

Celebrity Culture and Traditional Chinese Opera in Chinese Reality TV: A Case Study of *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot*

Yunqing Yang
University of Leeds, the UK
Email: yangyunqing0524@gmail.com

Received: 07/01/2026
Accepted: 24/03/2026
Published: 22/04/2026

Volume: 7 Issue: 2

How to cite this paper: Yang, Y. (2026). Celebrity Culture and Traditional Chinese Opera in Chinese Reality TV: A Case Study of Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 7(2), 16-21
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v7i2.440>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of celebrity culture and traditional Chinese opera through a comprehensive case study of the reality television program *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* (《越女争锋》). Originating in Zhejiang and evolving into a dominant urban art form in mid-20th-century Shanghai, Yue opera is uniquely characterized by its all-female casts and the performance of gender fluidity. The research analyzes how this traditional genre is recontextualized within contemporary media frameworks, blending the professional rigor of operatic discipline with the commercial and narrative tropes of reality TV. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of celebrification, media convergence, and cultural identity, the study examines the 2009 season to illustrate how the program negotiates the tension between individual fame and collective heritage. Unlike Western-style talent shows that prioritize self-promotion, this program subordinates individual celebrification to the values of artistic lineage and institutional support, foregrounding an ethos of "sisterhood" and collaborative excellence over individualized competition. Furthermore, the paper investigates the influence of national cultural policy, positioning the show as a strategic effort to revitalize intangible cultural heritage for a digital-era audience. The study concludes that *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* serves as a successful model for the sustainable development of traditional arts, demonstrating their capacity to adapt to modern broadcast environments without relinquishing their core aesthetic and cultural significance.

Keywords: Yue Opera, Reality Television Celebrification, Cultural Identity, Gender Performativity

1. Introduction: Why Literary Topology Needs Self-Reflection

Yue opera, which is a traditional Chinese opera style originating from Zhejiang province, has a distinctive feature of predominantly featuring women in its roles since the 1940s. Both the male roles and female roles are played by women. These female performers have excelled in portraying themes centered around family, love and life experience of women. During the days that Shanghai was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in the 1940s to the 21st century, the all-female Yue opera always played a significant role in the city's popular culture. This cultural phenomenon was characterized by a fascination with women and love, as well as the relationships and emotion inside the family reflecting notable shifts in gender ideologies and relationships within the modern metropolis. Furthermore, the women who entered the public cultural sphere influenced the opera's essence and aesthetics by drawing upon their emotions and life experiences. According to Jiang (2009), The emergence of mass media gave rise to a fresh public sphere where perspectives on the roles and portrayal of women underwent debate and negotiation. Thus, Yue opera has been closely connected to the media in the first place even since it was introduced to its audience.

As Hill (2004) presents, in recent decades, Reality TV has experienced a rapid and substantial expansion as a form of television entertainment. Thus, when the traditional opera style decides to turn up as a reality TV show, this led to the emergence of *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot*, (《越女争锋》) which was held by the "Liyuan Challenge" column of CCTV's opera channel and the Variety Department of Shanghai Media Group.

2. Sleeves in the Spotlight: The Modern Spectacle of Yue Opera Talent

Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot brings together young Yue opera actresses (under 35) from professional troupes across China and employs a more fashionable way of performance format, which is likely to be a talent show. This clearly demonstrates the influence of talent shows in China in the early 2000s. In addition to traditional singing and acting, the program incorporates talent showcases, interviews, and a pre-competition segment known as "The Perfect Match" (龙凤配) training camp. This segment is designed to foster familiarity among contestants and assess their compatibility, allowing them to select their own performance partners. Through ice-breaking activities such as group games and outdoor challenges, the program foregrounds interpersonal dynamics alongside artistic skill. *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* is being rooted in local cultural resources and aiming to achieve a synergy between the talent show and regional culture.

