A Case Study of the Singing Technique of "Shanqu Song of Shanxi Folksong" by Shi Zhanming

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Abstract

This research consists purposes were 1. to investigate the current status of Shanqu in contemporary society and 2. to analyze the singing techniques of Shanqu as demonstrated by Shi Zhanming. This qualitative case study investigates the current status of Shanqu in contemporary society and examines the singing techniques of Shanqu as demonstrated by Shi Zhanming. Data were collected through documentary research, field investigation, semi-structured interviews, performance observation and analysis of selected performances, particularly Gaoshan Shang Yi Lou You. Qualitative thematic analysis and performance-based interpretation were used to analyze the data. The findings show that Shanqu transmission has shifted from oral, community-based practice to a hybrid model supported by schools, cultural institutions, heritage programs, festivals and digital media. Although traditional transmission has weakened because of aging tradition bearers, declining dialect use and changing audience participation, Shanqu retains its cultural identity through dialect, vocal style, melodic features and regional memory. Shi Zhanming's singing technique consists of six interrelated components: vocal production and resonance, breath control, pitch accuracy and register coordination, diction and expressive delivery, emotional expression and vocal ornamentation and falsetto–modal voice transition. Together, these elements form an integrated vocal system that preserves the bright, resonant and expressive qualities of Shanqu while adapting them to contemporary performance and pedagogy. The study concludes that Shanqu sustainability depends not only on preservation policies and documentation but also on the continued transmission of performance practice. Shi Zhanming's vocal technique demonstrates how traditional singing can maintain and pass on regional folk-song culture in the present era.

Keywords: Shi Zhanming, Shanxi Folk Songs, Singing Techniques

Introduction

Chinese folk songs constitute an important component of China's intangible cultural heritage and serve as a medium for preserving local history, cultural memory, and social values. Through oral transmission across generations, folk songs reflect the lifestyles, customs, beliefs, and emotional experiences of ordinary people. As one of the earliest forms of Chinese musical culture, folk songs have played a significant role in maintaining cultural continuity and regional identity.

Among the different regional customs of Chinese folk music, Shanxi folk songs are known for their characteristic musical quality and long ancient history as a cultural domain. The geographical features of Shanxi province, especially the mountains and the Loess Plateau, have influenced, with a powerful projection, bright voice and expressive melody movement. Hence, Shanxi folk songs are an important image for the northern Chinese folk music culture to be represented (Guo, 2022).

Shanqu, an art form that has been carried on for centuries by local communities in mountainous regions, is thought to be one of the most representative of all forms in the Shanxi folk-song tradition. Historically, Shanqu was practiced in mountain regions as a communication and emotional expression tool among local people. Music of the style has high-point melodic lines, flexible rhythms, dialects lyrics and lots of musical decoration. Not only do these traits mirror the daily activities of community life: they also represent the local culture of the entire Shanxi region.

Modernization, urbanization, migration, changing audience preferences, and the declining use of regional dialects have weakened the community-based environment in which Shanxi folk songs were traditionally learned and performed. Previous studies provide important evidence for this situation. Guo (2022) investigated the history, musical characteristics, and conservation models of Shanxi folk songs and emphasized institutional support, folk-song contests, festivals, and cultural programs as practical preservation strategies. Zhou and Hou (2021) further discussed the development of Shanxi folk songs through cultural-tourism integration and proposed new dissemination channels combining traditional and modern media. Wang, Razali, and Musib (2024) specifically studied Shanxi mountain songs, including Shanqu, Kaihuadiao, and Juanxipian, and found that public familiarity with these genres remains low, with dissemination relying mainly on cultural events, educational settings, and traditional media.

