

# How Can the Social Media Platform WeChat Be Used to Promote the Declining Yunnan HuaDeng Opera?



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**A Research Project submitted to Auckland University of Technology in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Cultural  
and Creative Practice  
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## IMAGES OF HUADENG OPERA



*Figure 1. An elder recording a Huadeng opera performance. Photographed by Yadan Zheng in Zhuan Xin outdoor market, Kunming, Yunnan, 2017.*



## IMAGE OF HUADENG OPERA



*Figure 2. An actor prepares for a Huadeng opera performance. Photograph: Yadan Zheng in Zhuan Xin outdoor market, Kunming, Yunnan, 2018.*



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*Figure 3. An actress performs Huadeng opera on stage. Photographed by Yadan Zheng in Zhuan Xin outdoor market, Kunming, Yunnan, 2017.*



## IMAGE OF HUADENG OPERA



*Figure 4. A Huadeng opera musician plays the Chinese national instrument, a Zhongruan. Photographed by Yadan Zheng in Zhuan Xin outdoor market, Kunming, Yunnan, 2017.*



## IMAGE OF HUADENG OPERA



*Figure 5. The famous Huadeng opera singer Meihuai Yang performing in the Huadeng opera at Green Lake Park, Photographed by Yadan Zheng, Green Lake Park, Kunming, Yunnan. 2018.*



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## ABSTRACT

This study theorises that cultural self-contempt and negative media influences have contributed to the decline of the Huadeng opera. It also finds that these negative influences might be overcome through the use of modern communication and technology.

Given the rapid development of Chinese society, the growth of technology may also be beneficial for the country's struggling cultural heritage. Those who desire to protect traditional art forms can now access more financial and technological support. The WeChat social-media platform shows a positive side of technology that can be employed to help revitalize traditional culture.

In the new millennium, knowledge of Huadeng opera is based more on oral communication and participation than it was in the past. Thus, while it is undeniable that Huadeng opera is losing popularity at the moment with the cultural change in the tastes of the younger generation, the employment of the internet to spread information, digitising and archiving will be useful in protecting and saving, or at least slowing down, the speed of decline of Huadeng opera. The WeChat official account is just the beginning of the use of social media to promote Huadeng opera. For the future development of Huadeng opera, the relevant institutions need to pay more attention to this traditional art form.

The historical value and importance of Huadeng opera is clearly evident in the literature, and it remains very popular among senior citizens, representing good memories from when they were young. That generation built the country we live in today, and protecting their interests as well as inheritance is an important focus of senior welfare protection, and a focus of this study. Hopefully, the younger generation will also realise the value of Huadeng opera and keep it alive in the future with the support of lively, informative communication technology such as WeChat.

In this research, I have applied an ethnographic case study, and observations and reviews of the relevant literature to help me better understand the Huadeng opera. Interviews, photography and video footage were also combined in a video I produced to more effectively explore and analyse the subject matter, and to detail the history and influence of Huadeng opera.



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## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature

The image shows a handwritten signature in black ink. The characters are '郑雅丹' (Zheng Yadan), written in a cursive style. The first character '郑' is on the left, followed by '雅' in the middle, and '丹' on the right.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to my supervisors Dr Ella Henry, who generously helped me with this project.

Thanks also to Elwyn Sheehan for helping me to find journals and for reference checking and proofreading.

Anna Miles encouraged me to choose this homebound project for the one and half year Master of Cultural and Creative Practice studies, so thanks to her and to Rachel Carley for always being so supportive of my studies.

I am writing this project not only for marks but also because I want to use all I have learned here to find my cultural roots in amazing Yunnan.

### Third Party Copyright Material

All photographs and footage used in the research belong to the researcher, except footages from 02:54:10 to 03:58:22 and 06:51:12 to 07:10:12, provided by Li Yuan Zhang.

### Ethics

Ethics approval was not needed, as the people who agreed to being interviewed are experts in their field of the HuaDeng Opera.

### Confidential Material

No confidential material was used.



## 1. Introduction

Chinese opera is a rich art form that incorporates literature, language, dance, music, martial arts and acrobatics. The various regions of China have different forms of opera, one of which is the historic Huadeng opera in Yunnan province. Yunnan is the most diverse province in China, and it is the regional features and variety of cultures there that make the Huadeng opera so unique and special. Going to the opera is a popular leisure activity for people living in this border province and serves as a unifying medium for its different ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, with the fast development of the economy and society in China in recent decades and the impacts of globalisation and rapid economic growth, the Huadeng opera has been in decline. On the positive side though, the new technology of social media platforms may be able to support this valuable, traditional art form. WeChat has become one of the biggest social media platforms in China, and this study will explore how this modern technology and communication strategy might be used to promote the Huadeng opera. It may create new interest and encourage more people to become involved in the protection of their local heritage. This research illustrates the importance of the Huadeng opera to Yunnan province and a possible solution to the problem of its declining popularity in the contemporary era.

