

## Preserving Tradition through Innovation: Northeast Folk Music in Wang Danhong's Works for Chinese National Orchestra

Fang Danqi<sup>1</sup> , Tazul Izan Tajuddin<sup>2\*</sup> , Li Tengzi<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Conservatory of Music, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: fangdanqi4@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Conservatory of Music, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: tazulizan@uitm.edu.my

<sup>3</sup>Conservatory of Music, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: 327596407@qq.com

### ABSTRACT

#### CORRESPONDING

#### AUTHOR (\*):

Tazul Izan Tajuddin  
(tazulizan@uitm.edu.my)

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This paper aims to explore how Wang Danhong revitalizes the traditional music of the Northeast region through tuneful founding inputting new orchestral arts. This paper explores the security of intangible cultural heritage by analyzing the work of Danhong as globalism and modernization endanger traditional music. Through the collection of secondary data such as musical scores, recordings, and critiques, this research studies thematic analysis to analyse themes in her works. The learned major themes include The Cultural Imperative, Creativity and Tradition, Modernity and Truth. It is evidenced from the study that Wang's compositions are rooted in the musical elements of Northeast folk music but have employed new modes of orchestration to appeal to the modern sensibilities. This paper emphasizes the conservation of reverence music through modern adaptations and offers safeguard measures regarding cultural democracy. It has relevance regarding the discussions about the preservation of heritage in a constantly globalizing world.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by documenting how Wang Danhong's compositions blend Northeast folk music with modern orchestration, offering a unique approach to preserving intangible cultural heritage. The paper's primary contribution is finding that thematic reinterpretation ensures cultural relevance in a globalized context.

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine Wang Danhong's compositions as a model that seeks to conserve tradition as well as create contemporary music. This research was undertaken with secondary research data, including musical scores, recording, and critical analysis, to collect thematic data on cultural conservation and reinvention (Li & Xue, 2023). By

relying mainly on secondary data, the analysis covers the main aspects of Wang Danhong's work in the context of history, culture, and art. The culture is well-kept through music, which makes it the link between the past and the present. It reflects the developments, culture, and beliefs that exist within societies so that they may be passed from one generation to the other (Wang & Zhao, 2022). Therefore, it could be argued that the folk music of Northeast China expresses the cultural diversity and historical backgrounds of the region. However, with the growth of globalization as well as the enhancement of 3urbanization, traditional art threatens to lose practitioners, originality, and uniqueness. This has, in turn, called for the development of new modalities for the protection and preservation of such traditions with future generations (Zhang, 2015).

Wang Danhong, a distinguished composer for China National Orchestra has been prominent in the renaissance of the folk music of the Northeast region. Her work effectively incorporates pentatonic scale, folk rhythms, indigenous instruments and LOGIC of contemporary orchestral compositions (Wang & Zhao, 2022). In essence, through the setting of folk tunes to the modern orchestral arrangements, Danhong not only keeps her cultural heritage in existence but also brings it to other continents. These two approaches summarize the effectiveness of artistic iconoclasm in preserving the culture's originality whilst making it relevant in the contemporary world (Wang & Zhao, 2022).

Cultural sustainability is another approach advanced in the study that is relevant to larger discussion in ethnomusicology and heritage studies. They enact how contemporary artworks can develop the means by which intangible cultural heritage can be sustained in the face of changing social contexts (Zhang, 2021). In addition, it responds to the correlation between preserving cultural identity and embracing creative processes, providing suggestions for professionals and researchers in musicology, cultural studies, and cultural heritage management (Li & Xue, 2023). As for Wang Danhong's compositions, they provide the perfect example of how it is possible to update traditional music and ensure that people of the present and generations to come would still find it engaging. They also highlight a need to maintain the features of intercultural contact in an increasingly interconnected world (Hakonen et al., 2024).

The intensification of globalization and modernization processes has therefore put the practice and documentation of the intangible cultural heritage, including folk music, at risk. Problems include shrinking engagement, pressure for cultural standardization, and limited exportation of Northeast folk music, a rich cultural asset of China (Li & Xue, 2023). Though classical music enshrines and celebrates a nation's identity and heritage, its sustainability demands social culture shifts to fit the contemporary world. The problem is solved by Wang Danhong, a considered composer, who adds new life to the genre by incorporating folk music from the Northeast region into orchestral pieces (Li, 2024). However, there is a lack of study that looks at the balance of cultural sensitivity of her work and artistic creativity (Wang et al., 2021). This study aims to address this gap by critically examining the thematic aspects in Wang and Zhao (2022) compositions as strategies to modernise traditional music concerning their authenticity and cultural significance.

