

Travel Through Times of Hua'er: Cultural Integration and Historical Transformation in Northwest China

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Received: April 8, 2025

Accepted: May 9, 2025

Online Published: May 25, 2025

doi:10.5539/ach.v17n1p73

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v17n1p73>

Abstract

This study explores the historical, social, and cultural dynamics underpinning the origins and development of *Hua'er*, a distinctive folk song tradition in northwest China. Focusing on the Taomin and Hehuang regions, the research highlights how this musical form evolved through intensive interactions among diverse ethnic groups, including Han, Hui, Tibetan, and Tu communities. The historical context of the genre is closely associated with the ancient Silk Road and the traditional Tea-Horse Trade routes. These trade networks facilitated cultural exchanges between East and West, significantly influencing regional cultural practices, including music. Over time, the songs transformed from songs used in religious rituals—seeking divine blessings for harvests and fertility—into a popular form of secular folk expression. This evolution is exemplified by the transition from temple fairs and religious rites to contemporary recreational gatherings, now widely celebrated as the *Hua'er Festival*. The linguistic phenomenon known locally as “wind-churned snow”, referring to the intermingling of Chinese and minority languages in the lyrics, further demonstrates the cultural integration in this region. These linguistic exchanges reflect a broader pattern of ethnic coexistence and mutual influence. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Hua'er* serves not only as an enduring cultural tradition but also as a vivid illustration of intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. With its adaptability and continued relevance, it provides valuable insights into the complexities of cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and historical transformation in China.

Keywords: *Hua'er*, historical ethnomusicology, cultural integration, ethnic interaction, intangible cultural heritage

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Hua'er (花儿, literally “Flowers”) is a distinctive genre of folk songs prevalent in Northwest China, particularly in Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, and Xinjiang provinces. Performed primarily in Chinese, *Hua'er* embodies rich intercultural interactions among various ethnic groups, including Han, Hui, Tibetan, Tu, Yugu, Dongxiang, Bao'an, and Sala, and is noted for its lyrical focus on themes of love (Ke, 2001). Recognized internationally, *Hua'er* was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity in 2009, underscoring its cultural significance.

Despite extensive scholarly attention and documentation since the early 20th century, notable uncertainties and debates persist regarding *Hua'er*'s precise historical origins and development. Initial research dating back to the 1920s emphasized collecting and categorizing songs, lyrics, and their musical attributes (Xiao, 2013). Subsequent research expanded considerably in scope, engaging multidisciplinary approaches and socio-cultural analyses, particularly influenced by cultural heritage policies and *Hua'er*'s recognition by UNESCO (Zhao, 2008). Nevertheless, diachronic studies—examining *Hua'er*'s evolution over historical periods—remain relatively underdeveloped. This study addresses existing methodological limitations by integrating diachronic (historical) and synchronic (contemporary) analyses through a historical ethnomusicological approach.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

Clarifying *Hua'er*'s historical origins and developmental trajectories is vital for understanding its cultural role and significance in Northwestern China. Earlier investigations produced contradictory theories concerning

Hua'er's emergence, proposing various historical points ranging from primitive societies through major dynastic periods (Tang, Yuan, Ming, Qing). These theories typically relied on fragmented evidence such as lyrical analysis, historical documents, or literary citations, thus providing incomplete or conflicting narratives (Ke, 1981; Zhao, 1980; Zhou, 2021).

This research is necessary to resolve scholarly inconsistencies, provide a coherent narrative of *Hua'er's* historical progression, and enhance understanding of its contemporary cultural roles. Furthermore, examining *Hua'er* through the lens of intercultural exchanges contributes to broader theoretical understandings of cultural transmission, ethnic integration, and identity formation within diverse social contexts. Thus, the study serves both scholarly interests and broader practical objectives related to cultural preservation and social cohesion.

1.3 Review of Relevant Scholarship

Academic literature on *Hua'er* has evolved significantly over the past century. Initial research by Yuan (1952, cited in Zhang, 1980) laid foundational analytical frameworks for lyric content. Subsequent influential studies, notably by Xi (1989), systematically addressed *Hua'er's* regional variations and historical roots, proposing varied chronological and cultural contexts for its origin.

Controversies surrounding *Hua'er's* emergence timeline are prominent in existing literature. Zhang (1980) and Liu (1982) debated whether its origins trace back to the Sui-Tang period or significantly earlier periods. Hao (1985) and Yang (1985) independently linked *Hua'er* directly to ancient Qiang traditions, while Xi (1988) argued persuasively for differentiated developments across regions and historical periods. Ke (2002) similarly supported a Ming Dynasty origin based on musical and folkloric evidence.

Wang (2013) provided a comprehensive developmental narrative, distinguishing clear historical phases: early embryonic stages, gradual formation through various dynasties, and flourishing during the Qing Dynasty and Republican era. Recent scholarship increasingly calls for integrated, interdisciplinary approaches rather than isolated or overly generalized analyses. This study aligns with such methodological advancements, adopting a holistic historical ethnomusicological framework (Rice, 2017; Tanner, 2016).

