

Research on the Current Situation of the Musical Cultural Heritage in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia

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Abstract: The Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia, as one of the core areas of the Yellow River Cultural Belt, has nurtured a musical cultural heritage that integrates characteristics of both grassland nomadic culture and Yellow River agricultural civilization. Artistic forms represented by Urad original folk songs and Manhan Tune are the crystallization of multi-ethnic cultural integration. This paper adopts a combined approach of field research and literature review to systematically analyze the typological characteristics, current state of inheritance, and existing issues of the musical cultural heritage in this region, with a focus on discussing the preservation challenges and potential solutions in the digital era. The study finds that the heritage faces challenges such as a gap in inheritors, low level of digitalization, and singular methods of transmission, while the construction of a diversified training system, the development of digital platforms, and omnimedia communication provide effective support for its sustainable development. The conclusions of this paper can offer regional practical references for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the Yellow River Cultural Belt and contribute to the building of cultural confidence among ethnic groups.

Keywords: Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia; Musical Cultural Heritage; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Digital Inheritance; Manhan Tune; Urad Folk Songs

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The Jizi Bend of the Yellow River flows through multiple areas in Inner Mongolia, including Bayannur, Ordos, and Baotou, forming a unique cultural ecological zone characterized by "symbiosis between farming and nomadic practices, and integration of Mongolian and Han cultures." The musical cultural heritage in this region, as an important component of intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH"), carries the productive wisdom and spiritual beliefs of various ethnic groups. For instance, the song "Wild Goose" has made Urad original folk songs renowned nationwide, while Manhan Tune, with its distinctive feature of being sung in both Mongolian and Han languages, stands as a musical testament to ethnic integration. In 2005, the "State Council Office's Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage" explicitly called for the use of digital means to safeguard ICH. In 2023, the construction plan for the Yellow River National Cultural Park further emphasized the systematic preservation of regional cultural heritage. Against this policy backdrop, research on the current state and transmission pathways of the musical cultural heritage in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia holds significant contemporary value.

From an academic research perspective, existing studies predominantly focus on individual musical genres, such as Urad folk songs or Manhan Tune, lacking a holistic investigation of the musical heritage in the Jizi Bend region. In terms of research methodology, traditional literature reviews outweigh empirical studies, and there is insufficient analysis of digital inheritance practices. Based on this, this paper follows the logical framework of "current situation analysis—problem diagnosis—pathway construction" to address the gap in systematic research on regional musical heritage.

1.2 Research Scope and Core Concepts

This study delimits its scope to the geographical unit of the "Jizi Bend" formed by the Yellow River's course through Inner Mongolia, encompassing key areas including Bayannur City (Urad

Grassland), Ordos City (such as Jungar Banner), and Tumed Right Banner of Baotou City. The research subjects are music-related items inscribed on various levels of the intangible cultural heritage list within this region. These include folk songs (such as Urad original folk songs, Manhan Tune, and Mountain Climbing Tune), instrumental music (such as the performing techniques of Morin Khuur and the Four-stringed Fiddle), as well as song and dance music (such as the accompanied dance of Ordos Short Tune). Among these, the national-level ICH item Manhan Tune and the autonomous region-level ICH item Urad Folk Songs serve as the key case studies for analysis.

Core concepts are defined as follows: "Musical Cultural Heritage" specifically refers to the musical art forms generated and transmitted within this region, passed down orally and performed dynamically, along with the cultural connotations they carry. Its core characteristics are embodied in three attributes: the "integration of nomadic genes and agricultural elements," the "living nature of oral transmission," and the "identifiable significance of regional culture."

1.3 Research Methods and Data Sources

This paper adopts a multi-disciplinary integrated research approach. First, the literature research method is employed to systematically review official documents, such as the Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Inner Mongolia and Research on the Culture of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River, along with relevant academic papers, in order to clarify the historical context of heritage transmission. Second, the field research method is utilized; from July to September 2024, investigations were conducted in Urad Front Banner of Bayannur City and Jungar Banner of Ordos City, involving interviews with 12 ICH inheritors (including 2 national-level inheritors and 5 autonomous region-level inheritors), 6 staff members from cultural and tourism departments, and 4 university researchers. Third, the case analysis method is applied, using Manhan Tune and Urad Folk Songs as typical cases to conduct an in-depth analysis of the similarities and differences in their transmission models. Fourth, the comparative research method is used, drawing on the digital inheritance experiences of Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs and Northern Anhui Folk Songs to provide reference points for the heritage preservation in the Jizi Bend region.

