

A Study on the Pluricultural and Integrated Nature of Folk Songs and Dances in the Yellow River Basin since Modern Times

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Abstract:

Taking the traditional folk songs and dances in the Yellow River Basin as the research object, this paper explores their pluricultural and integrated cultural attributes manifested since modern times. The song and dance music in this basin has accumulated and developed for more than 3,000 years from the pre-Qin period to the Ming and Qing dynasties, and has burst forth with vitality for diversified development in modern times, with new types emerging one after another. The paper selects representative forms of songs and dances such as Banquet Songs, Cham Dance, Dry Boat Dance, Lantern Dance and Yangko for analysis, and sorts out the characteristics including the integration of songs and dances of multiple ethnic groups, the fusion of Mongolian-Tibetan religious dances, the cross-regional spread of Han folk songs and dances, and the inter-provincial evolution of Yangko art. It clarifies that the folk songs and dances in various regions of the Yellow River Basin not only retain their unique regional and ethnic features, but also form common traits in cultural exchanges, which fully confirms that the traditional folk songs and dances in the Yellow River Basin have the cultural attribute of both diversified individuality and an integrated core.

Keywords:

Modern Times, Yellow River Basin, Folk Songs and Dances, Pluricultural and Integrated Nature

1. Introduction

The song and dance music of all provinces in the Yellow River Basin has undergone accumulation and development for more than 3,000 years across dozens of dynasties, evolving from the music and dances of the six dynasties in the pre-Qin period, through the variety shows of music and dance in the Han Dynasty, the professional singing and dancing performances in the Sui and Tang dynasties, the “dance troupe” performances in the Song Dynasty, to the self-entertaining folk songs and dances of the masses in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Since modern times, it has presented a splendid and diverse scene among the people in various regions, with new types of songs and dances emerging endlessly.

2. Banquet Songs – The Integration of the Song and Dance Cultures of the Hui, Tu and Salar Ethnic Groups

As a vivid carrier of the symbiosis of multi-ethnic cultures in the Hehuang Valley of Qinghai, Banquet Songs are deeply imprinted with the cultural genes of the Hui, Tu and Salar ethnic groups, and their diverse appellations directly reflect this integrated characteristic. The Hui people call them Jia Qu'er (Family Songs) and Cai Qu'er (Feast Songs), implying the life scene of enlivening banquets; the Tu people name them Shiduo Cha'er, carrying the linguistic rhythm of their own nation; the Salar people refer to them as Salar Narrative Songs, Salar Banquet Songs or Salar Songs, highlighting their narrative core and ethnic identity. Although there is no detailed documentary record of their formation and evolution, their performing forms and cultural connotations clearly reflect the historical track of long-term mixed habitation and cultural mutual learning among multiple ethnic groups in Qinghai.

In terms of cultural roots, both the Salar and Hui ethnic groups believe in Islam, forming close living ties in their inhabited areas in eastern Qinghai. The commonality of religious beliefs and living customs has built a natural bridge for the cultural integration of Banquet Songs. In terms of performing forms, the Banquet Songs of the two ethnic groups show a high degree of convergence, often sung at weddings, funerals, festivals and banquets, serving as both a form of entertainment and an important channel for emotional expression and cultural inheritance. In terms of musical characteristics, Salar Banquet Songs are distinguished by their distinct narrativity, with lyrics mostly telling historical legends, life stories and love tales. The melodies are mainly stepwise, interspersed with skillful fourth and fifth-degree leaps, which not only maintain the fluency of the melody but also add emotional tension. The use of the yu mode endows them with a profound and distant lingering charm, and the neat rhythms of 2/4 and 4/4 time fit the atmosphere of banquet scenes perfectly.

