



A Study of the Singing Techniques of Tujia Gaoqiang Folk Songs in Guizhou Province, China

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Abstract

This research article aimed to study the singing techniques of Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs in Guizhou Province, China by employing a qualitative method. The instruments were in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The key informants included four teachers who have experience in teaching the Tujia Gaoqiang Folk Songs in Guizhou Province, China. The collected data were analyzed by using content analysis.

The results revealed that the singing of Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs in Guizhou Province, China comprised of seven techniques which included 1) using a true voice that focused on the natural movements of the oral cavity and the overall movement of the vocal cords, which inevitably led to excessive tension of all muscles in the vocal area, stiffness of the breath and sound, and full body force, 2) using mixed tones to make high-pitched and bright tones, 3) using mixed female voices within the range of a typical soprano voice that can move up and down freely, with indistinguishable true and false sounds, 4) using local vibration of mixed vocal cords with a high proportion of false sounds, frequent head sounds, natural oral cavity, low chest resonance, and low air consumption, 5) using natural adjustment of resonance in three zones, 6) using a low voice by opening the chest naturally and singing with slight vibration without emphasizing volume expansion; and 7) using two breathing methods which included slow and deep inhale, and fast and full inhale.

Keywords

singing techniques of Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs, Guizhou Province, China, high-pitched folk songs



Background and Rationale

The high-pitched folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou have the functions of expressing love, regulating labor, engaging in entertainment, and educating children. These special roles are quite rare in other types of folk art. The folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou are formed based on Zhuzhi Ci and ancient Ba Ge. The ancestors of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou, the Ba people, formed the concept of “singing and dancing to defeat the Yin people” during the period of King Wu’s overthrow of Zhou. During the Warring States period, the song, “Xia Li Ba people” was also sung. Later, Emperor Gaozu of Han spread the “Ba Yu Dance” as dance music among the people. Until now, there are still performances of the funeral songs and Nuo operas of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou. The Tujia people in Guizhou have created many unique mountain songs in the natural environment of undulating mountains and dense rivers. These folk songs are used for labor and daily life, as well as love songs sung in pairs. The duet may be sung across streams and mountains, so it is also called “shouting mountain songs”.

According to Wang et al. (2017, pp. 16-17), there was relatively little research on the Gaoqiang folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou. The first study was from Tian (2010) who studied the cultural connotation, and artistic characteristics of Tujia folk songs. Another study was from Xu (2013) on the protection and inheritance of Tujia high-tune folk songs along the river in Guizhou. Likewise, Zhang (2013) analyzed the music characteristics of Tujia high-tune folk songs in northeast Guizhou. Thus, Wang et al. (2017) conducted a study about the aesthetic characteristics of Gaoqiang folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in eastern Guizhou. In the same vein, Wei, Ma, and Wang (2017) studied the aesthetic characteristics of Gaoqiang folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in eastern Guizhou. However, none of them involved systematic research on the singing techniques of Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-pitched folk songs.

According to Zhang (2021, 43-45) as time passes, traditional music in China has been influenced by foreign and popular music. Minority music represented by Enshi Tujia folk songs was facing unprecedented challenges. More and more people are no longer paying attention to traditional music and turning to foreign and popular music. Therefore, the inheritance of folk songs is particularly important. The article took Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs as an example to study their development and inheritance status through on-site investigations, and identified problems, thus proposing a plan for the inheritance of Enshi Tujia folk songs so that this excellent traditional culture can radiate its vitality in modern society.

In conclusion, from the review of previous studies, the researcher was interested in the high-pitched tune which is a distinctive vocal style in folk singing. The application of high-pitched tune techniques in vocal teaching, combined with traditional teaching models, holds significant



research value and awaits in-depth exploration by scholars.

Research Objective

To study the singing techniques of Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs, Guizhou Province, China.

Limitations of the Study

The content of this study mainly focused on the investigation of the Gaoqiang folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou by exploring their origins and changes, historical background, and cultural connotations, and analyzing the factors that constrain their development which could help preserve the shrinking folk music culture of the ethnic group. By analyzing the singing techniques of Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-tune folk songs, it is helpful to supplement the lack of singing methods and techniques in folk song art research and to explore the direction to develop the active inheritance of Tujia ethnic high-tune folk songs in the modernization process.

Key Informants: The data in this research were collected by direct data collection from four singing teachers as key informants selected by purposive sampling method for in-depth interviews.

Area Scope: The area where the data were collected was at Guizhou. This is the place where the Tujia people live that is full of dangerous gorges, rapids, and mountains. Therefore, the historical rhythm of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou is slower than in the outer areas, forming a comprehensive and long cultural sedimentary belt.

