

Of Mice and a Musical: A Youth Audience Perspective on Theatricalized Jiangzhou Drum Music in China

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Abstract

Laoshu Quqin (《老鼠娶親》) is a traditional folk narrative widely circulated across different regions of China. In 1988, Hao Shixun (郝世勛), who was then engaged in the collection of folk drum music at the Xinjiang County Cultural Center (新絳縣文化館) in Shanxi (山西) province, composed a percussion ensemble piece based on this narrative. Characterized by its humorous style and broad appeal with audiences of all ages, the piece gained widespread recognition and became one of the representative works of Jiangzhou Drum Music (絳州鼓樂). In 2019, the Chongdaoyuan Drum Music Troupe (崇道源鼓樂團) reinterpreted this piece as a musical theater production, using the innovative process of theatricalization as a strategy to engage younger audiences in a contemporary cultural context. Through an evaluation of young audiences' perceptions of the percussion-based musical theater *Laoshu Quqin*, this study examines the impact of theatricalization on Jiangzhou Drum Music. Based on semi-structured interviews with ten young Chinese audience members, the study analyzes how theatricalization affects the expressiveness of Jiangzhou Drum Music and its reception among contemporary audiences. While the integration of dialog, song, and drum music bridges the gap between traditional sounds and contemporary expectations, it also poses significant challenges in balancing these elements. The findings reveal that despite these challenges, young audiences are generally receptive to innovations in performance forms. This study offers a better understanding of the attitudes of youth toward the theatricalization of musical heritage and provides reference points for the innovative development of other traditional art forms. These insights are crucial to how Chinese traditional culture is transmitted and adapted in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Keywords: theatricalization, Jiangzhou Drum Music, Chinese youth audiences, musical theater, musical heritage

人鼠之樂： 探討青年觀眾視野下 中國絳州鼓樂的戲劇化

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摘 要

《老鼠娶親》是一則流傳於中國各地的傳統民間傳說。1988 年，新絳縣文化館從事民間鼓樂採集工作的郝世勛根據這一民間傳說創作了一首擊樂合奏曲。該作品因其曲風詼諧幽默、老少咸宜而廣受歡迎，並迅速成為絳州鼓樂的代表作品之一。2019 年，為了使其更符合現代社會年輕觀眾的口味，崇道源鼓樂團以創新的戲劇化形式將這首作品改編為音樂劇。本研究透過評估年輕觀眾對擊樂音樂劇《老鼠娶親》的感受，探討了戲劇化對中國絳州鼓樂的影響。透過對十位中國青年觀眾進行半結構化訪談，研究探討了戲劇化如何提升絳州鼓樂的表現力，使其更容易被現代觀眾接受。雖然融合對話、歌唱和鼓樂彌合了傳統聲音與當代期望之間的差距，但在平衡這些元素方面也迎來重大挑戰。研究結果顯示，儘管面臨這些挑戰，年輕觀眾在整體上仍樂於接受創新後的表演形式。本文深入了解了年輕人對音樂遺產戲劇化的態度，也為其他傳統藝術形式的創新發展提供了寶貴的見解。這些洞察力對於在快速變遷的文化景觀中如何繼續傳承和適應中國傳統文化的議題是至關重要的。

關鍵詞：戲劇化、絳州鼓樂、中國青年觀眾、音樂劇、音樂遺產

1. Introduction*

(1) Background

Jiangzhou Drum Music (絳州鼓樂) was included in the first batch of China's intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. It is popular in Xinjiang (新絳) county (formerly Jiangzhou, Xinjiang hereafter), Shanxi (山西) province, China. It originated in the pre-Qin dynasty and flourished in the Ming and Qing dynasties.¹ The three major performance features of Jiangzhou Drum Music include Storytelling, *Lei Dagū* (擂大鼓),² and *Huaqiao Ganda* (花敲乾打).³ With societal evolution, the performance setting of Jiangzhou Drum Music has transitioned from *Yingshen Saishe* (迎神賽社)⁴—temple festivals and fairs praying for rain and

* The authors would like to acknowledge the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education for supporting this project through Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) under Project No. FRGS/1/2019/SSI08/UPM/02/1.

¹ 張於鑄，《直隸絳州志》，第2卷，1879（光緒5年），收錄於《中國地方志集成：山西府縣志輯》，第59冊（南京：鳳凰出版社，2005），19（Yuzhu Zhang, *Chronicles of Jiangzhou*, vol. 2, 1879, in *Collection of Chinese Local Chronicles: A Compilation of Prefectural and County Chronicles of Shanxi*, vol. 59 (Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing, 2005), 19)。

² *Lei Dagū* can be explained as pounding the big Chinese drum. A notable example is the horse-drawn drum cart (馬拉鼓車) from the southern region of the Fen River (汾河) in Xinjiang county (e.g. Yangwang town 陽王鎮). This drum cart, which evolved from ancient war chariots, is known for its earth-shaking drumbeats and imposing presence. See 王禕，〈山西運城：千年鼓樂馬拉鼓車 策馬擊鼓「梅花開」〉，《中國新聞網》，2023年2月9日，<https://m.chinanews.com.cn/wap/detail/chs/sp/9950548.shtml>（Yi Wang, “Shanxi Yuncheng: Thousand-Year Drum Music on Horse-Drawn Drum Carts, Whipped Horses Strike Drums, ‘Plum Blossoms Bloom’,” *China News Network*, February 9, 2023, <https://m.chinanews.com.cn/wap/detail/chs/sp/9950548.shtml>）。

³ *Huaqiao Ganda* refers to a drumming style where no additional music is added beyond the drum sounds. The performance techniques include more than ten methods, such as striking the drum center, hitting the drum edge, tapping the drum rim, grinding the drum tack nails, rubbing the drum mallet, bumping the drum mallet, knocking the drum rings, rubbing the drum skin, rolling the drumsticks, and hitting the drum frame, among others. See 劉夢，〈淺析絳州鼓樂《滾核桃》〉（中央音樂學院碩士論文，2017），10（Meng Liu, “A Brief Analysis of Jiangzhou Drum Music *Rolling Walnuts*” (master’s thesis, Central Conservatory of Music, 2017), 10)。

⁴ *Yingshen Saishe* (or simply *Saishe*) refers to various temple festivals and fairs where local

exorcising evil spirits before the late 1980s—to weddings, funerals, shop openings, and art stages today.⁵ A primary reason for this transformation is China’s reforms, opening up, and establishing the market economy system. Therefore, after the early 1990s, economic benefits became one of the main drivers of Jiangzhou Drum Music performances.

Gong et al. point out that young people are a robust, compelling, and influential consumer group in the Chinese market, and they will determine future preferences and trends in the consumer market.⁶ While preserving tradition, some troupes of Jiangzhou Drum Music are attempting to blend traditional elements with modern ones, adding innovation to enhance the audience experience. This trend is similar to the *guochao* (國潮) phenomenon reported by Liu,⁷ which is a long-term identifiable tendency in the consumption behavior of contemporary Chinese youth. It satisfies youth consumers’ desire for individuality and pursuit of fashion while also being a widespread phenomenon arising from the natural return to traditional culture.

Modern Chinese youth often gravitate towards contemporary hobbies that diverge significantly from traditional intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, their comprehension of such heritage is typically limited, as they usually lack an emotional connection to conventional cultural elements.⁸ Such disconnect poses

communities offer sacrifices to their deities. These events—featuring musical and theatrical performances—are held to entertain the gods and seek their protection from misfortune, as well as their blessings. See Xiaohuan Zhao, “Form Follows Function in Community Rituals in North China: Temples and Temple Festivals in Jiacun Village,” *Religions* 12, no. 12 (December 2021): 1, e1105, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121105>.

⁵ 楊高鵠,〈談絳州鑼鼓的發展狀況〉,《大眾文藝》2008年第12期:187, <https://doi.org/10.20112/j.cnki.issn1007-5828.2008.12.168> (Gaoge Yang, “On the Development of Jiangzhou Gongs and Drums,” *Popular Literature and Art*, 2008/no. 12: 187, <https://doi.org/10.20112/j.cnki.issn1007-5828.2008.12.168>).

⁶ Wen Gong, Zhan G. Li, and Tiger Li, “Marketing to China’s Youth: A Cultural Transformation Perspective,” *Business Horizons* 47, no. 6 (November 2004): 41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2004.09.007>.

