

# AN EXPLORATION OF THE CENTRAL ROLE OF FIELDWORK IN THE STUDY OF TAOIST DRUMMING AT XISHAN GUAN\*

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## Abstract

Taoist drumming is a form of artistic performance unique to Xishan Guan in Guangfeng, Jiangxi Province. As an important part of traditional Chinese religious culture, it carries deep historical deposits and unique religious connotations. In Taoist ceremonies, drumming is not only a bridge between humans and gods, but also an important medium for the transmission of Taoist culture. With the deepening of academic research, fieldwork, as a direct and vivid means of research, plays an increasingly important role in the study of Taoist drumming. The purpose of this paper is to explore the central role of fieldwork in the study of Taoist drumming and how it can provide new perspectives and depth to our understanding and interpretation of Taoist drumming as a traditional art form. In conclusion, fieldwork plays a central role in the study of Taoist drumming, not only enriching the content of the study, but also opening up new avenues for academic research and cultural heritage of Taoist music. This paper analyses examples of the application of fieldwork to the study of Taoist drumming and explores its important contributions in terms of data collection, theory construction, cultural understanding, and preservation and transmission.

**Keywords:** Fieldwork, Taoist Drumming, Cultural Heritage

## Introduction

Taoist music, an art form deeply rooted in traditional Chinese religious culture, plays a crucial role in Taoist rituals and is an important part of China's intangible cultural heritage. However, with modernization, Taoist music

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particularly the Taoist drumming of Xishan Guan in Guangfeng, Jiangxi Province nfaces challenges in both inheritance and development as a form of artistic performance.

Jianmin Huang (2016) observes: “From the perspective of the current state of research on the discipline of Taoism, academic research on Taoist culture in recent decades has focused on the theory of the discipline of Taoism, and fewer scholars will touch on the issue of regional Taoism, especially the research on the issue of the relationship between regional Taoism and local culture is even more rare, which is obviously deplorable.” To better understand and preserve this cultural heritage, fieldwork—being a direct and dynamic research method—has increasingly proven central to the study of Taoist drumming.

Yang Zhimin (2017) states: “Different geographical environments lead to different musical styles, and the production of a particular art form must be inseparable from the cultural geography of the region in which it is located.” Fieldwork allows researchers to move beyond traditional literature-based studies and directly engage with Taoist rituals at their source. Through on-site observation and active participation, scholars can collect firsthand information on Taoist drumming performances. This approach not only provides richer and more authentic data but also helps reveal contemporary practices and transformations in Taoist drumming. As a result, fieldwork offers new perspectives for academic research and the cultural inheritance of Taoist music and regional folk traditions.

Zheng Xin (2003) highlights the advantages of fieldwork, stating: “The greatest advantage of fieldwork lies in its intuitiveness and reliability. In field investigation, the researcher can directly perceive the objective object; it is obtained directly, specific, vivid perceptual understanding, especially the participation in the observation is more able to grasp a large amount of first-hand information, which is not as good as other methods of investigation.” Fieldwork requires researchers to immerse themselves in the natural environment of Guangfeng Xishan Guan, actively observing Taoist drumming performances—a traditional and enigmatic ritual—while conducting in-depth interviews with Taoist priests. This process allows for the collection of extensive

data in various forms, enriching scholarly understanding of this ancient art.

Sheng Huanxia (2020) notes: “Influenced by local culture as well as economic factors and other conditions, the folk cultures of different regions have their own characteristics, resulting in the formation of folk secular music that varies from place to place and style to style, which provides abundant material for the development of Taoist music.” In the study of Taoist drumming, fieldwork enables researchers to transcend the limitations of textual research, directly experiencing and contextualizing performances within their cultural framework. This approach is vital for understanding the transmission and evolution of Taoist drumming in contemporary society.

Despite its significant role in the study of Taoist drumming, fieldwork presents several challenges. These include difficulties in data collection and organization, the complexity of researcher-subject interactions, and the need to ensure objectivity and scientific rigor in the study. Overcoming these obstacles is essential for advancing the academic understanding and preservation of this unique cultural heritage.

## Objective

Examines the central role of fieldwork in the study of Taoist drumming. Suggests how to make more effective use of fieldwork methods to promote the in-depth development of Taoist drumming research.

