

Transmission of the Yao Ethnic Group's Jiaqiao Ritual Music Through Educational Practices in China

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Received: August 17, 2025

Accepted: September 12, 2025

Online Published: September 15, 2025

doi:10.5430/wje.v15n3p33

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wje.v15n3p33>

Abstract

This study investigates the educational practices for the transmission of Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Nanning, Guangxi, China. Jiaqiao ritual music is a sacred vocal tradition rooted in ancestral worship and communal ceremonies, reflecting the Yao people's spiritual beliefs, social cohesion, and cultural identity. With modernization and urban migration threatening its continuity, this research explores how both informal and institutional educational methods contribute to the preservation of this intangible heritage. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study was conducted between December 2022 and December 2024 across selected villages in Shanglin District. Four key informants, experienced female ritual performers and community mentors were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, supported by audio, video, and photographic records. Thematic analysis revealed key findings: informal education during rituals and family gatherings forms the primary transmission mode; female ensembles serve as intergenerational pedagogical hubs; cultural institutions and government initiatives provide supplementary support; and challenges such as aging performers, youth disengagement, and sacred content restrictions hinder sustainability. The study suggests promoting community-based mentorship, expanding culturally sensitive curricula, and enhancing policy support for holistic preservation. These insights contribute to heritage conservation discourse and highlight education's role in safeguarding minority cultural practices.

Keywords: Music education, cultural transmission, ritual music, ethnographic research, vocal ensembles

1. Introduction

Jiaqiao ritual music is a central cultural expression of the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Nanning, Guangxi, China. Deeply embedded in religious ceremonies and communal rites, this music serves not only as a performance art but also as a symbolic representation of the Yao people's spiritual beliefs, social order, and ancestral communication. It has historically played a critical role in shaping the identity of the community, guiding rites of passage, seasonal ceremonies, and healing practices (Cheng & Sikka, 2025; Liping & Taipanich, 2024). Yet, this rich tradition faces urgent challenges. With rapid social change, urbanization, and the growing disinterest of younger generations, the traditional mechanisms of transmitting this music mainly through oral learning and lived participation are increasingly at risk. As the elder performers age and the continuity of traditional knowledge becomes threatened, the need to understand how educational practices can support the survival and growth of Jiaqiao ritual music becomes increasingly vital (Jiayang & Su, 2024; Li, 2025; Wang & Thotham, 2024). Recent interdisciplinary work has emphasized that preserving such forms of music requires integrated strategies that bridge cultural transmission theory, ethnomusicological inquiry, and community-based education. By linking symbolic musical forms with educational and sociocultural structures, this study offers a focused contribution to emerging debates on how intangible heritage can be preserved through lived pedagogy.

1.1 Introduce the Problem

The core problem addressed in this study is the weakening of traditional knowledge transmission systems for Jiaqiao ritual music in the face of modernization. Unlike mainstream educational subjects, this music form has been preserved through informal methods, primarily within families or community gatherings. However, these methods are becoming less effective due to demographic shifts, migration of young people to urban centers, and the influence

of modern entertainment and digital media. With fewer young people participating in ritual ceremonies or learning from elders, the risk of cultural erosion is significant (Ande et al., 2025; Vázquez-Atochero, 2024; Zhang, 2024). This decline not only affects the music tradition itself but also erodes the Yao people's cultural identity, community cohesion, and intergenerational bonding. Without effective mechanisms for education and transmission, the sacred value and musical complexity of Jiaqiao rituals could be lost to time. In response to this growing disconnect, scholars in cultural studies and music education argue for hybrid transmission models that adapt traditional teaching to the realities of contemporary learners, without sacrificing cultural integrity.

