

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i5.1756>

Echoes of the Posthuman in the Historical Development of Tibetan Folk Songs in Diqing, Yunnan Province

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Abstract

This study investigates the historical development of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, through the lens of posthumanist theory. Set against the backdrop of cultural shifts from socialist institutionalization to digital globalization, the research explores how these folk songs have transformed in form, function, and meaning across three distinct periods: 1949–1979, 1979–2001, and 2001–2024. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Shangri-La County and surrounding villages between 2022 and 2024, the study incorporates interviews with five key cultural practitioners, archival analysis, and musicological transcription of 25 representative songs. Data were thematically coded and analyzed using narrative, stylistic, and technological frameworks. The results reveal that Tibetan folk songs have shifted from embodied, community-based practices to mediated cultural expressions shaped by state ideology, commercial tourism, and algorithmic curation. In the posthuman era, these songs are no longer solely authored by human agents; they participate in complex networks involving digital platforms, AI tools, and global audiences. The study contributes to contemporary posthumanist debates by rethinking cultural heritage as dynamic, relational, and multispecies. It suggests further research on how emerging technologies influence youth engagement with traditional music and calls for strategies that balance cultural preservation with creative innovation.

Keywords: Tibetan Folk Songs, Posthumanism, Digital Heritage, Cultural Transformation, Diqing Yunnan.

Introduction

Nestled within the mountains of northwestern Yunnan, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is home to a vibrant tapestry of cultural traditions, among which Tibetan folk songs occupy a central role. These songs—transmitted orally through generations—encapsulate the rhythm of daily life, the echoes of ancestral memory, and the cosmological worldview of the Tibetan people. Historically performed during labor, religious ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and communal gatherings, these folk songs articulate a cultural lifeworld shaped by both hardship and reverence for nature (Liu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Lott, 2023; Tang & Sornyai, 2023). In recent decades, however, the sociocultural fabric of Diqing has undergone substantial transformations, as modernization, state-led development, digital technology, and global tourism have reconfigured the modes through which these songs are performed, preserved, and reinterpreted. This dynamic terrain forms the foundation for examining the historical development of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing and situating them within broader theoretical debates about culture, media, and the posthuman condition (Cipolla et al., 2021; Coggins, 2019; Ping et al., 2024; Zeng & Chantamala, 2025).

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The impetus for this research stems from a growing disjuncture between the traditional context of Tibetan folk song transmission and the contemporary mechanisms through which they are now produced and disseminated. On one hand, efforts by local communities, scholars, and state institutions have led to the codification and archiving of folk songs as intangible cultural heritage, promoting awareness and preservation (Fan & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Gayley, 2018). On the other, these same processes often extract the songs from their embodied, lived contexts—reducing them to artifacts of tourism or symbols of national identity. Simultaneously, digital technologies have enabled new forms of circulation, such as streaming platforms and AI-assisted transcription, yet these technologies also risk flattening the spiritual and performative depth of the songs (Bauer, 2020; Edensor, 2020; Jia, 2022). Within this shifting landscape, there is a need to investigate how Tibetan folk songs are adapting to contemporary challenges, and whether their evolving forms represent resilience, erasure, or both. The problem, therefore, is not only one of historical continuity but of ontological transformation—how the very notion of what it means to perform and preserve “folk music” is being reshaped by non-human agents, global forces, and multispecies entanglements (Modi, 2023; Thompson, 2019; Yan et al., 2025).

This study is guided by the objective to examine the historical development of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing, Yunnan Province, from the early years of the People’s Republic of China to the present digital age. By tracing three distinct periods—1949 to 1979 (foundation and institutionalization), 1979 to 2001 (revival and modernization), and 2001 to 2024 (digitalization and globalization)—this research explores how folk songs have evolved in form, function, and meaning. The study adopts an interdisciplinary lens, integrating perspectives from ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, media studies, and posthumanist theory (Born, 2022; COX & GODØY, 2023; Woods, 2020). By doing so, it moves beyond simplistic narratives of cultural preservation to instead interrogate how Tibetan folk songs are enmeshed in complex networks involving human performers, recording technologies, algorithmic platforms, state policies, and tourist economies. Through fieldwork, interviews, and musicological analysis, the research aims to document not only the sonic changes of Tibetan folk music but also the shifting ontologies of performance, memory, and identity they signify (Li, 2022; Liu et al., 2025; Wang & Weng, 2025).