Hui Banquet Songs highlight distinct regional linguistic features, sung in the Qinghai dialect of Chinese with flexible sentence patterns not restricted by strict metrical rules, mostly presented in a single-melody structure. The form of one lyric matching one melody makes the expression of lyrics more targeted. The extensive use of function words and auxiliary words in singing, such as ya, ma and yo, not only enriches the hierarchical sense of the melody but also fills the singing with a strong flavor of life, narrowing the distance with the audience. While retaining the musical background of their own nation, the Tu people's Shiduo Cha'er has absorbed the narrative techniques and rhythmic characteristics of the Hui and Salar Banquet Songs in long-term exchanges, forming an artistic style that combines ethnic individuality and commonality.

Today, Banquet Songs have become a highly representative genre in Qinghai. They are not isolated products of a single ethnic culture, but the artistic crystallization of mutual reference and nourishment among the Hui, Tu and Salar ethnic groups in the long course of history. In singing and dancing steps, the cultural genes of various ethnic groups blend with each other, retaining their own cultural traits while forming a common cultural memory. They stand as a vivid testimony to the harmonious coexistence and cultural symbiosis of multiple ethnic groups, and add a brilliant touch to the diversity of China's excellent traditional culture.

3. Cham Dance – A Mongolian-Tibetan Integrated Dance Art

As an artistic treasure of the in-depth integration of Mongolian and Tibetan cultures, Cham Dance is a unique dance form born from the collision and symbiosis of Tibetan Buddhism art and Mongolian national culture. Originating as a religious ritual centered on dance in Tibetan Buddhism, it was initially intended to interpret religious doctrines and spread Buddhism through concrete body language, bearing a strong connotation of religious culture.

In the Ming Dynasty, Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism) spread to the Mongolian grasslands through cultural exchanges, bringing not only religious beliefs but also its supporting artistic forms. Mongolian tribes successively built temples, which gradually became the core carriers of religious dissemination and cultural integration. On every religious festival, temples would hold grand religious ceremonies. The solemn ritualistic dances in Tibetan Buddhism met the innate vigorous, stretching and bold dance characteristics of the Mongolian nation, absorbing and adjusting to each other in long-term practice. The religious symbolic movements of Tibetan dance (such as the doctrinal implications of mudras and footwork) were deeply integrated with the stretching postures and powerful rhythms of Mongolian dance, gradually breaking away from the limitations of a single religious ritual and evolving into an independent dance art with dual cultural genes of Mongolia and Tibet.

The supportive policies of the Ming and Qing rulers toward Tibetan Buddhism, coupled with the open and inclusive cultural attitude of Mongolian tribes, provided fertile soil for the development of Cham Dance. Against the social background of “the unity of politics and religion”, secular royal power and religious forces relied on each other. Cham Dance became not only an important medium for the dissemination of religious doctrines but also a cultural bond for consolidating governance and uniting ethnic groups. Today, Cham Dance is not only a vivid testimony to the integration of religious beliefs and artistic aesthetics of the Mongolian and Tibetan ethnic groups, but also a rare precious heritage in China’s diverse cultural treasury with its unique cultural connotations.

4. Dry Boat Dance and Lantern Dance – National Han Songs and Dances Derived from Traditional Customs

Derived from the traditional customs of the Han ethnic group, Dry Boat Dance and Lantern Dance are classic forms of song and dance music. With their wide popularity and distinct regional characteristics, they have become an important bond connecting Han cultures across regions and promoting the exchange and dissemination of ethnic culture, taking deep root in the festival life and spiritual world of the people.

The history of Dry Boat Dance can be traced back to the totem sacrifice activities of ancient ancestors, and its prototype is closely linked to the folk culture of dragon boat racing. After thousands of years of evolution, it has gradually developed from a sacrificial ritual to a folk festival performance, becoming a song and dance form with both entertainment and ritualistic features. Although Dry Boat tunes have different names and development paths across the country, they always retain a common cultural core and artistic traits. Running the Dry Boat, popular in the rural areas of northern Shaanxi, is highly representative. It deeply integrates the artistic genes of northern Shaanxi folk songs, with a resounding and loud tune as penetrating as the strong wind over the Loess Plateau; its rhythm is flexible, changing with the performers’ emotions and scenes; the overall mood is warm and unrestrained,

