

Preservation and Transmission of Musical Instruments of Ethnic Minorities in Northwestern Guangxi

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the preservation and transmission of ethnic minority musical instruments in northwest Guangxi. The study employed a qualitative research methodology that focused on how these instruments' performance contexts and functions have evolved in response to modern influences. Drawing on ethnomusicology research theory, fieldwork, and interviews, the study investigates the roles of government promotion, tourism development, and modern technology in shaping the contemporary usage of instruments such as the Biandan, Tonggu, and Sixianhu. The research highlights the balance between preserving traditional cultural roles and adapting to new functions, particularly as tourism and entertainment become central to economic development in the region. Additionally, it examines how modern technology, through platforms like Douyin, facilitates the transmission of musical traditions to broader audiences. The findings underscore the importance of fostering intergenerational connections and embracing contemporary tools for cultural expression while maintaining the cultural integrity of these instruments. This study provides insights into how ethnic minority musical traditions can continue to thrive in a rapidly changing world, ensuring the longevity of northwest Guangxi's rich musical heritage.

Key words: Preservation, Transmission, Ethnic Minority, Northwest Guangxi, Cultural Heritage

INTRODUCTION

The northwest region of Guangxi, China, is home to a rich array of musical instruments and a long-standing cultural heritage. However, due to its unique geographical location, in-depth scholarly research on the area has been limited. According to the "Gazony Dictionary of the People's Republic of China," the northwest region of Guangxi primarily encompasses counties such as Xilin, Tianlin, Leye, Lingyun, Fengshan, Baise, and the Longlin Autonomous County (Cui, 2002; Li et al., 2022). However, according to the Guangxi General Chronicles (Guangxi General Chronicles Editorial Board, 1993), the northwest region of Guangxi primarily includes areas such as Hechi, Yizhou, Nandan, Donglan, Fengshan, Tian'e, Luocheng, Huanjiang, Du'an, Bama, and Dahua. While there remains some debate regarding the geographical division of northwest Guangxi, Chinese academic circles and scholars generally adopt the classification presented in the Guangxi Tongzhi, published by the Chinese government, as the prevailing standard (Zhang et al., 2011).

The ethnic minority regions of northwest Guangxi, China, have long been home to a diverse array of traditional musical instruments, with more than ten types documented before the 1980s. Strict rules, including specific performance practices and taboos, bound these instruments integral to

local culture and restricted their use. For example, women were prohibited from playing bronze drums in certain areas (Liang, 2000; Guo et al., 2017), and wind instruments were restricted to being played only at designated times. Such customs reflect the deep connection between the music and the cultural traditions of the ethnic groups in this region. In addition to performance taboos, many of these instruments were reserved for use during particular ceremonies, further emphasizing their cultural and ritual importance (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023). Despite their significance, research on the traditional music of northwest Guangxi has been sparse, and written records are few. With the rapid development of the economy and the rise of tourism, these musical traditions are increasingly at risk. The disappearance of many instruments and their associated rituals has led to the simplification or complete loss of performances (Wan, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

The traditional musical instruments of northwest Guangxi, China, are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the region, serving not only as tools for musical expression but also as symbols of communication, social status, ritual practices, and entertainment. Historically, these instruments have played an essential role in transmitting signals, conducting religious rituals, and demonstrating social hierarchy within ethnic minority communities (Wong et al.,

2019). However, with the rise of state intervention, evolving government policies, and the rapid development of tourism, the performance contexts and functions of these musical instruments have begun to change significantly. Traditional venues, once rooted in cultural and ceremonial settings, are increasingly shifting toward tourist-centric displays, leading to a transformation of their cultural role (Wan & Wei, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022).

This evolution poses a critical challenge to the preservation of northwest Guangxi's rich musical heritage. The shift away from traditional practices has not only simplified many performances but also threatens the cultural knowledge tied to these instruments, especially their non-musical functions (Liu et al., 2024). The disappearance or alteration of these customs underscores the urgent need for comprehensive documentation and preservation efforts. Based on the above reasons, the traditional musical instruments of northwest Guangxi are undergoing profound changes, but with concerted preservation and transmission efforts, their cultural significance can be safeguarded. This endeavor aims to provide invaluable insights and resources for individuals keen on exploring the rich tapestry of cultural heritage, particularly in traditional musical instruments, so we can ensure that the unique musical and cultural heritage of the region continues to thrive.