Research Methodology

1. Key Informants

The key informants in this research included four singing teachers selected by purposive sampling. The reason for selecting these four singing teachers as the key informants was because these four teachers were well-known scholars and disseminators of Guizhou's Tujia culture. Moreover, they have a good understanding of Guizhou's Tujia folk songs. Some teachers have a Tujia identity, and they are Tujia cultural inheritors, Tujia singers, cultural scholars, and university professors. Thus, advice and suggestions from these four teachers with significant expertise in this field were beneficial and profound.

2. Research Instruments

The research instruments used in this study were in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis by using observation forms, interview forms, and audio/video recorders. The interview questions were validated using the Index of item Objective Congruence (IOC) by



three experts, consisting a music expert, a folk music expert, and a measurement and evaluation expert. The interview questions with values between 0.50-1.00 were used as the research instrument.

3. Data Collection

In this research, the data were collected as follows:

- 1) The researcher requested permission to inspect the research instruments.
- 2) The researcher requested permission to collect the research data.

3) The researcher collected the data in the middle and lower reaches of Wujiang River and Tongren City in northeastern Guizhou province. The data were collected through video recordings of the singing of Tujia ethnic high-pitched folk songs, and in-depth interviews for relevant cultural background and singing skills with the key informants.

4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed as follows:

- 1) Once the data were obtained from the interview transcripts and the video recordings, they were classified and categorized according to the type of data.
- 2) The collected data were analyzed using content analysis in which important ideas and key findings were scrutinized.
- 3) Then, the collected data were synthesized and summarized based on the historical and cultural context of Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs, Guizhou Province, China, as well as the singing techniques and teaching methods of Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs, Guizhou Province.

Results

The high-pitched folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou generally consisted of mixed tones with a high proportion of falsettos or mixed tones with a high proportion of authentic tones. The titles of folk singers were simple and vivid. It was found that folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group have a rich singing style, varying from person to person and song to song. There were different ways regarding the voice's height, the vocal cords' tension, and the cavity's resonance. Moreover, it was found that the singing techniques of the Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs in Guizhou Province were as follows:

1. True Voice Technique: In general, people speak with true voice, and those who have not received voice training often sing with true voice. The formation of the true voice singing method of mountain songs originated from human instinct and human natural conditions. The voice may be clear or dull, natural and plain, and cannot be practiced. Over time, a quaint style



has been formed, with lyrics (content) as the main purpose and there were no high standard requirements for vocal techniques. Due to the lack of emphasis on breathing, shallow breath, and voiced voice, as well as overall resonance, this method only focused on the natural movements of the oral cavity and the overall movement of the vocal cords, which inevitably led to excessive tension of all muscles in the vocal area, stiffness of the breath and sound, and full body force. Therefore, the vocal range was not wide, the pitch was not high, and the musical phrases were difficult to sing in one breath. Moreover, the sound could not go far and did not last. In the long-term singing practice, the high-pitched folk singers of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou tended to employ primitive and natural vocalization as the original sound, which referred to singing with a full mouth without emphasizing resonance because, in reality, only oral resonance was difficult to produce overtones. To elaborate, in this technique, the voice was wide, the volume was not low, the air was turbid, and the voice was straight. The muscles were excessively squeezed, and although the singing was charismatic, the voice was hoarse and easy to break as the range was between a-e2.

2. Mix Tones Technique: In pursuit of high-pitched and bright tones, mixed tones (i.e., false sounds in the true voice) were used based on the original tone, but without distorting the sound sensation. This was called the use of medium-high full accents and high full accents. This singing method required a bit of breathing to sing a note higher than the original tone and to complete a sentence in the lyric. The singer consciously or unconsciously added a small amount of resonance in the nasal and head cavities, and the vocal cords vibrated locally. The volume was higher than the original tone, and the endurance was stronger. The voice was bright and sturdy, with a range of # f1-g2, and the singing style was warm and natural. Although this singing method lacked a deep breath and consumed a lot of breath, there were still some manifestations of high positions and breath fulcrums.

3. Mixed Female Voices Techniques: This technique can be used to sing the high-pitched folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou. Within the range of a typical soprano voice, it can move up and down freely, with indistinguishable true and false sounds, deep breath, overall resonance effect, and the ability to naturally adjust the sound. It had strong long-range and long-lasting power. The voice was bright and round, with a simple and natural style, as well as a skillful expression.

