



Sacred Chants on Stage: The Performative Reconstruction of Yushan Fanbai

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformative journey of Yushan Fanbai, a traditional Chinese Buddhist chant, as it transitions from monastic ritual to staged performance. Originally embedded in liturgical practice where sound served spiritual discipline rather than artistic display, Fanbai has entered new domains of cultural presentation through intangible cultural heritage policies and spiritual-aesthetic markets. Analyzing its performative reconstruction, this study identifies how Fanbai's sonic, bodily, and spatial dimensions are systematically reconfigured for theatrical settings. Ritual chanting is reshaped into melodic phrases with harmonic enrichment; restrained bodily composure becomes choreographed movement; and sacred space gives way to symbolic scenography. These adaptations are driven externally by heritage frameworks and media markets, and internally by monastic communities seeking cultural outreach and institutional legitimacy. The resulting performance exists in a liminal space between ritual authenticity and aesthetic communication, generating tensions regarding sacredness and mediation. Ultimately, this reconstruction reflects not the dilution of tradition but its dynamic rearticulation, demonstrating how religious practices negotiate continuity within contemporary cultural economies while offering insights into the broader evolution of intangible cultural heritage in modern China.

Keywords: Yushan Fanbai; Buddhist chant; performative reconstruction; ritual and performance; cultural heritage; embodied practice; sacred space; authenticity

Introduction

The transformation of Yushan Fanbai must be understood within China's broader project of cultural revitalization, where the state-led intangible cultural heritage (ICH) system has become a primary driver for reframing traditional practices. Since the early 2000s, the ICH framework has systematically identified, catalogued, and promoted elements of "traditional culture," often recontextualizing rituals and ceremonies as performative heritage for public consumption. This institutionalization creates a new economy of value, where traditions gain legitimacy and resources through their visibility in festivals, exhibitions, and media. For monastic communities, participation in this system is increasingly vital for institutional survival and relevance, yet it necessitates navigating the inherent tension between the inward-focused, liturgical purpose of Fanbai and the outward-facing, representational demands of cultural display. This institutional landscape forms the essential backdrop against which the performance of Buddhist sound is being fundamentally renegotiated.

The staging of Fanbai reflects a significant shift in contemporary Chinese spiritual and aesthetic consumption, particularly among urban, middle-class audiences. There is a growing demand for cultural experiences that offer a sense of tranquility, historical depth, and spiritual authenticity—a demand often met through aestheticized forms of traditional practice. In this context, the solemn sounds and serene atmosphere of Fanbai are commodified as a form of "spiritual chic," providing a curated experience of Buddhist culture detached from religious commitment or doctrinal understanding. This trend illustrates a global phenomenon where ritual practices are repurposed as resources for personal well-being and cultural capital. The performance of Fanbai on stage, therefore, is not merely an adaptation but a strategic response to a modern yearning for meaning, one that is satisfied more through aesthetic and symbolic engagement than through devotional practice.

This transformation raises a critical question: through what specific mechanisms is the ritual practice of Yushan Fanbai reconstructed for the stage, and what cultural forces drive this process? This article argues that this is not a simple translation from temple to theater, but a deliberate performative reconstruction where the practice's core elements—sound, body, and space—are systematically re-engineered to meet the aesthetic and communicative logic of secular performance. This process creates a new hybrid form, situated between ritual authenticity and cultural display.

Analyzing this reconstruction is crucial for understanding how traditional practices evolve under modern pressures. The case of Fanbai offers a nuanced perspective on global debates about cultural heritage, demonstrating how religious traditions are actively negotiated rather than simply preserved or lost. By examining the interplay between external policies and internal monastic agency, this study illuminates the complex strategies through which intangible cultural heritage is made viable—and visible—in the contemporary world.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Buddhist chant in China has traditionally emphasized its ritual function and doctrinal embeddedness. Tian (2003) and Yuan (1997) describe Fanbai as a system of breath-inflected melodic recitation shaped by monastic discipline,

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where sonic beauty is secondary to devotional efficacy. While valuable for understanding Fanbai's religious ontology, such work seldom addresses its contemporary transformations.

By contrast, performance studies and ritual theory offer tools for analyzing Fanbai's recontextualization. Schechner's theory of restored behavior establishes that ritual actions can be disassembled, recombined, and performed in new settings while taking on new meanings. Turner (1982) shows how ritual generates liminality; once removed from the ritual cycle, such liminality is replaced by dramaturgical affect. These frameworks together help articulate what happens when ritual practice becomes aesthetic demonstration.

