

## Preserving Literacy for the Transmission of the Traditional Folk Song “Hehuang Huaer” in Qinghai Province, China

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### ABSTRACT

Preserving literacy for the transmission of the traditional folk song “Hehuang Huaer” in Qinghai Province, China, by emphasizing literacy for transmission, demonstrates a comprehensive endeavor to protect cultural heritage and promote communal harmony. This comprehensive undertaking involves multiple facets, including historical investigation, educational endeavors, and creative rejuvenation, to guarantee the ongoing vitality and significance of “Hehuang Huaer” for future generations. By employing rigorous academic research, active involvement with the community, and creative advancements, Qinghai Province has effectively safeguarded the intricate linguistic and cultural aspects inherent in this cherished folk culture. By developing a more profound comprehension of the lyrical substance, vocal methods, and emotional portrayal inherent in “Hehuang Huaer,” practitioners and admirers actively contribute to its continuous transmission and enjoyment. Moreover, preserving “Hehuang Huaer” is evidence of Qinghai’s abundant cultural heritage, promoting cohesion, esteem, and a feeling of inclusion among its heterogeneous populations. Overall, preserving literacy for the transmission of “Hehuang Huaer” highlights the significance of cultural preservation in upholding the liveliness and distinctiveness of Qinghai’s cultural heritage.

**Key words:** Preservation, Literacy, Transmission, Hehuang Huaer, Qinghai

### INTRODUCTION

“Huaer” is a quintessential type of folk song that is very popular in Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, and other regions. It is sometimes referred to as “the soul of the Northwest.” “Hehuang Huaer” refers specifically to the version of Huaer originating in the Hehuang area. Qinghai is the birthplace of “Hehuang Huaer” known for its vibrant and innovative Huaer culture. “Hehuang Huaer” represents the long-lasting cultural expression and communal celebration that has been present for four centuries, from the Ming and Qing Dynasties until the present day (Huang & Song, 2022; Wang & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

Over time, the collection of “Hehuang Huaer” songs has greatly expanded due to society’s changing nature. With its simple yet profound language style and painstakingly planned yet dynamically spontaneous shape, “Hehuang Huaer” exemplifies the essence of improvisation in folk songs. The melodies of the music alternate between quick and slow rhythms, with the fast speed conveying brief and condensed sentiments, while the slower parts provide a feeling of depth and contemplation (Zhou, 2017). In addition to its musical qualities, “Hehuang Huaer” powerfully represents the unique cultural tapestry and shared emotions of many ethnic groups. The song is primarily performed in

Chinese, occasionally using local dialects to create a more immersive musical experience. It promotes emotional connection and unity among diverse ethnic groups (Yang, 2020).

Essentially, “Hehuang Huaer” goes beyond basic musicality; it embodies a harmonic integration of music, literature, and art, including a rich array of cultural implications and artistic worth (Levinson, 2010). From its beginning and gradual development to its following growth and unwavering progress as an intangible cultural treasure, “Hehuang Huaer” possesses irrefutable historical and cultural importance. Nevertheless, this extraordinary and magnificent intangible cultural heritage is at great risk due to globalization fueled by the information economy (Li et al., 2022; Chang & Seekhunlio, 2024). Preserving literacy in the transmission of “Hehuang Huaer” is crucial. “Hehuang Huaer” represents an oral tradition, a sort of literature and art that comes alive when spoken but disappears when not vocalized. “Huaer Meetings” are authentic folk music gatherings that revolve around the performance of Huaer, emphasizing spontaneous expression. However, due to the widespread impact of contemporary culture, this fragile ecology is now confronted with unparalleled obstacles that must not be ignored (Yang & Chonpairot, 2024).

Many older versions of “Hehuang Huaer” have disappeared because of insufficient preservation efforts, while

most renowned singers have grown old, with just a few successors rising to continue this cultural tradition. The migration of young people to cities in search of economic prospects, along with a declining interest in traditional inheritance among the younger population, worsens the situation even further. As a result, the available space for Huer gatherings becomes smaller and the size of the gatherings decreases. Additionally, certain historically important Huer trends progressively decline or completely stop (Qifei & Chuangprakhon, 2022).