These studies demonstrate that existing research has mainly addressed Shanxi folk songs through the lenses of dialect, cultural preservation, dissemination, tourism development, teaching, and heritage policy. For

example, Fei and Pattananon (2023) discussed singing teaching techniques of Shanxi folk songs and introduced general pedagogical approaches, while Wang et al. (2024) focused on dissemination patterns and audience awareness of Shanxi mountain songs. However, these studies do not provide an in-depth case study of Shi Zhanming's Shanqu singing technique or explain how vocal production, breath control, resonance, diction, ornamentation, and register coordination operate together in performance practice. Therefore, the proposed research gap is clear: there is still limited systematic research on Shanqu singing technique as embodied by a representative contemporary performer and on how such technique functions as a mechanism of cultural transmission. This study addresses that gap by examining the current status of Shanqu and analyzing Shi Zhanming's singing technique as a living practice of intangible cultural heritage transmission.

The Purposes

1. To investigate the current status of Shanqu in contemporary society
2. To analyze the singing techniques of Shanqu as demonstrated by Shi Zhanming

Literary Review

Shanqu is a traditional mountain-song genre of the widely spread northern Chinese folk songs. It has free melodic expression, strong emotional delivery, and deep ties to local culture and daily life. Shanqu, as a form of folk music, is passed on through oral tradition, and, thus, it serves as an important transmission mechanism of regional identity and cultural memory (Oki, 2020). Vocal performance is a cornerstone in the survival of folk-song traditions. It has previously been suggested that singing techniques such as breath control, resonance, vocal projection, and register coordination are important elements for the artistic and stylistic quality of singing the folk song. These techniques provide a means for the singer to express musical meaning while remaining loyal to the conventional manner of singing (Gibbs, 2018).

Studies of Chinese folk music increasingly focus on the interplay of performance with transmission. Folk song performances are maintained not just through official documentation and heritage laws, but it is through individual performers who enact and convey stylistically the form of the song through their performance. Thus, a performer's capacity is important to protect the intangible inheritance of cultural heritage in modern culture (UNESCO, 2003).

Previous research confirms the importance of Shanxi folk songs but also reveals a clear limitation. Guo (2022) focused on conservation and development models; Zhou and Hou (2021) examined cultural-tourism integration and dissemination; Fei and Pattananon (2023) discussed teaching techniques for Shanxi folk songs;

and Wang et al. (2024) investigated the dissemination of Shanxi mountain songs, including Shanqu. Collectively, these studies provide reliable evidence that Shanxi folk-song research has concentrated mainly on cultural background, preservation, pedagogy, and public dissemination. Nevertheless, few studies have systematically analyzed the singing techniques of a representative Shanqu performer, especially Shi Zhanming. In particular, limited attention has been given to how vocal production, breath control, resonance, diction, ornamentation, register transition, and expressive delivery work together as a performance system for cultural transmission. This study therefore examines Shanqu's contemporary status and Shi Zhanming's singing techniques to fill this gap.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the current status of Shanqu and analyze the singing techniques of Shi Zhanming.

1. Key Informant

Shi Zhanming, an important performer and representative inheritor of Shanqu in Shanxi Province, China, was the key informant. He was selected through purposive sampling because of his extensive experience and significant contribution to preserving and transmitting Shanqu.

2. Research Instrument

The main research instrument was a semi-structured interview form constructed from the research aims and relevant literature. Interview questions addressed the current status of Shanqu, how Shanqu culture is passed down, the performance practices surrounding Shanqu, and singing techniques. Performance recordings and related documents were also referred to for analysis.

3. Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary research, semi-structured interviews, field observation, and performance analysis. The documentary data were obtained from academic books, journal articles, theses and dissertations, cultural-heritage documents, Shanxi folk-song publications, audiovisual recordings, and related online archival materials concerning Shanqu, Shanxi folk songs, vocal performance, and intangible cultural heritage. To ensure validity and reliability, the documents were selected according to their relevance to the research objectives, credibility of authorship or institution, publication quality, consistency with other sources, and usefulness for explaining Shanqu performance practice. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing documentary evidence with interview data, observation notes, and performance recordings. Shi Zhanming was interviewed as the key informant, and the interview data were checked against documentary sources and observed performances to confirm accuracy and consistency.

