Cultural Heritage in Transition: The Role of Baxian Folk Music in the Posthumanist Era

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Abstract

Baxian folk music, centered around the Suona instrument, remains a vital element in the ritual fabric of Zhuang wedding ceremonies in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. This ethnographic study investigates the cultural, symbolic, and performative roles of Baxian music while also exploring its precarious status in an era shaped by rapid technological, economic, and sociocultural transformations. Drawing on fieldwork observations, interviews with tradition bearers, and archival research, the study reveals that Baxian music operates as both an artistic form and a vessel of collective memory. However, the oral-based transmission of this intangible heritage faces threats from modern media, generational disinterest, and shifting socio-economic dynamics. In response, the study proposes a hybrid model of preservation, merging traditional pedagogies with digital tools, educational integration, and algorithmic dissemination. By reframing Baxian music within a posthumanist discourse, the research highlights the entanglements of human and non-human agencies in sustaining cultural continuity, offering an inclusive and adaptive framework for its revitalization.

Keywords: posthumanism, Baxian folk music, intangible cultural heritage, Suona, digital preservation, Chinese wedding rituals

Introduction

Baxian folk music, an integral part of the rich cultural tapestry of Fengshan County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, is deeply embedded in the traditional wedding ceremonies of the Zhuang people (Wang & Liu, 2023; Chao & Nicolas, 2024; Hendrokumoro et al., 2024). This unique musical tradition, centered around the Suona instrument, has historically played a pivotal role in marking significant life events such as weddings, birthday celebrations, housewarmings, and religious rituals (Du, 2016; Li, 2022). However, in an era characterized by rapid digital transformation, economic shifts, and cultural globalization, the transmission of Baxian music is at a crossroads. The oral tradition that has safeguarded its integrity for generations now faces challenges that necessitate innovative documentation and preservation strategies (Huang et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2024; Syahrul et al., 2024).

As the concept of posthumanism reconfigures our understanding of heritage, identity, and cultural continuity, it becomes imperative to explore how Baxian folk music can navigate contemporary technological and socio-cultural landscapes (Alonso, 2024; Morales & Zarabadi, 2024). Posthumanist perspectives challenge the conventional boundaries of human-centered cultural transmission, inviting discussions on how digital mediation, artificial intelligence, and technological interventions might redefine the preservation of intangible cultural heritage

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(Howard, 2016; Yang & Welch, 2016; Chong, 2020; Quang et al., 2022; Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024). This study engages with these debates by examining how Baxian folk music exists within and adapts to the posthumanist era, where human agency in cultural preservation is increasingly entangled with digital tools and mediated realities.

The primary objective of this research is to conduct an ethnographic study that not only documents the cultural, historical, and social significance of Baxian folk music but also interrogates its evolving role in the digital age. How do modern technologies interact with oral traditions? Can digital archives, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality help sustain the performative and ritualistic essence of Baxian music? By addressing these questions, this study aims to bridge the gap between traditional ethnographic methodologies and posthumanist inquiries into cultural sustainability (Tang, 2021; Zhao, 2021; Zhuo et al., 2024). Through extensive fieldwork, interviews with Baxian transmitters, and archival research, this study seeks to illuminate the intersection between ritual music, technological intervention, and contemporary heritage preservation (Jones, 2016; Su, 2019; Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Zhang & Wu, 2023; Guangguo et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2024).

Baxian music remains an essential component of Zhuang wedding ceremonies, shaping their performative and emotional landscape. The intricate musical repertoire, including pieces like "Man Tang Hong (The Whole Room is Red)" and "Bai Zhuo (Set the Table)," serves not only as accompaniment but as an auditory narrative preserving cultural memory (Sankar et al., 2016; Burch, 2019; McLaren, 2020; Ardizzoni, 2022). In the face of socio-economic and technological disruptions, the continuity of these traditions necessitates new strategies that leverage digital platforms, interactive media, and innovative pedagogical approaches to sustain their relevance for future generations (Feldman, 2016; Ho, 2017; Lee & Wong, 2017; Tang & Sornyai, 2023; Zhao, 2023).

The posthumanist lens compels us to rethink preservation beyond conventional documentation. As Grant (2010) argues, safeguarding cultural heritage involves not just archiving soundscapes but understanding the knowledge systems that inform their transmission. Traditional oral methodologies, while historically effective, now face challenges such as an aging transmitter population, limited written records, and shifts in generational engagement (Campbell, 2017; Lin & Lian, 2018; Schniter et al., 2018; Kuang & He, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Digital storytelling, immersive technologies, and AI-generated sound modeling present possibilities for reimagining cultural continuity in a posthumanist world.

