

Preserving Zhuang folk songs through education and community transmission in Xincheng County, Guangxi, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the preservation and transmission of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County, Guangxi, China, with particular emphasis on the complementary roles of education and community transmission. The study employed a qualitative research design grounded in ethnomusicology. Data were collected from 10 purposively selected key informants through semi-structured interviews, field observation, document analysis, and audiovisual documentation. The findings revealed three interconnected dimensions of preservation. First, emergency preservation involved collecting and collating ancient songbooks, transcribing and translating traditional materials, digitising and archiving them, and protecting institutional heritage. Second, living transmission was sustained through school-based education, community and rural participation, and intergenerational mentorship. Schools provided structured learning in repertoire, language, cultural knowledge, and singing skills, while communities offered authentic performance contexts in which learners could observe, participate, improvise, and understand the cultural meanings of the songs. Third, contemporary integration and innovation included creating new folk songs, cultural tourism, interdisciplinary artistic cooperation, and online–offline communication. These practices expanded opportunities for younger generations and wider audiences to engage with Zhuang folk songs while retaining core musical and cultural characteristics. The study concludes that sustainable preservation depends on a complementary process of school learning, community participation, intergenerational mentorship, and continued cultural practice. This integrated approach provides a culturally grounded model for maintaining Zhuang folk songs as living heritage amid ongoing social and cultural change.

Keywords: Zhuang folk songs, music education, community transmission, intangible cultural heritage, Xincheng County, Guangxi.

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INTRODUCTION

Zhuang folk songs constitute an important form of intangible cultural heritage in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, where music, language, ritual practice, local memory, and community identity are closely interconnected. As the largest ethnic minority group in China, the Zhuang represent not only a distinctive musical culture but also a key medium for transmitting social values, historical narratives, linguistic knowledge, and collective identity across generations. In Guangxi, these traditions have long been embedded in everyday life, agricultural activities, courtship, weddings, funerals,

festivals, and communal gatherings, making folk songs an essential component of the region's cultural ecology (Chen et al., 2024). From an ethnomusicological perspective, the continued vitality of these songs depends not only on preserving musical texts and melodies, but also on maintaining the social environments, educational processes, and community relationships through which musical knowledge is learned, practiced, and reproduced (Chen and Theerapan, 2025). Xincheng County, located in the Hongshui River basin of central Guangxi, represents an important area for the study of Zhuang folk-song

traditions. Its geographical and linguistic position has contributed to the development of distinctive musical practices that reflect characteristics of both northern and southern Zhuang song traditions. Local repertoires include ceremonial songs such as Huan, love songs such as Bi, and narrative songs such as Lun, many of which employ the distinctive Zhuang “waist-foot rhyme” structure (Lin and Liu, 2021; Tzeng and Huang, 2017). Their musical expression is also closely related to the local environment, particularly the karst landscape, which has influenced performance practices, vocal projection, and localized singing techniques. These characteristics demonstrate that Xincheng Zhuang folk songs are not merely musical compositions but culturally embedded practices shaped by language, environment, ritual, and communal interaction (Guangguo et al., 2024).

Despite their cultural significance, Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County are increasingly affected by rapid urbanization, population mobility, language shift, and changing patterns of cultural participation. Traditional song-gathering spaces have declined, and younger generations have fewer opportunities to participate in the social contexts in which folk songs were historically learned and performed (Chen et al., 2025). At the same time, many senior singers and recognized inheritors are aging, while younger people often have limited proficiency in the Zhuang language and less experience with improvised antiphonal singing. These changes have weakened the intergenerational transmission chain and reduced opportunities for young people to acquire the linguistic, musical, and cultural competencies required for sustained participation in the tradition (Yang et al., 2025). In response to these challenges, education has become an increasingly important mechanism for preserving and transmitting Zhuang folk songs. School-based programs have introduced Zhuang folk-song learning into primary and secondary education, creating opportunities for students to encounter traditional repertoires in formal educational settings. Such educational transmission can provide systematic access to repertoire, language, performance techniques, and cultural knowledge, particularly for children who may no longer experience these traditions regularly within the family or village environment. However, educational transmission is most effective when it remains connected to living cultural practices. If folk songs are taught solely as classroom content, separated from community performers, local festivals, ritual contexts, and social interaction, there is a risk that transmission becomes standardized and detached from the cultural meanings that sustain the tradition (Cao and Pantasri, 2025; Yang, 2022).

