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THE HISTORY AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ZHENBA FOLK SONGS OF SHAANXI PROVINCE, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the cultural role of Zhenba folk songs in Shaanxi Province, China. A qualitative research approach was adopted, using interviews and field observations as the main data collection methods. Respondents were interviewed on-site, and the data were thematically analysed. Originating in the Qinba Mountains at the historic junction of Liangzhou and Yongzhou where the ancient Ba people once lived Zhenba folk songs have thrived as a vibrant expression of agrarian life and cultural identity. Shaped by regional labor patterns and multicultural integration, these songs were traditionally passed down orally. Their inclusion in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List marked a shift to formal documentation and government-supported preservation. This expanded their role from local expression to national and international cultural representation. Today, Zhenba folk songs preserve regional language, history, and values, while their revival through media, festivals, and education reinforces their relevance in sustaining heritage and community cohesion.

KEYWORDS: Zhenba Folk Songs, History, Cultural Significance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The folk songs of Zhenba have a long history and are not lost in singing. For thousands of years, Zhenba people have created and accumulated precious wealth in production and labor. Zhenba folk music forms diverse, rich in content, has collected more than 4,000 works. Zhenba folk songs are rich in themes, including folk songs, minor tunes, labor songs, folk songs, sacrificial songs and so on. Representative works include "Little foot Red embroidered Shoes", "Ten Li Pavilion", "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" and so on (Bai Y,2020)

Zhenba folk songs have the most direct and close connection with the social life of the working people in Zhenba. Their singing forms are diverse and flexible, and the folk songs around weddings and funerals are rich and colorful. People summarize all activities of life into five words: life, labor, illness, death and suffering. The resulting folk songs show the picture of life vividly. The types of Zhenba folk songs Zhenba folk songs subject matter is very rich, many kinds of songs, including the labor song, the folk song, the folk song tune, the folk song, the minor key, the custom song, the folk art and so on. According to the lyrics content can be divided into "labor", "life", "love", "folk", "current politics", "historical legends" and "red ballads", etc (Wang B b,2016) Folk music in southern Shaanxi is rich, with wide themes and close to life, which has long inspired the working life of the people in southern Shaanxi. The music is full of special humanistic feelings and historical tracks. Combing and studying the folk songs of southern Shaanxi is conducive to the inheritance of national music culture, which is related to the prosperity of culture and music art, and has extraordinary reference significance and application value for the vocal music teaching of music majors in applied colleges and universities. The folk songs of southern Shaanxi are rich in themes and diverse in forms, among which the most widely spread are love songs, labor songs and folk songs minor tunes (The Soviet Army, 2019)

From the point of view of genre, there are complete types of Zhenba folk songs. These include labor songs that reflect coordinated work, mountain songs tied to rural and wild landscapes, and songs expressing the taste of rural life and free emotions. Town songs convey the small feelings of daily life, while long narrative custom songs serve storytelling functions rooted in local traditions. Some are also linked to sacrificial rites, embodying spiritual beliefs passed down through generations. Together, these genres showcase the diversity and depth of Zhenba's folk music and its role in preserving community

identity. (Wang A c, 2016)

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, integrating both fieldwork and extensive analysis of relevant literature. The research focused on the celebrated Zhenba Folk Song, regarded as a vital cultural treasure of Shaanxi Province. Data were gathered through a combination of structured questionnaires, direct field observations, and comprehensive interviews. During the fieldwork conducted in Shaanxi, the researcher amassed a rich collection of audio-visual documentation and primary source materials. Detailed attention was given to tracing the historical trajectory and contextual evolution of Zhenba Folk Song. The entire investigation was structured around four distinct phases, each marking a critical stage in the research process.

Step 1: Data Collection

A. Secondary Data

The researchers consulted numerous books, academic journals, and academic papers through academic resource platforms. Regarding the Zhenba Folk Song in Shaanxi Province, China, these documents offered insights into its historical origins and development trends. In addition, researchers also participated in various folk song competitions and festivals, observed folk song performances of different styles and schools, and learned about the inheritance and changes of Zhenba folk songs in different regions. These rich practical experiences provide researchers with valuable first-hand information and provide a solid foundation for subsequent data analysis.

B. Primary Data

Field research in Shaanxi Province, in this process, the research employed questionnaires, in - depth interviews, and on - site investigations. Researcher engaged in extensive and profound dialogues with local folk song inheritor, and relevant cultural officials. Researcher closely interacted with the inheritors of Zhenba Folk Song, who have dedicated their lives to this traditional art form. Through these interactions, researcher collected a wealth of stories and insights about the History of and cultural significance of Zhenba folk songs which are highly relevant to the research objectives and serve as a bridge connecting the past and the present, we can gain a more comprehensive and in - depth understanding of the history and development trajectory of Zhenba Folk Song within Shaanxi of

China.

