

The Fluidity and Construction of Soundscapes: A Case Study Based on the Lishui Boatmen's Work Songs

Hongqing Mo^{1*}

¹ College of Arts, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

*Correspondence: Hongqing Mo

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Abstract:

Selecting the Lishui Boatmen's Work Song as an outstanding representative of China's intangible cultural heritage in the category of labor chants, it embodies centuries of labor and musical wisdom from the Lishui River basin. This study examines the Lishui Boatmen's Chants transmitted from western Hunan to the Dongting Lake basin. From the perspectives of musical geography and soundscapes, it explores how a single folk song transforms its social functions and cultural meanings across diverse geographical spaces and social contexts. Analysis reveals that in the rugged mountainous terrain of western Hunan along the upper reaches of the Lishui River, this chant manifests as a high-pitched, urgent, and rhythmically forceful "labor signal." Its core function lies in coordinating physical movements and organizing collaboration to counter natural hazards. Upon reaching the Dongting Lake plains, however, it evolves into a melodic, elegant, and soothing "sound marker," shifting its primary purpose to expressing regional sentiment and fostering community cohesion. Thus, this paper analyzes three dimensions—context, sound, and meaning—to reveal how this evolution from "signal" to "marker" constitutes a "sound geography" unfolding along the river. It also examines how contemporary intangible cultural heritage transmission mechanisms have constructed it as a symbol of local culture.

Keywords:

Soundscape, Lishui Boatmen's Work Songs, Sound Signal, Soundmark, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Music

1. Introduction

The Lishui River originates in the Wuling Mountains of northwest Hunan, winding over 400 kilometers through Sangzhi, Shimen, and Lixian counties before emptying into Dongting Lake. This river not only shaped the natural landscape of northwest Hunan but also gave birth to a unique folk musical practice—the Lishui Boatmen's Chants. In 2006, these chants were included in the inaugural list of National Intangible Cultural Heritage, officially described as "a spiritual reflection of the people of the Lishui River basin in their struggle against nature."

Within traditional Chinese music studies, folk songs have long been treated as aesthetic objects and cultural specimens. Research has predominantly focused on analyzing musical structures and examining literary content, often overlooking their

fundamental nature as “spatial” cultural practices. This overlooks how folk songs are shaped through interactions with specific geographical environments, livelihoods, and human factors, and conversely, how they participate in constructing social spaces and cultural identities.

Therefore, this paper introduces an interdisciplinary perspective combining music geography and soundscapes, selecting “The Boatmen’s Work Songs of the Li River” as a core case study. These songs exhibit distinct stylistic variations as they travel along the Li River from the mountainous regions of western Hunan to the Dongting Lake plain, providing a natural “auditory laboratory” for observing the dynamic interplay between people, sound, and place. The soundscape of the Li River Boatmen’s Work Songs is not a homogeneous “local sound,” but rather a “spatially functional differentiated system” that unfolds along the river gradient—transitioning from “labor signals” upstream to “local identifiers” downstream. This soundscape flow not only embodies the ecological wisdom of “human-land-sound” in traditional society but also provides a theoretical reference for contemporary intangible cultural heritage preservation and transmission.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The term “soundscape” originated from Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer’s “World Soundscape Project” (WSP) in the late 1960s, also known as “soundscape” or “acoustic landscape.” He studied the entirety of human-environmental sounds, categorizing them into “ground tones,” “signal sounds,” and “sound markers.” “Ground tones” can be defined as background, persistent sounds often perceived unconsciously, forming the “backdrop” of the soundscape; “signal tones” are foreground sounds requiring attention, serving practical purposes and demanding active notice; “sound markers” are unique acoustic features of a community, imbued with special emotional value. In 2001, American musicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay introduced the concept of “soundscape” into musical anthropology for the first time in his work *Soundscape: Exploring Music in a Changing World*. He defined “soundscape” as follows: “A soundscape is the distinctive background, sounds, and meanings of a musical culture.” In this definition, “background” refers to “performance location” and “the behavior of performers and listeners”; “sound” denotes “timbre, pitch, duration, and intensity”; while “meaning” encompasses both the inherent significance of the music itself and its implications for the lives of performers and listeners.

Music geography is an interdisciplinary field exploring the bidirectional interaction between music and its geographical environment. By analyzing the relationship among “people-sound-place,” it investigates the spatial distribution patterns, historical evolution, and regional transmission pathways of music. It seeks to explain that music is not merely a product of space but also an active force that constructs social space, shapes a sense of place, and expresses cultural identity. Building upon diverse scholarly research, Chinese ethnomusicologist Xue Yibing proposed the concept of the “flowing soundscape” to transcend the limitations of static musical zoning in music geography. He contends that traditional music is not a static, unchanging form; musical traditions are not “landscapes” frozen in time or solidified in space. Instead, traditional music across regions constitutes a dynamic soundscape that continuously evolves within an ever-changing musical tradition.

