



# The Current Status and Musical Characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs in an Anthropological Context

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#### Abstract

**Background and Aims:** Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs represent a significant cultural heritage rooted in boatmen's laborious yet harmonious lives navigating the rivers of China's Sichuan and Chongqing regions. This anthropological study aims to explore the current status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs in an anthropological context.

Materials and Methods: Comprises a comprehensive literature review, incorporating anthropological theories on music, cultural heritage preservation, and sociological analyses of folk music transmission. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and content analysis, were employed to gather rich data on the evolution of these songs, their cultural significance, and the challenges they face in contemporary society.

**Results:** Reveal the intricate musical elements, such as rhythmic patterns, vocal techniques, lyrical content, and melodic nuances, reflecting the boatmen's experiences, camaraderie, and challenges encountered on the rivers. Even though modernization has made younger people less interested and traditional singers are getting older, the study shows how important it is to use comprehensive preservation strategies and encourage community involvement to ensure that Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs are passed on and remain important as intangible cultural heritage.

**Conclusion:** Emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts among cultural institutions, local communities, and educational initiatives to safeguard and promote these unique musical traditions for future generations.

**Keywords:** Chuanfuqu Songs; Cultural Heritage; Anthropological; Preservation Strategies; Community Engagement

## Introduction

The rich tapestry of cultural heritage woven into the fabric of humanity often reveals itself through the expressive medium of music. Among the myriad of musical traditions worldwide, the Chuanfuqu songs of Xiatan stand as a testament to the enduring legacy of China's cultural heritage. Deeply rooted in the laborious yet harmonious life on the rivers, these songs encapsulate not just melodies but stories of resilience, camaraderie, and the eternal dance between humans and nature (Lin, 2018; Li, 2021; Weisgrau et al., 2023; Wu, 2023).

The Chuanfuqu songs are an integral part of the cultural heritage of China's Sichuan and Chongqing regions. Originating from the boatmen who navigated the rivers, these songs were not merely a form of entertainment. Still, they served practical purposes in coordinating labor, communicating dangers, and fostering community among the river dwellers. The Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs, in particular, hold a distinctive place within this musical tradition (Chabrowski, 2015; Chen, 2022; Yang & Chonpairot, 2024). They are associated with the command to go to the beach, marking a crucial moment in the boatmen's journey where the turbulent waters demand the utmost concentration and unity. The songs sung during this phase reflect the intense yet synchronized efforts of the boatmen as they navigate the perils of the river (Waldburger, 2018; Gang, 2022).

However, with the passage of time and the rapid modernization of transportation and labor practices, the traditional contexts in which Chuanfuqu songs thrived have undergone significant transformations. The mechanization of boats, the decline of manual labor, and the changing lifestyles of riverbank inhabitants have all contributed to a shifting landscape where these songs find themselves at a crossroads between preservation and obscurity. The central problem addressed in this research is the survival and evolution of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs amidst changing socio-economic and cultural dynamics. As these songs were deeply intertwined with the daily lives of boatmen and the river ecosystems, their displacement from traditional settings raises questions about their authenticity,







transmission, and relevance in contemporary society (Ghosh & Muecke, 2009; Richardson, 2012; Lin, 2018; Luo & Suanmonta, 2024).

The transition from wooden boats to motorized vessels, the aging population of traditional singers, and the diminishing interest among the younger generation in learning and inheriting these songs pose significant challenges to their continuity. Moreover, the encroachment of modern media, digital platforms, and stage performances has altered the original contexts of Chuanfuqu songs, potentially diluting their essence and cultural significance (McCormick & White, 2010; Zou, 2019; Liu & Si, 2022).

