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A Study of Changde Gaoqiang: The Interplay of Music, Performance, and Cultural Identity

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Original Research Articles

A Study of Changde Gaoqiang: The Interplay of Music, Performance, and Cultural Identity

Ni Zheang¹*

Abstract

This study explores the artistic characteristics and value of Changde Gaoqiang, a significant branch of traditional Chinese opera known for its distinctive music and performance style. The research aims to highlight the importance of its protection, inheritance, and development as intangible cultural heritage. A qualitative research methodology is employed, involving a detailed analysis of more than 30 basic tunes and over 70 variations of Changde Gaoqiang. The study focuses on the different singing forms, such as rolling singing and gang singing, and examines the influences of Yuanshui boat songs and Zhapai chants on the performance style, categorizing it into vocal and instrumental Bangqiang. The study also analyzes the integration of the Zhongzhou rhyme spelling standard with the local Changde dialect, emphasizing regional characteristics in the performance. Further, it identifies the four main roles in Changde Gaoqiang—Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou—and examines the incorporation of local music forms like Shaman tune, Nuoyuan tune, and Yugu tune, which enhance the expressiveness of the opera. Additionally, the performance effects are enriched by the inclusion of stunts that captivate audiences. The findings of this research offer a deeper understanding of the musical style and performance techniques of Changde Gaoqiang, contributing to the preservation and development of this traditional art form while providing valuable insights for the evolution of modern opera.

Keywords: Changde Gaoqiang; Musical; Performance

Introduction

Changde Gaoqiang, a vital branch of traditional Chinese opera, has long been celebrated for its distinctive musical style and performance techniques (Wang, 2015; Mo, 2017). Originating from the Changde region in Hunan Province, this form of opera is characterized by its rich melodies, expressive singing forms, and deeply rooted connection to local culture and dialect (Yi, 2019). Despite its historical significance, Changde Gaoqiang has faced challenges over the centuries, with periods of decline followed by efforts to revive and protect it as a crucial part of China's intangible cultural heritage (Chen, 2020; Jiang, 2018).

The importance of safeguarding Changde Gaoqiang has been acknowledged by numerous scholars and cultural advocates, including Wang Kui, Mo Yiming, Yi Yi, Chen Weimin, and Jiang Hanyu, who have highlighted the opera's cultural and artistic value (Wang, 2015; Mo, 2017). However, existing research primarily addresses its historical and general aspects, with limited in-depth analysis of its musical style and performance forms (Chen, 2020). This study aims to bridge that gap by providing a detailed exploration of the key elements that define Changde Gaoqiang, focusing on its music, performance, and the cultural identity it expresses.

This research begins with an introduction to the historical background and development of Changde Gaoqiang, exploring its origins and the evolution of its artistic practices (Jiang, 2018). The central focus is on the opera's distinctive musical elements, including its various tunes and their integration with the local Changde dialect, as well as its performance forms that feature complex vocal techniques and regional influences (Yi, 2019). Additionally, the study examines the interaction between music and performance, analyzing how these elements work together to create an expressive and captivating experience for audiences (Mo, 2017). By delving into these components, this study not only seeks to enhance understanding of Changde Gaoqiang but also aims to provide valuable insights for the future of traditional and modern opera art forms (Chen, 2020).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Changde Gaoqiang, a key branch of traditional Chinese opera, has been a subject of scholarly interest for decades, primarily due to its unique musical and performance characteristics. Research on this art form has largely focused on its historical background, cultural significance, and efforts to preserve it as an intangible cultural heritage. Wang (2015) explores the historical development of Changde Gaoqiang, emphasizing its roots in the Changde region and the cultural exchanges that shaped its musical style. Mo (2017) delves into the opera's musical structure, highlighting the fusion of regional dialects and various local musical forms, such as the Shaman tune and Yugu tune, which are integral to its expressive power. Yi (2019) extends this analysis by exploring the specific vocal techniques used in Changde Gaoqiang, focusing on its intricate melodies and how they reflect the dialectical nuances of the Changde region.

