

Musical Characteristics of the Pingxian Folk Song as Cultural Narrative

Yang Jing ¹, Suthasinee Theerapan ², Sayam Chuangprakhon³, Noppon Chaiyason ⁴,
Kittikun Jungate ⁵, Wenyi Chen⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5} Mahasarakham University

⁶ Guilin Medical University

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the musical characteristics of the Pingxian Folk Song in Ping'an District, Qinghai Province, with a particular focus on its function as a cultural narrative. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research integrates ethnomusicological analysis, field observations, and interpretive frameworks to examine four key dimensions: lyrical structure and language use, rhythmic patterns and vocal ornamentation, melodic and modal systems, and cultural symbolism embedded in performance contexts. Findings indicate that Pingxian folk songs exhibit a distinct lyrical form known as the “3.5-line structure,” incorporating hybrid use of Mandarin and local dialects that reflect regional linguistic identity. The flexible rhythmic style, often governed by breath and emotion, is supported by the traditional use of Paiban as a percussive timing device. Melodic lines follow a modal system capable of symbolic modulation, such as transitions between Bb Gong and C Shang Qingyue, to express shifts in emotional and ritual states. Culturally, the songs encode ethnic memory and social values through symbolic narratives referencing local myths, ancestral figures, and natural imagery. Performances are deeply embedded in ritual, seasonal festivals, and informal educational settings, thereby serving as dynamic vehicles for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. These musical features collectively affirm the role of Pingxian Folk Song as a medium for maintaining ethnic identity and cultural continuity. The study highlights the necessity of understanding folk music as both sonic art and cultural practice. It is recommended that future research explore comparative modal systems across folk traditions in the Hehuang cultural region and investigate the integration of Pingxian folk elements into contemporary educational and digital platforms to support sustainable heritage preservation.

Keywords: Pingxian Folk Song; musical characteristics; cultural narrative; cultural symbolism



© 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative
Common Attribution 4.0 International License

1. Introduction

Pingxian Folk Song has been recognized as a significant form of Chinese folk music embedded in the socio-cultural context of Ping'an District, Haidong City, Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China. It has been deeply rooted in the daily life, ritual practices, and belief systems of multiethnic communities residing along the Huangshui River Basin, an area notable for its geographical and ethnic diversity. The musical characteristics of Pingxian Folk Song encompassing melodic contours, rhythmic structures, poetic forms, and vocal techniques have been shown to reflect the distinctive cultural identities of Han, Hui, and Tu peoples within the region. According to Fuquan & Karin (2022), the development of this musical tradition has been shaped by the intercultural convergence of linguistic, melodic, and performative elements drawn from these three major ethnic groups, which has contributed to a dynamic yet culturally grounded musical expression.

Furthermore, Pingxian Folk Song has functioned as a meaningful medium for the preservation and transmission of ethnic identity. Through its symbolic melodies, localized lyrics, and culturally embedded narrative structures, it conveys legends, beliefs, moral teachings, and collective memories. The role of such music as a form of cultural narrative has been emphasized in the study by G. Chen et al. (2023), which revealed that Pingxian folk songs have served as a vehicle for fostering cultural confidence among ethnic groups such as the Tu, Hui, Salar, and Tibetan communities through oral transmission and unaccompanied vocal performance. In a similar vein, Shi & Nicolas (2023) have highlighted that Chinese folk music operates as a vital mechanism for intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity, local history, and indigenous knowledge through family traditions, communal participation, and religious institutions.

However, no comprehensive research has yet been conducted that systematically analyzes the musical structure and interprets the cultural meaning of Pingxian Folk Song. Previous studies have primarily focused on the classification of Chinese folk songs in general or adopted broad ethnographic perspectives, lacking detailed structural and contextual musical analysis. This has resulted in a notable gap in the ethnomusicological literature concerning Pingxian Folk Song. Although certain studies have addressed folk music traditions in Qinghai Province especially within the Hehuang cultural region—most have emphasized literacy-based transmission and communal singing practices rather than musical structure. For instance, Feng & Suanmonta (2024) investigated the preservation of Hehuang Hua'er in Haidong, yet their study emphasized community-based performance and literacy transmission over formal musicological analysis. While G. Chen et al. (2023) conducted a structural

and field-based musical analysis of Xiansuo folk songs in Ping'an District including tonal organization, melodic patterns, instrumental use, and cultural transmission—the same analytical depth has not been applied to Pingxian Folk Song. These observations align with the findings of Larasati et al. (2024), whose bibliometric study of two decades of research on Asian traditional music revealed that most scholarship has centered on music education, performance arts, and cultural resilience, while systematic studies on melodic variation, lyrical structure, and local symbolic interpretation remain scarce. Therefore, a study centered on the analysis of poetic form, vocal style, melodic modes, and cultural context in Pingxian Folk Song is considered essential for addressing a critical gap in ethnomusicological knowledge.

This study was conducted to analyze the musical characteristics of Pingxian Folk Song and to interpret its cultural meanings as a form of ethnic narrative. Fieldwork and structural musical analysis were employed to examine the following components: lyric structure and poetic form, language use and vernacular style, rhythmic patterns, vocal styles and techniques, melodic and modal systems, and cultural symbolism and ethnic identity. These musical elements were analyzed in connection with the role of folk music in constructing collective identity and shared memory within the local community. Through this analytical framework, an in-depth understanding was aimed to be achieved regarding the function of traditional music in sustaining ethnic identity within the context of contemporary Chinese society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Characteristics of Chinese Folk Songs and Cultural Transmission

Chinese folk songs have been recognized as vital cultural expressions that deeply reflect the identities, lifestyles, and belief systems of local communities. This is particularly evident in ethnically diverse regions such as Yunnan Province, where the vocal traditions of ethnic minorities have been shown by S. Zhang et al. (2023) not only to function as tools for transmitting cultural heritage but also to serve as mediums for fostering cultural pride, spiritual connection to nature, ritual practices, and communal continuity.

The national-level role of folk music has been emphasized in the context of cultural policy. It has been analyzed by Zhu & Maags (2020) that the Chinese government has strategically employed the concept of cultural heritage to reinterpret the past in service of present-day agendas, including political consolidation, national unity, and the projection of soft power in international discourse. Consequently, the preservation of folk songs has been institutionalized as part of macro-level cultural regulation.

In academic discourse, Su et al. (2019) identified folk music as a crucial component of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which has garnered increasing international attention. China has played a leading role in promoting ICH policies, particularly with regard to safeguarding musical traditions. In a similar vein, Yuan et al. (2024) proposed that integrating folk music into university-level curricula fosters innovation-driven learning, including the use of digital technologies, interdisciplinary course design, and practice-based activities that connect students to local communities. This aligns with UNESCO's concept of "preservation through innovation."

Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2024) underscored the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual significance of folk music as a representative of local wisdom that is now facing pressure from globalization and contemporary cultural change. Preservation should extend beyond documentation to include revitalization through contemporary practices, community performances, educational integration, and digital dissemination to engage younger audiences.

To some extent, the vast panorama of Chinese folk songs reflects the cultural dimensions of community structure. However, the Pingxian folk songs of Qinghai Province are distinguished by the region's specific geo-cultural conditions, including its rugged highland terrain, long-standing multi-ethnic coexistence, and the accelerating influence of modernity and cross-border cultural exchange. These factors have shaped not only the stylistic development of Pingxian folk songs but also the contemporary challenges surrounding their transmission, as noted by Shi & Nicolas (2023). The circulation of folk songs in Qinghai further reveals the interrelated roles of geography, Tibetan cultural traditions, and community-based social structures, particularly the participation of families in sustaining musical heritage in daily life. This observation corresponds to Banban (2018) concept of "harmony in diversity," which emphasizes the coexistence and interaction of multiple ethnic groups through artistic fusion, cultural negotiation, and the recognition of layered identities within the anthropological landscape of Qinghai.

In summary, the review of the Characteristics of Chinese Folk Songs and Cultural Transmission discussed above demonstrates that Chinese folk songs play a vital role as vehicles of cultural memory, social values, and communal identity at both national and local levels. This concept forms the theoretical foundation of the present study, which is intended to explore and analyze the Pingxian folk songs of Qinghai Province through examinations of their poetic structure, melodic systems, and vocal styles. The analysis of these elements is conducted to elucidate the mechanisms through which intangible cultural heritage is preserved and transmitted as a living performing art and as an integral expression of ethnic identity within contemporary Chinese society. To

integrate Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) with the core research area of music structural analysis, I aimed at demonstrating that an analysis of the poetic forms, melodic patterns, and the singing techniques of the Pingxian folk songs is a scholarly interpretation that forms a part of the process of cultural heritage living transmission and preservation. Such interpretation embodies the nexus of music, culture, and ethnicity with modernity. This perspective parallels that of X. Zhang et al. (2022), wherein the distribution of music-related ICH in the Chinese context was highlighted as being closely tied to geographical, economic, and infrastructural determinants that affect the accessibility and the traditional transmission of regionally oriented artistic and cultural forms.