This study aims to explore the current status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs in an anthropological context. The research objectives include identifying the factors influencing the survival and evolution of these songs amidst changing socio-economic and cultural dynamics, examining the impact of modernization on their traditional contexts, and assessing the challenges and opportunities for their preservation and revitalization (Chabrowski, 2015; Chen, 2022; Yang & Chonpairot, 2024). By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation, and enhance our understanding of Chinese cultural heritage through the analysis of unique musical elements (Lin, 2018; Li, 2021; Weisgrau et al., 2023), and provide insights into the socio-economic dynamics of river communities and their musical expressions (Gang, 2022; Yang & Theerapan, 2024). Additionally, the research questions aim to investigate how the authenticity, transmission, and relevance of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs are affected by modernization, aging populations, and diminishing interest among younger generations. The study also explores the potential benefits of studying these songs, such as enriching our appreciation of cultural heritage, understanding the intricate relationship between humans, nature, and music from an anthropological perspective (Richardson, 2012; Wu, 2023), and recognizing the multifaceted roles of music in shaping social structures, identities, and collective memories (McCormick & White, 2010; Zou, 2019).

# **Objective**

To explore the current status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs in an anthropological context.

## Literature review

In exploring the current status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs within an anthropological context, it is crucial to delve into existing literature that sheds light on the cultural significance, historical evolution, and theoretical frameworks surrounding these traditional songs. This literature review will synthesize critical research theories and insights relevant to our research objective.

- 1. Cultural Heritage Preservation: A foundational aspect of understanding Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs lies in the discourse of cultural heritage preservation. Scholars such as Smith (2006) and Labadi (2013) emphasize the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, including traditional music forms, as they encapsulate collective memories, identities, and social practices. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) provides a framework for recognizing and protecting such heritage, highlighting the global significance of efforts to preserve traditional music like Chuanfuqu songs (Antons & Logan, 2017; Liu, 2022).
- 2. Anthropological Approaches to Music: Anthropological perspectives offer valuable insights into the role of music within social and cultural contexts. Scholars like Merriam (1964) and Titon (2008) advocate studying music as a cultural phenomenon, exploring how it intersects with rituals, labor practices, and community cohesion. Within this framework, Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs can be analyzed as more than just melodies but as dynamic expressions embedded in river communities' everyday lives and experiences.
- **3. Sociological Analysis of Folk Music:** Sociological theories provide lenses to examine the transmission, adaptation, and survival of folk music traditions. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) discuss the concept of "invented traditions," highlighting how certain cultural practices are deliberately constructed or revived to serve contemporary needs. This perspective prompts us to consider how





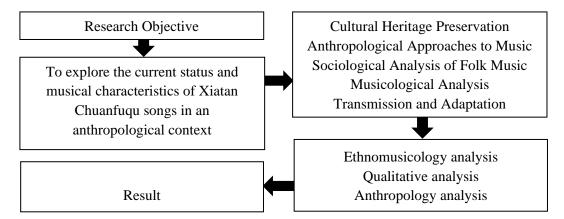


Chuanfuqu songs may have evolved in response to changing river dynamics, labor practices, and cultural contexts.

- **4. Musicological Analysis:** From a musicological standpoint, scholars such as Nettl (2005) emphasize the importance of studying musical characteristics, including rhythm, melody, and lyrics, to understand the cultural meanings embedded in music traditions. The analysis of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs can benefit from such detailed examinations, unraveling the nuances of their musical structure and how these elements reflect the laborious yet rhythmic life on the rivers.
- **5. Transmission and Adaptation:** Theories of cultural transmission and adaptation offer insights into how Chuanfuqu songs have been passed down through generations and adapted to changing circumstances. Hodges and Baron (2011) discuss the concept of "cultural sustainability," emphasizing the need for active engagement and participation in cultural practices to ensure their continued vitality. This perspective prompts us to consider strategies for transmitting Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs to younger generations and fostering ongoing cultural relevance.
- **6. Interdisciplinary Perspectives:** Finally, adopting a multidisciplinary approach that integrates anthropological, sociological, musicological, and cultural heritage perspectives allows for a comprehensive understanding of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs. By synthesizing theories and insights from these diverse fields, our research can offer nuanced interpretations of the songs' current status, musical intricacies, and broader cultural significance within an ever-evolving anthropological context.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The data analysis aims to understand the prevalence, distribution, trends, cultural meanings, and artistic expressions of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs in an anthropological context. Qualitative analysis explores lyrical content, melodic variations, performance styles, and socio-cultural contexts, contributing to anthropology and cultural heritage preservation.



# Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of the current status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs within an anthropological context, a qualitative methodology comprising interviews and observations will be employed. This approach explores the lyrical content, melodic variations, performance styles, and socio-cultural contexts of these traditional songs through rich, in-depth data collection and analysis, as shown in Table 1.

 Table 1 Qualitative Methodology Steps for Exploring Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs

Step	Method	Description
1	Interview	Create a semi-structured interview guide detailing the lyrical content,
	Preparation	melodic variations, performance styles, cultural significance, and historical evolution of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs.







Step	Method	Description
2	Participant	Participants are chosen based on their expertise in Chuanfuqu songs, cultural
	Selection	knowledge, river community experience, and willingness to share insights,
		ensuring diversity for a comprehensive understanding.
3	In-depth	Conduct in-depth interviews with participants to gather experiences,
	Interviews	knowledge, and perspectives on Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs, using open-ended
		responses and follow-up questions for rich qualitative data.
4	Audio/Video	The interviews will be recorded with participants' consent to obtain detailed
	Recording	responses, tone nuances, and non-verbal communication cues for future
		analysis.
5	Transcription	The study involves transcribing interview recordings and performing
	and Coding	thematic coding to identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories related
		to the musical characteristics, cultural meanings, and social contexts of
		Chuanfuqu songs.
6	Content	The study utilizes qualitative content analysis techniques to thoroughly
	Analysis	examine the coded data, identifying key insights, cultural nuances, and
		interpretive frameworks from the interviews.
7	Ethnographic	Ethnographic observations of Chuanfuqu song performances, rehearsals, and
	Observations	cultural events in river communities will be conducted, focusing on musical
		elements, audience reactions, interaction dynamics, and contextual factors.
8	Triangulation	The study aims to validate critical themes, patterns, and interpretations by
	of Data	comparing interviews with real-world observations and enhancing the
		credibility of the qualitative analysis.
9	Interpretation	The study uses qualitative findings and a narrative format to explore the
	and	status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs in an
	Reporting	anthropological context.

#### Results

Anthropological research into the current state and musical features of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs has produced a wealth of information that sheds light on how this traditional form of music has changed over time, what it means culturally, and the problems it faces today by meticulously examining the songs' development from labor chants to stage performances and their designation as intangible cultural heritage. The findings highlight the musical intricacies and the sociocultural contexts that have shaped and continue to influence the perception and preservation of this unique cultural heritage.

## 1. The Current Status of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs

The evolution of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs spans centuries and reflects the dynamic interplay between culture, tradition, and societal changes. In this historical timeline, we delve into critical periods that shaped the current status and musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs. From its origins as labor songs for boatmen navigating the rivers of the Sichuan River Basin to its recognition as an intangible cultural heritage in the 21st century, this timeline offers insights into the cultural significance, challenges, and preservation efforts surrounding this traditional music form:

- 1.1 Before the 1950s: The Chuanfuqu songs originated as labor songs for boatmen navigating the rivers of the Sichuan River Basin. These songs were integral to the boatmen's collective labor experience, unifying their movements, synchronizing their efforts, and alleviating fatigue during long work hours. The songs encapsulated the unique lifestyle and challenges boatmen face, symbolizing the harmonious integration of boats, people, and the river environment. Before the 1950s, wooden boats were the primary means of transport on the rivers, and the Chuanfuqu songs played a crucial role in coordinating the activities of boatmen engaged in transporting various goods.
- **1.2 Mid to late 20th century:** The mid to late 20th century marked a significant period of transition and development for Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs. This era witnessed the peak of wooden boat shipping activities, with bustling river scenes filled with boats coming and going. A notable shift from







privately owned boats to cooperative boat ownership led to more organized and regulated shipping practices. Government initiatives aimed at improving shipping conditions, regulating river security, and addressing challenges such as banditry and safety hazards. Despite political turmoil during this period, the development of shipping and the singing of Chuanfuqu songs continued, reflecting their resilience and cultural significance.

