

Heritagization of Buddhist music in China: A systematic literature review



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Abstract Buddhist music has played a central role in traditional Chinese music since the Han Dynasty. Over time, societal changes have placed much of this musical heritage at risk of disappearing. In response, the Chinese government has actively strengthened efforts to safeguard and preserve Buddhist music as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The study of heritagization has recently gained attention in China due to its potential to influence the preservation, transmission, and development of Buddhist music. Heritagization is considered a key factor in ensuring the continuity and evolution of this musical tradition. To investigate this process, a systematic review of twenty relevant studies was conducted using SCOPUS, Web of Science, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). Strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, guided by the PRISMA framework, ensured a rigorous and reliable methodology. The findings indicate that heritagization has had a significant and transformative impact on Chinese Buddhist music. It supports conservation initiatives, facilitates ongoing transmission, and emphasizes the cultural value of the music through its recognition as ICH. Additionally, heritagization has contributed to the internationalization of Chinese Buddhist music, enhancing its global recognition and appreciation. This study highlights the important roles of ICH gatekeepers and practitioners in sustaining Chinese Buddhist music. Drawing on academic literature addressing ICH, heritagization, Buddhist rituals, and musical practices, the review synthesizes prior research to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge and identify areas for further study. The findings are relevant to historians, musicologists, religious practitioners, and others engaged in the study and preservation of religious music, offering theoretical and practical insights for safeguarding this culturally significant tradition.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage (ICH), religious sound practices, cultural transmission, cultural policy, heritage safeguarding

1. Introduction

Buddhist music originated in ancient India, the birthplace of Buddhism, and was later introduced to China, where it absorbed elements of local musical traditions (Yu, 2020). In China, it has become a vital folk genre characterized by its solemn role in religious ceremonies, simple melodic structures, integration of diverse local cultures, and profound emotional expression. These qualities make Buddhist music central not only to religious practice but also as an important vehicle for cultural heritage. For centuries, it has developed into a rich and diverse tradition, including folk music, poetry, exotic music, and court music. Broadly, Chinese Buddhist music can be categorized into two types: ritual music, which is primarily vocal and used in ceremonies such as the Yogacara Rite of Feeding the Flaming Mouth (焰口施食仪 Yankou Shishi yi) and the Water and Land Grand Ritual (水陆法会 Shuilu Fahui) (Szczepanski, 2012), and melodic instrumental or quasiritual music, which is influenced by regional folk traditions and sometimes serves an entertainment function. Its evolution reflects both societal change and modernization, demonstrating innovation while occasionally diverging from traditional Buddhist norms (Zhuang, 2014).

Since the early 21st century, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has become a global priority. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH (CSICH) emphasized eliminating prejudice on the basis of political, social, racial, religious, linguistic, and gender factors (UNESCO, 2018). China ratified the CSICH in 2004, integrating ICH preservation into national and local policies (Xu et al., 2022; Tan & Wang, 2009). Buddhist music has been officially recognized as part of China's ICH, and the process of heritagization has played a significant role in its preservation and promotion. The performance of the Chinese Buddhist Music Exhibition Troupe, which represents three major Buddhist language traditions (Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan) and eight prominent temples, has been staged internationally, enhancing the global appreciation of Chinese culture and increasing recognition of Chinese Buddhist music worldwide.

To understand the value of Chinese Buddhist music, this study systematically reviews the literature from 2019--2024, focusing on its integration into Chinese cultural heritage. The objectives are to (a) identify opportunities and challenges arising from heritagization, (b) examine the influence of heritagization and the ICH on Buddhist music, and (c) explore the role of representative inheritors of the ICH. This review provides a comprehensive reference for scholars, researchers, and



practitioners in religion, musicology, history, and cultural heritage preservation while offering theoretical support for Buddhist communities and heritage preservationists globally, assisting in the transmission and safeguarding of Buddhist music.

Buddhist Music as a Distinctive Intangible Cultural Heritage Case. Buddhist music constitutes a distinctive and sensitive category within China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) framework because it is simultaneously a religious practice, a musical tradition, and a state-regulated cultural resource. Unlike many secular ICH forms, Buddhist music is embedded in ritual performance, doctrinal transmission, and monastic life, making its safeguarding inseparable from issues of religious governance and spiritual authority. Since religion in China is subject to close state oversight, the heritagization of Buddhist music operates within a complex regulatory environment that differs fundamentally from other folk or artistic traditions. This dual positioning—as both sacred sound practice and cultural heritage—renders Buddhist music a particularly revealing case for examining how heritage policies interact with religious life, cultural identity, and state management.

2. Research Background

2.1. Definition of heritage

This study situates “heritagization” in relation to heritage, intangible cultural heritage (ICH), heritage conservation, and community engagement, considering diverse definitions. In Chinese discourse, heritage has evolved from a tangible entity to a cognitive and intangible construct (Zhang et al., 2018). In addition to physical sites or relics, heritage encompasses perceptions, memories, and cultural values, emphasizing its spiritual and social significance. This transformation involves both objective characteristics and subjective perceptions of lived traditions, which are gradually recognized as heritage over time (Banaszkiewicz, 2022; Mai, 2021; Thouki, 2022).

Heritagization is the process through which active cultural practices are recognized, documented, and occasionally redefined as heritage (Caballero, 2017). With the rise of critical heritage studies, the concept has expanded to include pre- and postheritage phases (Salemink, 2021). Its influence extends across economic, political, and cultural spheres and is intricately connected to societal institutions, reflecting heritage's role in cultural transmission and social transformation (Mai Le, 2021; Moisala, 2019; Si & Liu, 2020; Thouki, 2022). Research on heritagisation spans disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and art, establishing an interdisciplinary framework (Baird, 2017; Bendix, 2008; Brandellero et al., 2014; Harvey, 2016; Kidd, 2011; Lixinski, 2011; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018; Ogino, 2021; Profico et al., 2019; Salemink, 2012). Heritagization remains a significant and multifaceted topic with ongoing societal implications.

2.2. Global preservation of ICH.

Globalization, modernization, and urbanization have increasingly challenged traditional cultural beliefs, placing cultural heritage at risk (Yao, 2021). Heritagization has emerged as a crucial factor in maintaining the vitality of ICHs, forming an integral component of the ICH ecosystem (Yao, 2021). The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH) represents a major global initiative to protect ICHs (Ambroise et al., 2017; Chami & Kajiru, 2023). ICH encompasses deeply embedded social practices, including oral traditions, customs, languages, music, and crafts, transmitted through interpersonal interaction and oral history (UNESCO, 2003). It is continuously reestablished by communities in response to their environment, engagement with nature, and historical context, providing a sense of identity and continuity (Jiang et al., 2023; Lenzerini, 2011; Singh, 2022). China ratified the CSICH in 2004, becoming the sixth country globally to do so (UNESCO, 2003). This ratification promoted cultural nationalism, supported economic development, and enhanced state legitimacy after periods of neglect and partial destruction of intangible heritage (Maags, 2021). The implementation of the CSICH has positioned ICH protection as a central sociocultural priority in China (Yan et al., 2021).

