

# ***A Study on the Current Situation and Development Strategies of Beijing Opera Spread in Colleges and Universities -- Based on Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory***

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**Abstract:** Under the new media environment, the phenomena of reading fragmentation and aesthetic pan-entertainment have appeared among college students, and Peking Opera, an excellent traditional Chinese culture, is facing challenges in college communication. Based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, this paper analyzes the current situation of Peking Opera's college communication from three dimensions: encoding, circulation and decoding. It is found that at the encoding level, there is the problem of closed production of professional symbol system, which is out of touch with the discourse system of college students; at the circulation level, there is a break between the traditional ritualized communication and the fragmented communication channels of new media; at the decoding level, the youth popular culture adopts a confrontational interpretation of Peking Opera. In this regard, the article proposes the development strategies of constructing a translation-type encoding system, reshaping in-depth participation scenarios, and formulating algorithmic countermeasure strategies, in order to realize the dynamic balance of encoding/decoding, and to promote the creative transformation and innovative development of Peking Opera in colleges and universities.

**Keywords:** Peking Opera, university communication, Stuart Hall Encoding/Decoding Theory, current status of communication, development strategies

## **1. Introduction**

Peking Opera is the national treasure of China, a traditional opera with a history of more than 200 years, bringing together the artistic essence of various types of opera. President Xi Jinping pointed out in his reply to the young art workers of the National Peking Opera Theater that it is necessary to adhere to the principles of virtue and art, abide by the right and innovate, so that the art of Peking Opera will continue to shine in the times and contribute to the prosperity of literature and art and the building of China's Cultural Strength. Actively inheriting and promoting the art of Peking Opera is a powerful means to build China's Cultural Strength [1]. At the same time, colleges and universities, as an important position for inheriting and carrying forward the excellent traditional Chinese culture, promote the dissemination of Peking Opera in colleges and universities is conducive to Peking Opera's rich repertoire, superb performance forms and profound aesthetic system to the college student population for the popularization of cultural knowledge, to enhance the level of aesthetics and the shaping of the correct values [2]. In the "Opinions on the Implementation of Traditional Chinese

Opera in Schools" jointly issued by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Education and other departments, it is also clearly pointed out that schools of higher education should offer a rich variety of elective courses in opera, and actively implement the activities of elegant art in schools. However, in the new media environment, with the prosperous development of short video platforms, the aesthetic habits of college students have changed, and the dissemination of Peking Opera in colleges and universities is facing challenges. At present, the university spread of Beijing opera overly relies on organizational communication, and has not formed a communication matrix in interpersonal communication and mass communication, presenting the phenomenon of "three more and three less", i.e., more unidirectional output and less interactive experience; more fragmented communication and less systematic cognition; more ceremonial performances and fewer daily penetration.

The theory of "encoding/decoding" was put forward in the 1970s by the Stuart Hall (Hall), who is regarded as the "father of contemporary cultural studies". This idea of his broke the linear communication model consistently advocated by the American empirical school, which believed that recipients receive information passively. Instead, Hall believed that the status of both the transmitter and the recipient is equal, and the audience's mobility should be emphasized [3]. This paper breaks new ground by introducing the encoding/decoding theory into the study of Peking Opera spread in colleges and universities, systematically sorting out the applicability of encoding/decoding theory in the field of opera communication, and based on the phenomena of fragmented reading and aesthetic pan-entertainment among college students due to the prosperous development of the current short-video platforms, it unfolds from the three dimensions of the production, circulation and reception of Peking Opera symbols, revealing the symbolic transformation of the Peking Opera, a traditional art, in the dissemination of the youth groups. It reveals the dilemma of symbol transformation of Beijing opera, a traditional art, in the dissemination among young people and shows the process of its meaning reconstruction, fills the theoretical gap of new media spread of opera to a certain extent, and puts forward a practical development strategy for the dissemination of Beijing opera in colleges and universities.

