

## Educational resources and instructional approaches for Chinese Hua'er Folk Songs in Gansu and Ningxia

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### ABSTRACT

This study delves into the cultural significance and educational potential of Hua'er folk songs within the Hui ethnic communities of Gansu and Ningxia in northwest China. By positioning Hua'er as an indispensable educational tool in folk song history, the research seeks to safeguard and elevate this revered musical tradition. Employing literature reviews, immersive fieldwork, questionnaire surveys, interviews with four significant contributors, and direct observations, the study sheds light on the importance of Hua'er music as a cultural legacy. These insights offer valuable guidance for educators, cultural institutions, and future research initiatives. Through a detailed exposition of the research methodology, this study enriches our understanding of the diverse landscape of Chinese folk song history, presenting avenues for further exploration and practical application in educational contexts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hua'er, a distinctive genre within Northwest Hui music, weaves together a diverse array of folk songs, instrumental melodies, and religious chants that have flourished among the Hui ethnic communities in China's northwestern region since the Yuan Dynasty [1]–[3]. As an integral thread in the rich tapestry of Hui cultural heritage, the roots and evolution of Hua'er can be traced back through the annals of history, resonating with the story of cultural amalgamation and integration within the region [4]–[7]. The northwestern region of China, particularly Ningxia and Gansu provinces, has stood as a stronghold of the Hui population [8]–[11]. The language and religious beliefs of the Hui are intricately woven with the tapestry of Chinese culture, with Islam reigning as their predominant faith. Hua'er has changed over time due to various cultural and societal dynamics, gradually shaping its unique musical characteristics and cultural significance [12]–[17]. The early blueprint of Ningxia Hua'er, marked by the fusion of Chinese melodies, Qiang music, and myriad ethnic elements, began forming during the Sui, Tang, and Song Dynasties [18]–[20]. The Silk Road, as a bridge between the realms of the East and West, facilitated economic and cultural interactions, leading to the settlement of numerous Arab merchants in Ningxia and contributing to the vibrant cultural palette of the region [21]–[25]. Wars and migrations also played their part in sculpting Ningxia Hua'er, with diverse ethnic groups like the Hui, Dongxiang, Sala, and Baoan coexisting, weaving the tapestry of their shared cultural legacies [26]–[29].

In contrast, Gansu Hua'er is a traditional folk song for its distinctive structure, vivid lyricism, and regional flavors [30]–[33]. However, the tides of modernization and urbanization have presented challenges to the authenticity of the Hua'er way of life, and the transmission of this cherished musical heritage stands at a

crossroads [34], [35]. While steadfast Hua'er singers strive to safeguard tradition, the sway of contemporary entertainment and shifting lifestyles has led to its waning popularity among the younger generation [36]–[39]. This study aims to explore Chinese Hua'er folk songs in Gansu and Ningxia as invaluable resources for education and instruction in the history of Chinese folk songs, simultaneously revealing the distinct features inherent in each regional tradition [40]–[42]. Through an in-depth analysis of the musical elements, cultural foundations, and transmission methods associated with these songs, we aim to uncover the unique attributes that define each tradition [43], [44]. This endeavor serves to preserve and disseminate Hua'er as a living repository of cultural heritage. It pays tribute to the enduring essence and artistic excellence of the Hui ethnic communities in China [45], [46].

The outcomes of this research hold substantial implications for the conservation of cultural identity, enriching our comprehension of the profound musical legacy that unites and differentiates these vibrant societies [47]. In an era characterized by global cultural interconnectedness, our study strives to establish a robust research foundation that fosters the continuous growth and propagation of Hua'er, ensuring its timeless resonance and enduring cultural significance [48], [49]. Thus, it emerges as an invaluable resource for education and instruction within the context of Chinese folk song history [50]–[53]. Consequently, an overarching question arises: How do the distinctive musical characteristics, cultural significance, and methods of transmitting Chinese Hua'er folk songs contribute to a broader understanding of the intricate interplay between music, heritage, and identity within the Hui ethnic communities of Gansu and Ningxia?

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Research scope**

This study focuses on their historical and musical dimensions. The investigation spans regions including Hezheng County in Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, in Gansu Province, and Haiyuan County in Zhongwei City, in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The research scrutinizes the evolution and musical characteristics of Hua'er in these locales, employing a comprehensive methodology. This includes literature analysis, immersive fieldwork, questionnaire surveys, interviews, and direct observations to understand the subject matter thoroughly. By exploring the rich tapestry of Hua'er expressions across different regions, this study aims to highlight their cultural significance and educational value in the broader context of Chinese folk song history.