2.3. Conservation of Buddhist music

Religion and heritage preservation are closely linked. While the 1972 UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention initiated global heritage efforts, religion was not specifically addressed (UNESCO, 1972). The CSICH addresses discrimination—including political, social, racial, religious, linguistic, and gender-based discrimination—in ICH protection (UNESCO, 2018). The correlation between religion and ICH has since become more evident (Guo et al., 2021; Hetmanczyk, 2015). Religious ICH includes performing arts, traditional knowledge, behaviors linked to nature and the cosmos, social customs, rituals, festivals, and intangible craft-making traditions (Liu, 2016; Van, 2014). Preserving religious ICH is thus central to global heritage efforts. UNESCO has recognized diverse religious and cultural practices on its “Lists of ICH” and “Register of Good Safeguarding Practices” (UNESCO, 2023), including Cambodia's Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet, Sri Lanka's traditional string puppet drama, and Vietnam's Mother Goddess rituals, which integrate music, dance, and traditional attire. UNESCO reports that protection of cultural traditions—including religious practices, folk arts, crafts, and languages—exists in more than 180 countries (UNESCO, 2023). In China, a national system established in 2004 officially recognized religious ICHs, including Buddhist music, and heritagization projects have renewed the relevance and value of these living traditions within local and global contexts (Zhang & Wu, 2023).

2.4. Living human treasures (LHTs)

A critical challenge in preserving ICH is the decline in practitioners capable of transmitting traditional knowledge. Japan initiated the formal recognition of Living Human Treasures (LHTs) in 1950, granting legal protection and support. Other countries, including South Korea (1964), Thailand (1985), the Philippines (1988), France (1994), China (2005), and Malaysia (2015), have implemented similar programs. UNESCO's LHT program (2003) emphasizes that long-term preservation depends on knowledge transfer to younger generations, which is recognized as a protective measure under Article 2.3 of the CSICH (UNESCO, 2005). Different nations use various designations for ICH bearers, including National Living Treasures (Philippines), Popular Craft Tradition Bearers (Czech Republic), Living Human Treasures (Cambodia), Living National Treasures (Japan and South Korea), National Artists (Thailand), and Warisan Kebangsaan Orang Hidup (Malaysia). In China, these individuals are called representative inheritors (代表性传承人). The Representative Inheritors of National ICH Program (RINICHP) was established in 2005 following UNESCO's LHT standards (Popova & Fomenko, 2022). To date, 3,057 individuals have been recognized as national-level representative inheritors across five batches (Huang & Li, 2023), playing a pivotal role in safeguarding and transmitting ICH.

3. Methodology

Systematic reviews require a predetermined protocol, which serves as a structured plan outlining the methodologies to be employed in the study. This protocol is widely recognized as a rigorous research design in social science studies (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The PRISMA framework, widely regarded as the gold standard for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, offers a structured and transparent process that ensures the reliability, replicability, and rigor of the evaluation.

This study was conducted via a systematic literature review (SLR) following the recommendations of Kitchenham and Charters. An SLR is a method used to locate, assess, and interpret relevant research on a specific topic (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). The conduct phase of the study was guided by the approach outlined by Kitchenham et al. and is described as follows:

3.1. Planning

This study focuses on research related to Buddhist music and its transformation into cultural heritage in China. This research aims to enhance the understanding of how Buddhist music has adapted to and benefited from the process of heritagization, revealing its development and significance in contemporary cultural and social contexts. These studies also provide insight into historical analysis and research on intangible cultural heritage (ICH), highlighting the essential role of representative inheritors in safeguarding and transmitting this cultural legacy. Consequently, studies have evaluated the impact of these factors on the preservation and promotion of Buddhist music traditions in China. The findings offer valuable guidance for researchers and practitioners interested in cultural heritage conservation and the sustainability of Buddhist musical practices (Table 1).

3.2. Search strategy and scope justification

The literature search employed explicitly defined Boolean search strings tailored to each database. In Scopus and Web of Science, the following string was used:

("heritagisation" OR "heritagization" OR "intangible cultural heritage" OR "cultural heritage" OR "ICH") AND ("Buddhist music" OR "Buddhism music" OR "ritual music" OR "Buddhist sound") AND ("inheritor" OR "bearer*" OR "transmission")**.

For CNKI, the search was conducted using Chinese keywords: "佛教音乐" (Buddhist music), "遗产化" (heritagization), "非物质文化遗产", and "代表性传承人", applied to title, abstract, and keywords.

The review focused on studies published between 2019 and 2024 to capture the most recent phase of Buddhist music heritagization following the consolidation of China's ICH policy framework and increased digitalization after 2018.

Although the initial search yielded a large number of records, only 20 studies met all inclusion criteria. This limited number reflects the narrow intersection of religion, music, and ICH policy, rather than a lack of scholarly production. Many publications address Buddhism, music, or heritage separately, but few critically examine their convergence. The stringent screening criteria were therefore necessary to ensure analytical relevance and methodological rigor.

3.2.1. Channels used for the literature search

The literature for this review was sourced from three major databases: Web of Science (WOS), Scopus, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (Table 2). Conducting a literature search across multiple databases, even if some publications appear in more than one source, is recommended to ensure that important and influential studies are not overlooked (Vieira & Gomes, 2009). The search was conducted up to January 25, 2024.

Table 1 Research questions.

Research questions	Possible responses
RQ1a. What is the current status of the development of Buddhist music in China?	Combining Tradition and Innovation Adapting to Social Needs ICH Protection
RQ1b. What are the opportunities and challenges heritagisation brings to Chinese Buddhist music?	Sustainable Development Cultural Preservation and Inheritance Commercialization Risk Lack of Successors
RQ2a. What are the focuses of the research on heritagisation and ICH?	Community Participation and Sharing Technology and Innovation Application Digital Archives and Databases Social Media and Online Dissemination Music Conservation and Community Intervention
RQ2b. What are the implications of heritagisation and ICH for the field of Buddhist music?	Identity and Functional Transformation Integration of Tradition and Modernity Technological Application and Dissemination Academic Research Focus
RQ3a. What is the role of Representative Inheritors in ICH?	Inheritance and Protection Cultural Identity Shaping Promotion of Cultural Innovation Professional Knowledge and Skills Transfer
RQ3b. What impact has Representative Inheritors had on Buddhist music in China?	Cultural Transmission and Innovation Religious Art Preservation Official and Folk Identities Widespread Dissemination of Cultural Heritage Traditional Purity and Modern Demands

Table 2 Search strings in Scopus, WOS and CNKI.

Scopus	WOS	CNKI
TOPIC: (("Heritagisation" OR "cultural heritage" OR "intangible cultural heritage" OR "ICH*")) AND TOPIC: (("Buddhist Music" OR "Buddhism music" OR "Buddhist Sounds")) AND TOPIC: (("Inheritors" OR "Bearers" OR "Owner"))	"Heritagisation" OR "cultural heritage OR "intangible cultural heritage" OR "ICH*" (Topic) AND "Buddhist Music" OR "Buddhism music" OR "Buddhist Sounds" (Topic) AND "Inheritors" OR "Bearers" OR "owner" (Topic) and Article or Review Article or Book Chapter (Document Types) and English (Languages)	Subject: "中国佛教音乐" (Chinese Buddhist Music), "遗产化" (Heritagisation), "非物质文化遗产" (Intangible Cultural Heritage), and "代表性传承人" (Representative Inheritors)

Source: Vieira & Gomes (2009).

3.2.2. Keywords

The search keywords were derived from the research question(s). The search was further enhanced by incorporating synonyms, abbreviations, variant spellings, and related expressions (Rowley & Slack, 2004). These strategies were used to select the most appropriate keywords, as illustrated in Table 3.

3.2.3. PRISMA approach

The retrieved data were filtered via the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Figure 1), which provides guidelines for initial screening and specifies parameters for inclusion and exclusion (Page et al., 2021).



Table 3 Keywords.

Buddhist	Music	Heritage	Heritagisation	Cultural Heritage	Inheritors
Buddhism	Melody	Inheritance	Heritagization	Intangible Cultural heritage	Heir
Buddhistic	Singing	Patrimoine		Patrimoineculturel	Recipient
	Hymn			ICH	Living National Treasure
	Sound				

Selected keywords used to refine and define the search for issues related to the heritagisation of Buddhist music in China.