Research Question

- How can ethnic minorities in northwest Guangxi preserve and transmit their traditional musical instruments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

General Knowledge of Chinese Ethnic Minority Musical Instruments

Ethnic minorities in China possess vast musical instruments, regarded as precious treasures within the nation's cultural heritage. According to *Musical Instruments of China's Ethnic Minorities*, there are 492 different kinds of musical instruments across China's 55 ethnic minority groups. Of these, 215 are wind instruments, with 24 varieties found in Guangxi (Liao, 2016). There are 62 string instruments, 9 of which are in Guangxi. In terms of plucked instruments, there are 72 types in total, with four represented in Guangxi. Although percussion instruments are relatively few in number, they have been documented among the Yao people in Guangxi. There are 154 types of percussion instruments, 30 of which can be found in Guangxi (Wu & Champadaeng, 2024; Chang et al., 2024).

Since the 1980s, more than 20 monographs have been published on the study of musical instruments of China's ethnic minorities. Some of these works provide a macro-level overview of the musical instruments used by ethnic minorities across China. In recent years, scholars have also begun to focus on cultural and acoustic research related to the musical instruments of specific ethnic groups or regions. For example, studies have been conducted on clarinet-like wind instruments used by ethnic minorities in Yunnan (Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023; Ma & Chen, 2024).

According to data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), as of 2023, there are a total of 367 journal articles on ethnic musical instruments, covering more than 40 ethnic groups and over 100 different instruments. These studies primarily focus on the musical traditions of groups such as the Miao, Zhuang, Mongolian, Tibetan, Tujia, Yao, and Yi. The research on musical instruments has largely centered on instruments such as the reed pipe (lusheng), suona, morin khuur, zhaoer, mouth string, duxian-qin, bronze drum, and wooden drum, reflecting the diversity and cultural significance of these instruments across various ethnic groups (Wong, 2020; Xu & Karin, 2024).

General Knowledge of Guangxi Minority Musical Instruments

Guangxi, located in the southern part of China, holds a distinct geographical advantage that has shaped its cultural and musical identity. Bordering Vietnam to the south and neighboring the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangdong within China, Guangxi serves as a crossroads of cultural exchange and diversity. People recognize the region as one of China's most important provinces, home to ethnic minorities with a rich and varied ethnic composition. The primary resident ethnic groups include the Zhuang, Han, Yao, and Miao, but there are also significant populations of other groups, such as the Tujia, Dong, Jing, and Yi, in addition to 44 other ethnic groups, including the Tujia, Mongolian, Korean, Bai, Li, and Tibetan peoples. Guangxi's reputation as a major repository of ethnic minority musical instruments passed down through generations and integral to the region's cultural identity is a result of this ethnic diversity (Wu & Boonsrianun, 2023; Liu et al., 2023).

The abundance of musical instruments found among Guangxi's ethnic minorities makes the region an important cultural resource within China. Not only do these instruments, ranging from wind and string to percussion, serve as tools for musical expression, but they also hold significant roles in various cultural, religious, and social activities. The variety of instruments reflects the rich musical traditions and distinct cultural practices of the different ethnic groups residing in Guangxi. Many of these groups intricately tie music to their way of life, spiritual beliefs, and communal activities, further enhancing the importance of preserving this musical heritage (Guangguo et al., 2024).

Since the 1980s, there has been a notable increase in comprehensive domestic research on the national musical instruments of Guangxi. Researchers have carried out comprehensive studies that scrutinize not just the instruments but also the cultural settings in which they function. These studies encompass a wide range of aspects, including the historical development of the instruments, their construction and playing techniques, and their role in ethnic minority rituals, festivals, and daily life. The depth and breadth of this research have provided an invaluable foundation for understanding the complex musical traditions of Guangxi (Yi et al., 2023; Chen & Seekhunlio, 2024).