In the main competition, contestants are also required to perform outside their primary stylistic training—for example, by attempting a secondary Yue opera school or taking on cross-gender roles. This format not only highlights technical versatility but also enhances the program's entertainment value, distinguishing it from conventional opera competitions.

As Ouellette and Murray (2009, p. 3) argue, reality television is "an unabashedly commercial genre" defined by its blending of entertainment with claims to authenticity. In this sense, the show exemplifies how traditional opera can be recontextualised within contemporary media frameworks. Rather than merely preserving tradition, it repackages Yue opera through narrative, competition, and personality-driven storytelling.

From the perspective of digital-era media practices, the program also reflects what Jenkins (2006) terms "affective economics," in which audience engagement becomes central to value creation. The show incorporates a judging panel that includes both Yue opera performers and cultural figures from other fields, such as Huangmei opera artist Han Zaifen, Shanghai opera actress Ma Lili, CCTV host Bai Yansheng, and writer Yu Qiuyu. Audience participation is further encouraged through voting mechanisms, which allow viewers to influence contestants' progression. The presence of a live audience, whose real-time reactions contribute to the atmosphere of performance, reinforces this interactive dimension. For instance, during a performance of *Meeting in the Garden* from *Bloody Handprint*, the audience's rhythmic clapping created a shared affective experience that blurred the boundary between stage and spectatorship.

Kavka (2012) identifies three primary formats of celebrity production in reality television: talent-based, non-talent-based, and the use of existing celebrities. The contestants in *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* occupy a hybrid position between the first and third categories. While they are already trained performers, they are not widely recognised by mass audiences, and the show functions as a platform for increasing their visibility. Unlike many talent shows, however, the program retains a strong emphasis on professional skill, positioning Yue opera as both an artistic discipline and a form of popular entertainment.

The program aired over three seasons (2006, 2009, and 2013), with the 2009 season being the most elaborate in scale. During this season, contestants formed performance pairs—typically combining sheng (male role) and dan (female role)—to present selected scenes and reinterpretations, including cross-gender performances. The analysis in this paper primarily draws on examples from this season.

Ultimately, the program distinguishes itself from other reality television formats by simultaneously showcasing technical expertise and reinforcing Yue opera's tradition of female-centred performance. It constructs a narrative in which contestants are presented not only as skilled performers but also as supportive collaborators, thereby extending the operatic emphasis on emotional connection into the realm of mediated reality.

3. Self-Presentation and Celebification in Reality TV

Celebification refers to the process through which ordinary individuals or public figures are transformed into celebrities, a transformation that affirms individuality and public visibility (Braudy, 1986). As Richard Dyer (2004) argues, celebrities function simultaneously as both the product and the labour of representation. Their status relies on the construction of an "extraordinary within the ordinary," whereby they maintain a sense of relatability while simultaneously cultivating distinction. This duality requires continuous self-presentation, through which celebrities sustain their public image while benefiting from its commodification.

Within reality television, self-presentation becomes a central mechanism of celebification. Participants frequently dramatize their emotions and personal narratives in order to establish intimacy with audiences and enhance their visibility. Such performances foster affective connections, enabling viewers to identify with participants while simultaneously consuming their mediated personas. For already established celebrities, the performance of "ordinariness" further strengthens this connection, allowing audiences to locate points of empathy. As Nick Couldry (2010) suggests, reality television expands the space of self-display and promotes a broader cultural logic of self-exposure. Moreover, these programmes often operate within

a discourse of “self-improvement,” normalizing an individualized project of personal development that prioritizes self-advancement over collective responsibility (Couldry, 2010).

However, this dynamic is notably reconfigured in *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot*. First broadcast in 2006 to mark the centenary of Yue opera, the programme is oriented less toward individual celebrity production and more toward enhancing the cultural visibility of the operatic genre itself. While individual performers demonstrate high levels of artistic skill, their success is consistently framed as deriving from the tradition of Yue opera rather than from personal talent alone. For instance, contestant Sheng Shuyang attributed her advancement—following a performance of *Du Shiniang Jumps into the River*—not to her own abilities but to the strength of the chosen repertoire, even describing her performance as substandard due to illness. Such statements illustrate a deliberate displacement of individual credit.