4. Local Vibration of Mixed Vocal Cords with a High Proportion of False Sounds Technique: This technique used frequent head sounds, natural oral cavity, no low (chest) resonance, and low air consumption. This technique was generally used for singing a song about women



doing household chores, small-scale farm work, etc. Some singers also used mixed vocals with more true voices when singing in outdoor fields, depending on their vocal conditions and self-adjustment ability. The sound quality was pure, the sound position was high, and the line was full of charm. The range of voice was within the range of a typical soprano, and it can move up and down freely.

5. Natural Adjustment of Resonance Technique: From the classification of singing methods, it can be seen that the resonance of the Guizhou Tujia ethnic group's high-pitched mountain songs not only existed but also had its resonance due to different singing methods.

6. Relax and Open the Chest Naturally in the Low Voice Area Technique: This technique involves singing with slight vibration, without emphasizing the expansion of volume. As the interval went up or down, resonance was adjusted promptly according to the direction of the sound. That was, when singing high notes, first inhale the air, sink at least to the upper waist, and release the words on the low note loosely. Then, as soon as the high note was released, the chest changed from loose to tight, maintaining a feeling of "holding" and shifting the chest strength upwards. The vocal cords were tightened to make the sound stand out. When singing low notes, a breath was naturally let out by relaxing the chest.

7. Breathing Method Technique: There were generally two types of breathing methods:

1) Slowly and deep inhale method which refers to inhaling at a slow speed at the bottom of the lungs, with the chest open, and waist full, and breathing deeply stored which was suitable for singing long and slow songs

2) Fast and full inhale method which was inhaling quickly, opening the chest, and expanding the waist. Although it felt fuller, it was not very deep. This method was suitable for singing songs that started and turned quickly or slowly. In this technique, the breath was saved, and an inhaling state was maintained to sing the lyrics, such as singing "Quick Drum and Slippery". Emotion was the foundation of qi, and qi was the body of emotion. Emotion generated qi, and qi produced sound. Mountain singers sang from their senses, using their breath to deliver the song in which the chest was expanded, an inhaling shape of the waist was maintained, the neck, the chest, and the back were lifted, and the breath was heavy, which was more concentrated in deep inhalation.

3) Due to the high pitch range of mountain songs, some decorative intervals have large jumps, free rhythms, long sentence widths, and harmonious melodies that often have upward or downward strokes. There were often line words at the beginning, middle, and end of sentences, which were necessary for expressing emotions and playing the voice. Mountain



singers often mentioned “withdrawing sound”, which means releasing and spreading, and trying to express the meaning as much as possible. To withdraw a voice was to sing it high, spread it far, and drag it out long. Elderly people who enjoy listening to mountain songs and singers who sing well often evaluate the singing method and effect of voicing. This kind of withdrawal without thinking was a relaxed and free-spirited pursuit of volume and sound quality, which was a singing style that was “not thinking” but “loud”. Singers also referred to it as “dawawa,” “bending,” or “little flower” in the performance of the script (withdrawal), which was both difficult to sing and was the most beautiful part of Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-pitched folk songs.

8. Balance of concepts singing is an activity directed by the human brain’s nerves to express emotions through sound. In Guizhou’s mountainous and sparsely populated mountain villages, the villagers often had a desire to shout out, as natural as breathing in air. The echoes of the drifting valleys were like friends answering which provided comfort to the soul. Shouting mountain songs was like relaxing and frowning, expressing inner desires, and regulating psychological balance (at least temporarily). Many good singers said that beautiful singing played a greater role in thought than in physiology, so even long-term singing did not cause fatigue.

1) The balance of the body was precisely guided by the idea of promoting one’s happiness and expressing one’s anger. The body condition under the control of the balance concept of mountain singers was natural. The body was accompanied by the song, often singing and dancing. When the body was tired and burdened with rice, lotus, and firewood, the singer took a break, took a few breaths, and then started singing freely. Even when bowing down to work, emotions can cause bloating in the waist, and the neck can be raised. Everything was only for the expression of emotions and voices, and conversely, shouting and singing increase the enthusiasm of emotions, and mobilize the coordination of various parts of the body, and the more people sing, the more they feel relieved and relaxed.

2) Balance of breath was emphasized. In ancient China, there was a saying that “breath is the commander-in-chief of sound”, while in the West, there was a saying that “singers are professional breathers” and “breath is the vitality of sound”. The traditional Chinese saying was, “Qi sinks into the dantian”. The ancient Italian saying about singing was, “If you know how to use your breath, you know how to sing”. Moreover, Wei Liangfu once said, “When singing, one must choose the sound, and the sound of the sand throat should be smooth, emanating from the dantian.” Traditional Chinese singing training often combined the upper, middle, and lower dantian into one.

