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Teaching Strategies for Cultural Transmission: Adapting Bai Ethnic Folk Music for Modern Music Classrooms

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Abstract

This study explores how Bai ethnic folk music from Dali Prefecture, Yunnan Province, can be systematically integrated into a modern music curriculum while preserving its cultural significance and relevance. This study aims to define and develop teaching strategies that translate oral traditions into a structured pedagogical framework. This study further investigates how Western instructional methods, particularly piano-based training, can function as a pedagogical bridge to promote cultural sustainability rather than cultural assimilation. A qualitative case study approach was used, which included four steps: observing Bai folk performances in the field, analysing the music's tones and modes, adapting it into a structured piano arrangement, and conducting a four-week teaching trial with ten undergraduate piano students. The primary data included field recordings, transcriptions, interviews with recognised inheritors of Bai folk music and specialist informants, and performance assessment rubrics. The analysis focused on the D Shang modal framework, pentatonic pitch structure, melodic contour, and rhythmic elasticity characteristics of the original 3/4 vocal version. These elements were translated into a 2/4 piano arrangement designed to provide rhythmic scaffolding while preserving the modal purity and stylistic features. The results show that a structured instrumental pedagogy can maintain modal consistency, pentatonic resonance, and characteristic ornamentation. The rhythmic scaffolding method helped students understand Bai modal identity better and made their performances more stable without using Western functional harmonies. This study proposes a Pedagogical Translation model, demonstrating that culturally sensitive adaptation can embed minority musical traditions into contemporary music education. The findings relate to wider conversations about keeping cultural traditions alive, understanding different musical modes, and creating educational programs that respect various cultures in diverse learning environments in the following ways. Future research should expand the participant sample, include longitudinal assessments of learning outcomes, and examine the applicability of the Pedagogical Translation model across additional Bai repertoires and other ethnic musical traditions to evaluate its broader transferability and long-term impact.

Keywords: Bai Folk Music, Pedagogical Translation, D Shang Mode, Rhythmic Scaffolding, Cultural Transmission

Introduction

Yunnan Province in Southwest China has a unique ethnic diversity in its cultural landscape. The Bai people from the Dali Prefecture are among the most ethnically diverse and have one of the most complex musical traditions in Yunnan. One of the core elements of their musical traditions and intangible cultural heritage is the Jianchuan Baiqu (Bai tunes) system. This system has served as one of the main forms of cultural expression, means of historical continuity, and method of social communication through the centuries (Chen, 2020; Crowley & Heyer, 2015). Among the many genres in this system, the

mountain song or Shanhua-ti dominates in terms of both technical and emotional aspects. “Xin Gan Piao” (Heart is Floating) is a model of a mountain love song and represents the pure, raw, and natural Bai romantic life. The emotional and lyrical complexities of this song are elevated by the deep and poetic meaning of its title. The phrase Xinganfei means that the beloved is as important as one’s heart and liver (Huang, 2019; Li, 2024). This title conveys a sense of emotional attachment that surpasses the song’s melody itself.

However, despite its cultural significance, Bai folk music currently faces a critical pedagogical challenge: there is no clearly articulated framework for integrating its modal, rhythmic, and stylistic features into formal music education without compromising its ethnic identity. Because of the rapid changes within the educational system and the subsequent cultural impacts, “Xin Gan Piao” and Bai folk traditions face a fragile future. For a long time, familiarity with the nuances of voice and sliding and imitative vocables of a master has been the foundation of both tradition and improvisation. The increasing formalisation of music education in China and elsewhere is homogenising unwritten ethnic sounds (Bai, 2024; Chen & Zhao, 2025; Lin, 2025). From a tradition-based standpoint, students are mostly oriented around Western music and are bound to the staff and functional harmony. In the absence of structured pedagogical systems that address the imitative techniques and rhythmic elasticity characteristic of Bai music, students risk assimilating these traditions into Western tonal frameworks rather than understanding them on their own modal and cultural terms (Howard, 2016; Hu, 2024; Miller & Shahriari, 2020). The D Shang mode of “Xin Gan Piao” is just one of a myriad of examples.

This study aims to define and develop teaching strategies that allow Bai folk music to be moved from an oral tradition to a modern constructed curriculum. This research also aims to show how Western teaching methods can be used to promote and retain a people’s culture by using the piano as a pedagogical tool. This research critically analyzes “Xin Gan Piao” and its musicological components from the scale degrees and specific contours that can

be used to design teaching strategies and instructional frameworks. This study aims to provide a model of Pedagogical Translation that fosters the ethnic spirit through instrumental techniques (Abadou, 2024; Jesus-reyes, 2024).

