

Literacy Preservation of Xiping Folk Song by Yu Xinhua

Jiahao Xu*, Weerayut Seekhunlio

College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Corresponding author: Jiahao Xu, E-mail: 897103054@qq.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs through the lifelong efforts of Yu Xinhua, a key cultural inheritor and advocate of this intangible heritage. Her family's passion for folk songs and storytelling deeply influenced Yu Xinhua's early life, shaping her dedication to preserving and promoting this art form. Her initiatives include founding the "Xiping Folk Song Preservation and Development Singing Troupe," hosting training courses, organizing competitions, and publishing foundational works like "Selected Folk Songs of Xiping" and "The Collection of Folk Songs of the Central Plains—Henan Xixia Volume." These efforts have documented and preserved over 500 folk songs, ensuring their continuity for future generations. Yu Xinhua's work extends to education, where she integrated Xiping folk songs into school curricula, inspiring younger generations to engage with traditional music. Her notable performances in national and provincial competitions and her recognition by the Henan Provincial Department of Culture highlight her role in revitalizing Xiping folk songs. This study underscores the importance of oral traditions, community involvement, and educational initiatives in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Documenting Yu Xinhua's contributions provides a comprehensive perspective on literacy preservation strategies and their impact on Xiping folk songs, offering valuable insights for cultural preservation efforts worldwide.

Key words: Xiping Folk Song, Literacy Preservation, Yu Xinhua, Cultural Heritage, Chinese Folk Song

INTRODUCTION

The Central Plains region, known for its simple folk customs, abundant resources, and rich historical and cultural heritage, has long been a fertile ground for flourishing folk traditions. Among these traditions, the folk songs of Xiping Town, located in Xixia County, Henan Province, stand out for their profound cultural significance and unique musical characteristics. These songs, shaped by centuries of historical and cultural evolution, exhibit a rare integration of multicultural influences, making them an invaluable component of China's traditional folk music heritage (Zhao, 2010; Guocheng et al., 2022).

Xiping folk songs originated from Xiping Town, situated at the intersection of Henan, Hubei, and Shaanxi provinces, where the Funiu and Qinling mountains converge. This strategic location has historically served as a transportation hub and cultural crossroads where diverse ethnic groups and cultures converged. The distinctive local dialects and cultural expressions, intricately woven into the fabric of Xiping folk songs, emerged over time from the dynamic interplay of languages, traditions, and customs (Fang, 2022; Ren & Thotham, 2023).

In June 2008, the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists formally recognized the importance of Xiping folk songs. This designation has attracted significant

attention from experts and scholars, highlighting the urgent need for their preservation and promotion. Despite their recognition, the survival of Xiping folk songs faces significant challenges. Many older folk singers, the primary carriers of this tradition, have reached advanced ages, with some unable to perform due to declining health and memory. Furthermore, issues such as simplified melodies, incomplete lyrics, and diminished singing skills threaten the integrity of this rich art form (Chai et al., 2022; Zhang & Bhengsri, 2024).

The role of the transmitter, who acts as the custodian and transmitter of this musical heritage, is paramount in safeguarding its future. Yu Xinhua, a native of Xiping Town and a recognized provincial inheritor of Xiping folk songs, has been instrumental in the preservation and dissemination of this tradition. Her journey began at the age of 15 under the tutelage of her mother, a prominent local singer. Over her six-decade-long career, Yu Xinhua has mastered the traditional repertoire and contributed her compositions, garnered widespread acclaim. Her dedication has earned her numerous awards in local and national competitions, and she has trained a new generation of singers to carry forward this legacy (Gong et al., 2024; Cao & Boonsrianun, 2023).

This research focuses on Yu Xinhua's invaluable contributions to preserving Xiping folk songs, exploring her

biography and efforts. By documenting her role as an inheritor, this study aims to comprehensively understand the methods and strategies necessary for preserving and transmitting this intangible cultural heritage in a rapidly modernizing world. This work highlights the cultural richness of Xiping folk songs and underscores the broader significance of oral traditions in sustaining cultural identities and fostering cross-generational continuity.

