

Dilemmas and Breakthroughs in the New Media Context: On the "Waithood" of Young Peking Opera Practitioners

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Abstract. In an era when traditional arts are no longer in their golden age, Peking Opera faces significant developmental challenges. Practitioners, especially young artists who have yet to establish their reputations, encounter multiple difficulties in gaining a foothold in the industry. Therefore, this paper employs the concept of waithood and considers Peking Opera's unique characteristics to analyze three main challenges faced by young practitioners: the closed nature of Peking Opera skills makes career transition difficult; traditionalist mindsets and high linguistic barriers reduce its modern appeal; and the long training period coupled with low returns exacerbates career uncertainty. On this basis, the paper explores how new media may offer potential solutions. It concludes that new media alleviates the waithood of young Peking Opera practitioners through three pathways: "knowledge generalization" (short videos, online teaching), "audience expansion" (interactive recreations, cross-art integration), and "efficiency improvement" (instant feedback, cloud rehearsals). This provides a model for integrating traditional art with modern communication. Future efforts should further explore common strategies for the revitalization of other traditional arts.

Keywords: dilemmas of young Peking Opera practitioners, waithood theory, new media context, transformation of traditional art, participatory culture

1. Introduction

In the current era where digital technology is reshaping the cultural communication landscape, traditional arts are undergoing unprecedented transformational pains. As a representative of China's cultural essence, Peking Opera exhibits waithood characteristics among its young practitioners similar to those observed among youth in the Middle East—graduates specializing in opera struggle to find relevant employment. Within the industry, structural contradictions exist, such as the closed nature of artistic skills, an aging audience, and an imbalance between input and output. This "waithood dilemma" not only reflects the universal challenges traditional arts face in the process of modernization but also highlights the opportunities enabled by new media. While two-dimensional subculture achieves exponential dissemination through participatory creation, Peking Opera remains constrained by traditionalist thinking and high-threshold linguistic systems. This contrast underscores the urgent practical significance of this research.

This paper first deconstructs the three major causes of waithood in Peking Opera: Chapter 1 analyzes the dilemma of skill transfer resulting from “embodied knowledge,” using employment data to reveal the industry’s insularity; Chapter 2 examines the generational gap formed by linguistic barriers and creative conservatism, comparing it with the diverse integration strategies of musical theater; Chapter 3 quantifies the imbalance between time/economic investment and returns. Subsequently, Chapter 4 proposes a new media solution matrix: a three-pronged breakthrough path comprising knowledge generalization (short video tutorials), audience expansion (interactive participatory recreation), and an efficiency revolution (cloud rehearsals), supported by case studies such as Guo Yu’ang’s live streams to validate effectiveness. This study aims to break down the disciplinary barriers between art studies and sociology, establishing a new research paradigm for the modern transformation of traditional culture. On a broader level, this research approach can be replicated for the preservation and inheritance of other intangible cultural heritage projects, offering a universal methodology for the contemporary survival of traditional arts.

2. Causes of the waithood dilemma among young Peking Opera practitioners

The concept of waithood was first proposed by Diane Singerman to describe the state of helplessness young people experience during their prime years of life. Few are able to transition smoothly from adolescence to adulthood as in traditional societies, meeting the secular conditions of adulthood, which are mainly reflected in five aspects: education, employment, housing, credit, and marriage [1]. During this period, young people are unable to gain a clear understanding and control of their future. This uncertainty leads to a transition phase that is wasted rather than fully utilized [2]. Young Peking Opera practitioners face many dilemmas similar to waithood, for the following three reasons:

