

Practice studies on the transmission of NiuGe Opera as Chinese intangible cultural heritage in education

Shuanghua Quan, Narongruch Woramitmaitree* and Tawanchai Suanmonta

College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the transmission practices of NiuGe Opera as Chinese intangible cultural heritage in education in Teng County of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region during significant socio-cultural transformations and the decline of traditional apprenticeship systems. It examines how educational settings, community engagement, and intergenerational learning processes contribute to structured school-based instruction and cultural sustainability. Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in schools, cultural centers, local archives, and active troupes between 2024 and 2025, involving five key informants, including community scholars and practitioners. NiuGe Opera is mainly based on genealogical and mentorship-based learning systems. However, due to demographic decline, reduced performance opportunities, and policy limitations, the opera is gradually fading. In response, classroom teaching activities have emerged as an important mechanism for transmitting cultural knowledge, enhancing student interest, and narrowing generational gaps. Nevertheless, insufficient teacher training, the absence of standardized instructional materials, and fragmented preservation policies continue to challenge long-term sustainability. For NiuGe Opera to be renewed, the study recommends strengthened cultural policy support, enhanced collaboration between schools and transmitters, and systematic curriculum integration. These findings demonstrate how formal education can serve as an effective mechanism for protecting local opera traditions in contemporary rural China, thereby contributing to the broader field of heritage education.

Keywords: NiuGe Opera, intangible heritage transmission, educational practice, cultural sustainability, Teng County.

*Corresponding author. Email: narongruch.w@msu.ac.th.

INTRODUCTION

Originating in Teng County, Guangxi Province, NiuGe Opera is an original and important piece of the culture and artistry of the folk opera and NiuGe of Guangxi. It represents a significant form of local folk opera and constitutes a central component of rural cultural life in the region, alongside traditional rural activities such as festivals, cultural ceremonies, and social gatherings in the community. It illustrates the history and culture of the area and embodies the culture and the aesthetics of the local people. It is sung as imitative and expressive of the local dialect, and it is focused around NiuGe style percussion (Sun, 2025; Zhang and Natayakulwong, 2024; Zhu and Suanmonta, 2024). However, over the past two decades,

rapid social and economic transformation has significantly reshaped the cultural landscape of rural Guangxi. Decreasing demand for traditional performances has coincided with rural-to-urban migration and changing patterns of cultural consumption. Many rural area revitalization activities are aimed at integrating modern entertainment forms into local cultural life, and culturally modern entertainment has also seen an uptake. Many of the rural traditional community platforms have been shut down as traditional performance spaces have gradually declined (Sun and Thotham, 2025; Zhang, 2024). Rural modernization has therefore altered the structural environment in which NiuGe Opera once flourished,

reducing opportunities for community-based transmission and informal apprenticeship (Liu and Chuangprakhon, 2024; Wang and Moonsuwan, 2024). As a result, NiuGe Opera increasingly faces the challenge of maintaining relevance within a rapidly modernizing rural society.

The urgency of addressing this situation stems from the fact that NiuGe Opera is more than art. It is a living heritage of historical memory, local identity, and intergenerational knowledge. The opera consists of a tapestry of cultural narratives, performance traditions and styles, symbolic gestures, and dialects of the community that form a heritage that, like all cultural practices, is not replaceable once lost (Fan, 2018; Lajosi, 2024). The fading of the community's traditional practices weakens the collective spirit of the community, and with it a sense of pride, history, and identity. The community is further challenged as many of the aging, highly skilled performers leave the scene, taking with them their unique vocal abilities and performance styles. This generational imbalance has created a structural transmission gap, making sustainable inheritance increasingly uncertain. It is within this context that the opera's continued existence makes education a primary focus (Li, 2024; Yan et al., 2025). The incorporation of NiuGe Opera into the classroom allows educators and cultural advocates to introduce younger generations to the opera's artistic beauty, and structured pedagogical approaches can facilitate systematic cultural engagement and long-term preservation (Feng, 2020; Zhang and Sornyai, 2025).

