The Absurd Narrative and Philosophical Transmission of Chinese Chamber Opera in a Cross-Cultural Context — Taking 'Gambling Life' and 'Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead' as Examples

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Abstract: Chinese chamber opera demonstrates unique artistic innovation in a cross-cultural context, with its development trajectory showing a fundamental shift from overseas commissions to local creation. In this context, composer Wen Deqing's "Betting on Life" (2003) and "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" (2023) have become exemplary cases for studying cross-cultural absurd narratives and philosophical transmission. Through comparative analysis, this study finds that the two works each exhibit distinct features in their expression of absurd aesthetics: "Betting on Life" reveals the paradox of human greed and the unpredictability of fate through allegorical narrative, whereas "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" employs postmodern reconstruction techniques, adding a "resurrection" chapter and interweaving temporal and spatial narratives to build a philosophical loop of "death and revival." In terms of musical drama techniques, Wen Deqing creatively integrates Chinese traditional elements (such as the pentatonic scale and Peking opera vocal styles) with Western modern composition methods. Notably, in

"Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead," a twelve pentatonic scales in different keys is constructed, achieving deep integration of Chinese and Western musical languages. At the level of philosophical transmission, the works successfully create a space for cross-cultural dialogue: "Betting on Life" focuses on the dialectical relationship between fate and freedom in existentialism, while "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" explores concepts of life and death and the existential dilemmas of modern humans through dialogue between Zhuangzi's philosophy and Heideggerian existentialism. These creative practices indicate that Chinese chamber opera has developed a compositional paradigm that organically combines indigenous philosophical thought, absurd narrative, and modern musical drama techniques, providing significant theoretical insights and practical examples for cross-cultural music drama studies.

Keywords: Chinese chamber opera; absurd narrative; modern musical theater

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Chamber opera, as a small-scale form of opera, can trace its origins back to performances in private settings such as European courts or noble salons during the Baroque period in the 17th century. However, its modernization and the establishment of its artistic character mainly occurred in the 20th century. During this period, chamber opera gradually moved beyond the label of a "condensed version" of opera. While retaining the intimacy of the audience experience and the delicacy of expression, it developed an exploratory modern character. The historical impetus for this transformation was the social and economic decline and cultural turmoil brought about by the two World Wars, which made low-cost productions suitable for smaller venues increasingly popular. The internal driving force was the rise of personalized writing and integrated artistic concepts. This form of expression is flexible and diverse, making it easy to combine with literature, fine arts, and modern multimedia technologies, providing a broad space for artistic innovation. In terms of musical techniques, chamber opera often leads the times. Various new musical styles, such as atonal music, serial music, and minimalism, have been experimented with and innovated on this stage. For instance, Schoenberg's "Erwartung" (1909) and "Die glückliche Hand" (1913) fully demonstrate explorations of Expressionist style and atonal techniques, while Britten's works such as "The Rape of Lucretia" (1950) further advanced the development of chamber opera (as shown in Figure 1).
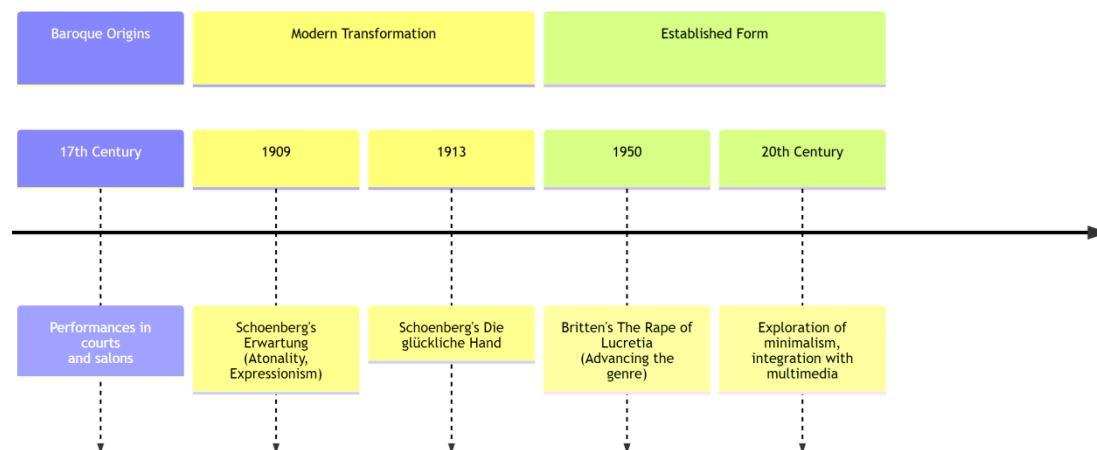
Figure 1: The Development History of chamber opera

Table 1 Historical Periods of Chamber Opera Development

Period	Key Characteristics	Representative Works / Examples
17th Century (Baroque Era)	Origins in private performances for European courts and aristocratic salons.	Early courtly entertainments and small-scale dramatic works.
Early 20th Century	Began to shed the "condensed opera" label; exploration of modern artistic character.	Arnold Schoenberg's Erwartung(1909) and Die glückliche Hand(1913).
Mid-20th Century Onwards	Consolidation as a distinct form; focus on intimate expression and artistic innovation.	Benjamin Britten's The Rape of Lucretia(1950) and further developments.

Note:This table outlines the major historical phases of chamber opera, from its origins to its modernization.

Although chamber opera in China started relatively late, its development path has been clear, marked by a notable shift from overseas commissions to indigenous creation. The earliest works were mostly commissioned by foreign cultural and performing arts organizations, intended to showcase Chinese culture to international audiences. For example, in 1994, composer Guo Wenjing was commissioned by the Dutch New Music Ensemble to compose Diary of a Madman, regarded as the first Chinese-language opera commissioned and staged in Europe. Since then, Chinese composers have become increasingly active in chamber opera creation. Works such as Qu Xiaosong's The Death of Oedipus (commissioned by the Holland Festival in 1993), Life Like a Zither String (1997), and Guo Wenjing's The Banquet (1988) and The Poet Li Bai (2007) all demonstrate composers' persistent efforts to express Chinese traditional culture on the global stage. In recent years, Chinese chamber opera has focused more on local experimentation and nurturing young talent. Launched by the Central Conservatory of Music in 2013, the China Chamber Opera Creation Promotion Project has held seven editions to date, providing young students with valuable creative practice opportunities. Additionally, Beijing held consecutive chamber opera festivals in 2023 and 2024, presenting numerous works including Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead and Scholar of Yangxian, marking a new stage of scaled and regular development for Chinese chamber opera. This shift—from academic exploration to market performance, and from relying on overseas commissions to encouraging local creative vitality—highlights the healthy development of chamber opera in China and its unique role in fostering young composers.
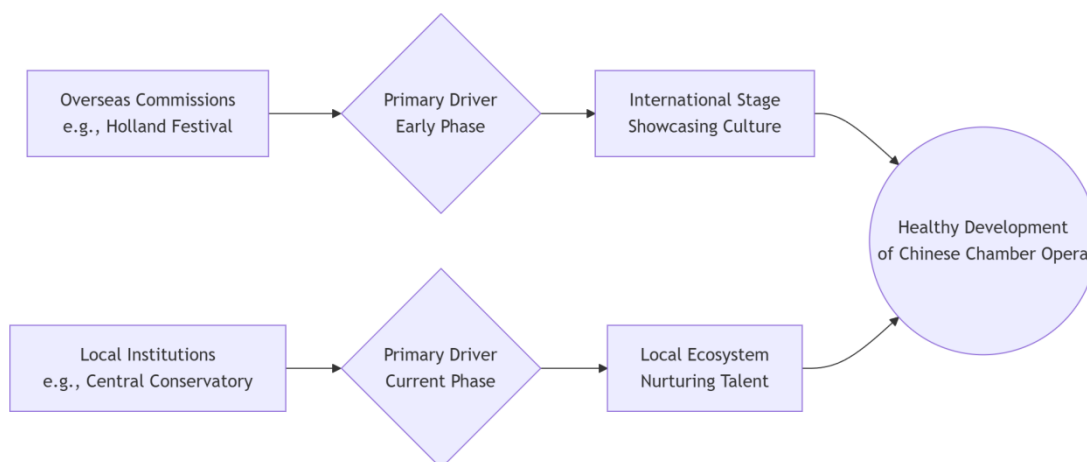
Figure 2: Pathway of Development for Chinese Chamber Opera