1.4 Research Question

Building upon the gaps identified in existing literature, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What socio-cultural and historical contexts influenced *Hua'er's* emergence and evolution in Northwest China?
- How have intercultural exchanges among diverse ethnic groups, particularly in the Taomin and Hehuang regions, shaped *Hua'er's* development and transmission?
- In what ways has *Hua'er* historically and contemporarily functioned as a cultural emblem promoting ethnic integration, social cohesion, and national unity in China?

To address these questions, the research employs a historical ethnomusicological approach, integrating analyses of historical texts, ethnographic field data, and intercultural interactions. This approach allows comprehensive exploration of both historical continuity and contemporary practice, aiming to provide new insights into *Hua'er's* cultural evolution and enduring significance.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative ethnomusicological study adopts a historical ethnomusicology approach, integrating diachronic (historical evolution) and synchronic (contemporary cultural practice) perspectives. Historical ethnomusicology is characterized by examining traditional music as both dynamic cultural transformation and living tradition (Widdess, 2012). It emphasizes historical reflection and analysis alongside social and cultural interpretations (Zhao, 2015; Huang & Luo, 2020). Particularly in East Asia, this approach frequently entails detailed analyses of ancient musical scores and textual sources, aimed at reconstructing historical music practices (Stock, 2003).

2.2 Research Methodology

The study primarily utilizes historical documents, ethnographic insights, and intercultural analysis. Historical ethnomusicology fills an important gap in conventional ethnomusicology, which traditionally focuses on contemporary musical practices, often neglecting the historical dimension (Rice, 2017). To address this gap, this research extensively examines historical documentation, organizing and synthesizing literature to contextualize *Hua'er* within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks. By immersing in historical and cultural contexts,

this method facilitates deeper understandings that reflect historical realities and indigenous perspectives (Ye et al., 2022).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved a comprehensive review and analysis of historical documents, including ancient texts and previous scholarly works on *Hua'er*. The analysis focused on identifying intercultural exchanges and the socio-historical contexts underlying *Hua'er*'s origins and evolution. The research incorporated a detailed historiographic methodology to critically evaluate sources, ensuring that interpretations remained contextually accurate and culturally valid. Additionally, comparative ethnographic methods were employed to cross-reference historical findings with contemporary cultural practices observed within ethnic communities in the Taomin and Hehuang regions.

2.4 Sampling Procedures

Historical documents and texts were selected based on their direct relevance to *Hua'er*'s historical development and intercultural contexts. Documents from diverse historical periods were systematically reviewed to ensure comprehensive temporal coverage. Inclusion criteria emphasized authenticity, historical relevance, and scholarly credibility. Exclusion criteria included documents lacking clear historical context or those providing redundant or irrelevant information.

2.5 Measures and Validation

This study's reliability and validity were enhanced by triangulating historical document analysis with contemporary ethnographic observations. Validation procedures included cross-verification of interpretations with previous scholarly analyses and consultation with experts in historical ethnomusicology. Measures were taken to ensure cultural validity through careful contextualization of findings within local historical narratives and perspectives.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Although this research primarily involved historical documentation analysis, ethical standards of scholarly inquiry were strictly upheld. All sources were appropriately cited, and care was taken to present findings respectfully and accurately concerning the cultures and histories involved. Institutional review board approval was not applicable due to the study's non-interactive nature, yet scholarly ethics and integrity guided all research processes.

3. Results

3.1 Tracing the Roots of *Hua'er*

To trace the origin of *Hua'er*, the first step is to verify the origins of the-singers of *Hua'er*, as well as the Han, Hui and other ethnic groups in the areas of Taomin and Hehuang regions. Firstly, the geographical environment inherently constrains *Hua'er* culture; aspects such as living standards, lifestyle, and people's physiological and psychological qualities differ from other regions. The initial state of *Hua'er* culture in the Taomin and Hehuang regions, formed on this geographic basis, constitutes its core content. Secondly, *Hua'er* culture is not entirely dictated by the geographical environment. It does not evolve in a closed system. Just as with human growth, the innate racial and ethnic genes one is born with certainly influence one's character and physique, but it is the environment in which one grows that truly affects one's emotional psychology and personality. It is evident that *Hua'er* culture is built upon a multicultural historical foundation.

3.1.1 Ethnic Migration

During the Hongwu era of the Ming dynasty, the government employed military strategies and established garrisons to facilitate the large-scale migration of Han people from areas like Jiangsu and Nanjing to Taomin and Hehuang regions. As stated in Zhu Yuanzhang's imperial edicts, the objective was to control the western territories and provide security for the eastern regions, which had been vulnerable to invasions. Zhu emphasized the strategic importance of these regions, noting that neglecting them could lead to future security problems (Nan & Tang, 2021).

