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Musical evolution and community-based education for the protection of Haicai Qiang Chinese folk songs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the musical evolution and protection strategies for Haicai Qiang, a sophisticated vocal art form of the Yi ethnic minority in Shiping County, Yunnan Province. As a National Intangible Cultural Heritage item, Haicai Qiang faces an imminent crisis due to rapid modernization, rural-to-urban migration, and an aging practitioner demographic. The research was conducted to develop a sustainable, community-based educational model that bridges the gap between ancient oral traditions and modern institutionalized learning. Through a qualitative ethnomusicological approach involving longitudinal fieldwork in Longpeng Town from 2024 to 2026, the study utilized participant observation and stratified interviews with heritage inheritors, stakeholders, and youth. Findings reveal a significant Great Shift in the genre, moving from spontaneous labor-based environments to structured stage and classroom settings. This transition has led to a professionalization of the music, where traditional improvisational trills and heterophonic textures are being replaced by standardized melodies and fixed rhythms. The study concludes that while formal school integration (the Campus Classroom) provides structural stability, it lacks the authentic spirit of the tradition. These findings are vital for policymakers and educators, as they provide a strategic roadmap for a multi-tiered heritage ecosystem. By integrating digital media, formal schooling, and community-led practice, this model ensures that Haicai Qiang remains a living, vibrant cultural expression rather than a static museum relic.

Keywords: Haicai Qiang, Yi ethnic minority, intangible cultural heritage, community-based education, ethnomusicology.

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INTRODUCTION

Haicai Qiang is one of the most sophisticated and structurally intricate vocal art forms, originating among the Yi ethnic minority in Shiping County, Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. Historically, this musical genre was not merely a form of entertainment, but an essential rhythmic accompaniment deeply embedded in the community's daily labor and social fabric (Ingalls, 2018; Provine et al., 2017). Characterized by soaring melodies, expansive vocal ranges, and complex heterophonic textures, Haicai Qiang was traditionally performed during communal activities, including collective farming, boat rowing on Yilong Lake, and festive social gatherings (Liu and Song, 2025; Zhang, 2024). These songs served as a profound repository of ethnic identity, carrying the Yi people's collective cultural memory, historical narratives, and philosophical worldviews across generations. The lyrical content often reflected the symbiotic relationship between the people and their natural environment, making it a living testament to the region's intangible ecological and cultural history (Gong et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

The cultural significance of Haicai Qiang was formally

recognized in 2006 when the State Council of the People's Republic of China officially listed it among the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage items. This designation highlighted its value as a living fossil of ethnic musicology. However, despite this high-level recognition, the traditional ecosystem that once sustained Haicai Qiang has undergone drastic shifts due to rapid modernization and the encroachment of globalized lifestyle patterns (Boyu et al., 2015; Ping et al., 2024; Tang, 2021). The original social contexts of these songs have changed because of the shift from a traditional agrarian society to a market-driven industrial economy. As young people from the countryside move to cities to find work, fewer places remain for them to sing together, causing both the number of performances and the number of active practitioners in the rural heartlands to decline (Huang, 2019; Malone and Laird, 2018).

This research examines the long-standing existence of Haicai Qiang and the pressing need for updated protection methods that are suited to contemporary society. Currently, the survival of the genre rests upon a fragile foundation; most master inheritors who possess the full repertoire and authentic vocal techniques are entering their twilight years (Meng and Chuangprakhon, 2024; Xiaobin and Ku Wing, 2025). In Shiping County, the demographic of skilled practitioners is aging rapidly, with many over 70, posing an imminent risk of cultural amnesia should these masters pass away without transferring their knowledge. The traditional oral transmission method, which relied on long-term apprenticeship and informal imitation within the family or village, is no longer sufficient or viable in a fast-paced society where the youth are increasingly disconnected from their ancestral tongue and traditional aesthetics (Carlson et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2025; Wenyan, 2025; Yan et al., 2025).