Based on the aforementioned challenges, researchers aim to delve into Qinghai's traditional folk song, "Hehuang Huer," emphasizing the importance of preserving literacy and ensuring its effective transmission. This endeavor aims to provide invaluable insights and resources for individuals keen on exploring the rich tapestry of Qinghai's cultural heritage, particularly in traditional folk songs.

### Research Question

- How can literacy be preserved to transmit the traditional folk song "Hehuang Huer" in Qinghai Province, China?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### General Knowledge of the Hehuang Huer

Qinghai Province, nestled amid the scenic sceneries of western China, is regarded as the birthplace of the Yangtze River, Yellow River, and Lancang River, together known as China's "three rivers." The Hehuang region, once known as the "three rivers," includes the upper portions of the Yellow River, the Huangshui basin, and the Datong River basin. The Huangshui River flows through the heart of Qinghai Province, passing through Huangyuan, Huangzhong, Xining, and other areas. It originates in the Haiyan Mountains. As it flows eastward, the Yellow River meets Qinghai and passes through Guide, Jianzha, Hualong, and Xunhua before continuing through Gansu Province. Meanwhile, the Datong River originates in Datong County and travels through mutual aid zones until connecting with the Huangshui River in Xining, eventually uniting with the Yellow River in Lanzhou's Xigu District (Guo, 2023; Feng et al., 2016). "Hehuang Huer," based in the Hehuang region, originates Northwest China's "Huer" tradition and remains the most lively and active hub for its practice. This region has a rich tapestry of ethnic diversity woven into its stunning natural scenery. Over millennia, the convergence of diverse ethnic groups has shaped the evolution of "Huer," creating a distinct cultural fabric that is inextricably linked to the region's history and terrain (Jianchun & Daming, 2007).

"Hehuang Huer" has a mythological background entrenched in folklore, dating back to ancient rites of worship, trading, and sacrifice ceremonies. According to folklore, villages would congregate atop temple hills during the warm spring months to pray to the gods for safety, good weather, and many harvests (Xu, 2018). Following these somber rituals, young men and women took breaks to participate in

communal meetings, where they expressed emotions and ideas. Individuals in a feudal culture found it difficult to express their love directly; hence, these meetings established a venue for delicate expressions of passion through singing. These musical exchanges eventually evolved into the lovely melodies of "Huer" (Gong et al., 2024)

"Hehuang Huer" is widely popular in Qinghai, Jiangsu, Ningxia, Xinjiang, and other huge rural areas. This musical legacy, passed down through centuries, cuts over ethnic lines, resonating with the Han, Hui, Tu, Tibetan, Salah, Dongxiang, Baoan, Yugu, and other ethnic groups. Qinghai Province, known as the "Hometown of Hehuang Huer," is especially prosperous in the agricultural and pastoral districts around the Yellow River and its tributaries (Chen et al., 2023). Today, the practice of "Huer Festivals" continues, with celebrations on auspicious days such as the first day of the first lunar month, the second day of the second month, the eighth day of the fourth month, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, and the sixth day of the sixth lunar month. These ancient worship ritual-infused celebrations overlap with the emergence of "Huer" tunes, exemplifying the timeless link between spiritual devotion and cultural expression (Shi & Nicolas, 2023).

### General Knowledge of Hehuang Huer Performance

"Hehuang Huer" is an irreplaceable, intangible cultural legacy that flourishes within a unique cultural domain, influenced by the intersection of location and time and cherished by individuals of many nationalities who appreciate its melodies. The practice of singing "Huer" epitomizes a treasured custom, attracting individuals of many backgrounds, including men, women, and children, to communal assemblies. These meetings serve as forums for many objectives, including prayers for blessings, finding solace in times of loss, or expressing sentiments of love and romance. Consequently, numerous "Huer" works evoke genuineness, straightforwardness, elegance, and deep sentiment (Chen & Sensai, 2023).