As modern influences such as tourism, government policies, and economic development continue to impact

traditional practices, this body of research plays an increasingly important role in safeguarding the musical heritage of the region. Scholars are contributing to the preservation and transmission of these traditions to future generations by providing a comprehensive and detailed record of the musical instruments and their uses. Ultimately, the research on Guangxi's national musical instruments serves as both a tribute to the region's rich cultural diversity and a critical resource for understanding the evolving role of music in the lives of its ethnic minorities. This academic work will continue to inspire further exploration, ensuring that Guangxi's musical heritage remains a vibrant and vital part of China's cultural landscape (Bing et al., 2024; Tang, 2023).

Research Theory

The study on the preservation and transmission of musical instruments of ethnic minorities in Northwestern Guangxi draws on ethnomusicology research theory. This theoretical framework enables a comprehensive exploration of the preservation of these musical instruments, as well as their cultural and social transmission within ethnic communities (Rice, 2010; Fan, 2016). By focusing on both preservation and transmission, the study emphasizes not only the importance of safeguarding the instruments themselves but also the cultural practices and knowledge systems that sustain them. Ethnomusicological approaches are key to understanding how these instruments and their associated traditions continue to evolve, ensuring that they remain integral to the communities that have maintained them for generations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is on the preservation and transmission of musical instruments among ethnic minorities in Northwestern Guangxi. The study aims to capture the subjects' complexity and dynamism.

Fieldwork

Extensive fieldwork in various ethnic minority regions of Northwestern Guangxi forms the cornerstone of this research. The researcher engaged in participant observation at local festivals, musical performances, and community events to directly experience the use and significance of traditional musical instruments. This immersive approach provides a contextual understanding of the instruments' roles within their communities, highlighting their importance for cultural preservation and transmission.

Interviews

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants, including local musicians, cultural practitioners, community elders, and government officials. These interviews are designed to gather qualitative data on the perceptions and practices related to musical instruments, exploring themes of cultural identity, change, and continuity. The insights gained from these interviews

contribute to understanding how preservation efforts and transmission of knowledge occur within the community.

Documentary Analysis

Research also included the analysis of existing documentation such as government records, cultural policies, and previous academic studies. This review contextualizes the current status and historical changes in the use and significance of musical instruments, offering a backdrop for interpreting new data. The analysis of these documents is vital for understanding the frameworks that support preservation and transmission initiatives in the region.

Audio-Visual Documentation

To capture the practical aspects of instrument usage, audio and visual recordings of musical performances were made. This documentation assists in the analysis of technical aspects of music-making and the aesthetic dimensions of performance, which are essential for understanding the transmission of skills and knowledge. The recordings also serve as a tool for preservation, allowing future generations to access and learn from these performances.

Data Analysis

Data from field notes, interview transcripts and audio-visual recordings are systematically analyzed using qualitative content analysis methods. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the detailed nuances and broader trends affecting musical instruments in the region, focusing on how these elements contribute to their preservation and transmission.

RESULTS

Adaptation and Preservation of Musical Traditions in Northwest Guangxi

According to the fieldwork, the performances of some musical instruments by ethnic minorities in northwest Guangxi have begun to change since the 21st century. These instruments, including Biandan, Zhutonggu, Tonggu, Yaozudagu, Fenggu, Niujiào, and Muye, have experienced shifts in their original contexts, such as festive occasions, festivals, and tourist activities. These changes have implications for both the preservation and transmission of the musical traditions associated with these instruments. While their usage is adapting to new contexts, it is crucial to ensure that efforts in preservation maintain their cultural integrity and that the transmission of knowledge about their traditional functions and significance continues within the communities that use them.

The Evolution of Performance Contexts for Ethnic Minority Instruments in Northwest Guangxi

The performance occasions and functions of the live musical instruments of ethnic minorities in Northwest Guangxi

have undergone significant changes. For example, the performance occasions for the Longsong of the Shui nationality in Nandan County and the Fenggu of the Maonan nationality in Huanjiang County have nearly disappeared. Despite their continued existence, people rarely use or see these instruments. The performance occasions for instruments such as Biandan, Tonggu, and Niujiao have shifted, now frequently appearing at festive events, festivals, or as part of tourist attractions in scenic spots. In addition, the original functions of instruments like the Yaozudagu and Lali have vanished, while other instruments have acquired a new function—entertainment.

