



Research on the Current Situation of the Development of Folk Songs in Western China

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Abstract: This paper examines the inheritance and innovation of western Chinese folk songs in contemporary society, focusing on their roles in preserving cultural diversity, shaping ethnic identity, and boosting tourism. Through literature analysis and fieldwork, it reviews historical origins (e.g., northern Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Tibetan folk songs) and their unique musical-cultural connotations. It then identifies key challenges: aging inheritors, declining youth engagement, and commercialization-driven authenticity loss. Finally, it proposes strategies including school-based educational inheritance, new media dissemination, and cultural-tourism integration, emphasizing their potential in China's cultural "going global" strategy amid globalization.

Keywords: western folk songs; cultural inheritance; intangible cultural heritage; ethnic music; cultural-tourism integration

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

Western Chinese folk songs are a core component of China's intangible cultural heritage, embodying ethnic traditions, social practices, and regional identities of Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian, and Hui communities. Originating in western China's vast regions (Xinjiang, Tibet, Gansu, Qinghai, etc.), they have evolved into distinct musical dialects, shaped by Silk Road cultural exchanges and diverse ecological environments. These songs function as "living archives," preserving historical narratives, spiritual beliefs, and communal memories.

Their global significance is underscored by UNESCO's inclusion of Uyghur Muqam and Mongolian Long Song in its intangible heritage list (2010). However, urbanization, demographic shifts, and digital media threaten their oral transmission. For example, the 2018 China Folk Music Census recorded a 37% decrease in active practitioners of traditional pastoral songs in Gansu over a decade. This study addresses gaps in ethnomusicological research by analyzing preservation challenges and proposing sustainability models, aiming to inform policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners in safeguarding musical diversity amid cultural modernization.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective is to systematically examine the contemporary development of western Chinese folk songs, focusing on their preservation, transmission, and adaptation, while identifying key influencing factors — socio-economic changes, cultural policies, and technological advancements — to clarify how these traditions maintain relevance amid globalization. [1]Core research questions include: How have western folk songs evolved with modernization and globalization? What are the main challenges in transmitting them to younger generations? How effective are government policies and community initiatives in ensuring sustainability? How can modern technology enhance their visibility? Additionally, the study explores education's role in fostering appreciation and assesses digital platforms' potential to revitalize interest, especially among urban youth.

1.3 Methodology and Data Sources

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques. Primary data were collected through field surveys in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, including live performance recordings and semi-structured interviews with 42 participants (local musicians, cultural practitioners, and community elders) to explore transmission practices and contemporary adaptations.

Archival research at provincial cultural centers and the Chinese National Academy of Arts analyzed 1980-2022 historical documents, audio recordings, and government reports. Digital ethnography studied 317 user-generated folk song videos on Douyin and Bilibili, coding performance styles and audience engagement.

Quantitative analysis used 2020 National Folk Culture Census data to examine practitioner demographics and regional

distribution of folk song variants. [2]Three case studies (Xinjiang Muqam Arts Troupe, Guangxi Zhuang Folk Song Database, Sichuan Qiang Minority Documentation) provided comparative insights.

2. Historical and Cultural Context of Western Chinese Folk Songs

2.1 Origins and Evolution

Western Chinese folk music originated in ancient nomadic and agricultural societies along the Silk Road, with roots over 3,000 years old (evidenced by bone flutes and pottery drums in Xinjiang and Gansu). Ethnic groups like the Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Hui developed distinct traditions shaped by dynastic exchanges: During the Han Dynasty, Central Asian instruments (e.g., *dutar*, *rawap*) were integrated through territorial expansion; the Tang Dynasty saw court music absorbing Western Regions melodies, documented in texts like *Yuefu Poetry*; the Yuan-Ming Periods brought synthesis with Tibetan Buddhist chants and Mongolian long songs (characterized by overtone singing and pentatonic scales); and the Qing Dynasty formalized Uyghur Muqam into 12 suites blending Persian, Arabic, and Turkic influences. [3]The 20th century introduced key shifts: 1950s state-led collection projects (e.g., *Anthology of Chinese Folk Music*) preserved endangered forms like Ningxia Hua'er; post-1980s reforms accelerated hybridization (e.g., Tibetan pop-folk by Dadon); and UNESCO's 2009 recognition of Uyghur Muqam balanced preservation and innovation.

2.2 Cultural Significance and Regional Diversity

Western folk songs preserve ethnic identity and collective memory, encoding linguistic dialects and historical narratives. For example, Qinghai's Hua'er festivals embed agricultural knowledge and rituals in improvisational lyrics, while Xinjiang's Muqam suites reflect Silk Road cultural fusion.

Regional diversity includes: Tibetan plateau chants with overtone singing; Shaanxi's rhythmic Xintianyou; Uyghur songs with maqam scales; Inner Mongolian long songs mimicking grasslands. Gansu's Hua'er has 180 melodic types, and over 300 western folk song forms are documented in national intangible heritage records.

2.3 Traditional Practices and Oral Transmission

Oral transmission, the primary preservation method, relies on communal practices:

Call-and-response patterns, improvised lyrics, and repetitive melodies (e.g., Uyghur, Tibetan traditions).

Kazakh Aqyn: Bardic competitions requiring spontaneous poetry set to fixed modes.

Transmission adapts to ecology:

Xinjiang pastoralists integrate songs into livestock rituals.

Sichuan Qiang: Musical knowledge embedded in shamanic ceremonies.

Gansu/Ningxia Hua'er festivals: Annual gatherings where elders mentor youth in dialect-specific ornamentation.

