

## Literacy Preservation of Baxian Chinese Folk Traditional Music

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### ABSTRACT

Baxian music, a traditional folk music genre deeply rooted in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, represents a critical component of the region's intangible cultural heritage. Known for using the Suona, a traditional woodwind instrument, Baxian music is closely associated with local customs, particularly wedding rituals. This study investigates Baxian music preservation's current status, focusing on literacy preservation, which is the knowledge and skills necessary to maintain and transmit cultural heritage. The research was conducted in Fengshan County and involved seven informants, including veteran Baxian musicians and community members. The study uses qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to identify Baxian music's challenges, including reliance on oral transmission, generational gaps, and economic pressures. The findings show that, despite Baxian music's continued cultural significance, modernization and shifting cultural values threaten its preservation. The study suggests that formal documentation, digital platforms, and community-based initiatives are crucial for enhancing the preservation of literacy and ensuring Baxian music's continuity for future generations. The research underscores the need for systematic support, both educational and financial, to safeguard this vital cultural tradition.

**Key words:** Baxian music, Literacy Preservation, Fengshan County, Chinese Folk Music, Cultural Heritage Preservation

### INTRODUCTION

Baxian Chinese folk traditional music, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, represents a vital component of the region's intangible heritage. Known for its use of the Suona, a traditional Chinese woodwind instrument, Baxian music is intricately linked to the local customs and ceremonies, particularly in wedding rituals that convey blessings and joy for the newlyweds (Cai, 2024; Liu & Cheng, 2023; Wang & Li, 2024). The term "Baxian," or "Eight Immortals," symbolizes the mythical figures revered in Chinese culture and the rich musical traditions passed down through generations (Ganany, 2018). These traditions embody the collective memory and identity of the local communities, reflecting their historical experiences, social values, and aesthetic sensibilities. Despite its profound cultural significance, Baxian music is increasingly at risk, as modern influences and a lack of systematic preservation efforts threaten its survival.

The rapid changes in modern society, which have brought about new forms of entertainment and musical expression that eclipse traditional practices, exacerbate the issue of preserving Baxian Chinese folk traditional music (Rees, 2003; Yang & Welch, 2014). The younger generation, in particular, is drawn to globalized music genres, often

perceiving traditional music as outdated and disconnected from their contemporary lives. This shift in musical preferences has resulted in a decline in the number of individuals who practice and transmit Baxian music, leading to a critical gap in the continuity of this tradition (Fung, 2013; Rees, 2010). The reliance on oral transmission methods, without adequate documentation or formal educational structures, further jeopardizes the longevity of Baxian music. This situation highlights the urgent need for initiatives to preserve the music and foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of its cultural and historical context (Gong et al., 2024; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018; Wu & Chuangprakhon, 2024).

Musical literacy, in the Baxian Chinese folk traditional music context, involves more than just the ability to perform or recognize the music. It encompasses a comprehensive understanding of the music's origins, its role in cultural and social practices, and its symbolic meanings. Developing musical literacy among the local population, especially the youth, is essential for preserving and transmitting Baxian music (Hallam & Prince, 2003; Howard, 2016; Shi & Nicolas, 2023). This literacy empowers individuals to engage with their cultural heritage actively, ensuring that Baxian music remains a living tradition rather than a relic of the past. However, the current preservation efforts are

fragmented and lack the necessary support from local authorities and broader cultural preservation frameworks. There is a pressing need to enhance musical literacy through educational programs, community initiatives, and systematic documentation to safeguard Baxian music for future generations (Du & Leung, 2022; Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Li, 2023; Zhang & Thotham, 2024). Given the challenges facing the preservation of Baxian Chinese folk traditional music, the primary objective of this research is to investigate the current status of this music in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The research seeks to understand the extent to which Baxian music is being preserved, the effectiveness of current preservation efforts, and the factors contributing to the decline in its practice and transmission.

