

Development of the China Media Group Spring Festival Opera Gala: A Cultural Ritual–Based Analysis

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Abstract

"Spring Festival Opera Gala" is a large-scale opera gala hosted by China Media Group (CMG) (formerly CCTV) and broadcast annually during the lunar new year. Unlike the renowned "Spring Festival Gala", it specializes in the vertical field of "opera".

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, involving the selection of four key interviewees: experts in traditional Chinese opera art, program directors and producers of the Spring Festival Opera Gala, as well as audience representatives. The research tools are categorized into three main types: program content analysis forms, semi-structured interview outlines, and participant observation records complemented by observation methods. The objective is to systematically collate the comprehensive program materials from the 36 editions of the "Spring Festival Opera Gala" organized by China Media Group from 1991 to 2026. This study delves into the developmental trajectory of the Spring Festival Opera Gala as a televised cultural ritual and examines the distinctive features of its evolution at various stages from the perspective of cultural rituals. The research findings elucidate: (1) the development of the Spring Festival Opera Gala; (2) The developmental trajectory of the Gala in terms of ritual structure, symbolic system, and collective participation. These findings suggest that future large-scale gala productions may benefit from employing digital media technology to reconstruct narrative scenes, thereby transforming opera ritual symbols into aesthetically accessible forms that broaden audience engagement and cultural resonance.

Keywords: spring festival opera gala; China media group; media ritual; opera television program; cultural identity

Introduction

The “Spring Festival Opera Gala” is a grand opera extravaganza produced by China Media Group (CMG, formerly China Central Television, CCTV) and broadcast annually during the Lunar New Year festivities. The gala was first staged in Beijing in 1991. Over the past three and a half decades, its performance scope has progressively expanded, with Beijing consistently serving as the principal venue. Since 2018, recordings have additionally been made in regions with rich opera traditions. In contrast to the widely recognized “Spring Festival Gala,” this event is dedicated to the specialized domain of opera, assuming the mission of preserving and promoting traditional opera culture while embodying the collective cultural memory of the Chinese people during the Spring Festival (Zhang, 2008).

The gala attracts a diverse audience. Initially, its primary viewers were middle-aged and elderly opera aficionados with a deep appreciation for traditional opera art. In recent years, however, with the integration of digital technology and the adoption of innovative presentation formats, it has also gained popularity among young people interested in traditional and “Chinese-style” culture, as well as among opera professionals, cultural scholars, and overseas Chinese who are passionate about cultural preservation.

From the perspective of cultural ritual theory, Carey (2009) underscores that the dissemination of the “ritual view” not only surpasses the mere realm of information transmission but also entails the preservation of social structure through shared symbolic practices. At present, academic research on the Spring Festival Opera Gala predominantly centers on the analysis of individual program content, the assessment of artistic forms, and the evaluation of communication effects. Nevertheless, systematic studies that comprehensively review its 36-year development from the cultural ritual dimension and delineate the distinctive features of each phase remain scarce. Furthermore, existing research has yet to fully elucidate the role of the Gala as a television cultural ritual and its contributions to the preservation of traditional opera.

To address this research gap, this study adopts a qualitative analytical approach to examine the historical development of the Spring Festival Opera Gala organized by China Media Group. Its developmental characteristics are distilled into three dimensions: ritual structure, symbolic representation, and collective engagement. The study elucidates the transformation of the Spring Festival Opera Gala from an art exhibition platform into a highly institutionalized cultural ritual embedded within China’s national media system.

Research Objective

1. To study the historical development of CMG's Spring Festival Opera Gala.
2. To study the development characteristics of the Spring Festival Opera Gala from the perspective of cultural rituals

Literature Review

Media ritual and communication

Media ritual theory lays the foundational conceptual framework for this study. Carey (2009) distinguished between the "communication view" and the "ritual view" of communication, where the "ritual view" regards media as a symbolic practice that maintains shared cultural meanings and strengthens social cohesion. Couldry (2003) further expanded this perspective, pointing out that media rituals actively construct collective social order rather than merely reflecting existing values; while Durkheim's (1912/1995) concept of "collective exhilaration" provides a sociological theoretical basis for understanding how communal participation in rituals fosters a sense of community belonging. These theoretical frameworks collectively establish the status of large-scale television events as institutionalized symbolic practices, playing a role in producing and maintaining national cultural identity. However, existing research on media rituals is primarily conducted in Western contexts and often focuses on news events, sports event broadcasts, or general variety shows. Research on specific types of programs rooted in non-Western performance traditions has largely been underexplored.