This research project will attempt to answer the question of how the social media platform WeChat can be used to promote the declining Yunnan Huadeng opera. To create new interest through the WeChat platform and promote Huadeng opera in the contemporary era, this study will draw on ethnographic research and visual and material culture studies for a case study, and also review relevant literature while using observation, interviews, photography and videos as the research methods to address the research question.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Brief History

China covers about 9.6 million square kilometres.<sup>1</sup> This massive geographical area, along with China's large population, provides plentiful artistic material for China's rich culture. Opera is an important art form in Chinese culture. The Beijing opera is well known all over the world, but it is not the only type of opera in China,<sup>2</sup> which has around 360 different types.<sup>3</sup> Throughout China's long history many ethnic groups have lived in different places around the country, practising distinct lifestyles. This cultural diversity created an array of opera types with regional features.

According to the historical record, Yunnan Huadeng opera was first performed at the She Huo Festival, a religious ceremony celebrating the god of land and fire.<sup>4</sup> After the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Huadeng opera became a regional opera form.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2 The Diversity of Huadeng opera

Yunnan is located in southwestern China and borders Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. With a population of almost forty-six million it is the most ethnically diverse province in China.<sup>6</sup> Of the fifty-six ethnic groups in China, twenty-six are represented in Yunnan.<sup>7</sup> These ethnic groups have their own special cultural practices, and many have adapted and produced their own forms of HuaDeng opera, utilizing different dialects depending on the locale and the different instruments, costumes and plots according to local norms. The flexibility of Huadeng opera is reflected in its ability to take on different regional features to appeal to different ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> State Council, "Guo qing," [National conditions], People's Republic of China, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Thorpe, "Transforming Tradition: Performances of Jingju ('Beijing Opera') in the UK," *Theatre Research International* 36 (2011): 33–46.

<sup>3</sup> Changhong Yan, *20 shi ji Zhong guo she hui sheng huo bian qian shi* [History of Chinese social life changing in 20th century] (Beijing: Ren Min Chu Ban She, 2007), 360.

<sup>4</sup> Di Zhu, "Yunnan hua deng ge wu de biao yan xing shi ji wen hua te zheng," [Artistic form and cultural characteristics of Yunnan Huadeng opera] *Ming Zu Yin Yue* 2 (2017): 52–53.

<sup>5</sup> People's Government of Yunnan Province, "Yunnan hua deng xi," [Yunnan hua deng opera] People's Government of Yunnan Province, December 29, 2011, accessed September 28, 2017, [http://www.yn.gov.cn/yn\\_yngk//yn\\_whzy/201112/t20111229\\_2677.html](http://www.yn.gov.cn/yn_yngk//yn_whzy/201112/t20111229_2677.html)

<sup>6</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, "Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China on Major Figures of the 2010 Population Census [1] (No. 2)," National Bureau of Statistics, People's Republic of China, April 29, 2011, [https://web.archive.org/web/20130727021210/http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110429\\_402722516.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20130727021210/http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110429_402722516.htm) (accessed December 25, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> ZhiJin Shen, *Yunnan shao shu min zu di qu de xian dai hua fa zhan* [Development of modernization in Yunnan minority areas] (Beijing: Min Zu Chu Ban She, 2000), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Bas Verchuuren et al., *Sacred Natural Sites Conserving Nature and Culture* (London: Earthscan, 2010), 99.

## 2.3 The Importance of Huadeng opera

In Yunnan province Huadeng opera is an essential part of local culture. According to the anthropological theory of theatre, an event such as an opera represents a transition of certain cultural values and allows for the study of people's sociocultural and physiological behaviour in a performance situation.<sup>9</sup> Huadeng opera showcases many of the diverse elements of Chinese culture through storytelling. It reflects society and its moral standards at different times, serving as an encyclopedia of Yunnan traditions.<sup>10</sup> The stories of Huadeng opera are diverse and include mythical, social, historical and modern tales. Many of the operas feature local customs and moral lessons.

## 2.4 The Crisis of Huadeng opera

As a traditional form of artistic performance, Huadeng opera has faced a decline in recent years. In 1949 China had 360 different forms of traditional opera; in 2004, when last calculated, this number had decreased to 260.<sup>11</sup> In the 1980s, Yunnan still had seventy to eighty active Huadeng opera groups but by 2017 only eight groups remained.<sup>12</sup> During the twentieth century, China's priority was to recover from the trauma of World War II and rebuild the economy. As China adapted to social changes and growing influences from other societies, the preservation of its own cultural heritage became less important. As a result, Huadeng opera become less popular. Seventy-two-year-old Huadeng opera director ZhengCai said, "It's getting worse every year, we moved seven stages already, it's getting smaller each time."<sup>13</sup>

## 2.5 One Possible Solution

Preserving traditional culture is not only an issue for opera in Yunnan province, but also a matter of worldwide concern.<sup>14</sup> The growth of technology like WeChat may be the saving

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<sup>9</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6–20.

