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Research on Strategies for Promoting the Protection and Utilization of Ancient Muyu Book Resources: Based on Investigations of Later Printed Editions in the Dongguan Area

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Muyu books are the librettos of Muyu songs, a traditional cultural form in Lingnan, and possess rich cultural value. This article investigates and analyzes Muyu book resources in the Dongguan area, aiming to identify the particularities and intrinsic needs in the preservation and utilization of these resources in this region, and to provide universal ideas and countermeasures for further protecting Lingnan's intangible cultural heritage resources. [Method/Process] This article comprehensively employs methods such as field research, interviews, and questionnaire surveys to systematically review the current status of Muyu book resources in the Dongguan area, including collection quantity, types, editions, preservation conditions, digitization level, sharing status, and literature utilization, and explores strategies for the preservation and utilization of ancient Muyu book resources. [Results/Conclusion] The preservation and utilization of ancient Muyu book resources in the Dongguan area face six major problems: weak preservation awareness, limited storage conditions, backward arrangement methods, severe damage to the original ecological context of the documents coupled with rising prices, lack of safeguards for preservation and utilization work, and insufficient collaborative cooperation among collection departments. It is necessary to advance efforts in aspects such as emphasizing top-level design, expanding document collection methods, standardizing arrangement, compiling union catalogs, accelerating the construction of oral literature, strengthening database construction, and enhancing international exchanges.

Full Text

Research on Strategies for Promoting the Conservation and Utilization of Ancient Muyu Book Resources: An Investigation Based on Dongguan

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Abstract:

[Purpose/Significance] Muyu books are the librettos of Muyu songs in traditional Lingnan culture, possessing rich cultural value. This article investigates and analyzes Muyu book resources in Dongguan to explore the particularities and inherent needs of their conservation and utilization, providing universal approaches and countermeasures for further protecting Lingnan's intangible cultural heritage resources.

[Method/Process] This study employs comprehensive methods including field research, interviews, and questionnaires to document the current status of Muyu book collections in Dongguan, covering collection size, varieties, editions, preservation conditions, digitization levels, sharing status, and resource utilization. It explores strategies for the conservation and utilization of these ancient documentary resources.

[Result/Conclusion] The conservation and utilization of ancient Muyu books in Dongguan face six major challenges: weak conservation awareness, limited preservation conditions, backward cataloging methods, severe damage to the original documentary ecology, rising prices, lack of safeguards for conservation work, and insufficient collaborative coordination among collecting institutions. Progress requires emphasizing top-level design, expanding collection methods, standardizing organization, compiling union catalogs, accelerating oral documentation construction, strengthening database development, and enhancing international exchanges.

Keywords: Ancient documents; Muyu books; Conservation and utilization; Dongguan

Muyu song is a type of chantefable popular in Cantonese-speaking regions of Guangdong. In May 2011, it was approved by the State Council and included in the third batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists. Muyu books are the librettos and songbooks of Muyu songs, serving as physical records of their development. They play a crucial role in understanding the historical features of Muyu songs, revealing their characteristics, providing information on folk literature exchanges, disseminating literary knowledge, promoting traditional virtues, and fostering harmonious societies. These resources contain rich historical, folkloric, literary, and artistic values. According to historical records, Muyu songs have a history of at least 400 years. During the Qing Dynasty, Muyu songs flourished throughout Lingnan, particularly in Dongguan. Zhu Yizun's poem "Seen

in Dongguan Books” from the Qing Dynasty describes “Muyu songs unfinished, cool moon emerges from clouds,” demonstrating their widespread popularity in Dongguan at the time. Literary scholar Zheng Zhenduo introduced 11 types of Guangdong songbooks in his article “Chinese Novels and Dramas in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris,” among which the rare early Muyu book edition, the Kangxi 52nd year (1713) *The Eighth Talented Scholar’s Flower Letter Paper*, originated from Dongguan’s Jingjing Studio. Dongguan’s rich regional customs and folk traditions of Muyu songs have accumulated abundant ancient Muyu book resources, forming a precious repository of folk cultural resources.