⁷ 劉能,〈結構性變遷、消費社會化和政治消費主義:也談國潮消費現象〉,《新視野》2023年第5期:74-75 (Neng Liu, “Structural Changes, Consumption Socialization and Political Consumerism: A Reappraisal of Concerted Guochao (National Fashion) Consumption Among Chinese Youth,” *Expanding Horizons*, 2023/no. 5: 74-75).

⁸ Lingyao Mao and Jiankang Zhang, “The Cultivation Model of Intangible Cultural Heritage

challenges to the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage to the next generations. For instance, Fu et al. emphasized that the decline of traditional cultural heritage is primarily due to a lack of youth audiences.⁹

According to data from China's Seventh National Population Census in 2020, China's youth population aged between 14 and 35 is approximately 400 million, accounting for 28.4% of the total national population. Compared to the 2000 census data, this is a decrease of 90 million from the peak of 490 million.¹⁰ With the decline in the youth population and the gradual retirement of older cultural "inheritors," the role of youngsters in "cultural inheritance"¹¹ becomes increasingly significant. Therefore, the youth group has become the leading force in cultural inheritance, and their attitudes directly impact the future of traditional culture. Furthermore, the Chinese government has emphasized the preservation of traditional culture in fostering national cultural identity.¹² Therefore, to avoid cultural disappearance, it is essential to understand how youth perceive traditional heritage.

Inheritors and Zhejiang Cases," in *Proceedings of the 2022 7th International Conference on Financial Innovation and Economic Development (ICFIED 2022)* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Atlantis Press, 2022), 467.

⁹ Mengxing Fu and Zhixiong Huang, "Transformation and Inheritance of Suzhou Pingtan in the Context of Intangible Cultural Heritage," in *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (ICADCE 2018)* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Atlantis Press, 2018), 243-244.

¹⁰ 中國共青團中央委員會，《青年發展統計監測數據》，2022年9月21日，https://www.gqt.org.cn/xxgk/qnfz/202209/t20220921_789722.htm (Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China, "Youth Development Statistics Monitoring Data," September 21, 2022, https://www.gqt.org.cn/xxgk/qnfz/202209/t20220921_789722.htm).

¹¹ The term "cultural inheritance" is a translation of the Chinese concept *wenhua chuancheng* (文化傳承), which signifies the transmission and preservation of cultural practices, traditions, and values across generations. It is placed in quotation marks to highlight its specific usage in the Chinese context, differing from the English connotation.

¹² 中共中央辦公廳、國務院辦公廳，〈關於實施中華優秀傳統文化傳承發展工程的意見〉，2017年1月25日，https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2017/content_5171322.htm (General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and General Office of the State Council of China, "Suggestions on Implementation of Projects to Promote and Develop Traditional Chinese Culture Excellence," January 25, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2017/content_5171322.htm).

In 2015, Chongdaoyuan (崇道源) Culture Media Company (Chongdaoyuan hereafter) decided to theatricalize Jiangzhou Drum Music, as it chose to re-theatricalize this traditional music heritage in a musical theater style due to investor Gao Hongqi's (高紅旗) judgment on the performing arts market at that time.¹³ The similarities between traditional Chinese opera and Western musical theater genres have made the integration increasingly popular among Chinese audiences.¹⁴ As Zhang's study shows, 52.29% of young Chinese students are interested in musicals.¹⁵ The storytelling-style works of Jiangzhou Drum Music inherently incorporate varying degrees of theatrical elements, typically expressed through costume, action imitation, and stage positioning based on the story plot. Examples include *Niu Dou Hu* (《牛鬥虎》, *Bull Fighting Tiger*), *Laoshu Quqin* (《老鼠娶親》, *The Mouse Bride*), *Yellow River Boatman's Song* (《黃河船夫曲》), and *Qinwang Dianbing* (《秦王點兵》, *Prince Qin Takes His Roll Call*). Among these, *Laoshu Quqin* was selected by Chongdaoyuan for re-theatricalization primarily for two reasons: it had previously won the Gold Award at the 9th China Galaxy Awards (群星獎), and its humorous performance style has gained a wider audience compared to other storytelling-style pieces.¹⁶ However, it remains uncertain whether musicals based on Jiangzhou Drum Music will resonate with these youngsters.

(2) *Laoshu Quqin*: Two Renditions

Laoshu Quqin was initially created by Hao Shixun (郝世勛) in December 1988 as a percussion ensemble work based on Jinnan (晉南) folklore.¹⁷ This piece

¹³ Hongqi Gao, interview by Kai Li, September 9, 2023. All interview transcripts for this study were translated from Chinese to English by Kai Li.

¹⁴ Xiao Lu, "The Musical Theatre Encounter: Chinese Consumption of a Western Form of Entertainment" (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2021), 4.

¹⁵ 張悅,〈綜藝節目對音樂劇觀眾拓展的啟示——以《聲入人心》引發音樂劇「熱」為例〉,《藝術大觀》2021年第5期:76-77(Yue Zhang, "Inspirations from Variety Shows for Expanding Musical Theatre Audiences: A Case Study of the Musical Theatre 'Craze' Sparked by Super-Vocal," *Art Panorama*, 2021/no. 5: 76-77)。

¹⁶ Shixun Hao, interview by Kai Li, September 13, 2023.

¹⁷ Hao Shixun is a recognized "inheritor" of the intangible cultural heritage of Jiangzhou Drum Music. In the past, he worked at the Xinjiang County Cultural Center, where he

interprets a scene during the New Year festivities, where a group of enchanting little mice hang lanterns and decorations—under the moonlight and among flowers—beat drums and gongs and form a lively procession. They jump and dance with delight, feeling ecstatic about welcoming the bride. Then, a large spotted cat suddenly pounces upon the scene, causing the little mice to scatter and flee in panic. As Hao elaborated, creating this work taught him that excellent music requires not only emotion, aesthetics, and innovation but also profound immersion in life and folk traditions. He emphasized the importance of internalizing folk music and grasping the essence of related art forms as crucial sources of creative inspiration.¹⁸

Laoshu Quqin, after theatricalization, is the first-of-its-kind “percussion-based” musical theater co-created by Chongdaoyuan and the music producer Fan Chong (樊冲) in China. It incorporates theatrical methods, songs, spoken dialog, and dance with Jiangzhou Drum Music. It premiered at Tianjin Jinwan Grand Theater (天津津湾大劇院) in 2019.¹⁹

A later version of the story describes a young bachelor named Da Zhi (大志) who, unable to find a partner, is reluctant to return home for the New Year. On the night of the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month, drunken Da Zhi impulsively rescues a small mouse named Dou Ding (豆丁) from the jaws of a cat. Subsequently, in his intoxicated state, Da Zhi suddenly finds himself transported into a world of mice. Feeling perplexed, he encounters Dou Ding, who persuades him to take part in a drum competition held by the Mouse Kingdom to win the Princess’s hand in marriage. The young and handsome Da Zhi catches the Princess’s attention, but the Queen stringently opposes their union. Forced by circumstances, she betroths the

was involved in collecting and organizing folk drum music from various parts of Xinjiang county. As the creator of the traditional *Laoshu Quqin*, he also contributed to creating the percussion-based musical theater version of *Laoshu Quqin*. Jinnan is the southern region of Shanxi province.

¹⁸ Shixun Hao, interview by Kai Li, September 12, 2023.

¹⁹ In 2015, Chongdaoyuan reached a collaboration agreement with musician Fan Chong for the musical theater production *Laoshu Quqin*. After the premiere in 2019, three performances were held in Gu’an (固安), two in Guangzhou (廣州), and one in Taiyuan (太原). However, the production was later discontinued due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Gao, interview by Li.

Princess to Da Huang (大黃), a rascal who has arrived opportunistically. However, with Dou Ding’s assistance, Da Zhi successfully rescues the Princess. Moved by this act, the Queen eventually consents to their marriage. Being unwilling to accept the defeat, Da Huang disrupts the wedding ceremony, and in the ensuing struggle, both he and Princess fall off a cliff. Then, Da Zhi awakens from this dream, realizing it was all just a fantasy. However, he spots a girl selling paper-cut artwork of *Laoshu Quqin*. The two slowly approach each other, holding the paper cut, ostensibly reminiscing about the events in the dream. Table 1 presents various characters and their species in this story.²⁰

Table 1. Main characters and their species in *Laoshu Quqin*

Main Characters	Species
大志 Da Zhi	Human
公主 Princess	Mouse
皇后 Queen	Mouse
丞相 Prime Minister	Mouse
豆丁 Dou Ding	Mouse
大黃 Da Huang	Weasel

2. Theatricalization: Concepts and Applications

Researchers generally concur that theatricalization can be traced back to ritual forms manifested in ancient Greek culture.²¹ The suffix “-ization” is used to denote

²⁰ The synopsis and character list are based on information courtesy of Chongdaoyuan in 2023.

