WE Media: The Platforms for Changsha Huagu Performing Arts

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(Received: 22 March 2024; Edit: 29 March 2024; accepted:: 30 March 2024)

Abstract

Influenced by diverse perspectives, temporal and spatial dynamics, and evolving societal

preferences, traditional cultural spaces and ecosystems undergo continual transformation, leading

to dynamic shifts in performance modalities. Through an examination of the evolving

communication patterns within Changsha Huagu opera, a traditional Chinese art form, this study

reveals that with the advent of information communication technology (ICT) and the emergence

of "we media," the traditional performance of Changsha Huagu opera transcends its conventional

confines. No longer confined to static venues or limited audiences for face-to-face performances,

the presentation of Changsha Huagu opera now encompasses a diverse array of performance

modes, characterized by both absence and presence. Moreover, the textual fabric of traditional

performance culture has evolved, transitioning from singular elements to a mosaic shaped by the

interactive amalgamation of diverse cultural influences.

Keywords: Changsha Huagu Opera, WE Media, Performance, Space Digital Platform

Introduction

Giddens notes that technological progress in modern society has "rearranged" space (Anthony Giddens. Trans. Zhang Xudong et al., 2003), (Giddens believed that in most cases, the spatial dimension of social life is governed by "presence", but with the advent of modernity, space is increasingly separated from place by "absence", which is far away from any given face-to-face interaction), so that different societies have different spatial perceptions, which is called the separation of time and space. There is a close relationship between the change of human culture and technological progress. The progress and change of contemporary culture is realized by a new cultural form under the condition of network culture technology – "network culture with its high timeliness, virtuality, globality and pluralism (Wang Shiming, 2004). "Victor Mayer-Schoenberger, a British scholar, proposes in the *Era of Big Data* that the era of big data will lead to great changes in people's life, work and thinking. For example, big data can predict the development of things; big data can make e-commerce more intelligent and services personalized; big data makes it possible to customize products for users, and so on (Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger. Trans. Zhou Tao, 2012).

Carey (James 2005;7) draws people's attention to the fact that the word "communication" is closely related to "community", "commonness" and "communion", which "have the same identity and common root in ancient times". This shows that communities and people that share a sense of commonality with each other is achieved by communication, which makes social life possible. "We media" was first described by Dan Gillmor, an American IT columnist (Gillmor, 2003) in "News for the Next Generation: Here Comes 'We Media'" published in the Columbia Journalism Review in January 2003. In We The Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, For the People published in

July 2004, Dan Gillmor argues that grassroots journalists have transformed the traditional mode of spreading news. With the development of communication technology, ordinary people have changed their traditional roles of mere viewers into producers, disseminators and receivers of news and information. He believes that we media, as a new form of media, has transformed the "point-(Traditional media such as newspaper, radio and television are "point-to-face" communication. With media as the intermediary, information senders ("point") mainly transmit information to the audience ("face") unidirectionally) information communication mode dominated by traditional media into the "point-to-point" communication mode dominated by the general public. Because of the almost unidirectional and closed communication of information in the "point-to-face" mode, "a small group of media professionals spread information to a large number of subjects who have little opportunity to express their reactions" (David Butler, 1989, 01:4). In the "point-to-point" communication mode, users (people or media) can interact with users at the other end of the network without time and space restrictions, and information receivers can be information disseminators, whose roles can be changed at any time. With the help of the "sharing" and "linking" functions of we media, viewers have become an active and multi-directional information disseminator, rather than a passive and unidirectional information receiver. Therefore, we media users are a communication link of the network community. Data show (Table 1) that the number of short video users in China has increased significantly, exceeding 700 million in 2020, and is expected to increase to 809 million in 2021. China's short video market size reached 140.83 billion yuan in 2020 at a high growth trend, and is expected to be close to 200 billion yuan in 2021. TikTok has 4.903247 billion users, accounting for nearly 70 percent of the industry. TikTok is a wemedia social software that combines music creativity with videos.

