



# Community Engagement and Intergenerational Transmission in the Cultural Heritage of Siping Opera

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**Abstract:** Siping Opera, a traditional art form from Fujian Province, holds immense cultural significance as a representation of local heritage and identity. Originating in Pingnan and Zhenghe counties, Siping Opera has been passed down through generations, preserving the region's history, language, and unique artistic traditions. As a national-level intangible cultural heritage, it has faced periods of decline and near extinction, particularly in the post-Republican era. This study examines the role of community engagement and intergenerational knowledge transmission in sustaining Siping Opera through a combination of literature review, fieldwork, and interviews with 20 practitioners in Pingnan and Zhenghe counties. The findings reveal that familial transmission, mentorship, and community workshops are vital mechanisms for transferring knowledge, despite challenges such as generational gaps and limited resources. Additionally, Siping Opera serves as both a cultural anchor and a source of professional livelihood, intertwining personal identity with broader communal values. The study highlights the indispensable role of community support and institutional involvement in preserving this art form for future generations. By focusing on community-based preservation efforts, this research underscores the importance of local artists, families, and cultural institutions in maintaining the vitality of Siping Opera and ensuring its continued legacy.

**Keywords:** Siping Opera, cultural heritage, intergenerational transmission, community engagement, traditional arts

## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

Siping Opera, also known as Sipingxi, Sipingxi, or Sipingqing, is a traditional folk opera that originated in the rural areas of Pingnan and Zhenghe counties in Fujian Province. As one of China's national-level intangible cultural heritage items, Siping Opera has been passed down through generations, carrying with it both cultural values and artistic traditions that reflect the history, language, and regional identity of the area[1]. The origins of Siping Opera can be traced back to the late Ming Dynasty when it was introduced from Jiangxi Province into Longtan Village in Pingnan. By the mid-Qing Dynasty, it had flourished in the region, and today it stands as a symbol of the local cultural heritage of Pingnan and Zhenghe[2].

Siping Opera is notable for its unique vocal style, which uses local dialects (known as "Tu Guanhua"), and features high-pitched melodies with alternating use of both natural and falsetto voices.[3] The performance style integrates elements of Southern Song and Yuan Dynasty drama, preserving a rich blend of folk tunes, dramatic techniques, and traditional rituals. Despite its significant cultural importance, the art form faced periods of decline and near extinction, particularly in the post-Republican era. However, thanks to ongoing preservation efforts, it was officially listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage by the State Council in 2006, ensuring its continued protection and revival[4]. The ongoing study of Siping Opera is crucial, as it explores not only the traditional performance practices but also the underlying mechanisms of cultural heritage preservation through community engagement and intergenerational transmission. This study will focus on the community-based efforts that keep the art form alive, emphasizing the role of local artists, families, and cultural institutions in passing down this tradition.

### 1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore the dynamics of community engagement and intergenerational transmission in the cultural heritage of Siping Opera, focusing on the local contexts of Pingnan and Zhenghe counties. The specific objectives are:

- To examine how Siping Opera has been preserved and transmitted within the community.
- To understand the role of community engagement in maintaining the art form and fostering its relevance in contemporary society.
- To analyze the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission, including the role of family traditions, mentorship, and local institutions.
- To explore the challenges faced in preserving Siping Opera and the strategies employed by the community to overcome these challenges.

The study will be guided by the following research questions:

- How does community involvement contribute to the preservation and revitalization of Siping Opera?



- What are the main channels and mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of Siping Opera traditions?
- How do local artists and families play a role in ensuring the continuity of Siping Opera across generations?
- What challenges does Siping Opera face in its transmission, and what steps are being taken to address them?

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

This study highlights how local communities actively engage with their cultural traditions, ensuring the transmission of both tangible and intangible elements to future generations. The research also emphasizes the importance of intergenerational transmission in sustaining traditional performing arts, exploring how knowledge, skills, and cultural values are passed down within rural settings where familial and community ties play a central role. Moreover, the study's findings have the potential to inform policies and strategies for preserving not only Siping Opera but also other forms of intangible cultural heritage in China and beyond. As traditional performing arts face increasing challenges from modernization and globalization, this research underscores the critical roles of community engagement and intergenerational transmission, offering valuable lessons for cultural heritage management and education while serving as a model for regions facing similar challenges.