Data sources include: statistical data from the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Department of Culture and Tourism; records from research interviews; materials from the Urad Culture Research Center database of Hetao College; and annual reports from the Jungar Banner Manhan Tune Art Research Institute.

2. Types and Characteristics of Musical Cultural Heritage in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia

2.1 Main Types and Distribution

The Jizi Bend region of the Yellow River has established a four-tier intangible cultural heritage list system at the "national-autonomous region-league/city-banner/county" levels. Musical heritage encompasses four major categories: folk songs, instrumental music, song and dance music, and narrative singing. The distribution of resources exhibits characteristics of "core concentration and radial diffusion."

Table 1 Distribution Table of Intangible Cultural Heritage Music Items in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia

Heritage Type	Representative Items	Distribution Area	Administrative Level	Quantity
Folk Songs	Manhan Tune, Ordos Short Tune Urad Folk Songs Hanghin Folk Songs Mountain Air Mountain Climbing Tune	Ordos Baotou Bayannur Hohhot	National Level Autonomous Region Level	26
Instrumental Music	Morin Khuur Music Chaoer Dao Four-Stringed Fiddle Music	Ordos Bayannur Hulunbuir Xilingol	National Level Autonomous Region Level	8
Song and Dance Music	Andai Dance Music Bowl Dance Music Chopsticks Dance Music	Tongliao Ordos Bayannur	Autonomous Region Level	7
Narrative Singing	Hao Laibao Uliger Errentai Rap	Chifeng Hinggan League Baotou Hohhot	National Level Autonomous Region Level	11
Total	-	-	-	52

2.2 Core Cultural Characteristics

2.2.1 Integration of Multi-Ethnic Cultures

This is the most distinctive characteristic of the musical heritage in the Jizi Bend region. The formation process of Manhan Tune is highly representative. During the "Westward Migration" population movement of the Qing Dynasty, Han Chinese immigrants combined the melodic patterns of Northwestern Shanxi folk songs with the rhythmic structures of Mongolian short tunes. The lyrics retain nomadic imagery such as "horse tethering pole" and "grassland," while also incorporating agricultural elements like "earthen cave dwellings" and "millet meal." The vocal technique of switching between head voice and falsetto during performance further reflects a blend of Mongolian and Han singing characteristics. In modern times, Urad folk songs have also absorbed the ornamental vocal techniques of Han Chinese folk ditties, with some pieces featuring versions that mix Mongolian and Chinese lyrics. For example, "Ballad of the Hetao" begins its melody in Mongolian and concludes in Chinese, demonstrating the depth of cultural integration.

2.2.2 Reflection of Regional Ecology

The content of the musical heritage closely aligns with the natural geographical environment of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River. Urad folk songs frequently employ imagery such as the "Yellow River," "Gobi Desert," and "wild geese," with melodies that are vast and prolonged, matching the topographic features of the grasslands and deserts. In contrast, Manhan Tune, shaped by the "interwoven mountains and rivers" geography of the Jungar Banner, develops melodic characteristics that are "soaring like mountain paths and winding like river flows." For instance, in the piece "Beyond the Mountains," the lyrical reference to "high mountains and long rivers" echoes the melodic undulations, creating a musical portrayal of the regional ecology.

2.2.3 Folkloric Nature of Living Heritage Transmission

The musical heritage remains deeply rooted in folk activities, forming a pattern where "daily life itself constitutes transmission." In Jungar Banner, Manhan Tune is frequently performed during weddings, funerals, and other rituals, as well as during fieldwork. Villagers improvise lyrics reflecting contemporary life, as seen in the modern Manhan Tune "On the Poverty Alleviation Road," which incorporates new terms like "solar panels" and "cooperatives" into traditional melodies. Conversely, Urad folk songs are transmitted through competitions like the "Singing King Contest" at the Nadam

Fair, where elderly artists impart singing techniques to the younger generation through live call-and-response performances, thereby maintaining the heritage's vitality.

3. Current Status of Inheritance of Musical Cultural Heritage in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia

3.1 Policy and Practical Foundations for Protection and Inheritance

3.1.1 Preliminary Establishment of a Policy Support System

A three-tier protection policy network has been formed from the national to local levels. At the national level, Manhan Tune was included in the second batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2008, and Urad Folk Songs were included in the fourth batch of the Autonomous Region-level Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2014. At the autonomous region level, the "Inner Mongolia Yellow River Culture Protection, Inheritance, and Promotion Plan" issued in 2021 incorporated the musical heritage of the Jizi Bend into the key protection list. At the local level, the Jungar Banner established the Manhan Tune Art Research Institute in 2018, while Bayannur City has defined policies for financial support and inheritor training.

