



Rhythms of Resilience and the Burden of Cultural Communication: Evaluating the Transmission and Preservation Strategies for Xi'an Guyue in Modern China

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Abstract

Background: Xi'an Guyue is known for its percussive rhythm and ceremonial function. Like most traditional art forms, it relies on oral transmission. Socio-economic change, urbanisation, lack of youth interest, and participation among the youth threaten its sustainability.

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the transmission and preservation strategies for Xi'an Guyue in modern China.

Methodology: In-depth participant observation and fieldwork were used. Data collection involved interviews with cultural practitioners, teachers, and heritage experts, as well as observations of the environment, archival research, and audio-visual recordings.

Results: The data indicate an oral mentorship system combined with institutionalised education. Digital media and hypermedia have provided new visibility methods, but do not assist in skill transmission. While community performances provide the most significant indication of cultural life participation, documenting these performances, along with the elderly practitioners' and the youth's lack of interest, are critical barriers.

Conclusion: Contemporary digital preservation practices, interdisciplinary collaboration, and active community engagement have the potential to foster interest among young people.

Unique Contribution: In-depth study in its changing context, with notable impact on contemporary traditional music preservation paradigms from theoretical and practical perspectives.

Key Recommendations: Enhance student engagement through developing curriculum-aligned digital resources, and actively promote performance interaction between younger and older generations.

Keywords: Xi'an Guyue, cultural preservation, oral tradition, ethnomusicology, intangible heritage

Introduction

Cultural preservation has become essential to safeguarding intangible heritage across global contexts, particularly as communities face increasing pressure from globalisation, urbanisation, and technological change. Institutions such as UNESCO and academic scholars emphasise the importance of preserving music, language, and ritual traditions as fundamental pillars of cultural identity and diversity (Harrison, 2020; Tan et al., 2020). Cultural practices are not static; they rely on active transmission and adaptation across generations to remain relevant and meaningful in contemporary society (García-Mieres et al., 2024).

Effective intergenerational communication plays a crucial role in preserving cultural traditions. Transmission involves more than skill; it involves transferring values, meaning, and memory. This transmission can occur through oral tradition, apprenticeship, institutional education, or digital media, each with unique strengths and limitations. Cultural forms are at risk of decline when communication between generations weakens, whether due to migration, disinterest, or sociopolitical constraints (Liu, 2024a; Cao, 2024).

Xi'an Guyue represents an essential genre of the traditional and folk music of Shaanxi Province in China, dating back to the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Xi'an Guyue is performed during ethnic fairs, festivals, and life events, serving religious and cultural purposes (Kircher, 2014). It features a unique rhythmic and melodic structure, characterised by percussive instruments such as drums, gongs, and sheng, for which it is renowned. Unlike other forms, its repertoire has always been passed down through oral teaching, communal singing, and dancing. This cultural expression style makes Xi'an Guyue stand out in local society. It maintains a central identity in public rituals and communal life through transitions and influences spanning centuries across dynasties (Liu, 2024b; Guan, 2019).

At present, however, Xi'an Guyue faces mounting challenges to its viability. The accompanying effects of urban sprawl, cultural shift, and generational apathy have led to a drop in public participation and interest. Knowledge is increasingly transmitted through informal social interactions, such as the master-apprentice system, which is on the brink of collapse due to the lack of young people willing to endure the painstaking and lengthy journey of musical inheritance. This is further complicated by limited economic resources, inadequate institutional support, a lack of thorough documentation, and widespread neglect (Howard, 2016; Yao et al., 2023; Wu & Chuangprakhon, 2024). These factors endanger Xi'an Guyue's existence as it risks fading into

cultural obscurity, with many of its forms only existing in relics, isolated communities, and ceremonial spaces.

This study approaches these issues by focusing on the preservation and transmission of Xi'an Guyue in modern China. Specifically, the study focuses on contemporary and traditional sustainability approaches (Liu, 2024b; Tang, 2021). The primary focus is to investigate the transmission and preservation strategies for Xi'an Guyue in modern China. The research question for this study is: How are traditional and contemporary strategies being used to transmit and preserve Xi'an Guyue in modern China? In answering this question, the study aims to document preservation efforts and explore innovative methods that promote intergenerational and cultural continuity during transition (García-Mieres et al., 2024).