In the context of this study, *folk music* is understood as a culturally embedded musical practice transmitted through oral tradition and performed collectively within ritual or communal settings. In contrast, *folk song* is defined as a vocal expression that combines melody and lyrics to convey collective memory, moral values, or local narratives specific to the community of origin. These two concepts are treated as analytically distinct yet interrelated, with folk song considered a subset of the broader category of folk music.

2.2 Ethnographic Approaches in the Study of Folk Music (Ethnomusicology)

Ethnographic approaches in ethnomusicology have gained increasing attention as conceptual and methodological frameworks that prioritize context, cultural meaning, and the voices of music practitioners. It was emphasized by Mantie & Risk (2021) that participatory research processes involving musicians and tradition bearers are essential to understanding the dynamic transmission of musical identity. The value of immersive fieldwork, interactive observation, and collaborative learning has thus been highlighted.

Ceribašić (2021) expanded upon this perspective by arguing that sound recording in music research should not be viewed merely as a data-storage method. Instead, it should be understood as a reflective process shaped by the positionalities and power relations between researchers and participants. Musicians, in this context, were framed as “co-creators of knowledge” rather than passive sources. Consequently, folk music research in ethnomusicology has been conceptualized not as mere sound collection but as a bodily, experiential, and community-engaged knowledge-making process.

McKerrell (2022) also stressed that musical knowledge is not acquired solely through theoretical study but through embodied, practice-based learning embedded in direct participation within musical communities. In the context of education, Ward

(2019) proposed that contemporary music pedagogy should integrate ethnomusicological principles, including reflexivity, culturally informed listening, and socially mediated learning. Collectively, these studies affirm that ethnomusicology is not merely an analytical discipline. It is also a cultural framework that fosters ethical awareness and supports inclusive pedagogical design rooted in community soundscapes and social diversity.

In summary, ethnographic theories within the field of ethnomusicology have emphasized the importance of understanding music through its social, cultural, and experiential contexts as perceived by the practitioners themselves. This conceptual framework serves as a fundamental basis for the present study and has been applied to analyze and interpret the social and ritual dimensions embedded within the vocal practices of the songs in a comprehensive manner. This study utilized an ethnographic approach that included participatory field observation and interviews with inheritors of Pingxian songs. This enabled the author to appreciate the social and ritual significances of the music and vocal performances. Additionally, the juxtaposition of Western ethnomusicology with its focus on the critique of power and identity politics and the Chinese fieldwork tradition with its emphasis on community-based engagement has provided a more nuanced comparative perspective on the analysis of Pingxian folk songs. This is in line with the position of Hammersley & Atkinson (2019) that ethnographic research constitutes a data collection process, in which the ethnographer is deeply involved. It reflects Bruno (2017) position that, in the past sixty years, the development of ethnomusicology has insisted on the importance of understanding music as a social and ritual practice, and experience, which corresponds to the analysis of Pingxian music in its community context.

2.3 Cultural Narrative through Music

Music has been widely acknowledged as a powerful medium for conveying cultural narratives embedded in both individual and communal experience. Margulis et al. (2022) demonstrated that music, even without lyrics, enables listeners to construct “imagined narratives.” These narratives are shaped by the listeners’ cultural frameworks and shared experiences. This concept aligns with the views of Steve (2013) and Shelemay (2013), who both regard music and sound as containers of memory and identity in ethnomusicology. In diasporic and traditional settings, music enables communities to imagine, preserve, and transmit shared memories while sustaining a sense of collective meaning and identity. Pfotenhauer et al. (2023) stated that people use musical sounds and moving images as cultural instruments for developing, articulating, and negotiating their identities in contemporary cultural contexts.

In summary, the concept of cultural narrative reflects the understanding that music functions as a medium of memory, identity, and social values transmitted through sound and collective perception within each culture. The understanding of music as a cultural tool offers another important conceptual framework for the role of Pingxian folk songs. This framework is applied in the present study to examine key dimensions of Pingxian folk songs, including lyrical text, representations of local legends, regional dialect, and ritual performance to articulate the function of Pingxian in the articulation and continuity of the ethnic identity and collective memory of music in the communities of Qinghai Province, China. This reading is in line with the perspective of Bohlman (2019), who maintained that music constitutes an enduring paradigm for the scholar to grapple with identity and culture in the field of ethnomusicology.

2.4 Theories of Chinese Music Analysis

Theoretical approaches to Chinese music have been developed and adapted across historical periods, with foundational concepts derived from traditional modal systems such as the five-tone (pentatonic) and six-tone (liùshēng) frameworks. These include the core pitches *gōng*, *shāng*, *jué*, *zhǐ*, and *yǔ*, which have served as the structural basis of classical Chinese musical composition.

Yu et al. (2023) systematically synthesized the evolution of these tonal systems and proposed analytical models that integrate Western theories—such as functional harmony and tonal hierarchy with traditional Chinese notations such as *ji* np and *gōngchě*. These hybrid approaches are particularly relevant to contemporary music that requires intercultural interpretation.

Zhang (2021) further argued that Chinese music analysis should no longer be confined to isolated traditional systems but instead be reinterpreted within the context of contemporary culture. This shift reflects a movement from closed canonical structures to open systems that emphasize synthesis and pluralism.

Nan & Guan (2023) also contributed to this discussion by highlighting the internal flexibility of Chinese pentatonic modes *gōng*, *shāng*, *jué*, *zhǐ*, and *yǔ* which influence the flowing and consonant character of Chinese melodies. Key features include stepwise melodic motion, the use of repeated pitches, and linear melodic structures, which contrast with the harmonic orientation of Western music. These analyses have not only affirmed the distinct identity of Chinese music theory but also facilitated the development of culturally grounded analytical tools capable of representing structure, sound, and context with precision.

In summary, the theoretical framework for the systematic analysis of Chinese music demonstrates the tonal system, as well as the specific melodic features, of Chinese music compositions. An analysis of Pingxian folk songs needs to consider an entire Chinese music theory. In this study, the ethnographic field data for the Qinghai region are complemented by an analysis of various musical elements: modes, scales, melodic motion, and linear melodic forms. Such an analysis provides an account of the role of sound and musical structure in the local context. While the analysis does account for certain formative musical structures, it attempts to capture the cultural, thematic, and social-commemorative aspects of a community associated with ritualized singing and listening. This is in line with the view of Witzleben (2019), who posits that the performance and active involvement in music are fundamental to the elucidation of the cultural significance contained in the structures of sound and the act of listening.

3. Methods

This study utilized qualitative research methodology designed as an ethnography to analyze the socio-cultural significance and the musical attributes of Pingxian folk songs in Ping'an District, Qinghai Province. Ethnography was selected because it allows the researcher to interpret both musical structures and their cultural meanings within real-life performance contexts. The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted from January to June 2025, during which the study focused on both the community context of the performers and audiences for folk songs, and the analysis of the musical sound structures. The study consisted of three key data collection procedures as follows:

In the first of these data collection procedures, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with five key informants, who are noted inheritors of Pingxian folk songs from the Han, Hui, and Tu ethnic communities in the region. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their status as recognized tradition bearers. Each informant had at least ten years experiences in performing and passing on the folk songs, thereby contributing to a rich and diverse ethnomusicological appreciation.

