

## The Literacy Preservation and Transmission of Yangzhou Folk Songs: Evolution, Adaptation and Modern Relevance

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: December 10, 2024

Accepted: March 12, 2025

Published: March 31, 2025

Volume: 13 Issue: 2

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

Yangzhou folk songs, an important part of China's intangible cultural heritage, capture the region's historical, cultural, and artistic traditions. This research investigates the evolution, preservation, and transmission of Yangzhou folk songs, focusing on topic development, vocal skills, and accompanying instruments across history. These songs represent each period's socioeconomic and cultural dynamics, beginning as work chants in the Sui and Tang dynasties and evolving into artistic expressions in the Ming, Qing, and Republican eras. Modern versions, such as incorporating Western musical elements and creative performing approaches, have increased popularity while keeping their original character. The research focuses on the shift from oral to written literacy, the role of educational and government endeavors in preservation, and the importance of cross-cultural cooperation in perpetuating these traditions. Furthermore, the growth of singing styles and accompanying instruments, from natural vocalization and traditional ensembles to modern and electronic arrangements, emphasizes the versatility of Yangzhou folk songs. Studying their historical continuity and contemporary relevance sheds light on long-term methods for safeguarding Yangzhou folk songs as a living cultural heritage, ensuring their transmission to future generations while encouraging innovation and global participation.

**Key words:** Yangzhou Folk Songs, Cultural Preservation, Transmission, Chinese Folk Songs, Literacy Preservation

### INTRODUCTION

Yangzhou folk songs are fundamental to China's intangible cultural heritage, embodying the region's rich artistic traditions and historical histories. The region's distinctive physical, economic, and cultural background has influenced these songs over their nearly 2,500-year history. Located at the confluence of the Grand Canal and the Yangtze River, Yangzhou flourished as a cultural and economic center, promoting the development and dissemination of folk tunes (Lau, 2007). Celebrated melodies like Jasmine Flower (Mo Li Hua), Eight Sections of Scenery (Ba Gen Lu Chai Hua), and Yang Liu Qing exemplify the creative essence of the populace, encapsulating their traditions, sentiments, and narratives over the ages (Li et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2024).

During the Ming and Qing eras, Yangzhou folk melodies thrived, achieving national acclaim through folk performers' endeavors and the literati's refinement. These songs epitomized the cultural richness of the era, encompassing topics of love, quotidian existence, regional traditions, and historical occurrences. Their oral transmission and evolution over generations guaranteed their survival, rendering them artifacts of Yangzhou's cultural legacy (Zurndorfer, 1983; Harris, 2005;

Wang & Thotham, 2024). Nevertheless, despite their historical and cultural importance, Yangzhou folk songs encounter considerable obstacles in contemporary times.

Generational disconnection jeopardizes the preservation and transmission of Yangzhou folk songs, as younger listeners gravitate towards contemporary and global cultural forms. The elderly demographic of traditional singers and practitioners, the main guardians of these oral traditions, intensifies the threat of losing this cultural heritage (Pu et al., 2023). Moreover, urbanization and modernization have reduced the significance of folk music in daily life, while the entry of foreign cultural influences has eclipsed their attractiveness to modern listeners (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Yang et al., 2015). These elements cumulatively jeopardize the continuity of Yangzhou folk songs, eliciting apprehensions regarding their relevance and survival in an increasingly dynamic environment.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Yangzhou folk melodies have exhibited notable adaptation over time. In the Republican era, Western musical influences introduced instruments like the piano and violin, enhancing the accompaniment of songs and expanding their appeal. Contemporary methods,

such as presenting folk songs as musicals and incorporating them into educational programs, have rejuvenated interest in this cultural legacy (Chang, 2007; Ping et al., 2024). Events such as the Yangzhou Folk Song Concerts and Folk Art Festivals, in conjunction with partnerships with emerging artists, have enhanced the contemporary significance of traditional songs, connecting historical and modern contexts.

Preserving and propagating Yangzhou folk songs is essential for conserving their artistic and historical significance and fostering a greater comprehension of traditional Chinese culture. These songs epitomize the era, mirroring the political, economic, and cultural development of Yangzhou and its inhabitants (Yao et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2024). By documenting, adapting, and promoting these songs, we can maintain their relevance and ensure their preservation as a dynamic component of China's intangible cultural heritage.

