

Original Research Article

Platformization and semiotic translation of local folk opera: Nanjing Baiju on Chinese short-video platforms

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Abstract: Chinese short-video platforms have changed the circulation and interpretation of local folk opera. Nanjing Baiju, a traditional performing art associated with local dialect, musical narration, and regional memory, now operates in a media environment shaped by algorithmic recommendation, audiovisual compression, and user participation. This paper examines its platformization and semiotic translation through qualitative theoretical analysis. It focuses on cultural visibility, the reconstruction of linguistic and performative signs, and the tension between accessibility and continuity. Platformization can broaden the reach of Baiju while encouraging fragmentation and selective representation. Sustainable transmission requires digital forms that improve accessibility without weakening local specificity.

Keywords: Nanjing Baiju; platformization; semiotic translation; short-video platforms; folk opera; digital communication

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become important spaces for traditional performing arts. Local folk opera, historically connected with regional communities, dialect communication, and face-to-face performance, increasingly appears in mobile media environments characterized by brief audiovisual forms and personalized recommendation. This shift changes both circulation and cultural meaning.

Nanjing Baiju provides a useful perspective on this transformation. Its identity is linked with Nanjing dialect, musical rhythm, vernacular narration, and local memory. When these elements enter short-video platforms, they encounter new audiences and new rules of visibility. This paper explores how platformization reshapes Baiju and how semiotic translation reorganizes its linguistic, musical, visual, and cultural meanings.

2. Platformization and the digital ecology of local folk opera

Platformization describes the growing influence of digital platforms on cultural production, distribution, visibility, and participation. Interfaces, recommendation systems, interaction metrics, and data structures affect what users encounter and how creators organize content. For local folk opera, technological design becomes part of cultural transmission. Short-video platforms intensify this process because content production and reception are closely connected with recommendation systems, mobile interfaces, and user behavior.

Traditional performance relies on shared context. Regional audiences may understand dialect expressions, musical conventions, humor, and gestures because these signs belong to a familiar cultural environment. Short-video circulation weakens geographical limits and allows Baiju to reach viewers with little knowledge of Nanjing culture, increasing the need for subtitles and concise explanation.

Live performance develops through continuity, whereas short-video viewing encourages rapid movement between unrelated content. A phrase, gesture, or musical passage can become an independent digital unit. Such modularization lowers the threshold of access, but fragments may lose meaning when detached from narrative and musical relationships. Platformization gains cultural value when visibility leads toward broader understanding.

3. Semiotic translation in short-video communication

3.1. Linguistic translation and local expression

Dialect is central to Nanjing Baiju because pronunciation, vocabulary, rhythm, and verbal humor carry regional meanings beyond literal information. Digital circulation places this linguistic system before audiences with different levels of familiarity. Subtitles can support comprehension, yet standardized writing cannot fully reproduce phonetic texture or local associations. Digital transmission should preserve the original voice while using concise textual support, helping audiences approach local language without replacing the qualities that distinguish Baiju.

The relationship between dialect and subtitles illustrates the complexity of semiotic translation. Linguistic accessibility does not require the elimination of regional difference. The continued presence of local pronunciation retains the auditory identity of Baiju, while textual explanation reduces barriers to interpretation. Digital mediation becomes culturally meaningful when translation functions as assistance rather than substitution.

3.2. Audiovisual reconstruction of performance signs

Baiju communicates through voice, rhythm, gesture, facial expression, movement, accompaniment, and narration. Short-video production reorganizes these elements because framing, editing, captions, and sound processing determine which signs receive attention. Digital reconstruction can clarify movement and improve vocal audibility, yet decorative effects may weaken cultural meaning when they dominate the material.

Musical expression is sensitive to severe compression because rhythm and melody depend on continuity. A brief segment may attract viewers through a distinctive sound but fail to communicate the musical relationship surrounding that sound. Audiovisual translation should remain responsive to Baiju's artistic logic. Editing and framing can improve communication, but technological techniques should support the performance rather than transform traditional expression into detached visual spectacle.

3.3. Cultural memory and recontextualization

Nanjing Baiju is embedded in local memory. Dialect, everyday narration, musical conventions, and performance styles preserve traces of regional experience and social history. Digital circulation relocates these signs into networked environments where viewers can engage with local culture without sharing the same physical space. Recognition may increase while context becomes thinner. Thematic collections, performer narration, and connected sequences can link fragments with broader cultural meanings.

Recontextualization is particularly important because digital circulation can separate recognizable symbols from their historical relationships. A melody or local expression may gain visibility while the experience and memory represented by it become less apparent. Short-video communication can respond to this problem through connected forms of cultural explanation. Cultural depth does not have to be contained within one video; it can develop through repeated encounters with related materials.

4. Algorithmic visibility and cultural representation

4.1. Recommendation logic and selective exposure

Short-video platforms rely on personalized recommendation, allowing users to encounter cultural content without deliberate search. Baiju may therefore reach audiences interested in traditional music, regional language, performance, or cultural heritage. Algorithmic distribution does not give equal visibility to every element of the tradition. Humor, distinctive sounds, dramatic expression, and recognizable visual features are more compatible with rapid attention than extended narration or culturally dense material.