The intangible cultural heritage of NiuGe Opera may be overlooked in educational backgrounds, despite the borne documentation and policies of the community opera. Although policy frameworks acknowledge its heritage status, practical educational models for systematic transmission remain underdeveloped. Though the educational heritage of NiuGe Opera has been understudied, there is currently no standardized or widely adopted educational model for its transmission. In educational practices, cultural practices and educational community collaborations, there is stagnation (Fu and Choatchamrat, 2024; Weiss et al., 2022). Existing initiatives are often fragmented, short-term, and insufficiently coordinated between schools, cultural institutions, and transmitters. Because of this, all educational practices related to NiuGe Opera need to be assessed to determine the community challenges and unknown opportunities that NiuGe Opera represents to a community that wishes to develop an educational model of NiuGe Opera. A systematic evaluation of these educational and community-based practices is therefore necessary to identify both structural barriers and potential strategies for revitalization (Chen and Theerapan, 2025; Li and Champadaeng, 2025).

Using qualitative research methods, the study examines school programs, cultural training, and intergenerational learning, seeking to understand the partnerships of

educational institutions, local communities, and heritage custodians in the preservation of culture (Fang, 2024; Hipolito, 2024; Mangkhang et al., 2025). This study highlights the importance of guided instruction, culture-based, and experiential learning activities in deepening students' appreciation of traditional arts. The objective of this study is to investigate the practice studies on the transmission of NiuGe Opera as Chinese intangible cultural heritage in education. The research question is, how do educational practices and instructional activities contribute to the transmission of NiuGe Opera as Chinese intangible cultural heritage? This study anticipates that active involvement, heightened cultural sensitivity, and intergenerational sustainability of NiuGe Opera would result from purposeful educational designs. The study aims to inform both theoretical and practical aspects of heritage education in the classroom, the implications of which will be useful to NiuGe Opera's preservation for educators, policy makers, cultural activists, and other heritage practitioners committed to preserving the cultural heritage of China.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research methodologies to analyze how educational practices and teaching activities facilitate the transfer of NiuGe Opera as a form of intangible cultural heritage (Qiu et al., 2024; Yan and Li, 2023; Uluöz, 2020). Since qualitative inquiry captures cultural practices, pedagogy, and community involvement, it was deemed best suited for this research. Fieldwork was conducted in the NiuGe Opera cultural region of Teng County in 2024 and 2025, where the opera remains culturally significant yet faces transmission challenges. It aimed to answer this research objective using a combination of observation, interviews, and document analysis.

Research design

This research adopted a multi-method qualitative research design approach, which included field research, documentation, semi-structured interviewing, and document analysis. Each of these research techniques helped to identify varied aspects of cultural transmission underpinning participants' education in community settings. Field research assisted the researcher in directly observing teaching practices, cultural gatherings, and community rehearsals. Semi-structured interviewing generated insights from educators, transmitters, and community members. Historical, archival, and policy documentation assisted in clarifying the context of contemporary transmission practices, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research design and purpose.

Method	Purpose	Data generated
Field observations	To understand real-time teaching, learning, and performance practices in natural settings	Field notes, performance records, instructional observations
Semi-structured interviews	To explore participant perspectives on transmission, education, and cultural value	Interview transcripts, reflective statements
Document analysis	To contextualize transmission practices historically and institutionally	Archival records, policy documents, teaching materials

Research site

Fieldwork was conducted in multiple locations within Teng County, including school programs, cultural centers, community performance venues, and local archives such as the Teng County Library. These sites were selected because they represent the primary spaces where NiuGe Opera is taught, practiced, performed, and preserved. The diversity of sites provided a holistic view of how teaching and transmission occur across formal and informal educational environments.

Informants

A total of five informants were selected using purposive and criterion-based sampling. They represented different roles in the educational and cultural transmission of NiuGe Opera. The selection criteria ensured that the study captured perspectives from both formal and informal learning systems, as well as community practices, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Profile of informants.