**1.3 Beginning of the 21st century:** In the early 21st century, Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs received formal recognition as intangible cultural heritage, highlighting its cultural significance and historical value. However, this period also witnessed commercialization and concerns regarding the authenticity of Chuanfuqu songs. The increased popularity of performances and cultural events featuring these songs led to questions about preserving their original essence and meaning. Efforts to promote and preserve Chuanfuqu songs intensified, focusing on balancing commercial opportunities with safeguarding their traditional heritage.

To provide a comprehensive summary of the evolution and current status of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs, highlighting key features and developments across different historical periods, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** The Current Status of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs

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Period	Key Features	Summary
Before the 1950s	Originated as labor songs for boatmen in the Sichuan River Basin. Served to unify movements, relieve fatigue, and symbolize boatmen's lifestyle.	Chuanfuqu songs were essential for coordinating boatmen's work and representing their unique lifestyles and challenges.
Mid to late 20th century	The peak period for wooden boat shipping, the transition to cooperative boat ownership, and government efforts to improve shipping conditions and security.	We have witnessed significant developments in shipping practices and government interventions aimed at enhancing safety and regulation on the rivers.
Beginning of the 21st century	Recognition as intangible cultural heritage, commercialization concerns, increased performances, and preservation efforts.	Cultural heritage is recognized but faces challenges like commercialization and authenticity concerns, necessitating increased preservation efforts and a balance between commercial opportunities and traditional heritage.

The research delved into the current status of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs, which have a rich history and unique characteristics among Sichuan's labor songs. These songs are predominantly circulated in various rivers, such as the Jinsha, Yangtze, Jialing, and their tributaries, with Sichuan Province and Chongqing Municipality being their main birthplaces and inheritance sites. Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs are primarily transmitted orally among boatmen's groups, with younger boatmen learning from the older generation. However, due to changes in production methods, lifestyles, and the passing of many old boatmen, many Chuanfuqu songs have been lost. Fieldwork revealed the challenges of finding proficient singers, with few old boatmen remaining who can lead these songs effectively. The geographical distribution of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs was extensively surveyed and researched, focusing on rivers like the Jialing, Jinsha, Tuojiang, Tonghe, Fuhe, Fujiang, and Minjiang. Each river basin showcased unique characteristics and challenges faced by preserving these traditional songs, emphasizing the urgent need for protection and transmission measures to safeguard this valuable cultural heritage, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs in Different River Basins







River Basin	Characteristics
Jialing River	Originating from the Qinling mountains, which have historical significance in
	water traffic and transport, it faces challenges due to rapid currents and
	hazardous terrains.
Jinsha River	Located in the lower reaches of the Jinsha River, historically linked to boat
	transport and shipping, it is endangered due to modern developments and a lack
	of successors.
<b>Tuojiang River</b>	Circulated in various counties along the Tuojiang river basin, reflecting the hard
	labor and customs of boatmen, they are highly endangered due to modernization
	and lack of inheritors.
Tonghe River	Known as the Raft Song in ancient times, it passed down for thousands of years,
	endangered by technological advancements and diminishing boatmen's heritage.
Fuhe River	It is found in Chengdu's Huanglongxi Town, showcasing unique melodic styles,
	which are endangered due to low water levels and modern transportation
	developments.
Fujiang River	They are mainly distributed in Santai County and Suining City, facing extinction
	due to modern transportation advancements and diminishing boatmen heritage.
Minjiang River	It originates from Minshan Mountain, reflecting the hardships and emotions of
	boatmen, endangered by modern transportation changes and lack of successors.