## Research Methods

### 1. Sources/Population and Sampling

The research focuses on sources related to Taoist culture and folklore. The population includes scholars, practitioners, and experts in the field of Taoist studies. Sampling is conducted using a purposive sampling method, selecting key experts and academics who have extensively studied or practiced Taoist traditions. This ensures that the study gathers reliable and in-depth insights from credible sources.

### 2. Research Tools

To collect and analyze data, the research utilizes the following tools:  
Literature Review: A comprehensive literature search using online platforms

such as Baidu, academic journal databases, and digital libraries to gather relevant information. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with experts, practitioners, and scholars to obtain qualitative insights into Taoist culture and folklore. Field Observations: Documenting real-world practices and rituals associated with Taoist culture through direct observation and participation.

### **3. Data Collection**

Data collection is conducted through the following methods: Primary Data Collection: Interviews and surveys are carried out among key informants, including Taoist scholars and practitioners. Fieldwork is conducted to observe and document relevant rituals and cultural practices. Secondary Data Collection: Extensive literature research on Taoist culture and folklore is conducted using academic journals, books, dissertations, and other relevant resources. Multimedia Documentation: Videos and photographs are used to document rituals, symbols, and practices, aiding in visual and contextual analysis.

### **4. Data Analysis**

The collected data is analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods: Qualitative Analysis: Content analysis of interviews and observations is conducted to identify recurring themes and significant patterns in Taoist culture and folklore. Comparative Analysis: A comparative approach is used to examine similarities and differences between various Taoist practices and their interpretations across different regions and periods.

## **Research results**

### **1. Practical Application of Taoist Drumming in Field Research**

#### **1.1 Specific implementation steps of Taoist drumming field investigation.**

This study focuses on the historical evolution of Taoist drumming in Xishan Guan, the playing techniques of drumming instruments, and the cultural significance of Taoist drumming as a Taoist ritual activity, aiming to deeply excavate and analyse the cultural connotations of Taoist drumming. After clearly studying this topic, before entering the field, it is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the geography and historical materials of the area

where Guangfeng Xishan Guan is located. At the same time, the findings of previous investigations are analysed through the literature to provide a direction for a new starting point for the investigation of Taoist music.

Develop a detailed programme and outline for the survey, including investigating the historical origins and development of Guangfeng Xishan Guan and the selection of targets. In order to ensure the accuracy and authority of the survey, the researcher focused on visiting Taoist personnel who have five years or more experience in performing Taoist drum music for Guangfeng Xishan Guan. To ensure that these professionals have rich experience in performing and researching Taoist drum music.

In this study, we chose representative places of Taoist music activities in Xishan Guan, and senior Taoist music performers as research subjects. Before conducting the formal survey, we familiarised ourselves with the environment of the area where Guangfeng Xishan Guan is located and reviewed the local literature, conducted the collection of basic information about Guangfeng Xishan Guan, as well as conducted a pilot survey of Taoist drumming, a Taoist ritual activity. In order to identify problems and revise the survey programme and outline of Taoist drumming in a timely manner.

Fieldwork plays a central role in the study of Taoist drumming in Xishan Guan, which not only provides rich first-hand information for the study, but also helps to deeply understand the cultural value and historical evolution of Taoist drumming. Through the field survey, we can grasp the connotation of Taoist music more comprehensively and provide a scientific basis for the inheritance and development of Taoist music.



Photo 1: Guangfeng Xishan Guan ; Source: Photo by Yu Meihan 2024.11.3

### 1.2 Types of data collected in a field survey of Taoist drumming.

In the study of Taoist drumming at Xishan Guan, the recorded materials include, but are not limited to, complete recordings of live performances at Taoist drumming ceremonial events, recordings of specific Taoist drumming segments, and recordings of music related to other Taoist ceremonies at Xishan Guan in Guangfeng. These recordings not only record the melodies, rhythms, and timbres of the music in the Taoist drumming or other ritual activities of Xishan Guan in Guangfeng, but also capture the emotions and techniques of the instrumental music played by different Taoist priests who performed the Taoist rituals, providing raw material for subsequent analyses and comparisons of the Taoist drumming music. The analysis of the recorded data involves a detailed examination of the musical structure, stylistic features, and performance techniques of Taoist drumming, aiming to reveal the artistic characteristics and cultural connotations of Taoist drumming.