Research Question

- How has Yu Xinhua contributed to the literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Knowledge of Xiping Folk Songs

Folk songs abound in the Central Plains region, renowned for its simple folk customs, long history, and rich cultural heritage. Over time, these folk songs have weathered the vicissitudes of history but have retained their vitality, serving as a precious artistic legacy for generations of people in the region. Xiping folk songs, in particular, originated at the junction of Henan, Hubei, and Shaanxi provinces in the northwest of Xixia County, Nanyang City, Henan Province. At the 800-li Funiu Mountain and the Qinling Mountains intersection, Xiping Town has historically been a vital border town and transportation hub. This unique geographical location has facilitated the gathering and mingling of immigrants from various ethnic groups, resulting in an intricate tapestry of cultures and languages that shaped the region's distinctive local dialects and customs (Li et al., 2019; Wang & Thotham, 2024).

As a representative of Xixia folk songs, Xiping folk songs possess unique musical characteristics and showcase a seamless fusion of diverse musical styles and local culture. These songs hold a significant place in the musical culture of Nanyang and the Central Plains. The national intangible cultural heritage list included Xiping folk songs in its second batch in June 2008. The genres of Xiping folk songs are remarkably diverse, including work songs, folk ballads, and minor tunes. Distinct regional colors and a strong local flavor characterize them. Working people traditionally performed these songs to express emotions and alleviate sorrow during labor (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Pu et al., 2023). They are improvisational, unrestricted by specific themes, venues, or accompaniment, allowing singers to express personal emotions at any time freely.

Characteristics and Historical Development

Xiping folk songs encompass many themes, including awakening songs, love songs, children's songs, and historical legend songs. They vividly reflect the people's lives, emotions, and cultural beliefs. Historically, the working people have passed down these songs orally, using them as a collective expression of their joys, sorrows, and experiences. During the Han Dynasty, Xiping folk songs began to emerge and

flourished during the Tang Dynasty. Legends suggest that these songs were popular among "Tang generals," groups of workers sent to the mountains by Emperor Li Shimin to develop lands. Over the centuries, the mingling of cultures, especially during migration, enriched the content and styles of Xiping folk songs, turning them into a vibrant repository of local history and culture (Xiaodun & Xiaohui, 2004; Xuelai, 2023).

Challenges and Preservation Efforts

In recent years, the modernization of society and the acceleration of urbanization have significantly impacted the transmission of Xiping folk songs. Modern music forms, such as pop music, amplified by media like television and the Internet, have overshadowed traditional folk arts. The challenges in preserving Xiping folk songs include a dwindling audience, limited transmission, and a lack of successors. Despite these challenges, Xiping folk songs remain a testimony to the region's cultural heritage, offering profound insights into the spiritual values, thinking patterns, and artistic sensibilities of the people in southwestern Henan (Su, 2018; Tang, 2021).

Singing Techniques of Xiping Folk Songs

Xiping folk songs primarily employ a straight-tone singing method, distinguished by the extensive use of true voice-over falsetto. Singers emphasize high vocal placement, utilizing the head cavity to project the voice in a straight-tone manner. This approach creates a voice with strong penetration and enhances head resonance, achieving a high vocal position akin to the traditional singing techniques of Henan opera (Rocksilp & Premananda, 2024; Zhu & Suanmonta, 2024).

The traditional singing method of Xiping folk songs emerged as a way for working people to express their emotions while laboring in fields, hillsides, and other natural settings. It retains an "authentic" local charm, with a simple, bright voice and sincere emotions. The vocal technique aligns with the local dialect's articulation habit of "singing as one speaks," with strong tongue-root control and sound returning to the oral cavity. This method emphasizes authentic sounds over falsettos, creating a mellow and earthy tone (Hu, 2022; Li & Seekhunlio, 2024). However, its limitations include a narrow vocal range, low voice placement, and a sharp, bright, yet less-rounded timbre.