Source: Rowley & Slack (2004).

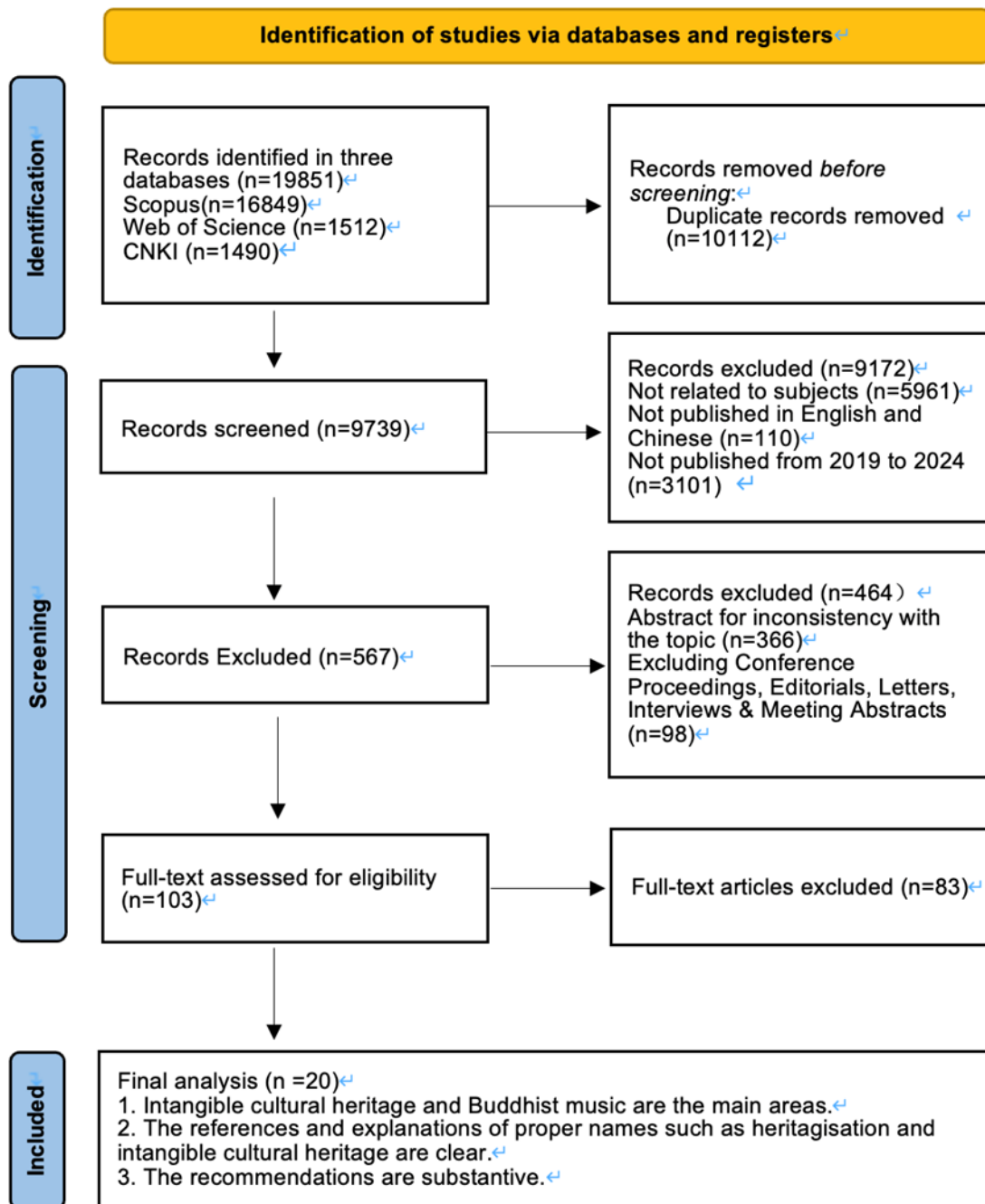


Figure 1 The PRISMA framework for this systematic review. Stages involved in finalizing the articles for analysis after the data were obtained.

Source: The flowchart was adapted from Page et al. (2021).

3.2.4. Eligibility criteria and study selection

Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2024 that explicitly addressed the heritagization of Buddhist music in China. Conference papers, book reviews, reports, and other non-peer-



reviewed materials were excluded. Although the CNKI database contains a substantial number of master’s and doctoral theses, these were not included in order to ensure consistency in peer-review standards and analytical comparability across sources. All retrieved articles were subsequently assessed against the following eligibility criteria:

- a. Relevance to the disciplinary categories of this study (music, culture, society, history);
- b. Exclusion of articles published in languages other than English or Chinese;
- c. Inclusion of articles published between 2019 and 2024;
- d. Exclusion of article types such as conference papers, editorials, letters, interviews, and meeting abstracts; and
- e. Inclusion of empirical or mixed-method studies (Table 4).

Table 4 Inclusion, exclusion and quality criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion	Quality criteria
Studies in the Scopus, WoS and CNKI databases	Research on topics other than music or ICH	Coherence between the objectives, methods, and results
Article abstracts which are relevant to the topic of this study	Studies in languages other than English and Chinese	
Studies published between 2015-2022	Conference Papers, Editorials, Letters, Interviews and Meeting Abstracts not arbitrated	

Source: Page et al. (2021).

Relevant Works Selection Process

Relevant studies were identified through the following systematic steps:

Step 1: Filter all papers by relevant fields (n = 19,851).

Step 2: Remove duplicates (n = 10,112).

Step 3: Exclude papers based on specific conditions (n = 9,172):

- a. Papers unrelated to the study’s disciplinary categories (n = 5,961).
- b. Papers not published in English or Chinese (n = 110).
- c. Papers published outside the period 2019–2024 (n = 3,101).

Step 4: Further exclude papers on the basis of additional conditions (n = 464):

- a. Abstracts not aligned with the study topic (n = 366).
- b. Excluded article types (e.g., conference papers, editorials, letters, interviews, meeting abstracts) (n = 98).

Step 5: Conduct a full-text review (n = 103) using the following inclusion criteria:

- a. Focus on ICH and Buddhist music as primary topics.
- b. Clear references and explanations of key terms such as heritagization and ICH.
- c. Substantive recommendations and contributions to the field.

Following this process, a total of 20 papers were selected for detailed analysis. These studies were systematically examined regarding their objectives, methodologies, and key findings/contributions (Table 5).

3.3. Results

An analysis was conducted on each research question to identify patterns in the incorporation of Buddhist music into China’s cultural heritage. This review also evaluated studies in this area and assessed the impact of influential representative inheritors on the preservation, transmission, and development of Buddhist music in China.

Table 5 The titles, authors, year, objectives and finding/contributions of the articles reviewed.