Step 2: Recording Data

Field research conducted in Shaanxi Province—particularly in areas where Zhenba folk songs are actively preserved and performed—served as the foundation for this study. To gather original data, the researcher employed a combination of questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and on-site investigations. These efforts involved engaging with local artists, villagers, scholars, and other individuals relevant to the study. The researcher conducted extensive and meaningful dialogues with folk song inheritors, elderly performers, and cultural officials who possess deep knowledge of the tradition.

Significantly, the study included close collaboration with Mr. Tian Hongtao, a dedicated inheritor of Xunyang Folk Song based in Zhenba

County, Hanzhong City, Shaanxi Province, China. Mr. Tian, along with other tradition bearers, has devoted his life to preserving this art form. Through these interactions, the researcher documented a rich collection of oral histories and cultural insights concerning the origin and development of Zhenba folk songs.

Each interview provided detailed contextual information about how these songs emerged in relation to local agricultural life, daily routines, and community festivals. These elements are not only deeply intertwined with the region's history but are also highly relevant to the research objectives. By analyzing these narratives, the study creates a meaningful bridge between past traditions and present cultural practices, enabling a more holistic and insightful understanding of the historical evolution and cultural role of Zhenba folk songs within the broader context of Shaanxi Province.

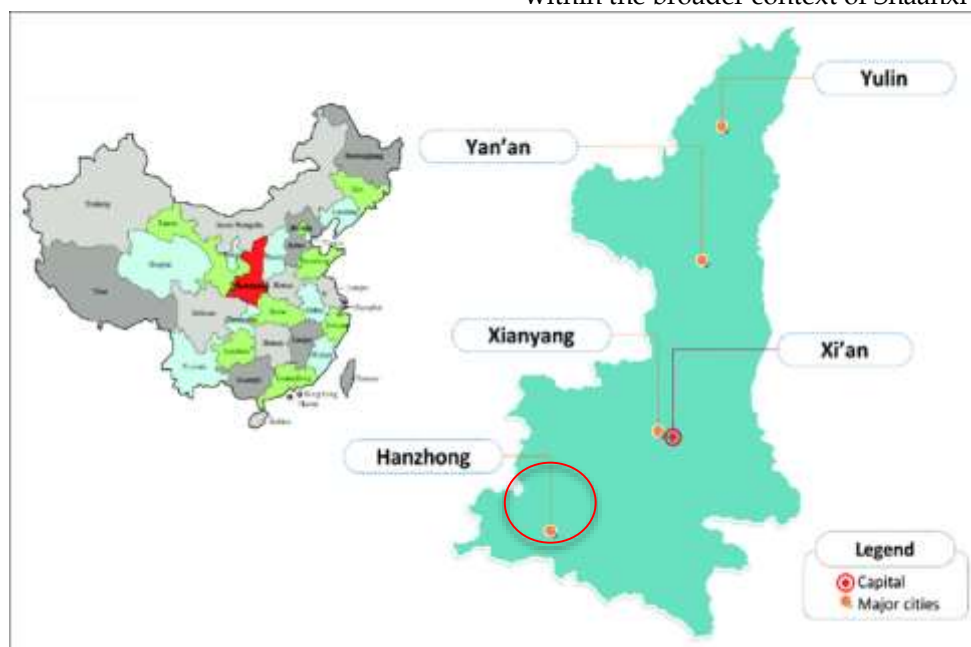


Figure 1: Map Of Hanzhong City, Shaanxi Province, China.

Source: Shanxi Province (N.D.), Wowslides (2019).

Step 3: Preparation And Analysis of Data

We carefully arranged and categorized the gathered data to guarantee seamless implementation of the research goals. To support the successful achievement of our research objectives, all data collected were systematically organized and classified. Each dataset was subjected to meticulous scrutiny, with team members undertaking detailed verification to ensure its integrity. Understanding that the credibility of our findings depends on the reliability of the underlying information, we placed strong emphasis on the accuracy of every detail. Prior

to dissemination, all data underwent repeated checks to uphold the highest standard of validity and to lay a robust groundwork for future academic inquiry.

