

Reconstructing Cultural Identity through Orchestration: Tradition and Innovation in Wuxi Opera, Jiangsu, China

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Abstract

This study employs a combination of theoretical analysis and field research to explore the mechanisms of cultural identity construction reflected in contemporary Wuxi opera orchestration practices. The findings reveal that traditional instruments such as the *erhu*, *pipa*, and *yangqin* play an irreplaceable role in maintaining the aesthetic appeal of Jiangnan music; meanwhile, the moderate introduction of Western instruments (such as the cello, double bass, and clarinet) has expanded the expressive power and aesthetic possibilities of opera. Through score analysis and in-depth interviews, the study further highlights that orchestration is not merely a technical process but also a symbolic means of dramatic narrative, cultural transmission, and identity negotiation. Drawing on Shen Qia's "musical morphology" (2015), Nettl's "style description" (1964), Tarasti's "musical semiotics" (1994) and Rice's "cultural re-creation" model (1987), this paper constructs an interdisciplinary analytical framework to elucidate the cultural logic of how local opera achieves "preservation through innovation" in a modern context. The study concludes with practical recommendations, emphasizing the protection of the core status of traditional instruments, guiding the contextualized use of Western instruments, and strengthening collaboration mechanisms between composers and performers.

Keywords: Wuxi Opera, Orchestration, Cultural Identity, Chinese-Western Integration, Ethnomusicology, Heritage Modernization

Introduction

Wuxi Opera (锡剧), a regional operatic tradition rooted in the Jiangnan area of China, holds a significant place in the country's intangible cultural heritage (2005). With its lyrical dialect delivery, expressive vocalism, and localized instrumental configuration, Wuxi Opera embodies the aesthetic values and cultural sensibilities of its geographic origin (Ye Lin, 1953). Among its musical components, the orchestra traditionally centered on a core trio of *zhuhu* (lead huqin), *pipa*, and *yangqin*, functions not only as a sonic backdrop but also as a medium for articulating cultural identity (Zhao Zhijian, 2013).

In recent decades, however, the modernization of stage productions and the increasing incorporation of Western orchestral instruments have brought about a profound transformation in the orchestration practices of Wuxi Opera (interview, Dong, January 3, 2025; Zhu, November 26, 2024). This shift, driven by artistic innovation, audience diversification, and institutional reform, raises critical questions about how changes in instrumentation reflect broader processes of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation (Guo Yansun, 2017). While previous scholarship has extensively examined vocal styles, role types, and dramaturgy in Chinese opera (Yao Gengji, 2011), the role of orchestration as a site of cultural meaning-making remains underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how orchestration mediates the relationship between tradition and innovation, local identity and modern aesthetics in contemporary Wuxi Opera. Drawing on theoretical insights from music morphology (Shen, 2015), style description (Nettl, 1964), music semiotics (Tarasti, 1994), and ethnomusicological models of cultural reinvention (Rice, 1987), the research proposes a multi-dimensional analytical framework. Through score analysis, field interviews, and contextual investigation of representative productions, particularly Huishan Clay Figurines (惠山泥人), this paper examines how instrumental transformation functions not merely as musical development, but as a process of cultural identity construction.

Background

As a prominent regional opera form in southern China, Wuxi Opera (锡剧) originated from Tanhuang (滩簧) folk songs and flourished in cities such as Wuxi, Changzhou, and Suzhou (2005). Known for its accessible musical language and close connection to everyday life, Wuxi Opera traditionally featured a small ensemble, with the zhuhu (lead huqin), pipa, and yangqin forming the core of its instrumentation (Zhao Zhijian, 2013). These instruments not only fulfilled musical functions supporting the vocal line and reinforcing emotional delivery but also evolved into symbols of regional sonic identity, encapsulating the Jiangnan aesthetic (Ye Lin, 1953).

