

How Can Intangible Cultural Heritage Gain New Vitality: A Study on the Activation Path of Nanjü from the Perspective of Interaction, Exchange, and Integration

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Abstract. As a local opera genre in southwestern Hubei that integrates multiple vocal styles, Nanjü has been inscribed on China's national list of intangible cultural heritage. Once on the verge of extinction due to transmission crises, it has regained vitality in recent years under the guiding concept of "creative transformation and innovative development." From the perspective of "interaction, exchange, and integration," this paper systematically examines the modernization path of Nanjü through three dimensions: cultural narrative, performance space, and innovative practice. The study finds that: first, its lyrics deeply integrate Confucian ethics with Tujia culture, forming a cultural tapestry of "harmony in diversity"; second, its performance spaces have shifted from traditional opera stages to modern public venues, reshaping a virtuous cycle of cultural dissemination and economic benefits; finally, innovative works represented by Xilankapu and Bense verify that activating intangible heritage elements and introducing technological narratives make the "Two Innovations" principle an effective path for the living inheritance of Nanjü. The experience of Nanjü provides valuable insights for the contemporary protection and development of similar intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Nanjü, intangible cultural heritage, interaction exchange and integration, living inheritance.

1. Introduction

Under globalization, the risk of cultural homogenization has made the protection of intangible cultural heritage a global issue. Traditional drama, as the "living soul" carrying collective memory, faces survival challenges such as transmission discontinuity and audience loss. In this context, how to achieve the contemporary transformation of ancient art has become an important issue concerning cultural diversity.

The development of Nanjü serves as a typical case of this issue. This opera, popular in Enshi and neighboring areas, artistically integrates multiple vocal styles such as pihuang, bangzi, gaoqiang, and dengxi. In performance, the "explosive tone" of the male jing role and the "narrow tone" of the female dan role form a striking contrast. Its more than nine hundred extant plays, focusing on historical romances and tusi legends, are regarded as "living fossils" for studying regional culture. At the end of the twentieth century, Nanjü encountered a severe transmission crisis, with only two or three professional troupes struggling to survive. The turning point came during the implementation of the concept of "creative transformation and innovative development." Innovative plays such as Xilankapu revitalized Nanjü by integrating intangible cultural heritage elements with stage technology.

Based on the perspective of ethnic "interaction, exchange, and integration," this paper explores the activation path of Nanjü from three dimensions: first, analyzing the integration mechanism of Confucian ethics and Tujia culture in its cultural narratives; second, examining the transformation logic of performance spaces from opera houses to public squares; and finally, demonstrating the effectiveness of innovative practices through typical cases. Through this research framework, the paper aims to provide theoretical reference and practical enlightenment for the contemporary transmission of similar intangible cultural heritage.

2. Cultural Tapestry: “Harmony in Diversity” at the Narrative Level

The lyrics of Nanjü integrate the core Confucian concepts of loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness with the cultural genes of the Tujia people—such as dialects, folk customs, and nature worship—forming an artistic character of “harmony in diversity” that vividly embodies the symbiotic wisdom of cultural integration within Chinese civilization.

2.1. Confucian Cultural Narratives in Nanjü Lyrics

As an artistic vehicle of Confucian ethics, the lyrics of Nanjü deeply reflect the core values of “loyalty, courage, filial piety, and righteousness.” In *The Fourth Son Visits His Mother*, Yang Silang’s ritualized gestures of “bowing thousands of times” and the repeated sentence pattern of “a son for his mother” elevate the emotion of filial devotion to its peak; meanwhile, the detail of “a fluttering butterfly, too weary to wear his official robe” [1] symbolically interprets the Classic of Filial Piety’s moral ideal of “showing reverence even in daily life.” At the same time, Madam She’s recollection of the heroic sacrifices of the seven sons of the Yang family closely links family memory with loyalty to the sovereign and devotion to the nation, perfectly presenting the Confucian pursuit of uniting loyalty and filial piety. These meticulously crafted lyrics not only lay an ideological foundation for dramatic conflict but also, through artistic expression, enable the wide dissemination and deep internalization of Confucian ethics in the Tusi regions of the Wuling Mountains, highlighting Nanjü’s unique function as a cultural medium for value transmission and moral education.

