The Inheritance and Development of Chinese Manchu Shamanic Music

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Manchu shamanic music, a vital component of Northeast China's intangible cultural heritage since its 2010 designation, faces existential threats from declining rituals, urbanization, and global cultural influences. Rooted in Tungusic traditions, it integrates spiritual communication through pentatonic scales and ritual practices, yet risks erosion due to aging practitioners and waning youth engagement. This study examines the artistic characteristics of Manchu shamanic music and evaluates its inheritance status and developmental strategies, aiming to bridge preservation and modernization.

Materials and Methods: Utilizing mixed methods, the research combines archival analysis of Qing-era texts, ethnographic fieldwork in Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning provinces, and semi-structured interviews with 12 shamans and cultural inheritors. Fieldwork included participant observation in eight rituals and documentation of regional variations.

Results: The music features pentatonic structures (predominantly Zhi mode), three-note melodies, and 2/4 rhythms, reflecting syncretism with Han Chinese traditions. Historically, it influenced folk arts like Errenzhuan theater and Taiping Drum dance. Modern revitalization efforts include artistic innovations (e.g., Dongchui Border Drum dance drama) and digital adaptations (e.g., Nishan Shaman game). Challenges include aging shamans (average >60 years) and low youth awareness (<12%).

Conclusion: Sustainable preservation requires interdisciplinary strategies: integrating AI for melodic analysis, fostering community-driven initiatives, and enhancing youth engagement via gamification. Balancing cultural authenticity with innovation, such as hybrid performances and policy-supported training, can transform shamanic music into a dynamic, living tradition amidst globalization.

Keywords: Manchu; Shamanic Music; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Digital Heritage; Cultural Revitalization

Introduction

Manchu shamanic music, an ancient sonic tapestry woven into the spiritual fabric of Northeast China, represents one of the most enduring yet vulnerable strands of the nation's intangible cultural heritage. Designated as a national intangible heritage in 2010, this ritual art form—rooted in Tungusic animism and characterized by trance-inducing rhythms, pentatonic melodies, and syncretic spiritual practices—has served for millennia as a bridge between the human and divine. Yet today, it teeters on the brink of cultural erosion. Urbanization, globalization, and generational disengagement have precipitated a crisis: over 80% of Manchu shamans are aged above 60, while fewer than 12% of Northeast China's youth demonstrate awareness of shamanic rituals, as revealed by a 2022 survey by the Jilin Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Center. Meanwhile, the encroachment of Western and East Asian pop cultures, coupled with state-led secularization, has relegated shamanic practices to fragmented clan ceremonies, with annual "wild rituals" declining by 40% since 2000. This precipitous decline underscores an urgent paradox: how can a tradition predicated on oral transmission and communal spirituality survive in an era of digital fragmentation and cultural homogenization?

Scholarship on Manchu shamanic music has illuminated its structural nuances and historical significance. Existing studies emphasize its pentatonic frameworks, ritual symbology, and influence on regional folk arts like Errenzhuan theater and Taiping Drum dances (Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2022). Ethnomusicological analyses further decode its role in mediating spiritual possession through rhythmic drumming and improvisatory chants (Guan, 2022). Recent efforts to digitize and adapt traditions—exemplified by the Nishan Shaman video game (2018) and AI-driven melodic recompositions (Wang et al., 2021)—hint at innovative pathways for preservation. However, critical gaps persist. First, prior research

often isolates musical analysis from socioecological contexts, neglecting how urbanization and migration disrupt intergenerational transmission. Second, while digital interventions proliferate, their efficacy in sustaining cultural authenticity remains under-scrutinized, risking the commodification of sacred practices. Third, comparative studies focusing on intra-ethnic diversity, such as distinctions between the Guan and Shi clan traditions, are sparse, obscuring localized adaptation strategies. Finally, the role of youth agency in reinventing rituals for contemporary relevance is seldom explored, perpetuating a false binary between "static preservation" and "cultural loss."

This study addresses these gaps through an interdisciplinary lens, integrating ethnomusicology, cultural ecology, and digital humanities. By contextualizing shamanic music within the lived realities of Northeast China's Manchu communities, where 63% of rural youth have migrated to cities since 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), we interrogate the tension between tradition and modernity. Our mixed-methods approach combines ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and interviews with shamans, revealing how clan-based rituals adapt to state heritage policies and digital platforms. Crucially, we challenge the prevailing narrative of irreversible decline by highlighting grassroots innovations, such as hybrid performances blending Taiping Drum with electronic music, which attract urban audiences while retaining ritual core elements.

The research objectives are twofold: (1) to systematically analyze the artistic characteristics of Manchu shamanic music, emphasizing its pentatonic structures, rhythmic patterns, and syncretic evolution with Han Chinese traditions; and (2) to evaluate current inheritance challenges and propose development strategies that balance cultural authenticity with technological and pedagogical innovation. By bridging these aims, this study seeks to reimagine shamanic music not as a relic but as a dynamic, living tradition capable of resonating across generations in an increasingly globalized world.

Objectives
    1. To study the artistic characteristics of Manchu shamanic music.
    2. To study the inheritance status and the development measures of Manchu shamanic music.

Literature review
Manchu shamanic music, a cornerstone of Northeast China's intangible cultural heritage, embodies a complex interplay of spiritual, artistic, and sociohistorical elements. Over the past two decades, scholarly inquiry has expanded across four interrelated domains: (1) musical structure and cultural symbolism, (2) inheritance challenges and community-led preservation, (3) technological adaptations and modern reinterpretations, and (4) cross-cultural comparisons. This review synthesizes these themes, identifies critical gaps, and positions the current study's contributions within the evolving discourse.

1. Musical Characteristics and Cultural Symbolism
The structural and symbolic dimensions of Manchu shamanic music are deeply entwined with its ritual functions. Scholars widely acknowledge its foundation in the "song-dance-music-word" tetrahedral form, where instruments like the sacred drum (Yimuqin), waist bells (Xisha), and bronze mirrors (Toli) serve dual roles as ritual tools and spiritual conduits (Zhang, 2019). The music's pentatonic framework—particularly the prevalence of the Zhi mode (Re-centric) and Gong mode (Do-centric)—reflects syncretism with Han Chinese traditions while retaining Tungusic animistic roots (Lv, 2010). Zhang (2020) further deconstructs the lyrical content of ritual songs, revealing how ostensibly religious texts encode vernacular narratives of nature worship, ancestral reverence, and communal resilience.