With changing times, the once-prosperous Lingnan Muyu song culture has gradually declined, and Muyu books now face the brink of endangerment and loss. Consequently, the conservation and utilization of Muyu book resources face urgent demands for accelerated professional protection.

1. Research Status of Muyu Book Resources in China

Academic research on Muyu books has gradually deepened in recent years. As of March 1, 2023, a subject search for “Muyu books” in CNKI yielded 122 relevant documents, with annual publication numbers shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], showing a general growth trend though research has declined since 2020. In terms of content, previous domestic research can be categorized as follows:

1) **Literary studies of Muyu books**, including artistic features, comparisons between Muyu lyrics and vernacular literature, and studies of classic Muyu books. For instance, Chen Ju argues that Muyu books is a general term encompassing all verse-narrative storytelling in vernacular Chinese, represented by dragon boat songs and Nan Yin, including Cantonese ballads, laments, and Ban Yan. Cui Yunhua and Tian Gengjing’s comparative analysis reveals striking similarities in style, form, and lyrics between Tanci, Zidishu, and Muyu books, with mutual influence and permeation driving the evolution of folk performing arts and cultural interaction. Che Zhenhua’s analysis of the classic Muyu book *The Story of Flower Letter Paper* identifies its ethical and didactic characteristics.

2) **Collection and cataloging studies**, including collection, cataloging, bibliography, and development management. Du Zexun examined the publication dates of 280 Muyu books, while Zeng Chimin analyzed their documentary characteristics and cataloging methods.

3) **Performance and inheritance studies**, such as Chen Liqin’s discussion on the origins, features, and preservation of Foshan Muyu songs, and He Yan’s reflections on the performance and inheritance of Dongguan Muyu books.

Overall, domestic academic research on Muyu books has explored their historical origins, artistic features, cataloging, conservation, and inheritance, enriching their documentary connotations and promoting the inheritance of Muyu song culture. However, systematic research on the information attributes of Muyu book documents remains lacking, particularly regarding resource surveys

and mechanisms for rescue, protection, and utilization—fundamental prerequisites for academic research. This article systematically analyzes the current status and existing problems in the conservation and utilization of Muyu book resources in Dongguan to identify regional particularities and inherent needs, providing universal approaches for protecting Lingnan’s intangible cultural heritage.

2. Investigation of Muyu Book Resources in Dongguan

2.1 Survey Content and Scope

Dongguan has a long history of Muyu songs, with continuous transmission for hundreds of years. Throughout this historical development, the people of Dongguan have left behind rich Muyu book resources, most of which are scattered among the public, while official collections are primarily housed in cultural institutions such as archives, libraries, museums, and exhibition halls. This investigation focused on the current status of Muyu book resources, including collection quantity, varieties, editions, preservation conditions, digitization levels, sharing status, and resource utilization.

The research team surveyed 28 town libraries in Dongguan and 12 other representative Muyu book collecting institutions, focusing particularly on Dongguan Library, Dongguan Museum, Dongguan Exhibition Hall, Dongguan Cultural Center, and Dongguan Cantonese Opera Development Center. These institutions basically cover the main Muyu book collections in Dongguan and represent the distribution and layout of resources in the region.

2.2 Survey Methods

The research team employed a combination of field investigation and bibliometric survey methods. Through field observation, key interviews, and questionnaires, combined with literature statistics, the team investigated and analyzed the distribution, preservation status, and utilization of Muyu book resources in Dongguan, summarizing universal problems in conservation and utilization work to clarify future directions.