## II. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Concept of Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage, as a concept, refers to the practices, expressions, knowledge, and artifacts that are inherited from past generations and are valued for their cultural significance. It encompasses both tangible elements, such as monuments, artifacts, and sites, and intangible elements, such as music, dance, oral traditions, and performing arts. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—and the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” [5]. This broad definition acknowledges the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural heritage, which is not static but is transmitted and transformed through ongoing social practices.

### 2.2 Community Engagement in Cultural Heritage Preservation

Community engagement plays a crucial role in the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly in the case of intangible cultural forms like folk opera. Scholars argue that cultural heritage is best preserved when communities actively participate in its safeguarding, as this fosters a sense of ownership and continuity. Community engagement in heritage preservation refers to the active involvement of local individuals, families, cultural institutions, and organizations in maintaining and transmitting cultural traditions. This process goes beyond passive preservation; it involves community members acting as carriers of tradition, ensuring its relevance and vitality in contemporary society [6].

Community engagement involves both the ongoing practice of performance and the transmission of specialized knowledge and skills. Local artists, often from family lineages, are key actors in this process, not only performing the opera but also teaching the next generation of performers, preserving its distinct vocal style, dance, and dramatic techniques. This intergenerational transmission is a vital aspect of cultural sustainability, as it allows the opera to evolve while maintaining its core elements. Community engagement is also reflected in how local cultural institutions and authorities contribute to the preservation of Siping Opera through initiatives such as festivals, performances, workshops, and educational programs [7].

The role of the community in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is closely linked to broader discussions of cultural sustainability. The idea of sustainability in cultural heritage preservation emphasizes the need for practices that respect both tradition and contemporary relevance. Community-based approaches to preservation allow for the dynamic adaptation of cultural practices, which ensures that cultural heritage remains a living, evolving force rather than a static artifact confined to museums or archives. In rural areas like Pingnan and Zhenghe counties, where Siping Opera has deep roots, community-driven efforts are essential to keeping the art form alive and connected to local identity [8].

## III. Literature Review

### 3.1 Previous Studies on Traditional Chinese Opera

Chinese opera originated from religious and ritual performances during the Tang Dynasty and evolved through the Song and Yuan dynasties, culminating in the formalized operatic genres we recognize today. For example, Siping Opera, like many other regional forms, reflects the regional musical styles, dialects, and socio-cultural traditions of its home area in Fujian Province [5]. The opera's narrative structure and performance techniques draw heavily from the local dialects and folk traditions, which are often passed down through family lines. Recent studies emphasize the significant role that local operas like Siping Opera play in expressing regional identity and preserving local folklore. Researchers have noted that, over time, these art forms have adapted to the shifting social, political, and cultural landscapes in China. The most significant challenge in the modern era has been the encroachment of mass media and popular culture on traditional forms of entertainment, which has led to a decline in traditional performances. However, local preservation efforts have gained attention for their role in reviving these operatic traditions. In the case of Siping Opera, it has been noted that community-driven initiatives, such as performances by local troupes, have been essential for keeping the art form alive in rural regions [9].

Another critical aspect of traditional Chinese opera research is the impact of government policies on cultural preservation. The formal designation of many operatic traditions as “intangible cultural heritage” by the Chinese government has been a critical turning point in their preservation. The 2006 recognition of Siping Opera as a national-level intangible cultural heritage is a case in point. This designation has provided the opera with institutional support, funding for preservation

activities, and greater public awareness of its cultural significance. Researchers have suggested that the balance between modernity and tradition in preserving operatic forms like Siping Opera is a key concern, as the modern audience's preferences often conflict with traditional performance aesthetics [10].

### 3.2 Theories on Intergenerational Transmission in Traditional Arts

In traditional Chinese opera, intergenerational transmission refers to the process through which skills, knowledge, and cultural values are passed down from one generation to the next, often within families or communities. Several theories in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, and education provide insight into the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission in traditional arts.