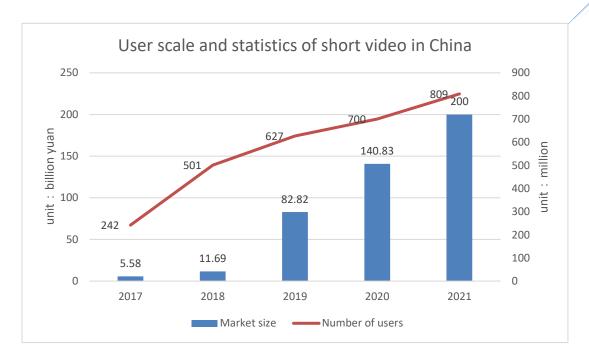


Figure 1: User scale and statistics of short video in China

Source: (ByteDance Arithmetic Center, June 2021. https://www.bytedance.com/zh/news)

Globalization, information technology and separation of time and space can cause "the emptiness of time" and then "the emptiness of space". Thus, "lost" time and "reclusive" space make "presence and absence intertwined" Anthony Giddens. Trans. Li Meng and Li Kang, (1998)). Under the conditions of modernity, places have gradually become unpredictable and social relations have been reconstructed through the uncertain time of interactive communication media from the original interactive regional relations. Changsha Huagu Opera was chosen as the main research body for this study because Huagu Opera is a form of folk performance enjoyed by Hunan people and developed by the folk itself with a huge performance group, audience group and a relatively long history. However, as local knowledge, this form of performance has been greatly squeezed in the process of global modernization. Therefore, under such a strong external squeeze, Changsha Huagu Opera is looking for a breakthrough in its own performance styles, performance behaviors and performance venues, which are closely following the changes of the times, especially the changes

in performance styles and venues, accumulating a variety of performance experience as well as problems for the Changsha Huagu Opera. This is also the theme and focus of this research, that is, when information communication technology (ICT) appears in we media with virtual time and space, Changsha Huagu Opera acts as absence-type of disembedding and diversified performing arts instead of single point-to-point performing arts in the field or on the theater stage, and oneto-many performing arts without communication in the traditional media era. In such a new domain, the Changsha Huagu Opera moves from a physical stage to a virtual performance domain. In Dissipated Modernity, Appadurai think Appadurai, Trans. Liu Ran, 2012), electronic media are undeniably transforming mass media and other traditional media in a broad way by providing new resources and rules for constructing imaginary selves and worlds. This is the relational argument for the study of Changsha Huagu Opera on we-media platforms in this study, namely, a new interactive scene of traditional Changsha Huagu Opera after the emergence of "we media". Using we media platforms represented by TikTok as the research object, this study observes the performance of Changsha Huagu Opera on the TikTok platform for 12 months in terms of performance venue, change of performance form, performance content and the way of viewing and performing. The multi-data collection analysis method and "thick description" method for a single typical user were used to obtain a more holistic cognitive and culturally thick description in a limited domain. Among the 95 users performing Changsha Huagu Opera on TikTok platform, 32 performers were randomly selected for multi-sample data collection and analysis, intermittently compiling information on their fans, live viewers and content to construct a theoretical model of traditional performing arts on TikTok platform.

Changes in the form of performance on we media

Changsha Huagu Opera is rooted in Chinese people. Owing to different folk customs, cultural atmosphere and local feelings, several different artistic schools of opera, such as Yiyang School, Xihu School, Ningxiang School, Litan School and Changsha School, have been formed (Zhou Yong and Liu Xinao, July 2017: 37-44). After nearly 100 years of artistic exchanges and mutual integration, various schools of Huagu opera have formed a relatively complete system of Changsha Huagu Opera today. Changsha Huagu Opera has formed and developed gradually for more than 200 years. However, since the 1990s, the development of traditional performance arts, including Changsha Huagu Opera, has begun to face development difficulties and gradually lost its glory under the strong impact of multiculturalism, technological development and market economy.

