

GUNBAN FOLK SONGS AND LOCAL IDENTITY: VOCAL STYLES AS CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: This study examines the three distinctive vocal styles of Gunban folk songs—Gaoqiang (high-pitched), Pingqiang (level-pitched), and Aiqiang (low-pitched)—as cultural symbols embedded in local identity and community governance. Drawing on literature review, field investigation, musical morphology analysis, and policy review, the research explores the stylistic characteristics, emotional functions, and socio-cultural significance of these vocal traditions. The findings reveal that Gaoqiang symbolizes collective vigor and resilience through soaring melodies and free rhythms, Pingqiang conveys ethical values and narrative subtlety within intimate performance settings, and Aiqiang anchors ritual continuity and communal memory through deep timbres and melancholic expression. Together, these styles constitute a holistic system of cultural expression that reinforces social cohesion, transmits moral norms, and consolidates local identity. The study further highlights the challenges of modernization, generational discontinuity, and media influence, while emphasizing strategies for safeguarding through education, innovation, and participatory governance. By situating Gunban folk songs within the frameworks of ethnomusicology, performance theory, and cultural governance, this research contributes to the understanding of how folk vocal traditions operate as both artistic heritage and governance resources, sustaining cultural resilience in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Gunban folk songs; Gaoqiang; Pingqiang; Aiqiang; Cultural governance

1. INTRODUCTION

Gunban folk songs, rooted in the Naxi District of Southwest China, constitute a unique form of folk artistry that reflects the close interaction between ecological environment, cultural tradition, and community life. Over centuries, these songs have been shaped by the rhythms of labor, the cadences of oral storytelling, and the symbolic values of ritual performance, becoming indispensable carriers of cultural memory and social cohesion. Their significance lies not only in their technical artistry but also in their role as cultural symbols through which communities negotiate identity and sustain governance mechanisms.

The core of Gunban folk songs lies in their three distinctive vocal styles: Gaoqiang (high-pitched), Pingqiang (level-pitched), and Aiqiang (low-pitched). Each style manifests unique vocal techniques, aesthetic orientations, and social functions, while collectively forming a comprehensive system of artistic

expression. Gaoqiang, characterized by its soaring melodic leaps, wide tessitura, and free rhythmic flow, evokes heroic spirit and communal solidarity, often performed in open-air environments such as mountain valleys or farmlands where voices resonate widely. Pingqiang, with its steady rhythmic patterns and smooth melodic contours, emphasizes textual clarity and emotional subtlety, providing an intimate mode of communication suitable for domestic and courtyard contexts. Aiqiang, distinguished by its deep vocal resonance and narrow pitch range, conveys solemnity, sorrow, and profound affective depth, typically performed in evening or ritual settings where its timbre strengthens collective identity and emotional solidarity.

Scholars have emphasized that vocal techniques are not merely technical means but cultural carriers. Bai and Chen (2023) highlight that the analysis of singing techniques in Chinese art songs reveals how vocal methods embody both artistic refinement and cultural connotation. Similarly, Dai (2023) stresses that vocal performance techniques serve as direct vehicles of emotional expression, where timbre, resonance, and articulation construct aesthetic meaning beyond textual content. In the context of Gunban folk songs, the dynamic interplay of Gaoqiang, Pingqiang, and Aiqiang illustrates how technical diversity is intertwined with social symbolism: the choice of vocal register, ornamentation, and phrasing becomes a medium for encoding cultural narratives and reinforcing local identity.

The study of Naxi and Gunban vocal traditions has revealed distinctive features that both align with and diverge from Han folk songs. Xu (2011a) observes that Naxi folk songs employ flexible melodic lines, irregular phrase structures, and naturalized vocal timbres, reflecting ecological adaptation and emotional immediacy. Miao and Qiao (1985) demonstrate how modal divisions in Han folk songs are marked by approximate tonal zones, while Gunban styles, especially Aiqiang, extend this logic by grounding vocal identity in dialectal articulation and regional aesthetics. Wang (2015) provides a micro-level analysis of the Naxi folk song *Climbing the Sea*, noting the balance between wide melodic leaps and lyrical stability, which parallels the characteristics of Gaoqiang. These comparative perspectives highlight that while Gunban folk songs share certain structural affinities with broader Chinese traditions, they maintain a distinctive expressive system rooted in local environment and cultural memory.

