

The Role of Nanyue Ritual Songs in Promoting Literacy and Cultural Education in Longhui County, Hunan, China

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ABSTRACT

Nanyue ritual songs are traditional vocal performances that hold religious and cultural significance, they are associated with worship ceremonies dedicated to the Nanyue gods. This study explores the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County, Hunan, China. The research site, Longhui County, is known for its rich cultural heritage and unique geographical location. The study employs a qualitative research method, including fieldwork and interviews with key informants who have expertise and experience in Nanyue ritual songs. The data collected undergoes comprehensive analysis, considering the religious and social functions of the songs as well as the development they have undergone. The research findings highlight the religious function of Nanyue ritual songs in guiding worship ceremonies, facilitating communication with the divine, and creating an enchanting atmosphere. Additionally, the social function of the songs in inheritance and education, entertainment, and social interaction is emphasized. The study also discusses the development of Nanyue ritual songs, considering the impact of changes in travel modes and societal shifts. The research suggests the importance of preserving and respecting these songs as a vital part of the local cultural heritage and promoting cultural education within the community.

Key words: Nanyue Ritual Songs, Longhui County, Cultural Education, Religious Function, Social Function

INTRODUCTION

The unexpected popularity of the song “Morning Long Hui” in December 2022 brought global attention to Longhui County, Hunan Province, China (Tang, 2019). As the creator and singer of the song, Yuan Shuxiong, received a visit from Argentina’s ambassador to China, the spotlight turned to this long-dormant hometown. Longhui County, located in the western part of Hunan Province, covers a land area of 2,868 square kilometers and is known for its diverse ethnic groups and unique regional culture. The county was recently removed from the list of China’s poverty-stricken counties, indicating its ongoing development and growth (Olson, 1998; Luo & Chen, 2013; Yang et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022).

The worship of the Nanyue gods and the associated ritual songs play a significant role in the cultural and religious practices of Longhui County (Arrault, 2008; Chen & Clark, 2010). Nanyue, also known as Hengshan, is one of the five sacred mountains in China and holds great importance in Chinese history and mythology (Robson, 2009; Hennessey, 2011; Lin, 2014). The belief in Nanyue symbolizes the desire for an extended and prosperous life, making it a focal point for cultural and spiritual activities (Pan, 2007; Shih, 2016). The worship of Nanyue gods has a long history and can be

divided into two stages: the “firewood worship” stage and the “temple worship” stage (Jones, 1999; Borgolte, 2019; Li & Li, 2022).

However, with the rapid modernization and technological advancements in Chinese society, traditional cultural practices, including the ritual songs associated with Nanyue worship, face challenges in terms of preservation and transmission (Oakes, 2006; Safford, 2014; Champadaeng et al., 2023; Juan et al., 2023). The younger generation’s lack of interest and the shift towards a digital and media-dominated culture have contributed to the marginalization of traditional arts and cultural practices. While the Chinese government has implemented policies for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, the specific focus on religious practices, such as the worship of Nanyue, remains limited due to the cautious approach taken by local authorities (McLaren, 2010; Maags & Holbig, 2016; Massing, 2018; Jack, 2019; Zhou, 2020).

Therefore, this research aims to explore the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County, Hunan, China. By examining the historical and cultural context, the impact of these ritual songs on the local community’s literacy development and cultural preservation will be investigated. The research seeks

to answer the following question: What is the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County, Hunan Province, China? By addressing this question, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the importance of preserving and promoting traditional cultural practices and their educational value.

The findings of this research will contribute to the understanding of the cultural significance of Nanyue ritual songs and their potential as educational tools. Moreover, the study will highlight the need for collaborative efforts between cultural institutions, educators, and policymakers to ensure the preservation and integration of traditional cultural practices in educational settings. By recognizing the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County, Hunan, China, this research will contribute to the broader field of education and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

Research Question

- What is the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County, Hunan Province, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Longhui County, situated in the central and southwest region of Hunan Province, China, holds a unique position within the country's administrative regions. Hunan Province itself occupies a middle ground between the dynamic coastal provinces and the more isolated inland regions. With its convenient connection to Hubei in the north and its proximity to the economically prosperous Guangdong in the south, Hunan strikes a balance between accessibility and relative isolation. Longhui County, one of the county-level areas within Hunan Province, faces challenges in terms of transportation and economic development due to its mountainous terrain, particularly with the presence of Longhui Mountain and the Xuefeng Mountains in the western part of the county (Xie, 2013; Zhang & Zhang, 2015; Tan et al., 2021).

