

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20385629

DIAN OPERA IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN KUNMING, YUNNAN

Juntao Wu¹, Khomkrich Karin^{1*}, Noppon Chaiyason¹

¹College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Received: 01/03/2026
Accepted: 26/04/2026

Corresponding Author: Khomkrich Karin
(khomkrich.k@msu.ac.th)

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the historical development and cultural transformation of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. As one of the most representative regional Han opera traditions in south-western China, Dian Opera reflects a long process of cultural interaction, artistic localization, and regional identity formation within Yunnan's multicultural social environment. The study aims to examine the development of Dian Opera through two major historical stages: the Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) and the Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present). Five principal dimensions are analyzed, including instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms. This research employed a qualitative methodology integrating historical inquiry, ethnographic fieldwork, and ethnomusicological analysis. Data were collected through documentary research, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and performance observation conducted in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. The findings reveal that Dian Opera gradually transformed from imported Chinese opera traditions into a localized regional opera system characterized by distinctive vocal systems, Kunming dialect expression, symbolic facial makeup, and unique performance aesthetics. During the contemporary period, Dian Opera has undergone significant transformation through cultural heritage preservation policies, educational transmission, digital dissemination, and modern theatrical adaptation. However, the genre continues to face challenges associated with modernization, shrinking audiences, and changing cultural consumption patterns among younger generations. The study concludes that the sustainability of Dian Opera depends upon balancing traditional artistic preservation with contemporary cultural adaptation. This research contributes to ethnomusicology, Chinese opera studies, and intangible cultural heritage research by presenting Dian Opera as both a living cultural heritage system and a dynamic regional performance tradition in contemporary.

KEYWORDS: Dian Opera; Yunnan Opera; Chinese Traditional Opera; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Ethnomusicology; Cultural Transformation; Yunnan Province; Traditional Performing Arts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional opera is regarded as one of the most significant forms of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, functioning not only as a performing art but also as a cultural medium reflecting historical memory, regional identity, language systems, and aesthetic traditions within Chinese society (Lim, 2010). Among the diverse local opera genres in China, Dian Opera (Yunnan Opera) represents one of the most important regional Han operas in south-western China and has become a symbolic artistic representation of Yunnan's multicultural society (Li Xiaogang, 2010).

Dian Opera originated and developed in Yunnan Province, a frontier region characterized by ethnic diversity and long-term intercultural interaction. Through historical exchanges between Han opera traditions and local ethnic cultures, Dian Opera gradually integrated musical elements from Kunqu Opera, Qinqiang Opera, Pihuang Opera, and Sichuan Opera with Yunnan folk melodies and the Kunming dialect, eventually forming a localized operatic system with strong regional characteristics (Yang Ming & Gu Feng, 1986). The genre developed three major vocal systems Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang which became the core musical identity distinguishing Dian Opera from other Chinese operatic traditions (Zhu Jianfeng, 2021).



Figure 1. Geographic location of Kunming City in Yunnan Province, China.

Source: Juntao Wu, from fieldwork in 2025.

The historical development of Dian Opera reflects a continuous process of cultural adaptation and artistic localization. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, various opera traditions entered Yunnan through migration and cultural exchange, gradually transforming through interaction with local dialects, folk customs, and audience preferences. By the late Qing Dynasty and Republican period, Dian Opera had entered a stage of artistic maturity characterized by diversified repertoires, flourishing opera troupes, standardized musical structures, and distinctive

systems of instrumental music, language, facial makeup, and performance forms (Bao Gang, 2015).

Despite its long historical development and artistic richness, Dian Opera currently faces serious challenges under conditions of modernization and rapid social transformation. The expansion of digital entertainment, short-video media, and popular culture has gradually weakened the social influence of traditional opera, particularly among younger generations. At the same time, many Dian Opera troupes face problems such as shrinking audiences, limited performance opportunities, financial difficulties, and insufficient transmission of young performers (Cao Yu, 2019). In response to these challenges, Dian Opera was officially included in China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2008, encouraging preservation, transmission, and innovative development within contemporary society (Yan Ye, 2020).

Although previous studies have examined aspects of Dian Opera history, music, facial makeup, and inheritance, comprehensive studies investigating its long-term historical development and cultural transformation remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the development of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, focusing on two major historical stages: the Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) and the Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present). The study analyzes five principal dimensions: instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms in order to understand the evolutionary processes and cultural significance of Dian Opera within contemporary Chinese society.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology integrating historical inquiry, ethnographic fieldwork, and ethnomusicological analysis. The research focused on investigating the development of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, particularly its historical evolution and cultural transformation from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The study emphasized five principal dimensions: instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms. Data were collected through documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and direct field observation. The fieldwork was conducted in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, where the researcher gathered extensive audiovisual documentation and primary source materials related to Dian Opera performance, transmission, and preservation. The investigation was structured

into four major phases, each representing a critical stage of the research process.