Equally significant is the pedagogical and cultural transmission of Gunban traditions. Gong (2017) emphasizes the importance of integrating Naxi folk songs into school curricula, demonstrating how classroom-based instruction can revitalize endangered traditions and strengthen ethnic identity among younger generations. Wu (2023), although writing about bel canto arias, provides insights into how technical exploration and stylistic interpretation ensure both artistic precision and cultural resonance—principles equally applicable to the safeguarding of folk traditions. Xu (2011b) further points out that local folk songs in Sichuan face challenges of modernization, urban migration, and generational discontinuity, underscoring the necessity of governance frameworks that balance preservation with adaptation. These insights resonate strongly with the case of Gunban folk songs, which must navigate the tension between authenticity and innovation to remain vibrant in contemporary contexts.

From a governance perspective, Gunban folk songs exemplify how local musical traditions can operate as instruments of cultural policy and community self-organization. As intangible cultural heritage, they serve not only to preserve historical memory but also to regulate social interactions and strengthen communal bonds. Gaoqiang sustains collective identity through its association with agricultural labor and outdoor communal practices; Pingqiang conveys philosophical reflections and emotional subtleties that reinforce interpersonal ethics; Aiqiang, with its solemn timbre, anchors ritual practices and strengthens spiritual connection within the community. By embedding artistic forms in everyday life, these vocal traditions act as cultural symbols that mediate between aesthetic experience and local governance, illustrating how music becomes a resource for sustaining cultural resilience and social solidarity.

In light of these dynamics, this study positions Gunban folk songs at the intersection of ethnomusicology, cultural identity, and local governance. It seeks to analyze the technical features, artistic functions, and cultural symbolism of the three primary vocal styles, while also exploring their significance for intangible cultural heritage preservation and community governance. By doing so, the research not only enriches the scholarly understanding of Chinese folk singing traditions but also offers theoretical and practical insights into how vocal heritage can support local identity formation, inform cultural policy, and sustain community participation in an era of rapid social transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Gunban folk songs at the intersection of vocal technique, cultural identity, and local cultural governance can be organized into three converging strands: (1) scholarship on singing technique and affect in Chinese vocal traditions; (2) musicological work on Naxi (and adjacent Southwestern) folk repertoires, including issues of style, classification, and modal/tonal zoning; and (3) studies of transmission, schooling, and intangible-heritage governance that embed folk performance within community life. Together, these literatures illuminate how Gunban vocal styles—Gaoqiang, Pingqiang, and Aiqiang—operate simultaneously as technical systems, aesthetic choices, and cultural symbols that mediate local identity and community participation.

2.1 Technique, timbre, and affect: from art-song analysis to folk vocal praxis

Recent Chinese vocal scholarship emphasizes that technique is never merely mechanical; it is constitutive of musical meaning and emotional address. Bai and Chen (2023), analyzing Chinese art songs, foreground breath management, resonance placement, vowel shaping, and phrase articulation as analytic categories that co-produce timbre and expression. Although their corpus is art-song, the framework is methodologically portable to folk traditions: tessitura choice, onset/offset design, and ornamentation patterns become readouts of style and carriers of cultural signification. Dai (2023) reinforces this view by arguing that affect emerges from the interaction of technique and delivery—dynamic gradation, rubato, and timbral inflection articulate emotional states beyond lexical content. In parallel, Wu (2023) shows how style interpretation in Western bel canto arias links technical parameters (*appoggio*, *legato*, *chiaroscuro*) to rhetorical meaning; this cross-genre insight supports a comparative lens in which Gunban's Gaoqiang (soaring register and freer rhythm), Pingqiang (more syllabic declamation and steady tempo), and Aiqiang (lower tessitura and darker timbre) can be read as patterned mappings between technique and locally valued affects. Collectively, these studies justify a literature-informed analytic pathway: to treat Gunban singing techniques as semiotic resources whose choices encode social situations (labor, narration, ritual) and community values (heroism, intimacy, lament).

