

Article

The integration of the intangible cultural heritage Hua'er into school music education

Yunan Cao*

Albertus-Magnus-Platz, Köln 50923, Germany.

*Corresponding author: Yunan Cao, caoyunan724@gmail.com.

CITATION

Cao Y. The integration of the intangible cultural heritage Hua'er into school music education. *Advances in Curriculum Design&Education*. 2025; Vol 1(No. 3): 103.

<https://doi.org/10.63808/acde.v1i3.103>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 16 June 2025

Accepted: 4 July 2025

Available online: 31 December 2025

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2025 by author(s).

Advances in Curriculum Design&Education is published by Wisdom Academic Press Ltd. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

scenarios. This study emphasizes strong teaching potential for Hua'er with additional functions aside from music training purely for practical advantages. This paper closes with a notion of a teaching model with passion and innovation because of intangible emotion to be a driving force for more effective integration of intangible teaching with modern teaching.

Abstract: This study explores how Hua'er, a typical form of traditional folk song in NW China, might be introduced to music teaching in schools as a way of protecting intangible culture. This particular problem is theoretically broken down into three main concepts: Cultural Transfer Theory, Concept of Curriculum Integration, and Aesthetic Student Experience. By observation, classroom teaching confirms that scenario learning and creative adjustment are efficient approaches for making a connection between traditional forms and modern scenarios. However, a lack of organized teaching content, insufficient instructor training, and a standardized assessment system are prominent negatives. To address such problems, this study proposes several approaches: utilizing electronic teaching content, inter-province teaching establishment based on cooperation among teaching staff, and teaching based on

Keywords: Hua'er; intangible cultural heritage; music education; curriculum integration; cultural identity; aesthetic learning

1. Introduction

“The integration of intangible cultural heritage into education” has recently become one of the prominent methods in China concerning the transmission of culture and changes in basic compulsory education. Chapter IV of Law of People’s Republic of China concerning Intangible Cultural Heritage reads: ‘The state encourages the integration of representative elements of intangible cultural heritage into the national educational system and encourages innovation in this regard within a learning environment.’

It is against this policy background that the question can be raised of how intangible cultural heritage with typical regional features may be brought into music education in meaningful ways.

Hua’er represents one of the most popular forms of folk mountain song not only in the Ningxia region but also in northwest China. This type of mountain song is characterized by its strong ethnic character, lyricism, and improvisational style. This kind of musical form conveys rich features of everyday life and linguistic culture, but simultaneously it reflects cultural fusion of various ethnic groups (Wang et al., 2024).

However, most of the transmissions today are through oral traditions passed by folk artists. Due to various factors such as the change of structure in urban and rural areas and modern times generational gap, conditions for survival become worse (Yang & Liu, 2020).

Research supports the fact that music education in the context of heritage preservation serves as a medium of transmission while at the same time fostering cultural identity and aesthetic awareness among the young (Brown & Collins, 2016; Russell, 2019).

However, apart from this, a more systematic integration of Hua’er music in primary and secondary music teaching is only in its infancy. This means that most music teachers have no training in this regard, music teaching primarily focuses on little content regarding Hua’er music, and most pupils only have a little interest in this form of local music (Han 2017). Nevertheless, a conventional form of teaching does not match up with regard to the interactive characteristics of Hua’er music. This again confines the learning scope of music itself (Sun, 2021).

This paper will explore the strategies of linking Hua' Er, an intangible cultural heritage, with school music education. In particular, this study will address the following key questions:

- (1) Does Hua'er possess cultural characteristics that allow for didactic transformation?
- (2) What structural obstacles exist within the current education system?
- (3) How can an integration model be developed that is both didactically viable and effective in conveying culture?

2. Methods

This study employs a theoretical-analytical approach, examining relevant literature of relevant scholarship and practical school observations, constructs three kinds of didactic perspectives to investigate the possible pathways of including Hua'er into school music education. This study will not be based on questionnaires or empirical field research but will propose a conceptual framework from the following three dimensions: culture, curriculum, and student experience. In this light, the objective of this paper is to construct a local intangible cultural heritage teaching strategy with theoretical and practical grounds.

