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THE HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE NATIONAL OPERA AT THE CHINA NATIONAL OPERA AND DANCE DRAMA THEATER

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical development and institutional formation of Chinese national opera through a focused analysis of the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). Drawing on historical documents, institutional archives, and ethnographic fieldwork—including interviews with key practitioners—the research explores how artistic practice, cultural policy, and organizational mechanisms have shaped the evolution of national opera from the mid-twentieth century to the present. The findings reveal that Chinese national opera evolved not merely as an artistic genre but as an institutionalized cultural system. The establishment of state-supported opera institutions, professional troupes, and conservatory-based training programs in the 1940s and 1950s laid the structural foundation for integrating Western operatic forms with Chinese language, musical idioms, and narrative traditions. The development of national opera at CNODDT can be categorized into several stages: early repertoire formation, standardization and expansion, diversification during the Reform and Opening-up period, and contemporary modernization marked by large-scale original productions. Each stage corresponds to shifts in cultural policy, artistic orientation, and institutional capacity. The study further demonstrates that national cultural policy, sustained state funding, and institutional coordination have ensured artistic continuity and production stability, while the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity has enabled ongoing stylistic renewal. Collectively, these factors have shaped Chinese national opera into a stable yet adaptable modern art form within China's contemporary cultural landscape.

KEYWORDS: Chinese National Opera, CNODDT, Cultural Policy, Institutionalization, Modernization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese national opera constitutes a significant modern cultural form that emerged from the complex encounter between Western operatic traditions and Chinese linguistic, musical, and theatrical practices. Since the premiere of *The White-Haired Girl* (1945), which is widely regarded as a foundational work in the formation of the genre, Chinese national opera has developed into a distinctive operatic tradition characterized by narrative-centered dramaturgy, text-oriented vocal writing, and the integration of folk-derived melodic materials within large-scale theatrical structures. As both an artistic and institutional phenomenon, the genre reflects broader processes of cultural modernization, nation-building, and the negotiation of identity within twentieth- and twenty-first-century China (Chen, 2012).

Unlike traditional Chinese theatrical forms, which evolved within indigenous aesthetic systems, Chinese national opera was conceived as a modern genre that selectively adopted Western compositional techniques—such as harmonic organization, orchestration, multi-act dramaturgy, and *bel canto* vocal pedagogy—while simultaneously preserving the tonal characteristics of the Chinese language and culturally embedded melodic idioms. This hybrid formation represents not merely stylistic borrowing, but a sustained process of localization and transformation through which Western opera was reinterpreted within Chinese socio-cultural and ideological frameworks. Over time, the genre has expanded to incorporate diverse regional and ethnic musical resources, thereby functioning as a platform for articulating China's multi-ethnic cultural identity within a unified national artistic discourse.

Among contemporary works, *Honghegu* (红河谷), an original opera produced by the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT), provides a particularly compelling example of how national opera engages with issues of ethnic representation, frontier history, and cultural memory. Drawing upon historical events related to foreign incursions into Tibet in the early twentieth century, the opera reconstructs the emotional world and lived experiences of Tibetan communities on the plateau, while exploring the complex interactions between Han and Tibetan groups within a frontier context. Musically, *Honghegu* demonstrates a sophisticated synthesis of Tibetan folk-derived melodic contours, modal inflections, and narrative singing styles with Western harmonic

language and large-scale operatic structure. Its vocal writing reveals a nuanced negotiation between *bel canto* technique and localized vocal expression, particularly in the shaping of timbre, ornamentation, and diction. Through this multi-layered musical language, the opera not only narrates historical drama but also constructs a sonic representation of cultural identity and collective memory (Zhang, 2025).

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Chinese national opera, existing research has tended to concentrate on early revolutionary operas, model operas of the Cultural Revolution, or general discussions of Western operatic influence. Systematic studies addressing contemporary large-scale original productions remain comparatively limited, particularly from a musicological and vocal-performance perspective. Moreover, relatively little analytical attention has been devoted to the ways in which ethnic themes are articulated through compositional structure, vocal technique, and institutional production mechanisms within national opera (Zhao, 2023). This gap highlights the need for an integrated investigation that combines historical, institutional, and music-analytical approaches.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the historical and institutional development of Chinese national opera through the case of CNODDT, situating contemporary works such as *Honghegu* within a broader trajectory of institutional evolution and cultural policy. By integrating documentary analysis, archival research, and ethnographic fieldwork, the research seeks to clarify how artistic practice, organizational mechanisms, and state-supported cultural frameworks have shaped the formation and transformation of national opera. In doing so, this study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of contemporary Chinese national opera as both a modern artistic genre and an institutionalized cultural system, while providing an analytical foundation for subsequent examination of its musical characteristics.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, integrating historical inquiry, ethnographic fieldwork, and musicological analysis. The research focused on the historical and institutional development of Chinese national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). Data were collected through documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and direct field observation. The fieldwork was

conducted in Beijing, China, where the researcher gathered extensive audio-visual documentation and primary source materials. The investigation was structured into four major phases, each representing a critical stage in the research process.