2.2 Style, classification, and “zonal” thinking in Chinese folk song analysis

The classification problem—how to sort, describe, and compare folk vocal styles—has a long pedigree. A classic point of reference is Miao and Qiao (1985) on the “division of approximate color zones” (近似色区) in Han folk songs, which, despite terminological differences in translation, effectively models regionalized pitch/modal territories and timbral tendencies. Their zonal perspective aids comparative description without imposing a single pentatonic norm, and it offers a template for mapping Gunban's three vocal styles along axes of pitch range, modal center, and timbral hue. Building at the micro-analytic level, Wang (2015)'s study of the Naxi song *Climbing the Sea* details the balance of wide intervallic ascent with stabilizing stepwise descent—an observation that resonates with Gaoqiang practice (leaping openings followed by contour-smoothing turns). More broadly, Xu (2011a) identifies core artistic characteristics of Naxi folk songs—flexible phrase lengths, speech-song proximity, ecological imagery, and naturalized timbre—that dovetail with Gunban descriptions: Pingqiang's relatively syllabic

declamation aligns with speech-song homology, and Aiqiang's lower tessitura and narrower ambitus match Xu's emphasis on intimate, earth-bound sonorities. Methodologically, these works legitimate a morphology-first approach (range, contour, rhythm, ornament) while remaining sensitive to local semantics.

2.3 Transmission, schooling, and governance of folk vocal heritage

A second cluster of literature addresses how folk vocal practices are transmitted and governed as living heritage. Gong (2017) documents the movement of Naxi folk songs "into the classroom," highlighting school-based instruction and repertoire curation as instruments for revitalization and identity formation among youth. This educationalization of folk music has direct governance implications: curricula, teacher training, and resource allocation become levers through which local authorities and cultural centers structure access to tradition. Complementing this, Xu (2011b) analyzes the challenges facing local folk songs in Sichuan—urban migration, performance-context erosion, and intergenerational discontinuities—while proposing countermeasures (community festivals, master-apprentice schemes, archive building). Read together, these studies show that sustainability depends on participatory governance that coordinates cultural centers, schools, and bearer communities. For Gunban traditions, the implication is clear: the three vocal styles function not only as music-aesthetic categories but as policy-relevant units for repertoire design (e.g., school songbooks), event programming (e.g., antiphonal contests vs. narrative nights), and heritage designation (e.g., style-specific inheritor recognition).

2.4 Bridging the corpora: technique as cultural symbol in community settings

Synthesizing the above, a literature-informed model emerges in which technique → affect → function → identity forms a causal chain. Technique (register, resonance, ornament, tempo flexibility) shapes affective stance (heroic, intimate, mournful), which maps onto situational functions (field labor coordination, narrative pedagogy, ritual lament), thereby stabilizing local identity symbols (strength/solidarity, ethical reflection, communal mourning). Art-song and bel canto analytics (Bai & Chen, 2023; Wu, 2023; Dai, 2023) provide the tools for describing technique-affect links; Naxi/Gunban scholarship (Xu, 2011a; Wang, 2015) grounds those links in Southwest practice; classification work (Miao & Qiao, 1985) supplies a comparative scaffold; governance-transmission studies (Gong, 2017; Xu, 2011b) specify institutional pathways through which symbols are taught, staged, and reproduced in community life.

2.5 Gaps and problems the present study addresses

Despite these foundations, four lacunae remain in the literature:

Tri-style integration: Prior work treats Naxi and related repertoires either via single songs or broad characteristics; few studies develop a three-style comparative typology (Gaoqiang vs. Pingqiang vs. Aiqiang) with linked technical, affective, and functional profiles across one local tradition.

