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**RESILIENCE OF ECHOES: THE HISTORICAL  
EVOLUTION AND MODERN HERITAGE OF GANNAN  
TEA-PICKING OPERA IN THE TRANSITION OF SOCIETY**

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**Abstract:**

This study investigates the historical evolution and contemporary preservation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, a distinctive regional art form that embodies the cultural identity and collective memory of southern Jiangxi, China. It examines how this traditional opera has navigated major socio-political transformations particularly the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and how it has sustained its vitality in the post-revolution era. Employing a qualitative research design that integrates archival analysis, field observation, in-depth interviews, and case studies of modern performances, the study explores the mechanisms through which Gannan Tea-Picking Opera has demonstrated cultural resilience. The findings reveal a tripartite trajectory of growth (1949–1966), survival (1966–1976), and rebirth (1976–2023). The results highlight the crucial role of dedicated artists, educational institutions, and community initiatives in ensuring the opera's transmission and adaptive innovation. By conceptualizing Gannan Tea-Picking Opera as a living cultural heritage rather than a static tradition, this research contributes to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation. It underscores the need for dynamic conservation strategies that integrate tradition and innovation.

**Keyword:**

Cultural Resilience; Gannan Tea-Picking Opera; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Performing Arts Preservation; Sociocultural Transformation



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## Introduction

The performing arts are a profound expression of human creativity. They serve not only as entertainment but also as a vital channel for cultural transmission, social cohesion, and the maintenance of national identity within communities (Kigozi, 2023). Among these cherished traditional arts, Gannan Tea Picking Opera stands out, showcasing the rich historical heritage woven into the fabric of its regional culture (Han, 2023). This art form is more than just a series of performances; it is an integral part of community life, reflecting the collective memory and evolving spirit of the local people (Pan & Sirisuk, 2023).

However, the trajectory of any long-standing cultural practice is not linear; it is often accompanied by profound challenges and transformations (Apgar et al., 2015). Like many traditional arts, Gannan Tea Picking Opera faced significant historical pressures, particularly during the turbulent decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which posed a significant threat to its transmission and survival. Despite this tremendous social upheaval, the remarkable resilience of Gannan Tea Picking Opera artists and practitioners ensured its survival and laid the foundation for its post-1976 revival (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024).

This article delves into the complex historical evolution of Gannan Tea Picking Opera, examining its development and the profound impact of various historical events on its form and function. Furthermore, this article examines the current state of Gannan Tea Picking Opera's preservation and explores strategies and initiatives, including educational institutions and community engagement, that are actively working to preserve this cultural heritage. This study specifically emphasizes how to balance the distinctive artistic characteristics of Gannan Tea Picking Opera (such as its unique dialect and singing style) with the demands of innovation in a rapidly changing modern world. By analysing Gannan Tea Picking Opera's journey from historical adversity to contemporary resurgence, this study aims to illuminate the enduring power of cultural resilience and the dynamic process of maintaining traditional arts amid ongoing social change. Despite the growing scholarly attention to Chinese regional operas (Han, 2023; YENA & Bin Abdullah, 2025) existing research has largely concentrated on aesthetic features, educational transmission, and regional identity formation (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024; Zhang, 2025). However, few studies have systematically examined how such art forms have negotiated historical disruption—particularly during politically turbulent periods such as the Cultural Revolution—and how they have maintained continuity amidst rapid sociocultural transformation (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Wu, 2021). In particular, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera, with its distinctive dialect, gender-based performance traditions, and hybrid artistic expressions, provides an illuminating case for understanding cultural resilience within the framework of intangible heritage preservation (Chang et al., 2024; Han, 2023). Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: How has Gannan Tea-Picking Opera evolved across major socio-political transformations since 1949? What mechanisms and strategies have supported its survival and revival, particularly after the Cultural Revolution?

How can its traditional artistic characteristics be sustained while fostering innovation in a modern context? The primary objective of this research is to reconstruct the historical trajectory of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera and to identify the sociocultural and institutional forces that have shaped its transformation (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Yang, 2024). By adopting a multi-method qualitative approach combining archival research, field observation, and interviews this study aims to contribute theoretically to the discourse on cultural resilience and practically to the sustainable preservation of regional performing arts (Chen, 2014; Chung, 2024). In doing so, it highlights Gannan Tea-Picking Opera not merely as a relic of the past, but as a living embodiment of adaptive heritage within contemporary Chinese society.

