

Singing Techniques and Styles of Specific Sangzhi Folk Song Works

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Abstract

This article examines the singing techniques and performance styles of Sangzhi folk songs, a vital element of China's intangible cultural heritage, highlighting their evolution from traditional to modern forms. Traditional Sangzhi folk songs, such as "Plant a Few Rows of Celery and Chives," emphasize natural, expressive vocal techniques, free rhythmic structures, and ornamentation deeply rooted in the Tujia and Bai dialects. These elements preserve linguistic and cultural authenticity while reflecting the historical and rural contexts of their origins. In contrast, modern Sangzhi folk songs, exemplified by "Hang a Lamp at the Door," integrate Mandarin, contemporary instrumentation, and refined vocal techniques to appeal to broader audiences and address modern themes. The study underscores the dynamic interplay between preservation and innovation, as traditional styles prioritize improvisation and raw emotional delivery, while modern adaptations incorporate structural precision and thematic expansion. Together, these approaches ensure the continued relevance and vitality of Sangzhi folk songs, enriching their status as a living art form and a testament to cultural resilience.

Keywords: Singing Techniques; Styles; Sangzhi Folk Song

Introduction

The vocal traditions of each ethnic group are shaped by a variety of factors, including linguistic and phonetic characteristics, which influence the tonal quality, melody, and vocal techniques used in their music. The differences in the languages spoken by various ethnic groups, such as the tones, syllabic structures, and phonetic rules, play a significant role in shaping the distinct vocal styles of Chinese folk music. For instance, Mandarin, which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, is characterized by its monosyllabic nature and a complex tonal system. These features give rise to a vocal style with a more forward tongue position, a higher pitch, a shorter vocal tract, and a more compact resonating chamber, all of which contribute to the bright and clear timbre associated with Han folk songs. This vocal style is further marked by its precision, beauty of tone, and emotional expressiveness, all of which are integral elements of the unique flavor of Chinese folk vocal music. Through the combination of these traditional elements with contemporary influences, Chinese folk vocal music has developed into a highly distinctive and vibrant art form that continues to evolve while maintaining its deep connection to the cultural roots of China's many ethnic groups.

Hunan Province, situated in the heart of southern China, holds a distinctive place in the country's economic, geographic, and cultural landscapes. Known for its rich historical legacy and vibrant cultural diversity, Hunan is a region where traditional customs and modern advancements coexist harmoniously. Geographically, Hunan is characterized by its mountainous terrain, vast river systems, and temperate climate, providing a diverse ecological backdrop that has shaped its cultural expressions. Economically, Hunan plays a crucial role as a significant agricultural hub, with its fertile land producing a variety of crops, while also contributing to the industrial and technological growth of the nation. In the cultural domain, Hunan is home to numerous ethnic minorities, including the Tujia, Miao, and Dong, whose customs and traditions contribute to the province's multifaceted cultural identity. The region's distinctive dialects, folklore, and art forms, such as the Hunan opera, make it an important center of cultural heritage in China.

Artistic Characteristics and Aesthetic Orientation of Sangzhi Folk Songs

China's definition of the concept of Sangzhi folk songs is well-established: Sangzhi folk songs, deeply rooted in the traditions of Sangzhi County in Hunan Province, are an important part of the Tujia ethnic culture and represent a vital aspect of China's intangible cultural heritage. Traditional Sangzhi folk songs vividly reflect the lives, emotions, and customs of the local people, encompassing themes such as love, labor, and nature. With the social changes and development in China, Sangzhi folk songs have also undergone a series of transformations, including innovations in their form, content, and performance. Domestic studies on them are mainly divided into four categories:

- a. Melodic and rhythmic characteristics of traditional Sangzhi folk songs
- b. Vocal techniques and timbre of Sangzhi folk songs
- c. Thematic content and cultural significance of Sangzhi folk songs
- d. Modern adaptations and innovations of Sangzhi folk songs

Melodic and rhythmic characteristics of traditional Sangzhi folk songs

The melodic and rhythmic characteristics of traditional Sangzhi folk songs reflect the deep connection between the music, language, and cultural life of the Tujia people in Hunan Province. These songs are known for their free-flowing rhythms and natural melodic structures, which distinguish them from more formal creative genres (Yang Yajun, 2015). The melodic lines are often fluid and adaptable, in line with the contours and phonetics of the local Tujia dialect, creating a seamless fusion of language and music. This fluidity gives Sangzhi folk songs a spontaneous, improvisational quality that enhances their emotional authenticity and artistic expression (Hu, 2021).

