

Genre and Subject Matter Characteristics of Zuoquan Folk Songs from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Zuoquan folk songs, renowned as a prominent example of Shanxi folk songs and Chinese traditional folk songs, possess a distinct and self-contained nature. Notably, the Zuoquan "Flowering Tune" stands as one of the earliest folk arts to be included in China's national intangible cultural heritage list. Additionally, the "Small Flowers Opera" within Zuoquan folk songs was incorporated into the fourth batch of national intangible cultural heritage in 2014. This research explores the style, structure, gestures, and themes of Zuoquan folk songs through the lens of intangible cultural heritage, providing valuable insights into this cherished aspect of China's national intangible cultural heritage.

Introduction

According to the Zuoquan County annals, Zuoquan folk songs have been passed down in Zuoquan County, Shanxi Province, as well as the surrounding regions (Zhao Shiyuan, 1999). These songs are a collective creation of the Zuoquan people, serving as a direct reflection of various scenes and phenomena from real life. They vividly convey the thoughts and emotions of the Zuoquan people through their song forms (Zhen-hua Yao, 2011). Consequently, Zuoquan folk songs hold a well-deserved position as a national intangible cultural heritage of China. These songs are characterized by clear and timeless melodies, rich poetic content, and an exquisite style. Moreover, their genre and subject matter exhibit distinctive features. The genre of a work of art pertains to its type and style, with an artistic structure that has historically assumed a certain stable form. This structure evolves alongside the diversity of the art form, reflecting both the reality it portrays and the aesthetic objectives set forth by the artist. Consequently, genre is directly intertwined with the style, structure, gestures, and artistic flair within the work. On the other hand, the subject matter encompasses the material employed by the artist to

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express the thematic ideas of the work. Typically, this material consists of life events or phenomena that have been concentrated, selected, and refined to be incorporated into the artistic creation. Both genre and subject matter hold significant importance as elements of artistic works. Zuoquan folk songs boast a rich variety of genres, each possessing distinct characteristics. Furthermore, they encompass a wide range of subject matter, covering various aspects of people's lives.

1. Genre characteristics of Zuoquan folk songs

Zuoquan folk songs encompass three distinct genres: "big cadences," "miscellaneous songs," and "small tunes." Notably, within Zuoquan's artistic landscape, the Small Flowers Opera stands as an intriguing anomaly. While it is not directly derived from the Flowering Tune, it has assimilated numerous musical elements from this particular genre (Xue Shouzhong, 2017). Given that both the Flowering Tune and Small Flowers Opera hold specific designations as categories within China's national intangible cultural heritage, I will provide separate explanations for each, highlighting their unique characteristics.

1.1 Big cadences

The big cadences form a traditional folk song genre presented in a suite-like style. Most of the melodies are refined, processed, and developed based on popular songs from the Ming and Qing dynasties. These songs are characterized by their lengthy duration, complete storylines, and a strong narrative and poetic essence. The melodies of big cadences feature noticeable rises and falls, with frequent use of prolonged notes. The liner notes, composed of tone auxiliaries, appear frequently, often at the end of phrases, occupying a significant portion of the musical space. There is a saying that goes, "You can sing Liaozhou small tune, but you can't shout Liaozhou big cadence," indicating the difficulty of singing big cadences and the need for specialized instruction. Alternatively known as "howl big cadences" or "children's opera," the performances typically involve middle-aged men seated in a semi-circle, singing in a seated position. Percussion instruments like gongs, drums, and cymbals add energy to the performances, accompanied by instruments such as erhu, banhu, sanxian, sheng, and flute. Notable folk artists known for their rendition of big cadences in the late Qing Dynasty were Niu Laizhang and Qi Gengzi, while influential singers during the Republic of China era included Cheng Fuyuan and Cheng Youku (Song Baoming and Song Yufeng, 2017). Due to its lengthy and complex nature, as well as the high level of skill required in singing, big cadences have faced some limitations in terms of popularity. Presently, there are over 20 preserved works of big cadences, mostly composed during the Qing Dynasty, and there are few folk artists who can sing these works in their entirety and with proficiency.

