
Practice Studies on Youth Engagement in Intangible Cultural Heritage Education through Shanwei Yuge Chinese Folk Songs

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Abstract

This study investigates how practice-based educational strategies can enhance youth engagement in intangible cultural heritage education through Shanwei Yuge Chinese folk songs. The purpose of the research is to address the challenges faced by young learners who are increasingly disconnected from traditional cultural practices due to modernization and limited experiential exposure. Conducted in Shanwei City, an important heritage preservation zone, the study involved key informants, a general informant, and thirty casual informants, using interviews, field observations, student reflections, and audio-visual documentation. A qualitative research design was employed, and data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding to identify core themes relevant to youth cultural engagement. The findings revealed that before educational practice, curriculum structures were overly theoretical, teaching materials were limited, and instructional behavior was teacher-centered, resulting in low youth participation. After implementing practice-based strategies, including digital listening modules, authentic field recordings, guided interpretation, and performance-based learning, students demonstrated increased motivation, emotional resonance, cultural understanding, and active participation. These results suggest that experiential, multimodal, and culturally grounded instructional approaches are essential for sustaining ICH among younger generations. The study concludes that integrating authentic materials and participatory learning environments into ICH curricula can significantly strengthen youth engagement and support the long-term transmission of Shanwei Yuge. Future research should explore comparative models in other regions and examine digital innovations for broader cultural dissemination.

Keywords: Shanwei Yuge, Youth Engagement, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Practice-based Learning, Cultural Transmission

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) education has become increasingly important in contemporary China as rapid modernization reshapes cultural identities and transforms traditional modes of cultural transmission. Among the many forms of ICH, Shanwei Yuge, an ancient maritime folk-song tradition rooted in the daily life and emotional world of fishermen, stands as a distinctive cultural expression linking generations through music, storytelling, and shared experiences (Lubao & Ichumbaki, 2023; Gong et al., 2024). While modern disruptions have been widely discussed in the broader ICH literature, the most pressing challenge for Shanwei Yuge today is the weakening of intergenerational continuity, as younger audiences encounter fewer opportunities to interact with its lived cultural setting. Young people, growing up in highly digital environments far removed from the rhythms of fishing life, struggle to engage naturally with indigenous cultural practices. As a result, ICH education must re-envision how youth encounter, understand, and participate in cultural traditions such as Shanwei Yuge if these practices are to remain vibrant and meaningful (Meng & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Tu & Weng, 2024; Wan & Zhu, 2024).

The challenge is not simply a matter of presenting cultural content to young people, but of fostering genuine engagement and an emotional, intellectual, and participatory connection that allows cultural heritage to take root in their lives. Youth engagement requires recognizing the shifting characteristics of young learners who are shaped by digital media, diverse learning preferences, and evolving aesthetic expectations. They often seek interactive, experiential, and visually rich modes of learning (Erstad, 2015; King et al., 2016). This stands in contrast to older models of heritage transmission that emphasized patient listening, repetition, and community labor-based contexts. The disconnect between traditional modes of Yuge transmission and contemporary youth culture, therefore, calls for innovative educational strategies that resonate with young learners' interests while honoring the authenticity and depth of the heritage. For example, classroom observations in related cultural programs show that young learners respond more enthusiastically when musical traditions are presented through participatory activities, demonstration-based performances, or multimedia explanations rather than through passive instruction. Understanding how youth respond to different teaching formats, learning environments, and participation opportunities is essential for designing effective ICH education (Alejandro & David, 2018; Wang & Thotham, 2024; Yao et al., 2023).

In recent years, educators, cultural practitioners, and community leaders have begun exploring ways to bridge generational gaps by integrating Shanwei Yuge into formal and informal educational settings. Schools, cultural centers, and local institutions have experimented with workshops, choir rehearsals, creative reinterpretations, and performance-based learning to make the folk tradition accessible and relatable to younger audiences (Chen & Sensai, 2024; Gaskins, 2021; Ho, 2018). Digital platforms have also emerged as influential spaces for youth participation, offering new forms of exposure through short videos, online performances, and interactive cultural content. These efforts demonstrate growing recognition that youth engagement does not occur automatically; it must be nurtured through carefully designed practices that combine cultural authenticity with appealing methods of delivery (Hill et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). Nevertheless, examples from recent educational initiatives indicate that while such approaches increase visibility, they do not always lead to deeper cultural understanding, revealing the need for more systematic investigation into how youth actually experience and internalize these practices. Yet, despite these promising developments, there remains a limited understanding of how these educational practices function in real contexts, how youth respond, what motivates participation, what challenges arise, and what pedagogical strategies generate the strongest impact (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Miyoba et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2022).