The policy required soldiers stationed at the border to bring their families, aiming to ensure a steady supply of new recruits, augment the labor force for agricultural development, and deter desertion by giving soldiers familial responsibilities. According to the historical recorded of *Da Ming Huidian* (Note 1), some soldiers relocated with up to twenty family members, and there were even cases where the troops left first, and then relatives from their hometowns sent the soldiers' families to the garrison to be reunited (Yuan, 2021). According to historical recorded in *Guo Que* (Note 2), during the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty, substantial numbers

of cantonment troops were dispatched to locations in Gansu—namely Taozhou, Minzhou, Hezhou, and Lintao—and in Qinghai to Xining, Mianbo, and Chunhua. The deployments ranged from a few thousand to tens of thousands of troops each time (Tan, 2013). These Tun army personnel, alongside their families, often settled in these areas permanently after their military service, and did not return to their original homes. They are considered the ancestors of the Han people residing in the regions around Taomin and Hehuang regions.

Historical records indicate that during the early Ming dynasty, there was significant Han Chinese migration into Gansu and Qinghai, primarily for reclamation purposes, and the Hui population began to thrive after the Ming dynasty, now comprising half of the region's total population (Ke, 1981). The early Ming Dynasty recruitment of the Hui people to reclaim the wasteland of the Taomin region. This initiative facilitated the intermingling of Hui and Han Chinese communities, along with migrants from Hami in Xinjiang, marking the origins of the Salar Hui in present-day Xunhua Hui Autonomous County, Qinghai Province. Additionally, during the late Yuan and early Ming periods, the Dongxiang and Baoan ethnic groups began settling in the region (Zhou, 2016). The coexistence of these ethnic groups with Han Chinese villages led to Chinese becoming the lingua franca. This linguistic integration contributed to the creation of the multi-ethnic art form *Hua'er*, which is composed and sung in Chinese.

3.1.2 “The Silk Road” and “Tea-Horse Trade”

The Hehuang Ethnic Corridor, also known as the Longxi Corridor, extends from Gansu to Xinjiang along the Silk Road. Located between the Tibetan Plateau, the Hengduan Mountains, and the Central Plains, this corridor has historically served as a crucial cultural crossroads and a bridge connecting East and West (Fei, 1997). Due to its strategic location, the Hehuang region developed into a diverse, inclusive, and vibrant cultural zone.

The Silk Road, approximately 14,000 kilometers in length, is a historically significant trade route connecting Eurasia, with about one-third of its total length lying within China. Originating in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an, Shaanxi Province) and centred on the city of Dunhuang, it stretched westward to the Mediterranean Sea (Chen, 2020). The eastern portion of the Silk Road had three main routes traversing the Gansu and Qinghai provinces, notably passing through Linxia (historically Hezhou) in Gansu and Haidong in Qinghai—both major areas for the dissemination of *Hua'er*.



Figure 1. Three routes of the Silk Road through Gansu, with the bottom route indicating the primary area for the dissemination of *Hua'er*

Historically, Arabs (referred to as “Dayi” during the Tang Dynasty), Persians, and Sogdians from Central Asia were among the earliest active traders along this route (Yan, 2007). During the Tang Dynasty, Muslims frequently travelled between Chang'an and their home regions for commerce and diplomatic exchanges. Historical records such as the *Jiu Tang Shu* (Note 3), document numerous diplomatic missions from Arab and Persian kingdoms, which enhanced cultural interactions along the Silk Road (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2021).

In the Song Dynasty, the frequency of these exchanges increased significantly, as detailed in historical sources such as the *Song History* (Note 4). This period saw many envoys and merchants conducting trade, fostering a

thriving economic environment along the Gansu corridor (Chen, 2020). The prosperity of this route facilitated the settlement of Muslim traders, laying the foundations for the Hui community in Gansu.

Significantly, the Silk Road and its economic activities influenced the content of *Hua'er* songs. Lyrics frequently mention key locations such as Liangzhou, Ganzhou, Jiayuguan, and Suzhou, reflecting their roles as important trading hubs. For example, *Hua'er* lyrics often depict merchants' journeys and emotional experiences related to trade and travel, capturing the historical atmosphere vividly.

Eg. *Hua'er* lyrics:

zǒu bà liángzhōu zǒu gānzhōu jiā yù guānkào de shì sù zhōu

走罢凉州走甘州,嘉峪关靠的是肃州 (After Liangzhou go to Ganzhou, Jiayuguan is next to Suzhou);

zhēngshàngxiēqián le huí jiā zǒu xīnshàng de gǎmèi la kànzǒu

挣上些钱了回家走,心上的尕妹啦看走 (Make some money and go home to see my sweetheart).

Eg. *Hua'er* lyrics:

sòngwǒ de zhàngfū dào jiā yù guān yǎnlèi ér liúchéng le qīngquán

送我的丈夫到嘉峪关,眼泪儿流成了清泉 (Sending my husband to the Jiayuguan with tears flowing like spring water);

shíniánbānián de jǐ shínián děng tā gè huánghé de shuǐ gàn

十年八年的几十年,等他个黄河的水干 (Wait for decades until the Yellow River dries up).