## 2. Literature Review

This review is based on at least ten peer-reviewed sources within the subfields of ethnomusicology, cultural heritage, and artistry. For instance, Marx (2023) reviews the

interplay between leadership and innovation from cultural and business perspectives with findings on how to align culture with contemporary approaches. In the same vein, [Zhang \(2015\)](#) contributes by exploring how efficiency in technology serves as a framework to analyze artistic modernity. [Wang and Zhao \(2022\)](#) stress the role of flexibility in creating value within an organization, which corresponds to the question of cultural integrity in changeable settings. Other works, including [Zhang et al., \(2020\)](#) considered the influence of innovation on social structures, can help explain the transformation function of contemporary compositions. These sources in addition to other databases such as [Dang et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Hakonen et al. \(2024\)](#) are the basis of this study. Taken together, these works present a matrix of cultural continuity and creation that reflects a breakdown of culture.

It has been widely acknowledged that music is a crucial component in the safeguarding of ICH. Ethnomusicology as an academic field focuses on the documentation of traditional music and the attempt of continuing their elements in the community. In their study [Zhang et al., \(2020\)](#) argued that the sustainability of cultural assets is preserved through effective and innovative ways that still retain the originality of the cultural objects for the modern taste. This is especially the case with regard to the Northeast folk music because globalization poses a great threat to traditional music culture. In songs by Wang Danhong, one can see a distinct approach to the contemporizing attempts of the traditional genres. Similar to other scholars like [Dang et al. \(2021\)](#), more focus on the need to incorporate traditional knowledge into the current ones, which calls for more attention towards creativity that would be useful in preserving cultures. Likewise, talks about how technology can be applied to preserve cultures and makes references to what Danhong did when he decided to use orchestral arrangements to enhance folk tunes.

Ideas or creativity are central to the process of ensuring that the traditional forms of art keep up with the modern world. [Wang et al. \(2020\)](#) also discusses ways in which innovation can increase efficiency but not sacrifice important values, which also applies to Wang Danhong's arrangements of Northeast folk music. All her pieces convert folk tunes into majestic pieces, with creativity without negation of cultural roots. Similar to what [Hakonen et al. \(2024\)](#) argued in 2024, Danhong tried to achieve a balance between the utilisation of traditional fabrics and modernity. She creates Northeast folk music for the whole world using quality instrumentation and orchestration while at the same time not losing its raw essence. [Zhang \(2015\)](#) consider innovation in relation to the juxtaposition between the conventional and the contemporary cultural artifacts and how the latter can boost the former. Culture conservation is another area of social concern that faces one major issue: the question of change. [Marx \(2023\)](#) addresses this issue, claiming that innovation might result in commodification of cultural references. This concern is relevant to Wang Danhong's work since the arrangement of folk music for performances affects the sensibilities of the masses.

[Li and Chen \(2021\)](#) warn against over-modernizing; this pushes the unconstructiveness of contemporary culture. This stance is especially important when considering Danhong's works because her compositions need to appeal to the modern audience while maintaining their Northeast folk identity. Similarly, [Zhang \(2015\)](#) points out that managing change also entails potential erosion of cultural identity, which should therefore be achieved with a view to preserving cultural reference points.

This paper examines selected compositions of Wang Danhong in an effort to understand how she not only has embraced Chinese traditional music but also expanded upon it. She shows that the folk style of Northeast China can still be performed in a contemporary way and yet still stay true to the roots. According to [Li and Chen \(2021\)](#), current interventions are vital towards the sustainability of ICH as the modern practice acts as the major means of engaging youths. In the context of dignity, creativity, and sustainability, [Marx \(2023\)](#) addresses the relevance of innovation in cultural conservation while also aiming at reaching the largest audience possible. This is similar to what Danhong has done in that the traditional melodies and rhythms are incorporated into orchestral works, therefore performing a dialogue between the old and new. Thematic analysis belongs to the most popular research approach in ethnomusicology as it provides a relational model for the analysis of motifs and themes in music. Thematic analysis, for instance, determines various themes representing culture and society, as argued by [Hakonen et al. \(2024\)](#). This methodology is particularly apt for the interpretation of Wang Danhong's works, especially since they are about cultural identity and change. [Dang et al. \(2021\)](#) discuss that thematic analysis is the best way to capture the specifics of traditional music as it reveals cultural and historical background of musical compositions. As [Wang & Zhao, \(2022\)](#) suggests that thematic mapping can help identify the process of change in adaptations and the manner in which conventional motifs are portrayed in modern adaptations.

