



## Anthropological Perspectives on the Historical Development of Salar Folk Songs in Qinghai Province, China

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### Abstract

**Background and Aims:** Salar folk songs, an integral part of the cultural heritage of Qinghai Province, China, are a testament to the remarkable diversity within Chinese culture. This research aims to investigate the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province, China.

**Materials and Methods:** Result: The research reveals that Salar folk songs have evolved, adapted, and continue to thrive, serving as a testament to the enduring mechanisms of cultural preservation. Recommendations include cultural preservation efforts, education, collaborative research, and international recognition, ensuring the continued vitality of Salar folk songs as a living legacy within the Chinese cultural mosaic.

**Results:** The research reveals that Salar folk songs have evolved, adapted, and continue to thrive, serving as a testament to the enduring mechanisms of cultural preservation. Recommendations include cultural preservation efforts, education, collaborative research, and international recognition, ensuring the continued vitality of Salar folk songs as a living legacy within the Chinese cultural mosaic. Salar folk songs are vital for their cultural heritage, requiring preservation, documentation, and promotion. Collaborating with scholars, incorporating them into festivals, tourism initiatives, and educational curricula, and gaining international recognition can facilitate cross-cultural exchange and contribute to diverse Chinese culture.

**Conclusion:** Safeguarding the rich tapestry of Salar folk songs demands concerted efforts in cultural preservation, documentation, and promotion. Embracing collaborative initiatives, integrating these melodies into various cultural platforms, and securing international recognition will not only ensure the vitality of this living legacy but also foster cross-cultural exchange, enriching the diverse tapestry of Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Salar Folk Songs; Anthropological Investigation; Musicology; Ethnomusicology; Cultural Preservation

### Introduction

Salar folk songs, deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage of Qinghai Province, stand as a testament to the remarkable diversity that characterizes Chinese culture. These melodious expressions, originating from the Salar people, one of China's 56 ethnic minorities, can trace their historical roots back to the 13th-century Yuan Dynasty (Guo, et al, 2014; Luh, 2014; Keating, 2016; Weiler, 2017; Xu et al, 2018). This narrative is intertwined with the journey of Central Asian Samarkand settlers who, after traversing Xinjiang, found their home in the Xunhua region of Qinghai. Over centuries, they coexisted harmoniously with indigenous Tibetan, Hui, Han, Mongolian, and other ethnic communities, shaping their collective identity. With a population of approximately 126,900 individuals, the Salar people primarily adhere to the Islamic faith (Stewart, 2014; Stewart, 2016; Banban, 2018).

The development of Salar folk songs is a captivating journey that spans centuries, with influences from local Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian, and religious musical elements. These songs have evolved to become a unique and distinctive musical tradition, earning recognition from the State Council of the People's Republic of China as part of the fourth batch of national intangible cultural heritage. Throughout generations, Salar folk songs have embraced diverse themes, content, and expressive techniques, reflecting the organic growth of music within ethnic communities (Ma, 2008; Wong, 2011; Wang & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

Folk songs, as cultural treasures, serve various social functions, including the conveyance of emotions, the facilitation of communication, and the promotion of social unity and national identity. This study transcends the confines of musicology by examining the richness, communicative power, integration, and expressive value of ethnic folk songs. It emphasizes the imperative need to preserve and propagate these songs as living legacies that remain relevant in contemporary society and contribute to the mosaic of Chinese culture. Additionally, the study offers insights into the historical, social, and artistic significance





of Salar folk songs, highlighting the dynamic interactions between different cultures and their enduring impact (Perlovsky, 2010; Li, 2015; Prakobboon, 2022).

