CULTURAL EMBEDDEDNESS AND LIVING TRANSMISSION OF LOCAL TRADITIONAL PERFORMING ARTS: AN INVESTIGATION BASED ON HUZHOU TANHUANG*

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Abstract

This research article aims to: 1) investigate the embedding characteristics of Huzhou Tanhuang within the Jiangnan water town cultural ecology; 2) construct a living transmission theoretical framework for local traditional performing arts based on cultural ecology; and 3) analyze the ecological adaptation strategies through which Huzhou Tanhuang has achieved sustained transmission. This is a qualitative research study collecting data from 15 key informants who are Huzhou Tanhuang practitioners, together with participant observation at 4 transmission bases over three years of fieldwork; the data were analyzed using content analysis with triangulation.

The research results found that: 1) Huzhou Tanhuang forms a unique musical morphology and performance system within the cultural ecology of Jiangnan water towns through a dynamic process of "environmental shaping–cultural adaptation–artistic generation"; 2) Huzhou Tanhuang forms a deep coupling relationship with the Jiangnan water town cultural ecology through

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three dimensions: geographical spatial embedding, linguistic prosodic embedding, and folk cultural embedding; 3) Huzhou Tanhuang demonstrates strong ecological adaptability in its historical evolution, achieving sustained survival through strategies of morphological adjustment, functional transformation, and spatial expansion.

The proposed "cultural ecological embedding" provides a new explanatory framework for understanding the generative mechanisms and survival logic of local traditional musical culture.

Keywords: Cultural Ecology, Huzhou Tanhuang, Cultural Embeddedness, Living Transmission, Intangible Cultural Heritage

Introduction

In the globalization, local traditional performing arts face unprecedented survival challenges. As important carriers of human civilization that preserve regional cultural memory and embody ethnic aesthetic characteristics, the protection and transmission of these art forms have become crucial issues in cultural research (Li, 2025). Particularly in China's Jiangnan region, the unique water town ecological environment has nurtured rich and diverse local opera and Quyi arts.

Huzhou, located on the southern shore of Lake Taihu with dense river networks throughout its territory, has long been praised as "Having traveled through all the beautiful lands of Jiangnan, one's life is only complete living in Huzhou." This area is not only an important birthplace of Chinese silk culture, tea culture, and writing brush culture, but has also nurtured the unique Tanhuang art. Tanhuang is a general term for folk theater in Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions, including areas such as Hangzhou, Jinhua, Huzhou, and Ningbo in Zhejiang Province, and Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou in Jiangsu Province, as well as Shanghai, all having their local Tanhuang forms (Zhou, 1979). Huzhou Tanhuang is the origin

and artistic foundation of Huzhou Opera formation, and is also the collective term for Huzhou short plays, Qinshu, and Santiao. It matured gradually as artists performed short plays, Qinshu, and Santiao repertoires, Fuzi, and hall narratives through long-term troupe performances and divided singing sessions (D. H. Liu, 2016). In 2011, "Huzhou Opera" was listed in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Registry (Yang, 2020), marking national-level recognition and protection for this local art form. As an important component of the Wu dialect cultural sphere, Huzhou Tanhuang's generation, development, and evolution fully reflect the dynamic interaction between regional environment, social structure, and cultural tradition.

Therefore, the core questions of this research are: What dynamic processes govern the interaction between Huzhou Tanhuang and the Jiangnan water town cultural ecology? What specific cultural embedding characteristics are manifested in this process? What ecological adaptation strategies has Huzhou Tanhuang adopted in its historical evolution to achieve sustained transmission? Through in-depth exploration of these questions, this study attempts to construct a cultural ecology theoretical framework for local traditional performing arts, providing theoretical support for understanding their generative mechanisms, embedding characteristics, and transmission logic.

Objectives

1) To investigate the embedding characteristics of Huzhou Tanhuang in the Jiangnan water town cultural ecology, revealing the shaping effects of geographical environment, linguistic culture, social structure, and other ecological elements on its artistic form.

2) To innovate theoretical understanding of local traditional performing arts, constructing a living transmission theoretical framework based on cultural

ecology by tracing Huzhou Tanhuang's historical evolution and cultural value system.