Concurrent with the Silk Road, the Hehuang region also served as an essential market for the historical “tea-horse trade”. This system involved exchanging tea from inland agricultural regions for horses from Tibetan pastoral areas, functioning as both an economic mechanism and political strategy employed by successive dynasties from the Sui and Tang periods onwards. This trade peaked during the Song Dynasty due to military needs resulting from constant warfare (Shen & Zhang, 2019).

The Ming Dynasty further institutionalised this practice by establishing a dedicated government office, the “Tea and Horse Division”, which significantly improved agricultural-pastoral relations, promoted regional economic growth, and strengthened ethnic harmony (Nan & Tang, 2021). Consequently, Hehuang region transformed into a prominent trade hub, actively participating in broader regional economic networks.

Hua'er lyrics:

qīngzàng de pí máo yúnnán de chá chá yè la huàn le gè jùn mǎ

青藏的皮毛云南的茶,茶叶啦换了个骏马;

hé zhōu de shāng rén zǒu tiān xià dà shì chǎng kāi chū le xiān huā

河州的商人走天下,大市场开出了鲜花。

(Lyrical interpretation: Furs from the Qinghai-Tibet region and tea leaves from Yunnan were traded for fine horses. Merchants from Hezhou traveled widely, their extensive commercial activities stimulating market prosperity.)

The cultural impact of this trade is richly depicted in *Hua'er* lyrics, which illustrate the vibrant economic exchanges of furs, tea, and horses. These songs vividly reflect the bustling trade activities and interethnic interactions historically centred in Hehuang. Thus, *Hua'er* embodies a distinctive folk tradition that emerged from the unique intersection of nomadic and agricultural civilisations and the cultural synthesis characteristic of Northwest China.

3.2 Origin of the *Hua'er* Festival

Originally, mountains and ancient temples in the Taomin and Hehuang regions served as sacred religious sites for Tibetan monks and herdsmen (Ke, 2002). As Han, Hui, and other ethnic groups gradually migrated into these areas and began agricultural practices, the mountains evolved into significant cultural centres. In historical times, frequent natural disasters, poverty, and personal hardships led local communities to gather annually at mountain temples to seek divine intervention through rituals such as incense offerings, rain prayers, fertility ceremonies, and blessings for health and prosperity.

During these gatherings, individuals shared personal sorrows and joys, often expressing their emotions through folk songs. According to historical records such as the *Di Dao Zhou Xu Zhi* (Note 5), a Qing Dynasty poet from Didao County (present-day Lintao County, Gansu Province) composed a song titled “Welcoming Heaven Song”.

This work vividly depicts festive singing and dancing during agricultural rituals along the Taohe River Basin, reflecting early origins of the *Hua'er Festival* (Ke, 1981).

niángniángmiào lǐ mùxiāngqiāng xiāngěitiānshàng yù huángchàng
娘 娘 庙里木香呛，先给天上玉皇唱，

qīngfēng xì yǔ luò yì chǎng xiān bǎ sì lù bā xiāng de zhuāng jià zhǎng
轻风细雨落一场，先把四路八乡的庄稼长。

dòu jià tā zhěsānbèishàng zuòzhěchīròu hē jiǔ tān zǐ shàng
斗价塌者三倍上，坐者吃肉喝酒摊子上，

qióngniángniángmen yì dā xuān yì chǎng
穷 娘 娘 们一搭喧一场。

Figure 2. lyrics of “Welcoming Heaven Song”

“Welcoming Heaven Song” lyrics illustrate the persistent challenges of agricultural life, particularly drought conditions in the northwest plateau. Farmers traditionally relied on divine blessings for rainfall to secure abundant harvests, an essential aspect of folk religious practices in these regions. Historical sources, such as the *Minzhou Zhi Xiao Zhu* (1988) (Note 6), indicate that Min County alone hosted up to twelve annual temple fairs. The “Zhuqiu God Temple Fair”, held each May 17th at Erlang Mountain for rain prayers, was particularly significant, eventually developing into today’s Erlang Mountain *Hua'er Festival*.

Another prominent theme in *Hua'er* songs was “reproductive worship”. For example, the *Hua'er* lyrics in Figure 3 capturing the heartfelt desires of childless women who sought the favour of the “Goddess of Fertility” to mitigate social pressures from patriarchal family structures. While originally reflecting entrenched gender inequalities, the nature of *Hua'er* songs gradually evolved. Ritual prayers increasingly gave way to songs depicting life’s hardships (“bitter songs”) and expressions of romantic love.

yì kǒuguōmǎliǎngkǒuguōniángniángmiào lǐ guīxiàshuō
一口锅嘛两口锅娘 娘 庙里跪下说；

ér zǐ nǚ zǐ gěi yì gè qīnfáng rén děng qì mièguò
儿子女子给一个，亲房人等气灭过。

yàoshì yào gè ér zǐ lǐ yào xià nǚ zǐ táo qì lǐ
要是 要个儿子哩，要下女子淘气哩；

ér zǐ qí mǎ dàixiào lǐ nǚ zǐ xǐ guō mǒ zào lǐ
儿子骑马戴孝哩，女子洗锅抹灶哩。

Figure 3. *Hua'er* lyrics of “reproductive worship”

Historical documents further demonstrate the transformation from solemn religious rites to secular celebrations. For example, the *Taozhou Ji Lue*, a local chronicle from Taozhou (present-day Lintan County), describes festivities held on the twelfth day of the fifth lunar month, when villagers honoured multiple deities through communal rituals. Visitors attending from distant regions received hospitality from local families, and celebrations continued into the night, featuring emotionally resonant singing. Men and women performed songs in a characteristic call-and-response style, highlighting the festival’s vibrant communal spirit (Ke, 1981).

