



Transformation Mechanisms of Traditional Music in Tourism Contexts: A Case Study of Nanyin

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of globalization and the rapid development of tourism, traditional music is undergoing significant transformation. Taking Chinese Nanyin as a focal case, this article examines the transformation pathways and underlying mechanisms of traditional music in tourism contexts from the perspective of music as social practice. Through a comparative analysis of four cases, including Bali in Indonesia, Mah Meri in Malaysia, hula in Hawaii, and Dong Grand Song in China, the study identifies common patterns of change and develops a conceptual model structured around four interrelated dimensions: performance purpose, artistic form, social function, and modes of transmission. This model explains the dynamic process of transformation. The findings suggest that such transformations are not unidirectional adaptations but emerge through continuous interaction with tourism, reshaping both social roles and cultural meanings. Applying this model to Nanyin, the study argues that its challenges stem not only from limited audience reach and dissemination modes, but also from unclear positioning across cultural contexts. Accordingly, the paper offers analytical insights into performance stratification, interpretive reconstruction, functional reorientation, and participatory transmission. By systematically theorizing the interaction between traditional music and tourism, this study provides a framework for understanding the sustainable development of traditions such as Nanyin in contemporary society.

Keywords: traditional music; tourism; cultural transmission; Nanyin; ethnomusicology

1. Introduction

In traditional Western thought, music has often been regarded as a stable and self-contained aesthetic object. However, scholars such as Christopher Small (1996) and David Elliott (1995) argue that music is not a static entity, but a form of human practice embedded in social contexts, whose meanings and forms are shaped by historical, cultural, and social relations. This perspective provides a foundation for rethinking traditional music in contemporary society, where many traditions face shrinking audiences, limited dissemination, and declining social functions. Nanyin, a Chinese musical tradition with a history of over a thousand years, exemplifies these challenges, as it is increasingly marginalized and confined to a restricted audience base. This raises the question of how its contemporary predicament can be understood and addressed.

From a broader perspective, musical development is closely linked to social structures, political conditions, and economic forces. As Elbourne (1975) notes, traditional music evolves not only internally but also in response to external dynamics such as migration, urbanization, and modernization. In the context of globalization, tourism has emerged as a major force shaping cultural practices, including music. Existing studies have examined the impact of tourism from perspectives such as authenticity, commercialization, and cultural display. However, these approaches often emphasize one-way influence and pay limited attention to the interactive mechanisms through which music and tourism shape each other. Moreover, few studies have applied such mechanisms to explain the contemporary development of specific musical traditions. To address these gaps, this study takes Nanyin as a focal case and investigates the interaction between traditional music and tourism. It addresses three research questions: (1) how does traditional music transform within tourism contexts? (2) how does a dynamic, two-way interaction between music and tourism emerge? and (3) how can this interaction help explain the contemporary challenges faced by Nanyin? To answer these questions, the study adopts a qualitative approach combining comparative case analysis and qualitative content analysis. It examines four cases, including Bali in Indonesia, Mah Meri in Malaysia, hula in Hawaii, and Dong Grand Song in China. Based on this analysis, the study identifies shared patterns of transformation, develops a model of interaction between traditional music and tourism, and applies this model to the case of Nanyin in order to offer new perspectives on its contemporary development.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between tourism and music has long been a key concern in ethnomusicology and cultural tourism studies. Existing research can be broadly grouped into three perspectives.

The first focuses on authenticity. Early studies examine how tourism affects the perceived authenticity of traditional music. When music is incorporated into tourism performance contexts, its original ritual functions and social meanings are often reduced, and performances are simplified to meet tourists' expectations (Harnish, 2005). While this perspective highlights the potential erosion of traditional music, it tends to portray music as passively shaped by external forces, overlooking its capacity for adaptation and innovation.

The second perspective addresses commercialization. Research in this area explores how traditional music is transformed into a marketable product within the tourism industry, serving economic development and cultural branding (Mazlan et al., 2025). Although this approach emphasizes new opportunities for dissemination and economic gain, it also raises concerns about the simplification of cultural meanings. At the same time, it often treats cultural preservation and commercialization as opposing forces, paying limited attention to their potential coexistence.

