



Developing innovative strategies for the protection and revitalization of Liuzi opera in China



Hao Zhi¹



Chalerm Sak



Pikul Sri²⁺



Pornpan



Kaenam Pornpan³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand.

¹Email: hao.z@kku.ac.th

²Email: chapik@kku.ac.th

³Email: pornpan@kku.ac.th



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 17 October 2025

Revised: 3 February 2026

Accepted: 10 March 2026

Published: 1 April 2026

Keywords

Art anthropology
China intangible cultural heritage
Community-based safeguarding
Cultural inheritance
Liuzi opera.

This study explores the integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) frameworks and art anthropology theories as an innovative way to strengthen the protection and revitalization of Liuzi Opera, a representative traditional opera of Shandong Province, China. It aims to identify current practices and challenges while exploring how integrating ICH frameworks and art anthropology theories can help sustainable cultural preservation. Adopting a qualitative, exploratory case study design, the research was conducted in Shandong Province and involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 participants, including policymakers, representatives from the cultural department, Liuzi Opera performers, staff of the Liuzi Opera Heritage and Protection Center, and academicians at Shandong University of the Arts. Data were analyzed thematically to capture recurring patterns related to ICH frameworks, art anthropology theories, policies, practices, cultural meanings, and inheritance dynamics. The results reveal that existing safeguarding efforts focus largely on documentation, staged performances, and institutional training but often neglect community-based contexts such as festivals, temple fairs, and apprenticeship networks that have historically sustained Liuzi Opera. Integrating ICH principles with anthropological insights into ritual, performance, identity, and community engagement provides a more dynamic, participatory approach that revitalizes both cultural practices and intergenerational transmission. This study contributes to the existing literature by refining theoretical understandings of ICH protection. It uses new analytical insights to integrate policy, education, and community roles. It is one of very few studies investigating Liuzi Opera safeguarding. The primary contribution of this paper is documenting strategies that ensure its living continuity.

Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution is finding that integrating Intangible Cultural Heritage frameworks with art anthropology theories reveals overlooked community-based contexts rituals, festivals, and apprenticeship networks as central to sustaining Liuzi Opera, offering a participatory safeguarding model not previously applied to this under-researched opera form.

1. INTRODUCTION

Liuzi Opera, originating in the Ming dynasty and flourishing during the Qing dynasty, is one of the most prominent local operatic traditions in northern China, particularly in Shandong and surrounding regions. Characterized by its distinctive singing style, rich narrative scripts, and integration of folk customs, Liuzi Opera represents a living repository of regional dialects, costumes, musical instruments, and performance aesthetics (Li, 2025). It is an ICH of China at the national level, representing centuries-old communal memories, artistic principles,

and cultural traditions connecting local communities to their historical identity (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024). Just like most traditional types of opera, the strength of Liuzi Opera lies in oral performance, apprenticeship, and live stage performance, making Liuzi Opera not only threatened but also a lively cultural performance (Chen, 2024). It is an uncommon perspective on the cultural diversity of Chinese performing arts, contributing to the world of ICH.

With the world experiencing the new era of accelerated urbanization, mass media and homogenization of culture, the classical opera genre like Liuzi Opera is grappling with the fact of dwindling audiences, aging performers, and deterioration of the apprenticeship systems (Xiang, 2024). Not just the preservation of a single art, the preservation of traditional opera is the continuity of one memory and the aesthetic culture, moral fiber, and regional consciousness centuries old (Chi & Belliveau, 2022). Preservation and education of this heritage in contemporary education, culture, and creative industries may reinforce cultural confidence, build social cohesion, and open access to cultural tourism and the creative economy (Stenberg, 2024).

Even though Liuzi Opera is a nationally recognized ICH, its spread and activity have declined over the past several decades (Li, 2023). The decline of master-apprentice model, which used to be the foundation of operatic singing, acting and stagecraft is also one of the biggest problems (Qing & Wang, 2025). With these changes in educational objectives, most young people do not want to pursue the traditional opera career; they become a diminishing fountain of trained art and knowledge holders. Moreover, there has been less intergenerational involvement because of the little use of Liuzi Opera in schools and community-based cultural practices (Huang & Xu, 2024).

The impact of commercialization and urban cultural change is another pressing problem, which would rather favor contemporary entertainment than conventional opera (Li, 2024). Many local troupes are characterized by a lack of stable financial conditions, the absence of appropriate rehearsal spaces and the inability to regularly perform the art, which is why the quality and liveliness of the art form can hardly be preserved (Bauman, 2024). Mainstream media dominance, shifts in cultural consumption trends, and rural-urban migration have further pushed community-based opera performances into the periphery. Lacking novel preservation and inheritance strategies, Liuzi Opera may end up as a museum piece instead of a vital living cultural practice (Yun, 2024).

Despite the abundance of research on the historical evolution, artistic characteristics, and present-day decline of Liuzi Opera, there has been inadequate engagement with art anthropology theories and ICH protection models in developing efficacious measures for its heritage (Xie, Pattayanon, & Makpa, 2025). Most studies have been concentrated on historical narration or policy advocacy, and few have been able to provide interdisciplinary perspectives on how performance practice is rooted in local communities' social life, rituals, and identity (Li, Subica, Kendra, & Ali, 2023; Li & Amirrul, 2024; Shao, 2023; Zhang, 2024). Theoretical frameworks used to investigate the functioning of Liuzi Opera as a living heritage are provided by art anthropology, which concentrates on the cultural context of making, meaning and transmission of artworks (Pan, 2024). Similarly, ICH protection systems focus on the interactive involvement of communities, the role of conserving living practices, and the development of traditions to adapt to contemporary lifestyles. The combination of these perspectives can generate new solutions beyond passive preservation in achieving sustainable cultural renewal.