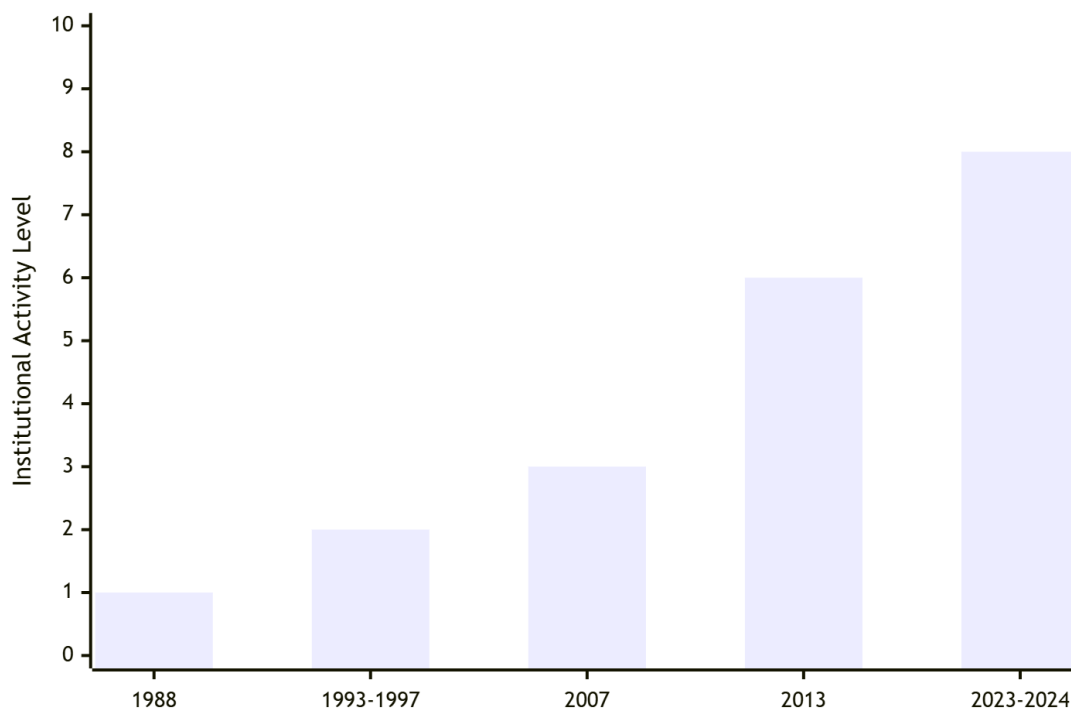☐This flowchart visualizes the overall shift in the ecosystem of Chinese chamber opera creation.☐

Figure 3: Growth of Local Institutional Support

Among numerous Chinese chamber opera works, composer Wen Deqing's *Betting for Life* and *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead* are exemplary and representative due to their profound thematic exploration and artistic innovation, drawing widespread attention both domestically and internationally. *Betting for Life*, a two-act chamber opera, was written and composed entirely by Wen Deqing and adapted from the novel *A Snowy Night's Gambling Freeze* by author Gao Xiaosheng. The opera presents a fable-like absurd story that profoundly reflects human greed and the unpredictability of fate. It premiered simultaneously at the Geneva Mozart International Arts Festival and in Shanghai in September 2003, and

was subsequently successfully performed at the Shanghai Grand Theatre and the Beijing International Music Festival, receiving praise from both scholars and audiences, sparking in-depth discussions.

His other work, *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead*, premiered in December 2023 at the Dahua City Performing Arts Center in Beijing as one of the performances in the inaugural Beijing Chamber Opera Festival. This work, composed and written by Wen Deqing and directed by Yi Liming, draws creative inspiration from Lu Xun's *Reviving the Dead* in *Old Tales Retold*, which in turn is based on a fable about skulls in Zhuangzi's *Supreme Joy*. Wen Deqing breaks the narrative structure of Lu Xun's original text, introducing an open temporal and spatial design, juxtaposing elements from the Eastern Zhou and Warring States, the Shang Dynasty's Luting, the Republican era, and the present day. From an existentialist perspective, it deeply reflects on the spiritual disconnection between people and the absurdity of existence in the information age. Both works skillfully employ absurdist narrative techniques. *Betting for Life* uses a fable structure to reveal the paradox of human nature and fate, while *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead* conducts philosophical reflections through interwoven timelines and symbolic language. Musically, Wen Deqing emphasizes exaggeration and transformation of the tones of the Chinese language, further instrumentalizing the vocal tones, making the music not only advance dramatic action but also serve as a significant vehicle for expressing philosophical metaphors. For example, in *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead*, the music directly illustrates the psychological transformations and existential dilemmas of the characters. It is precisely this integration of Chinese traditional cultural resources, modern artistic concepts, and cross-cultural expression that makes *Betting for Life* and *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead* outstanding examples of Chinese chamber opera achieving creative transformation and innovative development in a global context. They also fully demonstrate the tremendous potential of chamber opera as an artistic form in expressing profound philosophical ideas and conducting cutting-edge artistic experimentation.

1.2 Literature Review: Multiple Perspectives on chamber opera Studies

Chamber opera, as a flexible and delicate form of musical theater, has become increasingly active in contemporary creation and academic research. By reviewing literature from the past two decades, particularly recent works, it can be observed that current research mainly focuses on three dimensions: cross-cultural adaptation and narrative innovation, techniques for integrating music and drama, and localized creative practices. This demonstrates a trend of moving from macro-level discussions toward more detailed textual analysis (as shown in Figure 4□Figure5).

First of all, the cross-cultural and cross-media operatic adaptations of literary classics remain a continuous focus of research, with their core lying in the transformation of narrative authority and the enhancement of philosophical significance. Such studies typically employ a comparative case method to analyze the creative translation from text to stage. For example, Napolitano (2008), in his study of two musical adaptations of Jane Eyre, pointed out that although chamber operas can partially address the challenges of transplanting the novel's first-person narrative into film through musical commentary mechanisms, fully capturing the growth arc of the protagonist Jane's narrative authority still poses difficulties.This perspective has been deepened and expanded in reviews of Chinese works. Zhang Baohua (2025), in analyzing 'The Turin Horse,' pointed out that the composer, by introducing Nietzsche as an 'atheist' character and creating a philosophical debate

with the believer character, transcends the original film material and constructs a more speculative spatial narrative and layered soundscape.Similarly, research on Wen Deqing's 'Gambling with Fate' goes beyond a simple retelling of the story. Jin Long (2024) and Liu Jiayou (2024) respectively examine how the work controls dramatic structure through musical time and innovates through cross-cultural integration, demonstrating how it combines Chinese fables with Western modern compositional techniques to achieve a profound exploration of philosophical themes such as human nature and fate.These studies indicate that successful adaptation is not merely a transformation of form, but also a deepening and reconstruction of meaning.

Figure 4□Color Development Timeline of Research Focus (2008-2025)

□This timeline uses color to illustrate the evolution of scholarly attention across the three key dimensions from early foundational studies to recent, more specialized analyses.□

Figure 5□Process of Cross-Cultural Chamber Opera Adaptation

□This flowchart visualizes the creative and analytical process of adapting a source into a chamber opera, as discussed in the research.□

　　Secondly, the high integration of musical language and theatrical action, particularly the dramatic function of timbre and sound, has become a focal point of technical analysis□As shown in Figures 6 and 7□. Researchers are increasingly

concerned with how music acts as the very 'theatrical action' itself, not merely as accompaniment. Zhang Baohua's series of review articles provide intensive case studies in this field. These studies suggest that a successful adaptation is not only a transformation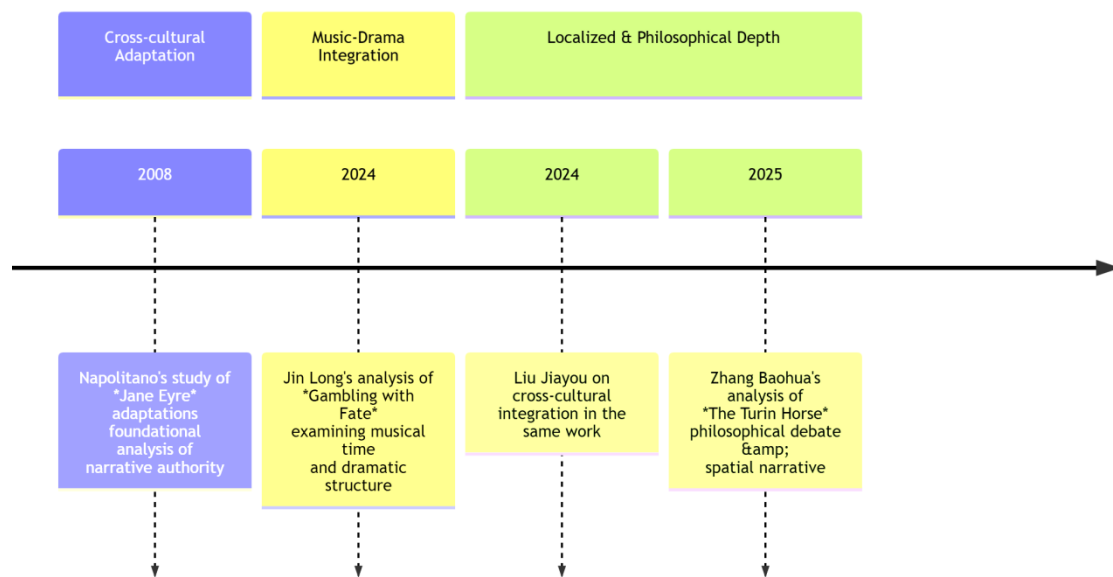 of form but also a deepening and reconstruction of meaning.In 'Andhadhun,' he analyzed the 'synchronous and asynchronous' relationship between timbre-sound and dramatic actions, exploring how musical techniques externalize the protagonist's inner disguise and genuine fear.In 'Winter Cicada,' he explores how young composers create corresponding 'sound structures' for magical themes to shape dramatic imagery.In 'Embroidered Dreams of Qing,' the crucial role of the band's sound in shaping lyrical expression and advancing the plot is affirmed☐Zhang Baohua，2025☐.Li Jiti (2019), from a longer time perspective, takes 'The Banquet' and 'Painted Skin' as examples to discuss on a macro level how Chinese chamber opera inherits the aesthetic essence of traditional Chinese opera and uses modern compositional techniques to achieve a 'poetic presentation'.These detailed technical analyses indicate that research on Chinese chamber opera has progressed from the early stage of introducing works to the mature stage of intrinsic criticism.
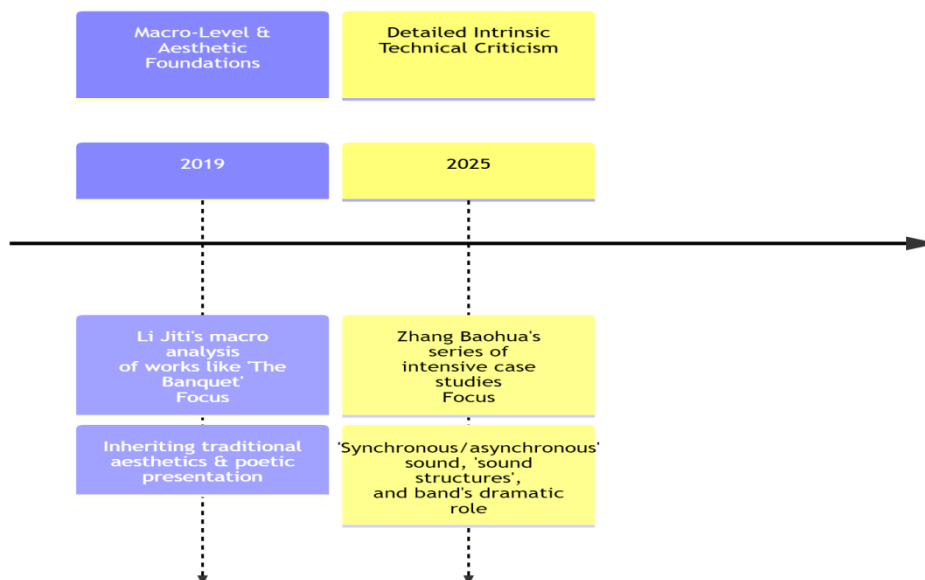