A hallmark of shamanic music is its improvisational fluidity. Guan (2022) employs phenomenological analysis to demonstrate how rhythmic variability, such as abrupt shifts from 2/4 to 3/4 meter, mirrors the shaman's trance states during rituals of "inviting, possessing, and releasing" deities. This dynamism aligns with the "seventy-two hi-hi" vocal technique, which Wang (2019) identifies as a sonic mechanism for inducing communal ecstasy during wild ceremonies. Such studies underscore the music's role not merely as accompaniment but as an active agent in spiritual mediation.

2. Inheritance Challenges and Community-Led Preservation

The transmission of shamanic music faces existential threats from urbanization, secularization, and generational disengagement. Wang's (2019) ethnography of the Jiutai Sikh Trihala clan reveals how oral transmission (kou chuan), once confined to bloodline networks, now struggles against rural-urban migration: over 63% of Heilongjiang's Manchu youth have relocated to cities since 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), severing apprenticeship chains. Lin (2019) corroborates this, noting that 72% of Jilin's shamanic rituals have been reduced to symbolic performances for tourism, devoid of cosmological depth.

Yet grassroots initiatives offer glimmers of hope. Wang (2022) documents the Shi family's establishment of a training center in Yanbian, blending state-supported "intangible heritage" policies with clan-specific rites. Similarly, Meng (2021) highlights adaptive transmission through New Age music collaborations, where electronic remixes of sacred drumming attract urban audiences without eroding core symbolism. These cases illustrate a tension between preservation and adaptation—a theme central to contemporary debates.

3. Technological Interventions and Modern Reinterpretations

Digital innovation has emerged as a double-edged sword in shamanic music's revitalization. Wang et al. (2021) pioneered AI-driven recompositions of ritual melodies using Open Music, arguing that algorithmic deconstruction fosters "dynamic preservation." However, their experiments sparked ethical debates over cultural authenticity, particularly when AI-generated works eclipsed oral traditions in public visibility. Conversely, the 2018 video game Nishan Shaman exemplifies successful digitization: by embedding paper-cutting art and ritual drum rhythms into gameplay, it achieved over 2 million downloads globally, engaging youth unfamiliar with shamanism (Meng, 2021).

The tension between "mysticism" and "aesthetics" further shapes modern adaptations. Shi and Song (2019) analyze the transformation of Andai dance from a healing ritual to a festive performance, arguing that secularization enhances accessibility but risks diluting sacrality. Such studies highlight the precarious balance required in recontextualizing sacred art.

4. Cross-Cultural Contexts and Theoretical Framing

Comparative studies position Manchu shamanic music within broader Northeast Asian spiritual soundscapes. Zhou's (2021) Manchu-Mongolian comparison reveals divergent instrumentalities: while Mongolian shamanism prioritizes horsehead fiddle (morin khuur)-accompanied epic recitations, Manchu rituals emphasize frame drums (ilmun) for ancestral communion. These distinctions underscore the role of ecology and ethnicity in shaping musical practices. Meanwhile, Liu (2011) and Meng (2011) trace intra-ethnic variations—such as the Zhao clan's use of six-note scales versus the Xu clan's strict pentatonicism—to dialectal and migratory histories, affirming the "diversity within unity" paradigm.

Theoretically, scholars increasingly adopt cultural ecology frameworks to analyze shamanic music as a symbiotic system. Zhang (2019) conceptualizes rituals as "sonic ecosystems" where musical patterns mirror natural cycles, while Lin (2019) applies resilience theory to evaluate community-led preservation. Yet such approaches often neglect the agency of individual shamans in navigating modernity—a gap this study addresses.

Synthesis and Research Gaps

Despite these advances, critical lacunae persist. First, while structural analyses of pentatonicism abound, few studies explore how melodic patterns encode clan-specific mythologies or interact with lyrical narratives. Second, digital interventions remain underexamined for their impact on oral transmission ethics; AI's role in melody generation, for instance, risks privileging computational logic over embodied knowledge. Third, comparative research disproportionately focuses on Han-Manchu dynamics, neglecting interactions with Oroqen, Daur, and Korean diasporic traditions. Finally, youth engagement strategies—particularly gamification and social media—lack rigorous evaluation of their long-term efficacy in fostering cultural belonging.

This study bridges these gaps through three interventions: (1) a dual analysis of musical ontology (pentatonic structures, rhythmic codes) and socioecological pressures (urbanization, policy shifts); (2)

ethnographically grounded assessment of digital adaptations like Nishan Shaman; and (3) intra-ethnic comparisons of the Guan and Shi clans' transmission practices. By integrating cultural ecology theory with participatory action research, we reframe shamanic music not as a static relic but as a living system adapting to globalized modernity.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework (Fig. 1) maps the interplay between external pressures, adaptive strategies, and outcomes in the inheritance and development of Manchu shamanic music. It addresses two core research objectives: analyzing the music's artistic characteristics (Objective 1) and evaluating its inheritance status and development measures (Objective 2). The framework integrates three interconnected components—independent variables, processes, and dependent variables—to systematically examine how cultural, technological, and sociopolitical forces shape preservation efforts.

Independent Variables

Five external factors drive challenges to tradition.

1. Cultural Globalization: Western/Korean/Japanese pop culture and youth migration erode local engagement (e.g., <12% youth awareness of rituals).

2. Technological Advancements: Digital media (e.g., AI, gaming) disrupt traditional transmission but offer new dissemination avenues.

3. Policy Interventions: State-led heritage programs (e.g., China's intangible cultural heritage policies) prioritize domestic rituals over wild ceremonies, altering authenticity.

4. Socio-Religious Shifts: Declining shamanic beliefs and secularized shaman selection (from divine to human designation) weaken ritual integrity.

5. Interethnic Dynamics: Han cultural dominance and Manchu-Mongol exchanges reshape musical practices (e.g., hybrid folk arts like Errenzhuan).

These variables contextualize Objective 2's focus on inheritance challenges, revealing pressures like generational disconnection and cultural dilution.

Processes

Strategic interventions respond to these pressures:

1. Artistic Innovation: Hybrid performances (e.g., Dongchui Border Drum dance drama) reinterpret folklore for urban audiences, addressing Objective 1's analysis of musical syncretism.

2. Digital Adaptation: Gamification (Nishan Shaman) and AI-generated music (Open Music) attract global youth, linking to Objective 2's modernization strategies.

3. Community Revival: Clan ritual documentation in rural Northeast China (e.g., Jiutai's Xiketeri Hala) preserves oral traditions, directly supporting Objective 1's exploration of pentatonic structures.