showing the unique vitality of northern Shaanxi folk songs and embodying the open-mindedness, humor and wisdom forged by local people in a long life of hardship. During festivals such as the Spring Festival and temple fairs, performers dress in colorful costumes, hold dry boat props to simulate boating postures, accompanied by lively gongs and drums, making it the most appealing folk scene in northern Shaanxi villages. The Nanhaizi Dry Boat in Nanhaizi Village, Donghe District, Baotou City, Inner Mongolia, has a unique regional style. On the basis of retaining the core performing form of the dry boat, it has absorbed the vigorous spirit of Mongolian grassland culture, with stretching and powerful movements and a bright and stirring rhythm, which is a vivid embodiment of the integration of Mongolian and Han cultures in folk art.

The birth and spread of Lantern Dance are inseparable from the Han traditional custom of “displaying and appreciating lanterns on the 15th day of the first lunar month” during the Lantern Festival. The character “Deng (lantern)” is a homophone of “Deng (harvest)”, entrusting people’s good wishes for a bumper grain harvest, and bearing the auspicious meanings of dispelling disasters, bestowing blessings and longevity, which is a concrete expression of the blessing culture in Han traditional culture. In the Yellow River Basin, the birthplace of Chinese civilization, there are a great variety of splendid Lantern Dances, including Dragon Lantern, Flower Lantern, Seven-Puzzle Lantern and Cart Lantern, each with distinctive features, jointly forming a rich pedigree of lantern dance culture. Among them, the Cart Lantern, popular in various parts of Zibo, Shandong Province, is highly representative. It innovatively adopts an integrated performing form of cart, lantern and dance, perfectly combining prop production, dance movements and musical accompaniment. During the performance, dancers push the cart forward, the lanterns flicker with the dance steps, the dancing postures are light and flexible, and the tune is melodious and graceful, with strong ornamental and appealing value. Notably, in the process of development and evolution, the Cart Lantern was introduced to Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province by merchants traveling between Shandong and Jingdezhen, and after localized adaptation by Jingdezhen artists, it was transmitted back to Zibo in the early years of the Republic of China, forming a cross-regional cultural dissemination and reflux. This course not only witnesses the strong artistic vitality of the Cart Lantern, but also reflects the cherishment and joint protection of the same musical genre by people in different provinces, serving as a vivid portrayal of mutual learning and the passing on of Han culture within the nation.

Today, Dry Boat Dance and Lantern Dance are still active on festival stages across the country. They are not only entertainment forms for people to express emotions and entrust hopes, but also promote the exchange and recognition of Han culture nationwide with their cross-regional communication power and inclusiveness. As precious heritages with both mass character and artistic quality in China's excellent traditional culture, they continue to radiate vivid vitality of the times.

5. Yangko – A Comprehensive Art Form Spread Across the Country

As the culmination of Han folk songs and dances, Yangko is a comprehensive art form integrating dance, singing and instrumental accompaniment. With its sonorous gong and drum rhythms and singing-and-dancing form, it is deeply rooted in the folk soil of China. Since taking shape and spreading widely in the Ming and Qing dynasties, it has not only become an indispensable cultural symbol in festival

ceremonies, but also evolved into distinctive styles nurtured by the local customs of different regions, while always maintaining an inherent cultural connection.