Given this context, the present study investigates how practice-based educational strategies support youth engagement in intangible cultural heritage through the case of Shanwei Yuge Chinese folk songs. The research examines how various forms of instruction, ranging from school-based programs and community activities to digital interventions, affect young people's interest, participation, and cultural understanding. It seeks to uncover the mechanisms by which educational practices can encourage youth to connect with traditional music, appreciate its cultural significance, and participate actively in its preservation. Corresponding to this research objective, the study proposes that well-designed educational practices will strengthen youth engagement by enhancing cultural identity, deepening emotional resonance, and providing meaningful experiences through which Shanwei Yuge becomes personally relevant. By analyzing the outcomes of these practices, the study aims to offer insights that support more effective ICH education models capable of sustaining cultural heritage in an era of rapid social change.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in educational practice analysis to investigate youth engagement in intangible cultural heritage education (Gürel & Çetin, 2019; Mangkhang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024) through Shanwei Yuge Chinese folk songs. The research emphasizes authentic field experience, intergenerational cultural transmission, and youth learning behavior.

2.1. Research Design and Scope

The research design centered on exploring youth interaction with Shanwei Yuge across community settings, school environments, and informal learning spaces. Shanwei City served as the principal site due to its cultural significance as the origin of Shanwei Yuge and its designation as a major intangible cultural heritage preservation zone. The study aimed to analyze

how youth participate in singing, observing, and responding to Shanwei Yuge, and how these practices support cultural continuity. The temporal scope of the study spans from September 2024 to November 2025, allowing for repeated engagement and seasonal cultural observations.

2.2. Selection of Informants

Informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich cultural insight and authentic representation of youth engagement. The study involved three key informants, one general informant, and thirty student participants constituting the Casual Informant Group. This sample size was considered sufficient because the three experts provided saturation in cultural and historical perspectives, while the thirty students offered adequate diversity to capture a broad range of youth responses. The combination of expert practitioners and youth participants enabled a multi-layered understanding of heritage education practices, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Informants

Informant Category	Criteria / Description	Number
Key Informants	≥30 years singing experience; ICH inheritors; deep cultural knowledge; contributors to Shanwei Yuge transmission	3
General Informant	Experienced practitioner actively engaged in Shanwei Yuge performance	1
Casual Informant	GroupSchool students familiar with Shanwei Yuge through school or community exposure	30

The key informants offered historical, stylistic, and cultural expertise, while the general informant provided additional perspective on performance practices. The Casual Informant Group represented the target demographic of youth, enabling the study to capture authentic responses to intangible cultural heritage education.

2.3. Research Tools

A combination of structured and semi-structured tools was used to gather data across different contexts. Interview guides were developed to explore cultural knowledge, learning experiences, and youth attitudes toward Shanwei Yuge. Observation forms recorded engagement behaviors during school-based and community activities. Reflection sheets provided insight into students' emotional, cultural, and cognitive responses. All research tools were reviewed by academic advisors and revised for clarity and alignment with research objectives, ensuring cultural appropriateness, comprehensibility for youth participants, and direct relevance to the research questions, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Research Tools

Tool Type	Purpose	Description
Interview Guide	Explore cultural perspectives	Used with key and general informants
Observation Sheet	Document youth engagement	Applied during classes, rehearsals, and cultural events
Reflection Form	Capture learning experiences	Completed by student participants
Audio-Visual	Preserve cultural performance	Photos, videos, and recordings of activities

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection proceeded in multiple stages. First, field visits were conducted to cultural centers and fishing communities, where the researcher observed performance practices and interacted with informants. Interviews with the key inheritors and general informants were conducted to obtain expert insight into the musical, historical, and pedagogical dimensions of Shanwei Yuge. The Casual Informant Group participated through observation, informal conversations, and reflective writing during school activities. All student reflections and observational field notes were documented systematically. Visual documentation, such as performance photographs and cultural event recordings, strengthened the accuracy of the data and served as supplementary evidence during analysis, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Data Collection Activities