2.1. Step 1: Data Collection

1. Secondary Data: The researcher consulted academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, opera archives, scripts, historical documents, musical manuscripts, institutional records, and cultural policy materials specifically related to the historical development of Dian Opera in Yunnan Province, China. Additional documentary sources concerning Kunming dialects, Chinese local opera systems, intangible cultural heritage preservation, and Yunnan regional culture were also examined. These materials provided an important foundation for understanding the historical evolution of Dian Opera, including the development of instrumental music, repertoire systems, language characteristics, facial makeup traditions, and performance forms from the Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) to the Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present).
2. Primary Data: Field research was conducted at four principal research sites in Kunming, Yunnan Province, including Yunnan Dian Opera Theater, Yunnan Vocational College of Culture and Art, Kunming Traditional Local Opera Inheritance and Performance Center, and Niujiezhuan Dianju Troupe. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, on-site observation of rehearsals and live performances, and examination of musical performances, vocal systems, and stage practices. The researcher engaged in in-depth dialogue with performers, composers, educators, inheritors, musicians, and institutional administrators including Wang Runmei, Liu Junwei, and Zhang Chunli. These interactions provided first-hand perspectives concerning the historical development, artistic transformation, transmission systems, and contemporary preservation practices of Dian Opera in Yunnan Province

2.2. Step 2: Recording Data

All interviews, rehearsals, and performance observations were systematically documented through audio recording, video recording, photography, 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 development of Dian Opera, including discussions concerning musical systems, repertoire evolution, language usage, facial makeup traditions, and performance transformation. These recorded materials constituted essential primary data for analyzing the historical development and cultural transformation of Dian Opera in contemporary Chinese society.

2.3. Step 3: Preparation and Analysis of Data

The collected data were systematically organized and categorized in accordance with the principal research objective: investigating the development of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. Historical and cultural data were analyzed using historical musicology and ethnomusicological approaches, with particular emphasis on chronological development, artistic transformation, and cultural adaptation. Musical materials were transcribed into staff notation and analyzed in terms of melody, vocal structure, rhythmic patterns, and accompaniment systems. 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 Dian Opera, including the development of instrumental music, scripts, language systems, facial makeup, and performance forms, was systematically contextualized within broader socio-cultural transformations in Yunnan Province and contemporary China. The results were critically discussed in relation to existing scholarship and theoretical perspectives concerning Chinese opera, ethnomusicology, and intangible cultural heritage studies in order to clarify their academic significance. Finally, the research outcomes were compiled into a scholarly manuscript presenting an integrated understanding of Dian Opera as both a regional opera tradition and a contemporary cultural heritage practice.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholarship on Dian Opera can be grouped into four major areas: the cultural context of Yunnan, the development of local opera genres, the artistic system of Dian Opera, and the preservation of

traditional opera in contemporary society. Together, these studies provide an important foundation for understanding Dian Opera as both a regional performing art and an intangible cultural heritage practice.

First, studies on Yunnan's geography, population, ethnicity, and cultural history emphasize that Yunnan is a frontier region shaped by mountainous terrain, ethnic diversity, and long-term cultural interaction. Scholars have noted that these conditions encouraged the formation of distinctive local performing traditions, including different regional schools of Dian Opera such as the Kunming and Yuxi traditions (Chen Jijun, 2022; Wu Ge, 2006). Yunnan's multiethnic environment also created opportunities for Han opera traditions to interact with Yi, Bai, Dai, Miao, and other ethnic cultures, giving Dian Opera a strong regional and multicultural character (Yang Shouchuan, 2006).

Second, research on opera in Yunnan shows that the province possesses a rich theatrical ecology consisting of both Han opera genres and ethnic minority operas. Dian Opera, Huadeng Opera, and Kunming Tune Opera represent major Han opera forms, while Zhuang Opera, Yi Opera, Bai Opera, and Dai Opera reflect the diversity of ethnic minority theatrical traditions (Chinese Opera Annals: Yunnan Volume, 1994; Zhang Zhimei, 2022). These studies indicate that Dian Opera should not be understood in isolation, but as part of a broader regional opera system shaped by cultural exchange, adaptation, and localization.

Third, existing studies on Dian Opera itself have examined its musical structure, vocal systems, language, repertoire, facial makeup, and performance conventions. Yang Ming and Gu Feng (1986) provided one of the most comprehensive historical accounts of Yunnan Opera, while Zhu Jianfeng (2021) analyzed its musical system, including vocal music, instrumental accompaniment, and percussion patterns. Other scholars have emphasized that the three major vocal systems—Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang—form the core identity of Dian Opera. Studies on dialect, facial makeup, costumes, and role types further demonstrate how Dian Opera localizes broader Chinese opera conventions through Yunnan language, aesthetics, and folk culture (Gao Xin, 2001; Dong Huiyang, 2016; Zhang Li, 2019).

Fourth, research on preservation and popularization has increasingly focused on the survival of Dian Opera in contemporary society. Scholars have discussed issues such as shrinking audiences, limited youth participation, weak market

mechanisms, and the need for educational transmission (Li Xiaogang, 2010; Cao Yu, 2019; Wang Xiaoyan, 2019). Other studies have explored possible strategies, including campus education, community performance, museum-based preservation, digital dissemination, and the integration of intangible cultural heritage activities into public cultural life (Yang Jun, 2019; Fang Zhufen, 2018; Jiang, Zhang, & Bao, 2024). These studies show that Dian Opera is now situated between heritage protection and the need for creative transformation.

Although these studies have made important contributions, several limitations remain. Much existing research focuses on isolated aspects of Dian Opera, such as music, facial makeup, education, or repertoire, rather than examining its historical development as an integrated artistic system. In addition, relatively few studies connect the evolution of instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms within a long-term historical framework. There is also limited discussion of how Dian Opera has transformed from the Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) to the Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present).

