

# Preserving and transforming Mulian Opera: Philosophy, evolution, and contemporary relevance



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**Abstract** Mulian Opera, an integral component of China's intangible cultural heritage, embody the region's historical, cultural, and artistic traditions. This study explores their evolution, preservation, and transmission by examining thematic development, vocal techniques, and instrumental accompaniment across historical periods. Originating as work chants during the Sui and Tang dynasties, these songs gradually transformed into sophisticated artistic expressions during the Ming, Qing, and Republican eras. In contemporary times, the integration of Western musical elements and innovative performance approaches has expanded their appeal while maintaining their traditional essence. This research highlights the transition from oral transmission to formal documentation, the role of educational and governmental initiatives in safeguarding these traditions, and the significance of cross-cultural collaborations in their ongoing vitality. Furthermore, the development of singing styles and instrumental arrangements, from natural vocalization and traditional ensembles to modern adaptations, underscores the versatility of the Mulian Opera. Analyzing their historical continuity and contemporary relevance provides insights into sustainable strategies for preserving Mulian Opera as a dynamic cultural heritage, ensuring their intergenerational transmission while fostering innovation and global engagement.

**Keywords:** chinese opera, cultural preservation, cultural transmission, traditional chinese art

## 1. Introduction

Mulian opera is a traditional Chinese opera that is popular in Henan, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Sichuan and other places and is deeply loved by the audience. To achieve the purpose of promoting and educating ideas, the story of Mulian saving his mother is the main purpose of the narrative. The performance form of the Mulian Opera integrates opera, martial arts, acrobatics, magic, science and art, and stunts, which is unique in terms of viewing and entertainment (Fan, 2020).

It still maintains its original appearance in terms of performance form, performance characteristics, and development trends and has important value for the study of ancient Chinese opera culture. On the basis of the original meaning, Mulian Opera is also called "the living fossil of the drama world" and "the ancestor of all operas." It exemplifies the creative essence of the populace, encapsulating their traditions, sentiments, and narratives over the ages (Li et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2024).

During the Ming and Qing eras, Mulian Opera thrived, achieving national acclaim through folk performers' endeavors and the literati's refinement. It epitomized the cultural richness of the era, encompassing topics of love, quotidian existence, regional traditions, and historical occurrences. Their oral transmission and evolution over generations guaranteed their survival, rendering them artifacts of Henan's cultural legacy (Zurndorfer, 1983; Han, 2020; Wang & Ma, 2022). Nevertheless, despite their historical and cultural importance, the Mulian Opera encountered considerable obstacles in contemporary times.

Generational disconnection jeopardizes the preservation and transmission of Mulian opera, as younger listeners gravitate toward contemporary and global cultural forms. The elderly demographic of traditional singers and practitioners, the main guardians of these oral traditions, intensifies the threat of losing this cultural heritage (Pu et al., 2023). Moreover, urbanization and modernization have reduced the importance of folk music in daily life, while the entry of foreign cultural influences has eclipsed its attractiveness to modern listeners (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Yang et al., 2015). These elements cumulatively jeopardize the continuity of Mulian Opera, eliciting apprehensions regarding their relevance and survival in an increasingly dynamic environment.

Despite these limitations, the Mulian Opera has exhibited notable adaptations over time. After the cultural evolution, Western musical influences introduced instruments such as the keyboard, enhancing the accompaniment of melodies and expanding their appeal. Contemporary methods, such as presenting opera pieces as musicals and incorporating them into educational programs, have rejuvenated interest in this cultural legacy (Fu et al., 2020; Jian et al., 2022).

After experiencing a decline and then a revival, the Mulian Opera demonstrated its strong artistic vitality. It not only is frequently performed at folk art festivals, ancestor worship, and traditional Lunar New Year events but also collaborates with emerging artists to enhance the contemporary significance of this traditional art and connects historical and modern contexts.

Therefore, protecting and spreading Mulian Opera is crucial to inheriting its artistic and historical significance and enhancing the understanding of traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, these plays are also a microcosm of time,



reflecting the political, economic and cultural development of Henan and its residents (Liu, 2018; He and Lu, 2024). By recording and analyzing their development process and contemporary status, we can maintain their contemporary significance and ensure that they are passed on as a vibrant component of China's intangible cultural heritage.