Heritage theory further illuminates the institutional and ideological dimensions. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of heritage-as-performance shows that traditions are not merely preserved but staged—often requiring transformation in order to appear “authentic” to the public. Benjamin's discussion of aura highlights how mediated performances generate new forms of symbolic sacredness. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives frame the staging of Fanbai as a culturally situated reconfiguration shaped by both internal agency and external structures.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach grounded in performance studies and ethnomusicology to investigate the transformation of Yushan Fanbai. The primary methodology is ethnographic fieldwork, involving participant observation at monastic rituals, staged performances, and heritage events across multiple sites in China over a two-year period. This immersive approach enabled direct documentation of how Fanbai is practiced, adapted, and discussed by its bearers. Supplementary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with Chan masters, monastics, performance directors, and cultural officials to understand the motivations, negotiations, and perceived impacts of staging this ritual practice.

The research incorporates detailed performance analysis of both live and mediated presentations. Audiovisual recordings of Fanbai in its ritual and staged contexts were analyzed to compare sonic structures, bodily techniques, and spatial arrangements. This was complemented by the close examination of promotional materials, program notes, and media coverage to understand how Fanbai is framed for public consumption. The methodology also includes document analysis of China's intangible cultural heritage policies, monastery publications, and historical texts to situate the practice within broader institutional and discursive frameworks.

The analytical process was guided by a triangulation of these qualitative data sources, interpreted through the theoretical lenses of performance studies (Schechner, Turner) and critical heritage studies (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). This integrated methodology allows the study to trace the process of "performative reconstruction" not as a singular event but as a continuous negotiation between ritual tradition and contemporary cultural production, capturing both the tangible modifications to the practice and the underlying cultural logics driving its transformation.

Original Ritual Logic

Before examining reconstruction, it is necessary to outline the minimal ritual logic shaping Fanbai. In monasteries, Fanbai is governed by three interlocking principles:

First, its sound is functional: breath-governed phrases align with sutra text, rhythm mirrors ritual pacing, and unison chanting reinforces collective discipline. Sonic embellishment is avoided because the purpose of chanting is spiritual clarity, not artistic display.

Second, its bodily comportment is regulated by the Six Harmonies—mind, intention, breath, strength, body, and voice. Movements are internalized, minimal, and emotionally restrained. The ritual body is not meant to attract attention; it is meant to vanish into practice.

Third, its spatial environment is sacred: the hall, incense, statues, and acoustics collectively create an atmosphere that supports devotional concentration. Sound, body, and space form a coherent ritual ecology.

It is precisely this ecology that is altered—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically—once Fanbai enters the stage.

Performative Reconstruction: Sound, Body, and Space

The entry of Yushan Fanbai into staged environments involves a systematic reconfiguration of its sonic structure, embodied practice, and spatial-semantic field. These reconstructions are not minor adjustments intended merely to “present” the ritual on stage. Rather, they form an internally coherent process in which ritual elements are aesthetically reorganized to function under the logic of theatrical communication. In this process, Fanbai becomes a new composite form whose artistic identity diverges substantially from its ritual ontology. The following sections examine these transformations not through enumerated features but through integrated analytical narratives that demonstrate how each dimension—sound, body, and space—undergoes conceptual and functional realignment.

1. Sonic Reconstruction: From Breath-Governed Chant to Aestheticized Vocality

The most immediately perceptible transformation occurs at the level of sound. In its ritual context, Fanbai's sonic flow is structured by breath, textual segmentation, and ritual pacing. On stage, however, these internal logics are recalibrated to meet the aesthetic expectations of spectators. Instead of the subtle, breath-inflected lines of temple chanting, staged Fanbai often exhibits clarified melodic contours, heightened dynamic contrast, and ornamented transitional gestures. Passages that would normally follow the natural rise and fall of sutra phrases are reorganized into musically coherent units, producing melodic arcs more legible to audiences unfamiliar with Buddhist recitation.

A significant transformation concerns the introduction of harmony and instrumental texture. While ritual Fanbai is strictly monophonic, staged performances may incorporate drones, sustained harmonies, or episodic counter-melodies.