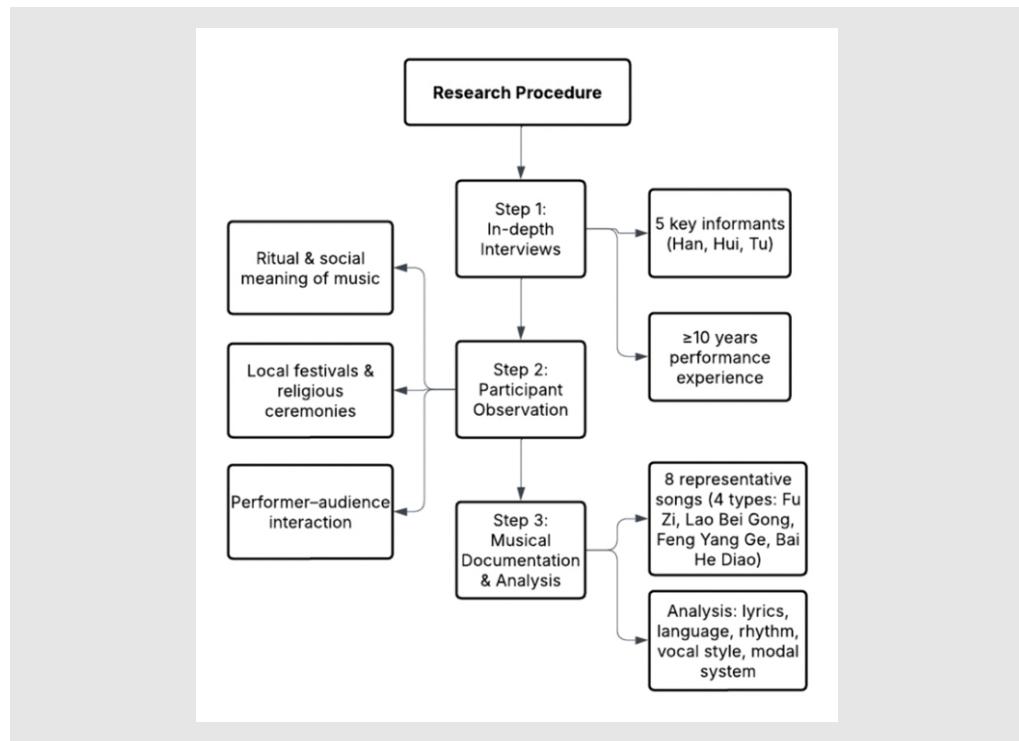
The second of these procedures involved participant observation, during which the researcher attended three live events where Pingxian folk songs were performed: a spring festival celebration in February, a local temple ceremony in April, and an ancestral worship gathering in early June. These events reflected diverse communal and ritual contexts in which Pingxian music is typically performed. A total of approximately 18 hours of on-site engagement allowed the researcher to document performance processes, observe performer-audience interactions, and interpret the ritual and social meanings associated with the music. The field data, including detailed

field notes, audio recordings, and contextual observations, were later cross-referenced with interview responses and musical analysis to ensure methodological triangulation.

The third procedure centered on the documentation and analysis of music. Folk Pingxian songs were noted and recorded for later transcription into the jianpu (jinp) notation system. The documentation included eight (8) representative songs spanning the primary types of Pingxian music: Fu Zi, Lao Bei Gong, Feng Yang Ge, and Bai He Diao. These songs were included based on the following three factors: (1) the songs' usage in live ritual and communal contexts, (2) local singer recognition as culturally important or stylistically representative, and (3) the inclusion of unique melodic, rhythmic, or linguistic characteristics that showcase the performance practice diversity in the Pingxian tradition. The analysis of music considered five aspects: (1) lyric structure and poetic form, (2) language use and vernacular style, (3) rhythmic patterns, (4) vocal styles and techniques, and (5) melodic and modal systems.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Mahasarakham University. All informants participated voluntarily and were assured confidentiality and respect for their sociocultural dignity. The combined use of musical and content analysis enabled the study to link the sonic features of Pingxian songs with their social functions, revealing how melody, text, and performance context work together to construct cultural meaning.

Figure 1. Three-Step Research Process (Yang Jing, 2025)



4. Results

The findings were derived from field data collected in Qinghai Province, China, using a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Data were gathered through live performance observation, interviews with local singers, and song transcription using ji np notation. The analysis focused on four primary types of Pingxian Folk Song: Fu Zi, Lao Bei Gong, Feng Yang Ge, and Bai He Diao. The collected data were systematically analyzed to investigate the musical structure, rhythmic features, and lyrical characteristics of Pingxian Folk Song. The results are presented under the following categories:

4.1 Musical Characteristics of Pingxian Folk Song

4.1.1 Lyric Structure and Poetic Form

A distinctive feature of Pingxian Folk Song is its diverse lyrical structure, particularly in the Fu Zi and Lao Bei Gong types. These songs exhibit systematically organized poetic lines that are deeply embedded in the cultural context. A commonly observed form is the so-called “three-five structure” (sān diǎn wǔ), in which each verse consists of unevenly metered lines typically ranging from five to seven syllables per phrase. The placement of syllables and the cadence of vocal delivery are structured with intentional rhythmic inflections, serving both poetic function and expressive musicality.

Figure 2: The “Three-Five” (3.5-line) Lyrical Structure in the Fu Zi Type of Pingxian Folk Song. (Yang Jing, 2025)

1=5B
中速 $\text{♩} = 84$
赋子(五)
(选自《拷红》唱段)
景增贵 演唱
刘毓芬 记谱

$\frac{2}{4}$ 8. 2 3 2 | 2. 5 2 3 2 i | i 7 6 5 | 4 3 (2 3 1 2) |
老夫人 听此言 泪珠长流，

5. 3 3. 2 | 2 2 i 6 | 6 5 v i | 7 5 4 | 4 3 (2 3 1 2) |
两廊下的僧和俗(啊) 目城(那) 口。

4 4 3. 2 | 2 4. 2 3 2 i | i 7 6 5 | i i 6 |
夫入你大佛殿 一言出口(啊)，

5 i 5 4 3 | 2. 5 1 | 5 5 i | 7 i 5 | 4 3 2 |
谁退贼(啊) 将姑娘配(啊) 作鸾 傢。

In Figure 2, the “three-and-a-half-line” structure referred to as the 3.5-line stanza is clearly illustrated, reflecting a distinctive lyrical feature found in Fuzi and Lao Bei Gong genres of Pingxian folk song. In the first line of the notation, the text is visibly segmented into three full phrases followed by a shorter, half phrase (e.g., “2 4 | 3 2 3 | 2 5 3 2 1 | 7 6 5 | 4 3 | (2 3 1 2)”), demonstrating a lyrical pattern in which each phrase contains a different number of syllables, typically ranging between five and seven. Emphasis is placed on specific rhythmic accents, particularly in the final half-line, where repetition of notes or concise phrases is often employed to deliver artistic weight, such as narrative resolution or emotional intensity. Such features correspond with the findings of Zhang & Dai (2023), whose quantitative linguistic analysis of Hua'er folk songs revealed asymmetrical phrase construction in terms of syllable count and rhythmic placement characteristics also observed in Pingxian folk song, including irregular line lengths and the deliberate use of rhymes and phonetic devices for artistic effect. This observation further aligns with Chen (2024), who explained that in Chinese lyrics particularly those rooted in poetry or folk traditions line segmentation and syllable counts are systematically connected to musical rhythm, tonal inflection, and listener perception. The lyrics, often comprising lines of five to seven syllables, are structured to correspond with melodic contours through the principles of stress-meter alignment and pause boundaries, thereby generating internal phrasing and semantic emphasis in a highly organized manner.

4.2 Language Use and Vernacular Style

In Pingxian folk song, the language used in lyrical composition has been characterized by a fusion of Mandarin Chinese and regional dialects spoken by Han and minority ethnic groups in Qinghai Province. In hybrid linguistic systems, tension and phrase breaks in a sequence allow for varying degrees of expressiveness and variation. Each staff of music consists of lines, and is typically formatted in a free verse style of poetry, where the lines and emotional sentiment of the poetry override structural consistency, and rhyme schemes are altered.

To further exemplify and articulate the vernacular and poetic aspects in direct relation to Pingxian folk songs, the regionally particular vocabulary, rhythmic structure, and poetic imagery of the traditional Fu Zi selection “Dongbin Buys Medicine” (洞宾买药) is particularly illustrative.

Exhibit 1. Lyric of the Fu Zi “Dongbin Buys Medicine” (洞宾买药)

Qi wan yao mai ying si gang

七丸要买硬似钢

(Seven pills to buy as hard as steel)

Di ba wan yao mai ruan ru mian

第八丸要买软如棉

(The eighth pill should be bought as soft as cotton)

Zhe ba wan yao ming ni quan bu quan

这八丸药名你全不全

(You don't know all the names of these eight pills)

As demonstrated above, the use of localized vocabulary and seven-syllable line structure aligns with the prosodic patterns described by Xu et al. (2024), which examined contemporary Chinese song lyrics and highlighted the interplay between lyrical depth and musical depth, demonstrating how lexical diversity, free-form phrasing, and rhythmic placement can reflect specific cultural contexts. Moreover, oral poetic narrative techniques commonly observed across various folk traditions have been employed to enhance emotional authenticity. Xiaoyu et al. (2023) similarly noted that the arrangement of vocal tone and phrase rhythm in Chinese folk song serves to enrich storytelling and preserve a natural flow of narration. Phonetic principles have been applied to control syllabic articulation and align vocal rhythm with spoken language, ensuring that tonal weight reflects the emotional content. The deliberate insertion of bracketed notes, such as "(2312)," in critical lyrical segments further demonstrates the sophisticated use of language and sound to amplify emotional intensity and deliver culturally meaningful narratives.

