

Educational Strategies for the Transmission of Tibetan Folk Songs in Multicultural China

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Abstract

Tibetan folk songs, as vital components of China's intangible cultural heritage, are under increasing threat from modernization, educational standardization, and cultural homogenization. This study investigates effective educational strategies for the transmission of Tibetan folk songs within the context of multicultural China. Conducted in six educational and cultural institutions across Qinghai and the Tibet Autonomous Region, the research employed a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Three key informants—a secondary school music educator, a university curriculum planner, and a community-based folk artist—were interviewed using semi-structured formats, supported by classroom observations and curriculum document analysis. Thematic coding was used to analyze data, with attention to cultural identity, teaching practices, and student engagement. The findings revealed three principal strategies that promote effective transmission: 1) integration into formal curricula with cultural contextualization, 2) community-based transmission through oral tradition and intergenerational learning, and 3) technology-enhanced learning via digital archives and multimedia platforms. Notably, the most impactful programs combined these approaches, leveraging formal education, community involvement, and digital tools to foster emotional connection and long-term retention. These results suggest that sustaining Tibetan folk songs in a multicultural education system requires hybrid strategies grounded in authenticity, participation, and innovation. The study recommends targeted teacher training, policy support, and investment in digital infrastructure to ensure the continued vitality of Tibetan musical traditions. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts and scalability across other minority groups in China.

Keywords: Tibetan folk songs, multicultural education, cultural transmission, community-based learning, digital heritage preservation

1. Introduction

Tibetan folk songs, rich with emotional depth and cultural significance, are a living expression of the Tibetan people's identity, worldview, and heritage. These songs have historically played a central role in preserving oral traditions, celebrating local customs, and transmitting intergenerational wisdom. However, in contemporary China, where rapid modernization, cultural homogenization, and educational standardization are increasingly prominent, the sustainability of Tibetan folk song traditions is under threat (Ping et al., 2024; Tang & Sornyai, 2023; Xiaozhi, 2024). As China continues to evolve as a multicultural society that balances unity with ethnic diversity, the question of how to effectively pass on ethnic minority heritage within formal and informal education systems has gained new urgency (Ho, 2018; Mohiuddin, 2024; Shiraev & Levy, 2024; Zhang, 2019). This study also situates Tibetan folk song transmission within an educational framework that includes multicultural pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and informal learning theories to understand better how learners engage with traditional music across diverse sociocultural settings. This study seeks to explore educational strategies that not only protect but also revitalize Tibetan folk songs by integrating them meaningfully into a multicultural educational landscape.

1.1 Introduce the Problem

The transmission of Tibetan folk songs is facing a generational crisis. Once naturally passed down through families, religious rituals, and local festivals, these songs now struggle for attention in a world dominated by mass media, urbanization, and standardized education. Younger Tibetans, especially those in urban areas or mixed ethnic

environments, are becoming increasingly disconnected from their traditional musical heritage (Dong & Xie, 2024; Tang, 2021; Williams, 2021; You & Prathumchan, 2024). Educational institutions, which have the potential to serve as powerful tools for cultural preservation, often lack tailored curricula or trained teachers capable of transmitting this rich oral tradition. Furthermore, the dominant emphasis on Mandarin-based instruction and mainstream cultural narratives in schools makes it difficult for ethnic minority traditions to find appropriate expression within formal education (Chantarasombat & Rooyuenyong, 2020; Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Jiang, 2020; Shen & Jiang, 2021). This gap points to the need for an inclusive curriculum design that supports multilingual and multicultural competencies while embedding traditional art forms into core music education. As a result, Tibetan folk songs risk being reduced to ceremonial showcases or touristic performances rather than serving as living, evolving components of cultural identity.

1.2 The Importance of the Problem

This issue holds deep significance on both cultural and educational levels. From a cultural perspective, Tibetan folk songs are an essential part of China's intangible heritage. They encapsulate centuries of collective memory, spiritual belief, and aesthetic expression. Their disappearance would not only represent the erosion of Tibetan identity but also a loss for global cultural diversity. From an educational standpoint, the failure to transmit these songs effectively reflects broader challenges in implementing inclusive, multicultural pedagogy (Subhash, 2022; Qu et al., 2019; Yang, 2020). In a country where over 50 ethnic minorities coexist, developing responsive education models that support diverse cultural expression is a vital component of national unity and social cohesion. Multicultural education frameworks, which promote cultural pluralism, intergroup understanding, and the validation of minority cultures within schooling systems, offer valuable tools for addressing these challenges. Thus, identifying and evaluating effective strategies for transmitting Tibetan folk songs is more than a niche concern—it is a case study in how to preserve minority culture through inclusive, transformative education within a multicultural national framework (Shi & Nicolas, 2023; Tan & Jehom, 2024; Waseem, 2023).