This study examines the preservation and transmission of literacy in Yangzhou folk songs, emphasizing their evolution, adaptation, and contemporary relevance. It aims to tackle essential inquiries regarding the evolution of these songs, the reasons shaping their development, and the tactics required for their preservation and promotion. This study seeks to enhance the sustainable preservation of Yangzhou folk songs, assuring their continued vitality and significance within China's cultural environment.

### Research Question

- How can the literacy preservation and transmission of Yangzhou folk songs?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Origins and Historical Development

The region's distinctive socio-economic and cultural context profoundly influences the historical development of Yangzhou folk songs. The origins of these songs go back to antiquity, highlighting the impact of labor, everyday life, and cultural traditions on Yangzhou folk songs. The documentation of early folk songs, like the Southern Dynasty Music - Changgan Song, showcases Yangzhou's musical culture's enduring heritage, even though time has obscured the melodies. Throughout the centuries, Yangzhou folk songs evolved under the Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, mirroring the changing socio-cultural environment (Xuelai, 2023; Chen, 2013).

### Characteristics of Yangzhou Folk Song Performance

Yangzhou folk songs display unique vocal traits shaped by the area's natural surroundings, cultural context, and linguistic attributes, which merge the gentleness of the Jiangnan region with the clarity of northern tones and significantly influence the singing style. Initial performances depended on innate vocal methods, with vocalists employing genuine voices to convey vibrant, lucid, and emotionally resonant songs (Li et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2015). The vocal technique embodies simplicity and directness, resonating with the populace's quotidian experiences and sentiments.

### Types and Applications of Yangzhou Folk Songs

Yangzhou folk songs comprise several styles, like ditties, labor songs, and rice-planting songs, mirroring their era's socio-economic and cultural circumstances. Classify Yangzhou folk music into two principal genres:

- 1) Yangzhou Ditties: These "leisure songs" originated in urban environments, influenced by the prosperity of life and the cultural interests of city inhabitants. Ditties like Jasmine Flower (Mo Li Hua) and Yang Liu Qing, noted for their emotional expression, wit, and humor, achieved considerable popularity. Their tunes are fluid and unrestrained, reflecting the cultural refinement of Yangzhou's urban existence.
- 2) Labor Songs (Haozis): Labor songs, including rice-planting chants, were essential to an agrarian existence. Field laborers performed these songs as mechanisms to coordinate activities and mitigate exhaustion. Their vocal presentation sometimes included a call-and-response format, incorporating a lead vocalist and a chorus, which enhanced rhythmic dynamism and emotional resonance.

The Gaoyou Folk Songs and the Yangzhou Qingqu, included in national intangible cultural heritage lists, demonstrate the cultural significance of Yangzhou folk songs. These forms exemplify the region's abundant musical legacy and the interaction between urban and rural cultural practices (Wang & Zhao, 2024; Li & Maneewattana, 2022).

### Significance in Socio-Cultural Context

Yangzhou folk songs encapsulate the region's political, economic, and cultural history. These songs offer significant insights into individuals' customs, lives, and emotional states, providing a lens into the socio-economic realities of many historical epochs. The integration of multiple musical styles, including Yangzhou Qingqu and popular lyrics infused with Jiangnan characteristics, illustrates the versatility of Yangzhou folk songs in accommodating various cultural influences. This amalgamation underscores their tenacity and significance as lasting emblems of Yangzhou's regional musical heritage (Lee & Wong, 2017; Wang et al., 2021).

### Challenges and Preservation Initiatives

Notwithstanding their cultural importance, Yangzhou folk songs encounter several problems. The modernization of agricultural practices, urbanization, and the impact of foreign cultures have reduced their traditional functions and significance. The aging population of practitioners presents a substantial risk to the oral transmission of these tunes (Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Shi & Nicolas, 2023). Initiatives to safeguard Yangzhou folk songs have intensified, especially following their designation as intangible cultural treasures. Extensive preservation and recording initiatives and integration into educational curricula and public presentations have been crucial in preserving their heritage. Incorporating Jasmine Flower and other folk songs into educational

curricula and cultural festivals underscores the significance of merging traditional music with modern living (Gao & Karin, 2023; Gong et al., 2024).

