

EXPLORATION AN ANALYSIS OF THE SINGING OF POLYPHONIC FOLK SONGS IN SOUTHWESTERN CHINA *

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Abstract

Polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China represent a unique musical heritage distinct from Western polyphony in their origins, functions, and performance styles. As vital expressions of minority cultures, these songs showcase diverse vocal techniques and reflect the social life, cultural values, and aesthetics of different ethnic groups. This study investigates the singing styles, inheritance mechanisms, and protection strategies of polyphonic folk songs in the modern era. Drawing from dialectical materialism and multidisciplinary approaches—including musicology, folklore, and cultural anthropology—the research combines qualitative interviews, musical analysis, and quantitative surveys among inheritors and folk ensembles. Findings reveal that polyphonic singing commonly involves repetition and chorus forms, using true and falsetto vocal techniques with strong ethnic characteristics. Transmission is primarily oral and intergenerational, yet faces challenges due to modernization. The study proposes digital preservation and integration with

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cultural tourism as practical pathways to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage.

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Introduction

Polyphonic folk songs, defined as vocal music with two or more independent voice parts, are an integral part of China's rich folk music tradition. Predominantly found among ethnic minorities in Southwest China—including the Zhuang, Dong, Miao, Yao, Buyi, Yi, and Naxi—these songs are deeply rooted in agricultural labor, rituals, courtship, and communal customs. Their complex harmonies and layered textures not only distinguish them musically but also serve as vehicles for expressing communal identity and emotional life.

The origin of polyphonic folk songs in China dates back to the late matrilineal society, and over centuries, they have evolved into a vital medium of oral heritage. Unlike the Western concept of polyphony that often emphasizes musical structure, Chinese multi-voice folk songs reflect a more functional and ritualistic orientation, embedded in everyday life and passed down through generations without written notation.

Today, as these musical forms face the pressures of modernization, urbanization, and cultural homogenization, questions of inheritance and protection have become increasingly urgent. With many elderly bearers retiring or passing away, and younger generations showing declining interest, polyphonic folk songs risk falling into obscurity. Meanwhile, their ethnomusicological and anthropological value has gained scholarly recognition (Ding, 2020; Fan, 2020).

Given this context, this study explores three main questions: (1) What are the distinctive singing styles of polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China?

(2) What factors influence their inheritance? (3) How can they be preserved in the digital era and through cultural tourism integration? Through a combination of fieldwork, musical analysis, and interdisciplinary methods, this research aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the sustainable transmission of China's intangible vocal heritage.

Objectives

1. In order to broaden new perspectives in the study of polyphonic folk song singing in Southwest China. To enrich the academic research on polyphonic folk song singing.

2. In order to trace the way of inheritance of polyphonic folk songs by investigating the current situation of the inheritors of polyphonic folk songs.

3. To provide specific strategies for the protection and inheritance of polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China.

Literature Review

Scholarly attention to polyphonic folk songs in China began relatively late. For decades, Chinese folk music was largely assumed to be monophonic until the 1950s, when musicians and scholars began documenting polyphonic traditions among ethnic minorities, particularly the Dong people. With the launch of the second National Folk Song Collection in 1979, researchers confirmed the existence of polyphonic structures in more than 30 ethnic groups, prompting greater academic interest (Fan, 1996). Since then, studies have expanded from basic musical structure to broader inquiries in music aesthetics, folklore, and ethnomusicology (Ding, 2020).

These folk songs typically feature a lead singer supported by group repetition or chorus, forming textures such as imitation or contrast. Voice techniques include true and falsetto registers, and rhythms range from free

and scattered beats to compound meters. Dong choral traditions, for instance, stress collective harmony over individual performance, reflecting communal values embedded in labor and ritual (Fan, 2020).

As for transmission, polyphonic folk songs are passed down through oral traditions, often taught by senior “song masters.” These traditions are deeply tied to social life—festivals, marriages, and collective labor. However, with modernization, migration, and generational shifts, many of these practices are endangered. Ding (2020) notes the necessity of integrating traditional knowledge with systematic education to ensure sustainable cultural inheritance.

In terms of preservation, scholars have proposed digital strategies and cultural-tourism integration. Fan (2020) advocates transforming traditional songs from “heritage” into “cultural resources,” while Tan (2020) emphasizes their role in expressing mother tongue identity. Though current efforts include audio archiving and performance-based tourism, further work is needed to explore advanced technologies such as VR and 3D digitization, and to encourage youth participation.