Xiping folk songs incorporate lining words to enhance the emotional and lyrical content, making the songs more vivid and expressive. The "moist tune" technique, a refined form of traditional Chinese vocal music, embodies the rich flavor of Chinese folk songs. Gaoqiang is a prominent form of Xiping folk singing, known for its notable characteristics.

1. High-Pitched Melody and Wide Range: Gaoqiang features a high-pitched and loud melody with an expansive range. Singers employ high pitches and clear, penetrating timbres, making it ideal for open mountain environments or large labor settings where the songs must carry long distances.

2. **Improvisational and Free Melody:** Unlike fixed-tune folk songs, Gaoqiang allows singers to improvise based on their emotions, vocal abilities, and the performance environment. This improvisation adds expressiveness and flexibility to the songs.
3. **Chorus and Group Singing:** Gaoqiang frequently features choruses or group performances in which others echo the lead singer through repetition or harmony. This enhances the emotional impact of the performance and fosters a sense of collective life, especially during festivals or labor gatherings (Chai & Lin, 2021).

Research Theory

Ethnomusicology research theory forms the foundation of this study on Yu Xinhua's Xiping folk song literacy preservation. Ethnomusicology provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing and understanding music's cultural, social, and historical contexts within specific communities. Focusing on Xiping folk songs, this research examines their musical and performance practices and the broader cultural and societal factors that have shaped their development and preservation (Wang, 2022).

Applying ethnomusicology theory enables the study to delve into the intricate interplay between music, language, and tradition. It emphasizes the role of oral transmission in maintaining the authenticity and continuity of Xiping folk songs and the significance of local dialects, cultural expressions, and communal participation in their performance and preservation. Furthermore, it explores the contributions of Yu Xinhua, a key inheritor, in safeguarding this intangible cultural heritage through her singing techniques, teaching methods, and innovative approaches to cultural transmission (Morgenstern, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology anchored in ethnomusicological approaches to examine the literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs by Yu Xinhua. The researcher designs the methods to explore the cultural, historical, and social contexts of Xiping folk songs and to document Yu Xinhua's role as a key inheritor in their preservation and transmission. The methodology integrates multiple techniques to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis:

Fieldwork and Participant Observation

Field visits to Xiping Town and surrounding areas are conducted to immerse in the cultural environment where Xiping folk songs thrive. Participants observe these songs by attending live performances, festivals, and informal gatherings. This method captures the communal context, performance settings, and the interaction between performers and audiences. The researcher can also observe Yu Xinhua's teaching and performing practices in situ, gaining a nuanced understanding of the maintenance of these traditions.

Interviews with Key Informants

Semi-structured interviews are a central component of the research, conducted with Yu Xinhua, other folk singers, cultural practitioners, and local community members. These interviews gather firsthand accounts of the historical evolution, stylistic elements, and challenges faced by Xiping folk songs. Yu Xinhua's personal experiences, approach to teaching and performing, and strategies for preserving the songs in modern society receive special attention.

Document and Archival Analysis

The researcher systematically reviews historical documents, archives, and prior research on Xiping folk songs and regional folk traditions. This analysis provides historical context and highlights the evolution of Xiping folk songs over time. By comparing archival materials with contemporary practices, the study identifies shifts in performance styles, thematic content, and societal relevance.

Linguistic and Dialectal Analysis

The study incorporates an analysis of the linguistic elements embedded in Xiping folk songs, given their deep connection to the local dialect. The intonation, phrasing, and unique phonetic features of the Xiping dialect are examined to understand how they shape the melodic and lyrical expressions of the songs.

Collaboration with Local Communities

The research involves collaboration with local cultural organizations and community members to ensure an inclusive approach. This engagement allows the study to reflect community perspectives and fosters a sense of shared responsibility in preserving Xiping folk songs.

Ethnographic Documentation

The ethnographic documentation process creates audio and video recordings of performances, interviews, and teaching sessions. These recordings serve as a valuable resource for analyzing the performance practices, vocal techniques, and emotional expressions unique to Xiping folk songs.

