



An Analysis of Wang Xiangrong's Singing Style in Shaanbei Chinese Folk Songs

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Abstract

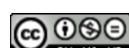
Background and Aims: Sha'anbei folk songs, originating from the Loess Plateau in northern Shaanxi Province, represent a vital component of China's intangible cultural heritage. These songs are characterized by bold vocal styles, regional dialects, and deep emotional expression. The objective of this study is to analyze the singing style of Wang Xiangrong in Shaanbei Chinese folk songs.

Methodology: This qualitative ethnomusicological study was conducted through fieldwork in Yulin City and surrounding counties in northern Shaanxi. Data collection included video/audio recordings of Wang's performances, semi-structured interviews with Wang and his disciples, and a review of archival materials. The data were analyzed using descriptive and interpretive techniques grounded in ethnomusicology, vocal performance theory, and regional cultural identity theory.

Results: The study found that Wang Xiangrong employs a sophisticated combination of abdominal breathing, resonance control, and true-false voice transitions. His performances exhibit emotional depth, maintain the use of regional dialect, and reflect cultural storytelling traditions. Furthermore, his stage presence and use of modern instrumentation illustrate a model of innovation within tradition, making Shaanbei folk music more accessible to contemporary audiences.

Conclusion: Wang Xiangrong's singing style embodies the living heritage of Shaanbei folk music. His work serves as both a preservation effort and an artistic evolution, offering valuable insights for music education, cultural transmission, and ethnomusicological research. This study contributes to the preservation of regional folk traditions and informs contemporary vocal pedagogy and performance practices.

Keywords: Shaanbei Folk Songs, Wang Xiangrong; Vocal Technique; Cultural Heritage; Ethnomusicology





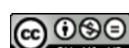
Introduction

Shaanbei folk songs, hailing from the Loess Plateau in northern Shaanxi Province, are a vital embodiment of China's rich musical heritage. Known for their expressive lyrics, bold vocal styles, and deep connections to rural life, these songs encapsulate generations of emotional, social, and cultural narratives. Traditionally passed down orally, they serve as both entertainment and a medium of collective memory, deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the region's people through categories like "Xin Tian You" (improvised songs), labor songs, and love ballads (Jones, 2020; Liu et al., 2024; Tang & Sornyai, 2023; Wu, 2023). However, modernization and digital culture have increasingly challenged the continuity of these traditions, raising urgent questions about how best to preserve and adapt them for contemporary audiences (Chen et al., 2025; Poddar, 2024; Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023).

Amid these concerns, the work of Wang Xiangrong emerges as both a cultural beacon and an artistic breakthrough. Born in 1952 in Fugu County, Yulin City, Wang has been recognized as the "King of Shaanbei Folk Songs" for his extraordinary contributions to the revival and transmission of this tradition. His unique singing style blends regional elements, such as the Shaanbei dialect and melodic motifs, with rigorous vocal techniques informed by modern performance practice. Through decades of performance, education, and international outreach, Wang has not only preserved Shaanbei folk songs but revitalized them. Despite his influence, limited scholarly attention has been given to analyzing the technical and expressive aspects of his singing in academic depth (Hakanpää et al., 2021; Shewell & Sansom, 2024; Walmsley, 2018).

This research addresses that gap by asking: How does Wang Xiangrong's singing style reflect the regional characteristics of Shaanbei Chinese folk songs? Through a focused ethnomusicological lens, the study sets out to analyze Wang's vocal style by identifying his technical traits, stylistic interpretations, and expressive choices that exemplify the sound and spirit of northern Shaanxi. Particular attention is paid to his use of true and false voice, tone, and resonance, emotional expression, and stage practices. This study investigates how Wang Xiangrong's vocal style reflects the technical mastery and emotional storytelling central to the cultural identity of northern Shaanxi (Gates, 2022; Martin, 2025; Spreadborough, 2022). The research draws on primary data from interviews, recordings, and fieldwork conducted in Yulin and surrounding regions.