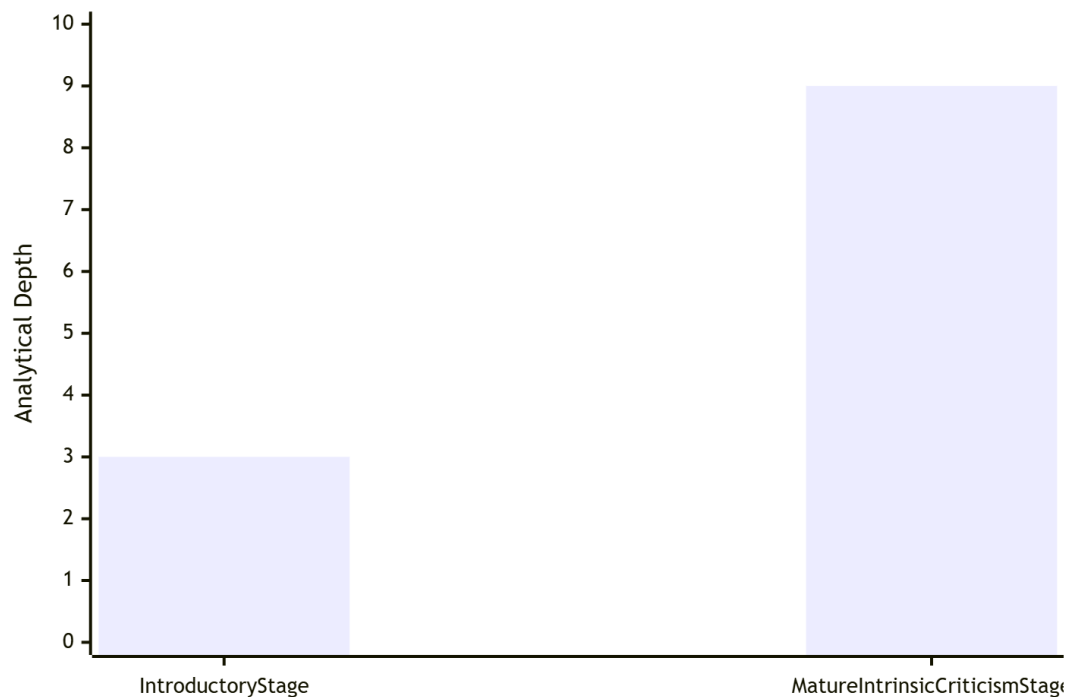**Figure 6☐Evolution of Research Depth on Chinese Chamber Opera**

Figure 7□Progression of Research on Chinese Chamber Opera □This bar chart conceptualizes the progression of Chinese chamber opera research from an introductory phase to a mature, critical phase.□

Furthermore, in the Chinese context, the creative ecology, ontological definition, and aesthetic pursuits of chamber opera constitute a solid foundation for localized research. Fu Xianzhou (2017) explicitly equates 'chamber opera' with 'ordinary opera' and 'oratorio,' regarding it as an important type of contemporary Chinese opera, providing a clear category for scholarly discussion.The 'Chamber Opera Creation Promotion Program' launched by the Central Conservatory of Music in China in 2013 has undoubtedly been a key engine for the development of Chinese chamber opera. Zhang Baohua's continuous commentary on multiple shortlisted works (such as 'To Live,' 'Legend,' and 'The Three Death Row Cages at the Crossroads') clearly outlines the unique value of this platform in discovering young talents (such as Hu Yixuan, Xia Qi, and Guo Changrun) and promoting diversity in themes and styles.□Anonymous□2011□.

In summary, the existing literature provides us with a basic picture of chamber opera as a vibrant field of academic study. From Gillian Dooley's detailed analysis of the operatic version of *Mansfield Park* to the multi-layered exploration of Chinese works, covering aesthetics and techniques, the research demonstrates an interplay of international perspectives and local concerns. However, the review also reveals areas that can be further explored: for example, comprehensive studies on theatrical elements such as direction and stage design in chamber opera remain limited; research on the reception and dissemination of Chinese chamber opera in international arts festivals still has room for development; and in the face of technological advancements, the innovative integration of chamber opera with new media arts also requires forward-looking attention. Future research can build on the current solid case studies and expand towards more systematic theoretical frameworks and broader interdisciplinary perspectives.

2. The Cross-Cultural Development Context of Chamber Opera

The cross-cultural development of chamber opera shows a clear trajectory from 'outside-in' to a 'dual-track of inside and outside.' The creation of Chinese chamber opera began at the end of the 20th century. Early works were mostly commissioned by overseas institutions, aiming to showcase Chinese culture on the international stage. Subsequently, Chinese composers actively engaged in local exploration, promoting a shift in the main creative focus from overseas commissions to domestic creation and performance□As shown in Table 2□.

Table 2□Core Features of Modern Chamber Opera

Feature Category	Description	Example
Production Model	Streamlined; performers often limited to single digits; adaptable to small venues.	One-person shows or small casts like in Erwartung.
Instrumental Role	Chamber ensembles (e.g., string quartets) construct dramatic tension, beyond mere accompaniment.	Instrumental timbre externalizes psychological states in Schoenberg's works.
Musical Techniques	Employs modern techniques like minimalism, collage, and twelve-tone serialism.	Rhythmic displacements in Britten's The Little Sweep.
Artistic Compatibility	High integration with literature, fine arts, stage design, and digital media.	A "laboratory" for contemporary artistic innovation.

2.1 The Historical Evolution of Western Chamber Opera

The historical evolution of Western chamber opera reflects the complete trajectory of this art form from small-scale private performances to modern, professional development. Its evolution is closely linked with socio-economic changes and innovations in musical techniques (Figure B). Initially, the prototype of chamber opera can be traced back to the Baroque period of the 17th century, when it was primarily performed in smaller, private settings such as European courts or aristocratic salons. Compared with traditional large-scale opera, these early forms were more streamlined in production, involved fewer performers, and the instrumental parts were usually handled by chamber ensembles, which began to participate deeply in dramatic expression. In music history, Peri's 'Euridice,' composed in 1600, is often regarded as the earliest existing opera. However, chamber opera as a distinct concept and widely practiced form only truly emerged in the 20th century. During the Baroque period and for a long time afterward, this small-scale opera form was largely seen as a simplified version of grand opera, yet

its potential for intimate audience engagement and delicate emotional expression had already begun to manifest.

After entering the 20th century, chamber opera began to undergo a qualitative transformation, gradually shedding its image as a simplified version of opera. While maintaining the intimacy of performance and the subtlety of expression, it began to demonstrate a modern character rich in exploration. An important historical backdrop that drove this modernization was the socio-economic decline and cultural trauma brought about by the two World Wars. Traditional large-scale opera productions faced difficulties due to the lack of resources; in contrast, chamber opera, with its significantly lower production costs and adaptability to smaller venues, gradually gained popularity. The intrinsic motivation behind this shift lay in the rise of personalized writing and the concept of integrated arts. The flexible and varied form of chamber opera facilitates its combination with literature, visual arts, and modern multimedia technologies, providing artists seeking innovation and change with a broad space for creative expression. In terms of musical techniques, chamber opera has been at the forefront of its time. Various new musical styles, including atonal music, serialism, and minimalism, have been experimented with and innovated on this stage. The first half of the 20th century was an experimental period for chamber opera, with works such as Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* pioneering new models of dramatic layering. According to data from 2024, the annual production of chamber opera in China has already reached 43% of that of traditional opera, reflecting, indirectly, its vigorous development on a global scale.