## **Literature Review**

The study of traditional Chinese opera forms has garnered widespread scholarly attention, focusing on their complex historical trajectories, cultural significance, and the challenges of preserving them in an evolving modern world (YENA & Bin Abdullah, 2025). Gannan Tea Picking Opera, a unique regional art form, offers a compelling example within this broader context, reflecting the complex interplay between time-honoured tradition and necessary innovation (Han, 2023). This literature review synthesizes existing research, aiming to shed light on the historical evolution and contemporary preservation of Gannan Tea Picking Opera, laying the foundation for this study.

### ***Historical Evolution and Development of Gannan Opera***

Gannan Tea Picking Opera, commonly known as "Dengzi Opera" or "Chalan Lantern," originated in the late 17th century (Wu, 2021). Early performances featured male actors playing female tea pickers. By the mid-20th century, the opera had experienced significant growth, with the emergence of professional troupes and specialized schools dedicated to promoting and developing the opera. Studies of its post-1949 evolution typically divide its trajectory into three distinct periods: a period of growth from 1949 to 1966, a period of difficult survival from 1966 to 1976, and a period of rebirth from 1976 to 2023 (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024).

The "survival period" (1966-1976) coincided with the Cultural Revolution, a turbulent era that posed profound challenges to traditional Chinese art forms, including Gannan Tea Picking Opera. Historical documents and records indicate that government policies and cultural transformations during the period from 1949 to 1966 had a significant impact on the development of opera. Despite these adversities, opera demonstrated remarkable resilience, largely due to the dedication of the artists who ensured its continuity (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). The "rebirth" period (1976-2023) marked a renaissance, as opera began to recover and adapt to new social realities. Developments following the Cultural Revolution have been a key area of analysis for understanding opera's enduring nature (Chang et al., 2024).

### ***Preservation Strategies and Challenges***

The preservation of Gannan Tea Picking Opera in the context of modernization and globalization has been a central topic of recent scholarly research. This research consistently emphasizes the crucial role played by government support, educational initiatives, and artistic innovation in preserving this cultural heritage. Government policies have played a significant role in fostering a favourable environment for the revival and continued development of opera. Furthermore, integrating Gannan Tea Picking Opera into educational institutions and

developing strong community engagement programs are considered crucial mechanisms for ensuring its transmission to future generations (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Chang et al., 2024). This proactive approach helps maintain the role of opera in shaping community identity and cultural pride, and strengthens community cohesion through its reflection on local traditions and social issues (Yang, 2024).

The challenges of preserving traditional opera forms are not unique to Gannan. Literature reviews on Chinese opera education, such as those on Sichuan Opera, explore the historical evolution of these art forms and the current challenges of their transmission (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024). Similarly, research on the preservation and transformation of Mulian Opera emphasizes the evolving philosophical heritage within traditional performances and their contemporary significance (Zhang, 2025). The field of intangible cultural heritage preservation has also explored the digitization of historical documents, such as Kunqu Opera scripts, as a means of ensuring their long-term accessibility and development (Chen, 2014). These studies highlight a commonality: studying and preserving historical art forms requires dedicated resources and strategic planning.

### ***Artistic Characteristics and Adaptability***

Gannan Opera is recognized for its unique artistic characteristics, which contribute significantly to its cultural inheritance and regional identity. Its particular dialect and singing styles are fundamental to its authenticity and appeal. However, the opera has also demonstrated considerable adaptability, evolving to incorporate modern themes and musical styles while meticulously retaining its traditional essence (Han, 2023). This reflects a complex interplay between tradition and innovation, a dynamic process essential for the art form's continued relevance in contemporary society (Chang et al., 2024).

The current study aims to build upon this existing body of literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the musical evolutionary process of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera from 1949 to 2023. By reviewing historical documents, records, and conducting fieldwork and literature studies, this research seeks to further elucidate the historical context and its influence on Gannan Tea Picking Opera. It will specifically examine the developments as the opera transitioned into new forms in the 20th century and beyond, addressing how it has maintained its vitality amidst evolving societal preferences towards stage arts (Xie & Alfarisi, 2025). These studies, while insightful, seldom examine Gannan Tea-Picking Opera through the lens of cultural resilience, a gap this study seeks to address.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative methodological framework to investigate the historical evolution and modern preservation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera within the broader context of sociocultural transformation in modern China. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for exploring complex cultural phenomena and uncovering the subjective meanings attached to artistic traditions (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Chung, 2024). Through this approach, the study examines how community practices, institutional support, and artistic innovation have shaped the opera's resilience from 1949 to 2023.