2.1. Low adaptability of Peking Opera art

Firstly, Peking Opera performance itself has low adaptability and limited value in non-Peking Opera contexts. The skills employed by Peking Opera actors (such as acrobatics in martial scenes and body movements in civil scenes) belong to “embodied knowledge,” and such physical abilities are difficult to translate into textual or universally applicable skills, resulting in limited application scenarios. Moreover, Peking Opera faces an “island effect”—its production chain, from creation to rehearsal to performance, is short and ecologically closed, with little interaction with external industries. Therefore, even if actors wish to transition to other industries, they encounter significant difficulties due to skill disparities. Additionally, Peking Opera performances are not ensemble-based; roles are clearly divided, with few leading parts, and these are mostly undertaken by established and reputable mature actors. In today’s rapidly changing society, where industry rise and decline cycles are shortening, transferable skills are highly valued. Abilities such as communication and data analysis are regarded as versatile skills and powerful tools for individuals to mitigate occupational instability risks. Consequently, young Peking Opera practitioners face the waithood dilemma brought about by limited employment prospects. Many are unable to fully rely on their professional skills to make a living and are forced to abandon their careers, thus facing a disconnect between education and employment. As shown in Figure 1, the Annual Report on the Quality of Higher Vocational Education of Beijing Opera Art College indicates that only 53 out of 124 graduates found relevant employment (including signed labor contracts and third-party contracts) [3].

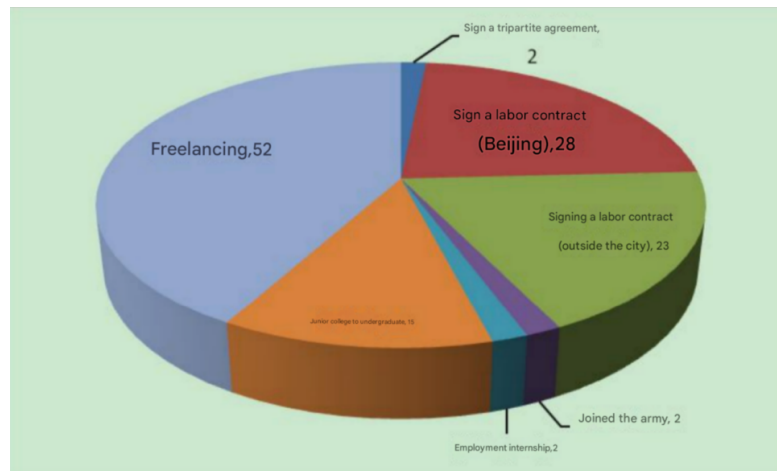


Figure 1. Employment statistics for the 2020 cohort of higher vocational graduates [3]

2.2. Low audience appeal of Peking Opera

Secondly, the limited audience for Peking Opera further exacerbates the difficulties faced by young practitioners.

Peking Opera originated in the 55th year of Emperor Qianlong's reign in the Qing Dynasty, when the Four Great Anhui Troupes entered Beijing. They collaborated with artists of the Han tune and, through continuous exchange and assimilation of elements from other operatic forms, developed synergistically. As a result, the formation of Peking Opera's rhythmic speech incorporated linguistic features of the Huguang accent, creating a unique stage language and artistic expression that reflects profound regional cultural influences [4]. In performing arts, language serves as a key medium for conveying information, yet ordinary audiences often struggle to quickly comprehend it, which leads to loss of interest [5]. This high-threshold art form contrasts sharply with other popular cultures in today's rapidly evolving society. For example, two-dimensional subculture, as a low-threshold "participatory culture," encourages user-generated content through intentional open interpretations by official creators. Hence, the audience is not only composed of consumers but also active producers of content (e.g., fan fiction and cosplay).

At the same time, a traditionalist mindset profoundly constrains the vitality of opera. In creation and performance, ancient-themed plays are revered as "orthodox," leaving limited space for modern dramas. According to incomplete statistics, in 2022, DeYunShe (a famous folk performance group) staged approximately 4,700 programs in small theaters, with entirely new programs accounting for only about 5% [5]. Academic research focuses predominantly on classical masters, regarding their work as the sole truth, thus becoming disconnected from reality. School-based inheritance further reinforces this conservatism, with master-disciple relationships being extremely emphasized [6]. Learning degenerates into mechanical imitation of predecessors' styles, pursuing "resemblance in form and spirit" rather than innovation and breakthrough, instilling the notion that "predecessors are insurmountable." Even when reform is advocated, it often falls into tokenism or is hindered by seniority-based systems, lacking the bold reformist spirit exemplified by figures like Mei Lanfang [7]. Meanwhile, to adapt to economic and policy environments, opera troupes rely on fixed repertoires to ensure successful performances, and the tradition of role typecasting within schools further restricts innovative development [8]. Consequently, artistic development tends toward conservatism and standardization, with personal creativity yielding to school traditions, making it difficult for opera to genuinely respond to contemporary and audience demands. In contrast, other