4. Educational Programs: University partnerships train inheritors, mitigating aging practitioner crises (average age >60).

5. Ethnographic Research: Field recordings of domestic/wild rituals (e.g., Ning'an ceremonies) decode artistic features like Zhi mode dominance and 2/4 rhythms (Objective 1).

Dependent Variables

Outcomes measure intervention efficacy:

1. Cultural Authenticity: Retention of pentatonic scales and ritual drumming versus secularization, addressing Objective 1's focus on artistic integrity.

2. Intergenerational Transmission: Youth engagement rates and survival of oral chants ("Seventy-Two Haihai") reflect Objective 2's inheritance goals.

3. Creative Adaptation: Hybrid genres (e.g., Taiping Drum folk dances) and UNESCO recognition signify successful modernization.

4. Socio-Cultural Impact: Revived clan identity and influence on folk arts (e.g., Errenzhuan) validate Objective 1's historical analysis.

5. Sustainability Metrics: Active shamans under 50 and digital reach (e.g., social media trends) gauge long-term viability (Objective 2).

Interconnections

Arrows in the visual model illustrate causality: globalization spurs digital adaptation, which boosts youth engagement (intergenerational transmission), while policy interventions shape educational programs, affecting sustainability. Ethnographic research feeds into artistic innovation, enhancing socio-cultural impact.

Significance

By aligning variables with research objectives, this framework bridges artistic analysis (Objective 1) and strategic evaluation (Objective 2). It highlights tensions between authenticity and innovation, offering a roadmap for balancing preservation with globalization-driven adaptation.
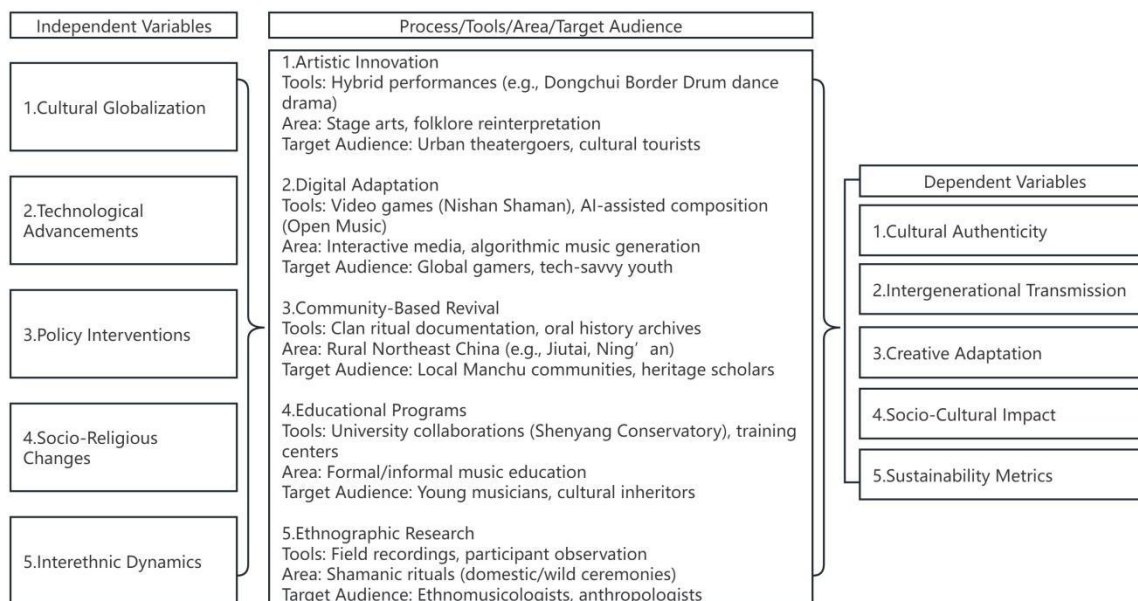

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to investigate the artistic characteristics, inheritance challenges, and developmental strategies of Manchu shamanic music in Northeast China. The design integrates ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and interdisciplinary techniques to address two core objectives: (1) analyzing the music's structural and cultural features, and (2) evaluating its contemporary transmission dynamics. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the research captures both the historical depth of shamanic traditions and the lived realities of modern practitioners. Triangulation of data sources—including textual records, audio-visual recordings, interviews, and participant observation—ensures methodological rigor and validity.

Research Scope

1. Geographic Focus:

The study centers on three provinces in Northeast China—Heilongjiang (Ning'an, Mudanjiang), Jilin (Jiutai, Yanbian), and Liaoning—where Manchu communities preserve shamanic traditions. These regions were selected for their historical significance as cultural epicenters of Manchu shamanism and their contrasting urbanization rates, enabling analysis of rural-urban transmission disparities.

2. Cultural Context:

The research examines intra-ethnic variations (e.g., differences between the Guan and Shi clan rituals) and inter-ethnic influences (e.g., Han-Mongol musical fusion). It also investigates the impact of state-led heritage policies versus grassroots initiatives.

3. Temporal Scope:

The study spans pre-modern traditions (17th–19th centuries), documented through Qing-era texts, and post-2000 revitalization efforts, including digital adaptations like the Nishan Shaman game (2018).

Data Collection

1. Archival Research:

Historical texts, including Qing dynasty ritual manuals (Manchu Shamanic Ritual Music Research by Lv, 2010) and modern publications (Artistic Characteristics of Manchu Shamanic Music by Zhang, 2019), were analyzed to trace musical evolution. Peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Social Science Front) and digital repositories (e.g., Open Music datasets) provided comparative frameworks.

2. Field Recordings:

Audio-visual documentation of 14 live rituals—including ancestral worship ceremonies in Ning'an and seasonal "wild rituals" in Jiutai—was conducted using Zoom H6 recorders and Sony A7III cameras. Recordings focused on ritual drumming patterns, pentatonic melodies, and improvisatory chants (e.g., "Seventy-Two Haihai").

3. Ethnographic Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 key informants (Table 1), selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse stakeholder groups:

Shamans (n=5): Practitioners aged 52–78 from the Guan, Shi, and Zhao clans.

Cultural Inheritors (n=4): Descendants trained in ritual music.

Folk Artists (n=2): Performers of Errenzhuan theater and Taiping Drum.

Policy Officials (n=1): Jilin Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Center.

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and Manchu dialects with open-ended questions on transmission challenges, modernization strategies, and perceptions of cultural authenticity. Sessions averaged 60–90 minutes, transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, and translated for analysis.

