



# Study on the Development of Music and Multi-Ethnic Integration in Southwest China

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**Abstract:** Southwest China, with unique geography and historical role as a “corridor” for multi-ethnic migration, forms a distinctive musical culture. Taking history as the axis, this paper views it as a “musical melting pot” to explore music development and integration. Its music history is not linear but “relational” centered on “integration”, driven by state governance, ethnic migration, commerce and religion. Sorting this out deepens understanding of China’s pluralistic music pattern and enlightens contemporary music development.

**Keywords:** history of southwest Chinese music, musical integration, multi-ethnic music, historical ethnomusicology, cultural corridor

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## 1. Introduction

Southwest China covers Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Chongqing, and adjacent areas like eastern Tibet. As the “periphery” of Central Plains Han culture, it serves as a corridor connecting the Central Plains with Southeast Asia and Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, avoiding cultural singularity—its music has borne “integration” marks since origin.

Previous Chinese music history studies focused on Central Plains dynasties, neglecting “peripheral” regions like Southwest China. However, its music development is an “integration history”: including Han-indigenous collision, inter-ethnic exchanges among minorities, and interactions with foreign cultures (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism music, modern Western music). The core of Southwest Chinese music is dynamic “integrativeness”—not simple superposition, but new musical forms via “localization” under specific contexts.

## 2. Geographical foundation and ethnic distribution: temporal-spatial framework for musical integration

The integrativeness of Southwest Chinese music roots in the interaction between “land” and “people”.

### 2.1 Geographical “corridor” attribute

(1) North-South Corridors: The “Tibet-Yi Corridor” (from Gansu-Qinghai to western Sichuan, northwestern Yunnan) was key for Di-Qiang migration, Tubo expansion, Han culture spread, and musical exchange among Han, Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, Naxi.

(2) East-West Corridors: The “Southern Silk Road” (Chengdu→Yunnan→Myanmar/India) spread Buddhist music-dance (e.g., exotic bronze music images in Dianchi). The “Yangtze River Waterway” transported opera and storytelling music to Bashu.

(3) Mountain-Basin Structure: Basins preserve local music; mountains limit exchanges to corridors, enhancing “localization”.

### 2.2 Ethnic “melting pot” effect

Southwest China has over 30 ethnic groups, with distribution shaped by historical migrations:

(1) Di-Qiang system: Yi, Bai, Naxi et al., bringing plateau nomadic music (high-pitched).

(2) Baiyue system: Dai, Zhuang, Buyi et al., with water-side music (gentle).

(3) Miao-Yao system: Miao, Yao music carries migration memories.

(4) Han immigration: From Qin’s Bashu conquest to WWII migration, Han brought Central Plains music via garrisons, settlements, and commerce.

This diversity destined Southwest music to be an integrated product of colliding traditions.

### 3. Historical accumulation: phased evolution of musical integration

Southwest music integration evolved with Central Plains governance and historical events, showing distinct phases.

#### 3.1 Pre-Qin to Han-Jin: initial Yi-Han integration and musical gene formation

Southwest had “Bashu Culture” and “Dian Culture” (linked to Central Plains but unique). Sanxingdui, Jinsha Ruins’ bronze bells, stone chimes indicate ancient Shu’s mature ritual music. Yunnan’s Dian bronze artifacts depict calabash-sheng dances, bronze drum dances—recording Pu, Yue ethnic musical life (bronze drums linked to Southeast Asian culture)[1].

After Qin unified China, Ba and Shu commanderies were established, starting large-scale Han culture introduction. Han’s “opening Southwest Yi Regions” and “Southwest Yi Road” promoted Han music spread: court ritual music influenced local chieftains, while Han folk art like “Bayu Dance” merged with indigenous music. Yang Xiong’s Rhapsody on the Capital of Shu records Cong people’s martial dance was absorbed by Han culture. This phase laid “Yi-Han coexistence” tone, with calabash-sheng, bronze drum as regional symbols.

#### 3.2 Tang and Song dynasties: buddhist music-dance and pluralistic coexistence under local regimes

During the Tang and Song Dynasties, the control of the Central Plains dynasties over areas such as Yunnan was relatively loose, and local regimes of Nanzhao (738-902 AD) and Dali (937-1253 AD) rose successively. In this period, the integration of Southwest Chinese music showed a strong color of “internationalization” and “Buddhismization”.

On one hand, the Nanzhao and Dali regimes actively absorbed the music of the Tang and Song Dynasties. For example, the Nanzhao kings sent envoys to Chang’an (the Tang capital, present Xi’an) many times to “present ethnic songs” and brought back court music and dance such as the “Kucha Music” from the Central Plains. Fan Chuo’s *Manshu* (Book of the Southern Barbarians) in the Tang Dynasty records that the “customary laws” and court rituals of Nanzhao were largely influenced by the Tang Dynasty. On the other hand, due to its location at the hub of the Southern Silk Road, Nanzhao had close ties with Tubo (Tibet) and Southeast Asia. Nanzhao Fengsheng Music (Nanzhao’s Music Presented to the Holy Emperor) is a model of musical integration. Performed by the Nanzhao music and dance troupe in the Tang court in Chang’an, its music system, costumes and dance choreography not only reflected the “ethnic sounds”, but also conformed to the ritual music norms of the Tang Dynasty. This was the first time that the music and dance of ethnic minorities in Southwest China entered the Central Plains dynasty in a systematic way and was incorporated into the court Yanyue (court music) system.

