen. She is an amateur in *Caidiao* opera. She was born in 1951 in Pingle County, Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. She likes *Caidiao* opera and often watches CDs or live performances. Sometimes she also takes part in the performance herself, so she has a certain understanding of *Caidiao* opera. After her retirement, she sometimes participated in *Caidiao* opera performances.

Mrs. Li Shanshan. She has a certain understanding of *Caidiao* opera. She was born in 1947 in Lingui District Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. She likes *Caidiao* opera and often watches CDs or live performances.

## Research Analysis

### 1. The importance and urgency of *Caidiao* opera protection

"Intangible cultural heritage as a living culture, because of the influence of human social structure and environmental changes, as well as the limitations of its own form of existence, makes their social existence foundation increasingly narrow, and their survival has also encountered an unprecedented crisis." (Wang 2006) In 2006, *Caidiao* opera was listed as the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage. *Caidiao* opera is a local performing art that reflects the rich characteristics of Guangxi people. However, confronted by rapid social development, 'the strength of the art is deteriorating' (Tang Jie, personal communication, 2019). Audiences under the age of 50 are unfamiliar with *Caidiao* and lack both interest and appreciation. The number of the audience members has naturally declined as the audience members age and are not replaced by younger fans. This cycle has contributed significantly to the decline of *Caidiao* opera.

The current situation is very serious. Firstly, individual education of *Caidiao* opera is severely underdeveloped. As many young people go to work in cities and lose interest in *Caidiao* when they are exposed to modern diversified entertainment culture, *Caidiao* is in danger of being lost. Secondly, the social education of *Caidiao* is outdated, and the scope, momentum and influence of the operatic art are not widespread. In Chinese education, there is a lack of attention and value placed on intangible cultural heritage, and the heritage education is divorced from the actual protection and inheritance of cultural heritage (Qiao 2004). Moreover, there is an extreme lack of intangible cultural heritage related disciplines in universities, and education does not cultivate social talent to provide cultural heritage protection or instruction.

Li Shanshan (personal communication, 2019) best summed up the nature of *Caidiao* by insisting that it is ‘a product of local farming culture’. It plays a unique role in the understanding of Guilin history and culture. From *Caidiao*, people can learn about the politics, economy, culture, history and life of ancient Guangxi, as well as its unique cultural psychological structure, cultural value, aesthetic orientation, daily life and folk customs. The protection and development of *Caidiao* should consequently form the cultural consciousness of the whole society. This mindset is not only conducive to the recovery and development of culture, but also conducive to the planning and construction of cultural ecology. At the same time, ‘if local people protect *Caidiao* operatic arts, its cultural uniqueness and nativity can be maintained’ (Gong Lianzhen, personal communication, 2020). This contributes to the diversity of world culture and the creativity of human civilization.

## **2. Exploration of ways to conserve and improve *Caidiao* opera popularity among the new generation**

According to the research respondents, there are a number of measures that can be taken to protect and spread *Caidiao* opera. Most agreed that ‘for the continuation of *Caidiao* opera, professional artists and amateurs must collaborate’ (Lai Dandan, personal communication, 2019). At present, there are still many non-professional troupes performing in Guilin city but their audiences are ‘made up of old people’ (Tang Jie, personal communication, 2019). The troupes rely on the older generation’s love for *Caidiao* opera. In recent years, amateur troupes have resorted to performing *Caidiao* opera at the roadside in Guilin. This kind of performance is generally free but has not led to a substantial increase in support among the youth. Instead, it is mainly for the actors to entertain themselves and pursue their hobby.

### **2.1 Improving cultural consciousness**

In order to cultivate a public cultural consciousness, the research informants unanimously believed that the most important step is strengthening the presence of local culture within education. Where conditions permit, it is necessary to make primary and secondary school students have regular contact with *Caidiao* through the study of music courses in compulsory education. This will promote the concept and consciousness of protection and inheritance within young people. For universities, it is necessary to set up relevant majors, recruit students and cultivate professionals in the inheritance, protection, development, management and research of *Caidiao* opera. The school should become the main body of inheritance of *Caidiao* opera and the most important foundation for its sustainable development.

### **2.2 Reasonable development and utilization of *Caidiao* opera**

Since the new era, the economic value of folk culture has been more and more recognized by people. In many areas, traditional folk culture and folk art are being developed in a variety of commercial ways. In fact, Guangxi Province has been actively developing and utilizing folk art, which has greatly promoted the economic and cultural

development of tourist destinations.