Similarly, reports such as those found in the Northwest Newsletter detail temple fairs at Leizu Mountain in Lintan County, where participants gathered to sing love songs in groups. After morning temple rituals, celebrations shifted into informal social events, with singing continuing in streets and eateries until dawn. These accounts illustrate a marked decline in the religious solemnity of temple fairs well before modern times, as *Hua'er* singing gradually became the central attraction (Xi, 1984).

Today, the *Hua'er Festival* remains a widely celebrated cultural event in northwest China, deeply rooted in the region’s historical interplay between religious tradition and secular entertainment. Its growing popularity underscores the importance of continued research into its cultural origins and ongoing evolution.

3.3 The Evolution of *Hua'er* under Ethnic Integration

The primary transmission area of *Hua'er* is situated at the junction between China's first and second terrain ladders, encompassing the transitional zone between the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the Loess Plateau (Yan, 2007). This region, historically part of the ancient Silk Road, exhibits a distinctive pattern of diffusion extending from east to west across multiple nodes and corridors. Notably, it is one of China's most ethnically diverse regions, comprising two autonomous regions, five autonomous prefectures, and over ten autonomous counties inhabited by more than forty ethnic groups.

Eight ethnic groups in particular actively participate in the *Hua'er* tradition: the Han, Hui, Dongxiang, Bao'an, Salah, Tu, Tibetan, and Yugu. Historically, the ethnic corridor of the Hehuang region has been home to numerous other ethnic groups, including the Qiang, Han, Di, Xiongnu, Xianbei, Tuyuhun, Tubo, Huihu, Dangxiang, and Mongolian peoples. Today, this region remains culturally diverse, featuring prominent communities of Han, Hui, Tibetan, Dongxiang, Salah, Bao'an, and Tu. Over an extended historical period, these ethnic groups have collectively shaped and maintained shared cultural practices, such as *Hua'er*, through continuous cultural inheritance, integration, and development (Qin, 2011).

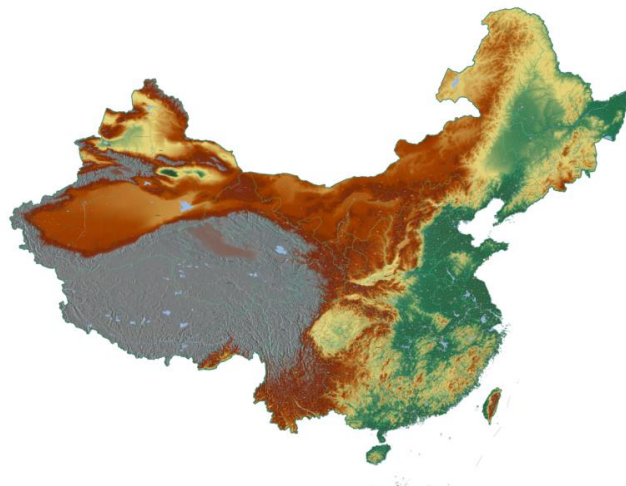


Figure 4. The terrain of China, the colors change according to the elevation from light to deep, corresponding to the first, second, and third terraces from left to right, respectively

3.3.1 Formation of the Three Cultural Circles

The original *Hua'er* likely emerged among Han immigrants at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. However, its development was significantly influenced by the cultural interactions with neighboring ethnic groups. This integration of cultures is both a result of *Hua'er*'s evolution and a manifestation of "Communitas" (Zhou, 2016). A cultural circle forms under the influence of various factors such as geography, economy, population, and culture, possessing relatively unified historical traditions, values, lifestyles, and social organization (Kramer, 1993).

The external characteristics of a cultural circle are evident in the existence of an ethnic group and its corresponding cultural group. Internally, this signifies cultural integration, while externally, it facilitates cultural diffusion (Zhou, 2016). The history of Hehuang region's three cultures has always been in a state of dynamic development, adapting to external changes through ongoing mutual collision and integration, penetration, and complementarity, thus creating a unique cultural landscape in *Hua'er*'s popular regions.

3.3.1.1 Han Cultural Circle

The formation of the Han cultural circle can be traced back to the Hehuang region, which has been predominantly inhabited by minorities since ancient times. Prior to the Han and Wei Dynasties, this area was part of the Western Qiang territory. However, the establishment of Daxia County by the Western Han Dynasty facilitated the migration of Han people from the mainland to this region. Recent archaeological discoveries of Han tombs in the area, now part of Guanghe County, further corroborate this migration (Ma, 2005).

