



The History of *Liao* Songs in Pingguo, Guangxi, China¹

ประวัติเพลงเหลี่ยว ในเมืองผิงกั่ว กวังสี ประเทศไทย

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Abstract

This article is part of a thesis study titled "The *Liao* Songs of Zhuang People in Pingguo, Guangxi, China". The study aimed to investigate the history and development of *Liao* songs, using the qualitative research methodology and historical-cultural theory. The data collection was conducted in Pingguo county, Guangxi province, China, and the data were collected from scholars, composers, writers, educators, singers and *Liao* song enthusiasts. The result has shown that before 1400 many legends related to the origin of *Liao* songs existed. A standard form of *Liao* songs started to take shape in the 1950s and prospered from this period up to the 1980s due to China's political and economic stability. However, during the years 1980-2000 the popularity of western music overshadowed that of *Liao* songs. In attempts to conserve and restore *Liao* songs, the Chinese government organized folk song festivals for *Liao* songs and included them in the school curriculum in Pingguo City, Guangxi Province. It could be said that *Liao* songs has gradually evolved from its previous heyday towards its decline and that the social function and status of *Liao* songs are becoming increasingly weaker. *Liao* songs, therefore, urgently need to be protected and repropagated.

Keywords: *Liao* songs, History of *Liao* songs, Development process, Guangxi

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิทยานิพนธ์เรื่อง "เพลงเหลี่ยว ของชาวจ้วง ในเมืองผิงกั่ว กวังสี ประเทศไทย" เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาประวัติความเป็นมาของเพลงเหลี่ยว ของชาวจ้วง ในเมืองผิงกั่ว กวังสี ประเทศไทย โดยใช้วิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพและทฤษฎีประวัติศาสตร์และวัฒนธรรม รวมรวมข้อมูลที่เมืองผิงกั่ว กวังสี ประเทศไทย กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยนักวิชาการ นักแต่งเพลง นักเรียน นักศึกษา นักวิจัยและผู้เชี่ยวชาญ

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ผลการวิจัยพบว่าก่อนปี 1400 มีต้นนາนเกี่ยวกับที่มาของเพลงเหลี่ยวนามากมาย และเริ่มมีความเป็นรูปแบบมาตรฐาน ในช่วงปี ค.ศ. 1950 และเจริญรุ่งเรืองมากในช่วงนี้ จนถึงปี ค.ศ. 1980 เนื่องจากมีความมั่นคงทางการเมืองและเศรษฐกิจ แต่ในปี ค.ศ. 1980-2000 มีรัฐน้อมรุ่มนต์วีระวนัต佳เข้ามานำจึงทำให้เพลงเหลี่ยวได้รับความนิยมน้อยลง ทำให้รัฐบาลจีนต้องห้ามการอนุรักษ์และฟื้นฟู โดยการจัดเทศบาลเพลงฟื้นเมืองสำหรับเพลงเหลี่ยว และนำไปบูรณาในหลักสูตรของโรงเรียนในเมืองผิงก้าว ขณะที่กว้างสี ภารพัฒนาของเพลงเหลี่ยวในขณะที่กว้างสีคืออยู่ พัฒนาขึ้นจากยุครุ่งเรือง และก้าวเข้าสู่ความเสื่อมถอย หน้าที่ทางสังคมและสถานะของเพลงเหลี่ยวเริ่มอ่อนแอลง เรื่อยๆ ทำให้เพลงเหลี่ยวต้องการการปกป้องและการสืบทอดอย่างเร่งด่วน

คำสำคัญ: เพลงเหลี่ยว ประวัติเพลงเหลี่ยว พัฒนาการ กวางสี

Introduction

The Pingguo topography features highlands in the southwest and in the northwest whereas lower grounds lie in the south. Mountains stand facing other mountains. Rivers lie facing other rivers. The loud cries become a song. “*Liao songs*” are long and far-reaching, and they are full of changes, like the mountains and the waters. The melodies sound like a song in the mountains. The songs are more or less influenced by the local mountains and rivers. (Hong, 2015, p. 10)