Since the 1980s, however, significant changes have occurred in response to institutional reforms, technological advancements, and shifting audience expectations. Contemporary Wuxi Opera productions have increasingly incorporated Western string and wind instruments, particularly violins, cellos, clarinets, and double basses to enrich the orchestral sound and meet the demands of larger performance venues and multimedia productions (Jiang Qiuxia, 2015). This instrumental transformation is not merely a matter of musical enhancement, it also signals a deeper reconfiguration of cultural expression (Guo Yansun, 2017).

The integration of Western instruments reflects an ongoing negotiation between preserving cultural specificity and adapting to contemporary theatrical aesthetics (Jiang Qiuxia, 2015). On one hand, traditional instrumentation and modal systems represent the cultural and historical essence of the genre. On the other, the inclusion of new instrumental timbres challenges established performance conventions and may gradually dilute regional distinctiveness.

While existing scholarship has thoroughly addressed aspects of vocal performance, dramaturgy, and cultural heritage preservation in Chinese opera (Yao Gengji, 2011), relatively little attention has been paid to orchestration as a site of symbolic and cultural production.

Questions such as how instruments function as semiotic resources in identity formation, and how shifts in orchestration reflect broader cultural transformations, remain under explored.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the transformation of instrumental practices in Wuxi Opera through both theoretical and ethnographic lenses. It argues that orchestration is not a neutral or technical process, but rather a culturally embedded mechanism through which operatic identity is constructed, negotiated, and expressed, particularly under the pressures of modernization, globalization, and regional continuity (Rice, 1987; Tarasti, 1994; Shen, 2015).

Problem Statement

While Wuxi Opera has long been recognized as a significant regional art form that preserves the cultural memory and aesthetic traditions of the Jiangnan region (Ye Lin, 1953), the role of orchestration in shaping its cultural identity remains understudied. Most existing research on Chinese opera focuses on vocal performance, textual analysis, and dramaturgical systems (Yao Gengji, 2011), leaving orchestration treated as either a neutral background element or a technical accompaniment to vocal lines.

However, the transformation of Wuxi Opera's orchestration from its traditional configuration of *zhuhu*, *pipa*, and *yangqin* to more hybrid forms incorporating Western strings and winds has significantly altered the musical and semiotic landscape of the genre. This shift has not only changed the sound aesthetics of Wuxi Opera but also affected the way cultural meaning is conveyed, particularly in relation to regional identity, emotional affect, and audience perception (Jiang Qiuxia, 2015).

Despite its importance, orchestration is rarely examined as a symbolic and identity-bearing mechanism, nor is it analyzed through interdisciplinary frameworks that combine musical analysis, semiotics, and ethnomusicological perspectives (Rice, 1987; Tarasti, 1994). There is currently a lack of theoretical models that can effectively explain how instrumentation functions as a cultural code and how composers and performers negotiate between traditional idioms and modern aesthetics within a changing socio-cultural context.

This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding orchestration as a culturally and ideologically loaded process. It aims to investigate how changes in instrumental practices reflect broader cultural negotiations, particularly in the face of modernization, globalization, and the need for cultural sustainability in regional opera (Shen, 2015; Nettl, 1964). In doing so, the research will reframe orchestration not as a peripheral craft, but as a central axis of cultural identity construction in contemporary Wuxi Opera.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the cultural implications of instrumental transformation in Wuxi Opera by pursuing the following objectives:

- i. **To analyze** the stylistic evolution of orchestration in Wuxi Opera, tracing the shift from traditional ensembles to hybrid Chinese-Western instrumentations, with a focus on representative productions such as Huishan Clay Figurines (*惠山泥人*).
- ii. **To explore** how individual instruments such as the *zhuhu*, *guzheng*, cello, and double bass, function as semiotic tools that articulate regional sound identity and convey emotional nuance in performance.

iii. To examine the perspectives of composers, performers, and audience members regarding the incorporation of Western instruments in Wuxi Opera, and how these views reflect broader tensions between innovation and tradition.

iv. To produce an integrated analytical model for interpreting how musical orchestration operates for preserving, transforming, and transmitting regional cultural identity within the context of modern Chinese opera.

