

The Thematic Structure and Development Trends of Chinese Opera Research—Based on an Examination of Opera Literature from the Past Five Years

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Abstract: From 2021 to 2025, as the creation and performance of Chinese opera continued to advance and the revival of classic productions unfolded, related research has been characterized by an expansion of research topics and a diversification of methodologies. On the one hand, traditional topics such as national opera, the Chinese school of opera studies, and the interpretation of classic productions have been continued; on the other hand, areas such as female characters, digital dissemination, and modern production have garnered increased attention. Overall, the scope of research has expanded from the levels of works and performance to include creative and performance mechanisms, media dissemination, and the artistic ecosystem, reflecting a trend toward broader research topics, deeper problem awareness, and a strengthened connection between theoretical research and creative and performance practices.

Keywords: Chinese opera; Opera studies; Stylistic research; Disciplinary construction.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, with the continuous advancement of cultural development, the creation, performance, and dissemination of Chinese opera have continued to expand. New productions have been launched on an ongoing basis, and the revival and reinterpretation of classic works have also been active. At the same time, research findings in the field of opera have continued to accumulate. Building upon established topics such as opera history, ethnic opera, compositional techniques, vocal performance, and repertoire criticism, the scope of research has further expanded to include issues such as disciplinary construction, production mechanisms, digital dissemination, and audience reception. A phased review of opera literature from 2021 to 2025 helps provide a comprehensive understanding of the composition of research topics and their developmental trends during this period.

Based on the thematic distribution of literature indexed on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) using the keyword “opera,” relevant publications over the past five years have covered a wide range of topics, including musical theater, arias, ethnic opera, vocal analysis, vocal techniques, character development, and artistic characteristics. Among these, topics such as arias, ethnic opera, and vocal analysis accounted for a significant proportion, reflecting that research on vocal performance, ethnic opera, and specific works remained the primary focus during this period (see Figure 1).

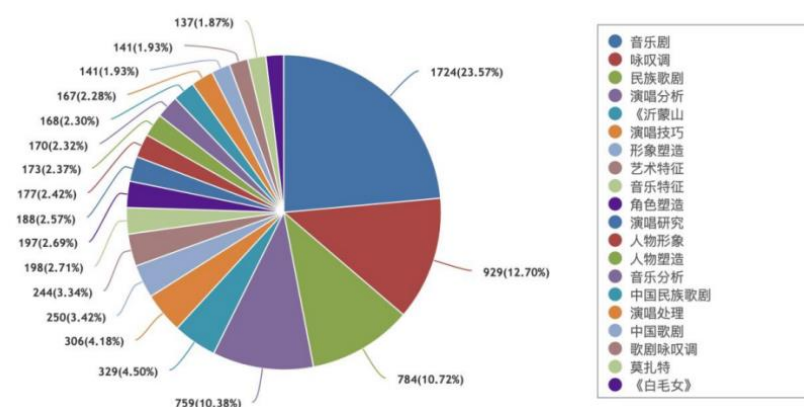


Figure 1: Major Themes Associated with the Keyword “Opera” on CNKI

Based on a further analysis of relevant literature, this paper categorizes Chinese opera research over the past five years into five areas: theoretical and disciplinary development; creative and stylistic studies; criticism and case analyses; performance and pedagogy; and production and dissemination (see Table 1).

Table 1: Structure of Major Topics in Chinese Opera Research, 2021–2025

Research Topics	Research Subjects	Core Questions
Theory and Disciplinary Construction	The concept of opera, national opera, the Chinese school of opera studies, opera studies	Conceptual analysis, disciplinary boundaries, the relationship between music and theater
Creation and Stylistic Studies	National opera, chamber opera, classical opera, literary adaptations	Musical forms, banqi style, recitative, transformation of traditional resources
Criticism and Case Studies	Criticism of Chinese Works, Female Characters, Music-Drama Structure	Critical Methods, Metaphors in Works, Character Portrayal, Analysis of Historical Sources
Performance and Teaching Research	National Opera Performance, University Productions, Character Development	Vocal Paradigms, Performance Aesthetics, Talent Development, Artistic Direction
Production and Dissemination Research	Theater Management, Digital Dissemination, Stage Visuals, Audience Development	Production and Performance Mechanisms, Co-productions,

VR/Live Streaming, Database Development The topics mentioned above encompass not only research on the concept of opera, its musical forms, and specific works, but also issues related to creative and performance practices, talent development, production mechanisms, and dissemination and reception. Together, they provide a relatively comprehensive overview of the primary areas of focus in opera research over the past five years. The following sections will use this as a basic framework to outline the research content and developmental trends of each topic.

2. THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION: FROM CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF “OPERA STUDIES”

Over the past five years, opera theory research has primarily centered on issues such as basic concepts, genre classification, and disciplinary construction. Concepts such as “ethnic opera,” “original opera,” “new opera,” “Chinese opera,” and the “Chinese school of opera studies” have continued to attract attention. Related research has analyzed their connotations, boundaries, and interrelationships from perspectives including historical development, artistic forms, cultural attributes, and creative practices, further addressing the conceptual boundaries, theoretical categories, and discursive construction of Chinese opera.

The classification of Chinese opera has been a key focus of theoretical research during this period. Discussions have primarily taken two approaches: First, grounded in the developmental experience of Chinese opera itself, researchers have emphasized its historical connections to traditional Chinese music, the opera tradition, and revolutionary literature and art, while distinguishing between genres such as musical drama, serious opera, national opera, and avant-garde opera; second, by comparing Chinese and Western operatic genres and concepts, discussions were conducted on classification methods such as “Western-style opera” and “Chinese-style opera.” Different classification schemes reflect researchers’ varying understandings of the historical experience, artistic forms, and classification criteria of Chinese opera, and have also driven further analysis of fundamental theoretical issues in Chinese opera.

Building on the deepening conceptual analysis and typological discussions, the disciplinary construction of “Opera Studies” has emerged as a prominent topic in theoretical research over the past five years. The term “Opera Studies” as a disciplinary designation can be traced back at least to 2010, when the Institute of Opera Studies at Peking University was established; at that time, the proposal to establish “an independent, comprehensive, and systematic discipline of Opera Studies” had already been put forward. In “A Theoretical Explanation of the Disciplinary Construction of ‘Opera Studies,’” Wu Jia further elaborates on the research scope and disciplinary connotations of “Opera Studies” from the perspectives of disciplinary construction principles and interdisciplinary research, emphasizing the importance of multidisciplinary research and interdisciplinary methods. In “My Views

on Several Issues Concerning the Disciplinary Connotation and Positioning of ‘Opera Studies,’” Ju Qihong incorporates literary creation, musical composition, and the arts of performance and direction into the disciplinary scope of opera studies and further discusses its disciplinary positioning. These studies have propelled “opera studies” from the practice of disciplinary development toward theoretical elaborations on its research objects, disciplinary connotations, and positioning, reflecting the continuous advancement of Chinese opera research in terms of disciplinary awareness and the construction of an autonomous discourse.

At the same time, theoretical discussions regarding the essential nature of opera have deepened further. Starting from the definition of opera and the relationship between music and drama, Wang Cizhao examines the structural relationship between music and drama in various conceptions of opera, emphasizing the central role of music in this comprehensive art form. Related research has also explored the relationships among sound, language, dramatic action, and stage presentation in opera from perspectives such as the phenomenon of sound, the human voice and meaning, and the structure of musical drama. Discussions ranging from conceptual and typological analysis to the disciplinary framework and ontological theory have formed a distinct developmental trajectory in opera theory research over the past five years.

3. CREATIVE RESEARCH: FROM MUSICAL FORM TO GENRE

Research on composition and style has been one of the most concentrated areas in opera studies over the past five years. The literature focuses on musical form, genre, and the transformation of resources, covering topics such as the arias, recitatives, and choral writing in the arioso-aria form of national opera, chamber opera composition, as well as literary adaptations and the utilization of traditional cultural resources. The scope of research has expanded from subject matter and thematic expression to include musical materials, structural organization, and their dramatic functions.