Metric description across styles: While qualitative accounts of range and contour exist, there is limited quantified morphology (e.g., ambitus, interval-class profiles, rhythm regularity indices, ornament frequency) that would allow systematic cross-style comparison—a gap this study addresses through software-assisted transcription and measurement.

Technique-to-governance pipeline: The literature on schooling and ICH policy is robust, but few studies explicitly model how style-specific techniques become governance units (e.g., which style best suits classroom initiation, festival branding, or ritual safeguarding, and why).

Dialectal articulation and identity: Descriptions note speech-song proximity, yet the identity work of dialectal timbre and articulation (prominent in Aiqiang) remains under-theorized in relation to community recognition and boundary-making.

By positioning Gunban's three vocal styles as cultural symbols in community governance, the present article responds to these gaps: it brings technique-level detail into dialogue with identity theory and

policy practice; it proposes a replicable analytic pipeline; and it articulates style-sensitive recommendations for schooling, festival programming, and ICH safeguarding.

2.6 Implications for local cultural governance

The reviewed literature collectively suggests that successful safeguarding depends on style-differentiated strategies: Gaoqiang aligns with outdoor, participatory events that dramatize collective vigor; Pingqiang lends itself to classroom literacy and narrative learning; Aiqiang requires respectful ritual settings and mentor-apprentice formats to maintain timbral ethos and dialectal nuance. Embedding these choices in policy (curriculum design, event typology, inheritor recognition) translates vocal technique into governance instruments that strengthen local identity while ensuring cultural sustainability.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method design that integrates ethnomusicology, performance analysis, and cultural governance perspectives. By situating the three vocal styles of Gunban folk songs—Gaoqiang, Pingqiang, and Aiqiang—within both their musical structures and their socio-cultural functions, the research seeks to capture the dual character of these traditions as artistic expressions and as cultural symbols in community governance. A triangulated methodology was employed, combining literature analysis, field investigation, musical morphology analysis, and policy review, in order to ensure both cultural depth and analytical rigor.

3.2 Literature analysis

The first stage consisted of a comprehensive review of archival sources, scholarly research, and folk song collections. Primary materials included annotated transcriptions of Gunban songs in *The Chinese Folk Song Collection · Sichuan Volume* and historical records maintained at the Naxi District Cultural Center. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed articles and monographs on Chinese vocal techniques (Bai & Chen, 2023; Dai, 2023; Wu, 2023), Naxi folk traditions (Xu, 2011a; Wang, 2015), and cultural heritage governance (Xu, 2011b; Gong, 2017). This review provided a theoretical foundation for classifying singing styles, identifying stylistic features, and contextualizing them within broader discourses of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and local governance.

3.3 Field investigation

Fieldwork was conducted over three months in the Naxi District, focusing on live documentation of performances and oral narratives from cultural inheritors. Audio and video recordings were collected during communal festivals, household rituals, and informal gatherings, ensuring coverage of multiple contexts where the three vocal styles are practiced. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants, including Li Yunliu (provincial-level ICH inheritor) and Kang Yiduan (researcher at the cultural center). These interviews explored not only technical aspects of performance but also the singers' perspectives on cultural identity, community participation, and the impact of governance measures on transmission practices. Participant observation during pange contests and ritual ceremonies provided insights into the interactive and symbolic dimensions of performance.

3.4 Musical morphology analysis

The collected recordings were transcribed using Sibelius software, and quantitative analysis was conducted on the following parameters:

Pitch range: measurement of ambitus and register distribution across the three styles.

Rhythmic form: differentiation between free and regular rhythms, as well as tempo elasticity.

Ornamentation type: frequency and function of ornaments such as glissando, trill, and appoggiatura.

Timbre and vocal quality: description of resonance, articulation, and the alternation of “true” versus “false” voice in different contexts.

Comparative morphology enabled the identification of both stylistic contrasts and complementarities, clarifying how vocal technique underpins functional differentiation—labor expression in Gaoqiang, narrative intimacy in Pingqiang, and ritual solemnity in Aiqiang.

