

The inheritance and digital preservation of Tujia oral tradition

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Abstract. This paper examines the living inheritance of Tujia oral tradition, drawing on fieldwork conducted from March 2024 to February 2025 in the Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture. It integrates the folkloric theory of "intensive fieldwork" with practices of digital cultural heritage preservation. By constructing a three-dimensional analytical framework of "oral historical materials – inheriting subjects – cultural space," the study identifies practical challenges faced by this tradition amid urbanization, including the shrinking of original contexts, intergenerational discontinuity, and inadequate adaptation of digital technologies. A corresponding preservation model is proposed, emphasizing the coordinated advancement of "digital archiving of historical materials, stratified cultivation of inheritors, and reconstruction of spatial ecology." The research finds that digital technologies must be deeply embedded within the cultural ecosystem of "people – context – content" to effectively facilitate the creative transformation of Tujia oral tradition. This study aims to provide operable theoretical support and practical solutions for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of non-written ethnic groups in the Wuling Mountain area.

Keywords: oral tradition, cultural ecology, digital ethnography, Tujia minority

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

As a non-written ethnic group, the Tujia people's oral tradition serves as the core carrier of their cultural DNA. Forms such as ballads (e.g., Hand-Waving Songs, Crying Marriage Songs), narrative poems (e.g., the Legend of Linjun), and ritual chants (e.g., Tima Songs) not only record ancestral memories and ethical codes but also embody the life wisdom of an agrarian society, constituting a veritable "sonic ethnic archive."

However, with the accelerated pace of urbanization in the Wuling Mountain area, the foundational context for transmitting Tujia oral tradition is continuously weakening. Firstly, original transmission settings like "hearthside storytelling" and "field-ridge song duels" are rapidly disappearing; currently, only 32% of remote villages in Enshi retain such scenes (Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Bureau of Culture and Tourism, 2024). The 23 inheritors surveyed had an average age of 68, with those over 70 accounting for 43% (Fu, 2025). In stark contrast, inheritors under 30 years old constituted a mere 12.3%, highlighting a pronounced intergenerational gap. Thirdly, although digital technology has been applied to heritage preservation, a tendency towards "prioritizing recording over transmission" exists in Enshi. For instance, recording equipment purchased by some transmission centers lies idle because inheritors lack the skills to operate it, and recorded audio is not integrated with teaching or dissemination needs, revealing a disconnect between technology and the cultural ecosystem.

Based on this context, this paper uses the Enshi region as an empirical case study. Through fieldwork, it systematically documents the current state of oral tradition inheritance and explores potential pathways for integrating living transmission with digital preservation.

1.2. Research significance

On a theoretical level, this research seeks to move beyond traditional "text-centric" limitations by incorporating physical carriers of orality, such as stone carvings and woven brocades, into its analysis. This refines the three-dimensional framework of "historical materials–subjects–space," responds to folkloristics' call for "intensive fieldwork," and contributes methodologically to the study of oral traditions among non-written ethnic groups.

On a practical level, addressing the shortcomings of "fragmented historical material compilation, superficial digital technology application, and weak cultivation of young inheritors" in Enshi, the study proposes stratified and categorized

preservation strategies. These include providing portable recording devices for elderly inheritors and establishing digital dissemination platforms for younger inheritors, aiming to directly serve the practical needs of intangible cultural heritage preservation in the border regions of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, and Guizhou.

2. Literature review

Research on Tujia oral tradition began during the ethnic identification period of the 1950s, initially focusing on "text collection," such as the compilation of Selected Tujia Ballads. Following the Reform and Opening-Up policy, research entered a revival phase. The establishment of the Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in 1987 fostered a multidisciplinary landscape involving folklore, ethnomusicology, and anthropology.

According to statistics from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 4,526 academic papers with themes like "Tujia oral tradition," "Tujia ballads," and "Tujia narratives" were published between 1958 and 2018. Core research institutions include Hubei Minzu University and Jishou University, with research focuses primarily in three areas: analysis of musical and dance forms, application in tourism development, and interpretation of cultural connotations from an ethnological perspective.

Recent years have witnessed three major shifts in research focus. First, the scope of historical materials has expanded from purely oral texts to "broadly defined oral historical materials." For example, Li Gang (2025) incorporated narrative symbols in Xilankapu woven patterns and stone carvings listed in the General Bibliography of Chinese Minority Ancient Books: Tujia Volume into his research (Zhang, 2009). Second, research on inheriting subjects has become more refined, shifting focus from "representative inheritors" like Tian Maozhong to broader "communities of inheritors." Gao Zhongyan (2024), for instance, analyzed the role of ordinary villagers in maintaining collective memory. Third, research methods have been upgraded, moving from large-scale surveys to "thick-description fieldwork." Zhang Wanrong (2024), through six months of resident observation, documented the specific settings and interactive rules of hearthside storytelling.