Television broadcasting of national cultural activities

Numerous Chinese media studies regard the CMG Spring Festival Gala as a paradigm of national television cultural rituals, exploring its role in constructing collective memory, maintaining ideological narratives, and transmitting national cultural identity among diverse populations (Qu, 2025; Sun, 2023; Zhan & Liu, 2015). Although these studies effectively demonstrate the role of the Gala as a nationally recognized mechanism for national cultural reproduction, they have a significant limitation: their analytical focus remains limited to the comprehensive variety show format of the main gala, with little in-depth exploration of specific types of festival programs.

Opera and television adaptation

At the end of the 20th century, with the widespread popularization of television broadcasting, traditional opera made its transition from the stage to the screen through various

adaptations. Scholars have confirmed that successful adaptations require substantial adjustments to the performance structure, narrative rhythm, and visual presentation to adapt to broadcasting conditions and the needs of home audiences (Pang, 2012). From the perspective of production research, Jiang (2004) and Wang (2015) emphasized the central role of the director in coordinating stage aesthetics and audiovisual grammar. Although this academic research provides strong evidence that television opera adaptations involve genuine creative and institutional labor, it often examines individual production decisions in isolation, without placing these practices within the broader framework of media rituals or the construction of national cultural identity.

Research gap in Spring Festival opera gala

Existing literature reveals significant intersections in the research void. Media ritual theory has not yet been systematically applied to the study of the arrangement of specific types of opera programs; research on China's national television gala has not yet extended its analysis to the Spring Festival Opera Gala as a unique research subject; and research on television opera adaptations has not yet linked production practices with rituals, symbolic meanings, or issues of national identity. This study directly targets this intersection, exploring how the CMG Spring Festival Opera Gala has evolved into a nationally institutionalized cultural event, how local opera traditions have been encoded into nationally recognizable symbols, and how evolving media technology has changed the collective participation patterns it facilitates.

Conceptual Framework

The framework links research objectives with theoretical perspectives and analytical dimensions. Drawing on the ritual view of communication proposed by James W. Carey and semiotic theory developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1972), the study analyzes three key aspects: development history, ritual structure, and symbolic representation. These dimensions help explain how the opera gala functions as a mediated cultural ritual characterized by structured performance, symbolic meaning, and collective audience participation.