This study examines the preservation and transmission of philosophy in the Mulian Opera, emphasizing their evolution, adaptation, and contemporary relevance. It aims to address essential inquiries regarding the evolution of these melodies, the reasons shaping their development, and the tactics required for their preservation and promotion. This study aims to enhance the sustainable preservation of Mulian Opera, assuring their continued vitality and significance within China's cultural environment.

### 1.1. Research question

How can the Mulian Opera be preserved and transmitted, considering its historical evolution, cultural adaptation, and modern relevance?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Origin and Historical Development of Mulian Opera

The unique socioeconomic and cultural background of Mulian Opera has profoundly influenced the historical development of Yangzhou folk songs. The origins of these melodies can be traced back to ancient times, highlighting the influence of labor, daily life and cultural traditions on them. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, social, cultural and economic development became increasingly prosperous, and the enrichment of material life led to people's pursuit of a spiritual life. Bianwen developed rapidly during the Tang Dynasty. Bianwen basically followed folk narrative poems from the Han Dynasty to the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The speaking part mostly used prose or four-six structures, which also laid the foundation for the structural characteristics of Chinese rap music later. Over the centuries, Mulian Opera has continued to develop in the Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, reflecting changes in the social and cultural environment (Xuelai, 2023; He et al, 2021).

### 2.2. Characteristics of Mulian opera Performance

Mulian opera displays unique vocal traits shaped by the area's natural surroundings, cultural context, and linguistic attributes, which merge the gentleness of the Jiangnan region with the clarity of northern tones and significantly influence the singing style. Initial performance depends on innate vocal methods, with vocalists employing genuine voices to convey vibrant, lucid, and emotionally resonant songs (Li et al., 2021; Pu et al., 2023). The vocal technique embodies simplicity and directness, resonating with the populace's quotidian experiences and sentiments.

### 2.3. Types and Applications of Mulian Opera

Mulian opera includes many styles, such as minor tunes, labor songs and rice planting songs, reflecting the social economy and cultural environment at that time. Its music is divided into two main categories:

1) Folk songs: Mulian Opera did not use a fixed tune at first but mostly used local folk minor tunes. Every time the artist performed in a place, he needed to perform according to the tunes popular with the local people and the artist's own qualities. Therefore, the tunes used are complex and diverse and are also known as "hundreds of tunes". Later, Huagu Opera was introduced to Nanyue, Qingfeng, Puyang and other places, absorbing folk songs and minor tunes popular in Anhui, Hunan, Hubei, Shanxi, Shandong and other places. The performance form usually involves two or three people holding gongs and drums while singing and accompanying (Zhang & Liu, 2020; Zhou & Zuo, 2020). It was popular for a time. Because it was mostly performed in the form of singing and dancing, it was similar to the performance program of Nanyue Mulian Opera. To unify the standard, the artists sang with the Huagu tune as the main singing style. Today, the Henan Nanyue Mulian Opera still preserves the gong and drum classics inherited from the Huagu Opera (Wang, 2020; Wang, 2017).

2) Dapingdiao: Dapingdiao emerged in northern Henan in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The so-called "Dapingdiao", also known as "Pingdiao", "Dayoubang", and "Dabangxi", is mostly accompanied by jujube wood bangzi and is named after this. It belongs to the Bangzi tuning system. Dapingdiao is widely popular in Henan, Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, Anhui and other places because of its unique singing and performance style. It is also called the "Five Provinces and Eight Prefectures" (Li, 2021; Sun, 2020).

After 2015, to promote southern music Mulian Opera in Henan and other areas outside Henan, the singing of Henan Opera was added. The singing of Henan Opera is four or five degrees higher than that of Dapingdiao, and the musical structure is roughly the same as that of Dapingdiao. According to the oral interview of Zhang Zhanliang, the inheritor of China's national intangible cultural heritage, although the southern music Mulian Opera is defined as Dapingdiao, according to its performance plot, roles, audience preferences, and the actors' own conditions, it will also adopt singing, such as Henan Zhuizi and Quju, but the performance content and stage movements are the same (Tang, 2021).