The significance of this study lies in its potential contributions to both ethnomusicology and cultural preservation. By examining Wang's vocal techniques in detail, this research offers valuable insights for musicians, educators, and cultural historians interested in Chinese regional music (He & Sornyai, 2023; Li, 2024; Pang & Sensai, 2025). For students of traditional vocal arts, Wang's techniques serve as a living model of blending tradition with innovation. More broadly, the study affirms the relevance of folk music in modern society, not by freezing it in time, but by enabling





its evolution in dialogue with contemporary voices (Altınbaş & Karahasanoglu, 2024; Bao & Chuangprakhon, 2025; Ovcharenko et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). Thus, Wang Xiangrong's artistic journey becomes a compelling case study in the sustainable inheritance of regional musical identity.

Research Objectives

To analyze the singing style of Wang Xiangrong in Shaanbei Chinese folk songs.

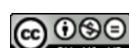
Literature Review

In the field of Chinese ethnomusicology, the study of regional folk songs—particularly those of Northern China—has gained increased scholarly interest due to its role in preserving intangible cultural heritage. Shaanbei folk songs, as one of the most distinctive musical traditions of the Loess Plateau, have been approached from various academic angles, including musicology, cultural anthropology, and folklore studies. Theoretical frameworks often center on the interplay between music and identity, oral transmission, and regional sound aesthetics. However, few studies provide a detailed analysis of an individual artist's interpretive methods and vocal techniques as a primary lens for understanding tradition in practice. Moreover, the role of dialect in vocal performance—particularly in shaping phrasing, timbre, and expressive nuance—remains underexplored in existing scholarship.

1. Folk Music and Regional Identity

Folk music is often seen as a representation of regional identity, particularly in Shaanbei, which is influenced by the Loess Plateau's geography, linguistics, and socio-cultural characteristics. The region's arid climate, rugged terrain, and agrarian lifestyle create a bold, open, and emotionally direct musical style (Ma, 2022; Peiheng & Kaewbucha, 2025). Ethnomusicology theories highlight how geography and environment influence vocal projection and tonal quality, particularly in Shaanbei's "Xin Tian You" (free tune) melodies. These songs use expansive vocal ranges, unaccompanied melodic lines, and slow, ornamented rhythms to express the collective consciousness of the people. Artists like Wang Xiangrong serve as cultural narrators and regional ambassadors, integrating Shaanbei dialect, melodic phrasing, and traditional motifs into their singing. While other prominent folk performers from regions such as Sichuan or Inner Mongolia often adapt to standardized Mandarin for broader appeal, Wang's steadfast use of the local dialect distinguishes him as a uniquely rooted voice in regional identity performance (Sonnendecker, 2023; Quintero, 2019; Xuming & Ut-sa, 2024; Walker, 2019).

2. Vocal Techniques and Expressive Aesthetics





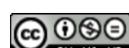
Chinese folk singer Wang Xiangrong's vocal style is characterized by emotional authenticity and communicative power, with techniques such as abdominal breathing, resonance control, and vocal placement enhancing clarity and impact (Dai, 2024; Wang, 2024). His mastery of transitions between true and false voice, chest resonance for power and depth, and strategic use of breath for emotional phrasing exemplifies a fusion of traditional and formal techniques. Wang's singing not only replicates folk standards but also interprets and elevates them, creating a bridge between regional authenticity and modern performance demands (Basile & Cavallo, 2020; Feinberg, 2018). In contrast to stylized vocal traditions in Cantonese or Jiangnan folk music—where restraint and ornamentation often dominate—Wang's use of expansive dynamic range, high-volume projection, and dialectal inflection reflects a uniquely Shaanbei aesthetic shaped by physical and social environment. His vocal aesthetics prioritize raw emotional delivery, projection without amplification, and ornamentation like glissandos and vibratos.