<sup>10</sup> Yunlin Huang, *2007 nian Yunnan dian ju hua deng fa zhan nian du bao gao* [An annual report on the development of Yunnan dian-opera and huadeng-opera in 2007], (Yunnan: Yunnan University Press, 2007), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Heping Zhou, "Zhongguo fei wu zhi wen hua yi chan bao hu de shi jian yu tan suo," [Practice and exploration of the protection in Chinese intangible cultural heritage] *Qiu Shi* 4 (2010), accessed, November 12, 2017, [http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2010/201004/201002/t20100209\\_20814.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2010/201004/201002/t20100209_20814.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Yong Zhang, Weidong Ren, "Tou shi Yunnan dian ju Hua deng yi shu fa zhan xian zhuang: Dian ge ji qu qi sheng he," [Perspective of Yunnan Dian opera and Huadeng opera development status] *Guangming Online*, January 8, 2017, accessed October 17, 2017, [http://news.gmw.cn/2017-01/08/content\\_23424484.htm](http://news.gmw.cn/2017-01/08/content_23424484.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Yu Song, "Yunnan hua deng ju xian kun jing yan yuan hou ji wu ren guan zhong xing qu," [The predicament of Yunnan Huadeng opera] Cao Kao Xiao Xi, January 15, 2016, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/china/20160115/1053587.shtml>

<sup>14</sup> Zhilan Xu, "UNESCO wen hua duo yang xing li nian dui shi jie yi chan ti xi de ying xiang" [World heritage and the UNESCO concept of cultural diversity] (PhD diss., Tsinghua University, 2012), 168.



grace for Huadeng opera. Technology gives people the opportunity to conveniently access information according to their needs.<sup>15</sup> Various approaches have been adopted to preserve and promote cultural values internationally.

One possible solution for preserving Huadeng opera is to combine traditional culture and contemporary technology. Huadeng opera must be promoted on a platform that reaches a contemporary audience, renewing interest in the art form so as to preserve it. China has 1.398 billion residents; 938 million use WeChat.<sup>16,17</sup> The popularity of WeChat could be harnessed to share Huadeng opera with social media users through phones and the Internet. Since WeChat has such a large user base, promoting Huadeng opera on this platform could help to create new interest in it as a lively, modern art form for the contemporary era.

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<sup>15</sup> Weimin Li, Zhengbo Ye, and Qun Jin, *Future Information Technology*, ed. James J. (Jong Hyuk) Park et al. (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014), 83.

<sup>16</sup> State Council, “Zhong hua ren min gong he guo 2017 nian guo min jing ji he she hui fa zhan bao gao,” [The statistical bulletin of the People’s Republic of China on national economic and social development in 2017] State Council, People’s Republic of China, February 28, 2018, accessed March 12, 2018, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-02/28/content\\_5269506.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-02/28/content_5269506.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Tencent, “Teng xun gong bu 2017 nian di yi ji du ye ji,” [Tencent announces first quarter 2017 results] Tencent, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.tencent.com/zh-cn/articles/8003431495014482.pdf>

### 3. Methodology

Using ethnographic research and visual and material culture studies, this study will incorporate a case study method, which will include a literature review, observation, interviews, photography and video to explore the topic and possible strategies for revitalizing Huadeng opera.

#### 3.1 Ethnographic Research

Ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviours and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organisations, and communities.<sup>18</sup> People who share a culture and certain interests become a community to some extent.<sup>19</sup> Communities usually have different layers, but certain traits are shared by all members of a community.<sup>20</sup> People who perform or watch Huadeng opera in the Yunnan province are a community distinguished by their interest in this art form.

In order to promote Huadeng opera via modern technology like WeChat, the author conducted field research in communities of Huadeng opera performers in SongMing, YaoAn and Yiliang. The author observed, interviewed, photographed and filmed HuaDeng opera performers and performances. By observing and communicating with the performers, the value of social interaction, behaviours, beliefs and perceptions can be identified,<sup>21</sup> providing a bridge to connect Huadeng opera and the general public, which can then be used to provoke interest in and an increased awareness of HuaDeng opera.

#### 3.2 Visual and Material Culture Studies

Huadeng opera has a long history. It is defined not only by a specific type of performance, but also by special costumes, instruments, props, music and dialect. These elements support the storytelling in Huadeng opera, which combines visual and auditory elements to increase the audience's understanding. In this project, it is important to understand the meaning of the elements of Huadeng opera, as well as how this influences the art form and affects its performance.

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<sup>18</sup> Scott Reeves, Ayelet Kuper, Brian David Hodges, "Qualitative Research Methodologies: Ethnography," *British Medical Journal*, 337 (August 7, 2008): 1-3, accessed May 3, 2018. <https://search.proquest.com/openview/3441a66af2194aacd111fccd696f6453/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2040978>.

<sup>19</sup> Phil Bartle, "What Is Community?: A Sociological Perspective," *Community Empowerment Collective*, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://cec.vcn.bc.ca/cmp/whatcom.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Kun He, Sucheta Soundarajan, Xuezhong Cao, John Hopcroft, and Menglong Huang, "Revealing Multiple Layers of Hidden Community Structure in Networks," pre-print, submitted January 23, 2015, accessed February 12, 2018, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1501.05700v1.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Gjoko Muratovski, *Research for Designers: A Guide to Methods and Practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 56.

Images and video can be used to promote Huadeng opera. Furthermore, understanding the relationship between individuals and Huadeng opera makes it easier to share the opera's action, emotion and meaning with potential audience members, possibly sparking their interest.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.3 Case Study

Case studies can be used to test hypotheses. In the social science literature, most case studies feature descriptions that are complex and holistic and involve a myriad of not highly isolated variables and a writing style that is informal, perhaps a narrative, possibly with verbatim quotations, illustrations, and even allusions and metaphor.<sup>23</sup> In this research project, the case study information will be collected from different areas in the region. This will provide insights into ways of thinking about preserving cultural heritage.