### Research Question

1. What is the current status of preserving Baxian Chinese folk traditional music in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region?
2. How can literacy preservation be effectively promoted to ensure its continuity for future generations?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Baxian Chinese folk traditional music, as a significant cultural expression in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, reflects the region's rich heritage and collective identity. However, the preservation of such music faces numerous challenges in the context of rapid modernization, changing social values, and the encroachment of global cultural influences, directly impacting the continuity of this tradition and necessitating a deeper exploration of preservation strategies. To understand how best to preserve this musical tradition, it is essential to explore existing literature on the theories of musical literacy, ethnomusicology, and cultural sustainability. This literature review will examine these theories, providing a framework for investigating the current status of Baxian music and identifying effective strategies for promoting preservation literacy within the community.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Musical Literacy

Musical literacy extends beyond the ability to read and write music; it encompasses a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, historical, and social contexts that give rise to musical traditions. In the case of Baxian Chinese folk traditional music, musical literacy involves recognizing the intricate connections between the music and the rituals, beliefs, and daily practices of the local communities in Fengshan County. Theories of musical literacy emphasize the importance of fostering an informed and engaged audience that not only appreciates the aesthetic qualities of the music but also understands its more profound cultural significance. This understanding is crucial in addressing the research questions of how Baxian music can be effectively preserved and how literacy related to this music can be promoted within the community. Promoting musical literacy among younger generations is particularly crucial, as it can help bridge the

gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring that Baxian music is not merely preserved as a static artifact but continues to evolve as a living tradition (Davis, 2005; Howard, 2016; McPherson, 2015).

### Ethnomusicological Approaches to Cultural Preservation

Ethnomusicology, which studies music in its cultural context, offers valuable insights into preserving traditional music like Baxian. This discipline highlights the role of music as a medium through which cultural identity and social values are communicated and maintained. Ethnomusicologists argue that preserving a musical tradition requires more than just safeguarding the music itself; it also involves preserving the cultural practices and social structures supporting it. This approach addresses the research question of how Baxian music can be sustained within its cultural context, ensuring that preservation efforts go beyond the music to include the broader cultural ecosystem. In Fengshan County, the transmission of Baxian music has traditionally relied on oral methods and community-based practices. However, these methods are increasingly under threat due to societal changes and the waning interest among younger generations. Ethnomusicological theories suggest that effective preservation strategies should involve revitalizing the community's engagement with the music, supporting the transmitters of the tradition, and creating new spaces for the music to thrive in contemporary society (Harrop-Allin, 2005; Howard, 2016; Treloyn & Emberly, 2013).

### Cultural Sustainability and Literacy Preservation

Cultural sustainability focuses on the long-term viability of cultural practices and traditions, emphasizing the need for adaptive strategies that respond to changing social and environmental conditions. In the context of Baxian music, cultural sustainability involves developing approaches that preserve the music in its traditional form and allow it to adapt and flourish in the modern world. This concept is essential to the research objective of understanding how to promote literacy preservation to ensure the continuity of Baxian music. Literacy preservation, which encompasses the knowledge and skills required to maintain and transmit cultural heritage, plays a critical role in this process. Theories of cultural sustainability argue that preservation efforts must be dynamic and inclusive, engaging both the older generation of transmitters and the younger generation of potential practitioners. By promoting literacy preservation, communities can ensure Baxian music remains relevant and accessible, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in the tradition among all community members (Barthel-Bouchier, 2016; Howard, 2016; Huang & Thotham, 2024). This alignment with the research questions highlights the importance of cultural sustainability in the effective preservation and transmission of Baxian music.

### METHODS

The theoretical framework, grounded in musical literacy, ethnomusicology, and cultural sustainability, informs both the

design and analysis of this research. By integrating these theories, the study explores preservation practices and how literacy related to Baxian music is developed, transmitted, and sustained within its cultural context. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of the cultural, historical, and social contexts that influence the preservation and transmission of Baxian music. The research is structured around investigating the practices, challenges, and opportunities for promoting literacy preservation among the community members and transmitters of this traditional music. Specifically, the theoretical perspectives on musical literacy guide exploring how community members understand and engage with Baxian music. At the same time, ethnomusicological approaches shape the investigation of the cultural and social structures that support its transmission. Cultural sustainability principles are applied to assess these practices' long-term viability and identify adaptive strategies to enhance preservation efforts. The methodology includes case studies, interviews, participant observations, and document analysis to operationalize these theoretical concepts and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

### Research Design

The research follows a structured design that includes the following key steps:

#### *Selection of research site*

The research is conducted in Fengshan County, Hechi City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, where Baxian music is traditionally practiced and preserved. The area's rich cultural heritage and deep roots in Baxian music make it an ideal site for investigating the current status of this musical tradition.

#### *Selection of informants*

This study examined three distinct groups: key informants, general informants, and casual informants. Key informants provided deep cultural insights, general informants provided broader views, and casual informants added context, as shown in Table 1.

### Data Collection

#### *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all informant groups to gather detailed insights into the preservation

status and challenges faced by Baxian music. The interviews focused on the informants' experiences, observed changes in the tradition, and their views on promoting literacy preservation.