4.3 Rhythmic Patterns

The rhythmic patterns of Pingxian folk song are characterized by distinctive features that clearly reflect its indigenous roots. Most rhythmic forms used in this genre fall under the category of folk rhythm, which differs significantly from classical or standardized musical rhythms. Rather than adhering to rigid technical structures, the rhythm is conveyed with flexibility, often shaped by the singer's breath, articulation, and emotional state. The musical phrase structure typically consists of two to three phrases per section, with repeated or variational phrases employed in response to lyrical context and emotional expression. According to Hu (2022), Chinese folk songs in general are marked by "free performance and flexibility," allowing performers to adjust the delivery in accordance with breath control, affective tone, and vocal quality. This aligns with the rhythmic characteristics of Pingxian folk song, which are not strictly bound to conventional metric frameworks but are instead shaped by spoken rhythm and the singer's emotional conditions. The result is an "individual performance shaped by melodic extension and emotional intonation," whereby the musical

phrasing is dynamically adjusted to suit the expressive needs of the piece. Xia (2022) similarly noted that in the performance of Chinese folk songs, rhythm is not rigidly tied to notation, but rather governed by “Dan Tian breath control” and a style of vocalization that emphasizes emotional fluidity. The syllabic contour often follows a circular or curved relationship within lines, which cannot be fully captured by notation alone and must be understood through local performance practices. One of the essential rhythmic instruments used in Pingxian folk song is the Paiban, a wooden clapper employed to mark primary beats and musical pauses during performance. The Paiban plays a crucial role in maintaining rhythmic structure and enhancing the emotional tone of the performance, especially in sections requiring vocal projection or heightened dramatic intensity. As noted by Zhang & Hu (2023), musical instruments serve to reinforce vocal sound, enrich timbral variation, and reflect both local and translocal musical cultures. In this regard, the Paiban in Pingxian folk song may be viewed as a rhythmic and expressive tool that enables precise emotional delivery in moments of intensified vocal expression.

Figure 3: The Use of Paiban for Rhythmic Control in a Performance of Pingxian Folk Music. (Yang Jing, 2025)



Table 1 presents the rhythmic characteristics of the four main types of Pingxian folk songs Fu Zi, Lao Bei Gong, Feng Yang Ge, and Bai He Diao which reflect the diversity of rhythmic systems across different vocal styles. The rhythm of these songs is shaped by the singer's breath, accentuation, and emotional expression during performance.

This feature embodies a key principle of folk music, in which emotional transmission and performer-audience interaction are prioritized over maintaining a rigid rhythmic structure.

Table 1. Rhythmic Characteristics of Four Type of Pingxiang Folk Song

Type	Rhythmic Structure	Tempo	Instruments	Feature
Fu Zi	Flexible rhythm based on poetic phrasing (2-2-3 / 3-3-4)	Slow-moderate-soft close	Paiban, Sancundie	Solo recitative guided by breath and emotion
Lao Bei Gong	Semi-fixed duple (2/4) rhythm	Moderate, varies with drama	Paiban, percussion	Duet “Back Palace” call-response style
Feng Yang Ge	Mixed 2/4-3/4 rhythm with free accents	Fast and lively	Paiban, clapping	Collective singing with “Pull Tip” repetition
Bai He Diao	Free lyrical rhythm, long phrases	Slow-moderate-gentle ending	Sanxian, melodic	Solo singing emphasizing expressive breath

4.4 Vocal Styles and Techniques

The vocal styles of Pingxian folk song have been characterized by notable diversity, reflecting the cultural dynamism embedded within each subgenre. Fuzi has typically been performed as a solo narrative form, wherein the lead vocalist may be joined intermittently by one to three supporting voices, fulfilling specific roles such as Qiancha and Houcha, which function to summarize the plot and enhance emotional narrative. These performances are often accompanied by the Sancundie, a traditional percussive instrument, used to support rhythm and reinforce the storytelling mode. In contrast, Lao Bei Gong is commonly performed in duets or ensembles, employing a call-and-response structure known as the “Back Palace,” allowing alternating vocalists to share lyrical lines an approach that adds emotional layering and mitigates vocal fatigue during extended performances. Feng Yang Ge is distinguished by the use of “Pull Tip,” a technique that invites collective participation from musicians, singers, and even the audience, thereby fostering a vibrant and interactive performance atmosphere. Meanwhile, Bai He Diao is primarily rendered as a solo performance accompanied by instrumentalists and is marked by a lyrical, poetic tone, often described as “graceful melody with minimal text.” These four singing types exemplify the multifaceted artistic, vocal, and cultural dimensions of Pingxian folk song. As observed by Tang (2021), such diversity in vocal form reflects both the preservation of cultural heritage and the influence of contemporary social mechanisms. Specifically,

the solo narrative forms of Fuzi and Bai He Diao resonate with the concept of *yuanshengtai*, which emphasizes the authenticity and natural state of folk traditions, while the communal forms of Lao Bei Gong and Feng Yang Ge suggest influences from staged performances and state-sponsored cultural festivals. The interaction among singers, listeners, and instruments in these genres not only represents localized vocal practices but also illustrates the deeper relationship between musical performance and ethnic identity in contemporary Chinese society.

A wide range of local vocal ornamentation techniques has been employed in Pingxian folk singing, including vibrato, melisma, glissando or portamento, and the insertion of extra syllables to emphasize specific emotional nuances rooted in local tradition. Ye (2022) described such ornamental tones particularly those influenced by Chinese opera styles as essential devices for conveying emotion and regional musical identity. These include the use of appoggiaturas, mordents, portamenti, and improvised embellishments to deepen emotional impact and convey culturally embedded meanings. Similarly, Hu (2022) analyzed the vocal techniques found in both Chinese pop and traditional songs, highlighting the diverse applications of melisma, falsetto, grace notes, and natural or throat-based vocalizations. These techniques have been shown to play a critical role in the expressive delivery of emotional depth, artistic feeling, and the aesthetic values embedded in traditional Chinese vocal music.

4.5 Melodic and Modal Systems

The melodic structure of Pingxian folk songs has been found to be strongly governed by the *Qupai* system, which plays a vital role in shaping musical organization. In particular, the melody of the song “Dalianhua” (Big Lotus) clearly demonstrates a standardized use of *Qupai* patterns. In this song, the *Qupai* sequences are arranged into distinct musical phrases, demarcated by vertical bar lines (|), which indicate cadence points and phrase boundaries within each line. For instance, the melodic segment beginning with “3 2 3 | 8 3 | 3 5 3” exemplifies a concise phrase structure, with rhythmic slowing strategically employed to emphasize key words within the lyrics.

This finding is consistent with the work of Qiu et al. (2023), who identified the function of the *Qupai* system in structuring melodic lines and phrase units in *Qin'an Xiaoqu*. It was noted that, although there is no fixed sequential ordering of *Qupai*, artistic flexibility is allowed through segmentation and reconfiguration of sections based on *Qupai* logic. Similarly, He (2022) described the critical role of *Qupai* in defining melodic and rhythmic frameworks within *Kunqu* opera, where each *Qupai* contains a specific name, prosodic structure, and melodic contour. These structures must align with lyrical lines that often vary in syllabic count. For example, a five-syllable phrase

might be segmented into 2+3 or 3+2, while a seven-syllable line could follow patterns such as 2+2+3 or 2+2+2+1. Accordingly, melodies are designed to match these phrase structures through the use of smaller phrase units called dou, with deliberate pauses or rhythmic gaps incorporated into each line.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the use of melodic ornamentation and emphasis techniques is evident. This includes note repetition, rhythmic elongation (e.g., 51:2~), and metrical stress to enhance the emotional expression of particular lyrical elements, such as in the phrase “含不得” (could not endure).

