Heritage in transition: The innovation and inheritance of Sichuan folk songs in the context of urbanization

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Abstract

As an important regional and national culture carrier, Sichuan folk songs have historically played a significant role in spreading community values and maintaining local identity. These traditional folk song forms face challenges and opportunities in the context of rapid modernization and urbanization in contemporary China. While retaining historical and folk elements, folk song content adapts to social changes. Folk songs have become a cultural bridge across age groups, especially among young people. This study examines the innovation and inheritance of Sichuan folk songs in urbanization, focusing on the adaptation of Bashan Beier Song, the first national intangible cultural heritage project. This study uses qualitative case analysis and cultural interpretation to examine the reshaping of these folk songs in a modern context. It also focuses on important issues such as intergenerational disconnection, commercialization, and the disappearance of authenticity. The results show that while urbanization poses challenges to the traditional way of inheriting folk songs, it is also capable of a creative revival supported by cultural innovation. Maintaining modern forms while retaining the cultural essence is a hallmark of successful adaptation efforts. This study further helps to understand how intangible cultural heritage can be sustainably developed in urban society. It provides valuable insights for cultural policymakers, educators, and artists who protect traditional music during social transformation.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, Heritage preservation, Intangible cultural heritage, Sichuan folk songs, Urbanization.

1. Introduction

In southwest China, Sichuan Province is the country's central agricultural region and a culturally diverse area inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, including Han, Yi, and Tibetan communities [1]. With a long history of agricultural development, economic prosperity, and cultural richness dating back to the Qin Dynasty, Sichuan has been a fertile ground for the evolution of folk culture. Among its many cultural expressions, Sichuan folk songs are a powerful medium of regional and ethnic identity. These songs encapsulate local customs, collective memory, labor, love, and moral values, offering a vibrant sonic reflection of Sichuan's social and historical development.

Large-scale population migration and cultural integration have significantly impacted Sichuan folk songs [2]. Sichuan folk songs have undergone centuries of development and formed a rich repertoire rooted in people's life experiences. However, traditional folk culture, such as Sichuan folk songs, has experienced unprecedented changes due to modernization, especially the rapid urbanization process following the reform and opening up in 1978.

Urbanization has reshaped the cultural landscape through material and physical means. On the one hand, it has expanded the channels for folk song dissemination through the media, online platforms, and educational institutions. On the other hand, it has also led to the gradual disappearance of traditional learning and performance venues. The intergenerational inheritance of folk songs has been hindered by the migration of rural populations, especially young people, to cities. Over time, Sichuan folk songs have become less and less dialectical, which is essential to the voice and style of Sichuan folk songs, threatening their authenticity and expressiveness. In addition, digital and mediated learning methods have replaced oral traditions. Although this can broaden learning channels, it often leads to the decontextualization of understanding and performance.

The current situation is paradoxical: Folk songs gain new attention and opportunities for reinterpretation in modern society while facing the risk of losing their original culture, aesthetics, and meaning. Therefore, maintaining the essence of Sichuan folk songs and innovating in the contemporary environment has become a cultural issue.

Bashan Beier Song is the first national representative project of intangible cultural heritage, and this study focuses on its inheritance and protection. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges and opportunities in the contemporary inheritance process by studying how Sichuan folk songs survive urbanization. It also attempts to provide references for academic research and practical cultural preservation and innovation strategies.

2. Research Objective

This study examines the changes and inheritance of Sichuan folk songs in the context of contemporary China's urbanization. It analyzes the historical and cultural characteristics of Sichuan folk songs and the impact of modernization processes such as population migration, dialect extinction, and media change on inheritance and authenticity. Additionally, it uses Bashan Beier Song as a typical case of adaptation. The study aims to identify significant issues, such as intergenerational rupture and the loss of oral traditions, and to propose sustainable methods to balance cultural preservation with innovative dissemination in modern digital environments and education.

3. Literature Review

In recent decades, the academic community has paid increasing attention to studying folk songs as an intangible cultural heritage (ICH), especially in modern cultural protection. In 2003, UNESCO defined ICH as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities regard as part of their cultural heritage." In this framework, folk songs are seen as a constantly changing form of cultural expression that maintains its core cultural significance and develops with social changes [3].

Scholars emphasize folk songs' dual role as an art form and a carrier of collective memory in China. Yu and Liu [4] pointed out that Chinese folk songs, including Sichuan ones, are deeply rooted in agricultural and community practices. Therefore, their singing is particularly sensitive to changes in social structure. Yang [5] pointed out that Sichuan folk songs originated from the interaction between different ethnic groups and reflected a long history of social integration and regional diversity.