For this reason, community transmission remains equally important. Village song fairs, local cultural activities, master-apprentice relationships, family networks, and community-based performance groups continue to provide social spaces where folk songs can be learned through observation, participation, repetition, and

interaction. These environments allow learners to acquire not only melodies and lyrics but also performance conventions, linguistic nuances, improvisational skills, social etiquette, and contextual meanings. Community transmission therefore maintains the relationship between people, song, and context, ensuring that Zhuang folk songs remain a living cultural practice rather than becoming static cultural objects (Li and Maneewattana, 2025; Zhuang and Pan, 2022). Current preservation practices in Xincheng County have also expanded beyond traditional oral transmission. Local cultural institutions have undertaken documentation, repertoire collection, archival preservation, training activities, and public cultural programs. Digital archiving has strengthened the preservation of song texts, recordings, and performance materials, while public cultural activities have increased awareness of Zhuang musical heritage. Nevertheless, archival preservation alone cannot ensure continuity. Musical traditions remain sustainable only when people continue to sing, teach, learn, perform, and reinterpret them within meaningful social settings (Chen and Sensai, 2024; Gong et al., 2024).

Existing scholarship on Zhuang folk songs has approached the subject from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including musicology, anthropology, linguistics, folklore, cultural studies, and ethnomusicology. These studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of musical forms, lyrical structures, festival contexts, linguistic features, and cultural meanings (Silva, 2024). However, research on Xincheng County remains comparatively limited, particularly regarding how educational institutions and community-based transmission can work together to sustain local folk-song practices in contemporary society. This gap is important because preservation cannot rely exclusively on institutional documentation, nor can it depend solely on informal community practice. A more integrated approach is required (Fan et al., 2025; Wang and Fei, 2010). Accordingly, this study examines the preservation and transmission of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County with particular attention to the complementary roles of education and community-based transmission. It seeks to document the current condition of local folk-song practices, analyze their distinctive musical and cultural characteristics, and identify practical approaches for strengthening sustainable transmission. Particular emphasis is placed on school-based learning, community participation, the cultivation of younger successors, and the continuing role of local inheritors as cultural knowledge holders. By examining how educational structures and community environments can work together, this study aims to contribute to a culturally grounded model for sustaining Zhuang folk songs as living musical heritage (Liu and Theerapan, 2024; Sang et al., 2025).

Ultimately, preserving Xincheng Zhuang folk songs requires more than conserving repertoire. It requires the continuation of relationships among language, music,

people, place, and cultural practice. Education can provide systematic opportunities for younger generations to acquire knowledge and skills, while community transmission can maintain the social contexts, cultural meanings, and participatory practices that keep the songs alive. The integration of these two dimensions offers a practical foundation for strengthening intergenerational continuity and ensuring that Zhuang folk songs remain an active and meaningful component of cultural life in Xincheng County.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in ethnomusicology to investigate the preservation and transmission of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. The study focused particularly on the complementary roles of education and community transmission in sustaining Zhuang folk songs as living musical heritage. Attention was given to school-based learning, community participation, intergenerational transmission, preservation practices, and contemporary forms of cultural dissemination. This design was appropriate because Zhuang folk songs are not only musical forms but also social and cultural practices closely connected with language, local customs, performance contexts, and community identity.

Key informants

The study selected 10 key informants through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, experience, cultural roles, and direct involvement in preserving and transmitting Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County. The informants included 4 experienced folk-song singers, inheritors, and practitioners; 2 cultural administrators and cultural-center personnel; 2 scholars specializing in Zhuang culture and local history; and 2 community representatives and local cultural participants.

The selection criteria required informants to have substantial knowledge or practical experience in at least one area related to Zhuang folk songs, including traditional repertoire and singing techniques, cultural heritage preservation, school- or community-based transmission, local cultural research, organization of folk-song activities, or intergenerational transmission. The study prioritized individuals directly involved in folk-song performance, teaching, preservation, research, cultural administration, or community cultural activities.

The diversity of the 10 informants enabled the study to examine Zhuang folk-song preservation from practitioner, institutional, academic, and community perspectives. Their

contributions covered traditional repertoire, singing practices, Zhuang language and lyrical forms, educational transmission, community participation, successor cultivation, preservation activities, and contemporary dissemination.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observation, document analysis, and audiovisual documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information on the history, current condition, preservation, teaching, performance, and transmission of Zhuang folk songs. The flexible interview format allowed informants to explain their experiences and perspectives in detail while ensuring that similar themes were explored across participants.