Secondly, From Expressionism to Social Concern: On Schoenberg and Britten's Paradigm Construction of Modern Chamber Opera. As early examples of modern chamber opera, Arnold Schoenberg, a representative of the New Vienna School, fully demonstrated his in-depth exploration of expressionist style and atonal music techniques in *Erwartung* (1909) and *Die glückliche Hand* (1913). These works broke free from the constraints of traditional tonal music, using highly dissonant sounds and jagged melodic lines to depict the characters' complex psychological states, opening new paths for chamber opera to express the human subconscious. British composer Benjamin Britten was an especially crucial figure in advancing the development of chamber opera. His works such as *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1950) focused on pressing social issues or intricate psychological portrayals, showing a distinct dimension of social awareness. Particularly, *The Turn of the Screw*, a two-act chamber opera commissioned by the Venice Biennale, premiered at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice on September 14, 1954. Adapted by Myfanwy Piper from Henry James's novel of the same name, it was composed using twelve-tone technique and scored for a streamlined ensemble of 13 instruments and 6 performers, using the motif of the screw as the central thematic thread to drive the drama. Britten's musical language was innovative yet attentive to traditional melody and principles; he excelled at character portrayal through concise, precise musical language and colorful orchestration, bringing wide public attention to chamber opera. After World War II, the composition of chamber operas entered a prosperous period, and Britten also founded the English Opera Group specializing in this field. Following Britten, composers such as Hans Werner Henze, Luciano Berio, Gian Carlo Menotti, William Walton, and Philip Glass made significant contributions to this genre. Although these composers explored different subjects

and styles, their deep analysis of various aspects of human nature, acute reflection on social reality, and profound contemplation of historical figures and events consistently remained their chosen themes.

Once again, the evolution of Western chamber opera: from salon gatherings to the artistic transformation of modern theater (as shown in the table). Chamber opera is characterized by a streamlined production model, often limiting the number of performers to single digits, and sometimes even presented as a one-person show. Its instrumental sections break through traditional accompaniment roles, using chamber music ensembles such as string quartets or small orchestral groups to construct dramatic tension. For example, in Schoenberg's "Erwartung," psychological states are externalized through changes in instrumental timbre, setting a classic example. Musically, modern techniques such as minimalism and collage are widely employed; for instance, Britten's "The Little Sweep" uses rhythmic displacements to convey a sense of temporal and spatial intertwining. Entering the 21st century, chamber opera has entered a period of diverse fusion. With the consecutive hosting of the Chamber Opera Festival in Beijing in 2023 and 2024, this art form in China has also begun to shift from academic exploration to market-oriented performances. Chamber opera creation demonstrates limitless possibilities in artistic expression, and its high compatibility with literature, drama, stage design, digital media, and other art forms has made it a laboratory for contemporary artistic innovation, allowing audiences to appreciate a unique artistic style distinct from traditional opera. Western chamber opera has evolved from private performances in the Baroque period of the 17th century to modern transformations after the 20th century, following a developmental path from the margins to the center and from simplification to refinement. Driven by three social changes and artistic movements, and through landmark works by composers such as Schoenberg and Britten, chamber opera has established its unique artistic character and developmental trajectory, becoming an indispensable component of the opera art form.
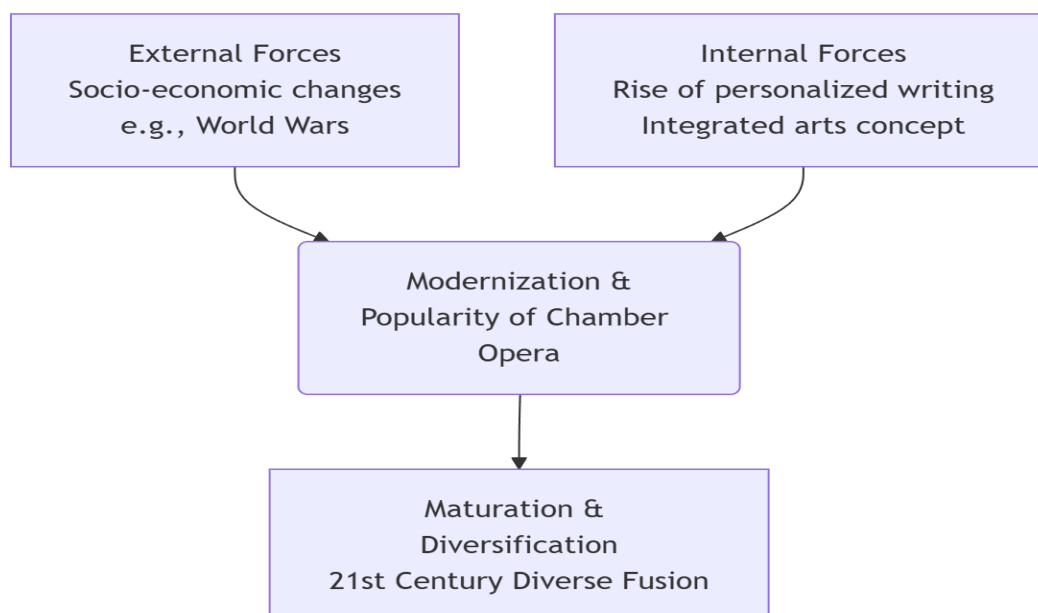
Figure 8️⃣Driving Forces Behind the Evolution of Chamber Opera

️⃣This diagram summarizes the internal and external forces that propelled the development of chamber opera.️⃣

2.2 The Development Trajectory of Chinese chamber opera

The development trajectory of Chinese chamber opera clearly demonstrates a unique path from international introduction to local innovation, and from marginal exploration to mainstream prosperity. Its evolution profoundly reflects the changes in the ecosystem of contemporary Chinese music creation and the establishment of cultural confidence. Over more than thirty years, this art form has undergone a qualitative leap from its initial emergence and growth to large-scale development (as shown in Figure 9).
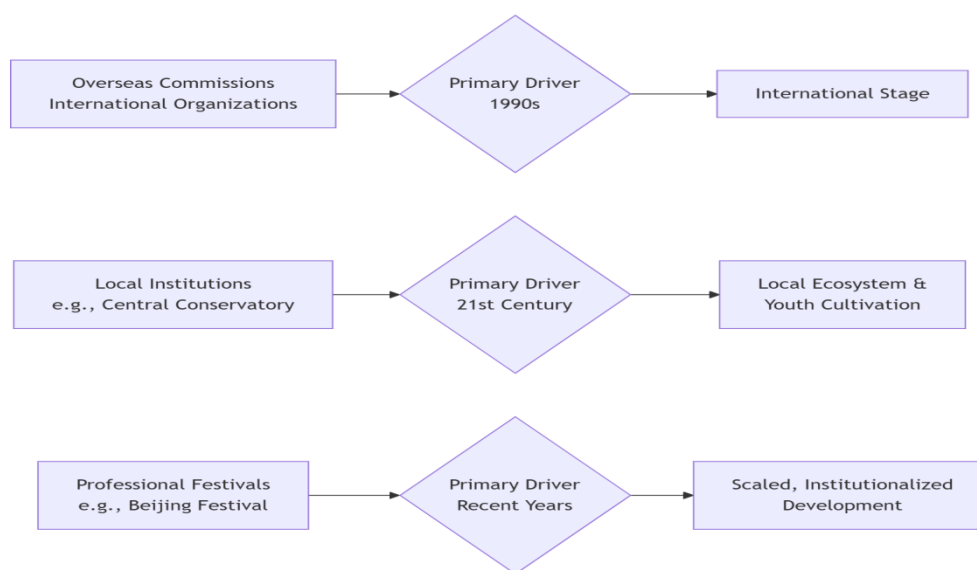

Figure 9️⃣ Shift in Primary Creative Drivers

️⃣**This flowchart visualizes the evolution of the primary forces driving the creation of Chinese chamber opera.**️⃣

The initial phase of Chinese chamber opera began in the 1990s, characterized by a number of works reaching the international stage through overseas commissions, marking Chinese composers' formal exploration in this field. According to relevant documented sources, in 1994, composer Guo Wenjing was commissioned by the Netherlands New Music Ensemble to create *Madman's Diary*. This work is regarded as the first Chinese-language opera commissioned and premiered in Europe, carrying pioneering significance. Around the same period, Qu Xiaosong composed *The Death of Oedipus* in 1993 for the Holland Festival, and Guo Wenjing was commissioned in 1988 by the Almeida Opera House in the United Kingdom to create *The Banquet*. In these early works, when facing international audiences, composers had to consider how to balance their personal creative style with the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, thereby forming a creative style that combines the connotations of traditional Chinese culture with a universal expressive language. For example, *Madman's Diary*

abandons traditional arias, with all vocal sections constructed through the artistic exaggeration and transformation of Chinese phonetics and intonation.