2.3 Survey Results

The investigation found that only 8 out of 40 cultural institutions in Dongguan collect Muyu books, accounting for just 20%. Collection details are shown in Table 1. Among these eight institutions, Guancheng Library holds the largest collection with 1,656 original volumes. In addition to original Muyu books, Guancheng Library also emphasizes collecting photocopied materials. With its rich collection, Guancheng Library has become one of the town-level public libraries with the largest Muyu book collection in Guangdong Province.

Dongguan residents not only enjoy singing Muyu songs but also create, comment on, and publish Muyu books. More valuable is that Dongguan editions are often

high-quality works. Scholars studying Guangdong Muyu books both domestically and internationally recognize that the best Guangdong Muyu books, *The Story of Flower Letter Paper* and *The Tale of Two Lotus Flowers*, have their earliest and finest editions from Dongguan publishing houses. The survey shows that among the eight collecting institutions in Dongguan, six—including Guancheng Library, Dongguan Cultural Center, and Dongkeng Town Muyu Song Inheritance Center—hold Dongguan editions. Guancheng Library houses 85 volumes across 22 types of Dongguan editions, the earliest being the 1886 Guancheng Cuiying Studio edition of *The Complete Story of Amber Marriage and Sister Hua*. Dongguan Cultural Center collects 45 volumes across 13 types, the earliest being the 1834 Guancheng Fuwentang autumn edition of *The Complete Story of the Third Continuation of the Golden Knife: Phoenix Tail vs Dragon Beard*. Besides these two institutions, Dongkeng Town Muyu Song Inheritance Center, Dongguan Cantonese Opera Library, Dongguan Museum, and Dongguan Cantonese Opera and Quyi Cultural Center all hold certain quantities of Dongguan editions.

Preservation environment is a crucial factor affecting the conservation quality of Muyu books. Different institutions in Dongguan employ varying preservation methods and environments. Temperature, humidity, air quality, lighting conditions, storage containers, restoration of damaged books, daily pest and mold prevention, and digitization all significantly impact the longevity of Muyu book resources. Preservation conditions in Dongguan are shown in Table 2. Guancheng Library stores Muyu books on compact shelves with constant temperature and humidity, regular pest control, and digitization. It has also established a document restoration room with specialized conservators for meticulous preservation, ranking top in Dongguan. However, only two institutions regularly restore Muyu books, and some lack even dedicated storage cabinets, revealing harsh preservation conditions.

Inheritance-based conservation protects ancient documents at the cultural level by making the culture they reflect known and mastered by their audience through various channels and methods, passing it down through generations. It is an important means of protecting and utilizing ancient documents. Table 3 summarizes the inheritance conservation status of Muyu book resources. The survey shows that all eight institutions holding Muyu books have some awareness of inheritance conservation, typically using exhibitions to help the public understand Muyu books and inspire conservation concepts. Guancheng Library's work is most prominent, featuring not only document exhibitions but also lectures, secondary literature development, and cultural experience activities with diverse forms, rich content, and significant social impact.

Overall, Muyu book resources in Dongguan have distinct regional characteristics, are historically distant, widely distributed, and difficult to protect. Fortunately, Dongguan's cultural departments have begun emphasizing collection and organization. Since the establishment of Dongguan Cantonese Opera Library in 2004, traditional Muyu book resources from folk heritage have entered

the vision of cultural institutions. Guancheng Library has achieved considerable scale in collection and organization, implementing digitization and multiple inheritance conservation initiatives. Dongguan Cultural Center has compiled and published *Dongguan Muyu Books*, collating and publishing 10 classic popular editions and 16 selected excerpts, providing a good start for resource collection and organization. However, the informatization and standardization of traditional Muyu book resources need improvement, and collaborative conservation has historically received insufficient attention, creating numerous difficulties in protection and utilization.