1.3 Relevant Scholarship

Previous research on ethnic music transmission has emphasized the importance of integrating cultural content into school curricula and using community-based learning approaches. Scholars have argued for including minority voices in curriculum design and teacher training, particularly in music and arts education. Some studies have focused on the challenges of balancing modernization with tradition, suggesting that educational systems must adapt to the changing contexts in which folk music is learned and performed (Bauer, 2020; Kertz-Welzel, 2018; Kivijärvi, 2021; Prest, 2020). Others highlight the role of digital technology in enabling the recording, archiving, and dissemination of traditional music. Additionally, theoretical perspectives from informal learning, where cultural knowledge is acquired outside formal instruction through community events, family practice, and experiential participation, shed light on how students might more naturally internalize and appreciate Tibetan folk songs. However, there remains a lack of empirical work focused specifically on Tibetan folk songs within the multicultural Chinese educational system (Du & Leung, 2022; Meng Zhang, 2024; Saputra et al., 2024). This study addresses that gap by providing a focused analysis of effective teaching and learning strategies that promote cultural sustainability and student engagement.

1.4 Hypotheses

This study is guided by the hypothesis that educational strategies that are contextualized, community-driven, and technologically supported will be more effective in transmitting Tibetan folk songs than those that rely solely on traditional or top-down methods. It is assumed that when students are exposed to culturally authentic content delivered by local experts or through immersive digital tools, they are more likely to develop a meaningful connection to the music. These strategies align with multicultural education theory, which emphasizes equity and cultural responsiveness in pedagogy, and informal learning theory, which values non-institutional modes of knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, by involving local communities, elders, and cultural practitioners in the educational process, students can benefit from lived cultural knowledge that formal institutions often overlook. The research also hypothesizes that a hybrid approach combining formal education, extracurricular initiatives, and digital resources offers the most promising model for sustaining Tibetan folk music traditions in a rapidly changing society (Liu et al., 2025; Thamrin et al., 2024; Wang & Thotham, 2024; Zelcer-Lavid, 2018). These hypotheses inform the qualitative research design and drive the investigation into real-world practices that can be scaled or adapted across different regions of China.

1.5 Research Objective

To investigate effective educational strategies for the transmission of Tibetan folk songs within the context of multicultural China.

1.6 Research Question

What educational strategies are most effective for transmitting Tibetan folk songs in the context of multicultural China?

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in ethnographic methodology. The research was conducted in Qinghai and the Tibet Autonomous Region, where rich musical traditions persist in diverse educational and community settings. Through field observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of teaching resources (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Ruslin et al., 2022; Silverman & Patterson, 2021), the study explored how Tibetan music is taught, preserved, and adapted in schools, universities, and cultural institutions.

2.1 Research Site

The research was carried out at six locations selected for their active role in Tibetan music education and cultural preservation. These included three secondary schools integrating ethnic music into their curricula, two universities with established ethnic music programs, and one community-based cultural center known for hosting folk song transmission activities, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Sites and Educational Levels

| Site No. | Type of Institution | Region | Role in Transmission |
|----------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | Secondary School | Qinghai | Integrates Tibetan music into curriculum |
| 2 | Secondary School | Tibet Autonomous Region | Emphasizes traditional vocal techniques |
| 3 | Secondary School | Tibet Autonomous Region | Focus on cultural identity through music |
| 4 | University | Qinghai | Offers ethnic music bachelor program |
| 5 | University | Tibet Autonomous Region | Conducts folk music preservation research |
| 6 | Community Cultural Center | Qinghai | Hosts intergenerational music workshops |

2.2 Informants

Three key informants were selected using purposive sampling. These individuals were chosen based on their deep involvement in Tibetan music education, community transmission, and curriculum development. The informants brought valuable perspectives from formal education and grassroots cultural contexts, as shown in Table 2. While the small sample size allows for in-depth qualitative insights, it limits the generalizability of the findings across the broader spectrum of Tibetan music educators and communities. This research serves as a foundational case study, and future studies involving a wider and more diverse set of participants across different regions could help validate and expand upon these findings.