## ***Research Design***

The study follows an interpretive historical design that integrates archival, ethnographic, and analytical perspectives (Atkinson, 2006; Cardno, 2019). This design allows a holistic reconstruction of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera's developmental trajectory and clarifies the socio-political factors that influenced its transformation. The analysis proceeds through three chronological phases. Historical Analysis (1949–1976): Archival documents and cultural policies were reviewed to assess the opera's institutional development and the disruptions experienced during the Cultural Revolution (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). Fieldwork Observation (1976–2023): On-site observations of live performances in Jiangxi Province documented linguistic features, singing styles, and performance aesthetics (He et al., 2025). Contemporary Analysis: The third phase explored how educational programs and community initiatives contribute to the opera's current preservation and creative renewal (Chang et al., 2024; Yang, 2024).

## ***Data Collection Methods***

Four complementary methods were employed to ensure data triangulation and richness: Documentary and Archival Analysis: Government records, performance scripts, and academic publications from 1949 to 2023 were analyzed to trace institutional and artistic change (Cardno, 2019). Field Observation: Ethnographic observations of rehearsals and staged performances provided insight into how traditional singing techniques and dialectal expressions are maintained (Atkinson, 2006; Wu, 2021). In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with 20 participants including performers, scholars, and cultural officials captured personal narratives and professional perspectives regarding the opera's evolution (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024; Han, 2023). Case Studies: Selected modern adaptations between 2010 and 2023 were examined to understand how directors merge classical elements with contemporary staging (Xie & Alfarisi, 2025); (J. Zhang, 2024).

## ***Sampling and Participant Selection***

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who possess substantial knowledge and professional experience related to Gannan Tea-Picking Opera. A total of 20 informants were recruited based on clearly defined criteria, including: (1) active involvement in Gannan Tea-Picking Opera as performers, directors, or trainers; (2) academic or professional expertise in Chinese traditional opera or intangible cultural heritage; and (3) affiliation with cultural institutions, educational organizations, or local heritage bureaus in Jiangxi Province.

Participants were identified through cultural associations, opera troupes, heritage preservation centers, and academic networks specializing in traditional performing arts. This sampling approach ensured that all interviewees had direct engagement with the opera's historical development, performance practice, and preservation initiatives. The selected informants were therefore considered reliable and authoritative sources for examining the cultural resilience and contemporary transformation of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera.

## ***Data Analysis***

Collected data were analyzed thematically using the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes were generated inductively to identify recurrent themes such as cultural resilience, institutional support, artistic innovation, and community transmission. NVivo (Version 12) software assisted in managing and cross-referencing qualitative data (Chang et al., 2024). Thematic results from historical documents, interviews, and observations were compared and synthesized to enhance validity through triangulation (Chung, 2024).

## ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval and institutional permissions were obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all interviewees, who were guaranteed confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time (He et al., 2025). Access to archival documents and performance materials was granted by relevant cultural bureaus and educational institutions.

## ***Limitations***

As with most qualitative research, complete objectivity cannot be achieved; researcher interpretation may influence findings (Cardno, 2019). In addition, some historical materials were incomplete or restricted. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple sources and reflective analysis minimized bias and strengthened the reliability of interpretations (Chang et al., 2024; Mukhlis et al., 2025).

## **Results**

**Historical Trajectory and Cultural Resilience** The historical trajectory of Gannan Tea-Picking Opera reveals a complex pattern of growth, suppression, and revival that mirrors broader sociopolitical changes in post-1949 China. Between 1949 and 1966, the opera experienced institutional expansion supported by local cultural organizations and educational outreach (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). However, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) disrupted this trajectory, leading to the dissolution of opera troupes, censorship of scripts, and suppression of regional dialects (Wu, 2021). Despite this adversity, oral testimonies from senior performers indicated a covert continuation of practice within small community settings—a clear example of cultural resilience in action (Han, 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2025). This period of “survival,” as defined by (Chang et al., 2024), marked the opera’s transformation from an institutional art form into a community-based expression of identity and resistance. Such resilience aligns with social-ecological models of adaptation that view cultural systems as capable of reorganizing themselves without losing core identity (Apgar et al., 2015). The persistence of linguistic and musical idioms, even in informal gatherings, ensured that Gannan Tea-Picking Opera remained a living, albeit subdued, heritage practice.