Step 4: Summarize, discuss the results, and present the data

The researcher synthesized the findings concerning the History of and cultural significance of Zhenba Folk Song in Shaanxi Province through detailed descriptive analysis and comprehensive discussions aligned with the study's objectives. The conclusions were then systematically compiled into a scholarly manuscript, which was submitted for publication in an international academic journal.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Countermeasures for The Transmission and Protection of Zhenba Folk Songs in Shaanxi Province

Zhenba folk songs are the cultural wealth accumulated by Zhenba people for thousands of years, and are an important part of Zhenba regional culture, which has been included in the national intangible cultural heritage protection list. Tian Hongtao suggested that the promotion and promotion of Zhenba folk songs should be strengthened, Zhenba folk songs should be deeply carried out to teach Zhenba folk songs to organs, the representative Zhenba folk songs should be simplified and adapted, compiled and printed into books, and personnel should be organized to learn and sing, so as to form a good atmosphere of singing and inheritance, and promote the inheritance and development of Zhenba folk songs (Xie H t& Kang B, 2024).

Since the 1990s, the cultural center of Zhenba County has taken collecting folk songs as an important work content to catch, has held four folk songs concert, and some folk songs recording, video, recorded into CD light Disk. In the process of collecting folk songs, new excellent songs and music materials are constantly discovered. It has been recorded in recent years. There are dozens of songs such as "Fishing Home" and "Lower River Fishing Doll". In order to rescue and protect Zhenba folk song culture, in recent years, a total of more than 400,000 yuan has been invested in the purchase of tape recorders, radio recorders, copiers and related materials. To conduct a census and register of folk singers and establish a complete database. In order to better protect and inherit Zhenba folk songs, in 2007, Zhenba County government invested 50,000 yuan to establish Zhenba folk song training Center and hired professional teachers to teach the business. In addition, some folk song lovers have been organized to exchange and study inside and outside the province.

On this basis, the work of arranging, recording and videotaping Zhenba folk songs is carried out. In 2008, in order to further explore the artistic value, the Zhenba County intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center was established. The center edited and published a collection of Zhenba original ecological folk songs - "Zhenba Folk Songs Collection", which contains more than 4,000 Zhenba folk songs that have been passed down to the present day, providing detailed and rich original materials for better protection and inheritance of Zhenba folk

songs. In 2014, the county Party Committee and the county government established the Zhenba Folk Song Research Association, which collected more than 4,000 Zhenba folk songs through contests and interviews.

In 2014, approved by the Ministry of Education, the Zhenba folk song "What is good to listen to" was included in the 2014 edition of the eighth-grade compulsory education music textbooks. In response to the national call for the introduction of intangible cultural heritage projects into schools, Zhenba County regularly holds training courses for primary and secondary school music teachers, and the local education department has compiled the local Music Textbooks for primary and secondary schools in Zhenba County -- Zhenba Folk Songs. These are the results of Zhenba intangible cultural heritage in the process of inheritance and promotion of new progress (Sha N, 2023).

In addition to the process of independent inheritance of Zhenba folk songs, the author believes that the role and value of primary and secondary schools and higher art colleges in inheritance cannot be ignored. Nowadays, the state is also constantly advocating letting elegant intangible cultural heritage art products into the campus. Then Zhenba folk song is also a traditional folk music art, its significance into the campus is also very unique. The author will take Shaannan town Ba folk songs into Xi 'a Conservatory of Music as an example, to talk about their own humble opinion. If Zhenba folk songs want to inherit well in professional music colleges, reform measures should be taken from many aspects (Dang K I, 2023).

3.2. Innovation and Development of Zhenba Folk Songs in Shaanxi Province

In order to meet the needs of the people's literary and artistic life in the process of the development of The Times, in the early 1970s, after the second recovery of the Zhenba Art Troupe, it has successively launched a number of new folk songs adapted, and created local large, medium and small opera music based on Zhenba folk music. In addition, the traditional singing methods of folk songs were carefully studied and organized, so that the troupe accumulated rich experience in the process of creating and performing in combination with folk literature and art, and made achievements in both works and talents. There were successful examples of the combination of national singing and folk singing (Liu Na, 2018).

The protection and inheritance of ethnic folk music should take the inheritor as the main body,

grasp the relationship between tradition and modernity, maintain the natural ecological environment and humanistic ecological environment on which ethnic art is produced, transmitted and inherited, provide relatively stable local survival and development conditions, maintain the original appearance of the traditional culture and art of the ethnic group, and minimize the interference and destruction caused by human factors. National folk music should develop in inheritance and inherit in development.

Metabolism is the law of development of all things, and it is also the basic law of protection, inheritance, innovation and development of national folk music.