The current research will try to investigate how preservation and transmission of Liuzi Opera can be enhanced through the integration of Chinese ICH models and art anthropology theories. In particular, it aims to examine the contemporary status of Liuzi Opera transmission, determine the sociocultural and institutional barriers to its sustainability, and suggest measures drawing on anthropological observations of performance practices and the participatory status of cultural heritage. By emphasizing the interface between cultural bearers, community, and contemporary cultural policy, the research hopes to provide a model for sustainable conservation that honors the living spirit of Liuzi Opera while promoting it to suit the needs of today's society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Chinese ICH

ICH in the Chinese context refers to the living practices, knowledge, and skills that communities identify as part of their cultural heritage (Ou, Guo, Liu, & Ling, 2024). Oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, festivals, traditional craftsmanship, and know-how related to traditional ecological knowledge transmitted from generation to generation are all part of it (Li, Li, Fong, & Li, 2025). Ever since China became a party to UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH, an overall framework has been established to categorize Chinese ICH into five broad areas: oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship (Li, 2023). The special place in this scheme is occupied by performing arts like Liuzi Opera, which are not only a manifestation of aesthetics but also historical memory and regionalism (Li, 2025). This published list of national and provincial and municipal ICH of China has helped to identify endangered traditions and provided opportunities to support designated "inheritors" of specialized knowledge (Li, 2024).

The dynamic nature of heritage as a living practice that is maintained by communities and is sensitive to changing circumstances is also the UNESCO perception of the protection of ICH as reflected in the 2003 Convention (Pan, 2024). It contrasts with past models of heritage conservation that were centered on the preservation of monuments and objects, but instead underscores the community, bearers', and youth people's active roles in guaranteeing transmission (Sun, 2025). Preservation thus entails facilitating the continuation of traditions in such a manner as to honor cultural diversity and foster adaptation to modern life (Zhang, 2024). In China, such an understanding has impacted national heritage policy by promoting local involvement in the identification, documentation, and revitalization of ICH.

2.2. Liuzi Opera

Liuzi Opera is an indigenous operatic tradition originating in the northern China folk songs and storytelling conventions of Ming times and popularized throughout the nation in Qing times, particularly in Shandong and neighboring provinces. "Liuzi" is named for the six-beat rhythm characteristic of its original musical structure (Chi & Belliveau, 2022). Traditionally, Liuzi Opera thrived as a grassroots mode of culture surrounding temple fairs, rural cycles, and local rituals, providing entertainment and moral instruction (Stenberg, 2024). The opera experienced a turnover as it grew and evolved in connection with urban theatres and government subsidies, particularly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, which saw the introduction and training of professional troupes (Ding & Haris, 2025).

Political turmoil in the Cultural Revolution ended its transmission, and as of 2006, when it was declared a national-level ICH, the opera has had to contend with dwindling audiences, older artists and a dearth of live performance options (Shao, 2023). These historical transformations reveal the intricate interaction between state policies, social transformations and communal practices that influenced the evolution of Liuzi Opera over the years (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024).

Cultural and artistic aspects of Liuzi Opera are attached to local identity and cultural memory. It is characterized by its fast and rhythmic singing style using local dialects, and it maintains linguistic and cultural traditions of northern China (Li, 2025). It uses a contrasting recitative and melodic passages, played on traditional instruments like the suona, jinghu, and percussion, and its makeups and costumes, which are simplistic compared to the Peking Opera, nonetheless, still have a folk aesthetic and motifs (Li, 2023). Its repertoire is predominantly based on historical fiction, folk legend and stories about morals, including fidelity, filiality and justice, which restate the common standards of morality (Xie et al., 2025). Besides aesthetic meaning, Liuzi Opera has been a social practice that unified the villages by engaging all of them as participants, promoters, and listeners.

2.3. *Traditional Opera Inheritance and Protection in China*

Protection of traditional opera in China needs to incorporate state policy, international heritage policy and cultural theory (Shen, Zhou, & Zaib, 2024). Since 2004, when China joined the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the ICH, a system has now been established in China that encompasses nationwide and multi-level lists of ICH, representative inheritors, troupes, recognition of festivals, and education subsidies (Yuan, Mohd Johari, Azmiah, & Cheah, 2025). This paradigm summarises the concept of living heritage because it is only when people keep applying them in evolving environments that traditions survive (Xie et al., 2025). The concept of “cultural ecology” is also applied by the Chinese philosophers, and it underlines that opera requires a responsive social space of festivals, apprenticeship networks, and the public space, where it can flourish (Zhang, 2024). Yet the expedient measures favor documentation, modernization of the stages, and accessibility of the opera to visitors more than the revival of the antique scenes which once supported opera (Li, 2023). The awareness of the populace is encouraged by museum exhibits, competitions, and school operas at the cost of making opera a cultural spectacle disconnected from its living environment.

Although some progress has been achieved on raising awareness and raising funds, the existing protection systems of classical opera are vulnerable to multiple threats and challenges (Qing & Wang, 2025). Sponsorship of festivals by the state, commercialization, and occasional disruptions disrupt the consistency of consumer interest, which provenly affects the authenticity of the opera, its ritual, and communal role (Li, 2024). Further erosions of the livability of many operatic traditions have occurred through urban migration, generation substitution in entertainment, and poor youth attendance (Ou et al., 2024). In which protection is chiefly sought by way of administrative adjudication, opera may be transformed into a danced pageant instead of as a tradition of living people (Li & Amirrul, 2024). This subjugation of officialdom does not take into account the mechanisms of the ground floor like the apprenticeship between masters and disciples that once guaranteed the transmission of life.