This section will incorporate fieldwork and interviews to examine the reasons behind the changes in the performance occasions and functions of some existing musical instruments in Northwest Guangxi since the 21st century. The research will also explore how these changes impact the preservation and transmission of these instruments. Despite the shift in their usage, it is essential to address the preservation of the instruments' traditional cultural roles and ensure their transmission to future generations, as these changes reflect both challenges and opportunities for safeguarding the region's musical heritage (Figure 1).

Promotion by Government and Cultural Institutions

The government and cultural institutions have played a significant role in promoting the performance of ethnic musical instruments. They have actively supported and encouraged the preservation and transmission of ethnic musical instruments through various policies and measures. In addition to providing financial support, the government formulates laws and regulations to safeguard and promote ethnic minority cultures, thereby ensuring the effective preservation and transmission of these unique art forms. Cultural institutions, in turn, provide platforms for the performance of ethnic musical instruments by organizing various events, exhibitions, and exchange activities. Additionally, they have implemented training and education programs to cultivate young inheritors, ensuring that these traditional arts have successors in the future.

Through extensive fieldwork, the researcher has learned that, in recent years, the government and cultural institutions

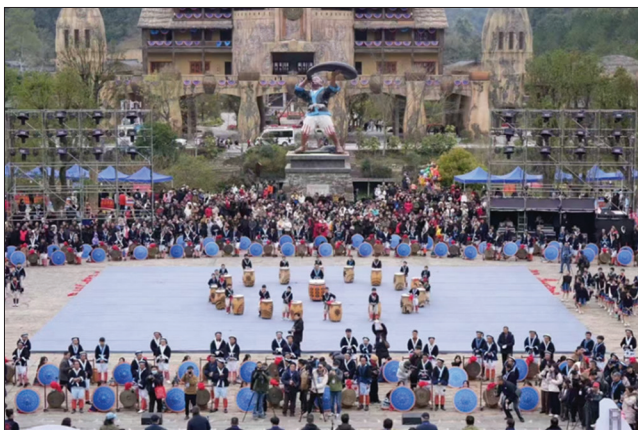


Figure 1. Tonggu and Yaozudagu performances
Source: Shouyu Yuan

in northwest Guangxi have vigorously promoted ethnic minority culture and art. The aim has been to use ethnic minority musical instruments, folk customs, and festivals as important cultural symbols to enhance their preservation and transmission.

As a result, musical instruments that once appeared only in specific settings, such as funerals (Bai Ku Yao) or festivals (Maguai Festival in Tian'e County and Zhuzhu Festival in Donglan County), have started to appear in a broader range of occasions. Therefore, government intervention and financial investment are essential for ensuring the preservation and transmission of these musical traditions. The change in performance venues is a necessary process for preservation. These instruments may only be played once a year or less often because funerals can happen at any time. Expanding performance occasions ensures the continuity and transmission of these musical traditions in a changing cultural landscape.

Tourism Development

The development of ethnic minority tourism has not only stimulated local economic prosperity but has also contributed to the preservation and transmission of traditional culture. In this process, musical instrument performances have become an essential form of cultural display, attracting significant attention and interest from tourists. As the tourism industry continues to grow, more and more visitors travel to ethnic minority regions to experience their unique customs and traditions. These regions boast rich and vibrant ethnic cultures, with music and musical instrument performances playing an essential role in these cultural experiences.

According to data, the number of tourists in northwest Guangxi exceeded 50 million in 2023, with total tourism consumption reaching 52.8 billion yuan. Ethnic minority culture and art, particularly in places like Nandan County and Donglan County, have become central to the tourism experience. For example, the Baiku Yao people, who once reserved their musical performances for specific cultural occasions, have become more accustomed to performing for tourists, accepting it as part of their evolving cultural expression. Additionally, local informants revealed that tourist projects increasingly showcase the bronze drum art of Donglan County in various settings. This method enhances the preservation of these musical instruments and facilitates their transmission to a broader audience, including tourists (Figure 2).