Literature Review

While Wuxi Opera has been well-documented as a regional art form that encapsulates Jiangnan cultural identity (2005), much of the literature remains descriptive and preservationist in tone, focusing on history, role types, vocal styles, and dramaturgy (Yao Gengji, 2011). These studies have been invaluable in documenting the art form's heritage but tend to treat orchestration as a neutral backdrop, failing to interrogate its potential as a symbolic medium for cultural expression.

Recent research addressing modernization in Chinese opera acknowledges the growing use of Western instruments in regional operas and situates this trend within broader processes of cultural adaptation and institutional reform (Jiang Qiuxia, 2015). These studies provide useful accounts of how orchestration has become richer and more technically sophisticated to meet contemporary aesthetic and logistical demands. However, they often adopt a functionalist perspective, prioritizing sonic enhancement and audience appeal, without critically engaging with the ways these changes may also transform or even dilute regional musical identity.

Tarasti's (1994) semiotic theory and Rice's (1987) model of cultural reinvention underscore that musical choices carry layered cultural meanings and mediate between continuity and innovation. Yet these theories have not been systematically applied to the specific case of orchestration in Wuxi Opera. Therefore, in my view, notably absent in the existing literature are in-depth, interdisciplinary analyses that integrate score-based musical analysis, semiotic interpretation, and ethnographic perspectives to understand orchestration as a site of cultural identity construction.

This study addresses these gaps by applying theoretical frameworks from Shen (2015), Nettl (1964), Tarasti (1994), and Rice (1987), integrating them with fieldwork and score analysis. It argues that orchestration is not merely a technical arrangement but a symbolic field where regional identity, cultural memory, and modern aesthetics are negotiated.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design grounded in ethnomusicological inquiry, combining theoretical analysis, score analysis, and field-based data collection to investigate the cultural identity construction embedded in Wuxi Opera orchestration.

Theoretical Framework

Three intersecting theoretical models guide this study:

i. **Descriptive Morphology of Music** (Shen, 2015): This framework focuses on the musical sound itself as the primary object of analysis, supported by related elements such as

instruments and notation. It provides a foundation for structural examination of orchestration through pitch contour, instrumental function, and sound morphology.

ii. Descriptions of Musical Styles (Nettl, 1964): Used to analyze melody, rhythm, form, and harmony across selected works, this method supports comparative studies between traditional and contemporary orchestration styles within Wuxi Opera.

iii. Theory of Musical Semiotics (Tarasti, 1994): This approach is employed to examine the symbolic and functional dimensions of orchestration, particularly how instrumentation conveys narrative meaning through modal logic (e.g., “*must*,” “*can*,” “*know*”) and role relations between composer, performer, and listener.

iv. Cultural Reinvention Model (Rice, 1987): This ethnomusicological framework analyzes the processes of historical construction, social maintenance, and individual creation that shape the transformation of instrumentation in cultural practice.

Research Approach

This study adopts a **multi-method qualitative design** comprising the following components:

i. Score Analysis: Historical and contemporary scores including those of Huishan Clay Figurines are analyzed to trace orchestration changes. Elements such as instrumental layering, harmonic function, and modal development are examined using musicological methods.

ii. Fieldwork and Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews with composers, musicians, and directors (e.g., Dong Qiming, Zhu Xiaochuan, Liu Junqi, Huang Jinghui) provide insight into creative decisions and aesthetic considerations. Audience members are also consulted through focus groups to understand reception and perception of instrumental transformations.

iii. Audio-Visual Documentation: Live performances are recorded to study instrumental integration. These materials are also used for reflexive analysis of emotional effect and cultural coding.

iv. Archival and Media Analysis: Institutional archives, program notes, and media reviews are examined to contextualize the sociocultural conditions under which orchestration practices evolve. This includes examining policy influences, funding mechanisms, and aesthetic expectations.