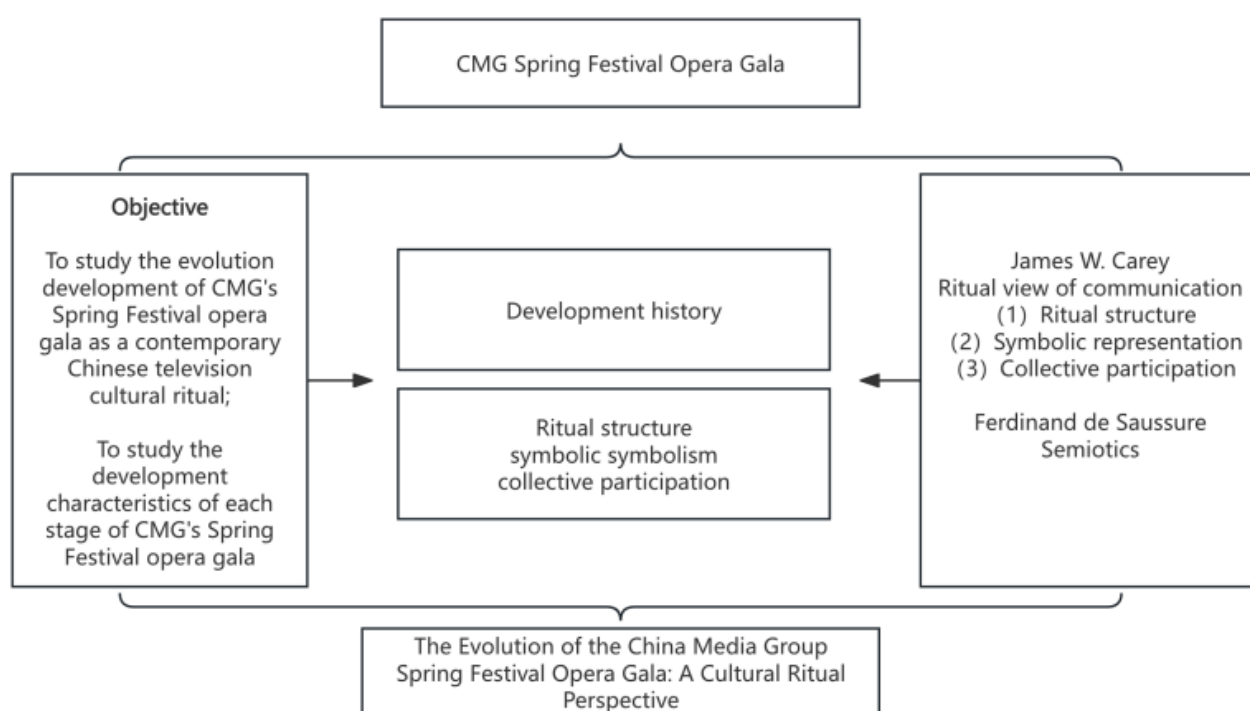


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Based on media ritual and cultural communication theories, this study adopts a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews and archived program video observation. It covers the 1991–2026 CMG Spring Festival Opera Gala for longitudinal analysis of ritual structure, symbol system, and collective participation.

Data Source

Primary data include 36 annual gala archived videos (1991–2026) from the official CMG archive and semi-structured interview records. Only fully broadcast videos are included to ensure data completeness and comparability.

Key Information Provider

Four interviewees were selected via purposive sampling, including TV production professionals, relevant scholars and long-time viewers, covering institutional, academic and audience perspectives.

Research Tool

Two tools were used: a semi-structured interview guide (focusing on gala understanding, cultural attributes and national role) and a structured observation framework (covering program structure, symbols and media forms).

Data Collection

Interviews (Oct 2025–Oct 2026) combined online and face-to-face methods, with audio recording and verbatim transcription. All 36 archived videos were reviewed twice with systematic records.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to interviews and observation notes (focusing on three core dimensions), with qualitative content analysis of observational data to track changes and interpret cultural significance.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

Study credibility was ensured by methodological/analyst triangulation, member checking and in-depth review of all 36 archived videos.

Research Ethics

All participants provided written consent, with data securely stored (research team only) and participant anonymity protected if requested.

Research Results

Historical Development

Stage1: Initial Period (1991–1996)

Its establishment is closely tied to the widespread adoption of television by Chinese households in the late 1980s (Chang, 2013). Given the limited space for opera performances in the comprehensive Spring Festival Gala, CCTV created a dedicated Spring Festival Gala aimed at providing an independent national platform for the dissemination of opera (Chen, 1996). The opera gala played a significant role under the relatively limited technical conditions of that time, utilizing technologies such as digital imaging, virtual production, and large-scale mechanical stage systems. Within these constraints, the use of fixed screens, static props, unchanging scenery, and a fixed stage space ensured production stability, efficient on-site recording, and clear television

image composition. This reflects a "stage-centered" television adaptation of dramatic art (Yang, 2008).



Figure 2 1991 Spring Festival Opera Gala Huangmei Opera (黄梅戏)

Fixed scenes on the opera stage (program clips)

Stage2: Exploration Period (1997–2007)

The digital EFP (Electronic Field Production) system introduced at the end of 1996 significantly improved image clarity and on-site coordination flexibility, marking the shift of gala production from simple live video recording to professional television art creation (Chen, 1996). The program structure began to form a fixed paradigm, including opening group performance, host program introduction, thematic opera segments, regional opera medleys, and a closing emphasizing unity and celebration.