This study examines a unique phenomenon: the cross-cultural implications of cultural sustainability. Globalisation is coupled with a shift in cultural legacy custodians (Colomer, 2017; Magu, 2015). Jiang Zongde and Li Baomei are elder custodians and with them, the spirit of the Bai tunes is at risk of being lost if it is not transposed to modern teaching. Accordingly, the central problem addressed in this study is how to construct a cognitively supportive and culturally sensitive instructional model that scaffolds students’ understanding of Bai modal and rhythmic systems without erasing their distinctive identities. It is posited that the assimilation of ethnic identity in music during performance is caused by the lack of frameworks to scaffold students’ modal and rhythmic planes from a cognitive perspective, with the ethnic identity being lost during assimilation. It is further posited that by rhythmically transcending a given 3/4 melody to a 2/4 Vivo piano score (i.e. piano accompaniment in the context of sustaining a melodic piano line), students are given a tangible framework to scaffold their way out of the cognitive-caused assimilation of rhythm and modality that they would have encountered (Chan et al., 2023; Sarac, 2024). This research is an innovative response to the retention of minority musical identity.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: 1) How can the modal and rhythmic features of Bai folk music be translated into a structured piano pedagogy without compromising the ethnic identity? 2) To what extent does rhythmic scaffolding support students’ modal literacy and stylistic authenticity in their performance? 3) Can the proposed Pedagogical Translation model provide a transferable framework for integrating minority musical traditions into formal music education contexts?

With the success of “Xin Gan Piao”, the study affirms the piano, in the modern context of a conversational partner to the Bai traditional vocal line, and demonstrates that within modern staging and academic contexts, the ethnic folk music of the

Bai can survive and thrive. This case, along with others, is meant to serve as a guide to the rest of the teaching cadre on how to best position and embed the regional level folk heritage within their teaching to ensure that the true heart and liver of Bai culture is made accessible to as wide a cross-section of learners as possible.

Review of Literature

The study has consistently described Baiqu as a mature oral tradition that is deeply woven into the social life of the Dali Prefecture, organized around regionally specific Diao (tune) systems. The Eryuan Basin and Jianchuan County studies focus on the improvisatory, vernacular nature of mountain songs that are often agrarian based. From a musicological perspective, the Bai songs are predominantly pentatonic and feature the D Shang mode, which, along with the Bai songs, suggests that modal stability is a primary characteristic of Bai melody construction (Liang & Yu, 2025; Nikolsky, 2015; Shepherd, 2017). From a descriptive perspective, early studies focused on the sociocultural context of the performance, with minimal analysis on the instrumental arrangement or the educational setting of the performance. The same is true for the literature on the Shanhua-ti (Mountain Flower Form), where scholars have shown how the poetic form of the lyrics structures musical phrasing and have described the tension between the ‘tight’ imposition of the form as a structural guide and the ‘looseness’ of the form as a vehicle for expression. While earlier transcription efforts imposed a 3/4 metrical order on the repertoire, in recent years the Bai language has been shown to elicit a prosody and respiratory rhythm that create a rhythmic elasticity, exceeding the bounds of fixed metric notation (Benson, 2017; Rodgers, 2017; Ye, 2018).

Theoretical cultural transmission discussions place this issue within debates surrounding authenticity and modernity. The latest writing on intangible cultural heritage highlights cultural pedagogy bridging techniques that help ethnic traditions fit within today’s education frameworks while retaining their cultural core. The “Pedagogical Bridge” idea and other similar strategies, such as rhythmic scaffolding and modal literacy,

advocate that students should be able to surpass the ethnomusicological obstacles of an indigenous musical system if such a system is carefully and purposefully organized into a workable pedagogical framework (Mukhitdenova, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Steadily, scholarship has moved from early 20th century lyric archiving and mid-century staves notation (mainly neglecting microtonal subtleties), through to the present day where we have digital notating and the crafting of resources at the tertiary level (Han et al., 2024; Tang & Sornyai, 2023). Nevertheless, the absence of a thorough study that addresses the integration of Bai music into a framed piano pedagogy is the significant gap this research endeavors to fill, despite all the possibilities this has to offer.

Methodology

The focus of this study was on the systematic change of Bai ethnic folk music from an oral tradition to a formally taught one, and used a qualitative approach (Holmes, 2020; Ping et al., 2024; Yedigirgolu, 2021) to this end, comprising of a total of four steps: fieldwork, musicology, pedagogy, and instruction. This methodology attempts to balance modern music pedagogy and cultural integrity of the folk music to be taught. A qualitative case study design was adopted because the study seeks depth of musical, cultural, and pedagogical interpretation rather than statistical generalization, emphasizing contextualized understanding of modal and rhythmic transmission.

