

The Sichuan Folk Song: A Case Study of Yibin City in Sichuan Province of the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to explore the rich tapestry of Sichuan folk songs through a focused investigation of Yibin city, situated within the province of Sichuan, China. Sichuan folk songs represent an integral component of the region's cultural heritage, embodying centuries-old traditions and narratives that reflect the essence of the local community. Yibin city, renowned for its historical significance and vibrant cultural milieu, serves as a compelling case study for delving into the nuances of Sichuan folk music.

The research delves into the historical evolution and distinctive characteristics of Sichuan folk songs, shedding light on their role in traditional ceremonies, social gatherings, and everyday life. By employing a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and analysis, this study uncovers the intricate melodies, lyrical themes, and instrumental techniques that define Sichuan folk songs in Yibin city.

Through a comprehensive examination of the cultural significance of Sichuan folk songs, this article seeks to highlight their enduring impact on the collective identity of the local populace. Additionally, it addresses contemporary challenges and opportunities in preserving and promoting these musical traditions amidst rapid societal transformations and globalization. Ultimately, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of Sichuan folk songs within the specific context of Yibin city, underscoring their importance as a cultural cornerstone that bridges past and present generations in Sichuan, China.

Keywords: Sichuan Folk Song; A Case Study of Yibin City; Sichuan Province

Introduction

Folk songs originate from the labor of ordinary people, serving as reflections of their daily lives and experiences rooted in their work. These songs hold significant relevance for laborers, especially in mountainous regions where communal labor practices historically intertwined with these melodies, acting as directives and sources of motivation. Furthermore, folk songs have played crucial roles as intermediaries in various life events such as marriages, funerals, and ceremonies, acting as conduits for invoking divine presence and expressing heartfelt sentiments.

Moreover, these songs have served as vehicles for articulating societal aspirations and values during rituals and festive occasions. They embody people's hopes and deepest convictions, reflecting their perspectives on life. The earliest recorded instance of a folk song can be found in the Guofeng of the Book of Shijing from the Zhou Dynasty, showcasing the longstanding tradition of folk music in Chinese culture.

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Chinese folk songs exhibit a rich diversity, shaped by successive dynasties and evolving traditions. The categorization of these songs includes Han folk songs representing general, pastoral, and agricultural themes, alongside minor folk songs centered on specific tasks like craftsmanship, construction, agriculture, and fishing. Furthermore, minority communities contribute unique forms of folk music, such as Uygur love ballads, Kazakh solo and ensemble performances, and Mongolian melodies, highlighting the varied cultural tapestry present within China. (Yuan, 2020).

In Sichuan, a province in China renowned for its rich musical heritage encompassing both folk and classical traditions, various music forms flourish. Sichuan opera, an ancient art form widely celebrated throughout China, coexists with the region's beloved Sichuan lantern drama, drawing on folk influences. The province also resonates with spiritual sounds as Daoist priests perform sacred music within temple walls, while married lay priests contribute their distinctive musical expressions to ceremonial practices. Folk ensembles in Sichuan often feature a diverse array of instruments like bamboo flutes, pans, cymbals, gongs, and horns, creating a symphony of traditional sounds. Noteworthy modern contributions include groups like the Higher Brothers, who have gained international acclaim, and bands like Hiperson, blending Sichuan's musical heritage with contemporary rock genres like post-punk and post-rock.

Within Sichuan's cultural tapestry lies Yibin, a city boasting a vibrant tradition of folk songs deeply ingrained in local culture. These songs intricately weave tales of everyday life, love sagas, and historical legacies unique to the region, serving as conduits for the transmission of customs and folklore across generations. Through Yibin's folk songs, the essence of Sichuan's musical identity finds resonance, bridging the past with the present in a harmonious celebration of heritage and creativity. (Li, 2020).

Yibin's folk songs showcase distinctive melodies influenced by various ethnic groups like the Yi and Qiang, enriching the region's musical landscape. Accompanied by traditional instruments such as the erhu, pipa, and suona, these songs blend melody and rhythm to encapsulate the cultural essence of Yibin. Themes in these songs often revolve around agriculture, nature, love, and historical tales, mirroring the customs and beliefs of local communities. Through their storytelling, Yibin's folk songs not only preserve the region's cultural legacy but also offer a captivating insight into the daily lives and traditions of its people, serving as a vibrant reflection of their heritage (Jiang & Zhang, 2021).