1. Cultural transfer: Originally, Hua'er was embedded in contexts of daily life such as festivals, fieldwork, or romantic encounters, a type of spontaneous orally transmitted singing. If this musical genre is to come to life in the classroom, the gap between its original setting and the contemporary lifeworld of students has to be bridged. As cultural ecology theory presupposes, cultural continuity can only be maintained if cultural expressions accommodate their social environment (Steward, 1955). What this means for educational practice is that Hua'er has to be taken out of its original context and transformed into something understandable and educationally appropriate. Teachers can make use of methods like staged scenes, thematic storytelling, or dialogic singing to embed traditional music into meaningful classroom experiences (Jackson, 2019; Yang & Liu, 2020).

2. Curricular integration: Traditional folk songs should not merely be used as cultural “ornamentation” in the classroom but must actively assist in achieving learning objectives. Indeed, the theory of integrated curriculum development emphasizes that the content of learning must be rooted in the experiences of the

students and foster relevance by relating the different knowledge fields (Beane, 1997). Thus, elements of Hua'er, respectively, can be related to typical training units such as rhythm training, melodic imitation, and lyric composition (Yang & Welch, 2014). For instance, Hua'er stanzas can be related to classical poetry or common time signatures to establish rhythmic skills, with the intention of strengthening the connection to the local musical culture (Wu, 2021).

3. Addresses students' aesthetic experience: Whether intangible cultural heritage is effectively communicated depends a lot on whether learners are able to establish an emotional contact with it. In general, the theory of aesthetic education emphasizes more aesthetic and sensory participation in artistic activities than technical competence, for example, singing skills (Russell, 2019). Hua'ers have free-flowing melodies with simple language and thus are directly accessible emotionally. In creative activities such as storytelling or reworking song lyrics, students may express their own experiences and emotions and thus attain a deeper understanding of cultural symbols and emotional expression. For example, rewriting traditional song lyrics to relate them to school life may be a good strategy to relate cultural information to students' personal experience (Li, 2019; Ma, 2022).

These three perspectives-cultural transfer, curricular integration, and aesthetic experience-together represent a theoretically founded as well as practice-oriented framework for the introduction of Hua'er into music education. In this, they combine educational theory with concrete didactic approaches and give a systematic basis for the development of local teaching strategies in support of the preservation of cultural heritage.

3. Results

3.1. Cultural Connectivity: Observations on Transfer

The shift of Hua'er from its folk context into the classroom calls for reconceptualization of the expressive environment. Drawing on previous teaching experiences, some instructors have reshaped the performing situation of Hua'er with "scenic reinterpretations," that is, interpreting traditional contexts like fieldwork or courtship as classroom situations like role plays and thematic short songs. This led to classroom activities such as "Hua'er Theatre in Duet" or "Write Your Own Hua'er

Line,” where students could become familiar with the improvisational style of Hua’er through adopting roles and then spontaneously extending them (Zhou, 2021; Yang & Liu, 2020).

Feedback suggests that the “everyday-based” forms of expression resulted in more student interest and, consequently, gave teachers the incentive to use local content in teaching. This would suggest that, through appropriate scenic recontextualization, Hua’er can be transformed from a traditional song form into a viable mode of classroom expression.

3.2. Didactic Applicability: Practical Integration into the Curriculum

Initial steps have also been taken regarding curricular integration. For instance, the typical pentatonic scales of Hua’er are included in the scale exercises, while their characteristic rhythms-for example, 2/4 time or compound rhythmic patterns-form the basis for rhythm training. Students also work with formal features of Hua’er in the analysis of lyrics, such as the question-and-answer structure of stanzas, or emotional contexts located in everyday situations (Wu, 2021).

Some educators even integrated Hua’ers melodic forms into literature lessons by creating interdisciplinary activities: students were asked to create a short melody in the style of Hua’er based on a poetic text. Such an approach not only strengthened the bond between music and literature but also developed cultural association and creative expression (Yang & Welch, 2014).

Generally speaking, it has become clear that effective Hua’er integration is based on two basic components: First, clear orientation toward a specific didactic goal, and second, relevance to the prior knowledge of the students. It is observed that under these conditions, teaching can move away from a purely “demonstrative” format toward a more “participatory” learning experience.

3.3. Aesthetic Student Response and Willingness to Participate

Especially in task-design situations, such as lyric writing or singing in role-playing situations, students were very engaged with the Hua’er-related classes. Some school activities, such as the “Hua’er Campus Competition” or the “Hua’er Remix Show,” showed that a lot of learners had high expressive needs and developed

remarkable creative skills. New forms of expression appeared, including school-related experiences and popular internet slang (Li, 2019; Ma, 2022).