### 3.4 Literature Review

A literature review is an important part of any research project as it helps the researchers to identify knowledge already available in the field of study, including theories, key variables, history and other important phenomena.<sup>24</sup> For this project, an understanding of the history of Huadeng opera and theories about the art form reveals sources on specific related topics or issues. This will demonstrate why Yunnan Huadeng opera has been declining in recent years and the importance of Huadeng opera in Yunnan province, including its historical, social, and cultural significance. It is helpful to collect a broad range of data and information as evidence of sufficient research. All published information about Huadeng opera, whether in books, magazines, newspapers, journals or websites, can be used to analyse its current status and identify the problems that must be overcome for the future development of Huadeng opera in Yunnan.

### 3.5 Observation

To observe the Huadeng opera community, the researcher engaged in the community's activities and obtain audio/video recordings, photographs and artifacts that can provide an insight into community members' thinking and behaviour.<sup>25</sup> The information collected during the observation phase may be used to analyse or create promotional material at a later stage.

### 3.6 Interviews

The ideas, opinions and attitudes of the people of Yunnan will affect the future of Huadeng opera. In this study, interviews used to collect data and learn about the history, theory and philosophy underpinning the Huadeng opera to shape the direction of the research that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 159–62.

<sup>23</sup> Robert E. Stake, "The Case Study Method in Social Inquiry," *Educational Researcher* 2 (1978): 7, accessed May 3, 2018, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0013189X007002005>.

<sup>24</sup> Justus J. Randolph, "A Guide to Writing the Dissertation Literature Review," *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 14 (June 13, 2009): 1–13.

<sup>25</sup> Muratovski, *Research for Designers*, 58.

follows. The interviews will also reflect the changes that Huadeng opera performers have experienced from the beginning of their careers until the present; these changes may indicate differences in social interaction between the Huadeng opera players and society.<sup>26</sup> The interviews may be adapted into stories about members of the Huadeng opera community to be shared as part of WeChat promotions, with their permission.

### 3.7 Photography and Video

In Huadeng opera, costumes and props are important tools for storytelling. For example, the colour of face paint and the way a fan is held can convey different meanings about a character's status and the mood of the piece. These details can be used as foreshadowing in a play.<sup>27</sup> Photography and video can be archived to help preserve the tradition of Huadeng opera. Furthermore, the analysis of content can be used for visual culture studies related to mass media,<sup>28</sup> and to produce a strategy for promoting Huadeng opera on social media platforms.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>27</sup> Hui Liu, "Yunnan hua deng 'wai' de dong lv te zheng," ["Wai" characteristics of Yunnan huadeng opera] *Da Zhong Wen Yi*, 21 (2013), accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotatDZLU201321043.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Muratovski, *Research for Designers*, 161.

## 4. Concept and Development

### 4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the way the research has been developed in terms of outputs that address the research question, and is combined to produce possible solutions and strategies for the Huadeng opera.

### 4.2 The Short Video

A short video about Huadeng opera was created to introduce and promote the art form and give viewers background information. The purpose of this short video was to increase awareness of Huadeng opera. Combining words and images in such a message is meaningful and culturally important to Huadeng opera.<sup>29</sup>

### 4.3 Video Content

Focusing on the community of the people of Yunnan to build a connection with Huadeng opera is the key to increasing local awareness about the art form.<sup>30</sup> Huadeng opera is an essential part of many elders' lives in Yunnan. They recall the singing and dancing of Huadeng opera music with their friends in the local square when they were young, try to learn new Huadeng operas, or work hard to save money to see a big show. Based on the author's field research, 95% of the audience of Huadeng opera in Yunnan is elderly.

Sharing an elder's story about the Huadeng opera will help potential audience members feel connected to the art form. The author created a video centred on the story of her grandmother and her experience with Huadeng opera. The author's grandmother has been a Huadeng opera fan for fifty years, and she became a Huadeng opera actress when she retired. She still goes to Huadeng shows and participates in performances. The author believes that highlighting her story will remind younger generations of their own grandparents or parents and help them connect with Huadeng opera.

Black Dragon Pool Park, the ancient town of Guandu, Green Lake Park and Zhuanxi outdoor market in Kunming were chosen as shooting locations for the video because Huadeng opera performances have taken place in all these locations. Using local dialect and familiar Yunnan locations also enhance the feeling of connection created by the video.

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Martin Lester, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), vii.

<sup>30</sup> Nico Schulenkorf and Deborah Edwards, "Maximizing Positive Social Impacts: Strategies for Sustaining and Leveraging the Benefits of Intercommunity Sport Events in Divided Societies," *Journal of Sport Management* 26 (2012): 379–90.



## 4.4 WeChat

The WeChat official account is designed to enable communication and interaction between the developer and reader.<sup>31</sup> The account also links with a QQ account. QQ is another popular social platform in China; there were 861 million QQ users in 2017.<sup>32</sup> Through the official Huadeng opera WeChat account, the account operator will use text, pictures, voice messages and video to create a mainstream online and offline interactive marketing platform. The account will also feature updated events, stories and information about Huadeng opera, collect feedback and provide a platform for people who are interested in Huadeng opera to create an online social space and find their community.