3. Major Problems in Muyu Book Conservation and Utilization

3.1 Weak Conservation Awareness

Lingnan performing arts have a long history, with many precious librettos preserved. However, due to age, paper aging, acidification, and other factors, their conservation urgently requires attention and support from all stakeholders. In 2019, the *Guangzhou Canon: Qu Genre* was published, collecting 1,589 titles from 24 domestic and overseas institutions and individuals, concentrating Lingnan performing arts literature including Muyu books, dragon boat songs, Nan Yin, Cantonese ballads, Cantonese opera, and Cantonese music from the late Ming Dynasty to before the founding of the People's Republic of China. This publication is significant for systematically collecting, organizing, and rescuing Lingnan performing arts literature. Compared to Guangzhou, Dongguan's awareness of Muyu book conservation and utilization remains relatively backward. First, top-level design lacks a holistic view, with localities and collecting units operating independently with serious departmentalism. Second, some collecting institutions lack strong awareness of meticulous protection and weak autonomous conservation consciousness. Third, public participation in conservation needs improvement, with some precious Muyu books lost overseas.

3.2 Limited Preservation Conditions

Ren Baiqiang classified Guangdong Muyu songs into regional varieties including Guangzhou, Dongguan, Foshan, Taishan, Yai, Wuchuan, and Hakka dialect versions based on their linguistic differences. Guangzhou Muyu benefits from systematic support by the Guangzhou Canon Center, Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province, and Sun Yat-sen University, ensuring collection and preservation. Foshan Muyu relies on institutions like Foshan Library, Foshan Museum, and Foshan Cantonese Opera Museum for guaranteed preservation conditions. After Dongguan Muyu was inscribed as intangible cultural heritage, Dongguan's cultural institutions gradually emphasized collection and organization. However, the survey reveals that overall preservation conditions in Dongguan are poor, with inadequate methods and concerning quality. Most traditional Muyu books were printed during the Republic of China period with

rough printing, thin volumes, and small formats. Folk collections suffered destruction during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in poor preservation, serious damage, and deterioration. Many papers have completely lost mechanical strength, crumbling at touch and verging on destruction, urgently requiring protection and organization.

3.3 Backward Cataloging Methods

For convenient preservation and utilization, all documents require classification and cataloging for systematic storage and retrieval. The survey found that due to a lack of professional technical personnel, cataloging methods in Dongguan's collecting institutions, including Guancheng Library and Dongguan Cantonese Opera Library, remain backward. Almost no Muyu books have complete cataloging, with only simple title and edition information recorded, lacking comprehensive systematic organization. By contrast, Guangzhou and Foshan have adequate bibliographic information with clear version dates, and their libraries have developed thoughtful approaches to Muyu book cataloging and edition identification.

3.4 Serious Damage to Document Original Ecology and Rising Prices

In recent years, with China's economic development and growing international influence, living standards have rapidly improved, cultural demands have increased, folk collecting activities have become unprecedentedly active, and the collection market is booming. Muyu book prices have skyrocketed from dozens of yuan per volume to hundreds or even thousands, creating difficulties for collection. Worse still, some dealers artificially damage the original ecology of Muyu books for greater profit. As discovered in this survey, the classic Muyu book *The Golden Knife Story* (same edition) is not collected complete by any institution, suspected to have been dispersed and sold separately. Such dismembered Muyu books have incomplete content and missing original titles, artificially diminishing their socio-cultural value and causing great inconvenience for researchers.

3.5 Lack of Safeguards for Conservation Work

Guaranteeing the smooth progress of conservation and utilization is a prerequisite for protecting Muyu book resources. As early as the 1990s, Guangzhou and Foshan began emphasizing collection, organization, and utilization, strengthening resource guarantees with substantial human and material support. The Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province holds hundreds of Muyu book titles, while Foshan has twice organized Muyu book projects, publishing *Catalogue and Research on Foshan Collected Muyu Books* (2009) and *Catalogue of Muyu Books in Foshan Library* (2019). In comparison, Dongguan lacks safeguards for conservation work. First, inadequate institutional construction and financial support result in regulatory gaps, funding shortages, and unclear responsibilities. Second, Muyu book resources lack medium- and long-term conservation

plans within institutional management, leaving protection work without specific goals and requirements.