Recent research focuses on the changes in folk music under the pressure of modernization and urbanization. Chen and Wang [6] believe that rapid urbanization has destroyed traditional ecological and cultural spaces in western China, thereby weakening folk customs. Similarly, Zhou [7] found that as rural populations migrated and dialects declined, a generational gap emerged in folk song inheritance. This often resulted in complex oral traditions being reduced to fragmented performances.

In addition, digital technology and media have changed how folk songs are spread. Huang [8] pointed out that platforms such as Douyin and YouTube have increased the audience for regional music, but sometimes at the expense of cultural context and depth. Although the media can creatively reinterpret, they also contribute to the commodification of folk culture, separating it from its original function and social context.

However, in tradition, innovation is also considered a means of revitalization. He and Zhang [9] hope to keep folk music alive in contemporary life. They proposed a hybrid cultural inheritance model that includes formal music education, community activities, and government support. Local projects such as including Bashan Beier Song in the national intangible cultural heritage list prove that official recognition and cultural policies can help protect it. However, the degree of grassroots participation determines its effectiveness [10].

The current literature studies the transformation of Chinese folk songs but lacks targeted case studies on how specific regional forms, such as Sichuan folk songs, adapt to urban pressures. This study addresses this shortcoming by contextualizing the adaptation and inheritance of Bashan Beier Songs as a cultural product and a living tradition.

4. Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods, including case studies and ethnographic methods, to analyze the changes and inheritance of Sichuan folk songs during urbanization. As a representative work of Sichuan folk songs in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage, the research focuses on Bashan Beier Song. This case provides a localized perspective to help us study cultural adaptation and dissemination trends.

Data was collected through field surveys, interviews, literature analysis, and media observation. The surveys were conducted in Bazhong, Guangyuan, and Chengdu, Sichuan Province, which are famous for their folk song heritage. Participation in local folk song performances, celebrations, and training courses provided first-hand information for understanding the living inheritance of these cultural expressions.

The study used semi-structured interviews to survey respondents. These respondents included local folk singers, cultural officials, music educators, young students, and community members. From 2023 to 2024, 25 interviews were conducted, each lasting 30 to 90 minutes. These interviews were designed to discuss the participants' experiences, views, and concerns about protecting, innovating, and disseminating Sichuan folk songs.

In addition, we collected and analyzed relevant policy documents, academic literature, and audiovisual materials (including online performances, TV broadcasts, and archival recordings). This helped to understand the mechanisms, technologies, and social contexts of Sichuan folk song adaptation.

Data analysis was completed through a thematic coding process using NVivo software. Emerging topics were divided into five main areas: changes in the production environment, the impact of urbanization, migration and intergenerational inheritance, dialect extinction, and inheritance methods. These themes were then analyzed from the theoretical perspectives of intangible cultural heritage protection and cultural ecology.

This approach ensured that the study could observe the various modern influences on Sichuan folk songs. By combining field research with documentary and media analysis, the study provided depth and breadth in understanding how traditional music has evolved under the pressures and possibilities of modern society.

5. Findings

The case study of Bashan Beier Song offers a vivid lens through which to observe the transformation of Sichuan folk songs under the influence of modernization, urbanization, and shifting cultural environments. The findings are categorized into four major themes: (1) the transformation of musical form and performance style, (2) the socio-cultural challenges of inheritance, (3) the complexities of dialect and linguistic transmission, and (4) strategic pathways for safeguarding and revitalization.

5.1. Transformation of Musical Form and Performance Style

Bashan Beier Song emerged from the rugged terrain of the Bashan and Micang mountain ranges, where porters locally known as "Bashan Beier Song" carried goods across treacherous trails. The song reflects the physical intensity of this labor and the emotional and social bonds among workers [11]. People usually chant this song collectively to soothe tired people and keep the rhythm during transportation.

The lyrics of this song vividly express the camaraderie among workers, the transcendence of material desires, and hard work. The following lyrics convey these emotions:

Table 1.
Bilingual Lyrics Table of 'Bashan Beier Song'.

