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## RESEARCH ON THE MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND SINGING STYLE OF ZHENBA FOLK SONGS IN CHINA

Meng Na<sup>1\*</sup>, Azli Ariffin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sultan Idris Education University  
Email: nnhcg19900524@163.com

<sup>2</sup> Sultan Idris Education University  
Email: azli@fpm.upsi.edu.my

\* Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

As a carrier of traditional culture, Zhenba folk songs have faced a serious impact from modern media in recent years. Contemporary young people are more fond of pop songs, resulting in Zhenba folk songs gradually losing the new generation of successors and singers. This problem is especially urgent when most of the original singers are now in their old age. In order to cope with this cultural crisis, this study aims to systematically analyse the characteristics, classification, musical features and singing styles of Zhenba folk songs, as well as to explore in depth the issues of their history, development and inheritance, in order to comprehensively understand the process of the emergence and evolution of this musical form. This study adopts the research method combining literature analysis method, field survey method and music analysis method. The literature analysis method is mainly used to collate and analyse the existing research results of Zhenba folk songs; the field survey method collects first-hand information through field visits to Zhenba County; and the music analysis method reveals the musical characteristics of the folk songs through the analysis of their scores. Through comprehensive analyses from multiple perspectives and levels, this study seeks to reveal the unique value of Zhenba folk songs in traditional culture and the realistic challenges they face. Through the combination of literature analysis, fieldwork and music analysis, the study will not only provide a deeper understanding of the cultural connotations and musical characteristics of Zhenba folk songs, but also provide practical suggestions and countermeasures for their inheritance and protection.

### Keywords:

Zhenba Folk Songs, Folk Song Theme, Tonality, Singing Characteristics, Cultural Inheritance

## Introduction

Folk songs are collective creations of the laboring people, serving as an art form through which they express their thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. These songs often reflect the life of the people and are the closest companions to their daily existence. As products of oral tradition, folk songs are commonly characterized by their ethnic, regional, and practical qualities. However, due to their lack of standardized notation and recording methods, they have often been transmitted orally, leading to their collective and hybrid nature. These songs are not only important historical records but also valuable cultural treasures. In particular, Zhenba folk songs, originating from Shaanxi Province, share many common characteristics with other traditional folk songs, including their folk nature, ethnic identity, and locality. This study aims to analyze Zhenba folk songs from three key perspectives: their historical significance, developmental changes, and ongoing inheritance.

### Key Issues:

- The impact of modernization on the transmission of Zhenba folk songs.
- The loss of younger generations' interest in traditional folk music.
- Insufficient research on the cultural and musical aspects of these songs.

## Literature Review

Zhenba folk songs, originating from Zhenba County in Shaanxi Province, are an integral part of the region's cultural heritage. These songs embody local traditions, social values, and historical narratives, and can be categorized into two main types: labor songs (such as "work songs" and "mountain tunes") and ritual songs (which are performed during festivals and communal events) (Liu et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2010). The musical characteristics of these songs are notable for their free rhythms and the use of pentatonic scales, creating melodies that are both simple and expressive (Li et al., 2016).

Traditionally transmitted orally, Zhenba folk songs have played a key role in preserving the oral history of the local community (Wang et al., 2012). However, the rapid process of modernization, along with a cultural shift towards globalized and commercial music forms, threatens the survival of these songs (Chen et al., 2018). Although local governments and cultural organizations have made efforts to preserve these traditions, challenges remain in ensuring their continued existence and relevance in the face of modern cultural changes (Liu et al., 2019).

In this context, the study of Zhenba folk songs not only sheds light on their musical structure but also their cultural significance, addressing the gaps in both cultural preservation and academic understanding.

## Problem Statement

Although Zhenba folk songs have been recognized as part of the provincial intangible cultural heritage in Shaanxi Province, underscoring their significant cultural and historical value, the current state of research on these folk songs faces several critical issues. One of the foremost problems is the limited number of studies available on Zhenba folk songs. The existing research is often superficial, lacking in both depth and breadth, which limits the understanding of the genre's complexities (Xu Tao, 2012). Furthermore, much of the research conducted thus far tends to concentrate primarily on the basic characteristics of the songs, such as their structure

and melody. However, crucial aspects such as the cultural context, historical evolution, and distinctive singing techniques of Zhenba folk songs have not received sufficient scholarly attention. This gap in research significantly diminishes the ability to appreciate the full cultural significance of these songs and their role within the community.