Traditional Nanjü repertoires, through their narrative logic and value system, vividly demonstrate the deep mechanisms of cultural “interaction, exchange, and integration.” At the level of the “great tradition,” historical plays such as *The Generals of the Yang Family* transform Confucian virtues like loyalty and filial piety into vivid stage narratives, symbolizing the successful infusion of Central Plains culture into southwestern Hubei. Meanwhile, local subjects such as Tusi legends carry the unique historical memories and values of the Tujia people, forming a distinctive “small tradition.” Elements such as Nuo masks and Baishou dance in plays like *The Mist over the Tusi Palace* not only artistically recreate folk life but also powerfully express collective identity. These two cultural traditions are not simply superimposed on the Nanjü stage; rather, they engage in a dialogic relationship of “harmony in diversity,” simultaneously disseminating Confucian ethics and highlighting Tujia cultural traits. Together, they construct a pluralistic yet unified sense of cultural identity. This unique cultural tapestry makes Nanjü an artistic paradigm that bears witness to the formation and evolution of the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation.

2.2. The Tujia Cultural Roots in Nanjü Lyrics

The lyrics of Nanjü deeply integrate the linguistic and cultural elements of Tujia folk traditions in southwestern Hubei, forming a distinctive mode of artistic expression. The scripts extensively absorb local dialects and idioms while skillfully incorporating imagery from rural production and daily life, imbuing the language with a vivid sense of realism. Proverbs and two-part allegorical sayings (xiehouyu) serve as core carriers of expression, encapsulating the Tujia people’s communicative wisdom and humorous thinking. The regular seven- and ten-character verse patterns, combined with dialectal speech, not only facilitate memorization and transmission but also aid in shaping vivid character portrayals [2].

Nanjü plays vividly present the linguistic essence of Tujia folk culture in Enshi, with proverbs and xiehouyu as central expressive forms. Through their unique phonetic harmony, implicit meanings, and balanced structures, xiehouyu constitute a linguistic form rooted in everyday life that embodies folk wisdom and aesthetic sensibility. The extensive use of dialectal phonetics, vocabulary, and folk sayings in Nanjü scripts not only enhances the efficiency and vitality of playwriting but also provides performers with ample space for memorization and improvisation. This linguistic system, rich in local characteristics and ethnic genes, strengthens the naturalness, humor, and vividness of expression,

thereby significantly enhancing the drama's popular appeal and artistic infectiousness. As the essence of folk language in Nanjü, Tujia xiehouyu possess a unique charm—playful in sound, implicit in meaning, smooth in rhythm, and highly symmetrical in structure. Originating from the fertile soil of Tujia daily life, they crystallize folk wisdom and aesthetic taste. Their frequent use in Nanjü composition not only makes the scripts livelier and more expressive but also facilitates actors' line memorization and on-stage performance. This form of language—rooted in local culture and carrying ethnic heritage—through apt metaphors, humorous undertones, and vivid expression, greatly enhances the artistic appeal of the drama. It also deepens Nanjü's resonance and acceptance among the public, becoming an important artistic means through which Nanjü showcases Tujia cultural characteristics. This language art, grounded in everyday life, not only preserves the Tujia people's philosophy of life and folk psychology but also refines the distinctive local cultural character of Nanjü.

3. Trade Routes as Theatrical Routes: Transformation and Expansion of Performance Spaces

The performance space of Nanjü has undergone a profound transformation—from guild halls and merchant theaters to modern civic squares. This trajectory is not merely a spatial shift but a vivid embodiment of the developmental pattern in which “trade routes are theatrical routes.” Throughout its evolution, the performance venues of Nanjü have remained in close resonance with the economic pulse of their times, achieving a transition from serving as social entertainment for *tusi* households and merchant guilds to becoming an integral part of public cultural consumption. [3]

3.1. Historical Spatial Dependence

The close connection between Nanjü and merchant guild halls reflects the developmental pattern that “trade routes are theatrical routes.” The opening of trade routes provided channels and momentum for the dissemination of opera, while the extension of theatrical routes, in turn, reinforced the regional connections fostered by commerce, making guildhall theaters cultural hubs linking communities across different areas. The cultural influences of various regional merchant guilds, the local cultures represented by their theater buildings, and the aesthetic preferences of merchants all influenced the architectural patterns and decorative designs of these theaters. For example, Jiangxi merchants built the Wanshou Palace in Baifusi, a border town on the southern foothills of the Wuling Mountains. As one of the representative architectural types of the Gan (Jiangxi) style, Wanshou Palace embodies the folk beliefs and local sentiments of Jiangxi people, preserving the profound cultural concepts of traditional Jiangxi architecture (Figure 1).