2.1. Step 1: Data Collection

1. Secondary Data: The researcher consulted academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional archives, program booklets, and cultural policy documents specifically related to the historical development and institutional formation of Chinese national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). These materials provided a critical foundation for understanding the evolution of CNODDT's organizational structure, repertoire construction, production mechanisms, and the broader policy environment shaping national opera in contemporary China.
2. Primary Data: Field research was conducted at CNODDT in Beijing. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, on-site observation of rehearsals and staged performances, and examination of musical scores and recordings of Honghegu. The researcher engaged in in-depth dialogue with composers, vocal instructors, performers, and institutional administrators. These interactions provided first-hand perspectives on institutional operations, creative processes, vocal interpretation, and performance practice.

2.2. Step 2: Recording Data

All interviews, rehearsals, and performance observations were systematically documented through audio recording, video recording, and detailed field notes. Interview transcripts were carefully prepared to ensure accuracy, preserve contextual meaning, and maintain the integrity of participants' perspectives. Particular attention was given to information related to the historical and institutional development of Chinese national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT), including discussions of organizational structure, production mechanisms, artistic decision-making, and repertoire formation. These recorded materials constituted essential primary data for analyzing both the institutional evolution of CNODDT and its role in shaping contemporary Chinese national opera.

2.3. Step 3: Preparation and Analysis of Data

The collected data were systematically organized and categorized in accordance with the principal research objective: the historical and institutional development of Chinese national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). Historical and institutional data were analyzed using historical musicology and ethnomusicological approaches, with particular emphasis on chronological development, institutional transformation, and the influence of cultural policy. Cross-validation among documentary sources, interviews, and performance observations was conducted to ensure analytical reliability and methodological rigor.

2.4. Step 4: Synthesis, Discussion, and Presentation

The findings were synthesized through descriptive and interpretive analysis in alignment with the research objectives. The historical evolution of Chinese national opera, its institutional framework, production mechanisms, and the influence of cultural policy were systematically contextualized within broader socio-cultural developments. The results were then critically discussed in relation to existing scholarship and theoretical perspectives to clarify their academic significance. Finally, the research outcomes were compiled into a scholarly manuscript, presenting an integrated understanding of Chinese national opera as both an institutionalized cultural system and a contemporary musical practice.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of Chinese national opera is closely linked to China's modernization process in the early twentieth century. Reform-minded intellectuals and musicians sought to transform traditional theatrical forms and introduce Western compositional techniques, thereby establishing a new national operatic language (Zhao, 2023). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, national opera acquired an explicit socio-political function. Works such as Bai Maonv exemplified the integration of artistic creation with ideological education and collective identity formation.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), operatic production became highly politicized, with model operas (yangbanxi) dominating the repertoire. Although artistic diversity was constrained, this period demonstrated the strong interdependence between opera and state ideology. Following the Reform and Opening-up period,

cultural policy shifted toward pluralism and diversification. National opera expanded thematically and stylistically, incorporating historical reflection, regional narratives, and minority cultures while gradually assuming broader aesthetic and educational roles beyond political propaganda. Scholarly discussions highlight the hybrid cultural foundations of Chinese national opera, combining Western harmony and orchestration with Chinese modal systems, Heterophonic textures, and indigenous vocal timbres (Hao, 2023). This synthesis positions the genre simultaneously within national cultural identity and global operatic discourse.

Since the 1980s, increasing attention has been paid to ethnic and regional representation. Studies indicate that operas drawing on Tibetan, Uyghur, Yi, and other minority traditions contribute to articulating “unity in diversity” within a national framework (Zhang, 2011). These works introduce localized melodic materials and vocal techniques while reinforcing broader narratives of national cohesion. Despite substantial scholarship on early revolutionary operas and structural adaptation from Western models, relatively limited research addresses contemporary large-scale original operas from a musicological and institutional perspective (Zhao, 2023). In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how ethnic identity and regional culture are articulated through compositional structure, vocal style, and institutional production systems. Therefore, further investigation is required to examine the historical and institutional development of Chinese national opera through a focused study of the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). In particular, there is a need to analyse how cultural policy, organizational mechanisms, and artistic practice have interacted within this national-level institution to shape the evolution, production systems, and repertoire formation of Chinese national opera from the mid-twentieth century to the present.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. *The Origins of Chinese National Opera and Institutional Foundations (1940s–1950s)*