Table 1 The 1997 Spring Festival Opera Gala has a fixed program structure

The Case of the 1997 Spring Festival Opera Gala		
Basic Structure	Typical program names	Program pictures
Opening Group Performance	Opening act Peking Opera (京剧) Song and Dance “Goddess of Flowers (Huashen Fu)	
Host a Series of Programs	The Host of the 1997 Spring Festival Opera Gala was Connected Song Shixiong, Liu Lu	
Theme Opera Fragments	Peking Opera Joint Singing	
Regional Opera Joint Singing	Jin Opera (晋剧) Ji Opera (吉剧) Sichuan Opera (川剧) Henan Opera (豫剧)	
The Paradigm is Fixed from Beginning to End		

Stage3: Transition Period (2008–2017)

In 2008, China initiated the development of terrestrial digital television, featuring both digital and analog broadcasting. Digital television employs digital signal processing technology to deliver a broader range of content, higher program quality, and more diverse programming formats (Zhang, 2008). Digitalization enhances the quality beyond analog coverage, broadcasting central and local radio and television programs free of charge, thereby fulfilling the public's fundamental demand for improving the level and quality of radio and television coverage (Sun, 2023). In 2008, CMG introduced the HDTV channel (CCTV-HD/after CCTV-5+) specifically for high-definition broadcasting, offering a channel-level technical platform for transmitting high-definition signals of large-scale galas and sports events, such as the Olympics and the Spring Festival Gala. From a cultural and media integration perspective, this study explores how the CMG Spring Festival Gala has evolved into a social tradition alongside technological advancements, including television media technology, highlighting the significance of technological innovation in shaping the gala into a "media tradition".

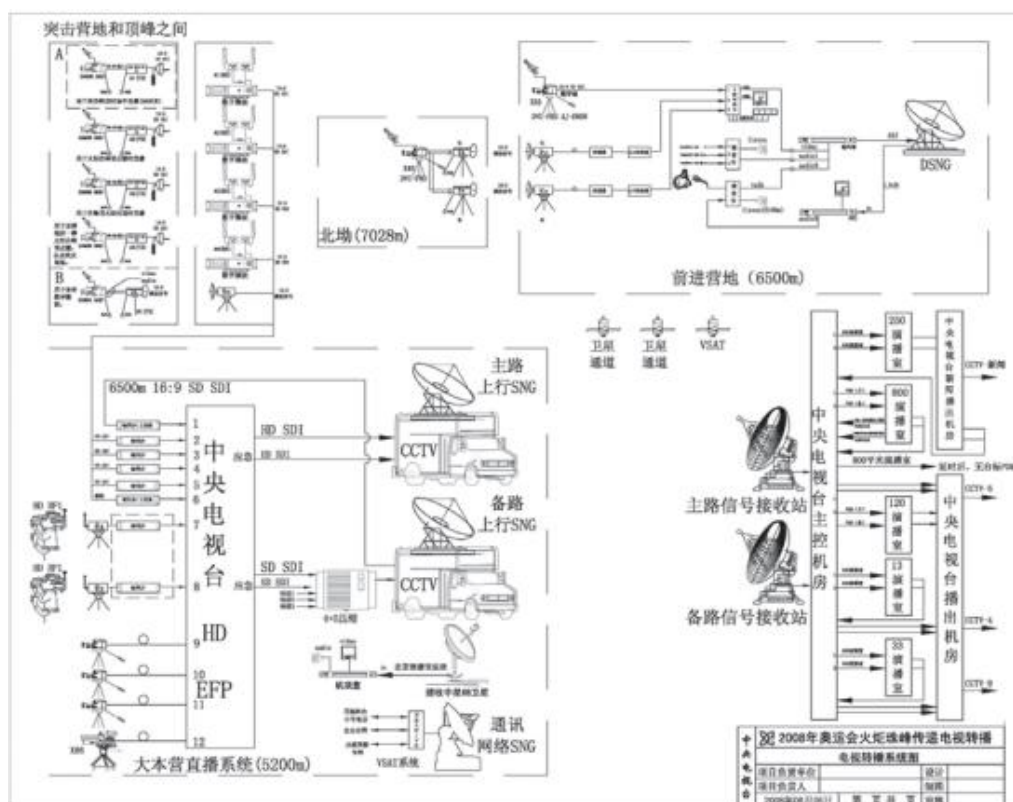


Figure 3 TV Broadcast System Diagram for the Olympic Torch Relay on Mount Everest

Source: Huang, P. G., Han, D. G., & Wang, H. B. (2008). Technical scheme of TV broadcast for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games torch relay on Mount Everest (Part 1). *Advanced Television Engineering*, (8), 20–23.