Overall, In Sichuan, a province deeply rooted in both folk and classical music, the tradition of folk music is intertwined with religious practices, local opera, and contemporary adaptations blending traditional melodies with modern genres. Furthermore, Yibin's vibrant folk song tradition, deeply embedded in local culture, serves as a medium for preserving and passing down traditions and folklore from generation to generation. The distinct musical styles, instruments, and lyrical themes in Yibin's folk songs reflect the region's unique cultural identity, capturing the essence of agricultural life, natural surroundings, love, and historical narratives. folk songs in Sichuan and specifically in Yibin play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, providing insight into the daily lives and traditions of its people while celebrating the region's diversity and cultural richness.

But at present Preservation and Transmission of traditional folk songs in Yibin City faces several challenges such as Loss of Traditional Knowledge with modernization and globalization, there is a risk of losing the traditional knowledge associated with folk songs. as younger generations embrace contemporary lifestyles, there may be a decline in interest and participation in preserving and learning traditional songs. The oral transmission of folk songs is integral to their preservation. However, rapid urbanization and changing social structures pose a threat to this oral tradition as communities disperse and traditional modes of communication diminish.

Influence of Popular Culture, Globalized media and popular culture may overshadow traditional folk music, leading to a decrease in the practice and appreciation of local musical traditions among younger generations. Socioeconomic Changes, shifts in livelihood patterns from rural to urban settings impact the continuation of traditional practices. Economic changes may reduce the time and resources available for individuals to engage in traditional song performances and related cultural activities.

Document

ntation and Archiving, there may be insufficient resources or infrastructure for adequately documenting and archiving traditional folk songs, which could lead to the loss of important cultural artifacts and historical context. Language Shift, as younger generations shift towards more widespread languages, there is a potential for the erosion of traditional dialects and linguistic nuances present in the lyrics of the folk songs. Lack of Institutional Support, Inadequate funding, educational programs, and institutional support for the preservation and transmission of folk songs may hinder efforts to sustain this aspect of cultural heritage.

Historical Background of Sichuan Folk Songs

(1) The historical roots and evolution of Sichuan folk songs.

Sichuan folk songs have deep historical roots that trace back centuries, reflecting the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse influences. The evolution of Sichuan folk songs can be attributed to a blend of indigenous traditions, interactions with neighboring regions, and historical developments over time.

Sichuan has been a cultural crossroads for various ethnic groups, including the Han Chinese, Yi, Qiang, Tibetan, and others. This diversity contributed to a multifaceted musical landscape. Ancient Sichuan folk songs likely emerged from rituals, agricultural practices, and storytelling within these communities. Sichuan's proximity to other provinces in China allowed for cultural exchanges, influencing the evolution of its folk music. For instance, interactions with regions like Yunnan, Guizhou, and Tibet could have introduced new musical elements to Sichuan folk songs. Throughout history, events such as wars, migrations, and political shifts impacted the development of Sichuan folk songs. These songs often served as a form of expression for the people, reflecting their joys, sorrows, and resilience in the face of adversity. Over time, Sichuan folk songs have integrated traditional instruments like bamboo flutes, pans, and cymbals with more contemporary influences. This fusion of old and new elements has kept the music vibrant and relevant to changing societal dynamics.

Overall, the historical roots and evolution of Sichuan folk songs are a testament to the region's cultural richness, reflecting a tapestry of influences, traditions, and experiences that have shaped this musical art form over time.

(2) The Origin Environment of Sichuan Folk Songs

Sichuan is a large basin. The unique geographical environment makes the people of Sichuan hardworking, brave, intelligent, flexible, generous, humorous, open-minded, eager to learn, full of vitality, and ambition. They create material wealth and spiritual wealth through labor, expressing their thoughts and emotions through songs, pursuing aspirations, and singing praises of beautiful things. Sichuan's long history, profound cultural heritage, and diverse factors brought by a large number of immigrants have enabled Sichuan folk songs to draw on the strengths of various sources while forming its own system, creating a unique regional color.