Overall, while the academic landscape is expanding, future research must focus on building inheritance models, promoting digital innovation, and enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration. This study builds upon these foundations to offer an integrated perspective on the singing, transmission, and protection of polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to examine the singing characteristics, inheritance pathways, and preservation strategies of polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China. Guided by

ethnomusicological theory and cultural anthropology, the research integrates literature analysis, fieldwork, and empirical validation.

1. Literature and Musical Analysis

A review of historical texts, academic journals, and local chronicles was conducted to understand the origin, function, and stylistic development of polyphonic folk songs. Simultaneously, selected songs from ethnic groups such as the Dong, Miao, Zhuang, and Naxi were analyzed in terms of melody, texture, rhythm, vocal techniques (e.g., true voice, falsetto), and polyphonic structure. These analyses provided the foundational framework for understanding stylistic typologies and regional traits.

2. Field Interviews and Observation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key cultural inheritors, performers, and community leaders. Interview topics included traditional teaching methods, ritual and communal contexts, and perceptions of cultural transformation. Participant observation during live performances and informal singing gatherings further contextualized the role of these songs in daily life.

3. Survey and Quantitative Validation

A structured questionnaire was distributed to local singing groups and enthusiasts to gather data on participation, preferences, and awareness. SPSS was used to analyze reliability (Cronbach's alpha) and validity (factor analysis). AMOS software supported structural equation modeling to explore relationships among variables, such as singing styles, inheritance methods, and preservation effectiveness.

4. Triangulation and Synthesis

To enhance validity, findings from textual analysis, interviews, and survey data were triangulated. This approach ensured consistency across qualitative insights and quantitative evidence, reinforcing the reliability and depth of interpretation.

5. Research Framework

The conceptual framework is shown below:

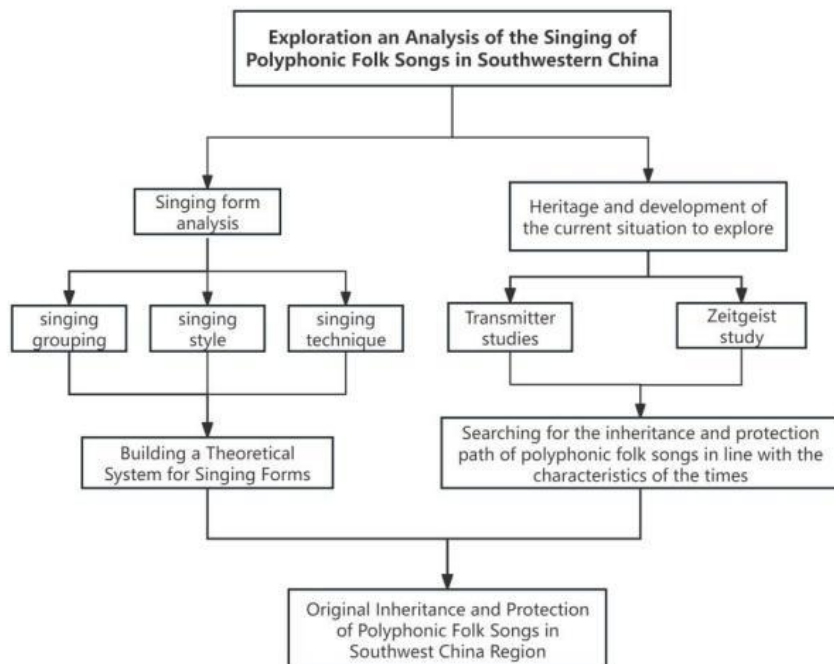


Figure 1 Conceptual framework (Constructed by the researchers)

Results

1. Singing Forms of Polyphonic Folk Songs

Chinese polyphonic folk songs are a unique musical form, characterized by rich vocal layering and strong ethnic expressiveness. Their structure reflects the collaborative spirit of communities, blending aesthetic harmony with social function. Whether in the Mongolian long tune of the north or the Yi chorus of the southwest, these songs express people's reverence for life, nature, and love.

Polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China represent a distinctive form of vocal tradition that embodies complex harmonies and strong ethnic expressiveness. Over time, these singing forms have evolved into relatively stable structures, deeply rooted in the collective labor, customs, and social rituals of ethnic communities. Generally, they can be divided into two main categories: chorus and repetition. Each category includes subtypes based on

participants—such as male chorus, female chorus, children’s chorus, mixed chorus, and male-female duets. For instance, male choruses are typically used in collective labor or ceremonial contexts such as forest calls or boat songs (Figure 2). Female choruses are often associated with daily activities or festive events. Children’s choruses are comparatively rare and are mainly preserved in traditions like the Maonan "Juggling" songs or select Zhuang children's songs.