Influenced by the domain of viewing and performing, cultural space and performance form are constantly evolving, and great changes have taken place in performers, performance behaviors, performance culture and communication carriers. For example, in addition to using traditional media to disseminate live performances, some organizers will open we-media platforms for simultaneous live broadcasting. Through the author's observation in the virtual network performance domain for half a year, Changsha Huagu Opera does not have a formal performance system, or a performance method easily recognized by social groups on we-media platforms. On September 24, 2020, according to the statistics of the author on TikTok platforms, Huagu Opera has 2.48 million followers and 18.75 million likes, while a pop "Internet celebrity" has 28.8 million followers and 260 million likes. The data from the TOP4 most frequently used short video platforms for Chinese short video users in 2020 (as shown in Figure 2) 6 show that 490.3 million short video users use the TikTok platform, 398.4 million users use the Aauto Quicker platform. On this basis, the author compilied statistics on the performance of Changsha Huagu Opera on these four

platforms and found that only four platforms on the Internet have users to spread Huagu Opéra (as shown in Figure 2). The number of users and the total number of fans are respectively: TikTok has 95 performance users with 2,480 thousand fans, Aauto Quicker has 6 users with 120,000 fans, Tencent has 10 users with 6,263 fans and Xigua video has 20 users with fans of 54,377. Therefore, this article makes statistics from the most influential TikTok we media platform on the current network.



Figure 2: Data release time: 2021-02-02

In the face of changes in the traditional performance domain, as compared with performance behavior, Changsha Huagu Opera has complete costumes, tacit cooperation between the performers and the musicians and direct interaction between performers and viewers in the physical domain, while in the virtual domain, there is strong self-creativity without fixed clothes, makeup and accompaniment resources in a fragmented performance mode. In terms of the

changes in cultural domain, the former combines the space and time of the fixed theatre stage to form the prescribed scene, so that the performance is endowed with more creative charm of image.

Table 1: Statistics on Changsha Huagu Opera on we media platforms in 2020 (September 24, 2020)

Statistics on Changsha Huagu Opera on we media platforms in 2020									
No.	Time	Platform	Number of anchors/ vali d accounts	Number of followers/radi ated users	Number of works	Number of likes			
1		Tik Tok	95	2.48 million	14,054	18.75million			
2	2020/0	Kuaishou	6	120,000	1,886				
3	9/24	Tencent	10	6,263	382				
4		ixigua	20	54,377	184				

The performances of Changsha Huagu Opera on we-media platforms include not only segments from traditional plays, but also adapted segments based on festivals, landscapes and moods. In this way, singing tunes, melodies and modes are usually unchanged, but lyrics, physical performances, costumes and scenes can be changed for different themes. Multiple versions of Changsha Huagu Opera by "eight-tone combination" (Traditional Changsha Huagu Opera Forms) are as shown in Table 1. "Luo Heng", a we-media user, has adapted the lyrics and performances based on the melody and accompaniment of "eight-tone combination" in different places and situations, and films them into short videos of a few minutes and uploads them to we-media platforms, so as to gain the recognition of more netizens.

As set forth to Table 2, the themes of adapted versions are diverse and the lyrics can be changed with different festivals, weather and the mood of the performers. Performance scenes, costumes

and venues can be changed at any time. Performance time is not fixed. When the lyrics and rhythm are not complete, more dialectal lining words will be added. In singing, there is no emphasis on professionalism and popular singing methods acceptable to the general public are adopted. The performances can even be without accompaniment. In terms of the number of performers, all the performances of adapted version can be completed by one person. Although there is a certain improvisation, the rhythm and rhyme are still in the framework of traditional "eight-tone combination". In terms of the number of likes, the first traditional performance received only 873 likes, while the adapted versions get 12,000, 9,136, 16,000 and 48,000 likes, respectively. "Like" is a positive and effective behavior in we-media communication, indicating the popularity of works. "The task of artists is to find ways to represent the reality behind objects of cultural heritage in order to help recipients understand the cultural and aesthetic significance of cultural heritage (Zhao, 2021)", Performers like Luo Heng play a crucial role in the continuation of traditional culture, it not only reconstructs and develops traditional culture, but also reconstructs traditional performing arts, which is of great significance to intergenerational cognition and interaction. The following is an analysis table of the tunes of "eight-tone combination" for "multiple versions" in different themes. (with lyrics)

 Table 2: Comparison of Multiple Versions (Source: TikTok, Date of statistics: August 15, 2022)

Comparison of multiple versions "eight-tone combination"									
Video source	Play	Theme	Segments	Place	Number of actors/roles	Duration	Accompaniment	Clothing	Number of likes/people
Clips from professional theatre performances	Segments from the Uphold Justice at the Cost of One's Blood	Narrative credit	3	Theater	2 / male roles	49 seconds	Live band	Costume	873
		Describing weather	3	Outdoor	1 / female roles	49 seconds	Sound	Informal dress	12,000
We- media user	None	Festival	3	Park		49 seconds			9,136
"Luo Heng"		Describing the society	4	Field		1 minute 4 seconds			16,000