### **2.2. Key informants**

Four key informants, comprising local Hua'er singers, musicians, music scholars, cultural experts, and members of the Hui ethnic community from both Gansu and Ningxia, have been identified for this research. These individuals offer expertise and understanding regarding Hua'er folk songs and their cultural significance within their regions. Their diverse perspectives and experiences will enrich the research findings and provide comprehensive insights into the nuances of Hua'er music traditions in both provinces.

### **2.3. Research process**

The process began with an extensive literature review to establish a foundational understanding of Hua'er music and its cultural context. Subsequently, a multifaceted methodology was employed, encompassing immersive fieldwork, questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews with key informants, and perceptive observations. Ethnographic fieldwork facilitated direct engagement with local communities, offering intimate insights into the heritage of Hua'er. Questionnaires and interviews harmonized, gathering perspectives from local singers, musicians, and cultural stewards.

### **2.4. Research tools**

The research utilizes various methodological tools to comprehensively explore Chinese Hua'er folk songs in Gansu and Ningxia. In addition to literature analysis, fieldwork, questionnaire surveys, interviews, and observation methods Table 1, the research also incorporates audio and video recordings to authentically capture the essence of Hua'er's performances. These multidimensional approaches enable a holistic examination of Hua'er traditions, encompassing historical contexts, cultural significance, and contemporary practices, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of the research outcomes.

### **2.5. Data collection**

Data will be amassed through a blend of written documentation and fieldwork. Relevant literature will be accessed through paper-based and online sources, and extensive field visits are scheduled for April 2021. The field visits will capture videos, audio recordings, and photographs to chronicle and document various facets of Hua'er.

## 2.6. Data management

In addition to systematic organization, the data management process will involve meticulous categorization and tagging of collected information to facilitate easy retrieval and analysis. Furthermore, a detailed metadata record will accompany each dataset, providing essential context and ensuring the integrity and reliability of the research findings. Additionally, measures will be implemented to safeguard the confidentiality and security of sensitive data, adhering to ethical guidelines and research protocols.

Table 1. Research tools

Research tools	Description
Literature analysis [54]	Relevant literature will be examined to scrutinize the historical and cultural trajectory of Hua'er music in the research site. This provides insights into the evolution and significance of Hua'er within the context of the Hui ethnic communities
Fieldwork [55]	The researcher engages in direct interactions with local communities and cultural centers to gain firsthand knowledge of the Hua'er tradition
Questionnaire survey [56]	Open-ended questionnaires will be administered to gather data from participants, encompassing their experiences, perceptions, and viewpoints regarding Hua'er. The questionnaires will be designed to capture a diverse spectrum of responses, providing a holistic comprehension of Hua'er's significance among varied demographics
Interview and observation methods [57]	Expert informants, tradition bearers, and residents will be interviewed to gain profound insights into Hua'er's historical background, performance dynamics, cultural import, and contemporary challenges. The observations during field visits will enable researchers to immerse themselves in the cultural milieu and witness the living embodiment of Hua'er

## 2.7. Data analysis

Data analysis involves categorizing and validating the collected information. Comparative assessments will be conducted regarding musical functions and genres, facilitating the identification of parallels and distinctions between the two. The credibility of the gathered data will be corroborated using the triangulation approach, which amalgamates field notes, video observations, interviews, documentation, and qualitative questionnaires. Through this robust and comprehensive research methodology, we intend to offer an in-depth and insightful exploration of these folk songs' distinctive attributes and shared components. This endeavor sheds light on their cultural significance and contributes to the safeguarding and propagating this cherished musical heritage.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Differences and similarities in the living environment

Gansu and Ningxia, both regions in China predominantly inhabited by the Hui ethnic group, exhibit a combination of commonalities and distinctions in their living environments Table 2. A primary commonality among these regions is their shared Islamic faith. The Hui communities in both Gansu and Ningxia adhere to specific religious customs and prohibitions, encompassing practices such as refraining from fortunetelling, idol worship, and gambling. Their unwavering religious devotion centers around their faith in Allah. Their dietary habits include avoiding pork and certain other animals, observing fasting rituals, and consuming specific types of poultry and seafood.