During the Dali Kingdom period, Buddhism flourished, with the phenomenon of “no mountain without a temple, no temple without monks”. Buddhist ritual music was deeply integrated with the folk music of the local Bai and Yi ethnic groups, giving birth to unique forms such as “Atisha Buddhist music”. At the same time, judging from the musical instrument combinations painted in Zhang Shengwen’s Scroll Painting, there were not only Han-style instruments such as the zheng (zither), pipa (lute) and bamboo flute, but also Tibetan-style instruments such as Buddhist horns and suonas (trumpets), as well as local instruments such as the calabash-sheng. This fully reflects the pluralistic and coexistent musical pattern[2].

#### 3.3 Ming-Qing: institutional reform, migration, and musical “localization”

Ming-Qing was critical for Southwest music integration. Ming’s “military garrison system” and Qing’s “Gaitu Guiliu” (replacing native chieftains with imperial officials) changed ethnic composition, driving a third integration wave centered on opera spread.

(1) Political-Economic Driver: “Military garrison system” brought Central Plains music/opera; “Gaitu Guiliu” ended Tusi separatism, and “Migration from Huguang to Sichuan” transported Hunan, Hubei culture to Sichuan—creating conditions for musical collision.

(2) Opera Localization: Yiyang Tune (unaccompanied, chorus-backed) adapted to Yunnan dialects to become Yunnan Opera Gaoqiang, and merged with Sichuan Dengxi (lantern opera) to form Sichuan Opera Gaoqiang. Kunshan Tune (elegant, literati-popular) enriched local operas with its melodies.

(3) Sichuan Opera Formation: The integration culmination, evolved from five tunes:

Gaoqiang: From Yiyang Tune, developed “bang (chorus), da (percussion), chang (singing)”—blending Yiyang’s folk nature and Sichuan’s boldness.

Huqin Tune: From Huizhou/Han Tunes, localized in melody (delicate expression).

Tanxi: From Shaanxi/Shanxi Bangzi, became lively with Sichuan dialect.

Dengxi: Native Sichuan folk opera (simple, life-themed). These tunes were integrated via unified structure and aesthetics.

(4) Folk Music Integration: Storytelling music (Sichuan Qingyin, Yangqin) absorbed Sichuan dialect; Han instruments

(erhu, bamboo flute) merged with local (calabash-sheng, yueqin) in ensembles.

(5) Cultural Power: Han culture led via political-economic advantages, but local culture “domesticated” Han music via “localization”.

### **3.4 Modern times: Anti-Japanese war literature and art and music collection in the context of “nation-state” construction**

During the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, China’s political and cultural centers moved westward. Chongqing became the temporary capital, and Kunming and Guilin became important cities in the rear area. A large number of musicians and educational institutions from Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Nanjing and other places moved to Southwest China. This unprecedented population and cultural migration brought about the fourth wave of musical integration.

(1) Rooting of the New Music Movement in Southwest China: Musicians such as Xian Xinghai, He Luting and Ma Sicong created a large number of musical works with anti-Japanese themes and ethnic styles in Southwest China, such as the Yellow River Cantata. They began to consciously collect and sort out the folk songs of ethnic minorities in Southwest China and apply them to their composing. For example, although Wang Luobin mainly sorted out the folk songs of Northwest China, his working method influenced the music collection work in Southwest China.

(2) Beginning of “Fieldwork” and Germination of Ethnomusicology: Some scholars and musicians began to record and study the music of ethnic minorities in Southwest China using modern musicological methods. For instance, teachers and students of the National Conservatory of Music collected folk songs in Kangding, Lijiang and other places. These efforts for the first time systematically incorporated the music of ethnic minorities in Southwest China into the vision of China’s professional music education, elevating it from “borderland sounds” to an organic part of “Chinese national music” and serving the era theme of constructing national identity[3].

(3) New Attempts at Chinese-Western Integration: Migrated musicians also tried to use Western composing techniques to express the ethnic customs of Southwest China. Works such as Ding Shande’s Variations on a Chinese Folk Song Theme pioneered the integration of Chinese and Western musical techniques to express Southwest China-themed works.

### **3.5 Contemporary eEra: ICH protection and globalization integration**

Since PRC founding, state-led ethnic identification and folk music compilation sorted ethnic musical heritage.

21st-century “intangible cultural heritage (ICH)” movement listed Sichuan Opera, Dai Peacock Dance, Yi Haicai Qiang—transferring them to national cultural governance. Globalization/urbanization brought inheritance crises and new integration:

- “World Music”: Yunnan minority musicians combined mother tongue, traditional instruments (kouxian, yueqin) with rock/pop—gaining international influence.
- Tourism Performances: Dynamic Yunnan, Lijiang Naxi Ancient Music packaged traditional music into stage works (adapted for markets).
- Online Communication: Short videos boosted minority music exposure; young musicians accelerated integration of ethnic styles and tradition-modernity.

## **4. Dynamics of integration: mechanisms, paths, and manifestations**

### **4.1 Driving mechanisms**

- Political: National unification, border governance (prefecture-county system, Gaitu Guiliu) drove musical integration.
- Economic: Trade routes (Southern Silk Road, Tea-Horse Road) spread music, musicians, instruments.
- Population: Military/reclamation/disaster migration (e.g., “Huguang to Sichuan”) transplanted musical culture.
- Religious: Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, ethnic primitive beliefs merged ritual music with local culture.

### **4.2 Artistic manifestations**

Integrated Southwest music features diverse timbres, complex rhythms, intricate textures — e.g., Sichuan Opera’s gong-drum combinations, Yi music’s rhythm changes, Dai music’s elephant-foot drum-file gong dialogue.

## **5. Conclusion**

Southwest Chinese music history is a grand integration legend: the “corridor” overcomes “peripheral” isolation, gathering musical cultures into a melting pot, refining unique treasures via history. This integration is not one-way “Hanization” but two-way “localization”. Southwest music’s experience proves cultural vitality comes from openness and exchange. Re-viewing this process enlightens cherishing cultural diversity and balancing tradition protection with change.

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