Sichuan is the birthplace of the ancient Shu and Ba peoples in China, nurturing a long history and culture in Sichuan. More than 10,000 years ago, the ancient Shu ancestors established the charming ancient Shu civilization in this land. Over 3,000 years ago, the ancient Shu civilization merged into Chinese civilization, becoming an important component of it. Sichuan's long history encapsulates a profound cultural heritage. Local Customs and Traditions Lay the Foundation for Folk Songs, Sichuan Province is a multi-ethnic province with a minority population of 4.15 million people, including 14 ethnic minorities who have been living there for generations. These include the Yi, Tibetan, Qiang, Miao, Hui, Mongolian, Tujia, Lisu, Manchu, Naxi, Buyi, Bai, Zhuang, and Dai ethnic groups. Each of these brotherly ethnic groups has its own customs and cultural characteristics, collectively contributing to the rich and diverse foundation of Sichuan culture. Migration and Implantation of External Elements, throughout history, the influx of a large number of migrants has had a significant impact on the local culture of Sichuan. The exchange and collision of various regional cultures, from quantitative accumulation to qualitative leaps, have generated a new form of "Sichuan culture." Sichuan folk songs, influenced by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrant culture and the local culture, have incorporated numerous musical elements, undergone qualitative leaps, and become a typical representation of historical sedimentation and cultural integration (Tao, 2012).

Introduction Yibin City

Yibin City, situated in the southeastern part of Sichuan Province, China, is renowned for its abundant cultural legacy and hosts an array of traditional art forms such as Sichuan folk songs. These folk songs are of great cultural significance in the region, often mirroring local traditions, history, and ways of life. The city's distinctive geographical position, nestled amidst mountains and along the Yangtze River, has shaped the evolution of its unique cultural heritage, particularly in music and performing arts. Serving as a focal point for preserving and promoting Sichuan folk songs, Yibin City showcases a musical legacy that has been passed down through generations. Like many parts of China, Yibin City has undergone transformations due to urbanization, modernization, and globalization, posing challenges in the conservation and transmission of traditional folk songs. Additionally, changes in demographics, technological progress, and evolving societal norms have affected the sustainability and continuation of these cultural traditions. (Xie, 2024).

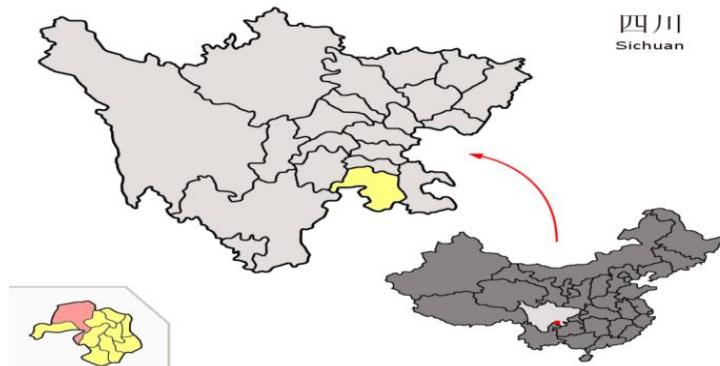


Figure1: Location of Yibin City
Source: Sichuan province administrative regions GIS data,2024

Yibin City is a melting pot of various artistic expressions, customs, and practices that have been preserved and passed down through generations.

The city's cultural identity is intertwined with its geographical features, including its proximity to the Yangtze River and surrounding mountainous landscapes, which have influenced the development of unique traditions and art forms. Yibin City is celebrated for its contributions to Sichuan folk songs, showcasing a rich musical legacy that resonates with local customs, history, and ways of life. Over the years, Yibin City has served as a hub for cultural exchange and creativity, fostering a vibrant community of artists, performers, and artisans who continue to uphold and promote the region's cultural heritage. From traditional music and dance to culinary arts and craftsmanship, Yibin City's culture is a testament to the enduring spirit of its people and their dedication to preserving age-old traditions in the face of modernization and globalization. As Yibin City navigates the challenges of a rapidly changing world, its cultural resilience and commitment to heritage conservation serve as a source of inspiration for future generations, ensuring that the city's rich cultural tapestry remains an integral part of its identity and legacy.

(1) Introduction to Yibin Folk Songs

As one of the birthplaces of Ba-Shu culture, Yibin has a history of over 3000 years. Yibin folk songs have a long history, diverse forms, and rich content. They are closely related to people's daily lives, with simple and clear lyrics that are easily understood. The general structure consists mainly of two or four phrases with varying tonal patterns. The lyrics employ techniques such as contrast, exaggeration, personification, metaphor, and storytelling, highlighting central ideas in just a few lines.