Consequently, this study argues that the preservation of Haicai Qiang must evolve beyond passive documentation toward an active, systematic integration into the community's modern life. By examining how the genre's musical evolution has already begun to adapt to stage performances and institutional settings, we can derive insights into how new educational strategies can be effectively implemented. The challenge lies in maintaining the music's artistic soul and living quality while adapting its delivery pathways to suit formal and semi-formal learning environments (Adams, 2024; Gibson and Gordon, 2018; Smith, 2021). There is a pressing need to move from event-driven conservation, which focuses on occasional festival performances, toward a process-oriented model that fosters continuous learning and daily practice among the younger generation.

Therefore, this study aims to develop community-focused education and protection plans for Haicai Qiang Chinese folk songs by examining how they have changed over time and the current challenges in their dissemination in Shiping County. By synthesizing fieldwork data from core regions like Longpeng Town with modern pedagogical theories, this research seeks to bridge the gap between ancient tradition and modern education. It aims to provide a strategic roadmap that enables local communities, educational institutions, and government bodies to collaborate to create a resilient cultural ecosystem (Chan, 2018; Guan, 2025; Issahaku et al., 2024). Ultimately, this study aims to prevent Haicai Qiang from becoming a static remnant of the past and to ensure its continued vitality as a dynamic and vibrant aspect of the Yi people's living cultural heritage in the 21st century.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research employed a qualitative methodology centered on the dual perspectives of ethnomusicology and ethnography (Chen et al., 2025; Huang, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). This approach allowed for a deep exploration of the musical evolution of Haicai Qiang while simultaneously analyzing the socio-educational structures that facilitate its transmission. By integrating long-term field observations with structured interviews, the study captured the transition of this vocal art from a traditional rural practice to an institutionalized educational subject.

Research site and temporal framework

The primary research site was Longpeng Town in Shiping County, Yunnan Province. This location was purposively selected as it serves as the core geographical heartland for the Northern Mountainous Style of Haicai Qiang, maintaining a high density of traditional practitioners while hosting modern educational pilot programs. Fieldwork was conducted over a longitudinal period from October 2024 to January 2026. This timeframe was essential to observe the art form across different contexts: during traditional Yi ethnic festivals, peak agricultural labor seasons, and standardized academic semesters in local schools.

Data collection and participant stratification

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the study utilized a triangulation method, combining field notes, participatory observations, and open-ended interviews. Participants were categorized into three distinct tiers to provide a comprehensive view of the cultural ecosystem. The selection was based on purposive sampling to include voices from those who create, those who manage, and those who learn the art form.

Table 1. Classification and roles of research participants.

Participant	Role and contribution to research	Data collection method
Heritage Inheritors	National and provincial-level masters; holders of authentic vocal techniques and traditional repertoires	In-depth interviews and observation of master-apprentice interactions
Cultural Stakeholders	Local government officials and ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) administrators	Semi-structured interviews regarding policy implementation and funding
Learners and Audience	Youth in local schools and community members representing the future of the tradition	Surveys and focus group discussions on learning motivation and barriers

Field procedures and recording tools

The researcher engaged in participatory observation by attending community events, lakeside gatherings, and Campus Classroom sessions. High-fidelity audio and video recordings were utilized to document the Musical Evolution of Haicai Qiang. This involved a comparative analysis of traditional improvisational versions against standardized versions taught in contemporary educational settings. The documentation focused on shifts in melodic ornamentation, rhythm, and performance context.

Analytical framework and synthesis

The raw data were processed using content analysis and thematic categorization. The analysis sought to identify recurring transmission barriers and evolutionary catalysts that affect the sustainability of the genre. The synthesis of this data led to the creation of a strategic matrix, which serves as the foundation for the community-based educational intervention proposed in this study.

Table 2. Data analysis framework and strategic outputs.

Analysis phase	Focus area	Intended output
Thematic Coding	Identifying barriers (e.g., aging masters) and opportunities (e.g., digital pedagogy)	A prioritized list of challenges and preservation catalysts
Comparative Analysis	Comparing traditional oral traditions with modern institutionalized performance styles	Documentation of the musical evolution of Haicai Qiang
Strategic Synthesis	Correlating musical changes with community educational needs	A multi-tiered governance framework for sustainable protection

By employing these rigorous qualitative methods, the study ensures that the proposed strategies for the protection and education of Haicai Qiang are grounded in the actual lived experiences of the Shiping community and the structural realities of modern musical evolution.