The birth of twin nephews	Indoor	39 seconds	None		48,000	
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1. Lyrics (Explanation of the content of the current We Media user performance and the focus of the audience through the lyrics. The author translated the lyrics): "Segments from the traditional play *Uphold Justice at the Cost of One's Blood* (This play is randomly selected from the traditional plays with joint play of eight tones on we media platform)Young master, please listen,the matter has been settled. The county magistrate is reasonable and promised;To get the matter settled, Wang Hu (the singer himself) took pains to stay outside the government office and saw the complainant;After she entered the government office, he beat drums to complain, and the county magistrate held the court."

2. Adapted -- The weather

The weather in Hunan is really cold. Although the sun is shining, I have to wear a down jacket; Shivering with cold, I cover myself with a 5kg quilt at night; It's not news that the quilt weighs 5kg. The problem is to wake up cold.

- 3. Adapted -- FestivalGo out to make money in the first month, and soon it will be the Mid-Autumn Festival; The family is looking forward to reunion in the New Year and festivals. No matter if you have money or not, go home for the festival first; On the night of the full moon, I wish my friends to be reunited, rich in wealth, and full of happiness
- 4. Adapted -- NarrationThe world (ah) is very different these days. Listen to me tell the changes;The women of the past (nay) just wanted to marry well, but the women of today are prestige in the business world;Security (na) used to come from (oops) a man's love. Now it comes from gas in the car, electricity in the phone and money in the card;At that time, the woman was called grandma at the age of 40, but now she can only be called a young lady.

5. Adapted -- MoodJuanjuan comes to (ah) Xiangyin County (na) to visit my little nephéw; look carefully at the twins (ah) in my arms, with high nose bridges and double eyelids; Looking rich and noble, they are blessed people (well) at a glance (na); Friends in front of the screen (na), I wishyou (na), if you want a son, you will have a son, and if you want a girl, you will have a pair.

Changes in the way of viewing and performing

Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan ([CAN] Marshall, 1964) put forward the concept of "The Media is The Message" (Agel, 1967) against the background of the advent of the information age and the rise of electronic media in the 1960s (Strate, 2008). The most important function of media is to "influence our habits of understanding and thinking". Therefore, what is truly meaningful and valuable to society is the nature of the communication tools used in this era, the possibilities it opens up and the social changes it brings about. For example, on November 1, 2018, the 7th Huagu Opera Show in Yiyang (Yiyang City is the birthplace and main transmission area of Changsha Huagu Opera) was recorded live for the first time in order to expand its influence and attract more opera fans who could not go to see the opera in person. The show was broadcast simultaneously through the network platform and received more than 10,000 clicks. Instead of hiring local experts for appraisal on the spot, it was recorded on videos to ensure absolute fairness (The opening of the 7th Huagu Opera Show in Yiyang of Yiyang Municipal Bureau of Sports, Culture, Broadcasting and Information). This kind of Huagu opera is not only the "absence" of performance that is not influenced by time and space in Giddens' words, but also the virtual performance of Changsha Huagu Opera in the age of information civilization after the emergence of modern media and we media, think of digital drama as a diverse medium that blends face-to-face and online elements to deliver live performances (Lennox, 2022: 1).

When a performer with the user name "Huagu Opera Huanshuai" (Professional Huagu Opera Actor) broadcasts on a we-media platform, he prepares two computers, one for playing music and the other for operating the teleprompter behind him. There is also a mobile phone in front of the live streaming platform. While singing the Changsha Huagu Opera, "Flirt with Brother-in-Law in the Library" (Flirt with Brother-in-Law in the Library" is a Changsha Huagu opera with short segments mainly based on the interaction between male and female roles. It is especially popular among opera fans because of its funny performance and humorous lyrics), he completes the segments of two roles and the rhyme part of "sister-in-law" and "brother-in-law" in the middle alone. As the music starts, the electronic subtitle screen immediately shows the words "Flirt with Brother-in-Law in the Library". Although sung in the local dialect, viewers who do not understand Changsha dialect can understand the meaning with subtitles. During and after the performance, viewers leave messages on the screen, which is generally some sort of praise, or express that they want to hear another one. The performer selectively responds immediately to the messages and then performs the next piece. Performing on "we media" relies on viewers, performers, performance domains (cultural space), a lot of technical equipment, communication media, etc. Performers and viewers are the core of performing arts, so if the communication process is to achieve interaction between viewing and performing, it is particularly important for the two sides to have a common meaning space for the exchange of meanings. First, they should have roughly the same or similar life experience and cultural background. Second, they should have a common understanding of the meaning of language, characters and other symbols used in the communication.