Yibin folk songs represent a cherished cultural tradition deeply rooted in the history and identity of Yibin City, located in the southeastern part of Sichuan Province, China. These folk songs hold profound cultural significance, serving as a musical narrative that reflects the region's customs, stories, and way of life. Known for their emotive melodies and poetic lyrics, Yibin folk songs encapsulate the essence of local traditions and evoke a sense of nostalgia for generations past. Often sung in the local dialect, these songs showcase the artistic prowess and creativity of the people of Yibin, preserving their unique heritage through oral storytelling and musical expression.

The themes of Yibin folk songs range from love and nature to historical events and societal values, offering a window into the cultural tapestry of the region. Passed down through oral tradition, these songs have been a source of entertainment, solace, and community bonding for the residents of Yibin, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among its people.

With their concise structure, precise language, and lifelike musical material, Yibin folk songs express profoundly deep thoughts and emotions, representing the wisdom of the laboring people. During performances, different singers often use existing songs as a basis and spontaneously create lyrics according to their needs, leading to frequent spontaneous adaptations of Yibin folk songs. In the process of spontaneous creation, the melody of the songs changes according to the different meanings of the lyrics (jiang, 2007).

Based on the author's review of various literature, the main genres of Yibin folk songs are summarized as follows:

(2) Shan Song (山歌shan ge):

Located at the junction of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan provinces, with its terrain dominated by mountains, Yibin has a wide variety of mountain songs, which is a characteristic feature of Yibin folk songs. Mountain songs primarily express emotions directly, using a free form of composition and diverse creative techniques. Yibin mountain songs vividly portray the local people's living conditions, thoughts, emotions, and spiritual pursuits in a bright and melodious singing style from various perspectives. They encompass agricultural labor as well as romantic themes. The structure mainly consists of seven-character lines, occasionally featuring five or four-character lines or other structures, with four-line stanzas being predominant. The songs combine main lyrics with complementary words, and smooth sustained tones with accompanying melodies. Particularly, the rich local dialects and accents add humor and charm to Yibin mountain songs (Li, 2023).

Shan Ge (山歌), also known as Mountain Song, is a traditional Chinese folk song genre that originated from the rural areas of China. The term "Shan Ge" literally translates to "mountain song." These songs are characterized by their simple melodies, expressive lyrics, and themes that often reflect everyday life in rural communities, such as work in the fields, love, nature, and social issues.

Simple Melodies: Shan Ge typically features straightforward and easy-to-follow melodies that are often performed a cappella or with minimal instrumental accompaniment.

Expressive Lyrics: The lyrics of Shan Ge are poetic and emotive, conveying a range of emotions and stories related to rural life and experiences.

Themes: Common themes in Shan Ge songs include nature, farming, love, family, nostalgia, and social commentary on issues affecting rural communities.

Oral Tradition: Shan Ge has been traditionally passed down through generations via oral transmission, with singers learning and performing songs based on memory and tradition.

Regional Variations: Different regions in China have their own styles and variations of Shan Ge, reflecting the unique cultural and linguistic characteristics of each area.

Shan Ge remains an important part of China's intangible cultural heritage, serving as a window into the rich tapestry of rural life and traditions across the country.

(3) Laodong Song (劳动歌 laodong ge):

Leveraging its natural geographical advantages, the Yibin region has a highly developed level of agriculture, and as a result, a rich agricultural culture. Labor songs emerged naturally, with labor chants and seedling-transplanting songs being the most representative. Depending on the terrain, labor chants are sung according to the suitability of the water or the mountains. With a wide variety and diverse forms, these tunes, which are frequently sung by laboring people during work and rest, employ a simple and straightforward expression, exhibiting resilient and rugged musical characteristics with a strong sense of life, concise language, diverse complementary words, and simple musical themes, encompassing various lyrical, duet, narrative, and human condition expressions. Extracted from everyday labor, this music resonates with laborers, alleviates physical and mental fatigue, expresses genuine emotions, inspires morale, leads labor, promotes unity and cooperation, and advances production (Li, 2023).

Laodong Ge (劳动歌), also known as Labor Song or Working Song in English, is a genre of traditional Chinese folk songs that celebrate the spirit of labor and the dignity of work. These songs have been an integral part of China's cultural heritage, reflecting the country's long history of agricultural and industrial traditions. Key characteristics of Laodong Ge include:

Celebration of Labor: Ge songs glorify the value of hard work, dedication, and resilience in various fields such as agriculture, industry, construction, and other occupations.