Original Chinese Version	English Version
Bèi èr (yě) gē (yě), bèi èr (ne) gē (yō)	Hey, my fellow brothers.
Nǎ ge jiào nǐ (yō), qíng gē ya bèi (yě) nà duō (yě)	Who told you to carry such heavy cargo?
Nǐ bǎ (yō) yínqián (luō), kàn dàn (luō) xiē (yō)	You should take a more indifferent view of money and wealth.
Qǐng ge (lā) tángjiàng (āi), xián mèi lā bèi (yō) shàng pō	You can ask someone else to help you carry the load uphill.

Source: Du [14].

These lyrics are known for their use of interpolation words, such as "yo," "la," and "la," non-semantic syllables and interjections that emphasize emotion, maintain rhythm, and create a colloquial musical texture. These vocal techniques are decorative and are unique to the Sichuan dialect and local folk traditions.

According to Wang [12] Bashan Beier Songs use a pentatonic scale, and free rhythm and often use falsetto and "shouting" sounds, which were able to spread far and wide in the mountainous area. Traditional performances use a flexible interpolation structure (three, five, or seven words per sentence), usually in a call-and-response format, with one singer leading the singing and others joining the chorus.

The modern adaptation by Professor Cao Le and Ban Jiandong retains many original features. However, it adds structured harmony and instrumental accompaniment to meet the needs of modern listeners [13]. In the revised version, the song adds the following elements:

Table 2.
Comparison of Traditional and Adapted Forms of 'Bashan Beier Song'.

| Musical Feature	Traditional (Original Bashan Beier Song)	Adapted (Modern Version)
Vocal Structure	Unison or solo call-and-response singing by laborers	Polyphonic layering to simulate collective labor scenes
Performance Format	Spontaneous solo or small group without a fixed arrangement	Alternating solos and choral sections to reflect lead-group dynamics
Singing Style	Raw, hoarse shouting with dialectal expressions	Contemporary vocal styles (soul, pop) to expand stylistic range
Rhythm & Meter	Free rhythm, irregular beats	Standardized 4/4time signature to enhance accessibility

Source: Du [14].

Despite these changes, efforts have been made to preserve dialect pronunciation and the original shouting style. Notably, performers have attempted to imitate the hoarse voices of the original singers, who often worked, smoked, and sang under challenging conditions. This nuanced approach to interpretation demonstrates a delicate balance between cultural authenticity and technical musicality.

5.2. Sociocultural Challenges of Inheritance

Field interviews and performance observations demonstrate tensions between tradition and modernity. The disappearance of the living environment is a significant challenge. The labor scene that once inspired the creation of the Bashan Beier Song is no longer the occupation of porters [5]. With the rise of mechanized transportation and urban lifestyles, the song's function as an emotional catharsis and labor chant has gradually weakened. This has reduced the once vital performance practice to a symbolic performance.

The spontaneous collective learning model during agricultural shutdowns has been disrupted. Folk music education is now achieved through sporadic workshops or institutional training rather than traditional teacher-student inheritance. This split affects the cultural immersion and depth of emotional resonance in contemporary performances.

The generation gap is also a notable issue. Many young people are unaware of the history, language, and emotions of Sichuan folk songs. In the communities participating in the survey, the elderly respondents said that young people rarely sing or listen to traditional folk songs, which leads to a gap in the inheritance of this cultural heritage.
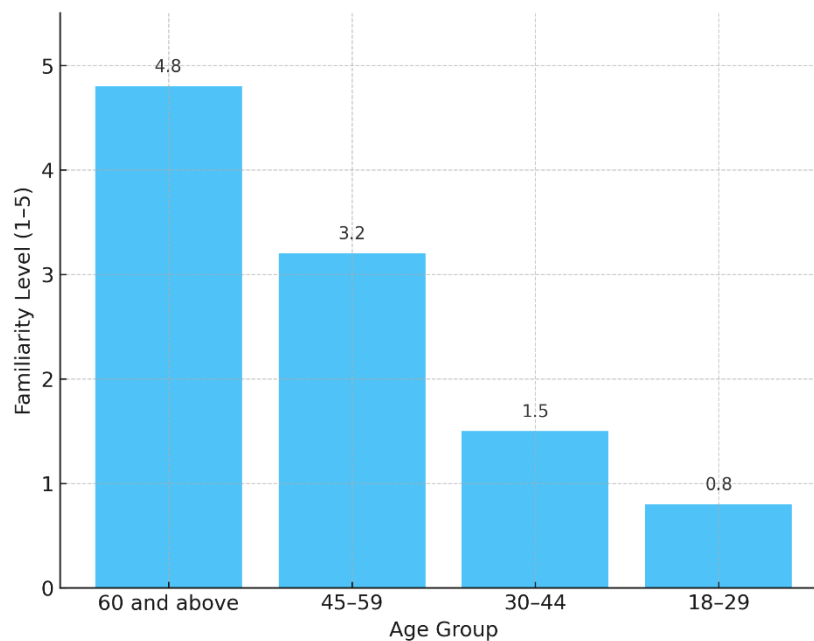
Figure 1.
Generational Familiarity with Sichuan Folk Songs.
Source: Du [14].