Despite the rich body of literature on Changde Gaoqiang, most studies have focused on its broader historical, social, and cultural contexts (Chen, 2020). These studies provide valuable insights into the opera's evolution and role within Chinese cultural heritage, yet they often lack a detailed examination of its music and performance forms. The study by Jiang (2018) stands out by discussing the challenges faced by Changde Gaoqiang in the modern era, including the loss of traditional forms and the need for revitalization. However, there is still a gap in research concerning the intricate relationship between the music style, performance techniques, and regional identity that define Changde Gaoqiang.

This literature review highlights the need for further analysis of Changde Gaoqiang's musical composition and performance forms. While previous studies have provided important context, there is a pressing need to explore how its music and performance techniques contribute to its cultural identity and artistic value. This research aims to fill this gap by offering an in-depth study of the musical elements, vocal styles, and regional influences that form the essence of Changde Gaoqiang.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon a combination of cultural heritage theory, performance theory, and musicology to examine the interplay between music, performance, and cultural identity in Changde Gaoqiang. Cultural Heritage Theory: Changde Gaoqiang is recognized as an intangible cultural heritage, and its preservation is of paramount importance to Chinese cultural policy. According to UNESCO (2003), intangible cultural heritage includes traditions, performing arts, and expressions that are passed down through generations. This theory provides the framework for understanding the value of preserving Changde Gaoqiang as a living tradition, ensuring its continuity and relevance in contemporary society. As such, the research emphasizes how its protection and inheritance are crucial to maintaining regional cultural identities and artistic practices. Performance Theory: Performance theory, particularly as it applies to traditional Chinese opera, is central to this study. In analyzing Changde Gaoqiang, performance theory helps to examine how musical elements are not just auditory experiences but also performative acts that convey cultural narratives and identity. Schechner's (2006) theory of performance as a "ritualized activity" is particularly relevant, as it highlights how the performance of Changde Gaoqiang serves as a symbolic practice that preserves cultural values and community identity. Musicology and Ethnomusicology: From a musicological perspective, the study of musical elements within Changde Gaoqiang draws on the work of ethnomusicologists who explore the relationships between music and culture. Nettl (2005) argues that understanding the role of music in different cultural contexts is key to grasping its broader social and cultural functions. This framework allows the research to analyze the specific musical features of Changde Gaoqiang, such as its melodic structures, vocal techniques, and instrumental accompaniments, and how these elements contribute to its expressive power and cultural significance. By combining these theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to explore how the distinct musical and performance styles of Changde Gaoqiang contribute to its role as both an artistic form and a

cultural symbol, ensuring its place in China's intangible cultural heritage while offering insights for its future development.