Performance data were collected from three observed performances and an interview with Shi Zhanming on April 17, 2026, in Zuoquan County, Changzhi City, Shanxi Province, China. The observation sites were the Migrant Workers' Singing Competition in Zhenxing Village, the Folk Song Inheritance Base of Shi Zhanming in Hongdu Village, and Mr. Shi Zhanming's residence. These settings covered public, heritage-based, and informal performance contexts. The performances were analyzed through repeated listening and viewing, note-taking, and comparison across six dimensions: vocal production and resonance, breath control, pitch accuracy and register coordination, diction and expressive delivery, emotional expression and ornamentation, and falsetto–modal voice transition.

4. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The data pertaining to Shanqu's status were grouped and themed. Singing techniques were studied in terms of the following six dimensions: vocal production and resonance, breath control, pitch accuracy and register coordination, diction and expressive delivery, emotional expression and vocal ornamentation, and falsetto–modal voice transition. The results were subsequently interpreted from ethnomusicological and vocal-performance point of view.

Results

This Research The researcher can classify the research results as follows

1. Current Status of Shanqu in Contemporary Society

1.1 Transmission of Shanqu.

Thus our findings suggest that the phenomenon of transmission of Shanqu has significantly changed in modern-day society. Shanqu has traditionally been transmitted orally in the local communities. Songs were learned through first-hand involvement in agricultural work, mountain labor, seasonal festivities, family gatherings, and village ceremonies in older generations. In such an environment, musical knowledge came from a natural way of learning, through socialization, imitation and participation in daily life.

Now, however, this old-fashioned way of passing it on is failing. The results show that younger people have limited access to Shanqu in day-to-day aspects of their lives, as a result of urbanization, migration, modernization and changing cultural preferences. But since then, the transmission of Shanqu has mostly relied on educational institutions, cultural heritage projects, folk-song festivals, workshops, and digital media platforms.

Based on the data collected from Shi Zhanming, contemporary transmission is no longer an inheritance from family or from village-based learning. This has encouraged an increased usage of conservation efforts that

involve government agencies, universities, cultural organizations and public performance events. Therefore, Shanqu's current transmission system is a hybrid model that combines traditional oral transmission with the support of institutions.

1.2 Performance Contexts of Shanqu

The results further indicate the significant changes in performance contexts of Shanqu. In the past, Shanqu historically served as a useful means of communication between people residing in mountainous areas. Songs were sung during farming activities, herding, courtship, social interaction, and community celebrations. Shanqu is also more frequent on today's concert stages, cultural festivals, educational programs, competitions, and online platforms. This shift has widened audiences' access and brought exposure of the form to public awareness. Yet it has also shifted the social uses of Shanqu. The genre is increasingly felt as a performance art rather than as an integrated component of everyday community life.

1.3 Continuity, Preservation, and Contemporary Adaptation

However, Shanqu continues to preserve important aspects of its musical and cultural identity. According to the findings, dialect pronunciation, melodic structures, vocal timbre, and expressive performance styles remain essential markers of authenticity. These characteristics enable Shanqu to maintain continuity with its historical roots while adapting to contemporary cultural environments. In addition, digital media platforms have become increasingly important tools for preservation and dissemination. Performance videos, online lectures, cultural documentation projects, and social media content contribute to wider accessibility and public engagement. Consequently, Shanqu remains a living tradition that continues to evolve through adaptation rather than remaining fixed in its historical form.

1.4 Challenges Affecting Shanqu

These studies revealed a few challenges. First, the number of carriers of continuing tradition continues to shrink due to the aging population. Second, among the younger generations, the use of local dialects is on the decline, creating difficulties in preserving the linguistic authenticity of Shanqu. Thirdly, modern audiences have taken on popular styles of music and are less likely to experience traditional folk-song practices directly. These barriers imply that Shanqu’s sustainability in the long run depends not only on documentation and policy support but also on further development of transmission systems that facilitate engagement for the youths.