Simple and Catchy Melodies: These songs often feature simple and rhythmic melodies that are easy to sing along with, making them accessible to a wide audience.

Lyrics Reflecting Work Ethics: The lyrics of Laodong Ge emphasize themes of teamwork, unity, perseverance, productivity, and the collective spirit of workers striving towards common goals.

Motivational and Inspirational: Laodong Ge songs serve as a source of motivation and inspiration for workers, encouraging them to take pride in their labor and contribute to the prosperity of society.

Community Bonding: Singing Laodong Ge songs together fosters a sense of community, solidarity, and shared purpose among workers, promoting camaraderie and cooperation in labor-intensive activities.

Historical and Cultural Significance: Laodong Ge songs have played a significant role in preserving and promoting Chinese cultural values associated with labor, portraying the importance of diligence, craftsmanship, and respect for work.

Through their uplifting melodies and empowering messages, Laodong Ge songs continue to resonate with audiences, honoring the hardworking spirit of individuals across different sectors and upholding the legacy of labor culture in Chinese society.

(4) Xiao Diao (小调 Xiao Diao)

Compared to small tunes from other regions, Yibin folk songs' small tunes predominantly depict rural themes, primarily expressing daily life or romantic relationships. Small tunes focus on narrative realism, supplemented with lyrical expression, featuring a narrow vocal range and concise structure. Widely circulated in Yibin's folk tradition, their form is more regular compared to music from other regions. Yibin's small tunes follow the trend of local dialects, and the lyrics extensively employ complementary words, highlighting the local characteristics of Yibin (Kang, 2023). Xiao diao song in Yibin folk songs primarily comprise rural melodies that predominantly depict aspects of people's daily lives, relationships between men and women, marriage, and family dynamics. These tunes excel in lyricism and

storytelling, characterized by smooth melodies, a limited range of sounds, and concise structures. They enjoy widespread popularity among the populace and typically adhere to a more structured form compared to other folk songs. Examples include Yibin City's "Sheep-herding Tune, Gao County's Singing Zhu Yingtai in the First Month, Xingwen's Needle in the Needle, and others. (Wen & Zhang, 2023).

Xiao Diao (小调) is a traditional Chinese folk music genre that is characterized by its distinctive melodies, lyrical styles, and regional variations. Key characteristics of Xiao Diao include:

Melodic Structure: Xiao Diao songs typically have simple and elegant melodies that are easy to remember and sing. These melodies often evoke a sense of nostalgia and emotional depth.

Lyrical Content: The lyrics of Xiao Diao songs are poetic and expressive, focusing on themes such as love, nature, everyday life, historical events, and emotions. They often convey deep sentiments and storytelling elements.

Regional Variations: Different regions in China have their own unique styles of Xiao Diao, reflecting local dialects, customs, and cultural influences. Each region's Xiao Diao may have distinct musical characteristics and lyrical themes.

Instrumentation: While Xiao Diao songs can be performed a cappella, they may also feature instrumental accompaniment using traditional Chinese instruments like the erhu, pipa, guzheng, or bamboo flute to enhance the overall musical experience.

Emotional Expressiveness: Xiao Diao songs are known for their emotional expressiveness, capturing a range of feelings such as joy, sorrow, longing, and nostalgia. The music and lyrics work together to create a powerful emotional impact on the listener.

Cultural Heritage: Xiao Diao is an important part of China's intangible cultural heritage, preserving traditional musical forms and lyrical traditions that have been passed down through generations.

Overall, Xiao Diao represents a rich and diverse genre of Chinese folk music that showcases the beauty of simplicity, emotional depth, and cultural diversity within the country's musical landscape.

(5) Fengsu song (风俗歌Fengsu Ge)

In Yibin, most people sing songs that convey the characteristics of traditional customs and grand festivals. Over time, these songs have increasingly acquired the distinctive features of the customs and are referred to as "fengsu ge" (folk custom songs). Fengsu ge mainly includes "lan diao" (lantern tunes), wedding songs, funeral songs, etc. Among them, lantern tunes have gradually become the typical representative of fengsu ge due to their wide application and rich content. The lantern tunes include "che lan diao" used for visiting relatives and friends during the Chinese New Year period, with representative works such as "Zhengyue Wanglang Shi Yuanxiao" from Jiang'an, "Yuè Er Wān Wān Xiàng Zhī Chuán" from Gōngxiàn, and "Qiántóu Hái Yǒu Jǐ Hù Jiā" from Chángníng; and "niu lan diao," performed by 3-5 people playing different roles, using actual oxen plowing labor as the script, with melodies mostly derived from che lan diao or xiao diao, and lyrics mainly reflecting agricultural scenes for entertaining performances (kang, 2013).