To express emotions, the singer should shout out the voice of Yingshan, whether



standing upright or bowing while working. The role of breath was extremely important. It was intentionally or unintentionally inhale at least below the chest, expand the chest, or inhale to the waist circumference, open in an extremely excited state, and “welcome” the arrival of shouting. The abnormal fullness of the chest and waist circumference indicated that the resilience of the inspiratory muscles should be sufficient to complete the long, high, and far range of the mountain song lyrics to be sung. The main support point for breath was the lower abdomen together with other factors.

Incorrect breathing was often detrimental to vocalization, causing unnecessary tension in the throat muscles or other areas. The foundation of all vocal techniques involved good control of breathing, which was in line with nature and not mandatory. In other words, the intensity of breathing during singing was always proportional to the intensity of activity. Outstanding singers never intentionally took a breath. However, they only stretched lightly at the beginning of a musical phrase, timely expanding their bodies, which was often unnoticed by people. This made them able to absorb enough breath to sing. The Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-pitched mountain singers often sang their voices promptly with sufficient breath unintentionally. The breath stretched freely around the waist, and the lower ribs lifted as the chest expanded and the amount of inhalation increased. A beautiful singing activity was a very natural and smoother expression than usual and effortless. Therefore, it was important to eliminate affectation and excessive tension. Breathing was an instinct, and the habit of singing was often referred to as controlled activity. The breathing habits of mountain singers needed to be coordinated with the breathing in daily life to make their voices successful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the singing of Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-pitched folk songs originated from natural ecology and human practice. The people of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou had accumulated more experience and became proficient, transforming from having no skills to being skillful. Gaoqiang folk songs can be sung bright, long, and far. Firstly, because of the good voice of the Tujia people in Guizhou, and, secondly, because the Tujia people in Guizhou sang with rich emotions and understanding, forming a special singing method with local tones and language. The Gaoqiang folk songs of the Tujia ethnic group in Guizhou had rich cultural connotations and heritage and were highly artistic and cultural in value. The artistic characteristics of Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-pitched folk songs should be carefully organized and explored from the perspective of ethnic music, and gradually promoted.



Although there were many singing styles and rich singing experiences, not many were left as recordings (especially those before modern times and folk ones), and some singing theories were also relatively scattered and unsystematic. There was no precedent for specific and comprehensive research on a particular singing style or school, such as the singing style of mountain songs. The general concept of ethnic vocal music is now referred to as the singing of Chinese opera, Guiyang folk songs, creative songs with strong ethnic styles, and ethnic operas. It was not the singing style that some people believed to be singing with squeezing their throat, not emphasizing resonance, and singing shallow songs with their mouth and teeth in front of them. This understanding was too narrow.

Two-thirds of the land in China is in plateaus, mountains, and hills, with a population mainly composed of farmers. Chinese songs are mostly agricultural songs, and mountain songs are extremely rich. Ethnic vocal music encompasses a wide range, and mountain songs are no exception. According to "Lü Shi Chunqiu Yinchu," it is said, "... Yu performed meritorious deeds and met the daughter of Tu. Yu had not met before and had traveled to the southern part of the province. The daughter of Tu Shan ordered her concubine to wait for Yu in the sun of the fortress mountain. The woman wrote a song, saying, "Waiting for people, Xi Yi." Moreover, Wen Yiduo once said, "This kind of voice is the sprout of music, and it is also a language that has not yet matured. The voice is stretched very long, and there are also considerable changes in tone, so it can be said that it is the sprout of music." The earliest form of human singing was mountain songs, and according to records to this day, mountain songs have long appeared in the south. Guizhou region is known as the hometown of songs and dances, and Guizhou Tujia ethnic high-pitched mountain songs are a very dazzling branch of China's colorful ethnic music flowers, with unique features in musicology, musical form, lyrics, singing methods, and other aspects. This is the county cultural troupe and cultural center and has provided many singers for the local and provincial song and dance troupes.