Figure 4: Melodic Phrase and Ornamentation in “Da Lianhua” (Yang Jing, 2025)

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled 'Da Lianhua'. The score includes the following details:
- Key signature: 1=B
- Time signature: 2/4
- Tempo: 稍慢 (Moderately slow) $\text{♩} = 80$
- Melodic line:
 - Top line: $\frac{2}{4} \underline{3 \ 2 \ 3} | \underline{3} \ \underline{3} | \underline{3 \ . \ 5} \ 3 | (\underline{3 \ 3 \ 2} \ \underline{1 \ 2} | \underline{3 \ 1} \ \underline{2 \ 2 \ 5} | \underline{3 \ 2 \ 1} \ 2) |$
 - Bottom line: 奴送情哥大路北,
 - Second line: $\underline{5 \ 3} \ \underline{5 \ 3} \ \underline{3 \ 3} | \underline{5 \ 1} \ \tilde{2} | (\underline{3 \ 3 \ 2} \ \underline{1 \ 2} | \underline{3 \ 1} \ \underline{2 \ 5} | \underline{3 \ 2 \ 1} \ 2) |$
 - Bottom lyrics: 手拖手儿(的个)含不得,
- Right side: 王子玉 演唱 (Performer: Wang Ziyu) and 刘毓荃 记谱 (Pianist: Liu Yuquan) (Composer: Liu Yuquan)

The modal system found in Pingxian folk songs is characterized by both diversity and complexity, with each mode exhibiting distinct structural, emotional, and functional attributes that correspond to the specific contexts of each piece. As presented in Table 2, the Bb Gong (Biangong) mode, which adopts a hexatonic scale (six-tone structure), is centered on the tonal pitch of Bb. This mode conveys a solemn and profound atmosphere and is typically employed in the opening sections of songs to establish a ritualistic or narrative foundation (e.g., invocation or introductory scene).

In contrast, the C Shang Qingyue mode, which utilizes a heptatonic scale (seven-tone structure) with a tonal center on C, evokes a tender, gentle, and romantic character. This mode is often associated with themes of love or descriptions of nature. Meanwhile, the F Zhi Wusheng mode, a pentatonic scale (five-tone structure), exudes a bright and elegant tone quality and is frequently featured in the climactic sections of songs, enhancing the emotional intensity and artistic expressivity.

A distinctive feature of the modal system in Pingxian folk music is its ability to employ smooth modulations within a single melodic section. These modulations are

used to reflect emotional shifts or changes in narrative context. For instance, a transition from Bb Gong to C Shang Qingyue may signify a movement from solemnity to tenderness, while a modulation from F Zhi to G Zhi intensifies emotional impact in the concluding passages. Additionally, non-diatonic tones or bianyin are frequently introduced to provide coloristic inflections, such as the insertion of la or mi^b tones in phrases intended to express sorrow or a bittersweet blend of grief and hope.

These techniques are emblematic of the local musical culture of ethnic groups in Qinghai Province, and they have been preserved in the Pingxian folk repertoire to this day. This observation aligns with findings by Nan & Guan (2023), who described the flexibility of modal systems in Chinese music, particularly the adaptation of principal modes Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu according to melodic and emotional contexts. Their study noted the use of modal mixtures and non-heptatonic tones to enhance emotional nuance and perceptual depth. Similarly, Zhang (2021) emphasized that modal functions in Chinese music are not confined to tonal structure alone but possess the capacity for modulation and modal blending, enabling the expression of complex emotional landscapes. The integration of extra-scalar tones or bianyin, in particular, serves as a deliberate strategy to highlight emotional color and intensify musical significance in key phrases.

Table 2: Modal Systems and Functions in Pingxian Folk Song

Modal Name	Number of Tones	Tonal Center	Aesthetic Mood	Usage Context
Bb Gong (Biangong)	Hexatonic	Bb	Solemn, profound	Opening, invocation
C Shang Qingyue	Heptatonic	C	Soft, romantic, lyrical	Love songs, nature
F Zhi Wusheng	Pentatonic	F	Majestic, bright	Climactic passages

4.2 Cultural Interpretation: Pingxian Folk Song as Ethnic Narrative

Based on the analysis of its musical components, Pingxian Folk Song has been interpreted as a cultural medium that profoundly reflects the ethnic identity of communities in Qinghai Province. Embedded within the musical narratives are symbolic representations of local beliefs, moral values, and traditional worldviews. In particular, references to legendary figures such as Dongbin who is portrayed as a symbol of benevolence, filial piety, and moral virtue have been used to reinforce core tenets of Chinese rural culture. The story of Dongbin's journey to procure medicine for his mother has been culturally codified as a metaphor for filial devotion, which remains a foundational value in traditional Chinese society. This function of folk song as a carrier of communal memory and identity aligns with Mantie & Risk (2021), who have

asserted that folk music in ethnic communities serves not only as artistic expression but also as a communicative channel for transmitting shared memory, cultural ideology, and symbolic structures. Folk songs, therefore, have been regarded as “repositories of symbolic systems,” preserving beliefs, myths, and lifestyle patterns in an audible and performative format that ensures cultural continuity across generations. Margulis et al. (2022) have further emphasized that folk music functions as a vehicle for conveying moral ideals and social values through narrative structures and culturally embedded representations, especially in rural contexts where belief systems remain rooted in local tradition. Accordingly, music is not merely performed sound, but rather a functional conduit for the transmission of virtue, communal ethics, and intersubjective relationships.

Furthermore, the localized language and idiomatic expressions used in Pingxian song texts have demonstrated linguistic preservation and cultural specificity. Hybridized usage of Han Chinese and regional dialects in lyrical content, without being subsumed into standardized Mandarin, has reflected an intentional resistance to linguistic homogenization. Figurative language referring to natural elements such as mountains, rivers, flowers, and medicinal herbs has served as metaphorical codes that reflect the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature, a foundational aspect of local ethnic cosmology. This phenomenon corresponds with Li & Gong (2024), who have indicated that ethnic folk songs across China not only function as art forms but also as informal conduits for the intergenerational transmission of language, worldview, and cultural knowledge. In contexts where Mandarin dominates formal education, folk songs have served as a vital cultural space for sustaining local dialects and indigenous belief systems through oral performance and collective memory.

Additionally, Pingxian Folk Song has played a vital role in ritual and community cohesion. It has been performed in the context of local festivals, communal ceremonies, and spiritual practices such as offerings to local deities and healing rituals involving music and herbs demonstrating that sound operates not merely as entertainment but as a ritualized medium of cultural continuity. These practices are consonant with the findings of Li & Gong (2024), who described Chinese ritual folk music as a culturally embedded form that mediates values, beliefs, and inherited wisdom. Similarly, Wu & Boonsrianun (2023) have shown that the Mulao folk songs in Guangxi function within festivals such as the Zoupo Festival as socially integrative events, where community members across age and gender participate in musical performances that express history, belief, and local life. Such folk songs function simultaneously as “cultural instruments” and “social mediators,” reinforcing ethnic identity and community cohesion. This aligns with the framework of “Living Heritage” proposed by Budiawan (2023), which conceptualizes traditional music and

performance not merely as aesthetic practices but as “performative sites of memory.” In such frameworks, music serves as a living archive through which collective memory, ritual, and wisdom are transmitted, revitalized, and embodied by community members through festivals, religious ceremonies, and intergenerational participation.

The analysis indicated that Pingxian folk songs function as a form of musical performance art and a cultural medium that conveys the values, moral principles, beliefs, and collective memories of the communities in Qinghai Province through their lyrical structure, language, and performance context. Songs that depict legendary figures such as Dongbin illustrate the transmission of moral virtues such as filial piety and goodness, which form the ethical foundation of traditional Chinese society. At the same time, the blending of local dialects with Mandarin Chinese and the frequent use of natural imagery such as mountains, flowers, and flowing water reflect the intimate relationship between humans and the natural environment, serving as the root of the cultural worldview among local ethnic groups. Furthermore, the performance of Pingxian folk songs within ritual and communal festival settings such as local deity worship or healing ceremonies demonstrates their role in strengthening social bonds and maintaining cultural continuity. The findings of this study therefore provide evidence of a living heritage, actively sustained, transmitted, and adapted by the community within contemporary contexts. This directly aligns with the second research objective, which aims to interpret the cultural meanings of Pingxian folk songs as a communicative medium that embodies the spiritual essence and collective identity of the local community.