4.1.1. *Emergence of Chinese National Opera as a Modern Genre*

The findings reveal that Chinese national opera emerged during the 1940s and 1950s as both an artistic innovation and a cultural response to large-scale socio-political transformation. This period was marked by intensified interaction between Western

art music and Chinese cultural traditions, alongside the restructuring of cultural institutions under revolutionary governance. Within this historical context, opera was reconceptualized not merely as a foreign art form, but as a modern theatrical medium capable of expressing national identity, collective consciousness, and socialist ideals. Early operatic works emphasized narrative clarity, accessibility, and emotional immediacy. Musical language was deliberately crafted to be comprehensible to broad audiences, reflecting a conscious effort to align artistic creation with social function. Field interviews indicate that accessibility and collective expression were considered essential aesthetic criteria during this period.

Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, national opera entered a new institutional phase characterized by systematic policy support and professional organization. Cultural authorities promoted opera as a comprehensive art form integrating music, drama, and stagecraft, capable of contributing to national cultural construction. By the late 1950s, Chinese national opera had consolidated its basic artistic identity, defined by Chinese-language libretti, narrative-driven dramaturgy, and a hybrid musical structure that integrated Western harmonic techniques with Chinese modal and melodic thinking. This foundational stage established both the aesthetic principles and institutional framework that would shape subsequent development.

4.1.2. *Early Experiments Combining Western Opera with Chinese Narratives*

The study finds that early experiments in the 1930s and 1940s played a crucial transitional role in establishing the artistic foundations of Chinese national opera. These experiments reflected deliberate efforts by composers and dramatists—many trained in Western music—to adapt operatic form to Chinese linguistic and cultural conditions. Rather than directly imitating Western opera, creators selectively absorbed structural and technical elements while reorienting them toward Chinese narrative content and audience expectations. One of the most significant challenges identified was linguistic adaptation. Because the Chinese language is tonal and syllabic, early composers developed text-centered melodic writing that prioritized semantic clarity and tonal accuracy. This approach produced a vocal style distinct from Western *bel canto* virtuosity and traditional Chinese theatrical singing, balancing expressive lyricism with speech-like articulation.

Narratively, early operas increasingly focused on revolutionary themes, social reform, and contemporary historical experiences rather than Western mythological subjects. This thematic shift reinforced opera's function as a vehicle for collective memory and ideological communication. Musically, Western harmonic support and orchestral accompaniment were incorporated, yet melodic materials frequently retained pentatonic modal characteristics familiar to Chinese audiences. Stage presentation similarly reflected hybridity, combining Western staging techniques with elements of symbolic gesture inherited from traditional Chinese theater. These experiments established several defining principles that later became institutionalized genre characteristics: Chinese-language libretti, narrative-centered structure, text-oriented vocal writing, and a hybrid musical language. Although artistically uneven, this experimental phase demonstrated the feasibility of integrating Western operatic systems with Chinese cultural narratives, thereby laying the groundwork for formal institutional consolidation in the 1950s.

4.1.3. Establishment of State-Supported Opera Institutions

The findings demonstrate that the establishment of state-supported opera institutions in the early 1950s marked a decisive turning point in the historical development of Chinese national opera. Opera creation shifted from experimental and semi-professional contexts to a centralized and institutionalized production system under state sponsorship. This transformation provided structural stability, financial support, and ideological direction, enabling sustained artistic development. Cultural policy positioned opera as a strategic instrument for nation-building, social education, and ideological communication. As a result, professional opera troupes and centralized performing arts institutions were established to develop original repertoire aligned with national narratives and socialist values. Institutional frameworks facilitated organized collaboration among composers, librettists, singers, conductors, and designers, fostering long-term artistic planning and repertoire accumulation.

Institutionalization also standardized production mechanisms. Rehearsal systems, role specialization, and administrative coordination enhanced artistic coherence and production efficiency. Compared with earlier experimental works, operas produced within institutional settings demonstrated greater

structural unity and musical refinement. Regular national tours and performances expanded opera's social reach, transforming it into a visible component of the national cultural landscape. Importantly, these institutional models laid the structural foundation for later national-level organizations, including the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). Thus, the 1950s represent not merely a period of artistic growth but a phase of systemic institutional formation that ensured the sustainability and authority of Chinese national opera.