more popular art forms today excel at integrating diverse elements, making them more valued in the new media era for their versatility. For instance, musical theater incorporates traditions such as jazz, rock, country music, disco, and soul, as well as hybrid compositions; some lean toward opera, others toward light opera, and some toward revues.

This series of phenomena leads to an aging consumer base without new audience members [9], resulting in a shrinking audience and reduced commercial demand for Peking Opera. Young practitioners lack sufficient social recognition, plunging them into the confusion and unease of *waithood*.

2.3. High investment required by practitioners

Lastly, the low returns on investment for young Peking Opera artists also contribute to their dilemmas. First is the high investment of time. As a Chinese proverb says, “One minute on stage takes ten years of practice offstage.” The artistry of Peking Opera highly depends on actors’ extreme dedication to a single domain (their role type and school), requiring long-term concentration isolated from external distractions. It involves understanding historical allusions, stylized conventions, and vocal styles, emphasizing gradual accumulation through immersion, oral transmission, and mindful practice. Artists achieve fame late and have relatively long artistic careers. Additionally, the preparation cycle for performances themselves is lengthy. For example, reports indicate that the rehearsal period for new Peking Opera works (such as “Jianzheng”) is two to three times longer than that of ordinary plays, underscoring that careful preparation and rehearsal are key to producing high-quality works, demanding significant time and effort, which reflects the complexity and artistic pursuit of Peking Opera productions. The adaptation, rehearsal, and performance of plays involve many systematic steps and a long-term adjustment phase, which also leads to extended preparation periods. Second is the high financial investment. The stage effects of Peking Opera require special props and costumes. Because Peking Opera costumes often incorporate traditional craftsmanship such as hand-beading and embroidery, they are meticulously produced and time-consuming to create. They must not only be aesthetically pleasing but also comply with historical and artistic standards. Many details require careful craftsmanship, consuming substantial labor and material costs, resulting in high prices. According to a survey, even among Peking Opera enthusiasts, only 23% have ever purchased costumes [10]. The high costs place a significant economic burden on troupes, which is insufficient to adequately support the performance returns of Peking Opera actors. Traditional production, characterized by high costs and long cycles, cannot meet the demands of the new media era for rapid content output and frequent interaction. Therefore, Peking Opera actors, especially young ones, undergo prolonged periods of waiting, repeated training, and experience accumulation. Only through substantial investment of time and energy can they gain opportunities for fame. During their transition through artistic and professional growth, they must actively cope with uncertainty and temporal extension. This process of waiting and accumulation can be regarded as a form of “*waithood*.” Thus, the long preparation cycle of Peking Opera productions is not only a necessity of artistic creation but also an inevitable “waiting period” for personal and career development of actors. This aligns with the core spirit of “*waithood*,” which involves waiting, preparing, and anticipating a breakthrough.

3. Breakthrough paths for young Peking Opera practitioners in the new media era

New media content, based on digital technology, allows information to be easily edited, replicated, and widely disseminated across platforms and devices, fostering a highly interconnected global

media environment. At the same time, new media is interactive. Unlike traditional "one-way" media where audiences passively consume content, new media encourages active participation. This interactivity supports a participatory culture, enabling audiences to co-create media [11]. Young Peking Opera practitioners can flexibly leverage new media characteristics to propose targeted solutions to the aforementioned challenges.