²¹ Valery Fazilevich Kudashov and J. R. Dzhindzholia, “«Театрализация» как явление праздничной культуры. Эволюция понятия (историко-сравнительный анализ теоретических трудов XX-XXI веков) [Theatricalization as festive culture phenomenon. Concept evolution (Historical and comparative analysis of theoretical works of the XX-XXI centuries)],” *International Research Journal*, no. 100 (October

that theatricalization is a process that transcends its limited boundaries and transforms a concept from a separate art form to an integrative process that absorbs elements from different artistic styles.²² The modern concept of theatricalization shares an intrinsic ideological lineage and close connection with the re-theatricalization movement of the early 20th century, which aimed to radically transform the nature of theatrical arts. Proponents of this movement—such as Georg Fuchs in his seminal work “Die Revolution des Theaters” (1909)—advocated for creating new performative spaces, liberating theater from its reliance on literary texts and introducing musical and compositional principles.²³ Fischer-Lichte argues that the movement can be comprehended as a “theatrical revolution,” seeking to deconstruct the traditional semiotic systems employed in Western culture and reconstruct it entirely.²⁴

While the re-theatricalization movement primarily focused on the theatrical arts, its underlying principles and aspirations laid the foundation for the broader concept of theatricalization as a sociocultural and aesthetic paradigm. Contemporary theatricalization builds upon these underpinnings, extending its reach across various artistic disciplines, academic settings, and cultural practices with the objective of nurturing emotional connections and transformative experiences.

2020): 77, <https://doi.org/10.23670/IRJ.2020.100.10.050>; Tatiana Valerevna Mishina, Irina Nikolaevna Podolskaya, and Tatiana Alexandrovna Samsonenko, “Театрализация как метод режиссуры театрализованных представлений и праздников [Theatricalization as a method of directing theatricalized performance and holidays],” *International Journal of Professional Science*, no. 8 (2021): 34, https://doi.org/10.54092/25421085_2021_8_32.

²² David Megarritty, “Musicalising Theatre, Theatricalising Music: Writing and Performing Intermediality in Composed Theatre” (PhD diss., Queensland University of Technology, 2015), 24.

²³ 高洋,〈「再劇場化」與「再總體化」——20世紀早期日本巡演劇團對西方戲劇「再活性化」進程的歷史影響〉,《文藝理論研究》第41卷,第3期(2021年5月):87(Yang Gao, “‘Re-Theatricalization’ and ‘Re-Totalization’: The Historical Influence of Japanese Touring Troupes on the ‘Revitalization’ of Western Theatre in the Early 20th Century,” *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 41, no. 3 (May 2021): 87)。

²⁴ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “From Theatre to Theatricality—How to Construct Reality,” *Theatre Research International* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 98-103, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883300008312>. 98-103.

For instance, education has embraced theatricalization to improve learning experience and student engagement. Pushkar et al. explored theatricalization in cultivating music choreography skills for future preschool and primary school teachers, signifying its efficacy of self-expression and self-cognition in practical skill acquisition.²⁵ Besides education, theatricalization has also made significant inroads in the museum sector. Yurchuk conducted an in-depth study of the theatricalization phenomenon in museums, using St. Petersburg museums as examples.²⁶ Their research underscored how theatricalization emotionally affects the way audiences perceive the world and reality, making it an effective means of reflection on sociocultural changes. Furthermore, theatricalization has also found applications in the fashion and political spheres. Sprinsyan et al. explored theatricalization as a method of expanding the communicative space of fashion shows.²⁷ The study demonstrated its positive impact on enhancing designer-audience interaction. In the political domain, Prokopovych evaluated theatricalization through the lens of clothing, decorations, and accessories.²⁸ The study elaborated that theatricalization can introduce interpretive elements in information transmission and expand audiences. The use of theatricalization in politics can effectively enhance communication between politicians by winning the respect of opponents, showing solidarity with the protest movements, and building supplementary communication channels for the “public.”

²⁵ Larysa Pushkar et al., “Theatrical Activity as a Way of Developing Musical-Choreographic Competence in Future Preschool and Primary School Teachers,” *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională* [Romanian journal for multidimensional education] 14, no. 3 (2022): 18-31, <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/14.3/595>.

²⁶ Ekaterina Viktorovna Yurchuk, “Феномен театрализации музейного пространства Санкт-Петербурга [The phenomenon of the theatricalization of the museum space in St. Petersburg]” (Bachelor’s thesis, St. Petersburg State University, 2017).

²⁷ Vasily Sprinsyan, Elena Shevchenko, and Lada Prokopovich, “Theatricalization as a Way of Expanding the Communicative Space of Fashion Shows,” *National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts Herald*, no. 4 (2018): 332-336, <https://doi.org/10.32461/2226-3209.4.2018.153115>.

²⁸ Lada Prokopovych, “Соціально-філософські засади театралізації політичної сфери [Socio-philosophical foundations of theatricalization of the political sphere],” *Scientific and Theoretical Almanac Grani* 22, no. 2 (2019): 48-58, <https://doi.org/10.15421/171922>.

The application of theatricalization across various domains—education, museums, fashion, and politics—unravels a common thread: its efficacy in enhancing communication between “expressers” and “receivers.” Whether it is teachers and pupils, museum curators and visitors, designers and fashion show attendees, or politicians, their opponents and constituents, theatricalization is a potent tool for engagement and interpretation. This versatility demonstrates its potential as a universal tool for improving interaction across diverse fields and offering innovative methods to engage younger generations with traditional cultural practices.

China has made significant progress in the theatricalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage, achieving contemporary representations of traditional arts through innovative stage design, interdisciplinary collaboration, and technological integration. When focusing on the adaptation of performing-related intangible cultural heritage into musical theater, it becomes evident that the dominant performance tends to be vocal-based intangible cultural heritage. The inherent narrative structures and melodic frameworks of these vocal-based musical heritages naturally align with the format of musical theater. Notable examples include: the musical *Galao* (《嘎老》), based on the Grand song of the Dong ethnic group (侗族大歌); *The Long Song of the Great River* (《大河長歌》), which incorporates Shanxi folk songs and performing arts, such as Hequ folk songs (河曲民歌), *Errentai* (二人台), and the River Lantern Festival songs (河燈會); *Yujia* (《漁家》), centered around Huidong Fishing Song (惠東漁歌); *The South Wall Project* (《南牆計劃》), which fuses traditional performing arts such as *Jingyun dagu* (京韻大鼓), *Meihua dagu* (梅花大鼓), and *Taiping geci* (太平歌詞) with blues music; *The Heroic Sisters of the Grassland* (《草原英雄小姊妹》), incorporating Mongolian *khöömei* (throat singing), *urtin duu* (long song), and Mongolian folk songs; and *Lady Xian* (《冼夫人》), a musical based on Cantonese opera.

In contrast, adaptations of instrumental intangible cultural heritage into musical theater remain scarce, as their non-verbal, rhythm-driven nature poses challenges to theatrical storytelling. One such example is *Pipa Journey on the Lake* (《湖上琵琶行》), a musical centered on the *Pinghu Pipa* (平湖派琵琶). However, in order to

fully conform to the structure of a musical, it still relies on additional vocal elements and dialogue to narrate the story. Therefore, the feasibility of musical instrumental intangible cultural heritage being fully theatricalized into musical theater remains a gap for further exploration, with the percussion-based musical *Laoshu Quqin* serving as a unique case for study.

3. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design, specifically using a case study approach.²⁹ The selected case is a percussion-based musical theater *Laoshu Quqin* that has been staged to perform in several cities of China. Semi-structured interviews are used in the study to collect data, providing flexibility to explore participants' perspectives while maintaining a focus on fundamental study questions.³⁰ The interview questions are designed around four main aspects: youth audiences' opinions between the old and new versions, their opinions on various theatrical elements in the musical *Laoshu Quqin*, their emotional resonance on social issues presented in the musical, and their attitudes for the future performances of theatricalized Jiangzhou Drum Music. The interview outline is as follows:

- What did you know about Jiangzhou Drum Music before you watched this musical?
- Did you know that there is a music piece of Jiangzhou Drum Music called *Laoshu Quqin*? (If yes, next question.) Can you understand the story that the traditional version of *Laoshu Quqin* wants to express? Please elaborate.
- Compared with the traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music in the past, is the theatricalized *Laoshu Quqin* more attractive to you? Why?