The geographical constraints, however, have inadvertently played a protective role in preserving the rich traditional culture of Longhui County. The county boasts a diverse range of cultural resources, including the distinct "flower yao" ethnic group and their traditional folk songs, local Taoist mage music, the captivating lung hui puppet shows, traditional musical forms such as minor and flower drum play, qi opera music, put songs, and the significant "worship Chao Bai Nanyue Ritual Songs" (Brokaw & Reed, 2010).

Longhui County's traditional culture represents an invaluable cultural heritage that has thrived despite the challenging economic conditions. The presence of the "flower yao" ethnic group adds to the county's cultural vibrancy, with their unique folk songs serving as an expression of their distinct traditions. Furthermore, the local Taoist mage music, puppet shows, and various traditional music forms contribute to the county's artistic and performance traditions (Dal Lago, 2005; Yang et al., 2022).

The research related to Nanyue Ritual Songs in Longhui County, Hunan Province, China, covers various aspects, including Nanyue religion, social functions of folk songs, regional culture of Hunan Province, and Nanyue worship and culture (Szto, 2007; Ye, 2023). Historical records indicate that Nanyue Hengshan Mountain has been revered since ancient times, and the worship ceremonies involve singing Nanyue Ritual Songs (Robson, 2009; Chengda, 2011). These songs have religious attributes and play a significant role in guiding worship, facilitating communication with the divine, and fostering moral values among participants (Chan, 2012; Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). The study also explores the cultural heritage and social impact of Nanyue Ritual Songs, as well as their connection to regional culture and historical events. The research findings provide valuable insights into the rich cultural significance and educational value of Nanyue Ritual Songs in the context of Longhui County's community and broader cultural heritage.

By acknowledging and exploring the rich cultural resources of Longhui County, researchers can delve deeper into the significance and impact of its traditional practices. Understanding the cultural heritage and educational potential of Nanyue Ritual Songs can contribute to a broader understanding of the region's cultural and educational practices. Through an in-depth analysis of existing literature and the examination of primary sources, this study aims to shed light on the cultural and educational value of Nanyue Ritual Songs in Longhui County, enriching our knowledge of education and cultural practices.

Research Theory

In the study of ritual songs in Longhui County, Hunan Province, two key theories are employed: ethnomusicology and aesthetic theory.

- 1) Ethnomusicology, which emerged in the late 19th century, focuses on investigating and understanding folk music across different social systems and development levels. It utilizes anthropological methods to explore the relationship between folk music and overall culture, emphasizing the significance of ritual songs beyond their role in mountain worship (Campbell, 2003).
- 2) Aesthetic theory, originating from ancient Greece and formalized in the 18th century, is concerned with the essence of art and philosophy. In the context of the study, aesthetic theory helps unravel the wisdom and philosophy of life embedded in the ritual songs, exploring their ethical values, interpersonal communication, and aesthetic significance. Chinese aesthetics, with its deep connection to morality, ethics, and politics, further enriches the understanding of the cultural and artistic dimensions of Nanyue ritual songs (Katz, 1994).

METHOD

Research Site

The research site chosen for this study was Longhui County, which is situated in Shaoyang City, Hunan Province.

Longhui County was specifically selected due to its unique geographical location, rich historical heritage, and deep cultural significance. The songs of Longhui County were regarded as an ideal subject for our study, given their prominence and importance in the local context. Additionally, the Chao Bai Nanyue Ritual Songs in Longhui County held a significant influence over the region, further contributing to our decision to select this site for the study, as shown in Figure 1.