3.5 Policy and governance analysis

In order to situate Gunban folk songs within local cultural governance frameworks, policy documents, cultural bureau reports, and intangible heritage protection plans were collected from district and municipal offices. Analysis focused on how Gunban songs are represented in policy discourse, the mechanisms of heritage designation, the role of schools and cultural centers in transmission, and the tension between authenticity and innovation in stage adaptations. This dimension provided an institutional perspective on how vocal styles are mobilized as cultural symbols in community governance.

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Data triangulation was employed to enhance validity. Archival findings provided historical baselines; field data yielded ethnographic richness; musical analysis clarified structural distinctions; and policy review contextualized governance implications. Coding and thematic analysis were applied to interview transcripts, focusing on themes of identity, memory, transmission, and governance. Musical and social data were then synthesized into a framework that links technique → affect → function → identity → governance, thereby interpreting vocal styles as cultural symbols with community and policy relevance.

3.7 Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent, and recordings were stored with confidentiality measures in line with ethical guidelines for ethnographic research. Care was taken to respect local customs, ritual protocols, and intellectual property rights associated with traditional songs. Community members were invited to review transcriptions and interpretations, ensuring accuracy and reciprocity.

3.8 Methodological contribution

By integrating ethnomusicological techniques with policy and governance analysis, this methodology moves beyond descriptive song analysis to reveal how vocal traditions function as living cultural resources. It contributes a replicable framework for analyzing how folk music traditions can serve as cultural symbols that reinforce local identity, support participatory governance, and provide pathways for sustainable heritage preservation.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Stylistic diversity and the symbolic role of vocal traditions

The investigation demonstrates that Gunban folk songs represent not a monolithic tradition but a multi-layered system of vocal practices in which Gaoqiang (high-pitched), Pingqiang (level-pitched), and Aiqiang (low-pitched) serve as distinct stylistic and functional categories. Each style reflects specific ecological, social, and cultural conditions, embodying the community’s creative adaptation to natural landscapes, labor rhythms, and ritual needs. These stylistic divisions are not merely technical classifications; they are imbued with symbolic significance. For local communities, the three styles form a cultural semiotic system, whereby differences in pitch range, melodic contour, rhythm, and timbre are read as signs of particular emotions, social roles, and community functions. In this sense, Gunban vocal styles act as cultural codes of governance, mediating collective identity and regulating social interaction through performance.

4.2 High-Pitched singing (Gaoqiang): heroism, labor, and the voice of collective energy

Gaoqiang is the most extroverted and expansive of the three styles, marked by a broad vocal range, frequent leaps of fifths and sixths, and long sustained tones. The melodic design often begins with a wide

ascending interval followed by gradual stepwise descent, creating wave-like contours that echo the natural acoustics of mountain valleys. Rhythmic freedom is a central characteristic: while basic rhythmic cells are present, performers often elongate or truncate beats to emphasize lyrical imagery or emotional intensity.

In performance contexts such as harvest celebrations or festive gatherings, Gaoqiang conveys joy, pride, and heroic vigor. Its timbre—bright, penetrating, and resonant—matches the physical setting of open fields or highlands, where voices must travel long distances. The soaring quality of Gaoqiang evokes the image of a trumpet call, symbolizing collective enthusiasm and determination. Songs like *Chasing Wild Cats* illustrate this function vividly: the repeated leaps and extended tones not only depict the literal chase but metaphorically represent the community's pursuit of prosperity and resilience against hardship.

In governance terms, Gaoqiang serves as a sonic embodiment of social cohesion. It is most often performed in communal contexts—fieldwork, festivals, or collective rituals—where the shared act of singing reinforces unity. Local authorities and cultural centers have recognized this symbolic power, often highlighting Gaoqiang in public performances to demonstrate communal strength and optimism. Thus, Gaoqiang is not only a style of vocal music but also a performative instrument of participatory governance, where shared artistic practice enhances solidarity and strengthens communal bonds.

