

The Style Features of Hubei Tujia Folk Songs: Taking *Dragon Boat Tune* as an Example

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Abstract

Hubei Tujia folk songs have rich contents. It has obvious ethnic features, which fully describe Tujia's information, including ethnic appearance, psychological features and characteristic features. Those songs have recorded the development process and life stories of Tujia, as well as historic culture, folk arts and ethnic traditions. In this paper, we analyzed music style feature and singing feature based on Dragonhead Tone, a Hubei Tujia folk song, in order to inherit and develop Hubei Tujia folk songs better.

Key words: Hubei Tujia; Folk songs; Style; Feather

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1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO TUJIA FOLK SONGS

1.1 The Origin of Tujia

Tujia ("Bizika in Tujia language") is mainly distributed in Wuling mountain area at the junction of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing and Guizhou provinces in China, namely Yongsan, Yongshun, Baojing, Guzhang counties in Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hunan Province; Xianyang, Qianjiang, Pengshui and other counties in the western part of Hubei Province; the cities and counties of Laifeng, Hefeng, Xianfeng, Xuanen,

Lichuan, Enshi, Badong, Jianshi, Wufeng and Changyang in the west of Hubei Province; Yinjiang, along the river and other counties. Tujia is nationality that both young and old. From a long time ago, Tujia people showed the characteristics of large complex and small settlements. This area is full of mountains and rivers aspect, resulting beautiful environment and wonderful scenery. The location here is very advantageous, which leads to a cultural deposition zone where a variety of nationalities develop.

1.2 Historic Develop Track of Tujia Folk Songs

In early society, production was in the low level and social development was slow. People were only able to use verbal expressions to express feelings, which formed this oral expression in format of folk singing. It constantly changes with the development of Tujia society and, is an indispensable part of people's lives. Also it has experienced changes of times.

(a) Ancient folk songs from ancient times to "reforming period of *Tusi systems*"¹ (ancient-1735). In this period, there are three main characters: i) tightly related to production; ii) related to traditional activities and religion; iii) most of them are lost due to lacking of word.

(b) Early modern folk songs from "Reforming" to Xinhai Revolution (1735-1911). In this period, Tujia folk songs involved clear time color in both style and content. There were lots of complaint songs, political songs, and oppression songs singing in minor folk forms reflecting the Tujia people oppressed. Love songs became the main media for young people to express love. While they were describing naïve romantic lives, they also criticized the brutal interference of feudal society to freedom of marriage.

¹ "Reforming period of *Tusi systems*" is a political reform of the Qing government's control over the ethnic minorities in southwest China. "reforming period of *Tusi systems*" of Tujia began in Qing Yong Zheng five years (1735).

(c) Modern folk songs from Xinhai Revolution to early time of establishment of People's Republic of China. In this period, lots of revolution and fighting folk songs came out. Among those folk songs, *Chaos World of the Republic of China*, *Days of Injustice*, *Expecting a Good World* and other seven-yin ballads, are straight to the point with emotional anger, directing the darkness of real life.

(d) Modern folk songs after the establishment of People's Republic of China (1949-1987). In this period, with the popularization of education and the launching of literacy, folk song production team has undergone great changes. From the content point of view, the early days of the founding of a large number of folk songs are about the party and leaders, the national policy, national unity, praise to labors and new life. In the artistic style, the new folk songs changed the traditional folk songs of low, melancholy, protest tone, and replaced them by bright, cheerful, optimistic mood, reflecting the spirit of the people in the new era.

(e) Folk songs in the new period (1987-now) have met limitation due to development of society and influence of Han culture to Tujia. However, with the national protection and attention to the non-material culture, Tujia folk songs will get new development opportunities under the new era conditions, which also provide a better way for us to spread the national culture.

1.3 Changing Process of *Dragon Boat Tune*

A folk song of a region has a profound historical origin. Its style is formed through the continuous renewal. Thus a popular classic folk song also has its own history. The birth of it results from many artists. For example, Hubei Tujia folk song *Dragon Boat Tune*, which is now famous in the world, origins from Hubei Lichuan County Tujia folk song *Growing Melon Tune*. Tune of it is the *Melon Seeds Tune*, which is sung from January to October. Thus it has ten paragraphs of the lyrics. The song *Melon Tune* is about farming activity of melon. Being collected and sorted by Zhou Xuqing and Huang Yewei, music cadre of Icheon County Cultural Center, the *Melon Tune* in Bo Yang dam, they gradually evolved, enriched, developed and created in the form of *Dragon Boat Dance*. After removing the virtual rowing action, which further improves art performance, *Dragon Boat Tune* is gradually formed getting better development. During collecting and storing, they made several modification as below: (a) standardized tunes and singing style and deleted random modification by people; (b) removed lotus boat and relocate it to from street or dam to stages, make it into a duet; (c) concentrate ten paragraphs into two in "dragon boat tune". "Melon seeds are sent too garden" is changed to "new year to children". Thus a song about growing melon is changed to love song which expresses personalities, traditions and pursues of Tujia people. Especially "(female) I want to cross the river, who can help me? (Male) I can help you!" echo with each other,

showing Tujia girl's shy and charming, young scholar's nerd and tease, and humpback helmsman's humor and wild. In total, they promote *Dragon Boat Tune* from style to content completely. After understanding reforming process of *Dragon Boat Tune* above, it is able to master its sincere emotional foundation.