1. Field observations were conducted in schools, villages, communities, folk-song festivals, training activities, and public cultural events. In educational settings, attention was given to singing instruction, lyric learning, cultural interpretation, extracurricular activities, and the involvement of experienced local singers in school programs. The findings indicate that school-based transmission includes classroom teaching, practical cultural activities, performance opportunities, and talent development.

2. Community observations focused on song fairs, village celebrations, cultural events, and intergenerational performance activities. These settings provided evidence of how younger participants learned through observation, imitation, interaction, and direct participation with experienced singers. Community-based transmission was therefore examined as a complementary process to formal school education.

3. Documentary materials included ancient songbooks, local publications, institutional records, heritage documentation, photographs, audio recordings, video recordings, digital archives, and materials related to folk-song activities. These sources were used to support and cross-check information obtained through interviews and field observations.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis combined with ethnomusicological interpretation. The researchers reviewed interview data, field notes, documents, and audiovisual materials repeatedly to identify recurring ideas, practices, and relationships relevant to the preservation and transmission of Zhuang folk songs.

The analysis generated three major thematic categories: (1) emergency preservation, (2) living heritage through education and community transmission, and (3) integration and innovation. Particular attention focused on the interaction among school learning, community participation, and intergenerational mentorship. These interconnected processes formed the basis for interpreting how Zhuang folk songs are sustained in contemporary Xincheng County.

Trustworthiness

The study's trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation. Information from interviews was compared with field observations, documentary materials, and audiovisual evidence. Data from different categories of informants were also compared to identify recurring patterns and areas of consistency.

RESULTS

Emergency preservation

The findings revealed that the preservation of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County has become an urgent cultural task due to the rapid disappearance of traditional knowledge, aging folk singers, and the deterioration of historical song materials. Many elderly singers possess extensive knowledge of ancient Zhuang folk songs, traditional performance rituals, local customs, and orally transmitted melodies. However, as these knowledge holders gradually pass away, much of this cultural knowledge is at risk of disappearing. At the same time, handwritten songbooks preserved in local households are vulnerable to fire, moisture, mold, physical deterioration, and loss. Oral melodies and performance techniques are similarly threatened by the decline of regular practice and intergenerational transmission. Field investigation showed that local preservation efforts have gradually developed from spontaneous grassroots collection into a more systematic framework involving community collectors, cultural organizations, government agencies, and heritage institutions. This framework can be summarized as a process of grassroots collection, professional organization, digital archiving, and institutional protection. These interconnected measures have enabled local folk-song materials to be documented, classified, and preserved while also providing a foundation for subsequent transmission, education, research, and cultural revitalization.

Collection and collation of ancient songbooks

The findings indicated that the collection and collation of

ancient songbooks have played a central role in safeguarding endangered Zhuang folk-song traditions in Xincheng County. Beginning in the late twentieth century, local cultural workers and folk-art organizations recognized that many traditional songbooks and related documents were at risk of disappearing. As a result, systematic collection activities were carried out across rural communities throughout the county. Fieldwork found that collection teams visited all 131 administrative villages and communities in Xincheng County to locate, document, and preserve traditional materials. Their work included the collection of handwritten folk-song books, ritual texts, local manuscripts, folk literature, and other documents associated with Zhuang cultural practices. Over several decades, nearly one thousand ancient documents were collected. Most of these materials were subsequently organized and deposited in museums, libraries, cultural centers, and intangible cultural heritage protection institutions at the autonomous-region, municipal, and county levels.

The findings also revealed that document preservation was not limited to physical collection. Considerable effort was devoted to transcription, translation, proofreading, annotation, and classification. Ancient Zhuang characters presented particular difficulties because of variations in local writing practices, dialect forms, and individual handwriting styles. In response, preservation teams adopted an approach that sought to retain the original linguistic and cultural characteristics while simultaneously making the materials more accessible for research and education. The collected songbooks were therefore organized in ways that preserved local vocabulary, dialect features, poetic structures, and traditional meanings. Ancient Zhuang characters were translated into modern Chinese where necessary, and lyrics were supplemented with explanations and contextual notes. In addition, performance situations, customs, ritual functions, and local narratives associated with particular songs were documented. This process transformed fragmented handwritten and oral materials into more systematic and usable cultural records.