This paper also focuses on the global view of cultural innovation as a way of understanding the problematic and potential of intangible cultural heritage. As [Zhang et al. \(2020\)](#) shows, globalization plays a role in the dissemination of traditional knowledge: technology as well as virtual platforms are useful in terms of both maintaining and erasing culture. This duality is evident in Wang Danhong's work, where the orchestration of folk music to the international audience creates doubts about whether the performance is genuine or commercial. [Marx, \(2023\)](#) discusses approaches on how to preserve cultures using technology, highlighting the change that technology brings. This is applicable to the job of Danhong in which modern orchestral practices act as a means of reanimating Folk music.

The current literature offers a clear context of the two related yet conflicting objectives of cultural conservation and change ([Song, 2020](#)). This study contextualizes Wang Danhong's contributions within the thought as informed by exploring peer-reviewed journal articles published on ethnomusicology, cultural heritage, and artistic modernization. Her work shows how Spanish traditional music can be preserved and modernized in compositions, which may provide methodological lessons for scholars and practitioners in the field. From the vital evaluation of sources, it is seen to define that modernity should be combined with tradition and while adopting new forms and elements, it should not deviate from cultural heritage ([Li & Xue, 2023](#)).

### 3. Methodology

As described in [Table 1](#) this research employs a qualitative approach explained by [Säfsen & Gustavsson, \(2020\)](#), directly analyzing Wang Danhong's compositions to examine how folk music from Northeast China is being retained and developed. As this study is based on the collection and analysis of secondary data, it includes previously produced works such as musical scores, recordings, reviews, critiques, and articles. The purpose is to identify patterns that express the heritage and cultural creativity in Danhong's pieces ([Pandey & Pandey, 2021](#); [Säfsen & Gustavsson, 2020](#)).

Table 1: Research Methodology Overview

Section	Details
Research Approach	Qualitative approach focusing on secondary data analysis of Wang Danhong's compositions.
Data Collection Methods	Scholarly online databases, musical repositories, reviews, critiques, and articles.
Inclusion Criteria	Emphasis on relevance, credibility, and focus on Northeast China folk music and orchestration.
Analysis Technique	Thematic analysis to code and group data, identifying recurring patterns and themes. (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2020)

The data for this study were collected from scholarly online databases, musical repositories, and critique articles on Wang Danhong's works. In the notated scores and recordings, technical and stylistic features of her arrangements of Northeast folk songs were examined (Wang & Zhao, 2022). Research articles, books, and conference papers provided insights into the cultural and historical background of her work. The inclusion criteria for sources emphasised relevance, credibility, and discussions on the folk music of Northeast China and its orchestration (Vebrianto et al., 2020).

A thematic analysis of the collected data was conducted, where information was coded and grouped to reveal recurring patterns aligned with the research objectives. Key themes that emerged include cultural sustenance, new approaches to orchestration, and the integration of traditional and modern elements. These themes provided a holistic view of how folk music is incorporated into contemporary compositions while preserving its cultural essence, as demonstrated in Danhong's work (Marx, 2023; Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2020).

Thematic analysis of secondary data is justified for this research due to its ability to comprehensively analyze existing materials without requiring primary data collection. By assessing Wang Danhong's efforts to preserve and modernize Northeast folk music, this methodology enables the discovery of theories and perspectives relevant to culture, heritage, and innovation discourse (Pandey & Pandey, 2021; Vebrianto et al., 2020).

#### 4. Results

This section presents a detailed analysis of the major findings from Wang Danhong's compositions based on the thematic analysis. Three primary themes emerged from the study: Cultural Preservation, Artistic Innovation, and Tension Between Tradition and the New. Each theme is discussed below, along with a table that provides a summary of key findings and supporting literature.

Table 2 is about Wang Danhong's works exemplify cultural preservation through her use of traditional Northeast folk music elements such as pentatonic scales and indigenous instruments (Ni, 2021). However, she does not simply replicate these traditional forms; she reinterprets them by incorporating modern orchestral techniques. This reinterpretation ensures that the music maintains its cultural essence while adapting it to contemporary contexts, ensuring both preservation and relevance in a globalized world which is summarized in Table 2.