Activity	Participants Involved	Data Produced
Field Observation	Key informants, students	Field notes, photos
Semi-Structured Interviews	Key + general informants	Interview transcripts
Student Reflections	Casual Informant Group	Reflective journals
Cultural Event	Documentation All groups	Audio-visual materials

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through a three-phase coding process. The initial phase involved open coding to identify recurring ideas such as youth curiosity, cultural identity formation, aesthetic appreciation, and learning challenges. The axial coding phase connected these ideas to broader themes of participation, cultural understanding, and traditional knowledge

transfer. The final phase involved selective coding to synthesize core themes that directly addressed the research objective. Reliability was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, reflections, and observational data, as well as peer debriefing with academic mentors. This analytical process ensured that the study captured both the depth of traditional cultural knowledge and the authenticity of youth engagement.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

All interviews, observations, and learning activities were conducted in a culturally sensitive and non-intrusive manner, acknowledging the deep historical and communal significance of Shanwei Yuge. The study maintained the principles of respect, voluntary participation, beneficence, and cultural responsibility to ensure that all research activities supported the ethical preservation and transmission of this important intangible cultural heritage.

3. Results

The findings of this study reflect youth engagement outcomes that emerged through structured educational practices integrating Shanwei Yuge Chinese folk songs into intangible cultural heritage (ICH) education. Thematic analysis of interviews, observations, digital learning analytics, and reflective responses allowed the researcher to identify three major areas in which youth engagement underwent significant transformation. These results collectively illustrate how Shanwei Yuge, as a living form of intangible cultural heritage, became a meaningful vehicle for student engagement and cultural appreciation, enabling the next generation to interact with heritage in ways previously limited by traditional instructional formats.

3.1. Curriculum Structure and Content Imbalance

Before the intentional incorporation of Shanwei Yuge into educational practice, the curriculum structure observed in participating institutions reflected certain limitations that hindered youth engagement. Course content typically progressed in a linear, historically oriented fashion, emphasizing the origins, chronological development, and stylistic classifications of folk traditions without offering students sufficient opportunities to interact with these materials in dynamic ways. As shown in Figure 1, the chronological presentation of heritage content mirrored the instructional pattern observed during class: long stretches of lecture, brief reviews, and minimal opportunity for active interpretation.



Figure 1. The Development Timeline of Shanwei Yuge Chinese Folk Songs

During classroom observations, students were observed copying notes but rarely demonstrating active aesthetic inquiry or personal interpretation. One field note entry recorded: “Most students look at the screen, write down dates, but show no visible reaction when music examples are mentioned; they have not heard any yet.” This passive pattern suggests that course design before implementing educational practice was heavily weighted toward theoretical explanation rather than participatory learning.

Interview responses from cultural inheritors reinforced this observation. One inheritor stated that young people often “hear the story but do not feel the song,” highlighting the gap between intellectual awareness and emotional connection. Another practitioner noted: “They know the name Yuge, but not its breath, its pulse.” General informants similarly affirmed that students lacked familiarity not only with performance practices but also with the cultural environments in which Yuge historically emerged. The absence of structured listening sessions, guided aesthetic reflection, or interactive activities contributed to what informants described as a “distance between young learners and the heritage they study.”

After implementing the educational practice model, the structural imbalance was significantly reduced. Students completed pre-learning activities, including digital listening modules, short documentary clips, and guided observation tasks, which allowed them to enter class with initial conceptual and auditory grounding. Several students mentioned that the pre-class listening “made the song feel real before the teacher explained it.” Classroom time then shifted from passive reception to active engagement, with students comparing melodies, discussing emotions, and proposing interpretations. The summarized as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Curriculum Structure Comparison Before and After Educational Practice

Aspect of Curriculum	Before Practice	After Practice
Learning mode	Instructor-centered lectures	Blended: pre-learning, in-class analysis, reflection
Student engagement	Passive notetaking	Active participation and dialogue
Content sequence	Linear, historical narration	Experiential - Analytical - Reflective cycle
Use of Yuge	Occasional mention as content	Central material for learning activities
Aesthetic engagement	Minimal	Strongly emphasized through guided tasks

Student responses confirmed these improvements. One reflection noted: “When I listened before class, I already had questions in my mind, so the discussion felt natural.” Another wrote: “I didn’t know folk songs could be analyzed like this; it’s not just history; it’s feeling.”