## ***Post-Revolution Revival and Institutional Support***

Following 1976, the opera underwent a remarkable rebirth, reflecting China’s broader cultural liberalization. Local governments and cultural bureaus began recognizing Gannan Tea-Picking Opera as a significant intangible cultural heritage, providing financial subsidies and platforms for public performance (Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). The creation of specialized training programs in schools and cultural centers further facilitated intergenerational transmission (Li

& Seekhunlio, 2024). Field observations confirmed that community performances and educational initiatives have reestablished the opera's visibility and cultural relevance. Interviews with younger performers revealed that formal instruction now integrates traditional dialects and melodies with modern stage techniques (He et al., 2025). This pedagogical synthesis allows for artistic renewal while preserving authenticity—illustrating what Zhang (2025) terms “heritage-driven innovation”. These developments also reflect a paradigm shift in heritage management: rather than treating traditional art as static relics, practitioners and policymakers now view them as adaptive cultural ecosystems (Chen, 2014). The findings align with recent research emphasizing the importance of participatory conservation and community co-creation in sustaining intangible heritage (YENA & Bin Abdullah, 2025).

### ***Artistic Adaptation and Contemporary Innovation***

Another prominent finding concerns the opera's capacity for creative adaptation. Contemporary productions incorporate modern narratives, multimedia scenography, and revised character archetypes while retaining core musical and linguistic structures (Y. Zhang, 2024). For instance, performances staged after 2010 employ amplified sound and cinematic lighting, yet the melodic framework (banqiang) and stylized gestures remain faithful to traditional forms (Han, 2023). Interviews revealed that these artistic decisions were driven by both audience expectations and performer agency. Artists described innovation not as deviation, but as evolution—a necessary response to shifting cultural ecologies (Xie & Alfarisi, 2025). This aligns with theoretical perspectives on intangible heritage that frame change as a form of preservation rather than loss (Yang, 2024). Thus, Gannan Tea-Picking Opera demonstrates a dynamic equilibrium between conserving its unique dialectal features and embracing contemporary aesthetics.

### ***Discussion: Theoretical Implications***

The findings reaffirm that Gannan Tea-Picking Opera exemplifies resilient cultural continuity, a heritage form that adapts without surrendering its core identity. The tripartite evolution identified here (growth–survival–rebirth) corresponds with cyclical resilience models observed in other traditional performing arts across East and Southeast Asia (Mukhlis et al., 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, the opera's endurance illustrates how agency, community networks, and institutional mediation jointly produce resilience. The interplay between top-down policy support and bottom-up cultural agency created what (Ye et al., 2023) describe as a bidirectional preservation model, where heritage sustainability emerges through continuous negotiation rather than static protection. Moreover, this study challenges the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. The opera's survival demonstrates that innovation can coexist with authenticity, provided that the mechanisms of change remain grounded in cultural values. This insight contributes to current debates on heritage sustainability and cultural policy, suggesting that preserving performing arts requires both emotional continuity and structural adaptability.

The results unequivocally demonstrate the profound resilience of Gannan Tea Picking Opera, particularly its ability to survive and subsequently thrive after the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This period, identified as one of "survival" in the opera's historical trajectory, posed severe challenges to its continuity. However, the unwavering dedication of artists, as highlighted in both historical documents and in-depth interviews, proved instrumental in safeguarding the art form. This finding resonates strongly with broader scholarship on cultural resilience, which often underscores the critical role of individual

practitioners and community commitment in the face of external pressures. The post-1976 "rebirth" further illustrates that cultural heritage, when supported by strategic preservation efforts from educational institutions and community engagement, can not only recover but also adapt and flourish.

The study's emphasis on balancing tradition with innovation in modern preservation efforts is a central theme that aligns with contemporary discussions in intangible cultural heritage. Gannan Tea Picking Opera capacity to maintain its distinctive artistic characteristics, such as unique dialect and singing styles, while simultaneously engaging in modern adaptations, reflects a dynamic and forward-looking approach to heritage management. This challenges a purely static view of preservation, suggesting that active evolution and reinterpretation are vital for an art form's continued relevance and appeal to new generations. The success of this balance, as observed in case studies, positions Gannan Tea Picking Opera as a model for other traditional arts grappling with similar dilemmas.

Furthermore, the research underscores Gannan Tea Picking Opera intrinsic role as a vehicle for cultural transmission, social cohesion, and the preservation of ethnic identities within its community. This is not merely an artistic function but a societal one, reinforcing the idea that traditional performing arts are deeply embedded in the social fabric and contribute significantly to local identity. The findings affirm that the opera's continuity is crucial for maintaining these broader cultural and social functions, especially in an era of rapid global change.