The structural function of culture can explain the cultural significance of Salar folk songs. It suggests that culture is a complex system, and music fulfills specific functions to maintain stability. Salar folk songs, like music, are not just artistic expressions but also functional components of Salar society. They convey emotions, facilitate communication, and promote social unity through shared traditions. They also foster national identity among the Salar people. Understanding the functions of these songs within their cultural context provides deeper insights into their role in preserving and shaping the Salar community's identity and contributing to Chinese culture (Zhu et al., 2022; Li, 2023; Pantasri et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this research acknowledges the current landscape of Salar folk song dissemination, education, and cultural influence. It delves into the complex dynamics of Salar nationality, plateau regionality, and the diversity of national styles that enrich the inheritance and development of these songs. In doing so, it aspires to break free from tradition and foster a flourishing renaissance of Salar folk songs. In summary, this study aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of Salar folk songs, offering insights to scholars, enthusiasts, and those interested in the interplay of culture, history, and contemporary evolution.

## Objective

To investigate the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province, China.

## Literature review

The historical evolution of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province is a testament to China's cultural diversity, and these songs hold a distinct place within this rich tapestry of folk music traditions. Rather than simply summarizing existing literature, this literature review critically analyzes how previous studies contribute to comprehending the development of Salar folk songs, emphasizing their origins, transformations, and cultural import. Furthermore, this review explicitly links the reviewed literature to the theoretical frameworks of musicology and ethnomusicology, elucidating how these frameworks inform the approach of this study and identifying gaps and areas where this research provides additional insights into the evolution and preservation of Salar folk songs.

**Historical Roots and Cultural Significance:** The historical roots of Salar folk songs can be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th century when Central Asian Samarkand settlers arrived in the Xunhua region of Qinghai. These songs represent not only the musical expressions of the Salar people but also their cultural identity and interactions with other ethnic communities in the region (Stewart, 2014). The songs have earned esteemed recognition as part of China's national intangible cultural heritage, indicating their profound cultural significance (Wang & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

**Musical Evolution and Fusion:** Salar folk songs are known for their remarkable fusion of diverse musical elements. They are a product of the blending of local Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian, and religious musical influences, resulting in a captivating and distinctive tradition (Ma, 2008). This fusion has evolved over centuries, reflecting the organic growth of music within ethnic communities. Understanding this process of musical evolution is essential to grasp the essence of Salar folk songs.

**Transmission and Continuity:** Cheng (2006) emphasizes that ethnic music naturally accumulates distinctive characteristics over time. Salar folk songs have continued to evolve and crystallize through long-term practice and regulation within the community. Examining the transmission methods and continuity of these songs provides insights into their sustainability and enduring cultural value.

**Social and Cultural Functions:** Folk songs, as cultural artifacts, serve multiple social functions beyond mere entertainment. They are vessels for conveying emotions, fostering communication, and promoting social unity and national identity (Li, 2015). Understanding the roles of Salar folk songs in these social and cultural contexts is vital for appreciating their broader significance.

**Contemporary Landscape and Challenges:** The literature also highlights the contemporary landscape of Salar folk song dissemination, education, and cultural penetration. It underscores the need to





navigate the intricate terrain of Salar nationality, plateau regionality, and the diversity of national styles that contribute to the inheritance and development of these songs. Additionally, it points to the challenges and opportunities for preserving and revitalizing this musical tradition in the modern era (Chen, 2023).

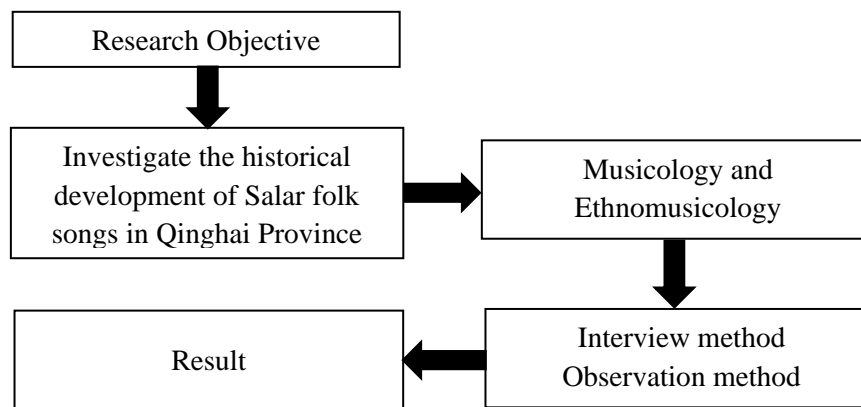
In conclusion, this literature review provides a foundation for our anthropological investigation into the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province, China. It underscores the significance of these songs in the broader context of Chinese folk art genres, their evolution, and their role in fostering cultural identity and continuity. By building upon the existing body of knowledge, our research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Salar folk songs and their cultural significance within China's diverse musical landscape.