In terms of structure, some big cadences retain elements from the Song Dynasty's "Changzhuan" and the Yuan Dynasty's "Santao." They consist of a prelude (Suangeda), the main song (Pipoyu), and a coda (Dacha). Each section has its own distinct name. The prelude and coda are fixed, while the main song (Pipoyu) can be repeated, varied, or pirouetted, allowing for flexibility and rich content. For instance, "Little Big Sister Goes Down to the Embroidery House" comprises 165 bars, with 26 bars for the prelude and 20 bars for the coda, which are not closely tied to the main song.

In contrast to "Little Big Sister Goes Down to the Embroidery House," "Su Ya'er Qing" does not have a clear differentiation between Suangeda, Pipoyu, and Dacha. Instead, it follows a stanza song format, presenting the complete storyline through the repetition of seven lyrics on a single fixed tune. Similarly structured big cadences include "Little Sister Dreaming," "Falling Plum Blossoms," "Falling Down the Broken Bridge," "The Second Girl is Sick," and "Dreaming."

Apart from the aforementioned big cadence structures, there are also single-part structures. For example, "Strange" consists of 134 bars and is performed continuously from beginning to end. Numerous liner notes strengthen the melodic tones, highlighting the distinct characteristics of Zuoquan's folk song style and enhancing the expressive power of the work. The same applies to "Little Black Mouse on the Lampstand," "Hitting Cherries," and "Red Lady Picking Flowers."

1.2 Small tunes

Small tunes, also known as "Xiaoling," "Xiaoqu," "Suqu," "Liqu," and "Shidiao," emerged during the late Qing Dynasty. They are folk songs that the working people use to express their emotions and entertain themselves during their daily lives, as well as during weddings and funeral ceremonies. Through artistic processing and oral transmission spanning generations, small tunes have become widely popular in towns and villages. They feature a balanced rhythm, delicate melodies, regular structures, and vibrant expressions.

Small tunes serve as the main component of Zuoquan's folk songs, covering a wide range of subject matters. There are soothing and beautiful lyrical works like "Embroidered Pouch," "With a Mind to Take Time," and "Four Hates." Additionally, there are vivid narrative pieces such as "Yellow Cliff Cave Great Victory," "Prostitute Sues," and "Back to My Husband's Family." Light-hearted and humorous songs like "Broken Tendons," "Old Man," and "Dan Brother's Matchmaking" add to the repertoire. Furthermore, there are entertaining songs that showcase festive celebrations, including "Pair of Flowers," "Playing Swing," and "Touring Garden." The lyrics predominantly consist of five-word and seven-word lines, although there are instances of cross

lines and mixed lines. Performers have the flexibility to improvise and modify the lyrics, making it easy to sing and greatly cherished by the people of Zuoquan. The internal structure of these songs is balanced and complete, with regular but unrestricted rhythms. The musical styles exhibit a diverse range, encompassing cheerful and warm tones, soothing and gentle melodies, humorous and witty expressions, as well as profound and ironic undertones. The rich musical expressions elicit cultural and emotional resonance among the working people..

1.3 Miscellaneous songs

Miscellaneous songs, also known as “mountain songs,” are an important category within Zuoquan folk songs. They can be further divided into two distinct types. The first category is a form of song created collectively by laborers, closely intertwined with their labor processes (Zhou Keng, 2003), known as labor songs. These songs are sung by working people while engaging in activities such as building houses, reinforcing river banks, and constructing fortifications. By singing these folk songs, they synchronize their labor efforts and boost their morale. These songs, including “Ramming Song,” “Caiqu Trumpet,” and “Opening the Land,” infuse some excitement into monotonous and strenuous work. They can be performed solo, as duets, or in groups, with various arrangements of singers. The music carries a distinct rhythm, featuring simple and lively melodies. The lyrics are often accompanied by liner notes, exhibiting regular and rhythmic movements (Jiang Ming Dun, 1982). Additionally, the songs sung by herdsmen involved in animal husbandry in the northwestern part of Zuoquan County during herding activities also fall under the category of miscellaneous songs.