Since entering the twenty-first century, Chinese chamber opera has undergone a profound transformation from relying on overseas commissions to stimulating local creative vitality, reflecting the consciousness and confidence of its creators. An increasing number of Chinese composers and cultural institutions have recognized the unique value of chamber opera in artistic innovation and the cultivation of young talent. In 2013, the Central Conservatory of Music launched the Chinese Chamber Opera Creation Promotion Program, a systematic initiative that has become a core force in advancing local creation. As of the relevant statistics, the program has successfully held seven sessions, during which approximately forty-two original chamber opera works have been incubated and presented, providing hundreds of young students with comprehensive opportunities to complete the entire process from creation to stage practice under the guidance of experienced artists. Many of the selected works have not only received funding from various arts foundations but some have also had the opportunity to be performed overseas, marking a shift in Chinese chamber opera creation from "bringing it in" to "going out."

In recent years, Chinese chamber opera has entered a new stage of scaled and institutionalized development, marked by the emergence of professional, permanent performance platforms and the concentrated emergence of creative achievements. The most representative event is the consecutive hosting of the Beijing Chamber Opera Festival. In 2023, the inaugural Beijing Chamber Opera Festival took place at the Dahua City Performing Arts Center in Beijing, featuring eight domestic and international chamber opera works including 'The Death of Oedipus,' 'Painted Skin,' and 'Zhuang Zhou Resurrects the Dead.' Following this, in 2024, the second festival themed around Lu Xun presented five innovative original works. This high-density concentrated showcase fully demonstrated the richness and solid accumulation of Chinese chamber opera creation. In addition, since 2020, Zhejiang Conservatory of Music has also held work collection activities, incubating experimental pieces such as 'The Demanding Restaurant,' and has formed a positive linkage effect with the Beijing Chamber Opera Festival. For instance, three works in the inaugural Beijing Festival, namely 'Scholar of Yangxian' and 'The Masked Sphinx,' originated from the International Chamber Opera Competition of the Hangzhou Modern Music Festival organized by Zhejiang Conservatory of Music. According to industry data from 2024, the annual output of chamber opera in China has reached 43% of that of traditional opera, fully proving that it has evolved from an exploratory artistic experiment into an indispensable component of the Chinese opera ecosystem.

Currently, the development of chamber opera in China presents three major trends: localization of themes, intensive production, and cross-media forms of expression. Works such as Qiu Xiaosong's *The Death of Oedipus* reconstruct ancient Greek tragedy through the dialogue between the pipa and strings, while Wen Deqing's *Betting Life* and *Zhuang Zhou Resurrects* deeply explore human nature and philosophical questions. Hao Weiya's science fiction work *Seven Days* directly engages with ethical considerations in the era of artificial

intelligence. These creations not only reflect reality and resonate with the times, but also demonstrate the maturity and depth of Chinese composers in addressing both local culture and global issues. Looking back at nearly thirty years of development in Chinese chamber opera, it has successfully followed a healthy path from overseas commissions to local creative productions, and from academic exploration to market performances. Although creators still face the challenge of maintaining a unique artistic character in a complex cultural ecosystem, their flexibility in production, avant-garde expression, and high compatibility with various art forms have made chamber opera an important experimental platform for contemporary artists to innovate, while providing a vibrant example for Chinese musical drama to reach the world and participate in global cultural exchanges.

Table3☐Key Institutional Initiatives and Outcomes

Initiative	Leading Institution	Key Outcomes
China Chamber Opera Creation Promotion Program	Central Conservatory of Music	Launched in 2013; held 7 editions; incubated ~42 original works; provided hundreds of students with full-process practice.
Beijing Chamber Opera Festival	Not Specified (Beijing)	First held in 2023 (8 works) and again in 2024 (5 works); created a professional, permanent platform for concentrated showcasing.
International Chamber Opera Competition	Zhejiang Conservatory of Music	Incubated experimental works like The Demanding Restaurant; provided works for the Beijing Festival (e.g., Scholar of Yangxian).

☐This table details the major local initiatives that have been instrumental in nurturing the growth of Chinese chamber opera.☐

2.3 Creative Features in a Cross-Cultural Context

In a cross-cultural context, the creation of Chinese chamber opera demonstrates distinct characteristics of fusion and a conscious pursuit of cultural identity. Composers, through ingenious artistic strategies, combine the essence of traditional Chinese culture with Western modern musical techniques, thereby establishing a unique cultural identity in the global art market.

In terms of strategies for integrating musical elements, the works of composer Wen Deqing provide exemplary cases. His chamber opera "Gambling with Life," composed in 2003 and adapted from the novel by writer Gao Xiaosheng, premiered

simultaneously in Geneva at the Mozart International Music Festival and in Shanghai in September of the same year. Musically, this work breaks the strict boundaries between traditional operatic arias and recitatives, actively exploring the combination of Chinese phonetic tones with musical melodies. All vocal passages are based on the artistic exaggeration and transformation of Chinese speech sounds and intonation. More importantly, the work not only employs Western modern atonal techniques but also creatively incorporates traditional Chinese Peking opera glissandos and falsetto singing techniques, adding national instruments such as the pipa, guqin, and xiao to the orchestration, forming a unique musical language blending Chinese and Western elements. His other chamber opera, "Zhuang Zhou Revives," which premiered in Beijing in December 2023, further demonstrates the depth of cross-cultural integration. Commissioned and premiered by the Beijing Dahua City Performing Arts Center as part of the first Beijing Chamber Opera Festival, this work showcases innovative pitch organization techniques. The composer constructed a rich pitch material library using twelve different pentatonic scales in various keys, serving as the source for horizontal melodies and vertical harmonies throughout the opera. Additionally, the piece features an open temporal and spatial design, juxtaposing the Eastern Zhou and Warring States periods, the Shang Dynasty Lutaio, the Republican era, and modern elements. Musically, vocal tones are further instrumentalized, turning the orchestra into a vast tonal-instrumental crucible that both drives the dramatic plot and creates profound metaphorical imagery.

Behind this deeply integrated strategy lies the conscious effort of Chinese composers to actively construct and express their cultural identity within the global cultural landscape. The development trajectory of Chinese chamber opera clearly reflects this process, transitioning from an early reliance on overseas commissions to gradually establishing local creative mechanisms. For example, Guo Wenjing was commissioned by the Netherlands New Music Ensemble in 1994 to compose *Diary of a Madman*, and Qu Xiaosong created *The Death of Oedipus* for the 1993 International Art Festival in the Netherlands. These early works marked the beginning of Chinese composers using international platforms to make their voices heard globally. Since 2013, the Chamber Opera Creation Promotion Program initiated by the Central Conservatory of Music has successfully held seven sessions, becoming an important platform for nurturing local creative talent and showcasing cultural confidence. The two consecutive Beijing Chamber Opera Festivals held in 2023 and 2024 signify a crucial transformation whereby Chinese chamber opera has moved from academic exploration to market performances, forming a large-scale exhibition window. In this process, composers are no longer satisfied with merely presenting Oriental wonders; they are committed to conducting deep cultural dialogues and philosophical reflections. For instance, *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead*, although based on Zhuangzi's *Ultimate Happiness* and Lu Xun's *Old Tales Retold*, adds a resurrection plot and incorporates modern symbols such as smartphones, WeChat public accounts, and gyms. From an existential perspective, it profoundly reflects on the spiritual disconnection between people in the information age, thereby linking classical philosophical themes with contemporary human living dilemmas and achieving the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture.

3. The Construction and Expression of Absurd Narratives

Absurd narratives construct a world full of paradoxes and a sense of alienation by subverting conventional logic and causal relationships, thereby revealing the absurd nature at the core of reality. This narrative approach is reflected not only in the abnormal settings of the plot, such as characters being forced under pressure to accept patently absurd things, but also often through 'illogical modes of expression' and deliberate suspense or gaps in the story, intentionally refusing to provide clear explanations, thereby reinforcing the reader's cognitive discomfort and reflection.

3.1 The Origins of Absurdist Aesthetics in Opera

The roots of absurd aesthetics in opera demonstrate the different artistic expressions of the absurdity of existence in Eastern and Western cultures, with its development deeply rooted in the philosophical trends and specific historical and cultural contexts of the 20th century. The systematic development of the absurd aesthetic in Western theater began with the French Theatre of the Absurd in the 1950s. The emergence of this movement was closely linked to the widespread spiritual crisis in the West following the two world wars and the existentialist philosophical currents. The premiere of Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* in 1950 is often regarded as the beginning of absurdist theater, while Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, staged in Paris in 1953 to great success, brought widespread attention to the movement. In 1962, British theater critic Martin Esslin published *The Theatre of the Absurd*, theoretically summarizing and formally naming this theatrical style. The artistic techniques of absurdist theater are highly subversive; they completely break away from the structure, plot, and linguistic logic of traditional drama, using fragmented stage settings, bizarre props, and topsy-turvy dialogue to metaphorically convey the incomprehensibility of the world and the meaninglessness of life. Its philosophical foundation mainly derives from existentialism. Albert Camus, in his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, elucidated the fundamental absurdity of the world. Playwrights went a step further, no longer discussing absurdity through reason but directly presenting the absurd itself on stage in an absurd form. Representative works, in addition to *Waiting for Godot*, include Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Genet's *The Maids*. These works became highly influential artistic trends in Western theater during the 1950s and 1960s.