Moreover, the lack of focus on these deeper elements has practical consequences. The insufficient exploration of Zhenba folk songs' rich cultural background and intricate vocal techniques hinders effective preservation efforts. This inattention has created obstacles to the wider dissemination and understanding of Zhenba folk songs in the modern era, particularly among younger generations. As contemporary media and musical preferences shift towards more globalized and commercial genres, the absence of comprehensive research contributes to the ongoing challenge of maintaining and transmitting this cultural heritage within the fast-changing modern cultural landscape. Consequently, there is an urgent need for more thorough and expansive research to better document, analyze, and promote the cultural and musical richness of Zhenba folk songs, ensuring their survival and relevance for future generations.

### **Purpose Of The Study**

The main objective of this study is to reveal the musical characteristics, cultural background and singing techniques of Zhenba folk songs through a comprehensive analysis of the songs, and then to propose effective protection and inheritance strategies. The specific objectives include:

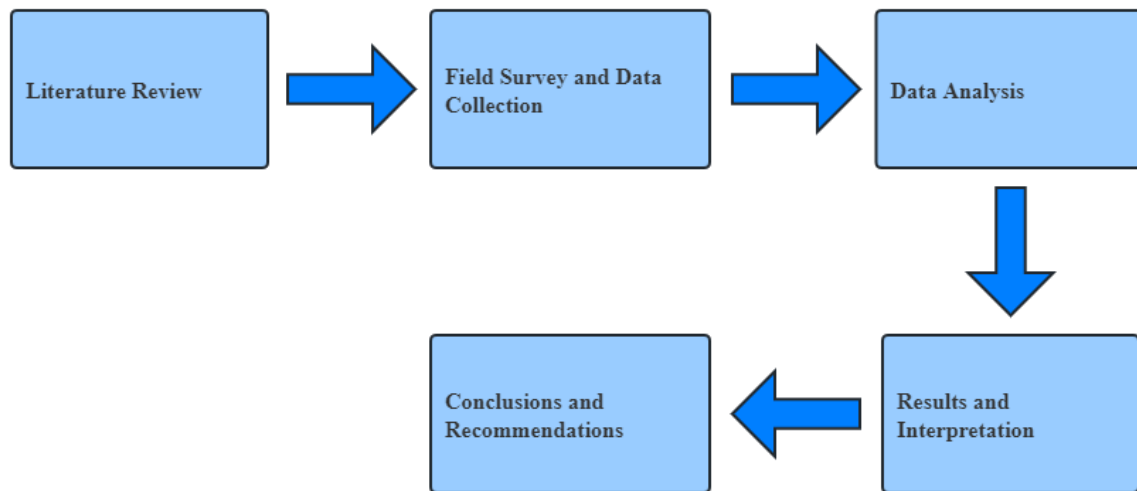
- a) To analyse the historical background of Zhenba folk songs and its development status.
- b) To explore the musical characteristics of Zhenba folk songs, including modal tonality, melodic characteristics, rhythmic characteristics, etc.
- c) To study the singing characteristics of Zhenba folk songs and their differences with other folk songs.
- d) To propose effective methods for the protection and inheritance of Zhenba folk songs.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research approach to explore the musical characteristics and singing style of Zhenba folk songs. The qualitative nature of the study enables a deep understanding of the cultural, historical, and musical aspects of the songs, while the descriptive approach allows for a detailed examination of the songs' features, their transmission, and the challenges they face. The research methodology integrates a combination of literature analysis, field surveys, and music analysis to address the study's objectives.

### Study Process Flow Chart

The research process follows a systematic flow, as shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1: Study Process Flow Chart**

#### ***Literature Review***

- Review of existing research and literature on Zhenba folk songs, their history, musical characteristics, and cultural significance.

#### ***Field Survey and Data Collection***

- Field visits to Zhenba County to gather primary data from folk artists, local scholars, and the cultural department. The fieldwork involves interviews, music recordings, and observations.

#### ***Data Analysis***

- Musical analysis of recorded folk songs to identify tonal patterns, rhythm, melody, and other musical elements.
- Qualitative coding and thematic analysis of interviews to identify key themes related to the singing techniques and cultural practices.

#### ***Results and Interpretation***

- Presentation of findings based on the analysis of the musical characteristics and cultural insights gathered through field surveys and literature review.

#### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

- Concluding remarks on the significance of Zhenba folk songs, challenges to their preservation, and practical recommendations for their future protection and inheritance.