Criteria Used in the Study

- 1) Criteria for Classifying Nanyue Ritual Songs: The Nanyue Ritual Songs in Longhui County are classified based on their functional use. Songs employed during the formal Nanyue spirit worship ceremony are referred to as “ritual songs,” while songs not used in the formal ceremony are termed “non-ritual songs.” For instance, this includes songs sung on the way to the Southern Mountain and songs performed during the ascent after entering the Nanyue range.
- 2) Criteria for Song Selection: The study employs specific criteria for selecting the songs under study. These include focusing on ritual songs performed during the ceremony itself, as well as ritual songs associated with significant steps within the ceremony. Additionally, preference is given to ritual songs that exhibit distinctive stylistic characteristics.
- 3) Criteria for Key informants: The key informants chosen for the study are actively involved in pilgrimage activities and serve as singers of the Nanyue Ritual songs. They possess the ability to perform songs during the worship ceremonies dedicated to the Nanyue gods, as well as most of the ritual songs throughout the pilgrimage journey. Alternatively, some key informants have conducted extensive research and have a deep

understanding of the cultural significance associated with the Nanyue ritual songs, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the selected key informants based on their participation in Nanyue pilgrimage activities, their ability to sing Nanyue worship songs in the ceremony and during the journey, and their in-depth study of the cultural connotations of Nanyue ritual songs.

Research Tools

- 1) Fieldwork: The researcher will actively engage in the cultural and social context where the ritual songs are performed and documented. This may involve attending local events, ceremonies, and gatherings where the ritual songs are practiced. Detailed field notes will be taken, documenting the context, performances, participants, and any relevant observations during the fieldwork process.
- 2) Interviews: Will be conducted with individuals who have knowledge and experience related to Nanyue ritual songs. This will include participants in the pilgrimage activities, singers of the ritual songs, and individuals with a deep understanding of the cultural connotations associated with the songs. The interviews may be structured or semi-structured, allowing for open-ended discussions and exploration of the participants’ perspectives, experiences, and insights regarding the Nanyue ritual songs. Audio recording, with the participants’ consent, will be used to ensure accurate capturing of the interviews.

By utilizing fieldwork and interviews as research tools, this study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of Nanyue ritual songs. The fieldwork will provide contextual and experiential information, while the interviews will offer valuable insights from individuals directly involved in the practice and study of the ritual songs.



Figure 1. Map of Longhui County in the Hunan Province Source: Chinafolio (n.d.)

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this research utilizes a comprehensive approach that qualitative methods, guided by principles of ethnomusicology and aesthetics. Through qualitative analysis, the social, cultural, and historical contexts of Nanyue ritual songs and their transmission process are explored. Fieldwork data, including interviews, observations, and audio/video recordings, are carefully examined to gain valuable insights into the religious and social functions of these songs. The analysis also delves into the songs’ role in cultural inheritance and education, entertainment during the pilgrimage journey, and social interaction among the pilgrims.

RESULTS

The Religious Function of Nanyue Ritual Songs

The study on the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County, Hunan, China revealed the profound religious function of these songs within the context of Nanyue worship ceremonies. The findings highlight the significance of Nanyue ritual songs in fostering religious devotion, facilitating communication with the divine, and creating a sense of enchantment. This research contributes to understanding the cultural and educational value of Nanyue ritual songs in Longhui County, as shown in Table 2.

The research results in Table 2 emphasize the religious functions of Nanyue ritual songs and their significance in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County. Understanding the role of these songs not only

enriches our knowledge of Nanyue worship practices but also highlights their educational value in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a deeper appreciation for traditional practices among the local community.

The Social Function of Nanyue Ritual Songs

The findings highlight the role of Nanyue ritual songs in inheritance and education, entertainment, and social interaction. This research sheds light on the social impact and educational value of Nanyue ritual songs in the local community, as shown in Table 3.

The research results in Table 3 highlight the social functions of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County. These songs play a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge, providing entertainment during the pilgrimage journey, and facilitating social interaction among the pilgrims. Understanding the social significance of Nanyue ritual songs enhances our appreciation of their cultural value and educational impact in the local community.

The Development of the Worship of Nanyue Ritual Songs

This research explores how the worship of Nanyue ritual songs has undergone significant transformations, impacting their form, repertoire, and content, as shown in Table 4.