After long-term observation (August 2020 to August 2022), the author found that performers of Changsha Huagu Opera on we-media platforms often record their work in different

performance scenes. They will decide to shoot indoors or outdoors as required by a story and sometimes they sing the same segment in different venues with different makeup, costumes and props. In addition, the number of performers and accompaniment can be changed. Sometimes there will be multiple roles in the work and occasionally modern musical instruments, such as guitar and electronic organ, are added for accompaniment. (Figure 3) Without subtitles and music, it is impossible to know that they are performing traditional opera from the visual perspective, because traditional Huagu Opera requires makeup and costumes. But now, the audience can only identify the types of performances through the music style, the aria characteristic and singing ways (such as Joint Play of Eight Tones mentioned above). During the performance, the performers communicate and interact with viewers watching the live broadcast from time to time. This interactive performance breaks the paradigm of opera in nature and breaks the relationship between performers and viewers. At this time, the performance is more entertaining. During the live broadcast, viewers can express their love for the show by sending virtual gifts on a platform and performance users can convert the virtual gifts into money and withdraw them. Thus, performers can transform their cultural capital into economic capital. The audience's reward provided impetus for the cultural holders of Changsha Huagu Opera. Expanded performers and viewers are particularly important for traditional performing arts in the modern consumer society. A new domain has beeen created by this interactive performance for dissemination and inheritance of Changsha Huagu Opera.



Figure 3: Screenshot of Changsha Huagu Opera performance on we media

Whether it is the performance during the live broadcast or the works (short videos) uploaded on we-media platforms, comments, likes and favorites from fans or viewers are all

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positive online behaviors. The platforms will actively capture this dynamic behavior through their own algorithm and conduct a comprehensive analysis based on the static network portrait of actors, then match and push content more accurately on an individual basis. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that these users who have browsed many times, spent a long time browsing a single video or even actively left likes and comments will be pushed more videos related to the "intangible cultural heritage", "Changsha Huagu Opera", or a certain drama segment of the relevant author, so as to enhance viewers' understanding of such culture. We media are not used for "pointto-point" or "point-to-face" one-way communication, but the participation of different subjects can play different effects. They have changed the spatial and temporal limitations of traditional performances in the broadcast space and screen. Viewers can watch short videos through playback and pause and can participate in production and modification through comments and sharing. Technology has become a part of today's social ecology and culture, and we media have begun to rebuild a new social and cultural order. British communication scholar Raymond Williams ([Eng] Raymond Williams, Trans. Feng Jiansan (1994)) believed that a material medium already contains a set of social values and ideas. On we-media platforms, live performances or short videos of traditional performing arts can reach more people from more cultural strata in popular and entertaining forms of expression, thus having an effect on social communication and play a role in narrowing knowledge gaps and maintain a balanced role in information communication.

Discussion

In the 15th International Academic Conference of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University in Bangkok,
Thailand, the presentation, "Reflections of Traditional Intangible Cultural Heritage Performance on

the Field Investigation of Changsha Huagu Stream" (Wang, 28 February 2022) elaborated the performance behavior of Changsha Huagu Opera in the physical performance arena and the changes of performance culture. Changsha Huagu Opera has experienced three stages: face-to-face and interactive oral communication, non-interactive traditional media communication and virtual face-to-face we-media communication. With the development of media technology, the limitations of virtualization and time and space have been broken, and the subject identity of individuals in virtual cyberspace has been reconstructed. Performers and viewers have assumed a new identity of the subject (namely, virtual identity in the network space), and they can switch between the two identities at any time.