#### 2.4. Significance in the sociocultural context

The Mulian Opera encapsulates the region's political, economic, and cultural history. These songs offer significant insights into individuals' customs, lives, and emotional states, providing a lens into the socioeconomic realities of many historical epochs. The integration of multiple musical styles, including folk songs and Yu opera infused with Henan characteristics, illustrates the versatility of the Mulian Opera in accommodating various cultural influences. This amalgamation underscores their tenacity and significance as lasting emblems of Henan's regional musical heritage (Lee & Wong, 2017; Wang et al., 2022).

#### 2.5. Challenges and preservation initiatives

Despite their cultural importance, Mulian Opera encounters several problems. The modernization of agricultural practices, urbanization, and the impact of foreign cultures have reduced their traditional functions and significance. The aging population of practitioners presents a substantial risk to the oral transmission of these tunes (Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Jian & Nicolas, 2021 ; Jian, 2022). Initiatives to safeguard Mulian Opera have intensified, especially following their designation as intangible cultural treasures. Extensive preservation and recording initiatives and integration into educational curricula and public presentations have been crucial in preserving their heritage. The incorporation of Yu Opera and other folk songs into educational curricula and cultural festivals underscores the importance of merging traditional music with modern living (Liu et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2018).

#### 2.6. Research Theory

Ethnomusicology research theory provides a robust framework for examining the preservation and transmission of Yangzhou folk songs via cultural, historical, and musical perspectives. Researchers may capture oral traditions, performance practices, and community viewpoints via fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews. The musical study elucidates the particular features of Yangzhou folk songs, whereas comparison studies underscore their geographical uniqueness. Ethnomusicology investigates the interaction between oral and written traditions, the significance of folk songs in articulating cultural identity, and their adaptation to contemporary and global settings (Tang, 2021; Morgenstern, 2018). By examining these dimensions and promoting community-oriented preservation strategies, ethnomusicology affirms that the Mulian Opera is recognized as a dynamic cultural expression that connects tradition and modernity, facilitating their sustainable transmission and significance in contemporary society.

### 3. Method

This research employs ethnomusic and qualitative approaches to examine the maintenance and transmission of philosophy in Mulian Opera. The technique examines the historical development, cultural adaptability, and contemporary significance of the Mulian Opera while investigating effective measures for their preservation and transmission.

#### 3.1. Ethnomusological fieldwork

Fieldwork is the foundation of this research, enabling direct interaction with the traditions and practitioners of Henan folk music. The interviews and observations were conducted between June and December 2024 and involved 3 scholars, 3 professional performers in different generations, and 150 audiences.

##### 3.1.1. Participant Observation

The researcher will visit Mulian Opera performances, cultural festivals, and rehearsals to examine the contemporary processes of performance and transmission.

##### 3.1.2. Interviews and questionnaires

Semistructured interviews will be carried out with a varied cohort of stakeholders, including local opera troupes, local cultural authorities, and educators, to record their experiences, attitudes, and practices, as well as three scholars of Chinese traditional opera and three Mulian opera performers separated by different generations. Moreover, 150 audience participant questionnaires were distributed.

##### 3.1.3. Documentation

Audio and video recordings of live performances, workshops, and interviews will be gathered to preserve and examine the melodic, linguistic, and performative attributes of the Mulian Opera.

#### 3.2. Historical and Cultural Analysis

This study examines the historical evolution of the Mulian Opera and its cultural importance.

### 3.2.1. Archival Research

Historical documents, music anthologies, and scholarly texts will be analyzed to track their development from the Sui Dynasty to the present.

### 3.2.2. Cultural contextualization

This research examines the impact of socioeconomic transformations, cultural interactions, and historical occurrences on the evolution and adaptation of the Mulian Opera.

### 3.3. Analysis of Qualitative Data

The qualitative data from interviews, observations, questionnaires and recordings will undergo thematic coding analysis to discern patterns, themes, and insights. This method will guarantee a comprehensive grasp of Mulian Operas' sociocultural, historical, and musical aspects.