Data Analysis

This study employs a multi-dimensional cross-analytical methodology that integrates theoretical frameworks with ethnographic data to uncover how orchestration in Wuxi Opera constructs and translates cultural identity between tradition and modernity. The analysis includes the following four components:

Musical Content Analysis

Based on musical scores, this analysis focuses on elements such as rhythm, modality, texture, and pitch range. These formal parameters are cross-referenced with descriptions of musical behavior recorded in interviews and field notes to build an analytical matrix.

The study centers on representative excerpts from specific scenes (e.g., *Huishan Clay Figurines*), analyzing how instrumental arrangement contributes to emotional progression, thematic development, and the construction of dramatic scenarios. By comparing the roles

of traditional and Western instruments in melodic leadership, harmonic support, and timbral coloration, the study clarifies their respective positions within the overall narrative structure.

Cross-Repertoire Comparative Analysis

Two representative works are selected for horizontal comparison: the traditional classic *Meng Lijun* and the contemporary original *Huishan Clay Figurines*. The comparison focuses on the following aspects:

- i. Differences in instrumentation (traditional all-Chinese orchestration vs. hybrid Chinese-Western orchestration);
- ii. The role of orchestration strategies in emotional expression and scene transition;
- iii. Continuities and innovations in relation to traditional musical models.

This comparative approach reveals the historical and stylistic evolution of orchestration strategies and reflects how different generations of creators understand musical expressivity and cultural representation.

Instrumental Function Analysis

Drawing on Eero Tarasti's theory of musical modalities, this component interprets orchestration as a symbolic mode of cultural expression. It analyzes the functional roles of different instrumental combinations in specific scenes.

The six modalities *being, doing, can, must, will, and know* are used to classify the following:

- i. The emotional guidance functions of strings and winds in various dramatic contexts;
- ii. The reinforcement of stage rhythm and emotional intensity by plucked and percussion instruments;
- iii. The symbolic cultural identity embedded in specific instruments (e.g., *guzheng*).

This method facilitates the transformation of musicological analysis into cultural interpretation by identifying how instrumental timbres participate in meaning-making and identity construction.

Cultural Identity Analysis

Using Thomas Rice's model of cultural reinvention, this section links instrumental transformation to mechanisms of cultural identity formation. The analysis is framed across three dimensions: historical construction, social maintenance, and individual creation. It addresses the following key issues:

- i. Differences in audience reception and emotional resonance with hybrid instrumentations across generational lines;
- ii. How composers, performers, and musicians negotiate the balance between traditional and modern orchestrational choices in practice;
- iii. How instrumental usage responds to national cultural policies, institutional production systems, and the needs for sustainable development of local cultural heritage.

This approach emphasizes that music is not an isolated or autonomous system but is a culturally embedded practice situated within broader social and symbolic structures.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants. Cultural sensitivity was observed by maintaining anonymity and respecting the community-based knowledge practices of Wuxi Opera practitioners.

Results and Discussion

This section, grounded in score analysis, ethnographic interviews, and performance observation, presents key findings on the transformation of orchestration in Wuxi Opera. These findings are interpreted through the lens of the previously discussed theoretical framework. The results are organized into four thematic dimensions, each addressing how orchestral changes manifest and acquire significance in relation to cultural identity, aesthetic renewal, audience reception, and dramatic function.

Instrumental Transformation and Regional Identity

Field interviews revealed that many practitioners perceive orchestration not only as an aesthetic device but as a marker of cultural identity. As Zhu Xiaochuan (interview, November 26, 2024) stated, “Even with the inclusion of Western instruments, the *zhuhú*, *pipa*, and *yangqin* still serve as the backbone of the vocal accompaniment. Without them, it would no longer sound like Wuxi Opera.” This perspective reflects the significance of maintaining traditional instrumental elements as cultural signifiers, aligning with Tarasti’s (1994) notion that certain timbres become symbolic codes within semiotic musical systems.