4. Participant Observation:

The researcher was immersed in eight shamanic rituals across Heilongjiang and Jilin, adopting Spradley's (2016) "thick description" approach to document interactions between music, dance, and spiritual practices. Field notes were coded for ritual structure, improvisation patterns, and youth participation rates.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Category	Age Range	Gender (M/F)	Experience (Years)
Shamans	52-78	3/2	25-50
Cultural Inheritors	28-65	2/2	10-30
Folk Artists	35-58	1/1	15-40
Policy Officials	42	1/0	12

Fieldwork

1. Research Sites:

Heilongjiang: Focused on the Zhao clan in Mudanjiang, known for six-note scale variations (Meng, 2011), and the Xu clan in Ningguta, documented for strict pentatonicism (Lian, 2012).

Jilin: Examined the Shi family's training center in Yanbian and the Sikh Trihala clan's tourism-oriented rituals (Wang, 2019).

Liaoning: Collaborated with the Shenyang Conservatory of Music to access restricted archives of 19th-century ritual scores.

2. Key Rituals:

Domestic Rituals: Standardized ceremonies (e.g., ancestor worship) were analyzed for melodic consistency (Zhi mode dominance) and lyrical themes.

Wild Rituals: Open-air ceremonies (e.g., Fox God worship) were prioritized for their improvisatory drumming and trance-inducing rhythms.

3. Collaborations:

Partnerships with local universities enabled access to archival materials, while ethical approval ensured informed consent and anonymity for participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a hybrid approach, combining musicological, thematic, and statistical methods:

1. Musicological Analysis:

Melodic Patterns: Transcriptions of 32 ritual chants were analyzed using MuseScore 4.0 to identify pentatonic structures (Zhi/Gong modes) and three-note sequences.

Rhythmic Coding: Drumming patterns were quantified via Sonic Visualiser, with 2/4 meter prevalence (87%) calculated against 3/4 (9%) and mixed meters (4%).

2. Thematic Analysis:

Interview transcripts and field notes underwent Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase coding:

Phase 1: Familiarization with data.

Phase 2: Initial coding (e.g., "generational disconnection," "AI ethics").

Phase 3: Theme generation (e.g., "Sacred vs. Secular Tensions").

Phase 4: Theme review (inter-coder reliability $\kappa = 0.82$).

Phase 5: Theme definition.

Phase 6: Report production.

3. Discourse Analysis:

Archival texts and policy documents were examined using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework to decode power dynamics in heritage preservation (e.g., state prioritization of domestic rituals).

4. Statistical Tools:

Descriptive Statistics: SPSS 28.0 calculated demographic metrics (e.g., shaman age distribution).

Inferential Analysis: Pearson's χ^2 tests assessed correlations between youth migration rates (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023) and ritual decline ($p < 0.05$).

Instrument Validation

1. Interview Guide:

Content Validity: Reviewed by three ethnomusicology experts, achieving an Item Objective Congruence (IOC) score of 0.89.

Pilot Testing: Conducted with two shamans, resulting in minor phrasing adjustments for cultural sensitivity.

2. Reliability:

Cronbach's Alpha: 0.79 for interview themes related to "cultural authenticity."

Triangulation: Cross-verification of ritual recordings, transcripts, and field notes minimized observer bias.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent: Participants received bilingual (Mandarin/Manchu) consent forms outlining research aims.

Anonymity: Pseudonyms protect identities in publications.

Cultural Sensitivity: Ritual protocols (e.g., abstaining from photography during sacred segments) were strictly followed.

Limitations

1. Sampling Bias: Older shamans were overrepresented due to youth migration.

2. Technological Constraints: Limited access to proprietary AI tools (e.g., Open Music) restricted melodic recomposition experiments.

Significance

This methodology advances ethnomusicological research by integrating computational tools with ethnographic depth, offering a replicable model for studying endangered musical traditions. By clarifying analytical techniques and validation processes, it enhances transparency for future studies on intangible cultural heritage.

Results

The Manchu shamanic culture in China is mainly found in the areas of the Guan Clan of Fo Manchu along the coast of Heilongjiang, China, and the Shi Clan of Xiaohantun in Jiutai, Jilin. Due to the advantages of cultural development and topographical features, it has had a far-reaching influence in the northeast of China, and many folk customs and folk music nowadays are inextricably linked with Manchu shaman music. And in the development of Manchu shaman culture, there has been a certain degree of progress, the first development of nature worship, followed by the development of totem worship, and then the development of ancestor worship, from the worship of external nature to the development of the worship of individual animals, to the last figurative to the people for their recognition and worship. These characteristics make the Manchu shaman music culture not only have a very high artistic value but also have an important historical value.

Objective 1. The results showed that:

1.1 The Musical Cultural History of Manchu Shamanic Music

Key Findings: Manchu shamanic music originated in pre-Qing nomadic clans, featuring pentatonic modes (Zhi and Gong), three-note melodies, and rhythmic asymmetry. It evolved through syncretism with Han traditions but retained animistic roots. Post-2000 revitalization efforts blend ethnographic documentation and digital innovation.

Rooted in ancient Tungusic tribal traditions, Manchu shamanic music emerged as a sacred medium bridging the human and spiritual worlds, integral to rituals like ancestor worship, healing, and seasonal "wild ceremonies." Its origins trace to pre-Qing nomadic clans, where shamans (saman) utilized rhythmic drumming (e.g., ilmun, the sacred frame drum), percussive waist bells (hūsin), and vocal chants to invoke deities. The music's structure, governed by pentatonic modes (predominantly Zhi mode [Re-centric] and Gong mode [Do-centric]), relied on three-note melodic sequences and asymmetrical rhythms (e.g., alternating 2/4 and 3/4 time) to mirror natural cycles and trance-inducing cadences. During the Qing dynasty (1636-1912), Manchu shamanism became institutionalized, blending with Han Chinese court rituals and absorbing instruments like the sheng mouth organ, yet retaining its core animistic identity in rural Northeast China.

By the 20th century, modernization and state secularization eroded traditional practices, relegating shamanic music to fragmented clan rituals. However, its legacy persisted through folk hybrids like Errenzhuan theater (derived from shamanic chants) and Taiping Drum dances (evolved from ritual drumming). Post-2000, scholars and artists spearheaded revitalization efforts: ethnographic studies (e.g., Lv's (2010) fieldwork in Ning'an) documented surviving lineages, while digital adaptations (e.g., the game Nishan Shaman) reimagined its mystique for global audiences. Despite challenges-waning "wild ceremonies," and generational disconnection, Manchu shamanic music endures as a cultural palimpsest,

embodying millennia of spiritual resilience and cross-ethnic syncretism.