Unique regional culture can play a large part in the nurturing of local operas. This regional culture forms the landscape of tourist destinations, combining environment, lifestyle and history. It is the cultural charm of these unique resources that leads to the influx of tourists from other regions and countries. Local Chinese operas have great value as an emerging attraction in modern human society. Tourism activities have two significant characteristics: first, tourism is often accompanied by cultural exchanges and mutual enrichment between tourists and receivers, and cultural factors attract tourists to the destination. Second, entertainment is often the main purpose of tourism. Chinese traditional opera art has two important corresponding characteristics. It is firstly imbued with unique charm and cultural connotations and, secondly, it is a leisure activity. Therefore, Chinese traditional opera is a valuable and promising tourism resource. Compared with natural resources, another advantage of this resource is that it is a living resource, which can be used in tourism activities, but can also be transported to foreign countries as an exported cultural resource to showcase its cultural charm and market Guilin as a destination.

Nevertheless, in the process of combining *Caidiao* opera with tourism development, it is important to protect authenticity. Development should not be pursued for its own sake. Moreover, it is important to avoid destructive development for purely economic interests. It is necessary to encourage sustainable development, with the foremost purpose of cultural conservation rather than profit seeking. Development driven by desire for monetary reward may cause a new wave of *Caidiao* opera owners lacking in cultural understanding and enthusiasm for *Caidiao* as a cultural resource. Performances could become superficially created and tailored to popular culture, becoming false cultural products that neglect the realities of *Caidiao* opera, its history and cultural characteristics. It is necessary to make the relevant personnel truly realize the relationship between short-term profits and long-term interests, realize the relationship between economic development and sustainable development, cultivate responsible practices, develop cultural consciousness and carry out long-term planning.

### **2.3 Give full play to the role of modern cultural media**

In recent years, China's animation industry has become more and more developed. Beijing "Rosen Digital" Technology Co., Ltd. launched a series of animation series with the themes of ancient Chinese stories combined with fantasy. The series achieved great success and is currently the most popular animation among young people in China. The stories of *Caidiao* opera are very close to life, and the content is also humorous, which itself can attract the audience. Therefore, the author believes that the relevant departments of the government can contact all sectors of society to jointly invest in the transformation of *Caidiao* opera into a series of cartoons. In this way *Caidiao* opera can penetrate into the children's world through animation. Karaoke is another potential



avenue for development among older youths. Full use must be made of all kinds of media to protect *Caidiao* opera, including innovations and strategies to protect its associated cultures. Only in this way can *Caidiao* opera attract younger audiences, and become popularized among the youth.

## Discussion

As a Guilin local traditional opera, the melodious music, singing, dancing and humorous plots of *Caidiao* opera once brought infinite fun to the audience. However, after the founding of the people's Republic of China, *Caidiao* became a tool for political propaganda, moral education, and even policy implementation. At that time, *Caidiao* opera was deprived of its original entertainment attributes. In order to win the audience, *Caidiao* opera must once again be promoted as a traditional opera that brings happiness to the people (Lu 2012). In order for this to be achieved, it is necessary for *Caidiao* opera to retain the original essence of people's lives. The scripts should reflect the lifestyles of the common people or the problems they care about, and the ideological content should be consistent with the ethics, morality and values of the common people. The more the audience can see reality in the stage performance, the more intimate the performance will feel and the more likely people will relate to the opera. However, there are great differences in the cultural tastes in urban and rural areas. New works cannot only reflect rural life but ignore urban life. Similarly, the original color of *Caidiao* opera must not be lost in order to write an opera for modern times. There must be compromise.

In terms of conserve and improve *Caidiao* opera popularity among the new generation. Whilst tourism is a viable mechanism for the protection of *Caidiao* opera, grassroots communities are the main media through which folk culture will be inherited. With community support, it is not only possible to make heritage a part of people's lives for the long term, it is also possible to reproduce and create culture under new conditions. In doing so, minimal capital is required. So long as the meaning is understood or recognized by community residents, culture can be preserved at a low cost. Heritage protection projects in grass-roots communities can also promote the development of local education and help to explore new methods to inherit traditional knowledge. Therefore, the attitude of the general public will fundamentally determine the fate of *Caidiao* opera and its ultimate inheritance or abandonment. In the process of protecting the genre, the enthusiasm of the people must be fully mobilized through the creation of a cultural consciousness that respects local lifestyle, religious beliefs and customs. At the same time, conservation policies should start from the actual interests of the general public, and let them become the real beneficiaries in the process of protection.

## Conclusion

*Caidiao* opera is a kind of local opera with distinctive characteristics in southern China. It is widely spread and influential in Guangxi local opera, and occupies an important position in Guangxi art research. Because of its various cultural values, it has been listed as a national intangible cultural heritage protection project. Out of the

academic thought of meticulous protection and sustainable development of the artistic heritage of *Caidiao* opera, the aims are: to study the importance and urgency of *Caidiao* opera protection, explore the ways to conserve and improve its popularity among the new generation, and has achieved more ideal research results and achieved the expected research objectives.

The research on the conservation and popularization methods of *Caidiao* opera can play an effective role in promoting the local traditional music culture in Guilin and provide effective strategies for the protection and communication of *Caidiao* opera by Guilin intangible cultural heritage research center.

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