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<sup>31</sup> Tencent, "Gong zhong ping tai," [Official account] Tencent, accessed January 2, 2018, [http://kf.qq.com/product/weixinmp.html#hid=hot\\_faq](http://kf.qq.com/product/weixinmp.html#hid=hot_faq) (

<sup>32</sup> Tencent, "Teng xun gong bu 2017 nian di yi ji du ye ji," [Tencent announces first quarter 2017 results] Tencent, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.tencent.com/zh-cn/articles/8003431495014482.pdf> (

## 5. Results & Findings

### 5.1 Literature Review

Various approaches have been adopted in an attempt to preserve and promote traditional cultural art forms around the world. The interaction between audience and players could be used to enhance the popular understanding of an art form and to promote it to the audience.<sup>33</sup> Precedents for the use of new media to promote traditional culture are found in the use of visual media in Indian and Inuit contexts.<sup>34 35</sup> Among the new media methods deployed for this purpose, game design offers one promising direction. Video games provide a visual language for transferring knowledge through images and animation, integrating art, craft and story in instructions and gameplay. Consider *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy*, a video game released in 2017, which sold 596,000 units in the first week following its release.<sup>36</sup> It tells the story of a female treasure hunter, Chloe Frazer, who embarks on a quest to find the remains of the lost ancient Hoysola Empire in India.<sup>37</sup> Through the gameplay, traditional India culture is accurately illustrated and explained, educating people about protecting their heritage. The rich cultural source material also enhances the quality of the game. Similar combinations of traditional culture and contemporary technology may create interest in HuaDeng Opera.

The use of technology to preserve traditional heritage, culture, arts and crafts can also be found in Zimbabwe, where contemporary musicians have combined new instruments with traditional music and dance, organizing competitions and festivals to promote traditional music forms.<sup>38</sup> In Europe too there have been similar innovations. In 2015, for example, the RICHES project (short for Renewal, Innovation and Change: Heritage and European

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<sup>33</sup> Ji Soo Yi, Youn ah Kang, John T. Stasko, Julie A. Jacko, "Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Role of Interaction in Information Visualization," *IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics* 13, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 2007): 1224-1231, accessed January 2, 2018, <https://ieeexplore-ieee-org.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/document/4376144/>

<sup>34</sup> Simon Parkin, "Never Alone: Could a Video Game Help to Preserve Inuit Culture?" *The New Yorker* November 17, 2014, accessed February 22, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/never-alone-video-game-help-preserve-inuit-culture>

<sup>35</sup> Saptarshi Kolay, "Cultural Heritage Preservation of Traditional Indian Art through Virtual New-Media," Conservation of Architectural Heritage, Luxor, 23-27 November 2015, accessed February 2, 2018, [https://ac.elscdn.com/S1877042816307157/1-s2.0-S1877042816307157-main.pdf?\\_tid=408541b0-44fa-4919-b088-710b5f91c0e3&acdnat=1524351112\\_b382b812d8f69cbaf46ba93580b08e5a](https://ac.elscdn.com/S1877042816307157/1-s2.0-S1877042816307157-main.pdf?_tid=408541b0-44fa-4919-b088-710b5f91c0e3&acdnat=1524351112_b382b812d8f69cbaf46ba93580b08e5a).

<sup>36</sup> William D'Angelo, "Uncharted: The Lost Legacy Sells an Estimated 596,000 Units First Week at Retail – Sales," *VGChartz* October 12, 2017, October 12, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <http://www.vgchartz.com/article/269792/uncharted-the-lost-legacy-sells-an-estimated-596000-units-first-week-at-retail/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ewan Moore, "Uncharted 4's New Story Chapter Is Coming, Here's What We Know," *UNILAD* December 15, 2016, December 15, 2016, accessed January 2, 2018, <https://www.unilad.co.uk/gaming/uncharted-4s-new-story-chapter-is-coming-heres-what-we-know/>.

<sup>38</sup> "Using Technology to Promote Culture," *The Herald*, June 20, 2016, accessed January 20, 2018, <https://www.herald.co.zw/using-technology-to-promote-culture/>.

Society)<sup>39</sup> made creative use of new technologies to build on traditional craft skills and knowledge in England, the Netherlands and Romania. Using additive manufacturing and laser cutting to achieve goals of efficiency, creativity, interactivity and customisation in the craft industry,<sup>40</sup> the project had both cultural and economic benefits. Keeping traditional culture alive and active meant making changes and adding new elements based on modern technologies.

Seeking cooperation with appropriate organizations is another way of building links between tradition and the wider world. The rapid development and modernization of society has led to the loss of many cultural traditions around the world. For example, the NGO Pasifika Renaissance has been involved in a number of initiatives to protect the traditional culture of the Pacific islands.<sup>41</sup> The projects include documentation, research and providing technical assistance to relevant agencies and organizations, as well as promoting tourism to the islands.