Discussion

The expressive power of Guizhou Tujia Gaoqiang was extreme, and the use of Tujia Gaoqiang almost covered all aspects of Tujia singing, such as mountain songs, chants, crying for marriage, mourning, sacrificial ceremonies, and hall performances. The themes of the work were also vibrant, expressing love, family, and friendship, as well as passion for nature, love for life, and worship of Tujia totems and gods. The performance forms of Tujia Gaoqiang singing were also diverse, including duet, relay, solo, and choral singing. The melody was beautiful and lyrical



as well as the rhythm was comprehensive and relaxed which was similar to the colorful opera. The Tujia Gaoqiang singing was to fully express the labor, love, life, and emotions of the Tujia people. The high-pitched tune of the Tujia ethnic group was full of unique tunes, words, dialects, and regional sounds, which were highly distinctive. For example, during collective weeding, farming, or digging, there were wedding gongs and drums, harmony gongs and drums, and digging songs. As time passes, the Tujia ethnic group's high-pitched singing has gradually decreased among young people. Gaoqiang singing was an important carrier for the Tujia people to convey information and express emotions during their production, activities, and labor processes in the natural environment of the mountains. Its content reflected the Tujia folk customs, lifestyle, and production methods. Nowadays, as an intangible cultural heritage, the high-pitched singing style of Tujia is more explored and studied by scholars. The lives of the Tujia people in Guizhou have undergone earth-shattering changes. Modern highways, bridges, and communication tools have brought people closer together, and the folk customs of the Tujia have gradually been diminished. More and more Tujia ethnic groups are being abandoned by young people today.

Protecting, researching, and inheriting Tujia Gaoqiang folk songs is of great significance from the perspective of ethnic vocal music and ethnic music research. The rich work they perform provides rich creative materials for music creation. The techniques of Tujia high-pitched singing are important references for vocal research, especially in obtaining stable and beautiful high notes, which is of great significance for vocal researchers. This will further broaden the vocal range of singers, challenge the limits of human high notes, and provide possibilities for vocal performers to perform more elaborately. The high-pitched singing style of the Tujia ethnic group has rich cultural connotations and heritage and is highly artistic and cultural in value. People need to constantly excavate and organize, constantly absorb its rich nutrients, which not only have social significance but also can bring huge economic benefits.

This study is similar to Gao's (2010, p. 138) study on the melody of E'xi high-pitched mountain songs which are high-pitched and loud, with a free and lingering rhythm. It possesses a vigorous and optimistic temperament, and due to the characteristics of the geographical environment and different ethnicities, it has unique musical features attributed to the differences in labor characteristics. To understand the singing characteristics of high-pitched mountain songs, ones need to comprehend them from the aspects of vocalization methods and characteristics of smooth tuning and feel and appreciate the beauty in the sound and the accuracy of its pitch. Only then can one continuously improve the tone of high-pitched mountain songs, pass them down from generation to generation, and develop the unique singing characteristics of



high-pitched mountain songs. Moreover, the present study is also in accordance with Tang (2019, pp.73-75) who found that Xiushan Tujia and Miao Autonomous County is known as the “hometown of Chinese folk song art”, and its folk song types can be divided into nine tunes and seven tunes. The Tujia ethnic group’s Gaoqiang folk song is one type of folk song with distinct ethnic characteristics. Gaoqiang folk song is an art form of folk song that integrates and coexists with the unique terrain, production labor, and national character of the local area, including lyrics, singing style, melody, rhythm, and other musical features. The unique charm of the Tujia ethnic group’s high-pitched folk songs in Xiushan was analyzed, including their tonality, musical structure, rhythm, and beat, as well as the skillful use of dialect singing lyrics. This article analyzed the artistic characteristics of Guizhou Tujia folk songs as the main entry point and elaborated on the inheritance strategies of Guizhou Tujia folk songs from two aspects which are family inheritance, and group inheritance. Then, it explored the dissemination methods of Guizhou Tujia folk songs, namely government propaganda and guidance, integration into classroom teaching, and strengthening mass dissemination, to provide certain references for relevant personnel and ensure that Guizhou Tujia folk songs were revitalized in the new era background. Thus, Tujia folk songs are gradually formed by the Tujia people through long-term production, life, and various social practices. Its melody is unrestrained, the song is tragic and heroic, generous and low-spirited, yet beautiful and melodious, the lyrics are easy to understand, vivid and interesting, with simple emotions and clear love and hate. The songs can make people excited and are full of philosophical and aesthetically pleasing phrases and poetry. It records the life stories of the Tujia people and the development process of the Tujia ethnic group by reproducing the historical culture, folk art, and folk customs of the Tujia ethnic group.

Implications and Recommendations

1. Implications of the Findings

1. The research results can be used as a guideline for basic to advanced singing training of Guizhou Tujia folk songs.
2. The research results can be applied to practice singing in other genres of songs.

2. Recommendations for Further Studies

1. Further studies should be conducted to develop singing skills that cover the singing styles of other folk music in Guiyang, China.
2. Further studies should be conducted to examine other folk singing styles in Guiyang, China by using the same methodology as the present study.



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