

Informal Learning Based on the Educational Practices of Folk Musicians

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Abstract

Folk musicians are the most direct representatives of folk music and an integral part of music maintenance and education. Informal educational activities conducted by civilian musicians are one of the most important forms of community music education. Likewise, folk musicians, in their capacity as folk song teachers, have completed the teaching of folk songs in community music education practices, thus facilitating the continuation of the folk songs. Consequently, this paper examines the importance of the music education practice activities of folk musicians in the Poya community for the sustainment of folk songs. Specifically, it focuses on the Poya Folk Songs of Intangible Cultural Heritage and describes in detail how, through the practice of folk musicians, an informal learning environment can be created and established in the Poya community that is conducive to the sustainment of folk songs. This study offers a reference case for the sustainment of folk songs by folk musicians as teachers and extends practical recommendations for informal community music education.

Keywords: Informal Learning, Community Music Education, Folk Musician, Folk Songs Sustaining.

Introduction

Music education is an activity that every community needs to undertake and carry out, and it is an important link in sustaining community music and passing it on from generation to generation. Community music education provides a suitable educational environment for community members in a variety of forms, including informal education, family education, and teaching activities by folk musicians as teachers. Then, with the participation of the entire community, music knowledge, singing skills, and music culture are passed on. As Adeogun (2007) verified, music education is life-long. It is given anywhere and at anytime with the involvement of the whole community (Adeogun, 2007). Music learning is endless and encompasses both formal and informal learning processes. Informal learning in this study refers to learning based on informal music education activities conducted by local folk musicians in the community. For informal education, Maarschalk (1988) also construes that informal education is education that is given in situations in life that come about spontaneously, for example, within the family circle, the neighborhood, and so on (Maarschalk, 1988). Furthermore, teachers are indispensable in community music education, and because of the uniqueness of community music, their identities in music education are

not “teachers” in the traditional sense. In community music education, parents and family members, musicians in the community, as well as music teachers, can become “teachers” of music sustainment, thereby passing on community music. By using qualitative ethnographic research methods to conduct interviews with Poya community members and field observations, it was found that the most effective way to sustain folk songs in the Poya community is mainly through community informal education activities conducted by local musicians as folk song practitioners and teachers. Accordingly, this study describes the role and advantages of folk musicians in the sustainment and learning of folk songs in the Poya community, thus ensuring that the traditional culture and folk music of the Poya community can be preferably sustained and circulated.

Background

Poya Folk Songs

The Poya folk songs are folk music of the Zhuang ethnic group in Poya Village, Funing County, Yunnan Province, China. Local government-affiliated cultural officials discovered the Poya folk songs for the first time in 2006. These officials then hired composers to re-compose the songs, which professional choruses performed and entered into numerous competitions. After that, it was disseminated beyond the confines of the community, attracting a broader audience. The Poya folk songs are depicted on a white cloth fabric with the use of 81 icons, each icon symbolizing a folk song of the Zhuang ethnic group. Since one icon on the cloth refers to a folk song, it is also called the “Poya Song Book”. As Joy (2015) reports:

It consists of a length of home-made cloth one meter long and half a meter wide, painted with 81 icons, about 3.3 centimeters in diameter and painted in cactus extract, symbolizing the moon, rocks, bamboos, maple leaves, various fruits and vegetables, clothes, fish, and farm tools. Each icon represents a Zhuang love song (reporter JOY, 2015).



Figure 1. The Poya Song Book

Icons and symbols were the most primitive way of recording life before many ethnic groups in China had writing. In the era without paper, the clever Zhuang ethnic group people recorded their music by drawing patterns on the cloth, and this way was also to facilitate the singers remembering the lyrics of Poya folk songs. The content of Poya folk songs also covers many aspects of the production, life, religious beliefs, and cultural connotations of the Zhuang ethnic group. Thus, Poya folk songs were included in the third batch of national intangible cultural heritage in China in 2011, with heritage number I-113. In this regard, Tian et al. (2019)

further explained that the Poya songs book is the third batch of national intangible cultural heritage in China. It is a collection of folk songs circulating in the Zhuang area of Funing County, Yunnan Province. It records the Zhuang folk songs on the coarse cloth with the original pictogram. It is the only document that used pictograms to record folk songs (Tian et al., 2019).