These positive experiences provide useful literature to consider when adapting new technology and cooperative initiatives to promote Huadeng opera. Before becoming a socialist state in 1949, China had spent 9000 years as an agricultural society,<sup>42</sup> and the agricultural population remains large.<sup>43</sup> Urbanization after 1949 caused a substantial part of the agricultural population to start moving to the city, taking their traditional art forms, such as Huadeng opera, with them. But as an essentially rural art form, the popularity of HuaDeng Opera is still overwhelmingly rural.<sup>44</sup> While it endures in its rural home-setting, China's rapid development has not given it enough time to adapt to the challenges of modern media, primarily television and the internet.<sup>45</sup>

The most important feature of Huadeng opera is its ethnic diversity; it is a reflection of a variety of ethnic cultural consciousnesses.<sup>46</sup> Because of the diversity of Yunnan province,

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<sup>39</sup> Amalia Sabiescu, Martin Woolley, Charlotte Waelde, Catherine Cummings, Wayne Modest, Saskia Konniger, Meia Wippo and Dick van Dijk, *The Use of Craft Skills in New Contexts* (Coventry University: May 2015), accessed February 6, 2018, <http://resources.riches-project.eu/d5-1-the-use-of-craft-skills-in-new-contexts/>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Takuya Nagaoka, "Preserving and Revitalizing Traditional Cultures and Historical Heritage in the Pacific Islands," *ICH Courier online, Intangible Cultural Heritage Courier of Asia and the Pacific*, 2015, accessed January 3, 2018. <http://ichcourier.ichcap.org/en/preserving-and-revitalizing-traditional-cultures-and-historical-heritage-in-the-pacific-islands/>.

<sup>42</sup> David Joel Cohen, "The Beginnings of Agriculture in China: A Multiregional View," *Current Anthropology*, 52 (2011): 273-93.

<sup>43</sup> Huang Yunlin, *2007 nian Yunnan dian ju hua deng fa zhan nian du bao gao* [An annual report on the development of Yunnan dian-opera and huadeng-opera in 2007], (Yunnan: Yunnan University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Wang Shenghua, *Xi ju ren lei xue* [Theatre anthropology], (Kunming: The University of Yunnan Press, 2009), 159.

actors and actresses in various regions adapted the opera to their specific cultural idiosyncrasies, localising the melody, musical score, instruments, costumes, accent, language, character development, storylines, settings and props, thereby enriching the art form with a layer of authenticity.<sup>47 48</sup> In such a diverse province, social stability requires harmony among different ethnic groups.<sup>49</sup> opera is an influential art form; it is a public space for interaction between different social classes and groups.<sup>50</sup> Performing Huadeng opera together provides a social platform for people to make new connections and deepen relationships.<sup>51</sup> Sharing a common interest in the opera form provides an opportunity to build harmony between different ethnic groups and contributes to social stability.<sup>52</sup>

To preserve and protect Huadeng opera, people should recognise its historical and cultural value, while looking ahead to its future.<sup>53</sup> The Huadeng opera WeChat account allows interested people to communicate with each other, and enhances the value of the opera.

## 5.2 Observation, Photography and Video

Gaining access to the Huadeng opera community and documenting their activities is vital for identifying strategies on how to promote the opera form on WeChat.

The names of the three agricultural towns of Yaoan, Songming and Yiliang in Yunnan Province always pop up in the literature and in popular discussion about HuaDeng opera. Yaoan has 19 ethnic groups, Songming has 25, and Yiliang has 18. Together they form the liveliest scene for Huadeng opera. A field trip and observation of performances in these towns demonstrated that performances and amateur or professional actors proliferate in them. The age group who perform and watch Huadeng opera is 98% over sixty, middle-aged people are rare to see, and young people attending are usually just grandchildren tagging along.

In Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, the opera form is performed much less than in the towns. Only one professional Huadeng opera group has a daily performance at the Zhuanxin outdoor market; amateur groups have no fixed location to perform in. After one month attending performances in that lone theatre, it was observed that actors, actresses and attendees amounted to about 30–50 people each day. With mostly the same attendees coming

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<sup>47</sup> Gang Bao, *dian ju shi hua* [A brief history of Yunnan opera], (Beijing: She Hui Ke Xue Wen Xian Chu Ban She, 2015), 58–62.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 58–62.

<sup>49</sup> Huang Yunlin, *Yunnan dian ju hua deng wen ji* [A collection of Yunnan dian ju hua Deng], (KunMing: Yunnan Ren Min Chu Ban She, 2008), 9–12.

<sup>50</sup> Chen Shixiong, *Xi ju ren lei xue* [Theatre anthropology], (Shanghai: Shang Hai Gu Ji Chu Ban She, 2013), 55–57.

<sup>51</sup> Huang, *Yunnan dian ju hua deng wen ji*, 9–12.

<sup>52</sup> Huang, *2007 nian bao gao*, 56–59.

<sup>53</sup> Chen, *Xi ju ren lei xue*, 22–29.

day to day, the theatre has become not only a venue, but a vital social space for the Huadeng opera community.

On June 10, 2017, the Yunnan Huadeng opera Studio opened in the middle of Kunming.<sup>54</sup> The main purpose of this studio is to provide a public space for fans of Huadeng opera and ethnic performances to communicate with each other and organize events. It was observed that youth shows are offered at the studio; an art school offering classes on Huadeng opera gives students extra credits to perform there. However, the researcher observed that the young don't seem to have the passion or engagement of the elder Huadeng actors or actresses, their performances were relatively flat. The elders' passion on stage is powerfully felt; how to take advantage of this to draw a larger audience is a key issue worthy of study.

### 5.3 Interviews

The interviews reflected the social changes that have led to the decline of Huadeng opera, and the pessimistic attitude of Huadeng opera actors and actresses.

When actors and actresses talk about their experiences with Huadeng opera, it appears that between the 1950s and the 1980s there was not much information or publicity about their activities. That might explain the decline in popularity. One person said "During that time, I was working hard, raising four children, and I was the only one speaking Lao in my factory, so they needed me, and I was not able to perform in the opera".