RESULTS

The research findings provide a comprehensive overview of the current status and transformation of Haicai Qiang within Shiping County. The data reveals a profound structural and functional shift, moving from an organic folk tradition to a formal educational subject. This section details the Musical Evolution of the genre, categorized into the transition of performance spaces, structural changes in musical form, and the shifting dynamics of educational transmission.

The transformation of performance contexts: From life to stage

Historically, Haicai Qiang was a functional, living music, intrinsically tied to the labor and social life of the Yi people. It was an environmental music, born from the rhythms of rowing on Yilong Lake and the communal energy of agricultural labor. However, contemporary analysis shows a radical shift toward fixed, formal spaces. Spontaneous singing in the fields is becoming rare, replaced by

structured exhibitions and cultural festivals. As one national-level inheritor noted during an interview:

> *"In the past, we didn't need a stage. We sang when we were happy, when we were working, or when we were out on the boats. Now, I only put on my traditional costume and sing when there is a government event or a cultural festival. The lake is still there, but the singing has moved to the theater."*

This transition signifies a move from daily practice to institutionalized performance. While the music is still present, its function has changed from social communication to cultural display. This evolution is visually summarized in Figure 1, illustrating the dramatic shift in cultural and spatial contexts.

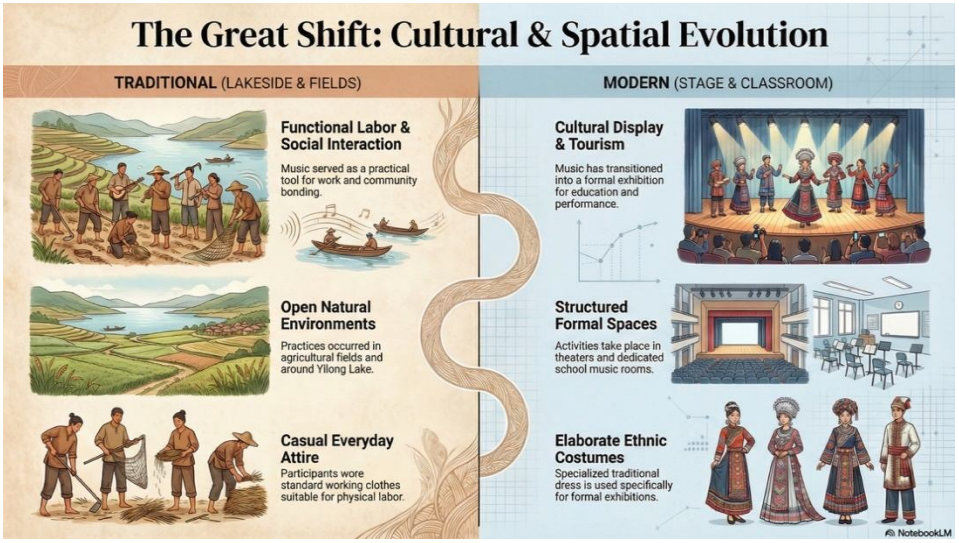

Figure 1. The great shift: Cultural & spatial evolution.

As shown in Figure 1, the Great Shift marks a fundamental transformation in the nature of Haicai Qiang, evolving from a natural accompaniment to labor to a more organized cultural performance. The shift from open natural environments to structured formal spaces (theaters and classrooms) has required a transition from casual everyday attire toward elaborate ethnic costumes, signaling the art form's professionalization and institutionalization to meet modern exhibition requirements.

Musical evolution: Standardization and structural change

As Haicai Qiang transitioned to the stage and the classroom, the musical structure underwent a process of professionalization. Traditionally, the genre was characterized by extreme improvisational freedom. The Qiang (tune) was a flexible framework that singers would ornament based on their surroundings. Current findings show that to suit public exhibitions and school curricula, the music has been condensed and standardized.

Table 3. Musical evolution matrix of Haicai Qiang.