Figure 2 shows a musical score for the Guizhou Dong folk song "Ga jin ban" (male chorus). The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 84. It features a leading singer part and a male chorus part. The title is "Ga jin ban" (male chorus) and the source is "Guizhou Dong Folk Song". The score is written in a Western musical notation style with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The tempo is marked as 84. The score is divided into two systems. The first system has two staves: the top staff is for the leading singer (labeled "(领) leading singer") and the bottom staff is for the male chorus (labeled "(齐) sing in chorus"). The second system also has two staves, continuing the melody for both parts. The music consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests and ties.

Figure 2 Guizhou Dong folk song "Ga jin ban" (Constructed by the researchers)

The repetition format shares similar contexts with chorus but is more common in small-group cooperative tasks, rituals, drinking songs, mountain songs, and romantic exchanges. These are also categorized into male, female, children’s, mixed repetitions, and male-female duets. Among these, the male-female duet is the most widespread and frequently used format, especially among ethnic groups like the Zhuang, Buyi, Maonan, Mulao, Yao, and She. Some Han, Lisu, and Qiang songs also adopt this structure. These forms are most often found in love songs and courtship settings, where emotional expression and lyrical dialogue are emphasized.

Two notable features characterize these group singing forms. First, chorus, repetition, and duet singing dominate, while fully mixed-voice textures are less common. This correlates with the division of labor and gender roles within ethnic traditions. In many groups, labor and customs are performed

separately by men and women, and songs mirror this separation. Second, the structure often follows a “one-leads-all-follow” pattern, where a skilled soloist or elder singer initiates the melodic line while the rest harmonize in support. The solo part—usually soprano—allows greater improvisational freedom and expressive nuance, yet its clarity remains prominent regardless of the number of accompanying voices.

The singing techniques used in polyphonic folk songs are equally rich and closely related to local ecology, performance genre, and cultural function. While most songs maintain consistent vocal techniques across parts, some ethnic groups exhibit contrasting combinations. The primary vocal types include: (1) true voice with true voice, common in labor and field songs, characterized by deep or high natural tones; (2) falsetto with falsetto, often found in mountain songs for sound projection, as in the Debao Zhuang repertoire; and (3) true voice combined with falsetto, either across different voice parts or alternating within a single part. For instance, the male singers often use falsetto in mixed-voice repetition, while Qiang sopranos may employ falsetto within same-part alternation. The Hani song "The Girl Comes Out" illustrates this technique, where the soprano part shifts between true and falsetto registers to enrich melodic expression.

Another distinctive element is musical foreshadowing, a preparatory gesture wherein a singer subtly alters pitch, timbre, or volume to signal the entrance of another part. This technique is especially useful in improvised or large ensemble performances, enabling smooth transitions and coordinated layering.

The Naxi polyphonic folk song *Woje* serves as a representative case of stylistic integration between music, ritual, and performance. This ancient song, sung in the Naxi language and often incorporating Dongba script, is traditionally taught through oral transmission over extended periods. It is structurally based on three parallel phrases followed by a coda and lacks accompaniment. Its melodic system defies standard scale conventions, making it difficult to transcribe with conventional notation (Figure 3).

窝热^①
(混声合唱)

云南纳西族民歌

古朴、庄严

♩ = 约60

(女)

(男)

(领) (嗵) 窝 热, (齐) 窝 热

Figure 3 Yunnan Naxi Polyphonic Folk Song "Woje" (Constructed by the researchers)

Woje is typically performed by a large circle of dancers, ranging from a dozen to several hundred people, moving clockwise around a fire. Led by male "ZuoLuoBa" and female "LeMei" chanters, the call-and-response format creates a dramatic sonic contrast. Female voices use throat trills with rapid horizontal tremor—resembling goat cries—while male voices produce rough, resonant roars. The resulting texture conveys a strong sense of primordial energy and ceremonial gravitas. The treble melody is limited to three tones (Gong, Shang, Jiao) and is simple yet powerful. Harmony is based on the D mode, with predominant intervals of unison, sixths, and thirds, forming a contrasting polyphonic weave in which lower voices enter before higher ones.

2. Research on the Inheritance of Polyphonic Folk Song Singing

Through field investigations and interviews, this study closely examined the current state of inheritance among polyphonic folk song practitioners across Southwest China. In nearly all ethnic communities studied, the core inheritance method remains oral transmission. Senior singers, often referred to as "song masters," teach students through a process of direct demonstration and imitation—line by line, phrase by phrase—accumulating singing proficiency over years of participation in social and ceremonial contexts. This mode of transmission, though lacking written documentation, embodies a deep-rooted system of cultural continuity based on embodied learning and collective memory.