Entering through the main gate of Baifusi's Wanshou Palace, one first encounters an open yard that can accommodate spectators, followed by a stage for performing Nanjü. Behind the stage stand wooden buildings that once served as lodging and dining spaces for wealthy merchants and distinguished guests. The stage stands about two meters high, surrounded by columns roughly the thickness of an adult's embrace and about ten meters tall. The theater roof is adorned with three porcelain basin-shaped ornaments of descending size. Porcelain, being one of the cultural symbols of Jiangxi, reflects the regional cultural identity of the merchant guild behind the building. The decorative motifs include auspicious animals such as dragons, phoenixes, and the twelve zodiac signs, as well as portraits of the Eighteen Arhats. Additionally, the eaves are embellished with gourd-shaped ornaments connected by iron wires extending from both ends of the eaves to the center. These gourd decorations are strung together on both sides, each filled with copper coins, serving the dual purpose of attracting wealth and warding off evil spirits.



Figure 1. Historical photograph of Wanshou Palace in Baifusi (Source: Provided by the People's Government of Baifusi)

3.2. Contemporary Spatial Transformation

In contemporary times, the performance space of Nanjü has transformed from traditional theater buildings to modern public venues. This shift transcends the physical domain and fundamentally represents an evolution of its social functions—from specific ritual performances for deities to broader roles in aesthetic education and cultural dissemination—ultimately realizing effective cultural integration within wider social contexts. One of the primary spaces for Nanjü performances today is the Nanjü stage established in Zhaxitai Square, Laifeng County, Hubei Province (Figure 2). This serves as a vivid example of the deep integration of culture and economy. The square's stage has transformed intangible cultural heritage into a visible and consumable “cultural product,” successfully converting audience flow into developmental momentum, and allowing the cultural vitality of this ancient art form to directly empower local economic growth. On one hand, the square's naturally high foot traffic provides Nanjü with an excellent showcase and promotional platform, allowing the traditional art to reach a broader audience of citizens and tourists, effectively enhancing its visibility and influence. On the other hand, the introduction of the Nanjü stage injects a distinctive cultural soul into Zhaxitai Square, elevating it beyond a purely commercial venue to a humanistic cultural consumption scene. This transformation infuses the square's economic development with differentiated vitality and sustainable competitiveness. Ultimately, a close symbiotic relationship of mutual promotion and coexistence has been established between economic development and Nanjü's cultural inheritance. The square's economic benefits provide a solid material foundation and sustainable space for Nanjü's regular performances, innovative publicity, and systematic transmission. Meanwhile, Nanjü's profound cultural heritage and unique artistic charm continuously attract audiences and shape the regional brand, becoming a distinctive cultural engine that drives local economic prosperity. Thus, a virtuous cycle of “economy nourishing culture, culture reinforcing economy” has been formed—economic strength ensures the promotion of culture, while cultural appeal injects lasting momentum into economic growth—together constructing a vivid pattern of sustainable development.



Figure 2. “Nanju Grand Stage” at Zhaxitai Square (Source: Internet)

The performance space of Nanjü has evolved from the carefully constructed professional theaters within historical merchant guild halls to today’s open stages integrated into everyday civic life and bustling public squares. This trajectory vividly demonstrates the intrinsic connection between “theatrical routes” and “trade routes.” The spatial shift is not merely a replacement of physical venues but a living testament to how Nanjü art has evolved in synchrony with regional economic fluctuations and commercial activity. The rise of guildhall theaters directly stemmed from wealth accumulation and the social needs of merchants along accessible trade routes, representing refined cultural consumption supported by the economic strength of merchant networks. In contrast, contemporary performances in public squares reflect the emergence of mass cultural consumption. To adapt to a broader market and more inclusive audience demands, Nanjü has proactively expanded its “theatrical routes” and integrated into modern public cultural spaces. Therefore, each expansion or shift in performance space effectively mirrors the prosperity of trade routes in a given era, the flow of commercial capital, and the resulting social entertainment patterns. The location of the stage and the origin of the audience are closely aligned with the pulse of the contemporary trade routes.