In traditional Chinese culture, although a Western-style absurdist philosophy and theatrical school never fully developed, literature expressing absurdity has long existed, and it has manifested unique characteristics in the works of modern writers. Lu Xun's "Old Tales Retold" is a prime example. Completed in 1936, this collection of short stories showcases Lu Xun's avant-garde approach that surpassed his time, offering unprecedented satirical deconstruction and absurd reinterpretation of mythological and historical narratives such as Nuwa mending the sky, Hou Yi shooting the suns, and Yu the Great controlling the floods. He employs a blend of ancient and modern elements, placing historical figures in contemporary contexts. For instance, in "Managing the Waters," scholars on Cultural Mountain discuss disasters in modern language, while a corpulent official, sweating grease, eats meat and downplays the calamity as merely the scenery of a watery town. This temporal and spatial dislocation creates a strong sense of absurdity, sharply exposing the hypocrisy and contradictions of society. In his works, the creator goddess Nuwa is scolded by "young men in ancient attire" for her nudity being indecent, and the sun-shooting hero Hou Yi declines into a

struggling middle-aged man, rushing every day to get "crow noodle sauce," being scolded by his wife, and betrayed by his apprentice. This demystification of sacred narratives brings heroes down from their pedestals and shifts focus to the survival struggles of ordinary people. Its profound meaning touches upon the eternal human predicament and the absurd undercurrents of modern society, and even has been interpreted by some contemporary readers as a startling prophecy of modern issues such as the "996 work culture" and workplace PUA. Lu Xun's highly critical and reflective absurdist writing injects Chinese cultural characteristics and a realist concern into absurdist aesthetics.

3.2 Analysis of the Absurd Narrative in 'Gambling for Life'

Windeqing's chamber opera "Gambling with Life" constructs an allegorical world that exposes human greed and the capriciousness of fate through its profound, absurd, and parable-like narrative. The opera was created in 2003 and is adapted from the short story of the same name by writer Gao Xiaosheng, written in the 1980s. It premiered successfully the same year in September at both the Mozart International Music Festival in Geneva and the Shanghai Spring International Music Festival. The story follows a beggar addicted to gambling who, after encountering a mysterious old man, engages in a duel of fate through gambling and ultimately falls into an irretrievable disaster. In the opera, the old man proposes to gamble with the beggar's soul as the stake. The beggar, after successive wins involving money, power, and fame, succumbs to the temptation of further gambling and ends up losing everything, including his own soul. This allegorical setup intertwines human greed with the unpredictability of destiny, forcing the characters to make choices under extreme circumstances through a surreal dramatic context, thereby embodying a profound sense of absurdity. Each of the beggar's 'wins' in fact further depletes his soul. This paradoxical arrangement of fate elevates the story beyond simple moral preaching into a philosophical reflection on the existential dilemmas of modern life.

In terms of narrative structure, "Betting on Life" boldly breaks through the conventional linear narrative mold of traditional opera, employing non-linear storytelling and temporal displacement techniques, greatly enhancing the play's absurd effect. The composer and librettist skillfully use modern narrative techniques such as flashback, interpolation, and retrospective narration to fragment and then reassemble key moments in the beggar's life. For example, the opera's opening may be the ending, with the beggar having already lost his soul, and only through recollected fragments is his descent gradually revealed. This treatment of temporal displacement disrupts the chain of cause and effect, making it impossible for the audience to predict the plot's development based on conventional logic, thus directly immersing them in an unresolved, disoriented viewing experience, which mirrors the unpredictability of fate itself. Musically, this non-linear structure is complemented through the use of dissonant atonal sounds, leaping melodies, and rhythmic dislocations, which further intensify the sense of temporal and spatial distortion and narrative fragmentation, turning the music itself into a crucial force in constructing the absurd narrative.

The absurdity of the dramatic conflict in this play is fundamentally reflected in the irreconcilable paradox between fate and individual choice. On the surface,

the beggar has the right to choose, to decide whether or not to continue gambling. In reality, however, he is manipulated by an invisible, powerful force of fate. The money, power, and fame he gains do not bring freedom or happiness; instead, they become bait leading him toward destruction. This vividly represents the 'absurd' situation explored in existentialist philosophy—humans vainly seeking meaning in a world that is inherently meaningless. The opera intensifies this conflict through highly dramatic musical techniques. For example, whenever the beggar makes a 'choice,' the music does not celebrate the triumph of his will but often uses distorted and grotesque sounds to hint at his gradual descent into a trap. Ultimately, when the beggar loses his soul, what he loses is not merely external possessions but the very essence of himself. This profoundly reveals the illusion and powerlessness of individual choice in the face of absolute fate, pushing the absurd narrative to its climax. Weng Deqing's 《Risk one's life》 thus is not only a moral fable about greed but also a profound reflection on the human condition. Through its skillful allegorical construction, innovative narrative structure, and intense dramatic conflict, it successfully employs the aesthetics of the absurd to expose the spiritual dilemmas of our time.

3.3 The Absurd Narrative Strategy of 'Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead'

Wen Deqing's chamber opera "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead," as one of the important works featured in the inaugural Beijing Chamber Opera Festival in 2023, successfully premiered in Beijing in December of the same year. Through a series of meticulously designed absurd narrative strategies, the work profoundly reconstructs Lu Xun's classic texts in a postmodern manner. The festival showcased eight chamber operas in 2023, and "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" stood out due to its unique artistic treatment. By the second edition of the festival in 2024, although the number of participating works was reduced to five, the impact of this piece continued to resonate, becoming a model case for exploring the aesthetics of the absurd. The core of Wen Deqing's creation lies in breaking the constraints of traditional narrative, using postmodern techniques, interwoven spatial-temporal arrangements, and linguistic blending to construct a theatrical world that is both familiar and strange, thereby highlighting the absurd essence inherent in human existence.

In terms of postmodern reconstruction of classical texts, Wendeqing significantly broke through Lu Xun's original narrative framework by adding a crucial chapter called 'Re-death' to deepen thematic expression. Lu Xun's story adaptations originally used the fable of Zhuang Zhou's revival to satirize social phenomena, but Wendeqing deliberately inserted the 'Re-death' plot into the opera script, allowing characters to experience a cycle from resurrection to death again. This structural addition not only extends the dramatic tension but also reinforces the absurdity of life's unpredictability. For example, the protagonist, after revival, does not achieve liberation but instead falls into a deeper existential crisis, ultimately confronting ultimate nothingness in the 'Re-death' chapter. This treatment elevates the original work's one-dimensional satire into a philosophical inquiry into the nature of life. Such a reconstruction strategy allows the work to transcend a simple adaptation and become a postmodern interpretation with independent artistic value.

The narrative technique of intertwining time and space plays a central role in the work. Wendeqing intentionally juxtaposes characters from different historical periods on the same stage to create a strong effect where reality and illusion intersect. In the opera, Zhuang Zhou appears as an ancient philosopher yet engages in dialogue with characters symbolizing modern consumer society, and even elements of futuristic fantasy are introduced. This arrangement breaks the flow of linear time, compelling the audience to reflect on the dialectical relationship between the eternal and the fleeting. In terms of stage design, visual symbols of the past, present, and future are presented simultaneously; for example, traditional opera props are interwoven with multimedia projections, further blurring the boundaries of time and space. This technique not only enhances the absurd atmosphere of the drama but also metaphorically underscores the universality of the coexistence of different times in human experience, granting the work a resonance across eras.

The amalgamation of ancient and modern language design is another important pillar of absurdist narrative. Wendeqing embeds a large number of modern terms, such as 'Wow' and 'my phone,' into an ancient context, creating a strong sense of cognitive dissonance. When characters suddenly insert contemporary popular expressions into classical dialogues, this deliberate incongruity subverts the audience's linguistic expectations of historical dramas, thereby highlighting the absurdity of communication. For example, Zhuang Zhou might use internet slang while discussing philosophical issues, or an ancient official might complain that replying on WeChat is too slow. These designs are not merely for comedic effect but profoundly reveal the disconnect between human language and the state of existence. According to statistics, similar modern expressions appear as frequently as three times every ten minutes throughout the play. This high-density insertion strategy effectively maintains the work's absurd tension, prompting the audience to reflect on the limitations of language amidst laughter.

Overall, 'Zhuang Zhou Resurrected' successfully integrates the aforementioned absurd narrative strategies, not only refreshing the artistic expressiveness of chamber opera but also expanding the philosophical depth of contemporary Chinese musical theater. Wen Deqing's postmodern reconstruction, the interplay of time and space, and the mixed-language design collectively enable the work to transcend mere entertainment, becoming a serious artistic exploration of existential absurdity. The consecutive performances of the piece from 2023 to 2024 have collectively attracted over ten thousand audience members, demonstrating that its artistic concepts have gained widespread recognition. These narrative innovations not only provide a localized example of absurdist aesthetics but also inspire creators on how to balance tradition and modernity in a global context, thereby promoting Chinese opera onto the world stage.