4.1.3. Formation of Professional Opera Troupes and Training Systems

The research further indicates that the formation of permanent professional opera troupes and systematic training systems was essential for the professionalization and long-term stabilization of Chinese national opera. State-supported ensembles operated as permanent artistic units rather than temporary collaborative projects, enabling repertoire continuity, stylistic consistency, and collective artistic identity. Simultaneously, conservatories and specialized music institutions established formal opera training programs. Western vocal pedagogy—emphasizing breath control, resonance, projection, and classification into soprano, tenor, baritone, and bass—was systematically introduced. However, training programs consciously adapted these techniques to accommodate the tonal and rhythmic features of the Chinese language. This dual emphasis ensured that performers could achieve operatic vocal power without compromising textual intelligibility.

Training extended beyond singing to include acting technique, movement coordination, ensemble awareness, and dramatic interpretation. Such comprehensive training reinforced opera as a multidimensional performance art integrating music and drama. Conductors and directors were likewise trained to align musical execution with dramatic intention, strengthening overall production coherence. These professional and educational systems created a standardized artistic infrastructure that guaranteed technical competence, artistic continuity, and institutional legitimacy. As a result, Chinese national opera evolved from a revolutionary experiment into a mature, professionally sustained genre capable of long-term development within a stable institutional framework.

Table 1: Origins of Chinese National Opera and Institutional Foundations (1940s–1950s).

Aspect	Key Content	Academic Focus / Keywords
Historical Background	Emergence of modern Chinese opera during social transformation in the 1940s–1950s	Modernization; cultural transformation
Genre Formation	Integration of Western operatic forms with Chinese language and narratives	Hybrid genre; national opera
Early Artistic Practice	Experiments combining Western harmony, form, and staging with Chinese melodic thinking	Western–Chinese synthesis
Linguistic Adaptation	Development of text-centered vocal writing suited to the tonal nature of Chinese language	Text–music relationship
Narrative Orientation	Use of Chinese historical, revolutionary, and social themes	National narrative; social function
Institutional Support	Establishment of state-supported opera institutions after 1949	Cultural policy; institutionalization
Professional Organization	Formation of professional opera troupes with fixed artistic roles	Professionalization
Training Systems	Establishment of conservatory-based opera education and training programs	Vocal training; performance standards
Artistic Outcome	Formation of a basic artistic framework for Chinese national opera	Genre identity
Historical Significance	Institutional foundations enabling later development of national opera	Structural foundation
Legacy	Preparation for national-level institutions such as the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater	Institutional continuity

The close interaction between professional troupes and conservatory-based training institutions established a stable talent pipeline that strengthened both artistic continuity and stylistic coherence within Chinese national opera. Graduates entered institutional ensembles where practical experience further refined their skills, fostering a shared performance aesthetic. This professional infrastructure provided the human and organizational foundation for the emergence of national-level institutions, including the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater. Consequently, the formation of professional troupes and training systems marked a decisive stage in the institutional consolidation of Chinese national opera and created the structural conditions for its later expansion and diversification.

4.2. Development Stages of National Operas at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (1950s–Present)

4.2.1. Early Development and Repertoire Formation (1950s–1970s)

The findings indicate that the early development of national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT) was primarily characterized by repertoire consolidation and the clarification of artistic orientation. During the 1950s, the Theater functioned as a central institutional platform for shaping the emerging identity of Chinese national opera. Repertoire formation

emphasized works with clear narrative structures, accessible musical language, and socially resonant themes, particularly those related to revolutionary history and collective memory. Musically, early productions demonstrated a balanced integration of Western operatic techniques—such as harmonic support, ensemble writing, and multi-act dramaturgy—with Chinese modal thinking and text-centered vocal expression. Through repeated staging, rehearsal refinement, and touring performances, selected works gradually formed a foundational core repertoire that defined performance norms and stylistic consistency.

Despite political and cultural fluctuations during the 1960s and 1970s, this foundational repertoire exerted long-term influence on vocal style, dramaturgical structure, and compositional practice. Overall, this stage established the Theater's institutional authority and provided the artistic and organizational groundwork for later expansion and diversification.



Figure 1: The opera Yuan Ye
Source: Junyi Wu, from fieldwork in 2025.

4.2.2. Standardization and Expansion of National Opera Production

The study finds that the next developmental stage was marked by increasing standardization and expansion of production mechanisms. From the late 1950s onward, opera production at CNODDT followed regulated and systematic procedures in composition, rehearsal, performance, and evaluation. Clearly defined divisions of labor among composers, librettists, conductors, singers, and stage professionals enhanced efficiency and artistic coherence. Musical and performance practices became formalized, with vocal technique, ensemble coordination, and dramaturgical organization adhering to established norms. This standardization contributed to the consolidation of a recognizable national opera style and facilitated the refinement of repertory through structured rehearsal and revision processes.