Therefore, this study addresses this research gap by investigating the development of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, through five interconnected dimensions: instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms. By synthesizing historical documents, fieldwork data, and ethnomusicological analysis, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Dian Opera as a regional opera tradition, a cultural heritage system, and a living performance practice in contemporary China.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. *The Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000)*

The Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) represents the foundational stage in the historical development of Dian Opera in Yunnan Province, China. During this period, Dian Opera gradually transformed from an opera form heavily influenced by external theatrical traditions into a localized regional opera system with distinctive musical structures, linguistic characteristics, facial makeup conventions, scripts, and performance styles. The development of Dian Opera was closely connected to the migration of opera troupes from central China, the interaction between Han and ethnic minority cultures, and the sociocultural environment of Yunnan Province. Through long-term adaptation and artistic refinement, Dian Opera eventually

established its own regional identity and matured into one of the most representative traditional opera genres in south-western China.

4.1.1 *Development of Instrumental Music*

The development of instrumental music during the Evolution and Maturation Period reflected a gradual process of localization and artistic integration. Early Dian Opera accompaniment systems were primarily derived from Kunqu Opera, Qinqiang Opera, Pihuang Opera, and Sichuan Opera traditions. These external musical influences were subsequently adapted to align with Yunnan's local performance environment, audience preferences, and regional vocal styles. The instrumental system gradually evolved into a relatively stable structure centered on the "three major traditional opera instruments": Siyan, Huqin, and Yueqin, while also incorporating local percussion traditions and ethnic musical elements.

The orchestral system of Dian Opera, known collectively as Changmian, was divided into Wenchang (melodic ensemble) and Wuchang (percussion ensemble). The Wenchang ensemble consisted primarily of string and wind instruments, including Huqin, Yueqin, Sanxian, Bangdi, Suona, and Gaoyin Sheng. Among these, different types of Huqin were used according to the characteristics of the three major vocal systems Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang thereby establishing close interaction between instrumental accompaniment and vocal performance. The tuning systems and accompaniment techniques gradually developed distinctive local features different from those of Peking Opera and Sichuan Opera.

The Wuchang ensemble occupied a particularly important role in Dian Opera performance. Percussion instruments such as large gongs, cymbals, tangu drums, bangzi clappers, and small gongs were used not only to regulate rhythm and tempo but also to strengthen dramatic atmosphere, emphasize emotional expression, and coordinate stage movement. During the Guangxu period of the Qing Dynasty, the percussion ensemble was designed primarily for temple fairs and open-air square performances. Consequently, the instruments were large, heavy, and extremely resonant in order to project sound across large outdoor spaces. Later, when performances increasingly moved into opera theaters, the percussion system underwent continuous reform, absorbing performance techniques from Sichuan Opera and Peking Opera while gradually developing a localized Yunnan style.

Another important development during this

period was the integration of ethnic minority percussion instruments into Dian Opera orchestration. Instruments such as the Dai elephant-foot drum, Wa wooden drum, bronze gong, octagonal drum, and cowbell were incorporated into performances of ethnic-themed repertoires. This integration strengthened the regional identity of Dian Opera and reflected the multicultural cultural ecology of Yunnan Province. By the late twentieth century, orchestral elements and expanded instrumental textures had also begun to appear in some productions, enriching the musical layers of Dian Opera while maintaining its traditional vocal-centered structure

4.1.2. *Development of Scripts*

The development of Dian Opera scripts during the Evolution and Maturation Period demonstrated a continuous process of adaptation, localization, and artistic refinement. The traditional repertoires of Dian Opera originated primarily from Kunqu Opera, Qinqiang Opera, Pihuang Opera, Peking Opera, and Sichuan Opera. Through long-term transmission and reinterpretation by local performers and playwrights, these imported repertoires gradually evolved into localized dramatic works possessing strong Yunnan characteristics.

Among the most influential script traditions was the Sixian system, which originated from Qinqiang Opera during the Qing Dynasty. Subsequently, Anhui and Hubei opera troupes introduced additional melodic and dramatic systems into Yunnan, eventually contributing to the formation of the three major vocal systems of Dian Opera: Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang. These vocal systems shaped not only musical performance but also dramatic structure, role classification, and repertoire composition.

The repertoires of Dian Opera covered a wide range of themes, including historical dramas, legendary stories, military conflicts, ethical narratives, romance, and revolutionary plays. During the late Qing Dynasty and Republican period, newly created scripts increasingly reflected contemporary political and social issues. Repertoires such as Sorrows of Yunnan and Patriotic Blood incorporated themes related to national crisis, modernization, and regional identity. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, large-scale efforts were undertaken to collect, revise, and preserve traditional repertoires. More than one thousand Dian Opera scripts were eventually documented and archived, demonstrating the richness and diversity of the genre's dramatic

heritage.

At the same time, playwrights and scholars such as Yang Ming played an important role in refining and modernizing Dian Opera scripts. Through adaptation and reinterpretation, traditional repertoires were reconstructed to align with contemporary cultural and ideological contexts. Works such as Niu GAO Tears up the Imperial Edict, Lotus Match, and Green Blood and Border Passes elevated the literary quality and dramatic complexity of Dian Opera while also strengthening its national recognition within Chinese opera culture.