A third perspective highlights the interactive relationship between music and tourism. Recent studies move beyond one-way explanations and emphasize their mutual influence. Tourism reshapes musical forms, modes of dissemination, and cultural meanings, while music, as a cultural resource and marker of identity, contributes to tourism development by shaping place image, attracting visitors, and reinforcing cultural identity (Mazlan et al., 2025). This perspective offers a more dynamic framework for understanding the transformation of traditional music in contemporary contexts.

Despite these contributions, two limitations remain. First, most studies rely on in-depth analyses of single cases, with relatively little cross-case comparison. Second, there is a lack of systematic theorization of the mechanisms underlying the interaction between music and tourism. To address these gaps, this study conducts a comparative analysis of four cases: Bali in Indonesia, Mah Meri in Malaysia, hula in Hawaii, and Dong Grand Song in China. It aims to identify shared patterns of interaction and to develop a more systematic understanding of how traditional music transforms within tourism contexts.

3. Case Analysis

3.1 Traditional Music and Dance of Bali, Indonesia

In Bali, Indonesia, the development of tourism has profoundly transformed traditional music and dance practices, as well as local understandings of cultural identity. Kecak, for example, was originally performed in religious rituals but has been adapted into a commercial performance for tourists. To support community development, villagers have actively reconfigured this ritual practice into a tourism-oriented program (Dunbar-Hall, 2001). While this transformation has generated economic benefits and strengthened community cohesion, it has also weakened the spiritual connections between music and ritual, making performances increasingly shaped by market demands. Tourism has not only led to simplification but also stimulated innovation. In response to tourism and external cultural influences, Balinese musicians have developed new musical styles such as gamelan gong kebyar (Harnish, 2005). These developments demonstrate both the adaptability of local traditions and the pressures of modernization in a global context. As Dunbar-Hall (2001) observes, cultural tourism sites create boundaries that limit access to condensed and repackaged versions of tradition, while performers continuously negotiate between cultural representation and authenticity. Although tourism has expanded the visibility of traditional arts, it has also introduced the risk of standardization and superficiality.

At the same time, tourism and national cultural policy have jointly contributed to the secularization and institutionalization of Balinese music. Music education has been incorporated into national art academies, where Balinese traditions are taught alongside other regional forms. This process of Indonesianisation has enhanced recognition and preservation at the national level, but has also reduced some of the local spiritual meanings of the music. Through the interaction of tourism and state policy, Balinese music now operates between local heritage and national cultural representation, ultimately forming a symbolic cultural brand within the global market.

3.2 Mah Meri Traditional Music in Malaysia

In Malaysia, tourism has significantly reshaped the music and dance practices of the indigenous Mah Meri community. By the late twentieth century, Main Jo'oh had become a regular feature of tourist performances due to its visual appeal, including colorful costumes and distinctive masks (Chan, 2015). As tourism developed, this ritual-based performance was adapted for tourist audiences to align with the expectations of the tourist gaze. At the same time, performers used these staged presentations to express cultural identity and assert connections to land, maintaining a degree of agency within a commercial context (Chan, 2015). Within tourism and national cultural display frameworks, Main Jo'oh has increasingly been framed as a symbol of "tradition" and "authenticity", reinforcing external perceptions of indigenous cultural difference (Chan, 2015).

Economically, tourism has provided sustained income and greater visibility. Culturally, however, the ritual significance and community functions of these performances have been reduced, and they have come to function more as symbolic dis-

plays within national narratives of multiculturalism. Performers continuously negotiate between representing tradition and responding to market expectations. While tourism offers opportunities for recognition, it also introduces pressures toward simplification and commodification. The Mah Meri case thus highlights a broader tension in which economic interests, cultural identity, and artistic authenticity must be continually balanced.

4. Changes in Hawaiian Hula Dance in the Tourism Industry

The transformation of hula in tourism contexts provides a representative example of how traditional performance is reshaped within commercial frameworks. Since the early twentieth century, as Hawaii's economy shifted from agriculture to tourism, hula and Hawaiian music have been reconfigured as cultural commodities for visitors (Imada, 2004). In this process, hula became closely associated with a feminized image of Hawaii and was incorporated into the construction of a broader destination image emphasizing the "Aloha spirit", sensuality, and tropical exoticism (Imada, 2004; Desmond, 1997). By the 1930s, hula had entered trans-Pacific entertainment circuits through Hollywood films and touring performances in the United States. Hawaiian performers, often presented as "messengers of Aloha", conveyed an image of the islands that was intimate, charming, and accessible (Imada, 2004). Imada (2004) conceptualizes this process as "imagined intimacy", through which audiences form emotional connections with Hawaii, thereby naturalizing colonial relationships. Meanwhile, the meanings and functions of hula were recontextualized. Whereas earlier forms were embedded in religious practice and community life, tourist-oriented performances emphasized entertainment and visual appeal. As Desmond (1997) argues, the figure of the "hula girl" became central to Hawaii's tourism imagery, representing a stylized and gendered form of cultural difference. While tourism has facilitated the global circulation of hula, it has also intensified ongoing negotiations over authenticity, representation, and power.