### Theory Used

**Musicology** is a scholarly study of music, focusing on history, theory, analysis, and cultural contexts. It provides a framework for analyzing Salar folk songs, examining their evolution, stylistic characteristics, melodies, and themes. This analysis also sheds light on cultural influences and historical factors that have shaped Salar folk songs, offering a comprehensive view of their development (Burkholder, 1993).

**Ethnomusicology** is a multidisciplinary field that integrates music studies with anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. It focuses on the cultural and social aspects of music, its role in different societies, and its connection to identity, ritual, and community. Ethnomusicology is particularly useful for researching Salar folk songs, as it allows a holistic examination of their cultural contexts, usage, and contribution to the Salar people's identity (Harrop-Allin, 2005).

### Conceptual Framework



### Methodology

**Research site:** The research site was chosen in Xunhua County, Qinghai Province, China, to study the Salar culture. This exclusive Salar Autonomous Region, with a population of around 161,600, is crucial to the study of Salar culture. Covering 2,100 square kilometers, it shares borders with Gansu Province and Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Xunhua County is the focal point of Salar culture, as it is the most densely populated region for the Salar ethnic group.





**Figure 1** Map of the research site in Qinghai Province  
**Source:** Chinafolio (n.d.)

**Key Informants:** The selection of three key informants uses criteria such as expertise, significant contributions, representative figures, historical and contemporary relevance, influence on the music community, and commitment to preservation. The selected informants provided comprehensive, authoritative insights into cultural heritage and its preservation and adaptation.

**Research tools and data analysis:** Employ two primary research tools: an observation form and an interview form. These tools are designed to gather qualitative data that will help us gain insights into the evolution, cultural significance, and contemporary landscape of Salar folk songs, as shown in Table 1:

**Table 1** Research Tools, Creation and Quality, Steps for Use, and Data Analysis

Research Tool	Creation and Quality	Steps for Using the Tool	Data Analysis
Observation Form (Huang, 2021)	The Observation Form, meticulously designed to capture Salar folk songs' context, performance, and audience reactions, has been pre-tested for clarity and effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The observer attends Salar folk song performances or events in Qinghai Province.</li> <li>- During the performance, the observer records observations on the form, including details about the performers, musical elements, audience reactions</li> <li>- The completed forms are organized and filed for later analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Quantitative data, such as the number of performances observed and their locations, will be summarized</li> <li>- Qualitative data, including descriptions of musical elements and audience reactions, will be analyzed thematically</li> <li>- Patterns and trends in the data will be identified to inform the study's findings.</li> </ul>
Interview Form (Wan, 2021)	The Interview Form, designed for comprehensive and relevant participant information, includes open-ended questions about Salar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify and approach individuals who have knowledge or experience</li> <li>- Conduct semi-structured interviews using the Interview Form</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Qualitative data from interviews</li> <li>- Responses will be analyzed to identify key narratives</li> <li>- Findings will be integrated into the broader research</li> </ul>



Research Tool	Creation Quality	and Steps for Using the Tool	Data Analysis
	folk songs and has undergone pilot testing for refinement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Record responses and gather additional contextual information</li> <li>- Transcribe and organize interview data for analysis</li> </ul>	analysis to enrich our understanding

From Table 1, the Observation Form and Interview Form, have been thoughtfully designed to collect comprehensive data essential for our study. They will aid us in exploring the historical development and cultural significance of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province, facilitating a deeper understanding of this unique musical tradition.

