

The Construction of Cultural Ecology in the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*: A Study Based on the Three-Dimensional Communication Model of University, Society, and International Sphere

ZHU Chenshu, REN Xiaofei

Jingjiang College of Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, China

Since its premiere in 2004, the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* has successfully reversed the aging audience and market contraction of Kunqu Opera through over 20 years of communication practice. Grounded in the theory of cultural ecology, this study systematically analyzes the ecological correlations among the university, society, and international dimensions in its communication system. The research indicates that universities achieves the cultivation of audiences and inheritors through curriculum institutionalization, industry-education integration, and global dialogue. The society expands the breadth of audience reach via mass media and emerging media combined with digital technologies. In terms of international communication, participation in art festivals and academic dialogues has enhanced its global influence and reinforces cultural confidence at home. The three dimensions reinforce each other, forming a closed-loop ecosystem that offers valuable insights and references for exploring new communication paths for Kunqu Opera, promoting Chinese culture going global, and advancing the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

Keywords: Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*, three-dimensional communication path, cultural ecology

Introduction

Adapted by Pai Hsien-yung's team, the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* adheres to the principle of "abridging without altering the original text". It condenses the original 55 scenes into 27, centering on the theme of "love", and is divided into three parts: "The Dream of Love", "Romance and Resurrection", and "Reunion and Triumph". Cast with young performers to draw young audiences, especially college students, this production has ignited a spark for the revival of Kunqu Opera. As the Kunqu Opera craze continues to grow, appreciating operas has become a new trend, and attending and staging Kunqu performances have prevailed on campuses.

The opera has won tremendous responses both at home and abroad and exerted a profound influence on academic circles. As an intangible cultural heritage, Kunqu Opera represents the quintessence of Chinese theatrical aesthetics and calls for systematic academic research to review its history, theories, and artistic achievements.

Literature Review and Research Trends

Using “Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*” as a keyword search in the CNKI database (May 6, 2026) yielded a total of 561 records.

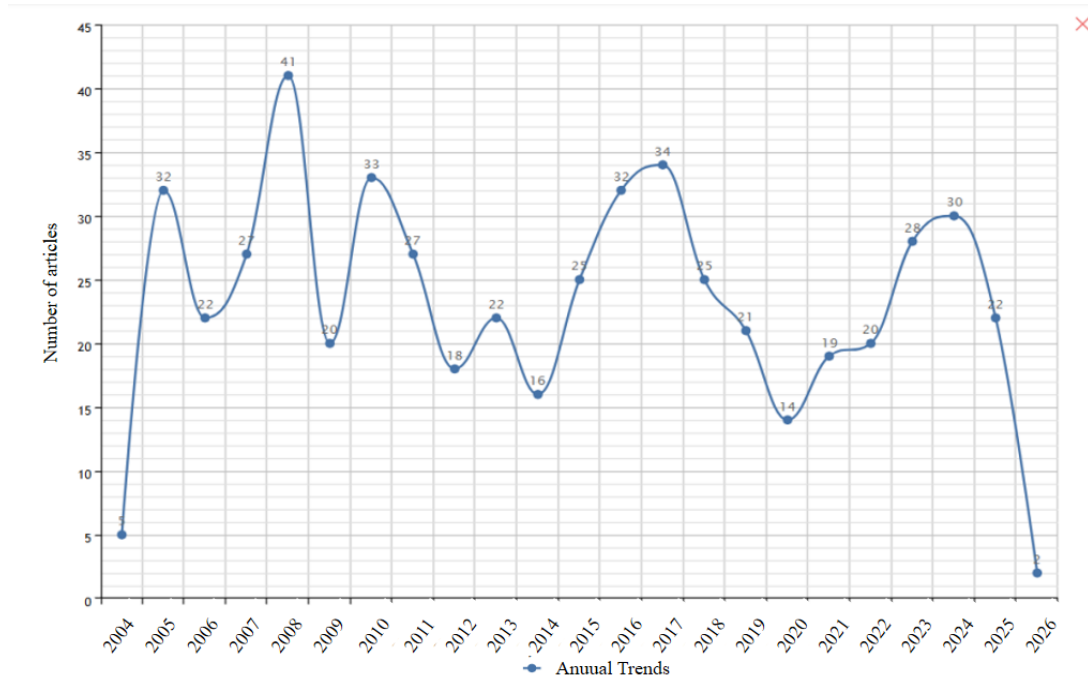


Figure 1. Domestic research trend chart for the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*.