This research emphasises that preserving cultural heritage is not simply an act of historical conservation but a vital process of communicating identity, meaning, and values across generations. In doing so, it highlights how traditional music, such as Xi'an Guyue, can contribute to contemporary cultural life through a balance of continuity and innovation.

The importance of this research is its relevance to ethnomusicology, arts management, and policies encompassing cultural heritage. Xi'an Guyue serves as a critical case study of an intangible cultural heritage that undergoes transformation and survival. Its studies shed light on potential answers regarding the sustainability of traditional music in the constantly shifting sociocultural environments. Additionally, this research supports the discourse regarding the globalisation-localisation paradox of local traditions by claiming the need for constructive participation and creativity in cultural sustainability (Harrison, 2020; Schippers, 2015; Tan et al., 2020). This study aims to uncover ways to revitalise Xi'an Guyue and other waning cultural expressions, integrating them into the living heritage of China by examining the revitalisation of traditions both within and outside the region.

Literature Review

Xi'an Guyue is a traditional regional music from Shaanxi Province. It has been the focus of concern in scholarly circles and the world of cultural preservation for its vibrant history and current critical state. As the music of Xi'an Guyue was once practised in ritualistic and communal settings, it serves as a good example of traditional knowledge systems that can thrive or die in the face of socio-political shifts, rural depopulation, and technological innovations. This review aims to capture the existing literature in five major areas for constructing concepts relevant to transmission and preservation approaches within the scope of this study.

Historical Origins and Structure of Xi'an Guyue

A root of ceremonial and religious activities, as well as folk customs, forms the foundation of Xi'an Guyue, a genre of traditional Chinese music. It is categorised into "sitting music," performed during rituals, and "walking music," played in parade-like movements during festivities. Sheng, drums, cymbals, gongs, other percussion, and wind instruments are used in both forms. These elements hold meaning and significance, often linked to ritual purity, the balance of the universe, and celebration. Tempos Xi'an Guyue is parallel to the history of social temples, community guilds, and lineage societies, which have mastered the form and practices of music along with its development in both sacred and secular contexts (Jingfang, 2023; Ollikkala, 2017).

Through Oral Tradition

A style of music in traditional China, Xi'an Guyue, was sustained by closed communities through oral tradition for centuries. Skilled performers were mimicked within the family, and through repetitive watching, the ability to perform was taught in one-on-one settings. This technique preserved details that would otherwise be omitted from written documents. At the same time, these methods imposed severe restrictions, fragmenting information and tethering it to certain families or cultures. This selectiveness, painstakingly slow and closed-minded approach, deprived those not bound by tradition of accessing the knowledge that broadened the musical repertoire—a critical challenge in our modern society (Campbell, 2017; Noland, 2017).

Decline of the 20th Century and its Impact Socio-Politically

The political suppression, war, and Cultural Revolution in the 20th century led to a decline in traditional Chinese arts. Folklore performance groups were evicted from their temples, which resulted in a loss of shrine followers, a break in the knowledge chain, and reduced opportunities. The shift of the public towards Western music, modern entertainment, and contemporary schooling, coupled with urban migration and the rise of multicultural mass culture, further eroded local art forms. Guyue societies struggled to maintain their existence amid the relentless modernisation; all they had left was the shadow of their once-vibrant past (Cao, 2024; Liu, 2024b).

Cultural Institutional Policy Response and Heritage Policy

In the early 2000s, the Chinese government was keen to 'protect' certain pieces of intangible cultural heritage, such as Xi'an Guyue. This policy attempt led to the labelling and limited documentation of repertoire supported by scant finances from the culture bureaus. However, policy implementation lacks coherence in other areas of regional governance. Local governments are, at the very least, allowing features like designated festivals and inclusion in educational curricula. Still, deeper primary community models make initiatives goal-oriented instead of community-led. The community-based models that are built tend to lack comprehensive follow-ups, resulting in the approach feeling premature and fueled by need (Maags & Holbig, 2016; Zhu & Maags, 2020). The reach and impact of sluggish bureaucracy and chronic underfunding constrain the initiatives set.