The long history of *Liao song* began before the *Ming* dynasty⁶ (A.D. 1440), when the jurisdiction of Si En prefecture included Pingguo, Wu Ming, Ma Shan, Da Hua, Long An, Tian Dong and Tian Yang counties. The first magistrate of Si En government was Ceng Ying. During his reign, based in Pingguo County’s town of Tai Ping several hundred years ago, a group of poets emerged. They sang to one another and learned from one another, forming a good environment for poetry study and creation, which had a great impact on promoting the development of classical poetry in the Zhuang region. (Nong, 2005, p. 89)

Three factors contributed to the period of maturity of *Liao songs* (A.D. 1400-1950): First, the widespread application of ancient Zhuang characters among townsfolk; second, the war-torn social background of the famous work of “*Zei songs*”⁷ in *Liao songs*; and third, the emergence of a dedicated *Liao song* team. (Nong, 2004, p. 21)

With the founding of the People's Republic of China (A.D. 1950-1980), the country enjoyed stability and economic development and paid attention to the national music culture, among others. *Liao songs*, therefore, entered a period of high development. From the 1980s, after the national

⁶ A dynasty in China during A.D. 1358-1644

⁷ A long song which describes the scene of war in Guangxi in the middle of Ming Dynasty



reform and opening up, "*Liao* songs" were sung among the people. Especially at the end of the 19th century, with the party and the state emphasizing the traditional folk culture and the promotion of the national folk culture policy, *Liao* songs began to revive. In most parts of Pingguo County, people could hear *Liao* songs, which then became an indispensable part of people's lives in the Pingguo area. (Li, 2016, p. 58)

However, with the gradual transformation of socioeconomic culture and changes in production relations, especially since the national reform and opening up, stimulated by the external economic environment, a large scale of population mobility has imposed limitations on the development of *Liao* songs, and has resulted in fewer people learning the songs. (Lan, 2005, p. 34)

With the Chinese government's emphasis on traditional folk culture, activities related to the conservation of the *Liao* folk songs are encouraged by the government and continued among family and community members. (Miao, 2011, p. 24)

Analyzing and studying the history of Guangxi, China, the researcher could deeply understand the various development stages of *Liao* songs and the reasons why *Liao* songs gradually declined from its prosperity. Understanding the development history of Guangxi Pingguo *Liao* songs would provide a foundation for the protection and propagation of *Liao* songs.

For the above reasons, the researchers were interested in studying *Liao* songs of Zhuang people in Pingguo, Guangxi, China, in order to investigate the history of *Liao* songs, to gain a clear insight into the development process of *Liao* songs, and to provide related information for those interested in studying *Liao* songs.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the history and development of *Liao* songs in Pingguo, Guangxi, China.

Scope of the Study

In terms of the study area, the researcher aimed to study only the *Liao* songs in Pingguo county, Guangxi, China, with Nong Minjian, a scholar of *Liao* songs, as a key informant.

In terms of the study content, the study aimed to investigate the history of *Liao* songs in terms of their development process.

The data collection period was between January 2018 to December 2020.



Research Methodology

For the data collection, the researchers conducted the fieldwork, collected relevant data, and studied books, research articles and online information in order to gain basic data for the research. After that, the researchers selected Pingguo in Guangxi as the study area. The scholar Nong Minjian⁸ asserts that Pingguo is the main area for the performances of *Liao* songs. Lu Shunhong is a famous singer in Pingguo who often sings *Liao* songs in Pingguo. Composer and *Liao* song singer Mo Yance⁹ often participates in various performances in Pingguo. A number of experts of *Liao* songs, including the study's key informant, Nong Minjian, an expert of *Liao* songs, live in Pingguo. In the designated area, the researcher selected casual informants comprising one writer, two artists, two composers, three educators and three singers in order to acquire the information relevant to the objective of the study.

After the data collection, the researcher studied the historical development process of *Liao* songs and set historical periods for data sampling. The development periods were divided by year as follows: the period of origin (before 1400), the period of maturity (1400-1950), the period of rapid development (1950-1980), and the period of decline and conservation (1980-2000). (Qin, 2008, p. 30)

The data analysis emerged from the investigation of the history of *Liao* songs including their development process and the advice from the Chinese expert Nong Minjian. The researcher conducted the investigation using historical and cultural theories.