Folk Musicians

Sustainment and transmission are the basic characteristics of music, and only through master-disciple transmission, oral transmission, family continuation, etc. can folk music be passed down from generation to generation through the sustainment activities of folk musicians. Keegan-Phipps and Wright (2020) contend that any discussion of folk music and learning requires a brief introduction to the concept of “transmission,” since this idiosyncratic conceptualization of the pedagogical process plays such an important role in forging the identity of so many folk musicians and their music (Keegan-Phipps & Wright, 2020). In the sustainment of folk music, folk musicians are the main protagonists. Also, Haiyan (2019) rationalizes that the first is that folk music depends on the main body of inheritance, folk music of ethnic minorities plays an important role in the daily life of ethnic minorities, which bears religious functions such as etiquette and so on in traditional minority culture, and only special inheritors can carry on the transmission and singing, so the development of minority folk music often depends on the main body of inheritance to a large extent (Haiyan, 2019). Folk musicians refer to those who need to be recognized as representations and influences in a particular field of music. They possess superior folk music skills, can improvisational folk music, and are familiar with the cultural contents of the folk music represented. Benedek et al. (2014) suggested that as an interesting additional finding, folk musicians were more achieved in the domain of arts and crafts. This may refer to stronger bonds of folk musicians to traditions and related skills in arts and crafts (Benedek et al., 2014). Moreover, they are representative inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage and key figures in the protection and sustainment of this heritage. As Guan (2021) emphasized, in this sense, the representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage is an important part of inheriting and protecting the representative projects of intangible cultural heritage, and is the key to the protection of intangible cultural heritage (Guan, 2021). The above discussion shows that folk musicians have an important role and position in the sustainment of community music, and as masters of folk music, they have the responsibility to carry out some community music education practice activities to sustain and protect the traditional culture of the ethnic groups they represent. The interview data shows that, as an intangible cultural heritage, Poya folk songs cannot be separated from the folk musicians. It relies on the protection of the inheritors and can be passed down from generation to generation. Regarding this, Onyeke (2021) concurred that folk songs are intangible cultural heritage that needs to be safeguarded (Onyeke, 2021). It shows that in the process of sustaining folk songs, folk musicians are both the carriers of the folk song and the core figures in the informal music education process in the community.

Informal Education and Learning

Education is relatively difficult to define, and as a concept, it has different understandings and meanings. Through the description of education in the literature, we can see some educational terms, such as “formal education”, “non-formal education”, “informal education”, etc. However, education in any form is a process that allows us to accumulate

knowledge and acquire skills to adapt to society and culture, and it is also the transmission of ideas and values from generation to generation. Regarding formal education, Dib (1988) suggested that formal education corresponds to a systematic, organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology (Dib, 1988). Formal education is a process of continuous education, and it is carried out in an organized, disciplined, and targeted manner with strong requirements and norms for learning. For the difference between informal and formal education, Dib (1988) further indicated that it does not correspond to an organized and systematic view of education; informal education does not necessarily include the objectives and subjects usually encompassed by the traditional curricula (Dib, 1988). From this, we can discover that both formal education and informal education have their own characteristics and their own applicability to specific subjects. Looking back at music, we can find that it is an integral part of the traditional culture of a specific group. Especially folk music among ethnic groups, due to its oral and improvisational characteristics, its sustaining and learning cannot be separated from the inherent cultural environment of the ethnic group and community. Thus, rigorous formal school education is not suitable for the sustaining and learning of community folk songs, while informal music education and teaching are more conducive to their inheritance. Du and Leung (2022) claimed that the existing model of school education is no longer fit for purpose in community and the traditional ways of inheriting ethnic music among minority groups should be seriously considered (Du & Leung, 2022). Informal education and learning have a strong adaptability effect in music education and are widely used because informal education can convey folk song cultural values and music cultural connotations in an unrestricted environment. Jenkins (2011) also concluded that if the primary aim of music education is to help foster creation of the student's self-identity, then informal learning is not only a good way to learn, it is the ideal way to learn (Jenkins, 2011). For the advantages of informal learning, Callanan et al. (2011) further summarized that attention to learning in informal settings high lights the importance of considering learning not just as an individual process, but also as a social and cultural process (Callanan et al., 2011). Thus, the use of informal education and learning in music is more widespread and has its own unique advantages for the sustainment of folk songs.

