

## The Modern Cultural Function of Chinese Traditional Religious Orchestra: The Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Orchestra (DTBO) of China

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### ABSTRACT

The Daxiangguo Temple, located in Kaifeng City, Henan Province, China, is prominent in the ancient capital of the Seven Dynasties. Due to its status as a royal temple, the Buddhist orchestra associated with it has a long history and profound cultural heritage, having been involved in numerous imperial events. Since its reconstruction in July 2002, the Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Orchestra (DTBO) has gained recognition as a second-batch national intangible cultural heritage project in 2007. This study is based on the existing literature, and employs ethnographic narration, and interviews with relevant managers and musician monks to investigate the operational and management modes of the DTBO. By examining the DTBO's activities and performances over the past 20 years, the research explores the adjustments made in cultural inheritance and development to align with modern societal needs following its recognition as a national intangible cultural heritage project. The findings indicate that DBO significantly contributes to the preservation of traditional Chinese religious music, alongside sustaining associated beliefs and ethical frameworks within contemporary society. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in enhancing the local tourism economy while fostering a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging among the people of the Central Plains.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study examines the impact of changes in China's religious environment on the sustainability of traditional religious music and contributes to the resulting shifts in its role and function. It emphasizes the cultural Inner Mechanisms that traditional cultural organizations employ to ensure their preservation and development, providing insights into the resilience and evolution of cultural heritage.

## 1. Introduction

Daxiangguo Temple, originally named Jianguo Temple, is located in Kaifeng City and is one of the ten most prominent Buddhist temples in China. According to legend, it once served as the residence of Duke Wei Wuji (Lord Xinling) during the Warring States period. While historical records of the site's use during the Qin, Han, Wei, and Jin.

Dynasties are sparse and often unverifiable, the earliest documented evidence indicates the establishment of Jianguo Temple in 555 A.D., during the sixth year of the Tianbao era under Emperor Wenxuan of the Northern Qi Dynasty (Xiong, 1985). The temple was subsequently destroyed in warfare. In 712 A.D, during the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Rui Zong renamed it "Daxiangguo Temple" to commemorate his enthronement. The temple continued expansion, peaking during the Song Dynasty when Kaifeng was the capital of China, and became the largest monastery, fulfilling religious, royal, cultural, economic, and recreational roles (Xiong, 1985). During the Northern Song Dynasty, it held considerable esteem among the royal family, functioning as the central hub of Buddhist activities and housing the "Senglu Si," the official department responsible for managing national Buddhist affairs (Yuan, 2013). It attracted numerous eminent monks and scholars. This place provides many eminent monks, both domestically and internationally, to exchange Buddhist teachings and promotes the dissemination and exchange of Buddhist teachings. According to historical records such as *Dongjing Menghua Lu*," as early as the Tang Dali period (766-779), there were professional musician monks in Xiangguo Temple, whose performance format was formed, and they participated in various Buddhist activities (Meng, 1982). Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist music activities in addition to normal Buddhist affairs, royal-related prayers and ceremony, there are many performances for the public, such as those specially set up to play the *Weimo Yuan*. There is also the "Music Pavilion" for the general public, which is dedicated to providing performances for pilgrims and tourists (Yuan, 2013).

After being devastated by war and floods, the temple was reconstructed in 1671 during the Shunzhi period of the Qing Dynasty (Xiong, 1985). Having endured and been rebuilt through numerous conflicts and natural disasters over the centuries, the temple has consistently maintained a close relationship with the royal family and has been actively involved in various Buddhist, social, and cultural activities. Ancient documents suggest that certain musical traditions have been preserved under the auspices of religion and royalty (Yuan, 2013). By the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, the temple's role had evolved from a solely religious and ceremonial space for the royal family to a public entertainment center, hosting events such as blessing prayers, ancestor worship, and ceremonies for royal anniversaries and banquets (Yang, 2020).

During the Nationalist regime in 1927, Feng Yuxiang, the governor of Kaifeng, initiated radical measures that included the expulsion of monks, the destruction of Buddhist statues, and a comprehensive renovation of Daxiangguo Temple, ultimately converting it into Zhongshan Market (Xiong, 1985). These actions led to the disbandment of the monks associated with the Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Orchestra (DTBO). However, in 1938, the Japanese occupation of Kaifeng facilitated the restoration of Buddhist religious practices at the temple, including the reinstatement of performances by the musician monks. At this stage, the monks who had been scattered in the countryside were able to return to the monastery, but only part of them. Therefore, in the Central Plains, some temples and folk ritual music groups can be traced back to some traces of these musical monks (Fang, 2010).

The Buddhist music of Daxiangguo Temple has retained an extensive collection of traditional Buddhist hymns alongside a diverse repertoire of folk and ancient music. Extant documentation, such as the *Daxiangguo Temple Handwritten Secret Score* and *Shi Kuang's Six Laws*, coupled with contemporary performances by local musician monks, indicates the Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist music can be briefly divided into two categories of vocal music and instrumental music. The vocal music, rooted in the teachings of Shakyamuni, is a vital component of the temple's daily rituals. This category includes *Jie* (Discipline) and *Zan* (Praise), which belong to the musical tradition of Tianning Temple in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province. Although Buddhist music at Daxiangguo Temple largely aligns with national practices, the *Quanshi Song* distinctively integrates folk melodies from the Central Plains, alongside elements of opera and other regional musical traditions (Ni, 1986).