3. Cultural Transmission and Artistic Innovation

The third conceptual area in the literature involves the processes of musical transmission and transformation. In traditional Chinese folk music, oral transmission remains the dominant pedagogical mode. This involves not only the memorization of melodies and lyrics but also the internalization of style, gesture, and context. However, scholars note that in contemporary times, this transmission is challenged by urbanization, generational shifts, and the commodification of popular music (Christensen, 2018; Derbaix & Derbaix, 2019; You & Prathumchan, 2024). Against this backdrop, the role of artist-inheritors like Wang Xiangrong becomes especially critical. Literature on cultural sustainability emphasizes the need for dynamic preservation, where traditions are not frozen in time, but adapt and evolve through interaction with new audiences and formats. While other regional artists often rely on stage reinterpretation or media aesthetics to modernize folk traditions, Wang's innovations are grounded in lived performance, community teaching, and the subtle modernization of lyrical themes. He introduces contemporary musical elements while retaining the emotional and thematic integrity of the original folk idiom. His work aligns with theories that advocate for "living heritage"—forms of cultural expression that survive through reinvention, not repetition.

Research Conceptual Framework

This study explores Wang Xiangrong's singing style by integrating ethnomusicology, vocal performance studies, and regional cultural identity theories. It examines the technical and expressive dimensions of Wang's artistry, highlighting his singing as a medium of cultural expression (Crooke et al., 2024; Waterman, 2019). Wang's vocal practice embodies the landscape, language,



and lived experiences of northern Shaanxi, showcasing how musical technique, local heritage, and personal innovation intersect to form a distinct folk vocal identity.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this research, showing how the three theoretical foundations converge to support the analysis of Wang Xiangrong's singing style. Each theoretical lens highlights specific aspects—technical execution, socio-cultural meaning, and regional identity markers.

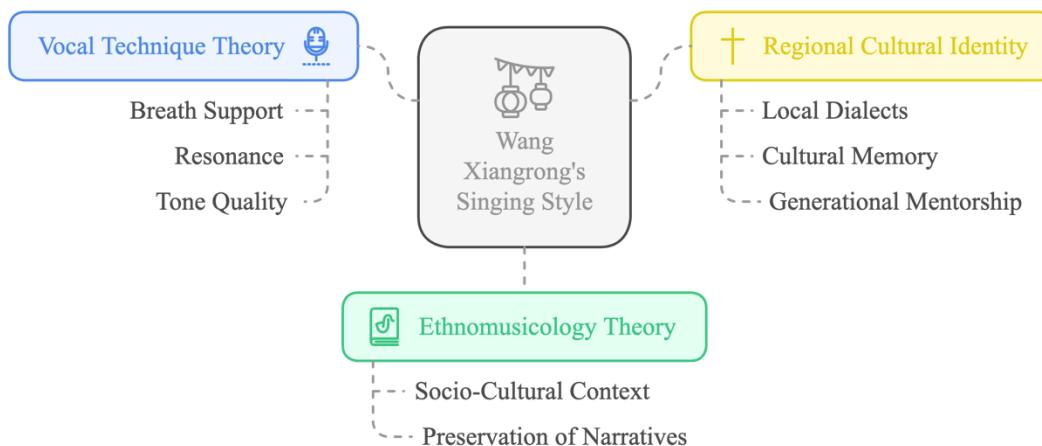


Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

Wang's performance in Shaanbei folk songs serves as a social and cultural practice, preserving community memory and embodying lived experience. His vocal technique demonstrates advanced control, allowing emotional projection and stylistic authenticity. Wang's use of Shaanbei dialect, regional metaphors, and narrative content emphasizes his rootedness in local tradition, transforming each performance into a statement of cultural pride, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Theoretical Application to Analysis of Wang Xiangrong's Singing Style

Theoretical Lens	Analytical Focus Area	Example from Study
Ethnomusicology Theory	Socio-cultural context and narrative	Preservation of Shaanbei folk storytelling and ritual
Vocal Technique Theory	Technical mastery and vocal control	Abdominal breathing, resonance shifts, and tone blending
Regional Cultural Identity	Cultural markers and dialect expression	Use of Shaanbei dialect and local imagery