A significant outcome of this work was the compilation and organization of large collections of Zhuang folk-song materials. These publications brought together lyrics, performance contexts, local customs, and historical information relating to different song genres. Collections focusing on Zhuang elegies, antiphonal songs, narrative songs, and festive songs have expanded the documented repertoire of Xincheng folk songs and provided important sources for academic study and cultural education. The findings further showed that document collation contributed directly to the formal recognition of local folk-song traditions as intangible cultural heritage. By systematically organizing lyrics, performance practices, and cultural contexts, scholars strengthened institutional recognition of several folk-song traditions and incorporated them into official heritage-protection mechanisms. This

created an important relationship among documentation, heritage recognition, and cultural dissemination.

Digital preservation and archival construction

The findings showed that digital preservation has become another important component of the safeguarding system for Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, digital technology has gradually been introduced into cultural heritage documentation, allowing local preservation work to expand beyond handwritten records and conventional paper archives. A major development occurred in 2006, when a county-wide survey of intangible cultural heritage resources was launched. This initiative marked a transition from primarily spontaneous grassroots collection toward a more institutionalized model coordinated by government agencies, cultural institutions, heritage centers, local artists, and community volunteers. Digital recording became an essential component of this process.

The survey covered all 131 administrative villages and communities in Xincheng County. Research teams systematically documented folk-song resources using audio recording, video recording, photography, interviews, field notes, and archival registration. This approach enabled the preservation of not only lyrics and written texts but also musical elements such as melody, rhythm, vocal style, performance technique, pronunciation, and improvisational practice. The findings also showed that researchers systematically recorded visual and contextual information. Researchers documented traditional costumes, ritual objects, performance spaces, community ceremonies, song festivals, and other cultural environments associated with folk-song performance. Oral-history interviews recorded personal transmission experiences, local explanations of song origins, performance customs, and knowledge associated with traditional singing practices.

This large-scale documentation produced more than 10,000 photographs, over 100 hours of video recordings, and more than 50 hours of audio recordings. These materials formed the basis of a multidimensional digital archive that integrates written documents, oral histories, performance recordings, musical materials, images, and contextual cultural information. The construction of the digital archive was accompanied by the establishment of a more systematic intangible cultural heritage classification structure. The findings showed that 1,218 cultural heritage resources were identified across categories including folk literature, folk music, folk dance, traditional crafts, and folk customs. Following classification, expert evaluation, and institutional review, a four-level heritage-list system was developed at national, autonomous-region, municipal, and county levels.

Within this system, several traditions directly associated with Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng were formally

recognized. These included traditions relating to festive songs, elegies, and local song festivals. Their inclusion in official intangible cultural heritage lists helped clarify the scope of protection, institutional responsibilities, transmission requirements, and policy support associated with each tradition. The digital preservation system has addressed several limitations associated with traditional paper-based preservation. Physical songbooks are often difficult to store over long periods, vulnerable to environmental damage, and inconvenient for repeated consultation. Digital copies reduce these risks while making materials easier to classify, retrieve, compare, and use for educational and research purposes.

Living heritage through education and community transmission

The findings revealed that the long-term preservation of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County depends not only on documentation and archival conservation but also on continued active singing, learning, and participation in schools and communities. Emergency preservation provides an essential foundation, but the survival of the tradition ultimately requires a transition from static preservation to living transmission. In this process, folk songs must remain connected with the people, social environments, and cultural occasions through which they acquire meaning. Field evidence shows that Xincheng County has developed a multi-level transmission system centered on three interrelated dimensions: school-based education, community and rural participation, and cultivating new generations of inheritors. These dimensions create opportunities for Zhuang folk songs to move between formal education and everyday cultural life. Schools provide structured learning environments, communities maintain culturally meaningful performance contexts, and experienced singers transmit specialized knowledge and performance skills to younger generations. Together, these mechanisms help rebuild the relationship among people, songs, and cultural contexts, which is central to the sustainable preservation of Zhuang folk songs.

Education and campus transmission

The findings indicated that education has become one of the most important mechanisms for strengthening the intergenerational transmission of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County. Younger generations are increasingly separated from the traditional family and village environments where they once learned folk songs through everyday participation. Schools therefore provide an important alternative space where children and adolescents can systematically encounter local songs, language, singing techniques, and cultural knowledge.