According to Han (1984), a nation that does not revitalize itself, remains stagnant, and fails to adopt the advanced science and technology of its neighbors to remedy its own deficiencies is destined to decline and fall.

During the formation and development process, the Hehuang region minority absorbed a considerable amount of advanced agricultural technology from the Han culture. The integration of Han agricultural techniques provided a foundation for the enrichment of Hehuang region's national culture. As Han settlements expanded in the Hehuang region, Confucian culture continued to spread. Consequently, Han culture began to exert influence not only politically and economically but also ideologically, morally, and in various other aspects, presenting a unified situation to the populace (Gao & Liu, 1995).

3.3.1.2 Tibetan Buddhism Cultural Circle

The Tibetan Buddhist cultural sphere in the Yellow River basin dates back to at least the Tang Dynasty. Historical evidence from the *Anduo Political and Religious History* (Note 7) indicates that Buddhist pagodas were already being constructed during Emperor Xianzong's Yuanhe era (806–820) in the Guide area along the Yellow River in what is now Qinghai Province.

However, the widespread expansion of Tibetan Buddhism in this region significantly intensified under the Tubo Dynasty. The Tubo administration extended its political and cultural dominance into the Hehuang region, establishing a robust governance system that encompassed political, economic, and cultural aspects (Zhi, 2017). This regime actively pursued a policy of cultural assimilation known as “Tuboisation”, systematically suppressing local cultures and compelling indigenous communities to adopt Tibetan Buddhist traditions and customs (Yang, 2020).

Tibetan Buddhism predominantly influenced three ethnic groups in this area: Tibetans, Mongols, and the Tu. The Tu ethnic group primarily resides in the Haidong region of Qinghai Province, specifically within Mutual Aid, Minhe, and Datong counties. The formation of the Tu people can be traced back to the Yuan and Ming dynasties when diverse groups of Tibetan and Han Chinese populations gradually integrated with immigrants from Altaic-speaking regions (Zhi, 2017). Historically, Haidong served as a transitional zone between the Han Chinese and Tibetan cultures, witnessing multiple migrations even before the Tang Dynasty.

Notable among these earlier groups were the Tuyuhun of the Xianbei people, who established local rule following their migration northwestward, the Turkic tribes emerging from the Altai Mountains region around the mid-6th century, and the nomadic Shatuo people, also from the Altai region. Collectively referred to as “Mongolian Tartars”, these nomadic tribes traditionally practiced shamanism and spoke Altaic languages. Additionally, the region attracted substantial numbers of Han Chinese and Tibetans (Zhou, 2016).

Rather than becoming exclusively Tibetan or Han Chinese, the region developed its distinct identity through the creation of a new ethnic community, today recognised as the Tu people. The significance of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural sphere within the Hehuang region truly solidified during and after the Five Dynasties, Song, and Jin periods, marked by cultural interactions and integration. This process reached its height during the Yuan Dynasty, particularly under Kublai Khan, who honoured the Sakya Sect leader Phags-pa as Imperial Preceptor. Under Kublai Khan's patronage and central authority, Tibetan Buddhism unified various ethnic groups such as Tibetans, Mongols, Tu, and Yugurs into a coherent cultural sphere in this region (Wu, 2020).

3.3.1.3 Islamic Cultural Circle

The history of the Islamic cultural sphere in the Hehuang region dates back to the Tang Dynasty. During this period, Hehuang was a crucial segment of the Silk Road, enabling frequent travel by Arab and Persian Muslim merchants. The prosperity of the Tang Dynasty encouraged continuous migration and trade activities, leading to early Islamic settlements within the region.

In the subsequent Song Dynasty, northern and central routes of the Silk Road were obstructed for approximately two centuries by the Kingdom of Xia and later by the Jin Dynasty. However, the southern route through Hehuang remained accessible, reinforcing the region's importance as a trade centre for Muslim merchants from the West (Yan, 2007). Historical records such as the *Zizhi Tongjian* (Note 8) indicate that Muslims settling in China during the Tang and Song dynasties maintained their religious practices and cultural traditions. They integrated peacefully, intermarried with locals, and became integral members of the local communities, eventually forming the ancestral core of Chinese Muslims (Shen & Zhang, 2019).

Islamic influence expanded considerably in the Hehuang region from the Yuan Dynasty through the early Ming Dynasty. Genghis Khan's westward military campaigns facilitated extensive interactions between China and various Islamic populations from Central and West Asia. Consequently, many individuals from Central Asia, Persia, and the Arab world were brought into China as part of the Mongol conquest, forming the “Allied Army”, primarily stationed in the Hehuang region. This influx significantly increased the Muslim population, leading to the establishment of multiple Muslim communities (Zhou, 2016).

Muslim settlers in Hehuang engaged primarily in pastoralism, agriculture, commerce, and various labour activities, laying solid economic foundations for Islam's further dissemination. By the early Ming Dynasty, ethnic groups such as the Hui, Dongxiang, Salar, and Baoan had become well-established, with Islam serving as the unifying religious and cultural identity. Political, economic, and intermarriage factors further contributed to widespread conversions among Han Chinese and Mongolian populations, reinforcing regional cohesion and fostering a collective cultural identity (Wu, 2020).

