

## To Research the Ways to Conserve and Popularize of the *Guangxi Wenchang* in Guilin, China

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### Abstract

The title of this paper is "To Research the Ways to Conserve and Popularize of the *Guangxi Wenchang* in Guilin, China". This is a qualitative investigation with the objective of identifying suitable methods for the conservation and preservation of the rich culture of *Guangxi Wenchang*, a Chinese performing art. The researchers conducted documentary analysis and field research to assess challenges facing the preservation of this valuable intangible cultural heritage and consider ways forward for its conservation. Results show that the biggest obstacles to sustainable inheritance are a lack of young inheritors and an alteration to the traditional social conditions that saw its emergence and growth. The paper argues that these conditions must be reconstructed through cooperation between the government and local stakeholders to ensure the art form continues for years to come.

**Keywords:** Conservation; Popularize; *Guangxi Wenchang*;

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### Introduction

*Guangxi Wenchang* (hereafter *Wenchang*) is a form of folk music that has existed in China for over two centuries but is now struggling to compete for the affections of the modern public. *Wenchang* is an important traditional performance combining singing and speaking that belongs in the category of *Quyí* (Chinese folk art). This genre is mostly associated with the northern Guangxi region, especially the cities of Guilin and Liuzhou. There are four performance forms: *Zuo Chang* ('Sitting Singing'), *Li Chang* ('Standing Singing'), *Zou Chang* ('Walking Singing') and *Wenchang Xi* (*Wenchang* Opera). The lyrics are clean, poetic and catchy, making them easy to remember and sing. They express local folk stories, combining the local Guilin dialect and musical culture with unique aesthetic characteristics. The original accompanying instruments were yangqin (dulcimer), pipa (lute), sanxian (three-stringed spike lute), erhu (fiddle) and bamboo flute. These instruments are referred to as the *Wu Jian Tou*

(‘The Five Pieces’). More recently, *gaohu* (a higher-pitched erhu) and cello have been added, along with a *zhongruan* (a tenor plucked string instrument). Percussion is provided by drums, *ban* (clapper), *diezi* (dish) and *Jiu Zhong* (ancient wine cup). Many of the melodies used in *Wenchang* have been retained from popular songs during the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

In June 2008, *Wenchang* was listed in the Chinese national intangible cultural heritage list (no. V-87), which is published by the State Council of China (Liquan 2010). This was recognition of *Wenchang* as an important part of the traditional aesthetic culture of China, with real historical and cultural value. *Wenchang* has been inherited over generations by the people of Guangxi and is closely related to local lifestyle. It is also a musical artform that reflects unique regional customs and the national characteristics of Guangxi. Thus, *Wenchang* is an important carrier of Guangxi culture (He 2011). Moreover, *Wenchang* is an indispensable part of spiritual and cultural life in Guangxi. The melody and lyrics depict the evolution of living conditions and attitudes of Guilin people since the Ming and Qing Dynasties. These are examined from many angles and layers, and show the humanistic spirit of Guilin. In the centuries since the appearance of *Wenchang*, traditional festivals, productive labor, weddings and funerals, and family gatherings have been the primary vehicles for *Wenchang* performances. Therefore, *Wenchang* not only showcases musical and performance talent in Guilin, but is also integral to individual human pursuit of spirituality and cultural conformity (He 2012). Merriam (1964) famously asserted that ‘music is clearly indispensable to the proper promulgation of the activities that constitute a society’. The health of *Wenchang*, the embodiment of human culture in Guilin, is thus a reflection of the general health of traditional culture and society in the area.

*Wenchang* is the manifestation of an integration between human character and the Guilin landscape (Qi 2018). Yet with the passage of time, the development of society and the progress of science and technology, young people are becoming more and more unfamiliar with *Wenchang* in Guangxi. Interviews on the streets of Guilin have revealed that many young people have never heard of *Wenchang* (Liang 2010). Therefore, the conservation and popularization of *Guangxi Wenchang* is becoming more and more important. This investigation was consequently designed with the objective of identifying suitable methods for the conservation and preservation of this rich part of Guangxi cultural heritage. The hope is that successful protection of *Wenchang* will go some way towards safeguarding the traditional culture of Guangxi.