The instrumental music at Daxiangguo Temple primarily draws from traditional Buddhist music and incorporates folk elements native to Central China, predominantly employed in ritualistic and chanting contexts. The instrumentation adheres to an ancient system of percussion and wind instruments (Yuan, 2013). As a *Zen* monastery following the *Ten Jungle system* (*shi fang cong lin*), the DTBO's music has absorbed a variety of styles and performance practices from diverse musical traditions within the monastic community.

In July 2002, under the initiation and organization of Master Xin Guang, the DTBO was re-established, primarily focusing on instrumental music. The orchestra comprises 22 full-time Buddhist monks (Wang & Chai, 2008). To cater to the aesthetic preferences of contemporary audiences, traditional wind and percussion instruments were retained, while the erhu, sanxian, guzheng, and even an electronic organ were incorporated for certain sacrificial and ceremonial occasions. Despite these modern additions, the orchestra continues to adhere to the performance configuration of the ancient court ceremonial music, known as *Guchui Yue* (configuration with only wind and percussion instruments), which consists solely of wind and percussion instruments. This adherence is particularly emphasized during performances in professional concert halls or academic conferences, especially in the presence of musicology scholars, highlighting the orchestra's traditional roots and its connection to court and sacrificial music (Yang, 2020).

In contemporary times, the DTBO in temples not only conducts religious activities, rituals, and prayers but also plays a crucial role in the preservation and promotion of local traditional music culture. During major celebrations at the Daxiangguo Temple, renowned musicians are often invited to perform. This multifaceted collaboration garners trust and welcomes from the local devotees. As a form of religious music, Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist music has become a cultural symbol of the Central Plains' traditional culture.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to describe the characteristics of present-day DTBO. In addition, this study also intends to investigate the functions of DTBO as a "local culture holder" that constantly adapts its internal structure to the needs of modern society, and maintains the sustainable and healthy development of traditional religious music groups in modern society.

## 2. Literature review

The Xiangguo Temple, located in the bustling center of Kaifeng City, Henan Province, has long been recognized as a significant cultural hub. Historically referred to as Dong Jing and Bian Liang, Kaifeng served as the capital for seven dynasties, including the Wei Kingdom during the Warring States period, the Liang, Jin, Han, and Zhou of the Five Dynasty period, as well as the Northern Song and Jin dynasties (Duan, 2004). This historical backdrop provided robust political and cultural support, as well as a material foundation, for the music employed within Xiangguo Temple. During the Northern Song dynasty, the temple was designated as an "Imperial Temple" by the emperor. The frequent exchanges between court musicians and temple music were evident, as some court music was inevitably performed to meet the emperor's demands. This interaction significantly influenced the temple's music, as evidenced by the instruments used, the organization of the orchestra, the notation methods, and the modes employed, all of which demonstrate a strong connection between the Buddhist music of Xiangguo Temple and the ancient central music and court music of China (Ni, 1984).

The handwritten secret scores related to the Buddhist music of Daxiangguo Temple document an extensive repertoire, encompassing both vocal and instrumental pieces, as well as some recitative content (Ni, 1983). The vocal music includes chants, praises, poetry, and songs of persuasion (Ni, 1984). The instrumental music draws from traditional Buddhist and Daoist songs, local folk songs, instrumental tunes, opera music, and a small amount of ancient court music (Ni, 1986). Ni was one of the earliest cultural researchers to engage in the collection of Central Plains folk music and the documentation of Buddhist music at Daxiangguo Temple. His works recorded much of the original information, symbols, and use of instruments at Daxiangguo Temple, providing credible firsthand data. However, due to the limitations of the objective environment at that time, Ni's conclusions are primarily descriptive and lack detailed literature support. Therefore, it is essential to discern and selectively adopt his findings with a critical approach.

Wang Zongkui, known by his Dharma name Shi Fochan, was the 29th-generation monk of Daxiangguo Temple (Wang, 2015). Under the tutelage of Shi Anlun and Shi Anxiu, who were the custodians of handwritten secret scores, Wang Zongkui acquired significant knowledge that lends substantial credibility to his oral history. His narratives offer valuable insights into the teacher-apprentice transmission mechanisms among earlier generations of music monks, as well as the living conditions and pedagogical practices of Buddhist music groups in traditional society. According to Wang and Tan (2015), the music contained within the score is predominantly Henan folk music, with genuine Buddhist Sanskrit chants occupying only a minor portion. This finding has significant reference value for further study of the Sinicization feature of Han Chinese Buddhist music and its distinct forms of expression.