Figure 2: Development of Instrumental Music (1850s-2000s)

Source: Juntao Wu, from fieldwork in 2025.

4.1.3. Development of Language

The development of language during the Evolution and Maturation Period was one of the most significant processes in the localization of Dian Opera. Although the original opera forms introduced into Yunnan were based on Northern Mandarin and other external dialect systems, prolonged interaction with local performers and audiences gradually transformed the linguistic structure of Dian Opera into a localized operatic language centered on the Kunming dialect.

The Kunming dialect became an important cultural marker distinguishing Dian Opera from other Chinese opera genres. Local phonetics, colloquial vocabulary, tonal systems, and sentence structures were systematically incorporated into spoken dialogue and vocal performance. These linguistic adaptations strengthened audience accessibility and enhanced emotional communication between performers and local communities. The spoken sections of Dian Opera became especially valued for their clarity, rhythm, and expressive power.

The tonal structure of the Kunming dialect also influenced the melodic organization of Dian Opera vocal systems. For example, the falling tonal characteristics of Yangping tones corresponded

closely with the emotional atmosphere of certain Sixian and Huqin melodies, while colloquial sentence structures enhanced the natural flow of dialogue and lyrical expression. The incorporation of local idioms and everyday vocabulary further reinforced the opera's connection to folk life and regional identity.

At the same time, Dian Opera librettos retained literary and poetic qualities while integrating local dialect expression. This combination of literary refinement and folk accessibility enabled Dian Opera to function simultaneously as a sophisticated theatrical tradition and a popular regional cultural practice. Repertoires themed on ethnic minorities also incorporated ethnic vocabulary and local expressions, strengthening the authenticity and multicultural character of the dramatic language.

4.1.4. Development of Facial Makeup

The facial makeup system of Dian Opera developed into a highly sophisticated visual language during the Evolution and Maturation Period. Based on inherited traditions from Kunqu Opera and other regional Chinese opera forms, Dian Opera facial makeup gradually evolved distinctive local characteristics through adaptation and artistic innovation by generations of Yunnan performers.

The color symbolism of facial makeup followed traditional Chinese opera conventions while simultaneously incorporating regional aesthetic preferences. Red symbolized loyalty and righteousness, black represented integrity and courage, and white indicated treachery and deception. Additional colors such as yellow, green, blue, purple, gold, and silver were used to portray warriors, supernatural beings, outlaws, and mythological characters. These visual codes enabled audiences to immediately recognize the moral identity and personality of dramatic figures.

The facial makeup system was eventually classified into ten major categories, including red faces, black-and-white faces, white faces, three-sectioned faces, multi-colored faces, pictographic faces, yin-yang faces, distorted faces, Ba'er faces, and Xiaohualian clown faces. Each category possessed specific painting techniques, symbolic meanings, and role associations. Particularly notable were the highly elaborate multi-colored and pictographic face designs used for mythological and supernatural characters.

As Dian Opera matured, facial makeup became increasingly standardized and closely integrated with role classification and stage performance. At the same time, local Yunnan aesthetic elements and ethnic decorative motifs were gradually

incorporated into costume and facial designs, especially in repertoires related to frontier culture and ethnic minority themes. These developments strengthened the visual identity of Dian Opera and distinguished it from other regional Chinese opera traditions.



Figure 3. Development and Classification of Facial Makeup in Dian Opera, Yunnan Province, China.

Source: Juntao Wu, from fieldwork in 2025

4.1.5 Development of Performance Forms

The development of performance forms during the Evolution and Maturation Period reflected the gradual maturation of Dian Opera as a comprehensive theatrical system. Similar to other traditional Chinese operas, Dian Opera emphasized stylization, symbolic expression, and the integration of singing, speaking, acting, and fighting into a unified artistic structure. However, through long-term localization, Dian Opera also developed distinctive regional performance characteristics closely connected to Yunnan folk culture and everyday life.

The performance system of Dian Opera was fundamentally based on the “Four Basic Skills” singing, speaking, acting, and fighting and the “Five Performing Methods” hand techniques, eye expression, body movement, performance methods, and footwork. Singing styles emphasized emotional expression through the three major vocal systems, while spoken dialogue incorporated Kunming dialect and local folk expression. Acting techniques frequently integrated elements of Yunnan folk dance, stylized gesture systems, and regionally specific movement aesthetics.

Martial performance and acrobatic movement were also important components of Dian Opera stage practice. Wusheng performers developed highly

dynamic fighting techniques incorporating local martial arts traditions, while dan performers refined stylized movement through the coordinated use of water sleeves, fans, and graceful body movement. Stage realism was often achieved through symbolic gesture and impressionistic acting rather than literal representation, reflecting broader Chinese opera aesthetics.

By the Guangxu period, Dian Opera had entered a flourishing stage characterized by the emergence of renowned performers, increasingly professionalized troupes, and expanded performance venues. Many influential artists developed highly individualized performing styles that contributed significantly to the maturation of Dian Opera performance aesthetics. After 1912, female performers increasingly appeared on stage, transforming role performance practices and contributing to new forms of audience appeal. At the same time, performances gradually shifted from temple fairs and open public spaces into commercial opera theaters, reflecting the growing institutionalization and urbanization of Dian Opera performance culture.