No.	Title	Author/-s, year	Objectives	Finding/Contributions
1	Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage: Exploring the synergies in the transmission of indigenous languages, dance and music practices in Southern Africa	Gwerevende and Mthombe (2023).	This article explores the synergies in the transmission of South Africa's aboriginal language, dance and music practices and how these ICHs can be preserved. The study highlights the holistic nature of language, dance and music to African cultural heritage and advocates for an interdisciplinary, community-based	The central role of communities, groups, and individuals in ICH’s production, protection, maintenance, and recreation is emphasised. The article also discusses a ubuntu/unhu-based methodology for transmitting cultural heritage, emphasising the integration of the implementation of music, dance, and language sustainability from an interdisciplinary perspective.



			model to safeguard this cultural heritage.	
2	Musical sustainability vis-à-vis intangible cultural heritage: Safeguarding and incentives in the Feast of the Virgin of Candelaria, Puno, Perú	Chocano (2022).	<p>ICH preservation and musical sustainability are examined in this essay. The study examines musical sustainability in the context of preservation and incentives during the Festival of Santa Candelaria in Puno, Peru, and its effects on intangible cultural assets. The study carefully examines state officials, music practitioners, and other stakeholders' motivations for the ICH project and their conformity with the music sustainability framework.</p>	<p>The article assesses the Music Sustainability and ICH frameworks for musical practice maintenance. It offers a case study to show how ICH programmes may encourage incentive structures that conflict with the music sustainability paradigm. Safeguarding ICH may encourage specific interests rather than cultural preservation.</p>
3	Heritagisation of Tamu music: From lived culture to heritage to be safe-guarded	Moisala (2019).	<p>This article explores the transformation of Tamu music in Nepal from a culture of everyday life to an ICH in need of preservation. By analysing the traditions and transformations of Tamu music, this study examines the changing status of music in social, religious and economic contexts, and how the Internet and globalisation have affected the preservation and transmission of Tamu music.</p>	<p>Music is transformed from an everyday cultural expression into a cultural heritage to be protected and preserved. It discusses applying the concept of "cultural heritage" and its importance in practice. It analyses how people are beginning to recognize their traditional musical practices as a cultural asset that deserves consideration and preservation.</p>
4	From wild songs to intangible cultural heritage: The heritagisation of Hua'er in China	Yang (2020).	<p>This article examines how the grassroots folk song tradition of north-west China - Hua'er - is affected by the ICH system and policies. Hua'er was named part of China's ICH in 2006 and became part of UNESCO's World ICH in 2009. This study explores how the Hua'er has been transformed from a music genre historically banned and seen as socially taboo to a respected element of world and national heritage.</p>	<p>Heritagisation of Huaer music from a grassroots folk song tradition to an ICH is an ongoing and consultative process including stakeholders at all levels, the community, and Hua'er singers. Additionally, heritagisation is employed to build national identity and Chinese identity. However, fieldwork singers, researchers, and authorities redefined Hua'er practices and identities using ICH recognition.</p>
5	Modalities for community participation in implementing the UNESCO ICH Convention	Aikawa-Faure (2022).	<p>This article explores and analyses the ways in which communities are involved in the implementation of the UNESCO ICH Convention. The article focuses on the importance of community participation in the safeguarding of ICH and looks at how the concept evolved during the drafting of the convention and how it was eventually embraced and adapted in the Inter-Member State Conference.</p>	<p>The experiences and practices of different countries and regions in implementing the UNESCO ICH Convention have gradually eroded participatory approaches in developing and implementing the Convention and its Operational Directives (ODs). In addition, top-down approaches at the governmental level may limit the actual participation of communities, and possible paths to enhance community participation in ICH conservation efforts in the future are suggested.</p>
6	Safeguarding traditional theatre amid trauma: Career shock among cultural heritage professionals in Cantonese opera	Chung (2022).	<p>This article examines and analyses the occupational shocks and traumas experienced by cultural heritage professionals in Cantonese opera, particularly Cantonese opera artists, during COVID-19, and how these shocks</p>	<p>Artists experienced a professional crisis during COVID-19 and adopted problem-oriented and emotionally oriented coping strategies. At the same time, artists also responded to the limitations imposed by COVID-19 through transformation, for</p>

			and traumas affected the transmission of ICH.	example, by engaging in non-traditional performance styles. These findings provide new perspectives for understanding cultural communication, ICH preservation, and post-traumatic industry transformation.
7	From Korea to Japan: A transnational perspective on South Korea's Important Intangible Cultural Properties and Zainichi Korean artists	Koo (2021).	This article analyses how Korean artists who migrated from North Korea to Japan preserve and disseminate Korea's important intangible cultural properties through a transnational perspective. The article focuses on how these artists maintain and develop their cultural identities in a transnational context and how they play an important role in preserving and transmitting ICH.	Zainichi Koreans use Korean Important Intangible Cultural Properties to differentiate themselves among their communities and with other ethnic groups and Japanese. These artists display individual commitment, specialised talents, and interaction with Important Intangible Cultural Properties, as well as their various motivations and ambitions for participating with cultural art forms.
8	The "ICH Movement" in China: The status of traditional music after ICH Certification	Xiao and Yang (2022).	This article discusses traditional music in China after its recognition as ICH and how it has affected cultural variety and musical preservation. The article empirically investigates how the Chinese government, scholars, artists, and communities in the ICH preserving movement have altered traditional music transmission in contemporary China.	Some national ICH assets are audio-visual archives due to the loss of living space. Many ICH artefacts with traditional folklore forms nearly fully divorced from their contemporary roots can be conserved under static and living national safeguarding. ICH preservation is a complex social dynamic system with many variables creating conflict. Due to modern society's focus on stage performances, traditional civilisations are losing their vitality and distinctive characteristics.
9	Religion-related intangible cultural heritage safeguarding practices and initiatives of the contemporary Chinese state	Xu and Tao (2022).	This article analyses and discusses contemporary Chinese state safeguarding practices and initiatives for religion-related ICH. The article focuses on the systematic strategies adopted by the Chinese state in safeguarding religion-related ICH and how these strategies affect religious groups and ICH programmes.	Because religion and heritage are closely intertwined, safeguarding religion-related ICH has been a major aspect of worldwide ICH safeguarding practices since the early 21st century. Despite being administered by an atheist political party, several components of the Chinese state have aggressively protected religion-related ICH. Protecting religion-related ICH can enhance policy goals and the local economy.
10	Heritage and religion in China	Zhu (2020).	This article examines the transformation of religious sites into tourist attractions in China and the impact of this transformation on religious practices and cultural heritage. The researchers aim to analyse the commercialisation and tourism development of religious sites, the impact on religious efficacy, and the porous boundaries between the religious and the secular. In addition, the study explores the role of heritage management in the context of heritage-based tourism, the impact of globalisation and the economic motivations of religious experts.	Heritage laws in China have modified religious practices through conservation and commercialisation by recognising religious sites as heritage sites and encouraging commercialisation and transformation into tourist attractions. The national economic development mandate, or entrepreneurship integration with religious organisations, drives religious places and practices. From religion to heritage, instrumental behaviours and colourful shows for hedonism emerge.