Table 2. Differences and similarities in the living environment

Number	Similarity	Similar content
1	Same ethnic group	Both regions have a significant population of Hui people
2	Common ancestry	The ethnic ancestors can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (615), when Arab and Persian Muslim merchants came to China by land and sea
3	Shared religion	Both regions share the belief in Islam.
4	Common lifestyle practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prohibition of fortune-telling: Hui people consider it improper and filthy behavior</li> <li>- Prohibition of gambling: It is believed to be harmful to oneself, others, and society</li> <li>- The earnings from gambling are seen as ill-gotten</li> <li>- Prohibition of idol worship: Hui people do not worship any idols and do not display them at home</li> <li>- Dietary habits: Apart from abstaining from pork, Hui peoples also refrain from consuming peculiar, dirty, and aggressive animals</li> </ul>

The term "Hui" has historical roots in references to the Hui people, and it later expanded to encompass diverse ethnic groups embracing Islam during the Mongol expansion. The Hui people share ancestral ties that

trace back to the Tang Dynasty, with Arab and Persian Muslim merchants settling in various Chinese cities. While these common elements bind the Hui communities together, variations in their natural environments Table 3, modes of production, and lifestyles have given rise to distinctive life experiences and languages between Gansu and Ningxia.

Table 3. Differences in the natural environment

Hezheng County, Gansu Province	Haiyuan County, Ningxia
Located at the confluence zone of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the Loess Plateau, the region features a south-to-north descending terrain with an altitude ranging from 1900 to 4368 meters. In the southern part lies Taizi Mountain, a rugged high mountain formed by the westward extension of the Qinling Mountains, while the northern area comprises loess hills and valleys. Taizi Mountain serves as the primary mountain range in the region, with four mountains extending from north to south and two from west to east. The rivers between these mountains form four valleys and two gullies. The region falls within the alpine humid and semi-humid continental monsoon climate zone and is situated on the northeastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. It is characterized by shallow mountains and complex terrain, with significant disparities in altitude and climate	Situated in the northwestern part of the Loess Plateau, the region belongs to the loess hilly and gully area in the middle section of the Yellow River. The territory is characterized by undulating hills and ravines, with the remaining ridges of Liupan Mountain extending from south to north, creating a unique landscape of higher elevations in the southwest and lower elevations in the northeast. In the southern part, Mawan Mountain, the central peak of Nanhua Mountain, stands as the highest point, reaching an altitude of 2955 meters. Haiyuan County is located deep inland and experiences a distinct continental monsoon climate. It is considered one of the driest counties in Ningxia

### 3.2. Comparative results

The comparative analysis sheds light on shared elements and unique characteristics in the Gansu and Ningxia Hua'er traditions, enriching our understanding of their cultural significance. The study elucidates the intricate tapestry of similarities and differences that define each tradition by examining three key aspects, including singing structure, rhythm, and vocal lists. Moreover, the nuanced exploration of these aspects deepens our appreciation for the diversity within Chinese Hua'er folk songs, contributing to a more comprehensive portrayal of this rich musical heritage.

#### 3.2.1. Singing structure

Firstly, the evolution of their singing structure from a four-sentence to a six-sentence format reflects the influence of traditional Chinese poetry and the common ethnic heritage they share. Despite these similarities, Gansu Hua'er distinguishes itself by using single or double-sentence endings. In contrast, Ningxia Hua'er displays its distinctive characteristics in endings, which may encompass concluding the entire song or employing single words to punctuate the narrative.

#### 3.2.2. Rhythm

Secondly, the rhythm of the songs demonstrates dialectal variations, offering insights into language and cultural diversity. Gansu Hua'er's rhythm bears the imprint of regional dialects, resulting in a distinctive rhythm pattern unique to the region. Conversely, Ningxia Hua'er exhibits less influence of Chen'ci words on its rhythm and instead reflects more pronounced regional cultural differences.

#### 3.2.3. Cultural integration

Lastly, Gansu and Ningxia Hua'er songs are products of cultural integration among multiple ethnic groups. They exhibit shared characteristics and individuality that directly mirror their regions' cultural and linguistic features. This comparative analysis enriches our understanding of the nuanced variations and shared elements within Gansu and Ningxia Hua'er, shedding light on the complex interplay between cultural heritage, language, and regional diversity in these folk song traditions Table 4.

The vocal characteristics of Ningxia and Gansu Hua'er are influenced by shared cultural and psychological traits and dialect similarities between the two regions. These vocal characteristics encompass wide, narrow, and ultra-wide cavity tones, with Gansu Hua'er exhibiting a higher prevalence of ultra-wide cavity sounds Table 5. However, within this shared cultural backdrop, regional distinctions emerge, delineating the unique traits of each style. Ningxia Hua'er, for instance, accentuates its local characteristics through the prominent use of narrow and small seven-cavity tones. In contrast, Gansu Hua'er displays tone list variations across different ethnic songs, reflecting each group's diverse cultural and national attributes.