## Results

### 1. The Historical Development of Salar Folk Songs in Shaping Culture

This study unveils the profound influence these songs have wielded in shaping Salar culture. The structural-functional theory, when applied to the study of culture, highlights the multifaceted functions of cultural elements in maintaining societal stability and coherence. It elucidates that culture encompasses values, norms, beliefs, symbols, and practices, each serving distinct roles within the social structure. These cultural components contribute to the harmonious operation of the social system, promoting integration, fostering a shared sense of identity, and facilitating socialization. Cultural practices, institutions, and rituals are essential tools for molding individuals and imparting the values and norms that govern their interactions and behaviors within society.

**1.1 Evolution and Cultural Significance:** Salar folk songs constitute a vital genre within Salar national music, serving as a mirror reflecting the history, society, labor, customs, love, marriage, and daily life of the Salar people. These songs have played a pivotal role in preserving and evolving the traditional musical culture of the Salar community. From ancient folk songs to modern compositions, Salar folk songs have skillfully woven their cultural significance and musical forms into China's evolving landscape of traditional folk music. This integration has not only established musical norms but also given rise to new poetic and musical styles, exemplified by compositions like "Alima" and "Beautiful Xunhua." Furthermore, innovative performance techniques, such as the incorporation of electroacoustic instruments alongside traditional accompaniments, have enriched Salar's musical culture, showcasing their remarkable skills and contributions, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2,** The performer sang Hua'er  
Source: Xiuhong Lou, from fieldwork in July 2023

**1.2 Cultural Icons:** Within the fabric of Salar folklore, one prominent figure emerges: Alima, a symbol of intelligence, beauty, and industriousness. Alima's lyrical representation has evolved over time, embodying pride and cultural identity for the Salar people. The songs dedicated to Alima transcend mere praise of her beauty and vocal talents; they encapsulate a profound expression of pride deeply ingrained in the Salar cultural identity.

**1.3 Musical Adaptations and Revival:** Over time, Salar folk songs have seen adaptations and revivals, demonstrating their resilience and adaptability. Renowned Salar composer Ma Jingfu and soprano Ke Zhishan re-created and adapted the song "Alima," enriching its artistic form. Likewise, the Salar people composed "Xinxunhua" to celebrate their hometown's new appearance and their inner joy. These adaptations reflect not only the evolution of Salar musical culture but also its ability to respond to changing times and circumstances.

**1.4 Impact of Social and Political Changes:** The artistic journey of Zhu Zhonglu, known as the King of Flowers in China, has been intertwined with significant social and political transformations. His ability to adapt and evolve in response to these changes highlights the resilience of Salar Hua'er music and its continued relevance in evolving cultural contexts. The shift from stagnation during the Cultural Revolution to revitalization during the reform and opening-up era underscores the dynamic relationship between material and spiritual culture in shaping the trajectory of Hua'er singing.

**1.5 Cultural Preservation and Adaptation:** The comprehensive preservation and scientific development of Salar folk songs hold historic significance in safeguarding and promoting the rich national culture. Factors like invention, accumulation, dissemination, and adaptation are what drive changes in Salar folk songs. These transformations reflect the evolution of artistic work and the broader evolution of social culture. Salar folk songs serve as a testament to the evolving mechanisms of art collection within Salar society.

**1.6 Gender Roles in Ceremonial Songs:** Salar ceremonial songs, including "Sahes" and "Wure Jesus," showcase distinct gender roles in performance. "Sahes" serves as a lament sung by brides embarking on their marital journey, while other songs are predominantly performed by men. This cultural tradition highlights the unique dynamics of gender roles within ceremonial song performances.