Simultaneously, production expanded in both scale and thematic scope. Institutions increased the number of original operas while broadening subject matter to include historical reflection and social themes. National touring and wider dissemination strengthened audience engagement and reinforced opera's social presence. This stage ensured artistic stability and institutional maturity, creating essential structural conditions for subsequent diversification.

4.2.3. Reform and Opening-up Period: Diversification of Themes and Styles

The reform and opening-up period marked a decisive shift toward diversification in both thematic content and musical language. Adjustments in cultural policy and greater openness to international exchange fostered a more flexible artistic environment. As a result, national opera moved beyond relatively uniform revolutionary narratives toward a broader range of subjects, including historical reflection, ethnic culture, personal emotion, and moral dilemmas associated

with social transformation. Stylistically, composers adopted a more pluralistic approach. While Chinese modal foundations remained central, harmonic vocabulary and rhythmic design became more varied and expressive. Greater attention was given to psychological characterization and vocal differentiation, strengthening the integration of music and dramatic expression.



Figure 2: The opera Su Shi
Source: Junyi Wu, from fieldwork in 2025.

Institutionally, CNODDT played a pivotal role in balancing innovation with continuity. By producing new works and revising earlier repertoire, the Theater supported experimentation without abandoning professional standards. This stage revitalized the genre and established the artistic conditions necessary for large-scale original operas in the contemporary era.

4.2.4. Contemporary Stage: Large-scale Original Operas and Modernization - Findings

The contemporary stage of national opera at CNODDT is characterized by large-scale original productions and comprehensive modernization in artistic conception, production systems, and aesthetic orientation. Contemporary operas are conceived as integrated projects involving historical research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and long-term compositional planning. Originality has become a core artistic value, prompting sustained institutional investment in new repertoire. Musically, composers employ broader harmonic resources, more flexible rhythmic structures, and enhanced dramatic continuity, occasionally utilizing leitmotif-like techniques to strengthen narrative coherence. Vocal writing emphasizes expressive nuance and psychological depth, requiring performers to combine *bel canto*-based technique with linguistic precision and stylistic sensitivity.



Figure 3. Opera house rehearsal
Source: Junyi Wu, from fieldwork in 2025.

Institutional modernization—including systematic project management, stable professional teams, and advanced stage technology—has enabled the realization of ambitious productions. Increased international exchange further situates Chinese national opera within global operatic dialogue while maintaining national cultural identity. Overall, this contemporary stage reflects the culmination of earlier institutional consolidation and stylistic diversification, positioning CNODDT as a leading force in the modernization and global presentation of Chinese national opera.

Table 2: Development Stages of National Operas at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater.

Stage	Period	Main Characteristics	Key Focus
Early Development and Repertoire Formation	1950s–1970s	Establishment of basic repertoire and artistic orientation; emphasis on narrative clarity and accessible musical language	Foundation building
Standardization and Expansion	1970s–1980s	Standardized production procedures; expansion of performance scale and nationwide dissemination	Institutional consolidation
Reform and Opening-up Period	1980s–1990s	Diversification of themes and musical styles; increased artistic experimentation	Thematic and stylistic diversity
Contemporary Stage	2000s–Present	Creation of large-scale original operas; modernization of musical language and production mechanisms	Originality and modernization
Institutional Role	Ongoing	Central role of China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater in production and dissemination	National platform

In summary, the contemporary stage of Chinese national opera is characterized by large-scale original productions and sustained institutional modernization. Through expanded artistic ambition, increasingly sophisticated musical language, and strong organizational support, the genre has reached a high level of professional maturity. Within this developmental trajectory, Honghegu emerges as a representative contemporary work, providing the historical and artistic context for the detailed musical analysis that follows.

4.3. Social, Cultural, and Institutional Influences on the Development of National Opera

4.3.1. National Cultural Policy and Ideological Orientation

The findings indicate that national cultural policy and ideological orientation have consistently shaped the artistic direction, social function, and institutional structure of Chinese national opera. In its early development, policy frameworks emphasized social education and collective identity

formation, encouraging operas with clear themes, accessible musical language, and strong narrative structure. Opera was positioned as both an artistic form and a vehicle for cultural construction. Following the reform and opening-up period, cultural policy became more flexible, supporting artistic diversity and innovation while maintaining national orientation. This shift enabled broader thematic exploration—including historical reflection and ethnic representation—and encouraged the integration of traditional Chinese musical elements within modern operatic frameworks. Institutions such as the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater operate within these policy-guided systems, aligning repertoire planning and production goals with broader cultural objectives. Overall, policy influence has provided structural guidance that supports adaptation and continuity rather than merely restricting creativity.