In validate, the video recordings provide us with a visual dimension of the performance aspect of religious music, including the body movements, facial expressions, and interactions of the performers with the audience during Taoist koan events. The video footage helps to analyse the performance styles of different instruments, the norms of movement in the koan activities, and the coordination between the Taoist music and the movement of the Taoist priests



in Xishan Guan, Guangfeng, when they perform the Taoist drum music. Through careful observation of the video footage, the researcher can gain a fuller understanding of the role and significance of Taoist drumming in Taoist koans, as well as the intrinsic connection between music and Taoist rituals.

Interviews are an important way to obtain first-hand information. In the study of Taoist drumming at Xishan Guan, interviews included Taoist priests, music performers, local residents, and scholars with in-depth knowledge of Taoist music. The interview transcripts include discussions of the historical background, performance techniques, and cultural significance of Taoist drum music, as well as the personal performance experiences of different Taoist priests. These transcripts not only provide perspectives for a deeper understanding of Taoist drumming, but also reveal the place and role of music in the local society and culture of Guangfeng, Jiangxi Province.

When conducting data collection of Taoist drumming, it is also necessary to make a comprehensive and detailed record and make a good observation note. The observation notes record what was seen and heard during the fieldwork, including descriptions of the ceremonial process of the Taoist rituals at Xishan Guan in Guangfeng, the environment in which the art form of Taoist drumming is performed, and the socio-cultural background of the area where Xishan Guan's activities take place. These notes provide an intuitive perspective for understanding the socio-cultural context of Taoist drumming music and help to reveal the interactions between Taoist drumming music and local socio-cultural factors in Guangfeng.

After collecting the different types of data on Taoist drumming mentioned above, the researcher needs to synthesise and analyse the data. This includes how to combine musical recordings of Taoist drumming with video recordings of Taoist rituals performed by Taoist drummers. This comparative analysis across data types enables us to obtain a more comprehensive performance analysis. The interviews with the Taoist priests in Xishanguan were compared with the documents collected about Taoist drumming in Xishanguan to verify and deepen the understanding of Taoist drumming. The goal of this step is to construct a multi-dimensional research perspective that will more accurately reveal the core characteristics and cultural values of the Taoist



drumming in Xishanguan.



**Photo 2:** List of musical instruments in Guangfeng Xishan Guan Source: Photo by Yu Meihan 2024.11.3

### 1.3 Practical problems encountered in conducting fieldwork on Taoist drumming.

The selection and entry of fieldwork research sites is an important theme, which defines the way of entry. The researcher needs to ensure that the field points remain highly relevant to the topic of the research and that individual cases are not used to seek commonalities or to divert the research from the topic. Interspersed with the study of Taoist drumming in Xishanguan is a large number of extended studies on Taoist ritual music and local folk music, which are far too complex and vast. Therefore, when conducting fieldwork on Taoist drumming, it is important to focus on the performance form of drumming. How did Taoist drum music evolve from Taoist ceremonial music to be named after the drum as a musical instrument? When did Taoist drum music originate, and how was it influenced by local folk music in Guangfeng and evolved into this special performing art form? The study of Taoist ritual music and local folk music is only to serve the study of Taoist drumming as a performing art form.

‘Apart from some relatively open sites where people are allowed to enter at will, most researchers tend to encounter problems such as ‘no one is



allowed in', refusal to co-operate, perfunctory work, false information, 'on-site fakery' and other artificial restrictions on access to key people and the darker side of the event, etc., even before they enter the site. ' and other artificial constraints, not being able to contact key people and the dark side of the event, etc.' (Zheng Xin, 2003) Fieldwork is a work in which people deal with people. Since there is a human being involved, it does not come with no feelings attached to it like machinery, and it will have an impact, big or small, in the field process and the collection of materials. This is a test of the researcher's ability and academic attitude.

## Result

### 1. Analysis of the central role of fieldwork

#### 1.1 Promote a deeper understanding of Taoist drumming performance practices.

The fieldwork enabled the researcher to enter the site of the Taoist rituals in Xishan Guan, the subject of the study, and to directly observe and participate in the practice of Taoist rituals, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the form of existence and the role of Taoist drumming in the local society and culture of Guangfeng. Through long-term fieldwork, the researcher was able to establish deep relationships with Taoist priests at Xishan Guan, other Taoist temples in Guangfeng, Jiangxi Province, as well as related cultural workers, and familiarise himself with their daily work and living environments, so as to gain a truer understanding of the practice of Taoist drumming.