The second category comprises the singing component of Zuoquan folk songs and dances. These folk dances are performed during events such as Naoshehuo, market visits, and temple fairs. Examples of such dances include inverted Daoyangge, pushing a cart, walking on stilts, rowing a dry boat, running with a bamboo horse, riding a donkey, playing with flower sticks, and performing ugly flower opera. Each dance has its own repertoire of short songs that are sung during the performance. On the 15th day of the first month, during the Lantern Festival, performance groups from the association go from door to door, a practice commonly referred to as “earning peanuts.” After their performance, the household owners reward them with peanuts, melon seeds, cigarettes, candy, and other small gifts. Examples of these songs include “Pushing the Cart,” “Pouring the Yangge,” “Small Yangge,” “Dumb and Dumber,” and “Fluttering Butterflies.” These songs can be sung not only during festive occasions with costumes but also in fields, hills, valleys, alleys, and courtyards. They can be performed with accompanying dances or independently.

1.4 Kaihua tune

During the Republican period, a unique art form called “Kaihua tune” emerged from the ditties within Zuoquan folk songs (Xue Shuzhong, 2017). The most distinctive feature of the flowering tune is the use of “XX flowering” in the lyrics. It goes beyond the blooming of plants and encompasses everything imaginable, such as pillows, glass, doors, chairs, beds, water pipe bags, stone slabs, and more. Singers can spontaneously create lyrics, allowing for a free-flowing and improvisational style, hence the name “flowering tune.” The structure of the tune is concise, delicate, and often consists of upper and lower lines. The upper line starts with “flowering,” while the lower line conveys the theme. A notable technique used in the flowering tune is the “Qixing” (seven stars) technique, where one thing is used as the starting point, leading to the content of the song. For instance, “sorghum flowering top red, a group of youngsters come to see you”; “pillow flowering top to top, the two of us in this world are close”; “persimmon flowering, ah, four flutters, since you have no one else”; “toad flowering, water bouncing, thinking of you during the day, dreaming of you at night,” and so on. These lyrics are carefully crafted and display originality within their context.

The research and classification of “flowering” in the flowering tunes of Zuoquan are incredibly detailed. Various categories exist, including “positive flowering,” “inversive flowering,” “real flowering,” “heart flowering,” “big flowering,” and “small flowering” (Luo Hu, 2010). “Positive flowering” refers to the structure of the upper and lower sentences, where the upper sentence sets the scene and emotions for the lower sentence. The presence of “Bi” in “Xing” allows for analogies and creates strong relevance. Conversely, “inversive flowering” involves a clear shift in mood between the first and second lines, revealing inner contradictions of the characters. “Real flowering” signifies that all instances of “flowering” in the lyrics are natural. The song “Heart Flowers” employs “flowers” as a metaphor to express the inner feelings of the main character, representing the blossoming of their heart. In terms of melodic color, “big flowering” features a lively and bright melody, used to convey joyful and happy moods of the characters in songs like “Meeting Brother,” while “small flowering” has a mournful and low melody, expressing the grievances and helplessness of women in the old society in songs like “Bitter Love,” “Returning When You Don’t Want to Go,” “Single Love,” “Not Living Well,” and more. The multitude of “flowering” variations fully captures the simple, modest character and rich inner world of the people of Zuoquan.

In terms of musical structure, the subsequent lines often expand on the title, incorporating affectionate terms of endearment such as “ah a yah yah dai” and “xiao qin ge dai.” These liner words convey a deep

sense of endearment, as the short lyrics alone are insufficient to express the depth of one's emotions. Gradually, these unique liner words have become a signature feature of Zuoquan folk songs.