At the same time, interviewees such as Liu Junqi emphasized the functional diversity of the *zhuhú* versus the *erhu*. The *zhuhú*, with its brighter tone and focused resonance, leads melodic contours, while the *erhu*, suited for lyrical elaboration, takes on a more expressive role. Their coexistence represents a layered soundscape that retains traditional identity while expanding expressive capability.

Integration of Western Instruments and Modern Aesthetic Demands

One of the most consistent themes across interviews and performance observations was the strategic use of Western instruments, especially cello, double bass, and clarinet to enrich harmonic support and low-end resonance. According to Dong Qiming (interview, January 3, 2025), “The use of cello and double bass provides stability and enhances emotional weight, especially in modern scenes requiring dramatic tension.” This aligns with Rice’s (1987) “social maintenance” function, whereby orchestration evolves to meet contemporary audience expectations while still sustaining core cultural memory.

In Huishan Clay Figurines, score analysis revealed deliberate timbral contrasts: Scene 1, Piece 5 used the clarinet at a slow tempo to reflect melancholic mood, while the same melody in Scene 5, Piece 8 was interpreted with the *guzheng* and a faster tempo to convey nostalgia and resilience. As the *guzheng* performer, the author noted that “changing instrumentation on a shared theme enhances emotional variation and audience perception.” This supports Shen’s (2015) emphasis on descriptive morphology as a tool for analyzing how instrumental choices shape narrative affect.

Audience Reception and Identity Continuity

While younger audiences expressed appreciation for the fuller sound enabled by Western instruments, elder viewers often emphasized their emotional attachment to traditional sounds. Pan Hua (interview, December 3, 2024) observed that older audiences “listen for the texture of the *erhu* and the flavor of the past.” This divide illustrates Rice’s (1987) third level individual creation where identity is constructed through personal memory and experiential listening.

Lu Yilun (interview, November 26, 2024) further emphasized the need to balance innovation and tradition in programming: “A repertoire like Meng Lijun offers cultural grounding, while newer productions like Huishan Clay Figurines provide stylistic renewal.” His view reflects Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity not in a colonial sense, but as a site of cultural negotiation, where traditions are not displaced but rearticulated.

Functional Roles and Dramaturgical Symbolism

Western instruments in Wuxi Opera orchestration serve distinct dramaturgical functions. Cello and double bass frequently establish harmonic grounding, especially in transitions between scenes. The woodwinds (clarinet, oboe, flute) offer textural contrast and are particularly effective in night scenes, rural settings, and psychological introspection (Mei Ruikun, interview, January 3, 2025).

Traditional percussion instruments, such as the *tanggu drum* and *bangzi*, continue to play a central role in maintaining rhythm and advancing the drama. Zhu Xiaochuan points out, “Percussion is sometimes adjusted on the spot according to the actors' performance.” This shows that the instrumentation is not a fixed format, but rather a narrative mechanism with immediacy and interactivity.

Summary: These findings suggest that instrumental transformation in Wuxi Opera functions as a multi-layered cultural mechanism: it mediates aesthetic continuity, supports dramatic symbolism, and reflects broader social adaptation processes. The orchestration is not merely a musical choice but a semiotic field in which tradition, innovation, and identity co-exist and evolve. It affirms that, rather than erasing the past, new instrumental practices in Wuxi Opera are reframing heritage in the language of the present.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that orchestration in Wuxi Opera is not merely a technical arrangement of instruments but a dynamic cultural mechanism through which regional identity, aesthetic values, and historical narratives are constructed and conveyed. By employing a multi-theoretical framework including Shen Qia’s *Descriptive Morphology of Music* (2015), Nettl’s style analysis (1964), Tarasti’s *Musical Semiotics* (1994), and Rice’s reinvention model (1987). This research has shown that shifts in instrumental practices reflect not only musical development but also deeper cultural negotiations between tradition and modernity.