All qualitative materials—interview transcripts, field-notes, questionnaire responses, and audio/video recordings—will be subjected to an inductive thematic coding process. First, two independent researchers will conduct open coding on a trial subset of data to develop an initial codebook. Intercoder reliability will be assessed via Cohen's  $\kappa$  (target  $\geq 0.80$ ); discrepancies will be discussed and resolved until consensus is reached and the codebook refined. Next, the finalized codebook is applied across the full dataset through focused coding to identify salient patterns, themes, and subthemes.

To bolster validity, we employ data triangulation (compared across interviews, observations, and recordings), methodological triangulation (cross-checking thematic findings against questionnaire data), and participant validation (member-checking key thematic interpretations with a sample of Mulian Opera practitioners). An audit trail documenting all coding decisions, codebook revisions, and analytic memos will further ensure transparency and dependability. This rigorous approach will yield a nuanced, trustworthy understanding of Mulian Opera's sociocultural, historical, and musical dimensions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Evolution of the subject matter of the Mulian Opera

The history of Yangzhou folk songs can be divided into four main stages, and the evolution and literary preservation and dissemination methods of each stage are unique.

#### 4.1.1. Origin and initial development (Sui Dynasty to Tang Dynasty)

During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, social culture and economic development became increasingly prosperous, and the enrichment of material life led to people's pursuit of a spiritual life. Bianwen developed rapidly during the Tang Dynasty. Bianwen basically followed folk narrative poems from the Han Dynasty to the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The speaking part mostly used prose or four-six structures, which also laid the foundation for the structural characteristics of Chinese rap music later.

According to the existing Bianwen related to "Mulian Saves His Mother", there are two forms: one contains ideas such as promoting cause and effect, persuading good deeds and filial piety; the other is close to the grassroots masses, providing entertainment for people during work, and has become a folk and secular rap music form. The Tang Dynasty Dunhuang scroll "Da Mulian Rescues His Mother from the Underworld" is one of the earliest existing storytelling books known to date. The story tells the story of Mulian saving his mother after going through all kinds of dangers. The whole text focuses on promoting ideas such as cause and effect and filial piety.

The oral characteristics highlight its function as a tool for cultural philosophy. Since there are no written records or musical scores, ballads rely on collective memory and improvisation to maintain the emotions and narratives of working people. This stage laid the foundation for the cultural continuation of the Mulian Opera.

#### 4.1.2. Economic prosperity and diversification (Song and Yuan eras)

During the Song and Yuan dynasties, industry and commerce developed rapidly, and the power of the citizen class became increasingly strong. In terms of music culture, music forms such as singing, drum lyrics, various palace tunes, dramas, and southern dramas emerged, accompanied by performance forms such as acrobatics, martial arts, and business riddles. Music forms such as storytelling music, song and dance music, and dramas are closely integrated with the folk, which has promoted the folkization trend of music performance art.

The brothels and theatres were the main performance venues for artists. According to this entry in "Dongjing Menghualu", we can obtain the following information. First, we can observe the prosperity of music, art and culture in the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty at that time, Bianliang (now Kaifeng, Henan). Among the several theatres, there were

more than 50 brothels, which could accommodate thousands of spectators; second, the service objects of the music culture in the Northern Song Dynasty gradually shifted from the court to the people and from serving the ruling class to serving the general public; third, we can understand the cross-regional characteristics of the music, that is, it no longer tends to develop in a single region but rather cross-regional music and cultural exchange, forming a richer, mass, social and secular music form.

#### 4.1.3. Stage of transformation and integration (from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to the Republic of China)

The Ming and Qing Dynasties were important periods in the development of Chinese opera music. Agricultural production was further restored and developed, handicrafts gradually developed, and many rural people flowed to cities, which promoted the exchange of folk music and urban culture. The literati of this period occupied a major position in artistic creation, and music cultures such as rap and opera quickly emerged in cities. Folk music culture spread rapidly, resulting in "convergence of the north and the south".

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, Yangzhou folk songs experienced major social and cultural changes. The new voices of Western music and China's rapid urbanization brought new problems and opportunities. They were on the verge of extinction but adapted to new influences and produced innovative adaptations of new and old styles. During this period, some scholars and cultural figures made achievements in collecting and preserving Mulian Opera. They worked hard to record these cultural treasures and pass them down from generation to generation. However, this stage not only emphasized the intervention of the above scholars in the written preservation of oral traditions, as written texts created a stable foundation for these stories to adapt to the new social environment.