Islam profoundly shaped the customs, lifestyles, and ethical norms of the Hui community in Hehuang, influencing marriage practices, family structures, dietary rules, funeral rites, festivals, and social etiquette. These customs align closely with the teachings of the Qur'an, influencing broader aspects such as politics, economy, education, and moral values within Muslim society (Zhou, 2016). During the Ming Dynasty, government policies towards Muslims became increasingly favourable. Muslim officials were appointed to prominent military and governmental positions, protective decrees were enacted, and mosques were extensively constructed. These measures allowed Islam to flourish, solidifying Hehuang as a distinct Islamic cultural region within China. Thus, the Islamic cultural sphere in Hehuang illustrates a vivid historical narrative of cultural integration and mutual influence, significantly shaped by the Silk Road's enduring legacy.

3.3.2 The "Wind-Churned Snow" Phenomenon of Hua'er

The term "wind-churned snow", originally a local Hehuang dialect expression referring to snowstorms, has acquired a metaphorical meaning within the region, describing the linguistic blending between the local Chinese dialect and minority languages. Linguistically, this phenomenon is understood as language contact, representing a fusion of distinct linguistic traditions (Zhou, 2016).

Through sustained social interactions, ethnic groups in the Hehuang region have developed close cultural relationships, facilitated by language and writing. These interactions have fostered a mutual cultural dependence, encapsulated in the local saying "you have me, I have you", highlighting the importance of interethnic connections in shaping cultural identity (Yan & Guo, 2024). Crucially, it is through such exchanges that ethnic groups develop a clear awareness of their unique cultural characteristics. Language, therefore, is not static; it is dynamic, creative, and continually evolving through active intercultural engagement.

Due to linguistic interactions, the Chinese language has become predominant in *Hua'er* singing traditions, often categorized into styles such as Chinese, Hui-tong, and Tibetan (Tubo). Ethnic minority languages in the region have absorbed many frequently used Chinese words, creating a shared core vocabulary that facilitates daily communication despite grammatical differences. Conversely, Chinese has also integrated linguistic elements from minority languages, illustrating the mutual nature of linguistic influence and cultural exchange (Du, 2004; Zhang, 2007).

The "wind-churned snow" phenomenon is vividly exemplified in *Hua'er* lyrics, which seamlessly integrate phrases from Chinese and minority languages such as Tibetan and Monguor (Qu, 1999). Examples include lyrical exchanges between Han and Tibetan languages, and similarly between Han and Tu (Monguor) languages, demonstrating how language blending enriches cultural expression and promotes interethnic understanding (Fei, 1989). Such lyrics not only preserve group identity but also bridge cultural gaps, strengthening mutual affinity and cultural freshness within the *Hua'er* tradition (Zhao, 1989).

Eg. the Han and Tibetan "wind-churned snow" *Hua'er*:

Chinese language: 樱桃好吃树难栽 (Cherries are delicious but hard to grow),

Tibetan language: 东扎的主汽团格 (There's water seeping out of the roots);

Chinese language: 心里有是口难开 (I have something on my mind but I can't say it.),

Tibetan language: 拉依个乃那乔占哲由果格 (Then I'll greet you with *Hua'er*).

Eg. the Han and Tu "wind-churned snow" *Hua'er*:

Chinese language: 蚂蚁虫儿两头儿大 (Ants have large heads and tails),

Monguor language: 希登你那仁达怀哇 (but thin centres);

Chinese language: 你十七来我十八 (You're 17, I'm 18 years old),

Monguor language: 达活罗赛你达怀哇 (We're a perfect match).

Several factors have contributed to the emergence of this linguistic phenomenon. Firstly, cohabitation among various ethnic groups in the region necessitates frequent socio-economic exchanges, reinforcing the need for effective interethnic communication. Secondly, the historical "tea-horse trade", which encouraged active

economic interactions between ethnic communities, has significantly promoted linguistic and cultural exchanges. Lastly, long-term linguistic interactions among ethnicities have fostered an atmosphere of harmony, further reinforcing cultural cohesion.

In summary, the linguistic phenomenon of “wind-churned snow” illustrates the importance of language as a tool for cultural interaction, social cohesion, and mutual understanding. The multilingual and multicultural interactions within the Hehuang region showcase the adaptability and progressive nature of ethnic cultures, highlighting the dynamic role of language in shaping historical, social, and cultural developments.

Language complementarity plays a crucial role in building this linguistic harmony, where learning and using languages of other ethnic groups enhance cultural exchanges and relations. In summary, language and cultural interactions are significant, with language serving as a vital tool in political, economic, and cultural exchanges across ages and ethnicities. It also promotes the socio-economic and cultural development of nations. Frequent bilingual or multilingual communication can lead to changes in language habits, exemplifying the adaptability, cohesion, and progressive nature of ethnic cultures, as vividly demonstrated in the “wind-churned snow” phenomenon.