RESULTS

Yu Xinhua's Early Life and Its Connection to Literacy Preservation of Xiping Folk Songs

Yu Xinhua, born in 1950 in Caochang Village, Xiping Town, Xixia County, Nanyang City, Henan Province, grew up in an environment deeply rooted in folk traditions. Her upbringing, surrounded by the cultural practices of her family and community, became the foundation of her lifelong dedication to preserving the literacy and heritage of Xiping folk songs.

Yu Xinhua was the second of four siblings in a hardworking farming family. Her father, Yu Dashan, a passionate folk

song enthusiast, played a pivotal role in shaping her connection to Xiping folk songs. Though he only had a few years of formal education, Yu Dashan was renowned in the village for his rich voice and expressive singing, which he shared at festivals, village gatherings, and while working in the fields. His singing was more than entertainment; it was a medium of emotional expression and cultural transmission. During the planting season, he would take Yu Xinhua to the fields every spring, teaching her the melodies and lyrics of traditional songs as they worked. These early experiences instilled in her a profound appreciation for the oral traditions of Xiping folk songs.

Yu Xinhua's mother, Liu Yulan, contributed to this cultural environment through storytelling and teaching traditional customs at home. Though not a singer herself, Liu Yulan's narratives enriched Yu Xinhua's understanding of folk traditions' cultural and emotional depth. Together, her parents provided a nurturing cultural foundation that emphasized the value of folk songs as a tool for emotional expression, historic preservation, and community identity.

Yu Xinhua sought to deepen her understanding of Xiping folk songs from an early age. She often ventured to fields and fairs to listen to local performers recount songs' origins and demonstrate their singing techniques. Her father, patient and encouraging, would answer her endless questions about lyrics and melodies, singing each song repeatedly until she could remember them. This familial support fueled her passion and laid the groundwork for her role as a cultural inheritor dedicated to the literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs.

Yu Xinhua's Lifelong Commitment to Preservation

Xiping folk songs, deeply intertwined with nature and labor, were central to Yu Xinhua's daily life and shaped her earliest memories. She witnessed the collective singing of villagers during labor, where songs synchronized their movements and lightened the burden of work. These experiences underscored folk songs' communal and functional aspects, inspiring her to preserve these traditions for future generations (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Yu Xinhua and her husband sing a Xiping folk song
Source: Jiahao Xu

Yu Xinhua's dedication to literacy preservation extended into her personal life when she met her husband, through their shared love of music, who was deeply impressed by her singing and became her collaborator and supporter. He contributed significantly to her efforts by providing accompaniment, writing lyrics, and assisting in creating new folk songs. Their partnership strengthened her musical output and advanced the preservation and development of Xiping folk songs as a living cultural heritage.

Yu Xinhua's upbringing and personal experiences reflect the essence of literacy preservation in Xiping folk songs. She has maintained their authenticity and cultural relevance by learning, practicing, and transmitting these songs orally from one generation to the next. Her life embodies the importance of familial and community support in sustaining intangible cultural heritage. Yu Xinhua's journey highlights how the preservation of Xiping folk songs is not merely about retaining melodies and lyrics but also about safeguarding the values, emotions, and identities embedded within them (Figure 2).

Performance Experience

Yu Xinhua has played a pivotal role in the literacy preservation and development of Xiping folk songs through her extensive performance and teaching efforts over several decades. As the leader of the 'Xiping Folk Song Preservation and Development Singing Troupe,' which she established in 1982 in Xiping Township, Xixia County, Henan Province, Yu Xinhua has spearheaded efforts to preserve and popularize this cultural heritage. The troupe, consisting of over 20 performers and a repertoire of more than 500 songs, including classics like *Flying a Kite*, *Gathering Lamps*, and *Four or Six Sentences with Embellishments*, serves as a living archive of Xiping folk traditions (Figure 3).