2. CHARACTERS OF MUSIC STYLE OF HUBEI TUJIA FOLK SONGS

"So called style refers to main thought characters and artistic characters expressed in a period of, a nation's, a sect of or an artist's art works." (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, para.5, 2005) The formation of the unique style of Tujia folk songs is one of the marks of art achievement of the people of Tujia nationality and in Hubei region. Formation of the style is also a long process of gradual removal and renewal.

Hubei Tujia is mainly distributed in Laifeng, Hefeng, Lichuan, Enshi and other cities and counties. Most of these cities and counties are in mountainous with beautiful scenery, wonderful landscape and pleasant climate. Because of distance between mountains, Hubei Tujia people in this special geographical environment process production and life, gradually forming their own unique folk songs with different identities of the music style characteristics and singing characteristics. They are the foundation and source of creation of new Hubei folk songs. As a result, characters of music style of Hubei Tujia folk songs are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.1 Special Five Tunes

For folk songs, musical character is mainly on its tune character. Therefore tune is the entry point for analyzing Tujia folk songs music. Hubei Tujia folk songs are mainly based on five Zheng tunes and five Yu tunes. Besides them, Gong tune, Shang tune and Jue tune are also used. Lost of folk songs at Zheng tunes also contain character of Yu tunes, which highlight "la do re" three tones. However Zheng tune is barely used except in the end, or as transition tone. Thus characterized Tujia folk song with Yu tune-mixed Zheng tune is formed.

2.2 Tone Structure With "La Do Re" as Core

From *Dragon Boat Tune* of Exi, Lichuan, it is obvious that Hubei Tujia music mostly uses three degree interval with occasionally six degree interval, which fully exhibits unique style of Tujia music. Hubei Tujia mostly uses combination of Zheng and Yu tunes. Professor Kuangmin Yang mentioned in *Three-Tone and Its Structure In Hubei Folk Songs* that

narrow three-tone such as "la do re", "sol la do" are very common, which are frequently used as connections in folk songs. Combination of Tujia folk songs in this region consist with Han folk songs. Melodies of both folk song are almost identical.

Thus, the extensive use of “la do re” in Hubei Tujia folk songs embodies the regional characteristics of the folk songs in the southwestern Hubei.

2.3 Lyric With Soul

Lyric is literate part that expresses ideological content in Tujia folk songs, which exists in the format of oral literature. After being combined with tones, it is directly based on aural format. Tone and lyric are formed gradually during long period of time, which makes it impossible to sing with languages other than folk language to express its original artistic connotation. Thus lyric and language both have influence on the formation of music style.

In Hubei Tujia folk songs, padding words are widely used, for example “a ya zuo”, “he ye he”, “ai yo ye”, “wei yi yo”, “luo”, “sai”, “na”, “ma”, “wo”, “a”, “wa”, “ai”, “luo jie er”, “li lan dang”. Those padding words have limited contribution to content. However, after being combined with tones, they are able to express feeling efficiently. That is why lyric in Hubei Tujia folk songs have influence on music style. In region that Tujia people are distributed, there are different languages in different parts, as well as

padding words. Among them, function words usually are oral syllables or common words in Tujia folk languages, which present Tujia national characters. Sometimes, it is able to determine region of the song from its unique padding words. Delicate using of padding words alters the tone of content, which makes Tujia folk song more vivid and the unique character of it more significant.

3. ARTISTIC MODIFICATION ON SINGING “DRAGON BOAT TUNE”

Dragon Boat Tune is a representative of excellent Tujia folk song, as well as an intensive exhibition of the essence of national culture. The song has wide range and free rhythm with frequently changed tones. It has lots of high tones and strong ability of expressing emotion. In addition, Hubei folk language makes it very charming.