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding intergenerational transmission is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which emphasizes the importance of family and social networks in the transmission of cultural practices. Bourdieu argues that cultural practices, including art forms like opera, are part of a broader system of capital that individuals inherit from their family and social environment. In the case of Siping Opera, for instance, knowledge of the opera's vocal techniques, performance practices, and local dialects is passed down through generations, often within specific family units. This concept of cultural capital aligns with the practices observed in rural areas like Pingnan and Zhenghe, where families have played a central role in the preservation and transmission of Siping Opera [9]. The concept of "cultural continuity" has been used to describe the uninterrupted transmission of cultural practices across generations. Cultural continuity ensures that traditions remain intact, despite changes in the surrounding social and cultural environment. Studies have shown that cultural continuity is not just a matter of passing down skills but also of maintaining a shared set of values and beliefs within a community. In the case of Siping Opera, the act of passing down the tradition is deeply embedded in the community's identity, as older generations teach younger ones not only the performance skills but also the values associated with the art form, such as respect for tradition and the collective memory of local history and culture [10].

Another theoretical perspective on intergenerational transmission is the theory of "oral tradition" developed by scholars like Albert Lord and Eric Havelock. According to this theory, oral cultures rely on direct personal transmission of knowledge and skills, which fosters a deep connection between the performer and the community. In this context, Siping Opera, like many traditional Chinese operas, relies on face-to-face interactions between master and apprentice, with the apprentice learning by observation, imitation, and repetition. The oral nature of this transmission fosters a strong sense of belonging and communal identity, as each performance is an embodiment of the shared cultural history of the community [11].

Modern scholars have also incorporated the concept of "community-based cultural practices" into their understanding of intergenerational transmission. This approach focuses on the role of community institutions, such as schools, local theater groups, and cultural organizations, in supporting the transmission of traditional knowledge. In the case of Siping Opera, many communities have established local performance troupes and educational programs to ensure that young people continue to learn and perform the art. These community-driven efforts ensure that Siping Opera is not only passed down through families but also integrated into the broader social fabric, making it a collective cultural asset rather than just a familial one [12].

## IV. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the mechanisms of community engagement and intergenerational transmission in the cultural heritage of Siping Opera. The research will combine literature review, interviews, and participant observation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of Siping Opera in Pingnan and Zhenghe counties, Fujian Province.

### 4.2 Data Collection Methods

The data collection for this study will involve a combination of literature review, interviews, and fieldwork. The literature study and document analysis will provide a foundational understanding of Siping Opera's historical development, regional characteristics, and preservation efforts, drawing from academic literature, archival records, and policy documents such as government reports, local gazetteers, and heritage designation materials. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 20 artists actively involved in the performance and preservation of Siping Opera in Pingnan and Zhenghe counties. These interviews will explore the artists' perspectives on intergenerational transmission, community involvement, and the challenges of maintaining the opera in modern times. The sample size of 20 was chosen to ensure a balanced representation of both veteran and younger practitioners, allowing for diverse perspectives and in-depth qualitative analysis. Fieldwork will also be conducted to observe Siping Opera performances, rehearsals, and community activities, with the researcher actively participating in local events and interacting with community members to gain a deeper understanding of the opera's role in the social fabric of the region.

### 4.3 Data Analysis Techniques

The interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods to identify recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses. The focus will be on extracting insights related to the processes of intergenerational transmission, community engagement, and the personal and collective experiences of Siping Opera artists. The analysis will aim to capture the nuanced perspectives of the artists, emphasizing their role in sustaining the cultural heritage. A thematic coding approach will be used to analyze data from interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Key themes will be identified and categorized.

### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent will be obtained from all interviewees, who will be briefed on the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Data will be anonymized to protect participants' identities, and any sensitive information will be handled with discretion. The researcher will also respect local customs and cultural practices during fieldwork to build trust and foster meaningful engagement with the community.