11	Textual research on Tianning Fanbai	Zhou (2021).	This article examines the history, current state of inheritance, content and cultural value of the Tianning Fanbai, analysing its importance in Chinese Buddhist ritual music and its role in cultural heritage preservation.	Fanbai has always been associated with rituals. From the traditional monk's perspective, it cannot be separated from rituals, nor does it exist independently within the rituals. The music structure varies by Buddhist ritual. Most Buddhist activities today have a rich musical composition, and monks refer to musical ceremonies as "sound Buddhist rituals," which encompass all sounds present in the Buddha's service.
12	The dual-function in Buddhist convention of offering and ritual-music	Wang and Sun (2020).	This article explains the uniqueness and historical inheritance of Buddhist ritual music, analyses its representativeness in the sound of Chinese Buddhism, and its influence on and integration with traditional Chinese ritual culture. The article reveals the status and importance of Buddhist ritual sound offerings in Chinese culture by examining Buddhist ritual sound offerings, the culture of ritual music, and its relationship to the Buddhist tradition of sound offerings.	The interdependence of sound and Buddhist rituals, known as "sound Buddhist rituals," is rooted in the Buddhist tradition of sound offerings and China's ancient cultural tradition of rituals and music. Over the past two millennia, the traditional Chinese liyue culture has influenced both the sound system and rituals, resulting in a "Buddhist system + ritual system" under the "sound Buddhist representation system."
13	The evolution of Chinese Buddhist music and its value	Wang (2022).	This article explores the development of Han Buddhist music and its cultural value, analyses the changes in Buddhist music from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, and explores its status and importance in China's ICH.	Chinese Buddhist music, originating from ancient Indian Buddhism, incorporated traditional Chinese thinking, Chinese music theory, and technology, resulting in diverse styles like fanyin, huayin and fanhua that reflected Chinese characteristics.
14	Yushan Sanskrit chant (Beompae): The beginning of contextualized Buddhist music in China	Meng and Gong (2022).	This article explores the place and role of Yushan Fanbai in the history of Chinese Buddhist music. The article explains in detail the origins, development and influence of Yushan Fanbai on Chinese Buddhist music, as well as its changes throughout history. It also discusses the preservation and transmission of Yushan Fanbai and its importance in cultural heritage preservation.	Fanbai is a common Buddhist practice among many sects and groups. Yushan Fanbai, the oldest Fanbai in China, played a key part in Chinese Buddhist music. It is a treasure of Chinese Buddhist culture for religion, sociology, and ethnomusicology. A deeper study, excavation and restoration of Yushan Fanbai and its creative metamorphosis and innovative development can help Chinese Buddhism today.
15	The sound of Brahma music in Daxiangguo Temple is clear and elegant and has a long rhyme	Du and Lv (2019).	This article explores the historical position, characteristics and cultural value of the Daxiangguo Temple's Brahma music in Chinese Buddhist music. The article analyses in depth the protection and inheritance of the Daxiangguo Temple Brahma music as a national ICH, as well as its influence and significance in modern society.	Letting the ICH "come alive" is the best way to protect and pass it on. Broad dissemination is one of the most effective ways to make its value and charm deeply rooted in people's hearts and minds, as well as uniting the consensus and strength of the whole society to protect and pass on the ICH.
16	The new discourse on Buddhist music sound classification exemplifying: The examination and	Sun (2019).	This article provides new insights into and analyses of the categorisation of Buddhist sounds, with particular reference to the Buddhist music of the Wutai Mountains. The article focuses on	With constraints imposed by precepts, Buddhist art has distinctive connotations and reach compared to secular art. Buddhist music spreads globally from its origin in India, while Wutai Mountain



	identification of Mount Wutai Buddhist music sound categories		the three major systems of Buddhist music: chanting, speaking, and kabuki offerings, and provides in-depth analyses of their historical evolution, current status, and connection with traditional culture.	represents the stronghold for the development of Indian Buddhist music in China.
17	The inheritance and development of Buddhist music in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative	Li (2023).	This article discusses the inheritance and development of Buddhist music under the "Belt and Road" initiative. It focuses on how Buddhist music promotes intercultural exchange and understanding, and its value and significance in contemporary society. The article also discusses strategies for the preservation and development of Buddhist music and its place in global cultural heritage.	Buddhist music constituted part of cultural transmission of the old Silk Road and can be inherited and developed in the modern "Belt and Road," which can enhance cultural communications among countries along the route. Buddhist music has incorporated Chinese folk music, developed new sounds and adapted Buddhist songs throughout decades.
18	The living inheritance of religious intangible cultural heritage from the perspective of communication studies	Liu (2022).	Communication studies explore the live transmission of religious intangible cultural assets. Communication ideas and methods help preserve and spread religious intangible cultural assets. It investigates how communication methods, vehicles, contents, and concerns impact religious cultural heritage transmission and how cultural heritage can be adapted to modern culture for enhanced comprehension and acceptance.	Most religious ICH is passed down through the "master-apprentice system" used by religious leaders to "teach by heart and mouth." Although this transmission method preserves "original flavour," many heritage projects diminish due to a lack of successors. According to communication science, religious ICH has specific means, carriers, contents and subjects.
19	On the protection and transmission of Buddhist music as intangible cultural heritage	Zhai (2022).	This article addresses Chinese Buddhist music ICH transmission and protection. The article details the history of Buddhist music study and preservation in China since the 1950s, the shift in transmission and preservation, and the status of Buddhist music-based ICH artefacts. The need of protecting and passing on this precious cultural treasure in modern culture and safeguarding Buddhist music is stressed.	In contrast to professionals' recommendations in preserving and inheriting the original form of Buddhist music before developing, the authors suggest that while preserving its authentic essence, innovative development is necessary for retaining its appeal. Despite notable preservation efforts in recent years, most Buddhist, music genres can no longer reach their historical peak, especially considering the loss of music scores and inheritors years ago.
20	Buddhist music from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage	Yang and Zhou (2021)	Buddhist music transmission and preservation are examined from an ICH viewpoint. The article examines Chinese Buddhist music and its status on the national ICH list. Additionally, the essay covers the methods used and the difficulties in transmitting and preserving Buddhist music in modern society.	Buddhism uses music for rituals and celebrations. The Buddha-worshipping "fanbai" tune is famous. Chinese Buddhist music, a key part of Chinese Buddhist culture and an outlier in Chinese traditional music, was created by combining Chinese folk music with artistic elements. The lack of long-term preservation and inheritance, diminishing audiences, and difficulties in relying on oral transmission still hamper Chinese Buddhist music inheritance.

Source: Scopus, WoS and CNKI databases.

4. Results and Discussion



4.1. RQ1a. What is the current status of the development of Buddhist music in China?

Evolution of Chinese Buddhist Music. Chinese Buddhist music has a long and rich history, demonstrating a profound fusion of Buddhist and traditional Chinese cultures. Originating in ancient India, Buddhist music was assimilated into Chinese culture, giving rise to a distinct musical framework (Zhang, 2023). During the early introduction of Buddhism into China, Buddhist music lacked a formal structure. Over time, it evolved with the emergence of fanbai, comprising zan (hymns of praise) and ji (songs based on the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha).

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386–589 CE), cultural, religious, and artistic divergence between the regions influenced the development of distinct northern and southern Buddhist music genres. Music became more refined, incorporating elements of chanting and singing, known as changnian (唱念) or changsong (唱颂) (Yin, 2022). In the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties, monasteries became hubs of musical innovation, generating diverse gezan (praise) genres. Through the Song (960–1279 CE), Yuan (1271–1368 CE), Ming (1368–1644 CE), and Qing (1644–1912 CE) dynasties, Buddhist music integrated secular melodies and qupai (labeled tunes). For example, in 1418, Ming emperor Zhu Di published fifty volumes of Buddhist hymns, encouraging widespread practice, which transformed these melodies into popular folk music (Wang, 2022). Overall, Chinese Buddhist music evolved across historical periods, regions, and social contexts, culminating in a distinct style that is integral to traditional Chinese music.

Contemporary Adaptation. Despite its historical continuity, Chinese Buddhist music has undergone significant transformations to align with modern aesthetics while preserving its core religious and musical characteristics (Chen, 2018). Traditional melodies, while culturally rich, may lack the dynamism needed to engage contemporary audiences, particularly younger generations. Since the 1950s, scholarly attention and preservation efforts have intensified, resulting in a gradual shift from rigid conservation toward adaptive strategies accommodating societal changes (Zhai, 2022; Tian, 1994). Monasteries now actively contribute to the safeguarding and transmission of Buddhist music as part of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), demonstrating the successful integration of ancient traditions with contemporary societal demands.

Global Influence. Chinese Buddhist music has been transmitted internationally since the Tang Dynasty, influencing East Asian and Southeast Asian musical traditions (Du, 2023). Historical routes such as the Maritime Silk Road facilitated the spread of Buddhist music to Japan, Korea, and other regions, merging with local music traditions and generating culturally distinct forms (Cawley, 2023; Wang, 2023). Monks and pilgrims served as primary agents, disseminating both religious teachings and musical practices. The compilation and circulation of theoretical and practical writings on Buddhist music further amplified its international influence (Dong, 2023).