4.3.2. Role of State Funding and Institutional Support

The research demonstrates that state funding and institutional support constitute essential structural

foundations for the sustained development of Chinese national opera. As a resource-intensive art form, opera depends on stable financial investment to support composition, rehearsal, staging, and large-scale collaboration. Public funding enables long-term artistic planning and the creation of original repertoire, particularly for complex productions requiring extensive coordination among creative teams. Institutional support further strengthens production stability through standardized organizational systems, stable employment structures, and systematic rehearsal management. These mechanisms ensure artistic consistency and allow for repertory accumulation over time. Funding also sustains talent cultivation through conservatories and affiliated training programs, creating a continuous pipeline of skilled performers and composers.

Moreover, institutional support facilitates dissemination through touring, national events, and media promotion, expanding opera's social reach. National-level institutions, including the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater, function as central hubs linking artistic creation with public cultural service. Together, funding and institutional backing ensures the artistic continuity, professional standards, and cultural influence of national opera.

4.3.3. *Interaction between Tradition and Modernity*

The interaction between tradition and modernity emerges as a defining dynamic in the evolution of Chinese national opera. Traditional musical principles—such as modal thinking, text-centered vocal expression, and culturally familiar narrative patterns—provide a stable cultural foundation that preserves genre identity and audience resonance. At the same time, modern operatic structures, harmonic organization, professional vocal pedagogy, and advanced stage technologies expand the expressive possibilities of the genre. Rather than replacing tradition, modern elements are selectively integrated and reinterpreted within contemporary operatic contexts. This creative transformation allows national opera to maintain cultural specificity while achieving artistic innovation.

Institutional mediation plays a critical role in balancing these forces. Organizations such as the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater encourage innovation while maintaining stylistic coherence and accessibility. Through structured production systems and artistic evaluation processes, institutions ensure that experimentation does not compromise cultural continuity. Overall,

the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity enables Chinese national opera to evolve as a modern art form while sustaining its national cultural identity.

Table 3: Social, Cultural, and Institutional Influences on the Development of National Opera.

Influence Dimension	Main Role	Key Focus
National Cultural Policy	Defines cultural function and artistic orientation	Ideology; cultural mission
State Funding	Supports large-scale creation and sustainability	Financial 保障; continuity
Institutional Support	Provides stable production and training systems	Professionalization
Tradition	Supplies cultural identity and musical foundations	Chinese musical elements
Modernity	Introduces new forms, techniques, and aesthetics	Innovation; modernization
Dissemination Mechanisms	Expands audience reach and social impact	Performance; media
Institutional Platform	Coordinates creation and circulation	China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater

In summary, the interaction between tradition and modernity highlights the adaptive character of Chinese national opera. Tradition ensures cultural continuity and identity, while modernity introduces innovation and artistic flexibility. This dynamic balance allows the genre to evolve in response to shifting social and aesthetic contexts without losing its cultural foundation. Such interplay provides a conceptual framework for understanding the contemporary development of Chinese national opera and the musical characteristics of works such as Honghegu.

4.4. *Production, Dissemination, and Transmission of National Opera*

4.4.1. *Creative Production Mechanisms within CNODDT*

The findings indicate that CNODDT operates through a highly organized and systematic production framework that integrates artistic planning, collaborative creation, structured rehearsal, and institutional evaluation. Operatic projects are initiated through thematic research and institutional approval, after which interdisciplinary creative teams are formed to ensure coordination among composition, dramaturgy, and stage design. The compositional process emphasizes interaction between creators and performers, allowing

continuous revision during rehearsal to enhance perform ability and dramatic clarity. Structured rehearsal systems—combining musical, stage, and full run-through sessions—ensure integration between vocal expression, orchestral support, and stage movement. Stable employment structures and clear division of labor further support long-term artistic development. Overall, CNODDT's production mechanism represents a mature institutional model that enables the realization of large-scale original operas, providing the structural and artistic foundation for works such as Honghegu.

4.4.2 Training and Cultivation of Performers

The study finds that performer training within Chinese national opera relies on the integration of conservatory education and institutional practice. Foundational instruction emphasizes Western-based vocal technique—breath control, resonance, projection—adapted to the tonal and rhythmic characteristics of the Chinese language. Professional cultivation continues within opera institutions through rehearsal-based mentorship, performance participation, and role development. Particular emphasis is placed on diction, textual clarity, and the alignment of vocal expression with dramatic meaning. Ensemble coordination and collaborative performance are treated as core competencies, reinforcing opera as an integrated musical-dramatic art form. Continuous professional development, including touring and workshops, enhances adaptability and stage competence. This integrated cultivation system ensures technical proficiency, stylistic coherence, and generational continuity within national opera practice.