Wang (2015) translated several pieces from the handwritten secret scores and compared them with contemporary performances by the musician monks. His analysis revealed that *"the standard performance scores for all instrumental music in the DTBO were recorded using the Gongche notation, akin to the common character notation of the Song dynasty, and represent the original scores without any added variations or fingerings. Each monk improvises based on his mastery of the instrument and playing skills, incorporating improvisational accompaniment techniques."* This insight may clarify the discrepancies between the music performed by the modern DTBO and that documented in ancient records. It absorbs folk music elements, through the individual creation of monks, by the

needs of the live performance environment, forming a melody style that integrates personal temperament. Combined with the existing fieldwork, it is found that there have been many changes in the expression of the music used by the DTBO, but the ancient customs are still followed in the melody and the ritual of using music.

Zhang (2020) analyzes and discusses the relationship between the cadences and the singing methods of the Huayan Oratorio, a representative piece of the Grand Xiangguo Temple Buddhist Orchestra. He compared the vocal (*Shengqiang*, common systematic tunes of many varieties of Chinese operas) and vocal rhythms of chant singing with modern vocal singing techniques and studied the way of singing chants in Buddhist music. Gao (2021), based on interviews with older artists and oral histories of family members and disciples of the deceased national non-geneticist Master Shi Longjiang, discusses the process and significance of the contemporary government's recognition of non-geneticists, arguing that the process of recognizing modern national non-geneticists, the interests involved in the recognition of qualifications, and the complex and changing of the transmission process are all factors that have led to changes in the direction of the Grand Xiangguo Temple Buddhist and its performance. He believes that these factors are important reasons for the change in the development direction of the DTBO and the change in the content of the orchestra's performance.

Previous research has found that the early scholars focused on the shape of Daxiangguo Temple and the source of hand-copied secret music to determine the source of the Buddhist music of Daxiangguo Temple and its historical value. In modern research, some scholars have begun to question the relationship between the Xiangguo Temple Buddhist music group and the authenticity of the performance content. These are all related to the historical background of traditional Buddhist music groups, the implementation of national religious policies, and the chain reaction formed when facing significant social changes. This study aims at the changes in the survival mode and performance content of the DTBO after successfully applying for China's national intangible cultural heritage project, studies the changes of DTBO in nearly 20 years, and explores the cultural functions and roles of traditional religious music groups in modern society.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study mainly employs the research method of the ethnographic grounded theory theory, takes the DTBO as the research object, and carries on the ethnographic writing to the living environment, operation mode and performance behavior of the DTBO in the contemporary. Based on Merriam's (1964) three-dimensional theoretical framework, this article employs a qualitative analysis to examine the conceptualization, behavior, and musical sound of the DTBO. Through field investigation and in-depth interview, relevant data were collected and collated, and the musical behavior, concept and music content of the orchestra members were analyzed in depth. The purpose of the interview was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the performance, identity, and contemporary roles and cultural functions of modern Buddhist orchestras. From the perspective of insiders (emic) and outsiders (etic) (Hood, 1960), the author discusses the cognition and positioning of musicians, monks and orchestra managers on their own cultural identity, and probes into the role and cultural function of the DTBO in the contemporary social context.

According to the records of the artistic activities of the DTBO from 2004 to 2023, the author visited the Daxiangguo Temple in Kaifeng several times in 2018, 2019, and 2023,



conducting long-term field investigations and interviewing the monks and managers of the temple. This study utilises field investigation, direct participant observation, and personal interviews, as well as reviews of relevant data from the past two decades. Focusing on the activities of contemporary Buddhist orchestras over the past decade, this paper aims to elucidate changes in the social roles and cultural functions of contemporary religious music.

In general, this study combines various qualitative research methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, to provide a deep understanding of the musical practices and cultural functions of the traditional Buddhist Orchestra in the Central Plains region of China in contemporary society.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. The Characteristics of Present-Day DTBO

#### 4.1.1. Staffing of DTBO

According to Liu (2011), in 2002, the DTBO trained more than 20 professional musician monks” and the number increased to 26 in 2010. When I visited the DTBO in 2019, there were 23 members. In recent years, due to the impact of the new coronavirus pandemic, the number of the orchestra has decreased, but the number of musical monks in the orchestra has fluctuated around 20. The orchestra is headed by Abbot Shi Xinguang, who is responsible for the daily reception, outreach, publicity, comprehensive quality, ideological education, performance rehearsal supervision, etc. The Stone Temple is responsible for the discipline, organization and management of the monks within the orchestra.

Currently, under normal circumstances, the resident musician monks total 20. The staffing of the orchestra is adjusted according to the needs of specific performances. For larger Buddhist events, monks may be reassigned to ritual duties, and for significant performances, additional cast members may occasionally be borrowed from local performance groups to enhance the sound effects, although this practice has become rare. Now, instead, musician monks often have to learn to play multiple instruments each to meet the actual needs of the orchestra. For instance, *Shi Yuanli* plays percussion, sheng, and chou; *Shi Yuanwu* plays chou, tin pipe, and bamboo flute; *Shi Yuanzhi* plays erhu and zhongruan; *Shi Yuanhong* plays the *Sheng*, *Electronic Organ*, and *Banhu*. According to the author's survey, more than half of the monks in the orchestra can play multiple instruments, ensuring the flexibility of their performance.