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to posthumanist discourse on cultural heritage and identity. While much scholarship on Tibetan folk music has focused on preservation, representation, or resistance within nation-state frameworks, this study seeks to reconceptualize folk songs as relational artifacts within an evolving assemblage of material, digital, ecological, and human forces (Karvelas, 2020; Shi & Nicolas, 2023; Sterling, 2020). It foregrounds the need to reconsider cultural continuity not as linear transmission but as an adaptive process marked by dislocation, reinterpretation, and hybridity. In doing so, the research aligns with posthumanism’s commitment to decentering humans and interrogating the entanglements between culture, technology, and the environment. When approached through this lens, Tibetan folk songs in Diqing offer more than historical narratives; they become echoes of a posthuman world in which identity, tradition, and sound continue to evolve beyond fixed boundaries.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the historical development of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing, Yunnan Province. Drawing from posthumanist theory, the methodology emphasizes not only the agency of human informants but also the mediating roles

of digital tools, institutional archives, and performative spaces (An et al., 2025; de Seta, 2024; Prasad & Shadnam, 2023; Yu et al., 2025). The research was carried out between March 2022 and March 2024 in key Tibetan cultural zones within Diqing Prefecture.

Research Design and Strategy

The study utilized an interdisciplinary strategy combining:

- Ethnographic fieldwork for firsthand cultural immersion and observation.
- Historical analysis of documented archives and governmental records.
- Musicological transcription and analysis of selected folk songs.
- Semi-structured interviews with experienced cultural practitioners.

This multi-pronged approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the development of Tibetan folk music through pre-modern, socialist, reform-era, and posthuman-inflected phases.

Fieldwork Sites

Field research was conducted primarily in Shangri-La County and nearby Tibetan villages in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. These sites were selected due to their long-standing traditions in folk singing, proximity to heritage festivals, and regional recognition as Tibetan cultural centers.

Informant Selection

Five key informants were selected based on the following criteria:

- A minimum of ten years of engagement in Tibetan folk music.
- Formal recognition by local, provincial, or national institutions.
- Continued involvement in music performance, teaching, or preservation.

These informants contributed diverse generational, stylistic, and ideological perspectives on Tibetan folk music, offering insights into changes before and after state interventions, digitalization, and global tourism.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using a combination of qualitative and musicological tools. Table 1 summarizes the primary collection strategies employed.

Method	Description
Semi-structured Interviews	Conducted in Tibetan and Mandarin; later transcribed and thematically coded
Audio and Video Documentation	Live performances recorded in various contexts: festivals, homes, and rehearsals
Archival Research	Review of folk song anthologies, regional songbooks, and cultural policy documents
Musicological Transcription	25 representative Tibetan folk songs were notated using Sibelius software

Table 1. Overview of Data Collection Techniques

Data Organization and Coding

The collected data—interview transcripts, video/audio files, song notations, and observation notes—were systematically stored and organized using digital folders categorized by theme and timeline. Archival materials were cross-referenced with oral histories and coded thematically into three major time periods.

Historical Period	Focus of Analysis
1949–1979	Institutionalization and ideological framing of folk songs
1979–2001	Revival, modernization, and emergence of hybrid musical styles
2001–2024	Posthuman entanglements: digital mediation, global tourism, youth adaptation

Table 2. Thematic Coding Framework for Historical Phases

Analytical Techniques

- Narrative and Thematic Analysis: Interview transcripts and observational data were coded to extract common themes, recurring metaphors, and shifts in musical symbolism across eras.
- Stylistic and Structural Comparison: Folk songs were categorized based on melodic contour, rhythmic structure, lyrical content, and modal systems.
- Technological Mediation: The role of recording, broadcast, and digital platforms in transforming folk song transmission practices was also highlighted.

Ethical Considerations

All five informants provided informed consent before participation. Anonymity was respected in data presentation unless otherwise permitted. Cultural sensitivity and respect for ritual contexts were maintained throughout the study, especially during religious or ceremonial performances.

Results

The historical evolution of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing, Yunnan Province, offers a window into the dynamic processes of cultural continuity and transformation across three pivotal periods: from 1949–1979, 1979–2001, and 2001–2024. These phases reflect changing sociopolitical climates, modes of cultural transmission, and the growing presence of digital and posthuman interfaces in everyday life. The following results delineate a layered portrait of cultural endurance and reinvention based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and the thematic analysis of 25 representative folk songs. Field interviews, archival data, and participatory observations across community rituals, staged performances, and digital dissemination platforms support the findings.

1949–1979: Foundation and Institutionalization

In the early decades following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Tibetan folk songs in Diqing underwent a systematic transition from orally transmitted traditions to institutionalized cultural artifacts. This was a period marked by both preservation and politicization. Government-led initiatives targeted ethnic cultural practices for documentation and ideological integration. Informants recalled their elders being invited to regional cultural

bureaus to perform folk songs, which were then recorded, transcribed, and arranged using Western notation systems for publication and educational use.

