



Research Paper

# Preservation and Challenges of Tanjing Ancient Music in Yishala Village: An Analysis of an Intangible Cultural Heritage in China

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## Abstract

*This study analyzes the current preservation status and critical challenges facing this musical tradition, including an aging cohort of inheritors, tensions between commercialization and authenticity, and inadequate legal protection mechanisms. Through a mixed-methods approach incorporating documentary analysis, field investigation, and comparative case studies, the research proposes strategic recommendations for sustainable safeguarding. The findings emphasize the necessity of integrated strategies that combine enhanced transmission systems, digital preservation initiatives, legal framework development, and sustainable tourism models to ensure the continuity of this valuable cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** Tanjing Ancient Music, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Preservation, Ethnic Music, China

*Received 25 Sep., 2025; Revised 03 Oct., 2025; Accepted 05 Oct., 2025 © The author(s) 2025. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

## I. Introduction

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has gained global significance as nations recognize the importance of maintaining cultural diversity and promoting sustainable development. According to UNESCO, ICH includes traditions or living expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. In China, the rapid pace of urbanization and modernization has posed significant threats to various forms of ICH, particularly those associated with ethnic minority communities.

Tanjing Ancient Music, practiced in Yishala Village, Panzhihua City, Sichuan Province, represents a valuable cultural artifact resulting from historical interactions between Han Chinese immigrants and the indigenous Lipo Yi people. Recognized as a provincial-level ICH in 2009 by the Sichuan Cultural Heritage Bureau, this musical tradition faces substantial threats from urbanization, modernization, and intergenerational discontinuity. The music embodies a unique blend of Han Chinese musical elements with indigenous Yi culture, creating a distinctive artistic form that serves as a living testament to centuries of cultural exchange along the Southern Silk Road.

This study provides a systematic analysis of Tanjing Ancient Music's preservation status and challenges, contributing to broader understanding of ICH safeguarding strategies in contemporary China. Unlike previous research that has focused primarily on historical documentation, this paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates ethnomusicology, cultural heritage studies, and digital preservation methodologies. The research addresses several critical questions: How can traditional knowledge systems like Tanjing Ancient Music be effectively preserved in the face of modernization? What role can digital technologies play in safeguarding such traditions? How can communities maintain cultural authenticity while adapting to contemporary economic and social pressures?

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1 Domestic Research on Tanjing Ancient Music

Academic interest in Tanjing Ancient Music has grown steadily since the early 2000s, paralleling increased governmental focus on intangible cultural heritage preservation. Domestic scholars have primarily investigated its historical origins and cultural significance, with seminal work by Zhang (2016) establishing connections to Jiangnan silk and bamboo traditions with influences from Ming Dynasty court music. The research of Wang and Zhang (2017) further documented how Han Chinese immigrants incorporated their musical traditions

with indigenous Yi practices, creating a unique syncretic form that reflects centuries of cultural interaction.

Current studies document various preservation approaches, particularly educational integration in local schools and adaptation for cultural tourism. The Panzhihua Education Bureau (2021) has implemented programs introducing Tanjing Ancient Music into school curricula, while the Yunnan Cultural Tourism Journal (2020) has documented its incorporation into cultural tourism initiatives. However, existing literature lacks comprehensive analysis of musical structures and systematic documentation of performance practices. Zhao (2022) identifies significant gaps in scholarly understanding of the music's technical aspects and recommends more systematic approaches to documentation and analysis.

## 2.2 International Perspectives on ICH Preservation

International scholarship on Tanjing Ancient Music remains limited, though comparative studies of similar Chinese ICH forms provide valuable insights. Research on Fujian's Nanyin and Guizhou's Dong Grand Song explores themes of authenticity maintenance and adaptive innovation in global contexts. Taylor's (2016) work on authenticity and adaptation in cultural tourism offers particularly relevant frameworks for understanding the challenges facing Tanjing Ancient Music as it navigates between preservation and commercialization.

The application of intellectual property frameworks to collectively-owned traditional knowledge presents particular challenges that resonate with Tanjing Ancient Music's situation. Anderson (2021) examines how conventional intellectual property systems often fail to protect evolving traditions maintained by communities rather than individuals. This research has significant implications for developing appropriate legal mechanisms for safeguarding Tanjing Ancient Music.

**Table 1: Comparative Research Focus on Chinese ICH**

| Research Aspect        | Domestic Emphasis                                | International Emphasis                                    |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Historical Context     | Lineage documentation and local significance     | Cross-cultural comparison and global significance         |
| Preservation Methods   | Educational integration and governmental support | Digital archiving strategies and community participation  |
| Key Challenges         | Inheritor succession and funding limitations     | Cultural commodification and intellectual property issues |
| Theoretical Frameworks | Cultural preservation and national identity      | Cultural sustainability and human rights approaches       |

## III. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research strategies to provide a comprehensive analysis of Tanjing Ancient Music's preservation status and challenges.