This bar chart illustrates the declining familiarity with Sichuan folk songs across different age groups. Elderly respondents (60+) show a high average familiarity level of 4.8, while familiarity among younger generations (aged 18–29) falls sharply to 0.8. The generational gap highlights the weakening intergenerational transmission of folk music in contemporary society.
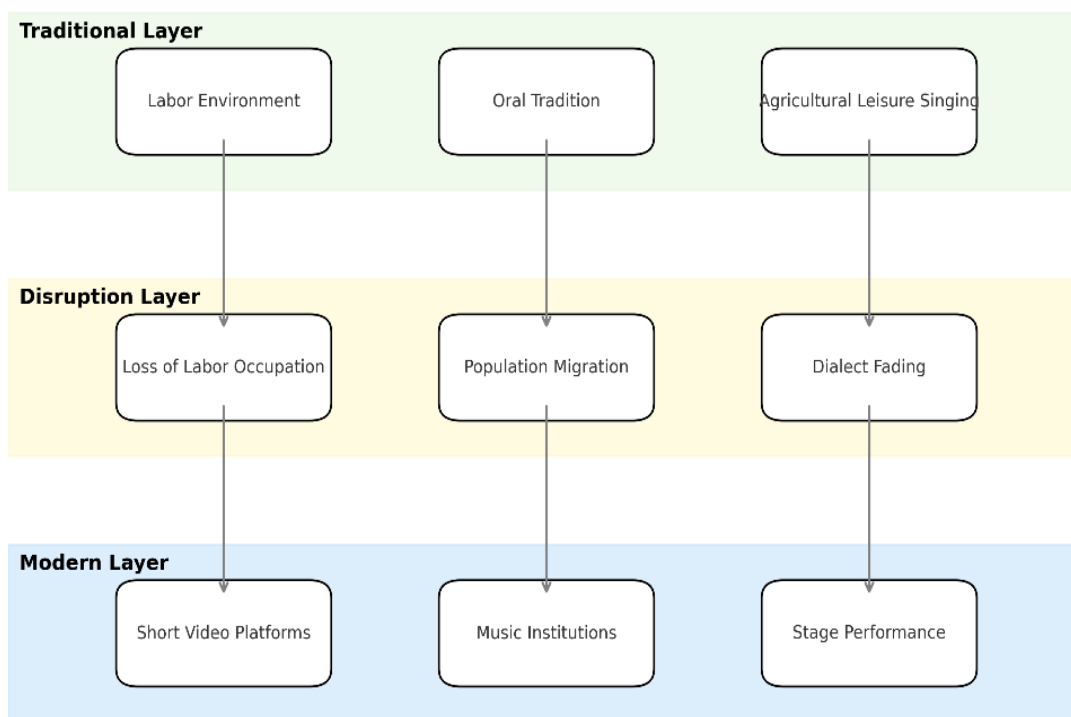
Figure 2.
Transformation of Bashan Beier Song folk song transmission.
Source: Du [14].

The figure depicts the three-level structure of the inheritance of Bashan Beier Song.

The traditional inheritance environment represents labor-based singing methods, folk oral inheritance, and seasonal community activities.

The middle layer is the split stage brought about by social changes, such as the disappearance of manual labor roles, the migration of rural residents to cities, and the decline of dialects.

The bottom layer represents contemporary communication channels, including digital platforms, institutionalized education, and stage performances.

The figure depicts the inheritance path structure of Bashan Beier Song from traditional to modern. In traditional society, this folk song formed a natural inheritance chain through "labor scene-word of mouth-slack farming gathering." However, the change in social structure, the disappearance of occupations, the migration of the population, and the weakening of dialects have become important "inheritance breakpoints." Due to these splits, the traditional cultural environment was disrupted, and folk songs were forced to turn to the "modern inheritance status quo," such as short video platforms, music education institutions, and stage performances. This figure highlights the process of folk songs from "the sound of life" to "the symbol of performance," which reflects the challenges and changes facing living cultural heritage.