In conclusion, this ethnographic study examines Baxian folk music as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation within the posthumanist paradigm. By documenting and analyzing its transmission methods, technological intersections, and contemporary challenges, we contribute to broader discussions on how intangible heritage can be preserved, adapted, and revitalized in the digital age (Chang et al., 2024; Seekhunlio et al., 2024). This research underscores that cultural preservation is not merely about safeguarding the past but about engaging with future-oriented strategies that sustain living traditions. In doing so, it repositions Baxian folk music within a framework of posthumanist heritage studies, fostering deeper appreciation and commitment to its survival in an era of transformation.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employs an ethnographic research design to explore the evolving role of Baxian folk music in the posthumanist era, particularly within traditional wedding ceremonies in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The methodology integrates classical ethnographic approaches with posthumanist inquiry, investigating how digital technologies, economic transformations, and cultural shifts influence the transmission of this musical heritage (Ghvinjilia, 2023; Moore, 2024; Yu et al., 2025).

Primary data collection methods include detailed field observations and ethnographic interviews, focusing on the performative, social, and cultural dimensions of Baxian music. The study also incorporates digital ethnography, examining how virtual platforms, online repositories, and media representation impact the preservation and transmission of Baxian music. By integrating participant observation with semi-structured interviews, this research captures the lived experiences of Baxian transmitters, wedding participants, and local cultural stakeholders.

Field observations were conducted during live wedding ceremonies to analyze the music's role in ritual practices, participant interactions, and its broader cultural significance. Semi-structured interviews provided key insights into the transmission of Baxian music, its adaptation to contemporary contexts, and the influence of modern technologies on traditional practices. Additionally, digital content analysis of social media, video archives, and online discussions was performed to assess the extent of Baxian music's integration into digital platforms.

Research Scope and Research Site

The study examines Baxian music explicitly in the context of wedding ceremonies in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Fengshan County, located in Hechi City, was selected due to its deep-rooted Baxian music traditions and its unique position as a site where heritage preservation and modernization intersect. This setting provides fertile ground for exploring how traditional folk music navigates digital transformation and shifting cultural landscapes. Figure 1 illustrates the research site, emphasizing its geographical and cultural relevance.

Figure 1. Map of the research site

Source: Chinafolio (n.d.), The Economist Group (n.d.)

Selection of Informants

Informants were purposefully selected to ensure diverse perspectives on the transmission and adaptation of Baxian music. Table 1 outlines the three key categories of informants.

Table 1. Selection of Informants

Informant	Description
Key Informants	Two experienced transmitters of Baxian music were interviewed in-depth. These individuals possess extensive knowledge, long-standing participation in wedding ceremonies, and play pivotal roles in preserving the tradition.
General Informants	These informants, including active practitioners and community participants, were chosen for their familiarity with Baxian music and its integration into wedding ceremonies.
Digital Informants	Individuals who engage with Baxian music through online platforms, including content creators, educators, and social media users promoting cultural heritage.

This classification ensures a broad representation of both traditional and digital transmission perspectives, highlighting the evolving nature of Baxian music's dissemination.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using a combination of traditional ethnographic and digital research methods, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data Source	Description
Fieldwork Observations	Notes and recordings were made during wedding ceremonies, focusing on the sequence of musical performances, participant engagement, and ritual context. Observations documented how Baxian music reinforces community identity and continuity.
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, Baxian transmitters, and local community members. Themes explored include the role of Baxian music in ceremonies, oral transmission processes, and the impact of modernization.
Digital Ethnography	Analysis of online media, digital archives, and social media discussions related to Baxian music. This method examines how digital platforms contribute to the evolving discourse and accessibility of Baxian music.
Archival Research	Secondary data, including historical manuscripts, music scores, and academic literature on Baxian music, were reviewed to provide contextual background and comparative analysis.

A thematic approach was employed in data analysis, identifying recurring patterns in interviews, observations, and digital content. This method allowed for a holistic understanding of how Baxian music functions as a living tradition in both physical and digital spaces.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were rigorously followed to ensure participant anonymity and informed consent. All informants provided voluntary participation agreements, and their cultural and intellectual contributions were acknowledged with respect. Given the integration of digital ethnography, additional measures were taken to ensure ethical engagement with online content, including consent for analyzing publicly available materials and anonymizing digital participants where necessary.