Overall, the performance skills of the musician monks have improved compared to previous years, a change attributed to the orchestra's increased participation in social and cultural activities. This heightened visibility has driven the monks to improve their musical abilities, leading to more rigorous performance standards. Unlike traditional pieces that relied on monophonic melodies and improvisation, modern works require an understanding of orchestral symphonic scores. Consequently, the orchestra's leaders have instituted music theory courses to enhance the monks' musical proficiency.

During the investigation, some scholars have suggested in interviews that the younger generation of music monks does not possess the same level of skill, adherence to

traditional rhythms, and melodic charm as the older generation. This assertion pertains to the performance of traditional opera and its inherent charm. By consulting relevant audio data and comparing it with the album *Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Music* released in 2010, it is evident that the performances by the older generation exhibit the traditional folk music charm of central Henan, with distinct linguistic features.

In contrast, modern young monks have grown up in an era dominated by modern multimedia cultural communication. The music they have been exposed to since childhood includes pop music and contemporary music teaching methods. Unlike the older generation, who were immersed in folk culture and relied on oral instruction from their teachers, their performances lacked many personal styles and individualised characteristics.

Additionally, the new generation of music monks has frequently interacted with teachers from professional music colleges over the past decade. Due to a subconscious deference to the authority of professional musicians, their performances have increasingly aligned with the evaluation standards of professional music performance. Both the monks and orchestra managers are aware of this issue, but it has not yet been effectively addressed.

#### *4.1.2. Daily Life and Identity of the Musician Monks*

As a member of the DTBO, the primary identity of the individual is that of a monk, which constitutes the foundational and requisite condition for membership in the Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist music ensemble. In recent years, China's religious policies have become increasingly stringent, necessitating intricate and thorough procedures for the recognition and confirmation of monkhood. According to the *Regulations on the Administration of the Threefold Platform Ordination in Chinese Buddhist Temples Nationwide* revised at the third session of the Ninth Standing Council of the Buddhist Association of China on July 24, 2019, as well as other relevant religious regulations, it is stipulated that: "*Chinese Buddhist temples of the Han tradition must obtain approval and coordination from the Buddhist Association of China before holding ordination ceremonies. No announcement related to ordination ceremonies may be made without the formal authorization of the Buddhist Association of China*" (BAC, 2019). The process of issuing ordination certificates (*Jie Die*) is stringent, with only a select few monks receiving formal ordination, the musical monks remain under the strict supervision of the monastery in their daily lives, disciplinary matters, and administrative responsibilities. Therefore, the musician monks, who must adhere to the basic monastic precepts. These precepts encompass strict adherence to Buddhist doctrine, observance of monastic rules, wearing of monastic attire, adherence to a vegetarian diet, abstention from lying and alcohol, and maintaining independence in their work. The daily routine of these musical monks involves living, working, and practicing alongside resident monks. They are required to attend morning and evening chanting sessions, participate in various ceremonies, and strictly observe the monastic precepts. Additionally, they are responsible for providing musical accompaniment and performances for various sacrificial rites and religious ceremonies within the temple.

Liu (2011) and Wang (2015) conducted research on the identity of musical monks, revealing that most members of the DTBO possessed some musical performance abilities upon joining. These skills are typically developed through oral transmission and mentorship between older monks and their apprentices within the orchestra. Through participatory observation, it has been observed that over the past five years, differences

in religious beliefs and the age at which individuals joined the Buddhist music group significantly influence their motivation for joining. Consequently, there are substantial variations in their attitudes and practices within the orchestra. Older members of DTBO, who tend to be more devout, invest more time and energy into their musical instruments practice. In recent years, the number of young people joining the orchestra has been low, and the number of musicians in the orchestra has been decreasing as older monks have fallen ill or died. According to an interview with the orchestra's leader, he believes that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the temple's dependence on tourism, causing some monks to leave the orchestra due to financial pressures and seek other livelihoods. The author believes that this is related to the rapid development of modern urbanization in China in the past ten years, which has led to a large number of rural people migrating to cities, changing their lifestyle, and greatly reducing the living space for religious activities. On the other hand, the Chinese government is more strictly in the management of religious activities, and the management of religious activities and the certification process of monk status will inevitably affect the process of young people entering the community.

The daily routines of the orchestra members at Daxiangguo Temple closely mirror those of the resident monks, with variations depending on scheduled performances. For example, during the author's fieldwork in August 2019, the orchestra engaged in morning, afternoon, and evening rehearsals to prepare for the 'China-US-Canada Buddhist Forum' at Lincoln Center in the United States, as well as the 'Fifth Chinese Kindness Filial Concert'. Attendance was meticulously tracked using fingerprint punches to ensure precise monitoring of practice times among the musicians. The orchestra's manager plays a crucial role in overseeing all aspects of the musicians' practice schedules to enhance the overall performance of the ensemble. Beyond daily rehearsals and formal performances, each monk is assigned various temple duties, including cleaning, maintaining different temple halls, and conducting necessary maintenance work. This regimen underscores the doctrinal principles of Zen Buddhism, which emphasize the importance of self-sufficiency and the practice of meditation through labor.