The free rhythm of Sangzhi folk songs allows for considerable flexibility in wording and rhythm, allowing singers to emphasize key words or emotions in the lyrics. Unlike structured musical forms (which are fixed in time), the rhythm of Sangzhi folk songs often follows the singer's natural breathing pattern, making the performance extremely expressive and personalized (Peng Xiaozhou, 2011). This rhythmic freedom reflects the influence of oral transmission, as these songs traditionally have no written scores, relying instead on the performer's interpretation and emotional connection to the music. The researchers stressed that the flexible use of rhythm reflects the improvisational nature of daily life in rural Sangzhi, where music is both a form of entertainment and a medium for storytelling (Huang, 2021).

Melodically, the melodies of Sangzhi folk songs are simple and pleasant, often based on the pentatonic scale common in traditional Chinese music. These melodies are often plain and rich in ornamentation, such as glissando, glide, and appoggiatura, which add expressiveness and nuance to the singing. For example, singers may use flower singing phrases to highlight specific emotional peaks in a song, thereby enhancing its narrative depth. This ornamentation also reflects the cultural aesthetic of the Tujia people, which values subtlety, emotional restraint, and the ability to convey deep emotions through minimalist musical gestures (Hu, 2023).

In addition, Sangzhi folk songs show a close relationship between melody and textual content, with the melody often adapting to the semantic flow of the lyrics. Melodic phrases emphasize the rhythm and tone of the words, creating a unified art form where language and music are inseparable (Wang, 2022). This adaptability allows for a high degree of emotional and narrative expression, as singers modulate their voices to match the mood and thematic content of the song.

The rhythmic and melodic characteristics of Sangzhi folk songs also reflect their functional role in the local community. Songs related to labor, love, festivals, or nature often adopt specific melodic and rhythmic patterns that suit their purpose. For example, mountain songs have open melodies and far-reaching voices; narrative songs have a relatively gentle rhythm and strong narrative. The diversity of melodies and rhythms reflects the diversity of Sangzhi folk songs as artistic expressions and cultural tools.

In summary, the melodic and rhythmic characteristics of Sangzhi traditional folk songs are "free rhythm", "natural melody", and "expressive decoration". These characteristics not only reflect the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of the Tujia people, but also their aesthetic values and lifestyle. Through improvisation and flexibility, Sangzhi folk songs continue to retain the depth, simplicity, and authenticity of emotions, making them a valuable part of China's intangible cultural heritage.

Vocal techniques and timbre of Sangzhi folk songs

The vocal techniques and timbre of Sangzhi folk songs are defining elements that distinguish them within the landscape of Chinese folk music. These elements not only reflect the unique artistic expressions of the Tujia ethnic group in Hunan Province but also embody the region's cultural and environmental influences.

The singing style of Sangzhi folk songs is characterized by the use of natural, unforced vocal production, emphasizing chest resonance, nasal placement, and the strategic blending of true and false voices. Chest resonance is frequently employed to achieve a rich, robust sound that ensures vocal projection, especially in outdoor settings like the mountainous landscapes where these songs historically originated (Zhang, 2019). Nasal resonance, another hallmark of this vocal tradition, produces a bright and penetrating tone, enhancing vocal clarity and audibility over long distances, a critical feature in songs associated with labor and communication across vast terrains (Huang, 2021).