4.2. RQ1b. What are the opportunities and challenges heritagization brings to Chinese Buddhist music?

Heritagization and global recognition. The preservation of traditional art forms such as Chinese Buddhist music is increasingly urgent amid globalization and rapid societal change. Classifying Buddhist music as an ICH offers both opportunities and challenges. Heritage involves safeguarding cultural heritage while integrating it into contemporary culture through meaningful interaction, maintaining traditional practices (Thouki, 2022).

By including Buddhist music on the ICH list, its historical and cultural significance is formally recognized and protected, enhancing its visibility and prominence both nationally and internationally (Xu & Tao, 2022). For example, the inclusion of Daxiangguo Temple's Brahma music in the national ICH list increased public awareness and prompted renewed scholarly interest in traditional music (Dong, 2023). In this way, heritagization enhances the international circulation of Buddhist music and encourages both scholarly inquiry and applied cultural engagement with these traditions.

Cultural Tourism and Economic Opportunities. Heritage also promotes the integration of Buddhist music into cultural tourism, creating economic benefits. Sacred sites such as Wutai Mountain, Putuo Mountain, and North Wudang Mountain have evolved into multifaceted destinations that combine religious significance, cultural immersion, and tourism, attracting both domestic and international visitors (Bian, 2020; Bruntz, 2020; Zhu, 2020). Music events at these sites generate economic activity; support local hospitality, transportation, and related industries; and provide platforms for artistic innovation and intercultural exchange. However, the tension between heritage preservation and commercialization is evident when cultural assets are exploited primarily for economic gain (Su, 2019).

Commercialization. A primary challenge of heritagization is the tension between maintaining authenticity and responding to market demands. Commercialization may shift focus from spiritual and religious functions to financial interests (Zhu, 2020). Cases such as the 2012 dispute at Famen Temple illustrate potential misuse of religious affiliation for profit, sparking debate on the commodification of Buddhism in China (Xinhuanet, 2012; Nichols, 2020). Excessive tourism can compromise the sanctity of sacred spaces and negatively affect the quality of religious practices (Rashid, 2018). Sustainable management of cultural and sacred sites is therefore critical.

Transmission and Continuity. The master–disciple system remains the primary mode of transmitting Chinese Buddhist music, yet the aging population of practitioners limits the scale of performance, audience engagement, and creative development (Yin, 2022). Balancing adherence to tradition with adaptation to contemporary society presents ongoing

challenges. The effective transmission and cultivation of successors are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and vitality of Buddhist music.

Heritagization as Safeguarding and Transformation. The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that heritagization has played a crucial role in safeguarding Buddhist music in China. Official ICH recognition has increased public visibility, institutional support, and financial resources, contributing to the documentation, transmission, and revitalization of endangered musical repertoires. In this sense, heritagization has functioned as an effective mechanism for cultural survival, particularly in the face of modernization, declining monastic populations, and reduced intergenerational transmission.

At the same time, heritagization has not merely preserved Buddhist music in its existing form but has actively transformed it. Several studies indicate that ritual sound practices are increasingly adapted for staged performances, cultural exhibitions, tourism events, and international showcases. These transformations often involve changes in performance context, repertoire selection, instrumentation, and audience orientation. As a result, Buddhist music is reconfigured from an internally oriented ritual practice into a publicly consumable cultural representation. Heritagization thus operates as a double-edged process that simultaneously sustains and reshapes Buddhist music, altering its social functions, meanings, and modes of transmission.

Critical Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Heritage Theories. Western critical heritage studies, most notably the work of Smith and Waterton (2012), argue that the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) structures heritage practices through expert-led and institutionalized frameworks that legitimize particular narratives while marginalizing community-based knowledge and lived cultural experience. Although this critique has been widely applied in European and post-colonial contexts, its applicability to China requires careful contextualization rather than direct theoretical transplantation. In Chinese scholarship, heritagization is predominantly framed as a necessary and affirmative mechanism for cultural survival, emphasizing state coordination, policy legitimacy, and the continuity of endangered traditions. By contrast, Western literature more frequently foregrounds the risks inherent in heritage-making processes, including cultural fossilization, staged authenticity, and the transformation of living practices into curated performances for tourism, governance, or cultural display.

This contrast reveals a significant analytical gap in the Chinese literature reviewed in this study, which rarely interrogates these tensions explicitly, particularly with regard to the ritual integrity and spiritual functions of Buddhist music. The divergence suggests that heritagization in China operates through a dual logic: it functions simultaneously as a safeguarding mechanism for vulnerable traditions and as a process that reconfigures religious sound practices into cultural representations aligned with national identity formation and cultural diplomacy. Recognizing this duality is essential for critically understanding the contemporary transformation of Buddhist music under heritage regimes. To further interpret these dynamics, it is necessary to situate the heritagization of Buddhist music within broader debates in critical heritage studies.

Unproblematized Dimensions in Existing Chinese Scholarship. While Chinese scholarship largely presents heritagization as a positive and necessary intervention, the reviewed literature reveals several critical dimensions that remain insufficiently problematized. First, the designation of representative inheritors is rarely examined as a process that may produce new hierarchies and elite status within religious communities. Official recognition can concentrate authority, resources, and visibility in the hands of a limited number of individuals, potentially marginalizing alternative practitioners and informal transmission networks within temples.

Second, the role of Buddhist music as a component of cultural soft power is seldom addressed explicitly. State-sponsored performances, international cultural exchanges, and heritage exhibitions position Buddhist music as a symbol of national culture, yet the implications of this recontextualization for religious meaning and ritual authenticity remain underexplored. Third, although tourism-driven performances are frequently acknowledged, few studies critically examine how staging, commodification, and audience-oriented adaptation may reshape Buddhist music into a heritage spectacle, potentially distancing it from its original spiritual functions. These silences indicate a significant analytical gap in the existing literature and underscore the need for more critical, ethnographically grounded research that examines power relations, institutional mediation, and lived religious experience within the heritagization of Buddhist music.

4.3. RQ2a. *What are the focuses of the research on heritagization and ICH?*

The preservation and protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) have emerged as central concerns in contemporary scholarship. ICH represents an integral aspect of cultural heritage, encompassing a continuously evolving process of creating and interpreting meaning. Its value is not inherent but shaped by complex, dynamic interactions within society, culture, and discourse (Wu, 2020). ICH encompasses the customs, traditions, and practices of diverse social collectives, reflecting collaborative efforts by communities, groups, and individuals (Moisala, 2019; Yi et al., 2021). Research on heritagisation spans multiple disciplines, including anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, history, art history, and folklore, with a particular emphasis on ICH and its processes (Aikawa-Faure, 2022; Baird, 2017; Banaszkiwicz, 2022; Gwervevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Hammou et al., 2020; Koo, 2021).

Sociocultural dynamics. Heritagization significantly affects multiple aspects of social life, functioning as a cultural and social endeavor that creates meaning within specific political and cultural contexts (Sárközi, 2021). Research highlights contrasting interpretations of heritage by minority communities, the Chinese state, and UNESCO. While UNESCO emphasizes



global significance, China views heritage as a tool for national cohesion. Within China's heritage governance framework, nation-building objectives are pursued through centralized administrative structures aligned with global heritage standards, resulting in the consolidation of cultural authority at the state level and the reconfiguration of community-based cultural ownership. (Chen et al., 2020). ICH also shapes individual and collective cultural identities, requiring active participation from all sectors of society to establish heritage as a shared social resource (Gao et al., 2022).