## 2. The Musical Characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu Songs

Exploring Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs' musical characteristics within an anthropological context reveals a multifaceted understanding of this cultural heritage. Firstly, delving into the background of these songs reveals their deep-rooted history, primarily circulating along various river basins like the Yangtze, Jinsha, and Jialing rivers, among others. Secondly, the singing characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs are distinct, showcasing a unique blend of vocal techniques, tonal variations, and emotive expressions intrinsic to the boatmen's cultural milieu. Thirdly, the rhythmic characteristics of these songs exhibit a dynamic interplay of beats, tempos, and cadences reflective of the laborious yet rhythmic nature of boatmen's work. Fourthly, the lyrics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs are rich in storytelling, often narrating tales of river journeys, hardships, and camaraderie among boatmen, offering insights into their daily lives and experiences. Lastly, the melodic characteristics of these songs feature melodic motifs, scales, and harmonies that resonate with the natural soundscape of rivers and evoke a sense of nostalgia and reverence for the waterways they traverse. These subsections provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse musical elements that define Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs and their significance within the anthropological landscape.

**2.1 The Background of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs:** Carry a profound background rooted in boatmen's daily life and work navigating the rivers. These songs serve as commands, specifically signaling the boat's approach to the shore. The urgency and intensity of these songs are palpable as they coincide with the boat's acceleration towards the beach, navigating through turbulent currents with the constant risk of capsizing. The lead singer's call of "Hey, come on, come on!" demands heightened concentration from the boatmen, who must execute each maneuver precisely. The Chuanfuqu songs reflect this tension, bearing a weighty and somber tone as if channeling all the energy and focus towards the boatmen's core, preparing them for imminent action. As the boat reaches the shore, the Chuanfuqu songs blend seamlessly with the rushing river waves, creating a visceral experience that fosters a strong sense of camaraderie and shared fate among the boatmen, encapsulating the essence of unity in facing life's challenges together, the music sheet as shown in Figure 1.





**Figure 1** Sheet music and QR Code, for example of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs Source: Xin Zhao, transcription from fieldwork in January 2024

- **2.2** The Singing Characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs: The Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs exhibit a distinctive singing style characterized by the seamless integration of the lead singer and chorus in a sentence-joining manner. This musical arrangement mirrors the transition in the environment, signifying the return to calm waters and the boatmen's gradual relaxation after navigating turbulent seas. The interplay between the lead singer and the chorus reflects the practicality and intensity of labor during boat operations. Consequently, analyzing the coordination and harmony of each Chuanfuqu song requires a nuanced approach that considers the specific working conditions and dynamics at play during its performance.
- 2.3 The Rhythmic Characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs: The Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs are characterized by a rhythmic pattern that reflects the transition from a tense and life-threatening environment to a calm and joyful scene. Employing a slow 4/4 time signature, the songs use half notes, first eight, and last sixteen notes, as well as quarter notes and quarter, which rest on depicting the intense struggle with nature during turbulent waters. Following this depiction, a melodious melody emerges, symbolizing the crew's safe arrival and the subsequent surge of joy. The rhythm gradually becomes soothing, allowing the boatmen to shift from the heightened tension to a state of calmness, with a noticeable weakening of the rhythm. This rhythmic progression captures the boatmen's emotions as they celebrate overcoming dangerous obstacles, starkly contrasting the more intense "Pinming Chuanfuqu songs."
- **2.4** The Lyrics Characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs: The lyrics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs primarily consist of functional words, serving the purpose of unified communication and coordination during labor activities. These functional words, such as "hi," "ah," "hey," and "ho,"







are modal particles used to shout slogans that ensure the crew's actions remain synchronized and cohesive amidst changing working conditions. As the rhythm and melody evolve, guided by the lead singer, the boatmen transition to singing a calming tune infused with the joy of triumph.