In today's era of rapid development of science and technology and education, the protection and inheritance of national folk music should pay attention to its scientific laws, take the school as the position, and pass on the cultural knowledge of national folk music to the young generation. To change the dominant unconscious mode of communication into a conscious mode of communication, only when more people understand and like folk music can it be more widely spread and develop more brightly (C Y, 2011).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Historical Development of Zhenba Folk Songs

4.1.1. Origins of Zhenba Folk Song

The origin of Zhenba folk songs is closely related to the unique geographical environment, historical immigrants, cultural integration, and social life of Zhenba County in southern Shaanxi Province. It is the product of the long-term collision and integration of multiple cultures. Situated at the intersection of the Qinba Mountains, Zhenba County has historically served as a migration corridor, where various ethnic groups such as the Han, Ba, and Qiang coexisted and exchanged traditions. This cultural convergence gave rise to a rich repertoire of musical expressions that reflect both the rugged terrain and the agrarian lifestyles of the local people. Folk songs evolved as a means to express labor rhythms, seasonal changes, emotional experiences, and communal values. Over time, these songs were passed down orally, gradually becoming embedded in rituals, festivals, and daily life. Their enduring presence reveals a deep-rooted connection between environment, memory, and cultural identity in the region (Zhao Ditong, 2024).

4.1.2. The Formation of Cultural Soil from Ancient Times to The Pre-Qin Period (Approximately 2000 BC - 221 BC)

Zhenba is situated in the Qinba Mountains, at the historical junction of Liangzhou and Yongzhou, a region known for its complex terrain and rich cultural interactions. This area was once an important center of activity for the ancient Ba people, an ethnic group renowned for their vibrant artistic traditions. Archaeological and historical evidence indicates that the Ba people were highly skilled in music and dance, which played a central role in both their daily life and ritual practices (Wang Anchao, 2017).

One of the key cultural elements preserved from this heritage is the legacy of Ba Yu dance, a performative art form that combines rhythmic movement with expressive vocalizations. The ancient text *Huayang Guozhi* describes the Ba people as being "fierce and passionate about dancing," highlighting the energetic and emotionally charged nature of their performances. Scholars have speculated that the rhythmic structure and expressive gestures characteristic of Ba Yu dance may have influenced the early stylistic foundations of Zhenba folk songs, particularly in terms of melodic phrasing and physical accompaniment (He Yizhan, 2017).

Another important cultural influence is found in the budding of Wnuo culture, associated with early religious and sacrificial practices. In these rituals, participants often performed cries, chants, and incantations to communicate with spiritual forces or to honor ancestors. These vocal elements-rich in tone, cadence, and symbolic meaning-are believed to have provided the conceptual and sonic framework for the earliest forms of folk song in the region. Over time, these ritualistic utterances evolved into more structured lyrical expressions, gradually forming a distinct musical tradition that reflects both spiritual depth and social identity (Zhang Yuhua, 2025).

4.1.3. Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties (960-1644)

During the period spanning the Southern Song to the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, southern Shaanxi experienced a sharp decline in population due to prolonged warfare and social instability. In response to this demographic collapse, the early Ming Dynasty implemented a large-scale migration policy known as "Huguang Filling Sichuan and Shaanxi," which brought in settlers from Huguang (modern-day Hubei and Hunan). These migrants introduced elements of Chu culture and Sichuan-Chongqing folk

traditions, which gradually blended with the indigenous Ba culture of Zhenba, resulting in a rich and diverse cultural synthesis.

Amid this process of cultural integration, labor ballads began to flourish. These songs emerged organically from the rhythms and routines of everyday work, particularly in agrarian and mountainous settings. Activities such as land clearing, logging, and tea picking gave rise to chant-like melodies and work songs, which were used not only to coordinate collective labor but also to express communal spirit and individual emotions. Representative examples include "Zhenba Yu Gu" and "Gong Gu Cao", which reflect both the physical cadence of work and the evolving cultural voice of the region.

Simultaneously, the formation of the Zhenba dialect played a crucial role in shaping the linguistic foundation of its folk songs. Situated at the transitional boundary between Southwest Mandarin and the Guanzhong dialect, the local vernacular absorbed and adapted features from both linguistic systems. This hybrid dialect contributed to a distinctive lyrical style, marked by phonetic diversity and regional expression, which became embedded in the structure and performance of Zhenba folk songs. Thus, language, labor, and cultural migration collectively formed the bedrock of Zhenba's rich folk music heritage.