## **2. The coding level: the closed production of professional symbol systems**

The domination of encoding by cultural authority is a common phenomenon in the current encoding link in the communication of Beijing opera colleges. Hall's encoding/decoding theory reveals that the essence of communication is the production and reproduction of cultural meaning through the symbolic system. In college Peking Opera communication, coding subjects such as professional teachers and Peking Opera troupes commonly adopt institutionalized coding methods, with the main purpose of promoting the programmed language of Peking Opera art. Programming is one of the expressive techniques of Chinese opera, and Peking Opera programming refers to the fact that actors have relatively fixed ways of performing their "four feats and five methods" on stage, in accordance with the content and technical requirements of the performances, including a unified singing style, stances, and a system of symbols of faces, etc [4]. This encoding method presupposes that the audience has basic knowledge of opera and that the decoder is able to recognize the metaphorical structure of the symbols by default. For example, college teachers default students to understand the historical context of the "contradiction between loyalty and filial piety" when explaining "The Fourth Son Visits His Mother". The programmed language of Peking Opera (singing, stance, face painting) is essentially a highly condensed symbolic system, which is a self-consistent knowledge system formed in the course of historical inheritance. However, the cultural cognitive threshold of Peking Opera is high. The unique presentation form of Peking Opera make it difficult to appreciate. If the audience is not familiar with the program of Peking Opera, it is difficult for them to quickly comprehend the essence of the art of Peking Opera [5]. Most college students have little knowledge

of Peking Opera, and it is difficult for students to decode the symbolic meanings due to a lack of background knowledge, and a cognitive gap is formed between the technical terms and programmed movements and the daily experience of young people.

The coding strategy of symbol producers is out of touch with the discourse system of university students, resulting in the traditional symbol system of Peking Opera facing difficulties in digital translation. Traditional Peking Opera coding follows the principle of integrity of theater art, and its symbolic system relies on linear narrative and immersive viewing to realize meaning transmission. However, in the communication ecology dominated by short video platforms, the symbolic cognition of Generation Z is characterized by fragmentation, instantaneousness, and visualization. When the Peking Opera symbols produced by the coders collide with the visual modes and popular vocabulary, the professional coding falls into the predicament of misalignment. This mismatch is not only a failure of communication in terms of meaning, but also an impact and challenge of emerging media rules on the cultural power structure.

This authority-driven coding model, to some extent, leads to one-way cultural indoctrination. In the Peking Opera elective course, the teacher's PPT lectures and video presentations lead to unsatisfactory communication effects. The closed nature of this coding strategy is essentially the lack of adaptability of elegant art to mass communication. How to organically integrate the symbol system of Peking Opera with the discourse system of college students, adapt the complete linear meaning transfer process to the fragmented communication ecology such as short video platforms, and encourage creative transformation and development of Peking Opera, the fine traditional Chinese culture, on college campuses on the basis of respecting the traditional art, has become a problem that coders in the communication of Peking Opera in colleges and universities urgently need to think about.

### **3. Circulation level: channel breaks in symbol transformation**

Hall's encoding/decoding theory emphasizes that the circulation of symbolic meaning is not a simple transmission process, but a dynamic reconstruction under the joint action of media characteristics and power relations. Currently, the circulation channels of Peking Opera in colleges and universities are mainly traditional ritualized communication and new media fragmented communication. Ritualized communication is a form of communication dominated by college Peking Opera elective courses, college Peking Opera organization activities and troupe performances, etc., while new media fragmented communication is a fragmented communication subject to algorithmic pushing rules on new media platforms such as short videos. The conflict between the two in the logic of symbolic transformation exposes the contradiction in the mechanism of cultural reproduction.

Traditional ritualized circulation has become a closed cycle of authoritative encoding. The traditional circulation channel is centered on organizational communication, building ritualized scenarios through Peking Opera club activities, Peking Opera troupes' performances and classroom teaching, and its symbolic circulation presents a three-fold characteristic.

Closed symbol production. College Peking Opera enthusiasts are college students who will take the initiative to learn and understand Peking Opera-related knowledge, and even perform on stage. The vast majority of college Peking Opera enthusiasts are members of college student Peking Opera organizations, and college Peking Opera enthusiasts do not account for a high percentage of the student body [5]. The essence of the activities of college Peking Opera societies is the internal dialog of the cultural community. Members of the society complete the ritualized reproduction of symbols in the closed community through regular rehearsals and repertoire interpretation. For example, the standardization of biting words for the old student's singing voice and the amplitude of the water sleeves for the Dan character are all used to strengthen the internal circulation of Peking Opera knowledge in the name of "skill transmission". Although this mode of circulation maintains the

formal integrity of Peking Opera, it restricts the circulation of symbols to specific groups, forming an inward-looking cultural closed loop.

Unidirectional output of educational communication. The classroom, as an organizational communication channel, has a strong ritualistic coding logic. Classroom teaching is linear through slide and video, and through the analyzing of the aesthetic rules of singing style and programmed movements, the normativity and artistic purity of Peking Opera symbols are emphasized. This kind of circulation puts students in the position of passive receivers, and their cognitive activities are reduced to mechanical reproduction of authoritative codes. Peking Opera, as a crystallized wisdom of cultural practice, can provide students with rich social resources, but this mode of communication restricts the circulation of symbols to the framework of "knowledge transfer", which severs the social interaction function of Peking Opera as a cultural practice.