## V. Results and Findings

### 5.1 Demographic Profile

The interviews were conducted with 20 artists from Pingnan and Zhenghe counties, each actively involved in Siping Opera. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 75 years, with diverse levels of experience and roles, including lead performers, musicians, directors, and apprentices. The following table summarizes the demographic and professional profiles of the interviewees:

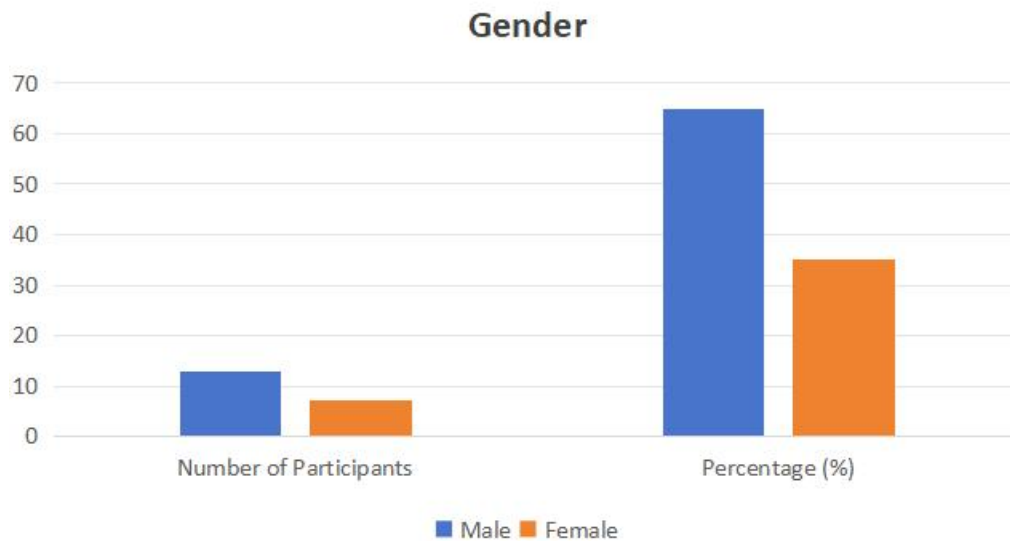


Table 1, Gender distribution of the participants.

The demographic data reveals a notable gender distribution among the participants, with a higher proportion of male artists involved in Siping Opera (65%) compared to female artists (35%). This suggests a gender imbalance in the field, which may be reflective of traditional gender roles in Chinese folk performing arts, where male performers historically dominated many operatic roles. However, the presence of female artists, accounting for one-third of the interviewees, highlights the role that women continue to play in preserving and promoting Siping Opera, particularly in supportive roles such as musicians or apprentices.