Against the backdrop of war, the generation born in the 1930s and 1940s was the major productive force for industrializing and building the new country; they were dedicated to the recovery of the Chinese economy. China's current level of development was built on the hard work of this generation. In their arduous youth, they didn't have time to think about how to preserve traditional cultural practices.

However, many in this region revitalised their interest in cultural practices by getting involved with the Huadeng opera after they retired. In further conversation one person mentioned that "The first thing I did when I retired was to sign up to the Huadeng opera group for the retirement community, I even met some old classmate I hadn't met in the past forty years, we have had a reunion in here!"

From the interviews, it was apparent that they did not see Huadeng opera as valuable culturally, socially or historically to our province. Another performer stated that "Huadeng opera is only fun for us, I know it's boring for them, we can't blame the youth, they don't enjoy our old timer's thing." For these elders the opera is and always has been a recreational activity, the cultural value is less important to them. Moreover, they don't have a confident

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<sup>54</sup> Peng Bi, "Huo tai chuan chen hua deng fei yi Yunnan hua deng chuan xi guan kai guan [The opening of huadeng opera studio in Yunnan]," last modified June 10, 2017, accessed October 13, 2017. [http://yn.yunnan.cn/html/2017-06/10/content\\_4850792.htm](http://yn.yunnan.cn/html/2017-06/10/content_4850792.htm).



and positive attitude toward its development and revitalisation. Even Huadeng opera performers think it is “out of fashion”. This attitude might be improved if younger people became interested in or involved with the opera.

## 6. Discussion

During this study, two new causes of decline were identified; cultural self-contempt and negative media influence. However, possible solutions were also noted, and both will be discussed, as the negatives have to be overcome when the solutions are applied.

### 6.1 Cultural Self-Contempt

A serious issue in the Chinese cultural sphere is the trend of cultural self-contempt.<sup>55</sup> From the interviews and academic literature, it is clear that the actors and actresses of Huadeng opera lack confidence about the future of it as an art form. They are ambivalent about the future preservation and development of Huadeng opera. Its cultural value and importance for our society is not an interesting topic for them.

Cultural self-contempt is caused by certain historical factors. With rapid development and globalization, people have been paying more attention to the new foreign global popular culture than to their own traditions.<sup>56</sup> After losing both Opium Wars, China remained in steady decline for over one hundred years; long-term social chaos and the invasion of China by various countries destroyed China's confidence in itself.<sup>57</sup> These traumatic experiences caused Chinese people to reevaluate their culture, adopting a suspicious, derogatory attitude towards it. The main idea of the New Culture Movement was conflict between the new culture of the modern socialist state and the old culture.<sup>58</sup>

The trauma of Western imperialism, aggression and exploitation and the semi-colonial, semi-feudal social structure associated with the old culture fostered a negative bias against it, causing people to spurn it on the whole. From a modern perspective, this was an immoderate and self-defeating turn, but the influence of the Cultural Revolution continues today. The lack of confidence in our culture is a chronic issue that remains to be solved. As confidence rises with the economic and geopolitical achievements China has made in recent decades, the problem may be resolved sooner rather than later.

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<sup>55</sup> Wolfgang Kubin, "De guo han xue quan wei ling yi zhi yan kan xian dang dai wen xue[ Famous German sinologist use another angle to look at contemporary Chinese literature]," last modified November 26, 2006, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.dw.com/zh/德国汉学权威另一只眼看现当代中国文学/a-2249278?&zhongwen=simp>.

<sup>56</sup> Huang, 2007 *nian bao gao*, 21–29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>58</sup> W.P. Chen, "The New Culture Movement in China," *East Asian History* 34 (December 2007): 47-58, accessed May 14, 2018, [http://www.eastasianhistory.org/sites/default/files/article-content/34/EAH34\\_05.pdf](http://www.eastasianhistory.org/sites/default/files/article-content/34/EAH34_05.pdf).

## 6.2 Negative Media Press Influence

This study has revealed that under the influence of various media, popular opinion has concluded that opera is a declining art form in China. Popular opinion has immense power in Chinese society; regardless of whether popular opinion is rational, it may influence people's thoughts, emotions, attitudes and aesthetic consciousness.<sup>59</sup> Popular opinion does not require specific people or groups to take responsibility for its effects, and usually popular opinion cannot be tested. Most people think the decline and loss of opera is a fait accompli.

Western societies embarked on globalisation much earlier than China, but opera is still a popular art form in the West. American Broadway musicals, European plays and ballet attract audiences who consider opera 'high class' entertainment. Compared with westerners, Chinese people are more focused on new, global culture at the expense of their heritage. The Chinese media reports that only elders perform opera and describe how hard it is for Huadeng Opera groups to survive.<sup>60</sup> Watching an opera is seen as an activity only for senior citizens. Therefore, this research will attempt to address some of that negative media influence, with a positive media spin on the opera and its relevance to younger people.

## 6.3 Applying Solutions

WeChat may not stop the decline of Huadeng opera, but it will increase awareness and draw more attention to it. It may help to preserve the opera form and provide a new platform to increase the audience size and age range. Promoting the Huadeng opera on WeChat has the potential to give it a new platform and raise its profile around the country. The large number of users on WeChat increases the possibility of successfully reviving the Huadeng opera. Drawing elders and the younger generation together may also build stronger connections between and among the members of Chinese society. The content present in the WeChat official account can be adapted into aesthetics that appeal to the tastes of the younger and older generations. Creating an online space for people to share their experiences of the Huadeng opera can grow the community group. Furthermore, it can provide a way for performers and audiences to record the Huadeng opera activity and post these online for people who want to participate in the Huadeng opera.