### Research Theory

Ethnomusicology research theory provides a robust framework for examining the preservation and transmission of Yangzhou folk songs via cultural, historical, and musical perspectives. Researchers may capture oral traditions, performance practices, and community viewpoints via fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews. The musical study elucidates the particular features of Yangzhou folk songs, whilst comparison studies underscore their geographical uniqueness. Ethnomusicology investigates the interaction between oral and written traditions, the significance of folk songs in articulating cultural identity, and their adaptation to contemporary and global settings (Tang, 2021; Morgenstern, 2018). By examining these dimensions and promoting community-oriented preservation strategies, ethnomusicology affirms that Yangzhou folk songs are recognized as dynamic cultural expressions that connect tradition and modernity, facilitating their sustainable transmission and significance in contemporary society.

### METHODOLOGY

This research employs ethnomusicology and qualitative approaches to examine the maintenance and transmission of literacy in Yangzhou folk songs. The technique examines the historical development, cultural adaptability, and contemporary significance of Yangzhou folk songs while investigating effective measures for their preservation and transmission.

#### Ethnomusicological Fieldwork

Fieldwork is the foundation of this research, enabling direct interaction with the traditions and practitioners of Yangzhou folk music.

- **Participant Observation:** The researcher will visit Yangzhou folk song performances, cultural festivals, and rehearsals to examine the contemporary processes of performance and transmission.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be carried out with a varied cohort of stakeholders, including folk song performers, local cultural authorities, educators, and audience participants, to record their experiences, attitudes, and practices.
- **Documentation:** Audio and video recordings of live performances, workshops, and interviews will be gathered to preserve and examine the melodic, linguistic, and performative attributes of Yangzhou folk songs.

#### Historical and Cultural Analysis

This study will examine the historical evolution of Yangzhou folk songs and their cultural importance.

- **Archival Research:** Historical documents, music anthologies, and scholarly texts will be analyzed to track

the development of Yangzhou folk songs from the Sui Dynasty to the present.

- **Cultural Contextualization:** This research will examine the impact of socio-economic transformations, cultural interactions, and historical occurrences on the evolution and adaptation of Yangzhou folk songs.

#### Analysis of Qualitative Data

The qualitative data from interviews, observations, and recordings will undergo thematic coding analysis to discern patterns, themes, and insights. This method will guarantee a comprehensive grasp of Yangzhou folk songs' socio-cultural, historical, and musical aspects.

### RESULTS

#### Evolution of Yangzhou Folk Song Themes

The history of Yangzhou folk songs is categorized into four principal stages, each exhibiting distinct characteristics in its evolution and the techniques of literary preservation and transmission.

##### *Origins and initial development (sui dynasty to song dynasty)*

Yangzhou became a prominent economic and cultural center throughout the Tang and Song dynasties due to its advantageous position along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal. The affluence fostered the initial evolution of Yangzhou folk music, which emerged from the quotidian lives and labor of the local populace.

Songs such as Qian Fu Hao Zi and Ge Mai Hao Zi were composed by laborers to facilitate task synchronization and alleviate the strain of work. These labor chants had uncomplicated melodies and rhythms that were easily memorable and executable, rendering them suitable for oral transmission. For example, Qian Fu Hao Zi was performed by fiber pullers to coordinate their activities, whereas Ge Mai Hao Zi elevated the spirits of farmers in the fields.

The oral characteristic of these songs underscores their function as tools of cultural literacy. In the absence of written documentation or musical notation, the songs depended on collective memory and improvisation, safeguarding the emotions and narratives of the working people. This phase established the groundwork for the cultural continuity of Yangzhou folk music.

##### *Economic prosperity and diversification (yuan, ming and qing dynasties)*

The Yuan, Ming, and Qing eras signified an era of cultural prosperity for Yangzhou. The city's economic expansion, propelled by the salt business, enhanced the standard of living, creating a milieu conducive to the flourishing of arts and music. During this period, Yangzhou folk songs developed in substance and sound, transforming from work chants into a diverse repertory of melodies that encapsulate all facets of life.

During this period, folk ballads such as Yangzhou Xiaoqu, Deng Yin Ban, and Jiangnan Diao arose, distinguished by their lyrical depictions of love, quotidian life, and regional traditions. These songs captivated local audiences and were disseminated nationwide through economic and cultural interactions. The distinctive “Yangzhou Xiaodiao” style emerged as a characteristic of the region’s folk music.