Research Methodology

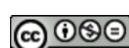
This research adopts a qualitative ethnomusicological methodology, focusing on how Wang Xiangrong's singing style embodies the cultural and regional essence of Shaanbei Chinese folk songs. It is structured to blend field research with performance analysis and cultural interpretation, enabling a comprehensive understanding of vocal practices within their social and musical contexts (Liao & Chaiyason, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024). The study investigates not only the technical aspects of Wang's vocal technique but also the symbolic and expressive meanings embedded in his performances. The research was carried out between January and August 2024, primarily in Yulin City and nearby counties in northern Shaanxi. While the study strives for accuracy and depth, some limitations must be acknowledged, including potential observer bias, the influence of live performance settings on vocal delivery, and the dynamics of different audience compositions, which may have affected interpretive choices and expressiveness.

1. Research Site and Informants

The fieldwork was carried out in Yulin City and surrounding counties such as Fugu and Suide in the Shaanbei region of China. These areas are known for their rich folk music culture and are also the places where Wang Xiangrong was born, trained, and developed his unique singing style. The cultural environment and community practices of these locales provided valuable context for the interpretation of his music. The main key informant for this research was Wang Xiangrong, while two of his well-trained disciples, Su Wen and Wang Yonghui, served as additional informants to offer perspectives on vocal inheritance and stylistic influence. Wang, aged 72 at the time of the study, has over five decades of performance experience. Su Wen, age 38, and Wang Yonghui, age 41, are both accomplished folk vocalists trained under Wang for more than a decade, performing in both traditional rural settings and modern concert stages.

2. Data Collection

The study relied on multiple sources of qualitative data, including live performance recordings, semi-structured interviews, and textual materials. The researcher documented several of Wang Xiangrong's performances through video and audio recordings, focusing on aspects such as breathing technique, vocal ornamentation, pitch modulation, and lyrical articulation. Interviews with Wang and his students were conducted both in person and online via WeChat. In addition, historical records, published recordings, and previously archived interviews were collected to provide comparative material for analysis. Field notes were kept to capture spontaneous observations and contextual interactions with local musicians and audiences. Special attention was paid to capturing vocal nuances in both formal concert settings and informal community gatherings, recognizing that performance context might subtly alter vocal style and emotional intensity.





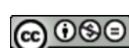
3. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed through descriptive analysis and interpretive techniques grounded in ethnomusicology and vocal studies. Descriptive analysis included transcription of selected song excerpts, focusing on vocal features such as true and false voice switching, nasal resonance, and glissando. Interpretive analysis looked at how these vocal choices reflect the regional identity, cultural memory, and emotional landscape of Shaanbei. The analysis also emphasized how Wang's stylistic innovations and adaptations of tradition contribute to the broader dissemination of folk music. All data were organized thematically and chronologically to provide a structured narrative of findings. While efforts were made to ensure analytical rigor, the inherently subjective nature of performance interpretation and the limited sample of informants may constrain the generalizability of results.

Results

The findings from the fieldwork and performance analysis offer a comprehensive view of Wang Xiangrong's artistic contributions to Shaanbei folk music. By examining his vocal execution, emotional delivery, linguistic nuances, stage presence, and adaptive innovation, this study identifies the defining characteristics of his singing style. Each element not only reflects Wang's mastery but also embodies the broader cultural and aesthetic identity of Shaanbei. The results illustrate how his vocal and interpretive choices sustain the tradition while making it relevant for modern audiences.

Figure 2 showcases a segment of the song "Na Da Da Ye Bu Ru Za Shan Gou Gou Hao," a signature piece performed by Wang Xiangrong that highlights his distinctive vocal style. This song, rooted in the "mountain climbing tune" tradition, encapsulates the essence of Shaanbei folk songs through its vivid lyrics, regional tone, and expressive delivery.





na da da ye bu ru zan shan gou gou hao 哪达达也不如咱山沟沟好

wangxiangrong yanchang

[王向荣 演唱]

wangxiangrong ci

王向荣 词

dangyinzhiqu

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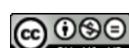
Figure 2 A Segment of the Song “Na Da Da Ye Bu Ru Za Shan Gou Gou Hao”

The musical score depicted in the figure demonstrates his skillful handling of melodic progression, his use of glissando and vibrato, and his effective transitions between registers. It also reflects the deep emotional resonance and regional color embedded in the performance. Through this case study, we gain insight into the broader techniques and stylistic traits that define Wang’s singing.