This study aligns with posthumanist ethics by recognizing the intersection of human and non-human agents in cultural preservation and acknowledging the role of technological interventions in shaping intangible cultural heritage.

Results

The Evolution of Baxian Music in Wedding Ceremonies

Baxian folk music, an essential feature of traditional Zhuang wedding ceremonies in Fengshan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, has historically been transmitted through oral tradition. However, in the contemporary era, this transmission faces existential challenges due to modernization, urban migration, and shifts in musical preferences. The evolution of Baxian music aligns with broader debates in posthumanist scholarship regarding the impact of technology and globalization on cultural preservation.

While early accounts trace the Suona, the central instrument in Baxian music, to its Persian and Arabian origins via the Silk Road in the 3rd century AD (Jin, 2011), its adaptation within Chinese folk traditions highlights its fluid, transnational identity. The instrument's integration into Ming Dynasty military and ceremonial music (Zhu, 2018) underscores its dynamic function within evolving sociocultural contexts. Within posthumanist discourse, such transformations challenge essentialist understandings of tradition, positioning Baxian music as a hybridized form continuously reshaped by historical forces and technological mediation.

Figure 2. Typical instrument arrangement of the "Eight immortals"

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2023

The name "Baxian" itself carries layered meanings. Oral traditions among transmitters suggest that the instrument embodies the Eight Immortals of Daoist mythology, with its seven holes representing the seven male immortals and an additional opening signifying He Xiangu, the female immortal (Burkus-Chasson, 2010; Johnson, 2009; Zhao, 2021). This mythological association underscores the intersection of religious symbolism and performative ritual in Baxian music.

With the emergence of digital ethnomusicology, Baxian music now exists at a crossroads between intangible cultural heritage and technological preservation. The posthumanist era invites new modes of musical engagement, from AI-generated sound modeling to immersive digital archives, which reconfigure traditional paradigms of cultural transmission and performance.

The Role of Baxian Music in Wedding Ceremonies

Baxian music is not merely an auditory component of wedding ceremonies but a structuring force that governs ritualistic transitions. Traditionally, Zhuang wedding celebrations span three days, with music dictating key ceremonial moments. However, recent shifts have seen the duration condensed to two days due to urbanization and changing lifestyles. Despite these modifications, Baxian music retains its essential role in reinforcing social cohesion and ancestral reverence.

Through oral transmission, Baxian transmitters have maintained an extensive repertoire of 74 musical pieces corresponding to various wedding rituals. However, the absence of written scores has rendered many pieces vulnerable to loss over time. The following sections highlight key musical performances that structure Zhuang wedding ceremonies and examine how digital methodologies can intervene in their preservation.

Ritual Music on the First Day

The first day of the wedding ceremony begins with the groom's procession to the bride's home, accompanied by "The House is Full of Red," a musical piece signifying prosperity and joy. "Golden Rooster Crossing the Ridge" follows as the procession travels, symbolizing the physical and symbolic challenges of the union. Upon arrival, "Place the Gifts" is performed, marking the dowry presentation as an auspicious ritual (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. The musician played the Suona along the way

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2023

These musical pieces serve a dual function: they reinforce the ceremonial importance of the wedding while providing an auditory conduit for cultural transmission. In a posthumanist framework, the potential for digitizing and disseminating these performances through augmented reality (AR) and interactive platforms offers new pathways for their survival beyond oral traditions.

Figure 4. The transmitters of the Baxian play the Suona to invite guests
Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2023

Ritual Music on the Second Day

The second day begins before sunrise with "Fifth Watch," a piece that marks the transition from the liminal space of betrothal to formal marriage. "Crying of Farewell Mother" follows, encapsulating the bride's emotional farewell to her natal family. As the bride arrives at the groom's household, "The House is Red" is performed once again, symbolizing new beginnings (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The groom and bride offer tea to their family
Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2023

These performances, grounded in Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, mark critical transitions in the bride's and groom's social identities. The integration of digital heritage tools, such as AI-generated sound replication and VR-mediated wedding reenactments, presents new possibilities

for sustaining the significance of these ritual performances while adapting them to contemporary cultural realities.