2.4. *ICH Frameworks and Art Anthropology Theories*

Cross-fertilizing ICH paradigms with the art anthropology hypotheses is an interdisciplinary approach to the restoration of traditional opera as living heritage (Yang & Rodsakan, 2024). The Chinese ICH policy was developed based on the UNESCO Convention and is focused on maintaining traditions alive, in constant practice and community engagement, but not preserving them as a past museum object (Thompson & Wojcik, 2025). Art anthropology also extends to consider how arts like opera are conceptualized, performed and gain a sense of meaning within a specific cultural and social setting (Bauman, 2024). It adds that the preservation of Liuzi Opera is not about scripts or melodies but about cultural ambiances, social networks, relations of apprenticeship, and community rituals, which have long been maintained by tradition (Chen & Wang, 2024). It is also through this realization that it becomes evident that performances are not merely aesthetic spectacles, but they are performances that transmit collective memory, recurring similarities and that the regional identities are perpetuated (Leung, 2023).

This scheme of integrating theory into practical protection includes the essentials of ritual, performance, community, and identity. Ritual discovers the genesis of the opera in a temple fair and the source of the seasonal cycle, where it was the medium between the sacred and the secular (Chen, 2024). The performance indicates the corporeal and interactive aspect of opera that shows that culture is co-produced between actors and spectators in the public (Shao, 2023). The community knows about the reciprocal networks that serve the art and give the assurance that heritage can never be preserved beyond local contact and apprenticing (Sun, 2025). Identity is perceived in the opera as a marker of local uniqueness, as a way of cultural survival and resistance to modernization and globalization (Zhang, 2024). This renders these aspects visible and when they are visible, scholars and policy-makers can be better placed to comprehend the dynamics that render Liuzi Opera vibrant and significant.

2.5. The Roles and Benefits of Art Anthropology in Understanding Cultural Practices and Inheritance

As far as the emergence, development, and maintenance of cultural practices like classical opera are concerned, art anthropology offers a crucial interdisciplinary framework (Chi & Belliveau, 2022). Unlike historically or aesthetically oriented approaches, which tend to concentrate on the recording forms, styles and prominent performers, art anthropology takes an interest in the fact that art becomes imbricated in the social life and everyday experience of communities (Iori & Liuzzi, 2024). It justifies the way the artistic works like Liuzi Opera are culturally constructed by the centuries-long cultural interaction between performers and spectators, by the festivals and rites that they are sung or performed in, and by the moral and spiritual sense that the local cultures assign to them (Juan, Jirajarupat, & Yinghua, 2023). The practice emphasizes the idea that classical opera is not just performance art, but also a living system of practice and knowledge based on which the communities share values, identity and collective memory (Li, 2025). Placing opera into the context of larger cultural formations, art anthropology becomes able to show how cultural practices are sustained in everyday contacts, through traditions of apprenticeship, storytelling, and communal ceremonial life (Chen & Wang, 2024). They are particularly relevant to the preservation and bequeathing of ICH since they highlight that preservation of a form of heritage depends on the preservation of a cultural environment, which endows it with meaning (Bi, 2024). For Liuzi Opera, an anthropological approach can clarify the role of unofficial learning in village life, the involvement of family lineages in maintaining repertoires, and the socio-spiritual contexts of prior performances, thus guiding strategies that honor the tradition's lived reality instead of projecting it as staged or museumized artifacts (Wei, 2024).

The advantages of using art anthropology for the study of heritage also include its capacity to connect theoretical models with their practical applications for conservation. By emphasizing terms like ritual, embodiment, performance, and collective identity, art anthropology makes visible the practices behind cultural knowledge being enacted and passed on, providing lessons for building better models of inheritance (Yang, Chonpairot, You, & Li, 2024). For instance, acknowledging performance as embodied knowledge implies that preservation strategies must be focused on live practice opportunities, mentoring, and local participation rather than archiving scripts or documenting performances (Wang & Chonpairot, 2023). Having an understanding of the ritual and communal roles of opera underscores revitalizing old buildings, festivals during different seasons, and local events where the art form traditionally flourished.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

In this study, a qualitative and exploratory case study design was applied to investigate the protection and inheritance of Liuzi Opera, with references to the combination of ICH theories and art anthropology theories. A qualitative design was employed since the research aimed to gain a deep understanding of the meaning, experiences, and perceptions of the key players in the protection process of Liuzi Opera, more than testing some pre-existing hypotheses. The exploratory study design helped the researcher examine the complex institutional and sociocultural environments that define the inheritance of heritage in contemporary China. The case study methodology was particularly appropriate as it enabled a very close examination of a single cultural practice, Liuzi Opera, in the real-life context, thereby capturing the dynamics between local policies, historical practices, and community forces.

3.2. Location

The fieldwork took place in Shandong Province, the old and cultural homeland of Liuzi Opera. Shandong is well known as the homeland and main area where Liuzi Opera is practiced continuously, where it has been thriving for centuries as a rural festival, temple fair, and local oral narrative tradition. The province has led the way in heritage protection policies as well, with a number of government departments and educational institutions committed to the

protection and revival of traditional opera. Carrying out the study in this location gave us direct access to the people, institutions, and performance spaces that represent both the historical origins and modern changes of Liuzi Opera. The site was therefore a perfect field location for studying how local cultural practice and national ICH policy intersect in the protection of this opera tradition.