**2.5** The Melodic Characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs: Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs feature a long rhythm-type melody, symbolizing the crew's journey past the brink of life-threatening situations. As they navigate through turbulent waters, the river gradually widens, and the once tumultuous currents subside. This transition from danger to safety brings a sense of relaxation, albeit accompanied by a hint of fatigue in the boatmen's emotions. The long rhythm-type melody effectively captures and conveys these nuanced feelings, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** Sheet music, for example of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs Source: Xin Zhao, transcription from fieldwork in January 2024

The musical characteristics of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs exhibit distinctive octave differences from bass to treble, creating a wide range of musical expressions. The interval relationships within the melody primarily rely on the progression of second and third degrees, contributing to a stretched and expansive melody. Moreover, the lead melody stands out with a significant ten-degree interval difference between bass and treble, emphasizing intervals of around four degrees. This composition allows for impactful leaps in the melody, enhancing the overall beauty and complexity of the musical lines, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Sheet music, for example of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs Source: Xin Zhao, transcription from fieldwork in January 2024

#### **Discussion**

The introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs, delving into their historical evolution, musical characteristics, current status, and challenges in preserving this unique cultural heritage. The literature review provides a solid foundation by drawing upon various scholarly works in anthropology, cultural studies, intellectual property, and musicology. These contribute valuable insights into understanding the significance of intangible cultural heritage and the complexities surrounding its preservation.

Antons and Logan (2017) emphasize the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the intersection of intellectual and artistic property rights in preserving traditions like







Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs. This resonates with the findings in the research, which underscore the cultural significance and challenges faced by this traditional music form.

Chabrowski (2015) sheds light on the historical context of Sichuan boatmen and their work songs, providing a backdrop for understanding the origins and evolution of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs as labor chants for boatmen navigating the rivers. This historical perspective aligns with the research's exploration of critical periods in developing these songs, from their origins to their recognition as intangible cultural heritage in the 21st century.

The study's methodology incorporates anthropological perspectives, fieldwork, and extensive research into the musical and sociocultural contexts of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs. This approach is consistent with Hodges and Baron's (2011) notion of cultural sustainability, aligning aesthetics with social practices to ensure the preservation and meaningful transmission of cultural heritage.

The research results illuminate the musical intricacies, sociocultural contexts, and challenges Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs face. The evolution of these songs reflects societal changes, government interventions, and commercialization concerns, as highlighted by Gang (2022), Ghosh, and Muecke (2009).

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs offers valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between tradition, culture, and modern challenges. The findings underscore the significance of intangible cultural heritage, the need for preservation efforts, and the importance of balancing commercial opportunities with safeguarding traditional heritage. The research's consistency with theoretical principles in anthropology, cultural studies, and intellectual property rights strengthens its contribution to understanding and addressing the complexities of preserving intangible cultural heritage. By incorporating fieldwork, anthropological perspectives, and interdisciplinary literature, the study provides a comprehensive overview that sheds light on the evolution, musical characteristics, and current status of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs.

## Recommendation

- 1. Implement Comprehensive Preservation Strategies: The preservation of Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs is crucial due to modernization, declining interest among younger generations, and the aging population of traditional singers. This involves establishing documentation initiatives, collaborating with local communities and cultural organizations to create educational programs, and integrating these songs into formal and informal education to ensure their continued transmission to younger generations.
- 2. Foster Community Engagement and Participation: To preserve Xiatan Chuanfuqu songs, promoting community engagement and participation is crucial. This involves organizing cultural events, workshops, and performances, fostering intergenerational knowledge exchange, and encouraging river communities to preserve their musical heritage actively. This fosters pride, ownership, and collective responsibility, ensuring the songs' relevance for future generations and promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility.

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