Technological advancements. Innovation and technology play vital roles in the preservation and dissemination of ICH. Advances in science and technology have facilitated new methods for documenting, transmitting, and promoting ICH, enhancing efficiency and offering opportunities for modernization (Wang, 2023). Tools such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) have been employed to recreate Chinese cultural artifacts, such as Peking Opera masks and dances, allowing audiences to engage interactively through head-mounted devices (Shi et al., 2023). AR is also used to showcase traditional crafts, enabling viewers to observe production processes via mobile devices, thereby increasing educational value and interest (Ishida et al., 2019). Digital archives and databases further support preservation by meticulously documenting ICH, safeguarding vulnerable artifacts, and providing global access for research and education (Yu, 2020). Social media platforms, including Weibo and TikTok, enable ICH practitioners to reach younger audiences, whereas webcasting and online teaching facilitate broader access to cultural knowledge.

Community Engagement and Dynamic Conservation. Research has emphasized the importance of community involvement in ICH preservation, particularly in music conservation. Studies highlight a shift from traditional methods of preservation toward approaches prioritizing community participation, innovation, and authentic conservation (Sousa, 2018; Melis & Chambers, 2021). Current perspectives underscore the layered meanings of intangible cultural heritage while stressing the necessity of adapting to shifting social and cultural environments. Collectively, these studies demonstrate a dynamic, interdisciplinary approach to ICH, emphasizing the central role of communities in sustaining and transmitting cultural practices such as music.

4.4. RQ2b. *What are the implications of heritagization and ICH for the field of Buddhist music?*

Identity transformation. The heritagization of Buddhist music in China has led to a significant transformation in its identity and function. Traditionally, Buddhist music primarily serves religious purposes, such as sutra chanting and ritual ceremonies, and is transmitted orally from mentors to apprentices (Wang & Sun, 2020). Regional variations contribute to diverse musical styles with minimal recognition beyond religious contexts (Yang & Zhou, 2021). The process of heritagization has repositioned Buddhist music within the cultural heritage domain, increasing awareness of its historical and cultural significance. UNESCO's advocacy for ICH, coupled with Chinese government initiatives, has prompted monasteries to declare their musical practices as intangible heritage, fostering proactive preservation strategies (Zhang, 2023).

Sustainable Preservation and Modern Adaptation. Heritagization underscores the need to conserve traditional music while accommodating societal changes. Sustainable preservation aligns with UNESCO's 2003 convention for safeguarding oral and intangible heritage (Xiao & Yang, 2022). Buddhist music must retain its religious and cultural characteristics while adapting to contemporary society to remain vibrant and meaningful (Du & Lv, 2019). The inclusion of Daxiangguo Temple's Brahma music and 13 other Buddhist works on China's national ICH list has enhanced their status, attracted government support, and increased public awareness (Xu & Tao, 2022; Dong, 2022; Yan & Chiou, 2021). Innovative initiatives, such as Dunhuang's "Heritage on the Cloud," leverage technology to digitize, organize, and popularize Buddhist music, expanding its reach beyond religious contexts to concerts, educational programs, and media.

Dynamic Integration of Tradition and Modernity. UNESCO's Ethical Principles for Safeguarding ICH emphasize honoring the evolving, living nature of cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2015). Chinese policies, including the 2017 "Opinions on the Implementation of the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture," support the integration of heritage into daily life and contemporary production (reference needed). Consequently, Buddhist music, recognized as an ICH, integrates modern elements while maintaining essential religious and cultural characteristics (Yan, 2023). Monasteries increasingly employ professional musicians, modify repertoire, and introduce new instruments (e.g., chime, yangqin, pipa, guqin, sanxian, drums), striking a balance between tradition and contemporary appeal (Zhai, 2022).

Academic exploration and sustainability. Buddhist music has become a focus of scholarly research, examining its historical development, cultural implications, and societal roles (Wang, 2022). Chocano (2022) applied qualitative analysis and historiography to investigate the long-term sustainability of musical ecosystems and the influence of ICH frameworks. The findings suggest that challenges to sustainability arise less from methodological differences and more from the need for effective stakeholder collaboration. Heritage and the ICH influence Buddhist music through cultural transmission, creative integration, contemporary adaptation, and a holistic understanding of the musical ecosystem. These processes are essential for preserving, transmitting, and promoting traditional Chinese culture globally.

4.5. RQ3a. *What is the role of representative inheritors in ICH?*

Community-Centric Transmission and Identity. ICH encompasses diverse communities, groups, and individuals. Traditional knowledge is inherited from forebears and passed down to future generations, and the ongoing recreation of heritage fosters a sense of identity and continuous connection, rendering it particularly vulnerable to disruption (UNESCO, 2007). Identity is central to the construction of a sense of place, encompassing both tangible elements, such as physical characteristics, and intangible aspects, such as meanings and symbols (Taylor, 2020). The preservation and dissemination of ICH is a complex, multifaceted process that relies on the active participation of key individuals and communities who carry and transmit these traditions.

According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, inheritors are recognized as authentic carriers of the ICH, and their engagement is crucial for its preservation. This underscores the importance of both communities and individuals in safeguarding cultural heritage, granting them agency independent of political or technological intermediaries. The Convention emphasizes that communities play a vital role in protecting ICH and in fostering identity and continuity through intergenerational knowledge transfer. Communities express their cultural heritage symbolically, reinforcing collective and individual affiliation with the ICH (Lázaro & Jiménez, 2022).

Culture Inheritors and Practitioners. Monks, including Buddhist music, are instrumental in both preserving and innovating within the ICH (MacLachlan, 2022; Meng & Gong, 2022; Xu & Tao, 2022). Buddhist music, as part of rituals and religious practices, is traditionally performed and transmitted in monastic settings. Monks act as creators, performers, and preservers of this heritage. For example, Yushan Fanbai (鱼山梵) integrated Han Chinese melodies with the traditional Fanbai style and was included in the second group of national ICH representative items in 2008 (Meng & Gong, 2022; Yin, 2022). Monks at Daxiangguo Temple maintain and transmit this tradition, seeking harmony in performance and chanting, demonstrating profound comprehension and reverence for the art. Monks also adapt Buddhist music to contemporary society, exemplified by the digital transformation efforts at Tianning Temple, which utilize technology to preserve and disseminate chanting and other musical forms such as the ICH (Zhou, 2021).

Guardians and innovators. Monks play a vital role in safeguarding and disseminating ICH, including Buddhist music (MacLachlan, 2022; Meng & Gong, 2022; Xu & Tao, 2022). Buddhist music, as part of Buddhist rituals and religious practices, is usually played and passed on by monks in religious settings such as temples and temple fairs. Many studies have shown that monks not only are the creators and performers of Buddhist music but also assume the role of preservers of intangible cultural heritage. An example is Yushan Fanbai (鱼山梵呗). Yushan Fanbai is an innovative system that integrates Han Chinese melodies with the traditional Fanbai style. The practical assimilation of Western Fanbai into Chinese culture profoundly influenced the evolution of Buddhist music in subsequent eras (Meng & Gong, 2022). Yushan Fanbai was added to the second group of national ICH representative items in 2008 (Yin, 2022). Monks uphold the central position of the Buddhist music heritage in preserving and passing on Yushan Fanbai, using the traditional technique of transmitting knowledge from teacher to disciple. Furthermore, at Daxiangguo Temple, monks not only have the duty of preserving Yushan Fanbai, a form of Buddhist music but also strive to attain a state of harmonious synchronization in their performance and chanting. This demonstrates their profound comprehension of and reverence for traditional arts. Monks are crucial in adapting and interpreting Buddhist music as an ICH in response to China's evolving social and economic landscape (Du & Lv, 2019). They not only preserve tradition but also strive to make it applicable to the demands of contemporary society. An illustrative example is the digital transformation endeavour undertaken by the monks at Tianning Temple. This project highlights the monks' innovative endeavors in conserving and disseminating Buddhist music, particularly chanting, as an ICH (Zhou, 2021).