Based on this research, Huadeng opera is still popular among seniors. They will be given access to the Huadeng opera WeChat account to promote the art form to their children and grandchildren as the first step in expanding its the audience. Most people who grew up in Yunnan have heard of Huadeng opera and have seen it regularly performed in public parks and at festivals.

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<sup>59</sup> Janusz Ziolkowski, "Democracy, Public Opinion and the Media," *Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Acta* 6 (2001): 174-203.

<sup>60</sup> Yong Zhang, Weidong Ren, "Tou shi Yunnan dian ju Hua deng yi shu fa zhan xian zhuang: Dian ge ji qu qi sheng he," [Perspective of Yunnan dan opera and Hua deng opera development status] *Guangming Online*, January 8, 2017, accessed October 17, 2017, [http://news.gmw.cn/2017-01/08/content\\_23424484.htm](http://news.gmw.cn/2017-01/08/content_23424484.htm).

The WeChat account will provide a platform for youth to learn about our valuable cultural heritage, the importance of Huadeng opera and their grandparent's lives through a familiar, generationally appropriate medium. I believe that carrying on our traditions in this way is the duty of the people of Yunnan.



## 7. Conclusion

With the speedy development of Chinese society, the growth of technology may also be beneficial for the country's struggling cultural heritage. Indeed, those who desire to protect traditional art forms have access to more financial and technological support these days. The WeChat social media platform may not be able to fully arrest the decline of Huadeng opera, but it does show a positive side of technology in this regard, one that can be employed in the service of revitalising traditional culture, suggesting also that other platforms may be used similarly.

In the new millenium, knowledge of Huadeng opera is based more on oral communication and participation than it was in the past. Thus, it is undeniable that Huadeng opera is losing popularity at the moment with the cultural change in the tastes of the younger generation and the employment of the Internet to spread information. However digitising and archiving will be useful in protecting and saving Huadeng opera, or at least in slowing down the speed of decline.

The WeChat official account is just the beginning of the use of social media to promote Huadeng opera. For future development, the relevant institutions need to pay more attention to this traditional art form. Steps that need to be taken include developing a protection policy, establishing a database for the collection and management of digital materials, protecting senior artists and providing them with the conditions necessary to continue Huadeng opera studies, and opening classes for people who want study Huadeng opera. The following action of this research will organize a Yunnan Hudeng opera competition for the elders by WeChat as a promation platform to increase the participation of young generation and create positive media influence in online space.

In this research, I have applied an ethnographic case study, observations and a review of the relevant literature to help me better understand the Huadeng opera. Interviews, photography and video footage were also combined in a video I produced to more effectively explore and analyse the subject matter and details of the history and influence of Huadeng opera.

This study has theorised that cultural self-contempt and negative media influence have contributed to the decline of the Huadeng opera. It has also found that the negative influences might be overcome through the use of modern communications and technology.

The historical value and importance of Huadeng opera is clearly evident in the literature, and it remains very popular among senior citizens, representing good memories from when they were young. This generation has built the country we live in today, and protecting their interests as well as their inheritance is an important focus of senior welfare protection, and of this study. Hopefully, the younger generation will also realise the value of Huadeng opera and keep it alive in the future, with the support of lively, informative communication technology such as WeChat.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

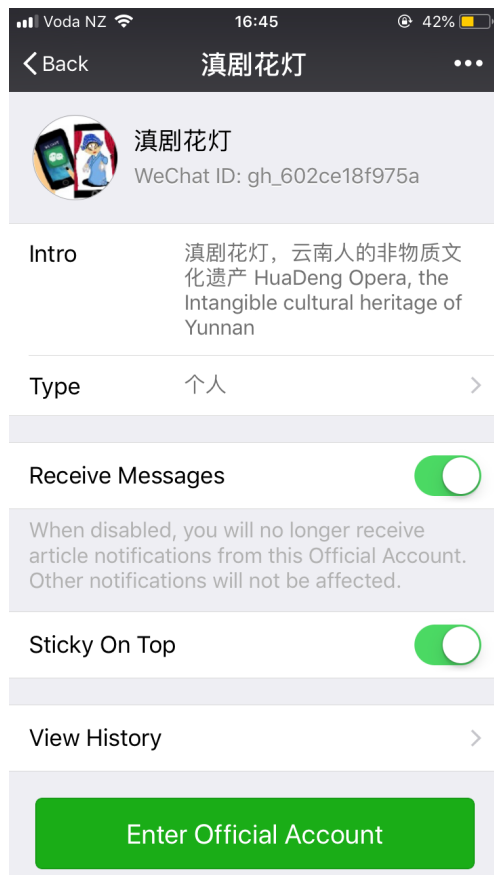
A story of my grandma's lifelong interests – Yunnan HuaDeng Opera.

Duration: 9:52 minutes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlru6fWcW48&feature=youtu.be>

### Appendix 2:

Screenshot of the WeChat Account and barcode to enter the WeChat Official account.



Screen shot of WeChat Official account.



Barcode to enter the WeChat Official

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