²⁹ John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (May 2004): 341-354, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055404001182>.

³⁰ Hanna Kallio et al., "Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Guide," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 72, no. 12 (December 2016): 2955, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>.

- Which stage element of the musical version *Laoshu Quqin* left a deep impression on you? For example, the plot, character modeling, props, costumes, drum music, song dialogue and performance, etc. Why? (Ask to elaborate each element separately.)
- When watching this play, did you find any abnormal or incongruous elements on the stage? Why?
- Have you found any social issues in this musical?
- When you watched this musical, did you connect some of the situations or plots in the play with your real life and experience?
- If there is a chance in the future, will you choose to watch the performance that combines intangible cultural heritage with other art forms again?

The interview involves ten youth members aged between 14 and 35 years, who were selected based on specific criteria to ensure a diverse yet relevant sampling.³¹ The most crucial criterion for all interviewees is that they must have watched this musical theatre to guarantee recent and relevant audience experience with *Laoshu Quqin*. They include individuals from diverse backgrounds and from various regions of China, aiming to capture a range of perspectives from different experiential contexts. Table 2 presents the age, gender, professional background, geographic distribution, and prior knowledge in Jiangzhou Drum Music among ten participants, providing essential background information for subsequent analysis.

³¹ According to the “Medium- and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025)” issued by the State Council of China, the age range for youth is specified between 14 and 35 years. See The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *Youth of China in the New Era*, White Paper, Beijing: The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, April 21, 2022, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/2022/04/21/content_WS6260cdc3c6d02e5335329bb1.html.

Table 2. Particulars of the Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Location	Professional Background	Prior Knowledge in Jiangzhou Drum Music
Yang	Male	26	Yuncheng (運城), Shanxi	Music composition	Initial understanding
Zhu	Male	26	Yuncheng, Shanxi	Trumpet	Initial understanding
Cao	Male	26	Lingshi (靈石), Shanxi	Vocal	Initial understanding
Duan	Male	23	Yuncheng, Shanxi	Economic management	Initial understanding
Guo	Male	25	Taiyuan (太原), Shanxi	Percussion	In-depth understanding
Qian	Male	27	Suzhou (蘇州), Jiangsu (江蘇)	Economic management	None
Zhang	Male	21	Shijiazhuang (石家莊), Hebei (河北)	Software engineering	None
Na	Female	26	Taian (泰安), Shandong (山東)	English literature	None
Li	Male	22	Qingzhou (青州), Shandong	Business management	None
Feng	Male	26	Haikou (海口), Hainan (海南)	Music composition	None

4. Perspectives of Chinese Youth Audience on *Laoshu Quqin*

The researchers employed Braun and Clarke's six-phase of thematic analysis to conduct systematic coding of the interview data.³² This approach included familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for and reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the thematic map. The coding process was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the content and ensure interpretive depth. As shown in Table 3, similar viewpoints were first identified and categorized into initial codes.³³ These codes

³² Virginia Braun, and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

³³ The full coding process of interview data are available on Figshare at <https://figshare.com/s/1ea40fde9dfa57cc5806>.

were then refined and grouped into three core themes—“Enhanced Perception Compared to Tradition,” “Strengthened Emotional Resonance,” and “Anticipated Theatricalization of Jiangzhou Drum Music”—which are visually represented in the thematic map, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 3. Coding of Audience Interview Data

Code	Coding Description	
1	Drum Music	Emotional perception (“laymen”)
2		In-depth understanding (“experts”)
3		Disappointment from high expectations (“experts”)
4	Song	Deficiency in song numbers
5		Design issue in production
6	Dialogue	Character and plot hints
7	Mise-en-scène	Character cues through costume diversity
8		Costume diversity challenges
9		Atmosphere creation via floodlights
10		Character focus via spotlight
11		Stage simplicity
12		Stage-narrative alignment
13		Visual engagement via props
14	Performance	Relative motion design
15		Mouse movement imitation
16		Character shaping via expression
17		<i>Jinnan Huagu</i> ’s appeal
18	Immersive Audience	Actors enter from the audience
19	Engagement in Narrative	Wedding ceremony interaction
20		Ineffectiveness from over-familiarity
21	Eclecticism in Narrative	Multiple worlds
22		Martial arts marriage contest in <i>wuxia</i> (武俠) novels
23		Blend of ancient, folk, and modern elements
24		East-West fusion
25		Imperial autocracy
26	Comparison of Versions	Insufficient understanding (Majority)
27		Sufficient understanding (Minority)

(Continued on next page)

28	Reflections on Theatricality	Marriage stress from parents
29		Gender roles and norms
30		Bullying
31		Parental overcontrol
32		Educational expectations
33		Medical expectations
34	Anticipation	Enhanced appeal compared to tradition
35		Accessibility and expressiveness of theatricalized innovation
36		Willingness to watch future performances
37		Support for music heritage innovation
38		Support for heritage-tourism integration

Figure 1. Theme 1: Enhanced Perception Compared to Tradition.

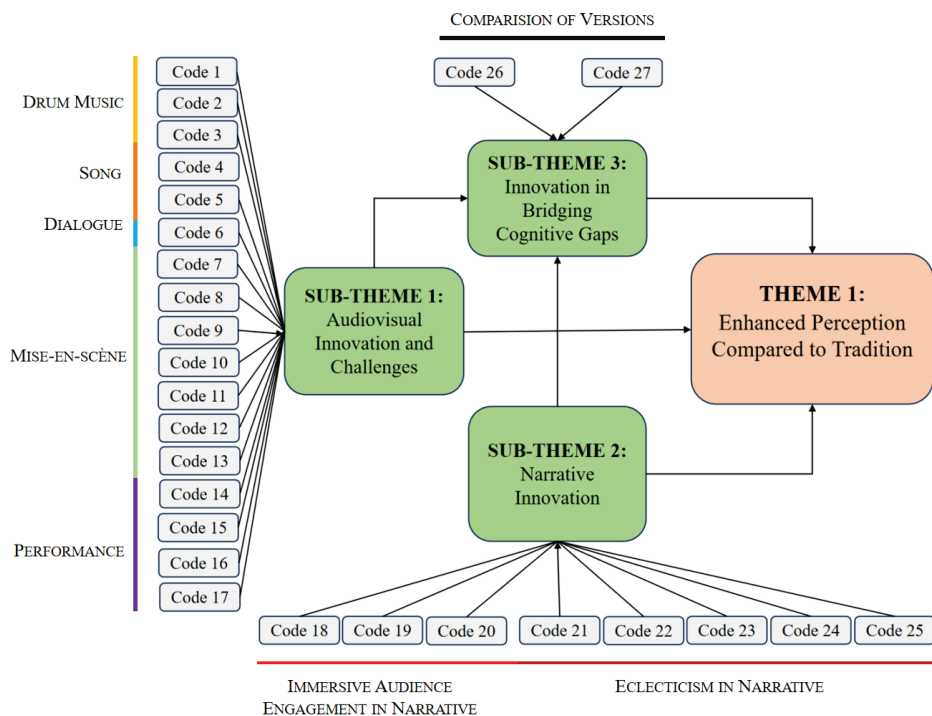
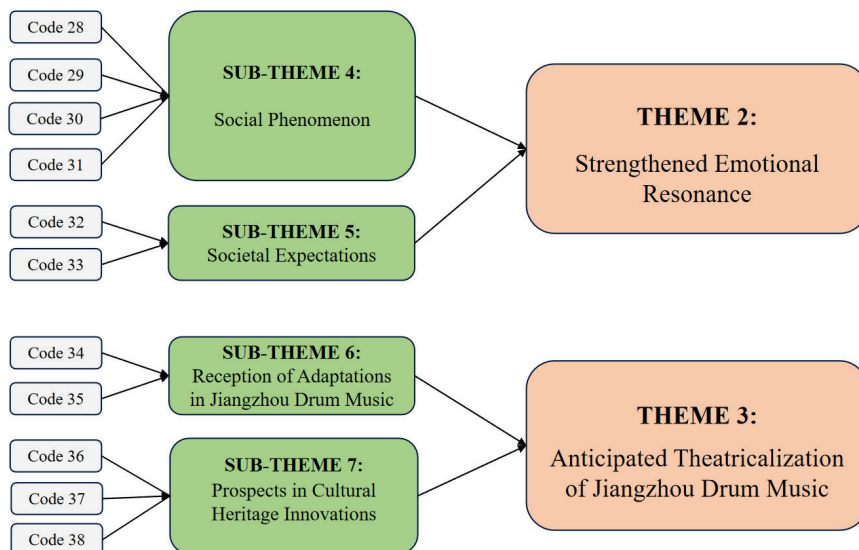


Figure 2. Theme 2: Strengthened Emotional Resonance, and Theme 3: Anticipated Theatricalization of Jiangzhou Drum Music.