Instruments such as guqin, xiao, pipa, and sometimes hybrid ensembles contribute timbral depth, transforming the chant into an aesthetically layered soundscape. These textures not only enrich the performance but also shift Fanbai into a genre closer to contemporary concert music, where timbral variation and harmonic warmth are markers of artistic refinement. Technology contributes further to this sonic reorientation. Reverberation effects, careful microphone placement, and audio engineering cultivate an atmosphere far more expansive than the naturally resonant but uneven acoustics of temple halls. The use of controlled amplification allows performers to create elongated vocal sustain or immersive spatial diffusion—qualities that reshape the “aura” of the chant from one grounded in spiritual discipline to one mediated through aesthetic design. The sonic world of staged Fanbai therefore becomes an aesthetic artifact: a curated experience shaped by musical sensibilities that depart from ritual necessity.

2. Bodily Reconstruction: From Ritual Discipline to Choreographed Presence

If sonic transformation alters how Fanbai is heard, bodily reconstruction alters how it is seen. In ritual contexts, bodily comportment is defined by stability, inward focus, and emotional neutrality. When Fanbai is staged, these qualities undergo subtle yet consequential recalibration. Performers often adopt controlled, visually readable movements—such as synchronized arm gestures, measured stepping patterns, or stylized bowing sequences—that emphasize group cohesion and spatial clarity. These gestures no longer function as ritual actions within a cosmological framework; they function as stage choreography, designed to render spiritual solemnity legible to external observers.

Facial expression is another critical site of transformation. Whereas monastic discipline emphasizes the effacement of individual emotion, staged performances often soften this restraint. Performers may maintain a serene or compassionate countenance—suggestive rather than overt, but nonetheless intentional as a communicative strategy. This subtle exteriorization of affect helps audiences interpret the chant as a form of “sacred art” rather than as a purely liturgical act. Moreover, the sequencing of bodily actions becomes more coordinated than in ritual settings. Directors may arrange monks or performers into visually symmetrical formations or slow processional patterns aligned with musical phrasing. Through these adjustments, the ritual body—traditionally shaped by internal discipline—is reconstituted as a performative body whose function is visual communication. This does not imply abandonment of monastic principles but rather a strategic reframing: the body becomes a vessel of stylized spirituality appropriate for the theatrical gaze.

3. Spatial and Visual Reconstruction: From Sacred Hall to Symbolic Scenography

Perhaps the most profound transformation occurs in the spatial and visual field. Ritual Fanbai is inseparable from the Buddhist hall, where statues, incense, and architectural materials produce a sacred environment that structures acoustic and symbolic experience. Once moved to a modern stage, however, this environment must be rebuilt through symbolic scenography, producing an imagined sacredness that is aesthetically mediated rather than spatially inherent.

Lighting design plays an instrumental role in this process. Warm tones mimic the candlelit glow of temples, while subtle gradients evoke contemplative calm. In contrast to the uniform lighting of ritual space, theatrical lighting provides dynamic shifts that mark structural transitions in the performance, generating emotional resonance rather than ritual symbolism.

Costumes undergo similar stylization. Traditional monastic robes, designed for ritual utility and hierarchical clarity, are often adapted for stage visibility: fabrics with heightened drape, coordinated color palettes, and simplified silhouettes that respond well to light. These visual refinements reinterpret monastic attire as aesthetic material rather than purely functional garment.

Multimedia elements, including projected sutra calligraphy or abstracted Buddhist iconography, further reshape the visual field. Such elements serve to condense the symbolic density of ritual space into accessible imagery. They do not recreate sacred space; they represent it. This marks a transition from embodied sacred presence to semiotic sacred suggestion—a transformation characteristic of heritage performance and mediated ritual display.

Collectively, these reconstructions produce a stage environment that evokes Buddhist spiritual sentiment without replicating the immersive atmosphere of monastic ritual. The sacred becomes staged not as ritual efficacy but as curated aesthetic experience.

External Drivers Behind Performative Reconstruction

The transformation of Yushan Fanbai into a staged practice does not occur in isolation; it is propelled by a constellation of external forces that shape how religious sound traditions are reimagined within contemporary cultural ecosystems. Central among these forces is China’s intangible cultural heritage (ICH) framework, which repositions ritual traditions as cultural assets requiring visibility, documentation, and public demonstration. Under this institutional logic, Fanbai becomes more than a monastic liturgical practice—it becomes an item of representational value, tasked with embodying the symbolic depth of “traditional Chinese culture.” This shift entails an implicit demand for presentability, legibility, and aesthetic coherence. Ritual elements that are opaque, slow-paced, or spiritually esoteric are adjusted to fit the communicative conventions of stage performance, thereby facilitating heritage display.