Type	Number	Description	Contribution to the study
Scholar Informants	2	Specialists with knowledge of cultural heritage education and music transmission	Provided theoretical and pedagogical insights
General Informant	1	Community member with direct involvement in local performances and cultural events	Offered practical observations on community transmission
Casual Informants	2	Individuals with informal exposure to everyday NiuGe cultural practices	Provided supplementary descriptive data on lived experiences

Data collection

Field observations

The researcher observed a range of activities, including school-based NiuGe Opera lessons, community rehearsals, cultural training workshops, and public performances. Special attention was given to instructional methods, interactions between learners and transmitters, vocal coaching, stage practices, student engagement, and intergenerational learning. These observations helped document how NiuGe Opera is being transmitted in real-time settings.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five informants, allowing them to share their experiences freely

while ensuring coverage of core topics. Interviews explored teaching approaches, transmission difficulties, learner attitudes, community participation, and perceptions of the opera's cultural significance. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically.

Document and archival analysis

The researcher examined local policy documents, cultural center reports, historical archives, VCD collections, opera troupe records, and school-based instructional materials. This analysis helped contextualize how formal policies and historical developments shaped current transmission practices.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The researcher first conducted open coding of all field notes, interview transcripts, and documentary materials, identifying key phrases and recurring concepts related to transmission practices. These initial codes were then systematically categorized into broader thematic clusters, such as teaching methods, transmission challenges, cultural participation, instructional outcomes, and sustainability issues. Axial coding was subsequently applied to examine relationships between themes, particularly connections between educational settings and transmission effectiveness. Data from different sources were compared to validate patterns. Cross-source comparison enhanced analytic rigor by identifying convergences and discrepancies across interviews, observations, and documents. Triangulation strengthened the reliability of findings by ensuring that interpretations were supported by multiple types of evidence.

Ethical considerations

All participants voluntarily agreed to share information, and their identities remain anonymous. The researcher obtained permission for observations, documented cultural practices respectfully, and ensured accuracy in reporting. Ethical procedures were followed to honor community values and protect informant confidentiality.

RESULTS

The findings derive from interviews, field observations, and document analysis conducted in Teng County. The results are structured into four major areas: the historical development of transmission practices, genealogical transmitter networks, educational practices in schools, and the current status of transmission.