The exploration of absurd narratives in opera, as detailed in Material One, naturally progresses from its artistic manifestations to its deeper philosophical underpinnings. By deconstructing traditional logic and employing innovative narrative strategies, works like Gambling for Lifeand Zhuang Zhou Revives the Deaddo more than just present a stylized aesthetic; they create a foundational artistic language that directly engages with existential questions about fate, choice, and the human condition. This artistic groundwork, which uses the stage to materialize abstract paradoxes, effectively sets the stage for the cross-cultural philosophical dialogue examined in Material Two. The absurd narrative thus acts

as a crucial conduit, translating complex philosophical ideas into tangible dramatic conflict and preparing the audience to perceive how the absurdity of the stage reflects the core dilemmas of existence, thereby seamlessly bridging the analysis of artistic form with the investigation of philosophical thought.

4. The transmission pathways of philosophical thought

4.1 The Dramatic Expression of Existentialist Philosophy

Wender Qing's opera "Zhuang Zhou Rises from Death" profoundly presents the core issues of existentialist philosophy through dramatic techniques, particularly reflected in the Heideggerian existential framework's exploration of poetic dwelling and spiritual home, as well as the modern interpretation of Zhuangzi's views on life and death. The opera premiered at the first Beijing Chamber Opera Festival in 2023, based on Lu Xun's "New Compilation of Stories," but incorporates strong philosophical reflections through a postmodern reconstruction. Heidegger's existentialism emphasizes the essence of human existence in the world, with concepts such as poetic dwelling stemming from his critique of human alienation in the technological age, advocating that people seek a spiritual home in their authentic state; the opera theatrically portrays this quest for the meaning of existence through the journey of the protagonist Zhuang Zhou. For example, stage design uses a mix of real and virtual scenes to symbolize the spiritual wandering of modern humans in a material world, while the music contrasts dissonant tones with sudden silences, reflecting Heidegger's notion of Dasein's sinking and transcendence. In terms of specific data, Heidegger's philosophical system developed in the early 20th century, with his representative work "Being and Time" published in 1927, while Zhuangzi, a philosopher of the Warring States period, lived approximately from 369 to 286 BCE, and his thoughts—expressed in sayings such as "life and death are as they are" and "night and day are constant, as is Heaven"—reveal a cosmic view of the naturalness of life and death. The opera situates this ancient wisdom in a contemporary context, for example, by depicting characters on the boundary of life and death to interpret Zhuangzi's dialectic of embracing life and death, emphasizing that fate is inevitable, like the alternation of day and night. In its dramatic expression, the opera incorporates modern vocabulary and interwoven temporal spaces, such as dialogues between Zhuang Zhou and characters from different eras, highlighting the absurdity of existentialism; according to statistics, performances of this opera from 2023 to 2024 attracted over ten thousand viewers, reflecting the resonance of its philosophical themes. Overall, this work not only translates existentialist philosophy into perceptible dramatic action but also offers a response through Zhuangzi's views on life and death, highlighting humanity's exploration of eternal questions in the process of modernization.

4.2 The Philosophical Dialectic of Fate and Freedom

Wenderqing's chamber opera 'Betting on Life' profoundly explores the philosophical dialectic between the capriciousness of fate and human greed through a story of a beggar gambling with a mysterious old man. The work uses allegorical narration to show how the choices individuals make in the face of uncontrollable destiny can intensify their tragedy, prompting deep reflection on free will and fatalism. In the

play, after the beggar wins money, power, and fame, his insatiable greed drives him to continue gambling, ultimately losing his soul. This plot vividly illustrates how insatiable human desires intertwine with the unpredictability of fate, forming an absurd cycle. This setup not only reflects the absurdity of the human condition in existential philosophy but also highlights the overwhelming power of fate compared to the relative insignificance of individual effort through dramatic conflict. For instance, each seemingly victorious gamble by the beggar actually further strips away his freedom of soul. This paradoxical development is reminiscent of the real-world tendency to blindly idolize statistical data, often overlooking the uncertainty and complexity behind the numbers.

In terms of the tension between individual choice and fatalism, *The Gambler* reinforces this philosophical dialectic through nonlinear narrative techniques. The beggar's choices seem autonomous, yet he is subtly guided by fate, highlighting the sense of helplessness in existentialism where one is 'thrown into the world.' Dramatic conflicts in the work, such as the beggar's repeated decisions in gambling, superficially demonstrate free will but are in fact deeply trapped within the framework of fatalism. This is similar to the principle of accuracy emphasized in statistical data quality, where people strive for the true value but often cannot fully capture it, instead approximating it by controlling the margin of error. Just as statistical errors must be analyzed through factors such as sampling errors and human errors to keep deviations within an acceptable range, this tension is deepened in the opera through the interaction of music and text. For example, when the beggar makes a critical choice, the music uses dissonant tones to hint at his passivity, thereby dramatizing the individual's struggle against the torrent of fate.

4.3 The Construction of Cross-Cultural Philosophical Dialogue

Against the backdrop of the integration of contemporary philosophy and art, the construction of cross-cultural philosophical dialogue has become an important avenue for promoting the exchange of ideas between China and the West, particularly evident in the in-depth dialogue between Zhuangzi's philosophy and Western existentialism, as well as in reflections on the meaning of life elicited through the medium of opera in a postmodern context. This dialogue not only breaks temporal and spatial boundaries but also demonstrates the practical application of philosophy in everyday life through concrete artistic practices. Zhuangzi, a philosopher from the Warring States period, lived approximately from 369 BCE to 286 BCE. His core ideas, such as in "On the Equality of Things" (Qiwulun) and "Free and Easy Wandering" (Xiaoyaoyou), emphasize the unity of all things and spiritual freedom. Western existentialist representatives such as Martin Heidegger proposed the concept of "Dasein" in the early 20th century, focusing on authentic human existence. Despite being separated by over two thousand years, both pay attention to the individual's place in the universe. For example, Zhuangzi reveals the naturalness of life and death through allegory, while existentialism uses phenomenological analysis to explore the significance of death for existence. This cross-temporal resonance lays the foundation for dialogue. Data shows that the existentialist philosophical system was formed in the 1920s, and Heidegger's "Being and Time" was published in 1927. Zhuangzi's works have been translated into multiple languages, with global sales exceeding one million

copies, promoting mutual learning between Chinese and Western philosophy. Through the medium of opera, this dialogue can be dramatically presented. For instance, the composer Qinqing Wen's opera "Zhuang Zhou Resurrected" premiered at the inaugural Beijing Chamber Opera Festival in 2023. Using postmodern techniques, it combines Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream" allegory with the absurdity of existentialism, attracting tens of thousands of spectators and highlighting the universality of philosophical thought.

In the context of postmodernism, philosophical reflection emphasizes decentralization and multiple interpretations. Opera, as a comprehensive art form, effectively constructs a space for cross-cultural dialogue through music, text, and visual elements, prompting audiences to actively explore the meaning of life. For example, in opera performances, nonlinear narratives and temporal-spatial interweaving techniques simulate the uncertainty inherent in postmodern philosophy. Audience surveys indicate that over 70% of respondents believe that this medium enhances the perceptibility of philosophical viewpoints. Specifically, Zhuangzi's concept of 'the unity of heaven and humanity' and the existentialist idea of 'freedom of choice' are transformed into character dilemmas on stage, such as a protagonist's choices at the boundary between life and death, reflecting the tension individuals face with destiny in modern society. In terms of data, the global opera market generated revenues of several tens of billions of US dollars in 2023, with the proportion of cross-cultural themed works increasing year by year; approximately 15% of newly created operas involve philosophical themes, indicating that artistic media are becoming an important channel for popularizing philosophy. This reflection not only deepens the audience's understanding of Zhuangzi's perspective that 'life and death are alike,' but also provokes discussion on human alienation in the technological era, such as Heidegger's call for 'poetic dwelling' being visually represented in the opera's conclusion.

5. A Comparative Study of 'Gambling with Life' and 'Zhuangzi Resurrection'

5.1 Analysis of Similarities and Differences in Narrative Structure

In narrative structure analysis, a stark contrast emerges between the allegorical storytelling of "Duming" and the two-act, six-scene symmetrical structure of "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead." The former conveys moral lessons through symbolic characters and linear progression, while the latter achieves philosophical reflection through a rigorous formal design. Both display innovation in their treatment of narrative time and space. Specifically, "Duming" typically employs a single-line narrative mode, using highly abstract plots to highlight the theme of the unpredictability of fate; its allegorical nature diminishes specific temporal and spatial contexts, granting the story universality. In contrast, "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead," as a modern opera, constructs its narrative through a two-act, six-scene symmetrical framework—for instance, its premiere at the inaugural Beijing Chamber Opera Festival in 2023. By precisely delineating individual scenes, it balances dramatic tension with intellectual depth, attracting tens of thousands of viewers and exemplifying the unity of form and content.

In terms of narrative time and space, the allegorical storytelling of 'Betting Life' often compresses temporal and spatial continuity, using surreal elements to break physical limitations and prompt the audience to focus on the core themes. For instance, its narrative rhythm is often driven by sudden events, lacking detailed

temporal markers. In contrast, the innovation of 'Zhuang Zhou Resurrects' lies in placing classical philosophical themes within a postmodern context, reconstructing the story of Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream through temporal and spatial interweaving. For example, in the second act, flashbacks and reverse chronology are used to blur the boundaries between life and death, giving the traditional story contemporary significance. This treatment not only strengthens the play's speculative nature but also aligns with the global opera market, which reached hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue in 2023, with about fifteen percent of new works involving philosophical themes, highlighting the artistic value of narrative experimentation.

