

Development and Protection of Instrumental Folk Music in the Ningxia Reach of the Yellow River Basin

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Abstract: The Ningxia region, located in the upper reaches of the Yellow River basin, boasts a profound tradition of Yellow River culture. This cultural heritage encompasses folk songs, instrumental music, dance, and opera. This study discusses the works and performances of folk instruments in Ningxia, such as the suona, kouxian, and niwuwa (a musical instrument made of clay similar to ocarina). This study contributes to not only the academic field but also the inheritance of excellent traditional Chinese culture as well as the prosperity of social culture. Studies on the Yellow River culture can enhance the international community's understanding and respect for China, promoting cultural exchanges and mutual learning.

Keywords: Instrumental Music; Musical Culture; Ningxia; Yellow River.

1. Introduction

The Yellow River basin is one of the cradles of the Chinese nation, with a long history and rich cultural traditions. This area has witnessed the development and prosperity of ancient Chinese civilization, nurturing a wealth of spiritual and cultural heritage [1]. The Yellow River culture is a crucial part of Chinese civilization as both the root and the soul of the Chinese nation. Protecting and inheriting the Yellow River culture is an essential aspect of the ecological protection and high-quality development of the Yellow River basin. The construction of the Yellow River National Cultural Park is a significant measure for the protection and inheritance of the Yellow River culture. Given the substantial national investment in the Yellow River culture, the tangible and intangible cultural heritage embodied by the Yellow River National Cultural Park should be leveraged to develop and protect the musical culture of the Yellow River basin. This effort will help tell the story of Chinese culture and spread China's voice. Promoting the history and strengthening cultural confidence are important steps to achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Constructing the cultural value system of the Yellow River National Cultural Park and protecting Yellow River cultural relics leads to a clearer and more detailed developmental trajectory of Chinese civilization. The construction of the Ningxia section of the Yellow River National Cultural Park has epoch-making significance for the protection, inheritance, and promotion of Ningxia's Yellow River culture, enhancing the happiness of Ningxia people, and driving the diversified and innovative development of Ningxia's Yellow River economy [2].

Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in the Yellow River Basin boasts a rich tradition and unique performance styles in instrumental folk music. Each city or county has its own distinctive characteristics. This study will provide a detailed introduction to some representative instrumental folk music and their corresponding performance forms and content. The focus of this study is on the artistic, musical, and performative aspects of Yellow River culture, using methodologies of art theory and musicological research to analyze the creation, performance, and inheritance of instrumental music in the Yellow River region.

2. Performance Forms of Ningxia Instrumental Folk Music

2.1. Suona and Suona Tunes in Yanchi

In Yanchi, folk suona performances are typically conducted by one or more suona players. The suona is a traditional folk wind instrument, usually made of bamboo, wood, or brass. Players produce music through blowing, breath control, and articulation, which requires both technical skills and a profound understanding of the musical tradition [3]. In folk music characterized by percussion and wind instruments, suona is one of the most beloved instruments by the people of Yanchi. People have boldly adapted traditional folk music, adding their own interpretations, gradually forming a unique local performance style that is widely loved by the public.

The suona is also extensively used in daily life, particularly during special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and traditional festivals. It is played to express various emotions appropriate to different occasions, encapsulating people's joys, sorrows, and other feelings. The suona holds a significant and indispensable role in people's lives culturally and spiritually. Consequently, many excellent performers have emerged, dedicated to the inheritance and development of suona performance styles. As a result, traditional music in Yanchi is widely disseminated and appreciated with far-reaching implications [4].

2.2. Kouxian

The kouxian is an ancient folk plucked instrument, consisting of a string and a resonating box. Performers use their fingers or picks to pluck strings, producing crisp and melodious music. This form of performance is usually either solo or in small groups, with performers sometimes incorporating singing or whistling into their acts [5]. Also known as "kouxianzi" or "kouqinzi," the kouxian is typically made from high-quality bamboo. The playing method involves pressing the tip of the string with the left hand, blowing into the end with the reed, and simultaneously using the thumb and middle finger of the right hand to pluck the thin string up and down. Therefore, the three essential elements of playing the kouxian are the blowing technique, breath control,

and the rhythm and strength of plucking the thin string, which determine the melody line. Its tone is lively and melodious [6]. The kouxian serves multiple purposes and fulfills three primary social functions. First, the most common use among ethnic minorities is as a musical instrument. After meals, Hui singers often gather to play the kouxian, expressing their inner thoughts through the music. Second, due to its small, light, and aesthetically pleasing characteristics, the kouxian is sometimes used as a decoration. People may tie it with an exquisite rope and a delicate tassel, attaching it to the second button of their clothing, making it an attractive ornament worn on the chest. This arrangement is both beautiful and practical, allowing people to play the kouxian anytime, anywhere. Third, the most important function of the kouxian is as a tool for conveying emotions. It has no fixed mode or tonality so ethnic minorities can play it flexibly and freely, using music to express their joys and sorrows. Listeners who resonate with the music will understand the underlying emotions and respond accordingly, making the kouxian a simple yet profound tool for expressing true, good, and beautiful feelings. Famous representative works include “Song of Suffering,” “Camel Ridge,” and “Fifth Brother Herding Sheep.”