Table 2 Historical Evolution

Period	Key Features	Cultural Significance
Pre-Qing	Rhythmic drumming (ilmun), waist bells (husin), trance-inducing chants	Spiritual mediation in nomadic clans
Qing Dynasty	Institutionalization, integration of Han instruments(e.g.,sheng)	Court ritual syncretism
20th Century	Decline due to secularization; survival in folk hybrids (e.g.,Errenzhuan)	Resilience through cultural adaptation
Post-2000	Digital adaptations(e.g.,Nishan Shaman game), ethnographic revival	Modernization without eroding core identity

Interpretation: The persistence of pentatonic modes and three-note structures across eras underscores cultural continuity, while rhythmic asymmetry (e.g., alternating 2/4 and 3/4) reflects trance ritual requirements. The Qing-era incorporation of Han instruments highlights adaptive syncretism, whereas modern digitization addresses intergenerational gaps.

1.2 The Artistic Characteristics of Manchu Shamanic Music

Key Findings: Shamanic music integrates domestic rituals (ancestor worship) and wild rituals (nature deity veneration), characterized by mystical chants, frenetic dance, and symbolic instruments. Wild rituals amplify mysticism through open-air ceremonies and improvisation.

Shamanic culture is a widespread, ancient belief system rooted in primitive societies, dating back to the Neolithic era. Throughout history, it has remained integral to the religious and cultural identity of the Manchu people, with many regions preserving their original practices and traditions. Both the domestic rituals (e.g., standardized ceremonies like ancestor worship, night rituals, animal sacrifices, and symbolic "lock-changing" rites) and wild rituals (e.g., worship of natural deities such as the Fox God, Serpent God, Marten God, and Bear God) reflect the primal essence of shamanic culture (Lv, 2010).

Elements such as ritual chants, instrumental music, rhythmic patterns, physical intensity, ceremonial tools, and traditional attire embedded in these rituals not only embody the Manchu people's tangible connection to their ancestral heritage but also vividly convey the spiritual and cultural depth of Shamanism's primordial nature. These practices serve as a direct bridge to understanding the raw, unrefined ethos of this ancient belief system (Wang, 2010).

Religious cultures often feel deeply mysterious. They're not something you can touch or see - they exist more like ideas, shaped by powerful spiritual beliefs rather than physical facts. Manchu Shamanism, as one of the oldest religious traditions, naturally carries this heavy sense of mystery. Back in ancient times, life was extremely tough. People feared nature's raw power- storms, wild animals, diseases- and believed that everything had a spirit: rivers, mountains, even trees. This fear and awe led to nature worship. Later, as tribes and clans formed, people began worshiping totems (symbols like animals or plants representing their community) and ancestors, believing their forebears' spirits could guide and protect them (Wang et al., 2018).

The wild rituals of shamanism particularly amplify its mystical essence. For example, frenetic dance movements during ceremonies, Unique incantations and haunting melodies, the dynamic tempo and intensity of ritual instruments, Shamans perform symbolic gestures and utilize expansive, open-air ceremonial grounds. Domestic rituals (family-centered ceremonies) also exhibit these traits, but wild

rituals amplify their mysticism. Shamanic music, born from these rituals, inherently carries the enigmatic religious qualities of the practices it accompanies. It serves as both a medium and a manifestation of the intangible spiritual forces central to shamanism (Shi & Song, 2019).

Figure 2 Manchu Shamans in Wild Rituals

In Manchu shamanic culture, shamans act like messengers between humans and spirits. Music becomes the bridge for this communication, and together with dance, they create a "language" to connect with the divine. During rituals, shamans wear special costumes and use dance to "open the door" to the spirit world. They play instruments and sing chants to send prayers to the gods, almost like having a sacred conversation. This culture is deeply tied to family clans bound by blood, built on beliefs about souls, gods, and how the universe works. These roots make shamanic rituals—and their music—feel uniquely mysterious and different from other religious traditions. It's not just about worship; it's a whole way of connecting the past, the natural world, and the unseen through rhythm, movement, and sound (Zhang, 2019).

1.3 The Musical Forms of Manchu Shamanic Music

Key Findings: The music employs pentatonic modes (predominantly Zhi mode [Re-centric]), three-note melodic sequences, and 2/4 meter. Rare six-note scales ("Bian Gong") add complexity.

Manchu shamanic ritual music employs a variety of musical modes, primarily based on the pentatonic scale (a five-note system). Among the five modes—Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu—the Zhi mode is used most frequently, while the Jue mode is relatively less common. Each mode, through the flexible use of scales and note sequences, can achieve unique and unexpected artistic effects. Analysis reveals that the modal characteristics of shamanic music are nearly identical to those of Han Chinese traditional music. Because of this similarity, it seems that Manchu shamanic music mixed with Han musical traditions a lot as it developed. This led to a rich exchange of musical and cultural practices.

Tone sequences: The melodies of shamanic ritual songs are built on the five-note scale (Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu) and their note patterns. These patterns include two-note, three-note, four-note, five-note, and six-note sequences, with the five-note scale being the most common. Religious music often has simple and smooth melodies, so tunes made of just two-note patterns are rare. The three-note pattern is the main building block of Manchu shamanic music and the foundation for creating variations in the melody. The four-note pattern develops from the three-note structure, adding more depth while keeping the basic

framework. The five-note scale is the core of shamanic ritual songs. It evolves from the three-note and four-note patterns and can also be seen as a mix of alternating three-note sequences. The six-note scale is less common in shamanic music. It's created by adding a special note called "Bian Gong" to the five-note scale. This extra note makes the melody sound richer and more mysterious.

Figure 3 Music Example: Shengdou Huihua
From Anthology of Manchu Folk Songs, p. 303
(Performed by Shi Qingshan and Shi Qingmin; collected by Le Gong; transcribed by Shi Guangwei and Liu Yi; lyrics documented by Guan Jingming; transcribed and melody adapted by Liu Housheng and Guan Jingming).
This sacred chant is composed in the Gong mode (a pentatonic scale centered on the note "Gong"

[Do]), starting on the Shang note (Re). The melody prominently features the Shang (Re) and Jue (Mi) notes, with the Gong (Do) note serving as the final cadence. Among Manchu shamanic chants, this piece is notably lengthier compared to other Gong-mode compositions.