5. Discussions

This discussion aims to interpret how the musical characteristics, lyrical symbolism, and performance contexts of Pingxian folk songs reflect the cultural identity and collective memory of the communities in Qinghai Province. The interpretation is grounded in three theoretical frameworks that guide each dimension of inquiry. Turner's idea of *Communitas* provides insight into how the melodic and rhythmic structures of Pingxian folk songs function within ritual contexts to generate shared emotional experience. Feld's concept of *Soundscape* is invoked to examine how the sonic qualities of the lyrics particularly their use of localized expressions and metaphor embody and transmit ethnic identity. Merriam's *Tripartite Model* informs the analysis of performance contexts by emphasizing the interrelationship between musical sound, behavior, and conceptual meaning as expressions of living cultural heritage. Accordingly, the first section discusses the role of musical form in ritual expression; the second examines symbolic narratives encoded in the lyrics; and the third situates the performance of Pingxian songs within community-based practices of cultural

transmission. Together, these three analytical dimensions address the study's two primary objectives: (1) to analyze the musical characteristics of Pingxian folk songs, and (2) to interpret their cultural meanings as ethnographic narratives that embody the spiritual and social essence of the local community.

5.1 The Role of Musical Form in Cultural Expression

The melodic and rhythmic components of Pingxian Folk Song have not merely served aesthetic purposes but have also conveyed profound cultural significance, particularly in their association with ritual practices, belief systems, and community narratives. A flexible rhythmic structure guided by the breath and emotional expression of the singer has reflected a "living performance" wherein the performer governs the transmission of emotion in an organic manner. The use of Paiban as a rhythmic instrument has therefore functioned not only as a technical tool but also as a medium for regulating sonic energy and emotional flow within ritual contexts, such as deity worship or healing ceremonies. During a ritual rehearsal, one interviewee explained:

"When we strike the Paiban, it's not just about the rhythm we are keeping. The sound is to signal that everyone return to the essence of the song, to paying reverence to the ancestors, and to the meaning of the ritual."

The Paiban, consequently, is not simply a means of keeping rhythm, but also a significant emblem that helps to direct the participants' feelings and psychospiritual alignment during the ritual celebration. This aligns with Victor Turner's theoretical framework of ritual performance and *communitas*, wherein ritual is interpreted as a process of "liminality" that enables participants to transcend social structures and enter a shared emotional state (*communitas*). In such contexts, music has been employed to sustain this liminal state through rhythmic continuity and melodic articulation. Maher (2021) has emphasized that ritual-like performances in contemporary music can generate emotional collectivity, momentarily uniting individuals into a communal experience. Consequently, the rhythmic and melodic organization in Pingxian Folk Song especially within ritual contexts has functioned not only as an aesthetic structure but as a social mechanism for sustaining collective consciousness and maintaining culturally embedded relationships through sound.

Simultaneously, the melodic structures based on the Qupai system and their significant modulations have reflected the emotional symbolism encoded in musical transitions. The shift from Bb Gong to C Shang Qingyue or F Zhi has not only expressed emotional contrasts but also symbolized transitions in narrative or spiritual states within the songs. These modal changes have been embedded within the cultural and ritual contexts of each song, particularly when used in community gatherings where

melody must align with both ritual rhythm and the psychological state of participants. Such structuring of melody and rhythm has thus functioned as a deep communicative tool capable of transmitting and preserving communal values. This interpretation is consistent with Theodor W. Adorno's view, as articulated in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* and interpreted by Zagorski (2020), wherein music is seen not merely as an artform for pleasure, but as "historical material" reflecting societal structures, emotional systems, and epochal sentiment. The compositional material and arrangement of modes or rhythmic units are thus viewed as manifestations of embedded sociocultural processes and structures of feeling. Alan P. Merriam's tripartite model sound, behavior, and conception as interpreted in Pace (2020), further expands the understanding of the cultural meaning of musical forms. When the Qupai structure and modal transitions of Pingxian songs are examined through this lens, it becomes evident that each melodic placement is inherently linked to communal performance practices and rituals. Whether employing Bb Gong to convey solemnity or modulating to C Shang Qingyue to intensify collective emotion, these sonic arrangements have carried socially and culturally meaningful connotations. Thus, the study of ritual music must regard sound as a "symbolic enactment" capable of synthesizing emotion, memory, and communal values through structured and meaningful musical communication.

5.2 Symbolic Narratives and Ethnic Identity

The lyrics of Pingxian Folk Song have functioned as carriers of symbolic meaning, discourse, and worldview specific to the ethnic communities of the Huangshui River region. The asymmetrical "three-five" lyrical structure has revealed a dynamic use of language within folk poetic forms, enabling both emotional fluidity and semiotic expression. Localized terminology referencing mythological figures such as Dongbin, and natural elements like mountains, streams, or medicinal herbs, has rendered the lyrics as an expressive space for conveying ethnic narratives and preserving communal values. This symbolic integration of local identity, folklore, and nature within the lyrics of Pingxian songs has revealed the role of ritual discourse in maintaining the worldview and values of ethnic groups. A 56-year-old Han informant recounted during the interview:

"When we sing about Dongbin or herbs and mountains, it serves as a narrative and as a way for us to teach our children who we are and what our people believe."

This perspective indicates that the lyrics of Pingxian folk songs function not only as poetic narratives but also as intergenerational conduits for transmitting ethnic identity and cultural heritage. This perspective is aligned with Clifford Geertz's theory, as

interpreted in Bakar Batu et al. (2024), which posits that cultural symbols serve as vehicles for transmitting meaning and knowledge. Similar to the symbolic role of heated stones in Papua's Bakar Batu ritual as metaphors of ancestral power and communal unity mythological references and natural imagery in Pingxian lyrics have functioned as "semiotic instruments" transmitting shared ethnic values through voice in ritual contexts.

This is consistent with Steven Feld's notion of soundscape, as interpreted by Ferrarini & Scaldaferrri (2020), which frames sound as a culturally meaningful landscape intertwined with memory, vocal expression, and identity. Feld's concept of "voice as identity," particularly within his study of the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea, underscores how human vocalization be it speech, song, or ritual chanting functions as a dynamic bearer of ethnic identity. These sonic expressions reflect belief systems, human-nature relations, and localized social structures, thereby enabling ethnic identity to be communicated through culturally embedded sound.

An excerpt from a Fu Zi song, "Dongbin Buys Medicine," illustrates how the narrative of Dongbin a figure of virtue has represented the Confucian ideal of filial piety, a value deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The presence of such content has gone beyond individual storytelling to serve as a reaffirmation of moral archetypes encoded within lyrics and musical expression. This supports Margulis et al. (2022), who have posited that music is not merely a sonic stimulus devoid of meaning, but a medium for storytelling that reflects social values and collective cultural experience. Music is thus regarded as a conduit for memory and ethnic identity. Similarly, Mantie & Risk (2021) have argued that folk songs act as "cultural memory spaces" through which ethnic communities maintain identity especially in societies where value systems are deeply ingrained. Folk music often conveys narratives of virtue, belief, tradition, and life lessons transmitted intergenerationally through familiar musical forms.

5.3 Performance Contexts and Cultural Memory

The performance context of Pingxian Folk Song has played a critical role in the transmission and interpretation of the song as a medium of cultural memory. Singing during local festivals, community rituals, or social events has not been conducted solely for entertainment purposes, but rather as a form of "living cultural performance" that intimately connects performers, audiences, and community settings. Songs performed during nature-worship, deity rituals, or seasonal festivals have thus functioned not merely as traditional melodies, but as tools for regenerating collective memory and identity among ethnic groups in present-day contexts. A Tu informant with over a decade of experience in ritual singing recounted during the

interview:

“When we sing during the mountain worship festival, it connects us as one. It reminds the younger generation of our history and the blessings of our ancestors.”

This account underscores the role of Pingxian folk song as a “voiced tradition” that links ritual practice, ethnic identity, and intergenerational memory.

Moreover, the role of Pingxian Folk Song within informal education such as learning through family, community-based singing practices, or religious activities has demonstrated the dynamic transmission of culture beyond state-controlled systems. This corresponds to the perspective of Shi & Nicolas (2023), who have proposed that folk music operates as a learning mechanism that stabilizes identity and culture within ethnic communities by harnessing the power of performance. Pingxian Folk Song, therefore, may be viewed as a medium of ethnic identity sustained through “voiced memory” embedded in each ritual or communal singing act. This view is reinforced by Lázaro Ortiz & Jiménez de Madariaga (2022), whose analysis of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the significance of “community participation” in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Article 18 of the Operational Directives particularly advocates for initiatives rooted in local engagement—aligning with the informal learning roles of Pingxian Folk Song, transmitted through family, communal gatherings, and religious practices. These practices affirm the importance of community-based agency in sustaining cultural identity and memory through collective sound-making.

This perspective aligns with Budiawan (2023) concept of “Living Heritage,” wherein traditional music and performance are understood not merely as forms of entertainment but as “performative sites of memory.” Within this framework, music becomes a medium for transmitting collective identity, indigenous knowledge, and social cohesion through community participation in festivals, religious rites, and communal rituals. Thus, Pingxian Folk Song embodies both a “cultural instrument” and a “social medium” through which the continuity of ethnic identity and shared memory is dynamically sustained.