2.3. Niwuwa

The niwuwa is a unique percussion instrument from the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. It is typically made from bamboo, wood, and animal leather. Performers use their palms, fingertips, or tools to strike the niwuwa, producing various tones and rhythms. The niwuwa can be played solo or in an ensemble. Also known as “nixiao,” the niwuwa comes in different shapes and sizes [7]. Larger niwuwas can be as big as a goose egg, while smaller ones are even smaller than a chicken egg. The size affects the tone, quality, range, and the number of sound holes. As society and technology have progressed, the craftsmanship of the niwuwa has continuously improved. With improvements and refinements, the niwuwa now has more precise tones, a wider range, and a more attractive appearance. As a result, the compositions created for it have become richer, and its musical expressiveness has significantly increased. The niwuwa has become a popular instrument in local folk culture, enjoyed by people of all ages. It deeply influences daily life, as individuals use it to depict the people, events, and things closely related to their lives. This instrument quietly weaves its influence into the fabric of people’s daily lives. To better preserve and protect Chinese ethnic folk music, the niwuwa was designated as a provincial art research project in 1985. In the late 1980s, the late vice editor of the *Collection of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Instrumental Music: Ningxia Volume*, Feng Huiyun, modified the ox-head-shaped niwuwa for mass production and use. It won the fourth prize at the 1987 National Folk Instrument Research Awards organized by the Ministry of Culture. In the late 1990s, Yang Dawude, a niwuwa maker from Pingluo County, Ningxia, expanded its range through modifications. In 2005, the niwuwa was added to the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage [8].

3. Performance Content

3.1. Yanchi Folk Suona and Suona Repertoire

The repertoire of Yanchi’s suona covers various themes, including life, love, nature, and religion. These pieces convey emotions and stories through the unique tones of the suona,

often eliciting resonance from the audience. The performance style and tunes of the suona repertoire may vary in different regions and villages, reflecting the diversity of local cultures. Different types of suona are used for different occasions and emotions. The longest and second longest types belong to the mid-range category, typically suitable for outdoor performances, with bright tones and a wide range. They are commonly used for singing and dancing celebrations during festivals and folk activities. The tiniest suona falls into the high-pitched category, boasting vibrant, exuberant tones that typically evoke feelings of joy and animate scenes. They are sometimes used for accompanying operas and other festive occasions. The performance content of suona is also diverse, including pieces that directly depict specific subjects, allowing the audience to understand the meaning of the piece through its title and thematic phrases. Some pieces are adaptations of folk songs. While their content might not be immediately clear, they hold special meanings that require deeper interpretation. Some pieces are named after specific musical terms used within them, adding to the richness and variety of the suona repertoire. It is these diverse pieces that endow Yanchi suona with unique artistic charm, immense infectiousness, and vitality. Yanchi folk suona and its repertoire are products of long-term social development, thanks to the labor and wisdom of the people of Yanchi. They represent a beautiful landscape in the traditional folk instrumental music of the region. One of the most notable performers is the local folk artist Hou Xingxian. He began teaching himself at a young age and later received formal training from a music teacher. His performance style is greatly appreciated by the local people. The rich and colorful traditional folk music of Yanchi vividly depicts people’s daily lives, authentically showcasing the most genuine emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, while also expressing people’s aspirations for a better life. A wealth of valuable treasures from outstanding classic folk songs and melodies are still inspiring to this day. The beauty and profound cultural connotations within them continue to hold important significance and value for the inheritance and development of traditional culture in contemporary times.