This pattern reflects broader cultural expectations associated with traditional performance forms, where emphasis is placed on collective heritage, pedagogy, and artistic lineage. Although the programme undoubtedly enhances the visibility and professional development of its participants, the celebrification process is significantly moderated. Recognition is frequently redirected toward the genre, teachers, and institutional support, thereby diluting the individualised construction of celebrity identity.

In this context, self-presentation does not primarily function as a means of constructing a commodified celebrity self. Rather, it serves to foreground artistic discipline, cultural continuity, and collective value. Consequently, while the programme operates within the format of reality television, it simultaneously resists its dominant logic of individualised celebrification, offering an alternative model in which celebrity is subordinated to cultural representation.

4. Fandom in Popular Culture

According to Anne Jerslev and Mette Mortensen (2016), contemporary celebrification is characterised by the construction of authenticity, accessibility, and a marketable persona. Central to this process is the commodification of the self, whereby individuals continuously negotiate between intimacy and performance.

In *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot*, Yue opera performers demonstrate a distinctive capacity to balance these elements. Their professional training enables them to present themselves as both highly skilled artists and relatable individuals. Through interviews, backstage footage, and staged interactions, they construct a form of mediated authenticity that aligns with the expectations of reality television while remaining grounded in theatrical discipline.

For instance, Liu Zhixia’s backstage interaction with her family foregrounds maternal sacrifice, emphasising emotional authenticity and personal commitment. Similarly, her participation in group activities, despite ranking last in a team challenge, elicited audience support, suggesting that relatability can outweigh competitive success. These moments illustrate how affective narratives contribute to audience engagement.

Performances also function as sites where personal identity and artistic representation intersect. The collaborative skit by Wang Rousang and Sheng Shuyang incorporates elements of self-referential humour, drawing on their respective operatic lineages. This form of performance blurs the boundary between role and self, allowing performers to engage in a mode of self-presentation that is simultaneously theatrical and personal.

Jerslev and Mortensen (2016) further argue that contemporary self-branding operates through visual and performative “self-imaging,” oscillating between authenticity and promotion. In this program, such self-imaging is constructed not only through interviews but also through strategic performance choices. For example, adapting repertoire to accommodate vocal limitations demonstrates both professionalism and transparency, reinforcing performers’ credibility while sustaining audience trust.

Narratives of physical endurance and vulnerability further enhance this dynamic. Instances such as Sheng Shuyang performing despite illness, or Chen Wenting participating while injured, generate empathy and position the performers as dedicated and resilient. These narratives contribute to what may be understood as affective labour, deepening audience investment.

At the same time, the program maintains a strong emphasis on technical excellence. The live, ticketed finale reinforces the importance of artistic skill, ensuring that self-presentation does not overshadow performance quality. This balance is further reflected in audience reception. Yue opera’s predominantly female audience base engages not only with performers’ personal stories but also with their artistic expression, forming long-term attachments that extend beyond the program itself.

In this sense, celebrification within *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* is not solely driven by individual self-promotion. Rather, it is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between personal visibility, professional discipline, and the cultural values embedded in Yue opera tradition.

5. Identity Formation and Negotiation

5.1. Cultural Identity

Unlike many ancient theatrical traditions, Yue opera emerged in early 20th-century Shanghai. This relatively short history allowed it to absorb the “modern core” of Shanghai’s urban culture. This evolution mirrors Hall’s view that identity is

framed by history and power; by surpassing Beijing opera in the 1940s (Jiang, 2009), Yue opera asserted a female-centric urban identity that challenged the patriarchal structures of traditional Chinese theatre.