5. Traditional Dong Ethnic Music and Tourism in China

According to Song and Yuan (2021), tourism has significantly influenced traditional music practices in Dong communities in China. In Xiaohuang Village, Guizhou Province, music centered on Dong Grand Song has undergone changes in performance form, social function, and its relationship with everyday life. To accommodate tourist audiences, performances have been shortened and selectively arranged, often highlighting more accessible and melodically appealing sections. In addition, new works, such as welcome songs in Mandarin, have been created to enhance audience understanding and participation. These adjustments reflect the adaptive transformation of traditional music within tourism contexts.

At the same time, the social functions of Dong music have expanded beyond community-based practice to become an important resource for tourism. Xiaohuang Village not only stages regular performances for visitors, but also participates in external cultural events, contributing to broader forms of cultural display and the emergence of more stable performance structures. Tourism has also reshaped local livelihoods and transmission practices. Some younger villagers engage in performances as a source of income, while communities and schools have introduced educational initiatives, such as music courses and documentation efforts, to support transmission. Overall, tourism has driven interconnected changes in the form, function, and transmission of Dong music.

6. Summary

The four cases, although situated in different cultural regions and historical contexts, exhibit striking similarities. The most fundamental transformation lies in the shift of musical audiences. Practices such as Kecak in Bali, Main Jo'oh in Malaysia, hula in Hawaii, and Dong Grand Song, which originally served ritual, communal, or expressive functions, have increasingly been reoriented toward tourist consumption and destination representation. This shift is not simply imposed from outside, but reflects local communities' active negotiation between economic needs and cultural continuity. Music thus moves from being performed within the community to being presented for external audiences. As audiences change, musical forms adapt accordingly. Performances are shortened, repertoires are selectively arranged, and new works are created to enhance accessibility. While such adjustments make music more approachable, they also risk reducing artistic depth. At the same time, adaptation is not limited to simplification. In some cases, tourism has stimulated creative innovation, such as the emergence of new musical styles in Bali and newly composed works in Dong communities. These examples suggest that traditional music is not only reshaped but also actively reconfigured in tourism contexts. Alongside these changes, the social functions of music have diversified. Music now operates simultaneously as cultural expression, economic resource, tourism attraction, and symbol of identity. This functional expansion provides new opportunities for visibility and income, but also transforms the cultural meanings of musical practices. In response, governments and institutions have increasingly intervened in processes of transmission, incorporating music into formal education systems and organized performance

structures.

Taken together, these transformations are not isolated, but form an interconnected process. Changes in audience orientation drive adjustments in musical form, which in turn reshape social functions and modes of transmission. This dynamic interaction across multiple dimensions suggests that the transformation of traditional music in tourism contexts is both structured and processual.

7. Theoretical Model

Looking back at the research questions raised earlier: How can traditional music be transformed in the context of tourism? How can a two-way interaction be formed between music and tourism? How does this mechanism respond to the contemporary predicament of Nanyin? The analysis of the four cases mentioned earlier provides an empirical basis for answering these questions. By synthesizing the common themes emerging from these cases, a theoretical model can be proposed: the transformation of traditional music in tourism contexts involves interrelated changes across four dimensions, namely performance purpose, artistic form, social function, and transmission mechanisms, which together constitute a dynamic and continuous cycle. Within this cycle, the shift in performance purpose serves as the starting point. As music moves from serving local communities to addressing tourist audiences, artistic forms are adjusted through processes such as shortening duration, reorganizing content, and creating new works. These changes further expand social functions from cultural expression to economic resources, cultural symbols, and national representation, and in turn reshape transmission mechanisms, shifting from informal and community-based practices to more institutionalized and open systems. These transformed mechanisms then feed back into future performance purposes and forms, enabling music to be continually redefined in changing social contexts. This cyclical process demonstrates that the transformation of traditional music (Research Question One) is driven by multiple interconnected dimensions, while the mutual shaping of music and tourism constitutes an ongoing two-way interaction (Research Question Two). The implications of this mechanism for addressing the contemporary challenges of Nanyin (Research Question Three) will be further discussed in the following section.