**1.7 Musical Diversity:** Salar folk songs exhibit a diverse range of musical styles, influenced by Tibetan culture and characterized by elements such as vibrato tones. Notable compositions include "Lamuxia Ling," "Canglanglang Ling," "Mengda Ling," "Sala Dali Ling," "Sanhuasao Ling," and "Qingshui Ling." In addition to songs, Salar culture features captivating dances like the "Camel Dance" and "Qianxunhua," "Xinxunhua," and "In-Law Mother." These performances are often featured at weddings and celebrations, serving as a means of emotional expression and cultural representation, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3,** Salar wedding scene  
Source: Xiuhong Lou, from fieldwork in July 2023



In conclusion, the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province has been characterized by cultural evolution, adaptation, and resilience. These songs continue to play a crucial role in preserving Salar traditional music and expressing the cultural identity of the Salar people, even in the face of social and political changes. The diverse musical styles, iconic figures, and gender dynamics within Salar ceremonial songs contribute to the rich tapestry of Salar culture and its enduring significance.

## 2. The Creation and Development of Salar Folk Song Style Identity

The exploration of the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province, China, this section delves into the creation and evolution of the Salar Folk Song Style Identity. It emphasizes the deep cultural ties between Salar folk songs and the Salar community's identity, culture, and history, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Narrative of Huanglong Opera

Research Findings	Description
1. Salar Folk Songs as Cultural	Reflection: The creation of new folk songs in the Salar style serves as a vibrant reflection of the social labor and daily lives of the Salar people, renowned for their singing and dancing prowess. These songs are an integral part of the Salar cultural realm, intertwined with their spiritual world, cultural space, and communal identity. The migration of the Salar people to Xunhua County marked the beginning of their settlement in this region, leading to the formation of communities and the nurturing of a resilient cultural identity. Xunhua County, in particular, became their homeland—a sanctuary for preserving and passing on their traditions to future generations
2. Oral Transmission and Cultural	Preservation: Despite the absence of a written language, the Salar people have preserved their traditional culture through oral transmission. Proficiency in singing has given rise to a diverse and rich repertoire of national music over its extensive history. Through folk songs, the Salar people convey historical narratives and folklore, embracing not only the Salar language but also elements from the broader Sino-Tibetan language family. The Salar people have written a wide variety of folk songs that draw inspiration from their daily lives, work, natural surroundings, customs, heroic tales, and love stories. As they engaged in cultural exchange and integration with neighboring ethnic groups such as the Han, Hui, and Tibetans, Salar folk songs absorbed influences, resulting in a unique style of expression
3. Emergence as Cultural	Heritage: Over centuries of historical evolution and cultural exchange, Chinese Salar folk songs have emerged as a vital cultural heritage and a symbol of Salar identity. The migration of the Salar people to Qinghai and Gansu during the Yuan Dynasty represents a longstanding cultural tradition, with their folk music culture becoming an integral part of China's multicultural musical landscape. Salar music exhibits distinctive artistic attributes, complementing various art forms and representing a unique genre within the broader musical spectrum. Lacking written historical records due to their oral tradition, the history and culture of the Salar people find expression in oral literature, mythological narratives, folklore, and musical compositions
4. Impact of Social and Political	Changes: The year 1949 marked a significant turning point for the Salar people following the liberation of Qinghai. This period witnessed dynamic developments in Salar music, with support from the government and collective efforts leading to substantial progress. Salar music researchers conducted field surveys, collecting traditional Salar music works. Performances and



Research Findings	Description
	presentations like "Salar Flower Duet," "Harvest Dance," "Chopping Wood Singing," "Salar Virtue and Filial Piety," "Free Old Man," and "Salar New Songs" (also known as "Xinxunhua") gained popularity. The analysis of these cases reveals the intriguing phenomenon of "identity" within the dissemination of Salar folk songs, shedding light on the challenges posed by adaptation and innovation

From Table 2, the creation and development of the Salar Folk Song Style Identity showcases the profound cultural relationship between Salar folk songs and the Salar community. These songs serve as a reflection of Salar life, encompassing history, society, labor, customs, and personal experiences. They have not only preserved traditional musical culture but also adapted and evolved, integrating cultural significance and musical forms into China's broader folk music landscape. The enduring contributions of King of Flowers Zhu Zhonglu and the preservation of Salar folk songs for national culture are highlighted, emphasizing their historical significance.