### **Research objectives**

- 1) To study the Importance and urgency of protection of *Guangxi Wenchang*;
- 2) To study specific measures to protection of *Guangxi Wenchang*;
- 3) To study the ways to conserve and popularize of the *Guangxi Wenchang*.

### **Literature Review**

Conservation and preservation is being increasingly viewed as a foundation of future policies rather than the end goal of policy. These include strategies for heritage-based education (Goddard 2009; Museums, Libraries and Archives 2010; Rebanks Consulting Ltd and Trends Business Research Ltd 2009), rural development projects (Thurley 2011), expansion of the creative economy (Canziani and Moioli 2010; Greffe 2009; Pastor Eixarch et al. 2011), contributions to a sustainable environment (CCRU and ADAS 2007; Ecorys 2012) and regeneration of urban spaces (Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi 2012; Michaelis-Winter and Ruland 2007). These benefits have seen an increasing number of nations recognise the official UNESCO list and develop their own domestic systems for the protection of cultural heritage, including China (Logan 2012).

‘The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a highly relevant case for a critical heritage studies approach due to its recent and dramatic ‘heritage boom’ and rapid socio-economic changes that give rise to new challenges and contradictions. The explicit political use of heritage makes it compelling to analyse power relations, governmentality, and issues of negotiations and resistance’ (Svensson and Maags 2018).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, only a few years after the publication of UNESCO’s list, cultural heritage was found by researchers to stimulate and foster intercultural dialogue, promoting social inclusion and increasing levels of tolerance (Bodo, Gibbs and Sani 2009; Bouchard 2009). However, more recent studies have been more accusatory in tone, reported government enthusiasm ‘for using the UNESCO World Heritage sites as a key aspect of the state’s cultural policy aimed at promoting cultural soft power on the global stage’ (Lee 2020). Researchers argue that China has sought to use the list to boost local tourism and simultaneously incorporate cross-regional ethnic minorities more firmly into the Chinese state (Blumenfield and Silverman, 2013; Kurlantzick, 2008). However, there is no doubt that Chinese efforts to engage with intangible cultural heritage protection have proven successful in reviving and protecting certain traditional dances, customs, songs and fashions that were in danger of disappearing (Lee 2020). It is hoped that this investigation can add to the existing protections supporting Wenchang by making feasible suggestions for continued preservation.

## **Research Methodology**

This qualitative research study analyzes data collected from documents and field study. In the initial research phase, the authors studied academic articles, books and historical documents related to *Guangxi Wenchang*. The second research phase was conducted in the field and researchers collected data from interviews with one key informant, three casual informants and one general informant with knowledge of *Guangxi Wenchang* in Guilin city, Guangxi province, China.

The key informant for this investigation was Mrs. He Hongyu, a *Wenchang* expert born in Lipu County, Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China in 1941. Mrs. He Hongyu has performed *Guangxi Wenchang* for more than 40 years, has taught,

directed and designed *Quyí* production and has published several articles and books about *Guangxi Wenchang*.