Within this framework, Yue opera should not be viewed as a fixed essence reflecting a stable "Shanghai soul." Instead, as Hall (1990) argues, cultural identity is a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation

Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot is a work that emerged on the occasion of the centennial of Yue opera. It is an organic integration of Yue opera with modern television media. This work showcases the talent and charm of female Yue opera performers while incorporating elements of modern films as well as plays, creating resonance between the traditional art form of Yue opera and contemporary audiences.

Over time, Yue opera has transcended the simple physical aspect of female portrayal and evolved into a more comprehensive concept that includes various elements such as stage style and subject matter, which means female Yue opera actresses are no longer limited to portraying male roles but instead showcase the emotions and inner world of women. This mode of interpretation enriches and diversifies Yue opera artistically. The genre has transcended the "simple physical aspect" of female-to-male portrayal. In Hall's terms (1990), this reflects a shift from identity as "being" (a fixed mimicry of gender) to identity as "becoming" (an active exploration of female subjectivity).

Unlike other traditional theatrical genres, Yue opera originated in early 20th century Shanghai, resulting in a relatively shorter history and a significant influence from modern art forms such as spoken drama and film. This influence has led to Yue opera incorporating more elements of Shanghai urban culture in its repertoire, presenting a modern core. *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* is not just a "preservation" of the past; it is an imaginative rediscovery of the craft for a globalized, mediatized audience.

In conclusion, the emergence of *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* represents a critical paradigm shift in the contemporary evolution of the genre, moving beyond the passive preservation of tradition toward a proactive re-articulation of its cultural identity. By showcasing the technical and artistic prowess of female performers through a framework of media convergence, the production effectively navigates what Philip Auslander (2008) identifies as the "mediatized" landscape, where traditional performance must strategically adopt the visual and narrative logic of modern media to maintain socio-cultural relevance. This integration does not merely "retrieve" a static past but, as Stuart Hall (1990) argues, facilitates an "imaginative rediscovery" of the art form, framing Yue opera as a dynamic process of "becoming" rather than a fixed historical essence. Ultimately, this innovative endeavor establishes robust new pathways for the inheritance of the craft, demonstrating that the sustainable development of traditional Chinese opera lies in its ability to foster deep resonance with contemporary audiences through the strategic fusion of historical heritage and modern media technologies.

5.2. Gender Fluidity and Performativity

Yue opera, also known as Shaoxing opera, is a traditional Chinese opera form that originated in the Zhejiang province of China. It is indeed an intriguing object of study in the field of gender studies due to its unique representation of gender fluidity.

A defining characteristic of Yue opera is its unique representation of gender. This phenomenon can be best understood through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (1990) which posits that gender is not an internal essence but a series of repetitive acts.

In Yue opera, the role of the male character, known as "Sheng" in Chinese opera, is traditionally played by a woman, which results in a female performer portraying a male character on stage. These performers undergo extensive training to master the mannerisms, vocal style, and movements associated with male characters.

The portrayal of the male character as feminine in both movement and vocal style adds an interesting layer to the representation of gender in Yue opera. It challenges traditional notions of masculinity and femininity and blurs the boundaries between the two. This fluidity of gender representation in the performances contributes to a sense of closeness and connection between the female characters and the female audience.

As Mu (2022) notes, through the celebration of a shared passion for Yue opera, the gay fans of Yue opera establish queer kinship bonds and seek sexual relations in the community so as to leave heterosexual marriages and families behind.

The use of specific gestures, such as pulling up water sleeves and staring at each other at close range, further enhances the expressiveness of the performances. These gestures, combined with the all-female cast, create a unique dynamic on stage. The proximity between the performers and the physicality of their interactions help to establish emotional connections between the characters and the audience.

Overall, Yue opera provides a fascinating exploration of gender representation and fluidity in the context of Chinese traditional theatre. Its portrayal of male characters by female performers, along with expressive gestures and an all-female cast, offers a distinct perspective on gender roles and relationships within the realm of traditional Chinese opera.