The melody of Kaihua tune is lyrical, simple, and smooth, characterized by vividness and liveliness. It features subtle variations and is easy to learn and sing. Recognized as the essence of Zuoquan folk songs, Kaihua tune was included in the first batch of China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006.

1.5 Small flowers opera

As the saying goes, "In Zuoquan County, where a hundred arts flourish, the most captivating of all is the small flowers opera." The origins of the small flowers opera can be traced back to the traditional custom of "social fire" in Zuoquan. The "Liaozhou social fire" is divided into three main categories: "martial social fire," "cultural social fire," and "ugly social fire." The "martial arts fire" features martial arts performances intertwined with activities like the "lion dance," "dragon lantern," and "bamboo horse running." The "ugly social fire" involves performers dressed in comical costumes, executing playful movements, accompanied by fixed tunes and percussion, while improvising and singing witty and humorous stories to amuse the audience. The "cultural social fire" serves as the precursor to the small flowers opera.

The small flowers opera combines songs, dances, and operas into a cohesive art form. It is considered one of the most representative forms of Han Chinese song and dance opera. Originating in the early Ming Dynasty and reaching its peak in the late Qing Dynasty, it was eventually renamed "small flowers opera" in the late Republic of China (Li Mingzhen, 2014). The term "small" refers to the young age of the early actors, who were mostly teenagers. The programs were relatively short, requiring simple costumes and modest venue requirements. The word "flower" signifies the delicate dance postures, diverse dance forms, colorful fans, and intricate formations. Finally, the term "opera" denotes the concise and vivid storyline accompanied by singing and dancing.

The small flowers opera encompasses two main performance forms. The first is group dance performances, which are based on Zuoquan folk songs. These performances feature lively dance movements that correspond to the lyrical content, incorporating songs and dances. Classic repertoire includes "Flowering Tune," "Kite Flying," "Brother Building Road," "Spring Tide," and more. The second form is the song and dance drama, which presents a complete storyline with strong dramatic conflicts. It integrates the three forms of songs, dances, and opera, showcasing rich character images and advancing the plot through emotive singing and elaborate dance movements. Notable

plays include "Selling Dumplings," "The Meeting of the Sophora Forest," "Wangsan and Xiaolan," and "The Nurse of Taihang."

The music of the small flowers opera draws from the widely circulated Zuoquan folk songs, with "small tunes" being the most popular, followed by "big cadences." The tunes are primarily joint tunes, allowing for free combinations or one song per play. The musical structure can be adjusted according to the content or performance requirements, with the tonality predominantly in the key of G. The rhythmic beat typically follows a 2/4 or 3/8 time signature. Accompanying instruments include suona, sheng, flute, jinghu, banhu, drums, gongs, cymbals, wooden fish, and more.

The small flowers opera is renowned for its captivating fan movements, fluid and rhythmic dance steps, and visually stunning dance postures. In recent years, with the progress of time and the increasing artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of the audience, efforts have been made to enhance the choreography of the small flowers opera. The complexity of the dances has increased, the number of performers has grown, and the movements and formations have become more intricate and varied. Furthermore, the traditional form of singing and dancing alone is no longer sufficient to convey the depth of today's performances. This has led to the inclusion of "backing singer" and "helper singer" groups, dedicated to providing vocal support. These backing singers typically perform solos, duets, or unison singing.

Following the reform and opening-up period, the small flowers opera has transitioned from amateurism to professionalism, achieving significant recognition. Accomplished performers such as Li Mingzhen, Liu Baozhen, Li Guiluo, Wang Lina, Han Yongqing, Hao Weizhong, and Liu Yu have emerged, contributing to the small flowers opera's success. In 2014, "Zuoquan small flowers opera" was included in the fourth batch of China's national Intangible Cultural Heritage List by the State Council. Currently, the practice of Zuoquan small flowers opera in local colleges and universities in Shanxi focuses on dance teaching and practical dance art.