(1) Enhanced Perception Compared to Tradition

Based on the comparative opinions of ten youth audience members on the traditional and musical theater versions of *Laoshu Quqin* in the interview data, it was found that even with the addition of contemporary aesthetic designs through theatricalization, the audience's views on the musical elements—drum music and songs—still exhibited the common phenomenon of “the layman watches the fun, the expert looks at the way.” This phenomenon stems from differences in professional background. The complex rhythms and playing techniques of drum music are difficult for non-professional audiences to interpret, leading them to focus more on the overall atmosphere and visual presentation. In contrast, youth audience member Guo, who has prior knowledge, showed interest in the novel drum music design that differentiates it from tradition. However, this familiarity also led to slight dissatisfaction with certain plot designs.

The overall performance style is a combination of tradition and modernity. When Da Huang first appeared, he used the traditional Chinese instrument three-tone gong to play Latin rhythms. It felt like it was combining all the best elements from around the world. I think it's interesting.

I kept thinking this was a drum music performance, so I was always expecting drum elements to appear. Therefore, I felt the plot of Act I where Da Zhi and the princess first met was a bit dragging.³⁴

Example 1. The rhythm of the three-tone gong played by Da Huang. Transcription by Kai Li.



The inclusion of songs in *Laoshu Quqin* represents a major breakthrough in the theatricalization of Jiangzhou Drum Music. Traditionally, Jiangzhou Drum Music rarely featured songs, with notable exceptions like the introductory part of the traditional piece *Yellow River Boatman's Song*, a labor song (勞動號子) composed by Li Siming (李思命), which served only as a background element. In contrast, the theatricalization of Jiangzhou Drum Music increases the prominence of songs. However, for audiences familiar with musicals but unfamiliar with Jiangzhou Drum Music, the balance between songs and drum performances appears to be a point of concern:

For a musical, the songs don't appear very often. Most of the performances are drums.³⁵

What impressed me most was the integration of the drums and the songs.

³⁴ Guo, interview by Kai Li, May 10, 2024.

³⁵ Feng, interview by Kai Li, May 10, 2024.

Compared with the musicals I've watched before, I rarely see musicals with drums as the main element.³⁶

Yang, who has a background in composition and some understanding of Jiangzhou Drum Music, noticed the use of the traditional pentatonic scale in song production and emphasized its characteristic features of Shanxi folk songs. Yang also pointed out that abrupt shifts in musical style caused inconsistencies.

The melody of the theme song, "My Heart Follows You" (〈我心隨你〉), seems to be a lyrical pentatonic *yu* (羽) mode. I think this is very characteristic of Shanxi folk songs.

Jiangzhou Drum Music is a relatively traditional music genre, usually without melodies. Therefore, I think it would be a bit abrupt to suddenly have a song that is not related to the cultural background and drum music. For example, "The Mouse World" (〈老鼠世界〉) sung by the protagonist and other actors.³⁷

According to the analysis of the authors, Yang's perception stems from the fact that the composition of the theme song is based on the B *yu* hexatonic mode with an added *bian gong* (變宮), and the use of *bian gong* in the do-si-la sequence, formed by the *gong* (宮), *bian gong*, and *yu* tones,³⁸ is a feature of Shanxi folk songs,³⁹ as shown in Example 2.

³⁶ Qian, interview by Kai Li, May 13, 2024.

³⁷ Yang, interview by Kai Li, May 10, 2024.

³⁸ The Chinese musical scale notes *gong*, *shang* (商), *jue* (角), *zhi* (徵), *yu*, and *bian gong* are equivalent to do, re, mi, sol, la, and si in Western solfège system.

³⁹ 黃允箴, 〈變宮的軌跡——民族傳承的「旋律基因」探幽〉, 《中國音樂學》2002年第4期: 22-26, <https://doi.org/10.14113/j.cnki.cn11-1316/j.2002.04013> (Yunzhen Huang, "Trail of Bian Gong: Exploring the 'Melody Gene' of National Inheritance," *Musicology in China*, 2002/no. 4: 22-26, <https://doi.org/10.14113/j.cnki.cn11-1316/j.2002.04013>).

Example 2. Introduction melody of the theme song “My Heart Follows You.”
Transcription by Kai Li.

S.
 T.
 5
 8
 shang jue yu zhi gong bian gong
 商 角 羽 徵 宮 變宮
 牽 著 手 兒 扯 著 那 衣 襟 ， 蒙 上 就 不 見 個 心

Although most interviewees did not mention much about their thoughts on adding dialogue and narration to Jiangzhou Drum Music, their answers to different questions reveal that they have subconsciously transformed the information conveyed through dialogue and narration into understanding. This approach is more direct and easier to comprehend compared to plot information conveyed through drum music and songs. However, this positive finding contrasts with Guo’s earlier opinion that the excessive dialogue in Act I disrupted the continuity of his expectation for drum music. It can be observed that the theatricalization of Jiangzhou Drum Music appears to be more oriented toward “layman” audiences. Similarly, Salemink, in his study about “Space of Gong Music in the Central Highlands of Vietnam,” emphasizes that theatricalization is often designed for external audiences, typically involving the replacement of traditional elements with new ones to better “adapt” them.⁴⁰

Regarding the costume design in the musical *Laoshu Quqin*, some interviewees pointed out the significant role that costumes played in helping them intuitively understand and distinguish between characters.

Through the costumes, I can immediately recognize the characters in the play, whether they are human, mice, a groom, or a bride.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Oscar Salemink, “Scholarship, Expertise, and the Regional Politics of Heritage,” in *Scholarship and Engagement in Mainland Southeast Asia*, ed. Oscar Salemink (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2016), 167-195.

⁴¹ Cao, interview by Kai Li, May 9, 2024.

Da Huang's costume makes him feel like a villain.⁴²

The actor playing the mouse wears mouse ear-shaped decorations, and the mink fur that Da Huang wears when he appears closely matches his character. Also, the Queen's costume enhances her dignified presence.⁴³

In the musical version, the diverse costumes form a stark contrast with the uniform attire of the traditional version of *Laoshu Quqin*, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. While Jiangzhou Drum Music has considered costumes in its traditional storytelling-style performances, as an instrumental performance form, it usually adopts uniform costumes that serve as a background complement to the storyline, or distinguishes between lead performers and accompanying musicians. Unlike traditional Chinese opera, such as Peking opera, where characters are categorized into four major role types, *sheng* (生), *dan* (旦), *jing* (淨), and *chou* (丑), each with specific costume and makeup designs that directly convey their identities and characteristics through visual elements.

Figure 3. Traditional version *Laoshu Quqin*.⁴⁴



⁴² Duan, interview by Kai Li, May 15, 2024.

⁴³ Na, interview by Kai Li, May 12, 2024.

⁴⁴ 〈鼓博群雄·地動山搖：絳州鼓樂奏響香江之濱〉，《運城新聞網》，2024年7月25日，http://www.sxycrb.com/2024-07/25/content_351161.html（“Drumming Resounded Across the Land, Shaking the Earth: Jiangzhou Drum Music Echoed Along the Banks of Hong Kong,” *Yuncheng News Network*, July 25, 2024, http://www.sxycrb.com/2024-07/25/content_351161.html）。

Figure 4. Costumes for main characters in musical version *Laoshu Quqin*.
Photograph courtesy of Chongdaoyuan, 2019.



However, while the diversity of costumes enhances character clarity, some youth audience members found that the large stylistic gaps—ranging from modern casual wear to highly theatrical costumes—made the design appear inconsistent, disrupting the visual continuity of the performance.