2. Singing Techniques of Shi Zhanming

2.1 Vocal Production and Resonance

An analysis of Shi Zhanming's performances identified a vocal style that is vivid and with strong projection and resonance. These vocal elements strike a delicate balance between native folk-song aesthetics and sophisticated technical control in his style. It remains focused and resonant without the high muscular tension, allowing the voice to expand in a way that makes sense whilst still being clear and flexible.

This resonates with the research that shows resonance placement matters; they help to gain penetration-related quality in Shanqu singing. Shi Zhanming has maintained a bright vocal quality that speaks more to the aesthetics of northern Chinese folk singing than to a heavy operatic tone. This approach helps communication to occur effectively in both modern practice as well as traditional performance settings.
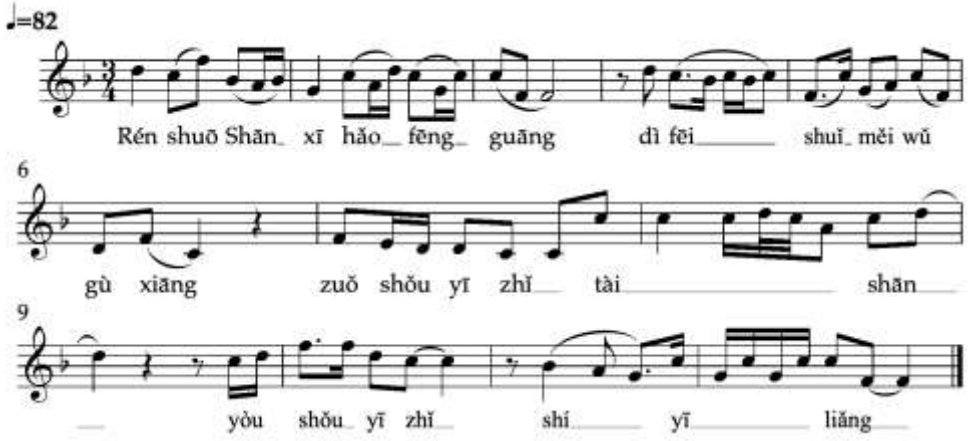


Figure 1 Illustration of Vocal Tone Production and Resonance Placement in Shanqu Singing (Meiling Song, 2026)

2.2 Breath Control

Control of breath became one of the most important technical aspects of Shi Zhanming's singing. It also found stable support from the lower body and good breath management during prolonged melodic phrases. Given this breathing, the performer is able to maintain consistent tone quality, phrase continuity, and vocal projection over longer passages. Breath control, coupled with breath management, also supports expressive phrasing. Strategic breath management enables flexible timing, dynamic shaping, and emotional expression while maintaining overall vocal stability.

2.3 Pitch Accuracy and Register Coordination

The results prove a high degree of pitch stability and register coordination. There were clear pitch centers when playing Gaoshan Shang Yi Lou You, including in passages of rapid melodic movement and

extended high-register singing. The transitions of registers were smooth without any prominent vocal breaks. Data from observation indicate that the coordination of breath support, resonance focus, auditory monitoring, and technical preparation occurs. These elements combine to achieve musical precision as well as stylistic authenticity.

2.4 Diction and Expressive Delivery

Diction is also very necessary for the survival of cultural structure of Shanqu. Shi Zhanming shows that he can speak clearly, while retaining the phonological character of the Shanxi dialect. His pronunciation adds not only to a text's intelligibility but also to the preservation of the musical identity of the region. The production of expressive delivery is closely related to diction, a type of articulation, phrasing, and vocal emphasis, and emotional expression. Changes in sound quality and articulation can facilitate emotional communication as well as strengthen the language-melody relationship.

2.5 Emotional Expression and Vocal Ornamentation

These findings demonstrate great utilization of ornamentation techniques such as melodic embellishment, portamento, and more expressive techniques. These assist in heightening the emotional tone and the unique artistic style of Shanqu. The emotional expression happens when vocal color, dynamic variation, phrasing, and ornamentation are worked together. These techniques are actually much more than mere decorative features but they perform as key vehicles in transmitting the song's emotional content.