A second external force stems from the cultural industry. Cultural festivals, tourism events, and televised galas often favor performances that combine “tradition” with aesthetic polish, resulting in a hybridized performance economy where religious sound becomes an artistic commodity. Within this environment, staged Fanbai functions as a market-friendly expression of spiritual heritage—quiet, solemn, exoticized, yet visually captivating. Organizers frequently seek performances that evoke cultural depth while remaining accessible to secular audiences, encouraging directors and monasteries to refine Fanbai into a form that balances ritual symbolism with artistic appeal. The demand for visually coherent group formations, timbral richness, and scenographic clarity arises in part from these market-driven expectations.

Media technologies form a third external driver. As Fanbai circulates through streaming platforms, documentary films, and promotional videos, its audiovisual qualities become increasingly important. Theatrical reconstruction produces a version of Fanbai that translates well into recorded formats: stable lighting, clear audio capture, and choreographed visual rhythm support high-quality representation across media. In this sense, the stage becomes a mediating apparatus through which Fanbai is reformatted for circulation in national and global cultural networks. The need for a camera-friendly performance further incentivizes aesthetic regularization and visual discipline.

Finally, public cultural taste exerts its own influence. Urban audiences often seek performances that convey spirituality through accessible sensory cues—evocative lighting, serene gestures, or harmonically pleasing vocal textures. Ritual Fanbai, with its inwardness and austerity, does not naturally align with these expectations. The reconstructed version, however, satisfies contemporary desires for “aesthetic spirituality,” allowing spectators to experience Buddhist cultural atmosphere without participating in ritual practice. This secular-spiritual appetite is a subtle but powerful driver behind the adaptation of Fanbai into an expressive art form.

Taken together, these external forces shape a cultural climate in which Fanbai’s ritual elements must be selectively amplified, adjusted, or reframed to meet institutional, aesthetic, and communicative demands. The resulting performance is thus not simply a reflection of monastic tradition but a cultural product crafted at the intersection of heritage policy, media visibility, and audience expectation.

Internal Drivers: Monastic Agency and the Rearticulation of Tradition

While external structures play a significant role, the internal motivations of monastic communities are equally crucial. Contrary to the assumption that staging is imposed from outside, many monasteries actively participate in or even initiate the performative reconstruction of Fanbai. Their motivations reveal a complex blend of pedagogical intention, cultural diplomacy, and institutional adaptation.

One major internal driver is cultural outreach. In the context of rapid social transformation, monasteries increasingly face the challenge of remaining relevant to younger and secularized publics. Staged Fanbai offers a way to communicate Buddhist values through aesthetic forms that resonate with contemporary sensibilities. By reframing chant as cultural performance, monasteries create a bridge between devotional practice and public culture, allowing non-practitioners to encounter Buddhism in a non-doctrinal yet emotionally meaningful way. This strategy reflects a broader trend in which religious institutions adopt aesthetic and cultural tools to maintain social presence.

Another internal motivation lies in institutional legitimization. Participation in heritage projects or cultural events can enhance a monastery’s public standing, attract visitors, and strengthen ties with local governments. In this process, Fanbai becomes an emblem of institutional identity. Staged presentations, with their polished appearance and symbolic clarity, allow monasteries to present themselves as custodians of cultural tradition. This dynamic helps explain why monastic leaders often support aesthetically refined performances, even when such refinements depart from ritual conventions.

A further driver concerns pedagogical utility. Staged performances can serve as training opportunities for younger monks, who learn to coordinate breath, pitch, and group discipline under structured conditions. Although these rehearsals differ from ritual immersion, they reinforce vocal stability and collective timing—skills transferable to liturgical practice. Some monastics view stage adaptation as a contemporary pedagogical tool that complements traditional oral transmission, making Fanbai more accessible to novices.

There is also a dimension of self-representation. Monastic communities recognize that modern audiences form impressions of Buddhism not through direct ritual participation but through mediated forms—films, concerts, online clips. By shaping how Fanbai appears onstage, monasteries exert control over how the religion is publicly understood. This agency challenges simplistic narratives that portray monks as passive bearers of tradition; instead, they emerge as strategic actors who negotiate cultural visibility on their own terms.