#### 4.1.4 Contemporary inheritance and innovation (New China-now)

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the protection of the Mulian Opera was highly valued as part of the "protection of intangible cultural heritage". In the 1950s, Mulian Opera began to collect and record on a large scale, collecting a large number of traditional ballads. The organization and promotion of these works were completed mainly by cultural departments and professional research institutions. Today, it has been revived through education, performance, and adaptation. Local art groups and schools have incorporated these folk songs into cultural programs to help pass them on to the younger generation. New interpretations have attracted a wider audience and kept these folk songs alive in contemporary society, including the adaptation of traditional tunes into dramas and musicals. In recent years, the continuous rise of cultural confidence and intangible heritage protection has also injected new vitality into Mulian Opera. Mulian opera concerts, folk art festivals, and cooperation projects with young artists have incorporated modern elements while retaining traditional characteristics (Table 1).

**Table 1** Development of the Mulian Opera.

Period	Key Features	Significance
Origins and Initial Development (Sui-Tang Dynasties)	Folk tunes like huagu diao from daily life and labor.	Oral transmission preserved cultural emotions and narratives and laid the groundwork for Mulian Opera music.
Economic Prosperity and Diversification (Song-Yuan Dynasties)	The emergence of diverse ballads Dapingdiao and the "Xiaodiao" style.	Promoted regional culture and identity; spread nationwide through cultural exchanges.
Stages of Change and Integration (Ming-Qing-Republican Period)	Western influences and urbanization led to innovative adaptations; scholars documented musics.	Preserved oral traditions through scholarly efforts; facilitated adaptation to modern contexts.
Contemporary Heritage and Innovation (PRC China-Present)	Large-scale preservation projects, integration into education, and modern adaptations (e.g., musicals, festivals).	Revitalized operas with modern elements, strengthened intangible heritage protection and broadened audience appeal.

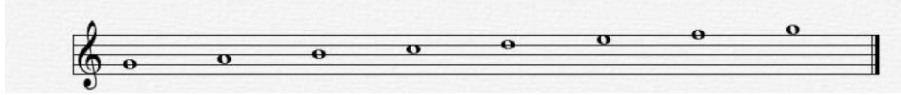
## 4.2. Evolution of the Artistic Form of the Mulian Opera

### 4.2.1. Evolution of the Singing Style

Mulian Opera primarily incorporates local folk tunes, characterized by a natural and unrestrained singing style. These spontaneous vocal techniques emerge organically from labor and daily life, emphasizing emotional authenticity and functional expression. Over time, the Mulian Opera absorbed popular folk melodies from Anhui, Hunan, Hubei, Shanxi, and Shandong, among other regions. Traditional performances typically feature two or three performers playing gongs and drums while singing. Eventually, Huagu tuning became the dominant singing style. Shaped by local cultural and environmental influences, the Mulian Opera has developed into a distinctive form of Chinese folk music.

During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Dapingdiao emerged in northern Henan. Also known as Pingdiao, Dayoubang, or Dabang Opera, this style derives its name from the jujube wood bangzi (clapper) commonly used for accompaniment. As a part of the bangzi tuning system, Dapingdiao is performed primarily via Dabensheng (chest voice),

with occasional use of Erbensheng (falsetto). The high-pitched Donglu Ping style uses predominantly C major, occasionally incorporating D major. It follows the seven-tone Zheng mode, with Qingjiao and Biangong as characteristic notes, producing a vigorous, high-pitched, and forceful vocal delivery. Moreover, the Xilu Ping style, which is mainly the C major with occasional use of the B major, follows the same modal system but emphasizes Bianzhi and Biangong, resulting in a louder and more resonant sound. The commonly used modal scale of the Mulian Opera is Qingyue G *Zhi* mode, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The G *Zhi* Mode of Mulian Opera.

#### 4.2.2. Evolution of Stage Form

With the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Mulian Opera underwent professionalization and began to transition into formal performance. Systematic training improved vocal techniques, while the incorporation of both traditional and modern instruments diversified musical accompaniment.