Xincheng County has gradually developed a school-based transmission model integrating classroom teaching, practical cultural activities, and talent development. Schools introduce folk songs through singing instruction, lyric study, cultural interpretation, performance activities, and extracurricular training. This model allows students to acquire basic knowledge of Zhuang folk songs while simultaneously developing performance skills and awareness of local cultural heritage.

A significant feature of campus transmission is the participation of experienced local singers and intangible cultural heritage practitioners in educational activities. Local cultural institutions have invited experienced performers to provide specialized instruction in singing, lyric composition, pronunciation, and traditional performance techniques. Schools including the County Experimental Primary School, Chengguan Town Ethnic Primary School, and County Ethnic Middle School have served as important locations for this work. The participation of local singers ensures that students are exposed not only to written teaching materials but also to traditional oral and demonstration-based learning methods. The findings further showed that educational transmission is reinforced through performance opportunities. Students participate in folk-song festivals, competitions, cultural exhibitions, and school-based

celebrations, enabling them to transform classroom knowledge into practical performance experience. Such activities strengthen singing skills while creating opportunities for students to experience Zhuang culture as a participatory rather than purely academic subject.

In recent years, more than 20 folk-song training activities have been conducted in schools, reaching more than 5,000 young participants. Some students have developed sufficient singing ability to become potential future transmitters of the tradition. Schools have also integrated folk songs with broader campus cultural activities, including the March 3rd Ethnic Culture Festival, folk-song competitions, thematic exhibitions, song-and-dance performances, and traditional cultural experiences. These activities extend transmission beyond formal music lessons and position folk songs within broader cultural education. The results suggest that campus transmission contributes to preservation in three main ways. First, it creates regular and systematic opportunities for young people to encounter Zhuang folk songs. Second, it connects musical learning with local language, history, customs, and identity. Third, it establishes a foundation for identifying and developing young learners who may later become active singers, community performers, or cultural inheritors (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Zhuang folk-song instruction in schools.

Community and rural transmission

The findings revealed that communities and villages remain essential cultural spaces for the living transmission of Zhuang folk songs. Traditional song fairs historically provided opportunities for people to gather, exchange emotions, participate in antiphonal singing, and strengthen social relationships through music. These events integrated songs with festivals, customs, social interaction, and everyday life, creating an environment in which musical knowledge could be naturally transmitted across generations. Modernization and changes in rural life have weakened many of these traditional performance environments. As some song fairs declined and community participation decreased, folk songs became increasingly separated from everyday social activities. To address this situation, local communities and cultural institutions have attempted to reconstruct performance contexts by organizing folk-song concerts, competitions, duet-singing activities, and festival events in villages and public cultural spaces.

Field findings showed that successful community transmission depends heavily on local participation. Rather than relying solely on government-organized cultural events, several communities have adopted models in which public institutions and local enterprises provide logistical or financial support while villagers remain the primary performers and organizers. This approach allows communities to maintain ownership of the cultural activity and helps avoid transforming folk songs into performances designed exclusively for external audiences. One representative community practice involved villagers organizing song and dance performances during the

traditional March 3rd festival. Local folk-song teams performed both traditional and newly composed songs, while older and younger singers participated together in antiphonal singing. The participation of multiple generations created opportunities for younger singers to observe experienced performers, practice local-language singing, and acquire performance conventions within a genuine social environment.

The reconstruction of song-fair activities also extends beyond traditional festival dates. Contemporary folk-song events held during the Spring Festival and other public celebrations have created additional opportunities for community participation. One event in 2025 brought together elderly, middle-aged, young, and child performers who alternated between traditional repertoire and newly composed songs reflecting contemporary life. This multi-generational participation demonstrates that living transmission can remain culturally grounded while adapting to changing social environments. The findings therefore indicate that community transmission plays a different but complementary role to school education. While schools provide structured instruction, communities provide the social and cultural environments in which songs acquire meaning. Village festivals and local gatherings enable learners to experience how folk songs function in communication, celebration, social interaction, and collective memory. Community-based preservation also supports the continued use of the Zhuang language. Because many folk songs depend on dialectal pronunciation, metaphor, rhythmic language, and improvised verbal interaction, participation in local song events provides an important environment for developing linguistic and musical competence (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Zhuang singing folk songs during the folk-song festival.