The research trend indicates that the production drew an immediate strong response from academia after its premiere in 2004, with the number of published papers rising to 32 in 2005. Its national tour from 2006 to 2008 created a phenomenal popularity, marking the second research peak in 2008. In 2010, the launch of the Kunqu Inheritance Program at Peking University pushed the paper count back up to 33. Research output remained relatively low from 2011 to 2022 before seeing a gradual rebound. Moreover, main research topics center on Pai Hsien-yung, the Youth Version and Kunqu art. Only eight papers are related to its overseas communication, most of which focus on the international dissemination of Tang Xianzu’s original *The Peony Pavilion*.

Recent studies mainly fall into three categories. First, the revival and contemporary inheritance of Kunqu Opera. Scholars regard the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* as a typical case of cultural revival and explore its role in revitalizing the ecology of Kunqu Opera (Wu, 2009; Zou, 2011; 2024). Overseas media including *The Daily Californian* hailed it as “the beginning of Kunqu Opera’s revival”. Second, textual adaptation and aesthetic comparison. Researchers conduct in-depth analyses of the script and its staged interpretations from internal and external perspectives. Internally, studies discuss the adaptation strategies for the original work (Qian, 2015) and the interpretations of the core theme of “love” across different performing versions (Chen, 2023). Externally, cross-cultural comparative studies draw a parallel study and the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* is likened to China’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Third, cross-cultural communication and reception. Relevant research explores its communication practices and strategies, analyzes the approaches and mechanisms for Chinese culture “going global” (Lu & Bai, 2005), and summarizes the experience of international communication (Hu, 2009; Zhao, 2018; Gao, 2024).

Previous studies have provided this paper with valuable research materials and methodological references. Nevertheless, existing research lacks a systematic investigation into the overall ecosystem of Kunqu Opera. Cross-cultural communication analyses tend to focus on empirical summaries without establishing a universal theoretical framework, and insufficient attention has been paid to interactions between digital media and diverse audiences. This study intends to track the domestic and international communication trajectory of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*, explore its value transformation as well as inheritance and communication pathways in contemporary society, and probe into communication strategies and platform construction for Kunqu Opera in the new media era, so as to facilitate the development of China's academic discourse system.

An Analysis of the Three-Dimensional Communication Paths of the Cultural Ecology of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*

The theory of cultural ecology was put forward by the American scholar Julian Steward. It regards culture as a dynamic and open system and emphasizes its complex interactions with the natural and social environments. Based on this theory, this paper takes the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* as a cultural organism and constructs a three-dimensional communication model consisting of universities, society, and the international community. In this model, universities serve as the core production layer, nurturing cultural resources and talents and offering professional support for social communication. Society acts as the extended communication layer. It realizes capital transformation and market expansion through media, commercial operations, digital technology and integrated cultural and tourism development, laying a solid foundation for international communication. The international sphere functions as the cross-cultural adaptation layer. Via academic exchanges and cultural recognition, it broadens the global vision for academic advancement in universities and further elevates the market achievements in social communication into national cultural confidence. The three dimensions interact cyclically and are mutually interdependent.

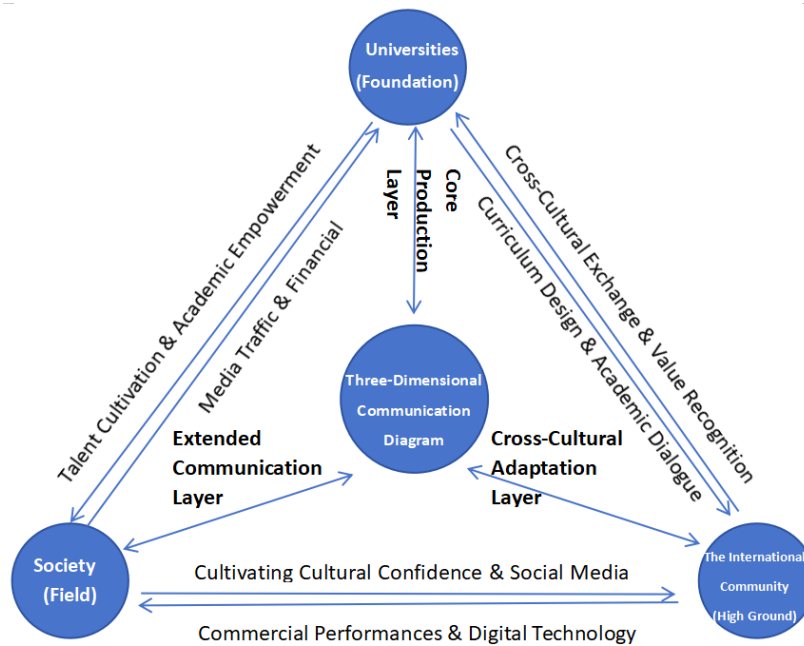


Figure 2. Construction of the three-dimensional communication model for the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*.