In addition, students also showed strong emotional resonance in the process of listening to original recordings or watching videos of authentic performers. Common responses during post-lesson feedback included comments such as: “The lyrics sound like stories—you can understand them easily,” or “Singing this makes you feel relaxed.” Some even began to perform Hua’er voluntarily on school radio and during class events. This mode of emotional transmission shows that Hua’er, rather than being purely instructional content, has reached a stage in which it is likely to become an independent cultural resource in the school context.

In their entirety, the results clearly show that the educational value of Hua’er lies not only in developing musical skills but particularly in evoking expressive desire, cultural understanding, and emotional participation. These potentials form a sound basis for further didactic application in school music education.

4. Discussion

4.1. Key Challenges

4.1.1 Lack of Curricular Resources

Currently, music textbooks only contain a few references to Hua’er, mostly in a very fragmented way. Most of these references have not been adequately contextualized in a systematic and pedagogical way; accordingly, the teachers barely have access to proper teaching materials. This seriously hinders an in-depth engagement with the topic (Liu & Zhang, 2020).

4.1.2 Qualified Teachers Lacking

Most music teachers have not been professionally trained in any of the local musical traditions or ICH. They therefore had no clue concerning the melodic language, cultural background, and social context for the Hua’er, hence the working out of the lesson plans and implementing them remained uncertain (Kim, 2019).

4.1.3 Standardized Assessment Systems in Education

Worse still, the current music education assessment systems tend to concentrate on technical criteria like intonation, rhythm, and execution while leaving other essential components, including cultural understanding and aesthetic experiences, unaddressed. This kind of practice therefore leads to teachers shying away from “non-standard” topics like Hua’er and teaching more standardized content instead (Brown & Collins, 2016).

4.2. Possible Didactic Solutions

4.2.1 Scenario-Based Lesson Design

Hua’er can be related to certain cultural contexts, such as festivals, labor, or folk traditions, by teachers. Afterwards, exercises like “Duet in a School Context” or “Lyric Completion through Role Play” can be developed. The more the learning format is scenically structured, the easier it is to understand the emotional and cultural logic of the lyrics (Gao, 2017).

4.2.2 Building School-Regional Cooperation Platforms

In cooperation with a cultural center, university, or UNESCO office for intangible cultural heritage, corresponding programs such as “Hua’er Workshops” or “School Meets Tradition” may be carried out. These formats enhance both the cultural competence of teachers and the authenticity of teaching content (Sun, 2021).

4.2.3 Development of Digital Teaching Resources

Thus, tutorial materials in various forms can be accessed through a virtual “Hua’er teaching portal” containing short videos, learning apps, or even audio libraries, while students are given options for individual and flexible practice and creative presentation (Lee, 2020).

4.3. Cultural Educational Value

More than regional music, Hua'er can serve as a bridge for students to express their personal feelings, seeking their cultural identity. When the students sing the Hua'er and express their feelings or add their daily experiences in the lyrics, a metamorphosis from mere imitation to independent expression and from passive learning to deep emotional resonance takes place.

Education should not be merely a question of tradition but rather an active process whereby the student learns to re-interpret traditions in their own terms. Thus, far from local culture being “preserved,” it is genuinely “revitalized” (Russell, 2019; Li, 2019).

5. Conclusion

5.1. “Hua’er” possesses pedagogical potential for school education

The analysis supports that the melodic structure, lyrical content, and cultural context of Hua'er meet the requirement of school music education very well. With its free rhythm, emotional immediacy, and regional language close to the students' everyday ways of communication and activities, it can support the students in developing active participation and expressive powers (Ma 2022). Hua'er can be more than instructional content for rhythm training, lyric adaptation, or scenic enactment, for example, to stimulate emotion and creative impulses - indicating the great value of this kind of music for educational transformation.

5.2. Institutional support and teacher professional development are needed for teaching intangible cultural heritage

Although it is currently taught in some classrooms, a number of structural factors stand in the way: incomplete teaching materials, a lack of discipline-specific training for teachers, and narrowly focused evaluation systems. For the long-term normalization of Hua'er in school curriculums in a sustainable way, substantial supporting conditions are required: creating appropriate textbooks, professional training for teachers, and revision of the examination criteria (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Han, 2017). Reinforced communication between the local cultural units and education

departments will also be needed to push the separated pilot projects toward an institutional educational model.