3.6 Insufficient Collaborative Coordination Among Collecting Departments

Collaboration drives high-quality development. Foshan attaches great importance to collaborative resource construction, organizing a city-wide Muyu book inventory and organization campaign in 2009 that surveyed collections at Foshan Museum, Foshan Library, and Shunde District Museum, jointly compiling *Catalogue and Research on Foshan Collected Muyu Books* (2009), which included 660 titles from various Foshan institutions. In contrast, Dongguan shows insufficient attention to collaborative conservation. The survey found that collecting institutions in Dongguan lack cooperation, presenting a dispersed state of independent operation. In collection, serious duplication occurs across institutions. Cataloging is fragmented and chaotic, lacking unified standards for description and classification, with incomplete bibliographic information and insufficient retrieval pathways, preventing systematic and complete collection and organization. This affects resource sharing, development, and utilization, diminishing the social influence of Dongguan's Muyu book resources.

4. Strategies for Promoting Muyu Book Conservation and Utilization

4.1 Emphasize Top-Level Design and Establish Sound Safeguard Mechanisms

Conservation and utilization of ancient documents is systematic work requiring strengthened top-level design and safeguard mechanisms. Muyu book conservation depends on local legal and financial support. The Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province is a key institution for Guangzhou's Muyu book construction, with rich resources and timely communication of national policies. The establishment of the Guangzhou Canon Research Center is significant for advancing the collection, organization, and publication of Lingnan historical documents and supporting cultural inheritance and innovation. Dongguan should learn from Guangzhou's experience by establishing special Muyu book projects with dedicated funding, optimizing allocation mechanisms, and providing financial support for conservation and utilization. Additionally, Dongguan should establish relevant departments to communicate national policies, report on local conservation work, deploy phased tasks, organize training and experience exchanges, avoid redundant construction, and ensure orderly conservation work.

4.2 Expand Collection Methods and Rescue Muyu Books

Collection is the foundation of Muyu book conservation and utilization. Dongguan's Muyu book resource construction should be based on rescuing and excavating folk resources through multi-channel, multi-level, and multi-method

collection. Cultural institutions should assign dedicated personnel, mobilize individual donations, and employ methods beyond purchasing, including reproduction, photography, exchange, and manuscript copying. In the internet era, Muyu book transactions have changed, requiring institutions to monitor specialized antiquarian book websites and WeChat public accounts for information, sparing no effort in collection. Moreover, since Muyu books circulated overseas during the Ming and Qing dynasties, institutions should strengthen the search, retrieval, and acquisition of foreign Muyu book resources.

4.3 Standardize Organization and Conduct Knowledge Organization and Analytical Application

Standardizing Muyu book cataloging and indexing methods through detailed organization and knowledge organization facilitates inheritance-based conservation. Given Guangzhou and Foshan's experience, Dongguan should strengthen communication, examine existing cataloging formats, rules, and indexing methods for ancient documents, and optimize organization techniques. Complete Muyu book bibliographic information should include cover title, text title, author, publisher, publication date, edition, volume count, page count, first-line text, format, layout, completeness, and notes. Additionally, a Muyu book thesaurus should be developed including identifiers, synonyms, near-synonyms, broader terms, narrower terms, and related terms to standardize terminology, solve knowledge dispersion, enhance retrieval recall and precision, and enable full-text browsing and multi-path retrieval to meet personalized needs, breaking temporal and spatial limitations for efficient utilization.

4.4 Strengthen Collaboration and Compile Union Catalogs

No single institution's strength is unlimited. Dongguan's Muyu book collecting institutions are small, dispersed, and widespread, with none dominating alone. Resource construction urgently requires adjustment and improvement to form a distinctive Dongguan Muyu book resource system. First, institutions should strengthen cooperation under unified yet flexible principles, developing targeted collection focuses. Second, they should enhance communication for unified standards in organization and digitization to prepare for resource sharing. Third, through multi-party collaboration using Foshan as a model, they should jointly compile a Dongguan Muyu book union catalog to fully reveal resource content and provide convenient retrieval services for researchers. Finally, they should strengthen cooperation in secondary literature development, learning from *Guangzhou Canon* to rescue and protect precious resources through compilation and publication, enhancing research efforts and expanding social influence.