These distinctive vocal characteristics underscore the rich diversity of musical expressions within Chinese Hua'er folk songs and offer a glimpse into the profound cultural identities embedded in music. Folk songs, as manifestations of oral musical creativity, embody the essence of individuals from various regions and ethnic backgrounds, serving as a living testament to the preservation and evolution of national culture Table 6.

Table 4. Comparison of Lyrics

Similarity	Gansu Hua'er	Ningxia Hua'er
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The structure of the lyrics reflects various patterns such as the four-sentence pattern, five-sentence pattern, six-sentence pattern, folding waist pattern, and two-tans-of-water pattern</li> <li>Both exhibit both symmetrical and asymmetric structures in their lyrics</li> <li>A single sentence with a single suffix and a double sentence with a double suffix represent the most distinctive endings in the lyrics of Hua'er in both regions</li> </ol>	<p>The rhythm of Gansu Hua'er lyrics exhibits a combination of three and four tones. The rhythmic patterns of the words reflect the characteristic rhythms of the lyrics in triple time.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The ending of Ningxia Hua'er libretto also exhibits the characteristics of a single suffix for the entire libretto, as well as the ending of a single suffix for the first three sentences and a double suffix for the fourth sentence in the four-sentence structure</li> <li>Two distinct rhythm patterns are discernible within the Ningxia Hua'er libretto. Predominantly, the libretto adheres to a rhythm sequence comprising two, two, and three words, recurring three times throughout. Conversely, another rhythm pattern emerges within certain sentences, featuring a sequence of three words, three words, and two words.</li> </ol>

Table 5. Comparison of singing vocal lists

Similarity	Gansu Hua'er	Ningxia Hua'er
<p>Simultaneously, the wide-cavity and narrow-cavity sound columns are employed.</p>	<p>The melodies of Gansu Hua'er primarily alternate between wide and narrow accentuations. Hua'er sung by certain ethnic minorities features occasional instances of close-toned sound series, resulting in a musical style that is both vibrant and lyrical.</p>	<p>The melodies of Ningxia Hua'er predominantly consist of narrow tunes, with the unique local characteristics of small seven-tuned tunes and small tunes setting it apart from Gansu Hua'er.</p>

Table 6. Factors influencing the similarities and differences in the characteristics of Hua'er

Similar reasons	Different reasons
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They belong to the same genre of folk songs and share a relationship of "source and flow."</li> <li>They share commonalities in terms of the singing nation and singing group, demonstrating a high level of cultural identity</li> <li>Oral teaching is the predominant method of instruction in both cases</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Different singing nationalities and cultural influences have played a significant role in the development and formation of Hua'er. Through the collective efforts of the nine singing nations, Hua'er has achieved its unique brilliance. Similarly, the unwavering dedication of the people in the Ningxia Autonomous Region, primarily the Hui nationality, has contributed to the distinctiveness of Hua'er as a local music culture</li> <li>Dialect variations also play a role in distinguishing between the two styles. The Sino-Tibetan and Altai language families influence the formation of the Linxia dialect. Ethnic minorities with their languages often use their respective languages for daily communication. In contrast, Hua'er has gradually developed under the influence of the Liupanshan dialect. Consequently, one style incorporates more Chen'ci words, while the other utilizes fewer Chen'ci words. One includes interlinear sections in minority languages, whereas the other has minimal interlinear content. These linguistic differences, along with variations in national culture, character, and subtle nuances in music style, contribute to their distinct accents</li> <li>Distinct regional cultures stemming from the different environments in which they grew are the primary factors contributing to the disparities between the two styles. Within this context, the artistic characteristics of both styles have emerged, highlighting their unique qualities</li> </ol>

The comparative study of Gansu and Ningxia Hua'er folk songs reveals a tapestry of similarities and distinctions between these musical traditions. Both regions boast significant populations of Hui people who share common religious practices, dietary customs, and moral proscriptions rooted in their Islamic faith. Nonetheless, variations in their natural environments, dialects, and regional cultures have contributed to forming distinct life experiences and linguistic peculiarities.

Over time, these songs' structural evolution and rhythmic nuances bear the imprints of traditional Chinese poetry and the dynamic interplay of diverse ethnic groups within these regions. This historical context has influenced the singing structure and reflected commonalities while fostering individuality. Gansu Hua'er, for instance, stands out with its distinctive single or double-sentence endings, while Ningxia Hua'er showcases its unique characteristics, including ending the entire song or employing single words.