4.1.4. Qing Dynasty to The Republic of China (1644-1949)

During the Qing Dynasty, Zhenba County witnessed a period of cultural prosperity and stylistic diversity in its folk song tradition, largely driven by a continued wave of migration. In the early Qing period, large numbers of settlers from Hubei and Hunan further migrated into Sichuan and southern Shaanxi, carrying with them rich musical traditions such as the Hubei "Hao Cao Luo Gu" and Hunan "Flower Drum Tune." The integration of these musical elements with the local Ba heritage led to the formation of diverse stylistic variations within Zhenba folk songs, enhancing both their melodic structures and thematic range.

In addition to musical enrichment, this period marked a significant expansion of the social functions of folk songs. No longer became limited to labor or leisure contexts, folk songs embedded in a variety of ceremonial and communal settings. Furthermore, the late Qing and early Republic of China period marked the beginning of formal documentation of this oral tradition. Local literati and scholars started recording and transcribing lyrics of folk songs, preserving them

as written texts. Notably, works such as the "Zhenba Local Customs and Traditions" include references to folk songs and melodies, providing valuable insight into the historical and cultural landscape of the region. This process of textualization signalled a shift toward the preservation and scholarly recognition of Zhenba's folk music heritage.

4.1.5. Since the Founding of The People's Republic of China (1949-)

The trajectory of Zhenba folk songs in the modern era reflects a dynamic process of protection, transformation, and innovation in response to shifting historical, political, and technological contexts. Between the 1950s and 1970s, Zhenba folk songs were actively integrated into the "New Folk Song Movement", a state-led initiative aimed at reshaping traditional cultural expressions to align with revolutionary ideals. During this period, many folk melodies were repurposed with socialist themes; for instance, the song "Ten Farewells to the Red Army" drew upon melodic and lyrical elements from Zhenba's traditional repertoire, transforming them into instruments of political mobilization.

From the 1980s through the early 2000s, efforts shifted toward systematic documentation and preservation. Under the guidance of the local cultural department, a comprehensive effort to collect, classify, and archive the region's folk music culminated in the publication of the Collection of Zhenba Folk Songs. This important cultural milestone contributed to the official recognition of Zhenba folk songs, which were inscribed on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Shaanxi Province in 2008.

However, the 21st century has brought both challenges and new opportunities. The accelerating pace of urbanization has led to the disappearance of traditional performance spaces and a decline in the number of experienced folk singers, posing a serious threat to intergenerational transmission. In response to this inheritance crisis, innovative strategies have emerged. Artists and cultural institutions have experimented with fusing folk songs with popular music genres and theatrical elements, exemplified by the symphonic folk production "Between the Mountains and Waters of Qinba", which reimagines traditional forms in a contemporary aesthetic framework. Additionally, digital preservation efforts have gained momentum, including the creation of folk song databases and the use of short-video platforms to disseminate content and engage younger audiences (see Table 1). These combined approaches reflect an adaptive cultural strategy—

one that balances heritage conservation with creative evolution in a rapidly modernizing world. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Zhenba Folk Songs Origin Timeline.

Period	Key Developments
The Formation of cultural Soil from Ancient Times to the Pre-Qin period (approximately 2000 BC - 221 BC)	The formation of cultural soil
The Qin and Han Dynasties to the Sui and Tang Dynasties (221 BC - 907 BC)	The emergence of the rudimentary form of folk songs
Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties (960-1644)	The initial shaping of the regional style
Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (1644-1949)	Prosperity and diversity in craftsmanship.
Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China (1949 -)	Protection transformation and innovation

Source: Mi Zhang, 2025

4.2. The Cultural Significance of Zhenba Folk Songs

Zhenba folk songs have demonstrated extremely high value in the field of art. In terms of music creation, its melodies are beautiful and smooth, and its rhythms are rich and diverse. There are both lyrical and melodious slow tempo and cheerful and lively fast tempo, which can express different emotional atmospheres. In terms of singing forms, various forms such as solo singing, duet singing and chorus singing are flexibly applied, enhancing the expressiveness and appeal of folk songs. In terms of literary quality, the lyrics of Zhenba folk songs are simple and natural in language, while also full of artistic imagination. They employ rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification and exaggeration to make the lyrics vivid and lifelike, and possess high literary aesthetic value. Zhenba folk songs provide rich materials and references for the creation of Chinese folk music and literature, and are precious treasures in the treasure house of Chinese folk art.

4.2.1. Festivals

During major festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival, Zhenba folk songs act as a "catalyst" for the lively atmosphere. People convey joy through singing folk songs with cheerful rhythms and festive melodies, such as "Celebrating the Spring Festival" and "Lantern Festival Joy". The streets and

alleys are filled with the echoes of songs, and everywhere is brimming with the festive atmosphere, making the holiday ambience even more intense.