A detailed account of governmental responses and actions related to the preservation and transmission of ethnic minority musical instruments in northwest Guangxi is essential. Specific measures have included financial support, the establishment of laws and policies aimed at cultural preservation, and the organization of cultural events to showcase these traditions. Additionally, government initiatives have promoted the integration of musical instruments into the tourism industry, thus creating new contexts for performance and opportunities for broader audience engagement. The government has also implemented training programs and educational efforts to cultivate new generations of practitioners capable of perpetuating these traditions.



Figure 2. Bronze Drum performance in Nandan county
Source: Shouyu Yuan

An evaluation of these efforts indicates that the government has made significant strides in raising awareness and supporting the visibility of this cultural heritage. However, while these actions have contributed to the preservation of ethnic minority musical instruments, challenges remain in ensuring the cultural authenticity of these practices, particularly as economic and tourism interests reshape traditional roles. Overall, the government's response has been impactful but requires continued attention to balance economic growth with the protection of northwest Guangxi's musical heritage.

The Development of Modern Technology

Modern technology is increasingly spreading and showcasing some of the musical instruments of ethnic minorities in northwest Guangxi, such as Muye and Sixianhu. The researcher's collected field data indicates that online performances and sharing of ethnic minority musical instruments have become common. Platforms such as WeChat and TikTok (Douyin) have been instrumental in the preservation and transmission of these musical traditions. Videos of performances can be published at any time, and live broadcasts—particularly on Douyin—have become a popular method for promoting and teaching Muye. For example, Douyin hosts four to five live broadcasts every week, allowing performers like Luo Rong to upload videos that reach viewers across the country. This approach significantly enhances the preservation and transmission of musical instruments, making it easier to promote these traditions to a broader audience.

Through online platforms, the performance venues of ethnic minority musical instruments in northwest Guangxi have experienced a true leap forward. These platforms allow more people to learn about the culture and art of ethnic minorities, thus contributing to the continued preservation and transmission of their musical heritage in the digital age.

The Influence of Modern Concepts for Preservation

Modern concepts generally refer to new cognitive models and ways of thinking that emerge in people's thoughts, behaviors, and values due to advancements in science and

technology, economic development, and cultural exchanges. These modern concepts have also influenced the ethnic minorities in northwest Guangxi, impacting the preservation and transmission of their musical instruments and changing their functions.

With the rapid advancement of science and technology, especially the widespread use of smartphones and other devices, communication among people has transcended the limitations of time and space. As a result, these musical instruments are no longer needed as a medium for interpersonal communication. Fieldwork informants report that young men and women today prefer to communicate through the Internet, with the practice of playing musical instruments to express emotions largely relegated to historical documents. Even when young people are skilled in playing musical instruments or performing at significant occasions such as funerals or festivals, they struggle to garner the same admiration as before. Modern youth are more concerned with practical matters, such as stable jobs, high salaries, or home ownership. With the help of mobile phones, even the Baiku Yao people, who live in remote mountainous regions, can easily access information about the outside world, which has shifted their values and priorities.

Although many young people express interest in learning instruments, their role in communicating emotions has significantly diminished. Today, people primarily view the Sixianhu as a tool for entertainment rather than a means of emotional expression. Consequently, the original functions of some musical instruments in northwest Guangxi have inevitably faded. Therefore, the influence of modern concepts has reshaped the preservation and transmission of these instruments, highlighting the challenges of maintaining their traditional roles in contemporary society.

The Need for Economic Development for Preservation

Since the 21st century, ethnic minorities in northwest Guangxi have shifted the functions of their musical instruments, primarily towards entertainment purposes. This transformation is not accidental but the result of deliberate human intervention aimed at promoting economic development. Due to its remote location, the economy of ethnic minority areas in northwest Guangxi lags far behind the national average. According to statistics from the Chinese government in 2023, northwest Guangxi includes 8 of the 20 poorest counties in the region, such as Huanjiang County (16th), Tian'e County (13th), Du'an County (9th), Bama County (6th), Luocheng County (5th), Dahua County (4th), Fengshan County (2nd), and Donglan County (1st). Therefore, finding a suitable path and strategy for promoting the economic development of these ethnic minority areas is essential.