1.2 The Importance of the Problem

The preservation of Jiaqiao ritual music is important for both cultural and educational reasons. It holds immense cultural value as a form of intangible heritage, representing the worldview, cosmology, and social structure of the Yao people. More than a musical genre, it is a vehicle for transmitting spiritual beliefs and ethical values (Algharabali et al., 2019; Jorgensen, 2021; Ping et al., 2024). It also offers a unique pedagogical opportunity to incorporate indigenous knowledge into broader educational contexts, fostering respect for cultural diversity and community participation. By focusing on education as a transmission mechanism, this study aims to highlight how cultural learning is not confined to textbooks but can also occur through ritual performance, oral storytelling, and participatory observation (Babazade, 2024; Maidou et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2025). Furthermore, music educators and ethnomusicologists have emphasized that integrating such local practices into educational programming can foster a culturally sustaining pedagogy, where learners not only gain technical skills but also deepen their connection to communal values and identities. Preserving this tradition through education thus has implications not only for safeguarding cultural assets, but also for promoting intercultural literacy, especially in multicultural societies like China.

1.3 Relevant Scholarship

Various studies on the transmission of traditional music have identified oral tradition, apprenticeship, and community-based learning as key elements in sustaining folk and ritual music. Research in ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology has emphasized how ritual music is more than an aesthetic experience; it is a form of social education that teaches roles, responsibilities, and cultural memory (Curran & Radhakrishnan, 2021; Miller, 2022; Waterman, 2019). However, much of this scholarship has focused on broader ethnic music traditions across China or Southeast Asia, with limited emphasis on the Yao ethnic group specifically or on Jiaqiao ritual music in Shanglin District. Moreover, while cultural policy and heritage programs are increasingly promoting the safeguarding of intangible heritage, there is a research gap in how these efforts intersect with local educational practices (Giglietto et al., 2022; Lee, 2021; Stefano, 2021; Zain El Shandidy, 2023). Scholars in music education (e.g., Coppola et al., 2020; Schippers, 2009) have also explored the role of participatory music-making in reinforcing local knowledge systems. Ethnomusicological perspectives contribute further by analyzing how these traditions are embedded within cosmological frameworks and everyday rituals. Cultural transmission theory complements this view by focusing on how knowledge, beliefs, and practices are passed between generations through specific pedagogical acts. By combining these perspectives, this study explores how learning, performance, and ritual converge in the transmission of Jiaqiao music.

1.4 Hypotheses

This study hypothesizes that educational practices, whether occurring in family units, community spaces, or cultural institutions, are central to sustaining the transmission of Jiaqiao ritual music. It assumes that the most effective forms of transmission combine mentorship, immersion, and repetition, often in informal learning environments such as village festivals, temple rituals, and household gatherings. Furthermore, it is expected that certain forms of government and school support can complement traditional methods, particularly when they respect the cultural protocols of the community. By examining how these educational practices function and evaluating their outcomes, this research aims to identify strategies that can be used to strengthen transmission efforts, engage the younger generation, and ensure the long-term vitality of this important cultural tradition. The research is guided by a qualitative ethnographic approach, combining field observations, interviews, and documentation analysis to explore the relationship between education and cultural continuity. Through this approach, the study seeks to offer a theoretical bridge between cultural transmission models, music pedagogy, and ethnomusicological fieldwork, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how ritual music can be taught, learned, and lived in contemporary Yao communities.

1.5 Research Objective

To investigate the educational practices for the transmission of Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Nanning, Guangxi, China.

1.6 Research Question

How do educational practices facilitate the transmission of Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Nanning, Guangxi, China?

2. Method

This research employed a qualitative ethnographic methodology to explore the educational practices supporting the transmission (An et al., 2025; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Liu & Woramitmaitree, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024) of Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Nanning, Guangxi, China. The methodology was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of how traditional music knowledge is conveyed across generations within a specific cultural and ritualistic context. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data through immersive engagement, capturing both the explicit and subtle ways in which music is taught, learned, and sustained in the community. While this ethnographic approach offers depth of insight, the limited sample size and regional focus may restrict the broader generalizability of findings. Future research could build upon this by engaging a larger or comparative population across multiple Yao communities or ritual traditions in different regions of China.