Table 2: Cultural Preservation in Wang Danhong's Compositions

Key Findings	Supporting Literature/Examples
Wang Danhong integrates Northeast folk music using pentatonic scales, rhythms, and indigenous instruments. Preservation involves reinterpretation without losing meaning or cultural essence.	Ni (2021): Aligns traditions with modernity. Zhang (2015): Reinterpretation respects meaning. <i>The Yellow River Ballad</i> : Blends traditional structures with orchestration.

Table 3 expresses the artistic innovation of Wang Danhong and it's crucial aspect of her compositions. By blending traditional folk music with modern orchestration, she preserves the cultural essence of the music while making it relevant to contemporary audiences (Zhang, 2021). As the Table 3 shows, the incorporation of traditional Chinese instruments, such as the erhu and guzheng, into Western orchestral settings reflects her commitment to both preserving cultural heritage and pushing the boundaries of artistic expression.

Table 3: Artistic Innovation in Wang Danhong's Works

Key Findings	Supporting Literature/Examples
Combines folk tunes with orchestral techniques, using instruments like the erhu and guzheng. Innovation ensures relevance while preserving cultural roots and storytelling.	Orgah et al. (2019): Innovation advances tradition. Zhang (2021): Ensures cultural relevance examples: Adaptive compositions harmonizing tradition and modernity.

Table 4 explains Wang Danhong's compositions highlight the delicate balance between tradition and modernity as expressed by Yu et al. (2021). While her works embrace modern elements, they remain deeply rooted in the traditional forms of Northeast folk music which is also reflected in Table 4. By avoiding the commercialization of cultural heritage, Wang Danhong's ensures that her work remains both authentic and relevant. The thematic integration of tradition with contemporary practices reflects the ongoing challenge in the preservation of cultural identity within an increasingly globalized and modernized world (Wang & Zhao, 2022).

Table 4: Tension Between Tradition and the New in Wang Danhong's Compositions

Key Findings	Supporting Literature/Examples
Balances authenticity with modern elements, preserving roots while avoiding reduction to commercial products.	Zhang (2021) Authenticity vs. modernity. Yu et al. (2021): Contextual adaptation respects tradition. Wang's work evolves traditions while retaining essence.

## 5. Discussion

The following analysis critically examines the key themes identified in Wang Danhong's compositions and compares them with existing literature. The interplay between tradition and modernity is the focal point of this discussion, highlighting how Wang Danhong's balances cultural preservation with artistic innovation (Wang & Zhao, 2022).

### 5.1. Theme 1: Cultural Preservation

Wang Danhong's approach to cultural preservation is evident in her symphonic compositions, where she seamlessly integrates traditional Northeast folk music through the use of pentatonic scales, rhythms, and indigenous instruments. This preservation, however, is not static; it involves a reinterpretation that does not diminish the meaning or cultural essence of the music. According to scholars like [Ni \(2021\)](#), cultural sustainability is achieved when traditional practices are relevant in modern contexts. This approach is exemplified in Wang Danhong's adaptation of *The Yellow River Ballad*, where she maintains traditional structures while incorporating orchestral arrangements. This reinterpretation ensures that cultural heritage remains accessible and engaging for contemporary audiences ([Wang & Zhao, 2022](#)).

Despite some criticisms, such as those from [Zhang \(2021\)](#), who argue that modernization leads to the commercialization of culture, Wang Danhong's work presents a more nuanced perspective. [Li and Chen \(2021\)](#) expressed that by preserving the thematic elements of Northeast folk culture, Wang Danhong's reinterprets these regional traditions in a way that maintains their authenticity while making them more universally understood and appreciated.

### 5.2. Theme 2: Artistic Innovation

Wang Danhong's artistic innovation is another prominent theme in the discussion. She blends traditional folk music with orchestral techniques, using instruments like the erhu and guzheng alongside a Western orchestra ([Li, 2024](#)). This synthesis allows her to retain the roots of the folk music while introducing modern elements that appeal to contemporary sensibilities. Scholars such as [Zhang et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that such innovation is essential for ensuring the cultural relevance of traditional art forms. While the incorporation of modern techniques and instruments might seem to risk overshadowing traditional elements, Wang Danhong ensures that the cultural essence of the music is preserved. She uses innovation not to dilute the cultural significance but to amplify it, ensuring that the stories conveyed through music are both timeless and current ([Wang & Zhao, 2022](#)).