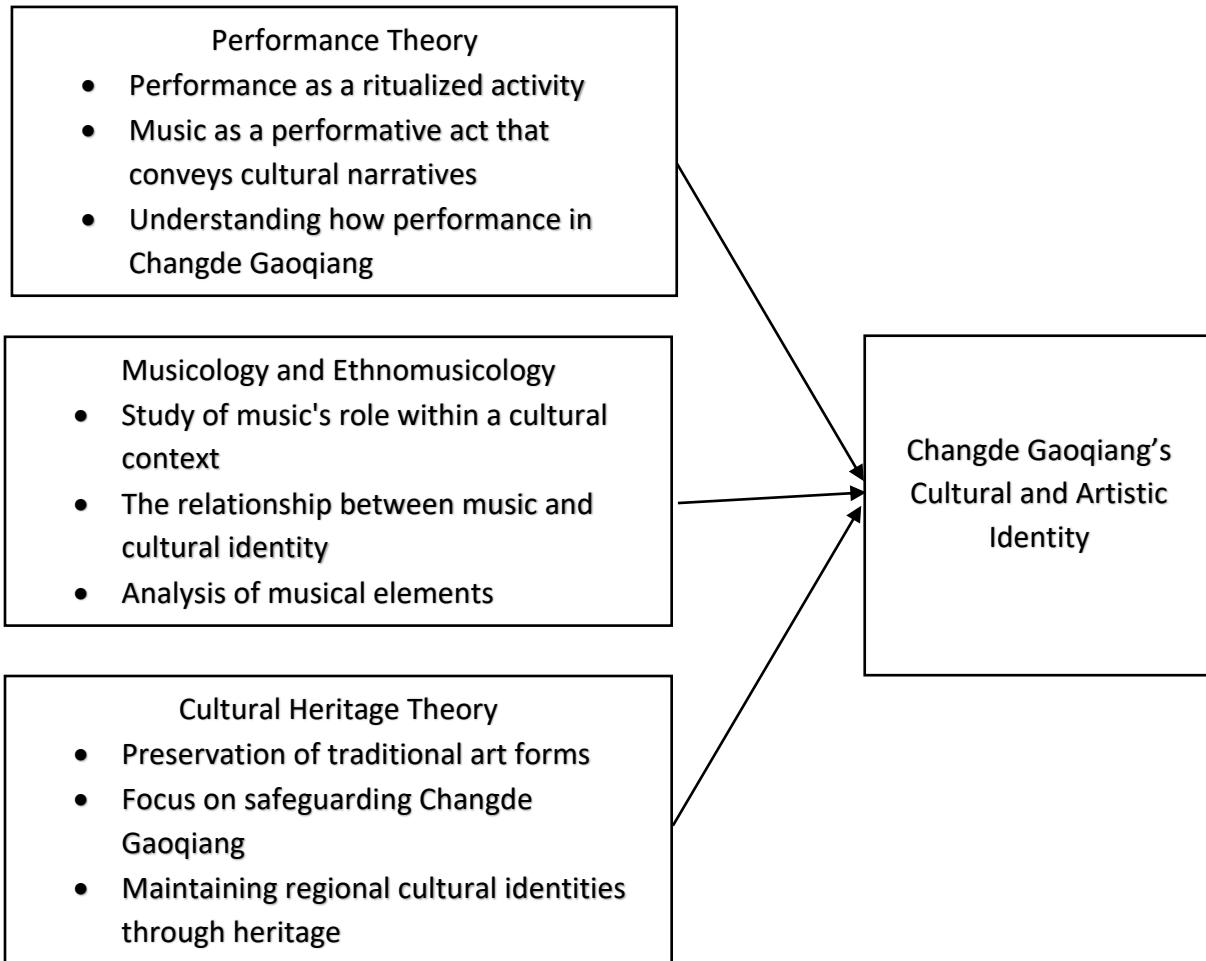


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework for Studying Changde Gaoqiang

Objectives

To bridge that gap by providing a detailed exploration of the key elements that define Changde Gaoqiang, focusing on its music, performance, and the cultural identity it expresses.

Research Methodology

This study employs a history and document research approach to explore the music style, performance forms, and cultural identity of Changde Gaoqiang. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the artistic characteristics of this traditional opera and its historical development.

1. Literature Review and Historical Research

In order to establish a foundational understanding of Changde Gaoqiang, an extensive review of existing literature was conducted. This included academic papers, historical records, and previous studies on the origins, development, and artistic elements of Changde Gaoqiang. The historical background was analyzed to understand how the opera evolved over time, including its periods of decline and efforts to revive and protect it as part of China's intangible cultural heritage (Wang, 2015; Mo, 2017). The literature review also included research on regional dialects, musical traditions, and performance techniques that influenced the development of Changde Gaoqiang (Yi, 2019).

2. Document and Performance Material Analysis

In addition to literature research, a significant portion of the study involved analyzing various Changde Gaoqiang performance materials. These included audio recordings, video performances, and photographs of live shows. The materials provided insights into the opera's performance forms, vocal techniques, and instrumental accompaniments. Special attention was given to identifying the key musical features, including the integration of local dialects and the specific melodies and variations used in the performances (Chen, 2020). Through these materials, the study observed how performance styles and musical elements interact to create a distinctive artistic expression.