The Cultural Loss of Theater Rituals. Peking Opera performances on campus and theater observation should constitute an immersive communication scene, but in practice, many colleges and universities link campus Peking Opera performances to the comprehensive assessment system for college students in the hope of encouraging and promoting the active participation of students in traditional cultural activities on campus. However, many students ignore the aesthetic appreciation of Peking Opera art just to fulfill the target task. Although this kind of ritualized communication has the value of cultural enlightenment, it is difficult to stimulate the value identity of the youth group.

Fragmented communication has triggered a crisis of deconstruction of the symbolic system. Short video platforms have reconfigured the basic rules of symbolic circulation, and their "decentralized, decontextualized and algorithmic" characteristics have plunged the Peking Opera communication into the confrontation between cultural logic and media logic. Its main performance is firstly the time compression and the suspension of symbolic reference. The "golden 6 seconds" rule of short videos forces content producers to fragment Peking Opera: programmed actions are cut into isolated "wonders", martial arts clips are extracted into action episodes, and singing patterns are compressed into sound fragments. This kind of violent editing leads to a situation in which symbolic references are separated from their original meaning and reduced to pure sensory stimuli.

The second is the narrowing of cognition under the constraints of algorithms. The platform's personalized recommendation mechanism creates a "cultural cocoon", causing students to fall into a vicious circle of symbolic cognition. The algorithm continuously pushes similar content based on initial interest labels, leading to a serious imbalance in the symbol system of Beijing opera that students are exposed to. Visual symbols (face painting, costumes) account for a very high proportion, while auditory symbols (singing rhythms) and narrative symbols (plot structure) are marginalized. This superficialization of cognition is essentially the expulsion of cultural connotations by algorithmic power.

Once again, after the "immersive scene" of the theater performance was replaced by the "intermittent viewing" of short videos, the aesthetic experience of Beijing opera underwent a fundamental change: digital interactions such as pop-ups and likes replaced the collective emotional resonance in the theater, and cultural resonance was quantified as traffic data. College students are more inclined to the entertainment value of Peking Opera's symbols than to its cultural connotations.

The split between the traditional ritualized communication and the fragmented communication of short videos reflects the game between cultural authority and media power: the essence of this channel break is that Peking Opera fails to establish a cross-media symbol conversion mechanism. The key to solving the problem is to break down the channel barriers and find a balance between cultural integrity and media adaptability, so as to realize the effective dissemination of Peking Opera cultural value.

#### 4. The decoding dimension: confrontational interpretation of youth popular culture

Hall's encoding/decoding theory emphasizes that the audience's interpretation of information is constrained by its cultural identity and aesthetic experience. In the context of booming youth pop culture, college students' decoding of Peking Opera presents a significant confrontational interpretation.

The decline of dominant-hegemonic decoding: the dissolution of the authority of interpretation. Traditional Peking Opera education tries to build a hegemonic decoding system, i.e., students are required to accept the teacher's authoritative interpretation of program symbols. However, the cultural affirmative action movement in the context of new media has made the youth group negatively treat unidirectional meaning inculcation, and the failure of hegemonic decoding is essentially the transfer of the right of cultural interpretation from the monopoly of the elites to the common of the masses.

Mainstreaming of negotiated decoding: fracture and reorganization of the symbol system. While fragmented communication makes the Peking Opera symbol system lose its integrity, the youth group will also reconstruct the meaning network through cultural collage based on their insufficient knowledge of Peking Opera. The fragmentation of short videos takes Peking Opera symbols out of their original contexts, dismantles Peking Opera into isolated symbols, and its circulation process is divorced from its original narrative contexts, with college students injecting new meanings into it in their secondary creations. This transformation of meaning is not a betrayal of tradition, but an adaptive strategy of the youth group in cultural understanding—through the appropriation of symbolic fragments, the fragile connection between traditional culture and the contemporary is maintained. The symbolism of programmed actions needs to be decoded through cultural accumulation, but the spread of fragments has led to the continuous dissolution of their references, and the youth group has reconstructed the symbolic connection through digital media. Although this reconstruction deviates from the logic of traditional aesthetics, it revitalizes the interpretation of Peking Opera symbols in the digital generation.