2.1 Research Design and Site

The research was conducted between December 2022 and December 2024 in Shanglin District, a culturally significant region where Jiaqiao ritual music is still actively practiced during seasonal ceremonies and spiritual events. The area was selected due to its continued vibrancy in ritual performance and the presence of skilled cultural custodians who actively mentor the younger generation. The ethnographic fieldwork involved extended visits to villages, temples, and performance venues, allowing for long-term observation and trust-building with community members.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify four key informants who were highly involved in the performance, teaching, or preservation of Jiaqiao ritual music. These participants were selected based on criteria such as years of experience, community recognition, and active engagement in educational roles. Although their names are not disclosed here for privacy, they consisted of experienced ritual leaders who acted as both performers and mentors. These four individuals contributed deep insights into traditional teaching techniques, intergenerational learning methods, and their perspectives on challenges and changes in the transmission process. It is important to acknowledge that the small number of informants reflects the intensive nature of qualitative inquiry rather than statistical representativeness. Nonetheless, future research could expand this approach with broader samples to enable cross-community comparisons or identify regional patterns of ritual music education.

2.3 Data Collection Tools and Procedures

To gather comprehensive data, the study employed multiple qualitative tools, including:

2.3.1 Participant Observation: Conducted during rituals, vocal rehearsals, and mentoring sessions to observe interactions, teaching methods, and contextual dynamics.

2.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews: Guided by a flexible interview protocol to explore personal experiences, beliefs about music education, and strategies for preservation.

2.3.3 Document Analysis: Included the examination of ritual scripts, community records, songbooks, and educational materials related to Jiaqiao music.

Additional tools included field notebooks for ethnographic notes, audio and video recorders for capturing performances and interviews, and photography to document visual aspects of transmission environments.

2.4 Data Overview and Organization

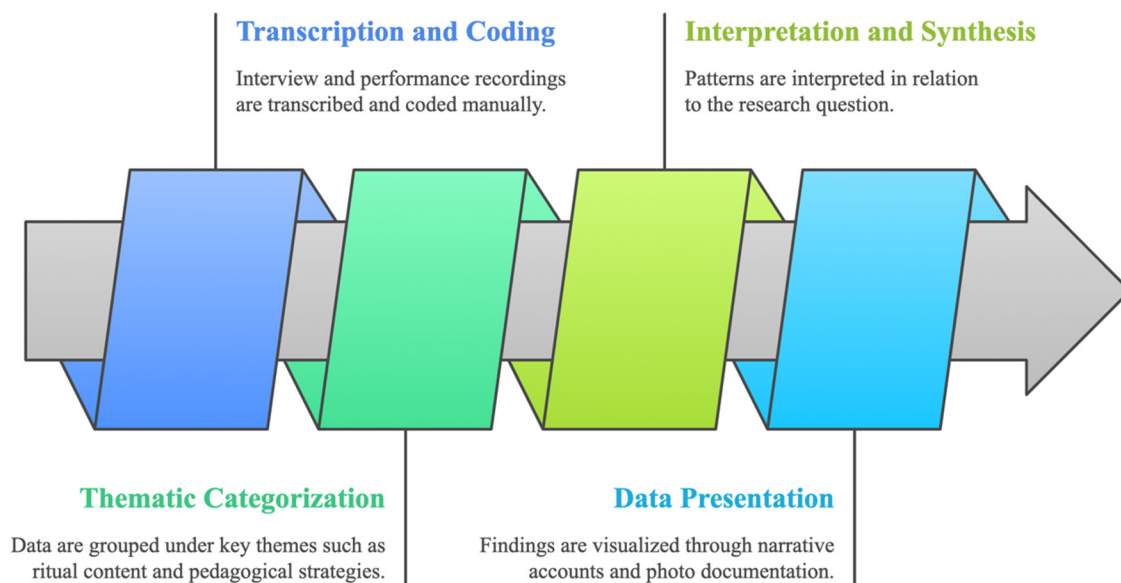
The collected dataset was extensive and covered various formats. The following Table 1 provides a breakdown:

Table 1. Data Overview and Organization

Data Type	Quantity Collected	Purpose
Video recordings	Over 50 recordings	Document live performances, teaching demonstrations
Audio recordings	Approximately 600 minutes	Capture vocal nuances, chants, and explanations
Books and manuals	10 traditional and local publications	Analyze ritual content and musical notation
Photographs	More than 100 images	Support visual interpretation of learning environments
Interview transcripts	4 extended transcripts from key informants	Analyze language, values, and reflections on pedagogy

2.5 Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to synthesize data from interviews and performances. The process involved transcription and coding, grouping data under key themes like ritual content, pedagogical strategies, community involvement, and barriers. The patterns were interpreted to understand educational practices within cultural contexts. The findings were presented through narrative accounts, thematic tables, and photo documentation to support the interpretations, as shown in Figure 1:

**Figure 1.** Data Analysis

2.6 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided verbal consent, and cultural protocols were strictly observed during fieldwork. The researcher ensured that all documentation was done respectfully and according to the community's traditions, particularly during sacred rituals.