4.5 Accelerate Oral Documentation Construction to Enrich Muyu Book Research

Human knowledge transmission occurs primarily through oral and written inheritance. Oral transmission has played an extremely important role in cultural continuity throughout history. Given Muyu songs' characteristics, Dongguan's oral documentation should include both "Oral Muyu Books" and "Oral History of Muyu Books." Many elderly people in Dongguan still sing Muyu songs, and modern audio-visual technology can record their memories and performance techniques to enrich historical information and aid cultural inheritance. A project team should be established to locate elderly individuals who experienced Muyu songs' popularity, record their memories and singing scenes, preserving various folk singing forms through audio-visual documentation. The "Oral History of Muyu Books" project should interview renowned Dongguan Muyu song researchers and intangible cultural heritage bearers to preserve fading traditions. Oral documentation will effectively supplement existing paper documents.

4.6 Strengthen Database Construction to Achieve Resource Sharing

Maturing network technology provides new conditions for document organization. Digital organization, unrestricted by space and region, better facilitates document protection and utilization. To systematically and permanently preserve Dongguan's Muyu book resources and continue Muyu song culture, a comprehensive, complete, and convenient Muyu book literature database must be constructed.

When building this database, collecting institutions should adopt unified systems and format standards to input bibliographic information and use scanners or cameras for text acquisition, establishing full-text, bibliographic, and image databases. Users should be able to conduct full-text retrieval, browse e-books, download pages, excerpt paragraphs, and upload local document information through interactive features.

4.7 Enhance International Exchanges to Expand Global Influence

Muyu song is an outstanding representative of Lingnan culture. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, frequent exchanges with overseas regions led foreign missionaries and sinologists to collect Muyu books to understand Lingnan culture. Today, the UK, Germany, Russia, France, and other countries hold numerous Muyu books. International literary figures and sinologists have also shown interest. The masterpiece *The Story of Flower Letter Paper* reached Europe in the 19th century, earlier than *The Peony Pavilion*. In 1824, it was translated into English by British scholar Peter Perring Thoms and published in London; two years later, Russia's *Moscow Telegraph* published a Russian translation. After reading the English version, the great German writer Goethe was so moved by its elegant text and intricate plot that he wrote *Chinese-German Seasons and Times of Day*, incorporating numerous Chinese elements and attracting

countless researchers for over a century—a fine tale of Lingnan performing arts literature spreading abroad. Foreign scholars have also compiled Muyu book catalogs, such as Akiko Inaba’s *Catalogue of Muyu Books: Research on Guangdong Chantefable Literature*, Li Fuqing’s *Catalogue of Guangdong Popular Literature in German Collections*, and Yuzhi Zhang’s *General Catalogue of Guangdong Muyu Books in the Bavarian State Library*. Dongguan’s cultural institutions should strengthen international exchanges with foreign collecting institutions and scholars, introducing overseas resources, compiling bibliographies, publishing facsimiles, accelerating the digital return of overseas Chinese ancient books, and conducting literary seminars to promote investigation, collection, organization, and research, advancing the inheritance and innovation of Muyu song culture.

Muyu song is one of Dongguan’s key projects for building a cultural city, serving as a bridge connecting its past and present. Promoting the Muyu song cultural brand is essential for its development, making Muyu book conservation and utilization a foundation for constructing Dongguan’s Muyu song cultural system. Dongguan’s Muyu book conservation and utilization requires innovative safeguard mechanisms, promoting standardized organization and collaborative applications to achieve substantive breakthroughs.

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