Furthermore, the vocal characteristics of these songs are a product of shared cultural and psychological traits and dialectal variations. Both traditions encompass wide, narrow, and ultra-wide cavity tones, with Gansu Hua'er displaying a higher prevalence of ultra-wide cavity sounds. Conversely, Ningxia Hua'er employs narrow cavity tones and minor seven-cavity tones as critical elements of its vocal palette. These unique cultural identities, interwoven into the essence of these traditional melodies, stand as a testament to the abundant diversity of musical expression and provide a profound glimpse into the inner realms of those who have created and cherished these traditions. This study illuminates the unique qualities and shared elements of

Hua'er music in the Gansu and Ningxia regions, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding and honoring the intricate cultural heritage embedded within these musical narratives.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings harmoniously resonated with existing literature, affirming the historical and cultural eminence of Hua'er music among the Hui community [1], [6], [14]. In alignment with the principles of ethnomusicology, our study embraced the recognition of environmental nuances, linguistic variations, and historical dynamics as formative influences in the evolution of folk music [37], [38]. Through intricate analysis of singing vocal lists and song structures, we unveiled the mosaic of cultural diversity and shared motifs intrinsic to Hua'er music [3], [13], [30].

Employing a robust and multifaceted methodology, we adeptly merged literature analysis, immersive fieldwork, questionnaire surveys, interviews, and perceptive observations. Using ethnographic fieldwork facilitated direct engagement with local communities, affording us an intimate grasp of Hua'er's heritage [55]. The questionnaires and interviews seamlessly harmonized, gathering insights from the very conduits of Hua'er tradition local singers, musicians, and cultural stewards [7], [56]. This collection of research tools orchestrated a symphony of exploration rich in different dimensions.

The revelations of our study painted a canvas adorned with unifying threads and unique strokes between Gansu and Ningxia Hua'er. While an overarching Islamic faith and significant Hui presence bridged the two regions, the interplay of geography, dialects, and cultural ethos imparted distinctive hues to their musical expressions [58]–[60]. The melodic narratives of lyrics and vocal renditions eloquently echoed these distinct musical signatures, intricately woven with linguistic and cultural motifs [20], [31]. As our journey through the melodies of Hua'er music comes to a close, we are left with a profound appreciation for the intricate interplay between culture, music, and identity within the Hui ethnic communities of Gansu and Ningxia. The significance of Hua'er as a living repository of cultural heritage is undeniable, and its potential as an educational resource is immense.

The insights gleaned from this study hold promise for practical applications and further research. Educators and cultural institutions can leverage the nuances of Hua'er music to foster a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and heritage. Additionally, this study beckons for future investigations into the broader musical landscape of China's diverse ethnic groups, offering opportunities for comparative analyses and exploring the impact of modernization on traditional music forms. In the end, Hua'er music stands as a testament to the enduring power of music to reflect, preserve, and transmit the cultural essence of a community through the generations.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our expedition into the realm of Chinese Hua'er folk songs in Gansu and Ningxia has unveiled a rich tapestry woven with threads of distinctiveness and shared resonances. The findings of this study have been harmonized with prior scholarship and theoretical frameworks, reaffirming the esteemed position of Hua'er music as a profound cultural heritage. The comprehensive and multifaceted research methodologies employed throughout this study have ensured a holistic and enlightening exploration of our subject matter.

As we conclude this transformative journey, the legacy of Hua'er is an invaluable resource for education and instruction, connecting the historical narrative of Chinese folk songs to the present day and resonating through the annals of time. The melodies and narratives encapsulated within Hua'er songs bear witness to the cultural tapestry of the Hui ethnic communities in Gansu and Ningxia, serving as a living repository of their unique identity.

The insights gleaned from this study hold promise for practical applications and future research endeavors. Educators have the opportunity to integrate the nuanced beauty of Hua'er music into curricula, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and heritage among students. Likewise, cultural institutions and community organizations can leverage these findings to create immersive experiences, workshops, and performances that showcase the uniqueness and unity of Hua'er music within the Hui ethnic communities.

Furthermore, this study beckons for future investigations into the broader musical landscape of China's diverse ethnic groups. Comparative studies that juxtapose Hua'er with other regional folk music traditions have the potential to unveil both commonalities and distinctions, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the nation's rich and multifaceted musical heritage. Additionally, delving into the impact of technological advancements and globalization on the transmission and evolution of Hua'er music can shed light on its adaptive resilience in the face of modern challenges, ensuring that this cherished cultural gem continues to flourish for future generations.

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