Cultivation of successors and intergenerational transmission

The findings showed that the aging of experienced folk singers represents one of the most serious challenges to the continuity of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County. Survey data indicate that some intangible cultural heritage projects have only one or two active transmitters remaining. Among projects associated with Zhuang folk songs, many experienced singers are over 60, and some are over 80. This creates an urgent need to transfer musical, linguistic, and cultural knowledge to younger generations. To address this challenge, Xincheng County has developed an approach that combines the protection of existing inheritors with the cultivation of younger successors. A four-level system of recognized intangible cultural heritage transmitters has been established at national, autonomous-region, municipal, and county levels. At present, the county has 30 recognized intangible cultural heritage transmitters and representative practitioners, including 12 associated with Zhuang folk songs. Support measures include subsidies, participation in training and performance activities, and encouragement for experienced singers to teach younger learners.

The findings revealed that mentor–mentee transmission remains particularly important because many aspects of Zhuang folk-song performance cannot be adequately learned from written materials alone. Pronunciation, vocal production, melodic ornamentation, improvisation, stylistic

interpretation, and performance etiquette are traditionally acquired through direct observation, imitation, correction, and repeated practice with experienced singers. Training activities therefore combine lectures, practical singing sessions, community performances, and direct mentorship. Collected songbooks and digital archives are also made available as supplementary learning resources. Experienced performers explain the historical background, melodic structures, lyrical characteristics, and performance practices of folk songs, while younger singers apply this knowledge through village and community performances.

An important finding is that successor cultivation involves more than developing singing ability. Effective transmission requires younger learners to understand the cultural meanings, social functions, language, customs, and values associated with the repertoire. This broader understanding enables learners to become not simply performers but cultural transmitters capable of sustaining the tradition within changing social conditions. The emerging transmission structure can be described as a multi-generational model in which senior singers provide cultural knowledge and specialized skills, middle-aged and young adults assume increasingly active transmission roles, and children and adolescents participate through school and community activities. This structure links formal education, informal mentorship, and community participation.

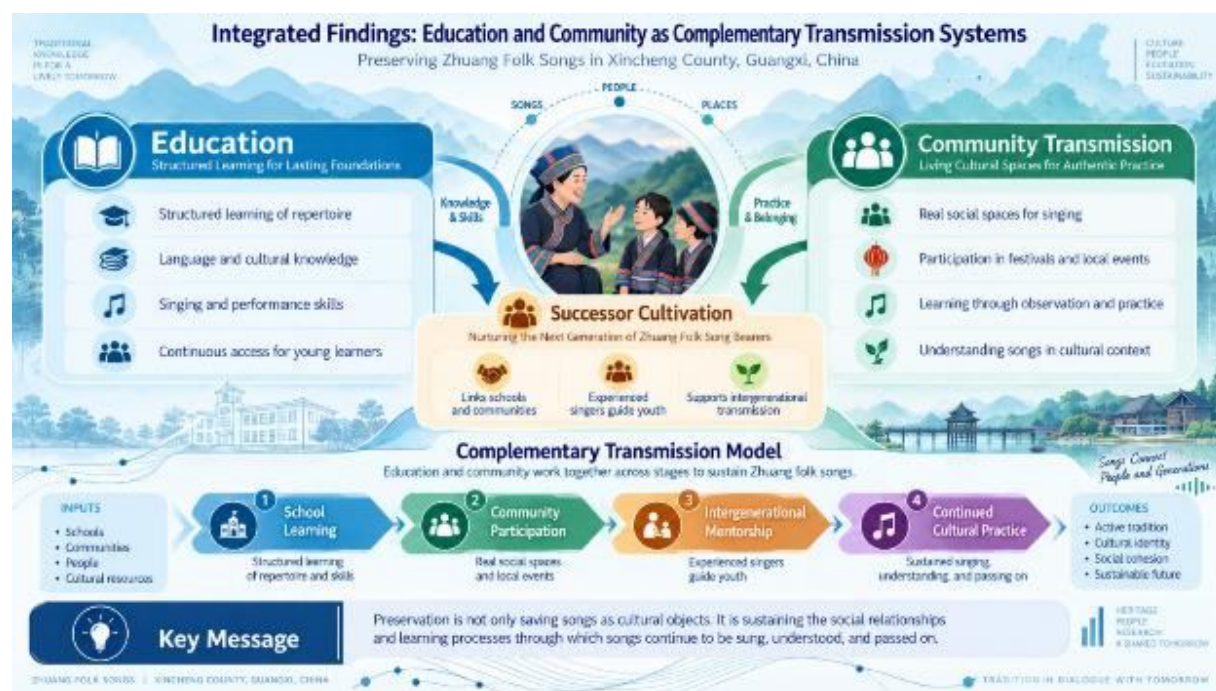


Figure 3. Education and community as complementary transmission systems.