Methodology

Research design

This paper focuses on the sustainment and learning of folk music in the practice of local musicians in the Poya community in Yunnan Province, China. As a result, the researcher needs to go into the area and observe the cultural characteristics of the Poya community, and then better grasp the current status of sustainment and learning of folk songs in the Poya community. Creswell (2012) confirmed that ethnographic designs are qualitative procedures for describing, analyzing, and interpreting a cultural group's shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time (Creswell, 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2016) also analyzed that derived from anthropology and qualitative sociology, ethnographies study human groups, seeking to understand how they collectively form and maintain a culture. Thus, culture is a central concept for ethnographies. Focusing on an analysis of actions and interactions within the group, culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Accordingly, this study uses a purely qualitative ethnographic research design, from the entire ethnic group to the individual and musical events, to have a more comprehensive understanding of the music and culture of the Poya community.

Data Collection Method

This study mainly completed data collection in the Poya community. Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasized that qualitative researchers typically rely on four primary methods for gathering information: (1) participating in the setting, (2) observing directly, (3) interviewing in depth, and (4) analyzing documents and material culture, with varying emphases (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Hence, this study collects primary and secondary data through participatory, observational, and semi-structured interview methods, and uses content analysis methods for data analysis. In order to ensure the reliability, objectivity, and rigor of this study data, the researcher has continuously entered the Poya community to participate in practical activities and informal learning by the folk musicians, thereby supplementing the credibility of the data with prolonged engagement.

Participants

This study used a purposive sampling technique, including criterion sampling, to recruit participants from data sources in the Poya community. Creswell and Poth (2016) construed that the concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Furthermore, participants will be interviewed using a criterion sample method that will include 40 participants who meet the criteria according to the intended criteria. The interviewees included five prominent folk musicians and 35 community members. Local musicians who need to meet the following criteria will be included as interview participants: be able to sing all the folk songs of the Poya community; be skilled in understanding the cultural history and cultural contents of the Zhuang ethnic group; and, most importantly, have carried out informal educational practices to sustain local folk music. Community musicians who do not meet the set criteria will be excluded from consideration. Community members who meet the criteria of having studied folk songs following with local folk musicians or in an informal learning manner will be included as interview participants. Those who do not meet the criteria will be excluded.

Research procedure

The first phase consists of observations into the Poya community, mainly to observe the local community environment, lifestyle and folk songs practice activities, etc., by observing to understand the behavior and interaction of members of ethnic groups in the community cultural environment, and through photographing and observing notes to record the observation data. The second phase is direct participation. Based on the observations of the first phase, the phase mainly experiences the local informal learning environment by continuing to participate directly in the singing festivals and music education practicals of folk musicians in the Poya community. The data is then recorded in participant notes. The final phase is the interview with the participants. Each interview lasts about 30 to 50 minutes and is recorded in audio and video, then transcribed in full. The languages used in the interviews include the native languages of the Zhuang ethnic group and the Yunnan dialect. Participants answered interview questions in their native language, with translation assistance provided by local Zhuang ethnic friends.

Findings

Analysis of data through content analysis shows that there are five main ways of informal learning in the Poya community: namely, learning in informal educational activities conducted by folk musicians; learning at family education and community interaction; learning at the

practice of singing festival events; learning based on media technology; and learning from vacation workshops.