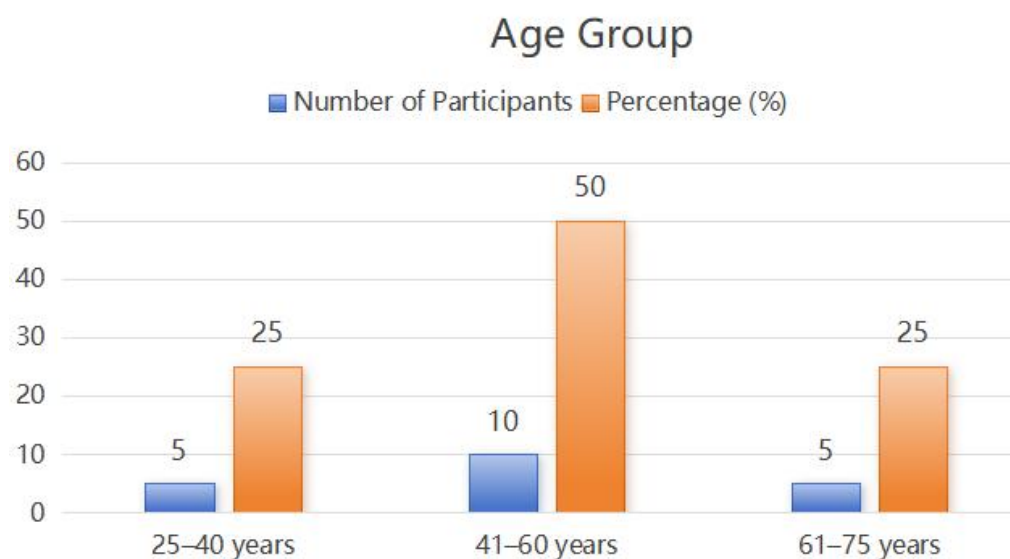


Table 2, Age group of the participants

In terms of age distribution, the majority of the participants are aged between 41 and 60 years, making up 50% of the sample. This group represents the core of Siping Opera's experienced practitioners, likely holding significant knowledge and expertise in the art form. The relatively balanced representation of the younger (25-40 years) and older (61-75 years) groups, each accounting for 25% of the participants, suggests an active intergenerational transfer of knowledge. While the older generation might focus on teaching and preserving traditional techniques, younger participants could be involved in learning and evolving the art form, ensuring its longevity and adaptation.

## Role in Siping Opera

■ Number of Participants ■ Percentage (%)

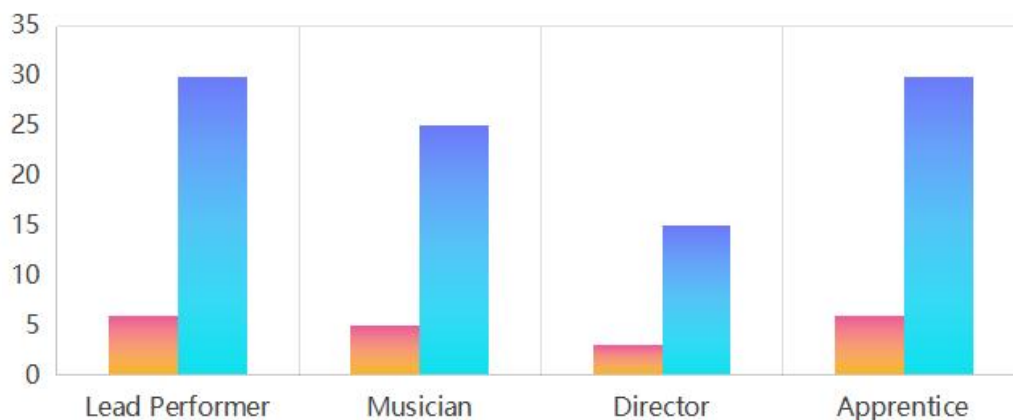


Table 3, Role in Siping Opera

Regarding professional roles, the participants are distributed across various positions within the Siping Opera community. The roles of lead performers and apprentices are tied, each comprising 30% of the sample. This indicates a strong presence of both seasoned and emerging performers, with apprentices being groomed to step into leadership positions. The musicians account for 25% of the participants, highlighting the importance of music in Siping Opera's performance structure. Directors, representing 15% of the group, play a vital role in shaping the artistic vision and direction of the opera. These figures underline the collaborative nature of Siping Opera, where various roles work together to ensure the sustainability of the art form.

### 5.2 Key Themes Emerging from Interviews

#### 5.2.1 Personal Experiences with Siping Opera

For many of the artists interviewed, their connection to Siping Opera goes far beyond just a professional or artistic pursuit; it is deeply personal and emotional. The journey often begins in childhood, influenced by family members who were involved in the opera themselves. Growing up surrounded by this cultural art form, many artists naturally inherited a love for Siping Opera, with parents or grandparents acting as role models and mentors. This familial bond serves as a vital link, creating an early and lasting connection to the opera's rich traditions and performances.

The artists often spoke about how Siping Opera is not just an art form but a powerful thread that ties them to their roots. As one participant expressed, "Siping Opera is more than an art form; it is a way of life that ties me to my ancestors and my community." This sentiment encapsulates the view that performing in Siping Opera is a way of preserving and passing down cultural heritage, keeping alive a living connection to the past. For these artists, it is more than performing on stage; it is about keeping the tradition alive for future generations, reinforcing their own sense of identity, and contributing to the cultural continuity of their community.