4.2. The Protection and Transmission Period (2000–Present)

The Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present) represents a significant stage in the contemporary development of Dian Opera in Yunnan Province, China. During this period, Dian Opera entered a new phase characterized by cultural preservation, institutional transmission, artistic reform, and adaptation to contemporary society. The inclusion of Dian Opera in the second batch of China’s National Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2008 marked an important turning point in the preservation and revitalization of the genre. Government agencies, educational institutions, opera troupes, and cultural organizations increasingly collaborated to promote the inheritance and sustainable development of Dian Opera within the context of modernization, globalization, and digital media expansion. At the same time, Dian Opera continued to face serious challenges, including aging audiences, declining youth participation, shrinking performance markets, and increasing competition from modern entertainment industries.

4.2.1. Development of Instrumental Music

During the Protection and Transmission Period, the instrumental music system of Dian Opera underwent continuous reform and modernization while maintaining its traditional musical foundation. Traditional accompaniment ensembles centered on

Huqin, Yueqin, Sanxian, Bangdi, Suona, and percussion instruments remained essential components of performance practice. However, orchestration techniques increasingly incorporated elements from modern Chinese orchestras and contemporary theatrical production systems.

One important development was the expansion of instrumental textures and harmonic accompaniment. In some large-scale productions, electronic keyboards, cello, double bass, and additional orchestral instruments were introduced to enrich musical atmosphere and improve stage acoustics in modern theaters. Despite these innovations, the three major vocal systems Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang continued to function as the central musical identity of Dian Opera. Traditional melodic structures and regional tonal characteristics were largely preserved in order to maintain authenticity and cultural continuity.

Educational institutions such as Yunnan Vocational College of Culture and Art also played an important role in transmitting traditional instrumental performance techniques. Senior musicians and inheritors trained younger performers through formal classroom instruction, ensemble rehearsal, and apprenticeship-based learning. Simultaneously, digital recording technology and online media platforms increasingly contributed to the documentation and dissemination of Dian Opera instrumental traditions.

4.2.2. Development of Scripts

The development of Dian Opera scripts during the contemporary period reflected the interaction between cultural preservation and modern creative adaptation. Traditional repertoires continued to be performed and preserved through archival documentation, stage revival projects, and educational transmission. At the same time, playwrights increasingly produced new scripts designed to address contemporary social issues, regional cultural identity, and modern audience preferences.

Contemporary Dian Opera productions frequently integrated themes related to ethnic unity, social harmony, environmental protection, modernization, and national cultural identity. Some newly created repertoires combined traditional operatic structures with modern narrative techniques, multimedia staging, and contemporary dramatic pacing in order to attract younger audiences. This process reflected broader Chinese cultural policies encouraging the “creative transformation and innovative development” of

traditional culture.

In addition, many traditional scripts were revised and simplified for educational performance, community transmission, and public cultural festivals. Opera troupes and cultural institutions increasingly collaborated with universities and heritage organizations to digitize manuscripts, archive repertoires, and publish research materials related to Dian Opera dramatic literature. These preservation activities strengthened the long-term sustainability of Dian Opera script traditions in contemporary Chinese society.

4.2.3. Development of Language

The language system of Dian Opera during the Protection and Transmission Period demonstrated both continuity and adaptation. The Kunming dialect remained the principal linguistic foundation of Dian Opera performance and continued to function as a key marker of regional cultural identity. Spoken dialogue and lyrical expression retained many local phonetic characteristics, tonal structures, and colloquial expressions inherited from earlier performance traditions.

However, modernization and expanding national audiences also encouraged partial linguistic adjustment. Some contemporary performances incorporated more standardized Mandarin pronunciation in order to improve accessibility for audiences outside Yunnan Province. This was particularly evident in televised performances, national festivals, educational productions, and intercultural cultural exchange programs. Nevertheless, many performers and scholars emphasized that excessive linguistic standardization could weaken the regional authenticity and local identity of Dian Opera.

Digital media and educational transmission further contributed to language preservation. Audio recordings, subtitles, online videos, and institutional teaching materials increasingly documented the linguistic characteristics of Dian Opera performance. These technologies not only preserved traditional pronunciation systems but also enabled younger generations to study and understand the linguistic aesthetics of Yunnan Opera traditions.

4.2.4. Development of Facial Makeup

The facial makeup system of Dian Opera during the contemporary period reflected a balance between preservation of traditional symbolism and adaptation to modern theatrical aesthetics. Traditional makeup classifications such as red faces, black-and-white faces, pictographic faces, yin-yang

faces, and clown-face makeup continued to be preserved as important visual symbols of Dian Opera identity. These makeup systems remained closely connected to role classification, moral symbolism, and character representation within traditional Chinese opera aesthetics.

At the same time, contemporary stage productions introduced adjustments in color intensity, material usage, lighting compatibility, and visual detail in order to suit modern theater technology and audience expectations. High-definition stage lighting and digital media broadcasting required facial makeup designs to become visually clearer and more refined than in earlier open-air performances. Costume and makeup designers also increasingly integrated Yunnan ethnic decorative motifs and regional artistic patterns into stage aesthetics.

Museums, cultural heritage exhibitions, and academic publications further contributed to the preservation and dissemination of Dian Opera facial makeup traditions. Facial makeup typologies were increasingly documented through photography, digital archives, educational exhibitions, and heritage research projects, transforming facial makeup from a purely theatrical practice into an important subject of cultural heritage preservation and academic study.