In synthesis, the musical structure, the nonmaterial symbolism, and the situational contexts of the folk songs of the Pingxian area form three interlinked components of a cultural system that strengthens the revitalization of a people's ethnic identity and collective memory. Folk song patterns and rhythms promote and sustain the ritual practices of sound and the social cohesion of community. The folk song lyrics serve the ethnocentric perspective and vision, and performances reinforce and facilitate intergenerational socialization and community incorporation.

6. Conclusions

The musical characteristics of the Pingxian Folk Song in Ping'an District, Qinghai Province, have been examined through the analysis of four primary dimensions: lyrical structure and language use, rhythmic patterns and vocal ornamentation, melodic construction and modal systems, as well as cultural symbolism and ethnic identity. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that these musical elements are deeply embedded in the daily life and worldview of communities along the Huangshui River Basin. Specifically, the use of the asymmetrical “three-five” lyrical structure, the integration of regional dialects with Mandarin Chinese, the significant modal shifts in melodic lines, and the symbolic expressions found in song texts have demonstrated that Pingxian Folk Song should not be regarded merely as sonic art, but rather as a cultural mechanism through which community identity is dynamically sustained and transmitted via sound, rhythm, and symbolic meaning within lived performance contexts. Based on these findings, this study asserts that the musical and cultural elements of Pingxian Folk Song function as an interwoven mechanism for preserving ethnic identity and cultural continuity.

By approaching folk song as both a sonic and social phenomenon, this study offers new insights into the cultural dynamics of transmission in Pingxian tradition. It foregrounds sound as a form of symbolic enactment, demonstrating how musical performance functions as a medium through which identity is transmitted across generations. This perspective aligns with UNESCO's notion of living heritage, which emphasizes not only documentation but the continued enactment of heritage through embodied practice. In doing so, the study contributes not only to ethnomusicological theory but also to policy-oriented discussions on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The findings affirm that Pingxian Folk Song is not merely an artistic expression, but an active cultural tool through which ethnic identity is negotiated, preserved, and performed within local communities. This interpretation supports the critique of Lázaro Ortiz & Jiménez de Madariaga (2022), who argued that the effectiveness of the UNESCO ICH Convention depends on the empowerment of heritage-bearing communities at the operational level, rather than solely on institutional recognition.

The findings of this study lead to practical implications that are highly valuable for the preservation and revitalization of folk musical heritage within multicultural settings. The analytical framework and data obtained can be applied in several areas: (1) designing local music curricula that emphasize cultural awareness and intergenerational learning; (2) integrating folk songs into digital media, cultural exhibitions, or contemporary communication platforms to enhance cultural

transmission; and (3) promoting community-based folk music activities to foster participation and sustain living heritage practices. This research underscores the urgency of recognizing Pingxian folk songs as active cultural resources that can meaningfully contribute to educational reform, creative practices, and heritage preservation. This finding corresponds with Jiang (2025), who stated that the integration of folk songs into educational curricula strengthens cultural sustainability, education, and creative industry development, and aligns with Pham (2015), who emphasized that folk music serves as a form of community participation and operates as a mechanism for the sustainable transmission of culture.

Although the scope of this research is comprehensive, several limitations should be acknowledged. The fieldwork was conducted primarily in Ping'an District, Qinghai Province, which may not fully represent the broader diversity of Pingxian folk songs across other regions. The interpretation of musical and cultural data relied on a limited number of informants, which may have influenced the perspectives presented. Moreover, the study did not extend to comparative analyses among different ethnic groups, which could have offered deeper insights into the regional dynamics of folk music traditions.

Nonetheless, further research is warranted to enrich the body of knowledge, particularly through comparative studies of the musical structures and cultural meanings of Pingxian Folk Song and other ethnic folk song traditions within the Hehuang cultural region or adjacent areas with both shared and divergent cultural contexts. Such studies would allow for the identification of both commonalities and unique features, thereby illuminating the processes of cultural adaptation within contemporary Chinese society. Furthermore, the analytical framework may be extended to explore the application of Pingxian Folk Song in contemporary platforms such as digital media production, cultural event programming, or the development of music education tools for community-based and non-formal learning. These approaches would facilitate the expansion of participatory and meaningful pathways for safeguarding cultural heritage at the grassroots level. As a first step toward addressing the limitations outlined above, future studies would benefit from more comprehensive geographic sampling, as well as the inclusion of a more varied range of informants. Comparative research focused on adjacent areas as well as different ethnicities would also enhance appreciation of the interconnected musical traditions of the larger Hehuang culture.

This study demonstrates that Pingxian Folk Song is not merely a historical artifact but a living cultural practice that continues to shape ethnic identity, cultivate social memory, and inspire cultural resilience in contemporary China.

7. Acknowledgments

This research project was financially supported by Mahasarakham University. Appreciation is extended to the local communities in Ping'an District, Qinghai Province, for their generous cooperation and for sharing their musical knowledge and cultural heritage throughout the fieldwork process. Gratitude is also expressed to cultural officers and local scholars who facilitated access to archives and performance contexts essential to the study. The completion of this research was made possible through their collective support and contributions.

8. References

Bakar Batu, P., Chuseok Jenri Ambarita, K., Siahaya, A., Purnama Sari, U., dan Spritualitas, T., & Budaya pada Tradisi Bakar Batu di Papua dan Chuseok di Korea Selatan Jenri Ambarita, S. (2024). Tradition and Sprituality: Cultural Symbolism of Papuan Bakar Batu and Korean Chuseok. *Jurnal SMART (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, Dan Tradisi)*, 10(2), 216–229. <https://doi.org/10.18784/SMART.V10I2.2374>

Banban, D. (2018). Harmony in diversity: an empirical study of harmonious co-existence in the multi-ethnic culture of Qinghai. *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, 2(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/S41257-018-0010-6/METRICS>

Bohlman, P. V. (2019). Traditional Music and Cultural Identity: Persistent Paradigm in the History of Ethnomusicology. In *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (Vol. 20, pp. 26–42). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/768164>

Bruno, N. (2017). Have You Changed Your Mind? Reflections on Sixty Years in Ethnomusicology on JSTOR. *International Musicological Society*, 89(1), 45–65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26350041>

Budiawan, H. (2023). The Logic of Sensation and Fantasy as a Step of Art Creation Through Practice-Based Research. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, 24(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.24821/RESITAL.V24I1.8757>

Ceribašić N. (2021). Music as Recording, Music in Culture, and the Study of Early Recording Industry in Ethnomusicology: A Take on Edison Bell Penkala A Take on Edison Bell Penkala. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 52(2), 323–354. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48640866?casa_token=R9hxWRkoTMAAAA%3ApkSa9APbEGMU-hM7DMgic-tjMchFuv63puDMQBxOY--yAiZBzUg3AtV0GR0KJrEv1uu6dEwly649RGRsBpL4E9H6Fn0LSftf7kK7jsTz7c-20tspsn7o&seq=1

Chen, G., Sensai, P., & Seeyo, W. (2023). Knowledge of the Historical Development of Chinese Xiansuo Folk Music in Qinghai Province's Hehuang District. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4353799>

Chen, Y. (2024). Lyrics generation constrained by tone, melody and imagery [University of Cambridge Repository]. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.113908>

Feng, J., & Suanmonta, T. (2024). Preserving Literacy for the Transmission of the Traditional Folk Song "Hehuang Huaer" in Qinghai Province, China. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 12(3), 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.12n.3p.89>

Ferrarini, L., & Scaldaferrri, N. (2020). Sonic ethnography. In *Sonic Ethnography. Identity, heritage and creative research practice in Basilicata, southern Italy*. Manchester University Press.