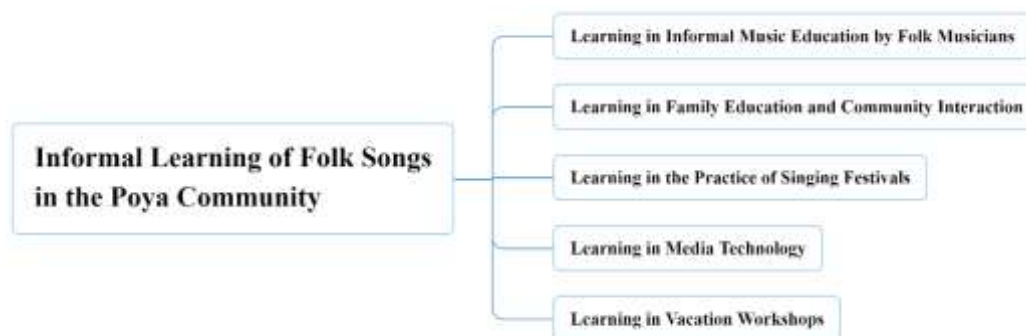


Figure 2. Informal Learning of Folk Songs in the Poya Community

Further analysis of the data found that the learning of folk songs in the Poya community prior to 2006 was primarily based on family education and community interaction, and that this type of informal learning was based on interaction between community members with parents, elders, and folk musicians in their daily lives. In informal learning after 2006, the main focus was on learning through informal education practices carried out by folk musicians. Secondly, equally important is the learning in the practice of singing festivals, which results mainly from listening to and watching singing performances by folk musicians. The learning based on media technology in the Poya community refers to the listening and learning of folk songs recorded on audio broadcasts by folk musicians and video learning on mobile phones, etc. Moreover, folk musicians also offer workshops during the vacation to provide the practice of extracurricular teaching to those who are willing to take the initiative to learn folk songs. It indicated that any form of informal learning has a close connection with folk musicians.

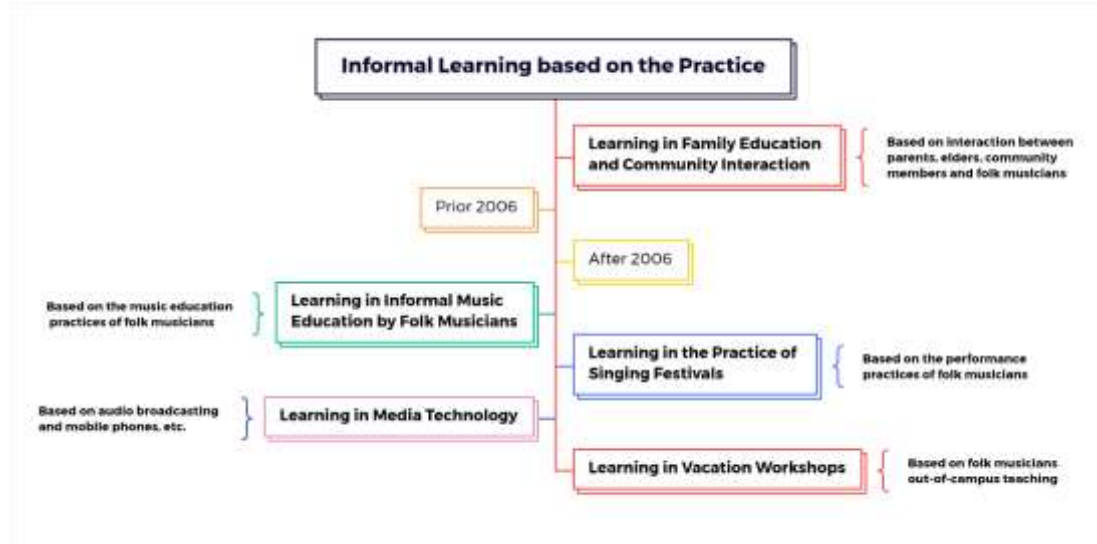


Figure 3. Informal Learning based on the Practice

Analysis of data from interviews with community members and folk musicians found that for older generations, the most effective form of informal folk song learning was based on family education and community interaction. Similarly, this was the advantage of sustaining folk songs before 2006, and the ten older members of the community interviewed were in this way of sustaining them. At present, youths and children in the community are learning and

sustaining folk songs through informal music education practices carried out by folk musicians. This way works better for community teenagers, and the young people interviewed to master folk songs and sustain them in this way. Furthermore, the practice of media technology and singing festivals has been continuously immersed in the learning of all community members for a long time. Since the Poya community regularly plays folk songs on the community audio broadcast, everyone can listen to and learn from them. The LongDuan festival is the most important singing event in the Poya community, and all community members must participate in this singing festival. Thus, all interviewees have experienced both of these forms of informal learning. In the Poya community, there are relatively few members who sustain the folk songs through the vacation workshops, and only four of the interviewees have participated in the workshops to learn folk songs.