3.3. Participants

The participants were recruited via a purposive sampling technique to obtain people with contrasting but complementary roles in protecting and inheriting Liuzi Opera. The research included 15 informants (Table 1) who represented five main stakeholder groups: (1) an official involved in regional cultural heritage policy and funding; (2) a higher-level government representative from the Shandong Cultural Department who is in charge of implementing ICH initiatives; (3) senior and junior Liuzi Opera practitioners, both veteran performers with extensive experience and younger practitioners who represent the intergenerational transmission dynamics; (4) personnel from the Liuzi Opera Heritage and Protection Center involved in heritage documentation, training, and public education; and (5) a professor at Shandong University of the Arts who is an expert in traditional opera studies and cultural preservation. This heterogeneous group of participants guaranteed that the research captured views from across policy, institutional governance, artistic practice, and scholarly research. Through voices from both government and civil society, the research was able to look beyond the formal protection machinery as well as the living reality of those who keep Liuzi Opera alive as an ICH.

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Participant code	Role / Affiliation	Gender	Years of Experience	Main Contribution to Liuzi Opera Preservation
P1	Policymaker – Provincial Cultural Heritage Office	M	15+ years	Formulating policies and funding frameworks
P2	Representative – Shandong Cultural Department	F	12 years	Implementing regional ICH programs
P3	Senior Performer – Veteran Liuzi Opera Artist	F	40 years	Traditional performance, mentoring apprentices
P4	Mid-career Performer – Local Opera Troupe Member	M	18 years	Community-based performances and training
P5	Young Performer – Apprentice	F	5 years	Learner representing new generation of artists
P6	Staff – Liuzi Opera Heritage & Protection Center	F	10 years	Documentation, training, and outreach
P7	Staff – Liuzi Opera Heritage & Protection Center	M	8 years	Organizing cultural events and heritage workshops
P8	Professor – Shandong University of the Arts	M	22 years	Academic expertise on traditional opera
P9	Professor – Shandong University of the Arts	F	17 years	Research on heritage policies and opera education
P10	Performer – Regional Troupe Leader	M	30 years	Preserving authentic repertoire
P11	Performer – Local Village-Based Artist	F	25 years	Linking opera with community festivals
P12	Staff – Regional Cultural Promotion Office	M	12 years	Supporting opera in local schools
P13	Staff – Local Heritage Documentation Office	F	10 years	Archiving oral histories and performances
P14	Performer – Young Female Lead Actress	F	7 years	Bridging traditional acting with modern stage
P15	Performer – Retired but Active Elder Mentor	M	45 years	Preserving dialect, rituals, and mentoring

3.4. Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect data that would capture rich, detailed descriptions of the experiences of the participants, their perceptions and recommendations to the protection and inheritance of Liuzi Opera (Table 2). The total number of interviews is 15, which were held either face-to-face in the context of cultural

institutions and performance halls or through online means of communication that were secured to prevent any potential safety breaches. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to provide some direction in talks with a set of main questions concerning policy implementation, community involvement, cultural definition, difficulty in transmission, and future directions, as well as give some flexibility to follow through on emerging issues brought up by the participants. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-taped with the participants' consent and transcribed literally for analysis. Field notes were also recorded to capture non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and thoughts about the interaction, which added more depth to the qualitative data set.

Table 2. Interview guidelines.

Section / Theme	Key questions
Background and involvement	• Can you describe your role and connection to Liuzi Opera? • How did you become involved in its protection or performance?
Current practices	• What strategies or activities are currently in place to preserve Liuzi Opera? • How effective do you think these efforts have been?
Policies and institutional support	• How do government policies and funding affect the inheritance and protection of Liuzi Opera? • What changes would you recommend in policy frameworks?
Cultural meaning and community role	• What cultural or symbolic meanings does Liuzi Opera hold for local communities? • How do communities participate in its safeguarding today?
Transmission and challenges	• What are the main challenges in transmitting Liuzi Opera to younger generations? • How do modern entertainment trends affect its continuity?
Application of ICH and art anthropology frameworks	• In your opinion, how can heritage frameworks and anthropological insights improve preservation efforts? • What role do rituals, festivals, and local traditions play in inheritance?

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in the data analysis process as a common approach to qualitative data analysis, which helps a researcher recognize, classify, and explain patterns of meaning in textual information. This analysis was conducted in a series of steps. Using NVivo software, the researcher first repeatedly read the transcripts to become well acquainted with the data. Second, preliminary codes were inductively generated to reflect important concepts related to the participants' experiences in terms of policy implementation, practical issues of opera inheritance, cultural meanings applied to performances, and community involvement. Third, the codes were analyzed and organized into larger categories, which were narrowed down to major themes that encapsulated the primary concerns of the research, including policy-practice gap, intergenerational transmission, cultural identity and ritual meaning, and strategies for sustainable preservation. Throughout the process, constant comparison was used to ensure that the themes reflected the diversity of participants' views and identified shared patterns. The thematic analysis enabled the research to integrate perspectives from various stakeholders while emphasizing the overlap of policy, practice, and cultural meaning within the protection of Liuzi Opera.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Every step of the research process was guided by ethical principles to protect and respect the participants as well as maintain the integrity of cultural knowledge imparted. Informed consent forms were given to all the participants, explaining the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and steps taken to ensure their privacy and confidentiality. Interviews were carried out sensitively to participants' time, cultural practices, and professional responsibilities, so that they could be comfortable expressing their experiences and perspectives. Privacy was preserved by allocating pseudonyms to the participants in all the transcripts and reports,

and by keeping audio recordings and transcripts in password-protected digital archives that only the researcher could access. Since the research involved ICH, care was taken to be respectful of cultural knowledge and intellectual property, so that the participants' input was recognized and not utilized for anything outside the bounds of the study. The research conformed to social science research ethics involving human subjects, with transparency, respect, and cultural sensitivity being the guiding principles throughout the project.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Current Practices, Policies and Theories in Protection and Inheritance of Liuzi Opera