Within this framework, the Lishui River can be viewed as a “sound gradient zone.” Its physical attributes—slope, flow velocity, and width—directly determine labor intensity and collaborative methods, thereby shaping two functionally oriented sound types, which will be analyzed below.

3. The Soundscape Flow of “Lishui Boatmen’s Work Songs”: Context, Sound, and Meaning

The Li River basin exhibits dramatic topographical variation, with its natural geography presenting a distinct gradient from the mountainous regions of western Hunan to the Dongting Lake plain. The upper reaches (Sangzhi, Yongshun, etc.) feature “lofty mountains, swift currents, treacherous shoals, and numerous reefs,” where navigation is a perilous livelihood. The lower reaches (Lixian, Jishui, etc.) boast “broad, tranquil waters and low-lying terrain,” fostering a settled water-based culture centered on rice cultivation, fishing, and hunting. Following the fundamental framework of soundscape theory, this paper analyzes the soundscape differentiation of work songs in the upper and lower reaches through three dimensions: context (geography and labor environment), sound (musical characteristics), and meaning (social function and cultural connotation). It reveals how an inland river becomes a natural conduit for the flow of sound and meaning.

3.1. The “Upper River Style” in Western Hunan

Sound: The musical form exhibits distinct “signal sound” features. The rhythm is dense and regimented (often in 4/4 or 6/8 time), with a tempo typically exceeding 120 BPM, creating a strong driving pulse. The vocal range is high (G4–C5), using a rough, penetrating “shouting” style to overcome the roar of the water. Lyrics are extremely simplified, consisting of improvised exhortations or meaningless vocables like “hei-yo.” The critical “call-and-response” structure is led by a foreman who improvises cues based on the water flow; the chorus must respond in perfect sync to avoid disaster.

Significance: The primary function is instrumental: to transmit commands, synchronize movement, and mitigate risk. The soundscape is a tense, high-stakes amalgam of human shouts, crashing water, and the friction of taut ropes. It actively constructs the river as a “heroic space” to be conquered through courage, discipline, and collective effort.

3.2. The “Lower River Style” in the Dongting Lake Region

As the Lishui flows into the areas of Lixian and Jinshi near Dongting Lake, the terrain flattens, the river widens, and the current gentles. Water transport became stable, with loading/unloading as the main task, drastically reducing physical strain.

Setting: A stable, settled riverside society with a slower, less perilous labor rhythm.

Sound: The musical morphology becomes “melodic” and “lyrical.” Tempo slows to 60–80 BPM, with syncopation and ornamentation. The melody expands in range, becoming smooth and flowing, often based on a pentatonic scale with a lyrical minor quality. Lyrics grow rich with depictions of local scenery, love stories, and nostalgia.

Significance: The function shifts from labor coordination to emotional expression and community bonding. The work song detaches from its purely utilitarian context and enters the realms of festival performances, temple fairs, and school education. It

transforms into a “soundmark”—an auditory symbol of “Lishui identity” that evokes collective memory and fosters local pride. Its soundscape becomes dominated by the aestheticized human voice, with environmental sounds receding into the background, thereby constructing the riverine landscape as a cherished “homeland space.”

3.3. The Flowing Gradient: From Signal to Soundmark

The Lishui River defies simple binary divisions. From the middle reaches at Linli to the Jinshi section, the form of boatmen’s chants exhibits a continuous transition: both abrupt anchor-lifting chants and melodious oar-rowing tunes coexist, reflecting functional layering and contextual shifts. This river-spanning evolution of soundscapes is fundamentally driven by the deep coupling of geographical environment, labor patterns, and sonic practices. Viewed through R. Murray Schafer’s soundscape theory, the watershed differentiation of Lishui boatmen’s chants can be understood as an evolution from “signal sounds” to “signifier sounds”. Upstream, the chants function as quintessential signal sounds, serving to convey functional information and coordinate collective action—indispensable auditory tools in the labor process. Downstream, they gradually transform into distinctive local landmark sounds—akin to auditory “landmarks” that carry memory, evoke belonging, and symbolize identity.

Thus, the soundscape of the Li River Boatmen’s Chants unfolds as an auditory geography charted along the river’s course. Its extraordinary quality lies in not only mapping acoustic features (where piercing shouts resonate, where melodious chants linger) and explaining sound origins (by linking acoustic characteristics to specific topography, hydrology, and livelihoods), but also elucidating the agency of sound. Sound is not merely an “echo” of the environment; it is an active medium transforming natural space into cultural space. The “Upper River Style” constructs the treacherous river channels as a “heroic space” requiring courage, discipline, and collaboration to conquer; the “Lower River Style” transforms the expansive lakeside villages into a “homeland space” worthy of affection, celebration, and identification. The evolution from “signal” to “identity marker” fully embodies the core proposition of musical geography: music is a powerful social practice that participates in perceiving, experiencing, and imbuing places with meaning. This sonic journey along the Lishui River unfolds as an audible, vivid narrative of human-land relationships and regional identity.