Table 2. Profile of Key Informants

| Informant ID | Position/Role | Setting Type | Years of Experience |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| A | Music Educator | Secondary School | 15 years |
| B | Curriculum Planner | University | 12 years |
| C | Tibetan Folk Artist & Workshop Leader | Community Center | 20+ years |

2.3 Research Steps

The research followed a phased approach to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis. Each phase was tailored to capture the lived experiences of educators and artists while documenting the institutional strategies in place for music transmission, as shown in Table 3.

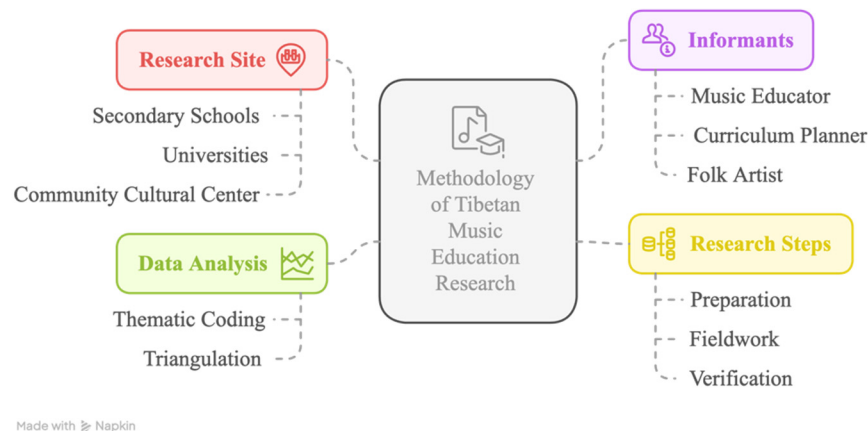
Table 3. Research Steps

| Phase | Description |
|-----------------------|--|
| Phase 1: Preparation | Gained site access, obtained ethical clearance, and built local partnerships |
| Phase 2: Fieldwork | Conducted observations, collected documents, and held semi-structured interviews |
| Phase 3: Verification | Member checking with informants to confirm accuracy and refine interpretations |

Each interview was conducted in Mandarin or Tibetan, depending on the informant's preference, with the support of a cultural interpreter where needed. Observational notes were taken during classes and workshops to record instructional methods, student participation, and the integration of cultural content.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic coding approach. All interviews were transcribed and coded to identify patterns in teaching practices, cultural identity reinforcement, student engagement, and institutional support structures. Observational data and curriculum materials were also analyzed to triangulate findings and ensure depth of insight. This analytical strategy enabled the identification of both shared and site-specific strategies for transmitting Tibetan folk songs and provided a nuanced understanding of how educational practices adapt to cultural and regional contexts.

**Figure 1.** Research Methodology

3. Results

Through in-depth analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum documents, three principal strategies emerged as central to the preservation and revitalization of Tibetan folk music: integration into the formal curriculum, community-based transmission models, and the use of technology-enhanced learning tools. These approaches reflect traditional and innovative methods that address the challenges of cultural continuity amid rapid modernization and changing educational landscapes. The results underscore how combining formal and informal educational environments enhances cultural relevance, student engagement, and long-term sustainability of Tibetan musical heritage. Student perspectives, particularly those shared during interviews and informal discussions, added valuable insight into how these strategies foster emotional connection and identity formation.

3.1 Integration into Formal Curriculum

Across the three secondary schools and two universities studied, the formal integration of Tibetan folk songs into music education curricula was a consistent strategy. In these institutions, ethnic music was either embedded within the broader music curriculum or offered as a specialized elective. Teachers often began lessons by introducing the historical and cultural contexts of each song, explaining how lyrics, melodies, and vocal techniques were connected to Tibetan traditions, religious practices, or regional events. This approach was particularly effective in fostering student appreciation and deeper understanding.

However, the success of this method was highly contingent on teacher expertise and resource availability. Educators with training in ethnomusicology or experience in local Tibetan culture were better equipped to deliver meaningful

content. One informant, a university music lecturer, emphasized the need for "teachers who can bridge textbook theory with lived cultural experience." In contrast, institutions with less access to trained staff or culturally relevant materials struggled to maintain student interest and accuracy in representation.