3.1 Analysis on Music Character of *Dragon Boat Tune*

The theme of *Dragon Boat Tune* is in the first two phrases, for example:

(女)正月里是新年 哪
(女)二月里是春分 哪

3 1 1 1 3 1 2 1 2 3 5 3 2 1 2 1 6 6² —

The whole song is formed around the change of theme phrase, which is the core of *Dragon Boat Tune*. The theme of it is novel and chic, neat and vivid. The phrases are clear and short, helping develop the music. It shows characters of style and idea of *Dragon Boat Tune*, which reflect tradition and customs of Tujia, as well as style character, music mood and ideological character. The main melody starts briefly, which is easy to recall and understand. The whole *Dragon Boat Tune* contains 5 tones at Zheng tune. The tune of it is mainly “1 3”, which is in Yu tune form. However it ends at tone 5, which is in Zheng tune form. This is a typical “Zheng-Yu alternate tune”, a character of Enshi folk songs, which makes the song energetic, bright and fresh. The main phrases are fluent and brief, which are sang sweetly and mildly. At the beginning of the song, there are two bright, free and fluent phrases, containing flavor of mountain folk songs, which provide sense of spacing across the river. The chorus part has a strong sense of rhythm, which is similar to rap music. It starts from Yu tune and spreads out comparably in middle. Repeated semiquavers in mid phase and tail phase express clear and beautiful melody and vivid and bright rhythm of *Dragon Boat Tune*. Tones around “tone 6” combining with clear high tones exhibit sound of Tujia young male

boating excitedly and happily, which suggests sincere love between Tujia lady and young man. It ends at tone 5 of “Zheng-Yu alternation” with rich expressing and structures. In total, it suggests beautiful melody and Exi Tujia folk song and charm of Tujia music. It is obvious that Tujia people have excellent intelligence in music art.

3.2 Singing Art in *Dragon Boat Tune*

3.2.1 Style-Expressing Operation Skill

Among Tujia groups, “dragon boat tune” has more characters in singing. The decent changes in pitch, timbre, strength, as well as use of “slide”, “lean”, “fluctuation”, and “real and fake sound”, reflect special connotation in Hubei Tujia folk songs. Those are art methods with style characters. For example, in the first phase, “It is New Year in January (na yi yo wei)”, semiquavers short lean sound is applied to “yi”. In addition, there are lots of uses of fluctuation. Those two decoration sounds make simple melody colorful and charming. While singers are singing, female uses both real and fake sounds, which make it fluent and crispy. Male singer uses real sound, which is unrestrained, high-pitched, straightforward and bold. Meanwhile, for parts with wide tone range and up and downs, singers are required to use long breath.

Thus *Dragon Boat Tune* though does not have a very wide range in tones; most of beautiful melody are in high pitches, which bring a higher requirement of breath and resonance. It is necessary to make sound penetrating to guarantee that sounds are united and charming in high pitches.

3.2.2 Funning Padding Words Such as “Yi Yo Wei”, “Ma”, “Na”

Dragon Boat Tune is a folk song with intensive Tujia character. Padding words are widely and uniquely used in it. Though “dragon boat tune” is not very long, padding words are widely used and occupied about one third of the content.

For example: New Year is in January (na yi yo wei), the girl is going to say happy new year (na yo wei); gold leaves, silver leaves, sparrow is singing (ai) with warble (ai), with warble.

(Female speaking) The girl wants to cross the river, who can help me (ma)! (Male speaking) Let me help you (ma)! Helmsman please move the rudder (na), the girl (er) is going (a) to aboard (a wei ya zuo, a wei ya zuo)! Ferry the girl cross the river (yo wei).

It is funny to have “na”, “yi yo wei”, “ma”, “wa”, “a”, “luo” as padding words in “dragon boat tune”. In every phase, those padding are used. Some of them ever form sentence. The repeated use of “a wei ya zuo, a wei ya zuo” reflects rhythms character of boating vividly. In the dialogue of *Dragon Boat Tune*, “ma” in “let me help you (ma)” matches environment perfectly, which is important to active atmosphere, filling life with fun (Cai, 1999).

Dragon Boat Tune fully reflects cheerful character of Hubei Tujia people. Their diligence and honesty, positive and optimistic attitude moves us. It can not success with out author and singer. It has strong rhythm, mild melody and bright color. Folk languages inserted in the dialogue make it humor and active. While singing, singer needs to adjust tone according to words. Also bright sound is necessary to express unique charm of “dragon boat tune”

Tujia people are good at singing and dancing. They regard the white tiger as their totem. They have unique aesthetic and pursue free and happy life. Hubei Tujia love folk songs are pure and infatuate. The reason of its success is the unique expression method. Vivid people, happy atmosphere and charming dialogues are highlights of this folk song. Intensive uses of interjection, as well as many conjunctions, plus unique expression of Hubei Tujia make it classic. In nowadays, with diverse music cultures, there are few pure, funky and easily spread music like “dragon boat tune”. In my opinion, music creators should go to fields to drain materials for creating music that is able to highlight national characters, inherit and protect Tujia music. *Dragon Boat Tune* is product of people’s intelligence. As a singer, one has responsibility to active that traditional music and keep Hubei Tujia folk songs with strong vitality.

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