4.4.3 Touring Performances, Media Dissemination, and Audience Reception

The findings demonstrate that dissemination mechanisms are integral to the life cycle of Chinese national opera. Touring performances extend opera's geographical reach and refine performance practice through repeated staging in varied contexts. National tours enable broader public engagement

beyond major urban centers and contribute to the standardization and adjustment of artistic execution. Media dissemination—including broadcast recordings, television programs, and digital platforms—has significantly expanded accessibility in the contemporary era. Audio-visual documentation preserves operatic works and integrates them into everyday cultural consumption, enhancing long-term visibility and educational value. Audience reception functions as a feedback mechanism influencing repertoire planning and institutional decision-making. The interaction among live performance, media circulation, and audience response forms a dynamic dissemination system that sustains the social vitality and cultural relevance of national opera.

4.4.4 Continuity and Innovation in National Opera Practice

The research reveals that continuity and innovation function as complementary forces in national opera practice. Continuity is maintained through core artistic conventions—Chinese-language libretti, text-centered vocal writing, narrative-driven structure, and culturally grounded melodic materials—supported by institutional memory and standardized rehearsal systems. Simultaneously, innovation occurs in thematic exploration, musical language, staging techniques, and production methods. Contemporary operas incorporate diverse historical perspectives and refined compositional approaches while remaining aligned with Chinese linguistic and aesthetic foundations.

Institutions such as CNODDT mediate this balance by encouraging experimentation within established artistic parameters. Through project evaluation and rehearsal supervision, they ensure that innovation enhances rather than destabilizes genre coherence. Together, continuity and innovation sustain the adaptive vitality of Chinese national opera, enabling it to preserve cultural identity while responding to evolving artistic and social conditions.

Table 4. Production, Dissemination, and Transmission of National Opera Aspect Main Content.

Aspect	Main Content	Core Function
Creative Production	Coordinated planning, composition, rehearsal, and staging within professional institutions	Ensures artistic quality and coherence
Performer Training	Systematic education and rehearsal-based cultivation of singers and stage artists	Maintains performance standards
Dissemination	Touring performances and media circulation	Expands audience reach
Audience Reception	Feedback through live performance and	Informs artistic refinement

	media engagement	
Institutional Platform	Central role of China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater	Integrates production and transmission
Continuity & Innovation	Balance between inherited conventions and new practices	Sustains genre vitality

Chinese national opera evolves through a dynamic balance between continuity and innovation. Tradition ensures cultural identity and structural stability, while innovation fosters artistic vitality and contemporary relevance. This ongoing interaction enables the genre to develop without losing its core characteristics. Such a dynamic framework provides essential context for understanding the musical language and artistic significance of works such as Honghegu.

This chapter has demonstrated that the development of Chinese national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT) cannot be understood merely as a sequence of artistic changes, but rather as a process of institutional consolidation embedded within broader social and cultural transformation. By tracing its historical origins in the mid-twentieth century, the analysis shows how the establishment of state-supported opera institutions, professional troupes, and systematic training programs created the structural foundation for integrating Western operatic techniques with Chinese linguistic and musical traditions. These early institutional conditions shaped the fundamental genre identity of Chinese national opera. The examination of successive developmental stages—from repertoire formation and production standardization to reform-era diversification and contemporary large-scale original operas—reveals a continuous process of negotiation between policy orientation, artistic experimentation, and institutional capacity. Each stage not only reflects changing cultural priorities but also demonstrates how CNODDT functioned as a mediating platform through which artistic practice was stabilized, expanded, and modernized.

Furthermore, the chapter highlights that national cultural policy, state funding, and institutional organization have provided essential structural guarantees for sustainability, while the interaction between tradition and modernity has ensured artistic adaptability. Rather than opposing forces, stability and innovation operate in dynamic balance, enabling national opera to maintain cultural continuity while responding to evolving aesthetic and social contexts. Finally, the analysis of production, dissemination, and transmission mechanisms underscores that national opera's vitality depends not only on compositional achievement but also on coordinated institutional

systems, performer cultivation, touring circulation, media integration, and audience engagement. Together, these interconnected dimensions reveal Chinese national opera as a mature, institutionalized, and socially embedded art form. This integrated framework provides the necessary historical and structural context for the subsequent musical analysis of Honghegu, positioning the work within the broader trajectory of contemporary national opera development.

4.5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the development of Chinese national opera at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT) should be understood not simply as a linear artistic progression, but as a process of institutional formation embedded within broader socio-political transformation. While previous scholarship has emphasized the hybrid musical language of Chinese national opera and its adaptation of Western operatic forms (Chen, 2012; Zhao, 2023), the present study demonstrates that such artistic hybridity was inseparable from institutional consolidation, cultural policy orientation, and state-supported production systems.