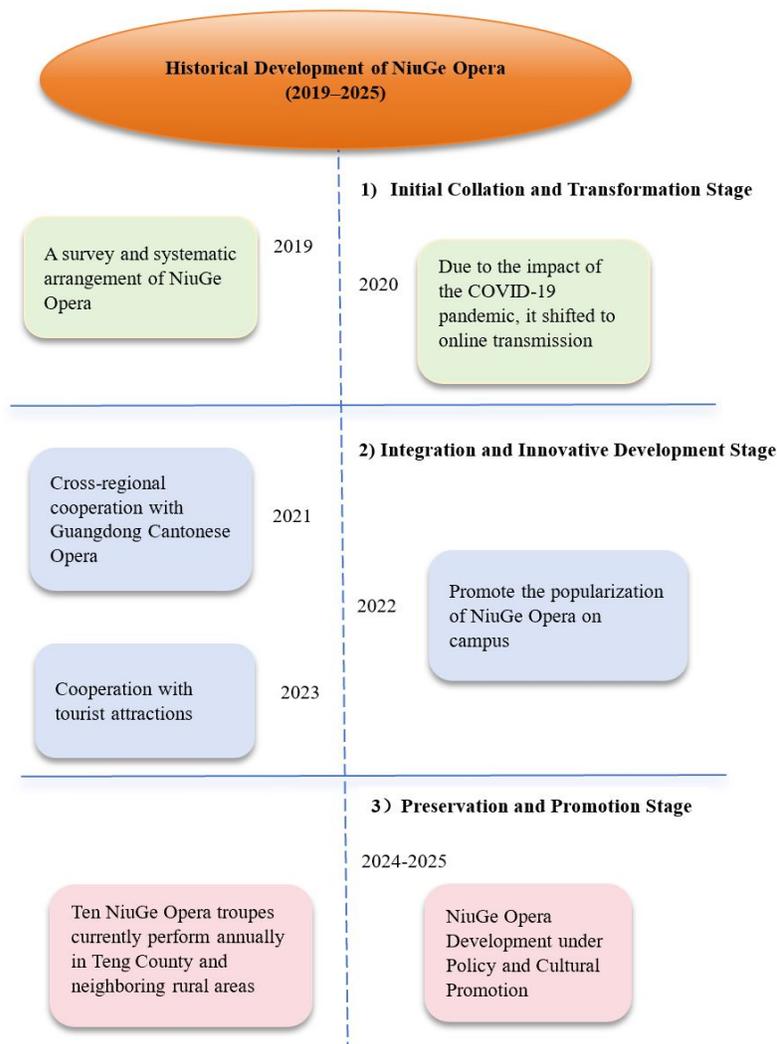


Figure 1. Historical Development of NiuGe Opera (2019–2025).

Historical development of transmission practices

The historical development of NiuGe Opera between 2019 and 2025 reveals a gradual transformation from informal community-based transmission to more structured and educationally oriented forms. This evolution is visually represented in Figure 1, which outlines the three primary stages shaping the opera's development: the Initial Collation and Transformation Stage (2019–2020), the Integration and Innovative Development Stage (2021–2023), and the Preservation and Promotion Stage (2024–2025). Each stage reflects changes in the cultural environment, the involvement of local institutions, and the emergence of educational initiatives.

Figure 1 not only presents a chronological timeline but also illustrates a structural shift in transmission logic, from spontaneous community preservation to policy-supported and education-oriented revitalization. The staged development indicates increasing institutional intervention,

suggesting that transmission has become progressively formalized rather than relying solely on traditional village performance networks.

Genealogical structure and transmitter networks

Transmission of NiuGe Opera has historically depended on lineage-based systems of learning, where knowledge is passed between senior and junior performers through long-term apprenticeship. The structure of these relationships is depicted in Figure 2, which provides a relationship diagram of transmitter personnel showing how knowledge flows across individuals and how teaching responsibilities are distributed in the community. Informants reported that these relationships form the cultural backbone of NiuGe Opera transmission and continue to influence how educational activities are organized today.

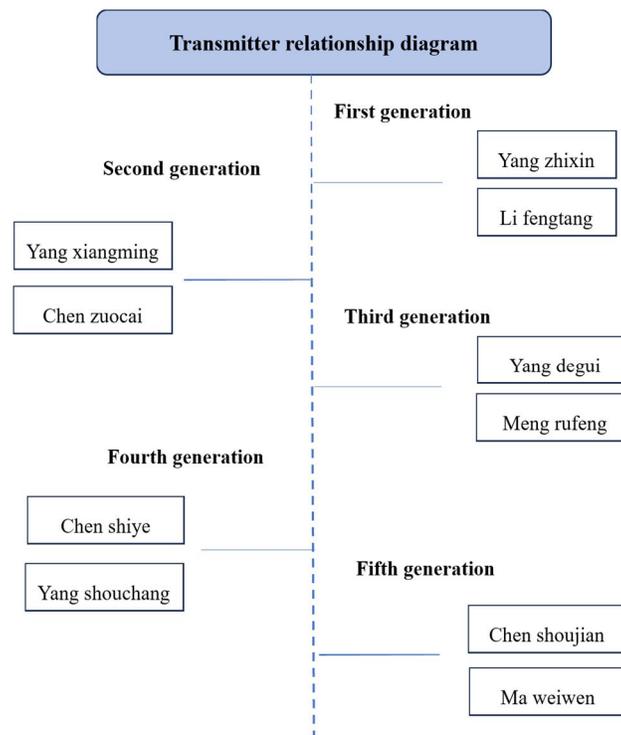


Figure 2. Relationship diagram of NiuGe Opera transmitter personnel.