The use of ornamentation is a notable feature in Sangzhi folk singing, with techniques such as glides, slides, and melismatic phrasing adding expressiveness and emotional depth to performances. Ornamentation varies depending on the type of song: for instance, mountain songs emphasize high-pitched, soaring glissandos to reflect the grandeur of the natural environment, whereas ditties incorporate subtle melodic embellishments to convey intimacy and gentleness (Song, 2019; Yin & Huang, 2014). Furthermore, singers exhibit considerable dynamic control, modulating volume and intensity to align with the thematic and emotional

demands of the song. Loud, sustained notes are common in celebratory or work-related songs, while more controlled, softer dynamics characterize songs expressing sorrow, love, or reflection.

The timbre of Sangzhi folk songs is shaped by the singers' vocal techniques, performance settings, and cultural aesthetics. The tone is often described as bright, raw, and earthy, reflecting the simplicity, authenticity, and emotional sincerity of rural life. Singers employ open-throat singing, allowing for natural vocal flow and minimizing tension, which results in a warm, resonant sound that aligns with traditional folk music aesthetics (Shu & Liu, 2021).

A distinctive feature of Sangzhi folk songs is the strategic blending of head voice and chest voice, enabling singers to traverse wide vocal ranges with tonal flexibility. Mountain songs, for instance, demand a strong, forward-placed timbre to project powerfully across open spaces, whereas narrative songs prioritize a clearer, more speech-like tone to ensure intelligibility and highlight the lyrical storytelling. This tonal adaptability allows performers to convey both the grandeur of nature and the intricacies of human emotion, reinforcing the songs' cultural and artistic significance.

The performance environment plays a significant role in shaping the timbre of Sangzhi folk songs. Traditionally performed in outdoor settings such as fields, mountains, or communal gatherings, singers adopted techniques that maximized volume and projection to overcome acoustic challenges. The result is a timbre that is naturally bright, resonant, and forward-focused, ensuring clarity and impact in open-air performances.

In modern contexts, as Sangzhi folk songs are increasingly performed in concert halls and multimedia platforms, adaptations in vocal technique have emerged. Performers now integrate smoother transitions, refined ornamentation, and controlled dynamics to suit formalized settings while retaining the core timbral qualities of the tradition. This fusion of tradition and modernity enhances the accessibility and appeal of Sangzhi folk songs to contemporary audiences (Tang, 2023).

The vocal techniques and timbre of Sangzhi folk songs are integral to their cultural and artistic identity. Through the deliberate use of chest and nasal resonance, ornamentation, and dynamic control, singers achieve a powerful and emotive performance that reflects both the grandeur of their natural surroundings and the subtleties of human experience. The bright, raw timbre and adaptability of Sangzhi folk songs ensure their continued relevance, serving as a testament to the enduring vitality of this important cultural heritage.

Thematic content and cultural significance of Sangzhi folk songs

The thematic content and cultural significance of Sangzhi folk songs are deeply rooted in the traditions, values, and lived experiences of the Tujia ethnic group in Hunan Province. These folk songs, as an oral art form, encompass a wide range of themes that reflect the social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of Tujia life, serving as a vital medium for cultural preservation and identity formation.

The thematic scope of Sangzhi folk songs is notably diverse, addressing universal yet locally contextualized subjects such as labor, love, nature, history, and rituals. Labor songs, for example, are rhythmically steady and practical in nature, designed to accompany agricultural and communal tasks. These songs not only alleviate the monotony of physical work but also foster a sense of community and shared purpose, symbolizing the collective spirit of rural life. Love songs constitute another significant thematic category, often

performed as antiphonal duets between male and female singers. These songs employ poetic metaphors, natural imagery, and subtle ornamentation to convey emotions such as longing, admiration, and romantic pursuit. Researchers have highlighted the frequent use of symbols like rivers, flowers, and mountains, which reflect the harmony between human emotions and the natural environment. The melodic lines and lyrical phrasing of these songs emphasize sincerity and tenderness, reinforcing the cultural importance of love and relationships in Tujia society.