Stage 4: Digital Integration Period (2018–2026)

In 2018, the CMG Opera Spring Festival Gala established its first two sub-venues in China, situated in Chaozhou (Guangdong, adjacent to the world cultural heritage Guangji Bridge) and Xi'an (Shaanxi, leveraging local Loess cave Dwelling). This initiative underscores the significance of "local opera" and extends the "national ritual" to its cultural origins. Leveraging digital broadcasting technology, each sub-venue connects the main venue in Beijing with local cultural hubs.

Subsequently, the gala expanded to include cultural landmarks such as Wenzhou, known as the "hometown of southern opera," and Taiyuan Ancient County Town, realizing the roots-seeking of southern opera and the dynamic inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. This spatial reconfiguration has transformed the opera gala from a singular artistic performance into a "national cultural emblem," integrating diverse regional cultures and public life, thereby showcasing the multifaceted development of the nation and its cultural confidence.

The amalgamation of online and offline media has propelled the dissemination of opera programs into a period of digital integration breakthrough. Technological innovations such as 5G webcasting, AI-driven visual displays, AR/XR stage technology, cloud technology integration, global live broadcasting, and robotic real-time interaction have not only enhanced the visual experience but also deeply integrated program production with global technological trends. This reflects the shift of large-scale evening events from traditional TV products to multi-screen, multi-terminal, AI-driven, and interactive media offerings (Ji, 2025).

Table 2 The sub-venue of the 2018–2026 Spring Festival Opera Gala.

2018 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue

Chaozhou, Guangdong	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Beijing CMG studio
		
Chaozhou Guangji Bridge Chaozhou News Network	Xi'an cave dwelling Xi'an Qin Chamber Theater	CCTV studio CCTV.com

2019 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue



Yongning Gate of the ancient city of
Xi'an CCTV opera channel



Chengdu Wuhou Shrine
Sichuan Online



Sailing stage
CCTV opera channel

2020 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue

Jiangmen, Guangdong



Wuyi Overseas Chinese Plaza
Jiangmen Radio and Television Station

Luoyang, Henan



Luoyang Yingtianmen Square
Luoyang.com

Beijing Studio



Beijing Studio
CCTV opera channel

2021 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue



Chang'an Grand Theater
CCTV Literature and Art

2022 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue



CCTV studio
CCTV Literature and Art

2023 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue



Wenzhou, Zhejiang Jiusan Shuhui
(Southern Opera Guild)

2024 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue

Deyang, Sichuan



Deyang Qiming Eastern Stars
gathered

2025 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue

Taiyuan, Shanxi



Taiyuan ancient county town
Shanxi Youth Daily

2026 Spring Festival Opera Gala sub-venue

Nanning, Guangxi



Nanning Folk Song Lake Stage
CCTV.com

Development Characteristics

Stability of ritual structure

The Spring Festival Opera Gala has progressively established a stable and institutionalized ritual structure throughout its four developmental stages.

The period from 1991 to 1996 marked the natural exploration stage, during which no comprehensive ceremony standards were established. From 1997 to 2007, the Gala established standardized procedures, encompassing a collective performance at the opening ceremony, a program sequence guided by the host, selections of themed plays, local opera performances, innovative or cross-genre works, and a closing ceremony themed around unity and celebration. The consistency of its structure reflects the trend of increasingly formalized rituals.

During the creative development stage (2008–2017) and the digital integration stage (2018–2025), the Gala's structure remained stable, with significant improvements in theme coherence and narrative integration. Technological advancements have played a pivotal role in this evolutionary process: high-definition broadcasting, multi-camera editing, LED environmental design, and XR-based virtual production have become integral components of the ritual structure, rather than mere auxiliary tools (Wang, 2015). This transformation has relocated the ritual space from a fixed theater stage to an immersive digital environment, enhancing the seriousness and ritualistic aspect of television events (Du, 2012).

Symbolic System

Media rituals construct national narratives through symbol selection. The Spring Festival Opera Gala builds a unique symbol system through opera genres, visual design and discourse.