Figure 2 highlights the vertical structure of inheritance and reveals that transmission authority remains concentrated within a limited number of recognized inheritors. This concentration indicates both continuity and vulnerability: while lineage connections remain intact, the narrowing transmitter base intensifies the risk of generational discontinuity.

Further detail is provided in Figure 3, which presents the genealogy of NiuGe Opera transmission across multiple generations. This genealogy illustrates how transmission traditionally followed family lines as well as mentorship networks that connected performers from different villages and troupes. Interviews revealed that although this genealogical system remains symbolically significant, it is

increasingly challenged by aging populations, the decline of apprenticeship, and decreasing opportunities for young learners to engage with traditional masters.

expressive movement. This demonstrates the increasing importance of educational institutions as providers of new transmission practices.

藤县牛歌戏传承

藤县牛歌戏传承人谱系图(截至2024年5月)

代	姓名	性别	民族	学历	学习年限	传承关系
第一代	杨寿昌	男	汉	私塾	1905—1963	家传
第二代	杨德明	男	汉	私塾	1922—1985	家传
第三代	杨德才	男	汉	初中	1954—1990	家传
第四代	梁如凤	男	汉	高中	1939—2003	家传
第五代	梁寿昌	男	汉	初中	1942—2008	家传
	马智文	男	汉	高中	1988	师徒

传承人谱

主要传承人 (群体)

马智文,男,现年11岁,第五代传承人,出生于藤县藤州镇。自1986年进入牛歌戏班跟班学习牛歌戏,很快就掌握了牛歌戏演唱的技巧。他的表演深受当地民间爱好者的喜欢。马智文于2009年5月被确定为自治区级牛歌戏传承人。

梁寿昌,男,现年62岁,第五代传承人,出生于藤县藤州镇。十六岁开始进入村里戏班跟班学习藤县牛歌戏。从藤县牛歌戏表演事业的团长、知名度高,于2009年5月被确定为自治区级牛歌戏代表性传承人。

Figure 3. Genealogy of the transmission of the NiuGe Opera in Teng County.

Figure 3 demonstrates that while five generations of transmitters are documented, the number of active inheritors in recent generations is comparatively small. This pattern signals a demographic imbalance within the transmission chain and reinforces the need for supplementary educational mechanisms to sustain long-term continuity.

Based on field data, three major transmission modes were identified in the community: family transmission, mentorship transmission, and natural transmission. These modes, while effective in preserving tradition, are insufficient to meet current transmission needs due to demographic and social changes. As a result, educational institutions are beginning to supplement these modes by providing structured learning opportunities for younger audiences.

Educational practices in schools

The incorporation of NiuGe Opera into educational institutions represents an emerging strategy for contemporary transmission. During fieldwork in Teng County, several local schools were observed implementing NiuGe Opera-related instructional activities. One of these activities is illustrated in Figure 4. The figure shows a classroom setting where students were taught basic patterns of singing, rhythmic structures, and



Figure 4. NiuGe Opera teaching activity in schools. Source: Teng County Federation of Literary and Art Circles (2024).

Figure 4 indicates a transition from informal apprenticeship to structured pedagogical delivery within classroom environments. The use of multimedia presentation tools and organized instruction suggests that transmission is becoming systematized, although it remains dependent on collaboration between teachers and cultural transmitters.

The students' enthusiasm and curiosity for the NiuGe Opera, particularly its cultural and performing aspects, were observed by teachers during interviews. In hands-on artistic practice, teachers noted that school-related activities helped close the gap between traditional opera and contemporary youth culture. They added that multidisciplinary integration of cultural knowledge into activities enriched the learning experience.

However, teachers also pointed out difficulties. For example, teachers reported that they did not have enough training in the traditional practices of opera teaching and were thus dependent on visiting transmitters for demonstrations. Teachers further noted that schools lacked basic NiuGe Opera teaching materials, making integration into school activities more difficult.