2. Characteristics of the subject matter of Zuoquan folk songs

Zuoquan folk songs represent the collective spiritual wealth generated by the hardworking people throughout successive generations in their lives of production. These songs directly depict various scenes and phenomena of real life from different perspectives and in diverse ways. They authentically and vividly express the thoughts and emotions of the Zuoquan people, serving as a testament to their labor and wisdom. The subjects covered in Zuoquan folk songs are extensive, encompassing themes related to production, marriage and love, revolutionary struggles, folk traditions, historical figures, myths,

and legends. Through these songs, every aspect of the lives of the Zuoquan people is deeply reflected upon. The fusion of realism and romanticism within Zuoquan folk songs is remarkable, as they focus on portraying the psychology, emotions, willpower, and desires of the Zuoquan people, embodying a clear ideology of affection and aversion. Consequently, Zuoquan folk songs have also become invaluable resources for understanding the history of Zuoquan and gaining insights into its folk customs.

2.1 Subject matter of production life

The majority of Zuoquan's geographical area consists of rugged mountains, making it a relatively barren region where people heavily rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Zuoquan's folk songs prominently feature themes of production and labor, providing a rich portrayal of life. Songs such as "Spring Plowing Song," "Four Seasons of Production," "Opening the Land," and "Picking Bean Pods" encapsulate the essence of Zuoquan's agricultural life. In the past, during the era of an underdeveloped economy and limited productivity, where the majority of land was controlled by a small number of landlords and wealthy peasants, the working class endured prolonged exploitation and oppression from the feudal ruling class. In times of severe scarcity, folk songs became a medium for expressing grievances towards feudal rule and exposing the cruel and avaricious nature of the landlord class. Songs like "Reduction of Rent and Interest" and "Feudal exploitation has plagued us for thousands of years, leaving the poor nowhere to voice their suffering" succinctly depict the unjust social realities and the harsh lives of the common people. These songs reflect the working people's resistance against oppression and their support for the new policies advocated by the Communist Party.

Through the use of simple language, these folk songs vividly illustrate the profound class conflicts between peasants and landlords, evoking sympathy and compassion for the hardships faced by the laboring masses. However, despite the hardships, the resilient working people remained filled with love for life and maintained a positive and optimistic attitude. In songs like "Shoveling Vegetables," "Bitter Vegetables," "Sweet Vegetables," and "Bran Vegetables," the challenging lives of the main character Fengying and her sister-in-law are depicted. Yet, despite the difficulties, the aunt and sister-in-law maintain a close and affectionate relationship, akin to sisters. The discovery of "wild vegetables on the hillside" brings them immense joy, with the sister-in-law quickly shoveling at the forefront, while Fengying happily gathers them from behind. Similarly, the song "Picking Pepper" tells the story of a girl engaging in the laborious process of picking peppers. Through its simple language, the song vividly portrays the entire process, from observation to

experimentation, and ultimately reaping the fruits of her labor. Expressive phrases such as “holding the waist,” “looking upward,” and “stabbing the hand” bring to life the image of a vibrant and lively rural girl.

Notably, with the advent of the Communist Party’s leadership and the empowerment of the people, a new atmosphere permeated the lives of the Zuoquan people. The song “Look at the Pumpkin” humorously depicts an elderly man’s joyous harvest from planting a melon. “Exaggerate the Local Products” serves as a proud tribute to Zuoquan’s specialty products, such as persimmon cake, goat-horn onions, walnuts, peppers, Dangshen, Huangqi, sisal paper, and more, overflowing with satisfaction and happiness. Meanwhile, “Sing the Harvest” captures the aspirations of developing industrialized production and doubling the overall grain yield in the new era, with lyrics brimming with appreciation for life and expectations for the future. Such songs eloquently express praise for life and optimism for the days ahead.