However, this approach contrasts with [Berry et al. \(2010\)](#), who caution against the overuse of modernity at the expense of tradition. [Li and Chen \(2021\)](#) emphasize on Wang's ability to balance these two forces traditional integrity and modern appeal positions her work as a model for contemporary ethnomusicology, where innovation is harmoniously integrated with cultural preservation.

### 5.3. Theme 3: Tension Between Tradition and the New

The third theme centers on the tension between tradition and innovation. While Wang Danhong's compositions embrace modern elements, they do so in a manner that respects the core of the folk traditions. This balance between authenticity and modernity can be a delicate one. Scholars like [Zhang et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that tradition can evolve while maintaining its historical and cultural roots, a notion that is embodied in Wang Danhong's works. Through careful contextual adaptation, Wang ensures that the folk themes are not altered but rather enriched with new interpretations that align with modern sensibilities ([Li & Chen, 2021](#)).

At the same time, critics such as [Zhang \(2021\)](#) raise concerns about the potential commercialization of cultural heritage when traditional music is adapted for mass consumption. However, [Zhang et al. \(2020\)](#) says Wang Danhong's works transcend this critique by offering a dynamic representation of Northeast folk music that remains authentic while adapting to modern contexts. By engaging with her audience in this manner, Wang helps preserve the essence of traditional music while making it relevant and accessible to contemporary listeners ([Wang & Zhao, 2022](#)).

## 6. Recommendations

This [Table 5](#) is expressing the thought of [Zhang et al., \(2020\)](#) about the potential for creativity in the compositions by traditional musicians and contemporary composers. Thus, in the opinion of [Yu et al. \(2021\)](#), partnerships should always be based on principles of respect, under which traditional musicians should be allowed to steer the affairs of their cultural properties. According to [Ren et al. \(2021\)](#), ethical innovation involves improving cultural value but not with the intention of commercializing it.

Table 5: Strategies for Preserving Traditional Music

Key Areas	Summary
A. Collaborative Innovation	Foster respectful partnerships and ethical innovation, avoiding commercialization.
B. Documentation and Community Role	According to <a href="#">Yu et al. (2021)</a> , Digitally archive music and engage local communities in preservation efforts.
C. Education and Cultural Exchange	Integrate music in education and exchange programs to enhance awareness and global appreciation.
D. Digital Platforms and Research	Use social media and streaming services and promote interdisciplinary research. ( <a href="#">Zhang et al., 2020</a> )

Traditional music should be well documented and archived in order to preserve it. [Berry et al. \(2010\)](#) stress the importance of digital platforms that make it possible to build a library for future generations' use. It should also be community-based, meaning that local people should be involved in the conservation and development. According to [He \(2023\)](#), communities must be involved in the preservation of culture.

Incorporating traditional music into learning systems can help create awareness among younger generations. [Yu et al. \(2021\)](#) support contextual learning, which involves both academic knowledge and real-world application. This means that cultural exchange programs can foster global appreciation, where cultures are maintained but also exposed to other societies, as pointed out by [Orgah et al. \(2019\)](#).

The use of social media and streaming services, for instance, can greatly improve the reception of traditional music by the public. [Danhong \(2019\)](#) also emphasizes the effective application of digital media for cultural promotion. Moreover, to further explore the cultural values of traditional music, [He \(2023\)](#) suggests that interdisciplinary research should be promoted as well.

## 7. Conclusion

The present research is inspirational for the preservation and further development of the traditional Northeast folk music through the case of Wang Danhong. Through thematic analysis, this study has explored three major themes: They did cultural



heritage and creative work, and how to combine the traditional and the contemporary. This is evident in Wang Danhong works, where he integrates the traditional into the modern, thus portraying how music can facilitate the interaction between the past and the present. The critical discussion also identifies potential and problems in this process. Thus, on the one hand, innovation is needed to make culture relevant, but on the other hand, it should be done without making culture a commodity. Likewise, finding a balance between the old and the new is not just about understanding cultural identity. As suggested above, there is much that practitioners and policymakers can do to help ensure the continued, healthy preservation of traditional music in the face of globalization.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This research is based on secondary data analysis, including musical scores, recordings, reviews, and critiques, and did not involve human participants or primary data collection. As such, no ethical approval or consent was required. However, all sources used were properly cited and acknowledged, adhering to ethical standards for academic integrity.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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