3. Interviews with Inheritors and Performers

To gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Changde Gaoqiang's performance traditions, interviews were conducted with key inheritors and performers of the opera. These interviews provided valuable perspectives on the practical aspects of performing Changde Gaoqiang, including insights into vocal techniques, staging, and the cultural significance of the opera. Inheritors shared their experiences and interpretations of the music and performance forms, offering firsthand knowledge that enriched the research (Jiang, 2018).

4. Analysis and Discussion

The data collected through literature research, document analysis, and interviews were then analyzed and synthesized to identify key themes and patterns. The study focused on the interaction between musical style and performance techniques, as well as the opera's role in expressing cultural identity. A detailed analysis was conducted on the musical elements, vocal styles, and regional influences that define Changde Gaoqiang, with the aim of highlighting the significance of this art form in preserving and communicating cultural narratives.

Research Results

The findings of this study were analyzed through the lens of three theoretical frameworks: Cultural Heritage Theory, Performance Theory, and Musicology and Ethnomusicology. The thematic and content analysis of the research data revealed significant insights into how these theories inform our understanding of Changde Gaoqiang, its musical style, performance forms, and cultural identity.

1. Cultural Heritage Theory

Changde Gaoqiang is recognized as an intangible cultural heritage, a designation that underscores its significance as a cultural treasure worthy of protection. The findings of this study revealed that this recognition is crucial for ensuring the opera's survival and continued relevance in modern society. By categorizing Changde Gaoqiang as part of China's intangible cultural heritage, the opera is not only celebrated as an art form but also as a key element of the Changde region's cultural identity.

One of the key concepts that emerged from the research is the essential role of preserving traditional art forms. The study highlighted that safeguarding Changde Gaoqiang is vital, not just for maintaining its artistic integrity, but also for ensuring the continuity of cultural practices unique to the Changde region. Changde Gaoqiang is deeply rooted in the local community, and its preservation is seen as a means to sustain not only an art form but also the cultural narratives, values, and historical context that it embodies. As the opera evolves, it continues to serve as a living testament to the region's rich cultural heritage.

The application of Cultural Heritage Theory in this study revealed that Changde Gaoqiang must be treated as a living tradition, one that adapts to contemporary realities while staying true to its historical roots. The opera's preservation requires a balance between tradition and innovation, where performance techniques and cultural knowledge are safeguarded while allowing space for creative expression and adaptation. This dynamic nature of Changde Gaoqiang was emphasized in the findings, with the understanding that the opera's ability to evolve while remaining true to its core values ensures its continued relevance in both artistic and cultural contexts.

The cultural significance of Changde Gaoqiang was underscored in the findings, especially in the context of globalization and modernization. As these forces continue to shape cultural landscapes, maintaining regional identities becomes increasingly important. The research found that Changde Gaoqiang plays a critical role in preserving the local identity of Changde and Hunan. Through its performance, the opera communicates regional stories, values, and traditions to contemporary audiences, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. The preservation of Changde Gaoqiang is thus seen not only as a means of keeping an art form alive but also as a way of reinforcing cultural ties and promoting a deeper understanding of local heritage in the face of rapid social change.

The findings emphasize the need for continued efforts to protect and promote Changde Gaoqiang as an invaluable part of China's cultural heritage, ensuring that it remains a living tradition for future generations.

2. Performance Theory

Performance Theory, which views performance as a ritualized activity where every action, gesture, and sound carries meaning and purpose, provided a crucial framework for understanding the role of performance in Changde Gaoqiang. The study found that, in the context of Changde Gaoqiang, every element of the performance—whether vocal, instrumental, or physical—serves a purpose beyond mere entertainment. The opera's performance is imbued with cultural significance, and each act is a deliberate expression of cultural narratives and communal identity.

One of the key concepts that emerged from the findings is that in Changde Gaoqiang, music functions as a performative act that conveys cultural narratives, beliefs, and identity. The study observed how the combination of vocal performance and instrumental accompaniment is not only an artistic display but a medium through which the values, worldviews, and historical stories of the Changde people are communicated. Rather than simply providing background music or entertainment, the musical and performative elements of Changde Gaoqiang serve as a channel for transmitting the community's cultural knowledge and identity across generations. This connection between performance and cultural transmission reinforces the notion that every performance is an opportunity to preserve and pass on important cultural traditions.