4.3 Level-Pitched singing (Pingqiang): narration, emotional subtlety, and ethical governance

Pingqiang is characterized by stable melodic lines, regular rhythms, and close integration of lyrics and melody. Unlike the expansive leaps of Gaoqiang, Pingqiang emphasizes smooth, coherent contours, often employing conjunct motion and gentle phrasing. Text clarity is paramount; lyrics are carefully enunciated to ensure narrative intelligibility. Ornamentation is relatively restrained, with subtle timbral shifts used to highlight emotional nuance.

Pingqiang is widely associated with the narration of everyday life, love stories, and ethical reflections. Performed in intimate settings such as courtyards or village gatherings, it creates a warm, personal atmosphere that draws audiences into shared storytelling. Songs like *This Mountain Is Not Higher Than That* exemplify its affective subtlety: soft timbres, controlled dynamics, and expressive gestures evoke tenderness and longing, allowing listeners to experience love, humility, and reflection simultaneously. Beyond artistic value, Pingqiang performs an important ethical governance function. By embedding narratives of love, loyalty, fairness, and respect into song, it becomes a medium for transmitting moral norms and community values. The gentle, narrative-driven quality of Pingqiang makes it especially effective for reinforcing interpersonal ethics and teaching younger generations lessons about reciprocity and relational harmony. Local educational programs often incorporate Pingqiang into cultural curricula precisely because it fosters ethical reflection and social cohesion, aligning community governance with cultural pedagogy.

4.4 Low-Pitched singing (Aiqliang): melancholy, ritual continuity, and identity consolidation

Aiqliang is distinctively melancholic, with a narrow pitch range concentrated in the mid-to-low register. Its vocal production relies on chest resonance, sometimes blended with throat resonance, creating a deep and magnetic timbre. Melodic simplicity is a hallmark, often employing repetitive motifs that highlight lyrical intensity rather than structural complexity.

Aiqliang is most often associated with expressions of sorrow, longing, or existential reflection. Its deep timbre conveys weighty emotions such as grief, melancholy, and yearning. Songs like *Rain from Heaven*, *Flowing in the Tile Gully* are performed in ritual contexts such as weddings, funerals, or nighttime laments, where they serve both cathartic and symbolic roles. The performance of Aiqliang is not only an aesthetic act but a ritualized expression of communal suffering, empathy, and memory.

In community governance, Aiqliang functions as a cultural anchor of memory and identity. Its ritual role

sustains ancestral ties, mediates the relationship between the living and the departed, and consolidates the collective sense of belonging. Governance structures that designate Aiqiang as intangible cultural heritage recognize its sacred role, ensuring that it is preserved with respect for ritual contexts. Unlike Gaoqiang and Pingqiang, which adapt more easily to stage and educational contexts, Aiqiang requires safeguarding strategies that balance preservation with ritual sensitivity.

4.5 Strategies for inheritance, development, and governance

Education is central to the long-term safeguarding of Gunban traditions. Integrating folk songs into primary, secondary, and university curricula creates a transmission chain that nurtures identity and pride in heritage from an early age. Folk artists invited to schools provide children with direct exposure to authentic performance, while competitions and workshops create opportunities for active participation. At the university level, specialized courses and fieldwork projects train future scholars and performers, ensuring that the tradition evolves within both community and academic contexts.

Modern media platforms have significantly expanded the reach of Gunban folk songs. Television and radio programs present curated performances, while social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo host online competitions and interactive discussions. These digital platforms create “virtual communities” where younger generations can engage with traditional culture in innovative ways. The use of modern production technologies—such as high-quality recordings and multimedia stage effects—has further enhanced accessibility and appeal.

Gunban folk songs are increasingly integrated with modern musical elements such as pop, rock, and electronic music. This fusion has created hybrid works that attract younger audiences without erasing the core identity of the tradition. For instance, arranging Gunban melodies with pop harmonies or electronic rhythms preserves melodic essence while revitalizing performance formats. These innovations align with governance strategies that promote cultural sustainability by balancing authenticity and modernization. Cultural exchange activities, including folk song concerts, academic symposia, and international festivals, have provided platforms for dialogue between Gunban traditions and other musical cultures. Collaborative performances highlight inclusivity and diversity, while academic discussions generate new insights for preservation and innovation. International exposure, in particular, positions Gunban folk songs as symbols of Chinese cultural diplomacy, reinforcing both local and national identity.