Finally, internal motivations reflect a desire to protect and sustain the tradition. In a cultural environment where ritual knowledge is vulnerable to decline, staging allows Fanbai to circulate more widely, attracting attention that may ultimately support its continuity. Even if staged forms differ from ritual ones, monastic leaders may view such adaptations as necessary to ensure long-term survival. The tension between preservation and adaptation is therefore not a contradiction but a mode of cultural negotiation.

Taken together, these internal drivers reveal that the reconstruction of Fanbai is not merely a process of external shaping but a mutual production. Monastic agency plays an active role in determining how far aesthetic modifications can go, what symbolic elements must remain intact, and how the tradition should be presented to the world.

Tensions of Sacredness, Authenticity, and Mediation

The performative reconstruction of Yushan Fanbai necessarily generates tensions that cannot be reduced to simple binaries of preservation versus loss. These tensions arise because staged Fanbai occupies a liminal zone between ritual integrity and aesthetic representation—a zone where sacred presence is both evoked and reframed.

The first tension concerns sacredness. In ritual contexts, sacredness emerges through disciplined repetition, embodied intentionality, and the resonant atmosphere of the temple. Staged Fanbai, however, produces a different modality of sacredness—one grounded in aesthetic atmosphere rather than ritual enactment. Theatrical lighting and amplified timbre create a contemplative ambience, but this ambience is directed toward spectatorship rather than spiritual transformation. Sacredness becomes symbolic rather than operative, shifting from an embodied lived experience to an aesthetically mediated impression.

A second tension centers on authenticity. Heritage discourse often demands that traditions appear “authentic,” yet such authenticity is itself a constructed expectation shaped by institutional and audience desires. Staged Fanbai presents an authenticity of appearance—monastic robes, chanting gestures, sutra imagery—while its underlying structures diverge from ritual logic. This produces what scholars describe as “performative authenticity,” where tradition is curated to meet the aesthetic expectations that define it. Fanbai’s authenticity therefore becomes dynamic and negotiated rather than fixed in ritual form.

A third tension concerns mediation. Once Fanbai is staged, recorded, and circulated through digital platforms, it enters a new regime of representation in which audiences increasingly encounter it not as a lived liturgical practice but as an audiovisual artifact. Mediation amplifies visibility but also creates distance from the ritual life that originally generated the chant. The authority once grounded in lineage and monastic embodiment is partially replaced by the authority of images, recordings, and cultural branding. Yet mediation also sustains tradition in environments where direct ritual participation is declining, revealing its ambivalent but indispensable role in cultural continuity.

These tensions highlight that the reconstructed Fanbai is not simply a diluted version of ritual practice; rather, it is a new cultural form shaped by contemporary modes of perception, heritage discourse, and negotiated sacredness. By embracing these tensions as constitutive rather than problematic, we gain a clearer understanding of how ritual sound survives in modern cultural landscapes.

Conclusion

The transformation of Yushan Fanbai from monastic practice to staged performance exemplifies the broader dynamics through which ritual sound traditions adapt to the contemporary world. Through the lens of performative reconstruction, this study has shown that Fanbai’s sound, bodily discipline, and spatial environment undergo systematic reconfiguration when transferred into theatrical contexts. These reconstructions produce an aesthetically refined form that departs from its ritual ontology yet acquires new cultural functions. The process cannot be understood solely as the influence of external forces such as heritage policy or cultural markets; equally important are the internal motivations of monastic communities, who strategically engage with aestheticization to enhance cultural outreach, institutional legitimacy, and pedagogical transmission.

Staged Fanbai operates as a hybrid form situated between ritual and performance, sacred practice and cultural display, lineage transmission and mediated heritage. Its emergence reflects not the erosion of tradition but the negotiation of continuity under new social and aesthetic conditions. By tracing how Fanbai is reconstructed and why these reconstructions occur, this article underscores the importance of understanding religious sound traditions not as static reliques but as dynamic cultural practices shaped by agency, adaptation, and creative negotiation. The reconstructed Fanbai that appears on modern stages stands as testimony to the ongoing vitality of Buddhist sound culture—transformed, rearticulated, and newly resonant within

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