#### 5.2.2 Perspectives on Community Involvement

The sense of community involvement was a recurring theme throughout the interviews, with most participants highlighting how central the local community is to the survival and growth of Siping Opera. These performances are seen as a vital part of the community's life, not just as entertainment but as a cultural event that strengthens social ties. Artists emphasized how deeply Siping Opera is woven into the fabric of village life, often taking place during local festivals or village gatherings. As one artist shared, "Community performances are more than just shows; they are gatherings that bring people together and remind us of who we are." These performances are not just a form of artistic expression, but opportunities for the entire community to engage with their heritage, celebrate their culture, and reaffirm their identity.

The interviewees also stressed the collaborative nature of these performances. In many cases, the entire village participates in one way or another—whether it's by attending, organizing, or even taking part in the performances themselves. These events foster a sense of unity and pride, creating shared cultural experiences that transcend individual performances. Many artists expressed their gratitude for the financial and logistical support provided by local cultural organizations, government bodies, and other community-based initiatives. These institutions help fund and organize performances, making it possible for Siping Opera to be showcased in both formal and informal settings. Without this support, many of the artists said, they would struggle to bring the opera to a wider audience. More than just providing financial resources, these networks also legitimize Siping Opera as an important cultural institution, helping it gain respect in broader cultural and artistic spheres. For the artists, this institutional backing allows them to focus on their craft, knowing they are supported by a broader infrastructure that values and sustains the art form.

#### 5.2.3 Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer in Siping Opera

One of the key themes emerging from the interviews was the vital role of intergenerational knowledge transfer in ensuring the survival and continuity of Siping Opera. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of passing down the techniques, traditions, and values of the opera from one generation to the next. This transfer of knowledge occurs through two primary modes: familial transmission and mentorship.

### Familial Transmission

The first and perhaps most significant mode of knowledge transfer identified by participants was familial transmission. Many of the older generation artists, who had learned Siping Opera from their own parents and grandparents, now pass this knowledge on to their children. This informal, family-based learning typically starts in childhood, where younger family members are exposed to the basics of performance, musical techniques, and storytelling. The emotional connection to the art form, formed within the family, is often deeply rooted, with parents taking an active role in teaching their children about the history and techniques of Siping Opera. This mode of transmission plays a crucial role in preserving the traditions of the opera, ensuring that the next generation maintains a close connection to their cultural roots.

However, this mode of transmission does not come without its challenges. A notable concern expressed by several participants was the generational gap in interest. As younger generations grow up in a modernized world, many are less inclined to continue the traditional practices of Siping Opera. With the rise of technology, new forms of entertainment, and a changing social environment, younger individuals may find it harder to relate to or invest in a cultural practice that may seem outdated or irrelevant to their daily lives. This generational gap presents a significant challenge in maintaining the continuity of the art form within families.

### Mentorship and Community-Based Workshops

In addition to familial transmission, mentorship plays a central role in the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Experienced artists often take on the role of mentors to younger practitioners, guiding them through the intricacies of Siping Opera. This informal mentorship typically occurs in community settings, where veteran artists lead workshops and provide on-the-job training during live performances. These workshops are an essential part of the process, offering young artists hands-on learning experiences that go beyond theoretical knowledge. Through direct participation in performances, apprentices gain an understanding of the physical, emotional, and artistic demands of Siping Opera, ensuring that the art form remains dynamic and relevant.

While mentorship is an effective way to transfer knowledge, it also faces challenges, particularly in terms of limited resources and funding. Many of the workshops and mentoring sessions are organized informally and rely on community initiatives or the voluntary efforts of experienced artists. This lack of institutional support can limit the reach and effectiveness of the programs, making it difficult to sustain them over time. Additionally, the informal nature of these sessions sometimes leads to gaps in structured, standardized training, making it harder for apprentices to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the opera.