Fuquan, E., & Karin, K. (2022). The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies Evidence of Acculturation in the Musical Culture of the Tu Ethnic Group of Qinghai Province, China. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 1.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). Ethnography: Principles in Practice: Fourth Edition. In *Ethnography: Principles in Practice: Fourth Edition* (pp. 1–280). Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315146027/ETHNOGRAPHY-MARTYN-HAMMERSLEY-PAUL-ATKINSON/RIGHTS-AND-PERMISSIONS>

He, T. (2022). Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Approach to Arts. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 12(3), 312–322. <https://doi.org/10.4236/OJPP.2022.123020>

Hu, M. (2022). Features of Singing in Chinese Pop and Traditional Music: the Influence of the Music Genre on Vocal Music. *Música Hodie*, 22, 73137. <https://doi.org/10.5216/MH.V22.73137>

Jiang, M. (2025). The Optimization of Curriculum System for Music Education Professionals in the Inheritance and Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage Music. *Pacific International Journal*, 8(2), 139–146. <https://doi.org/10.55014/PIJ.V8I2.801>

Larasati, Y. G., Fernando, H., Abdullah, I., Harpawati, T., & Morin, L. (2024). Bibliometric Analysis of 20 years of Traditional Music Research in Asia. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, 25(3), 392–413. <https://doi.org/10.24821/RESITAL.V25I3.14983>

Lázaro Ortiz, S., & Jiménez de Madariaga, C. (2022). The UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage: a critical analysis. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 28(3), 327–341.

[https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2021.1941914; WGROUP:STRING: PUBLICATION](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2021.1941914)

Li, T., & Gong, L. (2024). Cultural Identity and Historical Narration: An Analysis of the Expression of National Consciousness in Chinese Ethnic Opera Works. *Revista Electronica De Leeme*, 54. <https://leemejournal.com/menuscript/index.php/leeme/article/view/461>

Maher, J. (2021). Practicing Between Categories: A Hermeneutics of Ritual-like New Music. *Act. Zeitschrift Für Musik & Performance*, 10. <https://ojournals.uni-bayreuth.de/index.php/act/article/view/485>

Mantie, R., & Risk, L. (2021). Framing Ethno-World: Intercultural Music Exchange, Tradition, and Globalization. *York St John University*. <https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/ile/iccm/documents/Ethno-Research-full-Framing-report.pdf>

Margulis, E. H., Wong, P. C. M., Turnbull, C., Kubit, B. M., & McAuley, J. D. (2022). Narratives imagined in response to instrumental music reveal culture-bounded intersubjectivity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 119 (4), e2110406119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/PNAS.2110406119>. SUPPL_FILE/PNAS.2110406119.SAPP.PDF

McKerrell, S. (2022). Towards practice research in ethnomusicology. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 31(1), 10–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2021.1964374>

Nan, N., & Guan, X. (2023). Common and distinct quantitative characteristics of Chinese and Western music in terms of modes, scales, degrees and melody variations. *Journal of New Music Research*, 52(2–3), 227–244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09298215.2024.2311650>

Pace, I. (2020). The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music and the Application of Meta-Critical Scholarship on Ethnography: Reinscribing Critical Distance.

Pfotenhauer, S. M., Wentland, A., & Ruge, L. (2023). Understanding regional innovation cultures: Narratives, directionality, and conservative innovation in Bavaria. *Research Policy*, 52(3), 104704. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RESPOL.2022.104704>

Pham, T. T. H. (2015). Living heritage, community participation and sustainability : Redefining development strategies in the Hoi An Ancient Town World Heritage property, Vietnam (pp. 274 – 290). *Routledge*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728018-18>

Qiu, L., Chuangprakhon, S., & Phulaiyaw, A. (2023). An investigation of developing and inheritance of Qin'an Xiaoqu in Gansu province China | International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*,

15(2), 867–876. <https://www.ijci.net/index.php/IJCI/article/view/1247>

Shelemay, K. K. (2013). Ethnomusicology: history, definitions, and scope: a core collection of scholarly articles. Routledge.

Shi, W., & Nicolas, A. (2023). Enhancing Education and Literacy through the Transmission of Tibetan Folk Music Performing Art in Qinghai Province, China. International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 11(4), 151–158. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.11n.4p.151>

Steve, F. (2013). Ethnomusicology and Visual Communication. In Ethnomusicology (pp. 193–225). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203063347-19>

Su, X., Li, X., & Kang, Y. (2019). A Bibliometric Analysis of Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage Using CiteSpace. SAGE Open, 9(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019840119/SUPPL_FILE/APPENDIX.DOCX

Tang, K. (2021). Singing a Chinese Nation: Heritage Preservation, the Yuanshengtai Movement, and New Trends in Chinese Folk Music in the Twenty-First Century. Ethnomusicology, 65(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.5406/ETHNOMUSICOLOGY.65.1.0001>

Ward, F. (2019). Technology and the transmission of tradition: An exploration of the virtual pedagogies in the Online Academy of Irish Music. Journal of Music, Technology and Education, 12(1), 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1386/JMTE.12.1.5_1_CITE/REFWORKS

Witzleben, J. L. (2019). Performing in the Shadows: Learning and Making Music as Ethnomusicological Practice and Theory. In Yearbook for Traditional Music (Vol. 42, pp. 135–166). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0740155800012698>

Wu, Y., & Boonsrianun, P. (2023). Literacy Transmission of Mulao Folk Songs during the Zoupo Festival in Luocheng, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 11(3), 208–216. <https://doi.org/10.7575/AIAC.IJELS.V.11N.3P.208>

Xia, W. (2022). Peculiarities of Singing in Chinese Popular and Traditional Music: Influence of Musical Genres on Vocals. Música Hodie, 22. <https://doi.org/10.5216/MH.V22.73226>

Xiaoyu, W., Ying, X., Shilin, L., Xiubo, R., Dan, Y., Xinran, Y., Junrui, L., Jinjing, D., & Qijian, X. (2023). Phonetics as a means of nationalising art songs: a comparative music-phonetics study based on Zhao Yuanren's New Poetry Collection. Journal of New Music Research, 52(2–3), 202–226. [https://doi.org/10.1080/09298215.2024.2311649;PAGE:STRING:ARTICLE/CHAPTER](https://doi.org/10.1080/09298215.2024.2311649)

Xu, L., Xu, B., Sun, Z., & Li, H. (2024). Associations between lyric and musical depth in Chinese songs: Evidence from computational modeling. *PsyCh Journal*, 13(6), 915–926. <https://doi.org/10.1002/PCHJ.785>;WGROUP:STRING:PUBLICATION

Ye, Y. (2022). Brief Analysis of the Singing Skills and Artistic Treatment of Choral Works with Chinese Traditional Opera Style. *Forest Chemicals Review*, 899–907. <http://forestchemicalsreview.com/index.php/JFCR/article/view/1181>

Yu, F., Zhang, Q., & Thuy, P. M. (2023). A Study of the styles and characteristics of basic music theory textbooks in China in the past 100 years. *Trans/Form/Ação*, 46(spe), 117–144. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2023.V46ESP.P117>

Yuan, C., Kong, X., & Chen, P. (2024). The authentic experiences of tourists in Chinese traditional villages based on constructivism: a case study of Chengkan village. *Tourism Critiques*, 5(1), 2–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TRC-10-2023-0021>

Zagorski, Marcus. (2020). Adorno and the aesthetics of postwar serial music. *Wolke*.

Zhang, K., González del Valle-Brena, A., Ramos Riera, I., & Zhao, J. (2024). Ancient routes, new gateways: a systematic literature review of China's cultural route heritage. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 14(2), 266–281. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-06-2021-0114>

Zhang, L., & Hu, J. (2023). Pop Music Singing in Education with Modern Innovative Technologies: How the Chinese Language Shapes the Creation of Popular Singing. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 52(6), 2677–2691. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10936-023-10014-Z/TABLES/1>

Zhang, M. (2021). An Integration of Chinese Compositional Techniques with Western Musical Elements: A Stylistic Analysis of Huang An-Lun's Selected Works. *George Mason University*.

Zhang, S., Wu, C., Zhang, S., & Wu, C. (2023). Revitalizing endangered traditions: Innovative approaches to safeguarding Yunnan's ethnic minority music as intangible cultural heritage. *Herança*, 6(1), 101–128. <https://doi.org/10.52152/HERANCA.V6I1.787>

Zhang, X., & Dai, Z. (2023). Frequency in Chinese Ballad Song Lyrics: A Quantitative Morpheme-Based Study. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Including Subseries Lecture Notes in Artificial Intelligence and Lecture Notes in Bioinformatics)*, 13496 LNAI, 83–95. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28956-9_7/FIGURES/4

Zhang, X., Xiang, H., & Liu, R. (2022). Spatial pattern and influencing factors of intangible cultural heritage of music in Xiangxi, central China. *Heritage Science* 2022 10:1, 10(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-022-00672-y>

Zhu, Y., & Maags, C. (2020). Heritage politics in china: The power of the past. *Heritage Politics in China: The Power of the Past*, 1–162. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429446429/HERITAGE-POLITICS-CHINA-YUJIE-ZHU-CHRISTINA-MAAGS/RIGHTS-AND-PERMISSIONS>