2.2 Subject matter of marriage and love

Folk songs, as the earliest form of traditional music, have been sung by our ancestors during hunting, rituals, ceremonies, courtship, and other occasions to express their emotions and convey their thoughts. Love has always been an inseparable part of these songs. In fact, the “Lv Qiao Chun Qiu - The First Book of Sound” records the story of Tushan, the wife of Dayu, who anxiously awaited her husband’s return from water treatment, and in her overwhelming love, composed the “Song of Tushan.” This love song marked the beginning of a long history of love songs in China. Subsequent poems found in the “Shijing,” “Feng,” and “Ya” also revolve around themes of marriage and love. Consequently, love songs form the most abundant category within the realm of folk songs.

The essence of Zuoquan folk songs lies in their depiction of marriage and love. This particular theme occupies a significant portion of Zuoquan folk songs, constituting their main subject matter. Currently, the most frequently sung Zuoquan folk songs are predominantly based on the theme of love. Zuoquan folk songs can be categorized into three emotional stages: joy, bitterness, and sadness.

Songs of joy depict the devotion and unwavering love between young couples. Due to the influence of feudal ideological constraints and deep-rooted moral values, expressions of affection between young men and women were often subtly conveyed through singing. In the song “Qingedan,” the lyrics express, “The moon on the fifteenth day is studded with stars, but it pales in comparison to Gedanqin.” The beloved’s image is embellished and depicted with beautiful language. In “Qingedan washing clothes in the river,” the phrase “Qingedan”

conveys heartfelt love, sung sincerely and captivatingly. Similarly, in “Who knows that we are in love,” the lyrics boldly state, “A small wine pot blossoms as wine is poured within, and I have loved you for a long time.” The use of the metaphors “blossoming” and “overflowing” portrays a direct, sincere, and passionate expression of love.

On the other hand, the term “bitter” in “Bitter Love” encapsulates the yearning for a loved one who remains out of reach. Feudal women were bound by the dogmas of the “three virtues” and were not easily allowed to reveal their faces. Instead, they could catch glimpses of each other and express their emotions during occasional labor or activities such as meeting at the market or social gatherings. Works like “Bitter Love,” “Thinking of My Brother,” and “Unrequited Love” reveal the protagonist’s longing for their lover, their emotional deprivation, and their weary appearance. In the old society, young men often had to endure long hours of work or travel away from home to make ends meet, causing lovers or couples to be separated for extended periods. This separation led to compositions like “Don’t Want to Go Back,” “Sending Brother,” and “Sending Lover,” which portray the difficulties and pains of parting and longing.

In contrast to the joys and bitterness of love, songs of sadness expose the painful realities of oppressive marriages. In the old society, the majority of women were trapped in the shackles of arranged marriages dictated by parents and matchmakers. These feudalistic practices often resulted in tragic outcomes. Folk songs like “Haunting the Fifth Night,” “Playing the Silver Medal,” “The Great Mother,” “Little Bedwetting,” “Liumei Hiding from Marriage,” and “Dange” condemn arranged marriages, denounce child brides, and cry out against deceitful matchmakers. They serve as hoarse pleas from the hearts of women, desperately fighting against their predetermined fate but ultimately powerless to change it.

2.3 Subject matter of revolutionary struggle

Zuoquan’s anti-war folk songs encompass the songs that emerged during the period from the outbreak of the anti-Japanese war in 1937 to its victory in 1945. These folk songs document a wide range of themes related to war and revolution, including battle signals, hardships endured, current events and politics, decrees and policies, military-civilian relations, production and self-sufficiency, and war culture during the Anti-Japanese War. They possess distinct characteristics of effectiveness, utilitarianism, and popularity (Yao Zhenhua, 2011). Zuoquan’s anti-war folk songs not only served as a means of political propaganda and fulfilled the spiritual needs of the military and the people during the war, but they also possess significant historical and artistic value.

Following the "September 18 Incident," the Japanese army invaded Liao County, leaving a trail of devastation that included burning, killing, looting, and heinous crimes. Over 120 tragic incidents occurred, resulting in the direct death of as many as 3,027 individuals. During the five years when the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army was stationed in Liao County, the Japanese army conducted numerous destructive campaigns. Folk songs like "Escape," "People in the Enemy Area Complaining," "Bacteria Bomb," "People's Grievances," "Blood Feud," and "The Devils Took Over Liao County" documented the brutal crimes committed by the invading Japanese army.