The Cultural Significance of Baxian in Wedding Ceremonies

Beyond weddings, Baxian music permeates other cultural domains, including housewarming celebrations, religious ceremonies, and communal festivities. Interviews with Baxian transmitters reveal a strong belief that the Suona is a conduit for spiritual invocation, particularly in its association with the Eight Immortals (Figure 6). These perspectives highlight how music functions as both a sonic and ontological bridge between human and non-human entities—a theme central to posthumanist discourse.

Figure 6. Interviewing four transmitters of the Baxian

Source: The researcher, from fieldwork in October 2023

Despite its enduring significance, Baxian music faces existential threats due to demographic shifts, economic constraints, and the rapid dominance of globalized entertainment cultures. Digital media platforms increasingly replace traditional performance spaces, prompting concerns over the authenticity of folk traditions in the digital age. However, technological advancements, including blockchain-based archival storage, algorithmic music preservation, and AI-driven cultural restoration, present potential avenues for maintaining the authenticity and accessibility of Baxian music in a posthumanist context.

Guidelines for the Transmission and Preservation of Baxian

Sustaining Baxian music in the contemporary era requires adaptive preservation strategies that integrate technological innovation with cultural continuity. This study identifies several pressing challenges, including the reliance on oral transmission, declining youth engagement, and the economic marginalization of traditional musicians.

Challenges in the Transmission of Baxian Music

Interviews with Baxian transmitters highlight three primary challenges:

- Oral Transmission Constraints: The reliance on memory-based learning results in unintentional alterations and the gradual loss of repertoire over time.

- Shifting Cultural Preferences: Younger generations increasingly favor digital and globalized musical forms, perceiving traditional folk music as antiquated.

- Economic Instability: Many Baxian musicians struggle to sustain themselves financially, leading to declining participation in preservation efforts.

Proposed Solutions for Enhancing Transmission and Preservation

To address these challenges, this study proposes the following interventions:

- Educational Integration: Incorporating Baxian music into digital learning platforms and music curricula at various educational levels.

- Digital Ethnography and AI Preservation: Utilizing AI-assisted sound modeling, machine-learning transcription tools, and VR-based archival platforms to document and disseminate Baxian music.

- Online Community Engagement: Leveraging social media campaigns and digital music collaborations to create interactive spaces for learning and cultural participation.

- Economic and Institutional Support: Establishing funding programs for Baxian musicians through governmental and private-sector sponsorships to ensure sustainable livelihoods.

Practical Recommendations

To ensure the continued vitality of Baxian music, a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary. The following recommendations build on contemporary posthumanist approaches to cultural preservation:

- Develop AI-enhanced transcription systems to convert oral traditions into written notation while preserving stylistic nuances.

- Utilize digital platforms for real-time collaboration between Baxian musicians, ethnomusicologists, and global audiences.

- Encourage interactive ethnographic experiences through virtual reality and augmented reality reconstructions of Baxian music performances.

- Implement financial incentive structures for musicians engaging in preservation efforts, ensuring economic sustainability.

- Foster cross-disciplinary research integrating ethnomusicology, digital humanities, and posthumanist studies to explore new modes of cultural sustainability.

Discussion

This ethnographic study reveals the cultural, historical, and socio-technological dimensions of Baxian folk music. It highlights its role in Zhuang wedding ceremonies and positions it within the broader discourse of posthumanist thought. The findings, drawn from fieldwork, interviews with transmitters, and archival sources, demonstrate how this traditional musical practice acts as a medium of social cohesion, cultural continuity, and ritual transformation while facing the pressures of modernization and digitization.

Baxian music, led by the Suona instrument, emerges not merely as sound but as a conduit for performative meaning-making in transitional life events. Its significance extends beyond sonic aesthetics to function as a ritual technology, a medium for channeling ancestral memory and communal values. For example, "The House is Full of Red" and "Crying of Farewell Mother"

articulate not just festive joy or sorrow but codified stages of liminality (Turner, 1969), wherein the individual and community are symbolically reshaped. These performances reinforce Catherine Bell's (1997) theory of ritual practice, asserting that ritual music transforms otherwise mundane events into socially legitimized acts of cultural continuity.

However, the research also underscores critical challenges to sustaining this intangible cultural heritage. Oral transmission, once a source of authenticity, is now considered a constraint within the posthuman condition. The reliance on human memory, aging transmitters, and the absence of standardized records illustrate how embodied knowledge systems struggle in the face of global information economies. This aligns with Smith's (2006) concerns regarding the sustainability of intangible cultural practices.