1. Vocal Techniques

Wang Xiangrong’s vocal techniques are a refined blend of traditional folk practices and professional vocal discipline. One of the most prominent features is his mastery of abdominal breathing, which allows for deep, stable, and controlled vocal delivery—a technique crucial to the long phrases and high-energy segments typical of Shaanbei folk songs. Informant Su Wen stated, “Wang Xiangrong always emphasized breathing from the abdomen. He taught us that true power in singing comes from how you manage breath, not just the vocal cords.”

He uses a dynamic control of airflow that enables his performances to reflect sharp contrasts in mood and texture. The ebb and flow of breath are manipulated to produce legato passages that float seamlessly, as well as staccato bursts that resemble the rhythm of folk labor. His transition among chest, oral, and nasal resonance is remarkably fluid. Chest resonance is dominant in his lower register, providing a bold, rich timbre that resonates deeply, while nasal





and oral resonances brighten the upper tones for a more penetrating sound, perfectly matching the rugged and expansive feel of the Loess Plateau landscape.

Moreover, his command of true (modal) and false (falsetto) voice allows him to effortlessly transition between vocal registers, extending his range and accommodating the wide pitch spectrum of Shaanbei folk songs. The alternation between full-bodied chest tones and high, delicate falsettos reflects the region's oral storytelling tradition, where singers often play multiple emotional roles, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Overview of Wang Xiangrong's Vocal Techniques

Technique	Description
Abdominal breathing	Deep breath support for volume, control, and endurance
Airflow control	Precision in phrasing, dynamics, and breath placement
Resonance shifts	Transitioning between the chest, oral, and nasal cavities
True and false voice blending	Smooth register transitions for emotional range and tonal variety.
Ornamentation	Use of vibrato, glissando, and falsetto to decorate melody lines

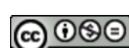
2. Emotional Depth

One of Wang Xiangrong's most defining artistic traits is his emotional sincerity. He invests every line of a song with authentic feeling, which he modulates through tone, dynamics, and tempo. His emotional delivery is not just a performance but a storytelling method rooted in local history and culture. In an interview, informant Wang Yonghui stated, "His singing always made me feel like I was back in my childhood village. Even when he sang on big stages, the feelings remained intimate and real."

Wang's emotional palette spans from passionate exultation to solemn melancholy. In labor songs, his energy becomes infectious—he channels the communal strength of working people. In love songs, his voice softens and flows more freely, evoking longing and tenderness. His precision in managing climactic surges and restrained sadness ensures that listeners are guided through emotional highs and lows, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Emotional Techniques and Their Impact

Emotional Element	Description	Effect on Audience
Volume variation	Crescendo and decrescendo to reflect emotional intensity	Creates tension and release





Emotional Element	Description	Effect on Audience
Tempo modulation	Accelerating or slowing to mirror moods	Keeps emotional pacing dynamic
Tone color adjustment	Bright or dark tones based on subject matter	Evokes mood-specific imagery

3. Dialect Usage

Wang Xiangrong's use of the Shaanbei dialect is essential to his authenticity. His articulation retains the phonetic inflections and cadence of regional speech, grounding his performance in the culture of northern Shaanxi. The dialect itself contains expressive vocabulary, proverbs, and metaphors deeply tied to local experience.

By keeping these dialectal elements intact, Wang ensures his songs resonate with regional audiences who identify with the language of their ancestors. Moreover, the phonological structure of the dialect—particularly its tonal rises and falls—naturally complements the melodic contours of traditional folk songs. This fusion creates a seamless integration of speech and melody.

According to informant Su Wen, “He never modified the words to standard Mandarin just to please wider audiences. That’s why his singing connects so strongly with locals. We feel represented.”