3. Results

The findings from this qualitative ethnographic research reveal a nuanced and dynamic transmission system for Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Guangxi. Educational practices play a crucial role in sustaining this cultural tradition, with a strong emphasis on informal, community-driven learning complemented by emerging institutional support. The data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis indicate four dominant themes: informal educational practices within the community, gender-based musical

learning through female ensembles, contributions from cultural institutions and policy interventions, and ongoing challenges to sustainability. The following sections present these findings in detail.

3.1 Informal Educational Practices in Community Settings

A significant insight from the fieldwork is the predominant role of informal education in transmitting Jiaqiao ritual music. Among the Yao community, musical learning often occurs organically within the framework of ritual performance. Young learners typically begin their musical journey by observing elders during actual rituals, such as seasonal offerings, ancestor worship, and temple fairs. These events not only maintain religious and communal life but also act as immersive pedagogical environments.

One of the most observed patterns was the apprenticeship model within family structures. Informants described how music is passed orally and aurally from grandparent to grandchild or aunt to niece. These learning environments are rich with cultural symbolism; children are taught not just melody and rhythm, but also the spiritual narratives and ethical significance of each song. Learning occurs through observation, imitation, correction, and eventually, participation. The songs are deeply embedded in the rhythm of communal life, and their meaning is intertwined with ritual context.

A significant dimension of this informal education is contextual learning, where music is taught in the actual environment where it is performed. This reinforces not only musical technique but also ritual timing, behavioral conduct, and spatial awareness. As observed in multiple rituals, elders often pause between songs to explain symbolism or correct a vocal phrase, reinforcing oral pedagogy, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Informal Learning Characteristics

Aspect	Observation Findings
Setting	Rituals, temple fairs, family altars
Method	Observation, imitation, oral instruction
Participants	Elders, children, young women
Content	Melody, lyrics, meanings, rituals
Tools	Voice, clapping, ritual instruments
Outcome	Incremental mastery, spiritual engagement

This informal structure also allows for flexibility in learning, where children can advance based on personal aptitude and interest. Unlike formal education, there is no rigid curriculum or time frame. However, this also means that the learning process is vulnerable to external disruptions—if elders pass away or if youth lose interest, the transmission chain can break.

3.2 Role of Female Ensembles and Gender-Based Learning

Jiaqiao ritual music is predominantly performed by female vocal ensembles, a unique feature that shapes its educational dynamics. These ensembles, composed of women ranging from young adolescents to elderly matriarchs, function as de facto community music schools. They rehearse in open courtyards, community halls, or near temples, and their sessions are semi-formal yet deeply instructional.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these groups emphasize communal learning. New participants are encouraged to sing along, and more experienced members offer corrections. Informants described how girls begin participating at around age 10 or 12, first by joining in chorus sections, and later by taking on solo or leader roles. The progression of learning is not only technical, but relational trust and emotional bonding are critical to mentorship.

The all-female nature of these ensembles also carries symbolic significance. Women are often seen as spiritual mediators in Yao rituals, and their music is believed to carry blessings or communicate with ancestors. This spiritual responsibility enhances their motivation to preserve the music and train successors, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Gendered Educational Roles in Jiaqiao Ensembles

Role	Age Group	Learning Method	Progression Path
Novice Singers	10–14	Listening, chorus	Group singing
Intermediate Learners	15–20	Repetition, guidance	Verse leading
Senior Performers	21+	Mentorship, correction	Solo roles, instruction

The peer-based learning among ensemble members creates a non-hierarchical atmosphere where feedback is normalized, and repetition is encouraged. Music is rarely written down; instead, each voice part is remembered through collective rehearsal and embodied memory. Over time, the body becomes a site of memory—rhythmic patterns are learned through clapping, stepping, or movement cues.