From its very inception, this production was conceived with a holistic vision for heritage: “centered on performers, carried by repertoire, and based on audiences”. For over two decades, its practice model of campus tours, city tours, and overseas tours has continuously driven the revival and comprehensive development of Kunqu Opera.

Educational Communication: Sowing Seeds and Taking Root

Educational communication aims to systematically cultivate audiences and inheritors, laying the foundation for the entire cultural ecosystem. It constructs a progressive system spanning from universities to society and then to the international community, completing a complete process from “theoretical cognition” to “practical experience” and ultimately to “expanded vision”, thus jointly building a stable and sustainable audience base.

First, the institutionalization of Kunqu courses in universities helps consolidate the foundation. Universities are the main front for educational heritage, with the core missions of “institutionalization” and “enlightenment”—transforming fleeting viewing enthusiasm into enduring heritage. By offering credit-bearing courses, Kunqu Opera is integrated into general education to systematize knowledge. At the same time, research centers are established to solidify short-term activities into long-term platforms for research and practice. The Kunqu Heritage Program launched at Peking University in 2009 has seen its successful model replicated at institutions including Soochow University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, forming a sustainable academic communication network.

Second, social industry-education integration broadens development pathways. Professional troupes and artists bring practical experience into universities, creating models such as “master artists in the classroom” and “project-based teaching”. This delivers targeted feedback to Kunqu education, effectively aligning academic learning with real-world needs. In Peking University’s course *Appreciation of Classical Kunqu Opera*, artists from the Suzhou Kunqu Theatre visit classes in person to teach physical movements and vocal techniques, ensuring the precise and standardized transmission of skills. The course has earned a reputation as a “legendary class” where seats are highly sought after.

Third, global dialogue on the international stage serves to build bridges. Using the world’s top universities as platforms, the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* cultivates cross-cultural audiences through following approaches: pre-performance talks and post-performance discussions, which transform the show into an “open class on Chinese aesthetics”. This lowers the barrier to cross-cultural understanding, guiding audiences from superficial “viewing” to in-depth “experience”. Moreover, performances at world-class institutions such as Harvard University and the University of Oxford, as well as Confucius Institutes, with accompanying masterclasses, workshops, and lectures. These popularize Kunqu knowledge in an accessible way, effectively building anticipation for the performances while establishing a strong academic tone. Lastly, the inclusion of Kunqu Opera in overseas curricula, such as the Kunqu course offered at the University of California, Berkeley. Though a short-term thematic program, it represents a deep interdisciplinary and cross-border teaching exploration, becoming a landmark event in the academic dissemination of Kunqu Opera at overseas universities.

Public and Mass Communication: Breaking Boundaries and Generating Public Momentum

In the mass communication of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*, society acts as the operational arm, universities serve as the source of ideas, and the international dimension functions as an accelerator of communication effects. The three parties collaborate to form an interconnected ecological system, driving Kunqu Opera from a niche art to a popular cultural form and turning it into an enduring cultural phenomenon.

First, universities nurture young audiences and foster cultural inheritance. As a cradle of culture in mass communication, universities promote the popularization and inheritance of Kunqu Opera through education, practice, and innovation, and facilitate in-depth dialogue between traditional culture and contemporary youth. On the one hand, campus tours consolidate the audience base. Its charity tours have visited more than 40 universities in 20 years. With young performers telling youthful stories, the production dispels the stereotype that opera appeals only to elderly people and builds up its core audience from scratch. On the other hand, the campus inheritance edition brings about a role transformation. Following campus tours, the launch of this edition marks a shift of audiences from mere recipients to active disseminators. In 2024, Southeast University launched a relevant project, recruiting 50 post-2000s students from 29 universities. Under the personal tutelage of professional artists, these students staged public performances, realizing in-depth inheritance where audiences became performers. The project drew widespread public attention, further expanding its influence and raising young people's awareness and interest in Kunqu Opera.

Second, society leverages media and the market to amplify communication effects. As the main battlefield of mass communication, society delivers a vivid popularization of Kunqu Opera via a comprehensive media matrix and social media interaction. For one thing, mainstream media elevate its cultural standing. Authoritative media including Xinhua News Agency, *People's Daily*, and *Guangming Daily* have launched in-depth coverage for over two decades. Their reporting evolves from documenting tour highlights to discussing the revival of Kunqu Opera, and ultimately framing the production as a national cultural name card. For another, social media platforms such as Tik Tok, Bilibili, and Weibo help the art break out of its traditional audience circle. Short videos, live streams, beauty imitation topics, and other forms break the constraints of time and space, create new interactive scenarios, integrate the ancient art with digital expression, and endow traditional culture with contemporary vitality.