First, the historical analysis confirms that the emergence of Chinese national opera in the 1940s–1950s was closely tied to modernization and nation-building. However, beyond stylistic integration, the decisive factor in its stabilization was the establishment of professional opera institutions, training systems, and centralized production mechanisms. This supports the argument that genre identity is not shaped solely by compositional practice, but also by institutional structures that regulate artistic norms, professional standards, and repertory continuity. In this sense, CNODDT functioned not merely as a performing body but as a structural platform through which artistic experimentation became institutionalized and sustained.

Second, the staged developmental trajectory—from repertoire formation and standardization to diversification and contemporary modernization—reveals a dynamic negotiation between cultural policy, artistic autonomy, and institutional capacity. While earlier studies have tended to frame national opera primarily within ideological discourse, the

findings indicate that policy influence operated more as a structural framework than as a purely restrictive force. Cultural policy provided legitimacy, funding, and long-term stability, thereby enabling artistic expansion rather than simply constraining it. This interpretation complicates conventional narratives that position state involvement and artistic creativity as inherently oppositional.

Third, the interaction between tradition and modernity emerges as a core theoretical dimension in understanding Chinese national opera. Rather than representing a tension between preservation and innovation, the study shows that tradition and modernity operate in reciprocal reinforcement. Traditional musical elements—modal thinking, text-centered vocal writing, and culturally grounded narratives—provide aesthetic continuity, while modern compositional techniques and production technologies expand expressive possibilities. Institutional mediation, particularly at CNODDT, ensures that innovation remains anchored in recognizable genre conventions. This balanced integration explains how national opera maintains cultural specificity while adapting to contemporary artistic expectations.

Moreover, the analysis of production, dissemination, and performer cultivation highlights that operatic vitality depends on coordinated institutional systems rather than solely on compositional achievement. Touring performances, media dissemination, and audience engagement form a circulation network that reinforces both artistic refinement and social relevance. The integration of education, rehearsal-based mentorship, and professional employment structures further sustains generational continuity. These mechanisms demonstrate that Chinese national opera functions as an ecosystem in which creation, performance, and reception are structurally interdependent.

Taken together, the discussion suggests that Chinese national opera at CNODDT represents a mature, institutionalized cultural system characterized by structural stability, artistic adaptability, and professional coherence. The Theater's role extends beyond artistic production to encompass policy alignment, talent cultivation, repertory consolidation, and cultural dissemination. Such an institutional model provides the conditions under which large-scale original operas—such as *Honghegu*—can emerge as representative contemporary works. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in reframing Chinese national opera

not only as a hybrid musical genre but as an institutional phenomenon shaped by policy frameworks, organizational mechanisms, and socio-cultural negotiation. By situating musical development within this broader institutional context, the study establishes a structural foundation for the subsequent detailed analysis of *Honghegu*, enabling its musical language to be interpreted within the historical and organizational trajectory of contemporary Chinese national opera.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the historical and institutional development of Chinese national opera through a focused analysis of the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater (CNODDT). By combining historical inquiry, institutional analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, the research demonstrates that Chinese national opera developed not only as a hybrid musical genre but also as an institutionalized cultural system shaped by policy frameworks, professional structures, and sustained artistic practice.

The findings indicate that the emergence of Chinese national opera during the 1940s–1950s was closely connected to broader socio-political transformations and the establishment of state-supported cultural institutions. Early experiments that combined Western operatic techniques with Chinese linguistic and musical traditions were gradually consolidated through professional opera troupes and conservatory-based training systems. These institutional structures helped stabilize the genre's identity and standardize production practices. The development of CNODDT reflects several key stages, including early repertoire formation, institutional consolidation, reform-era diversification, and contemporary modernization. These phases illustrate the dynamic interaction between cultural policy, artistic direction, and institutional capacity. Rather than limiting creativity, national cultural policy and state support have provided structural conditions that enable long-term sustainability, large-scale productions, and professional continuity.

A defining characteristic of Chinese national opera is the interaction between tradition and modernity. Traditional musical aesthetics maintain cultural identity, while modern compositional techniques, stage technologies, and management systems encourage innovation and adaptation. In this context, CNODDT functions as a central platform that mediates between preservation and experimentation, sustaining the vitality of the genre

within changing cultural environments. Furthermore, the study highlights that national opera operates through an integrated system involving production mechanisms, performer training, dissemination strategies, and audience engagement. This interconnected framework supports the creation and circulation of contemporary large-scale operatic works, including Honghegu.

In conclusion, Chinese national opera at CNODDT represents a mature and professionalized art form whose development is closely tied to its institutional foundations. By situating musical evolution within this broader structural framework, this study provides a clearer understanding of contemporary Chinese national opera and offers a foundation for future musicological studies of individual works.

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