### 3.1 Documentary Analysis

The research began with systematic analysis of existing literature, including academic publications, government reports, and archival materials. This involved comprehensive review of materials from the Sichuan Cultural Heritage Bureau, Panzhihua Cultural Bureau, and academic databases. Particular attention was paid to identifying patterns in preservation efforts, challenges documented over time, and successful intervention strategies.

### 3.2 Field Investigation

Field research was conducted in Yishala Village between March and August 2023, employing ethnographic methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio-visual documentation. The research team interviewed 15 key informants including inheritors, local officials, educators, and community members. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and concerns.

### 3.3 Comparative Case Analysis

The study employed comparative analysis with two well-documented ICH cases: Fujian's Nanyin music and Guizhou's Dong Grand Song. These cases were selected based on their similarities to Tanjing Ancient Music in terms of cultural significance, preservation challenges, and safeguarding approaches. The comparison focused on identifying transferable strategies and potential pitfalls in preservation efforts.

### 3.4 Digital Preservation Assessment

The research included evaluation of existing digital preservation efforts and assessment of potential technological solutions. This involved analysis of available digital resources, assessment of metadata standards, and identification of gaps in current digital preservation strategies.

## **IV. Historical and Cultural Context**

### **4.1 Origins and Development**

Tanjing Ancient Music originated during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when Han Chinese soldiers stationed in the region brought musical traditions from Jiangnan region. These traditions gradually integrated with indigenous Yi musical practices, particularly those associated with religious rituals and community celebrations. The resulting musical form represents what ethnomusicologists term "cultural hybridization" - a creative synthesis of diverse cultural elements that produces new artistic expressions.

The music traditionally served multiple functions within the community: as entertainment during festivals, as accompaniment to religious ceremonies, and as a means of transmitting historical narratives and cultural values. The name "Tanjing" (谈经) literally means "discussing the classics," reflecting the music's role in conveying philosophical and moral teachings through musical performance.

### **4.2 Musical Characteristics**

Tanjing Ancient Music exhibits distinctive musical characteristics that reflect its dual heritage. The instrumentation combines Han Chinese instruments such as the erhu, pipa, and dizi with traditional Yi instruments like the moon guitar and bamboo flute. The repertoire includes both vocal and instrumental pieces, with texts drawing from Yi epic poetry and Han Chinese literary classics.

The musical structure typically follows a suite format, with multiple movements representing different aspects of cultural or natural phenomena. The performance practice emphasizes collective participation rather than individual virtuosity, reflecting the community-based nature of the tradition. Ornamentation techniques show particular influence from Yi vocal traditions, featuring intricate melismatic passages and microtonal inflections.

## **V. Current Preservation Status**

### **5.1 Inheritance System**

The transmission of Tanjing Ancient Music relies on community-based practices supplemented by institutional support. The current inheritance situation presents a mixed picture of both concerning challenges and promising developments. Elderly practitioners form the core of knowledge preservation, with master inheritor Qi Guanglu playing a pivotal role in transcribing oral traditions into written scores since the late 1990s. According to the Sichuan Folk Music Archive (2018), only three master inheritors remain active, all aged over 70 years.

Government cultural departments have provided systematic support since 2005, including instrument acquisition and performance costume design. The Panzhihua Cultural Bureau (2019) established a dedicated safeguarding center that organizes regular training sessions and documentation efforts. However, these institutional efforts face significant challenges in attracting younger participants, particularly as rural-to-urban migration draws potential inheritors away from the community.

### **5.2 Educational Integration**

The incorporation of Tanjing Ancient Music into local school curricula represents a cornerstone preservation strategy. The Pingdi Town Central School has established dedicated music clubs and developed innovative exercise routines based on traditional rhythms. According to the Panzhihua Education Bureau (2021), approximately 300 students across five schools now participate in regular Tanjing Music activities.

The educational integration follows a progressive model, beginning with simplified versions of traditional pieces in primary school and advancing to more complex repertoire in secondary education. This approach has demonstrated effectiveness in engaging younger generations with their cultural heritage, though long-term impact assessment remains limited. Challenges include insufficient specialized teachers and limited instructional materials adapted for modern educational contexts.

### **5.3 Performance Practice and Cultural Tourism**

Contemporary performances occur during cultural festivals and tourism events, with the situational drama "Yi Ah · Yishala" becoming a significant attraction. Visitor numbers during peak seasons have shown consistent growth, reflecting increased cultural tourism interest. According to Sichuan Tourism Statistics (2022), cultural tourism activities featuring Tanjing Ancient Music attracted approximately 50,000 visitors in 2022, representing a 15% increase from the previous year.