Narrative songs play a crucial role in storytelling, preserving local legends, historical accounts, and moral teachings. These songs, often characterized by repetitive melodic structures and vivid lyrical content, serve as oral chronicles that transmit cultural knowledge and values across generations. Through the recounting of historical events or folklore, narrative songs provide both entertainment and education, strengthening cultural continuity. Furthermore, ritual songs, including sacrificial and celebratory pieces, occupy an important place in Tujia spiritual and communal life. These songs are performed during religious ceremonies, ancestral worship, and festivals, where their solemn and repetitive rhythmic patterns enhance their ritualistic function and emotional resonance.

The cultural significance of Sangzhi folk songs extends beyond their artistic merit, as they serve as a dynamic repository of Tujia cultural heritage, embodying historical memory, communal values, and regional identity. First, Sangzhi folk songs function as an oral archive, preserving the Tujia dialect, customs, and traditions. In an era of rapid modernization and cultural homogenization, these songs play a critical role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, ensuring its transmission to future generations.

Second, the thematic reliance on nature and the environment underscores the ecological consciousness inherent in Tujia culture. Imagery of mountains, rivers, and rural landscapes permeates the lyrics, symbolizing the interconnectedness between humans and their surroundings. This cultural emphasis on harmony with nature aligns with traditional ecological values and provides a lens through which to understand sustainable living practices in Tujia society.

Moreover, Sangzhi folk songs contribute to social cohesion by fostering community unity and interaction. Performed during festivals, weddings, and communal gatherings, these songs serve as a platform for social communication and emotional expression. The interactive format of certain genres, such as call-and-response duets, strengthens interpersonal bonds while reinforcing shared cultural identity.

In contemporary contexts, Sangzhi folk songs hold significant educational and artistic value. Integrating these songs into music education programs and cultural preservation initiatives has proven to be an effective method for raising awareness about the importance of intangible heritage. Such efforts not only promote cultural appreciation among younger generations but also ensure the continuity and revitalization of this art form in modern society (Zhang, 2019).

The thematic content and cultural significance of Sangzhi folk songs reflect the intricate interplay between tradition, environment, and social life in Tujia culture. Through themes of labor, love, history, and rituals, these songs preserve cultural narratives and express shared values, serving as a vehicle for social cohesion and identity formation. Their enduring relevance, both as artistic expressions and cultural artifacts, highlights the critical role of Sangzhi folk songs in maintaining the vibrancy of China's intangible cultural heritage.

Modern adaptations and innovations of Sangzhi folk songs

Modern adaptations and innovations of Sangzhi folk songs reflect a dynamic process of transformation driven by the interaction of technological advancement, cultural change, and contemporary artistic practices. These adaptations ensure that the traditional art form remains relevant and accessible in a rapidly evolving social and cultural environment while preserving its core identity and heritage values.

The proliferation of digital media and technological tools has played a key role in the preservation and revitalization of Sangzhi folk songs. Digital platforms such as music streaming services, social media networks, and video-sharing sites have significantly expanded the reach of these folk songs beyond their local origins. Scholars have emphasized that technologies such as live streaming, digital archives, and mobile applications not only increase accessibility, but also provide opportunities for creative reinterpretation and widespread dissemination of music to urban and international audiences. By leveraging multimedia forms, including video production and digital storytelling, Sangzhi folk songs have successfully adapted to contemporary cultural consumption patterns and rekindled the interest of younger generations.

The integration of Sangzhi folk songs with contemporary music genres represents a major innovation that connects traditional and modern artistic expressions. Traditional melodies and lyrical structures are increasingly combined with elements of pop, orchestral, jazz, and electronic music, creating hybrid forms that retain cultural authenticity while appealing to a wider audience. For example, orchestral adaptations of folk songs incorporate Western harmonies and modern instruments, adapting works such as "Ma Sang Shu Er Da Dengtai" into symphonic pieces, demonstrating the diversity and artistic richness of Sangzhi music. These cross-genre collaborations highlight the adaptability potential of traditional folk songs, allowing them to flourish in contemporary art spaces while maintaining their unique cultural characteristics.