Figure 3 illustrates the integrated model for preserving Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County through the complementary roles of education and community transmission. School-based education provides structured learning in repertoire, language, cultural knowledge, and singing skills, while community transmission offers authentic social settings in which learners can participate in festivals, observe experienced singers, practice performance, and understand the cultural meanings of the songs. Successor cultivation links these two domains by enabling experienced singers to guide younger generations through intergenerational mentorship.

Integration and innovation

The findings revealed that the preservation of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County extends beyond documentation

and intergenerational transmission. It also involves adapting the tradition to contemporary cultural life through creative transformation, cultural tourism, interdisciplinary collaboration, and modern communication. These practices do not replace education and community transmission; rather, they expand the environments in which younger generations can encounter, learn, perform, and reinterpret Zhuang folk songs. Field evidence showed that innovation in Xincheng County generally follows the principle of maintaining core cultural and musical characteristics while introducing contemporary forms of expression. This has created new opportunities for Zhuang folk songs to remain socially visible and culturally meaningful, especially among younger audiences. The findings indicate four major pathways: the creation of new folk songs, the integration of folk songs with tourism, cross-disciplinary artistic collaboration, and online–offline communication (Table 1).

Table 1. Integration and innovation in the preservation and transmission of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County.

Section	Main approach	Key findings	Contribution to preservation and transmission
Creation of New Folk Songs	Adapting traditional Zhuang folk songs to contemporary musical and social contexts	New songs retain traditional melodic patterns, rhythms, dialect features, and lyrical styles while incorporating popular music, modern ethnic instrumentation, and contemporary themes. Competitions and public performances encourage folk artists, musicians, community members, and young people to create and perform new repertoire.	New songs provide accessible entry points for younger learners and help connect traditional musical identity with contemporary life, supporting youth participation and continuity of the tradition.
Integration of Culture and Tourism	Incorporating folk songs into heritage sites, festivals, tourism activities, and local cultural events	Folk-song performances are presented at historical sites, festivals, study tours, and cultural events, allowing residents and visitors to experience Zhuang music in culturally meaningful settings. These activities create additional performance opportunities for community singers and younger performers.	Cultural tourism functions as an informal educational environment by linking folk songs with local history, customs, costume, language, and place. It supports living transmission when local communities remain active participants.
Cross-Disciplinary Artistic Cooperation	Combining Zhuang folk songs with dance, drama, instrumental music, popular music, and modern stage performance	Traditional folk songs are incorporated into larger artistic productions such as <i>Zhizhou</i> and into folk-song medleys using modern dance, bilingual performance, and contemporary stage techniques. Core melodic and rhythmic features are retained during adaptation.	Cross-disciplinary cooperation broadens participation and creates additional learning environments, especially for younger audiences and performers, while encouraging awareness of which traditional musical and cultural elements should be preserved.

Table 1. Continues.

Modern Communication	Developing integrated online and offline dissemination	Short videos, livestreaming, social media, and official media channels expand access to performances, lyrics, cultural stories, and folk-song activities. Offline transmission continues through schools, villages, cultural centers, libraries, heritage institutions, and community events.	Digital media expands access and supports repeated learning of pronunciation, melody, gestures, and performance styles, while face-to-face activities maintain direct interaction and living oral transmission. Together they form an online–offline transmission system.
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DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the preservation of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County cannot depend on a single safeguarding strategy. Instead, sustainable transmission requires the integration of documentation, education, community participation, intergenerational mentorship, and contemporary forms of cultural adaptation. This supports the central argument of the study that Zhuang folk songs should be understood not simply as repertoires to be preserved, but as living cultural practices sustained through relationships among people, language, place, performance, and social context (Yu, 2021). The findings therefore extend preservation beyond the conservation of musical texts toward the maintenance of the cultural environments in which songs continue to be learned, performed, and understood.