The casual informants were all *Wenchang* performers. The first informant, Mr. Su Junmin, was born in 1967 in Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. He started studying *Guangxi Wenchang* in 1972 under the tutelage of Mrs. He Hongyu and Mr. Zhuge Ji. Mr. Su Junmin worked in Guilin Quyí Troupe in the 1990s and more recently worked at Guilin Drama Creation Research Institute (also called Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Center), mainly engaged in the literature and music creation of *Quyí* programs. He has published books and many papers on music creation and musical instruments. He can play traditional Chinese instruments such as the Ruan, Pipa, Erhu and Yangqin. The second informant, Mr. Pang Jianning, was born in 1975 in Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. He started studying *Guangxi Wenchang* in 1991 under Mrs. Chen Xiufen and Mr. Zhuge Ji. He graduated from the Vocality and Quyí class of Guangxi Arts School and worked in the Guilin *Quyí* Troupe. Now, he is deputy director of Guilin Drama Creation Research Institute. The third informant, Mr. Gong Yi, was a staff member of Lingchuan County Sports Bureau and is now retired. He was an amateur performer in Guilin local opera and Quyí. After his retirement, he often participated in *Caidiao* Opera, *Guangxi Wenchang*, *Guijiu* Opera and other traditional operatic or Quyí performances.

The general informant, Mrs. Li Meimei, was born in 1945 in Guilin City, Guangxi Province, China. She graduated from the Guangxi Arts University and subsequently worked as the director and designer of Guilin Fine Arts Mirror Factory. In 1989, she was transferred to Guilin Advertising Company as a manager. Now she is retired but is an amateur *Guangxi Wenchang* performer.

## **Data Analysis**

*Wenchang* with its melodic and lyrical characteristics has unique artistic and commercial value. In order to conserve and popularize the genre, it is necessary to understand its characteristics and problems, and then to formulate effective policies and strategies.

### **1. The importance and urgency of protection of *Guangxi Wenchang***

As a traditional local folk art, *Guangxi Wenchang* is an important manifestation of Guilin traditional culture, an important reflection of Guilin humanistic spirit, and an important element of Guilin tourism economy. People of all ethnic groups live harmoniously in Guilin and have created a rich and vibrant culture through their combination of an optimistic and open-minded spirit and elegant artistic style. Guilin has been the distribution center of Central Plains immigrants since ancient times. Through advocacy of cultural inheritance and organization of traditional festivals, the culture of the Central Plains has become deeply rooted in society forming a framework of cultural exchange via festivals and temple fairs.

### **2. Problems with the transmission and dissemination of *Wenchang* in Guilin**

#### **2.1 No fixed place for performing and rehearsal**

In the past, public performances were held in ancestral village houses, temples and guildhalls. During festivals and temple fairs, people would sing traditional operas in these places, forming a cultural space of the village. Now this kind of cultural space does not exist and the rehearsal or performance locations are no longer fixed. Mr. Pang Jianning (Interview, 2019) said in an interview that 'now most of the activity areas of amateurs are parks, riverside and other quiet places, sometimes in their own homes. In the past, there were more works to sing. Now when the performers go out to perform, the employers will propose to increase the programs of *Caidiao* Opera. The implication is to sing less the *Guangxi Wenchang*. The performance of *Guangxi Wenchang* is restricted by the market'.

## **2.2 Shortage of funds**

Sustainable art needs economic investment, and *Wenchang* groups are facing funding and income issues. The economic status of Guangxi Province is relatively low compared to the rest of China, so government economic support is minimal. In general, financial support can only be limited to a very small number of professional *Wenchang* groups or government agencies for the cultivation of professional performers.

In the process of this investigation in 2019, the author found that Mr. Pang Jianning, a third-level performer at Guangxi Wenchang Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Center, is paid about 60000 yuan annually. Facing rising prices and the pressure of his children's tuition, Mr. Pang Jianning has to pick up commercial performances at the weekend to increase his income. His income from performing one private program is an additional 80-200 yuan (depending on the circumstances). This is a good amount but commercial performances are not available every week. For this kind of performance, Jianning felt that it is difficult for performers to get artistic respect.