3.2. *Teaching Materials and Cultural Coverage Constraints*

Before integrating practice-based methods, instructors faced challenges accessing diverse teaching materials related to Shanwei Yuge and other ICH music traditions. Textbooks offered written descriptions but few authentic soundscapes or demonstrations of performance context. One instructor reflected: “The textbook talks about timbre and ornamentation, but students cannot imagine them without hearing them.”

Students echoed this limitation. A general informant observed that “students know what Yuge is, but they do not know how it feels.” Instruction heavily depended on verbal explanation, with minimal use of audio-visual materials. Classroom observation confirmed this, noting: “Aesthetic concepts remain abstract for learners; without sound, Yuge becomes only a story.”

The adoption of educational practice greatly expanded the range of instructional materials. Performance videos, interviews with inheritors, field recordings, and documentary excerpts became central tools. As shown in Figure 2, school-based Yuge performances were used as key examples for illustrating intergenerational transmission.



Figure 2. The Choir of Shanwei Fishing Village Primary School is Performing
Source: The Researcher, from Fieldwork in June 2025

Through digital platforms, instructors curated playlists, arranged listening sequences, and provided subtitles and dialect explanations. Students could replay, annotate, and compare different Yuge styles at their own pace. This created what one student described as “a whole world of Yuge that I didn’t know existed”, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Teaching Material Expansion Enabled by Educational Practice

Category of Material	Before Practice	After Practice
Audio recordings	Limited; textbook-provided	Extensive: field recordings, archival clips, student-curated playlists
Video materials	Rare	Performance videos, interviews, documentaries
Cultural context sources	Text descriptions only	Ethnographic accounts, visual culture, community-oriented documentation
Interactive tools	None	Online annotation, collaborative playlists, discussion boards
Dialect resources	Very limited	Integrated captioning, transcripts, phonetic explanations

Students consistently reported that these materials brought the heritage “closer.” One student reflected: “The field recording with waves in the background—it was the first time I felt the sea inside the music.”

3.3. *Instructional Behavior and Learner Participation*

One of the most significant findings of the study is the shift in instructional behavior and corresponding increases in learner participation after integrating the educational practice model.

Previously, instructors dominated classroom discourse, explaining content while students listened quietly. Field notes captured this dynamic: “Only two students spoke during a forty-minute lecture. Most interaction was teacher-directed.” After implementing practice-based strategies, instruction became facilitative rather than directive. Instructors prompted students to interpret emotional tone, compare performances, or connect Yuge to local identity. A teacher explained: “Now I don’t tell them the answer, I ask them what they hear, what they feel.”

Online participation also increased dramatically. Students posted reflective entries, responded to peers, and engaged in aesthetic comparison tasks. Many reported feeling “more confident” in expressing opinions in blended environments. One

reflection noted: “Writing online helped me organize my thoughts before speaking in class.” Multimedia materials contributed substantially to deeper engagement. As shown in Figure 3, the cinematic presentation of Shanwei Yuge was used to demonstrate how traditional music adapts to modern performance settings.



Figure 3. The Shanwei Yuge Chinese Folk Songs Performed in the Theater

Source: The Researcher, from Fieldwork in June 2025

Students reacted strongly to these modern adaptations. One student commented: “Seeing Yuge on a big stage made me realize it doesn’t belong only to the past.” Another shared: “The visuals helped me understand the emotion better than the textbook ever did.” Observed changes in participation are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Changes in Learner Participation Before and After Educational Practice

Participation Indicator	Before Practice	After Practice
Number of students participating	Low	High
Depth of reflective writing	Surface-level	Interpretive and self-aware
Engagement with digital materials	Minimal	Frequent and sustained
Emotional response to Yuge	Uncertain or distant	Connected, empathetic
Cultural identification	Weak	Strengthened

Beyond intellectual development, emotional and identity-based engagement grew markedly. Students described feelings of pride, nostalgia, and cultural curiosity, even those not from Shanwei. This suggests that experiential ICH education cultivates cross-regional empathy and a stronger sense of cultural belonging.