Despite its explanatory value, the proposed model has certain limitations. It is primarily derived from musical practices already incorporated into tourism-oriented systems of cultural display and consumption, and its applicability to traditions outside such contexts, or those resisting commercialization, requires further examination. In addition, this study relies mainly on qualitative analysis of existing literature and lacks first-hand empirical data such as fieldwork, which limits the depth of analysis at the level of specific musical practices. Finally, as a framework based on cross-case synthesis, the model emphasizes structural relationships; its validity across different cultural and historical contexts should be further refined and tested through future research.

8. Nanyin in the Context of Tourism

Nanyin originated in the Central Plains and later took root in southern Fujian through southward migration, developing over time into an important remnant of traditional Chinese music (Liu & Chen, 2023). In the contemporary context, with the promotion of cultural narratives such as the “Maritime Silk Road” and the “Belt and Road Initiative,” Nanyin has gained new opportunities for development and has been incorporated into broader systems of cultural dissemination and display (Chen, 2019). Local governments have facilitated this process through intangible cultural heritage protection, education, and cultural industries, expanding its performance spaces from traditional associations to theaters, museums, and tourism venues, thereby increasing its visibility and reach. However, these developments have not fully resolved its existing challenges and have instead introduced new tensions. On the one hand, Nanyin continues to face a limited audience base, as its dialect, rhythmic structures, and aesthetic conventions present barriers to wider understanding, contributing to its relatively niche status (Liu & Chen, 2023). On the other hand, in adapting to tourism contexts, performance practices often involve content restructuring and shortened durations, raising ongoing concerns about authenticity and the balance between cultural representation and market demand (Wu et al., 2025a). As a result, the key issue for Nanyin is not only how to expand its audience, but also how to negotiate the relationship between display, dissemination, and the continuity of tradition within the growing influence of tourism and cultural industries.

9. Implications of Theoretical Models for Nanyin

The theoretical model proposed in the previous text reveals the transformation rules of traditional music in the context of tourism. Based on this model, the author puts forward the following four aspects of inspirations for the development of Nanyin for reference.

Firstly, in terms of performance purpose and cultural positioning, the key challenge facing Nanyin is not simply audi-

ence decline, but the persistence of a performance logic rooted in local community contexts that does not fully respond to the diverse demands of contemporary audiences. In tourism settings, this incomplete shift in performance purpose produces a structural tension: Nanyin remains difficult to access for wider audiences due to its dialect, rhythmic complexity, and aesthetic conventions, while limited adaptations risk simplifying the music and weakening its cultural depth. At its core, this reflects the absence of a clearly differentiated logic of “for whom to perform.” According to the theoretical model proposed in this study, changes in performance purpose serve as the starting point for transformations in other dimensions. Therefore, rather than attempting to address all audiences within a single framework, the development of Nanyin should pursue audience differentiation and functional diversification by constructing context-specific performance systems in which display and transmission functions can coexist. In practice, this may involve developing interpretive and presentation-oriented formats for tourism and public cultural contexts, using guided explanation, narrative framing, and cross-media approaches to enhance accessibility, while preserving complete repertoire structures, dialect expression, and ritual functions within community settings. The transnational practices of Singapore’s Siong Leng Musical Association offer a useful example. Its performances in cities such as Paris and New York do not replicate traditional formats, but reconfigure them through multimedia, spatial design, and experiential narratives, creating a multi-sensory cultural experience that engages international audiences (Tan, 2021). Importantly, such innovations do not replace traditional practice but operate alongside it, fulfilling different functions in different contexts. This suggests that traditional music need not choose between authenticity and accessibility, but can sustain itself through differentiated practices across multiple cultural settings. For Nanyin, this implies the need for a layered performance system that balances cultural integrity with broader dissemination, thereby supporting its sustainable development in contemporary society.