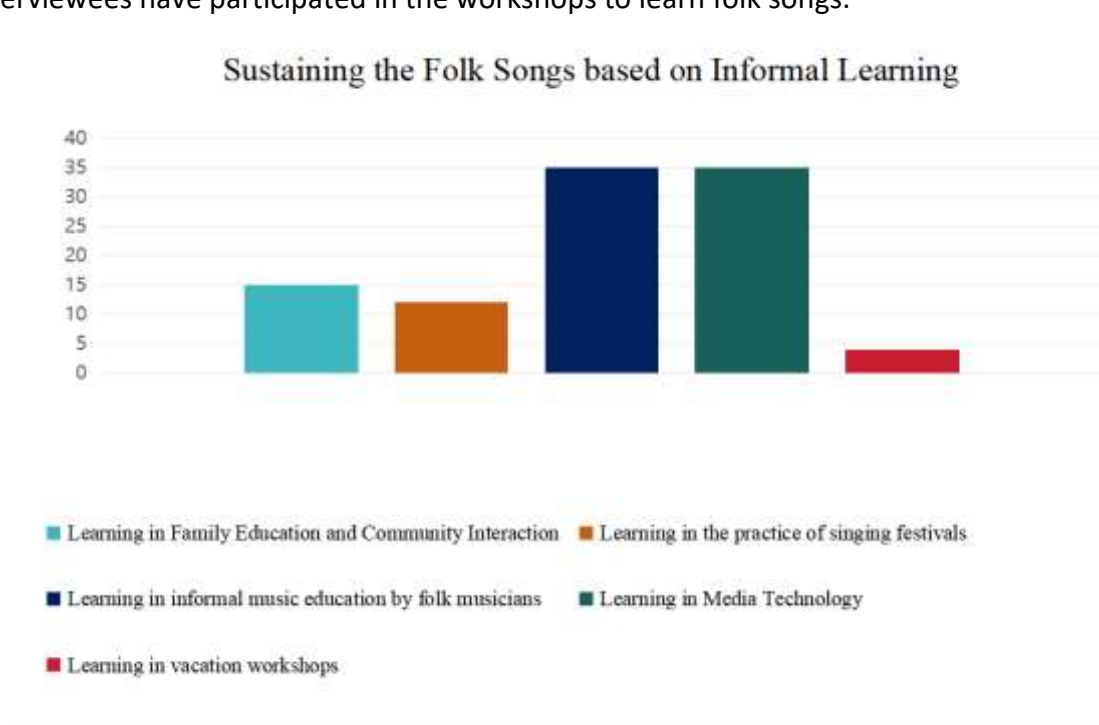


Figure 4. Sustaining the Folk Songs based on Informal Learning

Discussion

Informal Learning within the Community

In the interaction of the community population, music is an essential link in a particular culture, and community members often communicate and interact through music. As a result, community music is generally formed in the specific cultural environment of the community, and in addition to musical activities such as musical performances and music composition, community music education is also included in community music. For community music, Veblen (2007) construed that a central theme in community music is active music making, including performing, creating and improvising. All genres and diversities of music may be involved and they may be part of cultural and arts events, linked with celebrations, ceremonies, rituals, play, education, social uplift or life passages (Veblen, 2007). The participants in community music are a community-wide group, while community music education is an important part of community music and is taught to members of the community, including community children, youth, and the elderly. Community music education is an open education for community members, not a traditional formal music education, which combines the characteristics of community and music education and has

unique characteristics. For community music education, Zhiyan and Jantaramanee (2023) are defined as:

Community music education is an educational activity open to all citizens in the community. It is a part of music education broadly and has the characteristics of diversity and openness. With the fundamental purpose of promoting the common development of communities and residents, it plays an important role in constructing community culture and enriching people's spiritual life (Zhiyan & Jantaramanee, 2023).

Additionally, community music education, unlike school music education that offers traditional courses, does not have a systematic curriculum setting or a standardized education system. Consequently, informal learning is essential in community education. It can better enable community members to acquire musical skills and knowledge in ways such as interactive, spontaneous learning in situations where there is no music course or formal education. Schugurensky (2000) confirmed that in the concept of 'informal learning' it is important to note that we are deliberately using the word 'learning' and not 'education', because in the processes of informal learning there are not educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula (Schugurensky, 2000). In this context, informal learning is inseparable from the support of community folk musicians. Community folk musicians have the ability to perform community music, can improvise in music, and are familiar with the contents of community music culture. Thus, community folk musicians are the focus of community music education and can effectively sustain community music through their practical activities.