Regarding the protection of inheriting subjects, Lin Jifu's (2007) "tripartite structure of inheriting subjects" (core inheritors – ordinary inheritors – audience) remains a foundational framework, but recent studies emphasize intergenerational continuity. A typical case is Wang Bo, an inheritor of Tujia mountain songs in Yanhe, Guizhou. Through daily school visits teaching 12 weekly class hours, he cultivated over 120 student inheritors within three years (Yanhe Tujia Autonomous County Education Bureau, 2023), forming an echelon structure of "seniors guiding the middle-aged, the middle-aged teaching the youth." His "school + social media" model has proven effective in addressing low youth participation. Simultaneously, scholars like Gao Zhongyan (2024) caution that overemphasizing "representative inheritors" can undermine the folk nature of oral tradition, advocating for balanced attention to ordinary inheriting communities, such as village "story baskets (Gao & Zhang, 2024)."

Concerning the reconstruction of preservation contexts, academic consensus has shifted from "restoring original contexts" to "creating adaptive contexts." Examples include Xiangxi's "Digital Live Broadcast of the Hand-Waving Festival" and performance stages in Enshi's ethnic halls, constructing a dual-track context of "traditional festivals + modern stages." However, controversies arise. For instance, Crying Marriage Songs performed in tourist settings are often shortened to 15 minutes, with a simplification rate of up to 72% of the lyrics, including the removal of complex narrative passages, sparking debates between "cultural authenticity" and "adaptation for dissemination".

Regarding digital preservation pathways, Longshan County's "trinity archival model" is considered an industry benchmark. By 2025, it had established a 60,000-word text archive of Hand-Waving Songs and a 1,440-minute video library of rituals, covering 87% of core items (Rednet, 2025). The Xiangxi Online Exhibition Hall used 3D modeling to recreate the Hand-Waving Hall scene, attracting over 500,000 visits, demonstrating the potential of immersive dissemination. However, recent studies point out that existing digital archives often lack "interactivity." For example, the Longshan archive only supports "browsing and downloading," without developed teaching modules or user interaction functions, making it difficult to serve living transmission effectively.

Existing research has sufficiently revealed the historical value and transmission challenges of Tujia oral tradition. Digital preservation has also accumulated practical experience in places like Longshan and Xiangxi. Nevertheless, three main shortcomings persist. First, research on the "laws of digital translation" for oral historical materials of non-literate groups is insufficient, lacking standards for semantic annotation of local dialects and the conversion of cultural connotations in vocables. Second, there is an absence of an evaluative framework for the adaptability between "technology and the cultural ecosystem," failing to fully consider elderly inheritors' acceptance of digital devices. Third, theoretical summarization of new practices like school inheritance and social media dissemination lags. For instance, while young inheritors like Tian Shiyu achieved millions of views by blending traditional singing with popular music arrangements, related research remains largely descriptive, failing to distill replicable dissemination models. This paper will address these gaps using fieldwork data from Enshi.

3. Methodology

This study employs intensive fieldwork, comparative research, and digital ethnography to systematically investigate the current state and preservation practices of Tujia oral tradition in Enshi.

Intensive Fieldwork: following the "thick-description fieldwork" standards proposed by Gao Zhongyan et al. (2024), was conducted from March 2024 to February 2025 in five counties/cities of Enshi Prefecture: Lichuan, Xianfeng, Laifeng, Hefeng, and Badong. Specific operations included:

In-depth Interviews: 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Tujia community members, performers, tour guides, and others, focusing on their inheritance experiences, content memory, and use of digital technology.

Participant Observation: Researchers immersed themselves in six types of folk activities, including the Hand-Waving Dance, crying marriage ceremonies, and transmission center classes, meticulously documenting contextual details like seating arrangements during hearthside storytelling and lyrical interactions during rituals.

Document Collection: Various documents were compiled, including transmission center archives, local cultural records, and materials on stone carvings.

Comparative Research involved both horizontal and vertical analysis.

Horizontal Comparison: Contrasted inheritance practices and policy support between Enshi, Yanhe (Guizhou), and Xiangxi.

Vertical Analysis: Traced the evolution of inheritance policies in Enshi since the 1980s, analyzing the suitability and shortcomings of policies across different stages.

Digital Ethnography was applied to the digital dissemination contexts of Tujia oral tradition in Enshi. It combined online participatory observation with in-depth content analysis, tracking relevant digital accounts, recording their operators, content types, publication frequency, and user interaction data.