However, this situation was markedly different in China before 1949. According to [Xiang \(2006\)](#), he notes that "the music of a temple is performed by the sound people who belong to the temple (*Yin sheng ji yue ren*), and monks and nuns forbid the music." This traditional Buddhist concept of music offering, which dictates that there should be a clear distinction between the Buddhist music offering and the initial Buddhist music offering in terms of both the musicians and the music used, objectively exists. This concept inevitably affects the identity differentiation between orchestra monks and resident monks, as well as the distinct management methods for these two groups. In the modern DTBO, although there are no obvious differences between these monks and those of Daxiangguo Temple in terms of clothing, food, housing, transportation, and daily activities, there are still distinctions in their identities and national certification as monks.

From the definition of Chinese Buddhist music, Buddhism has many ritual behaviors, sounds and rituals need to be used to form a common atmosphere, but Buddhism does not identify all sounds that appear in the process of rituals as music. Many Musical Instruments are recognized as Dharma instruments in Buddhism ([Xiang, 2007](#)). Since ancient times, Chinese Buddhism has not refused the public to use secular music to support Buddhas and stupa (*futu*), to keep lay people in captivity, and to employ "white clothes" and "white disciples". It was also recognized within Buddhism, but in some periods in history, conflicts between religious groups and the authorities and rulers led



to several "Buddha destruction" movements, resulting in the dissolution of the economic integration of Buddhist monasteries in the Central Plains at that period, and the monasteries were difficult to provide for these secular groups, so that the maintenance of the sound and the sound of the Dharma were borne by monks and nuns (Sun, 2019).

#### 4.1.3. Sources of Funds

In 2007, the DTBO was designated as a national intangible cultural heritage, resulting in the allocation of national conservation funds. These funds are primarily utilized for academic seminars and the daily maintenance of the orchestra. However, the economic investment required for the preservation of Buddhist temples largely depends on the temple's tourism-generated revenue and expenditures. The daily operations of the Buddhist orchestra, including the maintenance of musical instruments and the logistics of out-of-town performances, constitute a significant portion of Daxiangguo Temple's income. Given the high transportation costs associated with the orchestra's external performances, including stage setup and the large number of performers, the funds available for regular training and rehearsals are notably limited. Consequently, the orchestra's operational budget relies heavily on the revenue generated from Daxiangguo Temple's tourism activities. Additionally, the orchestra allocates funds for recording and publishing related audio and video products to preserve and archive materials. During the investigation, it was observed that the rehearsal room facilities of the Buddhist orchestra were outdated (Figure 1). The walls were significantly chipped due to moisture, and aside from essential instruments, music stands, chairs, and air conditioning, no substantial improvements were noted. The monks often wear traditional robes and lead a simple life; according to the monks themselves, many of their daily necessities are donations from pilgrims, resulting in minimal personal expenditure. This observation was documented during the author's second field trip in 2018, during which the scene of some monks rehearsing in the rehearsal room for a formal performance.

Figure 1: DTBO rehearsal room



When asked about potential donations from the Daxiangguo Temple Charity Foundation, *Shi Hongguan* explained that this foundation is the first Buddhist charity in Henan Province to be approved by the civil affairs department. It strictly adheres to the principle of "compassion for all and benefiting the people." The foundation primarily funds elderly care, poverty alleviation, assistance for people with disabilities, and environmental protection. It is strictly prohibited from using these funds for the Buddhist orchestra or

temple expenses. Furthermore, each donation is subject to supervision and management by the government's foundation registration authorities, and we are not authorized to utilize this fund for the orchestra. Therefore, the funding for the operation of the DTBO primarily comes from the temple's own tourism revenue, government support from the Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, and a smaller portion from donations by devotees and volunteers. However, due to the modest lifestyle of the monk musicians, the temple is currently able to sustain the ensemble's operations.

In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly emphasized the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the promotion of traditional culture. Consequently, various levels of government have consistently provided resources to the DTBO. The financial support received by the orchestra mainly comes from fiscal subsidies from the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center and the internal revenue of the temple. This support has significantly encouraged and promoted the development of the Buddhist music ensemble. However, such support is subject to external influences. For instance, during the pandemic, the tourism industry was severely impacted, which greatly affected the stability and survival of the orchestra.

During the interviews, it was found that the musical instruments used by the monks of the orchestra were of high quality, and temple leaders showed significant support for the procurement and maintenance of these instruments. Additionally, some pilgrims also make donations with some instruments. To enhance the performance quality of the Buddhist orchestra, temple leaders have made considerable efforts in acquiring and configuring musical instruments. This includes increased investments in purchasing instruments and consulting with experts to create replicas of instruments depicted in Song Dynasty documents and sculptures. For example, the *Kong Hou* and Drums used in the Buddhist orchestra were made based on the performing sculptures of the "Twenty Musicians" carved in stone on the inner wall of the second floor of the Kaifeng Pota Pagoda (Ni & Yu, 1986). Efforts to replicate the musical arrangements of the Song Dynasty's royal court aim to showcase the unique traditions and cultural symbols of royal monastic music. Although much of the music they perform is rooted in folk traditions, the ensemble strives to forge its own identity as both traditional royal and Buddhist music.