Third, international recognition validates its cultural value and elevates its influence. The overseas success of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* not only broadens cultural boundaries, but also boosts its influence domestically. Its nearly two decades of overseas tours feature three strategic strengths. First, the tours span a long period and cover extensive regions. From 2006 to 2024, the production has traveled across four continents, achieving true intercontinental and cross-cultural communication. Second, it targets elite groups at top-tier institutions including the University of California, the University of Cambridge, and the University of Oxford. Third, it adheres to a high-end positioning by performing at world-class theatres and art festivals, gaining a place in the realm of Western high art with an audience attendance rate of over 90%. Domestic media coverage of its overseas popularity and positive reviews indicates that the production has successfully entered the global mainstream cultural landscape and established itself as a national cultural name card. It has reignited public attention and strengthened national cultural confidence at home.

Table 1

Overseas Major Performance Records of the Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion

Date	Country	Venue
Sept. 2006	United States	Four campuses of the University of California, San Francisco Bay Area
Jun.-Aug. 2008	United Kingdom	Sadler's Wells Theatre, London
Jun. 2008	Greece	Athens Concert Hall
May 2009	Singapore	Esplanade Theatre
Oct. 2012	United States	Kaye Playhouse, New York

Table 1 to be continued

Aug. 2014	United States	HBU Main Theatre, Houston (North America Tour)
Apr. 2015	United States	Baldwin Park Performing Arts Center, Los Angeles
Sept. 2016	United Kingdom	Troxy Theatre (in association with the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford and University College London)
Jul. 2017	Greece	Odeon of Herodes Atticus, Athens
Oct. 2018	United States	Upper Dublin School District Performing Arts Center, Philadelphia
Dec. 2018	Argentina	Pizzolla Tango Theatre, Buenos Aires
Dec. 2018	Uruguay	Fray Bentos, R ó Negro Department
Sep. 2019	Netherlands	Zuiderstrandtheater, The Hague
Apr. 2024	Singapore	Esplanade Theatre

Research, Innovation, and Communication: Enabling and Guidance

Within the cultural communication ecosystem of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*, research and innovation transform perceptual experiences into rational models, furnishing the entire system with theoretical foundation and cutting-edge directions.

In terms of academic research, solid theoretical frameworks and discourse systems have been established, forming a multi-tiered and systematic portfolio of research outcomes. On one hand, universities and social institutions jointly host seminars that integrate cutting-edge academic insights and practical industry experience to shape public understanding. A notable example is the 2025 academic seminar Kunqu Inheritance: Upholding Tradition, Pursuing Innovation, and the Mission of Universities held at Peking University, which facilitated the authentic inheritance and innovative development of Kunqu Opera. On the other hand, diverse academic works including journal articles and monographs have been published. For instance, *A Study on the Inheritance and Dissemination of Kunqu Opera Over the Past Century* by Zou Yuanjiang focuses on the core inheritance issues of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* and explores the model of “literati volunteer producers”.

In the field of digital innovation, the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* actively promotes the digitalization and global dissemination of resources, revitalizing traditional aesthetics for the contemporary era and enabling international cultural exchange. Digital resource repositories were developed at an early stage. Representative cases include the Chinese University of Hong Kong launching Kunqu lectures on Coursera, and the Sino-British co-built Digital Museum of Kunqu Opera launched in 2016. These efforts have transformed the communication model from “Bringing Kunqu to campuses” to “Taking root on campuses” and further “Reaching across the globe”. For public engagement, the production team adopted technologies such as 3D projection and VR to create immersive experiences. Examples include the 2011 photography exhibition of *The Peony Pavilion* by Xu Peihong and the 2023 VR exhibition Spring Scenes “as Beautiful as Ever”. Breaking the bounds of time and space, these works enable audiences to truly feel the power of profound love, resonate emotionally with the story, and expand the classic’s reach to new audiences.

Conclusion

The Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion* has established a three-dimensional collaborative cultural ecosystem involving universities, society, and the international sphere via three communication pathways: education, public engagement, and innovation. As the core pillar, universities deliver professional talent support and academic guidance. Serving as the foundation, society helps generate extensive market influence and build a large audience base. Standing as a high ground for cultural exchange, the international dimension brings global

perspectives and in turn reinforces local cultural confidence. These three sectors complement one another and create an interconnected ecological system. Together, they sustain the sound development of Kunqu's cultural ecosystem and offer valuable practical references for the contemporary communication of traditional Chinese opera.

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