A key shift was students moving from passive recipients to active interpreters. Several created audio commentaries on melodies voluntarily, while others produced short comparative presentations. One student summarized this transformation: “I used to think Yuge was old music. Now I see it as my heritage even if I wasn’t born in Shanwei.”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that practice-based educational strategies meaningfully enhance youth engagement in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) education through Shanwei Yuge Chinese folk songs, aligning with the theoretical and empirical foundations presented in the introduction and literature review. Prior research has emphasized that contemporary youth require multimodal, experiential, and culturally relevant learning environments to connect with heritage traditions (Erstad, 2015; King et al., 2016). This study supports these assertions by showing that traditional lecture-centered approaches were insufficient for fostering emotional resonance, cultural understanding, or sustained interest in Shanwei Yuge. Rather than relying primarily on memorization or linear presentation of historical facts, effective ICH education requires instructional formats that actively involve learners in listening, observing, and responding to cultural materials, confirming observations that heritage transmission must balance authenticity with accessible instructional design (Ho, 2018; Tu & Weng, 2024).

The integration of real-world cultural materials, field recordings, and performance-based learning resolved the constraints identified in earlier teaching practices. This aligns with research suggesting that audio-visual and experiential media deepen cultural immersion and aesthetic cognition (Gaskins, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Students’ reflections indicated that hearing authentic vocal timbres and observing community performances helped them “feel the sea inside the music,” echoing the view that embodied encounters with ICH strengthen cultural identity and emotional connection (Chen & Sensai, 2024; Yao et al., 2023). By shifting from abstract explanation to direct engagement with cultural soundscapes, students developed more nuanced perceptions of Yuge’s emotional and social functions, aligning with Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who argue that learning environments integrating sensory, affective, and intellectual dimensions promote deeper engagement and long-term retention.

Furthermore, the shift in instructional behavior from teacher-centered lecturing to dialogic facilitation mirrors broader pedagogical trends in innovative and learner-centered ICH education (Alejandro & David, 2018; Gürel & Çetin, 2019). Students' increased participation, enriched reflective journals, and voluntary creative analysis demonstrate how practice-based instruction fosters agency, interpretive skills, and cultural ownership. These outcomes align with Torres et al. (2022), who found that youth engagement grows when learners are positioned as interpreters and co-creators of cultural meaning. The emergence of independent student commentary, peer-to-peer exchanges, and aesthetic comparison work in this study reflects a growing sense of ownership, suggesting that learners move beyond passive reception toward active cultural interpretation. The results also affirm Wang & Thotham's (2024) argument that experiential methods enhance literacy transmission in Chinese folk song traditions by connecting students to the social and emotional contexts of musical heritage.

This study contributes to ICH education research by revealing that youth engagement improves most significantly when three conditions are met: 1) curricular restructuring enables experiential-analytical-reflective learning cycles; 2) teaching materials include authentic, multimodal cultural sources; and 3) instructional behavior supports student agency, interpretation, and dialogue. These findings reinforce the theoretical principle that ICH preservation depends not only on access to cultural content but also on pedagogies that transform cultural artifacts into meaningful learning experiences (Meng & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Wan & Zhu, 2024). Overall, the results suggest that when Shanwei Yuge is taught through participatory, culturally grounded, and student-centered methods, young learners become more capable of appreciating its artistic value and more motivated to contribute to its transmission.

In conclusion, in this case study, practice-based educational strategies substantially increased youth motivation, emotional resonance, cultural identification, and active participation in learning Shanwei Yuge Chinese folk songs. Students moved from passive recipients of knowledge to engaged cultural participants, demonstrating that ICH education must integrate authenticity, interactivity, and reflective learning to remain relevant in modern contexts. Among participants in this research, these strategies proved effective in strengthening connections to Shanwei Yuge, though outcomes may vary in different cultural or curricular settings. While this study focused on Shanwei Yuge, its implications extend to other forms of ICH requiring revitalization among younger generations. Future research should explore comparative models across diverse regions and musical traditions, evaluate long-term impacts on cultural identity development, and investigate how digital platforms can further enhance ICH engagement. By expanding research in these directions, educators and policymakers can develop more sustainable, culturally grounded, and youth-centered models of intangible cultural heritage education.

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