## Discussion

The research presented here embarked on an anthropological exploration of the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province, China. The findings reveal a rich tapestry of cultural significance, evolution, and resilience within the Salar musical tradition. This discussion will delve into the implications of the research findings, their alignment with theoretical principles, and their broader relevance.

The study aligns with theoretical principles from musicology and ethnomusicology, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding Salar folk songs. Musicology, with its focus on history, theory, and cultural contexts, enables an analysis of the evolution, stylistic characteristics, and cultural influences that have shaped Salar folk songs (Burkholder, 1993). Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, bridges music studies with anthropology and cultural studies, allowing for a holistic examination of the cultural contexts, societal roles, and identity aspects of Salar folk songs (Harrop-Allin, 2005).

The findings resonate with these theoretical foundations as they reveal how Salar folk songs have evolved while preserving their cultural significance. The songs serve as more than just musical expressions; they embody the history, identity, and interactions of the Salar community with other ethnic groups in Qinghai Province.

The research highlights the cultural significance of Salar folk songs as a reflection of daily life, customs, and history. These songs have served as a means of preserving Salar cultural identity, even in the face of social and political changes. The oral transmission of these songs has played a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of Salar traditions (Chen, 2018). This preservation aligns with the theoretical principles of cultural heritage and the role of music in maintaining cultural identity (Stewart, 2016).

The adaptability of Salar folk songs over time underscores their resilience and ability to respond to changing circumstances. The incorporation of new musical elements and performance techniques demonstrates the dynamic nature of Salar musical culture (Cheng, 2016). This adaptability aligns with theories of musical evolution and cultural exchange, illustrating how Salar folk songs have absorbed influences from neighboring ethnic groups while maintaining their distinct style (Ma, 2008).

The broader cultural and social implications of these findings are significant, particularly concerning cultural preservation and the role of Salar folk songs in contemporary society. In a rapidly changing world, where traditional cultures often face challenges to their survival, the resilience and adaptability of Salar folk songs offer a valuable lesson in cultural preservation. These songs continue to be a source of cultural identity and pride for the Salar people, serving as a living connection to their history and traditions.







## Conclusion

In conclusion, the research into the historical development of Salar folk songs in Qinghai Province provides valuable insights into the cultural significance, evolution, and adaptability of this unique musical tradition. The findings align with theoretical principles from musicology and ethnomusicology, demonstrating how Salar folk songs have served as a vital cultural heritage, reflecting the history and identity of the Salar people. Their ability to adapt and evolve while preserving their core cultural elements exemplifies the resilience of Salar musical culture in the face of social and political changes.

## Recommendation

1. To preserve the cultural heritage of Salar folk songs, comprehensive preservation efforts should be launched, including recording and archiving oral traditions, documenting historical narratives, and retrieving lost songs. Community awareness and engagement are crucial, with workshops, cultural events, and educational programs promoting their preservation. Collaborative research with scholars can provide insights into the songs' significance. Integrating Salar folk songs into regional festivals and education can enhance their visibility and promote intercultural exchange. International recognition for the unique blend of cultural influences can further enrich the songs' cultural tapestry.

2. Future research should explore the contemporary impact of Salar folk songs on cultural preservation, identity, and intercultural understanding. Building digital archives of these songs can enhance accessibility and preservation efforts. Comparative studies with other ethnic minority musical traditions in China can provide insights into cross-cultural influences. Community-led initiatives can offer valuable lessons for cultural preservation strategies. Analyzing cultural policies can help evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and propose improvements.

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