

ENEMY: How Traditional Chinese Opera Culture Enters the Infinite-Flow Narrative

Yuhong Xi¹, Wenzhe Li^{1*}

¹Dalian Minzu University, Dalian, 116600, China.



Fig. 1 Still from the Micro-Drama ENEMY

In the spring of 2026, the micro-drama ENEMY unexpectedly became a cultural phenomenon. The story follows two rivals in the real world who are forced to enter an infinite-flow universe and complete a series of challenges. While many micro-dramas rely on emotional stimulation and fast-paced storytelling, the most discussed part of ENEMY was not its infinite-flow framework itself, but the story of two bosses revealed in the first instance—the “Twin Stars of the Pear Garden.” Centered on the fate of Chen Qiaotou and Chen Xiangkou, this storyline prompted extensive discussion and led many young viewers to engage with traditional Chinese opera culture for the first time. This raises an intriguing question: why did opera-related elements become one of the most influential aspects of a series that was not created to promote opera culture?

The answer lies less in the amount of operatic content presented than in the role opera culture plays within the narrative. Representations of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in film and television have traditionally followed a logic of display, highlighting costumes, vocal performance, stage techniques, and

narratives of cultural transmission. In *ENEMY*, however, opera culture is not an object of presentation but a narrative foundation. In the Republican-era storyline, Chen Qiaotou and Chen Xiangkou are opera performers whose emotional relationship, life choices, and ultimate sacrifice all emerge from their identities within the opera troupe. The troupe functions not merely as a setting but as the social and cultural framework that shapes the entire story. Without the Pear Garden setting, the narrative of the “Twin Stars of the Pear Garden” would not exist. Opera culture therefore functions as a structural force that organizes character relationships, drives plot development, and conveys thematic meaning.

More importantly, *ENEMY* alters the way opera culture reaches audiences. In conventional ICH-themed productions, opera is usually the starting point of the story; audiences are first introduced to opera and then guided toward its cultural significance. In *ENEMY*, by contrast, viewers are initially drawn to a mystery: why have the two bosses become malevolent spirits, and why are they trapped within the instance? As the narrative unfolds, audiences gradually discover the identities, experiences, and destinies of Chen Qiaotou and Chen Xiangkou. Through this process, opera culture is encountered not through direct explanation but through emotional engagement with the characters. Opera is therefore not the audience's point of entry into the narrative; rather, it is what they gradually encounter through their engagement with the story.

In the contemporary media environment, where short-video and vertical-screen content compete intensely for attention, genre narratives such as infinite-flow storytelling provide a powerful entry point for audience engagement. By embedding opera culture within an emotionally compelling narrative, *ENEMY* enables viewers to enter the tragic story of the “Twin Stars of the Pear Garden” before encountering the historical memory and cultural values associated with opera culture. What is activated in this process is not necessarily an interest in operatic techniques themselves, but an awareness of the cultural meanings they embody.

The significance of *ENEMY* may lie precisely here. Rather than attempting to introduce audiences to opera culture from the outset, the series first invites them to care about the fate of Chen Qiaotou and Chen Xiangkou. Once the characters’ stories become the point of emotional entry, opera culture acquires a new pathway into contemporary audiences’ consciousness—not through prior explanation, but through emotional engagement and narrative experience. This shift suggests how intangible cultural heritage can be reactivated within contemporary media environments. Rather than being introduced first and understood later, cultural heritage may be encountered through narrative immersion and emotional resonance.

*Corresponding author: Wenzhe Li, Ph.D. His research interests include documentary theory and practice. Email: 123448440@qq.com.