Songs such as the “Harvest Song of Shangri-La” and “The River Blesses the Fields” were collected in anthologies intended for patriotic use, emphasizing motifs of national unity, anti-feudal progress, and community collectivism. These arrangements were often performed by state-sponsored cultural troupes in regional tours and political gatherings. In interviews, musicians from this era expressed both pride in their participation and concern over the simplification or alteration of melodies and lyrics to fit state narratives.

The process of institutionalization reshaped the purpose and audience of folk music. Previously embedded in rituals, agricultural cycles, and courtship practices, the songs began appearing in school assemblies and regional propaganda events. Their intimate, locally grounded functions gave way to a broader, often abstracted cultural function. This shift marked the beginning of a long trajectory where the folk song would oscillate between preservation and performance under state influence.

Feature	Description
Performance Context	From ritual/agricultural use to political gatherings
Transmission Mode	Oral tradition supplemented by transcription and notation
Institutional Actor	State cultural bureaus and county-level performance troupes
Thematic Shift	Nature and love labor, collectivism, national unity
Technology Used	Analog recording, notation in staff and numbered systems

Table 3. Institutionalization Characteristics of Tibetan Folk Songs (1949–1979)

1979–2001: Revival, Hybridization, and Tourist Appropriation

The post-1978 Reform and Opening-Up period catalyzed a resurgence of Tibetan folk music, marked by renewed interest in ethnic identity, cultural pluralism, and commercial potential. Local governments in Diqing supported music festivals and heritage projects to showcase Tibetan culture. As one informant shared, “We were asked to dress in our ancestral clothing and sing for guests from Beijing and abroad—it was a stage, not a mountain anymore.”

This era saw a flowering of hybrid performances. Musicians integrated traditional Tibetan instruments with electric keyboards, synthesized harmonies, and amplified vocals. The melody structures of classical folk songs such as “Snowland Love Song” were retained, but their lyrical stanzas were adapted for romantic, cosmopolitan themes to appeal to younger audiences. Some artists also began composing original works based on folk melodies, contributing to the emergence of “ethnic pop.”

Tourism in Shangri-La further accelerated this transformation. As Diqing became a flagship site for Tibetan-style tourism, folk music was curated as part of a performative experience. Shows were designed for non-Tibetan spectators—often domestic tourists seeking an “authentic” encounter. Folk songs were shortened, dramatized, and synchronized with choreographed dances. While this commercialization provided income for musicians and brought broader visibility to Tibetan culture, it also raised concerns among traditional practitioners about the dilution of cultural meaning.

Informants noted that songs which once held sacred or ritualistic weight were now sung in hotel lobbies and banquet halls. This recontextualization led to tensions between older performers—

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many of whom refused to participate in staged events—and younger artists trying to balance economic survival with cultural fidelity.

Aspect	Traditional Form	Modified Form in Reform Era
Musical Instruments	Dranyen, Piwang	Electric guitar, synthesizer, keyboard
Lyrics and Themes	Religious, pastoral, courtship	Romantic, modern, scenic praise
Performance Venues	Villages, monasteries	Hotels, tourist stages, television programs
Cultural Ownership	Community-based	State-led and private enterprise
Intergenerational Attitude	Guarded conservation	Selective adaptation and creative experimentation

Table 4. Characteristics of Cultural Transformation (1979–2001)

2001–2024: Digital Reproduction and Posthuman Reframing

The early 21st century marked the entrance of Tibetan folk songs into the posthuman domain. With the rise of internet penetration, mobile technology, and state-driven digital heritage initiatives, the songs of Diqing migrated to cloud servers, music platforms, and algorithm-driven social networks. Songs are now disseminated on platforms such as WeChat, Douyin (China’s TikTok), and QQ Music, often accompanied by AI-generated subtitles, emoticons, and short video montages. The informants described how “even elders who never used a phone are now featured in livestreams by their grandchildren.”

Digital archives—produced by cultural bureaus in collaboration with universities—used AI to transcribe lyrics, identify melodic structures, and generate metadata tags for future research and cataloging. In one notable case, a youth-led NGO digitally restored and translated a 1965 field recording of “The Song of the Highland Bride,” which is now streamed globally with voiceover explanations in Mandarin, English, and Tibetan. These digital platforms blur the boundaries between human and machine, past and present, performance and preservation.

