

The Bottleneck in the Inheritance of Red Flag Canal Folk Songs and Its Innovative Practices

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Abstract: The Red Flag Canal folk songs are a treasure of folk music created by the people of Linzhou during the construction of the Red Flag Canal project in the 1960s. Centered on labor chants and small tunes, these songs embody collective memories and the spirit of the Red Flag Canal within a specific historical context. Through methods such as literature review, field research, and oral interviews, this study systematically collects and organizes historical materials related to the Red Flag Canal folk songs, analyzes their geographical and historical-cultural origins, and examines current challenges such as declining performance scenarios, insufficient documentation, lagging innovation, and the absence of key transmission figures. Building on this, the study explores contemporary development paths for the Red Flag Canal folk songs from dimensions like artistic expression innovation, dissemination route expansion, and inheritance mechanism construction, providing theoretical references and practical insights for the dynamic preservation and innovative development of this red folk music culture.

Keywords: Red Flag Canal folk songs; Collection and compilation; Inheritance challenges; Innovative development; Folk music

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1. Survey background

1.1. The geographic and historical-cultural context of the Red Flag Canal construction

The birth of the Red Flag Canal folk songs is deeply intertwined with the natural environmental challenges of Linzhou and the construction practices of the Red Flag Canal project. Linzhou, constrained by its terrain, topography, and climate, has historically faced severe water shortages, which directly impacted the lives of the people and regional development. To address this survival challenge, the Red Flag Canal project was initiated in the 1960s and fully completed in July 1969, taking nearly a decade to accomplish this grand hydraulic engineering endeavor. As a people-driven livelihood project, the Red Flag Canal attracted nearly 100,000 participants, including farmers, workers, officials, and individuals from diverse age groups^[1]. During the arduous and prolonged construction process, these builders used labor as a medium to document their struggles and express emotions through songs, giving rise to a wealth of Red Flag Canal folk songs. These songs, based on the

hardships and joys of labor, the yearning for a better life, and rooted in practical work, combine narrative and entertainment elements. Spoken and sung orally, they encompass various genres such as labor chants and ballads, becoming a vital cultural carrier of Linzhou’s collective memory and spirit.

1.2. The current status of Red Flag Canal folk songs

1.2.1. The decline of traditional performance spaces and the weakening of dialect

The Decline of Traditional Performance Scenes and the Erosion of Dialects ^[2]. With the completion of the Red Flag Canal project and the advancement of urbanization along with rural population outflow, the traditional performance scenes of Red Flag Canal folk songs (such as folk gatherings and temple fairs) have gradually diminished or even vanished ^[3]. Meanwhile, the widespread adoption of Mandarin across the nation has led to a continuous decline in the usage of the Linzhou dialect. Given the deep connection between Red Flag Canal folk songs and the dialect, the unique regional charm and cultural characteristics of these songs have been progressively fading. This current situation has directly resulted in a relatively small number of young people actively singing Red Flag Canal folk songs, posing challenges to their preservation.

1.2.2. Incomplete historical documentation and the ambiguity of authentic style

Due to historical constraints, the recording and preservation of folk songs from the Red Flag Canal construction period were incomplete. The lack of professional musicians and standardized song documentation methods led to issues such as songs with melodies but no lyrics or vice versa. For instance, the widely circulated “Pushing Cart Song” in Linzhou City was composed by Wang Huaireng in 1993. Although it borrowed the rhythm of labor chants, the lyrics were entirely original. Therefore, further efforts are needed to investigate and preserve the authentic style of these folk songs.

1.2.3. The fading of living memory and the crisis of oral transmission

The Red Flag Canal folk songs, once numerous in the decades-long history of the canal construction, now face severe challenges in transmission as the temporal and spatial distance between contemporary society and the canal’s historical context continues to widen. Many of these songs rely solely on oral tradition and are deeply rooted in the unique Linzhou dialect and distinct melodies, making them difficult to widely disseminate among modern youth. The core meanings and complete performance techniques of these songs are largely preserved in the individual memories of the canal builders, who are gradually passing away. With the fading of these memories, the folk songs lose their original vitality, leaving their transmission in dire straits (**Figure 1**).

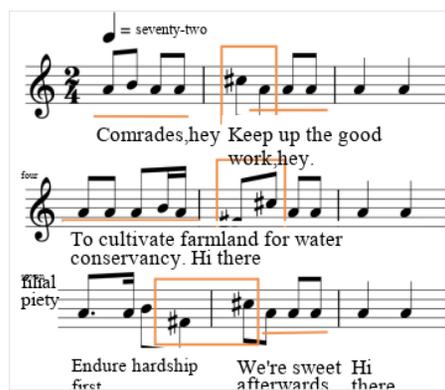


Figure 1. Musical Score of “Pushing Cart Song.”