6. Celebrity/Popular Culture vs. Traditional Culture Heritage

6.1. Celebrity vs. Actress

Within the context of Yue opera, performers who attain a degree of public recognition through stage and media appearances do not necessarily internalise a celebrity identity. Rather, they tend to position themselves primarily as actresses whose professional legitimacy derives from artistic discipline rather than public visibility. This distinction reflects a divergence

between the logics of popular culture—where visibility, branding, and self-promotion are central—and those of traditional cultural heritage, which prioritise craft, lineage, and aesthetic refinement.

Although participation in televised programmes and public performances may generate forms of recognisability, Yue opera actresses frequently emphasise the primacy of their artistic practice over personal fame. Their professional identity is grounded in sustained training, technical mastery, and interpretive depth, with particular attention to vocal control, stylised movement, and emotional expression. In this sense, recognition is framed not as an end in itself but as a by-product of artistic excellence.

Moreover, these performers often articulate a strong sense of cultural responsibility. Their work is not only a means of individual advancement but also a contribution to the preservation and transmission of Yue opera as an intangible cultural heritage. This orientation reconfigures the relationship between performer and audience: rather than cultivating a commodified persona for mass consumption, actresses foreground the integrity of the art form and their role within its historical continuity.

Consequently, while Yue opera performers may operate within media environments that facilitate processes of celebrification, their self-identification resists full incorporation into celebrity culture. Instead, they negotiate a professional identity that privileges artistic commitment over individualised fame, thereby sustaining a model of cultural production in which the value of the performer remains inseparable from the tradition they embody.

6.2. *Competition vs. Sisterhood*

Within Yue opera, the apparent tension between competition and collaboration is mediated through a strong ethos of sisterhood that shapes both professional practice and interpersonal relations. While performances—particularly in televised competitions—may appear to foreground individual achievement, the structure of Yue opera itself is fundamentally relational. Many canonical works are staged as paired performances, requiring a high degree of mutual atonement, coordination, and emotional reciprocity between performers.

Beyond the stage, these professional partnerships often develop into sustained personal bonds. Actresses typically engage in intensive, long-term training and rehearsal processes, during which they share not only artistic labour but also everyday experiences. This extended proximity fosters relationships characterised by trust, mutual support, and emotional intimacy. Such connections transcend functional collaboration, forming a sisterhood that becomes integral to both the creative process and the performers' sense of identity.

Importantly, this sisterhood is not merely affective but also structurally embedded in performance practice. The success of a Yue opera performance depends on the performers' ability to anticipate and respond to one another's movements, vocal rhythms, and emotional cues. Deep interpersonal understanding enables actresses to complement each other's strengths and compensate for limitations, thereby producing a cohesive and aesthetically unified performance. In this context, artistic excellence emerges as a collective achievement rather than an individual accomplishment.

This dynamic also reshapes the meaning of competition within Yue opera. Even in competitive formats, outcomes are influenced not only by individual technical proficiency but also by the quality of collaborative execution. Synchronisation, harmony, and ensemble coherence are central evaluative criteria, reinforcing the importance of collective effort. As a result, competition does not negate sisterhood; rather, it coexists with and is underpinned by it.

In this sense, Yue opera offers an alternative model to the individualistic ethos often associated with popular culture and reality television. While individual talent remains essential, it is the cultivation of relational bonds and collaborative discipline that ultimately sustains artistic excellence. Sisterhood thus functions as both a social and aesthetic principle, enriching performers' lived experiences while enhancing the depth and impact of their stage performances.