With the establishment of the headquarters of the 129th Division of the Eighth Route Army, the Eighth Route Army headquarters, the Northern Bureau of the Communist Party of China, and the provincial committee of the Communist Party of China in Jiyu and Jin, the revolutionary struggle in Liao County began to turn in favor of the resistance forces. The people of Liao County expressed their sentiments through folk songs, resulting in a multitude of compositions such as "The Great Victory in Huangya Cave," "The Hundred Regiment War," "General Zuoquan," "Thanks to the Communist Party," "General Peng in Matian," "Song for the Army," "Taihang Militia," and "Support for the Eighth Route Army." These songs reflected the intensity of the war, voiced support for the Communist Party's leadership, and praised the harmonious relationship between the army and the people. Literary artists in the base area responded to the call of the Cultural Association to "contribute to the war effort through literature and art, nationalize and popularize literature and art." They took the familiar and beloved folk songs of the masses as a foundation, extracting the essence while discarding the irrelevant. By employing the method of "new wine in old bottles" and incorporating new lyrics into the original folk melodies, they mobilized the masses, inspired their fighting spirit, battled the enemy, and propagated policies through the medium of literature and art. Folk songs like "Production Saving," "Purchase of Public Debt," "Refining the Military," "Women's Liberation," and "Democracy" possessed a local flavor, were easily comprehensible, and served as effective tools for propaganda, education, resistance, and work promotion.

Throughout the eight-year war of resistance, Zuoquan folk songs united the masses and exuded a potent force of unity and resistance. Each thread of Zuoquan's war of resistance folk songs weaves together a magnificent tapestry, recounting history while reminding us to remember past humiliations and cherish the gift of peace.

2.4 Subject matter of folklore and folk style

Folk songs are intricately intertwined with social life. They not only emerge as products of social existence but also serve as reflections of

local customs, lifestyle habits, rituals, and culture, including the festivals and seasons that shape social life. Zuoquan's folk songs like "Selling Dumplings," "Selling Lanterns," "Cherry Picking," and "Bitter Love" can be traced back to the culinary preferences of the Zuoquan people. "Falling Down the Broken Bridge" vividly portrays the sequential wedding customs, from the entrance and exit of the bridal sedan chair to the worship of heaven and earth, and the entry into the bridal chamber. "December Pair of Flowers," "Pair of Flowers," "Look for the Man," "Dange," "Visiting the Sister," and "Tour the Garden" encapsulate different months, holidays, festivals, and corresponding natural phenomena, reflecting the agrarian civilization's distinct characteristics. Works such as "Autumn Song," "Four Seasons of Production," and "Farming Reform is Good" transform labor experiences into lyrical compositions, effectively disseminating farming knowledge through the medium of folk songs. Through their life experiences, the common people have created numerous folk song works imbued with ideological and artistic value, providing us with a deeper understanding of the traditional psychology and cultural heritage of the Zuoquan people.

The development and dissemination of Zuoquan folk songs are closely intertwined with folk artistic activities. Each year, the "social fire" holds great significance as a major event for the people, who highly prioritize its observance. Particularly, Zuoquan's "Wen social fire" or "small flowers opera" gained popularity in Liao County during the late Qing Dynasty. This form of literature and art resonated deeply with the masses in Zuoquan, with folk songs constituting an integral part of this traditional song and dance opera.

2.5 Subject matter of historical figures

French thinker and sociologist Roland Barthes (1966), in his article "Introduction to the Analysis of Narrative Works," posited that narratives exist universally, transcending time, place, and social boundaries. Narrative works encompass all forms of literature and are not limited to any particular class or human group. Folk songs, as a direct lyrical art form, possess a profound narrative function, often recounting historical events and venerating historical figures. Zuoquan's folk songs are no exception to this, offering tales that chronicle historical events and exalt heroic figures.