Several informants noted that students responded positively to including folk songs in assessments, performances, and class projects. One high school teacher described a unit where students researched the origins of a selected folk song, interviewed family members or elders, and performed the song with traditional instrumentation. Students expressed pride in connecting with their ancestry through these assignments and reported that singing the songs with classmates felt more personal than reading about them. This practice not only enriched learning but also reinforced familial and community ties, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Key Components of Curriculum-Based Transmission

| Component | Description |
|----------------------------|---|
| Cultural Contextualization | Lessons include background on history, religion, and customs |
| Performance Assessment | Students are evaluated on vocal and instrumental presentation |
| Interdisciplinary Links | Integration with language, history, and arts education |
| Resource Challenges | Gaps in teacher training and access to authentic teaching tools |

3.2 Community-Based Transmission Models

Community settings offered an alternative yet complementary environment for learning Tibetan folk songs. These models included local cultural centers, amateur performance troupes, and grassroots workshops. In particular, the Niangre Township Troupe in Lhasa was highlighted as a best practice case. This troupe consisted of farmers and laborers who gathered regularly for rehearsals and community performances. Many young learners gained confidence and cultural fluency through mentorship and group singing.

Unlike formal school settings, community transmission was often characterized by oral tradition, embodied learning, and ritual participation. Songs were learned during festivals, spiritual gatherings, and village celebrations. Informants from cultural centers emphasized the importance of "learning by doing," where young people participated not just as observers but as active performers alongside elders.

One particularly powerful example came from a cultural worker who described how children learned songs during Losar (Tibetan New Year) festivities: "They may not know the lyrics at first, but through dancing, drumming, and watching their grandparents, they slowly absorb everything." A student participating in a community drumming circle said that learning songs this way made her feel "part of something bigger than school, like the spirit of my village lives in the rhythm." This immersive method fostered a strong sense of identity and pride among learners, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Features of Community-Based Models

| Feature | Description |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Oral Tradition | Songs passed down verbally through demonstration and repetition |
| Intergenerational Learning | Elders mentor youth in informal, participatory settings |
| Festival Participation | Learning embedded in religious and communal events |
| Cultural Identity Reinforcement | Music serves as a medium for expressing and preserving heritage |

3.3 Technology-Enhanced Learning

The third major strategy identified was using digital tools to aid the transmission of Tibetan folk music. Schools and cultural institutions reported increasing reliance on digital archives, multimedia content, and online platforms to teach and disseminate traditional songs. These resources included government-funded intangible cultural heritage databases, mobile apps, VR concerts, and video interviews with master musicians.

Younger learners showed higher levels of engagement when exposed to audiovisual material. One secondary school teacher shared how her students were more enthusiastic during lessons that featured 360-degree recordings of folk

performances in traditional dress: "It made the music come alive for them. They could see the costumes, the instruments, and the village background." A university student described a VR lesson as "stepping into the music," an experience that felt more personal and made the tradition "feel alive, not ancient."

Technology also allowed access to rare or endangered songs previously unavailable in print or oral formats. In universities, digital software enables students to analyze melodic structure and linguistic features more precisely, supporting artistic practice and academic inquiry, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Advantages of Technology-Enhanced Learning

| Tool | Application |
|--------------------------|--|
| Digital Archives | Access to historical and rare song recordings |
| Multimedia Presentations | Videos, animations, and VR to enhance cultural immersion |
| Music Analysis Software | Tools for studying pitch, rhythm, and language integration |
| Online Interviews | First-hand accounts from Tibetan musicians and songwriters |

While each of the above strategies had independent merits, the research indicated that the most effective programs combined formal, informal, and digital methods. For instance, a university that hosted both classroom courses and community engagement events while developing a student-run online folk song archive demonstrated high levels of learner motivation and retention.

Students interviewed in such environments reported feeling emotionally connected to the music when their learning combined storytelling, community performance, and multimedia experiences. One student reflected, "After singing with my grandmother and uploading our version online, I understood the song in a new way, like it belonged to both her and me." Teachers echoed this view, noting that students participating in storytelling and community concerts were more confident and emotionally connected to the material.