3.1.2 Initial Achievements in Cultivating Inheritors

An inheritor system combining "official recognition and public participation" has taken shape. Currently, the Jizi Bend region boasts three national-level inheritors of Manhan Tune (such as Qi Fulin) and 11 autonomous region-level inheritors and 28 municipal-level inheritors of Urad Folk Songs. Inheritance models show diversified development: firstly, master-apprentice transmission, exemplified by the "Masters Mentoring Apprentices" activities organized by the Manhan Tune Inheritance Center in Jungar Banner; secondly, school-based transmission, where Hetao College offers elective courses incorporating Urad Folk Songs content, and many primary and secondary schools in Jungar Banner integrate Manhan Tune into their school-based music curricula to cultivate young inheritors.

3.1.3 Gradual Expansion of Communication and Display Platforms

A combination of traditional and modern communication methods is being employed. Offline, Jungar Banner hosts the Manhan Tune Art Festival, attracting singers from Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia; Bayannur City organizes the "Urad Folk Song Competition" and has set up intangible cultural heritage performance sites in the Yellow River Hetao Cultural Tourism Zone. Online, some inheritors have begun utilizing short-video platforms for dissemination.

3.2 Exploration and Progress in Digital Preservation

Driven by the "Internet + Intangible Cultural Heritage" policy, digital preservation of the musical heritage in the Jizi Bend region has commenced, characterized by a "university-led, government-supported" approach. Hetao College, as a research institution, is digitally organizing the oral histories of inheritors and establishing a foundational database containing lyric texts and musical scores^[3]. The Jungar Banner Manhan Tune Art Research Institute is promoting the digital archiving of audio and video materials.

3.3 Existing Core Issues and Challenges

Although certain achievements have been made in preservation efforts, the musical cultural heritage of the Jizi Bend still faces three core problems: "a fractured transmission chain, lagging digitalization, and insufficient vitality," specifically manifested as follows:

3.3.1 Deteriorating Inheritor Ecology and Severe Gap in Talent Pipeline

This is the most prominent issue. Firstly, a high proportion of inheritors are elderly; secondly, recruiting young inheritors is difficult, as interest in traditional music among the youth is low due to the influence of modern popular culture; thirdly, motivation for transmission is insufficient. Most grassroots inheritors lack stable incomes, with municipal-level inheritors receiving an average monthly subsidy of only 800 yuan, which is inadequate to support full-time inheritance work. Consequently, many inheritors must engage in agricultural production or other jobs, limiting the energy they can devote to transmission.

3.3.2 Low Level of Digital Preservation and Insufficient Resource Integration

Compared to the digital development of Northern Shaanxi Folk Songs and Northern Anhui Folk Songs, the Jizi Bend region lags significantly. Firstly, data resources are fragmented. The digital platform for Urad Folk Songs has only completed text organization, with audio and video resources accounting for less than 10% of the total. Furthermore, it lacks interconnection with databases for Manhan Tune, Mountain Climbing Tune, and others, forming "information silos." Secondly, technological application remains superficial. Current digital methods are still confined to "storage and playback," lacking interactivity and experiential elements. For instance, AR experience zones only enable virtual viewing and have not established a complete communication chain of "learn-sing—interact—share."

3.3.3 Singular and Rigid Transmission Methods, Insufficient Cultural Vitality

Traditional transmission models struggle to meet the demands of the new era. Firstly, communication channels are limited. Offline exhibitions and performances are mostly concentrated during festival events, while online dissemination relies on inheritors' personal accounts, lacking professional team operation and resulting in severe content homogenization^[2]. Secondly, innovative transformation is insufficient. There is a low degree of integration between musical heritage and modern art forms. Apart from a few adapted works like "The Soul-Tugging Line" and "Beyond the Mountains," most pieces retain their traditional form, making it difficult to attract younger demographics. Thirdly, the degree of marketization is low. A virtuous cycle of "preservation—development—income—reinvestment in preservation" has not been formed. Only a few inheritors earn income through commercial performances, and related cultural and creative products (such as Manhan Tune USB drives and folk song score collections) have limited sales and weak market influence.

3.3.4 Weak Academic Research Support, Insufficiently Targeted Preservation

Existing research suffers from a "three deficiencies" problem: a lack of cross-regional studies, resulting in insufficient systematic research on the musical heritage of the Jizi Bend as a whole; a scarcity of empirical research, with most studies being literature reviews and inadequate investigation into the living conditions of inheritors and audience needs; and a shortage of applied research, with limited feasibility studies on digital inheritance and market-oriented development. This leads to a lack of precise data support for the formulation of preservation policies.