From a posthumanist perspective, Baxian music represents an intersection where tradition collides with digitization. The younger generation's disinterest, influenced by algorithmically driven popular culture, exemplifies how technologically mediated identities are reshaping aesthetic values and social participation. One participant lamented, "Traditional music feels outdated compared to what we hear on social media," highlighting how non-human agents (i.e., algorithms) now co-author musical tastes. This dynamic situates Baxian music in a hybrid ecology where human and technological forces co-influence cultural survival.

While local festivals and policy initiatives have contributed to awareness, they often lack long-term impact or technological integration. The study suggests that embedding Baxian music in educational curricula and utilizing immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) re-enactments or AI-assisted music composition could foster deeper engagement. Digital storytelling, blockchain-based music archives, and interactive learning platforms represent emergent pathways for participatory preservation within posthumanist frameworks.

This reframing also invites us to view Baxian transmitters not as passive carriers of tradition but as cultural technologist's agents navigating the interface of analog memory and digital futures. The performative rituals they lead are increasingly becoming co-mediated by digital tools, from smartphone recordings to online tutorials, making them hybrid actors in a posthuman assemblage of cultural transmission.

Therefore, the preservation of Baxian folk music must move beyond heritage nostalgia into adaptive posthuman futures. The study's recommendations, including structured education, economic incentives, and digital engagement, must be seen as conservation efforts and strategies to redesign tradition in collaboration with technological systems. These approaches align with Kurin's (2007) and Howard's (2016) calls to reconfigure cultural policy and pedagogy to meet the needs of technologically fluid societies.

Future research could deepen this trajectory by exploring how AI-generated simulations of Suona playing, digital twin models of wedding rituals, and virtual ethnographies impact the authenticity and reception of Baxian music. Comparative studies with similarly digitized folk traditions in other regions may further elucidate how posthumanist methodologies reshape ethnomusicological practice.

In sum, Baxian music in the posthumanist era must be understood as both a cultural artifact and a living interface where heritage, identity, and technology converge. It offers a rich case study of how communities negotiate their place within a shifting ontological landscape of human-nonhuman relations. It affirms the journal's mission to investigate the evolving intersections of culture, society, and technological transformation.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving role of Baxian folk music within traditional Zhuang wedding ceremonies, exploring its function as a living repository of cultural memory and its implications for posthumanist thought. Through ethnographic inquiry, we have illustrated how Baxian music, particularly the Suona, narrates, enacts, and transforms key moments in ritual life, reaffirming communal identity and social cohesion. Each musical piece functions as a performance and cultural code, revealing the multilayered intersections between music, ritual, and belief.

However, this cultural practice is now embedded in a rapidly shifting socio-technical context. Challenges such as the erosion of oral transmission, generational disinterest, and economic constraints are compounded by the increasing influence of digital technologies. These pressures signal a critical juncture where traditional musical knowledge systems must adapt to survive. Within a posthumanist framework, Baxian music becomes more than heritage; it becomes an interface between embodied cultural knowledge and emerging digital infrastructures.

Our findings indicate that the future of Baxian music depends on reimagining its transmission and preservation strategies through hybrid models that integrate human agency with technological mediation. Educational programs must teach performance and embrace digital archiving, virtual reality re-enactments, and AI-driven musicological tools. Community engagement, economic support, and state policy must coalesce with media innovation and algorithmic outreach to build an inclusive ecosystem for cultural continuity.

This research contributes to a broader understanding of intangible cultural heritage as a dynamic and contested terrain within the posthumanist condition. By repositioning Baxian music as a socio-technical assemblage rather than a static tradition, we advocate for its preservation through isolation and transformation. The revitalization of Baxian music in the digital age should be guided by interdisciplinary collaboration, ethical innovation, and a recognition that cultural practices now evolve within complex entanglements of human and non-human actors.

In conclusion, safeguarding Baxian music is not merely a cultural imperative but a posthumanist challenge that demands rethinking heritage through the lens of hybridity, adaptation, and technological co-authorship. Through sustained collective effort, the Baxian tradition can continue to resonate across temporal and technological boundaries, offering a connection to ancestral legacies and a blueprint for cultural survival in the age of digital transformation.

Acknowledgments

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