7. National Policy: Encouragement / Censorship

Yue opera is widely recognised as an element of China's intangible cultural heritage, characterised by its use of regional dialect, its rootedness in specific social contexts, and its incorporation of distinctly Chinese aesthetic traditions. As Jin (2023) argues, this designation has positioned Yue opera within a broader framework of national cultural policy, through which the state actively promotes, preserves, and revalorises traditional art forms. Such policy support has contributed to the increased institutional recognition of Yue opera, facilitating its adaptation to contemporary contexts and encouraging its integration with sectors such as cultural tourism.

At the same time, national cultural policy does not function solely as a mechanism of encouragement but also as a form of regulation. While state initiatives provide funding, platforms, and visibility, they also shape the modes of representation and development available to traditional performance genres. In this sense, Yue opera's transformation is guided not only by artistic innovation but also by policy frameworks that prioritise cultural continuity, national identity, and social cohesion.

The interaction between policy and audience development is particularly significant. Efforts to sustain Yue opera increasingly involve strategies aimed at expanding and diversifying its audience base, including younger and more urban demographics. This requires a careful negotiation between preservation and innovation, as practitioners and institutions adapt the form to contemporary tastes while maintaining its cultural authenticity. Consequently, audience reception becomes a key factor in shaping both policy implementation and artistic practice.

Overall, the development of Yue opera illustrates the dual function of national cultural policy as both enabling and constraining. While it provides crucial support for the preservation and revitalisation of intangible cultural heritage, it

simultaneously establishes boundaries within which such traditions evolve, thereby influencing how cultural identity is articulated and sustained in modern contexts.

8. Conclusion

Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot, as a reality television programme centred on traditional Chinese opera, exemplifies the interplay between national cultural policy and contemporary media practices. It reflects state-led efforts to promote and revitalise traditional culture while simultaneously engaging with the logics of popular media and celebrity production. This convergence illustrates the capacity of traditional art forms to adapt to digital and broadcast environments without relinquishing their cultural significance.

The programme adopts a hybrid format that combines Yue opera performance with elements typical of reality television, including talent showcases, interviews, and structured training segments. Such integration enhances audience engagement while providing performers with multiple modes of visibility. Through the inclusion of cross-gender roles and the representation of different stylistic schools within Yue opera, the show foregrounds both the technical versatility of the performers and the diversity embedded within the tradition itself.

In addition to its performative dimensions, the programme emphasises interpersonal relationships among participants, particularly the notion of sisterhood. This focus reflects established cultural values within Yue opera, where collaboration and mentorship are central to artistic practice. By highlighting both onstage partnerships and offstage interactions, the show reinforces the collective ethos of the form, positioning relationality as integral to both performance quality and professional identity.

Overall, the programme demonstrates how traditional cultural forms can be recontextualised within contemporary media frameworks under the influence of national policy. By combining diverse representational strategies with interactive and relational elements, *Yue Opera Girls Vying for the Top Spot* functions as a platform for showcasing artistic skill, fostering cultural appreciation, and extending the reach of Yue opera to broader and more diverse audiences in the digital age.

References

- Auslander, P. (2008). *Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture*. Routledge.
- Braudy, L. (1986). *The frenzy of renown: Fame and its history*. Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. SAGE.
- Dyer, R. (2004). *Heavenly bodies: Film stars and society*. Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hill, A. (2004). *Reality TV: Audiences and popular factual television*. Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.
- Jerslev, A., & Mortensen, M. (2016). What is the self in the celebrity selfie? Celebification, phatic communication and performativity. *Celebrity Studies*, 7(2), 249–263.
- Jin, J. (2009). *Women playing men: Yue opera and social change in twentieth-century Shanghai*. University of Washington Press.
- Jin, Q. (2023). Yue opera start a new journey under China's cultural policy. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 7(1), 210–213.
- Kavka, M. (2012). *Reality TV*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Mu, Z. (2022). *Yue opera in queer gaze: Chinese gay fans of Yue opera in negotiation with heteronormative mainstream society and identity politics* (Doctoral dissertation, King's College London).
- Murray, S., & Ouellette, L. (2009). *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*. New York University Press.