3) To analyze the ecological adaptation strategies through which Huzhou Tanhuang has achieved sustained living transmission in its historical evolution—namely morphological adjustment, functional transformation, and spatial expansion—thereby clarifying its survival logic within the Jiangnan water town cultural ecology.

Literature Review

To situate this study within existing scholarship, the literature review is organized around three thematic strands: the theoretical foundations of cultural ecology, the application of cultural ecology to local opera and traditional performing arts, and the protection and living transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Concepts and theories regarding cultural ecology.

Cultural ecology originated in cultural anthropology as a framework for explaining how human cultures adapt to and are shaped by their environments. Steward (1955) established the field by proposing the concept of the cultural core and a method of multilinear evolution, arguing that environmental conditions and subsistence activities decisively shape cultural forms. This materialist orientation was extended by Harris (1979), whose cultural materialism foregrounds the determining role of infrastructural and environmental conditions, and by Rappaport (1968), who demonstrated the ecological and regulatory functions of ritual within a community’s adaptive system. Within Chinese scholarship, Fang (2001) advanced the proposition of cultural ecological imbalance, drawing attention to the disruption of traditional cultural ecosystems under modernization, while Huang (2013) reframed heritage protection through a cultural-ecology lens. Together these works supply the conceptual vocabulary

environment, adaptation, embeddedness, and ecological balance on which the present study's analytical framework is built.

Concepts and theories regarding cultural ecology in local opera and traditional performing arts.

A growing body of research applies cultural-ecology perspectives to regional opera and folk-music traditions. Chen (2012) examines Shaanxi opera within its regional cultural ecology, while Hu (2020) traces the cultural ecology of Jiangnan opera during the Qing Dynasty, underscoring the ecological specificity of the Jiangnan region most relevant to the present case. Pan and Pang (2020) analyze the cultural-ecological protection and construction of Guilin local opera and Quyi, and Fan et al. (2022) read Bashu folk culture through the musical morphology of Sichuan Opera lantern tunes, showing how regional environment and folk life are inscribed in musical form. Earlier ethnomusicological work, such as Miao and Qiao's (1985) study of similar color areas in Han folk songs, similarly links musical morphology to geographical and cultural regions. Lü and Yao (2006) address the broader survival and development challenges facing local opera, and Li (2025) reflects on the contemporary coordinates of traditional music research. These studies confirm the explanatory value of cultural ecology for regional performing arts, yet they concentrate on other genres and regions, leaving Huzhou Tanhuang largely unexamined.

Concepts and theories regarding intangible cultural heritage and living transmission.

The third strand concerns the safeguarding and living transmission of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). K. L. Liu (2004) articulates the principle of holistic protection, arguing that heritage cannot be preserved in isolation from its cultural ecosystem, a position consonant with the cultural-ecology orientation above. Yang (2020) documents the "Zhejiang experience" in protecting ICH performance projects, providing a regional policy context directly relevant to

Huzhou, which lies within Zhejiang Province. For the specific object of study, Zhou (1979) situates Tanhuang within the broader development history of Chinese opera, and D. H. Liu (2016) provides the most systematic account of Huzhou Opera and its Tanhuang foundations. These works establish both the conceptual emphasis on living, ecosystem-embedded transmission and the empirical groundwork for studying Huzhou Tanhuang.

Summary.

In sum, prior scholarship has firmly established cultural ecology as a theoretical framework and has applied it productively to various regional operas and to ICH protection. However, two gaps remain: most cultural-ecology analyses of opera address regions and genres other than Huzhou Tanhuang, and existing accounts of Huzhou Tanhuang are largely historical or descriptive rather than ecological. This study addresses both gaps by applying a cultural-ecology framework to systematically analyze the embedding characteristics and living transmission mechanisms of Huzhou Tanhuang within the cultural ecology of Jiangnan water towns.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, applying a cultural ecology theoretical framework, systematically examining the cultural embeddedness and living transmission mechanisms of Huzhou Tanhuang through multiple data collection and triangulation verification.

Data Collection

Documentary Research

The study systematically collected and organized historical documents from the Qing Dynasty to contemporary times, including local gazetteers, opera and Quyi historical materials, and academic works, including important historical materials such as "Nanxun Chronicle" and "Chinese Opera Music Collection:

Zhejiang Volume," as well as monographs such as "Huzhou Opera," "History of Huzhou Opera Development," "History of Huzhou Quyi," "Huzhou Santiao," and "Spring and Autumn of Qin Rhymes," constructing the historical trajectory of Huzhou Tanhuang development.