In terms of musical form, national opera remains a primary focus of research. Relevant studies have centered on arias, recitatives, choruses, and orchestral writing within the banchang system, examining the application of traditional Chinese opera forms, folk music, and regional musical materials in opera, as well as the relationship between these musical techniques and character development, plot progression, and dramatic expression. Research on works such as **The White-Haired Girl**, **Yimeng Mountain**, and **Azalea** has addressed issues including the board-and-melody structure, regional melodies, diverse musical materials, and symphonic composition. [Discussions on recitative, meanwhile, have largely focused on Chinese linguistic expression, examining the connections between phonetics, intonation, the relationship between melody and lyrics, and melodic organization, while also highlighting the role of recitative in character development and dramatic progression.

In terms of genre and form, chamber opera has become a subject of considerable attention in creative research over the past five years. Studies examine the creative characteristics of chamber opera from the perspectives of thematic content, libretto structure, compositional techniques, musical style, and performance space. Focusing on works such as *The Painted Skin* and *Thinking of the Mortal World*, research further explores the structural relationship between music and drama, the utilization of traditional opera resources, and the impact of different performance spaces on stage presentation.

4. OPERA CRITICISM: FROM CASE STUDIES TO METHODOLOGICAL SELF-AWARENESS

Opera criticism and case studies constitute a substantial and diverse segment of opera scholarship over the past five years. The subjects of these studies encompass both original Chinese operas and classic repertoire. As case studies have continued to accumulate, the methods and evaluation criteria of opera criticism have gradually become a focus of research.

Theoretical research on opera criticism provides a methodological foundation for related critical practices. Such research emphasizes that critics should possess knowledge of musicology, stylistic judgment, humanistic sensitivity, technical description, and the ability to make value judgments, while also reflecting on the methods of opera criticism from perspectives such as hermeneutics, reception history, and the critical subject. As the number of opera productions and performances increases, critical writing must fulfill the functions of analyzing works, evaluating their value, and providing feedback on creation and performance. A heightened awareness of critical methodology helps drive opera criticism beyond promotional descriptions and immediate reactions, fostering a

more professional and discerning critical ecosystem.

Criticism of original Chinese operas is closely linked to contemporary creative and performance practices. Criticism of original Chinese operas is closely linked to contemporary creative and performance practices. Reviews of works such as **The Red Boat**, **Border Town**, **Red Sorghum**, and **Azalea** address aspects including subject matter selection, libretto structure, musical style, regional culture, stage design, and contemporary themes. These studies examine the creative characteristics and stage presentations of these works from various perspectives, constituting one of the key components of criticism of original Chinese operas over the past five years.

Female characters and gender criticism are also key topics in case studies of Chinese opera. These studies focus on female roles in Chinese opera, examining emotional expression, dramatic actions, social positioning, and gender relations. By interpreting character development through the lenses of cultural narratives, social relations, and gender structures, research on female characters has expanded beyond character analysis and vocal performance to explore the sociocultural implications of the works.

5. PERFORMANCE AND PEDAGOGY RESEARCH: FROM METHODOLOGICAL EXPANSION TO EXPLORATION OF TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Research on performance and pedagogy centers on the aesthetics of ethnic opera performance, character development, and vocal instruction in higher education. The scope of research has gradually expanded from the analysis of individual vocal techniques to the integrated practical relationships among singing, acting, rehearsal, directing, and teaching.

Research on character development reflects a trend toward greater refinement in performance studies. Whether it is the subtle portrayal of Han Ying in **The Red Guards of Honghu**, the layered performance depicting different stages of life in **Li Qingzhao**, or the distillation of real-life figures for the stage in **On the Fields of Hope**, related research discusses character development within the comprehensive interplay of text, music, vocal performance, and stage presentation. Consequently, performance research has gradually moved beyond mere analysis of vocal excerpts to a holistic interpretation of a character's actions, aesthetic qualities, and theatrical expression.

Research on opera education in higher education institutions primarily focuses on talent development and practical pathways. Opera rehearsals are regarded as a crucial link connecting vocal technique, understanding of the work, character experience, and stage practice. In the past five years of university opera practice—as exemplified by the Central Conservatory of Music's *Classic of Mountains and Seas: Controlling the Floods*, Tianjin Conservatory of Music's *The Knot of Unity*, and Zhejiang Conservatory of Music's *Li Qingzhao*—related research has explored topics such as repertoire creation, rehearsal practices, and talent development, reflecting the connection between university opera education and repertoire production as well as stage practice.