The Rise of Changing Cypher Technology and New Disciplines

Guyue has been studied ethnomusicologically, culturally, and within the framework of the digital humanities, which shows that such scholarship is informative. Scholars are seeking new methods for documenting older approaches, including teaching tools, digital recording, online teaching, and interactive databases. Some projects focus on blending modern performance elements with traditional Guyue, making it more appealing to a broader audience. However, not all problems are solved, such as minimal perception of the complex, irrelevant, and unchanging traditions, and insufficient funds for permanently adapting technology (Schuiling, 2019; Urberg, 2017). Academic work that relies on grant funding often lacks local relevance.

Methodology

This examination utilises a qualitative approach informed by ethnography to analyse the modern-day transmission and preservation techniques for Xi'an Guyue. It incorporated evocative fieldwork,

cultural interviews, and holistic observation to apprehend the sociocultural framework surrounding this living tradition and its contemporary practice (Qiu et al., 2024). This study aimed to understand the practices and innovations associated with the support of institutions, people, and places involved in the preservation of Xi'an Guyue.

Design and site of the study

Conducted in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, this research spanned a period of 18 months, from March 2023 to September 2024. Xi'an was selected due to its rich history as the birthplace and cultural hub of Guyue tradition. The study employed an ethnographic approach to design a qualitative framework, focusing on direct interactions with cultural practitioners, teachers, and heritage educators. The study also involved active participation in public and private music events, escorted tours to local Guyue clubs, and direct involvement in teaching and performing sessions.

Participant Selection and Key Informants

Informants in the Guyue community were selected using purposive sampling to represent various perspectives within the community. Participants were included based on three primary criteria: 1) direct involvement in Xi'an Guyue practice or transmission; 2) recognition within the local or academic community as cultural practitioners, scholars, or policymakers; and 3) willingness and availability to participate in in-depth interviews and/or allow observational fieldwork. This ensured relevance to the research objectives while capturing both traditional and institutional perspectives. Eight informants participated in this study:

- Four elder practitioners of Guyue, Cultural Inheritors, who provided insights into oral transmission and performance methods.
- Two music scholars from regional institutions of higher learning provided input on curriculum integration and pedagogical outreach.
- Two cultural staff members from the municipal heritage office of Xi'an discussed funding and policy-related institutional issues.

It proved instrumental in selecting participants from diverse backgrounds, including those with long-term involvement in Xi'an Guyue, experts, and individuals actively engaged in preservation and dissemination activities.

Data Collection Methods

A combination of qualitative techniques was employed to capture the richness of Xi'an Guyue:

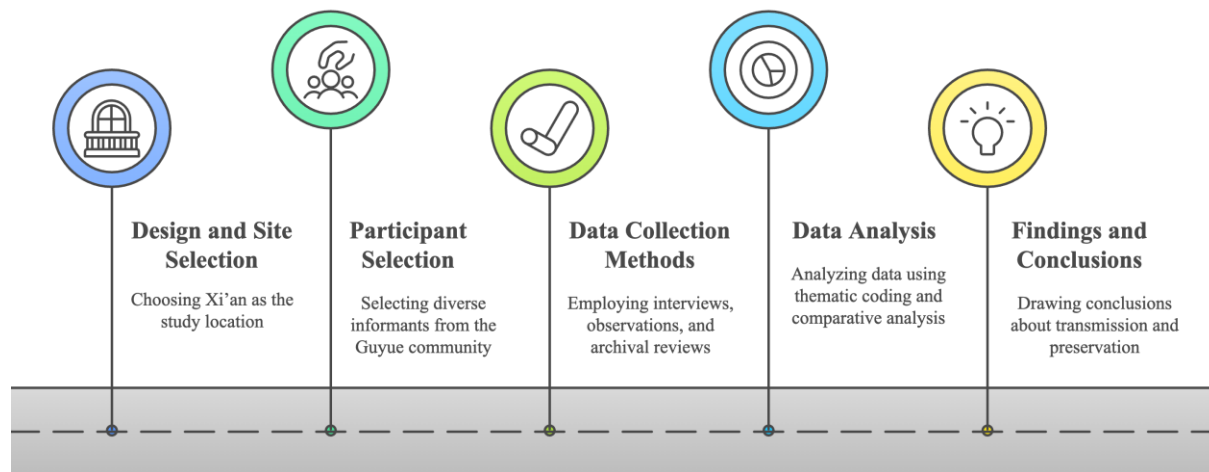
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** The interviews with the informants concentrated on teaching, cultural inheritance bottleneck issues, community activities, experiences, and future aspirations regarding Guyue. The format allowed drilling into individual stories while maintaining uniformity over core questions.
- **Field Observations:** Observations were made during live performances, Rehearsals, temple fairs, and classroom instructional activities. Detailed notes were made on the setting, audience, level of engagement, teaching style, and function of music in community rituals.
- **Archival Review:** A broad array of historical and institutional documents was analysed, including traditional music manuscripts, policy documents, festival brochures, and other published works. These materials were presented to understand the ancestors' practice of evolution.
- **Audio-Visual Recordings:** High-quality audio and video recordings of performances and