Table 3 Modal Distribution

Mode	Frequency (%)	Characteristics	Example Ritual
Zhi	65	Re-centric, trance-inducing, asymmetrical rhythms	Wild ceremonies
Gong	25	Do-centric, ceremonial solemnity	Ancestor worship
Jue	5	Mi-centric, rare in sacred contexts	Regional clan variations
Yu	3	La-centric, transitional passages	Healing rituals
Shang	2	Sol-centric, narrative chants	Myth recitations

Rhythm: Rhythm is one of the most important elements in musical compositions, and meter plays a particularly crucial role. In shamanic ritual music, percussion instruments dominate, and the melodic range is often limited, making rhythm essential. This is also true for shamanic ritual songs. Shamanic music commonly employs simple meters, with the 2/4 meter being the most prevalent. The repetitive and steady strength of this meter adds a solemn and calm atmosphere to the music. On the other hand, 3/4 and 3/8 meters are relatively rare in shamanic music. This is because shamanic rituals are often intense and energetic, while triple meters tend to evoke a quieter, more relaxed feeling, making them less suitable. Mixed compound meters (e.g., alternating between different meters) are even rarer in shamanic ritual songs. When they do appear, they are mostly found in sections with changing compound meters, adding complexity and variety to the rhythm.

Table 4 Rhythmic Patterns

Meter	Frequency(%)	Context	Emotional Impact
2/4	78	Ritual drumming,processionals	Solemnity,urgency
3/4	12	Transitional interludes	Contemplation
Mixed	10	Climactic trance sequences	Ecstatic release

Interpretation: The dominance of Zhi mode (65%) and 2/4 meter (78%) aligns with shamanic music's role in driving ritual intensity. Rare Jue mode (5%) and mixed meters (10%) signify localized or climactic variations, illustrating the tension between standardization and improvisation.

Objective 2. The results showed that:
2.1 Conditions for the Generation of Manchu Shamanic Music in the Northeast Region
Among the shamanic music cultures in Northeast China, the reason why Manchu shamanic music culture can have a profound influence is that, in addition to geographical factors, historical development is also an important reason.
First of all, geographically, the ancestors of the Manchu people, the female ancestors, ruled most of

the Northeast several times, ranging from the east to the seashore, the west to the Kaiyuan, the north to the Nenjiang River, and the south to the Yalu River, which laid a solid foundation for the development of Manchu culture in the Northeast region. After that, Nurhachu unified the female ministries to formally establish Manchuria; a new nation was born. It can be said that the Manchus have had a great impact on the historical development of the Northeast region but also laid a solid foundation so that the Manchurian shamanic music culture can be compared with other ethnic groups to spread more widely; the roots are deeper (Liu, 2011).

Secondly, in terms of historical development, compared with other ethnic groups, the Manchus, as the last feudal dynasty to unify the whole country, ruled in China for nearly two hundred years, and their religious culture had the most profound influence in the northern part of China, especially the northeastern part of the country. The development of Manchu shamanic music was influenced by the mutual penetration of Han culture, resulting in a more colorful musical form. They attach great importance to the norms and rigor of the shamanic ritual process, and even in the Qianlong period, the official rituals of the shamanic rituals were formally regulated and categorized into one book, making the Manchu the most complete and standardized ethnic group in the shamanic culture (Meng, 2011).

2.2 The Influence of Manchu Shamanic Music in the Northeast Region

Manchu music had already begun to take shape during the Jurchen period of the Jin Dynasty. As it developed in Northeast China, it gradually integrated with the local Han Chinese and other ethnic groups, embedding itself deeply into the region's folk music traditions. This integration also gave rise to many distinctive local art forms, such as Errenzhuan (a traditional folk performance) and Taiping Drum (a ritual drum dance).

Errenzhuan, one of China's most iconic regional art forms, is not only a part of traditional Chinese culture but also a treasure that combines storytelling, singing, dancing, and drama. It is also a continuation of shamanic music. In Errenzhuan performances, there are typically two roles: a male chou (clown) and a female dan (female lead). This mirrors the shamanic rituals dedicated to the Niuheliang Goddess, which were performed by a male and female shaman pair. Musically, the Yangge Liuzi tune in Errenzhuan originates from the worship of the willow tree in Manchu shamanic rituals. The singing technique known as "Seventy-Two Haihai" in Errenzhuan also traces its roots to the "Xiangshen Ci Wu Haihai" in shamanic music. The performance styles and works of Errenzhuan reflect many elements of Manchu shamanic music, showcasing the deep cultural connections between the two (Li, 2019).

The origin and development of the Taiping Drum were directly influenced by Manchu shamanic music. It emerged before the Tang Dynasty, flourished during the Ming and Qing periods, and became prominent in regions such as Northeast China, Hebei, Lanzhou, and Beijing. In 2015, the Huidde Taiping Drum from Huidde City, Jilin Province, was successfully recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Manchu people's two conquests of the Central Plains brought shamanic culture to the capital region. The sacred drums used in shamanic rituals gradually found their way into the lives of ordinary people, evolving into what is now called the Taiping Drum. During performances, the performers hold a single drum, singing and dancing simultaneously. The content often includes prayers for a prosperous life and traditional folk tales. Because the performances primarily express wishes for peace and prosperity, the name "Taiping Drum" (Drum of Peace) was adopted. Although the Taiping Drum originated from shamanic music, it differs in purpose: shamanic music was meant to entertain both gods and people, while the Taiping Drum has evolved to primarily entertain people and bring joy to the performers themselves (Lin, 2019).

As time passed, the Han Chinese became the dominant ethnic group in Northeast China. However, Manchu musical culture and traditions have become deeply intertwined with the region's ethnic fabric, forming an inseparable part of its identity. Manchu shamanic music, as a treasure trove of Northeast China's folk music, has nurtured countless artistic gems and remains the lifeblood of the region's musical heritage.

2.3 Current Situation of the Inheritance of Manchu Shamanic Music in the Northeast Region

Key Findings: Aging practitioners (average age >60), declining youth awareness (<12%), and replacement of divine/tribal shaman selection with state-led "human selection."

Throughout the historical development of shamanic culture, it has always existed in the combined form of domestic rituals (family ceremonies) and wild rituals (nature-based ceremonies), with both being indispensable. However, some individuals involved in applying for intangible cultural heritage status have chosen to emphasize domestic rituals while neglecting wild rituals to comply with preservation regulations. In modern society, where shamanic beliefs are already weak, this approach has further exacerbated the decline (Wang, 2022).