The cultural domain of "Huer" encompasses many traditional customs and practices, including notable occurrences such as temple fairs, Huer markets, festivals, and weddings. "Huer" demonstrates its distinctive singing forms and styles within these cultural locations and musical surroundings (Yang & Theerapan, 2024). The performance of "Huer" follows established singing techniques and regulations and significantly emphasizes the singer's authentic feelings and insights. Employing a flexible and discerning approach to various voice styles and decoration techniques frequently results in various artistic outcomes (Fuquan & Karin, 2021).

Currently, "Huer"'s singing styles primarily evoke landscapes, involve improvisation, and exhibit smoothness in their flow. Without prior planning, vocalists can perform individually or participate in musical collaborations with two performers, characterized by their impromptu nature, unpredictability, improvisation, and self-amusement. The words of "Huer" songs display rhythmic patterns reminiscent of poetry and prose, accompanied by vibrant and unrestricted folk melodies that enchant listeners. Moreover, differences in geographical features and cultural practices contribute to

the emergence of unique singing styles (Jiang et al., 2020; Hu, 2020).

### Research Theory

The study on preserving literacy for the transmission of the traditional folk song “Hehuang Huaer” in Qinghai Province, China, draws on ethnomusicology research theory. This interdisciplinary topic provides unique insights into the cultural setting, social dynamics, and musical traditions of “Hehuang Huaer.” Researchers use ethnomusicological concepts to investigate the impact of literacy on the transmission process, record musical structures and cultural practices, and analyze how “Hehuang Huaer” connects with broader socio-cultural dynamics (Nettl, 2005). Ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, enable a comprehensive comprehension of the preservation and diffusion of traditions. In conclusion, this interdisciplinary approach provides insights for developing ways to protect literacy and maintain the enduring significance of traditional folk songs in Qinghai Province (Jones, 2003; Wang, 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

### Scope of the Research Site

The researchers have chosen Haidong City in Qinghai Province as a focal point for their study since it is one of the main regions where the tradition of “Hehuang Huaer” is passed down. This traditional folk song has a strong historical connection to Haidong City and is one of the region’s oldest folk music types. “Hehuang Huaer” is sung in the local dialect of Qinghai and is known for its straightforward and memorable lyrics (Figure 1).

### Data Collection

- 1) The data collection process included conducting structured interviews to document “Hehuang Huaer” performances. Prepared materials and interview questions were used to drive participant conversations, guaranteeing a thorough covering of pertinent themes. The researchers methodically transcribed respondents’ thoughts into interview forms, capturing opinions from three main groups: local inheritors of “Hehuang Huaer,” locals, and performers associated with local troupes.
- 2) The data collection methodology was complex, including information gathering, participant observation, interviews with insiders, literature consulting, and literature searches. Researchers hoped to build a strong dataset for analyzing “Hehuang Huaer” preservation and transmission dynamics by engaging key stakeholders and conducting on-site investigations.
- 3) Researchers used these interviews and data collection approaches to clarify the mechanisms underlying the preservation of “Hehuang Huaer” and its transmission over generations. By documenting the viewpoints of local inheritors, citizens, and performers, the study

hoped to help ongoing efforts to preserve literacy and ensure the effective transmission of this treasured cultural asset in Haidong City and elsewhere.

### Data Management

- 1) Researchers rigorously organize and categorize all types of research material, such as written records, audio recordings, video footage, and field notes. This systematic approach ensures that essential information about “Hehuang Huaer” is easily available and well-documented.
- 2) Transcribing and translating “Hehuang Huaer” recordings are critical data management components. By transcribing interviews, researchers create textual recordings that capture crucial insights from key informants.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis entails analyzing the collected data to uncover patterns, trends, and insights relevant to the transmission and preservation of this traditional folk music. Researchers qualitatively analyzed textual documents, transcribed interviews, and field notes to identify recurring themes and patterns related to “Hehuang Huaer.” This approach allows for a deep exploration of this folk music tradition’s cultural significance, transmission methods, and preservation efforts. And the transmission processes embedded within the data. The goal is better to understand the cultural significance of “Hehuang Huaer” and inform strategies for its continued preservation and transmission.