The variety of Yangzhou folk songs in this period highlights their significance in promoting cultural literacy. As these songs were transmitted orally and then written, they served as conduits for conveying regional culture and identity, augmenting their preservation and transmission.

**Stages of change and integration (late qing to republican period)**

The folk songs of Yangzhou experienced major social and cultural changes during the late Qing and Republican eras. The new sound of Western music and the fast-paced urbanization of China had new questions and opportunities. They were at risk of extinction but adapted new influences and generated innovative adaptations of old and new styles.

During this time, local scholars and cultural figures, including Shen Xinguang, made achievements in collecting and preserving Yangzhou folk songs. They worked hard to document and preserve these cultural treasures for generations. More than this, though, this stage emphasizes the aforementioned scholarly intervention in the literacy preservation of oral traditions, as writing created a stable basis for the adaptation of these stories to new social environments.

**Contemporary heritage and innovation (new china- present)**

After founding New China, the preservation of Yangzhou folk songs received significant attention as part of the “preservation of intangible cultural heritage.” In the 1950s, large-scale collection and recording projects emerged, capturing a trove of traditional songs. Organizing and promoting these efforts was primarily achieved through cultural departments and professional research institutes.

Nowadays, Yangzhou folk songs have been revived through education, performances, and adaptations. Local

arts groups and schools have incorporated these songs into cultural programming, helping to pass them on to younger generations. New twists have drawn a wider audience, keeping the songs alive in contemporary society, including staging traditional tunes as plays and musicals.

Swelling cultural confidence and intangible heritage protection in recent years has also given fresh vitality to Yangzhou folk songs. Yangzhou Folk Song Concerts, Yangzhou Folk Art Festivals, and joint projects with young artists have incorporated modern factors while maintaining traditional features (Table 1).

**Yangzhou Folk Songs Singing Techniques**

To put it another way, as the function of Yangzhou folk songs transfers from functional labor tools to a type of artistic singing expression, the preservation and transmission of these songs also need to be transformed and become more complex accordingly, reflected in the evolution of singing techniques.

**The period of natural singing (qing dynasty and before)**

Before and during the Qing Dynasty, Yangzhou folk songs were characterized by natural and unrestrained singing styles. These untrained vocal techniques sprung organically from labor and quotidian existence, emphasizing emotional veracity and function. Improvisation was central to the practice: singers would adapt lyrics and melodies to suit the situation.

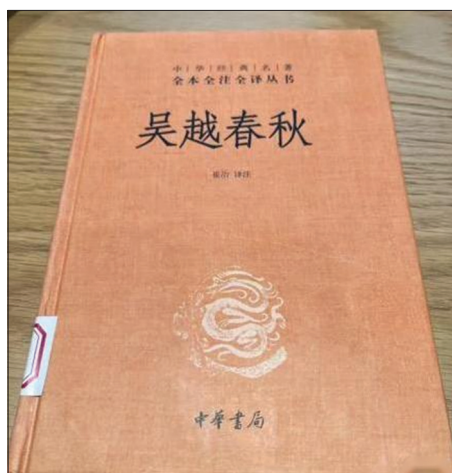
This mode of development relied on oral literacy, where they learned and performed songs by rote. Their raw and unadorned nature was a direct result of their lack of formal training and because they never wrote their sheet music down. Yangzhou’s culture and environment gave rise to this unique form of Chinese folk music (Figure 1).

**Artistic development from the mid-to-late qing dynasty to the republican period**

Yangzhou folk songs date from the mid-to-late Qing Dynasty. Drawing on native operatic regional influences, singers introduced stylistic approaches to their singing—breath control, vibrato, and ornamentation—which improved the emotional

**Table 1.** Development of yangzhou folk songs

Period	Key Features	Significance
Origins and Initial Development (Sui-Song Dynasties)	Labor chants like Qian Fu Hao Zi and Ge Mai Hao Zi emerged from daily life and labor.	Oral transmission preserved cultural emotions and narratives and laid the groundwork for Yangzhou folk music.
Economic Prosperity and Diversification (Yuan-Qing Dynasties)	The emergence of diverse ballads (Yangzhou Xiaoqu, Deng Yin Ban) and the "Yangzhou Xiaodiao" style.	Promoted regional culture and identity; spread nationwide through cultural exchanges.
Stages of Change and Integration (Late Qing-Republican Period)	Western influences and urbanization led to innovative adaptations; scholars like Shen Xinguang documented songs.	Preserved oral traditions through scholarly efforts; facilitated adaptation to modern contexts.
Contemporary Heritage and Innovation (New China-Present)	Large-scale preservation projects, integration into education, and modern adaptations (e.g., musicals, festivals).	Revitalized folk songs with modern elements, strengthened intangible heritage protection and broadened audience appeal.