To restore the early performance traditions of Nanyue Mulian Opera, a significant revival took place on February 7, 2023. This initiative, led by the Henan Provincial Department of Culture, the Nanle County Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, and heritage practitioners, featured a reconstructed performance incorporating Luogujing (percussion).

The performance forms of the Nanyue Mulian Opera can be broadly classified into three categories:

Marching performances – These are mobile, processional performances featuring live music and ritualistic elements.

Traditional stage performances – Performed on temporary or fixed stages, preserving historical performance techniques.

Contemporary staged productions – Adapted for modern theatrical settings, incorporating lighting, stage effects, and extended instrumentation.

The performance typically takes place in the period following the Lantern Festival. To heighten the atmosphere, corn stalks are arranged around the venue and ignited at the beginning of the performance, a tradition known as "watching the show across the fire." This practice enhances the spectacle and underscores the ritualistic nature of the Nanyue Mulian Opera (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2** The performance of watching the show across the fire.

#### 4.2.4. Modern Innovation and Integration (1978–present)

In the modern era, the Mulian Opera has demonstrated innovation and cross-cultural integration. Performers have merged traditional methods with contemporary approaches, incorporating elements of popular music and global influences. During this period, Mulian Opera also expanded its reach by adapting to multiple dialects and collaborating with artists from different regions of China. This growing intercultural exchange sparked greater interest in Mulian Opera's song repertoire. The fusion of tradition and innovation has ensured the vitality of the Mulian Opera as a dynamic part of China's intangible cultural heritage. By embracing modern musical elements while preserving their historical essence, the Mulian Opera continues to evolve, maintaining its relevance for contemporary audiences.

#### 4.3. Evolution of Accompanying Instruments

The evolution of accompanying instruments in Mulian Opera is a testament to the genre's adaptability and enduring appeal. This transformation reflects not only broader cultural and economic shifts in Chinese society but also the influence of Western music, modern technology, and changing audience preferences. As a crucial aspect of cultural preservation and transmission, the adaptation of accompanying instruments has played a significant role in maintaining Mulian Opera's relevance across generations.

##### 4.3.1. Influences in the Republican Era

During the Republican period, the Mulian Opera underwent significant transformations, incorporating Western musical elements. Traditional instruments, such as the pipa, yangqin, and erhu, remained central, preserving the music's cultural and regional identity. At the same time, the introduction of Western instruments, including the piano, violin, and cello, enriched the sonic landscape of Mulian Opera, expanding its tonal possibilities.

This fusion of traditional and Western influences led to the development of unique lyrical styles, blending folk poetry with heightened emotional depth and structural simplicity. These adaptations brought the Mulian Opera closer to court music conventions while shaping a distinct musical identity. By integrating Western harmonies and instrumentation, the Mulian Opera became more accessible to urban and international audiences, enhancing both its cultural transmission and public appreciation.

#### 4.3.2. Contemporary updates and adjustments

Before the emergence of modern communication technology and the widespread popularity of staged performances, the Mulian Opera underwent several adaptations and challenges in its instrumental accompaniment. Traditional instruments have always played a fundamental role in shaping the melodic identity of the Mulian Opera. However, to appeal to broader and more diverse audiences, many performances now incorporate modern instruments and electronic elements.

For example, traditional ensembles featuring the pipa, guqin, and dizi now coexist with keyboards, electric guitars, and synthesizers. This fusion of traditional and contemporary sounds injects a dynamic energy into the music while preserving its distinctive historical essence. In modern Mulian Opera, band accompaniment is generally categorized into two main types: traditional band accompaniment and Western band accompaniment. Owing to their performance requirements and stylistic characteristics, these two approaches are often blended and innovatively adapted for actual performance (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Accompaniments of the Ensemble Classification of Modern Mulian Opera.