The study concluded that the existence and continuation of Liuzi Opera in Shandong Province have resulted from a crossroads between state-made policies, institutional initiatives, and locally grounded practices, although they are more likely to be parallel rather than integrated with each other. The interviews with policymakers and cultural department officials demonstrated the primary role of national ICH status in increasing Liuzi Opera's visibility and obtaining financial subsidies to transmit it. Interviewees described how the inclusion of Liuzi Opera as a national ICH item has provided access to systemic safeguarding practices, including the establishment of special training bases, identification of model inheritors, and creation of repositories of scripts and sound recordings. Such efforts, they argued, have rescued the art form as it was about to lose its footing when society was experiencing rapid change. However, participants also noted that much of this policy focus is on documentation and performance presentation rather than on continuation, with an emphasis on staged festivals, competitions, or cultural tourism, rather than serving the daily contexts of transmission like village fairs and webs of apprenticeships that have long supported Liuzi Opera.

The second significant discovery is connected with the institutional and educational infrastructure implemented in the case of Liuzi Opera, which, despite being beneficial, has not fully resolved the conflict between modern professionalization and the ancient ways of knowledge transmission. Liuzi Opera Heritage and Protection Center actors shared their experiences in trying to standardize training programs, produce quality productions on stage, and work with local schools to introduce students to the basics of opera. These initiatives have increased visibility and provided technical support, but experienced performers have asserted that the archetypal master-apprentice relationship based on tacit knowledge and one-on-one instruction cannot easily be replaced by classroom training or short courses.

The third similarity was the lack of connection between the intentions of the policies and ground-level reality, which affects not only the welfare of Liuzi Opera but also the motivation of its members. The participants observed that state subsidies are being applied to high-profile events and anointed successors, and the smaller community-based companies are left unsubsidized and marginalized. Also, despite its successful performance in creating awareness, heritage festivals sometimes promote performances that are framed in ways that satisfy tourist expectations and lead to staged authenticity that works against the connection of the opera to its traditional performance context. According to some performers and heritage staff, younger generations are reluctant to join the career of opera performance due to the fact that traditional performers have such a shaky livelihood and that it is believed to be culturally lagging. These problems are indicative of the narrow scope of top-down protection interventions unless they are supplemented by long-standing and enduring community participation, community support, and responsive innovation activities.

4.2. Applications of ICH Frameworks and Art Anthropology Theories in Protection and Inheritance of Liuzi Opera

The findings of the study highlighted the idea that the inclusion of ICH frameworks and theories of art anthropology offers a more context-sensitive and culture-based approach to preserving Liuzi Opera. Different actors remarked that the community-based safeguarding model is consistent with the conventional Liuzi Opera ecology that enjoyed its boom in the past in temple fairs, occasional festivals, and village squares where performers and audiences

alike enjoyed cultural performances. Employees at the Liuzi Opera Heritage and Protection Center emphasized that their more recent programs to re-imagine local festival performances and hold community-based workshops with older artists were informed by this principle. Such initiatives have started closing the divide between official conservation projects and the living cultural activities of indigenous people. An anthropological perspective of art, the audience emphasized that it is important not to treat the opera as an aesthetic stage performance, but rather as a ritualized storytelling and identity performance whose existence depends on active involvement of the community, not just a well-coordinated exhibition.

The second noteworthy result of the study is the viable implementation of anthropological theory in ritual, performance, and embodiment to protect the strategy design. An example is how Liuzi Opera had a traditional connection with temple fairs and farming celebrations, which provided a social, ritual space that ensured intergenerational continuation, as performances were not isolated spectacle events. They testified to successful experiments in a few towns where local festivities were revived with active participation of both older and younger performers, and the way in which localized performance conditions can arouse interest in opera and re-establish the conventional conditions of apprenticeship. In the same vein, the notion of performing performance as an expression of cultural knowledge suggested to teachers and professionals working at heritage centers that effective passing of the performance necessarily requires not only classroom training but also practice where learners have the opportunity to rehearse, practice, and experience the dynamics of live performance in front of audiences.

The third issue raised by the participants was that the identity and engagement with the community in relation to policy and practice have to be linked in a manner that allows Liuzi Opera to be upheld within the context of a modernized culture. The department of culture professors and administrators emphasized that opera is reflective of the local linguistic and aesthetic values that give the local communities some sense of continuity and belonging to history. Valuing this aspect of identity, some conservation efforts have even gone to the point of introducing opera into school curricula and local festivals so that the young people would see the tradition as theirs but not an art of old. Such community initiatives as oral histories documentation by students and joint stories with older citizens were mentioned as things that worked to bolster the relationship between the youth and the opera on a trans-generational level. The agency of local communities in their perception was also highlighted by the participants, which fits the ICH paradigms and conforms to the art anthropological theory, also contributing to the idea that heritage is created by those who practice it and bear it, and not imposed by foreign forces.

5. CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS

The research findings confirm that the conservation and transmission of Liuzi Opera cannot be effectively managed through preservationist and institutional projects, including policy, but only through a broader and more comprehensive approach provided by the Chinese ICH approach and art anthropological theories. The findings emphasize that, regardless of government interventions such as identifying representative inheritors, subsidization, and creating training institutions, they have been unable to overcome the cultural and social forces that still support the survival of this living heritage (Li, 2023). Here is where the insights of art anthropology may be useful in drawing relevance to the importance of ritual, community, identity, and embodied practice in preserving heritage as a living tradition. Such theoretical observations have been linked to real-world actions, as expressed in the study that preservation of Liuzi Opera involves enhancing cultural ecosystems within which the opera has flourished over the years, such as temple fairs, seasonal festivals, family-based apprenticeship practices, and community social events (Yuan et al., 2025). This approach will also appeal to the fact in the Chinese ICH is not about holding traditions back in the past, but about allowing them to be continuously created and renewed.

Application of ICH frameworks and theories of art anthropology offer many possibilities and advantages for re-invigorating Liuzi Opera. It shifts the focus from safeguarding strategies centered on documentary forms and performance to a dynamic practice that recognizes the agency of cultural bearers and the importance of their daily

life contexts. This approach promotes a broader understanding and more effective preservation of the cultural tradition (Xiang, 2024). The research further indicated that the younger generations are very likely to adopt and value the tradition when the festivals and community performance is reinstated as strategic points of the transmissions. This is more of a general tendency of successful heritage revival that we can observe in China and elsewhere where a community-based, bottom-up approach to heritage conservation has proven more effective over the long run than their top-down, exhibitionist equivalents (Zhang, 2024). Further, the integration of these frameworks will help build policy innovation because it shows that local identity can be enhanced together with social cohesion and that the future of cultural industries like heritage tourism and education could be enhanced by the preservation of culture. These opportunities signify the practical meaning of the fact that the protection of Liuzi Opera is not an issue of cultural nostalgia but a way of the sustainable development of the community and intercultural communication.

An important point emerging from the findings is how closely they align with the study's research questions and existing scholarship on ICH preservation. Participant insights, such as the reflection that "without the village fairs, the opera loses its roots," reinforce the literature that emphasizes the necessity of community contexts for sustaining living heritage (Sun, 2025; Zhang, 2024). These perspectives demonstrate that the policy-practice gap, intergenerational transmission challenges, and the need for community-centered safeguarding are not only empirical observations but also confirm and extend established theoretical discussions within both ICH models and art anthropology.

By thus doing so, though, the discussion should be cognizant of the shortcomings and challenges to the implementation of such syncretic structures. Operating solo, institutional pressures, including bureaucratic financial systems, unequal resource allocation, and high-profile production over local transmission agendas, incarcerate the participation ethic of ICH practice, as well as art anthropology practice (Sun, 2025). Comparisons with other Chinese traditional forms of opera, such as Kunqu Opera or the Qinqiang Opera, validate the same manner of tension between modernization and authenticity, particularly where heritage has been highly commodified into cultural tourism. For example, it has been confirmed in the Kunqu Opera revival analysis that, despite state patronage enhancing its presence, it also preconditioned the formation of a stylized form among urban theatre audiences, weakening its foothold in community practice. Similarly, efforts to safeguard minority folk operas by documenting and museumizing them, rather than teaching them to the younger generation, reflect this dilemma. Such comparative observations may lead to the challenge faced by Liuzi Opera in balancing institutional resource exploitation and the organic vibrancy rooted in community-based traditions. These oppositions support the theoretical argument that heritage preservation is not a purely administrative process but should be informed by anthropological insights into how tradition lives, develops, and remains relevant to communities that reproduce it.

The study's conclusions also address the overall discussion in heritage studies on which techniques of preservation and inheritance are most appropriate in cases of rapid social change. In the case of Liuzi Opera, the presence of national policies, local cultural departments, heritage centers, local artists, and institutions of higher learning implies a multi-stakeholder structure in which there is a necessity to effectively coordinate responsibilities, as well as capacity (Ou et al., 2024). The evidence reveals that despite the crucial policy guidance, money and recognition that governments provide, their efforts are most effectively complemented by the efforts of non-governmental organizations, schools, and citizens themselves. NGOs can provide a facilitator promoting community projects, sponsoring apprenticeships and commercializing heritage into the public spaces and schools (Pan, 2024). Research, documentation, and educative outreach in universities can help, and the local citizens, particularly the youth can help with ensuring the performance practice sustainability through acting as learners, performers and audiences. This is a co-production model that reflects the participatory values of the two ICH frameworks and the anthropological theory to offer an optimistic path ahead by decentralizing responsibility and agency across all the interested parties rather than relying on state-led interventions alone.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

6.1. Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the body of theory in ICH models and art anthropology since it reveals the need to combine the two methodologies into a more integrated view of cultural heritage conservation and inheritance. The result shows that conventional models of ICH, as much as they have succeeded in recording and defining aspects of heritage, fail to capture the social and ritual contexts in which such traditions as Liuzi Opera are still practiced. This study enhances the existing theory by bringing art anthropological theory directly into the field of heritage studies through the introduction and application of the concepts of ritual, performance, embodiment, and community agency to the idea of heritage to show that preservation should also consider the informal, embodied practices occurring at festivals, temple fairs, apprenticeship networks, and everyday cultural practices. The study thus aims at bringing in a new interpretive model in which protection is considered a collaborative activity of preservation of cultural ecosystems and not preservation of artistic forms alone. This conceptual emergence makes heritage studies reach further than any fixated models of preservation towards more dynamic and participatory models of cultural continuity, which offer future researchers a model within which to interpret similar predicaments in other forms of traditional opera or heritage management that face the pressures of modernization. By contextualizing the Liuzi Opera as an artistic product and a source of shared identity, the paper provides a platform to rethink preservation as something living and adapting that remains relevant and meaningful in contemporary communities and, therefore, becomes a part of future theoretical discourse on ICH preservation and succession.