The manifestation of confrontational decoding. Youth culture has transformed Peking Opera symbols into pan-entertainment through confrontational decoding, the core strategy of which is, first and foremost, symbol collage, i.e., the demystification of cultural orthodoxy. In the video on the Bilibili website, the singing voice is mixed with electronic drum beats, which receives a very high number of plays; at the same time, the related passages of Peking Opera is used by viewers' pop-up interactions to dilute the seriousness of the historical narrative. The essence of this decoding practice is to counter the interpretive hegemony of cultural authorities through symbols: while professional coders position Peking Opera as "cultural heritage," young people compete for the right to define it in the form of "cultural memes". From aesthetic resonance to social interaction, the dissolution of serious themes through entertainment reflects the logic of youth cultural creation. This logic of cultural creation is not only the dissipation of cultural orthodoxy, but also the revolt of youth pop culture against the elite aesthetic system.

At the same time, the decoding practices of youth popular culture are twofold. Resistance is manifested in the way in which the seriousness of cultural authority is dissolved through the transformation of general entertainment (e.g., opera electro-acoustic remixes), challenging the right to define "what is orthodox Peking Opera". Constructively, Peking Opera symbols have been transformed into social symbols in popular culture forms such as emoticons and creative videos, which have actually realized circulation among college students. The process of decoding practice is not just a conflict of opposites embodied in hegemonic or antagonistic decoding, but also nurtures the symbiosis of deconstruction and reconstruction in youth culture. In the dissemination of Peking Opera in colleges and universities, youth's antagonistic decoding is not only a force for the dissolution

of cultural authority, but also a driving force for the creative transformation of traditional symbols. This dialectic suggests that the contemporary communication of Peking Opera needs to seek a dynamic balance between cultural correctness and meaning innovation, so that confrontational decoding can be transformed from a communication dilemma into an opportunity for innovation. This confrontational decoding is not only a manifestation of the conflict between traditional culture and contemporary culture, but also an inevitable way for traditional art to integrate into contemporary life.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Hall's theoretical framework reminds us that the dilemma of Peking Opera's dissemination in colleges and universities is essentially a malfunction of the cultural reproduction mechanism. There is a deep cultural tension in the dissemination of Peking Opera in colleges and universities. When the encoder closes the symbolic system in the historical context, the decoder is forced to open up a new space of meaning through antagonistic practices. When traditional coding in the professional field encounters the creative decoding of youth popular culture, traditional art faces the risk of meaning loss, but also nurtures opportunities for cultural reproduction. The way out is to maintain the dynamic balance between encoding and decoding, and to build a flexible encoding system.

The first step is to do a good job of symbol translation. We should develop resources for the enlightenment of Peking Opera such as the "Opera Resource Bank" and the "Peking Opera Symbol Dictionary". The programmed language should be transformed into cultural modules that can be embedded in digital grammar. Based on the online entertainment preferences of college students, we should create a fusion media matrix and produce tweets, short videos and short audios that college students enjoy, so that they can learn about Peking Opera culture in a fragmented time [5]. The deconstruction and realization of the programmed system of Peking Opera is realized with the help of the fragmented communication of new media, and the rules of new media communication are adapted while the aesthetic core is maintained.

The second is to reshape the scene of in-depth participation. Breaking the one-way communication structure, through the open script creation, campus theater construction, etc., guided by the university, Beijing Opera Club, organizing students to direct and perform in a Beijing Opera show, so that as many students as possible to participate in the work of acting, so that the students from the "cultural consumers" to "cultural producers" This will transform students from "cultural consumers" to "cultural producers".

Finally, it is to formulate algorithmic countermeasure strategies. The challenge of "Finding misunderstood Peking Opera symbols" was launched on a short video platform, which transformed Peking Opera from a closed system of meanings into an open scene of cultural dialog.

Based on the guidance of the above innovative methods, the author and his team have carried out related practices. We have operated the WeChat subscription account "Understand Peking Opera instantly", which currently has three main sections: "Peking Opera Resource Library", "Interesting Stories of Peking Opera" and "Click Me to Watch the Opera". It has three major sections, and is bound to a video number, producing and releasing Peking Opera-related feature films and short videos, which are loved and supported by many Peking Opera enthusiasts and students in colleges and universities, with the highest number of views exceeding 6,000 and the number of likes exceeding 300, which proves the feasibility of utilizing new media platforms to disseminate Peking Opera in colleges and universities.

Only by respecting the logic of youth popular culture decoding while adhering to the core cultural values, and realizing the dynamic balance between encoders and decoders, can Beijing Opera truly cross the cultural generation gap, and complete the leap of "creative transformation and innovative development" in the youth group.

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