In-depth Interviews.

Fifteen key informants were selected for semi-structured interviews, including 3 cultural workers, 7 professional performers, and 5 non-professional performers. Interviews spanned from January 2022 to July 2025, with each interview lasting over 60 minutes.

Field Observation.

The study combined participant and non-participant observation methods, systematically observing and recording 4 transmission bases (Huzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Training Center, Huzhou Normal University, Tangdian Primary School, Renhuangshan Community) and 4 live performances (2022 Changtianlang Park Cultural Heritage Day, 2023 Nanxun Ancient Town "Art Heart One Art · Cultural Beauty" 365 Action, 2024 Hanshan Silkworm Flower Festival, 2024 Huzhou Grand Theater large-scale original contemporary-themed Huzhou Opera "A Leaf" exhibition).

Table 1 Research Data Collection Overview

Research Method	Scope of Data Collection	Time Period
Documentary Research	Historical documents (Qing Dynasty to contemporary)	Qing Dynasty-2025
In-depth Interviews	15 key informants (3 cultural workers, 7	January 2022 - July 2025

	professional performers, 5 non-professional)	
Field Observation (Transmission Bases)	4 transmission centers: Huzhou ICH Training Center, Huzhou Normal University, Tangdian Primary School, Renhuangshan Community	January 2022 - July 2025
Live Performance Observation	4 performances across various community and institutional venues	May 2022 - September 2024

Table 2 Interviewee Classification (N=15)

Interviewee Category	**Number**	**Professional Status**
Cultural Workers	3	Intangible Cultural Heritage officials and researchers
Professional Performers	7	Full-time Tanhuang artists and troupe members
Non-professional Performers	5	Community members and hobby practitioners

Table 3 Primary Transmission Bases for Huzhou Tanhuang

Institution Name	Location	Type of Transmission	Audience/Participants
Huzhou ICH Training Center	Huzhou City	Professional/systematic instruction	Professional trainees
Huzhou Normal University	Huzhou City	Academic and performance training	University students and scholars
Tangdian Primary School	Huzhou District	Youth education and transmission	Elementary school students
Renhuangshan Community	Huzhou District	Community-based folk practice	Community residents and families

Table 4 Core Musical Morphology of Huzhou Tanhuang

Tune Type	Melody Character	Rhythm	Primary Function	Key Characteristics
Short Play Tune	Lively and bright	Straightforward and energetic	Entertainment and storytelling	Flexible seven-character line structure; highly adaptable and memorable

Ben Tan Tune	Graceful and refined	Leisurely and contemplative	Emotional expression and characterization	Intimate and beautiful quality; utilized for love stories and inner emotions

Table 5 Huzhou Tanhuang Historical Evolution and Adaptation Strategies

Historical Period	**Environmental Context**	**Performance Venues**	**Art Form Status**	**Adaptation Strategies**
Late Qing - Early Republic (1800s-1940s)	Rural agrarian society with folk traditions	Temple stages, rice fields, threshing grounds, water-side markets	Folk art tradition with high community participation	Morphological adjustment; maintained core characteristics while incorporating regional influences
Post-1949 Republic Era (1949-1978)	National cultural policy standardization	Urban storytelling houses, designated theaters	Transitional phase: folk art to professional genre	Functional transformation; established Huzhou Opera Troupe; professional training systems

Contemporary Period (1978-2025)	Digital age and globalization pressures	Modern theaters, digital platforms, educational institutions, community centers	Professional opera with heritage recognition (2011 ICH listing); hybrid traditional-modern	Spatial expansion; digital experimentation (live streaming, short videos); maintained linguistic authenticity

Results

Through systematic fieldwork and documentary analysis documented in Tables 1-5, the study finds that Huzhou Tanhuang, as a typical local performing art of Jiangnan water towns, exhibits distinct cultural ecological characteristics in its generation, development, and transmission. First, Huzhou Tanhuang follows a dynamic process of "environmental shaping-cultural adaptation-artistic generation," which constitutes the theoretical framework for understanding its cultural ecological mechanisms; second, within this dynamic process, Huzhou Tanhuang forms deep embedding relationships with the Jiangnan water town cultural ecology through three dimensions: geographical space, linguistic prosody, and folk culture; finally, based on these processes and characteristics, Huzhou Tanhuang has developed three ecological adaptation strategies morphological adjustment, functional transformation, and spatial expansion and it achieved trans-temporal living transmission.