5.3. Dialect and Language Restrictions

Sichuan folk songs have unique dialect expressions and phonetic features. Promoting Mandarin has led to the demise of local dialects, which has brought two problems [15]. Mandarin translations can improve popularity and national influence, but local dialects' unique charm, humor, and metaphors are difficult to translate fully.

Filler words and dialect vocabulary have cultural value beyond literal meaning. Phrases like "dear sister" and "dear compatriots" express regional and emotional intimacy. If these phrases are adapted or replaced, the emotional texture may be lost, reducing the cultural authenticity of the song. In addition, because non-local singers often have difficulty mastering the correct pronunciation and intonation, the expression of local characteristics is weakened.

Table 3.
Semantic Comparison of Dialectal Lyrics in 'Bashan Beier Song'.

Expression Type	Example Sentence	Emotional Effect
Dialect (Original)	"Xian mei la, bei yo shang po"	Intimate, lively, emotionally embedded in labor
Standard Mandarin	"Mèimei, qǐng bāng wǒ bēi dōngxi shàngpō"	Formal, lacking rhythm and oral flavor
English Translation	"Dear sister, help me carry it uphill"	Literal meaning retained but lacking context and tone

Source: Du [14].

The comparison table illustrates the semantic and emotional shifts when a dialect-based lyric from Bashan Beier Song is adapted into Standard Mandarin and subsequently translated into English. While the literal meaning is largely preserved across versions, the emotive resonance and cultural embeddedness diminish significantly through each translation stage.

In the original dialectal form—"Xian mei la, bei yo shang po"—the phrase "xian mei la" conveys a tone of affectionate intimacy, with the particle "la" adding rhythm and a musical quality characteristic of the local dialect. The expression "bei yo shang po" combines the action of carrying with a playful interjection, "yo," reflecting the performative nature of folk labor songs traditionally sung in mountainous regions. This formulation is colloquial and rich in interpersonal warmth, capturing the regional voice and cultural identity.

When translated into Standard Mandarin—"Mèimei, qǐng bāng wǒ bēi dōngxi shàngpō"—the tone shifts to one of formality and neutrality. Although the sentence becomes grammatically correct, it loses the poetic rhythm, emotional spontaneity, and local warmth of the original dialect. The oral charm diminishes, and the unique cultural markers embedded in the dialect are essentially erased.

The semantic content is conveyed in the English translation—"Dear sister, help me carry it uphill" but the cultural and tonal context is not. Without the linguistic rhythm, social context, or familiarity with Sichuanese expressive norms, the English version becomes a functional but flattened communication, detached from its folk and performative origins.

This analysis reveals that dialectal expressions in Sichuan folk songs carry multilayered cultural meaning linguistic, musical, emotional, and communal that cannot be fully replicated in standard or translated forms. Therefore, preserving dialectal features in folk music performance and research is not merely a linguistic choice but a crucial element in cultural authenticity and heritage protection.

5.4. Strategic Pathways for Revitalization and Sustainability

(a) Authenticity: Preserving the original musical form and performance techniques is essential. Fieldwork and interviews suggest three strategies to address these issues. These include respecting traditional vocal textures, dialects, lyric structures, and lyrics. To avoid stripping the songs of their folk vitality, modern adaptations should avoid being too academic or overly stylistic.

(b) Comprehensibility: Adaptations convey the melody, social stories, and emotions in folk songs. Understanding the life experiences of historical figures (such as porters) is essential for effective transmission. For example, to perform the Bashan Beier Song sincerely, singers must understand the camaraderie and hardships in the song.

(c) Integrity of cultural context: Protection should cover instruments, rituals, landscapes, and folklore, not just lyrics and notation. Folk songs' "living context" can be restored through community performances, immersive cultural heritage festivals, and fieldwork.

The government should take action, such as listing the Bashan Beier Song as an intangible cultural heritage, funding related competitions, and supporting academic research, but this requires grassroots participation. Local communities and cultural inheritors must be empowered to lead these actions to ensure that inheritance is rooted in living practice rather than confined to museums or media presentations.

In summary, the transformation of Bashan Beier Song reflects the broader development of Sichuan folk songs in contemporary China: vibrant yet fragile, visible yet vulnerable. While adaptations allow for cultural renaissance, careful consideration must be given to what is retained, modified, and lost. Through a nuanced, community-centered approach that values authenticity, interpretability, and cultural integrity, it is possible to ensure that the legacy of Sichuan folk songs remains vibrant amid rapid social change.