The application of Performance Theory revealed that the performance of Changde Gaoqiang plays a vital role in preserving and reinforcing cultural values and community identity. Through the dramatic expression of themes such as love, heroism, loyalty, and morality, the opera communicates key aspects of the Changde people's worldview. The performances act as ritualized acts of storytelling and song, where every gesture and note contributes to the collective memory of the community. This allows the opera to serve as both an artistic form and a tool for safeguarding cultural identity. The study found that the opera's performance does not just entertain; it actively participates in the cultural transmission of core values and social norms.

The cultural significance of the performance elements in Changde Gaoqiang was highlighted in the findings. The performance was found to be a symbolic practice that reflects the community's cultural norms, ideals, and social roles. Through its music and gestures, Changde Gaoqiang renews and reinforces the meanings associated with cultural practices, social roles, and community beliefs. The performance itself becomes a space where cultural meanings are revitalized, helping to maintain a strong sense of belonging and collective identity. Both the performers and the audiences participate in this process of cultural renewal, as they engage with the themes and values expressed in the opera. This cyclical process strengthens the community's sense of shared identity and helps to ensure that these cultural traditions continue to resonate in contemporary society.

In conclusion, the findings emphasize that the performance of Changde Gaoqiang is a powerful ritualized activity that transcends the realm of entertainment. It serves as a profound medium for expressing cultural values, conveying narratives, and reinforcing collective identity, ensuring that the cultural heritage of the Changde region is preserved and celebrated through each performance.

3. Musicology and Ethnomusicology

Musicology and Ethnomusicology, as frameworks for examining music within its cultural context, played a pivotal role in understanding the relationship between music and cultural identity in Changde Gaoqiang. The study found that the opera's musical traditions are intricately tied to the identity, beliefs, and social functions of the Changde community. The opera's musical elements—ranging from its melodic structures to its vocal techniques and instrumental accompaniments—serve as vital components that not only define its musical style but also serve as reflections of the region's cultural identity.

A key finding from the study was that the relationship between music and cultural identity is integral to Changde Gaoqiang. The opera's distinctive musical features, including its unique melodies, vocal techniques such as rolling and gang singing, and the integration of the local Changde dialect, were identified as essential markers of cultural identity. These musical forms are not arbitrary; they are deeply embedded in the social and historical context of the Changde region, allowing the music to function as a reflection of the local culture. The melodic structures, in particular, were found to resonate with the social fabric of the community, where specific tunes and vocal techniques communicate the cultural practices, values, and experiences of the region.

In terms of application, the study emphasized how the musical elements of Changde Gaoqiang serve as cultural markers. The distinctive melodies and singing techniques, along with the use of the local dialect, are not only integral to the opera's aesthetic appeal but also embody the community's identity and history. The integration of the Changde dialect into the music serves as a linguistic marker that connects the opera to the region's historical narratives, offering a direct link between the music and the cultural traditions of the area. This finding highlights how music in Changde Gaoqiang does not exist in isolation but is deeply connected to the cultural context in which it is performed.

The cultural significance of the study's findings lies in the expressive power of music in Changde Gaoqiang. The emotional depth conveyed through the opera's music—characterized by its rich melodies, intricate vocal techniques, and the unique integration of local dialects—underscores the power of music as a tool for cultural communication. The music is not merely a form of aesthetic pleasure but a potent medium for conveying cultural meanings, emotions, and stories. The study found that through its music, Changde Gaoqiang communicates not only the emotions and experiences of individual characters but also the collective sentiments and cultural values of the Changde people. Music, in this context, becomes a vessel through which cultural narratives are passed down from generation to generation, ensuring the continuity of cultural identity in the face of change.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the centrality of music in Changde Gaoqiang as both a form of artistic expression and a powerful means of cultural communication. The opera's distinctive musical elements—its melodies, vocal techniques, and dialect integration—are not only key to its musical style but also serve as vital markers of cultural identity. The music of Changde Gaoqiang thus plays a dual role: it provides aesthetic enjoyment while simultaneously

acting as a conduit for the transmission of cultural values, emotions, and stories, ensuring that the opera remains a living tradition deeply connected to the region's cultural heritage.