The fieldwork provided rich and authentic first-hand information for the study of Daoist drumming at Xishan Guan in Guangfeng, including music recordings, videos, and interview transcripts, which are indispensable parts of understanding Daoist drumming performance practices. Through these sources, the researcher was able to capture the details of Taoist drumming performances, including the melodies of Taoist drumming, the rhythms of the drums during the performances, the timbres played by different sizes and shapes of drums, as well as the emotions and techniques of the performers.

In the field, the researcher can gain insights into the historical background, performance techniques and cultural significance of Taoist

drumming through observation, interviews and participation, and these understandings can in turn enrich and deepen the theoretical framework.... It helps us to understand the cultural connotation of Taoist rituals, the uniqueness of its performance form for Taoist rituals, and the soothing effect of the religious significance of Taoist drumming on the human soul. The practical role of Taoist drumming in social ceremonies and religious activities is observed, and its social function in communicating with gods and humans, praying for blessings and eliminating disasters is understood. This understanding helps to reveal the influence of Taoist drumming in the spiritual world of the Chinese people and its vitality.

### **1.2 Help reveal the socio-cultural context of Taoist drumming.**

‘The most important feature of modern anthropological fieldwork is participant observation, which is the essential hallmark of scientific fieldwork and the most basic method of collecting first-hand information. Although different data can be used to collect information, the most important thing is that the researcher is fully involved in the natural, daily research process in some form of participatory role.’ (Le Yueying, 2007).

The fieldwork not only provides in-depth empirical information, but also helps us to understand the position and function of Taoist drumming in society and culture through multi-dimensional analyses. This in-depth field approach has led to the author's personal involvement in a number of Taoist rituals at Xishan Guan, where he performs one of the instruments in the Taoist drumming performance. By directly experiencing the practice of Taoist drumming in society and culture, the social and cultural significance behind it can be more realistically understood.

The fieldwork involves quite a wide range of categories and fields, and through interdisciplinary and comprehensive research, combining historical texts, folklore, archaeological data, etc., anthropological survey information is used to revive the historical development of Taoist drumming in Xishan Guan. This combination of history and reality helps to reveal the role and significance of Taoist drumming in cultural transmission. Oral history and textual analyses in the fieldwork provide rich historical information and the subjective understanding of the locals about the socio-cultural background of Taoist



drumming. Through these materials, we can construct the historical lineage and socio-cultural network of Taoist drumming.

### **1.3 The role of fieldwork in the transmission and development of Taoist drumming.**

Through our fieldwork, we can capture that Taoist drumming is a form of Taoist music that is unique to Xishan Guan in Guangfeng. This conveys to us the specific manifestations of Taoist music in different regions and rituals, leading to a fuller understanding of the diversity of its transmission and development. After conducting in-depth fieldwork, researchers can observe how Taoist music interacts with local beliefs, social rituals, and cultural activities in order to understand its position and influence in society and further promote the in-depth development of Taoist music research.

Fieldwork not only helps to document and preserve the endangered Taoist music traditions, but also provides scientific advice and recommendations to the government and related organisations to promote the protection and transmission of Taoist music. Through interviews, it was learnt that the Xishan Guan Taoist Drum Music is facing inheritance problems. Most of the young practitioners are moving to big cities outside the country, and there is a large shortage of local inherited talents, while some of the performers who can interpret the original Taoist drum music are too old to perform for long periods of time. And most of what is left behind in Xishan Guan are ancient written scores, but the difference between written scores and pentatonic scores is that written scores can only record the pitch in detail, but not the complete record of the musical melody. In response to these problems, researchers can combine the results of the study with field research to discover the new functions and forms of Taoist music in modern society, and promote the innovation and development of Taoist music. It also proposes protection measures and inheritance strategies to support the protection of intangible cultural heritage.



**Photo 3:** Photos of some of Guangfeng Xishan Guan's social activities

Source: Photo by Yu Meihan 2024.11.3

## Discussion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the historical origins, contemporary value, and promotion paths of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance. The findings suggest that with the continuous improvement of living standards, people have developed a renewed appreciation and pursuit of these traditional dance forms. This shift in perception facilitates a deeper understanding and mastery of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance, enhancing their relevance in contemporary society (Yan, 2021).