The research findings in Table 4 demonstrate the dynamic nature of Nanyue ritual songs in Longhui County, Hunan, China, as they have evolved to meet the challenges of modern

Table 1. The list of key informants in the study

Informer	Gender	Age	Education	Role
1	Male	67	Junior High School	Buddhist master, Nanyue worship organizer, participant, singer of worship ceremony songs
2	Male	72	Technical Secondary	Retired teacher in Hengbanqiao Town, School volunteer in Longhui County volunteer service team
3	Male	50	Middle School	Teacher in Nanyue Temple Town Huong Village
4	Male	40	Not specified	Taoist master, singer of Nanyue ritual song

Table 2. The religious function of nanyue ritual songs

Religious Function	Description
Ceremonial Function	Nanyue ritual songs are an integral part of the worship ceremonies, guiding participants through various rites and invoking a sense of spiritual transformation.
Communication with the Divine	Through melodic variations and vocal expressions, Nanyue ritual songs serve as a means of communication with the gods, amplifying believers’ voices and facilitating a connection with the divine realm.
Praise of the Gods	Nanyue ritual songs often include sections dedicated to praising the gods, expressing gratitude for their benevolence and miraculous deeds before making specific requests.
Strengthening of Belief	Singing Nanyue ritual songs during pilgrimages strengthens believers’ faith, reinforcing their spiritual connection with the Nanyue Holy Emperor and maintaining devout devotion throughout the journey.
Enchantment and Sacred Atmosphere	Nanyue ritual songs contribute to the enchanting and mystical ambiance of worship ceremonies, creating a sacred atmosphere and reinforcing believers’ belief in the existence of a spiritual realm.

Table 3. The social function of nanyue ritual songs

Social Function	Description
Role of Inheritance and Education	Nanyue ritual songs serve as a means of passing down cultural knowledge and traditions from generation to generation. Through songs based on historical stories, agricultural production knowledge, and everyday life, children participating in the pilgrimage activities gain valuable enlightenment education. These songs not only entertain them but also instill important knowledge and interpersonal skills.
Role of Entertainment	During the pilgrimage journey, Nanyue ritual songs provide entertainment and relieve the monotony and fatigue of the travel. The songs contain historical stories, fairy tales, and interactive elements that make the journey more enjoyable and engaging for the pilgrims.
Role of Social Interaction	Nanyue ritual songs include non-ceremonial songs that facilitate social interaction among the pilgrims. Songs such as “for water,” “Into the store,” “Brother Meet,” and “He goes to me” are sung during specific social situations, fostering connections and camaraderie among the pilgrims. These songs serve as a form of communication and bonding during the pilgrimage.

Table 4. The development of the worship of nanyue ritual songs

Development Aspects	Description
Impact of Changes in Travel Mode	With the advent of modern transportation, the duration of the Nanyue pilgrimage journey has significantly reduced from a 15-day hike to a one-day round trip by car. This compressed travel time has resulted in a reduction in the number of ritual songs performed. Certain songs associated with specific pilgrimage scenes, such as “Into the Store,” “Crossing the Street,” and “Bye to the Temple,” are no longer sung due to the absence of corresponding situations during the shortened journey. Selecting representative songs that best express their emotions has become more common during the shorter pilgrimage.
Streamlining of Rituals	The change in travel mode has led to the streamlining of the original rituals associated with the Nanyue pilgrimage. Activities that once accompanied the ritual songs, such as singing, dancing, and praying together, have been diminished due to limited time and space in cars. The streamlined rituals no longer provide the same comprehensive context for the performance of the ritual songs.
Influence of Modern Lifestyle and Pragmatic Thoughts	The fast-paced modern lifestyle and pragmatic mindset have also influenced the Nanyue worship ceremony songs. Less crucial ceremonies, such as the fasting ceremony, are often omitted, resulting in the loss of significance for the corresponding ritual songs, such as “Wish the Ribbon.” These songs have been relocated to the pilgrimage journey, but their original depth of meaning has diminished.
Adaptation and Survival	Despite the changes brought about by modern travel and societal shifts, the ritual songs have not disappeared but have found new ways of survival in the altered social environment. Today’s worshippers place greater emphasis on the spiritual connotation and significance of the songs, seeking respect for the gods and personal spiritual elevation. The songs also serve as a means of preserving traditional culture and enhancing community cohesion during the ceremony.

society. While facing changes in travel modes, streamlining of rituals, and the influence of pragmatic thoughts, the ritual songs continue to represent a rich cultural heritage. This research emphasizes the importance of understanding and respecting the development and adaptations of these ritual songs to ensure their preservation and inheritance in a contemporary context.

