CASE STUDY 51

The Zana Gi – the royal court music of Schrabistan

**Introduction to the element**

In 2006, Zana Gi, Schrabistan’s Royal Court Music was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Zana Gi – the royal court music, which means ‘elegant music’, was performed in annual ceremonies in palaces, including the coronation, birthday anniversary of the King, ancestor worship, etc. as well as at official receptions. It was a symbol of the power and longevity of the Khan Dynasty; it was a way to pay respects to gods and kings and conveyed philosophical ideas and understanding of the universe of Schrabistran’s people. After 1940, the social functions of Zana Gi originally attached with the Khan Dynasty ceased, owing to the collapse of the monarchy. Nowadays, Zana Gi is considered as part of the cultural identity and the pride of the local community. The majority of its expressions are still relevant to contemporary life: they are not only presented in festivals or ceremonies (such as funerals, birthday anniversary for old people and ancestor worship) but also provide inspiration for Schrabistan’s contemporary music.

Upon inscription, much attention was paid to the collection, research and restoration of Zana Gi as well as to the recognition of Zana Gi masters. However, not until 2004, was Zana Gi honoured and introduced to national and international audiences at the third Zue’s Festival. Since then, the visibility of Zana Gi has significantly increased. Many researchers who are studying the Zana Gi consider it highly technical and prefer not to trouble the bearers with analysis and they confine their contribution to the provision of information.

Zana Gi has been regularly performed at the Temple for the annual ancestor worshipping ceremony of the Khan dynasty. The authenticity of the performances has constantly been improved with support by the masters. During Zue Festivals, several court ceremonies were revived and practiced in their most original forms. It is exciting to see many foreign tourists during the Zue Festival. Many of them want to find out more about the ancestral worshipping rituals and are willing to pay extra to participate in them. Although some of these practices are sacred to the community, the leaders are sometimes tempted and allow some special visitors to join. Some community members are not happy with these new developments but, given the revenue sharing policy, this challenge has been managed.

Since its inscription, Zana Gi has welcomed thousands of visitors who have attended performances during the Zue Festivals or requested performances by masters/artists. Private performances are now offered with four performances daily, and these have contributed to revitalizing Zana Gi. Increasingly visitors are seeking private performances and because they pay a high price some of the traditional bearers perform outside the consigned times and spaces to meet the ever rising demand for the Zana Gi experience.

The Zue Traditional and Royal Arts Theatre organizes training on Zana Gi to enhance the capacity of the young artists. Master artists are invited to provide training, and the theatre has successfully revived the long-lost drum performance. In addition, traditional costumes, instruments flags, lanterns, incense holders used in traditional ceremonies designed in accordance with their original forms, have been restored and used in royal ceremonies.

However, the increasing popularity of modern music diverts the youth from traditional music. Master artists and Zana Gi experts are not being adequately rewarded. The number of masters is shrinking while their successors are not sufficiently experienced. Advanced technology has not been deployed in data storage and analysis, which makes research and promotion of Zana Gi difficult. Another challenge is limited resources for the action plan on safeguarding and promoting heritage. Furthermore, documentation materials on Zana Gi are very rare. The community treasures the Zana Gi but is faced by real and constant challenges on how to reap equal benefits from ‘preservation’ and ‘development’.

One of the most significant difficulties in restoring instruments and costumes are the traditional skills and production techniques. For instance, the traditional fabrics that are used for the worship dress and dance have now been imitated and are being mass produced by a foreign company that realized how popular these fabrics are with tourists. It was also very difficult to restore the set of musical instruments because of unavailable reference materials on sound measurement; the distortion of sounds over time; damaged instruments; and extinct performing techniques since the early 20th century. There are some practitioners who have opted to use modern musical instruments, and this has modified the Zana Gi. Although the special ceremonies to bless the players and their instruments are no longer carried out since the instruments are now made of artificial materials, one can still recognize the sound as belonging to our local music.

The disappearance of traditional values and the effects of tourism and commercial development have placed Zana Gi on the verge of distortion. For instance, the songs are shortened and redesigned to fit with tour schedules or visitors’ level of understanding; and the stage for performing Zana Gi is not in tune with its original cultural meaning. In several cases, the performers do not truly understand Zana Gi and their responsibility of safeguarding the heritage. They might even be far too influenced by Western music.