In terms of music, Lin County is also part of Henan Province, so folk songs also use the pentatonic mode in terms of tonality^[4], and emphasize the main note more in the labor chant to improve overall stability; At the same time, techniques such as repetition and modeling are commonly used to make it more convenient to serve labor. The tone of the Linxian dialect is downward, approaching the nasal sound backwards^[5], which is an important feature that affects the direction of local folk song melodies^[6]. This labor badge adopts the A-series mode to shape its bright, powerful, and heroic emotional color. In terms of melody, the entire piece is mainly composed of eighth notes, with a stable rhythm, which is an important manifestation of serving the unified labor rhythm. Simultaneously enhancing the stability of the entire piece through repeated main notes and progressive forms. And the three jumps, especially the big jump in the second one, added to the boldness and sense of the workers, injecting strength into their next move. The Linxian dialect plays a more important role in this piece of music. For example, the three words 'comrades'. The tone of "tong" and "men" should be downward, while the tone of "zhi" should be upward. The same applies to "repairing water conservancy". The Linxian dialect is also characterized by a backward nasal sound, so the character 'men' needs to be pronounced towards the backward nasal sound (meng). For example, the treatment of the character 'Tian' is post nasalization, removing the nasal ending 'n' and pronounced as 'tia', which results in differences in the stress positions of the lyrics in the numbers. Therefore, this is a labor code with local characteristics formed based on the language habits of the people in Lin County.

The following is a labor chant collected by the author from the book "A Red Flag Canal in China". The melody was created by the author through studying the characteristics of the local labor chant in Lin County. This song has a length of over ten minutes and is a typical ramming song used in large-scale labor scenes. This number uses the E-quotient mode, with the melody repeating in pairs of approximately two sentences to make the melody more stable and brighter, creating a stronger auditory impact. The number is mainly composed of quarter notes, Make the whole piece slow down and more stable, supplemented by eighth notes to enhance the fluidity of the labor chant. The use of progressions and minor thirds in melody not only maintains overall stability but also adds a sense of rhythm. At the same time, occasional additions were also made



Figure 2. Musical score of a ramming song (Created based on local labor chant characteristics).

The big jump (we (high-pitched E) (# F) descend (B) stay (A) he (# F)...) enhances the boldness of the trumpet, which is also in line with the real state of laborers working hard. In addition, the melody also pays attention to the local dialect characteristics, for example, the ups and downs of “Hongqi Canal” and “to be built” in “How can Hongqi Canal be built?” are derived from the local dialect characteristics.

2. Emotional expression - minor tune

Conceptually speaking, minor tunes, also known as folk songs or ballads, are a type of folk song genre with a well-structured and smooth melody. And the people of Lin County like to write and sing small songs in their daily lives. These small songs have been continuously supplemented and modified, gradually forming complete folk songs, some of which have become Lin County tunes with local characteristics^[7]. In addition, the people of Lin County are also good at compiling labor experience into songs, which are also a type of minor tune in Lin County. As a carrier of emotional expression and life records, the tune vividly showcases people’s current living conditions, psychological activities during canal construction, and the wisdom and spirit of the working people during canal construction during this period.

Our Linxian County is really pitiful, with bare hills and dry riverbanks; rainy days make it impossible to harvest crops, and little rain and drought make it impossible to find seeds; busy throughout the year, we can’t finish our meals. “This folk song was collected by the author from a Lin County tune recorded in “There is a Red Flag Canal in China”. The natural phenomenon of drought in Linxian County fully describes the people’s difficulty in sustaining their lives due to water scarcity. This reflects the helplessness of the people in Lin County towards life and their deep desire to change their predicament.

People who grow fields in the mountains all know how to protect the shore. The shore is a dam that surrounds the land, and the shore is a fence that protects the land. If there is a shore that protects the water, the land that is not on the shore will be washed away. When we harvest grain in autumn and return to the warehouse, we need to check the store again. We need to rebuild the big ravine and fill the small ravine in a timely manner. If we want the shore not fall, we need to make it narrow at the top and wide at the bottom... This small tune is collected by the author as “The Song of Building the Shore”. The tune consists of 14 lines, all of which are rhymed in five syllables. This tune was passed down orally by the working people of Lin County, blending the skills and experience of embankment protection into it. It not only embodies the survival wisdom tailored to local conditions, but also embodies the simple craftsmanship of local ancestors in guarding their homeland. It is a folk treasure intertwined with labor and wisdom.

The Taihang Mountains are high and high, and the Zhang River flows far and wide. Today, we beat the war drums and swear to bring the river water to the outskirts of the forest! Mountain God, do not block the way. Dragon King, do not act coquettishly. The children of Lin County are unyielding, and they will surely make the mountains and rivers change their appearance. This minor is different from the previous two minor songs in that it is no longer primarily expressed through gentle and lyrical language, but rather the lyrics are full of emotions and hope for the future. This is not only because the people of Lin County have a tenacious character in their bones to face difficulties, but also because they have been infused with the spirit of the 1960s. This confidence and confidence in daring and daring to take action have ultimately condensed into this simple and uplifting tune, which is highly characteristic of the times.