The folk songs "Ban on Foreign Cigarettes" and "Eat Foreign Cigarettes" shed light on the historical reality of British powers establishing tobacco shops in China during the Daoguang period, flooding the country with harmful substances and leading to the degradation of people's health, even driving them to the extreme of selling their own children and families. In response, Lin Zexu, the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi, staged a public destruction of opium in Humen, igniting a vigorous anti-smoking campaign that

awakened the patriotic consciousness of the Chinese people. Lin Zexu's integrity and righteousness were highly revered by the populace.

Works like "General Zuoquan," "Missing Premier Zhou," and "The People of Matian Miss General Peng" narrate the touching deeds of proletarian revolutionaries who led battles and connected with the common people. These songs express the deep admiration of the people of Zuoquan for these great revolutionaries, effectively enshrining their legacies in the language of folk songs.

Amid the arduous years of war, with intricate and complex political forces at play, songs such as "Reasoning Struggle," "Scolding Wang Small Tune," "Commenting on Jiang Small Tune," and "Opposing the Civil War" utilize simple and direct language to articulate people's indignation and denounce the perverse practices of reactionary forces. They play a vital role in advancing the anti-Japanese salvation movement by combating stubbornness. Folk songs like "The Soviet-German War," "The Sino-British-American North African Conference," "The Moscow Conference of the Three Powers," and "The Opening of the Second Battlefield" focus on international current affairs and politics, harnessing the powerful narrative function of folk songs to recount historical events in vivid detail.

2.6 Subject matter of tropes and legends

Within the realm of Chinese folk art, including folk songs, operas, sculptures, and various literary styles, historical allusions and myths and legends stand out as highly popular subjects. Among these, the four major myths and legends in China—Cowherd and Weaving Maiden, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, Meng Jiangnu Weeping on the Great Wall, and The Legend of the White Snake—frequently appear in folk songs. Additionally, myths and legends such as the Eight Immortals and the Journey to the West are also commonly depicted.

Folk songs like "Embroidered Pouch," "December Pair of Flowers," and "Little Herding Cow" encompass numerous instances of the aforementioned myths and legends. Moreover, these folk songs interweave historical allusions from the Three Kingdoms era, the Yang family generals, Xue Pinggui, and Crouching Ice for Carp. They delve into the spiritual beliefs, ethical principles, moral values, and aesthetic interests of the people of Zuoquan. Furthermore, some opera stories are frequently referenced in folk song compositions. For instance, "The Play of Ying Ying" and "Strange" both draw from the tale of Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying, who, with the assistance of their maid Hongniang, defy feudal rituals and ultimately marry according to their desires. This story originates from the Yuan Dynasty playwright Wang Shifu's miscellaneous play "The West Wing." As indicated, these Zuoquan folk songs, brimming with myths, legends, and historical

allusions, transcend time and space. They possess richness and fascination while carrying profound meanings. Not only do they encapsulate a cultural heritage spanning thousands of years, but they also encapsulate the straightforward historical perspectives and values of the people, promoting the punishment of evil and the promotion of good. Consequently, future generations can glean valuable lessons and be inspired by these songs.

Conclusion

Zuoquan folk songs represent a well-defined genre, classified into five distinct categories based on their internal structure and artistic style: big cadences, miscellaneous songs, small tunes, flowering tunes, and small flowers opera. The subject matter of Zuoquan folk songs is extensive, encompassing six major themes: production life, marriage and love, revolutionary struggle, folklore and folk style, historical figures, and tropes and legends. These songs vividly portray all facets of the lives of the people of Zuoquan. The rich variety of genres and subjects woven into Zuoquan folk songs showcases their role as a traditional cultural expression passed down from generation to generation. These songs hold great significance as part of Zuoquan's cultural heritage, serving as important symbols of the historical and cultural achievements of the nation. They are an integral component of China's outstanding traditional culture, shining brightly in the long and illustrious history of Chinese traditional music culture.

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