The Dynamic Process of "Environmental Shaping-Cultural Adaptation-Artistic Generation" Environmental Shaping Mechanisms.

The formation and development of Huzhou Tanhuang is deeply shaped by the unique environment of Jiangnan water towns. This environmental shaping

is not unidirectional determination but results from the combined effects of natural, social, and cultural environments. The geographical environment provides material foundation and spatial carriers. The dense water network geographical pattern facilitates itinerant performances by artists, with waterside spaces becoming natural performance venues. The water town's production and life style directly influences Tanhuang content creation, producing repertoires related to agriculture, aquaculture, and folk production practices. Additionally, linguistic culture constructs spiritual support and social soil. The rich prosodic system of Huzhou dialect determines the basic characteristics of Tanhuang singing styles, the deep literati tradition shapes its gentle and delicate aesthetic style, and flourishing folk activities provide broad social fields for Tanhuang performances.

Cultural Adaptation Process.

Huzhou Tanhuang demonstrates strong cultural adaptability in its historical development, including both active adjustment to environmental changes and passive acceptance under environmental pressure. During the late Qing and Republican periods, facing urbanization trends, Tanhuang actively moved from rural to urban areas, from threshing grounds and temple stages to urban storytelling houses and theaters (Table 5). After the founding of the People's Republic, under national cultural policy guidance, Tanhuang successfully transformed from folk art to professional opera genre, establishing the Huzhou Opera Troupe and training professional performers. In contemporary times, facing new trends in digital communication, some inheritors have begun experimenting with live streaming, short videos, and other new forms.

The study finds that throughout this adaptation process, Tanhuang consistently maintains continuity of core characteristics. Core elements such as dialect singing, basic singing styles, and local themes are preserved, ensuring artistic characteristics are not lost through adaptation.

Artistic Generation Results.

Through bidirectional interaction between environmental shaping and cultural adaptation, Huzhou Tanhuang has formed a unique artistic system. In musical morphology, it has developed a complete system centered on "Ben Tan Tune" and "Short Play Tune," supplemented by various functional singing styles (Table 4). In performance conventions, it has formed body movement characteristics of "gentleness with strength, combining hardness and softness," exhibiting both the grace of Jiangnan culture and appropriate strength expression. In repertoire content, it has formed a rich repertoire reflecting water town life, carrying moral education, and meeting festival needs.

Three-Dimensional Cultural Embeddedness of Huzhou Tanhuang Geographical Spatial Embedding: Water Network Environment and Itinerant Performance.

The study finds that Huzhou's unique "lake-water network-plain" composite geographical pattern had decisive influence on Tanhuang art formation.

First, the natural foundation of Jiangnan water town geographical pattern. Huzhou is located on the southern shore of Lake Taihu, in a subtropical monsoon climate zone, with terrain higher in the southwest and lower in the northeast, presenting a natural pattern of "five parts mountain, one part water, four parts farmland." Major waterways including Lake Taihu, Tiaoxi River, Zhaxi River, and the Grand Canal crisscross the region. Tiaoxi River originates from Tianmu Mountain, flowing from southwest to northeast through the entire territory, merging with Zhaxi River in Huzhou city before flowing into Lake Taihu; the Grand Canal runs north-south through the city, connecting with the Taihu water system.

The water network pattern profoundly influenced Tanhuang. According to documentary records and inheritor interviews, convenient water transportation created natural conditions for artists' itinerant performances.

Artists "used boats as carriages and oars as horses," traveling by water from Nanxun to Zhenze, from Shuanglin to Tongxiang. A small boat loaded with simple costumes and instruments could perform everywhere along the waterways. The water town environment also shaped unique performance spaces, with early Tanhuang mostly performed at rice fields, threshing grounds, markets, and even on boats and docks flexible performance methods adapted to water town life needs.