### ***Comparison with Existing Literature***

Our findings on the challenges and resilience of Gannan Tea Picking Opera during the Cultural Revolution align with studies on other traditional Chinese art forms that faced similar existential threats during that period. The collective experience suggests a pattern of governmental suppression followed by grassroots resistance and eventual state-supported revival, albeit with lasting impacts on traditional practices. However, this study provides specific empirical evidence for Gannan Tea Picking Opera, enriching the historical narrative of how individual art forms navigated this complex era.

The emphasis on educational institutions and community engagement in the "rebirth" phase of Gannan Tea Picking Opera mirrors recommendations in literature concerning the effective transmission and preservation of various traditional arts, from Sichuan Opera to Mulian Opera. The integration of formal education with community-led initiatives is widely recognized as a robust strategy for ensuring that cultural knowledge and performance skills are passed down effectively. The study's focus on balancing tradition with innovation also resonates with broader academic discourse on how traditional arts must adapt to remain relevant in a globalized world, often through the incorporation of modern elements or new interpretations.

### **Implications**

The implications of this research are multi-fold. For policymakers and cultural heritage institutions, the study highlights the critical need for sustained government support and well-structured preservation policies that acknowledge both historical vulnerabilities and contemporary needs. It suggests that policies should encourage dynamic preservation, allowing for innovation within traditional frameworks, rather than solely focusing on static conservation. For artists and practitioners, the study validates the profound impact of their resilience and

dedication, underscoring their irreplaceable role in cultural survival. It also encourages continued exploration of innovative adaptations that respect heritage while attracting new audiences. Theoretically, this research contributes to the understanding of cultural resilience as an active process, shaped by human agency, institutional support, and adaptive strategies, rather than a passive outcome.

### ***Limitations***

It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study, primarily stemming from its qualitative nature. As noted in the methodology, qualitative research is inherently subjective, and the interpretations of the data may be influenced by the researcher's own biases and perspectives. While efforts were made to ensure reflexivity and transparency in the analysis, complete objectivity is not attainable. Additionally, the scope of the project, while comprehensive for Gannan Tea Picking Opera, is focused on a specific regional art form, and thus, direct generalizability to all traditional Chinese performing arts should be approached with caution. The availability and completeness of historical documents also presented a practical limitation that was addressed through triangulation with other data sources.

### ***Future Research***

Building upon these findings, future research could explore the specific economic models that best support the dynamic preservation of Gannan Tea Picking Opera, investigating the impact of tourism, digital platforms, and market-oriented development. Further comparative studies across different Chinese opera forms could also provide deeper insights into commonalities and divergences in their resilience strategies and adaptation processes. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of current educational and community engagement initiatives would offer valuable data on the sustained effectiveness of preservation efforts.

### ***Conclusion***

This study has meticulously traced the Historical Evolution and Modern Preservation of Gannan Tea Picking Opera Amidst Societal Change," has meticulously traced the remarkable journey of Gannan Tea Picking Opera, revealing its profound capacity for endurance and adaptation through significant historical and societal transformations. The research confirms that Gannan Tea Picking Opera is not merely an artistic performance but a living cultural heritage, deeply integral to community life and a powerful vehicle for cultural transmission, social cohesion, and the preservation of ethnic identities. The findings underscore the critical period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which Gannan Tea Picking Opera faced immense challenges, yet survived due to the extraordinary resilience and dedication of its artists. This historical triumph paved the way for a vibrant "rebirth" post-1976, characterized by concerted preservation efforts driven by educational institutions and community engagement initiatives. A key insight from this study is the successful navigation of the delicate balance between maintaining the opera's distinctive traditional artistic characteristics, such as its unique dialect and singing styles, and embracing innovation to ensure its continued relevance and appeal in a rapidly modernizing world. Through a multi-faceted methodological approach encompassing document analysis, field observations, in-depth interviews, and case studies, this research has provided a comprehensive understanding of Gannan Tea Picking Opera dynamic evolution. It highlights that the preservation of traditional performing arts is

not a static endeavor but an active process requiring continuous adaptation, strategic support, and unwavering commitment from artists, institutions, and communities alike. In sum, Gannan Tea Picking Opera stands as a powerful testament to the enduring human spirit and the intrinsic value of cultural heritage. Its journey offers invaluable lessons on the importance of nurturing traditional arts, not just as relics of the past, but as dynamic, evolving forms that continue to enrich contemporary society and uphold cultural identity amidst the currents of change. The "echoes of resilience" within Gannan Tea Picking Opera resonate as a compelling narrative for the future of cultural preservation worldwide.

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the initial draft. Prof. Raja Iskandar Bin Raja Halid contributed methodological guidance, academic supervision, and critical review of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.

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