**Figure 1.** Recorded lyrics book of ancient Yangzhou folk songs

and aesthetic dimension of the performance. The use of pipa and yangqin instrumental accompaniment further added to the richness of the music.

During this time, a transition from oral to written literacy occurred, during which folk songs began to be documented and performed in more organized contexts. The development of singing techniques made Yangzhou folk part of the artistic creation, which benefited local consumption and appealed to a larger audience.

#### **Stage performance and specialization (post-1949–1978)**

With the founding of New China, Yangzhou folk songs entered the professional and stage performance phase. The competence of singing was improved through systematic training and standardization, and modern and traditional instruments introduced diversity.

Yangzhou folk songs have been effectively recorded and spread thanks to the state's focus on cultural preservation. The transmission of traditions to new generations was facilitated through educational programs and public performances, which could be seen as marrying oral and textual literacy in imaginative ways.

#### **Modern innovation and integration (1978–to present)**

Yangzhou folk songs have shown innovation and cross-cultural integration in the new era. Singers have blended traditional methods with modern ones, adding pop music touches and global influences. During this time, Yangzhou folk songs also extended global reach, which is characterized by adaptation into multiple languages and collaborations with other musicians. This piqued their interest in the song repertoire of Yangzhou folk singers. The intermix of tradition and innovation has guaranteed the living quality of Yangzhou folk songs as an active part of China's intangible cultural heritage.

#### **Evolution of Accompanying Instruments**

The evolution of accompanying instruments in Yangzhou folk songs is a testament to their adaptability and enduring

appeal. This process reflects not only the cultural and economic shifts in Chinese society but also the influence of Western music, modern technology, and changing audience preferences. As a crucial aspect of literacy preservation and transmission, the adaptation of accompanying instruments has played a significant role in maintaining the relevance of Yangzhou folk songs across generations.

#### **Influences in the republican era**

During the Republican period, a great change occurred in Yangzhou folk songs-- they started absorbing Western musical elements. Traditional instruments, including the pipa, yangqin, and erhu, remained front and center, grounding the songs in their cultural and regional roots. The inclusion of Western instruments, such as the piano, violin, and cello, added new textures and expanded the musical swirling of Yangzhou folk songs.

This amalgamation of traditional and Western aspects resulted in one-of-a-kind verses incorporating folk verse, which had a lot of emotional depth and simplicity, so it was practically run-of-the-mill court music and established a musical approach. These adaptations made Yangzhou folk songs more accessible to urban and international listeners and improved the cultural literacy and transmission of the songs.

#### **Contemporary updates and adjustments**

Before the emergence of modern communication technology and the gradual popularity of performance, Yangzhou folk songs adapted their accompaniment to changing times and also experienced a few twists and turns. Traditional instruments have always been a key part of these songs' identity. However, many of them also incorporate modern instruments and electronic music to appeal to more and different audiences.

For example, traditional ensembles with pipa, guqin, and dizi now coexist with keyboards, electric guitars and synthesizers. That mix of fresh sounds and aesthetics gives the songs a forward energy—yet allows them to retain an arcane heart—to modern listeners.