4.6 Implications for local identity and community governance

The findings confirm that Gunban vocal styles serve as multi-functional cultural symbols with profound implications for local identity and governance.

Gaoqiang embodies collective energy, dramatizing resilience and optimism in communal labor and celebrations.

Pingqiang emphasizes narrative intimacy and ethical teaching, reinforcing norms of reciprocity, respect, and moral order.

Aiqiang anchors ritual continuity, enabling communities to process grief, affirm ancestral ties, and consolidate identity.

Together, these styles create a holistic framework in which music, identity, and governance intersect. They demonstrate how artistic forms are not peripheral to governance but central to it, operating as symbolic resources that regulate social life, transmit cultural values, and strengthen cohesion.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Vocal styles as cultural semiotics in community life

The findings of this study confirm that Gunban folk songs are not simply musical artifacts but operate as semiotic systems embedded in local culture. The three vocal styles—Gaoqiang, Pingqiang, and

Aiqiang—demonstrate how technical elements such as pitch range, rhythmic structure, and timbre carry symbolic meanings that extend beyond artistic expression. Ethnomusicological perspectives (Merriam, 1964; Feld, 1990) suggest that music is best understood as a nexus of “sound, behavior, and concept.” Within Gunban practice, Gaoqiang symbolizes communal heroism, Pingqiang encodes ethical reflection, and Aiqiang anchors ancestral and ritual memory. These correspondences illustrate that vocal styles function as cultural signs, shaping local identity and mediating community relationships through sound.

5.2 Performance theory and the eventfulness of song

Schechner’s (2003) performance theory emphasizes that performance is not a static object but an “event,” co-created by performers, audiences, and settings. Gunban performances exemplify this principle. In Gaoqiang, the expansive outdoor setting enhances resonance and dramatizes collective vitality; in Pingqiang, courtyard intimacy supports moral and emotional storytelling; in Aiqiang, ritualized contexts reinforce solemnity and collective mourning. These examples reveal that the meaning of song lies as much in its performative setting as in its musical form. This suggests that safeguarding strategies cannot focus only on repertoire preservation but must also attend to performance environments that enable community participation and identity construction.

5.3 Cultural ecology and environmental adaptation

The diversity of Gunban vocal styles reflects an ecological adaptation to natural landscapes and social contexts, aligning with Steward’s (1955) concept of cultural ecology. Gaoqiang’s high-pitched resonance matches the acoustic needs of mountain valleys; Pingqiang’s smoother contours suit intimate, low-volume settings; Aiqiang’s deep timbre aligns with ritualized, contemplative environments. These ecological correspondences underscore how music and environment co-construct cultural practices, suggesting that governance efforts must recognize the environmental embeddedness of song traditions. In practical terms, this means preserving performance sites—fields, courtyards, ancestral halls—as much as preserving repertoires, since these spaces are integral to the cultural ecology of Gunban music.

5.4 Intangible cultural heritage, authenticity, and innovation

The safeguarding of Gunban folk songs reflects broader debates in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policy regarding authenticity and innovation (Blake, 2009; Su, 2018; Zhu, 2015). On one hand, Aiqiang demands ritual integrity, where deviation risks diminishing its spiritual authority. On the other hand, the incorporation of Gunban melodies into pop and electronic formats demonstrates the vitality of innovation in maintaining relevance among younger generations. The findings suggest that a dual-path strategy is necessary: (1) ritual-sensitive preservation for sacred repertoires, and (2) creative adaptation for secular repertoires. Such differentiation ensures that authenticity is safeguarded where essential while innovation is embraced where permissible, balancing continuity and transformation.