Outside of the school, folk musicians in the Poya community conduct practical activities and informal learning for community members. And Eshach (2007) also revealed that there is some sense that in-school learning is formal learning and out of school is informal tout court (Eshach, 2007). Most of the informal learning of Poya community members comes from the practical activities of folk musicians. For instance, folk musicians occasionally conduct informal music education practices in the local Heritage Learning Hall to teach folk songs. Due to the oral nature of folk songs, verbal instruction is mainly used. This is primarily informal learning conducted by community children and teenagers based on fixed-time, fixed-place participation in the teaching practice of folk musicians. It is characterized by community children and teenagers actively and intentionally learning in an interactive and participatory learning environment of teaching practice. Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) construed that we suggest that informal learning could be understood as a deliberate attempt to be immersed in intense situations of non formal learning, and therefore results in the creation of non-traditional social learning environments, combining interactive, non-linear and self-directed processes (Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010). Furthermore, folk musicians from the Poya community also offer a folk music training workshop during the vacation, providing opportunities for more people to learn folk music through out-of-campus teaching. Some informal learning in the Poya community occurs in a specific context, such as interaction with parents or elders in the family, interaction and exchange in community gathering activities, and participation in community festivals. In these informal learning environments, community members can uninterruptedly and unconsciously learn and master singing skills and knowledge of Poya folk songs. Rogoff, Barbara et al. (2016) emphasized that for millennia, children have learned the skills, life ways, and philosophies of their communities informally, through their engagement in everyday family and community settings (Rogoff, Barbara et al., 2016). The application of media technology may be indispensable in the informal learning

process of Poya folk songs. Local folk musicians have recorded folk songs and played them on the audio broadcast in daily life, giving children and young people in the village an immersive learning experience. Regarding the use of media technology in informal learning, Greenfield (2009) confirmed that media technologies are an extremely important part of informal learning environments (Greenfield, 2009). As the oral traditional music of the Zhuang ethnic group, the informal learning of Poya folk songs in daily life and in the natural environment of the community is more suitable for its sustainment.

The sustaining of folk songs in informal Learning

Observing the performance of the Poya folk songs, it was found that the lyrics are sung in the native language of the Zhuang ethnic group. The tone is also a more unique ethnic musical style, and there is no music text, so the music is in the process of continuation mainly by verbal transmission. This also demonstrates that informal learning methods are more suitable for the sustainment of folk songs in the Poya community, because informal learning is not just individual learning, but also based on the cultural values and content of folk songs that are transmitted throughout the community and cultural context. Also Callanan et al. (2011) rationalized that attention to learning in informal settings high lights the importance of considering learning not just as an individual process, but also as a social and cultural process (Callanan et al., 2011). Besides, folk musicians are also central figures in community music education. They can organize music learning and teach folk songs as teachers. They then provide community members and participants with knowledge such as musical skills, improvising creative skills, and musical cultural content expression. Regarding the importance of community musicians, Koopman (2007) confirmed:

The community music teacher has the task of providing the participants with basic knowledge of how to handle musical instruments. The teacher will guide them in acquiring skills in dealing with musical parameters— sound, melody, rhythm, harmony, dynamics and tempo (Koopman, 2007).

Firstly, folk musicians preserve the cultural traditions and fine singing skills associated with the Poya folk song. They transmit their own musical culture through community music education practices to the descendants of the community. Secondly, only folk musicians in the Poya community are fully adept at singing folk songs and are familiar with the cultural themes they express. Hence, they are the best practitioners in the informal learning of folk songs. As representatives of intangible cultural heritage, local government departments also require folk musicians to complete corresponding teaching tasks. The folk song teaching in the local Heritage Learning Hall is aimed at children or teenagers in the villages. In each teaching session, more than 10 students learn and sing most songs without using music teaching materials or musical text. The main form of teaching is that the folk musicians sing a line of folk songs, and the students sing a line after them until they completely master the entire folk song. The utility of this informal learning activity in sustaining folk songs is that conducting it within the community can make students more relaxed. Folk song teachers who are familiar to them can make them more motivated to learn, and the learning participants are all children of the same ethnic group, and this phenomenon can strengthen their learning initiative. In addition to music teaching within the community, the Poya community also provides off-campus folk song training courses to help strengthen and promote the sustainment of folk songs. These training courses and workshops are organized by local government departments to provide learning opportunities for students who are willing to take the initiative to learn about intangible cultural heritage during the holidays. Teaching