## RESULTS

### Huaer: Preserving Tradition, Cultivating Culture

The term “Huaer” emerged during the early Ming Dynasty due to the movement of individuals from the Central Plains and Jianghuai regions to the Hehuang area, which encompasses eastern Qinghai and western Gansu. This migration enabled the fusion of diverse cultural expressions, leading to the emergence of “Huaer” as a distinct genre of folk songs, ensuring the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge.

Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the term “Huaer” was frequently mentioned in poetry and literature, indicating its widespread presence and appeal. Nevertheless, conventional Confucian philosophy constrained its explicit endorsement and widespread distribution. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a significant rise in interest in «Huaer” following the “May Fourth” movement. This led to increased academic research, public awareness, and the study and publication of “Huaer” materials. The culmination of these efforts was the publication of the first comprehensive anthology and academic monograph on “Huaer” in China, which aimed to preserve its literary value and ensure its transmission.

After the release, studies on “Huaer” in Qinghai Province saw sustained growth. Academic circles have published

various studies on “Huaer,” investigating its historical evolution, cultural importance, geographical differences, and role in maintaining literacy and transmission. Artists and literary luminaries integrated “Huaer” aspects into their works, preserving and promoting them. They spread “Huaer” through many multimedia platforms, solidifying its cultural significance in the Great Northwest region of China (Table 1).

**Vocal Techniques for the Transmission of Hehuang Huaer**

“Hehuang Huaer” is vital to Qinghai’s cultural history, representing centuries of tradition and artistic expression. A comprehensive literacy and cultural dissemination approach

must ensure its ongoing transmission and maintenance. This entails preserving oral traditions and vocal methods and promoting knowledge of the cultural relevance and historical background of “Hehuang Huaer”.

Breath control is essential for mastering the vocal methods of “Hehuang Huaer.” Singers must learn to control their inhale and exhale to achieve full and balanced vocalization. Deep abdominal breathing and controlled exhalation are techniques that vocalists can use to sustain notes and successfully portray emotions.

Sound resonance enhances the depth and richness of singing in “Hehuang Huaer.” Singers can improve the clarity and projection of their voices by knowing and utilizing oral,



**Figure 1.** Map of Qinghai  
Source: Chinafolio (n.d.)

**Table 1.** Evolution of hehuang huaer in qinghai province

Period	Key Developments
1930s and 1940s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial efforts to collect, organize, and study "Hehuang Huaer"</li> <li>• Documentation of lyrics, dissemination of tradition's content, singing styles, and tunes</li> </ul>
Late 1950s to The early 1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resurgence of interest driven by the "New Folk Song Movement"</li> <li>• Vigorous advocacy for the preservation and dissemination of "Hehuang Huaer"</li> <li>• Publication of anthologies and scholarly articles</li> </ul>
The 1970s to The early 1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiatus during the Cultural Revolution followed by a revival in the post-revolution era</li> <li>• Renewed efforts in collecting, organizing, and studying "Hehuang Huaer"</li> <li>• Understanding of origins, musical characteristics, and cultural significance</li> </ul>
From the beginning of the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century to the Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renaissance in the study of "Hehuang Huaer"</li> <li>• Government initiatives and the introduction of Western research methods contribute to scholarly revitalization</li> <li>• Progress in collecting, organizing, and analyzing "Hehuang Huaer"</li> <li>• Production of high-quality research works and innovative perspectives</li> </ul>



laryngeal, nasal, and head cavity resonance, engaging listeners with their performances.

The lyrical content of “Hehuang Huaer” is essential for its transmission. Singers must explore the meaning and passion underlying the lyrics, using stress, intonation, and expressive language to portray the core of the music. By learning these grammatical intricacies, singers may bring the stories and cultural history of “Hehuang Huaer” to life.