#### *Participant observation*

The researcher participated in local ceremonies and celebrations where Baxian music was performed, allowing for firsthand observation of the music's role and significance in the community. These observations provided contextual understanding and enriched the data collected from interviews.

#### *Document analysis*

Historical documents, local records, and existing literature on Baxian music were analyzed to trace the evolution of the tradition and understand the broader cultural and historical context.

### Data Management and Analysis

All the information gathered, like interview transcripts, observation notes, and analyzed documents, was put into categories that made sense with the research questions and objectives. These categories were initially derived from the theoretical framework, which informed the coding process. Key themes, such as current practices, challenges in preservation, and opportunities to promote literacy, were identified and used to organize the data. The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved several stages. First, the data was coded line-by-line to identify initial patterns, then grouping these codes into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives. Themes were refined by examining their relationships, ensuring they accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and the contextual factors influencing Baxian music preservation. Particular attention was given to how these themes intersected with the theoretical concepts of musical literacy, ethnomusicology, and cultural sustainability, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the data. This approach enabled the extraction of meaningful conclusions and formulating recommendations to enhance literacy preservation, ensuring a thorough analysis. Throughout the process, constant comparison was employed to refine themes and sub-themes, ensuring they were representative of the diverse experiences and insights of the informants.

**Table 1.** Selection criteria for informants

Informant Group	Number	Criteria
Key Informants	2	Key informants were selected based on their extensive knowledge and experience with Baxian music. These individuals were born and raised in Fengshan County, have deep cultural insights into Baxian music, and have been active practitioners for many years.
General Informants	4	General informants were selected based on their familiarity with Baxian culture and music and their years of practitioner experience.
Casual Informants	1	Casual informants include locals interested in Baxian music, such as cultural enthusiasts or individuals working in related fields like tourism and cultural preservation.

## RESULTS

This study focuses on how literacy preservation can be effectively promoted to ensure its continuity for future generations. The research findings are organized into three main sections, each addressing critical aspects of literacy preservation. These sections provide a comprehensive analysis of the existing practices, challenges, and opportunities for promoting literacy in the context of Baxian music preservation, highlighting the essential steps needed to safeguard this cultural heritage.

### Current Literacy Practices in Baxian Music Preservation

The literacy preservation of Baxian Chinese folk traditional music in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, is deeply intertwined with the region's rich oral traditions. This musical literacy, which refers to the knowledge, skills, and practices involved in preserving and transmitting Baxian music, has been passed down through generations primarily through oral instruction, personal demonstration, and communal participation. The research aimed to uncover the current status of these literacy practices, focusing on how they support or hinder the ongoing preservation of Baxian music.

Interviews with key informants, including veteran Baxian musicians who have been practicing for decades, revealed that the transmission of Baxian music is mainly informal and rooted in the daily life and rituals of the local community. These musicians, who have acquired their skills through years of apprenticeship under older masters, continue to pass on their knowledge similarly. Figures 1 and 2 show that this process is not confined to a classroom or formal setting but occurs naturally within community events, such as weddings and religious ceremonies.

Figure 1 shows a seated performance by Baxian musicians, a typical scene during wedding ceremonies. In these settings, the musicians not only perform but also actively engage in the process of literacy transmission. Younger or less experienced musicians observe and imitate the elders' techniques, learning the music's nuances through direct



**Figure 1.** Musicians sitting and performing  
Source: Ruiling Liu, from fieldwork in October 2023

participation. While effective in maintaining the authenticity and tradition of Baxian music, this method of transmission relies heavily on the availability and willingness of skilled musicians to teach and the readiness of the younger generation to learn.

Similarly, Figure 2 captures a walking performance, another traditional aspect of Baxian music literacy. During these processional events, such as when a groom's party travels to the bride's home, the Baxian musicians play while walking, providing both a live performance and a mobile teaching session. The movement through the landscape while playing adds a layer of complexity to the music, which the younger musicians absorb through experience rather than formal instruction.

However, relying on oral transmission poses significant challenges to preserving Baxian music literacy. One of the primary concerns identified through interviews is the lack of written documentation or musical scores. Unlike Western music traditions, where literacy often involves reading and writing music, Baxian music literacy remains almost entirely oral. This means that the music's survival is contingent on the memory and oral skills of the current practitioners. As the older generation of musicians ages, there is a growing risk that much of this knowledge could be lost if not effectively passed on to the next generation.

Furthermore, their insular nature limits current literacy practices in Baxian music. The music is primarily shared within a small, localized community, with few opportunities for broader dissemination. Due to the possibility that those outside the community may have limited access to the tradition, this insularity reduces the potential audience for the music and the pool of potential learners.