#### *4.1.4. The Fundamental Distinction between the DTBO and Typical National Ensembles*

During fieldwork, through interviews with the musician monks and prolonged participant observation, it was discovered that there are significant differences in how the musician monks of the Buddhist orchestra, the orchestra's management, and the relevant government authorities perceive their identity, cultural symbols, and the cultural functions they embody. From the perspective of government officials, the DTBO represents a local cultural symbol, with the musician monks being disseminators of intangible cultural heritage, viewing their role as a job. In contrast, the orchestra's management defines their identity through the social function of religious belief. They believe that the primary attribute of the orchestra members is their religious faith, and all their activities are aimed at promoting Buddhism. They see performances as a form of venerating the Buddha, spreading Buddhist teachings, encouraging people to do good, and guiding individuals towards Buddhist beliefs. Their daily activities are centered around "accumulating merit" and "practicing virtue." Additionally, there is a strong value identification with their cultural identity. During the interviews, many musician monks mentioned that "if they left the DTBO, they would be nothing." Although the income of the music monks is not high, they describe it as "enough to maintain a basic living." Their

commitment to this role year-round reflects their identification as non-genetic successors, valuing their identity as music monks, and their dedication to the mission and responsibility of cultural inheritance.

The DTBO does not strictly conform to the structure of a national orchestra, nor is “*it entirely based on the musical systems of the Tang and Song dynasties*” (Ni, 1986). Instead, the orchestra has cultivated a distinctive style that embodies the spiritual values and beliefs of the monks. The conductor collaborates with professional academic experts to refine the orchestral arrangement, striving to align it with historical records. For instance, the use of instruments such as the Erhu and Guzheng, which were prominent in earlier performances, has been reduced. Experts from the Central Conservatory of Music have noted that ancient Buddhist music from the Tang and Song dynasties predominantly featured wind and percussion instruments, leading to adjustments in the orchestra’s configuration to better reflect this historical emphasis.

Over the past five years of research, I have observed that during academic conferences and Buddhist music cultural exchanges, the DTBO adheres to Song Dynasty court music configurations as documented in ancient texts, using only wind and percussion instruments, with some plucked instruments (Zhao, 1993). However, for performances related to social and cultural promotion and tourism, they incorporate additional traditional Chinese instruments, such as the erhu and pipa, to enhance the musical expressiveness and richness of timbre of traditional ethnic music.

In daily temple rituals and some opening performances of Buddhist ceremonies, a substantial amount of electronic equipment is used, including amplifiers, synthesizers, and electronic keyboards. When the author questioned the appropriateness of these instruments, the musician monks explained that their primary purpose in these contexts is to create a solemn and grand atmosphere that quickly captures the attention of worshippers. Many of these instruments are also used at the request of the patrons. In modern Buddhist ceremonies, some officiating monks are equipped with microphones and loudspeakers. The inclusion of these electronic instruments helps achieve a richer and more dignified musical ambiance. The main goal is to foster a solemn and majestic religious environment, allowing worshippers and ceremony participants to quickly develop a sense of reverence and religious sentiment.

## **4.2. The Functions of DTBO**

### *4.2.1. DTBO as the Protector of Intangible Heritage*

Based on an interview with the leader of the DTBO, it was revealed that since the successful inclusion of Daxiangguo Temple's Buddhist music in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, the ensemble's repertoire has undergone significant changes. Although traditional content is still heavily relied upon in some academic conferences and professional performances, the daily performances are often adapted to meet the requirements of the organizers. To accommodate the sporadic invitations for performances, the orchestra rehearses 6-10 new pieces each year to suit various performance activities, recordings, and publications. As an important historical and cultural landmark in Kaifeng, the DTBO has participated in numerous traditional cultural festivals and promotional events organized by the municipal government, including non-religious traditional festival parades and intangible cultural heritage promotion activities.

Consequently, their rehearsal and performance content is customized according to the event organizers' demands and is not entirely under their autonomous control.

Based on document analysis, the DTBO participated in approximately nine major public performances in 2017. Of these performances, more than half were associated with government-sponsored tourism, cultural initiatives, and academic research. This indicates that although the DTBO is a religious music ensemble primarily centered on the Buddhist activities of Xiangguo Temple, the actual content of its activities largely serves the promotion of local cultural heritage through traditional music symbols.