Cultural innovators and intergenerational mediators. Monks facilitate intergenerational dialog and cultural exchange, acting as both custodians and innovators. Using Margaret Mead's theoretical framework of co-figurative and postfigurative culture, Ma and Liu (2019) highlight that monks bridge traditional and contemporary elements, integrating new influences and adapting to evolving contexts. They are central to cultural identity formation and communication. Poulos' living heritage approach emphasizes the critical role of communities and inheritors in ICH management (Taylor, 2020). Monks engage with government agencies and academic institutions to document, promote, and preserve ICH, ensuring its vitality and relevance while safeguarding its historical and cultural significance.

4.6. RQ3b. *What impact have representative inheritors had on Buddhist music in China?*

Principles and Integration. The development and dissemination of Buddhist music have been guided by foundational principles embedded in the Mahayana Buddhist monastic tradition. Monks play essential roles in spreading teachings and extending care to all sentient beings, with music serving as a central component of religious ceremonies and practices (Zhou, 2021). Chinese Buddhist music functions as a system of sound offerings—including chanting, spoken texts, and musical performances—integral to both ritual practice and the transmission of Buddhist teachings and is pivotal to embedding Buddhism within traditional Chinese ceremonial culture (Wang & Sun, 2020).

Secular Integration. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhist music extended beyond religious settings into the secular sphere. Monks composed and performed music, integrating chanting, recitation, and musical offerings from classical texts into broader musical systems. This facilitated the assimilation of Buddhist music into traditional Chinese ritual culture.

The popular lecture system (*sujiang*, 俗讲) during the early Tang Dynasty made Buddhist music more accessible to the general populace, contributing to its secularization. Later, the incorporation of lyric music and *qupai* (labeled melodies) during the Song Dynasty further sinicized Buddhist music (Yin, 2022).

Today, Buddhist music is transmitted primarily through monastic organizations. Monks, often trained in contemporary musical techniques, serve as the main performers and custodians of these traditions. For example, the Kaifeng Daxiangguo Temple Buddhist Orchestra, founded in 2002, combines full-time monastic musicians proficient in both traditional and modern instruments, ensuring continuity and innovation in musical practice (Du & Lv, 2019).

Cultural Exchange. Monks are central to both preserving traditional Buddhist music and facilitating cultural exchange. Senior monks impart knowledge of *Fanbai* singing and Buddhist music to younger generations through oral transmission. Monasteries such as Shuxian Temple (Wutai Mountain) and Tianning Temple (Changzhou) maintain authenticity while fostering evolution and adaptation (Meng & Gong, 2022; Zhai, 2022). The Maritime Silk Road and other cultural routes facilitated the introduction of foreign elements into Chinese Buddhist music, enhancing its diversity and enriching cultural exchange (Dong, 2023). Monks adapt Buddhist music to contemporary aesthetics while preserving religious and artistic integrity (Zhu, 2022).

Duality in State Management. The state plays a dual role in the preservation of Buddhist music as the ICH does. While the Chinese government provides recognition, legal frameworks, and financial support for certified inheritors (Song, 2022; Maags, 2023), this centralization can create a disconnect between official inheritors and authentic cultural custodians (D'Evelyn, 2021). Government-sanctioned inheritors may emphasize formal transmission, sometimes at the expense of deeper spiritual and cultural meanings. However, state involvement can also provide resources, visibility, and opportunities for broader dissemination, and diverse inheritors contribute innovative perspectives and revitalize cultural heritage. Balancing official oversight with authentic practice remains a key challenge and area for future research.

The results demonstrate that Chinese Buddhist music has evolved historically, adapted to contemporary society through heritagization, and relies on the central role of representative inheritors—primarily monks—for preservation, transmission, innovation, and cultural integration. Heritage has strengthened global recognition, academic exploration, and public engagement while presenting challenges such as commercialization, succession, and the ability to balance authenticity with modern adaptation. Representative inheritors act as both guardians and innovators, ensuring that Buddhist music remains a living, dynamic cultural heritage while preserving its religious, historical, and artistic significance.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major findings and critical insights

Guided by the PRISMA framework, this systematic review examined 20 peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2024 on the heritagization of Chinese Buddhist music. The relatively small number of eligible studies reflects both the specificity of the topic and the stringent inclusion criteria applied. Despite this limitation, the review provides a comprehensive synthesis of how heritagization has shaped the preservation, transmission, and contemporary reconfiguration of Buddhist music within China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) system.

The findings demonstrate that heritagization has played a significant role in sustaining Buddhist music by enhancing institutional recognition, public visibility, and material support. At the same time, it has actively transformed religious sound practices. Through their incorporation into heritage frameworks, Buddhist musical forms have increasingly moved beyond temple-based ritual contexts into cultural festivals, tourism performances, and heritage exhibitions. In regions such as Tibet, Sichuan, and Fujian, Buddhist music operates within a hybrid cultural ecosystem in which religious, folk, and regional musical elements converge. The inscription of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist music on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List further underscores the cultural significance of these traditions within both national and global heritage landscapes.

Representative inheritors—particularly Buddhist monks—occupy a central position within this ecosystem. As custodians and transmitters of musical knowledge, they play a crucial role in maintaining ritual continuity while also adapting practices to contemporary social and cultural conditions. Heritagization has provided these inheritors with institutional recognition, material resources, and symbolic authority, strengthening their capacity to safeguard Buddhist music. At the same time, this process reshapes the social roles and responsibilities of inheritors, positioning them at the intersection of religious practice, cultural policy, and public representation.

5.2. Analytical gaps and future research directions

A critical synthesis of the literature reveals several persistent gaps. First, although heritagization research increasingly addresses cultural, economic, and political dimensions, focused studies on Buddhist music remain relatively limited and predominantly China-centered. Few studies examine cross-cultural transmission or the global circulation of Chinese Buddhist music. Second, existing research tends to prioritize historical excavation, ritual analysis, and textual studies, often overlooking how heritagization affects musical practice, community participation, and creative innovation. Third, while policies governing representative inheritors are well documented, insufficient attention is given to their lived experiences, internal dynamics, and creative negotiations between tradition and modernity.

In addition, emerging challenges related to digital technologies, social media, and new performance environments remain underexplored. Although digitization is frequently presented as a tool for preservation, systematic analyses of its impact on musical practice, audience engagement, and intergenerational transmission are still scarce. Addressing these gaps will require more ethnographically grounded, interdisciplinary, and longitudinal research approaches.

5.3. Contributions and implications

By systematically examining the heritagization of Chinese Buddhist music, this study consolidates existing scholarship while offering a more critical and nuanced understanding of heritagization as a dynamic and transformative process. The findings demonstrate that heritagization extends beyond symbolic or administrative recognition to involve ongoing negotiations among communities, representative inheritors, and policymakers over how Buddhist musical traditions are preserved, adapted, and publicly represented.

This review contributes to heritage studies by situating Buddhist music at the intersection of religion, culture, and state governance, thereby highlighting its analytical value as a distinctive form of religious intangible cultural heritage. By identifying theoretical and empirical gaps—particularly regarding power relations, institutional mediation, and ritual transformation—the study provides a systematic foundation for future research on religious heritage under contemporary heritage regimes.

The findings are relevant to multiple stakeholders. For cultural policymakers and heritage managers, the study underscores the importance of balancing safeguarding objectives with religious authenticity and community agency. For Buddhist institutions and monks, it highlights both the opportunities and potential risks associated with heritage designation, particularly in relation to ritual transformation and public performance. For scholars, the review calls for more ethnographically informed and audience-centered research to better understand the social impacts and lived experiences of heritagization in religious sound practices.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on previously published academic literature and does not involve human or animal subjects. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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