4. Discussions

4.1. Dominance of aging and intergenerational gaps

The age structure of oral tradition inheritors surveyed in Enshi shows significant aging. The average age was 68, with those over 70 comprising 43.5%, those aged 50-69 accounting for 39.1%, those aged 30-49 merely 13.0%, and inheritors under 30 a scant 4.3%, indicating a severe lack of youth participation.

Regarding educational attainment, only 21.7% had a junior high school education or above, 52.2% had primary school education, and 26.1% were illiterate. Most inheritors belong to the type "proficient in tradition but barely literate," making it difficult for them to independently document their knowledge. In terms of willingness to transmit, over 91% explicitly expressed a desire to systematically record their skills, but nearly 78% admitted to not knowing how to use computers or record with mobile phones, indicating a reliance on external technical support.

A typical case further highlights the crisis of intergenerational discontinuity. A 72-year-old inheritor surnamed Tian in Lichuan could completely sing 27 ancient *Hand-Waving Songs* but could only write down 32 core lines. His two children work in Zhejiang province and explicitly stated they "do not want to return home to learn the songs." In contrast, Wang Bo (45 years old) in Yanhe, Guizhou, collaborated with the local education bureau to integrate Tujia mountain songs into the primary and secondary school curriculum as a "local course." Teaching 12 weekly class hours, he cultivated over 120 student inheritors within three years, 20 of whom can now independently participate in folk performances, forming a coherent inheritance echelon. This comparison suggests that Enshi lacks a systematic plan for cultivating inheriting subjects, and its youth discontinuity problem is far more acute than in Guizhou. Transition from

4.2. "Life world" to "performance arena"

The transmission contexts for Tujia oral tradition in Enshi are undergoing dual changes: "erosion of the original" and "emergence of the new."

4.2.1. Continued disappearance of original life contexts

Original contexts, the "source carriers" of oral tradition, including hearthside storytelling, field-ridge song duels, and collective chanting during marriage rituals, are persistently fading. The survey indicates that only 32% of villages, primarily in remote mountainous areas of Hefeng and Laifeng, still maintain such contexts, and their frequency has significantly decreased. Hearthside storytelling has dropped from 2-3 times per week to 1-2 times per month, and field-ridge song duels only occur occasionally during busy farming seasons.

A more prominent issue is the "functional shift" of ritual contexts. The Crying Marriage Songs, originally an "emotional expression medium" within the wedding ceremony requiring the singing of family history and sorrow of departure, now predominantly occur in tourist performance settings in Enshi. To accommodate tourist schedules, the songs are compressed to 15 minutes, with a lyric simplification rate of 72%, omitting complex narratives like "family migration history" and retaining only simpler sections.

4.2.2. Preliminary rise of emerging dissemination contexts

Three types of emerging contexts are gradually supplementing traditional ones, but exhibit clear shortcomings:

Stage Performance Contexts: Venues like the Enshi Prefecture Ethnic Hall and county cultural centers host 40-50 oral tradition performances annually, attracting over 500 attendees per event. However, content adaptation is an issue – 60% of Hand-Waving Song performances are "abridged versions," where archaic vocables and ritual movements are simplified for easier viewing.

School Education Contexts: Only 11 schools in the entire prefecture offer courses related to Tujia oral tradition, mostly as weekly "elective classes" without systematic textbooks (Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Bureau of Culture and Tourism, 2024). Teaching content primarily focuses on "learning simple songs," lacking depth in narrative meaning and ritual function.

Digital Dissemination Contexts: Only a small percentage of inheritors use platforms like Douyin or WeChat Video Channels, typically posting short, casually filmed clips with low interaction. In contrast, young inheritor Tian Shiyu achieved up to 1.2 million views for a single video by blending traditional singing with popular music arrangements, with comments frequently expressing a desire to learn, highlighting a "mismatch between supply and demand" in Enshi's digital dissemination landscape.

4.3. Dual lags in historical material compilation and digitization

4.3.1. Fragmented compilation of historical materials

The compilation of Tujia oral historical materials in Enshi remains at a preliminary stage. Recording forms are singular; only 38% of core oral items have audiovisual records, with the rest relying on written transcripts that often omit crucial information like intonation and ritual movements. Physical historical materials are disconnected from oral tradition; among the numerous stone carvings documented in Enshi, only a small fraction are explicitly linked to oral narratives, and no correlational database exists for cross-referencing studies. Archive management is loose; few transmission centers maintain detailed inheritor files, lacking dynamic records such as inheritance genealogy or changes in content memory.