Since 2010, Daxiangguo Temple has produced and released CDs annually, totaling 12 albums, including the series *China's Intangible Cultural Heritage - Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Music* and *Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Music – Sheng Shi Fan Yin*. In 2015, Ni (2015) edited *Daxiangguo Temple Music and Zhongzhou Buddhist Music System Arrangement and Research*, published as part of the national key book planning project under the 'Twelfth Five-Year Plan' and supported by the national publishing fund. In 2013, Yuan and Wang (2013) compiled *Musicologist Handed Down the Lone Copy of Daxiangguo Temple*, with the aim of preserving traditional Buddhist music. Shi Hongguan emphasized that the previously handwritten and secret music scores of Daxiangguo Temple have been made publicly accessible, primarily for scientific research purposes, through collaborations with the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Henan Academy of Arts. Through these activities, it is evident that the management of the DTBO is actively fostering strong collaborations with both governmental and academic institutions, seeking official recognition and endorsement.

In 2015, the Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Music Research Institute was established through the joint efforts of relevant scholars and temple leaders. The initial aim was to establish a data database for Daxiangguo Temple, allowing public access to its data. However, due to the complexity of document collation and the need for staff with excellent academic ability and professional literature skills, there has been limited progress in this area.

The local government and the administrators of Daxiangguo Temple have recognized the academic value of intangible cultural heritage. On one hand, they strive to document and promote the uniqueness and originality of their oral traditions and the historical and cultural practices of religious music. On the other hand, they actively respond to the evaluations and affirmations from the local government and the academic community. This situation inevitably presents irreconcilable contradictions, posing a conundrum for the future development direction of the DTBO.

#### 4.2.2. DTBO as a Social Ethics Catalyst

Social ethics are the basic rules of human social interaction and the norms of rational behavior. Religious consciousness is deeply embedded within individuals, serving as a private, latent, and invisible behavioral norm. Buddhism, through numerous stories depicting karma, reincarnation, and retribution for good and evil, sanctifies and dignifies human ethical and moral norms. This process eliminates the superficiality of ethics and morality in interpersonal practices and behaviors, granting these behavioral guidelines a more special significance. From this perspective, religion helps maintain the value and function of moral systems. The primary moral status of religion does not lie in it being a prerequisite for ethical values but in its auxiliary role in reinforcing secular moral



standards. Instead of merely accompanying religious activities, the use of music in religious practices concerns much of communal function and institutional meanings (Chen et al., 2001). In this process, Buddhist music is used as a non-verbal demonstration of the correct understanding of human existence and human relationships, forming a potential ideological shape. In religious practices, however, it is more important to recognize that music possesses a function that can direct practitioners toward certain specific experiences and allow them to make sense of the coherent relationships of body and mind (Chen, 2001). Most re-ligions retain their own chant or musical practice, which profoundly in-volves the cultural and cosmological structure of the people.

Chinese folk religious beliefs have a profound social foundation. With the effective implementation of the policy of religious freedom, religious belief has become a potential contract for establishing secular moral norms, meeting certain individuals' specific, private, and latent functional needs. Currently, Chinese society strictly regulates folk religious superstitious activities, most superstitious and witchcraft activities driven by monetary or secular interests, as well as those promoting withdrawal from society, are prohibited. Although China is ruled by a political party officially embracing an atheist ideology, various elements of the contemporary Chinese state have been proactively involved in safeguarding religion-related intangible cultural heritage. With the development of global industrialization, Chinese religious development also faces new changes. Their successors have also paid relatively little attention to social problems, with the advent of post-industrial or late capitalist society, the environment in which religion exists is also undergoing changes. Artistic products are becoming new cultural symbols of religion and traditional thought, as well as increasingly important mediums for responding to social issues. In this social environment, the Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Music Ensemble has astutely grasped the changing trends and actively adapted to societal demands, finding the most appropriate path between self-preservation and development and the conservatism inherent in their religious practices.

In recent years, the DTBO has actively participated in local folk festivals, tourism, cultural promotions, national public holiday blessing events, and government cultural promotion activities. On the stage of social public welfare activities, the orchestra showcases the ambiance and elegance of Buddhist music, promoting the essence of traditional music from the Central Plains region. While religious music groups do not exercise authority or coercion in maintaining secular ethics and moral order, their performances—imbued with Buddhist stories and teachings, featuring deified characters and images that embody moral standards—create supreme moral exemplars. These performances subtly inspire and educate people in ethical and moral behavior. As an indispensable component of religious rituals, Buddhist music utilizes this art form to enhance the solemnity and sanctity of the religious environment. It strengthens the individual's spiritual experience within a confined space and fosters a sense of identity and belonging within the group. This plays a crucial role in reinforcing, regulating, and inspiring moral behavior.

#### *4.2.3. DTBO as Product of Tourism*

Daxiangguo Temple, located in the ancient cultural tourism city of Kaifeng, Henan, is a national AAAA-level scenic spot that attracts millions of tourists from around the world each year. It has become a cultural landmark of Kaifeng's tourism industry. The related cultural and creative products associated with intangible cultural heritage have significant economic value and are recognized and promoted by the local government, cultural and tourism bureaus, and scholars. During the investigation, it was found that the



DTBO participated in more than half of the annual tourism season promotion activities. These include public cultural promotions, opening ceremonies of traditional festivals, and intangible cultural heritage protection publicity events. According to interviews with the orchestra's management, the DTBO actively collaborates with government departments of culture and tourism. Most of these collaborations and performance are of a public welfare nature. At the same time, they strive to maintain the principle of healthy and sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage projects, avoiding excessive commercialization and industrialization that disregard their development laws and detach from their essential religious core. They emphasize that the economic value of intangible cultural heritage is multifaceted. Simplifying the cultural and economic value of the DTBO, its brand awareness, musical characteristics, and cultural creativity undermines its religious nature and the form of religious ritual music. This level of industrialization and commercialization could inflict irreparable damage on the Buddhist music of Daxiangguo Temple.