Feature	Traditional form	Modern standardized form
Melody	Complex ornaments, heterophonic trills	Simplified melodic lines for easier learning
Rhythm	Free rhythm (Sanban), improvisational	Fixed tempo, synchronized for group singing
Structure	Flexible duration based on emotion	Condensed duration for stage timing
Learning	Oral mimicry (Listening and Repeating)	Notation-based (Staff or Numbered notation)

A provincial-level inheritor expressed concern over this homogenization during an interview:

"The young people today want to learn the 'correct' way to sing. But in my day, there was no correct way, there was only your way. We are losing the subtle trills because they are too hard to write down in music books. When we sing for a competition, we have to make sure everyone starts at the same time. That isn't how Haicai Qiang was born."

This standardization is a double-edged sword: it makes the music more teachable for modern education but risks stripping away the heterophonic complexity that defines the genre's unique identity.

Transmission channels: The shift to educational institutionalization

The traditional informal apprenticeship, where children learned by listening to elders, has almost entirely collapsed due to urban migration. In its place, the Campus Classroom has emerged as the primary lifeline. Local schools in Shiping have integrated traditional singing into extracurricular activities, yet this transition faces significant structural challenges. Interviews with local cultural management stakeholders reveal a disconnect between heritage and pedagogy:

"We have successfully brought the masters into the schools, but there is a disconnect. The masters know the songs but don't know how to teach in a formal classroom. The school teachers know how to teach but lack the authentic flavor of the Qiang. Without standardized textbooks or consistent budgets, these programs remain fragile."

To address this gap, the development of hybrid educators is essential. This requires a dual-track training model: masters should receive pedagogical scaffolding sessions to translate oral mimicry into structured lesson plans, while school teachers undergo immersion residencies in Longpeng Town to internalize the heterophonic nuances and breath control unique to the Qiang. Collaborative co-teaching modules where the master provides the vocal model and the teacher facilitates the theoretical framework can ensure that the artistic soul of the music is not lost during institutionalization (Wenyan, 2025; Yan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, while public awareness of Haicai Qiang as a National Heritage has peaked, active participation among youth remains low. A student learner shared:

"I like learning the songs in music class; it makes me feel proud of my Yi heritage. But I don't sing it outside of school. My friends and I listen to digital pop music. Haicai Qiang is something we do for school performances, not something we do for fun at home."

The aging crisis and the need for a new ecosystem

The data confirms that the living library of Haicai Qiang is concentrated in a generation that is rapidly aging. During the fieldwork in Longpeng Town, it was observed that most singers capable of performing the most complex mountainous styles were over 65 years old. This demographic gap creates a vacuum that formal education alone cannot fill.

Table 4. Analysis of transmission barriers and catalysts.

Barrier type	Description	Observed impact
Demographic	Aging inheritors (65+ years)	Imminent risk of losing authentic vocal techniques
Economic	Lack of financial incentive for youth	Migration to cities; abandonment of traditional practice
Educational	Lack of standardized materials	Inconsistent quality of transmission in schools
Social	Perception as old-fashioned	Low daily engagement among the younger generation

The survival of the art form is now dependent on a hybrid model of Community-Based Education. This model seeks to bridge the gap between the school and the village square. Figure 2 illustrates the proposed heritage ecosystem where the community, the school, and the government work in a unified framework.

As shown in Figure 2, the survival of this heritage now relies on a multi-tiered heritage ecosystem that bridges the gap between traditional practice and modern education. This model positions living heritage at the center, sustained by the synergy between formal schooling (which provides structural stability) and community interaction (which preserves the soul and authenticity of the music), all while using a digital media bridge to maintain relevance for younger generations.

Figure 2. The Haicai Qiang heritage ecosystem: A model for protection.