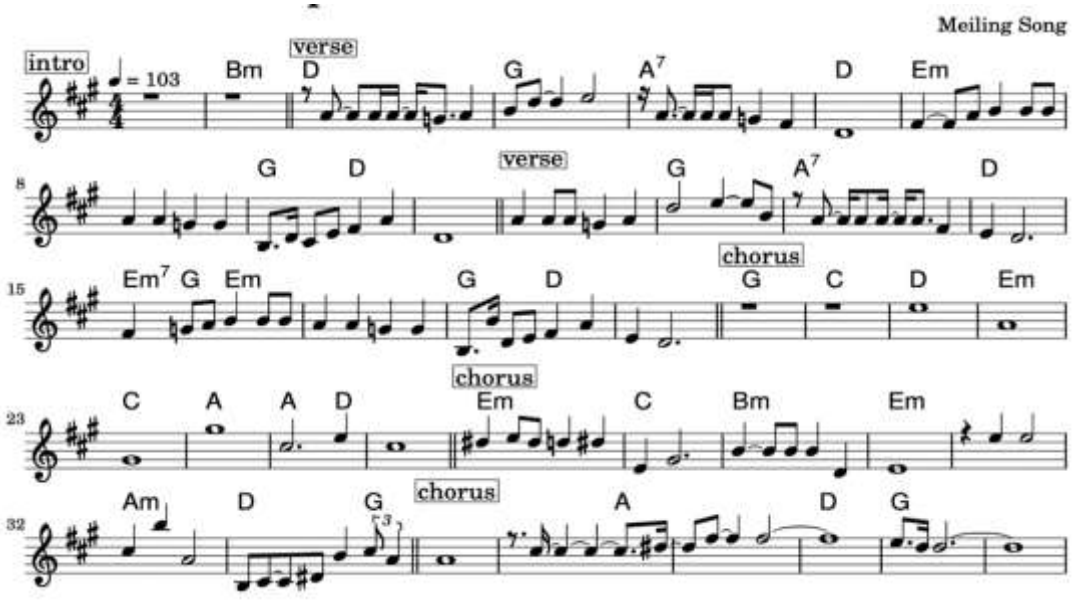


Figure 2 Illustration of Emotional Expression and Vocal Ornamentation in Shanqu Singing (Meiling Song, 2026)

2.6 Falsetto–Modal Voice Transition

The analysis also identified smooth coordination between modal voice and falsetto. This technique is particularly important in high-register passages that require vocal flexibility and expressive contrast.

Shi Zhanming demonstrates gradual transitions between registers while preserving tonal continuity and expressive coherence. The technique contributes to the characteristic sound of Shanqu and enhances the singer's ability to navigate demanding melodic passages.
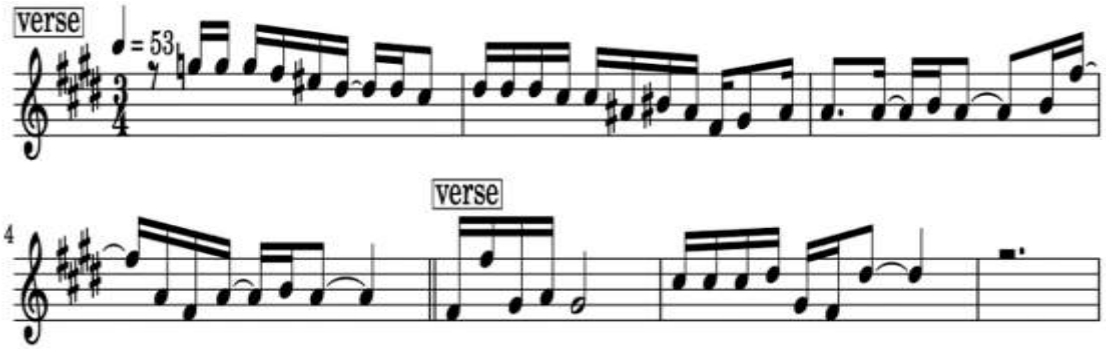