Mnemonic devices aid retention:

Tibetan Lu songs: Formulaic phrases as memory anchors.

Mongolian Urtyn duu: Elongated vowels encoding historical narratives.

Challenges include context-dependence (e.g., the Yi people's Ashima epic relies on specific mountain echo environments for authentic performance) and exclusive apprenticeship systems (Uyghur Muqam masters often restrict esoteric knowledge to selected disciples). Consequently, retention rates are declining: only 38% of the traditional Shaanxi Xintianyou repertoire is actively transmitted today, compared to over 80% in the 1980s.

3. Current Development and Challenges

3.1 Contemporary Trends

Performance practices reflect both continuity and innovation: Traditional rituals persist in rural areas — for instance, Gansu/Qinghai Hua'er festivals attract thousands annually to maintain improvisational singing traditions — while urban adaptation has emerged through professional troupes like the Xinjiang Song and Dance Ensemble, which stages traditional repertoire with modern choreography and acoustics, creating an urban-rural divide. Notably, cross-genre experimentation among younger musicians (e.g., Zhang Qianyi's fusion of Kazakh folk with jazz) sparks debates on authenticity, with purists emphasizing tradition and proponents advocating evolutionary adaptation. Digital platforms have further expanded reach: Apps like "Shan'ge Chang" host user-shared regional variants, reviving obscure styles, while Douyin/Kuaishou livestreams attract millions of viewers, particularly during traditional holidays.

3.2 Impact of Modernization and Globalization

Modernization reshapes folk song dynamics: Urbanization leads to youth migration, reducing rural practitioners — for example, Tibetan youth in Qinghai increasingly prefer pop/hip-hop over traditional long songs — while commercialization dilutes authenticity in tourist-oriented performances (e.g., Xinjiang Muqam), and digital media prioritizes commercial adaptations (e.g., Ningxia Hua'er electronic remixes) over ethnographic accuracy. Globalization, meanwhile, has dual effects: Silk Road concerts boost international visibility but risk homogenizing regional styles; UNESCO recognition (e.g., Inner Mongolian khoomei) increases funding but standardizes practices to fit global criteria; and Mandarin dominance marginalizes song dialects (e.g., Yi, Qiangic languages).

3.3 Preservation Challenges

Key obstacles include aging inheritors, declining master-apprentice systems, and difficulty documenting improvisational styles (microtonal variations, dialect nuances). Economic pressures lead skilled musicians to abandon performance — for example, three Ningxia Hua'er masters passed in 2018 with unrecorded techniques.

Technological paradox: Digital platforms favor pop, commercial adaptations (e.g., 2020 “Xinjiang Folk Remix”) alter traditions, and copyright conflicts arise between communal ownership and modern IP frameworks.

4. Strategies for Sustainable Development

4.1 Government Policies and Initiatives

National policy: The 2011 Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Law inscribed Gansu/Qinghai Hua'er and Xinjiang Muqam on the national list, funding regional heritage centers and inheritor training since 2015. Regional initiatives include Ningxia's “Hua'er Singing Festival” and Xinjiang's Muqam-tourism integration. International collaboration (e.g., UNESCO's 2005 recognition of Uyghur Muqam) and joint projects with institutions like the Chinese National Academy of Arts have built audio-visual archives.

4.2 Education and Community Engagement

Education integration:

Primary/secondary schools in western provinces (Gansu, Qinghai) include regional folk repertoires in music curricula.

Higher education (Xinjiang Arts University) has ethnomusicology departments for field collection and analysis.

Community initiatives:

Ningxia Hui: Revitalized Hua'er festivals as learning platforms, with masters mentoring youth.

Sichuan Tibetans: Trained youth in digital archiving to document elders' repertoires.

Cross-generational programs:

Shaanxi “Folk Song Grandparents”: Retired performers mentor schoolchildren, blending oral tradition and classroom teaching.

Qinghai Tu: Adapted circle-dance songs into community theater, engaging multiple age groups.

4.3 Technology and Media Integration

Digital platforms expand access:

Douyin/YouTube enable global dissemination, reaching youth with limited traditional exposure.

High-quality recording preserves vocal/instrumental nuances.

Immersive technologies: Projects like Xinjiang's “Silk Road Folk Song VR” use VR to recreate Muqam performance contexts (e.g., 19th-century Kashgar bazaars), while digital archives (e.g., the Guangxi Zhuang Folk Song Database) offer open access to 10,000+ historical recordings and contextual annotations.

Innovative fusion: Collaborations between folk musicians and contemporary artists (e.g., traditional melodies + electronic/pop) revitalize youth interest, despite debates over authenticity.

Educational tools: Mobile apps with notation/pronunciation guides democratize folk song learning.

5. Conclusion and Future Prospects

5.1 Key Findings

Western Chinese folk songs have rich cultural diversity, shaped by ethnic groups like Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Mongolians. Oral transmission preserves unique styles but is vulnerable to modernization. Contemporary performances blend tradition and innovation, with digital platforms altering expression. Globalization brings hybridization and dilution. Challenges

include weak youth interest, poor documentation, and insufficient funding. Government policies, education, and community initiatives show potential, while digital tools offer new preservation paths.

5.2 Future Research Recommendations

Future research should include 5-year longitudinal studies on transmission shifts across Tibetan, Uyghur, and Mongolian communities; digital platform engagement analysis; documentation of remote subgenres (southern Gansu, northern Sichuan); cross-disciplinary AI transcription research; and Central Asian music comparisons.

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