3.1. Enhancing the broad applicability of professional Peking Opera knowledge

As an important information dissemination medium in the 21st century, new media features speed and spread (enabling rapid and large-scale information transmission). Young Peking Opera actors can use their age advantage and familiarity with new media technology to manage personal social media accounts. Through live streaming platforms, short videos, and other formats, they can share professional knowledge and skills involved in Peking Opera—both on and off stage—film daily rehearsal routines (vlogs), and conduct online classes (reports) targeting those interested in Peking Opera. Additionally, as a low-threshold tool, new media does not require extensive professional expertise to operate, significantly reducing the difficulty of creating Peking Opera-related content and enhancing the feasibility of spreading Peking Opera knowledge. Therefore, young Peking Opera practitioners can fully utilize their professional knowledge, using media accounts as a supplementary profession to diversify income streams while expanding market reach and influence across demographics. For example, post-90s Peking Opera actor Guo Yu'ang attracted young audiences through live streaming "cloud performances," interacting via real-time comments and providing easy-to-understand explanations, breaking down barriers.

3.2. Expanding the reach of Peking Opera audiences

Young Peking Opera practitioners can use social media and short video platforms to present Peking Opera in a more accessible and diverse manner, creating relatable narratives that emphasize attracting young people to participate and engage in secondary creation, forming a new participatory cultural ecosystem. For instance, the micro-documentary 'Fen Mo' (Powder and Ink) utilized social platforms like Bilibili to break down communication barriers, bringing younger audiences closer and enhancing the accessibility of Peking Opera. At the same time, innovation within the art form should be encouraged while preserving its traditional roots, integrating Peking Opera with various art forms such as film, television, and popular music [5], and leveraging diverse communication formats to produce IPs, short dramas, and mid-to-long-length videos. Young practitioners need to use new media technology to make opera displays more entertaining and interactive [9]; enhance the blend of content and emotional resonance; create immersive atmospheres focused on core experiences to deepen emotional connections; and stimulate interactive empathy, forging lasting emotional impressions of Peking Opera [12]. Through online activities, audiences can be attracted to offline events, thereby achieving an integrated online and offline effect [5].

3.3. Improving the return on investment for practitioners

In the context of new media, online content production is highly efficient and feedback is immediate. Young actors can quickly accumulate influence and gain visibility, using fast-paced platforms to strengthen self-promotion and market shaping, thereby breaking traditional temporal constraints. For example, the 'First Young Peking Opera Actors Convention' integrated CCTV's media convergence technology, providing a new stage for young Peking Opera actors through high-

quality multi-platform dissemination, thereby showcasing the vitality of contemporary young performers. Meanwhile, diverse formats such as online "cloud performances," short video edits, and live interaction shorten the distance between actors and audiences, providing instant feedback and fan support, stimulating personal energy and confidence, and overcoming career anxiety caused by traditional long waiting cycles. For instance, during the pandemic, the Peking Opera production "Jianzheng" adopted innovative "cloud sitting rehearsals," demonstrating digital transformation amid long preparation cycles and offering a new online practice model for young actors.

4. Conclusion

In summary, young Peking Opera practitioners face the waithood dilemma due to the low adaptability of Peking Opera, leading to narrow employment options and intense competition; its limited audience appeal, resulting in a lack of consumer groups within the industry; and the high investment required for learning Peking Opera, which causes a mismatch between effort and reward. They encounter challenges in transitioning from adolescence to adulthood along the path from education to employment. In the new media context, young Peking Opera practitioners can leverage live streaming, short videos, online interaction, converged media dissemination, and content innovation to break through the "island effect." These digital tools help mitigate issues such as an aging audience and financial difficulties, while also resolving temporal pressures and the contradiction of high investment and low returns. Ultimately, this approach enables a dual breakthrough in both preserving artistic heritage and achieving contemporary relevance. However, this paper focuses on Peking Opera and therefore cannot adequately provide direction for young practitioners of other traditional arts facing even greater challenges. Future research could examine the difficulties and breakthrough strategies of traditional Chinese arts in the modern era within a broader macro context, identify commonalities, and thereby better enable traditional arts to advance together and create a brighter future.

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