Secondly, at the level of artistic form, current adjustments in Nanyin are largely characterized by content compression. While this simplification lowers the threshold of understanding in the short term, it also risks weakening the music’s aesthetic depth and cultural distinctiveness. According to the theoretical model proposed in this study, changes in artistic form are not independent but are driven by shifts in performance purpose, and should therefore respond to new audience structures and communicative contexts. However, the current limitation lies in the fact that these adjustments focus primarily on reducing the music itself, rather than reconfiguring how audiences engage with it. Instead of passively accommodating audience comprehension, Nanyin needs to develop interpretive strategies that guide audiences into its cultural context without fundamentally altering its musical content. This can be achieved through approaches such as guided performances, narrative framing, and cross-media presentation, which translate historical background, aesthetic logic, and linguistic features into accessible forms of cultural knowledge. Such an approach emphasizes the parallel development of adaptation and interpretation: while moderate adjustments in duration and structure respond to the practical constraints of tourism settings, interpretive guidance helps preserve the music’s cultural depth and integrity.

Thirdly, at the level of social function, although Nanyin has been incorporated into systems of intangible cultural heritage protection and urban cultural display, it remains largely positioned as a passive component within tourism, functioning mainly as something “to be used” rather than as an active cultural agent. The theoretical model proposed in this study suggests that the diversification of social functions does not arise unidirectionally from tourism, but emerges through ongoing interaction between music and tourism. Accordingly, the development of Nanyin should move beyond merely adapting to tourism demands and instead explore its active role in shaping cultural symbols and designing tourism experiences. The recent development of Quanzhou, the birthplace of Nanyin, offers a useful reference. Local cultural practices such as “Hairpin Flowers” have been transformed from everyday customs into recognizable cultural brands, attracting large numbers of visitors and generating significant economic growth; tourist numbers reportedly exceeded 100 million in 2024 (Quanzhou Evening News, 2025). This suggests that when cultural elements are successfully symbolized, they can both convey cultural meaning and actively shape tourism demand. By contrast, despite its rich historical and artistic heritage, Nanyin has yet to establish a comparable path of cultural symbolization. In this regard, Balinese music provides a useful comparison, as it functions not only in performances but also as a core element of national cultural identity and tourism experience. Building on this insight, Nanyin could shift from being a cultural resource to a driving force within tourism by engaging more actively with urban branding and cultural initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road. For example, collaboration with cultural and tourism institutions could support the development of Nanyin-centered experiential spaces and performance programs, allowing it to occupy a more central position in tourist experiences. From the perspective of the model, this shift reflects a transformation of social function from passive expansion to active construction, enabling Nanyin to strengthen both its cultural relevance and its sustainability within contemporary society.

Finally, at the level of transmission mechanisms, Nanyin currently relies mainly on intangible cultural heritage frameworks and formal education, yet a gap remains between these institutionalized approaches and contemporary performance

practices. The model suggests that transmission is not an isolated dimension, but is shaped through its interaction with performance purpose, artistic form, and social function. As music enters tourism contexts, transmission extends beyond traditional systems and becomes embedded in broader social interactions. Existing studies show that participatory tourism experiences can influence tourists' cognition, emotions, and behavior through host–guest interaction, thereby facilitating cultural exchange (Wu et al., 2025b). Building on this, tourists can be understood not only as audiences but also as active agents in the dissemination and reproduction of Nanyin. Accordingly, transmission should move beyond reliance on formal education and institutional frameworks by developing participatory approaches that position tourists as nodes in cultural circulation. This may include interactive performances, participatory learning, and digital platforms that encourage engagement and sharing. In turn, audience feedback can inform adjustments to performance practices, allowing Nanyin to evolve through ongoing interaction. In this way, transmission shifts from one-way preservation to a dynamic and reciprocal process, forming a continuous cycle with tourism.

Overall, the development of Nanyin in tourism contexts is characterized by the ongoing interaction among performance purpose, artistic form, social function, and transmission mechanisms. The theoretical model proposed in this study suggests that the transformation of traditional music follows a cyclical pattern: tourism provides new spaces and channels for dissemination, while Nanyin, through formal adaptation and functional expansion, actively contributes to the construction of local cultural identity and tourism experiences. Within this process, traditional music is continuously reconfigured in response to changing social contexts. This indicates that its contemporary development depends not on preserving fixed forms, but on the ongoing reconstruction of its position and meaning through interaction.

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