“Hehuang Huaer” uses various vocal techniques to enhance their performances, including grace notes and gray tones. Singers can develop a dynamic and fascinating vocal delivery by honing their talents in true and falsetto singing and integrating numerous vocal registers, which will captivate listeners with their variety and artistry.

Emotional expression is important to the “Hehuang Huaer” singing style. Singers must connect emotionally with the ideas and narratives of the songs, conveying true emotions through breath control, vocal resonance, and expressive language. Singers can connect deeply with their audience through emotional training and sophisticated body language, assuring Hehuang Huaer’s continuous resonance and relevance in Qinghai’s cultural scene.

As shown in Figure 2, preserving literacy for transmitting “Hehuang Huaer” necessitates a multifaceted approach that includes vocal technique, linguistic proficiency, and emotional expression. By cultivating these skills and fostering an appreciation for the cultural heritage of “Hehuang Huaer,” Qinghai can ensure this treasured folk tradition’s continued vitality and relevance for future generations.

### The Current Situation of the Folk Song “Hehuang Huaer” and Its Impact on Literacy and Transmission

#### *Insufficient innovation*

Despite its local appeal, Qinghai Huaer is experiencing stagnation because of a lack of innovation in music melody, singing style, and lyrics. The lack of new tunes and outmoded subjects reduces its social relevance and appeal in the cultural market. The disparity between Huaer’s cultural expression and public understanding jeopardizes its long-term viability in the music industry.



Figure 2. Hehuang Huaer Performance

Source: Jialing Feng, from fieldwork in September 2023

#### *Insufficient quality products*

While Qinghai Huaer is culturally significant, a scarcity of high-quality productions limits its market potential. Previous works must be refined and efficiently packaged to appeal to a larger audience and prosper in the market economy. Utilizing TV and screen culture could help Huaer gain recognition and appeal in mainstream media channels.

#### *Language constraints*

Language is a big hurdle to Huaer’s development, as many songs are sung in dialects that are not generally understood. To solve this difficulty, efforts must be made to build versions of Huaer in a more generally understandable language. Breaking away from linguistic constraints will increase Qinghai Huaer’s attraction and accessibility to a broader audience.

#### *Insufficient cultural protection and inheritance*

The protection and inheritance of Qinghai Huaer culture depend on the people’s active engagement. However, a lack of recognition of its intangible cultural value and misconceptions about its cultural relevance impede preservation efforts. Changing social perspectives and promoting Huaer as an essential component of Qinghai’s intangible cultural heritage are critical steps toward ensuring its survival and vibrancy for future generations.

### Preserving Literacy for the Transmission of Hehuang Huaer in Qinghai Province

The preservation of literacy for the transmission of the traditional folk song “Hehuang Huaer” in Qinghai Province, China, has been a comprehensive and broad effort, resulting in profound and long-lasting outcomes that go beyond cultural preservation. This extensive endeavor has included several elements of cultural heritage, education, community involvement, and creative advancement, thereby enhancing and preserving Qinghai’s dynamic cultural fabric.

The core of this endeavor is the dedication to safeguarding the literary and linguistic character of “Hehuang Huaer.” By engaging in thorough documentation, research, and instructional efforts, substantial progress has been achieved in guaranteeing the precise conveyance of lyrics, linguistic subtleties, and cultural significance embedded in this traditional folk song. The preservation of “Hehuang Huaer” for future generations has been ensured by promoting literacy and comprehension among practitioners, educators, and the wider community, thereby safeguarding its intricate beauty and historical relevance.

Moreover, in disseminating knowledge related to “Hehuang Huaer,” the unique insights regarding the vocal methods, musical arrangements, and emotional expression present in this folk song have been effectively communicated through a combination of oral tradition, educational initiatives, and community engagement. Consequently, the dissemination of “Hehuang Huaer” has thrived, as practitioners and lovers have developed a more profound understanding of its cultural and artistic importance (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Preservation Hehuang Huaer with Modern Music  
Source: Jialing Feng, from fieldwork in January 2024

Preserving literacy for the transmission of “Hehuang Huaer” ensures cultural preservation and enhances the artistic growth of this ancient folk song. Through cultivating a more profound comprehension of the lyrical substance, musical complexities, and cultural backdrop, vocalists and artists have gained the ability to convey more subtle and genuine renditions. This has resulted in a revival of “Hehuang Huaer” performances, where artists incorporate centuries-old traditions while adding new originality and energy.