Moreover, damaging the authenticity and integrity of Daxiangguo Temple's living environment for commercial interests, and engaging in false advertising, can lead to the dilution and degradation of its musical form and performance environment, ultimately affecting the cultural value of its religious music. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization at its thirty-first session on November 2, 2001, states: *Cultural diversity increases choices for everyone: It is one of the sources of development, not only a factor of economic growth but also a means of enjoying a satisfying intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual life* (UNESCO, 2018).

#### 4.2.4. DTBO as an Advocate of Distinct Cultural Style

*"Biodiversity is determined by the diversity of biological genes. Maintaining biodiversity is a condition for the sustainable development of both biological life and human society."* Consequently, a series of international regulations have been established to protect the diversity of biological genes (Song, & Wang, 2013). Similarly, culture faces issues of sustainable development. With the rapid expansion of economic globalization, many traditional art forms, which are integral to traditional lifestyles, are facing threats of assimilation and encroachment by external influences. For the sustainable development of human civilization, scholars are dedicated to protecting the diversity and living inheritance of cultural heritage. This approach ensures that each ethnic group preserves its distinct cultural style and maintains a relatively independent cultural system. Intangible cultural heritage embodies the traditional cultural essence of a nation, with these original art forms reflecting the cultural identity, philosophical outlook, aesthetic preferences, and developmental pathways inherent in that nation's cultural heritage (Bendix, 2018). The distinct cultural characteristics displayed by each culture are the result of generational cultural accumulation, forming explicit genetic traits. These cultural traits provide rich original materials and reference value for anthropological, sociological, and ethnological theories on ethnic differences and equality.

Throughout its long history, the DTBO has endured numerous natural disasters and human conflicts, experiencing interruptions, reconstructions, and continuations. This resilience underscores the indispensable role of religious music groups in community life. The handwritten secret traditions and the performances and personal experiences of Master *Shi Longjiang* reveal the connections between Buddhist music in the central plains of China and the forms of Henan local opera and ancient court music ensembles. Xiang

(2009) discussed the musical commonalities between Taoist and folk music groups where where when comparison are done between the sounds and melodies used by Taoist temples, folk groups, and clubs in a region, it is noticeable that their music shares considerable commonality, similarity, and consistency. The development of Buddhism in China parallels that of Taoism, and we can observe that Buddhist music has undergone remarkably similar experiences. The art of music inherently possesses complex dual attributes of nature and society. Traditional ethnic music styles from different regions exhibit unique scale compositions, interval structures, functional tonal characteristics, and expressive functions of local dialects. These characteristics form the core content of each ethnic group's cultural genes. From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, each intangible culture is a product of continuous evolution and accumulation, stemming from the practical life experiences of human history, with cultural spirit embedded within material forms.

## 5. Conclusions

Human existence constructs civilization, and the diversity of artistic forms within cultural ecology reflects the diversity of human civilization. The rapid development of science and technology, coupled with the sweeping effects of global industrialization and urbanization, has significantly altered people's lifestyles. The homogenization of lifestyles poses a fatal threat to the inheritance of traditional regional civilizations. The rapid development of manufacturing has allowed mass culture and "elite" culture to spread globally, leading to the emergence of artistic forms consumed by the public in short, entertaining formats. This blind catering to public interest and entertainment, lacking spiritual content, harms the healthy development of human spirit and the continuity of cultural ecology. Preventing economic interests from destroying the unique charm of art through artificial intervention is crucial. Such managerial interventions can cause irreversible damage to intangible cultural heritage.

The value of intangible cultural heritage to humanity is multifaceted, including memory value, heritage value, aesthetic mechanism value, genetic value, academic value, and the economic value of cultural capital reproduction. These represent the universal values of intangible cultural heritage. For specific art forms, their value depends on the particularity and representativeness of local culture. Adhering to the principles of authenticity and integrity in the transmission of intangible culture, without arbitrarily changing its form and living environment for commercial value or political environment, is the ideal state for the survival and development of traditional musical culture.

Respecting the development and survival laws of each intangible cultural heritage, while maintaining its original characteristics in the innovation and creation of cultural content, is crucial. This not only revitalizes traditional culture in the new era but also allows traditional culture to survive within a protective mechanism that conforms to its own development principles. From governments to management institutions, and to individual inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, these cultural holders must always remain vigilant and adhere to these fundamental principles.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia (UiTM). REC Approval No. :REC/07/2024

(PG/MR/334) All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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