3.2. Kouxian

The repertoire of the kouxian typically includes various folk music and songs, covering various aspects of life. Performers can use the kouxian to express themes such as love, family, nature, and solar festivals. The melodies of kouxian music are beautiful and captivating. The tunes are diverse, capturing aspects of life, conveying feelings of missing family members, and portraying love. The repertoire of the kouxian highlights the inseparable connection between humans and nature, intimate emotional exchanges between individuals, and the integral relationship between individuals and societal development. Representative works include “Camel Bell,” “Dripping Water from the Eaves,” “Sentiment of Homecoming,” “Peony Tune,” “Green Leek,” “Happy Hui Girl,” “I Love Ningxia, My Hometown,” “I Tripped and Fell in the Mud,” “Birds Singing in the Bamboo Forest,” “Wind Swirls and Clouds Spread,” “Thoughts on a Quiet Night,” “A Swarm of Bees,” “The Melody of Suffering,” and many more. These classic pieces have been passed down through generations via oral transmission, while some have been adapted or created by folk artists. Performance forms include solo, ensemble, tutti, and accompaniment. Performers may play in various postures such as walking, sitting, and wiggling.

Kouxian music is popular and has unique characteristics. The Hui people have a distinctive culture and express their stories through a unique way of life, forming a strong cultural identity [9]. Kouxian music reflects both individual and communal aspects of this identity.

3.3. Niwuwa

The performance content of the niwuwa is usually related to festivals, celebrations, and ceremonies. In religious rituals and traditional festivals, the niwuwa is widely used to accompany dances, songs, and traditional ceremonies. This musical instrument adds to the festive atmosphere with its lively rhythms and tones. In the past, the niwuwa was primarily a recreational instrument for shepherds during grazing and was not used in formal performances. With advancements in manufacturing and performance techniques, the niwuwa has been studied more extensively. This instrument is categorized by different pitches and timbres, each suited to specific musical works based on its unique characteristics. Usually, the niwuwa has a deep, ancient, slightly melancholic tone. Therefore, most of the music played by niwuwa is slow, improvised, or adapted from folk music. The content of the music also closely relates to Ningxia's local customs, regional characteristics, and lifestyles. The musical style is deeply characteristic of northern ethnic traditions. The niwuwa not only enriches the local people's work and leisure but also cultivates their sentiments, contributing to both their material pursuits and spiritual world. The niwuwa exemplifies the rich diversity of ethnic folk music, showcasing China's vibrant multi-ethnic culture. This cultural richness plays a crucial role in fostering the development of the modern economy and society [10].

4. Implications

Although the instrumental folk music of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is inherited and performed in various cities and counties, there is no obvious single representative group. Instead, in various communities, villages, and celebrations, the music has been passed down and performed by local musicians and performers. In various regions and communities, distinct musical traditions and performance styles are typically embodied by a select group of folk musicians and performers. Through generational transmission, these musicians and performers have maintained and inherited the rich and colorful regional traditions of instrumental folk music.

The development and protection of folk music in the Ningxia section of the Yellow River Basin have important cultural, historical, and academic significance. First, the Yellow River culture symbolizes China's long history and rich cultural heritage. Studying the Yellow River culture is conducive to the inheritance, protection and promotion of China's cultural treasures. The Yellow River is the second largest river in China and has played a crucial role in its history. This river has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous ancient civilizations. Studying the musical culture of the Yellow River provides a deep understanding of the historical, political, and social developments related to ancient Yellow River culture, offering a comprehensive framework for grasping the overall Yellow River culture. The Yellow River basin spans numerous regions and ethnic groups, boasting rich cultural diversity. This study also delves into how different cultures interact and influence one another, fostering respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Second, as the Yellow River is one of the most important water sources for China, studying its environmental conditions and sustainable development management is crucial to solving China's water challenges. Therefore, understanding the relationship between the Yellow River culture and the environment can provide important information for sustainable development. Since the Yellow River culture contains rich artistic, musical, and performing arts traditions, studying these aspects is conducive to the promotion and protection of China's traditional arts and culture, as well as international cultural exchanges. Chinese culture is an integral part of the world's rich tapestry of cultures, contributing to global cultural diversity. Studying the Yellow River culture offers valuable materials and resources for education and talent development, boosts cultural tourism, and attracts more visitors to the Yellow River basin, thereby enhancing economic development. Additionally, studies on the Yellow River culture can improve international understanding and respect for China, fostering cultural exchanges and mutual learning among different cultures.

Conclusion

In summary, studying the development and preservation of folk music culture in the Ningxia section of the Yellow River basin enhances understanding of China's history, culture, and society. It also aids in protecting traditions, promoting sustainable development, and encouraging cross-cultural exchanges. This research field contributes to the development of academia. Moreover, it also has a positive impact on the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture and the prosperity of social culture.

5. Conclusion

In summary, studying the development and preservation of folk music culture in the Ningxia section of the Yellow River basin enhances understanding of China's history, culture, and society. It also aids in protecting traditions, promoting sustainable development, and encouraging cross-cultural exchanges. This research field contributes to the development of academia. Moreover, it also has a positive impact on the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture and the prosperity of social culture.

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