5.3. Linking cultural education with classroom practice is a long-term task

The significance of Hua'er music does not only lie in its role of preserving culture but, more importantly and profoundly, in its appropriation with internalization among learners. While learners may be singing, appropriating, and relating Hua'er music, this will be a reference back to their culture in a most personal manner. This would thus be a learning process that directly counts because it would go beyond merely being a handing-down exercise. Indeed, for any kind of valid Cultural Education, handing down culture would only be one aspect. Cultural Education would also have to be about providing learners with a capability to appropriate their culture (Russell, 2019; Li, 2019).

In the future, the basic direction for further research might be: formulating a system for assessing intangible cultural heritage education. This would consider technical ability, comprehension of culture, emotional expression, and a willingness to participate. Regional studies regarding such endeavors for broader areas such as Gansu and Qinghai might specify in which respects models for curriculum structure, instructor training, and student participation have newly converged and diverged with a focus on transferable models. In addition, more in-depth studies regarding digital learning aids such as virtual simulations for singing, artificial intelligence for lyric composition, and short-video platforms for student performances may integrate traditional culture with new technology and powerfully facilitate student activation and creativity.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

References

[1] Beane, J. A. (1997). *Curriculum integration: Designing the core of democratic education*. Teachers College Press.

[2] Brown, A., & Collins, T. (2016). Music, culture, and identity: Teaching traditional forms in contemporary classrooms. *International Journal of Music Education*, 34(2), 215–229.

[3] Gao, W. X. (2016). Role-playing and cultural learning in music education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 118(2), 65–75.

[4] Han, R. (2017). A survey on Weifang teachers' attitudes toward teaching Chinese folk music. *International Journal of Music Education*, 35(2), 202–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761415620521>

[5] Jackson, M. (2019). The power of story in folk song education. *Music Educators Journal*, 105(3), 45–51.

[6] Lee, H. (2020). Using digital resources for traditional music learning: Pedagogical affordances and student engagement. *Computers & Education*, 148, Article 103784.

[7] Li, F. (2019). Emotional resonance and music heritage: Student responses to Hua'er in schools. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 53(2), 72–88.

[8] Liu, X., & Zhang, M. (2020). Curriculum reform and local music content in Chinese schools. *Frontiers in Education China*, 15(1), 112–128.

[9] Ma, J. (2022). School-based folk music integration and student creativity. *Music Education Research*, 24(1), 56–71.

[10] Russell, D. (2019). Aesthetic education in contemporary classrooms: Rethinking expression. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 27(1), 5–21.

[11] Steward, J. H. (1955). *Theory of culture change: The methodology of multilinear evolution*. University of Illinois Press.

[12] Sun, H. (2021). Intangible heritage and classroom innovation in Chinese middle schools. *International Review of Education*, 67(4), 533–551.

[13] Wang, X., Chuangprakhon, S., Jian, S., 和 Wang, G. (2024). Educational resources and instructional approaches for Chinese Hua'er folk songs in Gansu and Ningxia. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 18(3), 914–922.

<https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v18i3.21589>

[14] Wu, T. (2021). Rethinking rhythm: Ethnic music integration in Chinese urban classrooms. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 69(3), 239–254.

[15] Yang, X., & Liu, Y. (2020). Hua'er as living heritage: Intergenerational transmission and educational inclusion. *Asian Music*, 51(2), 123–142.

[16] Yang, Y., & Welch, G. F. (2014). Contemporary challenges in learning and teaching folk music in a higher education context: A case study of Hua'er music. *Music Education Research*, 16(2), 193–219.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2013.878324>

[17] Zhou, Q. (2021). Local voices in the classroom: Experiments with traditional duet singing. *Chinese Music Education Review*, 32(1), 18–30.

[18] Huang, W. J. (2020). Music improvisation and student agency: Traditional forms in modern settings. *International Journal of Music Pedagogy*, 6(1), 33–49.

[19] Zhang, J. (2021). The educational ecology of folk music: Opportunities and barriers. *Education and Music*, 43(3), 27–39.

[20] Carter, R. (2017). Song, memory, and identity: A pedagogical perspective on oral music. *Musicology and Education*, 13(2), 66–80.