Discussions

The findings of this study underscore the importance of safeguarding and promoting Changde Gaoqiang, which is an invaluable part of China's cultural heritage. As an intangible cultural heritage, it is vital to ensure that this traditional art form remains a living tradition for future generations. Cultural Heritage Theory emphasizes the necessity of preserving such art forms, not just as static relics of the past, but as dynamic elements that continue to evolve while staying rooted in their historical and cultural contexts (UNESCO, 2003). The research findings suggest that Changde Gaoqiang, while facing challenges such as modernization and changing audience preferences, must be actively preserved through initiatives that promote its performance, teaching, and documentation. Scholars such as Wang (2015) and Chen (2020) have highlighted similar concerns, advocating for the systematic preservation of traditional arts to ensure their continuity.

Additionally, the study emphasizes that Changde Gaoqiang is not merely an entertainment form but a ritualized performance that conveys deep cultural meanings. Performance Theory, particularly Schechner's (2006) perspective of performance as a "ritualized activity," is particularly relevant here. The findings demonstrate that each performance of Changde Gaoqiang serves as more than just a means of artistic expression; it is a powerful cultural act that reaffirms the Changde community's collective identity and cultural values. Through its performances, the opera communicates narratives related to love, heroism, morality, and community, which are essential to the identity of the region. The study found that these performances function as symbolic practices, reinforcing cultural bonds and offering a shared space for the renewal of cultural meanings (Schechner, 2006). This ritualized nature of performance ensures that cultural heritage is not just maintained but is continually revived and celebrated.

Finally, the findings highlight the central role of music in Changde Gaoqiang, which serves as both an artistic expression and a potent means of cultural communication. As pointed out by Nettl (2005), music is integral to understanding cultural identity, and the unique musical elements of Changde Gaoqiang—including its melodic structures, vocal techniques, and the integration of the Changde dialect—are not only fundamental to the opera's musical style but also act as markers of cultural identity. The music's deep connection to the region's cultural and historical context is vital for the continued relevance of the opera. The study emphasizes that these musical elements serve a dual purpose: they provide aesthetic enjoyment while also transmitting cultural narratives, emotions, and values. The emotional resonance of Changde Gaoqiang, conveyed through its distinctive melodies and vocal techniques, helps communicate the region's cultural identity to contemporary audiences. This aligns with the arguments of ethnomusicologists like Nettl (2005), who stress the role of music as a tool for cultural communication and identity formation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm that Changde Gaoqiang's preservation and promotion are crucial for maintaining the cultural identity of the Changde region. The opera's performance practices and musical elements are not only central to its artistic form but also vital for conveying the cultural values, stories, and emotions that define the region. By safeguarding and promoting Changde Gaoqiang, China ensures the continuity of its rich cultural heritage while fostering a deeper understanding of the role traditional arts play in shaping cultural identity.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that Changde Gaoqiang is much more than a traditional opera form—it is an essential component of the Changde region's cultural identity. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Heritage Theory, Performance Theory, and Musicology and Ethnomusicology, the research provides a multifaceted understanding of how Changde Gaoqiang operates as a living tradition, a performative act, and a reflection of regional cultural identity. The study highlights the need for continued preservation efforts to ensure that this unique art form remains a vibrant part of China's cultural heritage for generations to come.

Suggestions and Implementations

The findings from this study provide several valuable insights into the preservation, performance, and cultural significance of Changde Gaoqiang, which can guide future efforts to safeguard this important cultural heritage. Based on the results, the following suggestions and recommendations are proposed for both the public and for future research:

1. Continued Efforts for Protection and Promotion of Changde Gaoqiang

The study emphasizes the need for continued and enhanced efforts to protect and promote Changde Gaoqiang as a vital part of China's cultural heritage. Given its status as an intangible cultural heritage, it is essential to develop comprehensive protection policies and programs to ensure the opera remains a living tradition. Local governments, cultural institutions, and educational organizations should collaborate to: Establish formal training programs for young performers, scholars, and artists to ensure the transmission of knowledge and skills related to Changde Gaoqiang. Develop digital archives to preserve performances, recordings, and documents related to Changde Gaoqiang, making them accessible to a global audience and future generations. Organize cultural festivals and public performances that highlight Changde Gaoqiang, thus raising public awareness of its cultural significance and fostering appreciation for this traditional art form.