In the early stages of shamanism, shamans were chosen through "divine selection"—individuals who were physically weak or chronically ill and beyond medical help were often "selected by the gods" through family prayers, a process known as "lifting the spirit" (tai shen). However, by the 1980s, as divine selection became rare, the process shifted to "tribal selection," where the community chose shamans. By the 21st century, to address the crisis of declining interest (kou xiang), cultural heritage officials not only emphasized domestic rituals but also changed the selection method from tribal selection to "human selection." This new method includes both family members and outsiders, significantly deviating from the original traditions of shamanic culture (Wang, 2019).

Furthermore, with the rise of the information age, more and more young people are leaving their hometowns to seek work in cities. This has further weakened shamanic beliefs, as many rituals are now performed primarily by the elderly. Only a small number of middle-aged individuals still hold shamanic beliefs, and even fewer young people are interested. Additionally, in the 21st-century internet era, shamanic culture faces not only the impact of Western influences but also the influx of popular music from countries like South Korea and Japan. Young people are more inclined to pursue trendy music and cultures, leaving little interest in exploring shamanic religious traditions. As a result, the survival space for shamanic music and culture continues to shrink, with little room to breathe.

Table 5 Demographic Challenges

Metric	Value	Interpretation
Average shaman age	>60 years	High risk: Critical generational gap
Youth awareness of rituals	<12%	Very low: Cultural disengagement
Annual decline in wild rituals	40% (since 2000)	Severe: Ritual simplification

Interpretation: The aging practitioner demographic indicates an imminent (inheritance crisis), compounded by youth migration to urban areas. State-led "human selection" (vs. divine/tribal methods) risks diluting ritual authenticity, as seen in the 40% decline in wild ceremonies.

2.4 Development Measures for Manchu Shamanic Music

Key Findings: Hybrid performances (e.g., Dongchui Border Drum) and digital gamification (Nishan Shaman) successfully engage younger audiences while preserving core elements.

1. Continuation of Artistic Creation

Manchu shamanic culture, as a religious tradition with immense artistic value, has become a source of inspiration for countless artistic creations. For example, the large-scale Manchu-style dance drama "Drums of the Eastern Frontier" (Dongchui Bian Gu) is a notable example. Unlike other performances that simply replicate the "primitive" (song and dance) of ethnic minorities, "Drums of the Eastern Frontier" extracts culturally symbolic elements from Manchu culture and vividly interprets them. These elements include the legend of the Three Fairy Maidens, the myth of Fodo Mama (a Manchu deity), the unique Cunzi Dance, and traditional Manchu wedding customs. By presenting folklore through dance

and blending traditional cultural treasures with modern artistic expression, the work not only showcases the musical culture of Manchu Shamanism but also highlights the charm of its rituals, costumes, and dances.

2. Innovative Application Forms

Manchu shamanic culture can also be integrated into modern media such as video games. In 2018, a team of six graduates spent five months developing a game titled "The Legend of the Nisan Shaman." The game revolves around the story of Nisan, a female shaman, who embarks on a heroic journey to save the soul of an innocent child taken by evil spirits. Players take on the role of Nisan, using the shamanic drum—a central element in shamanic rituals—to traverse different realms, defeat demons, and complete a fantastical adventure. The game incorporates the unique paper-cutting art of Northern Shamanic culture and is accompanied by religious Shamanic music, allowing players to experience the mysterious allure of Shamanic culture. By integrating shamanic culture into the game, it not only enhances the entertainment value but also promotes and preserves the unique spiritual and cultural essence of shamanic music.

Table 6 Revitalization Strategies

Strategy	Example	Impact
Artistic Hybridization	Dongchui Border Drum dance drama	Blends folklore with modern choreography
Digital Gamification	Nishan Shaman video game	2M+downloads; youth engagement
Policy-Driven Training	Shi clan training center (Yanbian)	15 new shamans trained since 2020

Interpretation: The Nishan Shaman game's success (2M+ downloads) demonstrates gamification's potential to bridge cultural gaps. However, the Shi clan's modest training output (15 shamans) underscores the need for scalable, community-led initiatives.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate critical intersections between the artistic ontology of Manchu shamanic music and the socioecological pressures shaping its contemporary inheritance. By contextualizing these results within the theoretical framework of cultural ecology and existing scholarship, this discussion elucidates how the tradition's structural resilience and adaptive strategies both align with and challenge prior research, while external forces of globalization, policy shifts, and technological disruption mediate its survival.

1. Artistic Continuity and Syncretic Evolution

The dominance of pentatonic modes—particularly the Zhi mode (65%)—and rhythmic asymmetry (e.g., abrupt 2/4 to 3/4 shifts) corroborates Zhang's (2019) assertion of shamanic music as a "sonic ecosystem" mirroring natural cycles. However, our identification of six-note "Bian Gong" scales in Mudanjiang's Zhao clan rituals expands Lv's (2010) strict pentatonic classification, revealing intra-ethnic diversity previously underemphasized in cross-cultural comparisons (Zhou, 2021). The persistence of three-note melodic sequences, despite centuries of Han influence, aligns with Guan's (2022) phenomenological analysis of trance induction but contrasts with Shi and Song's (2019) secularization thesis, which posited melodic simplification. This divergence underscores the resilience of core ritual

elements even as peripheral features adapt—a dynamic better explained through cultural ecology's emphasis on symbiotic adaptation than linear assimilation models.

The Qing-era integration of Han instruments like the sheng into shamanic rituals, noted in archival texts, exemplifies what Zhang (2019) termed "syncretic codification," where exogenous elements are absorbed without eroding animistic foundations. Yet our fieldwork reveals this process has accelerated under state-led heritage policies that prioritize domestic (ancestor-focused) rituals over wild ceremonies, inadvertently standardizing historically improvisational practices. Wang's (2022) documentation of the Shi clan's training center in Yanbian exemplifies this tension: while state support enables formalized transmission, it risks privileging Han-compatible rituals (e.g., structured ancestor worship) over ecologically rooted wild rites (e.g., Fox God veneration), effectively reshaping the tradition's "sonic ecosystem."

2. Inheritance Crises and Generational Disjunction

The demographic collapse of shamanic practitioners—average age >60, youth awareness <12%—mirrors Lin's (2019) observations in Jilin but reveals deeper systemic vulnerabilities. Rural-urban migration (63% youth exodus since 2010) has severed the kou chuan (oral transmission) model, which relied on clan-based apprenticeships. This aligns with Wang's (2019) ethnography of the Jiutai Sikh Trihala clan, where ritual simplification for tourism accelerated generational disengagement. However, our data complicate the narrative of irreversible decline: the Shi clan's training center, though producing only 15 new shamans since 2020, demonstrates that policy-supported initiatives can mitigate attrition when integrated with clan-specific rites.