Figure 3 Illustration of Falsetto–Modal Voice Transition in Shanqu Singing (Meiling Song, 2026)

2.7 Summary of Singing Techniques

The findings indicate that Shi Zhanming's singing technique functions as an integrated vocal system composed of vocal production and resonance, breath control, pitch accuracy and register coordination, diction and expressive delivery, emotional expression and ornamentation, and falsetto–modal voice transition. Together, these techniques preserve the bright, resonant, and emotionally expressive qualities of Shanqu while supporting its continued transmission in contemporary society.

Conclusion

This Research The researcher can summarize the results of the research study according to the following The Purposes

This study has focused on the present-day status of Shanqu in contemporary society and how Shanqu has been understood through the singing techniques of Shi Zhanming. The results demonstrate the persistence of Shanqu as a folk-song tradition in modern society despite profound social and cultural transformations. Instead of being extinct, the genre has developed in accordance with current living situations: through educational institutions, cultural organizations, heritage programs, public performances, and digital media, its style has evolved to meet the current context of contemporary society.

Other channels of transmission have allowed Shanqu to adapt to changing social contexts while remaining culturally relevant. Also, the study shows that the sustainability of Shanqu is directly related to representation. For Shi Zhanming, singing technique becomes a vehicle through which artistic skill is translated into knowledge of music, stylistic traits, and culture. The most important aspects of Shanqu identity, including vocal aesthetics, dialect-based expression, and traditional communication music practices and their application in his performances, inform every facet of his performance practice.

Furthermore, singing techniques and performance techniques are not only performance resources but also cultural mechanisms that help in preserving intangible cultural heritage, according to the analysis. The synthesis of vocal production, breath control, register arrangement, diction, ornamentation, and interpretation keeps the unique musical essence of Shanqu and allows Shi Zhanming to connect it to audiences in the contemporary world. Thus this study arrives at the conclusion that the existence of Shanqu still relies on the dynamic between cultural preservation and performance.

Although institutional support permits transmission, the long-term continuation of cultural heritage demands that performers not only practice traditional singing style, but also express and maintain it and the musical properties that form it. In this sense, the singing of Shi Zhanming provides a particular instance of how the indigenous singing practice has helped to establish the current folk-song cultural heritage in modern China.

Discussion

This Research The researcher can discuss the research results as follows

Current Status of Shanqu: These results suggest that Shanqu conservation in modern society should be understood as a process of adaptation rather than simple continuity. Although traditional community-based transmission has weakened, Shanqu has survived through preservation programs, educational institutions, cultural organizations, competitions, festivals, and media dissemination. This finding is consistent with Guo (2022), who argued that the conservation and development of Shanxi folk songs require institutional support and public cultural frameworks. It also corresponds with UNESCO's (2003) concept of intangible cultural heritage, which emphasizes that living traditions are sustained through practice, performance, and transmission rather than through documentation alone.

The results also indicate that current support systems do not eradicate all the problems of cultural inheritance. The weakening of oral transmission, the aging of practitioners, declining dialect usage, and a preference for staged and mediated performance have all affected the depth of cultural transmission. The

present study argues that the sustainability of Shanqu is not just contingent upon maintaining the repertoire, but also on preservation of dialect-based expression, participatory practice, and knowledge of the local culture. The findings also support theoretical perspectives in ethnomusicology that view music as a cultural practice embedded in social context. Oki and Santangelo (2011) show that mountain-song traditions are closely connected with language, emotion, and local social life. In this regard, the present study confirms that the preservation of Shanqu depends not only on public performance opportunities but also on maintaining dialect pronunciation, regional vocal color, and local expressive style. However, the findings also partly contradict overly optimistic views of modernization because the shift toward staged and mediated performance may increase visibility while reducing everyday community participation.