These findings suggest that while schools provide an accessible platform for transmission, the sustainability of such programs depends on systematic teacher training, curriculum development, and resource allocation. Without institutional capacity-building, school-based transmission risks remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Data collected from students indicated that although learning about NiuGe Opera was engaging and culturally meaningful, longer-term programs were necessary to sustain interest. Informants suggested organizing extracurricular groups and providing performance opportunities to maintain motivation and deepen experiential learning.

Current status of transmission (2019–2025)

The current status of NiuGe Opera transmission is characterized by coexisting progress and challenges. This situation is visually summarized in Figure 5, which

presents the main factors shaping the transmission environment between 2019 and 2025, namely troupe distribution, performance frequency, talent succession, innovation bottlenecks, and protection mechanisms.

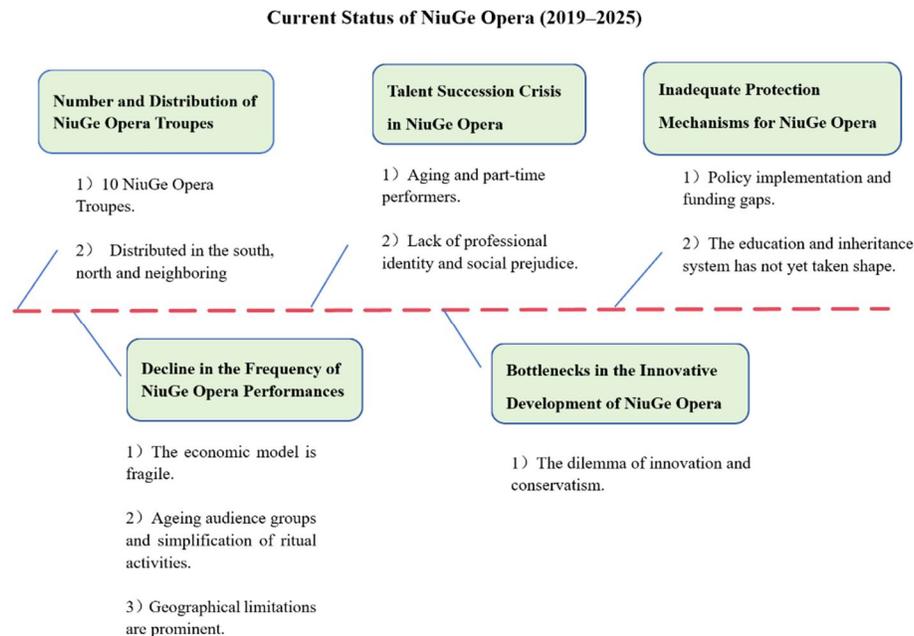


Figure 5. Current status of NiuGe Opera (2019–2025).

Figure 5 synthesizes structural pressures affecting transmission. It visually demonstrates that demographic, economic, and institutional factors intersect to shape the sustainability of NiuGe Opera.

Number and distribution of troupes

Field research and interviews with local cultural authorities indicated that although NiuGe Opera once boasted more than 270 active troupes during its peak in the 1980s, archival records and local cultural office data collected in 2024 confirm that approximately ten active folk troupes remain today. These troupes are distributed across southern Teng County and neighboring areas, forming a limited but persistent performance network. The drastic reduction in troupe numbers reflects structural contraction rather than short-term fluctuation. While stabilization has occurred in recent years, the diminished network reduces performance visibility and weakens routine community exposure to the art form.

Decline in frequency of performances

Interviews with troupe members revealed that

performance frequency has declined significantly, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic limitations were a major factor. Earnings from performances remain minimal. Younger performers often seek better-paying employment in urban areas. In addition, rural population decline has reduced traditional festival and celebration events, resulting in fewer community-based transmission opportunities. This decline in performance frequency directly affects experiential learning environments, as reduced stage practice limits both audience engagement and apprentice participation.

Talent succession crisis

The most serious issue identified is the talent succession crisis. Most active performers are middle-aged or elderly. Very few young people are willing to pursue long-term training. Informants explained that low income, limited professional recognition, and social prejudice against operatic careers discourage youth participation. Schools have begun to fill this gap, but educational programs remain limited in scope and duration. The succession crisis demonstrates that informal lineage systems alone are insufficient under contemporary socioeconomic conditions. Educational intervention, therefore, becomes

not merely supplementary but structurally necessary.