Moreover, the inheritance and development of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. By studying their evolution and contextualizing them within modern frameworks, these dances can be adapted and sustained for future generations (Wang, 2021). The research highlights the necessity of considering not only the historical and present aspects of these dances but also their future trajectory. Emphasizing the cultural and spiritual essence embedded within these dance forms allows for a more comprehensive appreciation and long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, the stylistic characteristics, contemporary relevance, and strategic promotion of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance (Liu and

Potiwetchakul, 2023) contribute significantly to their cultural depth and artistic value. These traditional dances are not merely artistic expressions of the past but living embodiments of cultural continuity and innovation. By integrating historical authenticity with modern adaptations, Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance can achieve greater recognition and appreciation on both national and international platforms (Yu, 2021).

Through our fieldwork, we found that the inheritance and development of Taoist drum music have been influenced by various factors, including social change, technological advancement, and cultural policies. These factors work together to preserve and innovate Taoist drum music and influence its future development direction (Li, 2022). In the course of the survey, we encountered several methodology-related issues, such as protecting the privacy of research subjects and ensuring the authenticity and reliability of the data. The resolution of these issues is crucial to the quality of the fieldwork and the accuracy of the study of Taoist drumming (Zhang, 2022).

Modern technologies used in fieldwork, such as digital audio and video recording, have provided new tools for research. The intervention of these tools not only improved the efficiency of data collection but also made the study of Taoist drumming in Xishan Guan more intuitive and vivid (Chen, 2023). Although fieldwork provides us with valuable first-hand information, it also has limitations, such as time constraints, resource limitations, and subjectivity issues. These limitations, in turn, require us to adopt various methods in our research to overcome difficulties and obtain truthful findings (Wang & Liu, 2023). To ensure the comprehensiveness and objectivity of the research findings, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods should be applied.

The study underscores the importance of a holistic approach to the promotion and development of Dunhuang dance, Dai Peacock dance, and Taoist drum music. Their historical significance, contemporary value, and future potential must be equally prioritized to ensure their continued relevance. Recognizing the deeper cultural and spiritual narratives within these art forms will enhance their impact, allowing them to thrive in an evolving cultural landscape.

## Conclusion

Through an in-depth exploration of the central role of fieldwork in the study of Taoist drumming in Xishanguan, this paper reveals the significance of fieldwork in understanding and passing on Taoist drumming in Xishanguan. As a direct and vivid research method, field survey provides us with a valuable opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of Taoist drumming performance practices, socio-cultural contexts, as well as inheritance and development.

Firstly, the fieldwork enabled the researcher to directly participate in and observe the live performances of Taoist rituals at Xishan Guan, a living heritage that is essential for capturing the actual performance techniques, styles and spiritual connotations of Taoist drumming. Through the fieldwork, we were able to collect a wealth of first-hand information, including audio recordings of Taoist rituals at Xishan Guan, videos of Taoist rituals used by Taoist drumming, and interviews with Taoist priests who have been practicing at Xishan Guan for many years, which provide an empirical basis for understanding the socio-cultural functions and regional characteristics of Taoist drumming.

Secondly, the fieldwork reveals the functions and roles of Taoist drumming in society and culture, showing how it interacts with local beliefs, social rituals and cultural activities in order to understand its position and influence in society.

It also promotes interdisciplinary research on Taoist drumming, in which we need to combine the theories and methods of musicology, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines to explore in depth the historical origins of Taoist drumming in relation to Taoist culture and in Taoist music. Through the investigation, we are able to propose targeted conservation measures and transmission strategies to support the preservation of Taoist drum music. Meanwhile, from the relationship between the Taoist drum music of Xishan Guan and local folk music, we also reveal the regional characteristics of Taoist music and the trans-regional transmission paths, providing a record for the historical study of Taoist music.

Finally, the fieldwork contributes to the modern dissemination and popularisation of Taoist music, discovers new functions and forms of Taoist music in modern society, explores its value and significance in cultural diversity



and modern life, and promotes the innovation and development of Taoist music. Therefore, we should continue to pay attention to and strengthen the application of field surveys in the study of Taoist music in order to ensure that Taoist drumming, a valuable cultural heritage, can be effectively protected and passed on.

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