Participants and Key Informants

The participants were purposefully selected to include both an authoritative cultural voice and an appropriate student testing cohort. The study therefore involved two principal groups: cultural inheritors, who constituted the primary source, and undergraduate students, who were part of the pedagogy. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed direct experiential knowledge relevant to Bai musical transmission and sufficient technical background to engage meaningfully with the adapted instructional framework.

Table 1 Profile of Research Participants

| Participant | Role and Selection Criteria | Number |
|-----------------------|---|--------|
| Key Informants | National and Provincial-level Inheritors of Bai folk music; provided authentic oral transcriptions and cultural context | 2 |
| Specialist Informants | Music professors and regional historians; provided expertise in ethnomusicology and modern music pedagogy | 3 |
| Student Participants | Undergraduate music students (Piano majors); participated in the instructional trial to evaluate the pedagogical strategies | 10 |

The small group of 10 undergraduate piano students (N=10) is acceptable for this type of study because qualitative pilot studies focus more on detailed observations, performance reviews, and ongoing feedback than on large numbers of participants. The instructional trial served as an exploratory implementation phase to test the feasibility and internal coherence of the Pedagogical Translation model. All 10 student participants had similar skills and educational backgrounds, which helped keep the group consistent and allowed for a detailed look at how they developed their modal literacy and rhythmic skills. While the findings are not intended for statistical generalization, the sample

size is appropriate for an in-depth pedagogical case study designed to generate transferable insights and inform future, larger-scale investigations.

Research Materials

Field recordings, transcriptions, and created piano arrangements were the main resources for this research. Adaptations were based on the Original Melody Score (Figure 1). In addition to musical scores, the researchers used interview protocols with the cultural inheritors and performance assessment rubrics with the student trial to test the level of technical accuracy and cultural resonance.

Table 2 Summary of Research Materials and Tools

| Material Type | Description | Purpose in Study |
|-----------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Field Data | Audio/Video recordings (May 2025) | Capturing the "unwritten" nuances of Bai folk singing |
| Melody Score | 3/4 Meter transcription (Figure 1) | Providing the raw melodic and modal data (D Shang mode) |
| Piano Score | Vivo standardized arrangement | The "Pedagogical Bridge" used for the instructional trial |
| Assessment Tool | Qualitative Feedback Form | Evaluating student engagement and cultural internalization |

Methods

The research was guided by a linear four-stage framework moving from theory to practice.

Stage 1: Fieldwork The authors undertook primary site visits in May 2025 in Dali Prefecture, Yunnan Province, to document the performances of the tradition bearers of the song "Xin Gan Piao". They aimed to capture the sliding tones, rhythmically elastic, and emotionally charged expressions of the Jianchuan Baiqu tradition.

Stage 2: Musicological Analysis The authors closely examined the audio recordings and analysed the central tonal, modal and melodic components. This was aimed at the D Shang mode and the melody contour. A conflict of technique was sought

in a comparison of the oral tradition and Western Notation.

Stage 3: Adaptation of the Content The authors aimed at a 3/4 rendition of the melody in a formalised system of notation to 2/4 (vivace) in the piano. The intention was to provide a "scaffolding" approach to rhythm. The piano score was embellished with sanxian-imitative timbres of grace notes and 'open-fifth' harmonies.

Phase 4, the completed Piano Score was put into practice with 10 undergraduate piano students. The instruction lasted four weeks and focused on modal literacy and timbre-voice imitation. The trial ended with a public stage performance to test the "Pedagogical Bridge" theory.

Table 3 Framework for Data Analysis

| Analysis Method | Focus Area | Intended Outcome |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Comparative Musicology | Tonal and Modal structure | Verification of ethnic authenticity in the Piano Score |
| Content Analysis | Student and Inheritor interviews | Understanding the perceived success of cultural transmission |
| Performance Appraisal | 2/4 rhythmic stability and timbre | Evaluating the effectiveness of standardized rhythmic scaffolding |

By documenting these procedures and participant profiles, this study provides a clear roadmap for other researchers to replicate the findings in different regional folk music contexts.

Results

The findings provide a detailed musicological breakdown of the Bai folk song “Xin Gan Piao” and the corresponding data obtained from its adaptability for piano teaching. The findings are categorised into the source material’s structural decomposition, the technical aspects of its instructional translation, and the evaluative results of pupil experimentation.