Training and Education

Yu Xinhua's commitment to literacy preservation is evident in her dedication to training and education. Over the years, she has hosted more than 50 training courses on Xiping folk songs, nurturing over 300 folk song enthusiasts and singers. Additionally, her active participation in organizing the Xixia County Folk Song Competition has led to the discovery

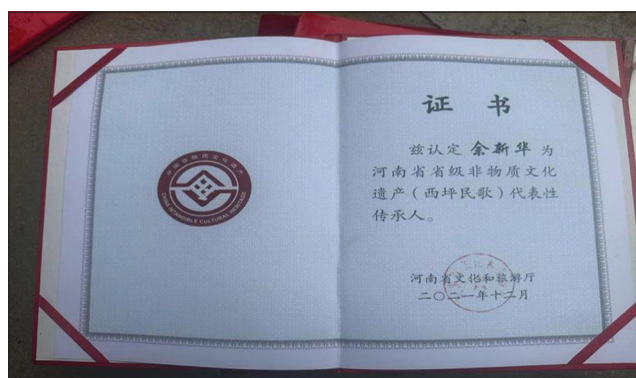


Figure 2. Intangible cultural heritage certificate
Source: Jiahao Xu

and mentorship of over 50 outstanding folk song inheritors, including her 20 apprentices, such as Wang Xiuli and Li Xiaohong, who have become prominent inheritors of Xiping folk songs. Her initiatives, such as the “Establishment of Inheritance Archives” and “Cultivation of Young Singers” programs, have ensured the systematic preservation and transmission of Xiping folk songs (Figure 4).

In 1985, Yu Xinhua, alongside cultural workers from Xixia County, conducted extensive fieldwork in Xiping Town and surrounding villages. The publication of *Selected Folk Songs of Xiping*, which documented over 150 folk songs and preserved melodies and lyrics on the verge of extinction, culminated their efforts. In 1993, she contributed to the compilation of *The Collection of Folk Songs of the Central Plains—Henan Xixia Volume*, which recorded more than 400 folk songs from the region. These publications have become foundational resources for studying and preserving Xiping folk songs, expanding their reach and safeguarding their legacy for future generations.

In 1999, Yu Xinhua collaborated with the education department of Xixia County to incorporate Xiping folk songs into the school curriculum. As an off-campus tutor, she regularly taught students about the history, cultural

background, and singing techniques of Xiping folk songs. Her efforts to formalize folk songs within the educational system have laid a foundation for long-term preservation, inspiring young generations to engage with and continue this cultural heritage.

Prominent Performances and Recognition

Yu Xinhua’s performance career has significantly contributed to the literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs by showcasing their artistic charm to diverse audiences (Table 1).

Yu Xinhua’s performances and initiatives have preserved the melodies and lyrics of Xiping folk songs and revitalized their cultural significance. By blending performance, education, and written documentation, she has ensured that Xiping folk songs remain a vital part of the cultural identity of Henan Province and beyond. Her recognition as a representative inheritor underscores her immense contributions to safeguarding this intangible cultural heritage and inspiring others to continue its legacy.

DISCUSSION

The study of literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs by Yu Xinhua demonstrates the critical role of individuals in safeguarding and transmitting intangible cultural heritage. Through her lifelong dedication, Yu Xinhua has preserved the musical and lyrical aspects of Xiping folk songs and ensured their cultural and educational significance remains relevant in modern contexts (Shi & Nicolas, 2023; Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023). The preservation and transmission of Xiping folk songs by Yu Xinhua highlight several key themes. Yu Xinhua’s work underscores the importance of oral traditions in preserving folk songs. She has created a sustainable model for passing down these traditions by teaching her apprentices and engaging with local communities. Her efforts to mentor young singers and organize community competitions have invigorated interest and participation in Xiping folk songs (Chang et al., 2024).

Incorporating Xiping folk songs into the local school curriculum marked a transformative step in literacy preservation. This initiative formalized the teaching of folk songs and inspired a new generation to engage with and appreciate this cultural heritage. Young people now possess the knowledge and skills to continue this tradition through structured learning (Lau, 2007; Ye et al., 2023). The publication of *Selected Folk Songs of Xiping* and *The Collection of Folk Songs of the Central Plains—Henan Xixia Volume* demonstrates the value of written records in complementing oral traditions. Researchers and enthusiasts now rely on these works as critical resources, safeguarding the melodies, lyrics, and cultural contexts of Xiping folk songs for future study and appreciation (Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023; Yang et al., 2015).