Tourism primarily drives economic development in Donglan County, the poorest county in Guangxi. The performance of Tonggu and other ethnic musical instruments has become a central feature of the county's tourism industry, which explains the shift in the performance occasions of certain instruments due to government and cultural institution initiatives. Similar strategies have been adopted by Nandan County and Tian'e County. To successfully develop the

ethnic minority tourism industry, the region must emphasize its unique culture and traditions. In addition to meeting tourists' visual and auditory expectations, "participatory" and "experiential" tourism have become increasingly important. As a result, the Baiku Yao people in Nandan County not only prepare captivating performances for visitors but also offer tourists the opportunity to learn how to play instruments like the Tonggu and Niujiiao.

In this context, the government and cultural institutions have been actively integrating the preservation and transmission of ethnic minority musical instruments into the region's tourism industry. While the functions of these instruments may have changed, their use in tourism has indirectly protected them and facilitated their transmission to future generations. This approach, while focused on economic development, has also ensured the preservation and continued vitality of these important cultural assets in northwest Guangxi.

DISCUSSION

This study of the preservation and transmission of ethnic minority musical instruments in northwest Guangxi highlights the significant changes in their performance occasions and functions over recent years. The findings indicate that these musical instruments adapt to contemporary societal changes influenced by government initiatives, economic development through tourism, the impact of modern technology, and evolving cultural concepts.

One of the primary factors contributing to the transformation of performance contexts is the government's and cultural institutions' proactive role in promoting ethnic musical heritage. Through financial support, policy frameworks, and organized cultural events, these entities have created opportunities for ethnic minority instruments to be showcased in diverse settings beyond traditional ceremonies (Jian & Nicolas, 2021; Hou & Seekhunlio, 2023). This shift enhances the visibility of these instruments and contributes to their preservation and transmission by engaging younger generations and broader audiences. However, the increasing integration of these instruments into tourism and entertainment raises questions about the potential dilution of their original cultural significance (Wong et al., 2019).

The emergence of tourism as a catalyst for economic development has further influenced the roles of these musical instruments. This offers a significant opportunity for economic expansion and heightened public engagement, although it also provides obstacles in maintaining old norms. Modifying instruments for entertainment reasons may jeopardize their cultural significance and result in the erosion of their original meanings. By providing participatory experiences, such as enabling tourists to engage in performances or learn to play instruments, the Baiku Yao and other ethnic groups have discovered methods to preserve their traditional legacy while adjusting to contemporary needs (Lei, 2024; Hu et al., 2022).

The influence of modern technology cannot be overlooked in this discussion. Platforms like Douyin and WeChat have revolutionized the dissemination and consumption of

these musical traditions. Sharing performances online allows for broader exposure and accessibility, ensuring that the knowledge and skills associated with these instruments can be transmitted to future generations (Seekhunlio et al., 2023; Davis & Xiao, 2021; Plantin & De Seta, 2019). However, this reliance on digital platforms also necessitates a careful balance to ensure that traditional practices are preserved and not merely commodified for online consumption.

Additionally, younger generations' changing values and priorities pose another layer of complexity to the preservation and transmission of these musical instruments. The emotional connection to musical expression has diminished with modern concepts prioritizing practical aspects such as employment and economic stability. This shift emphasizes the need for targeted efforts to engage youth in preserving their cultural heritage, reinforcing the importance of musical traditions as a means of identity and community connection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a confluence of factors, including government promotion, economic development through tourism, technological advancements, and evolving cultural concepts, influence the preservation and transmission of ethnic minority musical instruments in northwest Guangxi. While these changes present challenges and opportunities, the adaptability of these musical traditions reflects the resilience of the ethnic minority communities.

For effective preservation and transmission, it is crucial to balance modern influences and traditional practices. Efforts must be made to maintain the cultural integrity of these musical instruments while embracing contemporary modes of expression and engagement. By fostering intergenerational connections and encouraging active participation in cultural heritage, the unique musical traditions of northwest Guangxi can thrive amidst a rapidly changing cultural landscape. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of recognizing and supporting the dynamic nature of artistic practices, ensuring that the rich heritage of ethnic minority musical instruments continues to resonate for generations to come.

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