4. Contemporary Construction and Recognition of the Soundscape of “Lishui Boatmen’s Chants”

With inland river shipping largely phased out by the late 20th century, the Lishui Boatmen’s Chants faced imminent extinction. However, since its inclusion in Hunan Province’s inaugural list of intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and its elevation to national-level status in 2008, this labor chant—once silenced alongside inland waterway shipping—has been reintegrated into the national cultural preservation system. This marked the commencement of a systematic contemporary reconstruction driven by institutional frameworks and involving multiple stakeholders. This reconstruction is not merely a simple “restoration to its original form.” Within the framework of intangible cultural heritage discourse, it involves recognizing inheritors, establishing protection mechanisms, promoting educational dissemination, and integrating cultural tourism. These efforts endow the chants with new cultural identity, social functions, and pathways for survival. Essentially, the “rebirth” of the Lishui

Boatmen's Chants is a process of being valued, organized, and passed down as intangible cultural heritage music.

Before its inscription, the chants existed only in the memories of a few elderly boatmen, dismissed as "outdated labor noise." Once designated as "National Intangible Cultural Heritage," it attained cultural capital status, entering government work reports, local chronicles, and media narratives. This process of "legitimization" marked the first step in its construction—it allowed a nearly extinct sound to be "heard" and "valued" anew. Subsequently, veteran boatmen like Huang Suping and Liu Zhisheng were formally designated as national and provincial-level inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. At training centers in Lixian, Shimen, and other locations, they teach apprentices, perform, and share oral histories—transmitting not only the songs themselves but also the collective memory of "how the people of the Lishui River used sound to confront the raging currents."

Moreover, educational outreach and mainstream festival platforms have significantly expanded the call-and-response songs' reach. Multiple primary and secondary schools in Lixian County have incorporated these songs into their curricula, with students learning to sing pieces like "Cargo Loading Call" and "Oar-Rowing Tune" for campus arts festivals. More notably, this sound is now reaching nationwide audiences through high-impact media platforms. The 2025 Hunan TV Spring Festival Gala specially invited national-level inheritors Sun Shanqing and Tian Zhenju to perform the adapted piece "Lishui Haozi: New Year Ballad". The performance preserved the original chants' soaring rhythms and call-and-response structure while weaving in New Year blessings like "Blessings Fill the Three Xiangs" and "National Prosperity and People's Peace." Audiences hailed it as "the audible essence of Hunan's New Year spirit."

Contemporary reinterpretations have not erased regional variations but rather invigorated diverse cultural identities. Upper reaches (e.g., Shimen) emphasize the "rapids spirit" of the work, highlighting its original high-pitched and urgent form; lower reaches (e.g., Lixian) focus on its melodic beauty and lyrical tradition. This differentiated inheritance respects the soundscape basin differentiation discussed in Chapter Two, making "Lishui identity" not a single template but a composite embodying both mountain resilience and lakeside warmth.

Challenges persist, however: the aging of practitioners, insufficient youth engagement, and the difficulty of recreating original soundscapes (like flowing water or rope sounds) constrain the depth of living transmission. Yet recent initiatives—such as the digitization and public release of Yang Yinliu's 1956 recordings and university "soundscape mapping" projects—are attempting to bridge the historical-contemporary auditory gap through technological means.

In conclusion, the contemporary soundscape of the Lishui Boatmen's Work Songs represents a cultural reconstruction driven by intangible cultural heritage (ICH) systems and accomplished through systematic transmission and creative transformation. It no longer merely serves labor coordination but has become a medium of identity—one that consolidates community memory, inspires local pride, and connects the past with the future. This process of construction demonstrates that the value of sound lies not only in its historical authenticity but, more importantly, in its ability to remain "needed" in the new era—needed to be remembered, needed to be sung, and needed to be identified with. Only in this way can the ancient echoes over the Lishui truly flow into the future.

5. Conclusions

The Lishui Boatmen's Chants have never been mere byproducts of labor; they constitute a sound-based practice system embedded within local experience. This paper uses the case of the Lishui Boatmen's Chants to reveal how soundscapes evolve functionally from "signal sounds" to "signifier sounds" through spatial mobility, and how they are systematically constructed as contemporary identity carriers under the intangible cultural heritage framework. Research demonstrates that rivers serve not only as transport corridors but as natural conduits for the circulation of sonic meaning. The value of intangible heritage preservation lies not merely in preserving "original form," but in ensuring that sounds remain "needed, sung, and recognized" in the new era. Future research may extend to river basins like the Yuan and Zi Rivers, constructing a spectrum of labor soundscapes along Hunan's inland waterways to deepen understanding of the auditory heritage of water transport civilization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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