5.5 Education, transmission, and governance mechanisms

Educational initiatives play a decisive role in shaping how Gunban folk songs are transmitted and recontextualized. Gong (2017) highlights the integration of Naxi folk songs into classroom teaching, which parallels the growing inclusion of Gunban repertoires in school curricula. The findings of this study confirm that school competitions, campus workshops, and university field courses not only preserve repertoire but also cultivate pride in local identity among youth. From a governance perspective, this demonstrates how education functions as a cultural governance mechanism, transforming songs into tools for identity reinforcement and social cohesion.

5.6 Media, exchange, and the reconfiguration of identity

The expansion of Gunban folk songs through media and cultural exchange highlights the ways traditions are reconfigured in a global era. Online platforms such as Douyin and WeChat broaden access and foster virtual communities, while cross-ethnic collaborations at festivals enhance cultural dialogue. These processes illustrate what Small (1998) terms *musicking*—the active social act of engaging with music

that continuously redefines identity. In the Gunban case, digital circulation and intercultural performance reposition vocal styles as symbols not only of local identity but also of regional and even national representation. For governance, this implies that policies must support both localized safeguarding and globalized dissemination, ensuring that Gunban folk songs serve as flexible identity resources in multiple contexts.

5.7 From folk song to cultural governance resource

The study reveals that Gunban vocal styles embody what Nitzky (2012) describes as the “mediating role” of ICH in rural development and governance. The artistic and symbolic functions of Gaoqiang, Pingqiang, and Aiqiang are mobilized in community festivals, educational programs, and ritual events to reinforce solidarity, transmit values, and negotiate identity. This shows that folk songs are not merely objects of heritage preservation but active governance resources, capable of shaping collective behavior, supporting social regulation, and providing platforms for cultural participation.

6. CONCLUSION

The study of Gunban folk songs reveals that their three vocal styles—Gaoqiang, Pingqiang, and Aiqiang—are far more than artistic categories; they are cultural symbols deeply embedded in the social life, collective memory, and governance practices of local communities. Gaoqiang conveys heroic strength and optimism, echoing the spirit of communal labor and celebrating collective achievements. Pingqiang emphasizes narrative subtlety and ethical values, transmitting moral lessons and emotional intimacy that strengthen interpersonal bonds. Aiqiang resonates with grief, longing, and ritual solemnity, serving as a vessel for ancestral remembrance and regional identity consolidation. Together, these styles form a comprehensive expressive system that reflects the dynamic interaction between music, culture, and governance.

Through their stylistic diversity, Gunban folk songs embody the historical trajectory and lived realities of working people, capturing both the material conditions of agricultural life and the evolving aesthetic sensibilities of communities over time. They serve as living chronicles of China’s cultural development, articulating values of love, family, resilience, and aspiration. In contemporary contexts, their preservation and revitalization carry profound significance not only for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage but also for fostering community identity and cultural governance. Educational integration, community performances, media dissemination, and intercultural exchange all demonstrate that Gunban folk songs are not static relics but adaptive traditions capable of thriving in modern society.

The findings affirm that the safeguarding of Gunban folk songs requires a balance between authenticity and innovation. On the one hand, ritual traditions, especially those tied to Aiqiang, demand faithful preservation in order to maintain their cultural essence. On the other hand, integrating Gunban melodies with modern genres and digital platforms can extend their reach and appeal, ensuring vitality across generations. This dual-path approach highlights how cultural sustainability depends on both reverence for tradition and openness to creative renewal.

Gunban folk songs illustrate how local traditions can operate as governance resources—strengthening community cohesion, transmitting values, and shaping identity in ways that align with broader cultural policies. By treating vocal styles as cultural symbols within community governance, this research demonstrates that music is not simply art for art’s sake but a vital social practice that sustains cultural continuity and contributes to the resilience of local communities. As Gunban songs continue to evolve, they not only preserve the heritage of the past but also project the cultural vitality of the present into the future, ensuring their place as a treasured voice of the Chinese nation in the global cultural landscape.

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