Repeated circulation of a limited range of signs can influence the public image of Baiju. Elements that perform well within platform environments may gradually appear to represent the whole tradition even though they constitute only part of its artistic structure. Popular fragments are useful when they serve as entrances to fuller cultural knowledge rather than complete representations.

4.2. Attention metrics and cultural value

Views, likes, comments, reposts, and completion rates turn audience activity into measurable indicators. These metrics reveal patterns of attention but do not directly represent cultural value. A comic

passage may circulate more easily than an explanation of musical structure, while a complete recording may attract fewer interactions despite its preservation value. Dependence on metrics can encourage repetition and reduce cultural diversity.

The effectiveness of digital cultural transmission can also be considered through educational use, interest in complete performances, continued viewing, discussion of artistic conventions, and movement from online exposure to offline participation. Such forms of engagement reflect whether digital visibility creates lasting cultural interest. Popularity remains useful for expanding exposure, but it cannot independently measure cultural understanding.

4.3. Fragmentation and cultural reconnection

Fragmented viewing does not necessarily prevent cultural learning. Short units can be arranged into coherent sequences that introduce language, rhythm, performance technique, history, and aesthetic conventions gradually. Search functions, thematic labels, and digital archives can connect individual videos with a larger knowledge structure. Organized materials create pathways toward cumulative understanding.

This form of reconnection changes the role of fragmented content. Instead of functioning as isolated entertainment, a short video can become one component of a wider cultural system. Viewers attracted by a dialect expression may continue toward musical materials, performance explanations, or longer recordings. Platform fragmentation can therefore coexist with deeper learning when content is designed to encourage continued exploration.

5. Cultural continuity and sustainable digital transmission

5.1. Authenticity as negotiated continuity

Authenticity in a living tradition should not be equated with resistance to change. Cultural forms develop through changing audiences, technologies, and social conditions. Digital adaptation can coexist with continuity when transformed expressions remain connected with the elements that constitute Baiju. Dialect, musical organization, performance knowledge, and local memory provide major points of continuity.

Problems arise when traditional signs are retained only as decorative or novelty effects. A local expression may sound distinctive without conveying its cultural meaning, while a musical fragment may become recognizable without revealing its artistic function. Authenticity in digital communication is more productively understood as continuity of meaningful cultural relationships rather than complete preservation of external form.

5.2. Participation and digital cultural belonging

Short-video platforms make audience participation visible. Viewers can ask about lyrics, discuss pronunciation, share memories, respond to performers, and circulate content to new communities. This interaction can expand cultural belonging for both local and non-local viewers. Participation gains long-term significance when it moves beyond momentary reaction toward sustained cultural engagement.

Audience interaction also changes the traditional relationship between performer and receiver. Digital viewers can participate in the interpretation and circulation of cultural signs rather than remaining silent recipients. Such participation may strengthen awareness of Baiju when comments and discussions encourage knowledge exchange. Short videos can stimulate curiosity, while longer recordings, cultural education, and live performances provide opportunities for deeper involvement.

5.3. A sustainable platform-based transmission system

Sustainable transmission requires connections among communication, preservation, education, and performance. Short-video materials can present selected elements in accessible forms, while digital archives preserve complete performances, linguistic materials, musical structures, and technical knowledge. These functions should complement rather than replace one another.

Content design should maintain semantic links among cultural elements. A dialect phrase becomes more meaningful when its social context remains visible, and a musical passage becomes more intelligible when related to performance structure. Digital communication can include performance appreciation, linguistic interpretation, musical knowledge, historical information, and materials concerning artistic practice. Diversity prevents highly visible content from becoming the sole representation of Baiju.

Online communication is most sustainable when it reconnects audiences with embodied performance, since mobile media cannot fully reproduce the voices, bodies, spaces, and social relations of folk opera. Digital platforms can extend the reach of Baiju, document cultural knowledge, and stimulate interest, while live performance and artistic transmission continue to provide the experiential foundations of the tradition.

6. Conclusion

The platformization of Nanjing Baiju demonstrates how local folk opera is reorganized within contemporary digital culture. Short-video platforms expand cultural reach and create new possibilities for participation, yet algorithmic recommendation, brief duration, and measurable attention also encourage selective representation and fragmentation.

Semiotic translation explains how dialect, musical rhythm, bodily performance, and cultural memory are reconstructed in this environment. Subtitles, framing, editing, and interactive communication can improve accessibility, but each transformation changes relationships among signs. Digital transmission becomes culturally productive when adaptation preserves enough context for audiences to understand how individual elements belong to a larger artistic system.

Visibility alone cannot represent successful preservation. Sustainable transmission depends on links among short-form content, systematic documentation, educational interpretation, audience participation, and live cultural practice. Digital platforms are most useful when initial attention develops into continued cultural learning rather than ending with brief consumption.

Nanjing Baiju can maintain cultural vitality through a form of digital adaptation that recognizes both technological change and regional specificity. Platform communication should broaden access without reducing local language and musical expression to decorative symbols. The relationship between fragmented content and systematic cultural knowledge deserves particular attention because it determines whether short-video exposure produces recognition or understanding.

Future research may examine generational differences in digital interpretation and the relationship between online participation and interest in live folk opera. Comparative discussion of other local performing traditions may further reveal how platform structures interact with different linguistic and artistic systems. The vitality of Nanjing Baiju ultimately depends on whether platformization can enlarge access without dissolving local meaning.

About the author

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