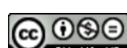
4. Stage Performance

Wang Xiangrong's live performances are theatrical experiences rooted in folk customs. His posture, hand gestures, eye movements, and facial expressions reflect the theatricality embedded in traditional rural storytelling. He engages with audiences not only through voice but with body language and charisma, bridging the performer-listener gap.

For example, in outdoor courtyard performances, he often sings directly to members of the audience, incorporating eye contact and verbal improvisation. These gestures simulate a dialogue and enhance the communal spirit that is a hallmark of Shaanbei folk music. His connection with the audience mirrors the traditional setting in which folk songs are shared among neighbors and families, not just spectators, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Performance Strategies Used by Wang Xiangrong

Strategy	Application in Performance
Eye contact and gesture	Direct audience engagement and dramatization
Storytelling pauses	Builds suspense and adds emphasis
Cultural costume use	Reinforces authenticity and visual identity



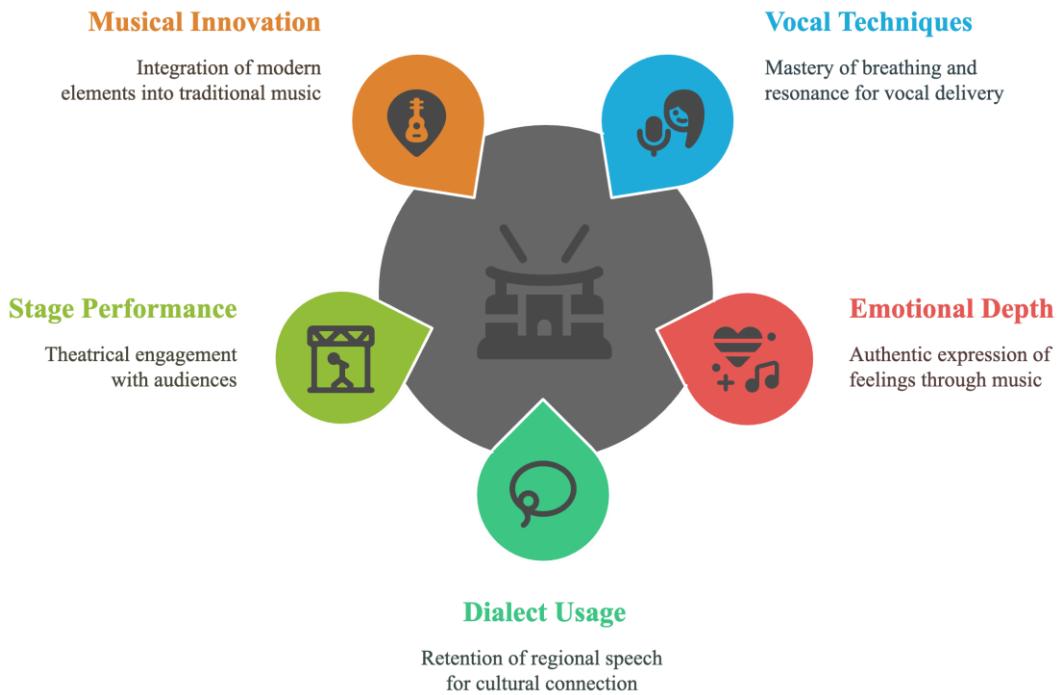


Figure 3 Elements Contributing to Wang Xiangrong's Artistry

Discussion

The analysis of Wang Xiangrong's singing style reveals a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, resonating with established theoretical principles in ethnomusicology, vocal studies, and cultural identity. Consistent with the theoretical framework of ethnomusicology, Wang's performances emerge as cultural practices rooted in specific social, geographical, and historical contexts (Waterman, 2019; Crooke et al., 2024). His singing, deeply connected to the Loess Plateau's agrarian life and emotional landscape, exemplifies the idea that music serves not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for community memory, social cohesion, and regional storytelling (Jones, 2020; Tang & Sornayi, 2023).