Thematic content of songs also evolved. New compositions and remixes address contemporary issues such as environmental degradation, ethnic identity, and urban migration. Songs originally rooted in localized rituals have become vehicles for political commentary and cultural resistance. For instance, one popular TikTok remix of a traditional love song was overlaid with spoken-word lines protesting deforestation in the Meili Snow Mountain region. These hybrid expressions underscore how Tibetan folk songs have become tools of posthuman assemblage—where sound, data, social media, and cultural memory intermesh.

In this context, musicians are no longer sole authors of their work. Algorithms curate audiences, shape visibility, and affect performative choices. Informants explained how they now design songs that align with platform metrics: shorter length, punchy openings, and hashtags that increase traffic. As a result, folk music becomes part of an attention economy, governed by feedback loops of likes, shares, and monetization.

Feature	Description
Digital Dissemination	Streaming apps, short-video platforms, digital archives
AI Integration	Automated transcription, translation, annotation

Audience Engagement	Algorithmic visibility, interactive platforms, comment culture
Thematic Expansion	Eco-activism, identity politics, urban nostalgia
Performer-Platform Relationship	Songs shaped by metrics, virality, and influencer trends

Table 5. Posthuman Features in Contemporary Tibetan Folk Music (2001–2024)

Across the three eras, the development of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing reveals a shift from embodied, community-based traditions to networked, mediated forms of sonic expression. While threats to authenticity and cultural integrity persist, the adaptation and survival of these songs demonstrate both resilience and reinvention. In the posthuman condition, these songs are not simply echoes of the past—they are active agents in negotiating memory, identity, and the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

The historical development of Tibetan folk songs in Diqing, as outlined across three temporal phases—foundation and institutionalization (1949–1979), revival and hybridization (1979–2001), and digital reproduction and posthuman reframing (2001–2024)—illustrates both the resilience and transformation of a cultural form under intense sociotechnical and ideological shifts. These findings are consistent with broader posthumanist theories that emphasize the entanglement of human and non-human actors in cultural production (Cipolla et al., 2021; Sterling, 2020). Rather than treating folk songs as static artifacts, this research affirms their ontological mutability as they traverse political regimes, economic reforms, and digital infrastructures.

The results support prior literature that documents the state’s role in institutionalizing ethnic cultural practices during the Maoist era (Gayley, 2018; Edensor, 2020). Songs like the “Harvest Song of Shangri-La” were ideologically repurposed and aestheticized for state performances, echoing Thompson’s (2019) notion of “folklore as political material.” However, this shift also reflects a loss of intimate performative contexts, a concern echoed by several informants in this study. From a posthumanist standpoint, this phase illustrates early forms of human-nonhuman interaction—between tradition bearers and analog technologies like reel-to-reel recorders and musical notation systems—that began abstracting embodied performance into textual forms (Born, 2022; COX & Godøy, 2023).

The revival era coincides with what Ping et al. (2024) describe as a commodified return to cultural plurality, wherein folk traditions are revived under the dual pressures of marketization and tourism. The emergence of hybridized musical forms, infused with synthesizers and amplified instruments, is consistent with the literature on cultural hybridization and “ethnic pop” (Liu et al., 2024). Yet this study further nuances these dynamics by revealing the tensions between cultural fidelity and survival—particularly among intergenerational musicians negotiating between ancestral loyalty and economic precarity. Here, the findings complicate simplistic preservationist narratives and align with posthuman critiques of authenticity as a construct shaped by political and economic ecologies (Karvelas, 2020).

In the most recent phase, the posthuman condition becomes fully realized. The incorporation of Tibetan folk music into algorithmic platforms like Douyin and WeChat illustrates a profound reconfiguration of authorship, dissemination, and audience interaction. The agency of non-human actors—AI transcription tools, metadata tagging systems, and platform algorithms—demonstrates what Sterling (2020) calls the “distributed authorship of heritage.” Songs become

entangled in feedback loops shaped by metrics and monetization, where virality often supersedes ritual function. This shift signals not the end of tradition, but its evolution into a networked ecology of performance, identity, and memory. The case of a youth-led NGO restoring and globally streaming a 1965 field recording exemplifies this adaptive hybridity—an embodiment of both rupture and continuity (Yan et al., 2025; An et al., 2025).

Future research should further examine the affective responses of younger Tibetan performers to platformized folk practices, as well as the ecological implications of folk songs now repurposed for environmental activism. Moreover, comparative studies across other Tibetan regions or ethnic communities can reveal how posthuman entanglements vary by local history and technological access. This study contributes to rethinking folk songs not merely as echoes of the past but as living agents within posthuman cultural assemblages—fluid, mediated, and unfinished.

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