This gendered learning system also has implications for cultural identity. Many women stated that participating in Jiaqiao ensembles gave them a sense of pride, continuity, and community, especially in the face of economic migration and modern distractions.

3.3 Transmission through Cultural Institutions and Government Support

In recent years, there has been a noticeable effort by local government and cultural organizations to support the preservation of Jiaqiao ritual music. Although still supplementary to community-based transmission, these initiatives mark a significant shift toward structured educational inclusion.

One significant development is the inclusion of Jiaqiao music in community arts programs. These are usually organized through cultural heritage centers, which offer short workshops, intergenerational dialogue events, and seasonal performances. Some local schools have begun integrating Yao music in general music classes, although this is often limited to surface-level exposure.

Documentation and archiving projects have also contributed to preservation. With the support of cultural bureaus, hundreds of songs have been recorded and transcribed, serving both as educational material and archival records. Informants expressed cautious optimism, noting that while institutional support is still modest, it offers recognition and legitimacy to their practice, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Institutional Support for Transmission

Initiative Type	Description	Impact
Community Workshops	Short-term classes on Yao music and rituals	Beginner engagement
School Integration	Music class units on ethnic music	Awareness, limited depth
Documentation Projects	Audio/video archives, publications	Long-term preservation
Festival Sponsorship	Government funding for ritual music shows	Public visibility

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Most instructors for institutional programs are drawn from community leaders, who already carry heavy cultural responsibilities. Additionally, curricular constraints in public schools limit the extent to which ritual music can be taught, especially considering its spiritual content and performance complexity.

Nonetheless, the movement toward multilevel educational transmission—from informal to institutional—presents a spectrum of sustainability strategies that can work together to protect Jiaqiao ritual music.

3.4 Challenges to Sustainability

Despite these educational efforts, several challenges threaten the long-term sustainability of Jiaqiao ritual music. One of the most pressing issues is the aging population of ritual performers. Most experienced singers and mentors are over the age of 60, and few successors are fully trained to take over their roles. The oral nature of the tradition means that any break in the transmission chain could result in irreparable cultural loss.

Another challenge is the declining interest among younger generations, especially those who leave the village for education or work. Interviews revealed that many youths view ritual music as old-fashioned or irrelevant. Some even feel embarrassed to sing in public due to social pressures or changing aesthetic tastes influenced by popular media.

In addition, the sacred status of certain songs limits their transmission. Some rituals are considered too sacred to perform outside of religious contexts, which constrains their teaching. Moreover, this cultural code of secrecy makes it difficult to integrate the music into formal education settings fully.

Finally, the lack of standardized curricula, resources, and teacher training means that even well-intentioned institutional programs often fail to achieve depth or continuity. Without consistent support and integration, these programs may remain tokenistic rather than transformational, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of Challenges to Transmission

Challenge	Description	Implication
Aging Performer Population	Few successors for elders	Risk of knowledge extinction
Youth Disinterest	Modern distractions, stigma	Weakening intergenerational continuity
Sacred Content Restrictions	Limits on song teaching and performance	Constrained pedagogical flexibility
Institutional Gaps	Lack of curriculum, teachers, materials	Limited sustainability and outreach

Nevertheless, interviews consistently revealed that cultural respect, spiritual belief, and community mentorship remain powerful motivators. Young learners who do engage often describe a deep sense of purpose and identity, especially when trained by relatives or respected elders. This emphasizes that while challenges persist, the foundations for resilience still exist in the relational networks and value systems of the Yao community.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study on the transmission of Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group align with existing literature emphasizing the significance of informal education in sustaining intangible cultural heritage. As noted in previous research, oral transmission, apprenticeship, and community-based learning are foundational to the perpetuation of folk and ritual music (Miller, 2022; Curran & Radhakrishnan, 2021). This study reaffirms these assertions by showing how informal learning in ritual spaces remains central to musical continuity among the Yao. Unlike formal educational environments, the teaching of Jiaqiao music is deeply embedded within religious ceremonies and communal life and is passed down through generational bonds, particularly within families. These findings support Waterman's (2019) argument that ritual music functions not only as an artistic performance but also as a vehicle for transmitting cultural memory, values, and identity.