teaching sessions were captured. They functioned as documentation and resources for subsequent musicological and comparative studies.

Data Analysis

The data was systematically analysed by applying thematic coding and comparative analysis. Interview transcripts were analysed, and multiple themes related to preservation methods, educational methods, and other issues for Guyue practitioners surfaced. Observational notes were systematised by type of event, performer identity, and level of audience participation. Audio-visual materials were scrutinised for consistent stylistic traits associated with rhythm, instrumentation, and performance structure, which enabled the delineation of traditional modern performances and the continuity of old practices.

Archival documents were systematically compared with field documents to determine how forms created in the past are retained or reinterpreted in contemporary practice. The combination of evidence from different archival documents enables the study to triangulate different pieces of evidence and build a comprehensive understanding of the transmission and preservation practices of Xi'an Guyue within the current sociocultural context.



Made with Napkin

Figure 1. Research Process of Xi'an Guyue

Results

The findings of this study indicate that Xi'an Guyue operates within a dynamic and evolving ecosystem of transmission and preservation. Based on qualitative fieldwork, interviews, and performance analysis, several core dimensions reflect continuity and innovation.

Dual-Track Transmission Model Results

After research, it was found that Xi'an Guyue preservation operates within a dual-track transmission model. An example is the deep-rooted oral tradition in local music communities, such as the Hejiaying Guyue Society. In these societies, elder masters impart knowledge to students through informal teaching that is often personal and based on oral traditions. Masters work with apprentices in highly individualised ways, using memory, repetition, and practice instead of the written page. This preserves style and nuance in performance, yet remains fragile due to its strong

dependence on willing and available individual masters. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge is not documented, which jeopardises it as these elders age.

On the second track, we have the formalised institutional education, which was founded in recent years due to the involvement of cultural centres, art schools, and even universities. A rise in cultural interest has led to the establishment of structured music courses and workshops, which include Xi'an Guyue in their curriculum. These programs are typically designed for younger students and aim to standardise teaching across a wider audience. While aiming to achieve broader reach and access, this approach often falls short in preserving the traditional intangible spirit, particularly in active improvisation and expression contexts where oral tradition excels.