Cultural tourism has become an important platform for the modern adaptation of Sangzhi folk songs, incorporating Sangzhi folk songs into performances that promote regional identity and heritage awareness. Scholars have observed that local festivals, heritage events, and tourism-driven performances are vehicles for the revival of these songs, often incorporating dramatic elements such as staging, choreography, and multimedia effects. Such adaptations not only enhance the visual and emotional impact of the performances, but also promote regional economic development and cultural sustainability. The dual role of Sangzhi folk songs as cultural products and tourism products highlights their importance as modern living heritage.

The inclusion of Sangzhi folk songs in the educational framework represents a deliberate effort to preserve and pass on this cultural tradition to future generations. Modern teaching methods emphasize the integration of these folk songs into music education courses, combining traditional oral transmission methods with modern tools such as digital recordings, multimedia presentations, and simplified student practice arrangements. These initiatives not only ensure the systematic dissemination of Sangzhi folk songs, but also encourage students to explore their cultural and artistic significance and cultivate an appreciation of intangible heritage in the formal education system.

As society develops, the themes and lyrical content of Sangzhi folk songs have also undergone modernization. While traditional themes such as love, labor, and rural life remain prominent, new adaptations reflect contemporary issues, including environmental protection, social development, and cultural pride. Modern adaptations often incorporate vernacular language and stylistic innovations that conform to current cultural sensibilities, ensuring that the songs remain relevant while retaining their basic melodic and structural characteristics. These thematic innovations highlight the ability of Sangzhi folk songs to adapt to modern contexts without losing their historical and cultural resonance (Peng, 2013).

The modern adaptations and innovations of Sangzhi folk songs reflect their remarkable ability to evolve while retaining their cultural authenticity. Through the integration of digital media, fusion with contemporary musical styles, engagement with cultural tourism, incorporation into education, and thematic modernization, Sangzhi folk songs have successfully transitioned into the modern cultural landscape. These innovations not only preserve the artistic and cultural essence of this traditional art form but also ensure its continued relevance, accessibility, and vitality in contemporary society.

Singing Techniques and Styles of Specific Sangzhi Folk Song Works

According to the definition of the concept of Sangzhi folk songs and their artistic and aesthetic characteristics, many scholars have conducted in-depth studies by classifying them based on their level of dissemination, dialect use, and time of creation. Sangzhi folk songs can be broadly divided into traditional Sangzhi folk songs and modern Sangzhi folk songs with high levels of dissemination. Traditional Sangzhi folk songs are characterized by their reliance on local dialects, free melodic structures, and their close ties to historical narratives and rural life. In contrast, modern Sangzhi folk songs incorporate wider dissemination, often integrating standard Mandarin, contemporary musical elements, and reflecting themes relevant to modern society. Scholars have further analyzed the singing techniques and performance styles of both categories, demonstrating how the art form evolves while retaining its cultural essence.

Traditional Sangzhi folk songs, "Plant a Few Rows of Celery and Chives" and "A Peach Tree in Front of the Sister's Door," emphasize vocal techniques that prioritize naturalness and expressiveness. These songs feature free rhythms, allowing performers to adapt their phrasing and dynamics to convey personal emotion and narrative content. The use of ornamentation, such as glides, melismas, and "running" (grace notes), enhances the lyrical and emotional depth of these performances. An essential characteristic of traditional Sangzhi folk songs is their reliance on the Tujia and Bai dialects, which are deeply embedded in the vocal delivery. The tonal qualities and rhythmic accents of the dialect not only enrich the melodic lines but also preserve the linguistic and cultural identity of the region. This interplay between language and melody enhances the authenticity and oral tradition of the genre. Singers often employ a combination of chest and head voices, enabling a wide dynamic range and tonal flexibility, which is particularly effective for the improvisational nature of these songs (Wu, 2023).

Additionally, the simplicity of instrumentation in traditional performances emphasizes the vocal line as the primary vehicle for emotional and narrative expression. These performances require precise breath control and an innate sense of rhythmic freedom, allowing singers to adjust their vocal delivery in response to the thematic and emotional demands of the song.