Cultural inheritance and Display: Festivals have become an important stage for the inheritance and display of Zhenba folk songs. During festivals, the elders of the family sing classic folk songs to the younger generation and tell them the stories and cultural connotations behind the folk songs. For instance, the lyrics of "Zhenba Folk Song" cover the local history and folk customs, allowing the younger generation to understand the culture of their hometown through singing and achieving the intergenerational inheritance of culture. Meanwhile, the folk song performances during the festival also attract tourists from outside, showcasing the unique cultural charm of Zhenba to the outside world.

Folk song duets and choral performances during festivals are important forms of social entertainment for the public. Men, women, the elderly and children gathered together, making friends through songs and exchanging ideas with each other. For instance, during the Spring Festival, there is a "singing competition" where singers improvise lyrics, engaging in a contest of wisdom and talent. This not only enhances the bonds among neighbours but also strengthens the cohesion of the community, allowing people to enjoy the joy of the festival and the warmth of reunion through singing (Xu Tao, 2012).



Figure 2: Zhenba Folk Songs Spring Festival Performance.

Source: Mi Zhang, 2025.

4.2.2. Folk Lifes

Labor collaboration and emotional regulation: In

daily production and labor, Zhenba folk songs play a role in coordinating movements and enhancing efficiency. In the fields and at the edges of the land, farmers sing "Pulling the Yangko Dance". The uniform rhythm makes everyone's labor movements consistent and relieves fatigue. When moving heavy objects, the "Lifting Worker's Badge" boosts morale and encourages everyone to work together to complete the task. Meanwhile, folk songs are also a way for workers to express their emotions and relieve stress, making the dull labor full of fun.

Emotional Expression and life Documentation: Folk songs are an important medium for the people of Zhenba to express their inner emotions. Young men and women convey their love and express their yearning for a beautiful love through love songs such as "Love Girl Yearning Song". When parting with loved ones, the "Song of Seeing Off the Son" is used to express the reluctance. People also record the little things in life through folk songs. For instance, "The Four Seasons Song of the Peasant Family" depicts the agricultural activities and life scenes of the year, becoming a vivid portrayal of folk life (Heng Junchang, 2025).

An important component of ritual activities: In significant ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and sacrificial ceremonies, Zhenba folk songs are indispensable. At the wedding, "The Wedding

Greeting Tune" and "The Bed spreading Song" sent blessings to the newlyweds and added to the festive atmosphere. In the funeral ceremony, the "Mourning Song" conveys the grief and remembrance for the deceased. During sacrificial activities, the "Song of Worship to the Gods" expresses the reverence and prayer for the deities. Folk songs make these ceremonies more solemn and ritualistic, carrying people's beautiful expectations for life and spiritual beliefs.

During festivals, Xunyang folk songs become the glue that binds the community. People of all ages and backgrounds gather around to sing and listen, breaking down social barriers. The shared musical experience creates a sense of belonging, reinforcing the idea that they are part of a collective cultural identity. As the familiar tunes fill the air, the community's unity and solidarity are visibly strengthened. Festivals provide the perfect stage for Xunyang folk songs to transmit cultural heritage. Through the lyrics and melodies, the songs tell stories of the region's history, traditions, and values. Older generations pass down these musical treasures to the young, ensuring that the unique customs, ancient wisdom, and historical memories of Xunyang are not lost but are instead carried forward through the ages.



Figure 3: Zhenba Folk Song Performance at Local Festivals.

Source: Mi Zhang, 2025.

4.2.3 Build Social Relationships

The role of Zhenba folk songs as a tool for building social relationships is profoundly significant for maintaining the social and cultural structure of local communities. In other words, folk songs serve as a cultural communication space that is

not limited to entertainment singing, but also involves the process of exchange between people in the community, in terms of language, emotion, and social values. Especially in the context of community activities, which opens up space for community members to participate equally, whether as singers,

listeners, or even critics and adjusters of lyrics according to the specific context. These activities are therefore cultural processes that create “social capital” that leads to trust, mutual acceptance, and participation in the joint creation of the community. In addition, Zhenba folk songs help establish a sense of shared ownership among community members, as these songs reflect shared experiences, cultural memories, and local values. When people have the opportunity to sing the same songs or listen to the same songs on important occasions, it creates emotional power that unites the spirit of the community and also creates a sense of cultural bond between people of different ages, genders, and social statuses (Su Jun, 2017).