The lack of structured teaching methods further complicates the preservation of Baxian music literacy. While the informal, experience-based learning model has sustained the music for generations, it may not be sufficient in the face of modern challenges such as urbanization, the influence of popular culture, and the migration of younger people away from rural areas. Without a more formalized approach to teaching Baxian music, there is a danger that these traditional practices could fade away.



**Figure 2.** Musicians walking and performing  
Source: Ruiling Liu, from fieldwork in October 2023

### Challenges to Literacy Preservation in Baxian Music

The literacy preservation of Baxian Chinese folk traditional music in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, faces several pressing challenges threatening its survival and continuity. In this context, literacy preservation refers to the collective understanding, skills, and practices necessary to sustain the knowledge and transmission of Baxian music across generations. Despite the deep cultural significance of Baxian music, several factors impede the development and maintenance of this literacy.

A primary challenge to literacy preservation is the reliance on oral transmission methods, which have historically been the primary means of passing down Baxian music. While ensuring the tradition's authenticity and purity, this method presents significant vulnerabilities. The aging population of Baxian musicians, who are the custodians of this musical heritage, is a critical concern. Interviews with key informants highlighted a lack of younger individuals willing to commit to the rigorous and time-consuming process of mastering Baxian music through oral tradition. This generational gap threatens the continuity of literacy preservation, as the nuanced techniques and cultural contexts embedded in the music risk being lost if not adequately passed on.

Cultural shifts within the community also pose a significant threat to the preservation of the literacy of Baxian music. With the rapid modernization and globalization of rural areas like Fengshan County, younger generations are increasingly drawn to contemporary and popular music genres. This shift in musical preferences contributes to declining interest in traditional forms such as Baxian music. The interviews revealed that many young people perceive Baxian music as outdated and irrelevant to their modern lifestyles, further eroding the base of individuals who preserve this musical tradition.

Another challenge is the lack of formal documentation and systematic academic research on Baxian music. Unlike more widely recognized musical traditions, Baxian music remains undocumented, relying instead on oral knowledge that is not quickly transcribed or standardized. This absence of written records and formal educational resources significantly hampers efforts to promote literacy preservation.

Without a structured curriculum or scholarly attention, it becomes difficult to teach Baxian music to new learners in a way that preserves its integrity and richness. Moreover, the lack of documentation limits the integration of Baxian music into broader cultural preservation programs, thereby reducing its visibility and accessibility.

Economic pressures also play a crucial role in hindering literacy preservation. Fengshan County's economic constraints limit the resources needed to support the preservation and transmission of Baxian music. Many current transmitters face financial challenges that necessitate prioritizing their livelihoods over cultural transmission. This economic reality reduces the time and energy they can devote to teaching the next generation, further exacerbating the risk of cultural erosion. The lack of financial support for preservation initiatives, including training programs and cultural events, further diminishes the prospects for sustaining Baxian music literacy.

### Opportunities for Enhancing Literacy Preservation in Baxian Music

Preserving Baxian Chinese folk traditional music in Fengshan County offers several opportunities to enhance literacy preservation, ensuring that this cultural heritage is sustained for future generations. Through careful analysis of the current practices and interviews with key informants, it has become evident that leveraging these opportunities can significantly contribute to the continuity and revival of Baxian music.

One of the most promising opportunities lies in formalizing the documentation and transcription of Baxian music. Traditionally, this music has been passed down orally, which, while maintaining its authenticity, has also made it vulnerable to loss as the number of experienced transmitters diminishes. The transcription of critical pieces like "Jin Ji Fan Ling" is shown in Figure 3.

Written scores represent a crucial step in preserving the musical literacy associated with Baxian music. This transcription preserves the music and provides a tangible resource that can be used in educational settings, allowing new learners to engage with the music more effectively. By capturing the intricate melodies and rhythms of Baxian music, such as the up-and-down melodic patterns highlighted in Figure 4,



**Figure 3.** The music score 'Jin Ji Fan Ling' of Baxian music  
Source: Ruiling Liu, transcription from fieldwork in October 2023

educators can develop more structured teaching methods that help students internalize and appreciate the nuances of this musical tradition.

Moreover, analyzing the structure of pieces like “Jin Ji Fan Ling” reveals the complex compositional techniques inherent in Baxian music, which can be further explored and taught as part of broader music literacy programs. By integrating these traditional musical elements into formal music education curricula, there is an opportunity to raise awareness and appreciation of Baxian music among younger generations. This integration could involve the development of specific modules that focus on the literacy skills needed to understand and perform Baxian music, thus ensuring that the knowledge and skills associated with this tradition are not lost, as shown in Figure 5.