6. RESEARCH ON PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION: FROM CREATION AND PERFORMANCE MECHANISMS TO STAGE PRODUCTION

Over the past five years, research on opera production and dissemination has gradually garnered attention, with the scope of study expanding from the text of the works to the processes of creation and dissemination. Issues such as creation and performance mechanisms, theater management, stage visuals, digital dissemination, and international dissemination have entered the research landscape, and scholarly literature has begun to examine the entire process—from the creation of a work, through its stage presentation, to its dissemination and reception.

Research on production and performance mechanisms primarily focuses on institutional policies, production organizations, and operational models, examining the historical evolution of such mechanisms in mainland China and incorporating the “large-scale production” phenomenon, co-production models, and theater management issues into the analysis. Research has focused on the sustainability of repertoire production, the control of production costs, the assurance of artistic quality, and the refinement of management mechanisms. The scale of the stage and the social impact generated by large-scale opera productions, as well as the role of co-productions in resource allocation, repertoire circulation, and brand building, have all become key entry points for examining contemporary opera production mechanisms.

Research on digital technology and media communication is a relatively active field. The emergence of topics such as VR technology, online broadcasts, ultra-high-definition live streaming, “second venues,” visual viewing, and immersive performances has shifted the focus of opera communication studies toward audience-performance relationships beyond the theater space. Digital media has expanded opera’s distribution channels and viewing methods. Ultra-high-definition live streaming enhances the presentation of details in makeup, performance, and stage choreography, while the “second venue” creates a new form of reception that bridges live theater performances and screen broadcasts.

Research on stage visuals and modern productions has expanded the dimensions of opera as a comprehensive art form. Studies focusing on the semiotic tendencies of modern productions, modes of visual expression, and the stage design of specific productions demonstrate that stage visuals have become a crucial element in the interpretation of works. The interplay between music, drama, space, lighting, props, physical movement, and the audience’s line of sight collectively constitutes the semiotic system in modern opera productions. This has extended opera research beyond the internal realms of music and dramatic texts to encompass stage presentation and theatrical expression.

7. CONCLUSION

From 2021 to 2025, opera research presented an overall landscape characterized by a rich structure of research topics, an expansion of research subjects, and a heightened awareness of methodology. Related research has focused on theoretical construction, creative studies, critical interpretation, performance pedagogy, and production and dissemination. While continuing to explore traditional topics such as national opera, the classification of Chinese opera, classic repertoires, vocal performance paradigms, female characters, and work criticism, it has also incorporated emerging issues such as chamber opera, digital dissemination, modern productions, immersive performances, and audience development into its research scope. Opera research, starting from textual analysis and performance reviews, has gradually expanded to encompass creative mechanisms, stage practices, media dissemination, and the artistic ecosystem.

In terms of research focus, opera studies over the past five years have made continuous progress in conceptual construction, methodological innovation, and practical research. Theoretical research has advanced the discursive framework of Chinese opera studies through discussions on concepts such as “ethnic opera,” “Chinese opera,” and “opera studies”; creative research has placed greater emphasis on musical material, structural composition, and dramatic function; criticism and case studies have expanded in areas such as work interpretation, critical methods, and gender perspectives; performance and teaching research has begun to focus on college-based creation and performance, rehearsal mechanisms, and talent development; and production and dissemination research has examined opera within the context of creative production, theatrical presentation, media circulation, and audience reception. This has resulted in a relatively clear framework of research topics, reflecting the further expansion of Chinese opera studies over the past five years across theoretical, creative, and practical dimensions.

While existing achievements continue to accumulate, there remains room for further deepening of related research. Current studies have provided relatively thorough interpretations of works’ themes, character portrayals, and cultural significance; however, research into the nature of the music itself, the dramatic functions of duets and choruses, orchestral composition, and the relationship between stage action and musical structure can still be expanded. Areas such as dissemination, education, reception, and theater operations have already received attention, but there remains room for further development in systematic and empirical research. In the future, building upon research on ethnic opera and classic Chinese opera works, we can further strengthen the connections between historical research, work analysis, performance studies, dissemination studies, and creative and performance practices, thereby providing a more solid academic foundation for the theoretical development and practical advancement of Chinese opera.

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