While other members of the Mouse Kingdom were wearing traditional Chinese-style clothing, the Princess suddenly appeared in very fashionable attire, which I found abrupt.⁴⁵

I always feel that some of the costumes don't quite fit, such as the Princess's modern outfits.⁴⁶

Da Zhi initially wears relatively modern clothing, and even after he crosses over in a dream, he's still wearing the same outfit. I feel that creates a bit of a mismatch. However, the transition is indicated through a hat and mouse ears, which effectively conveys the idea of crossing over, so I can understand the design. The Princess's costume is quite fashionable, and I feel like it's from a different era compared to the other actors. The other actors wear more theatrical costumes, while Da Zhi and

⁴⁵ Zhu, interview by Kai Li, May 9, 2024.

⁴⁶ Feng, interview by Li.

the Princess dress more casually, like something you'd wear on the street.
I feel their costumes don't quite match the rest of the cast.⁴⁷

In addition, interview findings reveal that the theatricalized version of *Laoshu Quqin* enhanced audience perception through its lighting design. This enhancement was primarily evident in two key aspects: atmosphere creation via floodlights and character focus via spotlight. The use of floodlights and colored lights played a role in shaping the mood and enhancing the immersive quality of various scenes. Interviewees such as Na, Yang, and Guo observed how the dim lighting effectively represented the underground mouse world; the red lighting in the wedding procession emphasized the celebratory atmosphere;⁴⁸ the flashing lights during the scene “Bigu Zhaoqin” (〈比鼓招親〉, Drumming Competition for Marriage) and Da Huang's sudden entrance heightened the tension. These demonstrated how lighting was employed as a technique for atmosphere building, not only setting the emotional tone but also guiding the audience through the narrative transitions. The implementation of spotlights was highlighted by Li, Zhang, Zhu, and Qian as a design in ensuring the audience's focus on main characters and important moments.⁴⁹ The spotlights provided clarity in scenes where multiple characters were present, ensuring that the audience could easily identify the central figures and follow the unfolding action.

Traditionally, Jiangzhou Drum Music pays more attention to the placement of drums in stage design, whether in historical contexts such as *Yingshen Saishe* and rain-praying ceremonies or in contemporary settings like marriages, funerals, shop openings, and professional stage performances. For example, in *Niu Dou Hu*, two *datang gu* (大堂鼓, Chinese bass drums) are placed center stage to specify the bull and tiger. Likewise, in *Qinwang Dianbing*, drums are arranged according to ancient Chinese military formations, where *zu gu* (卒鼓, soldier drums), *jiao gu* (校鼓,

⁴⁷ Yang, interview by Li.

⁴⁸ Na, interview by Li; Yang, interview by Li; Guo, interview by Li.

⁴⁹ Li, interview by Kai Li, May 14, 2024; Zhang, interview by Kai Li, May 10, 2024; Zhu, interview by Li; Qian, interview by Li.

captain drums), *jiang gu* (將鼓, general drums), and *shuai gu* (帥鼓, commander drum) are placed sequentially from the audience to the stage.

In the musical theater version, apart from the careful arrangement of instruments, the stage set also received significant attention. Compared to the musical elements, all interviewees shared a consistent view on the stage design: the set was relatively simple, predominantly black, with dim lighting, which complemented the theme of “mouse,” the entire stage resembled a large, immersive mouse burrow, creating an atmospheric setting (see Figure 5). Additionally, the stage design prompted deeper reflection from Na:

I’m not sure if it’s due to budget constraints or other reasons, but the stage isn’t particularly large, and the set is relatively small. I’ve considered that since they’re telling a story about mice, the condensed set might be intentional, possibly resembling a mouse’s burrow or something similar.⁵⁰

Figure 5. Stage setting. Photograph courtesy of Chongdaoyuan, 2019.



⁵⁰ Na, interview by Li.

Earlier, in a separate interaction of the authors with Hao, the “inheritor” of Jiangzhou Drum Music, has confirmed a point relevant to the observation above. He mentioned that Jiangzhou Drum Music had a classic drum music theater production in the past, *Female Generals of the Yang Family* (《楊門女將》),⁵¹ which received government funding of 15 million Chinese yuan. The grand production of this theater led to challenges, such as difficulties in touring and managing numerous props. It was a feat that most people couldn’t achieve.⁵² Drawing from this experience and without government funding, the production team of *Laoshu Quqin* opted for a minimalist approach with fewer actors and soft props.

The use of props in the stage set plays a significant role in attracting the audience and enhancing the narrative. Zhu expressed his thoughts on this:

Because there was constant talk about the “Bigu Zhaoqin,” in that scene, a prop sign with the words “Bigu Zhaoqin” appeared above the stage (see Figure 6), which was like highlighting the theme. That scene left a deep impression. Another one was in the final scene, where the paper-cut *Laoshu Quqin* held by the actors contrasted with the *Laoshu Quqin* New Year painting decoration above the stage (see Figure 7). These two patterns formed a contrast by appearing simultaneously, which also left a deep impression.⁵³

⁵¹ The drum drama *Female Generals of the Yang Family* was performed by the Shanxi Jiangzhou Drum Music Art Troupe (山西絳州鼓樂藝術團) at the Great Hall of the People (人民大會堂), Beijing on September 18, 2010. It was jointly organized by multiple government departments of Shanxi province, with a total investment of 15 million Chinese yuan. More detail see 〈絳州鼓樂敲出《楊門女將》傳奇〉,《戲曲文化網》, 2010年9月23日, <https://xiquwenhua.net/xiqudaqun/xinwen/2010/25251.html> (“Jiangzhou Drum Music Plays Out the Legend of *Female Generals of the Yang Family*,” *Chinese Opera Culture Network*, September 23, 2010, <https://xiquwenhua.net/xiqudaqun/xinwen/2010/25251.html>).

⁵² Hao, interview by Li, September 13, 2023.

⁵³ Zhu, interview by Li.

Figure 6. Props: “Bigu Zhaoqin.” Photograph courtesy of Chongdaoyuan, 2019.



Figure 7. Paper cutting adapted for the theatrical stage from the folklore version of *Laoshu Quqin*. Photograph courtesy of Chongdaoyuan, 2019.



It is worth noting that paper-cutting is another intangible cultural heritage of Xinjiang county, the theatricalization approach showcased its positive influence on various cultural heritage preservation and dissemination. In addition, the innovative use of moving stage props combined with character movements in place demonstrated dynamic spatial choreography that enhanced the audience's perception of chase action and spatial relationships on stage. In traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music performances, performers usually do not move extensively but instead perform while standing in place.

When it comes to performance, most audience members expressed interest in the actors' imitation of mouse-like movements. However, this is a continuation of the performance movements in traditional version *Laoshu Quqin*, and this is precisely one of the reasons why the traditional version of *Laoshu Quqin* has enjoyed broad audience appeal. With the enriched storyline following theatricalization, some personalized movements and facial expressions of the actors left a strong impression on the audience by enhancing the portrayal of the characters:

One example is the Princess's facial expression when pressured to marry, conveying a sense of helplessness. Another is Da Huang's vivid portrayal of the villain's fierce and evil nature.⁵⁴

Da Huang's expressions and eye movements during his first appearance left a deep impression on me. He made certain gestures, such as shrugging or raising his eyebrows, which gave off a very arrogant yet detestable aura—clearly marking him as a villain. You could sense his disdain for the mice, as he considered himself superior. He probably thought he was the stronger one in front of them, so his overall demeanor was extremely arrogant yet deeply unlikeable. His performance was incredibly vivid.⁵⁵

In addition, the audience showed great interest in the unusual drum performance of *Jinnan Huagu* (晋南花鼓, Jinnan Flower Drum), this form of drum music—famous in southern Shanxi—involves the performer wearing five small Chinese

⁵⁴ Duan, interview by Li.

⁵⁵ Na, interview by Li.

drums on various parts of the body, struck through diverse dance movements (see Figure 8). As Li et al. indicated in their study on the modernization of Chinese opera, one of the factors influencing attendees' loyalty intention toward modernized Chinese opera is perceived novelty.⁵⁶

I hadn't seen some of these drumming styles before. For example, there was a person with many drums tied to their body. I had never seen this form of performance before, and I found it very intriguing.⁵⁷

I think the white-haired performer left a strong impression on me. In our understanding, traditional drumming usually involves placing drums on the ground to play. But this old man had drums tied to his body, many small drums worn like clothing. He played the drums through dance movements, which really shocked me. This gave me a new understanding of Jiangzhou Drum Music.⁵⁸

Figure 8. An actor demonstrating the *Jinnan Huagu*. Photograph courtesy of Chongdaoyuan, 2019.