4.2.4. Preservation Of Local Culture And Identity

Zhenba folk songs play an important role in preserving local culture and identity, which is particularly important as a cultural mechanism that acts to integrate the group and local identity of the community to maintain it in a situation where society is facing external changes, whether it is the expansion of mainstream culture, modern communication technology, or the influence of globalization that causes rapid changes in values and lifestyles.

Zhenba folk songs also act as a tool to preserve and transmit local identity through local dialects, song content that reflects beliefs, local wisdom, and lifestyle patterns accumulated from generation-to-generation experiences. In particular, songs that use local languages or regional words are even more valuable as a space for cultural communication that resists the decay of local languages and knowledge in the modern era. Moreover, Zhenba folk songs also play a role in creating a cultural space, which allows

communities to assert their identity and revive their pride in their cultural roots. These songs act as a storehouse of verbal knowledge that is not only preserved in the form of documents or archives, but also exists through performances, singing, and learning in the context of real life. On the other hand, Zhenba folk songs can also act as a “cultural immunity” that allows communities to select, adapt, and synthesize external influences with discretion. Without having to sacrifice their original identity, the community does not reject modernity or change, but uses folk songs as a framework to screen and mold a new culture that is consistent with their own context (Seng Wenli, 2010).

4.2.5. In Terms of Education and Knowledge Transfer

Folk songs play an important role as an educational tool and a means of transmitting local knowledge. They act as a medium of learning, both in informal learning systems within communities and in formal educational systems in various institutions. In the context of communities, Zhenba folk songs are transmitted through intergenerational learning processes, through listening, singing, and participation in cultural activities such as rituals, festivals, and annual festivals, which are areas of practical learning that contain knowledge of language, history, beliefs, and ethical values. In the context of educational institutions, Zhenba folk songs are integrated into the curriculum at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, linking them with the content of music, literature, art, and local culture, promoting interdisciplinary learning, and instilling a sense of cultural heritage conservation in students (Song Yun, 2020).



Figure 4: Hanzhong Vocational and Technical College's Folk Song Zhenba Performance, Shaanxi.

Source: Mi Zhang, 2025

Zhenba folk songs are rich and profound in cultural significance. They are the carriers of

historical and cultural memory, the witnesses of the integration of ethnic cultures, the symbols highlighting regional cultural characteristics, the bonds for the inheritance of emotions and values, and also the folk treasures of great artistic value. Under the background of the new era, we should attach importance to the protection and inheritance of Zhenba folk songs, deeply explore their cultural connotations, and enable this ancient folk art to regain new vitality and vigor in the process of inheritance and innovation, so as to play a greater role in promoting the excellent traditional Chinese culture and the development of local culture (Meng Na, 2015).

Zhenba folk songs represent a vital cultural heritage that embodies the historical memory, linguistic diversity, and emotional expressions of communities in southern Shaanxi. Rooted in the region's unique geography and shaped by waves of migration and cultural fusion—particularly among the Ba, Han, and Chu traditions—these songs reflect the lived experiences of agrarian life, ritual practice, and communal celebration. Their social function extends beyond entertainment, serving as tools for emotional communication, moral instruction, and community cohesion. Over time, Zhenba folk songs have adapted to changing political and social contexts, evolving from oral traditions into documented cultural assets, and now finding renewed life through digital platforms and modern performance. As such, they not only preserve the intangible cultural identity of the region but also provide a dynamic link between past traditions and contemporary innovation.

5. DISCUSSION

The historical and cultural trajectory of Zhenba folk songs exemplifies the dynamic interplay between traditional expressive forms and the evolving social, political, and technological contexts of southern Shaanxi. As revealed in this study, the enduring vitality of Zhenba folk songs is rooted in their multifunctional roles—not only as musical compositions but also as complex cultural mechanisms for identity formation, intergenerational communication, and social cohesion.

The evolution of Zhenba folk songs reflects broader patterns observed in other regional folk traditions, such as the Liu Sanjie Ge Yao folk songs in Guangxi, which Yiying Li (2024) argues serve as “literary, linguistic, and cultural markers” for the Zhuang ethnic identity. Similar to Ge Yao, Zhenba folk songs emerged from the historical entanglement of local ethnic groups—including the Ba, Han, and

Qiang—and absorbed diverse cultural traits through successive waves of migration and social upheaval. These formative historical experiences endowed Zhenba folk songs with an inclusive and hybrid character, enabling them to accommodate multiple cultural lineages while retaining a distinctly local ethos.