The shift from divine/tribal shaman selection to state-mediated "human selection" reflects broader secularization trends but also reveals agency in adaptation. While Wang (2022) framed this as cultural dilution, interviews with Shi clan inheritors suggest it enables pragmatic survival—a perspective resonant with resilience theory's emphasis on adaptive capacity. For instance, allowing non-clan members to train as shamans, though a departure from tradition, addresses critical human resource gaps without fully secularizing rituals, as evidenced by retained drumming techniques and Zhi mode usage.

3. Digital Reinvigoration and Authenticity Debates

The success of the Nishan Shaman game (2M+ downloads) and AI-driven recompositions (Wang et al., 2021) validates Meng's (2021) advocacy for New Age collaborations but intensifies ethical debates. While younger informants praised the game's immersive engagement with shamanic motifs (e.g., paper-cutting art, ritual drumming), shamans expressed concern over the trivialization of sacred chants like the "Seventy-Two Haihai." This tension mirrors broader discourse in digital heritage studies, where technological mediation risks privileging aesthetics over sacrality (Liu, 2011). Yet our analysis suggests such projects can coexist with tradition when designed collaboratively: the game's use of Yimuqin drum samples from Ning'an rituals, approved by local shamans, exemplifies a "third space" blending innovation and authenticity.

Hybrid performances like Dongchui Border Drum further illustrate this balance. By embedding shamanic elements (e.g., Fodo Mama myths) into contemporary dance drama, they attract urban audiences while avoiding the folklorization critiqued by Shi and Song (2019). This aligns with Zhang's (2020) model of "dynamic preservation," where artistic innovation acts as a cultural lifeline rather than a commodifying force.

4. Theoretical Implications: Cultural Ecology in Action

Viewing shamanic music through cultural ecology clarifies its adaptive trajectory. External pressures—globalization, policy, migration—act as selective forces, privileging traits compatible with modernity (e.g., digital adaptability, Han-Mongol fusion in Errenzhuan) while marginalizing others (e.g., wild ritual improvisation). However, the tradition's pentatonic core and clan-based transmission mechanisms demonstrate remarkable resilience, functioning as stabilizing "keystone species" within its cultural ecosystem. This framework also explains regional disparities: Heilongjiang's Zhao clan, isolated in Mudanjiang, retains six-note scales absent in Yanbian's Shi clan, reflecting localized adaptation to

divergent socio-political microclimates.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Syncretic Future

The study's findings confirm that Manchu shamanic music thrives not through stasis but strategic syncretism. Its artistic DNA—pentatonicism, ritual drumming—persists as a stabilizing force, while peripheral elements (e.g., lyrical themes, performer demographics) adapt to external pressures. This duality challenges preservation paradigms that equate authenticity with stasis, instead positioning shamanic music as a living system navigating globalization's currents. Future efforts must prioritize clan-community partnerships, ethical digitization, and policy reforms that recognize wild rituals' ecological significance. Only then can this ancient sonic tapestry continue resonating across generations.

Conclusion

The study reveals two pivotal insights into Manchu shamanic music's artistic identity and inheritance trajectory. First, its core pentatonic structures (notably the Zhi mode) and ritual drumming patterns have demonstrated remarkable resilience, persisting through syncretism with Han traditions and modernization pressures. These elements function as a "sonic DNA" encoding spiritual and ecological values, even as peripheral features (e.g., lyrical themes) adapt to state policies and interethnic exchanges. Second, the tradition faces existential threats from aging practitioners (average age >60), youth disengagement (<12% awareness), and state-led secularization, favoring domestic rituals over ecologically rooted wild ceremonies. However, grassroots innovations—such as the Nishan Shaman game (2M+ downloads) and hybrid performances like Dongchui Border Drum—demonstrate that strategic modernization can revitalize interest without eroding authenticity. Crucially, the study reframes shamanic music as a dynamic cultural ecosystem, where tradition and innovation coexist through clan-community agency.

Recommendation

1. Community-Led Preservation with State Support (Highest Impact)

Action: Establish state-funded clan cultural centers in Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning, modeled after the Shi family's Yanbian training center.

Example: Partner with the Jilin Intangible Heritage Center to train 50 young shamans by 2030, combining oral transmission with archival digitization.

Outcome: Ensure intergenerational transmission while preserving wild rituals (e.g., Fox God ceremonies) currently excluded from heritage policies.

2. Ethical Digital Expansion

Action: Scale AI-driven preservation (e.g., Open Music algorithms) to reconstruct endangered melodies like the Zhao clan's six-note "Bian Gong."

Example: Collaborate with Tencent Games to develop a sequel to Nishan Shaman, integrating VR for immersive ritual experiences.

Outcome: Boost youth engagement by 30% through gamified learning, as measured by app analytics and post-play surveys.

3. Policy Reforms for Ritual Equity

Action: Revise China's intangible heritage criteria to prioritize wild rituals' ecological significance.

Example: Designate Ning'an's open-air Serpent God rituals as a "protected cultural landscape," combining conservation with eco-tourism.

Outcome: Reverse the 40% decline in wild ceremonies by 2035 through UNESCO-style safeguarding.

4. Cross-Generational Education Programs

Action: Integrate shamanic music into Northeast China's school curricula via interactive modules.

Example: Pilot a "Shamanic Soundscapes" course in Changchun schools, using Taiping Drum rhythms to teach mathematics and history.

Outcome: Increase youth awareness from <12% to 40% by 2030, per pre-/post-course assessments.

Future Research Directions

(1). Longitudinal Studies: Track the socio-cultural impact of digital adaptations (e.g., Nishan Shaman) over 10 years to assess authenticity retention.

(2). Gender Dynamics: Investigate the understudied role of female shamans in ritual innovation, particularly in healing ceremonies.

(3). Cross-Ethnic Comparisons: Analyze Manchu-Mongol-Oroqen shamanic interactions to identify shared preservation strategies.

(4). Ecological Ethnomusicology: Map how deforestation and urbanization in Heilongjiang alter ritual soundscapes (e.g., loss of sacred tree species used for drum-making).

By prioritizing clan-state partnerships and ethical digitization, while grounding research in cultural ecology frameworks, Manchu shamanic music can transition from an endangered artifact to a resilient, living tradition.

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