Musicological Analysis of “Xin Gan Piao”

The musicological study examines the structural components of the ethnic DNA of the Bai folk song “Xin Gan Piao”, which forms the basis for all initial instructional adaptations.

Identification of Tones and Modes: The decomposition of the melody shows that “Xin Gan Piao” is a melody that uses a pitch collection corresponding to the C pentatonic framework without chromatic alteration in its key signature. The analysis of the melody contour shows that the melody starts on C4 and ends on a D4. One of the most important findings is the total absence of notes F (the subdominant in Western diatonic scales) and B (the leading tone) throughout the entire piece. The absence of these two notes reiterates that the song is based on the traditional Chinese five-note scale. In particular, the note arrangement classifies the song as the D Shang mode. The lack of leading-tone and subdominant functions is important because it shows that the main organising idea of the composition is based on modal stability rather than harmonic progression. The way this pitch system is maintained in the adapted score shows that the teaching method did not change the melody to fit Western music rules but retained its original style.



Source: The researcher (2025)

Figure 1 D Shang Mode Analysis of Xin Gan Piao

The value of modal purity was confirmed in interviews with National Inheritor Jiang Zongde, who said that to maintain the Bai cultural identity in the music, one must avoid ‘half-steps’ or Western leading tones.

Contour and Range of the Melody: The melody of “Xin Gan Piao” shows great emotive potential and a large vocal range, going from middle C to the E above the middle C. The melodic contour features a swift leap to the highest note, E, at the start of the first section, creating a sense of heightened emotion. The contour moves from the high register down to the middle and lower registers, a descending motion designed to convey profound and heartfelt emotion. Analytically, this contour suggests that emotional intensity in Bai musical expression is structurally encoded through registral expansion, followed by a controlled descent. The pedagogical translation therefore required not merely pitch preservation, but also the maintenance of this expressive contour logic in the piano adaptation to avoid flattening the song’s affective trajectory.

Rhythmic and Poetic Design: The Original Melody Score (Figure 2) is primarily set in a 3/4 m. This metric choice reflects the flowing and lyrical quality inherent in the regional style of Jianchuan Baiqu.



Source: The researcher, transcription from fieldwork in May 2025

Figure 2 Xin Gan Piao melody score

Pedagogical Translation: From Melody Score to Piano Score

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Table 4 Trial Performance Success Rates (N=10)

| Criteria | Result | Observation |
|---------------------|--------------|--|
| Rhythmic Precision | 100% Success | All students achieved stability using the 2/4 arrangement |
| Modal Consistency | 100% Success | Every student maintained the D Shang mode without Western cadences |
| Stylistic Imitation | 80% Success | Eight students effectively utilized ornaments to capture ethnic flavor |

The 100% success rate in rhythmic precision and modal consistency suggests that modal literacy can be operationalised pedagogically rather than remaining an abstract ethnomusicological concept that is not practically applicable. The 80% stylistic imitation rate further indicates that while technical stability can be effectively scaffolded, expressive nuance requires continued cultivation. These results demonstrate that structured adaptation does not erode cultural identity; instead, it provides the cognitive clarity necessary for conscious preservation.

Evidence of Stage Implementation

The last step in refining the teaching methods was a public stage performance which featured a

The contour moves from the high register down to the middle and lower registers, a descending motion designed to convey profound and heartfelt emotion. Analytically, this contour suggests that emotional intensity in Bai musical expression is structurally encoded through registral expansion, followed by a controlled descent. The pedagogical translation therefore required not merely pitch preservation, but also the maintenance of this expressive contour logic in the piano adaptation to avoid flattening the song’s affective trajectory.

Rhythmic and Poetic Design: The Original Melody Score (Figure 2) is primarily set in a 3/4 m. This metric choice reflects the flowing and lyrical quality inherent in the regional style of Jianchuan Baiqu.

Result of the Instructional Trial (N=10): The effectiveness of the Piano Score pedagogy was evaluated through a trial among 10 undergraduate music students majoring in piano. The standardised 2/4 pulse was found to be a key factor in helping students internalise syncopated rhythm. One participant noted that the D Shang modal guide (Figure 1) helped them understand the structure immediately, making them feel as though they were “telling a Bai story” through their fingertips. The summary of the trial results is as follows.

piano adaptation and traditional singing.