Red Flag Canal folk songs are the crystallization of the music of the working people, and also the “spiritual monument” poured by the singing voice. Whether it’s the small and medium-sized models that adapt to labor

scenarios, gather collaborative strength, or the small tunes that express emotions, record life and experience, they all blend the sweat of individual labor, the passion of collective struggle, and the belief in changing destiny. It is not only a vivid transformation of folk music in Linzhou City in a specific historical context, but also a cultural symbol engraved with the spirit of the times and conveying local resilience, allowing the struggle story of the Hongqi Canal to be passed down forever through melody.

3. Practice and innovative development

The innovative development of Hongqiqu folk songs has been limited in the past due to various reasons, and the relevant materials of Hongqiqu folk songs are not fully preserved, with many works already lost. Therefore, it is very necessary to systematically collect and organize the Hongqi Canal folk songs^[8], compile the collected information into a book, and produce literature materials that can be used for academic research and social dissemination, facilitating the research and development of Hongqi Canal folk songs. In addition, promoting the innovative development of Hongqi Canal folk songs is of paramount importance in the work of inheriting Hongqi Canal folk songs. This is not only related to the survival of this folk music form, but also to the inheritance and development of the Hongqi Canal spirit in contemporary times. Therefore, the author innovatively develops Hongqiqu folk songs from the following aspects:

3.1. Injecting melody

Conduct on-site investigations in Linzhou for secondary creation, collect scattered folk song lyrics and related oral historical materials through interviews, recordings, and transcripts, and based on this, create melodies to promote the modern development of Hongqiqu folk songs. At the same time, incorporating folk song melodies into piano compositions creates piano versions for them, enhancing their artistic appeal and dissemination.

3.2. New media communication

Relying on new media platforms to expand communication channels and adapt to the communication laws of the information age, we will open exclusive accounts on young and interactive new media platforms such as Bilibili (Bilibili), and produce and publish promotional and popular science content related to Hongqi Canal folk songs based on the audience characteristics of the platform^[9]. By uploading videos of secondary creations of folk songs, we aim to increase the interest and recognition of young people and attract related enthusiasts to join the ranks of inheriting Hongqiqu folk songs. In addition, using forms such as topic guidance in the comment section, a participatory cultural community is constructed to encourage users to spontaneously create, share, and discuss.

3.3. Creation of cultural and creative products

Develop cultural and creative products centered around the background and environment of folk song creation, design and produce creative pendants, with a QR code attached to the back of the product^[10]. Users can open an exclusive mini program by scanning the code to listen to folk song audio. Let Hongqiqu folk songs enter people's daily lives with a more modern attitude. The innovative development of Hongqiqu folk songs is a systematic project that requires us to shift from static protection in the form of a museum to dynamic inheritance in the form of a flowing stream. The core lies in a profound understanding of the profound historical and cultural foundation of Hongqiqu folk songs, and embracing the changes of the times with an open and inclusive attitude.

4. Conclusion

This study provides a feasible path for the modernization development of Hongqiqu folk songs through collaborative innovation in three dimensions: creative adaptation, media dissemination, and product transformation. This paper takes the folk song of Hongqi Canal, which emerged during the construction of the Hongqi Canal in the 1960s, as the research object. It systematically analyzes and organizes the geographical and cultural historical background, current situation, genre, and musical characteristics of Hongqi Canal folk songs, and describes the team's ideas and practices for the innovative development of Hongqi Canal folk songs. Red Flag Canal folk songs are heroic epics written by the people of Lin County with their lives in extremely difficult environments. They are the most vivid and lively musical expression of the Red Flag Canal spirit of "self-reliance, hard work, unity and cooperation, and selfless dedication". The lyrics use a large number of dialects, rich in local flavor and infectiousness, containing rich spiritual connotations such as heroism, collectivism, optimism, etc. Folk songs often use the pentatonic mode and can be roughly divided into two genres. One type is the Labor Hymn, also known as the "Ramming Song", which has a distinct rhythm and is often sung during labor, leading the crowd and boosting morale; Another type is the minor tune, which combines elegance and strength, often used to express emotions and narratives, recording scenes and emotional moments during canal construction. The Hongqi Canal folk songs, in the simplest and most direct artistic form, record a miracle in the history of Chinese water conservancy and reflect the spiritual height of an era. It is not only a precious intangible cultural heritage, but also an indispensable component of the spiritual lineage of the Chinese nation. Studying the folk songs of the Hongqi Canal is not only a retrospective of a period of history, but also a pursuit and call for the spirit of the Chinese nation. Standing at a new historical starting point, we should make these voices that once resounded through the Taihang Valley through multi-dimensional innovation such as education, new media, and creation, travel through time and space, stir up the echo of the times again on today's Internet and in young people's headphones, so that the Red Flag Canal spirit can gain eternal vitality in the development of the new era, and provide inexhaustible spiritual power for the development of the country and nation.

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