Another challenge that emerged was the pressure to adapt traditional forms. While many young artists appreciate the value of preserving the traditional aspects of Siping Opera, there is also an increasing desire to innovate and modernize the performances. This tension between tradition and innovation can create a dilemma for both mentors and apprentices: how to stay true to the core of the art form while making it appealing and relevant to contemporary audiences. As one artist explained, "It is difficult to balance the integrity of the tradition with the need to modernize in order to attract younger audiences."

The following table summarizes the key practices in intergenerational knowledge transfer, along with the challenges faced by both teachers and students in this process:

Practice	Description	Challenges
Familial Teaching	Informal learning at home, often beginning in childhood.	Generational gaps in interest.
Community-Based Workshops	Organized training sessions for apprentices in community settings.	Limited resources and funding.
On-the-Job Training (Performances)	Learning through participation in live events.	Pressure to adapt traditional forms.

Table 4 Key Practices and Challenges in Knowledge Transfer in Siping Opera

### 5.3 Role of Traditional Arts in the Artists' Personal and Professional Lives

Siping Opera holds a central place in the lives of the participants, serving not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a powerful cultural anchor. For many artists, it is deeply intertwined with their personal identity, professional endeavors, and a broader sense of community responsibility. The interviews revealed that Siping Opera is more than just a performance art; it is a lens through which the artists perceive themselves and their connection to their cultural heritage. However, the artists also face significant economic and professional challenges, which require them to balance their passion for the opera with practical realities of sustaining their livelihoods.

#### Cultural Identity

For many artists, Siping Opera is a profound expression of cultural identity and pride. Their involvement is not merely a career but a connection to their roots, community, and cultural legacy. One participant noted, "Siping Opera is not just my profession; it is the core of my identity, the essence of where I come from." This deep bond with the art form reflects their sense of duty to preserve traditions passed down through generations. Through performing and sharing the opera, artists experience a sense of belonging to both the art and their cultural ancestry, reinforcing the continuity of their heritage.

#### Economic Challenges

Irregular performances and limited financial support compel many artists to seek supplementary income. Older artists often turn to teaching, while younger ones take on secondary jobs. The lack of institutional funding exacerbates this instability, with most income relying on occasional festivals and village events. Nevertheless, the emotional fulfillment



and cultural connection derived from Siping Opera motivate many to endure financial difficulties, prioritizing the art form over economic security.

#### Social Impact

Beyond personal and professional significance, Siping Opera plays a vital social role in rural communities. Artists view themselves as cultural educators, fostering pride and awareness among younger generations. Performances at local festivals and gatherings strengthen social cohesion and reinforce communal identity. For artists, the opera becomes a medium for social change, bridging generational gaps and enhancing the cultural well-being of their communities. This broader impact adds profound meaning to their work, affirming the opera's role as a cornerstone of both personal and collective identity.

Aspect	Description	Impact on Artists
Cultural Identity	Artists view Siping Opera as a deep connection to their cultural heritage and community.	Provides a sense of personal and communal identity; strengthens cultural pride.
Economic Challenges	Irregular performance opportunities and limited financial support create economic instability.	Artists must supplement income, leading to stress and financial uncertainty.
Social Impact	Siping Opera is seen as a means to inspire younger generations and foster community pride.	Strengthens communal ties; acts as an educational tool for cultural transmission.

Table5 : Role of Siping Opera in Artists' Lives

#### Conclusion

This study on community engagement and intergenerational transmission in the cultural heritage of Siping Opera highlights the intricate relationship between cultural preservation, individual identity, and community involvement. The findings reveal that Siping Opera serves as both a personal and collective expression of cultural heritage, deeply rooted in familial traditions and community practices. Despite challenges such as generational gaps, economic constraints, and the pressures of modern adaptation, the opera persists as a vital medium of cultural continuity. Intergenerational transmission emerges as a cornerstone of its sustainability, facilitated through familial teaching, mentorship, and participatory performances. The study also underscores the critical role of community support networks and institutional backing in ensuring the opera's longevity. By preserving Siping Opera, its practitioners not only maintain a vibrant cultural tradition but also reinforce communal identity and inspire future generations.

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