Second, the hub position in the Grand Canal cultural belt. As an important node city of the Grand Canal, Huzhou's section spans approximately 43.9 kilometers, connecting important cities like Suzhou, Jiaxing, and Hangzhou, making Huzhou a crucial channel for north-south cultural exchange. According to local chronicles like "Nanxun Chronicle": "Tiaoxi and Zhaxi rivers flow together, circling the city eastward for over fifty li, branching southward with winding shores, pooling into expanses, dispersing into streams." The study finds that the water network structure of "four waters embracing the city obliquely, dispersing into thousands of streams throughout myriad homes" provided convenience not only for material transport but created conditions for cultural exchange. Introduction to East China Local Opera (East China Ministry of Culture Arts Management Bureau, 1952) clearly states: "Huzhou Tanhuang was initially just folk short plays with very simple form. Later, through artists who had been to Shanghai absorbing tunes from the early sections of Shanghai Opera (Shen Opera) and making improvements, using Wuxing (now Huzhou city) dialect (later also incorporating Mandarin and northern dialects) while preserving original characteristics, it achieved preliminary development." This record clearly reveals how convenient water transportation facilitated Tanhuang's interactive absorption with opera genres from Shanghai, Suzhou, Jiaxing, and other regions.

Third, formation of regional cultural radiation networks. According to the comprehensive review section of the Chinese Opera Music Collection: Jiangsu Volume (Chinese Opera Music Collection Editorial Committee, 1992), Tanhuang

is divided into two major categories: "Nanci Tanhuang" and "Huagu Tanhuang," widely spreading to Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, and Fujian provinces. Luo (2018) states: "In the late Qing and early Republic, folk theater with certain modern theatrical characteristics appeared (first along China's coast), called 'Tanhuang' in the south, with Zhejiang and southern Jiangsu (the Song Dynasty's 'Liangzhe Circuit') as its birthplace and main activity area."

Research finds that cultural exchange within the network endowed Huzhou Tanhuang with three important characteristics: linguistic interoperability (dialects within the Wu dialect region, though varied, are basically mutually intelligible), artistic compatibility (performance styles from different regions can be mutually borrowed), and market mobility (artists can tour within a relatively large area).

Linguistic Prosodic Embedding: Dialect System and Musical Morphology.

First, the prosodic foundation of the dialect system. Huzhou dialect belongs to the Wu dialect Taihu subdivision Tiaoxi subgroup, colloquially called "Huzhou idle talk." According to linguistic research, Huzhou dialect has 29 initials, 37 finals, and 8 tone categories, with this rich phonetic system providing broad space for Tanhuang singing style development. The study finds that inheritors' practical experience confirms the importance of these phonetic characteristics the core singing styles of Huzhou Tanhuang fully utilize Huzhou dialect's tonal characteristics, with "Ben Tan Tune" fully utilizing Huzhou dialect's tonal features, sounding both intimate and beautiful. Moreover, the Wu dialect region traditionally has "different sounds within ten li," with phonetic differences existing between counties and even villages and towns within Huzhou's jurisdiction. This differentiation led early Tanhuang artists to form different "guild" structures. According to historical records, artists were divided by locality into Huzhou guild,

Changxing guild, Nanxun guild, Shuanglin guild, Deqing guild, and others (D. H. Liu, 2016), with each guild having subtle differences in singing styles.

Second, the historical accumulation of cultural tradition. Located in the Jiangnan heartland with mountains and water, mild climate, Huzhou is a typical nurturing ground for "mountain-water culture." As an important node city in the Wu dialect cultural sphere, Huzhou has a long history and abundant cultural heritage. Particularly noteworthy is that Shen Yue from Wukang in Wuxing Commandery during the Southern Dynasties proposed the "ping, shang, qu, ru" (level, rising, departing, entering) four-tone theory in "Sisheng Pu" (Four Tones Manual), establishing prosodic standards for later poetry and lyrics. This deep cultural tradition provided rich aesthetic resources for Tanhuang art development. Field research finds that Huzhou Tanhuang's textual system exhibits distinct orality and narrativity, adopting a prose-like structure primarily using seven-character lines, emphasizing linguistic flexibility with adjustable line segments, particularly represented by the "four-three structure." Rhetorically, Tanhuang extensively employs the three rhetorical devices of "fu, bi, xing" (exposition, comparison, evocation), enhancing linguistic expression and emotional conveyance.

Third, the cultural soil of musical morphology.