6.2. Practical Implications

The research also entirely presents a valuable practical value to policymakers, cultural practitioners, teachers, and communities that would wish to revive and preserve Liuzi Opera. In a way that is meaningful to the policymakers, it can be implied that the investigations of the study show that it is necessary to leave behind top-down and display-related designs of protection, and invest in models of participation that embrace grassroots troupes, rehabilitate performance sites rooted in festivals, and invest in high-profile and grassroots-level practitioners at the same level of funding. The study can be relevant to cultural practitioners, especially opera actors and staff at heritage centers who require sensitization on the significance of balancing between professional performance on the stage and traditional apprenticeship training and performance in the community that foster intergenerational learning and authenticity. In teaching, the paper states that Liuzi Opera must be included in school curriculums, in the school art education curriculum, and after-school programs so that young children can experience learning about the opera as a cultural heritage, not as a living art. Another important impact is community involvement: local people, particularly the elderly, are given the opportunity to be part of storytelling, which teaches them dialect and trains young actors, with the social aspect achieved through audience input. Lastly, the research underlines to students and even prospective performers that competency and hard work are inculcated by high exposure to live areas of performance, attendance in common schools among players, and the availability of chances to engage in cultural rituals where the opera has always flourished. These functional propositions, taken cumulatively, signal a policy of accommodating protection, which includes policy, education, community involvement, and student-based practice in such a way as to make Liuzi Opera a dynamic and living tradition in modern times.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the research provides practical information on the protection and inheritance of Liuzi Opera, it also has several limitations that can be addressed in future studies. Existing literature on the protection of traditional opera tends to focus on historical data, policy analysis, or descriptive performance studies but does not attempt to explore how theoretical perspectives such as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and art anthropology can be practically implemented to overcome contemporary challenges of inheritance. The current qualitative, interview-

based research at a regional level reflects the opinions of stakeholders but lacks the capacity to comprehensively consider broader socio-economic, technological, and generational contexts that influence cultural transmission across China or other heritage contexts. Longitudinal studies would enhance future research by assessing the effectiveness of combined protective measures on the long-term vitality of Liuzi Opera and providing empirical data on interventions such as festivals or apprenticeships led by local communities. Empirical research based on quantitative surveys or mixed methods could also gauge public opinion, student engagement, and policy effects, offering factual results to complement qualitative findings. Cross-cultural comparisons, such as between Liuzi Opera and other regional operas like Kunqu, Qinqiang, or Huangmei, or with other performing arts that have preserved their traditions in rapidly modernizing cultures, may reveal commonalities and unique issues related to preserving living heritage. Lastly, future studies could adopt hybrid approaches combining ethnographic fieldwork, performance analysis, archival research, and audience studies to develop a multidisciplinary strategy for heritage protection. To address these limitations, further research can deepen the theoretical discourse and establish best practices for maintaining living cultural heritage through context-sensitive, community-based, and sustainable solutions.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The research concludes that the questions of sustainable conservation and heritage of Liuzi Opera depend on considering it not only as an artwork to be preserved but also as a living heritage deeply rooted in the cultural and social life of the local communities, as well as in ritual activity. The findings point to the observation that although state-sponsored recognition, subsidies, and institutional training programs have played a significant role in halting the eroding wave of Liuzi Opera, this focus is largely on documentation and staged performances rather than the renewal of community-based environments such as festivals, temple fairs, and apprenticeship practices that traditionally underpinned the opera. By developing the synthesis of Chinese ICH principles and art anthropology theory, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge, indicating that conservation-related activities should focus on bringing cultural ecosystems to life, allowing community members to be involved, and acknowledging the agency of practitioners. On a theoretical level, the study enhances understanding of the use of the ICH framework to incorporate anthropological insights into ritual, performance, and identity, shifting the heritage protection discourse beyond preservationist static conceptualizations toward dynamic continuity and flexibility. Practically, it recommends combined strategies among policymakers, cultural organizations, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and civic inhabitants to restructure existing venues of traditional performance, enhance generational learning, integrate opera within educational systems and cultural tourism, and distribute funds fairly between well-known companies and grassroots practitioners. Placing Liuzi Opera as an aesthetic art and a medium of collective identity, the study emphasizes that successful heritage preservation must find a balance between authenticity and modernity, institutional support, and local action. The findings of such an endeavor to conserve Liuzi Opera in contemporary China can serve as a blueprint for preserving other traditional performing arts facing extinction in a rapidly changing world.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

Bauman, R. (2024). The nature of performance. In *Anthropology of the Arts*. In (pp. 231-236). London, UK: Routledge.