4. Preservation and Inheritance Pathways for the Musical Cultural Heritage in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia

In response to the aforementioned issues, and integrating regional realities with advanced experience, a "four-in-one" preservation and inheritance system should be constructed, centered on "talent cultivation as the core, digitalization as the support, marketization as the driving force, and academic research as the safeguard," to achieve the living inheritance and sustainable development of the musical heritage.

4.1 Constructing a Diversified Talent Cultivation System to Address the Inheritance Gap

4.1.1 Improve Support Policies for Inheritors

Establish a "graded subsidy + incentive reward" mechanism to enhance the economic treatment of inheritors. This includes raising the monthly subsidy for municipal-level inheritors to 2,000 yuan and incorporating national-level inheritors into the government's special allowance system. Set up an "Inheritance Contribution Award" to grant one-time bonuses (suggested range: 50,000 to 100,000 yuan) to inheritors who demonstrate significant success in cultivating young talent. Simultaneously, provide inheritors with medical security and training opportunities, organizing their participation in national intangible cultural heritage inheritor training workshops to enhance their professional competence.

4.1.2 Deepen the School Inheritance Project

Implement a dual-track cultivation model of "popularization + excellence." At the popularization level, integrate the musical heritage of the Jizi Bend into the compulsory education music curriculum for primary and secondary schools, compile the "Reader on the Musical Culture of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia," and assign full-time intangible cultural heritage teachers. At the excellence level, institutions of higher education such as Hetao College and Ordos Institute of

Technology should establish academic programs or specializations in "Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance," enrolling students with musical aptitude. Implement "college-enterprise cooperation" cultivation models, where students undertake internships at inheritance centers during their studies and are given priority for employment in cultural and tourism departments or ICH institutions upon graduation.

4.1.3 Activate Vitality in Folk Inheritance

Support the development of folk song societies and enthusiast associations, providing registered civil organizations with annual operational subsidies (suggested range: 20,000 to 50,000 yuan per organization). Regularly hold activities such as "Folk Song King Competitions" and "Youth Folk Song Showcases" to build platforms for folk inheritance and display. Encourage inheritors to conduct public welfare classes in communities and villages, fostering an inheritance atmosphere where "everyone can learn, and transmission can happen everywhere."

4.2 Build an Integrated Digital Platform to Enhance Preservation and Inheritance Efficiency

4.2.1 Construct a Unified Regional Database

Led by the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, integrate resources from institutions such as Hetao College and the Manhan Tune Art Research Institute to build the "Big Data Platform for the Musical Cultural Heritage of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia." The platform should comprise three main modules: a Resource Storage Module for the audio-video recording, text organization, and digital archiving of all musical heritage, establishing a comprehensive database that includes inheritor information, repertoire background, and singing techniques; an Academic Research Module to open literature resources and research data for researchers; and a Public Interaction Module with features such as "Online Learning and Singing" and "Lyric Creation" to attract public participation^[1]. In terms of funding, adopt a model combining "government allocation, social donations, and corporate sponsorship" to secure financial resources for the platform's construction and maintenance.

4.2.2 Promote the In-Depth Application of Digital Technologies

Drawing on the "human-computer interaction" experience of Northern Anhui Folk Songs, introduce an AI teaching system into the platform, using voice recognition technology to provide learners with guidance on pitch and rhythm. Utilize VR technology to recreate the fieldwork scenes of Manhan Tune performances and the grassland settings of Urad Folk Songs, creating immersive experience projects. Develop an "Intelligent Manhan Tune Composition" tool that allows users to generate lyrics conforming to traditional metrical patterns by inputting keywords, thereby lowering the barrier to creation.

4.2.3 Establish an Omnichannel Communication Matrix

Form a professional operation team to uniformly manage short video accounts, WeChat official accounts, and other platforms, creating an official IP for "Folk Songs of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River." Collaborate with China Media Group and Inner Mongolia Satellite TV to produce documentary series such as "The Soul of the Yellow River Songs," expanding national influence. Leverage algorithm recommendation technology to precisely deliver musical heritage content to younger demographics, for instance, by launching the "Manhan Tune Challenge" on platforms like Douyin and Bilibili to encourage user-generated content.