Summary: The religious function of Nanyue ritual songs is highlighted, emphasizing their role in guiding worship ceremonies, facilitating communication with the divine, praising the gods, strengthening belief, and creating an enchanting atmosphere. These songs hold cultural and educational value by preserving traditions and fostering a deeper appreciation for local practices.

Furthermore, the social function of Nanyue ritual songs is examined, emphasizing their significance in inheritance and education, entertainment during the pilgrimage journey, and fostering social interaction among the pilgrims. These

songs serve as a means of passing down cultural knowledge, relieving monotony during travel, and promoting connections among the community.

The research also discusses the development of Nanyue ritual songs, considering the impact of changes in travel modes, the streamlining of rituals, and the influence of modern lifestyles. While compressed travel time and streamlined rituals have affected the performance of certain songs, the adaptation and survival of Nanyue ritual songs demonstrate their resilience in the face of societal changes. Today, these songs continue to hold spiritual significance, preserve traditional culture, and enhance community cohesion during worship ceremonies.

Understanding the religious, social, and developmental aspects of Nanyue ritual songs enriches our understanding of their cultural and educational value in Longhui County. This research emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving these songs as a vital part of the local cultural heritage and promoting cultural education within the community.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study regarding the role of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County are consistent with the existing literature and theoretical principles discussed in the literature review. The literature review highlighted the unique cultural and historical significance of Longhui County and the diverse ethnic groups residing there. It also emphasized the importance of Nanyue ritual songs as a significant component of the local cultural heritage (Arrault, 2008; Chen & Clark, 2010; Robson, 2009).

The research methods employed in this study, including fieldwork and interviews, allowed for an in-depth exploration of the religious and social functions of Nanyue ritual songs. The fieldwork provided firsthand observations and experiences within the cultural context, while the interviews with key informants enriched the understanding of the cultural and educational value of these songs. The qualitative data analysis aligned with the principles of ethnomusicology and aesthetics, enabling a comprehensive examination of the research question.

The research results demonstrate that Nanyue ritual songs play a significant role in religious practices, as they guide worship ceremonies, facilitate communication with the divine, and create a sacred atmosphere. This finding aligns with the religious function of ritual songs discussed in the literature review (Campbell, 2003; Katz, 1994). The songs are also shown to have a social function, serving as a means of inheritance and education, providing entertainment during the pilgrimage journey, and fostering social interaction among the pilgrims. These findings corroborate the social function of ritual songs described in the literature (Dal Lago, 2005; Yang et al., 2022).

Moreover, the study highlights the developmental aspects of Nanyue ritual songs, indicating the impact of changes in travel modes and societal shifts on the performance and repertoire of these songs. While certain songs and rituals have been adapted or streamlined, the research findings emphasize the continued survival and cultural significance of Nanyue ritual songs, consistent with the adaptive nature of traditional cultural practices (Xie, 2013; Zhang & Zhang, 2015).

Overall, the research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and educational value of Nanyue ritual songs in promoting literacy and cultural education in Longhui County. The discussion reveals the importance of preserving and promoting these songs as a vital part of the local cultural heritage, while also acknowledging the need for adaptation and recognition of the dynamic nature of cultural practices in the face of societal changes.

The research has confirmed the importance of preserving and promoting Nanyue ritual songs as a means of cultural preservation and education. Despite the impact of changes in travel modes and societal shifts, the study highlights the resilience and continued significance of these songs in the local community. The findings align with the existing literature on Nanyue ritual songs, emphasizing their cultural and educational value (Arrault, 2008; Chen & Clark, 2010; Dal Lago, 2005).

In conclusion, this research underscores the need for collaborative efforts among cultural institutions, educators, and

policymakers to ensure the preservation and integration of Nanyue ritual songs in educational settings. Recognizing the role of these songs in promoting literacy and cultural education contributes to the broader field of education and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

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