The form of band accompaniment for modern Yangzhou folk songs is usually divided into two main types: traditional band accompaniment and western band accompaniment. According to the needs of performances and stylistic characteristics, these are flexibly combined and innovated in actual performances (Table 2).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study underscores the importance of Yangzhou folk songs as a vital element of China's intangible cultural heritage, embodying the region's rich history, cultural identity, and creative traditions. Over the years, these songs have transformed from work chants in the Sui Dynasty to varied ballads in the Ming and Qing dynasties, culminating in inventive stage performances in the contemporary day (Liu et al., 2018; Wang, 2014). This development illustrates

**Table 2.** Modern Yangzhou folk songs accompaniment band classification

Band type	Instruments	Functional orientation	Applicable Scenarios
Traditional bands	Pipa, yangqin, erhu, bamboo flute, pan-drum, small gong	Showing traditional flavor and highlighting local characteristics	Non-heritage performances, cultural festivals and local exhibitions
Western-style orchestra	Piano, violin, cello, flute, jazz drums	Enrichment of melodic and harmonic structure and enhancement of dynamic expression	Concerts, large-scale stage performances, innovative adaptations
Fusion Band	Pipa, Erhu, Bamboo Flute, Piano, Electronic Piano, Synthesizer, Board Drums, Jazz Drums	Retaining the traditional flavor while introducing modern sound effects, adapting to diversified performance needs	Crossover concerts, contemporary theater, and music festivals

their exceptional adaptation to socio-cultural and economic changes while highlighting the problems presented by modernity, globalization, and declining generational interest.

Historical conditions have influenced the subject and melodic attributes of Yangzhou folk songs. Initial songs had practical roles, assisting laborers and conveying everyday sentiments, whereas subsequent works encapsulated the cultural wealth of Yangzhou’s affluent eras. The amalgamation of Western musical components during the Republican era and the infusion of current technology and performing methods in contemporary times have significantly enhanced the musical uniqueness of these tunes (Hao, 2023; Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023). This flexibility has enabled Yangzhou folk songs to maintain relevance amid evolving socio-economic situations, yet these changes also prompt worries over the preservation of their original core.

Historically, oral transmission has been the principal method for preserving Yangzhou folk tunes, allowing them to endure through generations despite the absence of written documentation. This dependence on oral traditions has rendered them susceptible to deterioration, especially as the demographic of traditional practitioners ages. The shift to written documentation and modern recording technology has introduced innovative preservation strategies (Xie & Punvaratorn, 2024; Horlor, 2019). However, these methods must be strengthened through community activities, educational programs, and cultural events to ensure their continued existence. Moreover, new reinterpretations of Yangzhou folk songs, including collaborations with current artists and adaptations into modern art forms, including musicals, can broaden their audience and enhance their appeal.

Yangzhou folk songs function as a cultural reflection, providing significant insights into the region’s history, traditions, and emotional tales. They illustrate the interaction between local customs and external influences, highlighting the dynamic essence of Yangzhou’s cultural character. Contemporary initiatives to globalize and promote Yangzhou folk music have expanded its audience, although preserving their originality poses a significant problem (Ho, 2014; Yu & Leung, 2019). Incorporating these songs into educational curricula, community workshops, and internet platforms has been essential in closing generational divides, enhancing awareness, and cultivating cultural pride.

A comprehensive strategy is necessary to tackle the issues confronting Yangzhou folk music. Community interaction is crucial since local practitioners and cultural stakeholders

are vital for maintaining the authenticity and significance of these songs. Educational and outreach campaigns can motivate future generations to value and engage with this cultural legacy. Digital technology provides robust instruments for storing, documenting, and transmitting Yangzhou folk tunes, reaching international audiences while maintaining their historical and cultural significance. Innovative adaptations and partnerships can engage new audiences and sustain tradition in contemporary settings (Young, 2007; Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023). Moreover, robust governmental policies and financial support for intangible cultural heritage initiatives are essential for long-term preservation endeavors.

In conclusion, the preservation and transmission of Yangzhou folk music necessitate a harmonious strategy that honors tradition while integrating modernity. This study highlights the historical evolution, cultural adaptation, and contemporary relevance of Yangzhou folk songs, illustrating how they have transformed from labor chants into artistic expressions reflecting regional identity. The amalgamation of Western musical components, the professionalization of vocal skills, and the inclusion of contemporary instruments exemplify their versatility. Nonetheless, obstacles such as generational disconnection, a diminishing number of conventional practitioners, and the effects of industrialization jeopardize their existence.

An integrated strategy that merges community involvement, education, and technical advancement is essential for preserving Yangzhou folk tunes. Promoting engagement among younger generations via interactive workshops, experiential learning, and digital platforms may connect historical and contemporary contexts. Furthermore, utilizing contemporary technologies, like online archives, virtual performances, and multimedia collaborations, can enhance accessibility and international renown.

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