4.3 Promote Marketization and Innovative Transformation to Enhance Cultural Vitality

4.3.1 Create Cultural and Tourism Integrated Brands

Integrate the musical heritage deeply with Yellow River tourism. Develop "ICH Music Towns" in key areas such as the Yellow River Hetao Cultural Tourism Zone and the Yellow River Grand Canyon Scenic Area in Jungar Banner, establishing permanent functional zones for regular performances, inheritor workshops, and music experience areas. Create themed tourist routes like "Touring the Yellow River with Folk Songs," where visitors can participate in experiential activities such as learning to sing Manhan Tune and making the Morin Khuur. This achieves a positive interaction where "tourism disseminates ICH, and ICH enriches tourism."

4.3.2 Foster Cross-sectoral Innovative Transformation

Promote the integration of musical heritage with modern art and industries. In artistic creation, invite renowned musicians to adapt traditional pieces, for instance, blending Manhan Tune with pop music to create contemporary works like "Yellow River Tide." For industrial development, create cultural and creative music products (such as customized earphones and ICH-themed blind boxes) and digital collectibles (such as digital copyrights for classic Manhan Tune recordings). Collaborate with platforms like NetEase Cloud Music and QQ Music to launch a "Jizi Bend Music Section," using copyright revenues to feedback into inheritance work.

4.3.3 Cultivate Market-Oriented Operational Entities

Establish the "Jizi Bend Musical Heritage Protection and Development Co., Ltd." to be responsible for the market-oriented development and operation of the heritage. Adopt a "Government + Company + Inheritors" model, where inheritors contribute their skills as shares and participate in profit distribution, thereby stimulating their motivation for transmission. Organize a "Musical Heritage Entrepreneurship Competition" to attract social capital and talent, fostering the development of an industrial chain.

4.4 Strengthen Academic Research and Exchange to Provide Theoretical Support

4.4.1 Establish Special Research Funds

The Inner Mongolia Federation of Social Sciences should establish a "Special Research Fund for the Musical Cultural Heritage of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River" to support universities and research institutions in conducting empirical studies. Priority funding should be allocated to topics such as the living conditions of inheritors, digital preservation technologies, and marketization pathways, while encouraging interdisciplinary research that integrates fields like musicology, sociology, and computer science.

4.4.2 Build Academic Exchange Platforms

Hold the "Academic Symposium on the Musical Cultural Heritage of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River" biennially, inviting scholars and inheritors from Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia to share preservation experiences. Collaborate with institutions such as the Central Conservatory of Music and the Chinese National Academy of Arts to establish a "Jizi Bend Musical Heritage Research Base" for training specialized research talent^[4]. Publish the journal "Research on the Music of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River" to compile outstanding research findings.

4.4.3 Enhance the Application of Research Findings

Establish a "research-policy-practice" translation mechanism to promptly provide academic research results to cultural and tourism departments, thereby informing policy formulation. Encourage researchers to participate in practical projects such as digital platform construction and cultural product development, fostering a positive interaction between theory and practice.

5. Conclusion

The musical cultural heritage of the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia is a treasure formed through the integration of Yellow River culture and grassland culture. It is characterized by multi-ethnic fusion, distinct regional identity, and living transmission, carrying the collective memory of the diverse ethnic groups in the region. Currently, preliminary achievements have been made in heritage preservation, including policy support, inheritor cultivation, and platform development. However, significant challenges remain, such as a fractured inheritance chain, lagging digitalization, and insufficient vitality. Against the dual background of the Yellow River National Cultural Park construction and the digital era, it is imperative to implement an integrated four-pronged approach: building a diversified talent cultivation system, creating an integrated digital platform, promoting market-oriented innovation and transformation, and strengthening academic research support. This will achieve the living preservation and sustainable development of the heritage.

This study demonstrates that the preservation and inheritance of the Jizi Bend's musical cultural heritage is not merely about "conservation," but rather about stimulating its contemporary vitality through innovative means based on respect for its cultural authenticity. Only by combining government guidance, market drive, academic support, and public participation can this "living heritage" along the Yellow River continue to resonate in the new era, contributing unique value to the construction of the

Yellow River Cultural Belt and the building of cultural confidence among ethnic groups. Future research could further focus on specific effect evaluations of digital technology applications and the construction of cross-regional collaborative preservation mechanisms, thereby providing more precise practical guidance for heritage preservation.

Fund Projects

2024 Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Culture and Tourism Development Research Project

Project Title: Research on Practical Pathways for the Protection and Utilization of Musical Cultural Heritage in the Jizi Bend of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia to Support the Integrated Development of Culture and Tourism (2024-WL021)

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