One teacher summarized the benefit of this blended strategy: "When students learn about the meaning behind a song, sing it with elders, and then record it using their phones or laptops, it becomes more than just a school assignment; it becomes part of their identity." As shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Outcomes of Integrated Strategies

| Outcome | Evidence from Field Data |
|------------------------|---|
| Increased Engagement | Higher attendance and participation in music classes |
| Retention of Material | Long-term memory retention through multiple sensory experiences |
| Emotional Connection | Students relate music to family, spirituality, and place |
| Performance Confidence | Increased public performances and creative reinterpretation |

These findings offer a blueprint for sustaining Tibetan folk music through education in multicultural China, where cultural preservation must balance modern education goals. They also suggest that successful transmission depends not only on content but also on the learning environment, teacher expertise, and community involvement. This multifaceted approach enables Tibetan folk songs to remain vibrant and meaningful to younger generations, ensuring continuity in rural and urban settings.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with existing research that highlights the critical role of culturally responsive education in the preservation of minority traditions (Kertz-Welzel, 2018; Du & Leung, 2022). In line with the theoretical framework of multicultural pedagogy, which advocates for the inclusion of diverse cultural expressions in formal education (Ho, 2018; Chantarasombat & Rooyuenyong, 2020), the integration of Tibetan folk songs into school and university curricula demonstrated measurable benefits in student engagement, cultural understanding, and community ties. As shown in the results, when students were exposed to music through culturally embedded teaching, framing songs within their historical, linguistic, and spiritual contexts, they developed deeper emotional connections

to the material. This supports previous findings by Prest (2020) and Kivijärvi (2021), who emphasized linking identity and local knowledge to classroom instruction.

However, the data also reinforced persistent challenges in multicultural music education, particularly regarding teacher training and curricular resource development. Educators with formal training in ethnomusicology or local culture could deliver more meaningful content, while those lacking such a background struggled to maintain student interest. This mirrors the concerns raised by Bauer (2020) and Liu et al. (2025), who noted that teacher competence and the availability of culturally relevant materials are essential to authentic learning experiences in minority music education. Thus, there is a clear need for professional development programs and policy interventions aimed at equipping teachers to teach Tibetan folk songs with both technical proficiency and cultural sensitivity.

The study's exploration of community-based transmission models aligns with the literature on informal and embodied learning. Rooted in oral tradition and experiential practice, community engagement, such as that observed in the Niangre Township Troupe, provided learners with authentic, intergenerational experiences that emphasized ritual, identity, and participation. These models correspond with Silverman and Patterson's (2021) argument that informal learning spaces can serve as critical classroom extensions, particularly in culturally rich yet structurally underserved communities. Moreover, the reinforcement of identity through community performance, storytelling, and elder mentorship resonates with the work of Tang and Sornyai (2023), who stress the importance of maintaining living cultural heritage through socially embedded practices.

Additionally, the study's emphasis on digital technology as a tool for cultural transmission supports emerging theories of posthumanist and digital pedagogy (Saputra et al., 2024; Tan & Jehom, 2024). Digital archives, multimedia resources, and virtual reality recordings created immersive learning experiences that engaged younger students and made previously inaccessible musical content available for study and performance. This reflects Zelcer-Lavid's (2018) insights into how modern educational systems can leverage technological advancements to bridge cultural gaps and revitalize traditional knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The research validates the hypothesis that hybrid educational strategies combining formal curricular integration, community-based learning, and technology-enhanced instruction are the most effective in transmitting Tibetan folk songs in contemporary China. These findings are consistent with Banks' (2009) theory of multicultural education, which emphasizes the importance of integrating minority cultural knowledge into mainstream educational practices and aligns with Silverman and Patterson's (2021) work on community-centered, experiential learning frameworks. They also contribute new empirical insights into the field of minority cultural transmission by demonstrating how culturally authentic instruction, supported by local knowledge and digital tools, fosters stronger student engagement and cultural retention.

This study holds specific implications for education policy and teacher training. It suggests the need for culturally responsive curricula that include ethnic music education as a formal component of national learning standards. Additionally, targeted teacher development programs, particularly in ethnomusicology and culturally sustaining pedagogy, should be prioritized to enhance educators' ability to deliver heritage-based instruction effectively.

The study's limitations include its qualitative scope and regional focus, suggesting the need for broader comparative studies. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of these strategies on learner outcomes, explore their application across other ethnic communities, and further investigate how artificial intelligence, gamification, and mobile learning tools can enrich heritage education in multicultural societies.

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