4.2.5. Development of Performance Forms

The development of performance forms during the Protection and Transmission Period reflected the broader transformation of Dian Opera within contemporary Chinese cultural society. Traditional stage conventions based on singing, speaking, acting, and fighting remained central to Dian Opera performance practice. However, opera troupes increasingly experimented with modern staging technology, multimedia projection, digital lighting systems, and contemporary theatrical choreography.

Large-scale productions increasingly adopted modern theater stage design, cinematic visual effects, and amplified sound systems in order to improve audience engagement and commercial competitiveness. Some productions shortened performance duration, simplified narrative structure, and emphasized visual spectacle to accommodate contemporary viewing habits shaped by television and digital media culture. These reforms were intended particularly to attract younger audiences unfamiliar with traditional opera aesthetics.

Educational transmission became another important aspect of performance development. Universities, vocational institutions, and cultural

centers established formal Dian Opera training programs emphasizing vocal technique, stage movement, martial performance, instrumental accompaniment, and repertoire study. Public performances, cultural festivals, school outreach activities, and online broadcasting platforms further expanded opportunities for transmission and audience development.

Nevertheless, the modernization of performance forms also generated debates concerning authenticity and cultural preservation. Some scholars and senior performers expressed concern that excessive commercial adaptation and technological modification could weaken the traditional artistic identity of Dian Opera. Consequently, contemporary Dian Opera continues to negotiate the complex relationship between heritage preservation, artistic innovation, and modern cultural consumption within twenty-first-century China.

4.2. The Protection and Transmission Period (2000–Present)

The Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present) represents a major transitional stage in the contemporary development of Dian Opera in Yunnan Province, China. During this period, Dian Opera entered a new era characterized by cultural preservation, institutional transmission, artistic adaptation, and modernization. In 2008, Dian Opera was officially included in the second batch of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list, significantly strengthening governmental and institutional support for preservation and transmission activities. Opera troupes, educational institutions, museums, and cultural organizations increasingly collaborated to sustain Dian Opera within the rapidly changing sociocultural environment of contemporary China. At the same time, Dian Opera faced serious challenges caused by modernization, digital entertainment, urbanization, and declining interest among younger audiences. Consequently, preservation and innovation became two interconnected directions shaping the contemporary transformation of Dian Opera.

4.2.1. Development of Instrumental Music

During the Protection and Transmission Period, the instrumental music system of Dian Opera continued to preserve its traditional musical identity while gradually incorporating modern orchestration and contemporary stage technology. Traditional melodic accompaniment centered on Huqin, Yueqin, Sanxian, Bangdi, Suona, and percussion ensembles remained fundamental to Dian Opera performance

practice. However, contemporary productions increasingly introduced expanded orchestral textures, amplified sound systems, and modern theater acoustics to improve performance quality within large indoor theaters and multimedia stage environments.

The three major vocal systems Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang continued to function as the musical core of Dian Opera. Traditional accompaniment techniques were preserved through institutional education, apprenticeship systems, and professional opera training programs established by organizations such as Yunnan Vocational College of Culture and Art and Yunnan Dian Opera Theater. Senior musicians and inheritors transmitted traditional instrumental performance techniques to younger generations through classroom teaching, ensemble rehearsal, and live stage practice.

At the same time, digital technology increasingly contributed to the preservation and dissemination of Dian Opera instrumental music. Audio recording, online video platforms, digital archives, and academic documentation projects enabled traditional performance techniques to be preserved and accessed more systematically. Some contemporary productions also incorporated orchestral harmony and modern stage composition techniques while maintaining the traditional melodic structures and regional tonal identity of Dian Opera music.



Figure 4: Development of Instrumental Music (2000 to the present)

Source: Juntao Wu, from fieldwork in 2025.

4.2.2. Development of Scripts

The development of Dian Opera scripts during the contemporary period reflected a balance between preservation of traditional repertoires and adaptation to modern cultural contexts. Traditional plays continued to be performed, documented, and

archived as important components of Yunnan's cultural heritage. Simultaneously, contemporary playwrights increasingly created new repertoires addressing themes related to modernization, ethnic unity, social harmony, environmental awareness, and regional cultural identity. Many contemporary productions adapted traditional narratives into shorter and more accessible performance formats suitable for modern audiences, cultural festivals, television broadcasting, and educational activities. New dramatic structures frequently incorporated contemporary pacing, simplified storytelling, and multimedia stage presentation while preserving the musical and theatrical characteristics of Dian Opera. This reflected broader national cultural policies encouraging the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture.

In addition, opera institutions and cultural organizations increasingly engaged in script preservation projects through manuscript collection, digital archiving, publication, and academic research. Traditional Dian Opera repertoires were systematically documented in order to prevent cultural loss and strengthen long-term transmission. These activities transformed Dian Opera scripts from oral and performance-based traditions into formally preserved cultural heritage materials.

4.2.3 Development of Language

During the Protection and Transmission Period, the Kunming dialect remained the principal linguistic foundation of Dian Opera and continued to function as an important marker of regional cultural identity. Traditional pronunciation, tonal systems, and local expressions were preserved in both spoken dialogue and vocal performance. However, some contemporary productions incorporated elements of Standard Mandarin to improve accessibility for wider national audiences, particularly in televised performances and cultural exchange programs.