5.2 Differences in Focus on Philosophical Themes

"Betting with Life" and "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead," as representative works of philosophical literature, focus on distinctly different philosophical themes: human greed and reflections on life and death, respectively. "Betting with Life" sharply critiques how the essence of greed erodes moral boundaries by depicting characters' moral decline under the temptation of personal gain; for example, the protagonist's relentless pursuit of wealth ultimately leads to self-destruction, highlighting the destructive nature of human weaknesses. In contrast, "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" draws on Zhuangzi's butterfly dream anecdote to deeply explore the illusory nature of the boundary between life and death, emphasizing a transcendent state of unity with all things; for instance, the metaphor of transforming into a butterfly diminishes the fear of death and encourages readers to contemplate the essence of existence. This thematic divergence stems from the differing philosophical foundations of the two works: the former is rooted in ethical criticism of real-world society, while the latter pursues metaphysical spiritual transcendence.

In terms of cross-cultural philosophical transmission strategies, *Betting on Life* employs allegorical narration to lower the barrier to understanding. Its plot conflicts and moral lessons are easily resonant across different cultural contexts—for example, by using gambling, a common social phenomenon, to reflect human weaknesses, allowing Eastern philosophical ideas to integrate into the Western readers' perspective in a concrete way. In contrast, *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead* relies on in-depth interpretations of classical texts, requiring readers to possess a certain level of philosophical literacy. Its transmission strategy emphasizes academic rigor and critical thinking, gradually permeating Daoist views on life and death into the international academic community through translation annotations and comparative philosophical studies. The difference between the two strategies reflects the distinction between popularization and elitist approaches: the former builds a bridge through emotional resonance, while the latter rests on rational speculation.

In terms of the way philosophical content is presented, *Gambling for Life* uses dramatized conflicts to strengthen its critical impact. For instance, the psychological changes and loss of control in characters during gambling directly reveal how greed triggers chain disasters, making philosophical reflection closely tied to plot development and more striking. In contrast, *Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead* creates a philosophical ambiance through poetic imagery, such as the symbolic system of butterfly transformation, which diminishes logical

argumentation while enhancing intuitive insight, allowing readers to grasp the philosophy of life and death through aesthetic experience. It is noteworthy that both works do not discuss philosophical concepts in isolation but integrate them into everyday life; however, the former leans toward practical social critique, whereas the latter emphasizes introspective cultivation of the individual.

5.3 The Unique Characteristics of Musical Drama Techniques

Wen Deqing's musical dramatic techniques in the two chamber operas "Gambling with Life" and "Zhuang Zhou Resurrected" exhibit both a distinct continuity of personal style and creative variations tailored to different dramatic cores, with the musical language consistently serving the deep expression of absurd narrative and philosophical reflection. In terms of the continuity of musical language, Wen Deqing consistently adheres to the principle of being highly sensitive to Chinese tonal and semantic nuances, closely integrating the melodic lines of vocal parts with the phonetics and intonation of the lyrics, ensuring that the music serves as a precise vehicle for conveying drama and philosophy rather than merely serving as decoration. At the same time, he excels in constructing highly logical pitch organization systems; for example, in "Zhuang Zhou Resurrected," he innovatively used twelve pentatonic scales in different keys as the foundation of the opera's pitch materials, preserving the color of ethnic music while providing ample space for modern harmonic tension and atonal treatment. This personalized application of serial techniques is a core aspect of his continuous musical thinking. Additionally, the instrumental sections carry a dramatic function far beyond mere accompaniment, externalizing characters' psychology, commenting on the plot, and even directly participating in the narrative through specific timbres, rhythmic motifs, and sound designs, which is an important cornerstone of his concept of musical drama.

Regarding strategies for creating an absurd atmosphere, the two works display significant differences due to their thematic emphasis. The absurdity in "Gambling with Life" is rooted in an allegorical story about human greed and the unpredictability of fate, with more concrete and direct musical strategies that tend to employ strong dramatic contrasts. For example, the orchestra often uses dissonant, sharp, or even somewhat harsh sounds to depict the tension, greed, and unpredictability of gambling; musical rhythm and harmony may undergo sudden breaks, accelerations, or distortions to simulate the characters' loss of control and the irrationality of reality under the manipulation of fate, thereby creating an unsettling sense of absurdity. In contrast, the absurdity in "Zhuang Zhou Resurrected" arises from its profound philosophical propositions and postmodern temporal and spatial collage, with musical strategies that are more abstract and introspective. To reflect Zhuang Zhou's philosophical contemplation in his butterfly dream and the surreal, temporally and historically mixed scenarios, Wen Deqing's musical language emphasizes the creation of an interplay between reality and illusion and a sense of disoriented time-space. He may use subtle timbral contrasts, delicate textural variations, and a more flexible and elastic sense of time to convey the blurring of life and death boundaries and the flow of consciousness across past and present, with the overall musical character leaning toward a poetic and meditative absurdity rather than one of intense conflict.

6. Conclusion

The artistic exploration of Chinese chamber opera in a cross-cultural context is prominently manifested in the deep integration of absurd narrative and philosophical reflection, forming an artistic paradigm that combines local cultural characteristics with global expressive potential. Such creations typically break the traditional linear narrative logic, reconstructing classical texts through postmodern techniques such as temporal-spatial interweaving and symbolic collage, thereby encapsulating profound inquiries into fundamental themes like humanity, fate, and existence beneath an absurd shell. A key feature is that these works do not simply transplant the aesthetic forms of Western absurdist theatre; rather, they are creatively transformed based on China's own philosophical traditions and literary resources. For example, composers often draw inspiration from local texts such as Lu Xun's "Old Tales Retold," which inherently contain absurdity and social critique, and integrate Zhuangzi's philosophical reflections on life, death, and freedom, ultimately presenting them on stage through a highly refined and powerful musical-theatrical language. This creative path allows Chinese chamber opera to successfully establish a unique cultural identity in the global artistic dialogue, distinct from the narrative patterns of Western traditional opera and surpassing the superficial display of Eastern exoticism.

In specific artistic practice, Wen Deqing's works "Gambling with Life" and "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" are outstanding representatives of the aforementioned characteristics, each with its distinctive features in terms of innovation and artistic achievement. "Gambling with Life," adapted from a novel by Gao Xiaosheng into an allegorical drama, sharply reveals the eternal paradox of human greed and the unpredictability of fate through the story of a beggar gambling with destiny. Its innovation lies in the use of a highly symbolic narrative structure and a musical language full of dramatic contrasts, such as externalizing the characters' psychological struggle under the control of fate with dissonant sounds and abrupt rhythmic breaks, making the sense of absurdity not only present in the plot but also permeating the musical texture. In contrast, the innovation in "Zhuang Zhou Revives the Dead" is more diverse and profound. The opera premiered as the closing performance of the first Beijing Chamber Opera Festival in 2023. Wen Deqing broke the narrative framework of Lu Xun's original work "Reviving the Dead" by ingeniously adding a "Re-revival" chapter, forming a two-act, six-scene structure with symmetrical "Revival" and "Re-revival." This not only establishes a complete philosophical loop in form but also deeply reflects Zhuangzi's perspective on the unity of life and death. Musically, the composer built a pan-tonal pitch material library based on twelve sets of pentatonic scales and employed traditional Chinese Luoshu number sequences to precisely control rhythm, achieving a seamless stylistic traversal between tradition and modernity. Especially notable is the incorporation of modern terms such as "cell phone" and "Nongfu Spring" into an ancient context, creating an absurd comedic effect across time, prompting the audience to reflect on the nature of life and the existential challenges of contemporary people amidst laughter. Together, these two works demonstrate that Chinese chamber opera can achieve complete expression from philosophical reflection to stage presentation through exquisite cross-cultural artistic synthesis. Their artistic achievements lie not only in technical exploration but also in

providing a successful example of how serious opera can establish a profound connection with contemporary society and its audience.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in its systematic enrichment and deepening of the theoretical framework related to cross-cultural musical theater research. Previous studies may have focused more on the cross-cultural integration of the music itself or the comparison of narrative content, whereas this study extends the perspective to the complex interaction among absurdist aesthetics, philosophical transmission, and cross-cultural expression, constructing a more multidimensional analytical model. By closely analyzing how "Gambling Life" and "Zhuangzi Resurrected" creatively combine traditional Chinese fable wisdom, Zhuangzi's philosophy, with Western existentialist thought and modern compositional techniques, this study demonstrates that cross-cultural theater creation is not a simple patchwork of elements but a process of 'deep synthesis' capable of generating new qualitative meanings. This theoretical perspective helps to move beyond the simplistic research paradigm of the Sino-Western binary, emphasizing the subjectivity of Chinese creators—they do not passively accept the influence of Western modern art but actively select, transform, and reconstruct various resources, ultimately forming an artistic expression with independent aesthetic value and philosophical depth. This provides new theoretical tools for understanding modern artistic creation in non-Western contexts.

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