Furthermore, the focus on safeguarding literacy for disseminating “Hehuang Huaer” has cultivated a heightened recognition of Qinghai’s abundant cultural legacy. By organizing community events, seminars, and educational projects, people from many backgrounds have united to honor and preserve the customs linked to this traditional song. The aforementioned phenomenon has not only enhanced the unity and shared values among individuals in Qinghai Province, also fostered a deep sense of satisfaction and attachment among its citizens.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion of preserving literacy for transmitting the traditional folk song “Hehuang Huaer” in Qinghai Province, China, entails protecting a traditional folk song and its lyrics and melodies’ linguistic and cultural legacy. This campaign aims to diligently conserve literacy to effectively transmit the essence of “Hehuang Huaer” across generations. It serves as a valuable store of cultural knowledge and identity for the people of Qinghai (Shen & Tan, 2012). An essential aspect of the preservation endeavors is the recognition of “Hehuang Huaer” not only as a musical genre but also as a vibrant witness to the area’s history, customs, and principles. Emphasizing literacy in its communication allows people to fully immerse themselves in the intricate and artistic aspects of the folk song, fostering a deeper understanding and respect for its cultural significance. Education and outreach initiatives give community members the necessary knowledge and skills to maintain and continue this valued practice (Shi & Nicolas, 2023; Law & Ho, 2011).

Furthermore, the focus on literacy spurs artistic progress within the community, motivating singers and performers to delve into fresh interpretations and manifestations of “Hehuang Huaer.” Artists revitalize the melodies of folk songs by exploring their literary and melodic complexities, imbuing them with innovation, authenticity, and vigor (Tang, 2021). This artistic rejuvenation guarantees that “Hehuang Huaer” maintains its relevance and emotional impact in modern settings, enthraling audiences with its enduring charm (Li, 2011). In addition, “Hehuang Huaer” conservation promotes social togetherness and community strength by cultivating a collective feeling of cultural pride and identity. By engaging in cooperative efforts such as community festivals, seminars, and educational projects, people unite to commemorate and pass on cultural information, enhancing connections and cultivating a sense of belonging (Tong & Mitra, 2009). Through active participation in their cultural heritage, individuals in the community gain the necessary skills to effectively negotiate the complexities of the contemporary world while safeguarding the customs that establish their shared sense of identity.

Nevertheless, the preservation and transmission of “Hehuang Huaer” encounter obstacles in contemporary times, including language difficulties, cultural integration, and shifting social dynamics. To overcome these problems, it is necessary to have a focused and collaborative approach that involves cultural institutions, educational programs, community participation, and policy assistance (Seeyo et al., 2023). To ensure the continued success and popularity of “Hehuang Huaer,” stakeholders must tackle these obstacles and adopt measures that enhance knowledge, appreciation, and engagement. This will guarantee the enduring prosperity and appeal of this cherished folk heritage, not only within Qinghai Province but also among wider audiences (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The preservation of “Hehuang Huaer” through a concentration on literacy for transmission has resulted in great accomplishments in protecting Qinghai’s cultural legacy, encouraging artistic expression, and creating communal cohesiveness. By conserving the linguistic and cultural intricacies of this classic folk song while encouraging singers and performers to explore its creative depths, this maintains its life and relevance in the present era. Future attempts to preserve “Hehuang Huaer” could focus on increasing educational activities, improving digital documentation and archiving efforts, and promoting international collaborations to encourage cross-cultural interchange. Building on past achievements, Qinghai Province can remain a beacon of cultural preservation and artistic innovation, ensuring the value of “Hehuang Huaer” as a symbol of its rich cultural heritage for future generations.

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