The role of female ensembles as key pedagogical units offers a unique insight into gendered forms of cultural transmission. Contrary to much of the literature that portrays ritual leadership as male-dominated, this study reveals how women in Yao communities act as spiritual intermediaries and educators, a finding consistent with the work of Cheng and Sikka (2025), who highlight the spiritual leadership of women in Yao religious practices. These female-led ensembles serve as living schools, where mentorship, repetition, and embodied learning reinforce musical and spiritual values. The emphasis on peer learning and non-hierarchical structure among ensemble members is particularly noteworthy, reflecting Jorgensen's (2021) advocacy for music education grounded in communal engagement and relational ethics.

Institutional involvement, though still developing, plays an increasingly important role in supporting transmission efforts. Community workshops, school programs, and documentation initiatives serve as supplementary tools that reinforce traditional knowledge systems. These efforts reflect broader policy trends in China and globally that advocate for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through educational integration (Stefano, 2021; Giglitto et al., 2022). However, this study also identifies tensions between institutional frameworks and traditional cultural protocols. For instance, sacred songs cannot be fully shared or performed in non-ritual contexts, thereby limiting their pedagogical applicability in formal education settings. This echoes concerns raised by Lee (2021) and Zain El Shandidy (2023) regarding the ethical complexities of institutionalizing sacred cultural expressions, and parallels can be drawn to similar preservation efforts such as the Lusheng music of the Miao or the Guqin traditions among Han Chinese communities, where formalization often struggles to capture the depth of spiritual and contextual learning (Liu & Woramitmaitee, 2024; An et al., 2025).

What sets the Jiaqiao case apart is the strong emphasis on female-led spiritual pedagogy within a sacred ritual

framework, an element less prominent in many other ethnic traditions in China. For instance, while Guqin transmission emphasizes an elite, often male literati tradition through master-disciple models, and Lusheng instruction is increasingly linked to staged performances for tourism, Jiaqiao music remains deeply embedded in lived, communal rites and emotional kinship, especially among women. This makes the Yao model particularly valuable for developing community-centered, gender-sensitive preservation frameworks with broader applicability across regions facing similar transmission threats.

Despite promising strategies, several challenges persist, including the aging population of knowledgeable performers, the lack of youth engagement, and the absence of standardized curricula. These issues mirror findings in other studies on intangible heritage, which warn of the rapid decline of traditional practices in the face of modernization and urban migration (Ande et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024). Yet, the study also found evidence of resilience. When mentorship is rooted in trust and cultural pride, young learners exhibit strong motivation and identity alignment, reinforcing the theory that meaningful cultural transmission is dependent on relational learning rather than formal instruction alone (Babazade, 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

This research underscores the multifaceted and culturally embedded nature of educational practices that sustain Jiaqiao ritual music among the Yao ethnic group in Shanglin District, Guangxi, China. At its core, the transmission of this sacred tradition relies heavily on informal, community-centered learning where knowledge is passed through ritual performance, family mentorship, and gender-based ensemble participation. These methods, deeply rooted in lived experience and spiritual meaning, foster not only musical skill but also cultural identity and intergenerational cohesion. Although institutional support, such as community workshops and artistic documentation, remains limited, it holds potential to enhance preservation when implemented with cultural sensitivity and respect for ritual protocols.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of Jiaqiao ritual music, educational policies must amplify the voices of elder practitioners, who serve as the primary cultural bearers. Additionally, greater support should be given to female-led ensembles, which are essential not only for musical instruction but also for maintaining the spiritual integrity of the tradition. Designing adaptive curricula that integrate traditional knowledge while respecting sacred boundaries is crucial, particularly in formal education contexts. Future research should investigate comparative transmission models among other ethnic groups in China to better understand shared challenges and unique strategies. Moreover, the potential of hybrid models blending traditional pedagogy with digital platforms should be explored to engage younger generations while preserving the cultural authenticity of the practice. Overall, this study contributes to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage and the evolving role of education in cultural resilience and continuity.

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Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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