By doing so, Changde Gaoqiang can maintain its relevance in the contemporary cultural landscape while safeguarding its artistic essence for future generations.

2. Recognition of the Ritualized Nature of Performance

The findings highlight the profound ritualized nature of Changde Gaoqiang performances, which go beyond mere entertainment to serve as a medium for expressing cultural values and

reinforcing collective identity. To further leverage the cultural power of these performances, the following strategies are recommended: Community engagement and involvement: Encouraging local communities to actively participate in Changde Gaoqiang performances will help strengthen the sense of cultural pride and belonging. Community-based performances can deepen the connection between the opera and its audience, reinforcing its symbolic role in expressing regional identity. Incorporate storytelling in performances: Given the opera's role in conveying cultural narratives, there should be a greater emphasis on using Changde Gaoqiang as a platform for narrating regional stories, folk traditions, and historical events. This will further embed the opera within the cultural consciousness of the community and beyond. Educational programs: Integrating Changde Gaoqiang into school curricula, particularly in the Changde region and other parts of Hunan, will ensure that future generations learn not only about its artistic value but also its cultural and ritualistic significance.

These efforts will ensure that Changde Gaoqiang remains a vibrant and meaningful cultural practice that continues to serve as a medium for storytelling and identity reinforcement.

3. Emphasizing the Central Role of Music in Cultural Communication

The study underscores the dual role of music in Changde Gaoqiang: as both an aesthetic form of artistic expression and a powerful means of cultural communication. To fully realize the potential of this musical heritage, the following recommendations are proposed: Musical education and research: Establish specialized programs in music schools and universities focused on the study and preservation of Changde Gaoqiang's distinctive musical elements. These programs can explore its melodies, vocal techniques, and dialect integration, providing students with the opportunity to learn directly from masters of the art form. Collaboration with ethnomusicologists and cultural researchers: Future studies should explore the connection between the music of Changde Gaoqiang and broader sociocultural phenomena, such as the impact of globalization and modernization on traditional art forms. These collaborations can further illuminate the role of music in maintaining cultural identity and its function as a form of communication. Documenting musical heritage: Expanding the documentation of Changde Gaoqiang's musical forms through audio and video recordings will ensure the preservation of its unique characteristics. These materials should be made available for study, public access, and educational purposes.

By strengthening the understanding of the relationship between music and cultural identity in Changde Gaoqiang, these efforts can ensure that its music continues to serve as a living tradition, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Changde region.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Comparative studies: Future research could compare Changde Gaoqiang with other regional Chinese operas or traditional art forms, examining how similar and distinct musical elements contribute to the preservation of local cultural identities.

2. Impact of modern technology: Investigating how modern technology, such as digital platforms and social media, can be used to promote and preserve traditional forms like Changde Gaoqiang, could yield insights into how these art forms can thrive in the digital age.

3. Longitudinal studies: Long-term studies on the transmission of Changde Gaoqiang across generations would help to understand how the opera evolves over time and how it remains relevant to younger audiences, ensuring its continued vitality.

In conclusion, the preservation and promotion of Changde Gaoqiang require both concerted efforts from cultural institutions and communities, as well as innovative strategies for integrating traditional practices with contemporary societal needs. By implementing these suggestions, Changde Gaoqiang can continue to thrive as a living tradition, enhancing cultural identity and serving as a valuable expression of regional heritage.

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Declaration of Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines for this study were followed in accordance with the institutional review board (IRB) standards. All participants in interviews and performances provided informed consent, and the study was conducted with the utmost respect for cultural sensitivity and participant privacy.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest to declare.

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