6. Discussion

The example of the Bashan Beier Song demonstrates how local folk music is inherited and evolves amid social change. This study reveals tensions between preservation and innovation, tradition and modernity, and authenticity and accessibility. These tensions symbolize the challenges facing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the context of China's rapid urbanization.

First, the adaptation of the Bashan Beier Song emphasizes the dynamic nature of ICH, emphasizing that tradition is constantly evolving through constant reinterpretation rather than being fixed. Smith and Akagawa [3] pointed out that heritage should be understood as a process rather than a fixed product. The modern adaptation of the Bashan Beier Song, featuring polyphonic textures, instrumental accompaniment, and multiple vocal styles, shows how musical innovation can coexist with core cultural identity under the careful guidance of cultural practitioners familiar with traditional forms and contemporary aesthetics.

Nevertheless, this process also exposes significant risks. Due to a lack of cultural sensitivity and sufficient background knowledge, adaptation work may lead to misrepresentation or simplification of culture. The dilution of dialect characteristics, the marginalization of ancient vocal traditions, and the reconceptualization of lyrics may cause the music to lose touch with its socio-historical roots. This is consistent with the concerns of Zhou [7] and Huang [8], who noted that urbanization often leads to the disappearance of original performance contexts and the weakening of intergenerational transmission pathways.

The decline of oral transmission has further exacerbated sociodemographic changes, especially the migration of young people from rural to urban areas. As the traditional master-apprentice model disappears, the emergence of digital technology is both a solution and a part of the solution. While platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, and WeChat have increased the dissemination of folk music, their presentation is often entertainment-centric and fragmented. This is consistent with the warning of Li [16], who noted that digital dissemination may make folk songs more prominent but less profound, reducing folk songs to superficial cultural products rather than living traditions.

The use of Sichuan dialects has gradually declined with the promotion of standard Mandarin, leading to the loss of culture and language. Dialects are more than just communication tools; they contain history, humor, emotions, and social connections. This study found that many young singers lack the language skills to identify the vocal nuances of Sichuan folk songs accurately. This results in their performances sounding technically accurate but emotionally alienated.

This discussion also highlights the importance of a holistic approach to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Cultural preservation is more than just documentation, museum exhibitions, or institutional programs. Instead, it must actively engage with local communities, restore performance venues, and recognize the intangible "spirit" of folk songs, including their social functions, emotional resonance, and symbolic meanings.

This study shows that folk song inheritance is about culture, cultural justice, and identity. In response to cultural commodification and urban homogenization, maintaining the diversity of China's regional cultures, such as that represented by Sichuan folk music, is essential for preserving a diverse and inclusive national cultural narrative.

The case of Bashan Beier Song is both a warning and a model: it reveals what can be lost in modern competition and shows how meaningful heritage revitalization can be promoted through creative, community-centered cultural transformation.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the changes, adaptations, and contemporary inheritance of the Sichuan folk song "Bashan Beier Song" in the context of China's urbanization and cultural modernization. Through historical analysis, field observations, interviews, and musical comparisons, this study reveals the evolution of Bashan Beier Song from a labor-themed folk song to a performance work that integrates traditional folk elements and modern musical sensibilities.

The results show that Sichuan folk songs are rooted in a specific historical, linguistic, and cultural context and are a living tradition capable of renewal and reinvention. The contemporary adaptation of "Bashan Beier Song" embodies a meaningful attempt to balance inheritance and innovation. It preserves the original work's emotional spirit and regional characteristics and makes it more accessible and resonant to modern audiences.

This process is fraught with difficulties. The disappearance of dialects, the fragmentation of oral transmission, the decline of traditional performance venues, and intergenerational ruptures threaten folk song culture's authenticity and sustainability. In addition, commodifying folk traditions in the digital and commercial spheres raises important questions about cultural ownership, representation, and identity.

This study advocates a multidimensional approach to folk song inheritance, including respecting authenticity, encouraging interpretability, and ensuring cultural integrity. Preserving Sichuan folk songs, such as the Bashan Beier Song, requires policy support, academic research, and the active participation of communities, performers, and educators who can keep these traditions alive.

Future research could examine the role of digital platforms in shaping new models of intangible cultural heritage inheritance or conduct cross-regional comparative studies of folk song adaptations in other parts of China. Finally, the example of the Bashan Beier Song shows that meaningful cultural preservation must go beyond aesthetics and be based on respect for life experiences, historical memories, and regional diversity in an increasingly homogenized cultural landscape.

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