Particularly noteworthy is the role of Zhenba folk songs in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Their continued performance in festivals, ritual settings, and daily life sustains not only regional identity but also linguistic diversity through the use of local dialects and expressive idioms. This aligns with Noppon Chaiyason (2021) analysis of Khmer music, which he describes as a “foundation of cultural resources and conservation,” underscoring how traditional musical expressions operate as reservoirs of indigenous worldviews and social memory. Like Khmer music, Zhenba folk songs function as both cultural archives and living traditions, maintaining a vital role in the community's adaptive strategies toward modernization and globalization.

Furthermore, the legal and institutional dimensions of Zhenba folk song preservation echo the concerns raised by Lin and Lian (2018), who explore the protection of intangible cultural heritage in China from the perspective of intellectual property rights. The official documentation and listing of Zhenba folk songs as provincial intangible cultural heritage in 2008 represent an important shift toward state-recognized conservation. However, as Lin and Lian emphasize, such formal mechanisms must be complemented by community-based safeguarding practices that ensure the active participation of local inheritors and practitioners. In Zhenba's case, the integration of digital platforms, community festivals, and cross-generational storytelling reflects a balanced model of cultural transmission that combines institutional support with grassroots engagement.

At the social level, Zhenba folk songs function as a medium for collective memory and emotional expression. Through their performance in various communal contexts—weddings, funerals, labor, and seasonal festivities—these songs foster shared emotional landscapes and cultivate a sense of cultural continuity. In line with theories of “cultural space” and “social capital,” the performance of folk songs enables inclusive participation and mutual recognition, creating bonds across generations, social strata, and gender lines. Although the research supports foundational theories of cultural transmission and music pedagogy, it simultaneously

highlights pressing obstacles to the sustainability of the Liu Sanjie Ge Yao tradition. One of the most critical concerns is the evident generational disconnect, as younger audiences exhibit declining interest and participation in traditional folk music. The study underscores that, while institutionalized education and the utilization of digital media platforms present promising channels for enhancing folk music literacy, these alone are insufficient. To ensure effective preservation, such strategies must be integrated with targeted initiatives aimed at re-engaging youth and fostering renewed appreciation for indigenous musical heritage (Huang et al., 2024; Wang, 2024).

In sum, Zhenba folk songs exemplify the adaptive vitality of traditional music within a rapidly transforming cultural environment. They simultaneously serve as cultural texts, social practices, and modes of resistance against the homogenizing effects of globalized culture. As evidenced by comparative studies across Southeast and East Asia (e.g., Chaiyason, 2021), such traditions continue to act as anchors of identity, reservoirs of creativity, and catalysts for community resilience. Their sustainable preservation thus requires not only historical awareness and policy recognition but also an active commitment to cultural education, digital innovation, and intergenerational dialogue.

6. CONCLUSION

Zhenba folk songs, as a national intangible cultural heritage, have accumulated profound knowledge throughout history. Their development is closely linked to regional culture, ethnic integration and social changes. From a historical perspective, Zhenba folk songs originated from the unique natural and cultural environment of the Qinba Mountainous Area. In the early days, as an accompaniment to the production and life of the working people, they carried practical functions such as coordinating labor, conveying information, and expressing emotions in the form of labor chants and

mountain songs. During its long-term development, the integration of multi-ethnic cultures has endowed it with rich connotations, integrating elements of ethnic music such as Han, Miao and Hui, and forming a unique artistic style. The historical legends and folk customs recorded in the lyrics and melodies have become "living documents" for the study of local history and culture.

During its development process, Zhenba folk songs have undergone inheritance and transformation. In traditional society, folk songs were passed down through word of mouth among families and villages, becoming the bond that maintained local cultural identity. Entering modern society, the waves of industrialization and urbanization, along with the impact of popular culture, have once squeezed its living space. However, in recent years, with the country's emphasis on the protection of intangible cultural heritage, Zhenba folk songs have ushered in new development opportunities. Through policy support, cultural activity promotion, innovative adaptation and other means, it has gradually moved from the folk to the stage, from the regional to the national level. While inheriting the essence of tradition, it has continuously combined with modern music and tourism industries, and has been rejuvenated with new vitality (Ren Xiaotian, 2021).

Looking to the future, the development of Zhenba folk songs needs to seek a balance between protection and innovation. It is necessary to not only adhere to its cultural authenticity, strengthen the cultivation of inheritors and the collection and organization of original ecological folk songs, but also follow the trend of The Times, explore the integration with new media and digital technology, and develop diversified forms of dissemination and cultural products. Only in this way can Zhenba folk songs continuously exert their cultural value and social functions, achieve creative transformation and innovative development in the new era, and become a model for the inheritance of China's fine traditional culture.

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