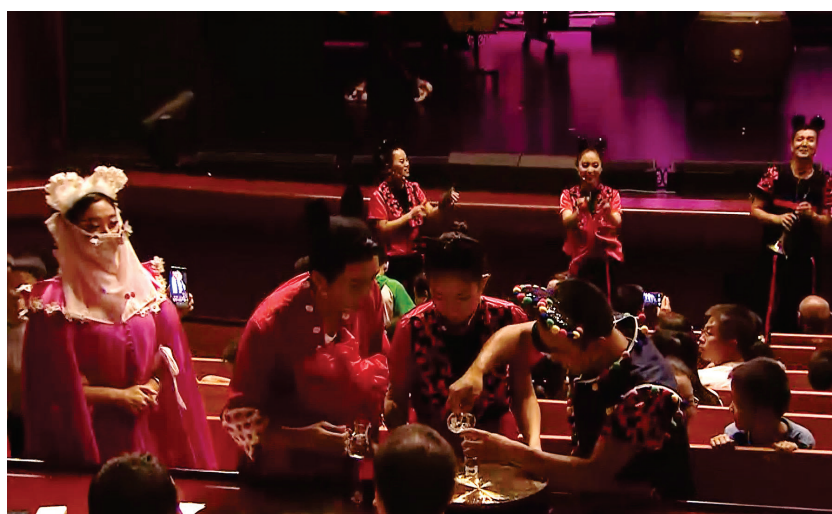
⁵⁶ Shanshi Li et al., “When Intangible Cultural Heritage Meets Modernization—Can Chinese Opera with Modernized Elements Attract Young Festival-Goers?,” *Tourism Management* 107 (April 2025): e105036, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.105036>.

⁵⁷ Li, interview by Li.

⁵⁸ Na, interview by Li.

Traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music performances in stage maintain a clear boundary between the stage and the audience, often referred to as the “fourth wall” on stage. However, in this theatricalized production, by deliberately “breaking the fourth wall” and involving the audience directly in the narrative, the production creates a more immersive experience. Actors frequently appeared in the audience area, including Da Huang’s entrance, the appearance of Mouse Kingdom soldiers before the “Bigu Zhaoqin,” Da Zhi and Dou Ding’s emergence in the audience while searching for the Princess, and most notably, during Da Zhi and the Princess’s wedding ceremony (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Wedding ceremony in *Laoshu Quqin*. Photograph courtesy of Chongdaoyuan, 2019.



Feedback from interviewees reveals that the toasting scene in wedding ceremony is a key moment where the boundary between performance and reality dissolved, transforming the theater into a shared celebratory space. The actors’ direct engagement with the audience created a multisensory immersive experience. This immersive participation brought a novel experience to them. It transforms passive audiences into active participants, enhancing their emotional connection to the story and characters.

Da Huang came from the side of the stage. I found myself imagining how he might interact with me if I were nearby. This thought occurred to me.⁵⁹

The toast during the wedding ceremony left a deep impression on me. When the actors came down from the stage to toast with the audience, everyone in the theater—both audience and actors—became part of the performance. It was actually part of the play's performance, but during this time, the audience also became part of the performance.⁶⁰

I found the wedding participation scene particularly memorable. The actors came to the audience seats to toast, while the sound of the suona was also captivating.⁶¹

However, for Zhu, the interaction within the wedding ceremony design did not seem to evoke the same level of engagement as it did for others. When asked why, Zhu explained that his familiarity with the cultural context and customs reduced the novelty and immersive impact of the scene.⁶² This reveals an important consideration: the effectiveness of such immersive techniques may diminish when the audience is overly familiar with the cultural elements being presented, as they may no longer find them engaging. Therefore, there is a possibility that when production teams consider theatricalized intangible cultural heritage, it seems effective to avoid some overly familiar content designs as much as possible based on its target audience.

In the interviewees' evaluations of the theatricalized *Laoshu Quqin*, Guo specifically mentioned the word "fusion." In other words, this is an eclectic design. The production team drew inspiration from various elements of ancient, traditional, and modern China, as well as literature and different performance forms, shaping the fictional narrative setting they sought to create. This fusion of choices represents the essence of eclecticism. Eclecticism is a philosophical approach that draws value from various schools of thought, overcoming biases and traditions to think

⁵⁹ Yang, interview by Li.

⁶⁰ Na, interview by Li.

⁶¹ Guo, interview by Li.

⁶² Zhu, interview by Li.

independently based on personal experience and reason. It focuses on the outcome of combining different elements. In a modern context, eclecticism is regarded as a way to foster individual social and cultural development while maintaining cultural identity.⁶³

In the researcher's interviews data with ten youth audience members, a world cultural collage emerged. This collage intertwines and juxtaposes various elements: the human world and the animal world; ancient Chinese imperial autocracy and modern healthcare and education; ancient Chinese poetry and literature, *wuxia* (武侠) novels, and folklore; musical theater production methods and traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music; and the "Bigu Zhaoqin" inspired by martial arts competitions for marriage. The audience's perception of these elements is not merely a simple juxtaposition but a process of cultural negotiation. By integrating elements from different time periods and cultures, contemporary youth audiences subconsciously explore their own cultural positions within the wave of globalization and the context of a rapidly evolving modern society.

The researcher asked ten youth audience members whether they had known and understood the performance content of the traditional version of *Laoshu Quqin* before watching the musical adaptation. The responses revealed that only one audience member, Guo, could fully comprehend its performance content. However, when asked which version was more appealing, they unanimously chose the theatricalized version.

I think incorporating theatrical elements would be more beneficial. Firstly, youth today often lack the patience to engage with traditional culture. Adding some theatrical elements could provide more points of interest. For me, the inclusion of these elements makes the performance more captivating.⁶⁴

⁶³ Ruxandra Maria Stoia, "The Fusion of Philosophical Traditions: Between Loyalty and Eclecticism in Antiquity," in *Globalization and National Identity: Studies on the Strategies of Intercultural Dialogue (Sociology, Political Sciences and International Relations Section)*, ed. Iulian Boldea (Târgu Mureș, Romania: Arhipelag XXI Press, 2016), 154-162.

⁶⁴ Zhu, interview by Li.

I think the theatricalization approach makes Jiangzhou Drum Music more captivating. The traditional form is relatively singular, as it primarily relies on drum performances, which can sometimes make it difficult to grasp the meaning behind the music. However, with the addition of theatrical elements like stage design and costumes in the new drum musical *Laoshu Quqin*, I feel Jiangzhou Drum Music has transformed into a performance that appeals to both refined and popular tastes, making it accessible and understandable to a wider audience.⁶⁵

Although theatricalized *Laoshu Quqin* still presents perceptual and comprehension barriers regarding its musical elements for external audiences, it effectively breaks the singular auditory limitation of traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music through dialogue, costume design, lighting, stage scenery, and performance. These elements provide easily understandable informational cues and immersive sensory experiences, significantly enhancing external audiences' comprehension of drum music. As Nikolskaya pointed out, theatricalization transcends beyond emotional engagement to engage in cultural understanding, exhibiting an associative perception of ethnic cultural realities. By integrating various artistic elements and activities, theatricalization offers an all-inclusive view of a group's cultural space, proposing a holistic lens that is often lacking when evaluating isolated cultural elements such as rituals or costumes.⁶⁶

Moreover, while the theatricalization approach effectively enhances perception, it is important to acknowledge that certain problems and challenges within theatricalized *Laoshu Quqin* have also emerged. These include the drum music segments occurring more frequently than songs, abrupt shifts in musical style causing a sense of discontinuity, and inappropriate costume designs disrupting immersion. The root cause lies in the fact that the creative framework for adapting instrumental performance-based intangible cultural heritage into musical theater is still not fully developed.

⁶⁵ Duan, interview by Li.

⁶⁶ Tatiana Mikhailovna Nikolskaya, "Театрализация как способ изучения культурного пространства этноса [Theatricalization as a way to study the cultural space of an ethnic group]," *Neophilology* 7, no. 25 (2021): 152, <https://doi.org/10.20310/2587-6953-2021-7-25-151-164>.