The performance domains of Changsha Huagu Opera range from folk entities to theaters, and then to the virtual space of we media. With the change in performance domains, performance behavior, content and singing tune of Huagu opera have changed (Table 6). In terms of the way of viewing and performing traditional performances, both performers and viewers need to participate in fixed time and place in the physical domain, which is called "closed space and time", while in the virtual performance domain, both of can broadcast or watch video at any time, which can be called "open space and time". From the perspective of performance function, the former is transformed from ritual, indoctrination and ethnicity to entertainment, aesthetics and commerce (Zhang Yinghua, 2020), while the latter is more utilitarian on the basis of indoctrination, entertainment, aesthetics and commerce.

Table 6: Behavior changes of Changsha Huagu opera in different domains

	Behavior changes of Changsha Huagu opera in different domains								
No.	Domain	Theme	Operatic vocal music	Role	Clothing	Scene	Number of Players	Duration	
1	Folk	Farming life Country love	Optional	Get back to the script as much as possible	Costume/ Informal dress	A makeshift stage	2	1-2 days	
2	Theater	Positive content Diverse themes	Professional Stylized	Strictly follow the requirements of the play	Costume	Theater/Stage/Mo bile stage car	2	2-4 hours	
3	We media	Traditional themes Modern life	Popularized Optional	Done by 1 person	Informal dress	Anytime, anywhere	1/unlimited	3-5 minutes/unlimited	

In Giddens' (February 2011: 32) chapter on reflexivity of modernity: "In traditional culture, tradition is a model that integrates reflective monitoring of actions with temporal and spatial organization of communities. It is a means of controlling time and space. It can embed any particular behavior and experience into the continuation of the past, present and future, which are themselves constructed by repeated social practices". In addition to opening up a new path for traditional culture, we-media performance domains bring certain social, cultural and economic capital to the holders of traditional culture, so that culture is reproduced, and on this basis, other traditional performance can be further studied through we media platforms. There must be a phenomenon of mutual "quotation", "reference" and "absorption", because in the diachronic and synchronic dimension of time and space, many music texts as the product of multi-cultural interaction and integration, are not composed of a single element (Zhao Shufeng, August 2013:4).

Cconclusion

In conclusion, the interplay between globalization, information technology, and the blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries has led to what Anthony Giddens (1998) describes as "the emptiness of time" and "the emptiness of space." This phenomenon intertwines presence and absence, reshaping social relations and the perception of places in modernity. Traditional forms of performance art, such as Changsha Huagu Opera, have been significantly impacted by these changes. Changsha Huagu Opera, rooted in the cultural fabric of Hunan province, has faced challenges amidst the rapid globalization and technological advancements of the modern era. As a result, it has sought to adapt to new performance styles, behaviors, and venues in order to remain relevant in an evolving cultural landscape.

This study focused on observing the adaptation of Changsha Huagu Opera to digital platforms, particularly TikTok, over a period of 12 months. Through multi-data collection and analysis, it was observed that the performance form, content, and viewing methods underwent significant transformations in the virtual domain. Traditionally, Changsha Huagu Opera thrived in physical spaces, characterized by elaborate costumes, set stages, and direct interactions between performers and audience members. However, in the virtual realm of we media platforms, performances became fragmented, self-creative, and lacked fixed elements like costumes and makeup. The study also highlighted the diversification of performance themes and the adoption of modern communication tools such as subtitles and interactive features to engage with viewers. Moreover, performers on we media platforms enjoyed a wide reach and popularity, with their adaptations often garnering more likes and engagement than traditional performances.

The emergence of we media platforms has redefined the way traditional performing arts are consumed and shared. Performers and viewers now participate in a dynamic exchange of cultural expressions across virtual spaces, transcending the limitations of time and place. Furthermore, the study emphasized the economic opportunities created by we media platforms, where performers could monetize their cultural capital through virtual gifts and interactions with viewers. This economic

incentive has incentivized the continuation and adaptation of traditional cultural practices in the digital age. In conclusion, the integration of Changsha Huagu Opera into we media platforms represents a new chapter in its cultural evolution, where tradition intersects with modernity in a dynamic digital space. As the cultural landscape continues to evolve, the study underscores the importance of adaptation and innovation in preserving and disseminating traditional performing arts in the contemporary world.

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