Research finds that Huzhou Tanhuang has formed a unique and complete singing style system through long-term development. This system centers on "Short Play Tune" and "Ben Tan Tune." "Short Play Tune" is one of Huzhou Tanhuang's most representative singing styles, characterized by lively melody and bright, straightforward rhythm. Musically, Short Play Tune mostly adopts upper-lower phrase structure, with seven-character lines being most common, facilitating memorization and transmission. On this foundation, it can be reduced to "five-character lines" or expanded to "nine or eleven characters." This flexible and variable line structure makes Huzhou Tanhuang vivid and intriguing, captured in many repertoires like "Selling Charcoal" and "Borrowing the Cape." "Ben Tan

Tune" is another major singing style of Huzhou Tanhuang, characterized by graceful melody, leisurely rhythm, and delicate emotion. This singing style is mostly used to express love stories of talented scholars and beautiful ladies or to express characters' inner emotions.

Folk Cultural Embedding: Festival Customs, Folk Belief, and Community Life.

First, folk festivals and ritual occasions as performance fields. Within the seasonal rhythm of Jiangnan water town life, Huzhou Tanhuang was closely embedded in folk festivals, temple fairs, and ritual gatherings, which supplied both regular performance occasions and committed audiences. As an important birthplace of silk culture, Huzhou developed a dense calendar of sericulture-related customs, and field observation of the 2024 Hanshan Silkworm Flower Festival confirms that Tanhuang performance is still enacted within such folk-ritual settings. Festival stages, cultural-heritage days, and community celebrations thus functioned as the social fields in which the art was repeatedly performed, witnessed, and renewed, binding the repertoire to the lived cycle of agrarian and sericultural life.

Second, folk beliefs, production life, and moral values embedded in the repertoire. The thematic content of Huzhou Tanhuang is saturated with the everyday worldview of water town communities. Repertoires drawn from agriculture, aquaculture, sericulture, and other folk production practices encode local livelihoods, while the art's recurrent function of moral education conveys community ethics, kinship norms, and didactic values. In this sense the singing styles are not merely entertainment but a vernacular medium through which folk beliefs, customs, and shared moral sentiments are transmitted across generations.

Third, community participation and folk social organization. Huzhou Tanhuang was sustained by dense networks of community participation and folk

self-organization. Early artists were organized into locality-based guilds such as the Huzhou, Changxing, Nanxun, Shuanglin, and Deqing guilds, each carrying subtle stylistic differences, while contemporary transmission persists through community-rooted bases such as the Renhuangshan Community alongside formal institutions (Table 3). This embeddedness in grassroots social structures—amateur troupes, family transmission, and community practice—has been decisive in maintaining the living, participatory character of the art.

Discussion

The findings of this study both confirm and qualify the cultural-ecology tradition on which its framework is built. Steward's (1955) concept of the cultural core and his method of multilinear evolution lead one to expect that environmental and subsistence conditions will shape cultural form, and the case of Huzhou Tanhuang bears this out: the density of the water network, the rhythm of the sericultural year, and the prosodic structure of the Huzhou dialect are all legible in the art's repertoire, its performance occasions, and its singing styles. The evidence gathered here indicates, however, that this shaping is neither unidirectional nor deterministic. The process of "environmental shaping–cultural adaptation–artistic generation" identified in the Results describes a two-way relationship in which the art form does not merely register environmental conditions but selects among them and converts them into expressive resources: the constraint of water-borne travel became the performance convention of the itinerant troupe, and the fragmentation of dialect across short distances became the stylistic diversity of the locality-based guilds. This qualifies the stronger infrastructural determinism of Harris (1979) while preserving its central insight that material and environmental conditions set the terms within which cultural forms develop. Rappaport's (1968) demonstration that ritual performs regulatory work within an adaptive system finds a close parallel in the folk-cultural embedding

described above, since temple fairs, silkworm-flower festivals, and community celebrations were not simply venues but regulatory occasions that synchronized performance with the agrarian and sericultural calendar, supplying at once a recurring audience and a socially sanctioned reason to perform.