Results of the Study

The results have revealed that practice constantly evolves, and so does human cognition. Therefore, history and culture will continue to advance. *Liao* songs, as a kind of music culture, is also like this. (Lin, 2003, p. 84)

Before 1400, the period of origin, there were many legends related to the origin of *Liao* songs; for example, the ceremony legend, play legend, “Yue” people’s songs, etc. The *Liao* songs at that time were still in their primitive stage.

⁸ This is the study's key informant and a very well-known expert on *Liao* songs. He has published many books and papers on *Liao* songs in both English and Chinese.

⁹ He once made an innovation of *Liao* songs.



In 1400-1950, the period of maturity, ancient Zhuang manuscripts, or “*Zei* songs”, emerged. This coincided with the emergence of a dedicated *Liao* song team. Both indicated the maturity of *Liao* songs. *Liao* songs became more and more standardized during this period.

In 1950-1980, the period of rapid development, China's politics and economy stabilized, and the Chinese government began to attach importance to art and culture. *Liao* songs were integral to the life of Zhuang people who were very keen on singing *Liao* songs in order to talk, make friends, fall in love, etc. The development of *Liao* songs then progressed and improved economic, social and political factors determine cultural factors. (Lin, 2003, p. 85)

With China's policy to reform and open its economy, the Chinese culture was impacted by global multiculturalism. As a result, the development of the traditional music culture became restricted.

In 1980-2000, the people were no longer enthusiastic about singing *Liao* songs. Many preferred western pop music. More and more people went out to work to make money, and the popularity of the songs began to decline. In this period, government departments strongly encouraged the conservation of the songs and formulated many measures to assist this. The development of *Liao* songs faced more and more difficulties. *Liao* songs urgently needed protection and propagation.

The researchers followed the advice of the Chinese expert—Lin Yongkuang—in dividing the development of *Liao* songs into historical periods and analyzed them using historical and cultural theories.

The origin period of *Liao* Songs

The origin of *Liao* songs could be dated back to 1400 A.D. There were several speculations about the origin of *Liao* songs: First, *Liao* songs originated from legends related to ceremonies, government creations and fairies. Second, *Liao* songs originated from the play theory, since “*Liao*” means “eat, play and happy”. Third, *Liao* songs originated from the “*Yue*” people’s songs, because in ancient times “*Yue*” people were “*Liao*” people.

For the speculation about the origin from legends involving ceremonies, it was related that all the folk song fairs in *Pingguo* county were held along with ritual activities in which young men and women sang songs to worship the realm of heavens and presiding gods. This led to the emergence of



Liao songs. (Qin, 2018, p. 20). In addition, legends served also as a government's pretext to promote the sustenance of the folk songs through competitions. With the rewards of cattle, gauze and other materials, these competitions attracted large numbers of participants and ensured the continuation of *Liao* song singing. (Bai, 2009, p. 58) Moreover, there was also a legend of the creation involving fairies. According to the local people, in ancient times there were fairies and their two daughters who sang very beautifully. Each year in July, they went to the "Mu Niang Shan" mountain to sing, beginning with *Liao* songs before others. Local people then joined in, and this was developed into a folk song fair. The tradition became widespread later on. (Xue, 2016, p. 47). According to the legend of "Sanbao Buddha Songs", the song that Sanbao Buddha once sang gradually became the foundation of the folk song fair, and *Liao* songs were formed later on. (Yu, 2018, p. 38)

For the speculation about the origin from the play theory, this was based on the origin of the word "*Liao*" in the Zhuang language which referred to the local people, play and entertainment. Therefore, *Liao* Songs referred to "the songs played by Zhuang people".

For the speculation about the origin from the "*Yue*" people's songs, this was based on the partly known origin which indicated that *Liao* songs originated from "*Yue* people's songs" ¹⁰ from approximately 2,000 years ago. The meaning translated in the Zhuang language was exactly the same as the meaning of the ancient translation. According to the analysis of the historical data, either "*Yue* people's songs" were the source of *Liao* songs, or *Liao* songs flourished from "*Yue* people's songs". In either case, the finding indicated a close relationship between *Yue* people's songs and *Liao* songs.