Yu Xinhua’s extensive performance career has showcased the artistic charm of Xiping folk songs to a broad audience, ensuring their continued relevance. Her recognition on provincial and national stages, such as the Henan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Folk Song Competition and the CCTV program *China Songs*, has amplified awareness and

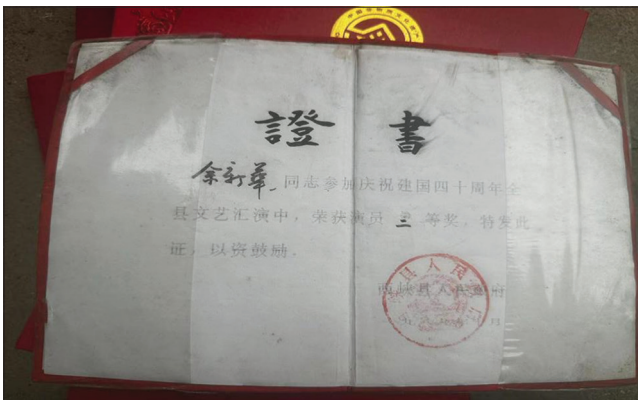


Figure 3. The awards for Yu Xinhua, who participated in the artistic performance

Source: Jiahao Xu



Figure 4. Yu Xinhua attending the performance of the Xiping folk song

Source: Jiahao Xu

Table 1. Prominent performances and recognitions of yu xinhua

Year	Event	Performance	Recognition/Award
1989	Xixia County's cultural event celebrating the 40 th anniversary of the founding of the PRC	Performed Xiping folk songs	Second Prize for her performance
2005	CCTV Sound Channel program China Songs	Performed New Year's Greeting	Featured performance
2005	Henan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Folk Song Competition	Performed Selling Flatbread and Flying a Kite	High praise from judges, recognized for showcasing Xiping folk songs
2008	CCTV Sound Channel program China Songs	Performed Tuning Troops Song	Acknowledged for promoting Xiping folk songs
2009	Yu Xi Concord Cup Literary Competition	Performed The Great Pair of Flowers	Outstanding Performer Award
2015	Xixia County Agricultural Bank Cup Xiping Folk Song Competition	Performed Xiping folk songs	First Prize
2021	Recognition by Henan Provincial Department of Culture	N/A	Officially recognized as a representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage (Xiping folk songs)
2023	Nanyang City Intangible Cultural Heritage Exchange Forum	Performed Xiping folk songs	Expanded awareness of Xiping folk songs

appreciation of this cultural heritage. Despite her success, the preservation of Xiping folk songs faces challenges from modernization and urbanization. The decline of traditional lifestyles and the dominance of popular music threaten the transmission of folk songs (Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Gao & Karin, 2023). However, Yu Xinhua's proactive measures, including mentorship, archival work, and formal education, have mitigated these threats to a significant extent.

CONCLUSION

Yu Xinhua's contributions to the literacy preservation of Xiping folk songs exemplify the powerful impact of dedicated cultural inheritors in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. By combining oral transmission, documentation, education, and performance, she has ensured the survival and vitality of Xiping folk songs in the face of modernization. Her recognition as a representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage underscores the value of her work, not just for the local community but for the broader preservation of cultural traditions.

The case of Yu Xinhua highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to cultural preservation. It calls for collaborative efforts between individuals, communities, and cultural institutions to support initiatives like hers. As Xiping folk songs evolve within their cultural and historical contexts, Yu Xinhua's legacy serves as a model for preserving the essence of intangible cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary realities. By preserving the melodies, lyrics, and cultural context of Xiping folk songs, Yu Xinhua has provided future generations with a vibrant connection to their heritage, ensuring that these songs remain a source of cultural identity, inspiration, and pride.

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