Key findings highlight that while traditional instruments such as the *zhuhu*, *pipa*, and *yangqin* remain central to maintaining the Jiangnan aesthetic, the selective incorporation of Western instruments, particularly violins, cellos, clarinets, and double basses has expanded the expressive capacity of the orchestra and aligned it more closely with the emotional demands of contemporary stage drama (Guo Yansun, 2017). These changes have been recognized by composers such as Mei Ruikun and performers such as Liu Junqi, who emphasized the need to balance sonic innovation with cultural authenticity. As Liu remarked in a 2024 interview, “the zhuhu still anchors the soul of Wuxi Opera, but new instruments allow us to paint with more colors, especially in larger venues and complex narratives.”

However, the research also reveals critical tensions. The integration of Western instrumentation risks diluting regional musical characteristics if not carefully contextualized. Several interviewees including Dong Qiming (2025) and Huang Jinghui (2024) stressed that the purpose of orchestration should always remain rooted in “serving the voice and the story.” Additionally, the increased reliance on notated scores and institutionalized training models threatens the oral and improvisational dimensions of Wuxi Opera’s instrumental tradition.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Preserve Core Instrumental Identity

Maintain the central role of traditional instruments in Wuxi Opera orchestration by ensuring their prominence in new productions and training programs. Digital archiving projects should prioritize recordings of these instruments in performance contexts to document stylistic nuances and oral traditions.

ii. Contextual Integration of Western Instruments

Develop explicit guidelines for integrating Western instruments that align with the dramaturgical and emotional needs of specific scenes. As Tarasti (1994) suggested, musical choices must reflect modal logic (e.g., “must” vs. “can”) rather than mere technical availability.

iii. Promote Ethnographic and Comparative Research

Support comparative studies with other regional operas (e.g., 越剧 Yueju, 黄梅戏 Huangmei) to uncover broader trends in orchestration transformation and identity formation. These could provide models for sustainable innovation that remain rooted in local aesthetics.

iv. Institutional Policy and Community Involvement

Advocate for government funding and institutional support that prioritize cultural sustainability. Policies should promote community engagement in production processes, ensuring that modernization does not override tradition but evolves alongside it echoing Rice’s (1987) model of reinvention as a dialogue between historical construction, social maintenance, and individual creation.

In conclusion, orchestration in Wuxi Opera represents a powerful nexus of musical form and cultural meaning. Its transformation under modernization is not simply a technical shift, but a symbolic one redefining what it means to sound “Jiangnan” in a globalized age. Future studies and productions must remain critically aware of this duality, fostering innovation without sacrificing identity.

Theoretical and Contextual Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the theoretical understanding of orchestration as a site of cultural identity construction in Chinese regional opera. By integrating Shen Qia’s *Descriptive Morphology of Music* (2015), Nettl’s style analysis (1964), Tarasti’s *Musical Semiotics* (1994), and Rice’s model of *Cultural Reinvention* (1987), the paper proposes an interdisciplinary analytical framework that goes beyond conventional musicological or ethnographic treatments. Unlike prior studies that treat orchestration as a technical layer or

background sound, this research foregrounds instrumentation as a semiotic and cultural process through which meaning is encoded, negotiated, and rearticulated on stage.

Contextually, the paper expands the discourse on regional opera modernization by presenting Wuxi Opera not only as an object of heritage preservation but also as an evolving medium for cultural negotiation under globalization and institutional change. It situates the transformation of instrumental practice within broader societal dynamics such as aesthetic policy shifts, generational tastes, and media-driven staging demands, thereby bridging the gap between musical form and socio-cultural function.

In doing so, the research provides a replicable model for future studies in other opera forms and culturally embedded musical genres facing similar pressures of transformation. It affirms that orchestration is not just a matter of sound, but a culturally strategic act central to the future sustainability of traditional performing arts.

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