## **2.3 Propaganda can't keep up with the times**

*Guangxi Wenchang* can't keep up with the times in propaganda. "The dissemination and inheritance of *Guangxi Wenchang* is facing great difficulties. The audio-visual materials of *Guangxi Wenchang* are scarce, and the publications of audio-visual products are also very few." (Xiao 2018)

## **3. The conservation and popularization of *Guangxi Wenchang***

Government departments and performers should work together to promote the dissemination and promotion of *Wenchang* in a number of important ways. Inheritors can make use of festival activities, exhibitions, observation, training, professional seminars, production of TV feature films, mass media and Internet publicity, to deepen the public's understanding of *Wenchang* and promote social sharing (Giaccardi 2012). The system of performance can be improved to attract more people to participate in *Wenchang* by regularly organizing exhibitions. When public interest has been piqued and inheritance conditions become more favourable, market mechanisms

should be introduced to systematically disseminate and develop *Wenchang* and promote the formation of a cultural industry. To achieve this the government must cooperate with folk artists to create a system for inheritance, especially by providing official funding, and encouraging donations from all sectors of society. Working groups must also be established to help performers manage locations, personnel and funding. This kind of activity can be funded by a combination of government investment and enterprise sponsorship through the establishment of *Guangxi Wenchang* Protection and Development Fund. *Wenchang* roles must be defined, with performers afforded a basic allowance and responsibilities and obligations clarified. As a living cultural tradition, *Guangxi Wenchang* can then be inherited and carried forward in relevant communities, especially among younger people using modern media (Zhou, Sun and Huang 2019). These measures are all to be implemented by the Guilin government, who should be responsible for the formulation and implementation of an annual work plan.

## Discussion

From the perspective of cultural ecology, there are three living environments for human beings: natural environment, social environment and normative environment. Folklife determines the cultural significance of folk art, which is based on people's living conditions. Folk culture is like an ecological environment in which different organs have been propagated and grown. Folk art is a product of this ecological environment. However, if research is only limited to the study of cultural products, it ignores the foundation and internal vitality of traditional culture. If the cultural ecological environment is destroyed, the culture will wither, disappear or develop abnormally. The new culture will become a tree without roots, or water without a source. This is the ecological nature of culture (Pan 2007).

Regarding this investigation, the concept of cultural ecology refers not only to the literary and artistic works, but also the relationship between culture and human beings. In the past, the cultural environment of *Guangxi Wenchang* was composed of villages, communities and performance locations for blind artists. During earlier periods, the social environment was familiar to people, and the performance environment of *Wenchang* was relatively standardized. Amateurs and professional blind artists formed a harmonious group of performers who strived to create a good development space for the prosperity of the art form. Over time, before its recent decline, the influence of *Guangxi Wenchang* grew and became more prosperous - causing an increase in performers with unimpaired vision and a neglect of inheritance within the blind community.

*Guangxi Wenchang* was born among the people and flourished among the people. It has a natural relationship with the urban and rural masses. Today, we should cherish the cultural and ecological environment once related to *Guangxi Wenchang* and aim for its reconstruction.



## Conclusion and Suggestion

Nowadays, modernization has become the theme of the social life of all ethnic groups in China, and the desire of all ethnic groups for economic prosperity and social development is unprecedented. These groups have been involved in the realization of national modernization. Globalization, as an objective historical development trend that does not depend on people's subjective will, has increasingly become an important background and internal factor in Guangxi social life and cultural development. Given this integration of modernization and globalization in society and the continuous influx of foreign and mainstream Chinese culture, *Guangxi Wenchang* has been weakened and is facing a serious survival crisis. *Guangxi Wenchang* is a symbol of the unique cultural identity and cultural personality of the indigenous people in Guangxi. It is also a national cultural memory accumulated over hundreds of years. The carriers of community memory are vital to its inheritance. Therefore, the protection and preservation of *Guangxi Wenchang* must focus on maintaining local sentiment, enhancing local consciousness, restoring local memory and local identity, and realizing the regional music culture through reconstruction of traditional social structures. Whether it is *Guangxi Wenchang* or any other traditional art form, inheritors need the power of government support in order to achieve the goal of sustainable development, but the government also needs the will of the people to enact preservation measures.

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