Digital media and educational institutions also played important roles in preserving the linguistic characteristics of Dian Opera. Audio-visual recordings, subtitles, online archives, and opera training programs increasingly documented traditional pronunciation and vocal expression, enabling younger generations to study and inherit the language system of Dian Opera within contemporary educational contexts.

4.2.4 Development of Facial Makeup

The facial makeup system of Dian Opera during the contemporary period reflected both

preservation and modernization. Traditional makeup categories such as red faces, black-and-white faces, pictographic faces, yin-yang faces, and clown-face makeup continued to function as important visual symbols representing character identity and dramatic meaning. At the same time, modern stage technology influenced makeup design and visual presentation. Contemporary productions adjusted color intensity, line clarity, and material usage to suit modern lighting systems and digital broadcasting. Museums, exhibitions, and digital archives further contributed to the preservation and dissemination of Dian Opera facial makeup traditions as part of China's intangible cultural heritage preservation efforts.

4.2.5. Development of Performance Forms

During the Protection and Transmission Period, Dian Opera performance forms continued to preserve traditional structures based on singing, speaking, acting, and fighting while simultaneously incorporating modern theater technology and multimedia stage design. Contemporary productions increasingly adopted digital lighting, amplified sound systems, and visual effects to improve audience engagement and adapt to modern performance environments.

Educational institutions, cultural centers, and opera troupes also strengthened transmission through formal training programs, public performances, and online media dissemination. However, the modernization of performance forms generated ongoing debates concerning the balance between artistic innovation and preservation of traditional Dian Opera aesthetics within contemporary Chinese society.



Figure 5. Development of Performance Forms (2000 to the present)

Source: Juntao Wu, from fieldwork in 2025

4.3. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the development of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, reflects a continuous process of cultural adaptation, localization, preservation, and modernization. The results indicate that Dian Opera

did not emerge as an isolated theatrical form, but rather developed through long-term interaction among Han Chinese opera traditions, Yunnan regional culture, and the multicultural environment of southwestern China. This finding corresponds with previous studies emphasizing that Yunnan's ethnic diversity and frontier cultural ecology significantly shaped the formation of regional opera traditions (Yang Shouchuan, 2006; Wu Ge, 2006). However, the present study extends earlier scholarship by demonstrating how instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms evolved together as an integrated artistic system rather than as isolated cultural elements.

The study also reveals that the Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) was fundamental in establishing the artistic identity of Dian Opera. During this period, Dian Opera gradually transformed inherited theatrical systems from Kunqu Opera, Qinqiang Opera, Pihuang Opera, and Sichuan Opera into localized Yunnan performance traditions. This process is particularly evident in the development of the three major vocal systems Sixian Qiang, Huqin Qiang, and Xiangyang Qiang which became central musical identities of Dian Opera. These findings support Zhu Jianfeng's (2021) argument that vocal systems and accompaniment structures constitute the core musical framework of Yunnan Opera traditions. Nevertheless, this study further demonstrates that the localization process extended beyond musical adaptation and included dialect transformation, symbolic facial makeup systems, and regionally specific performance aesthetics.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between cultural preservation and modernization during the Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present). The inclusion of Dian Opera in China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list significantly strengthened institutional preservation, educational transmission, and public cultural promotion. This finding aligns with previous studies arguing that heritage policies play an important role in sustaining traditional Chinese opera in contemporary society (Cao Yu, 2019; Wang Xiaoyan, 2019). However, the study also reveals that preservation alone is insufficient for long-term sustainability. Contemporary Dian Opera increasingly depends on adaptation to modern audiences through multimedia stage technology, shortened performance structures, digital dissemination, and educational reform. This reflects broader cultural transformation processes occurring

within traditional performing arts across contemporary China.

The findings further suggest that modernization simultaneously creates opportunities and tensions within Dian Opera development. On one hand, digital technology, online media, and modern theater systems expand public accessibility and support cultural transmission among younger generations. On the other hand, excessive commercialization and standardization may weaken the regional identity and traditional aesthetics of Dian Opera. This tension between preservation and innovation is especially visible in language adaptation, contemporary script creation, and modified performance forms. Similar concerns have been identified in studies of other Chinese opera traditions facing globalization and digital entertainment competition (Li Xiaogang, 2010; Fang Zhufen, 2018). The present study therefore highlights that the future sustainability of Dian Opera depends not only on institutional preservation but also on achieving a balance between cultural authenticity and contemporary adaptation.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, the study demonstrates that Dian Opera should be understood as a living cultural system continuously negotiated through social change, regional identity, and artistic practice. The interaction between traditional inheritance and contemporary transformation reflects broader discussions concerning intangible cultural heritage preservation in modern society. Consequently, this research contributes to Chinese opera studies, ethnomusicology, and heritage studies by presenting Dian Opera as both a historical regional opera tradition and a dynamic contemporary cultural practice within twenty-first-century China.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the development of Dian Opera in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, represents a continuous process of artistic adaptation, cultural localization, preservation, and modernization from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The findings reveal that Dian Opera gradually evolved from inherited Chinese opera

traditions into a distinctive regional opera system characterized by unique instrumental music, vocal structures, scripts, linguistic expression, facial makeup traditions, and performance forms closely connected to Yunnan's multicultural cultural environment. The Evolution and Maturation Period (1850–2000) established the artistic foundation and regional identity of Dian Opera, while the Protection and Transmission Period (2000–present) reflects contemporary efforts to preserve and revitalize the genre within the context of modernization, digital media expansion, and changing audience behaviour.