## Source of Data

The data for this study is sourced from a combination of primary and secondary resources:

### *Primary Data:*

- **Fieldwork:** Data is collected directly from the community in Zhenba County. This includes interviews with folk artists, music scholars, and local cultural experts. Folk artists provide insights into the traditional performance techniques and styles, while scholars offer their expertise on musical theory and historical context.
- **Audio and Video Recordings:** Folk song performances are recorded in their natural settings using recording and video equipment. These recordings serve as the primary material for musical analysis.
- **Local Cultural Records:** Documentation and records from the local cultural department provide background information on the songs' origins and cultural significance.

### *Secondary Data:*

- **Literature Review:** Research articles, books, and previous studies related to Zhenba folk songs, traditional Chinese music, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage provide context and foundational knowledge for this study.

## Analysis of Data

The data collected is analyzed using both musical analysis and qualitative thematic analysis:

### *Musical Analysis:*

- Audio recordings are transcribed using music notation software to analyze the structure, melody, rhythm, and tonality of the folk songs. Particular attention is given to the use of modal tonality, melodic development, and rhythmic patterns unique to Zhenba folk songs.
- The musical features, such as the pentatonic scale and vocal techniques, are closely examined to understand their role in the identity of the folk songs.

### *Qualitative Analysis:*

- Interviews and field notes are transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding to identify key themes. Thematic analysis will focus on understanding the cultural significance of Zhenba folk songs, the challenges faced by folk singers, and the techniques used in their performances.
- A cross-comparison of perspectives from folk artists, scholars, and local cultural authorities will be conducted to assess the relevance of traditional singing techniques in the modern context.

## Challenges of the Study Processes

While the methodology outlined above is comprehensive, several challenges are anticipated during the research process:

### *Access to Folk Artists:*

As Zhenba folk songs are traditionally passed down through oral transmission, the number of folk artists capable of performing these songs authentically is dwindling, particularly with older generations. It may be challenging to secure participants who possess the necessary expertise and experience.

***Elderly Singers:***

Many of the elderly folk artists may have physical or health limitations that affect their ability to perform, provide interviews, or travel to fieldwork sites. This could limit the number of participants and the accuracy of data collection.

***Language and Dialect Barriers:***

The local dialect and cultural nuances in Zhenba may present challenges for researchers unfamiliar with the region. Accurate translation and interpretation of the songs' meanings, as well as cultural practices, are crucial for the success of the study.

***Authenticity of Performance:***

Given the oral nature of Zhenba folk songs, performances may evolve over time, potentially altering their original form. Ensuring that the data collected reflects the authentic characteristics of the songs is an important challenge, especially as modern influences increasingly impact traditional performances.

***Technological Constraints:***

While modern recording equipment and analysis software are essential tools for data collection, technical difficulties such as low-quality audio or video recordings may hinder the accuracy of the musical analysis. Ensuring high-quality recordings and managing technical issues will be crucial.

***Cultural Sensitivity:***

The study must approach the community with respect, recognizing the cultural value of the folk songs and the potential impact of external research. It is important to involve local stakeholders in the research process and ensure that their cultural heritage is represented accurately and respectfully.

This methodology ensures a comprehensive, in-depth exploration of Zhenba folk songs, combining both qualitative insights and musical analysis to uncover the unique characteristics of these traditional songs and the challenges they face in the modern era.

**Findings*****Historical Background of Zhenba Folk Song***

Zhenba County belongs to Hanzhong City, Shaanxi Province, and is located in the western part of the Daba Mountains and the eastern part of the Micang Mountains, with complex and varied topography, and this unique geographic environment has given birth to the Zhenba folk songs (Dai Lei, 2010). The development of Zhenba folk songs can be divided into three stages: the formation period, the development period and the modern inheritance period. The formation period is mainly the stage when folk songs are spontaneously created and circulated among local working people; the development period is the stage when folk songs are gradually compiled and recorded; and the modern inheritance period is the stage of protection and inheritance of folk songs after they have been entered into the list of intangible cultural heritage.



## *Musical Characteristics of Zhenba Folk Songs*

### *Modulation*

Zhenba folk songs are mainly in the tonal modes of zhi and yu, with zhi being particularly widely used. In addition, Zhenba folk songs have a four-tone tuning, with the most common missing tone being the jiao, followed by the gong and zhi. This specific scale relationship allows Zhenba folk songs to further display unique characteristics based on the five-tone modulation (Guo Yixin, 2015). In Chinese, the pentatonic scale consists of gong, shang, jiao, zhi, yu, where gong stands for do, shang stands for re, jiao stands for mi, zhi stands for sol and yu stands for la. Table 1 demonstrates the modal tonality of 15 Zhenba folk songs.