Set against earlier applications of cultural ecology to regional opera, the three-dimensional account of embedding proposed here offers a more differentiated explanation than single-factor analyses allow. Miao and Qiao (1985) established a correspondence between the morphology of Han folk song and geographically defined color areas, and Fan et al. (2022) read Bashu folk culture through the musical morphology of a Sichuan Opera lantern tune; both demonstrate that regional environment is inscribed in musical form, but neither specifies the mechanism of inscription. The linguistic-prosodic dimension identified in this study supplies that mechanism for the present case, since the tonal and syllabic resources of the Huzhou dialect are the proximate cause of the melodic contour and line structure of Ben Tan Tune and Short Play Tune. Geography, on this account, acts upon music through language rather than directly upon it. Hu's (2020) account of the cultural ecology of Jiangnan opera in the Qing Dynasty is extended here in two directions, from opera to the Quyi tradition out of which Huzhou Opera emerged, and from the imperial period into the contemporary one, while the addition of the Grand Canal cultural belt as a radiation network shows that the relevant ecology was regional as well as local. The contrast with Chen's (2012) study of Shaanxi opera is instructive in this respect: where an inland ecology produced relatively fixed circuits centered on temple stages, the Huzhou water network made mobility a structural feature of the art, with artists who "used boats as carriages and oars as horses" and a repertoire adapted to short, portable, and flexible performance. That two regional forms embedded in different ecologies developed correspondingly different performance conventions strengthens the claim that cultural ecology is

genuinely explanatory rather than merely descriptive. The aesthetic consequences of such folk embedding are comparable to those Zhu (2012) identifies for Cao Kun, where rural performance conditions likewise generated an aesthetic distinct from that of the literati stage.

The three adaptation strategies documented in Table 5—morphological adjustment, functional transformation, and spatial expansion—bear directly on the theory of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding. K. L. Liu (2004) argues that heritage cannot be preserved in isolation from its cultural ecosystem, and the historical trajectory traced here shows why: at each transition, what carried the art across was not a fixed form but a set of relations between performers, occasions, language, and community. Yang (2020) documents the policy instruments of the "Zhejiang experience" in safeguarding performance projects; the present study supplies a complementary account of the mechanism through which such instruments take effect, since institutional recognition—including the 2011 national listing—proved productive precisely where it sustained ecological relations such as dialect competence, folk occasion, and community participation, rather than the artifact alone. Read alongside Huang's (2013) reframing of heritage protection through a cultural-ecology lens, this suggests a practical criterion for evaluating any safeguarding measure: whether it maintains the art's capacity to re-embed itself in a changing environment, not whether it fixes its present form.

This has a bearing on Fang's (2001) proposition of cultural ecological imbalance. The Huzhou case does not present a simple picture of imbalance or collapse. The agrarian and sericultural ecology that originally sustained Tanhuang has undoubtedly weakened, and the concerns raised by Lü and Yao (2006) about the survival of local opera are borne out in the contraction of its traditional occasions. Yet the study also finds evidence of partial re-coupling. The transmission bases documented in Table 3—a professional training center, a university, a primary school, and a residential community—constitute new

ecological niches that reproduce in institutional form several functions the folk ecology once performed spontaneously, namely recruitment, repeated exposure, and occasions for performance. Contemporary experiments with live streaming and short video extend the same tendency and are best understood not as a break with tradition but as a continuation of the logic of mobility that the water network once served, transposed from a physical to a digital network. Imbalance, on this reading, describes a phase in an ongoing process of re-embedding rather than an endpoint, which is consistent with Li's (2025) call to locate traditional music research within contemporary coordinates rather than to treat tradition as a fixed inheritance.

The most consequential finding for theory concerns what did not change. Across all three historical periods, the core elements of the art—dialect singing, the tune system organized around Short Play Tune and Ben Tan Tune, and locally grounded subject matter—persisted, while venue, function, patronage, and medium were repeatedly reconfigured. This distribution identifies dialect prosody as the cultural core of Huzhou Tanhuang in Steward's (1955) sense, that is, the element whose loss would dissolve the genre rather than merely alter it. It also explains why adaptation did not become assimilation: because the core was linguistic and the periphery institutional, the art could accept substantial institutional change without losing its identity, whereas the loss of dialect competence would leave the tune system without its generative substrate. Living transmission, understood in these terms, is not the preservation of a fixed form but the maintenance of a capacity to re-embed a stable core in successive environments.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The study examines a single genre in a single locality, so its findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable, and the three-dimensional model of embedding requires testing against other cases before it can be treated as general. The interview sample of