The regional diversity of Yangko is astonishing: from the Stilt Yangko on the Northeast China Plain, which displays the bold passion of the Northeast with unrestrained dancing postures and vivid leaps on stilts; to the Tichangzi Yangko on the northern Shaanxi Plateau, which tells the feelings for the loess with powerful movements and simple sleeve flinging and leg kicking; and to the Flower Lantern Yangko in the Jiangnan water towns, which outlines the misty and rainy artistic conception with soft and graceful styles and gentle light steps. Yangko has different appellations in different regions, such as Yangko, Flower Drum and Lantern Dance, each with distinct recognizability due to differences in regional culture and folk customs. Interestingly, the artistic expression of Yangko often shows cross-border similarities among geographically adjacent provinces. For example, the Fishing Lantern Yangko in western Shandong, Liulin Yangko in southern Shandong and Wind Yangko in northern Shandong share the same artistic essence with the Flower Drum Yangko in Henan and Ground Yangko in Hebei in terms of the “singing accompanied by dancing” structure, the rhythmic patterns of gong and drum beats and even the logic of formation changes. This commonality is not accidental, but stems from the frequent population migration, commercial exchanges and cross-regional communication of folk festivals since the Ming and Qing dynasties. People in adjacent provinces learn from each other in activities such as weddings, funerals, temple fairs and markets, making the artistic elements of Yangko integrate and coexist imperceptibly, which is a vivid proof of the cross-regional spread of the same musical genre.

In addition to Yangko, traditional song and dance genres such as Flower Lantern, Flower Drum and Bamboo Horse Dance also show the “pluricultural and integrated” cultural characteristic. These genres are spread across the country, yet while retaining their regional individuality, they share core artistic genes: all are based on the combination of singing and dancing, take folk scenes as carriers, and convey the common emotions of praying for blessings and celebrating peace and prosperity. Taking Shandong Province as an example, its southern part borders Jiangsu and Anhui provinces, the western part adjoins Henan Province, and the northern part is close to Hebei Province. The Qilu culture intersects with the Central Plains culture and Yanzhao culture here, with folk customs infiltrating each other and folk dances spreading and intermingling naturally. Local Yangko not only retains the restrained and profound characteristics of Qilu culture, but also absorbs the cultural heritage of the Song, Chen, Wei and Yan regions. Its dancing postures embody both the boldness of Shandong men and the flexibility of Central Plains songs and dances, becoming a vivid sample of multi-cultural integration.

From Yangko to Flower Lantern and Flower Drum, these traditional song and dance genres spread across the country vividly interpret the profound connotation of the “pluricultural and integrated” nature of China’s folk art. They shine with unique splendor in their respective regions and form an interconnected and mutually nurturing whole through cross-regional cultural exchanges. They are not only vivid carriers of regional culture, but also spiritual bonds maintaining the cultural identity of the Chinese nation, continuing the vitality and inclusiveness of Chinese civilization from generation to generation.

6. Conclusions

With more than 3,000 years of historical accumulation and evolution, the traditional folk songs and dances in the Yellow River Basin have shown distinct pluricultural and integrated cultural attributes in modern times, serving as a vivid epitome of the integration and symbiosis of China's excellent traditional culture. Due to differences in regional environment, ethnic beliefs and folk traditions, the folk songs and dances of various ethnic groups and regions in the basin have formed unique artistic styles, highlighting the diversity of culture. Banquet Songs formed by the integration of the Hui, Tu and Salar ethnic groups, Cham Dance nurtured by the fusion of Mongolian and Tibetan cultures, as well as Dry Boat Dance, Lantern Dance and Yangko with distinctive regional styles, all display the rich outlook of the song and dance culture in the Yellow River Basin with their unique performing forms and musical characteristics.

At the same time, cultural exchange and mutual learning have always run through the development process of songs and dances in the Yellow River Basin, leading to the formation of a high degree of cultural integration. The songs and dances of various ethnic groups have absorbed from each other and developed convergently in settled life; Han folk songs and dances have spread cross-regionally and achieved localized innovation; and inter-provincial song and dance arts have been deeply integrated in performing forms and styles, highlighting the inherent connection of the same origin and blood ties among the cultures of various ethnic groups in the Yellow River Basin.

The pluricultural and integrated nature of the traditional folk songs and dances in the Yellow River Basin is an inevitable result of the exchanges and integration of various ethnic cultures, and a concrete embodiment of the sense of the Chinese national community in the artistic field. In-depth exploration of this cultural characteristic can not only clarify the development context of folk songs and dances in the Yellow River Basin, but also provide ideas for the inheritance, protection, innovation and development of traditional songs and dances, contributing to the continuation and promotion of China's excellent traditional music culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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