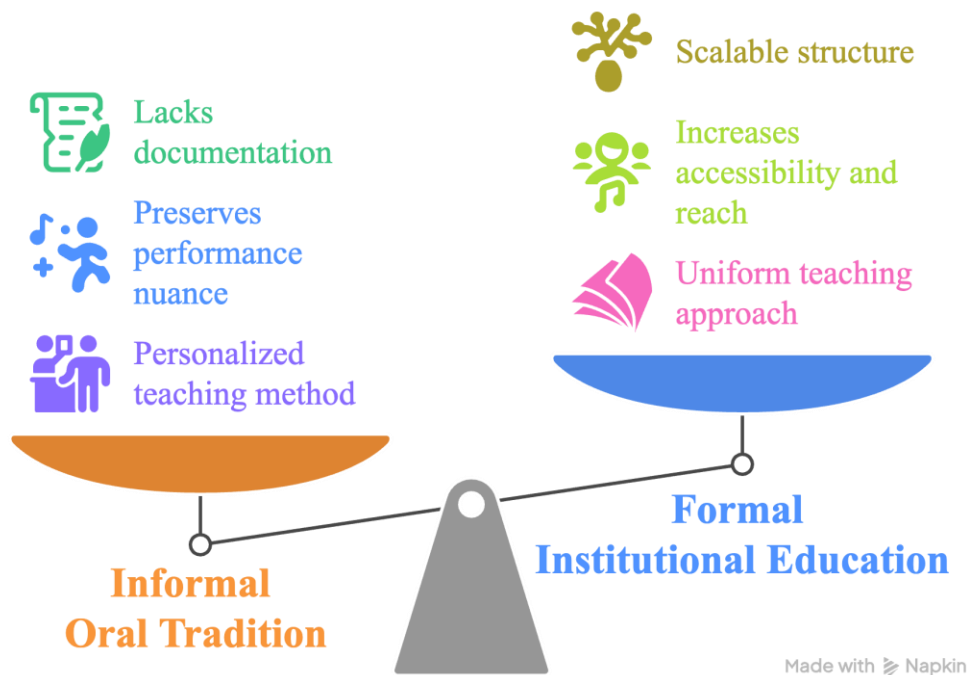


Figure 2. Balancing Tradition and Modernity in Xi'an Guyue Preservation

This dual-track system is both an opportunity and a contradiction. Emotional and cultural elements are typically absent from the institutional education system's framework, scale, and structure. On the other hand, oral instruction promotes understanding on a deeply personal level but does not allow for documentation or scalability. Practitioners tend to oscillate between extremes. Most appreciate the convenience of having institutional support, but there is concern about blending traditions when removed from their original context.

Digital Outreach and Online Learning

Guyue has not been left behind in the digital age race. Xi'an Guyue has skillfully entered the digital space. He and others perform on Douyin, Bilibili, and other live streaming platforms, where they can reach a large audience beyond Shaanxi Province. With these tools, Guyue has been able to gain expression, especially among younger generations, who are more in tune with the digital world. Many short-form videos of Guyue performances, including stylised and contemporary remixes, have received thousands of views.

Notably, the data suggests that this presence has not prompted engagement or skill transfer at a deeper level. Much of the available content, regardless of its entertainment value, does not meet the standards of educational rigour. According to informants, these platforms are designed to pique interest but are not intended for in-depth learning. In real-time, it is very challenging to recreate the traditional teaching aspect of correcting posture, tone, rhythm, or any other performance element with video instruction. In addition, few digital projects have developed systematic, curriculum-based initiatives that enable learners to advance from novice to expert levels.

Hence, even as digital media increasingly augments a body of work, its primary focus remains cultural delisting rather than technical or stylistic instruction. The manner of consuming digitally, in video scrolling or performance liking, is inactive. Such behaviour does not cultivate the sustained skill and appreciation needed for enduring safeguarding.

Community Performances and Festivals

Regardless of the mounting importance of digital platforms, regionally based performances and local festivals continue to be the centrepiece for Xi'an Guyue. The traditional temple fairs, regional folk festivals, and season-specific celebrations enable Guyue groups to perform publicly, thereby cultivating their cultural identity and facilitating character recruitment. These events customarily include spectacular processions, ritualistic dances, and group playing sessions, featuring musicians of every generation. Parents often bring their children to these displays, and it is not uncommon for the younger audience members to take an interest in pursuing the art form after witnessing such spirited performances.

These festivals serve as informal educational settings, incorporating teaching through observation, imitation, and communal participation. However, according to informants, these activities are limited to the local area. Additionally, fewer young people returning to the countryside for the festivities causes slower transmission cycling over time. Most people agree on the importance of community performances in aiding lesser-known cultural heritage, especially in contextual performance and dynamics of a group to these performances, as much continuity is lost to formal and digital environments.

Challenges to Sustainability

This study spotlights four critical areas that could pose a challenge to the enduring sustainability of Xi'an Guyue.

Aging of Practitioners: One of the most acute issues must be addressed is the age problem of master musicians confined to the cradles of hierarchy. Many are beyond 60 years of age, and few actively hold apprentices. Some critical techniques are known to one or two people. Figure 3. Singular Inheritance through Oral Transmission depicts the vulnerability and richness of the elder-dominated oral knowledge system central to Guyue's survival.