teachers are the local folk musicians, and their task is to help students understand traditional music culture, master the singing skills of folk songs through folk song teaching, and finally inspect the learning results with stage practical performances. This kind of teaching method is relatively rigid for the learning of folk songs, but it is more formal and more disciplined than teaching in the community, and it is teaching with purpose. Folk song teaching outside school is to expand the ways to learn folk songs in the form of training courses and workshops, and then extend the breadth of the sustaining and learning of folk songs. The role of informal learning in teaching is to encourage community members to learn folk songs actively and in a practical way, so that folk songs can be better sustained for future generations. Rogoff, Barbara, et al. (2016) indicated that the organization of informal learning has some shared features across many settings: It is nondidactic; is embedded in meaningful activity; builds on the learner's initiative, interest, or choice (Rogoff, Barbara et al., 2016).

There are also informal learning activities based on immersion in the Poya community, and family education is the mainstay of such learning activities. The effect of family education on informal learning cannot be ignored, especially within an ethnic group and community. Callanan et al. (2011) emphasized that children in all communities engage in informal learning in their homes, learning about a variety of domains through everyday parent-child conversations as well as observation and participation in culturally valued activities (Callanan et al., 2011). Most of the older generation of musicians in the Poya community can sing folk songs, and they express their lives through singing in their daily lives. Over time, the children in the family will gradually master the singing and expression of some folk songs through daily listening and imitation. Informal learning in the family and within is always based on the functional role of the family environment and the form of daily interaction, which in an unconscious way sustained the folk song on to the next generation. In this regard, Magomeddibirova et al. (2020) mentioned that the pedagogical potential of traditional family education is based on the functions and forms of the family itself (Magomeddibirova et al., 2020). The singing cultural activities in the Poya community are also one of the immersive informal learning methods. When children participate in singing cultural activities, they watch and listen to the singing of folk songs and then imitate and copy folk song performances so as to gradually learn how to perform the folk song. The informal learning of singing cultural activities is mainly based on the performances of folk musicians, using verbal singing to immerse participants in the learning of folk songs. Immersive informal learning activities can also be achieved using media technology. In this regard, Schugurensky (2015) asserted that the role of technology in people's everyday lives has exponentially increased informal learning activities (Schugurensky, 2015). For instance, the Poya community also uses audio broadcasts to play folk songs recorded by folk musicians, and community members can perceive folk songs through constant listening and then use their sense of hearing to immerse themselves in the teaching of folk songs. Consequently, informal learning in the Poya community can enable learners and participants to have a relaxed learning mentality and achieve learning effects with an immersive experience, so that folk songs can be better sustained during immersion.

Conclusion

Folk songs are part of the traditional culture of ethnic groups, and their origins are closely related to the ethnic group's cultural history, geographical environment, customs, and other comprehensive environments. In terms of the characteristics of folk songs, it is necessary to better promote the sustainment of folk songs in an informal learning manner in the overall

ecological environment of the ethnic group. Whatever form of informal learning that members of the community use to sustain folk songs, they need the support of folk musicians' educational practical activities to continue with folk songs in a more integrated way of learning. As a result, in a community-cultural environment, informal learning based on the practice of folk musicians has its advantages in music education, and informal methods of learning aimed at participation and practice are more suitable for the sustenance of folk songs. Most importantly, this kind of informal learning is relatively effective for intangible cultural heritage with oral characteristics, and community members can completely master folk songs in the local environment and then become practitioners of the sustaining and learning of folk songs.

Additionally, the study discusses the role of informal learning in the sustenance of folk songs from the perspective of qualitative research. While there are many scholars who are currently focusing on informal learning in music education, there are fewer studies on informal learning of folk songs. Hence, this study provides a specific theoretical contribution to the informal learning of folk songs. Moreover, this study uses the music education practices of folk musicians as a starting point to broaden the academic view of informal learning of folk songs. It then offers examples of the sustenance of folk songs in this study and provides reference suggestions for folk songs that have the same sustenance dilemma.

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