**Table 1**  
**The Modal Tonality Of 15 Zhenba Folk Songs.**

Song Title	Tune tonality	Scale features
Luoyang Bridge	G zhi four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
Pull the grass	D zhi four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
Old crow	C zhi five-tone mode	The first half is a pentatonic scale, the second half is a tetratonic scale with missing jiao.
Look at the lights	D gong five-tone mode	Complete scale
five watch periods on a whitewash wall	D yu four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
Embroidered lotus bag one	A zhi four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
Embroidered lotus bag four	D zhi four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
Filial piety song	A zhi four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
Lift the stone	B zhifive-tone mode	Complete scale
The sun shines on bad guys.	B yu four-tone mode	Lack of zhi sound
Workers folk songs	A zhi four-tone mode	Lack of jiao sound
We'll set up the songstress here.	bE major 7-tone yan mode	jiao and run are added to the first phrase, and the subsequent phrases are in a four-tone scale, lacking jiao
Please die	C zhi in 7-tone yan mode	The first phrase is in seven-tone mode, followed by four-tone mode with missing jiao.
Long song	D shang five-tone mode	
The first month is the New Year	G zhi five-tone mode	The jiao sound appeared only once

### *Structural Characteristics*

The common structures of Zhenba folk songs include two-line monodic, three-line monodic and four-line monodic. Among them, the four-line single-section body is the most common,

such as "Luoyang Bridge", whose structure is very regular, with each phrase consisting of four bars, forming a structural relationship of rise and fall (Guo Yixin, 2015).

### ***Melodic Characteristics***

The melodic characteristics of Zhenba folk songs are mainly reflected in the following aspects: firstly, there are various melodic development techniques, including thimble structure, the same head and tail change and the expansion method; secondly, the melody is concise and plain, and is mostly carried out in small intervals, which demonstrates a simple and austere temperament (Cui Ya, 2012).

### ***Rhythmic Characteristics***

The rhythmic layout of Zhenba folk songs often adopts the way of dense first and then sparse, and the beats are mostly in 2/4. In addition, the commonly used rhythmic patterns of Zhenba folk songs include the quarter rhythmic pattern, the two-eight rhythmic pattern, the eighty-six rhythmic pattern, etc., which are the inheritance of the characteristics of traditional Han folk songs (Xie Yan, 2014).

### ***Singing Characteristics Of Zhenba Folk Songs***

The singing characteristics of Zhenba folk songs mainly include the following points:

- a) True voice singing: whether male or female, the singing of Zhenba folk songs is mainly in true voice. For example, in the singing of "Pick Water Tune", the overall vocalisation is done inside the mouth, and the whole song is based on true voice pronunciation (Xu Tao, 2012).
- b) Vocal skills: Zhenba folk singers have self-contained vocal skills, including the use of breath and the stabilisation of the laryngeal position. For example, folk singer Lin Xiancheng adopts deep breathing in his singing, and the position of breath exchange is under the chest cavity, close to the diaphragm, which is common to contemporary scientific singing (Cui Ya, 2012).
- c) The use of liner-notes: liner-notes are widely used in Zhenba folk songs, with decorative and uniform rhythmic effects. For example, in the "Bugle" sung by Ran Mingyuan and others, the leader adds liner notes such as "yo" and "yay" to the transition between high and low notes to unify the sound (Guo Yixin, 2015).
- d) Pitch system: the pitch system of Zhenba folk songs is autochthonous and differs from the pitch system of the twelve equal temperament. When singers sing, the backbone is often offset, but this pitch melody and rhythmic approach is a unique feature of Zhenba folk songs (Xie Yan, 2014).
- e) penetrating power: Zhenba folk singers' singing voices have strong penetrating power, and they are able to sing in open outdoor environments with focused and bright voices (Cui Ya, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

Through a comprehensive study of Zhenba folk songs, this paper reveals their unique musical features and singing characteristics. Zhenba folk songs show uniqueness in terms of tonal patterns, structural features, melodic features and rhythmic features, and have important cultural values. However, the inheritance and protection of Zhenba folk songs still face challenges and require further attention and effective protection measures. In the future, the



dissemination and development of Zhenba folk songs should be promoted through a variety of means, such as modern marketing methods and education and inheritance.

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