Singing Techniques of Shanqu by Shi Zhanming: The results show that Shi Zhanming's singing should be considered an integrated technical and stylistic system rather than a set of isolated vocal skills. His vocal production, breath control, pitch management, register coordination, diction, ornamentation, and expressive delivery collectively shape the distinctive sound of Shanqu. This interpretation is supported by vocal pedagogy theory. Ware (1997) explains that singing depends on the coordination of respiration, phonation, resonance, articulation, and registration, while Miller (1996) emphasizes breath management, resonance balance, diction, and register negotiation as central components of efficient vocal technique. From this perspective, Shi Zhanming's technique reflects both general principles of vocal production and the specific aesthetic requirements of Shanxi folk-song performance.

The emphasis on breath control and resonance in the findings is consistent with singing pedagogy, which regards breath coordination as the foundation for stable tone, projection, and phrase continuity. Ware (1997) describes breath, phonation, and resonance as interconnected processes, and Miller (1996) similarly links breath management to tonal freedom and vocal efficiency. Shi Zhanming's bright resonance and strong projection therefore support the view that technical control is necessary for both vocal clarity and stylistic expression in Shanqu. At the same time, his use of a bright, forward tone differs from heavier operatic vocal ideals, suggesting that folk-song technique must be interpreted according to regional style rather than judged solely by Western classical standards.

The findings on diction, ornamentation, and register transition further demonstrate the relationship between singing technique and cultural transmission. Fei and Pattananon (2023) indicate that teaching Shanxi folk songs requires attention to regional vocal style and expressive delivery. Shi Zhanming's use of dialect-based diction, melodic ornamentation, and smooth falsetto–modal transition therefore functions not only as artistic expression but also as a means of preserving stylistic knowledge. Nevertheless, because this study is

based on one representative performer and three observed performances, the findings should be interpreted as a case-based contribution rather than a universally validated model of Shanqu singing. Further comparative studies with other performers are needed to confirm, refine, or challenge these observations.

Discoveries or New Knowledge

This research brings new insights to ethnomusicology, folk-song studies, and vocal performance by showing that singing techniques operate not only as artistic skills but also as mechanisms of cultural transmission. Previous work focusing on Shanqu has mostly examined the topics of cultural preservation, historical advancement, and educational promotion.

By contrast, this study shows that the continuity of Shanqu depends partly on the transmission of specific vocal practices embodied by representative performers. Rather than proposing a fully validated analytical framework, this study identifies six analytical dimensions within this case study: (1) vocal production and resonance, (2) breath control, (3) pitch accuracy and register coordination, (4) diction and expressive delivery, (5) emotional expression and vocal ornamentation, and (6) falsetto–modal voice transition. These dimensions help describe how Shi Zhanming's singing technique contributes to maintaining the distinctive vocal style and cultural identity of Shanqu.

Another major finding of this study is the alignment of vocal performance and the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. The results indicate that Shanqu's sustainability has to do not only with preservation policies, documentation and institutional support but also with the continued performance techniques being maintained and transmitted by tradition bearers. So singing technique should be regarded as a practical way of cultural practice which can be regarded as a means of maintaining regional cultural identity in the transmission of musical identity from generation to generation.

Suggestion

1. Current Status of Shanqu

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The results also indicate that current support systems do not eradicate all the problems of cultural inheritance. The weakening of oral transmission, the aging of practitioners, declining dialect usage, and a preference for staged and mediated performance have all affected the depth of cultural transmission. The present study argues that the sustainability of Shanqu is not just contingent upon maintaining the repertoire, but also on preservation of dialect-based expression, participatory practice, and knowledge of the local culture. The findings also support theoretical perspectives in ethnomusicology that view music as a cultural practice embedded in social context. Oki and Santangelo (2011) show that mountain-song traditions are closely connected with language, emotion, and local social life. In this regard, the present study confirms that the preservation of Shanqu depends not only on public performance opportunities but also on maintaining dialect pronunciation, regional vocal color, and local expressive style. However, the findings also partly contradict overly optimistic views of modernization because the shift toward staged and mediated performance may increase visibility while reducing everyday community participation.

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