Bottlenecks in innovation

Attempts to modernize NiuGe Opera to attract young audiences have encountered resistance from traditionalists who fear that innovation may compromise artistic authenticity. Meanwhile, younger audiences describe traditional singing styles as slow or outdated. This tension reflects a broader preservation-versus-modernization dilemma. Sustainable development requires balanced innovation that maintains stylistic integrity while enhancing cultural accessibility.

Inadequate protection mechanisms

Although NiuGe Opera has been designated as intangible cultural heritage, effective protection mechanisms remain limited. Funding for troupes is insufficient. Training programs are irregular. Integration into formal education has not yet been standardized. Informants stated that without continued policy support and systematic educational inclusion, the opera's long-term survival remains uncertain. This finding underscores that heritage designation alone does not guarantee sustainability. Institutional coordination between cultural policy and educational practice is essential to convert symbolic recognition into functional preservation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows how the transmission of NiuGe Opera in Teng County has begun its first stage of transformation. Traditional lineage-based systems are gradually being supplemented by formal educational structures, with school practices assuming an increasingly central role. This transformation aligns with previous and emerging scholarship on the institutional preservation of intangible cultural heritage. For instance, Fang (2024) claims that educational institutions create a niche for heritage revitalization, whereas Hipolito (2024) explains that intergenerational cultural continuity is strengthened through school-based programs. This study supports those claims by demonstrating that, amid the decline of rural apprenticeship systems, classroom teaching introduces students to the performative aspects, vocal techniques, and cultural significance of NiuGe Opera.

While the findings correspond with existing scholarship, they also reveal important tensions. For example, Li (2024) advocates immersive opera integration within modern aesthetic education. However, this study identifies the absence of standardized curricula, insufficient teacher training, and limited instructional resources in Teng County schools. Furthermore, the limited innovative development observed in this study contrasts with Zhang's (2024)

optimistic view of modernization as a driver of creative renewal in traditional opera. Interview data reflect cultural conservatism and cautious attitudes toward innovation, resulting in a fragile balance between artistic authenticity and contemporary relevance.

In addition, the genealogical analysis deepens understanding of structural challenges in transmission. Fu and Choatchamrat (2024) described similar discontinuities in Jinghe Opera due to the absence of younger apprentices. The present study corroborates the existence of a "talent succession crisis," consistent with findings in Siping Opera (Sun, 2025). These parallels suggest that demographic pressures are not isolated to NiuGe Opera but reflect a broader structural issue within traditional Chinese operatic forms. At the same time, this study highlights how educational institutions in Teng County are attempting to mitigate these gaps, although such efforts remain fragmented and insufficiently systematized.

Beyond institutional education, sustainable transmission requires broader structural coordination. Field observations, interviews, and archival materials indicate that community participation, cultural policy support, and multi-stakeholder collaboration are equally essential. Weiss et al. (2022) emphasize the need for collective participatory frameworks involving communities, state actors, and institutions. The current findings reinforce this perspective, demonstrating that transmission cannot rely exclusively on schools or troupes. Rather, long-term sustainability depends on integrated collaboration.

This study concludes that the survival of NiuGe Opera depends on a hybrid transmission model integrating traditional apprenticeship, community engagement, and structured educational innovation. Schools have emerged as significant transmission spaces; however, their impact remains limited without long-term curricula, systematic teacher training, and sustained policy support. Future revitalization will require stronger collaboration between schools and experienced transmitters, the development of pedagogically appropriate materials, and more coherent cultural protection strategies.

Future research should focus on three key areas. First, comparative studies between Teng County and other regions could clarify effective educational models for traditional opera transmission. Second, longitudinal research tracking student learning outcomes would provide evidence of the sustained impact of school-based heritage programs. Third, further investigation into balancing pedagogical adaptation with cultural authenticity could strengthen integration between traditional and contemporary teaching methods.

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