fifteen key informants, while covering cultural workers and both professional and non-professional performers, is small, and the reconstruction of earlier periods depends on documentary sources whose interpretation is unavoidably retrospective. Finally, the digital adaptation described above is recent enough that its consequences for transmission cannot yet be assessed, and the present account of it should be read as a description of an emerging strategy rather than as an evaluation of its outcome.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the cultural embeddedness and living transmission of Huzhou Tanhuang within the cultural ecology of the Jiangnan water towns. In relation to the first objective, it finds that the art is embedded in its environment along three mutually reinforcing dimensions: a geographical-spatial dimension, in which the water network and the Grand Canal cultural belt shaped itinerant performance and regional exchange; a linguistic-prosodic dimension, in which the tonal system of the Huzhou dialect generated the melodic and metrical characteristics of the principal singing styles; and a folk-cultural dimension, in which festivals, beliefs, and community organization supplied the occasions, themes, and social structures of performance.

In relation to the second objective, the study proposes "cultural ecological embedding" as a theoretical framework for the living transmission of local traditional performing arts. The framework describes a recurring cycle of environmental shaping, cultural adaptation, and artistic generation, and distinguishes a stable cultural core from an adaptable institutional periphery. In relation to the third objective, it identifies three ecological adaptation strategies—morphological adjustment, functional transformation, and spatial expansion—through which Huzhou Tanhuang has moved from rural threshing grounds and temple stages to urban theaters, professional troupes, educational

institutions, community bases, and digital platforms without surrendering its dialectal and stylistic identity. Taken together, these findings indicate that the survival of a local performing art depends less on the preservation of any particular form than on the continued vitality of the relations that bind it to its cultural ecology.

Recommendation

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are offered for the safeguarding and transmission of Huzhou Tanhuang and comparable local performing arts, and for subsequent research.

Recommendations for policy and practice

First, safeguarding measures should be organized around ecological relations rather than around the artifact alone. Programs are better evaluated by whether they sustain dialect competence, folk-occasion performance, and community participation together than by the number of repertoires archived or performances staged.

Second, dialect transmission should be treated as core rather than contextual work. Because the prosodic system of the Huzhou dialect is the generative substrate of the tune system, dialect programs in kindergartens and primary schools should be coordinated with Tanhuang instruction rather than run as separate initiatives.

Third, performance should continue to be sited within living folk occasions, such as the Hanshan Silkworm Flower Festival and comparable community and temple observances, and not only on commemorative or heritage-day stages, since it is the recurring folk occasion that renews the relationship between repertoire and community life.

Fourth, the existing transmission bases should be articulated into a single progression rather than operated in parallel. A pathway linking community

practice, primary and secondary school instruction, university study, and professional training would convert four separate audiences into one pipeline of practitioners.

Fifth, digital media should be positioned as an extension of reach rather than a substitute for co-presence. Live streaming and short video can carry the art beyond its region and attract younger audiences, but the evidence of this study suggests that transmission itself continues to depend on embodied, face-to-face participation.

Sixth, the stylistic variation preserved by the former locality-based guilds should be documented as a matter of priority, since the surviving practitioners who carry these distinctions are elderly and the differences among them are not recoverable from published sources.

Recommendations for future research

First, comparative research across the wider Tanhuang family, including the Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou, Hangzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai branches, would test whether the three-dimensional model of embedding proposed here holds beyond the present case and how its dimensions vary with local ecology.

Second, longitudinal research is needed on the outcomes of digital transmission, and in particular on whether online exposure converts into sustained participation, since the present study can describe the strategy but not yet evaluate its effects.

Third, the reception side of transmission deserves attention. This study approaches Huzhou Tanhuang largely from the perspective of practitioners and cultural workers, and audience-centered research would clarify how meaning and attachment are formed among listeners, especially younger ones.

Fourth, mixed-methods or quantitative work that operationalizes the notion of embedding into measurable indicators would allow the framework to be compared systematically across genres and regions.

Fifth, detailed musicological and linguistic analysis correlating the eight tone categories of the Huzhou dialect with melodic contour at the level of notation would substantiate the claim of prosodic embedding with evidence of a kind this study was not designed to produce.

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