Local operas are reshaped as national cultural symbols on the national TV platform. Peking Opera (32.1%) dominates as the national cultural authority; Yue Opera, Huangmei Opera, Henan Opera form the core symbol system; rare operas increase significantly in the digital integration period, reflecting cultural diversity protection. This “pluralistic integration” transforms regional traditions into national heritage.

Table 3 Frequency of Appearances by Drama (1991–2026)

The Number of Plays by Genre From 1991 To 2026					
Opera genre	1991–1996	1997–2007	2008–2017	2018–2025	%
Peking Opera (京剧)	62	263	284	139	32.10%
Yue opera (越剧)	13	24	23	12	11.60%
Huangmei Opera (黄梅戏)	9	12	14	17	9.40%
Yu drama (豫剧)	7	14	18	19	8.90%
Ping Opera (评剧)	6	14	11	8	5.90%
Sichuan Opera (川剧)	4	11	8	9	5.40%
Kunqu Opera (昆曲)	5	9	6	4	4.50%
Cantonese Opera (Yueju) (粤剧)	2	8	4	7	3.70%
Qinqiang Opera (秦腔)	3	7	7	9	4.20%
Jin Opera (Shanxi Opera) (晋剧)	4	7	6	4	3.50%
Hebei Bangzi (河北梆子)	4	9	9	4	2.60%
Gaojia Opera (高甲戏)	1	2	3	3	1.70%
Wu Opera (婺剧)	1	2	5	6	1.80%
Longjiang Opera (龙江剧)	0	3	1	1	1.30%
Wuxi Opera (Xiju) (锡剧)	2	2	3	2	1.30%
Lv Opera (吕剧)	1	1	0	1	1.80%
Ji Opera (吉剧)	1	3	1	1	1.50%
Tibetan Opera (藏戏)	0	1	3	4	1.00%
Geza Opera (Taiwanese Opera) (歌仔戏)	0	4	2	1	1.20%
Erren Tai (二人台)	0	1	5	0	2.20%
Other Rare Genres	20	42	83	90	7.70%

The 2026 Opera Gala introduced Southeast Asian performing arts (Thai Kong opera, Malaysian Zabid dance, etc.) under the theme The Covenant of Harmony and Beauty, extending the symbol logic from “domestic pluralistic integration” to “regional cultural community”.



Figure 4 Poster of the 2026 Spring Festival Opera Gala

The visual symbol system shifts from “stage-centered” to “actor-centered”. Costumes highlight “Chinese style”; stage design evolves to XR virtual space. LED, XR, AR enhance ritual immersion, making opera a mass-oriented audio-visual symbol system (Zhan & Liu, 2015).

Table 4 Visual and aesthetic symbol characteristics

Period	Costumes	Stage Design	Lighting	Technology
1991–1996	Traditional normativity	Proscenium stage with physical scenery	Basic functional lighting	Single camera angle
1997–2007	TV-oriented aesthetics	Festive elements (lanterns, red)	Warm celebratory lighting	Multi-camera setup
2008–2017	Cross-over designs	LED main screens	Narrative lighting	HD broadcasting
2018–2025	National symbol style	XR immersive space	Digital ritual lighting	4K/8K/XR virtual production

The host discourse plays a pivotal role in culture by constructing discourse symbols through the protagonist's narration. It utilizes terms such as "Chinese excellent traditional culture", "national achievements", and "cultural confidence", along with thematic narratives of "the unity of family and

country" and "reunion and harmony", to fulfill the role of linguistic symbols. Ritualistic communication establishes the significance of cultural order. The artistic expression of these discourses becomes a symbol of national spirit, effectively reinforcing the "pluralistic unity" of Chinese cultural identity among the audience.

Collective Participation

Collective participation is the core feature of rituals (Durkheim, 1995). Leveraging innovative technology and communication strategies, the audience of the gala has transitioned from being spectators to participants in national celebrations. The audience has broadened to include the public. The Spring Festival Opera Gala encapsulates the folk customs of the Spring Festival, and its social function has evolved from "professional performance" to "national cultural ceremony". Creative technology in today's television production has fostered a symbolic sense of participation, reflecting the "sense of presence" (Couldry, 2003). The audience is no longer mere spectators, but active participants in the ritual setting. Since 2018, the scope of participation in the digital age has expanded beyond television. The inclusion of online streaming media, social media discussions, and mobile platforms has broadened the ritual space (Luo, 2022). Through the technological empowerment of live television and real-time interaction, the gala has forged an "imagined community" beyond physical boundaries, enabling the audience to affirm their cultural identity and build a sense of collective belonging during the ceremony.