(2) Strengthened Emotional Resonance

Based on feedback from ten youth audience members, it was found that incorporating contemporary social elements into the storyline design has potential appeal for them. Traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music works in the storytelling style tend to narrate folklore and historical stories, while the musical version of *Laoshu Quqin* centers on the exploration and quest for love by contemporary youth in the Mouse Kingdom, and the plot also incorporates many phenomena from the contemporary Chinese social context. Firstly, what aroused strong emotional resonance among youth audience members was the Queen's pressure and overcontrol regarding the Princess's marriage in the musical.

Although I've not been married, many people around me have. There are many similarities that make it easy to empathize with.⁶⁷

In the theater, I saw some current hot topics happening in real life. For example, the pressure on youth to get married and the urging from their families. It connects with things happening in reality. Some people around me might be facing these issues right now.⁶⁸

In the current social environment, there's pressure to marry. For us young men, it seems that marrying and having children later has become a trend. I have an older sister who's almost 30 now. Our family is always trying to set up blind dates for her or asking relatives to introduce potential partners. But the more they push, the more likely it is to cause resentment. The second point is parents' control over their children's lives. Children are independent individuals, and they don't want their parents to dominate them like this. That's why there are scenes of running away in the plot. That's what I think.⁶⁹

At the beginning, when Da Zhi was being pressured to marry, that part resonated with me emotionally.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Li, interview by Li.

⁶⁸ Na, interview by Li.

⁶⁹ Yang, interview by Li.

⁷⁰ Zhu, interview by Li.

I can feel the princess's helplessness. She is being manipulated and moved around like a chess piece.⁷¹

When considering why youth audiences strongly resonated with and reflected on this issue, one important factor must be considered—the development of socio-cultural context of China. The expansion of education, migration, and urbanization in China has led to a challenge to age-related marital norms, which has resulted in a rising divergence between parental expectations and children's autonomy in making marital decisions. While the younger generation, influenced by a fast-modernizing society, values autonomy and the pursuit of passionate relationships, parents who grew up in a traditional social setting are more likely to adhere to family obligation standards regarding marriage and become overly protective of their children.

From the socio-economic perspective, the sharp rise in marriage-related costs in some rural areas and the resulting consequences also contribute to marital pressure. This includes the gender imbalance in rural marriage markets and the escalating competition over bride prices fueled by vanity within villages.⁷² It is clear that audiences associated with the phenomenon of marital stress because it reflects their own experienced reality or the experiences of those around them.

Some youth audience members also talk about the bullying actions and non-traditional gender role norms that are shown in the plot of the musical *Laoshu Quqin*. Na, as a woman, noted that different gender roles experience marriage pressure differently. Compared to men, older unmarried women often face greater bias and prejudice regarding their marital status.⁷³ Guo highlighted the line spoken by the Prime Minister, describing two “male” characters as “a bit sissy.”⁷⁴ Additionally, Yang pointed out that Da Huang's behavior in the Mouse Kingdom was a form of bullying.⁷⁵ Based on their responses, the theatricalized *Laoshu Quqin* not only

⁷¹ Guo, interview by Li.

⁷² Quanbao Jiang, Yanping Zhang, and Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte, “Marriage Expenses in Rural China,” *The China Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 207-236.

⁷³ Na, interview by Li.

⁷⁴ Guo, interview by Li.

⁷⁵ Yang, interview by Li.

reflected issues of gender and power dynamics, but also prompted youth audiences to critically engage with these themes within a contemporary social context.

In addition, Guo also noted the sharpness of some lyrics in the song “The Mouse World,” such as the contrasting depiction of 12 years of compulsory education and the healthcare system between the mouse world and reality. He believed that these lyrics reflect people’s expectations for social progress and echo ongoing discussions in China regarding healthcare and education reform. Social expectations are collectively shared social beliefs, and fundamental social change usually does not occur without changes in these expectations. Therefore, the design of the lyrics also implicitly conveys positive social expectations to the youth audience.

(3) Anticipated Theatricalization of Jiangzhou Drum Music

Based on the previously observed preference of youth audiences for the musical version of *Laoshu Quqin*, the researcher further explored whether this positive reception could translate into sustained interest by posing the question: “If given the opportunity in the future, would you be willing to watch similar innovative performances that blend cultural heritage with modern theatrical forms?”

I would watch this type of innovative ICH performance again because the new form of expression helps me better understand traditional culture. When watching traditional heritage performances, I often feel confused and usually don’t grasp the meaning after a single viewing—I need to watch them multiple times. However, this new format offers a refreshing experience and helps me fully understand some of its meanings. If given the chance, I would definitely watch it again.⁷⁶

Yes, definitely. Traditional culture, after all, thrived in an older time and space, and its traditional forms are rarely seen in modern society. It has long shown signs of being replaced by internet culture. In this new era, traditional culture must adapt to modern trends. It needs to continuously innovate by integrating modern popular culture to develop and thrive.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Duan, interview by Li.

⁷⁷ Feng, interview by Li.

Yes, I would. First, this approach makes cultural heritage more intuitive. You can grasp its meaning very directly. Nowadays, many places combine cultural heritage with tourism projects, such as *Encore Pingyao* (《又見平遙》) or *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (《長恨歌》). They incorporate local stories and customs into theatrical or artistic forms, allowing the audience to quickly understand local culture in a short period of time. I believe this format turns the learning of cultural heritage into entertainment, making it more accessible. I feel this is a more easily accepted approach for modern people.⁷⁸

The interview responses reveal that youth audiences unanimously expressed willingness to watch theatricalized intangible cultural heritage performances again in the future. This repeated engagement suggests that theatrical adaptation not only holds novelty-driven appeal but also has the potential to establish a sustainable model for cultural transmission. A key driver of this sustained engagement lies in the enhanced accessibility and comprehensibility offered by theatrical adaptations. Youth viewers often struggle to grasp the meanings embedded in traditional instrumental performances, requiring multiple viewings and independent study. In contrast, the theatricalized version retains elements of traditional culture while providing immediate clarity, enabling audiences to focus on enjoyment rather than grappling with basic understanding. This improved accessibility encourages not only initial viewership but also repeat attendance.

In addition, their responses reflect an understanding that traditional culture must evolve to maintain its relevance in contemporary society. Audiences regard theatricalization as a suitable adaptation strategy in today's cultural landscape—an approach that integrates traditional music heritage with modern art forms and even cultural tourism. Youth audiences' acceptance of and expectations for innovative formats suggest that theatricalization may serve as an effective bridge between traditional culture and contemporary life, potentially ensuring the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage. While the responses represent only a subset of audience intentions, they collectively indicate broader implications for cultural preservation and transmission.

⁷⁸ Na, interview by Li.

5. Conclusion

The study finds that the theatricalization of *Laoshu Quqin* plays a positive role in enhancing youth audiences' understanding of Jiangzhou Drum Music. Unlike many drum music performances that lack a clear narrative structure, Jiangzhou Drum Music leverages its inherent storytelling style to theatricalize the traditional piece *Laoshu Quqin* into a musical format—the first percussion-based musical theater of its kind in China—while retaining drum music as the primary narrative vehicle. Many among the youth audience have also noted that this production was distinctly different from both traditional drum performances and musical theater productions that rely primarily on vocal performance as the main narrative vehicle. Although the common phenomenon of “the layman watches the fun, the expert looks at the way” still exists among youth audience members in the musical context, the theatricalized version—unlike traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music performances—uses immersive and eclectic narrative design, compensates for the single auditory nature of drum music through songs and dialogues, and incorporates diverse costumes, lighting, stage design, and props. Together, these elements construct an artistic form that aligns with contemporary youth aesthetics, thereby lowering the cognitive threshold and improving their perception of drum music. However, some challenges that emerged in the theatricalized version of *Laoshu Quqin* also reveal the creative limitations and structural immaturity in adapting instrumental performances into a musical theater format.

In addition, the theatricalized version *Laoshu Quqin* reconstructs artistic expression of Jiangzhou Drum Music from a youth-centered perspective, incorporating real-world issues such as marital pressure, parental control, bullying, twelve years of compulsory education, and healthcare reform into its narrative. These elements strengthen emotional resonance and stimulate critical reflection among youth audiences. Compared to traditional Jiangzhou Drum Music, youth audiences show a clear preference for performances with contemporary aesthetic appeal and

express strong anticipation for future theatricalized versions of Jiangzhou Drum Music and other intangible cultural heritage performances. This further demonstrates the sustainable potential of these innovations to spread among younger generations.

Furthermore, future studies focusing on the perspectives of investors, inheritors, and performers could provide valuable insights into the process of theatricalization and its broader implications for the long-term sustainability of intangible cultural heritage.

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