Conclusion of results

The research highlights that Haicai Qiang is at a strategic crossroads. The transition from spontaneous rural practice to structured educational programs is not merely an option but a necessity for survival. However, for this Musical Evolution to be successful, it must move beyond the exhibition phase. As one local cultural expert concluded:

> *"Protection is not about keeping the music in a museum; it is about keeping it in the mouths of the people. We need the schools to teach the notes, but we need the community to provide the spirit. If we only have the stage, we only have a show. If we have the community, we have a heritage."*

The results emphasize that the survival of Haicai Qiang depends on transforming it from a static item into a living heritage through a multi-tiered educational approach that respects its evolutionary history while embracing modern pedagogical tools.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evolution of Haicai Qiang from a functional labor song to an institutionalized cultural heritage reflects a broader global trend in the transformation of folk music within modernized societies. The findings of this study, which highlight a Great Shift from natural environments to structured stages, are consistent with the theories of Museumization proposed by Tang (2021), who argues that intangible heritage often loses its organic vitality when it is removed from its original socio-ecological context. In Shiping County, the transition from the banks of Yilong Lake to the Campus Classroom has preserved the melodic outline of the music, but, as the results indicate, at the cost of its improvisational soul. This supports the observations of Boyu et al. (2015), who noted that Chinese intangible heritage protection often prioritizes the preservation of form over the preservation of the living process.

The musical standardization observed, specifically the simplification of heterophonic trills into fixed rhythms, is inconsistent with the traditional Yi aesthetic of one song, a thousand versions. This homogenization is a byproduct of modern pedagogical needs, echoing the concerns of Wang et al. (2024) regarding the standardization trap in folk song education. While notation-based learning makes Haicai Qiang more accessible to students, it risks creating a correct version that excludes the regional nuances of the Northern Mountainous Style. Furthermore, the aging crisis identified in Longpeng Town mirrors the demographic challenges found in other minority regions (Meng and Chuangprakhon, 2024), where the disconnect between ancestral tongues and youth culture creates a vacuum in oral transmission.

Theoretical principles of Community-Based Education (CBE) suggest that for a tradition to survive, it must be re-embedded into the daily social fabric. The proposed multi-tiered heritage ecosystem in this study aligns with the cultural resourcefulness model of Gibson and Gordon (2018), which emphasizes that rural music enterprises must balance government support with local agency. The disconnect between school teachers and master inheritors highlights a critical pedagogical gap: the need for a hybrid educator who possesses both the authentic vocal flavor of the Qiang and the methodological skills of modern music education (Qian et al., 2025; Wenyan, 2025). In practice,

these hybrid educators serve as the vital link in the proposed ecosystem by facilitating a dual-teacher classroom model. In this framework, traditional masters provide the primary oral mimicry and authentic stylistic nuances, while formal educators apply pedagogical scaffolding such as structured lesson plans and theoretical context to make the complex techniques accessible within a standardized curriculum. This collaborative approach effectively bridges the gap between the informal apprenticeship and the formal classroom, ensuring the music remains both teachable and authentic.

This study concludes that the protection of Haicai Qiang in the 21st century requires a paradigm shift from passive conservation to active, systemic evolution. While the formalization of the music has led to a loss of some complex heterophonic textures, the Campus Classroom has successfully prevented the total disappearance of the genre among the younger generation. However, the survival of the art form remains fragile, resting on a diminishing number of elderly masters. The transition from a labor-based accompaniment to a symbol of ethnic identity is a necessary evolution, but it must be managed through a model that bridges the gap between the theater and the village square. Ultimately, Haicai Qiang must not be viewed as a static relic of the agrarian past, but as a dynamic cultural ecosystem that can thrive through the synergy of institutional schooling, community engagement, and digital relevance.

Future studies should investigate the impact of digital technology and AI in preserving the complex trills of Haicai Qiang. While this study touched upon a digital bridge, more empirical research is needed to determine if virtual reality (VR) or high-fidelity audio archives can effectively replace the physical presence of a master in the transmission of vocal nuances. Specifically, future research should explore how artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms can be utilized to perform frequency-domain analysis and pattern recognition on "heterophonic trills." Such technology could assist in deconstructing and digitally mapping the subtle microtonal fluctuations and rhythmic irregularities that define the authentic Qiang, providing a high-precision pedagogical tool for modern learners. Additionally, comparative research between the Northern Mountainous Style and the Southern Style of Haicai Qiang could provide deeper insights into how different geographical contexts influence musical resilience.

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