One important finding concerns the role of emergency preservation. The collection of ancient songbooks, transcription of lyrics, audiovisual documentation, and construction of digital archives have created an important foundation for safeguarding endangered repertoire. These activities are particularly necessary because many traditional singers are elderly and handwritten materials remain vulnerable to physical deterioration and loss. The preservation system developed in Xincheng County has gradually moved from spontaneous grassroots collection toward more systematic institutional documentation (Seeyo et al., 2023; Tang, 2021). This transformation has enabled traditional materials to be organized, classified, and made available for research and education. However, the findings also show that archival preservation alone is insufficient. A song may survive as a document or recording while losing its social function if it is no longer practiced within living communities.

Education therefore emerges as a major mechanism for transforming preservation into active transmission. School-based programs provide younger generations with systematic access to repertoire, Zhuang language, performance skills, and cultural knowledge (Chang and Seekhunlio, 2024). Through classroom teaching, practical activities, festivals, and performances, students are given repeated opportunities to engage with folk songs. More importantly, the involvement of experienced local singers

in school activities helps connect formal education with traditional oral transmission. This is significant because many aspects of Zhuang folk-song performance, including pronunciation, vocal production, melodic ornamentation, improvisation, and stylistic interpretation, cannot be effectively transmitted through written materials alone (Gong and Wang, 2023; Law and Ho, 2009).

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that school education becomes most meaningful when it remains connected with community life. Community transmission provides the social and cultural contexts in which learners can understand why, when, where, and with whom folk songs are performed. Song fairs, village festivals, local celebrations, and community gatherings create authentic settings for observation, interaction, and participation (Cao et al., 2025). In such contexts, younger singers encounter not only musical structures but also linguistic expression, social etiquette, collective memory, and the cultural meanings embedded in performance. This suggests that schools and communities should not be treated as separate transmission systems. Instead, they perform complementary functions: schools provide structured learning, while communities provide contextualized practice (Southcott and Lee, 2013; Yang et al., 2025).

Cultivating successors further strengthens this relationship. The aging of experienced singers and the limited number of younger inheritors remain serious concerns for the continuity of Zhuang folk songs. The findings show that mentor–mentee transmission remains central because it allows specialized musical and cultural knowledge to be transferred directly from experienced singers to younger learners. Such transmission involves much more than teaching songs. It includes performance etiquette, interpretation, local history, language use, improvisational strategies, and cultural values. As a result, successor cultivation bridges formal education, community participation, and traditional oral learning (Jiang, 2022; Luan Ng and Beng Lee, 2020).

Another important finding is that contemporary innovation can support preservation when it remains culturally grounded. The creation of new folk songs, cultural tourism, interdisciplinary artistic cooperation, and digital communication have expanded opportunities for younger generations and wider audiences to encounter

Zhuang folk songs. New compositions retain recognizable melodic, rhythmic, linguistic, and lyrical characteristics while introducing contemporary themes and arrangements (Hou and Seekhunlio, 2023; Zhao, 2023). Cultural tourism provides additional performance spaces, while interdisciplinary collaboration brings folk songs into theatre, dance, and modern stage production. Digital and social-media communication further expands access beyond traditional geographical boundaries (Zhuang et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the preservation of Zhuang folk songs in Xincheng County through the complementary roles of education and community transmission. The findings reveal that sustainable preservation depends on the interaction of three broad dimensions: emergency preservation, living transmission, and contemporary integration and innovation.

Emergency preservation safeguards endangered songbooks, recordings, and cultural knowledge through collection, documentation, and digital archiving. Living transmission ensures that folk songs continue to be learned and performed through schools, community activities, and intergenerational mentorship. Contemporary innovation extends the tradition into new cultural environments through new song creation, tourism, interdisciplinary performance, and modern media. Among these dimensions, education and community transmission form the central mechanism of continuity. Schools provide structured opportunities for young people to acquire repertoire, language, musical skills, and cultural knowledge, while communities provide the social environments in which those skills gain cultural meaning. Experienced singers connect these two domains by transmitting specialized knowledge and guiding younger generations.

The study therefore concludes that the preservation of Zhuang folk songs should not be limited to protecting musical materials as heritage objects. More importantly, it should sustain the processes through which people continue to learn, sing, interpret, and share the songs. A complementary model of education, community participation, intergenerational mentorship, and continued cultural practice provides a practical pathway for maintaining Zhuang folk songs as living heritage in Xincheng County. By integrating formal education with community-based cultural practice, Xincheng County demonstrates how local musical traditions can remain culturally rooted while responding to contemporary social change. This approach provides a useful model for the sustainable preservation of other oral musical traditions facing similar challenges of aging inheritors, declining performance contexts, language change, and modernization.

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