Intergenerational inheritance appears in three primary forms: spontaneous transmission, where children learn songs naturally by participating in communal life; family-based transmission, where skills are passed within households, especially among women or lineage elders; and government-supported or institutionalized inheritance, wherein local authorities recognize and support designated cultural bearers. For example, among the Yao people of Fuchuan, oral transmission has helped preserve not only vocal techniques but also important social knowledge, such as customs, belief systems, and cultural identity.

However, this traditional system faces increasing challenges. In many villages, folk festivals and communal rituals—once key settings for song learning—are fading or have disappeared entirely. With the rise of urbanization and modern lifestyles, the survival space for polyphonic folk songs has drastically shrunk. Many highly skilled singers have aged or passed away without successors. Younger generations, shaped by digital entertainment and formalized education, often show little interest in traditional music, viewing it as outdated or irrelevant. As a result, the oral transmission chain is breaking down, and many ancient vocal styles and techniques are in danger of being lost forever.

These findings highlight an urgent need to both document and revitalize the living practice of polyphonic folk singing. Beyond textual preservation, attention must be paid to the relational, situational, and performative dimensions of inheritance—how knowledge is shared in context, how emotional bonds are forged through singing, and how the community structure supports or hinders cultural continuity. Recognizing inheritors as dynamic agents—not passive transmitters—can help reshape preservation policies that are responsive to local realities and capable of bridging tradition and transformation.

Discussion

This study has examined the vocal forms, stylistic characteristics, inheritance mechanisms, and preservation strategies of polyphonic folk songs

in Southwest China. The findings confirm that these songs, deeply embedded in the daily lives and rituals of ethnic communities, are not merely artistic expressions but also carriers of social cohesion, historical memory, and cultural identity. Their complex vocal structures—typically involving true voice, falsetto, and mixed techniques—demonstrate a high degree of musical coordination and ethnic distinctiveness. Singing formats such as chorus, repetition, and male-female duets are closely aligned with social divisions of labor, gender roles, and local customs. The “one-leads-all-follow” structure remains a defining characteristic, fostering both artistic expression and collective participation.

However, despite their rich cultural and musical value, polyphonic folk songs are facing unprecedented challenges in terms of intergenerational transmission. The inheritance system, still primarily oral and informal, is increasingly vulnerable due to aging inheritors, weakening communal rituals, and the influence of modern lifestyles and media. Many traditional singing contexts have either disappeared or been replaced by commercialized, staged performances, leading to a detachment of younger generations from original forms and meanings.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study further suggest that factors such as singing style, skill mastery, community environment, and policy support are all positively correlated with the effectiveness of inheritance and preservation. Notably, the “contemporary cultural environment” plays a dominant role in shaping the current state of folk song transmission. Where community rituals and shared values persist, polyphonic traditions remain more vibrant and resilient.

In response to these findings, this study emphasizes the importance of two integrated strategies for safeguarding polyphonic folk songs. First, digital preservation must be expanded beyond audio and video archiving to include immersive technologies such as VR, 3D modeling, and interactive platforms,



enabling deeper engagement and public access. At the same time, capacity-building programs should train a new generation of practitioners with both musical and technical competencies to sustain digital initiatives. Second, integration with cultural tourism provides a pathway for revitalization. By embedding folk song performances into living cultural experiences—such as village ceremonies, music festivals, and participatory workshops—communities can maintain tradition while generating economic and educational value.

In conclusion, polyphonic folk songs in Southwest China remain a profound testament to the creativity, resilience, and emotional depth of ethnic minority cultures. Their preservation cannot rely solely on documentation or museum-like conservation but must be rooted in dynamic, community-driven practices that respect tradition while embracing adaptation. This study contributes both theoretical understanding and practical recommendations, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and long-term cultural investment to ensure that these intangible musical heritages continue to resonate across generations.

Recommendation

1. The future outlook of polyphonic folk song singing research is full of opportunities and challenges. With the advancement of science and technology and the strengthening of interdisciplinary cooperation, researchers are expected to utilize modern technological means, such as audio analysis, digital recording and virtual reality, to more comprehensively and accurately capture and record the details of multi-voice folk singing, thus enriching the research materials and enhancing the depth of research.

2. Digging deeper into the cultural connotations and social values behind polyphonic folk songs and strengthening the consideration of cultural

contexts will promote a deeper understanding of their artistic characteristics and historical inheritance.

3. Strengthening exchanges and cooperation with international academics and drawing on advanced international research methods and experiences will also promote the study of polyphonic folk singing to new heights. In the face of the challenges of social and cultural changes, researchers also need to actively participate in the protection and inheritance of folk songs, and explore new modes and ways of inheritance, so as to ensure the continuation and development of this valuable intangible cultural heritage.

Funded Project

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