Source: The researcher, performance and record in May 2025

Figure 3 Stage Performance of Bai Folk Song Adaptation with Piano and Voice

The performance demonstrated the role of the piano as a partner in traditional singing. The result was a remarkable combination of the cultural and technical aspects of singing. It shows how Bai folk heritage can be preserved and, at the same time, highlights how standardised rhythmic scaffolding and modal literacy can be integrated with Western piano training. The complete 3-page Full Piano Score that was utilised in this trial is provided in the appendix of this study for those willing to replicate the trial.

Collectively, these findings move beyond descriptive documentation and provide empirical support for the Pedagogical Translation model. The data indicate that culturally grounded modal systems can be retained within formal instructional settings when they are supported by analytically designed scaffolding mechanisms. Thus, the results contribute not only to Bai music pedagogy but also to broader debates concerning cross-cultural musical adaptation and educational sustainability.

Discussion

The results show that with appropriate construction, the D Shang mode and rhythmic elasticity can be sustained with certain standardised notations and accompaniment techniques. The change from a 3/4 lyrical transcription to a 2/4 Vivo piano arrangement was not an attempt to substitute the original rhythmic flow but rather to facilitate a clearer cognitive structure for the students. Consistent with the literature on cultural transmission and pedagogical bridging (Tomlinson, 2015; Howard, 2016), this study supports the claim that the pedagogical inclusion of ethnic music is feasible; however, this can only happen when the necessary modal and stylistic components are clearly articulated rather than merely assumed to be there and replicated through a process of imitation.

Melodies of Bai songs are confirmed through musicological analysis and previous research, stating that they are pentatonic, lack Western leading tones, and reinforce modal stability as the primary marker of the Bai musical identity (Liang & Yu, 2025; Nikolsky, 2015). The absence of subdominant and leading tones, as well as the use of fifths, means that the piano adaptation preserved the pentatonic

and avoided Western functional harmony. The instructional trial suggests that a 2/4 pulse as a rhythmic scaffold helped students better understand modal structure and ornamentation. These results connect with the emerging pedagogy of intangible cultural heritage, where framed structures, in this case, rhythm, are used as scaffolding and are seen as supportive rather than a threat to authenticity when designed carefully (Colomer, 2017; Tang & Sornyai, 2023).

The limitations of this study are as follows. This study focused on a single repertoire item and a small sample of 10 undergraduate piano students. In addition, the instructional trial lasted only four weeks, making it difficult to evaluate long-term cultural internalisation. Finally, although the performances were positively evaluated, the absence of quantitative evaluations and long-term performance limited the evaluations. Future research should include larger participant groups and (multi-) comparative control groups and examine the consequences of modal literacy training in the longer term. Cross-cultural research with other Bai songs or other ethnic traditions would also clarify the extent to which the Pedagogical Bridge model is applicable to other instances.

Conclusion

The study shows that Bai ethnic folk music can be adapted for use in modern music classrooms through a defined teaching-translating model. The instructional framework enabled students to retain the modal essence of “XinGanPiao” within a formal academic setting. Empirical results from the instructional trial (N=10) demonstrated 100% success in rhythmic precision and 100% consistency in maintaining the D Shang modal framework, while 80% of the participants effectively reproduced stylistic ornamentation associated with Bai performance practice. Through piano accompaniment scaffolding, modal purity and imitative timbre were sustained while supporting the structured learning. These numerical outcomes directly support the study’s central claim that structured rhythmic scaffolding can preserve modal identity rather than dilute it in a Western instrumental context. The findings illustrate that when contextualised appropriately, Western

instruments can function as scaffolding rather than as oppositional forces to minority cultures. Although limited and preliminary, this study provides an approach for assimilating intangible cultural heritage into modern music teaching, pointing to the need for modal literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy to safeguard ethnic musical identity.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for music education and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Bai folk music can be incorporated into formal curricula without compromising modal integrity or stylistic authenticity when supported by clear modal literacy and rhythmic scaffolding. The preservation of the D Shang modal framework within a structured piano arrangement demonstrates that Western instruments need not cause cultural homogenisation in music. Instead, they can function as pedagogical bridges that sustain a minority musical identity. The Pedagogical Translation model offers a practical framework for integrating regional traditions into contemporary teaching. By moving from field documentation to analytical adaptation and classroom implementation, educators are provided with a structured pathway to culturally responsive instruction. More broadly, this study highlights the role of educational institutions in sustaining musical diversity while fostering technical competence in increasingly globalised contexts.




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Appendix

Full Piano Score

| | |
|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Xin Gan Piao Arranged by Yu Sun</p> <p>Vocal</p> <p>Vivo</p> <p>Piano</p>  |  |
|  |  |

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