Discussion

This study reveals that CMG's Spring Festival Opera Gala has traversed four developmental stages over 36 years, transitioning from a professionally oriented opera performance into an institutionalised national cultural celebration embedded within China's Spring Festival media ecosystem. This trajectory substantiates concept of "media tradition," elucidating how traditional art becomes progressively integrated into national media governance through recurring broadcast cycles and technological advancement. Unlike existing scholarship, which has concentrated predominantly on the comprehensive CMG Spring Festival Gala and its role in shaping collective memory and ideological narratives (Qu, 2025), the present study treats the Opera Gala as a discrete media entity and conducts the first systematic, stage-based longitudinal analysis of its development, thereby incorporating this underexplored category of specialised traditional arts programming into the broader domain of Chinese festival media studies (Pang, 2012).

Drawing upon cultural ritual theory, this study identifies three defining developmental characteristics: the stabilisation of ritual structure, the systematisation of symbolic repertoires, and the universalisation of collective participation. These findings extend Carey's (2009) ritual view of communication beyond its original Western context, demonstrating that ritualised media practices actively construct and stabilise shared meaning across time, consistent with Durkheim's (1995) argument that collective participation constitutes the essence of ritual. Unlike prior studies that examined opera television programmes through the lens of production aesthetics or media convergence (Jiang, 2004; Pang, 2012), the present study repositions the Opera Gala as a self-reproducing cultural ritual system — a dimension that scholarship on Chinese festival media has largely overlooked and which this study brings into scholarly focus for the first time.

New Knowledge from Research

This study demonstrates that: (1) It reveals the institutionalized mechanism underlying the transformation of professional opera galas into national television cultural festivals, demonstrating how this process achieves a deep integration of traditional opera art within the national cultural ritual system through the television medium. (2) It introduces a new analytical perspective on cultural encoding, showing how diverse local opera traditions are systematically re-encoded into nationally recognizable cultural symbols through ritualized broadcasting, thereby constructing a "pluralistic yet unified" narrative framework that addresses an existing gap in understanding the symbolic relationship between local and national culture within media ritual contexts. (3) It develops a dynamic evolution model of audience participation, tracing the trajectory from professional viewership to broad public engagement and subsequently to multi-platform digital interaction, while explaining how this evolutionary process reinforces national cultural identity.

Conclusion

Research findings demonstrate that, as an institutionalized cultural practice, the gala has continually evolved in tandem with adjustments in national cultural governance strategies and shifts in the media landscape. It has traversed four developmental stages, gradually transforming from a specialized venue for traditional opera performances into a national cultural ritual firmly entrenched within the framework of Spring Festival traditions. The evolution of its cultural ritual is manifested in the institutionalized structuring of ritual elements, the nationalization of symbolic representations, and the digital augmentation of collective participation. The significance of this

study resides in its elucidation of how national-level galas harness advancements in television production technology and annual broadcasting customs to foster the ongoing dissemination of traditional opera and the construction of cultural identity within the contemporary media milieu. It offers a valuable perspective for the preservation and innovation of traditional art in the media age.

Suggestions

This study offers practical guidance for the future development of the CMG Spring Festival Opera Gala. By clarifying the equilibrium between digital innovation and the intrinsic aesthetic value of traditional opera, the research findings contribute to ensuring that technological advancements support artistic heritage rather than undermine it. The thorough analysis of symbolic expression and cross-platform interaction further bolsters the optimization of communication strategies, fosters cultural inclusivity, reinforces a multifaceted national cultural identity, and broadens the space for audience co-creation, thereby enhancing youth participation and sustaining long-term engagement in the digital age.

Future research could employ a comparative framework to investigate the mediation process of traditional performing arts in the broadcast of other significant festivals. Such research will extend the applicability of cultural ritual theory beyond the Chinese context, allowing scholars to evaluate its explanatory efficacy across diverse cultural and media landscapes, thereby enriching the theoretical underpinnings of media ritual and traditional art communication studies.

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