The findings strongly align with the vocal technique theory, which posits that breath control, resonance, and register transitions are critical components of vocal effectiveness (Dai, 2024; Wang, 2024). Wang's mastery of abdominal breathing and his fluid transitions between true and false voice affirm this, particularly as they enable the delivery of emotionally nuanced and physically demanding musical phrases. This supports Dai's (2024) assertion that artistic vocal expression is inseparable from technical proficiency. Furthermore, Wang's ability to switch between chest, oral, and nasal resonance aligns with Spreadborough's (2022) emphasis on tone color as a narrative device, enabling singers to move listeners emotionally through sonic variety and contrast.

The incorporation of regional cultural identity theory is also evident in Wang's performance style, especially in his consistent use of the Shaanbei dialect and traditional metaphors, which ground his songs in local heritage (Ma, 2022; Peiheng & Kaewbucha, 2025). This is consistent with Quintero's (2019) and Xuming and Ut-sa's (2024) findings that regional folk music embodies



localized linguistic and cultural codes that foster belonging and historical continuity. Wang's commitment to performing in dialect despite broader pressures to conform to Mandarin underscores his role as a cultural conservator and strengthens the argument for folk music as a form of living heritage (Altınbaş & Karahasanoglu, 2024; Shewell & Sansom, 2024). Few previous studies have explored dialect use in folk vocal performance with this degree of specificity, positioning Wang's practice as a uniquely rich case for linguistic and musical preservation.

However, some elements of Wang's innovation challenge traditional boundaries and complicate the notion of cultural preservation. For example, his integration of modern instruments and updated thematic content appears inconsistent with more conservative views of preservation that prioritize authenticity over adaptation (Christensen, 2018). While scholars like Derbaix and Derbaix (2019) advocate for dynamic transmission models that evolve with societal changes, others warn against diluting folk traditions through hybridization. This tension reflects broader debates in ethnomusicology between the concept of "living heritage," where music adapts and thrives through change, and "museum preservation," where the primary goal is to conserve tradition in its original form. Wang's work leans toward the former, demonstrating that preservation can coexist with innovation if rooted in local values and cultural continuity.

The research methodology—particularly the use of field interviews, performance observation, and descriptive analysis—proved effective in capturing both the technical and cultural layers of Wang's artistry. Informants like Su Wen and Wang Yonghui offered critical insider perspectives that confirmed the pedagogical significance of Wang's approach. This qualitative insight aligns with Walmsley's (2018) recommendation for immersive, ethnographic methods in capturing cultural value in the arts. Moreover, the performance analysis of "Na Da Da Ye Bu Ru Za Shan Gou Gou Hao" exemplifies Spreadborough's (2022) concept of "emotional tone-text unity," wherein musical texture and lyrical content are inseparably fused to evoke authentic sentiment.

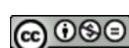
In sum, the findings reaffirm that Wang Xiangrong is not merely a performer but also a teacher, innovator, and cultural bridge, transmitting the essence of Shaanbei folk tradition while renewing it for future generations. His vocal artistry exemplifies how technical mastery, regional identity, and cultural resilience can intersect. As such, his work offers a compelling model for other regions grappling with similar tensions between heritage and change.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Applying the Research Findings

1.1 Music educators and vocal trainers can incorporate Wang Xiangrong's singing techniques, such as abdominal breathing and true-false voice transitions, into folk music curricula to preserve and modernize regional vocal traditions.

1.2 Cultural institutions can use Wang's performance model to develop community-based workshops and digital archives that promote local dialect usage and emotional expression in folk singing.





2. Suggestions for Future Research

2.1 Future studies could conduct comparative analyses between Wang Xiangrong and other folk singers from different regions to explore stylistic diversity and shared transmission methods in Chinese folk music.

2.2 Further research can examine audience reception and intergenerational learning outcomes to assess the long-term impact of innovative folk music practices on cultural preservation. As a final reflection, scholars might ask: Can folk traditions thrive as performance art in a digital world, or must they remain tied to local lived experience?

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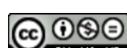
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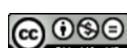
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