The local government's "Five Ones" initiative further institutionalizes support for cultural preservation activities. This program, implemented by the Renhe District Government (2021), provides funding for one annual major performance, one training workshop, one research publication, one digital documentation project, and one international exchange activity specifically dedicated to Tanjing Ancient Music.

## **VI. Critical Challenges**

### **6.1 Inheritor Crisis**

The advanced age of master practitioners and insufficient youth participation present critical challenges to sustainable preservation. Current demographic data indicates that the average age of active practitioners is 68 years, with only 12% of practitioners under 40 years old. Rural-to-urban migration patterns significantly impact knowledge transmission, as younger generations pursue educational and employment opportunities elsewhere. The National Rural Development Report (2022) documents that approximately 65% of youth from ethnic minority communities in Sichuan Province migrate to urban areas for work or education, creating a substantial gap in intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The master-apprentice system, traditionally the primary mode of transmission, faces particular challenges in the contemporary context. The time-intensive nature of training, combined with limited economic incentives, discourages potential young inheritors. Furthermore, the oral transmission method, while historically effective, proves vulnerable to interruption when regular teaching sessions cannot be maintained.

### **6.2 Authenticity and Commercialization Tensions**

The integration of Tanjing Ancient Music into tourism economies creates tensions between economic viability and cultural authenticity. Performance adaptations for tourist audiences risk altering traditional practices and diminishing cultural significance. Research conducted during field investigations identified several concerning trends: abbreviated performance lengths (reduced from traditional 2-3 hours to 30-45 minutes for tourist shows), simplification of complex musical structures, and incorporation of non-traditional elements aimed at enhancing audience appeal.

These adaptations raise fundamental questions about cultural integrity and authenticity. As Taylor (2016) notes, the commodification of cultural heritage often leads to what scholars term "staged authenticity" - performances that prioritize tourist expectations over cultural accuracy. While tourism provides valuable economic support for preservation efforts, it simultaneously threatens the very traditions it aims to promote.

### **6.3 Legal Protection Gaps**

Conventional intellectual property frameworks provide inadequate protection for collectively-owned, evolving traditions like Tanjing Ancient Music. Current Chinese intellectual property law, designed primarily for individual creators and fixed works, struggles to address the unique characteristics of traditional cultural expressions. These include collective ownership, intergenerational development, and fluid rather than fixed forms of expression.

The lack of tailored legal mechanisms leaves cultural heritage vulnerable to misappropriation and unauthorized commercialization. Documented cases include unauthorized sampling of Tanjing Ancient Music in commercial recordings and use of traditional motifs in fashion design without community consultation or benefit-sharing. These incidents highlight the urgent need for legal frameworks that recognize community rights and protect traditional knowledge from exploitation.

## **VII. Comparative Analysis with Other ICH Cases**

### **7.1 Nanyin Music Preservation Model**

Fujian's Nanyin music, recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, offers valuable insights for Tanjing Ancient Music preservation. The Nanyin preservation model emphasizes several key strategies: establishing specialized research institutions, developing systematic educational programs, and creating performance opportunities that maintain artistic integrity while reaching new audiences.

The Fujian Cultural Heritage (2019) documentation reveals that Nanyin's successful preservation relied heavily on academic institutionalization. Music conservatories incorporated Nanyin into their curricula, while research institutes conducted comprehensive documentation and analysis. This approach demonstrates high applicability for Tanjing Ancient Music, particularly regarding academic integration and research-based preservation.

### **7.2 Dong Grand Song Community Model**

The preservation of Guizhou's Dong Grand Song highlights the effectiveness of community-centered approaches. Unlike the institutional focus of Nanyin preservation, Dong Grand Song safeguarding emphasizes community participation and intergenerational transmission within natural cultural contexts. The Guizhou Ethnic Affairs (2020) reports show how community-based festivals, rather than formal performances, serve as primary transmission mechanisms.

This model offers important lessons for strengthening local participation in Tanjing Ancient Music preservation. Particularly relevant are strategies for engaging youth through community events and creating

economic incentives that encourage continued practice within the community context.

*Table 2: Preservation Strategy Comparison*

| Case Study            | Primary Strategy           | Key Strengths                                 | Relevance to Tanjing Ancient Music                   |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Nanyin Music          | Institutional preservation | Academic rigor, systematic documentation      | High applicability for research integration          |
| Dong Grand Song       | Community transmission     | Cultural continuity, grassroots participation | Relevant for strengthening local engagement          |
| Urtiin Duu (Mongolia) | International recognition  | Global awareness, cross-cultural appeal       | Potential for international promotion                |
| Kabuki (Japan)        | Commercial adaptation      | Economic sustainability, audience development | Lessons for balancing authenticity and accessibility |

## VIII. Innovative Preservation Strategies

### 8.1 Enhanced Transmission Systems

Developing multi-generational training programs with appropriate incentives represents a crucial strategy for addressing the inheritor crisis. Based on successful models from other ICH cases, we propose a three-tiered approach:

1. **Youth Engagement Programs:** Establishing school-based clubs and summer camps that introduce Tanjing Ancient Music through interactive and age-appropriate methods. These programs should emphasize the cultural significance and creative aspects of the tradition rather than treating it as historical artifact.
2. **Master-Apprentice Incentive Schemes:** Creating financial and social incentives for both masters and apprentices to participate in sustained training. This could include stipends, public recognition, and performance opportunities that demonstrate the value of acquired skills.
3. **Intergenerational Community Activities:** Organizing regular community events that bring together practitioners of different ages, creating natural learning environments and strengthening social bonds around the tradition.

### 8.2 Digital Preservation Initiatives

Implementing comprehensive audiovisual documentation and digital archiving can address both preservation and access challenges. Specific strategies include:

1. **High-Quality Documentation:** Using current audio and video technology to create detailed records of performances, teaching sessions, and contextual information. This documentation should follow international standards such as those developed by the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives.
2. **Interactive Learning Platforms:** Developing digital resources that allow both community members and external researchers to engage with the tradition. These could include annotated performances, musical transcriptions with audio examples, and virtual reality experiences that recreate traditional performance contexts.
3. **Digital Access Management:** Creating systems that balance open access with cultural protection, ensuring that sensitive cultural content is appropriately protected while still making the tradition accessible to legitimate researchers and community members.

### 8.3 Legal Framework Development

Advocating for sui generis protection mechanisms tailored to traditional cultural expressions requires coordinated action at multiple levels:

1. **Community Rights Recognition:** Developing legal instruments that recognize communities as rights-holders rather than merely stakeholders in their cultural heritage.
2. **Traditional Knowledge Databases:** Creating systematic documentation of traditional knowledge that can serve as evidence in cases of misappropriation or unauthorized use.
3. **International Cooperation:** Working with international organizations such as WIPO to develop cross-border protection mechanisms that address the global nature of cultural heritage exploitation.

#### **8.4 Sustainable Tourism Models**

Creating culturally respectful tourism experiences that benefit local communities requires careful planning and continuous evaluation:

1. **Community-Led Tourism Development:** Ensuring that tourism initiatives are designed and managed by community members rather than external operators.
2. **Cultural Impact Assessment:** Implementing regular assessments of how tourism activities affect the practice and perception of Tanjing Ancient Music within the community.
3. **Value-Added Experiences:** Developing tourism offerings that provide deeper cultural understanding rather than superficial entertainment, such as workshops where visitors can learn basic techniques or understand cultural contexts.

### **IX. Conclusion and Future Directions**

Tanjing Ancient Music represents valuable cultural heritage facing significant preservation challenges. Its sustainable future requires comprehensive strategies addressing transmission gaps, legal protection needs, and balanced tourism development. The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that successful preservation will require integrated approaches that combine community engagement, institutional support, technological innovation, and policy reform.

The research findings highlight several key priorities for future action. First, addressing the inheritor crisis must be the immediate priority, as the loss of master practitioners represents an irreversible diminishment of cultural knowledge. Second, developing appropriate legal frameworks requires urgent attention given increasing commercial pressures on cultural heritage. Third, technological solutions should be pursued not as substitutes for living traditions but as supplements that can enhance accessibility and documentation.

Future research should focus on several underexplored areas. Longitudinal studies tracking the effectiveness of different preservation strategies would provide valuable evidence for policy development. More detailed musicological analysis would enhance understanding of the tradition's artistic qualities and their cultural significance. Finally, comparative studies with international cases could identify additional strategies and potential pitfalls in preservation efforts.

The preservation of Tanjing Ancient Music represents not merely the safeguarding of a musical tradition but the maintenance of cultural diversity and the promotion of sustainable development. By implementing the strategies outlined in this study, stakeholders can ensure that this unique cultural heritage continues to enrich both its home community and the broader cultural landscape.

### **X. Research Limitations**

This study acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and recommendations. The available quantitative data on practitioner demographics and economic impacts remains limited, necessitating reliance on estimates and projections in some analyses. The field research, while comprehensive, focused primarily on one village during a specific time period, potentially missing seasonal variations or long-term trends.

The reliance on secondary sources for comparative analysis necessitates cautious interpretation of findings, as contextual differences between cases may affect the transferability of strategies. Additionally, the study's focus on structural and institutional factors may have underemphasized individual agency and creativity in preservation efforts.

Future research would benefit from more extended ethnographic engagement, including longitudinal studies tracking preservation efforts over time. Quantitative surveys of community attitudes toward preservation and tourism development would provide valuable supplementary data. Finally, collaborative research methodologies that actively involve community members as co-researchers could generate insights that external observation might miss.

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