Figure 3. Singular Inheritance through Oral Transmission

Source: The Researcher, from Fieldwork in August 2024

Economic Constraints: Financial restrictions pose an obstacle to all activities within Guyue's ecosystem. Many lower-tier societies struggle significantly with acquiring instruments, hiring rehearsal halls, and even affording the money to travel and perform. For amateur musicians, the instability that comes with traditional arts in the region deters commitment for a prolonged period. Many very talented youngsters tend to abandon their pursuit the moment they enter the job market. This leaves them as a 'niche' pastime, where Guyue is the primary interest.

Documentation Gaps: The scarcity of documentation remains a considerable problem. Written, audio, and even visual documentation is nearly non-existent. Most musical compositions are still being shared over numerous generations through oral means, and very few have been formally written down. Figure 4. Documentation Conditions and Transmission Process combines an image of handwritten musical notation with a teaching session between a Guyue instructor and students, symbolising both the lack of archival structure and the living act of knowledge transfer.

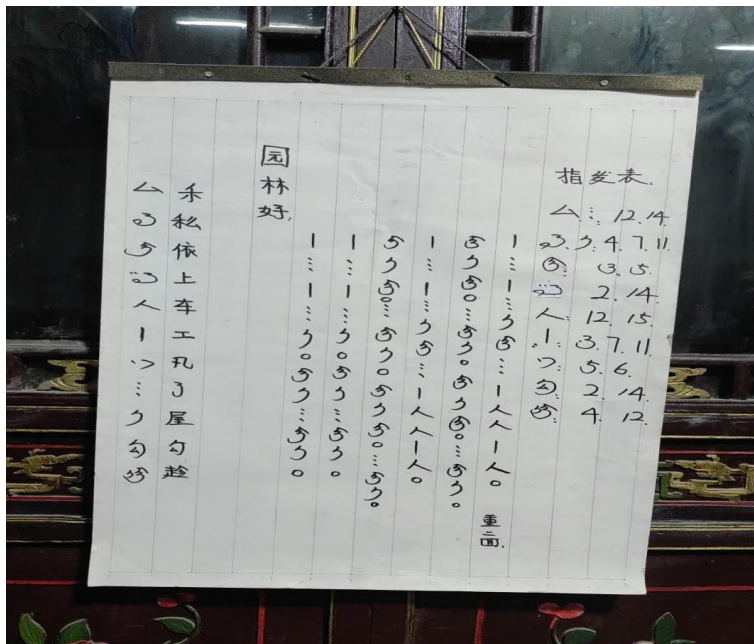


Figure 4. Lack of Documentation and Organisation

Source: The Researcher, from Fieldwork in August 2024

Youth Disengagement: Guyue's cultural heritage faces a compelling challenge from the youth's detachment from traditional music. With global pop culture gaining traction, many young people regard Guyue as outdated or dull. Informants highlighted a lack of incorporation of traditional music into the school curriculum and the preference for Western instruments or modern genres in extracurricular activities. If this cultural divergence is not addressed through media and education, it seriously threatens the transmission of Guyue across generations.

Innovative Practices and Inter-Genre Collaborative Efforts

The study noted numerous challenges, but it also recorded a growing number of innovative practices aimed at reinvigorating Xi'an Guyue. This includes cross-genre collaborations with pop, electronic, and even rock. Some groups have collaborated with choreographers and visual artists to stage gallery performances and other interdisciplinary cultural events. Guyue has been modernised to be considered a living art form through modern lighting design, projection mapping, modern dance, and other disciplines.

Rehearsal settings have evolved from traditional, framed-off-stage performances to contemporary, staged arrangements. In contrast, stage performances are the culmination of integrating modern aesthetics. Hybrid cultural events, such as music weeks at the university or urban art festivals, highlight Guyue's integration in these multifaceted cultural programs. All these activities have engaged younger audiences and sparked discourse on the place of performance arts in the context of today's world.