4. Discussion

This study has explored the complex historical, social, and cultural factors influencing the origin and evolution of *Hua'er*. By positioning *Hua'er* within a broader ethnomusicological context, the research highlights significant cross-cultural interactions and socio-historical dynamics in the diverse ethnic landscape of northwest China. The multifaceted nature of *Hua'er*, as demonstrated through varied scholarly interpretations across different historical periods, underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in uncovering the nuances of folk music traditions.

Hua'er exemplifies China's extensive history of ethnic integration and cultural exchange, specifically among the Han, Hui, Tibetan, and Tu ethnic groups. It serves as more than merely an example of cultural blending; rather, it acts as a historical testament to the symbiotic relationships and mutual prosperity developed among these diverse communities. Through its continual evolution, *Hua'er* has reflected shifts in northwest China's social structures and political climates, making it a critical lens through which social transformations can be examined.

At a socio-historical level, *Hua'er* offers insights into how historical shifts have influenced cultural forms. Each era's distinct political environment and societal dynamics have left their mark, thus highlighting *Hua'er*'s adaptability and ongoing relevance. Moreover, by interpreting social changes through musical expressions, this research provides a novel approach to understanding historical transformation across multiple dimensions.

Regarding cultural heritage, *Hua'er* serves as a potent cultural symbol. Its ongoing practice not only reinforces regional cultural continuity and national identity but also prompts contemporary society to reconsider the value and significance of traditional cultural forms. The examination of *Hua'er*'s origins and its role as ICH further demonstrates the importance of cultural diversity in fostering social cohesion and preserving humanity's collective cultural memory.

Additionally, the analysis of *Hua'er* reveals a complex history of ethnic integration and intercultural exchange, particularly in the Taomin and Hehuang regions. *Hua'er* is not merely a relic preserved from the past; it remains a vibrant, living tradition that continuously adapts to contemporary contexts. Ongoing debates surrounding its origins indicate a sophisticated developmental process influenced by multiple factors, perspectives, and historical circumstances.

In conclusion, *Hua'er* exemplifies the richness of cultural exchanges among ethnic groups in northwest China. It showcases the adaptive and integrative capacities of cultural traditions within diverse societal contexts. Future research should continue exploring the intricate interplay of historical, social, and cultural dynamics within *Hua'er*, thereby enhancing our understanding of the broader processes shaping ICH and ethnic integration.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to Dr. Ang Mei Foong for her consistent academic guidance and support throughout the course of this research. As the second author of this paper, Dr. Ang made substantial contributions to the theoretical design and manuscript revision, and her mentorship has been instrumental in shaping the scholarly direction of the study. We also wish to acknowledge the librarians at Tianshui Normal University for their invaluable assistance in providing access to critical historical and ethnomusicological resources that greatly enriched our analysis. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. Finally, special thanks to all those who offered personal assistance during the manuscript preparation process.

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Notes

Note 1. Da Ming Huidian (大明会典), authored by Li Dongyang (1447-1516) and Shen Shixing (1535-1614), is a five-volume collection of administrative law and regulations of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

Note 2. Guo Que (国榷) is a chronicle of Chinese history compiled during the Ming dynasty.

Note 3. Jiu Tang Shu (旧唐书) is also known as “The Old Book of Tang”, or the “Book of Tang”, is the earliest historical record of the Tang dynasty (circa 618–907), comprising 200 chapters and was compiled during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, it was later supplanted by the New Book of Tang in the Song dynasty but eventually regained acceptance. While Chief Minister Liu Xu is credited as the editor, the majority of the work was done by his predecessor Zhao Ying, with contributions from Zhang Zhao, Jia Wei and Zhao Xi.

Note 4. Song History (宋史), a historical material about the history and culture of the Song Dynasty in China, covering the political, economic, military, cultural, ideological, and natural sciences of the Song Dynasty.

Note 5. Di Dao Zhou Xu Zhi (狄道州续志) is a historical document that records the history, geography, customs, personalities, and cultural education of Lintao and Min County in Gansu Province, China. It was compiled in the 28th year of the Qianlong period (the year of Guihai, 1763) of the Qing Dynasty.

Note 6. Minzhou Zhi Xiao Zhu (岷州志校注), a county chronicle that records the ancient Minzhou region of China (including present-day Min County and its surrounding areas).

Note 7. Anduo Political and Religious History (安多政教史), a historical work, recounts the establishment and development of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, mainly of the Gelug school, in the Gansu and Qinghai regions of China, and the process of the formation of the unity of church and state, and deals with the religious struggles of the time and the relationship between Qinghai and Wei-Zang, among other things.

Note 8. Zizhi Tongjian (资治通鉴), literally Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance, is a chronologically arranged historical text compiled by Sima Guang during the Northern Song dynasty. Comprising 294 volumes, it chronicles over 1,300 years of Chinese history (403 BCE–959 CE) and was intended as a guide for rulers, emphasizing political and moral lessons.

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