4.3.2. Low level of digital construction

Digital preservation in Enshi faces three main problems: insufficient equipment, superficial technical application, and a significant scale gap compared to other regions. Equipment is scarce; few transmission centers possess even basic recording devices, let alone cameras or 3D modeling equipment, forcing some inheritors to rely on personal mobile phones with compromised audio quality. Technical application is shallow; existing digital outcomes are mostly simple combinations of audio and text, lacking standardized processing like semantic annotation or contextual restoration, thus failing to meet teaching or research needs. The scale gap is notable; the volume of digital archives at the prefectural level in Enshi covers less than 25% of core items, piling in comparison to the extensive archives of neighboring Longshan County.

5. Dissemination models and pathways of Tujia oral tradition

5.1. Dissemination model: a three-dimensional interactive framework of "Subjects – Contexts – Media"

Based on the Enshi fieldwork and existing practices, the dissemination pathways of Tujia oral tradition can be conceptualized through a three-dimensional interactive model of "Subjects – Contexts – Media."

- **Inheriting Subjects:** This dimension encompasses elderly inheritors (tradition holders), middle-aged inheritors (tradition translators), and young inheritors (tradition innovators), who act as the "producers and transmitters" of content.
- **Dissemination Contexts:** This includes original life contexts, adapted performance contexts, and digital virtual contexts, serving as the "spatial carriers" of dissemination activities.
- **Dissemination Media:** This covers traditional media and digital media, functioning as the "tools and carriers" for content transmission.

Three-Dimensional Interactive Relationships:

- Subjects Determine Media Choice: Elderly inheritors rely on oral media, middle-aged inheritors combine oral and simple digital media, and young inheritors excel with digital media.
- Contexts Influence Subject Behavior: Original contexts demand content integrity, performance contexts encourage simplification, and digital contexts incentivize formal innovation.
- Media Support Context Expansion: Traditional media support original contexts, while digital media enable virtual contexts, achieving a two-way integration of "digitizing offline contexts and materializing online contexts."

These elements form a closed-loop interaction, collectively constituting the dynamic dissemination system of Tujia oral tradition.

5.2. Summary of core dissemination pathways

- Traditional Pathway: Closed-loop dissemination within "Family – Village": This pathway relies on original contexts and oral media, flowing from elderly inheritors to family/village members and then to the next generation. It features high content integrity but strong geographical limitations, dependent on kinship/community ties, and is now preserved in only 32% of remote villages.
- Expanded Pathway: Meso-level dissemination through "Transmission Centers – Schools – Stages": This pathway utilizes transmission center classes, school courses, and cultural hall performances. The flow involves middle-aged inheritors teaching students/trainees, who may perform for audiences. It offers wider coverage but requires content adaptation and depends on policy support like curriculum integration and funding.
- Breakthrough Pathway: Cross-regional dissemination via "Digital Platforms – National Audience": This pathway leverages platforms like Douyin, WeChat Video Channels, and 3D cloud platforms. Young inheritors create digital content that reaches a national audience, some of whom may become learners. It features minimal geographical limits and strong potential for formal innovation, representing a key future growth point, though it relies on technical support and platform promotion.

6. Conclusion

The inheritance of Tujia oral tradition in Enshi faces a "triple challenge": fragmented historical material compilation, a discontinuity in the inheriting subjects, and degradation of the contextual ecology. This situation essentially reflects a mismatch in the carriers of cultural DNA transmission during the transition from traditional agrarian civilization to modern society.

Digital preservation is not merely about "technology stacking." It needs to be embedded within a complete ecological chain involving "historical material archiving-subject cultivation - spatial reconstruction." Only by safeguarding cultural roots through multimodal archives, activating transmission vitality through stratified cultivation, and expanding dissemination boundaries through contextual integration can a synergy between "living inheritance" and "technical preservation" be achieved.

The "Subjects-Contexts-Media" three-dimensional dissemination model reveals the dynamic transmission patterns of Tujia oral tradition. Inheritors of different ages require adaptation to different contexts and media. The innovative dissemination by young inheritors within digital contexts is key to breaking geographical limitations and attracting younger audiences.

This study covered five counties/cities in Enshi Prefecture; the sample scope could be expanded. Furthermore, it lacks long-term tracking and evaluation of the sustained effectiveness of digital preservation measures, such as the usage frequency of digital archives and the retention rates of young inheritors.

Future research could develop in three directions: First, conducting cross-regional comparative studies to refine more universal preservation models. Second, focusing on the application of AI technologies. Third, investigating the "protection of intellectual property rights for digital archives," balancing resource sharing with inheritors' rights and interests to provide more forward-looking solutions for the cultural inheritance of non-written ethnic groups.

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