The new structures have helped improve audience engagement, as indicated by informants. Performance inspires younger people more when it is contemporary than an ordinary formal listening event. Some reported that they first encountered Guyue through pop fusion shows and

subsequently strived to find more information. However, proponents of new forms emphasise the need to support traditional training without supplanting it.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study's findings demonstrate the intricate and complex system within which Xi'an Guyue operates both as a business and a cultural entity, as well as its strengths and weaknesses. It corroborates ethnomusicological work on intangible cultural heritage (Schippers, 2015; Howard, 2016) by confirming that oral transmission is a critical factor in enabling the cultural continuity of Xi'an Guyue. However, from the fieldwork conducted with elder masters and community societies, such as the Hejiaying Guyue Society, it was clear that the oral model, although personal and culturally intimate, is unsustainable and undocumented. This parallels Campbell (2017), who critiques the self-referential epistemic knowledge frameworks within contemporary education paradigms for their reliance on the master-apprentice structure devoid of organisational support.

The mixed oral and institutionalised teaching approach described in this research, as a dual-track model, reflects the struggle captured in other research on heritage music systems (Maags & Holbig, 2016; Tang, 2021). The incorporation of music and cultural centres into educational institutions, in many cases, widens accessibility. However, accessibility is often devoid of a contextualised emotional connection to the tradition. Participants noted how institutional teaching focuses on technical execution, ignoring ritualistic components, which Schuiling (2019) calls the danger of desensitising traditional music through rigid curricular formats. These results suggest that cultural transmission is not solely about pedagogical access but about identity formation, ritual, embodiment, and belonging. Xi'an Guyue, therefore, represents more than a set of techniques; it is a vessel for collective memory and cultural self-understanding.

Also, the case study's investigation of cyber outreach yielded a contradictory result. Firstly, Douyin and Bilibili have increased Guyue's exposure to its audience, especially the youth, which is a positive development. However, that reach is relatively shallow. Exposed audiences consume videos but do not acquire the skills or sincerely appreciate the culture. These findings support García-Mieres et al. (2024), who argue that digitisation is effective for outreach purposes but requires careful instructional design to sustain educational impact. Informants believed the digital space promotes culture more effectively than it technically transmits. This aligns with Liu (2024a), who analyses the deficit in the meaningful integration of traditional music within the digital frame. The implications here extend to cultural studies and media theory: digital diffusion without depth risks transforming heritage into spectacle rather than sustained identity practice. Scholars in cultural heritage must thus examine who accesses tradition and how it is internalised, enacted, and lived across platforms and generations.

Participation in community festivals and local performances remains important for the culture's survival as far as Guyue is concerned. This study resonates with Harrison (2020), who argues that performance is a site of community resilience, regarding folk culture as stubbornly persistent. This study found temple fairs and seasonal gatherings to be important events for the transmission of folkloric traditions. However, dwindling youth and returnee participation due to urban migration suggests that traditional sociological structures may not be enough in the long term without some form of comprehensive intervention frameworks.

The study highlights emerging avenues for revitalisation through innovative, cross-genre collaborations that align with Tan et al. (2020)'s cultural creativity model. These modern hybrid performances and interdisciplinary integrations stand to deepen audience participation and public re-contextualization of Xi'an Guyue vastly. However, as some informants warned, traditional practices must always remain primary, while supporting innovation.

This means Xi'an Guyue embodies an incessant legacy and a formidable challenge. Strikingly, claiming an 'effort' to preserve embodies the sheer nature across all boundaries of culture and society, calls for more intricate multilateral blending that simultaneously tends to oral mentorship, institutionalisation, digital innovation, and creativity. Theoretically, these findings contribute to broader discussions in heritage studies and ethnomusicology regarding authenticity, transmission, and adaptation. They demonstrate how musical traditions are not merely preserved but actively shaped through negotiation with shifting cultural values and technological realities.

They must strike a balance between fidelity to the tradition and more appealing strategies for contemporary learners and audiences. Future research requires innovative exploration focused on constructing interactive, curriculum-based digital platforms for traditional music education, enabling longitudinal engagement studies on regional music traditions. The future of Xi'an Guyue will not seek a balance between tradition and modernity; it will be about finding the negotiation space where the two coexist.

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