4. Transformation through Creative Innovation: Activation Path Driven by Innovative Practice

As a brilliant treasure of Chinese traditional drama, Nanjü possesses unique artistic value. Its vocal styles, performance forms, and rich repertoire are all important components of Chinese traditional culture. However, as audience aesthetic demands become increasingly diverse, research related to Nanjü has gradually declined. Therefore, it is necessary to dialectically promote the preservation and innovation of Nanjü in line with the cultural development needs of the new era. In the process of innovation, the principle of “inheriting the essence while maintaining integrity and promoting innovation” should be adhered to, enabling a scientific sorting and optimization of Nanjü. [4]

4.1. Inward Deepening in Xilan Kapu

The Nanjü play Xilan Kapu centers on the nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage of Tujia brocade, vividly presenting the humanistic and historical panorama of the Tujia people on stage through the organic integration of indigenous songs and dances, ethnic costumes, and folk scenes.

The play breaks away from the traditional Nanjü’s formulaic structure, which mainly relies on single-act plays and serially linked scripts. Through carefully designed dramatic scenes such as “Brocade Encountering Obstacles,” it enhances modern theatrical conflict and emotional tension, achieving a creative transformation from traditional narrative to contemporary expression. Elements of intangible cultural heritage, including Baishou dance and folk songs, are deeply woven into the narrative, allowing these cultural symbols to transcend mere stage decoration and become core

components that drive the plot and shape characters. This realizes a fundamental leap from the static preservation to the living inheritance of ethnic culture. The play innovatively establishes a “drama + craft” dual intangible heritage symbiotic model: artistic innovation revives the endangered Nanjü genre, while Tujia brocade techniques gain visibility and become a dynamic symbol of cultural confidence through stage dissemination.

The successful practice of Xilan Kapu demonstrates that by deeply excavating local cultural resources and achieving an organic alignment between traditional art forms and modern aesthetic demands, ethnic theater can fully realize the creative transformation from cultural heritage to cultural resource within the contemporary cultural ecosystem. This provides a practical reference for the preservation and innovation of similar intangible cultural heritage.

4.2. Outward Leveraging in Bense

The Nanjü play Bense, based on the life of Zhang Fuqing, a recipient of the “Medal of the Republic,” was meticulously developed over three years and presents the hero’s spiritual journey through a six-act structure. The play exemplifies Nanjü’s proactive exploration of modern transformation through “outward leveraging.”

In terms of value reconstruction, the play successfully achieves a creative transformation from the traditional Confucian ethics of “loyalty and righteousness” to the socialist core values centered on “loyalty, dedication, and responsibility,” elevating individual memory into a shared spiritual heritage of the Chinese nation. Artistically, while retaining Nanjü’s traditional vocal styles and performance techniques, the play boldly employs modern stage technologies such as fully immersive projection, creating a visual space rich in Tujia cultural aesthetics and forming a “tradition as bone, technology as wings” aesthetic experience. Regarding the creative mechanism, the “school-local cooperation” with the Chinese Academy of Traditional Opera not only enhanced the play’s production capabilities but also led to the establishment of a Nanjü undergraduate program in 2024, marking a new stage of professional talent cultivation.

Together, Bense and Xilan Kapu outline Nanjü’s “preserve the essence while innovating” development path—Bense activates modern resources through outward leveraging, while Xilan Kapu revitalizes cultural genes through inward deepening. This dual innovation practice demonstrates that the vitality of traditional opera lies in the alignment of content with contemporary spirit, the integration of form with modern aesthetics, and the combination of mechanisms with innovative models, providing a widely applicable paradigm for the modern transformation of similar intangible cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically elucidates how Nanjü, under the context of “interaction, communication, and integration,” has successfully achieved the modern transformation from a static “heritage” to a living “resource” through narrative integration, spatial transformation, and the dual innovation practices of inward deepening and outward leveraging. The case of Nanjü demonstrates that the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is not a closed or rigid process; rather, it is an “organic growth” process of self-reconstruction and cultural regeneration, continuously shaped through dynamic interaction and dialogue. Looking ahead, the sustainable development of Nanjü still faces critical challenges, necessitating deeper exploration in areas such as systematic talent cultivation, balancing artistic authenticity with market-oriented development, and other strategic dimensions. Nevertheless, its “preserve the essence while innovating” pathway—activating cultural genes through inward deepening and integrating modern elements through outward leveraging—not only revitalizes Nanjü itself but also provides a valuable “Nanjü model” and a replicable activation paradigm for traditional performing arts facing similar survival crises in China and globally.

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