The study further demonstrates that Dian Opera should not be understood solely as a traditional theatrical performance, but as a living cultural heritage system continuously negotiated through social transformation, institutional preservation, and contemporary artistic adaptation. Although modernization has created significant challenges including declining audiences, reduced youth participation, and increasing competition from modern entertainment industries it has also generated new opportunities for preservation through educational transmission, digital documentation, multimedia performance, and cultural heritage policy support. Consequently, the sustainability of Dian Opera depends upon achieving a balance between preserving traditional artistic identity and adapting to contemporary cultural society.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to ethnomusicology, Chinese opera studies, and intangible cultural heritage research by presenting a comprehensive analysis of Dian Opera as an integrated artistic and cultural system. By examining the interconnected development of instrumental music, scripts, language, facial makeup, and performance forms across two major historical periods, the study provides a broader understanding of how regional opera traditions survive, transform, and maintain cultural significance within contemporary China. Ultimately, Dian Opera remains an important representation of Yunnan regional identity and an enduring symbol of China's diverse theatrical and cultural heritage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the performers, musicians, scholars, and cultural practitioners in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, for their valuable cooperation, knowledge, and support throughout the fieldwork process. Special thanks are extended to Yunnan Dian Opera Theater, Yunnan Vocational College of Culture and Art, Kunming Traditional Local Opera Inheritance and Performance Center, and Niuji Zhuang Dianju Troupe for providing important research materials and facilitating field observations and interviews. This research project was financially supported by Mahasarakham University.

REFERENCES

- Bao, G. (2015). A brief history of Yunnan opera. Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Cai, M. (2020). Pattern, vision and path: Multiple explorations on the inheritance and development of traditional opera. *Sichuan Drama*, 7, 8-13.
- Cao, Y. (2019). A study on the figurative rhetoric of singing words in Yunnan opera (Master's thesis). Yunnan Normal University.
- Chen, J. J. (2022). On the formation of southwest local operas under immigration in the Qing Dynasty. *Studies in Qing History*, 1, 207-218.
- Chinese Opera Annals Editorial Committee. (1994). Chinese opera annals: Yunnan volume. China ISBN Center.
- Dong, H. F. (2016). Localized artistic expression and cultural inheritance of Dian opera. *Sichuan Drama*, 8, 72-74.
- Dong, J. F. (2012). Artistic features of the three major vocal tunes in Dian opera. *National Music*, 1, 33-34.
- Fang, Z. F. (2018). Analysis on the protection, inheritance and performance paths of intangible cultural heritage: Taking Yunnan Dian opera as an example. *Popular Literature and Art*, 2, 1-2.
- Gao, X. (2001). A study on the music system and artistic characteristics of Dian opera. *National Ethnic Arts Research*, 3, 28-35.
- Hu, R. M. (2013). On the inheritance of Yunnan's traditional opera intangible cultural heritage: From the perspective of Dian opera. *Ethnic Music*, 4, 69-72.
- Jiang, X., Zhang, Y., & Bao, L. (2024). Digital dissemination and sustainable inheritance strategies of Dian opera in the context of intangible cultural heritage. *Sustainability*, 16(8), 1-15.
- Jiang, Y. P., & Su, C. (2024). Virtual reality technology for the digital dissemination of traditional Chinese opera culture. *Visual Communication*, 36(2), 1-18.
- Li, X. G. (2010). A study on the survival and development of Dian opera in contemporary society (Master's thesis). Yunnan Arts University.
- Lim, S. K. (2010). Origins of Chinese opera. Asiapac Books Pte Ltd.
- Wang, H. B. (2011). Inheritance and development of Dian opera: A case study of the modern Dian opera Heroic Blood and Noble Fragrance. *Ethnic Art Studies*, 5, 59-63.
- Wang, X. Y. (2019). Based on campus education to realize sustainable development of Dian opera. *Home Drama*, 21, 23-25.
- Wu, G. (2006). Theatrical culture: A rich and overlapping art landscape. In S. C. Yang (Ed.), *Yunnan featured culture* (pp. 1-28). Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Xu, Q. (1993). Cultural background and artistic characteristics of Dian opera. *Art of Theatre*, 2, 27-32.
- Yan, Y. (2020). Yunnan Dian opera in archives. *Yunnan Archives*, 1, 28-30.
- Yang, J. (2019). The practical significance of colleges and universities in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage of traditional opera: From the perspective of ecological construction of Dian opera inheritance. *Journal of Yunnan Arts University*, 3, 44-49.
- Yang, M., & Gu, F. (1986). A history of Dian opera. China Theatre Press.
- Yang, S. C. (Ed.). (2006). *Yunnan featured culture*. Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Zhang, L. (2019). Art form and contemporary inheritance of Dian opera from the intangible cultural heritage perspective. *Art of Chinese Opera*, 40(2), 67-72.
- Zhang, Z. M. (2022). A study on the history and inheritance of Dounan Dian opera (Master's thesis). Wenzhou University.
- Zhu, J. F. (2021). An introduction to Dian opera music. *National Music*, 1, 50-52.