- Bi, X. (2024). Cultural inheritance and protection of traditional villages: A perspective of philosophy and cultural values. *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 21(3), 305–323.
- Chen, B., & Wang, Z. (2024). Protection and inheritance of Bozhou Erjiaxian cultural tradition from perspective of musical anthropology. *Revista Electronica De Leeme*(54), 149–164.
- Chen, J. (2024). Aesthetic value and cultural philosophy in opera: A cross-era perspective. *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 21(3), 376–394.
- Chi, X.-B., & Belliveau, G. (2022). Between tradition and modernity: Developments in Xiqu (Chinese opera) actor training. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 13(4), 616–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2135873>
- Ding, J., & Haris, F. (2025). The future of opera: Enhancing intangible cultural heritage through multimedia communication techniques. *Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites*, 61(3), 1638–1648.
- Huang, X., & Xu, J. (2024). Han opera interactive exhibition and app design based on the theory of cultural three factors. In HCI International 2024 – Posters (Communications in Computer and Information Science. In (Vol. 1840, pp. 220–227). Cham: Springer.
- Iori, M., & Liuzzi, A. (2024). The educationalist's research approach as a qualifying element for educational services for children aged 0-6. The design approach as a framework. *Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Infantil*, 13(2), 119–132.
- Juan, L., Jirajarapat, P., & Yinghua, Z. (2023). The transmission of Guqin musical instrument knowledge literacy and its reflection study in Guizhou Province, China. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 11(2), 22–29.
- Leung, H. B. I. (2023). Power and knowledge: The birth of museums in China. *Museum Anthropology*, 46(1), 26–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12269>
- Li, C. (2023). Safeguarding Chinese traditional local opera as intangible cultural heritage: A study of Maoqiang Opera in Shandong, China. Doctoral Dissertation. Durham University, Department of Music, UK.
- Li, D. (2024). *A pluralistic development model for intangible cultural heritage traditional Chinese opera art in aesthetic education: The immersive integration of traditional Chinese opera and musical drama named “entering the Chinese opera”*. Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2023), Atlantis Press.
- Li, H., & Seekhunlio, W. (2024). The preservation and literacy transmission of Jiang Jie in Sichuan Opera in Chongqing, China. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 12(4), 81–87. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.12n.4p.81>
- Li, Q., Subica, A., Kendra, J., & Ali, S. H. (2023). Tradition or modernization? The dilemma of Chinese indigenous communities. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 29(5), 382–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2193818>
- Li, S., Li, S., Fong, L. H. N., & Li, Y. (2025). When intangible cultural heritage meets modernization—Can Chinese opera with modernized elements attract young festival-goers? *Tourism Management*, 107, 105036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.105036>
- Li, X. (2025). Performing arts as culture heritage: Jingju (Peking Opera)’s innovations from a historical perspective. In E. R. Kosmidou & L. G. McMurtry (Eds.), *Intangible cultural heritage and new methodological frameworks: Media, performance and the public space*. In (pp. 87–103). London, UK: Routledge.
- Li, X., & Amirrul, A. A. (2024). The public education effect of the protection of Shandong local traditional opera costumes on digital platforms: Traditional cultural education brought by visual and online experience. *Arts Educa*, 41, 190–203.
- Ou, Y. L., Guo, Y., Liu, J., & Ling, J. (2024). *The cross-cultural application of Cantonese opera costume elements in 3D pop-up card design: Focusing on youth and intangible cultural heritage elements*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, Springer.
- Pan, Y. (2024). Strategies for the preservation and sustainable development of Huayin Laoqiang Opera as urban intangible cultural heritage. *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 21(2), 330–360.
- Qing, L., & Wang, H. (2025). *Exploration of multimodal narrative approaches of intangible cultural heritage and construction of Lingnan cultural image: A case study of Cantonese opera*. Paper presented at the 2025 3rd International Conference on Language, Innovative Education and Cultural Communication (CLEC 2025), Atlantis Press.

- Shao, C. (2023). On the musical characteristics of the local opera Liushan Bangzi. *Pacific International Journal*, 6(2), 140-145. <https://doi.org/10.55014/pij.v6i2.372>
- Shen, Z., Zhou, M., & Zaib, K. (2024). Religious semiotics in performance and visual art: Symbolism in aboriginal dot painting, Sichuan opera makeup, Chinese traditional sculpture and shu embroidery. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 16(3), 266-292.
- Stenberg, J. (2024). Diplomatic, migrant, intercultural: Chinese opera's performance modes in the contemporary west. *Comparative Drama*, 58(3), 283-311.
- Sun, X. (2025). Community engagement and intergenerational transmission in the cultural heritage of Siping Opera. *Pacific International Journal*, 8(1), 28-34.
- Thompson, T., & Wojcik, D. (2025). *Exploring anthropology through folklore and mythology*. New York: Routledge.
- Wang, M., & Chonpairot, J. (2023). *Laiwu Bangzi Opera in Laiwu, Shandong, China*. Mahasarakham, Thailand: Mahasarakham University Press.
- Wei, Y. (2024). The development and evolution of Lahun air. *Simvol Nauki*, 11(2-3), 143-145.
- Xiang, J. (2024). An analysis of the essence of Chinese opera and vocal music from the perspective of hermeneutics and reception aesthetics. *Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp Journal of Philosophy*, 47(3), e0240029. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n3.e0240029>
- Xie, D., Pattayanon, P., & Makpa, P. (2025). Study of China opera intangible cultural heritage for online learning center. *Pakistan Journal of Life & Social Sciences*, 23(1), 2087-2100. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2025-23.1.00164>
- Yang, F., Chonpairot, J., You, L., & Li, J. (2024). Guqin: The physical structure and literary significance of Chinese traditional musical instruments. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 12(2), 111-117. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.12n.2p.111>
- Yang, X., & Rotsakan, T. (2024). The artistic characteristics and future development of the National arts fund of China. Unpublished Thesis. Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand.
- Yuan, Y., Mohd Johari, M., Azmiah, A., & Cheah, C. F. (2025). Challenges in safeguarding cultural heritage: A case study of Chinese traditional villages in Huangpu District, Guangzhou, China. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 15(2), 1279-1300.
- Yun, X. (2024). The evolution of the method of 'oral and heart-to-heart teaching' in contemporary times: Based on the observation of Shandong opera classroom. *International Journal of Music Education*, 42(4), 613-629. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02557614231190400>
- Zhang, H. (2024). Recognising menhu as a community within Wushu intangible cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 30(1), 28-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2281769>