Band type	Instruments	Functional orientation	Applicable Scenarios
Traditional bands	Pipa, yangqin, erhu, bamboo flute, pandrum, small gong	Showing traditional flavor and highlighting local characteristics	Nonheritage performances, cultural festivals and local exhibitions
Western-style orchestra	Piano, violin, cello, flute, jazz drums	Enrichment of melodic and harmonic structure and enhancement of dynamic expression	Concerts, large-scale stage performances, innovative adaptations
Fusion Band	Pipa, Erhu, Bamboo Flute, Piano, Electronic Piano, Synthesizer, Board Drums, Jazz Drums	Retaining the traditional flavor while introducing modern sound effects, adapting to diversified performance needs	Fusion concerts, contemporary theater, and music festivals

## 5. Discussion

This study highlights the importance of the Mulian Opera as a vital component of China's intangible cultural heritage, encapsulating the region's rich history, cultural identity, and artistic traditions. Over the centuries, it has evolved from work chants in the Sui Dynasty to diverse ballads in the Ming and Qing dynasties, ultimately developing into innovative performance in the contemporary era (Liu et al., 2018; Wang, 2014). This evolution underscores their remarkable adaptability to sociocultural and economic transformations while also revealing challenges posed by modernity, globalization, and waning generational interest.

Historical context has significantly shaped the thematic content and melodic characteristics of the Mulian Opera. Early compositions served practical functions, aiding laborers and expressing daily emotions, whereas later pieces reflected the cultural prosperity of Mulian Opera's flourishing periods. The integration of Western musical elements during the Republican era and the incorporation of modern technology and performance techniques in recent decades have further enriched musical distinctiveness (He, 2019; Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023). While this adaptability has allowed Mulian Opera to remain relevant amidst shifting socioeconomic landscapes, these changes also raise concerns about the preservation of their original essence.

Traditionally, oral transmission has been the primary means of preserving Mulian Opera, enabling their survival across generations despite the lack of written records. However, their reliance on oral traditions has made them vulnerable to decline, particularly as the number of traditional practitioners diminishes. The transition to written documentation and modern recording technology has introduced innovative preservation approaches (Xie & Punvaratorn, 2024; Horlor, 2019). Nevertheless, these efforts must be reinforced through community engagement, educational initiatives, and cultural events to ensure their sustainability. Furthermore, contemporary reinterpretations of Mulian Opera—such as collaborations with modern artists and adaptations into contemporary art forms, including musicals—can expand their audience and enhance their cultural resonance.

Mulian Opera serves as a cultural mirror, offering profound insights into the region's history, traditions, and emotional narratives. They exemplify the interplay between indigenous customs and external influences, underscoring the evolving

nature of local cultural identity. Contemporary efforts to globalize and promote Henan folk music have broadened its audience; however, maintaining its authenticity remains a critical challenge (Hao, 2023; Lau et al., 2007; Yu & Leung, 2019). Integrating these songs into educational curricula, community workshops, and digital platforms has played a pivotal role in bridging generational gaps, raising cultural awareness, and fostering a sense of cultural pride.

Addressing the challenges facing Henan folk music requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach. Community engagement is paramount, as local practitioners and cultural stakeholders play an essential role in safeguarding the authenticity and significance of these songs. Educational and outreach programs can inspire younger generations to appreciate and actively participate in preserving this cultural heritage. Digital technologies provide powerful tools for archiving, documenting, and disseminating Mulian Opera, allowing them to reach global audiences while retaining their historical and cultural essence (Yuan et al., 2022; Zhi, 2020). Additionally, innovative adaptations and cross-disciplinary collaborations can attract new listeners and ensure tradition continuity in contemporary settings (Young, 2007; Song, 2022; Li, 2021). Furthermore, strong governmental policies and sustained financial support for intangible cultural heritage initiatives are indispensable for long-term preservation efforts.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, ensuring the survival and transmission of Henan folk music demands a harmonized approach that respects tradition while embracing modernity. Through a synergistic integration of community-driven initiatives, educational programs, technological advancements, and institutional support, Henan local opera can endure as a dynamic and enduring facet of China's cultural heritage. The regional distribution of the Mulian Opera highlights its traditional cultural exchanges and regional changes, while its exquisite repertoire demonstrates its evolving technical and artistic qualities. In future research, protecting these traditional arts is not only to pass on local traditions but also to enable their historical and cultural contributions to continue to inspire and pass on to future generations, providing a useful reference for the development of contemporary global art diversity.

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## Ethical considerations

This study interviewed key participants who were supervised and gave their informed consent. The consent process clearly outlined the study's purpose, methodology, confidentiality measures, and any potential benefits or risks associated with participation.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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