Modern technology offers another significant opportunity for enhancing the literacy and preservation of Baxian music. Digital platforms can be vital in preserving and disseminating Baxian music to a broader audience. For instance, creating digital archives of Baxian music performances and making them accessible online can help ensure that this music is preserved and shared with people beyond Fengshan County. Such platforms can serve as educational resources, providing learners with audio and video recordings that complement the transcriptions and theoretical studies of Baxian music. This approach allows for a more comprehensive and immersive learning experience, where students can see and hear how the music is performed in its cultural context.

Furthermore, community-based initiatives offer another avenue for enhancing literacy preservation. Engaging local communities in preservation can foster a sense of ownership and pride in Baxian music, encouraging more active participation. Workshops, festivals, and public performances can serve as platforms for teaching and celebrating Baxian music, keeping it alive in the community. These events can also facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, where experienced musicians share their skills and insights with younger participants, ensuring that the tradition is passed down effectively.



**Figure 4.** The melody of “Jin Ji Fan Ling” presents an up-and-down pattern

Source: Ruiling Liu, analyzed from fieldwork in October 2023

	A				A1			
introduction	a	b	c	d	a + b1	c1	d1	
2	4	7	4	5	4	7	4	6

**Figure 5.** The structure of the “Jin Ji Fan Ling.”

Source: Ruiling Liu, analyzed from fieldwork in October 2023

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results underscore the vital role of musical literacy in preserving Baxian music, consistent with Davis (2005) and McPherson (2015), who emphasize the importance of a deep understanding of cultural, historical, and social contexts in sustaining musical traditions. As observed in this study, the reliance on oral transmission methods aligns with Howard’s (2016) assertion that musical literacy involves the ability to perform music and an understanding of its cultural significance. However, the lack of formal documentation and structured teaching methods in Baxian music presents a challenge that contrasts with the more formalized approaches to musical literacy discussed in Western contexts (Hallam & Prince, 2003). This gap suggests a need for more systematic efforts to document and teach Baxian music, mainly through written transcriptions and formal educational programs, to ensure its survival.

The ethnomusicological perspective highlights the importance of preserving the music and the cultural practices and social structures that support it (Treloyn & Emberly, 2013; Harrop-Allin, 2005). The findings from this study reveal that Baxian music remains deeply embedded in the community’s rituals and daily life, which supports the notion that cultural preservation must encompass the broader social context in which the music exists. However, the study also identifies significant challenges, such as the generational gap in knowledge transmission and the declining interest among younger generations. These challenges resonate with Yang and Welch’s (2014) observations of similar difficulties in other traditional music contexts in China, where modern influences and shifting cultural values threaten the continuity of traditional practices. Addressing these challenges requires innovative strategies that engage younger generations, such as incorporating modern technology and digital platforms to make Baxian music more accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences.

Cultural sustainability theories emphasize the need for adaptive strategies that respond to changing social and environmental conditions (Barthel-Bouchier, 2016). This study’s findings highlight the potential for enhancing literacy preservation through modern technology and community-based initiatives. As illustrated in this study, the successful transcription of Baxian music represents a crucial step toward cultural sustainability, allowing for both the preservation of the music’s traditional form and its adaptation to new contexts. This approach aligns with Huang and Thotham’s (2024) work on conserving other Chinese folk music traditions, where combining traditional practices with modern tools has proven effective in sustaining cultural heritage. However, the Fengshan County community’s economic constraints suggest that additional financial and institutional support is necessary to realize these opportunities for full preservation.

This study on the literacy preservation of Baxian Chinese folk traditional music provides valuable insights into the current status, challenges, and opportunities for safeguarding this cultural heritage in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The findings reveal that while Baxian

music remains a vital part of the local community's cultural identity, it faces significant threats from modernization, changing cultural values, and economic pressures. Though effective in maintaining the authenticity of the tradition, the reliance on oral transmission methods poses a risk to the music's continuity as the older generation of practitioners ages and the interest among younger people declines.

The study's findings are consistent with existing theories of musical literacy, ethnomusicology, and cultural sustainability, highlighting the need for more systematic and innovative approaches to preservation. The successful transcription of Baxian music and the potential for using digital platforms and community-based initiatives to enhance literacy preservation represent promising avenues for future efforts. However, the economic and institutional challenges identified in this study suggest that further support is needed to ensure the long-term sustainability of Baxian music.

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