Anthem song one of traditional customs and grand festivals, the style and categories of divine songs vary widely. Divine songs employ a singing style that is relaxed and humorous, featuring deep and emotive melodies. They often utilize refined techniques to depict various scenes of life. To date, numerous Yunlian divine songs have been collected, structured in sets of 4 sentences, 6 sentences, or multiple sentences. These songs exhibit free rhythms and beats with intricate changes. Most songs blend beats, alternating between at least two (e.g., 2/4 and 3/4) and up to three (e.g., 5/4, 4/4, 3/4) rhythms (Tan, 2016).

Anthem song can be categorized based on their singing methods into high-pitched, semi-high-pitched, flat-pitched, and other forms. Each category employs distinct melody expression methods, resulting in varied rhythms and beats. High-pitched divine songs dominate in number, characterized by high and resonant tones, free rhythms, significant melodic fluctuations, long dragging notes. Songs with brief lyrics are typically sung in high-pitched tones (Tan, 2016), like Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea to Show Their Magical Powers No Singing of Mountain Songs, No Cheerfulness, Three Doves Flying Past the Window (see Figure 2.2).

谱例 1-1

三个斑鸠飞过窗

(高腔)

1 = B^{\flat} $\frac{2}{4} \frac{3}{4}$

三 个 (呀) 斑 鸠 儿 (嘛) 飞 进 (呀) 窗, 两 个 得 成 才 (嘛)
 两 个 (呀) 飞 到 (嘛) 花 山 (呀) 去, 一 个 在 此 又 受 孤

一 个 (呀 哈 哈) 单 (呀) (呀 哈) 单 (呀)。

演 唱: 张幼同
采录记谱: 刘仁洪

Figure 2.2: Divine songs
Source: Tan Weiwei, 2016

Conclusion

In conclusion, Cultural Significance of Yibin Folk Songs, Yibin folk songs represent a cherished cultural tradition deeply rooted in the history and identity of Yibin City, located in the southeastern part of Sichuan Province, China. These folk songs hold profound cultural significance, serving as a musical narrative that reflects the region's customs, stories, and way of life. Known for their emotive melodies and poetic lyrics, Yibin folk songs encapsulate the essence of local traditions and evoke a sense of nostalgia for generations past. Often sung in the local dialect, these songs showcase the artistic prowess and creativity of the people of Yibin, preserving their unique heritage through oral storytelling and musical expression.

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Preserving cultural heritage through musical traditions like Sichuan folk songs holds immense significance on multiple levels:

These traditions serve as a cultural anchor, connecting present generations to their roots, history, and shared identity. They provide a sense of belonging and continuity, fostering pride in one's cultural heritage. Through songs and music, historical narratives, customs, values, and societal norms are preserved and passed down. They offer valuable insights into the past, allowing for a deeper understanding of cultural evolution over time. Musical traditions bring communities together, fostering solidarity, cooperation, and a sense of collective identity. They serve as a means for people to come together, celebrate shared experiences, and strengthen social bonds.

Preserving musical traditions facilitates cross-cultural exchanges, promoting mutual understanding and appreciation among diverse communities. It opens avenues for cultural diplomacy and dialogue, fostering respect for different traditions and perspectives. Cultural heritage, including musical traditions, can drive tourism and economic development by attracting visitors interested in experiencing authentic local culture. This can lead to sustainable growth and opportunities for local artists and artisans.

Studying and preserving musical traditions offer educational benefits by enhancing awareness, understanding, and appreciation of diverse cultures. It promotes intergenerational learning and nurtures a sense of cultural literacy. Music has the power to evoke emotions, create connections, and promote well-being. Preserving cultural musical heritage contributes to emotional enrichment, mental health, and overall quality of life, serving as a source of comfort and inspiration.

In conclusion, preserving cultural heritage through musical traditions like Sichuan folk songs is vital for maintaining a sense of identity, fostering community cohesion, promoting artistic expression, facilitating intercultural understanding, driving economic growth, supporting education, and enhancing emotional well-being. By safeguarding these traditions, societies can ensure that their rich cultural tapestry remains vibrant and relevant for future generations.

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