Modern Sangzhi folk songs, such as "Hang a Lamp at the Door" and "Build a Lamp Stand on the Mulberry Tree," integrate contemporary musical elements and advanced vocal techniques, showcasing a more structured and polished style. These adaptations reflect the influence of modern instrumentation, standardized rhythms, and linguistic shifts, blending traditional elements with modern sensibilities. One of the defining features of modern Sangzhi folk songs is the incorporation of Mandarin alongside local dialects, broadening their accessibility and appeal to non-local and international audiences. Clearer enunciation and standardized phrasing are emphasized in modern performances, aligning the songs with contemporary musical aesthetics while retaining their cultural roots.

The use of orchestral and electronic accompaniments introduces harmonic complexity and dynamic variation, which demands technical precision and adaptability from singers. Vocalists must navigate between traditional ornamentation and the structured requirements of modern arrangements, balancing the raw emotionality of the original songs with the formalities of contemporary music production. Modern performances often incorporate vibrato, sustained tones, and dramatic shifts in dynamics, enhancing the emotional and theatrical impact of the songs (Yuan, 2023).

Moreover, the thematic focus of modern Sangzhi folk songs has expanded to include contemporary issues such as environmental awareness and rural revitalization, influencing both lyrical content and vocal delivery. These innovations reflect the adaptability of Sangzhi folk music as it evolves to remain relevant in a modern cultural context.

Traditional and modern Sangzhi folk songs demonstrate complementary approaches to preserving and innovating this cultural heritage. Traditional songs emphasize improvisation, linguistic authenticity, and the simplicity of vocal expression, rooted in the daily lives and emotional landscapes of rural communities. In contrast, modern adaptations focus on accessibility, technical refinement, and the integration of contemporary musical elements, appealing to a broader audience while maintaining the genre's cultural integrity.

While traditional styles prioritize oral transmission and raw emotional delivery, modern forms introduce a balance between individual expression and the structural demands of modern performance contexts. Together, these styles highlight the versatility and resilience of Sangzhi folk songs as both a historical artifact and a living art form.

The vocal techniques and singing styles of Sangzhi folk songs reflect a rich interplay between preservation and innovation. Traditional forms embody the authenticity and linguistic heritage of the Tujia and Bai cultures, relying on free rhythms, tonal inflections, and ornamentation. Modern adaptations, on the other hand, embrace technical precision, orchestral arrangements, and thematic expansion, ensuring the continued relevance and vitality of Sangzhi folk music in contemporary society. Together, these forms underscore the dynamic evolution of Sangzhi folk songs as a treasured component of China's intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sangzhi folk songs, as a vibrant expression of the Tujia ethnic culture and an invaluable part of China's intangible cultural heritage, exemplify a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity. Their melodic and rhythmic freedom, expressive vocal techniques, rich thematic content, and cultural significance highlight their deep-rooted connection to the lives and values of the Tujia people. Modern adaptations, driven by technological advances, contemporary artistic practices, and cultural tourism, ensure these songs remain relevant and accessible while preserving their authenticity. As both a cherished cultural artifact and a dynamic living tradition, Sangzhi folk songs continue to inspire, educate, and connect audiences across generations, underscoring their enduring role in fostering cultural pride and heritage preservation. The evolution of Sangzhi folk songs, encompassing both traditional and modern styles, highlights a harmonious blend of preservation and innovation, ensuring their relevance as a cultural treasure. Traditional Sangzhi folk songs, deeply rooted in the linguistic and emotional landscapes of the Tujia and Bai communities, emphasize free rhythms, dialectal authenticity, and expressive vocal techniques to convey the richness of rural life and historical narratives. Modern adaptations, on the other hand, incorporate contemporary musical elements, broader themes, and technical precision to appeal to a wider audience while retaining their cultural essence. Together, these forms showcase the adaptability and resilience of Sangzhi folk music, serving as a testament to its enduring significance as an integral part of China's intangible cultural heritage.

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