(Li, 2013, p. 10)



Figure 1 *Liao* Songs¹¹ manuscripts

¹⁰ "*Yue* people's songs" are the ancestor songs of the Zhuang nationality.

¹¹ The songs were written in ancient Chinese characters. Modern people need to learn these characters to understand the lyrics.



The Mature Period

Between 1400 and 1950 A.D., during the *Ming* Dynasty, although materials rarely recorded the use of the ancient Zhuang characters, in the early *Qing* Dynasty, Wu Qi was able to receive many songs in the ancient Zhuang manuscripts. This indicated the popularity of the ancient Zhuang manuscripts in the *Ming* Dynasty. (Jin, 2018, p. 30)

Liao songs' mature work called "Zei songs" appeared as an important chapter in the *Liao* songs system and masterpieces of the mature specification of *Liao* songs. These were songs that narrated the war, described the love story between men and women, formed a stable singing content, and reflected the era of the mature norm of *Liao* songs. As for the age of "Zei songs", many scholars, for example, Teng Guangyao, Fan Ximu, Zheng Chaoxiong, Nong Minjian and Qin Naichang, did research studies on this subject and obtained a consistent view that "Zei songs" were originally produced during the *Ming* Dynasty. (Lu, 2018, p. 39)

The dedicated *Liao* song team, as evidenced by the existence of a variety of manuscripts for the Zei songs, concurrently comprised a number of folk people and folk song books. The Zei songs were songs of war. Despite the lengthy war years and the destitute circumstances of Guanxi villagers, certain music groups emerged making their living on singing. They sang for the unification of the people. The singing skills of these folk artists were more sophisticated than those of ordinary singers, hence more artistically attractive. *Liao* songs matured during this period.

Rapid development

Between 1950 and 1980, it was common for families to propagate songs in the Zhuang area. Many Zhuang youths, their fathers or mothers, and sometimes their neighbors, elders or brothers, sang at will, using songs as a tool to entertain and educate people, to mind their moral principles and life experiences. People learned about the world and life experiences from these folk songs. This process was not only meant to entertain, but also to cultivate and instill life experience, moral education and good conscience. (Li, 2016, p. 56)

It could be said that folk song fairs are corollary of the religious festivals of the Zhuang tribes. Apart from religiosity, the festivals featured grand ceremonies, stimulating social gathering, singing and dancing, which gave young men and women opportunities to meet, thereby, making ways for original folk song fairs to emerge. Young men and women usually sang together to decide



whether or not they had mutual likings. (Bai, 2009, p. 29) *Liao* songs reached their heyday, with tens of thousands of people participating in the folk song fairs.

Family retrogress and transmission

Between 1980 and 2000, with gradual socio-economic changes since the national reform, a large scale of population mobility imposed the decline of *Liao* songs. The "family" transmission had a great impact, but the time when *Liao* songs were passed on by oral tradition was almost gone. To revive the tradition, in the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government paid increasing attention to the traditional folk culture and vigorously organized large-scale folk song fair activities to encourage families to participate in singing these songs. Despite the stimulation, few people attended folk song fairs and performances. The adolescents, especially, would rather go to work and earn more money. They had no time for singing *Liao* songs. The social transmission of the songs was in decline.

To solve this problem, the Chinese government promoted *Liao* songs as an intangible cultural icon. For example, the local government of Pingguo County, on the basis of traditional music, annually held the "Zhuang Guo Qing" ballad festival and folk song exposition. In addition to the main events of the folk song fair, the festival also hosted many star-studded concerts and rich folk song cultural forums. This event attracted many scholars and experts from universities in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and ASEAN countries. The folk song festivals and music festivals not only helped conserve and pass on *Liao* songs but also provided more opportunities for the economic and cultural development in Pingguo County. (Qin, 2018, p. 19)

During this period, when singing *Liao* songs in schools lost its importance, the Chinese government set an agenda for the schools to reconsider having children to sing *Liao* songs. For example, the Pingguo county government officially introduced *Liao* songs as a local folk music and culture course, enabling students to have a more general understanding of the local musical culture. The establishment of the *Liao* song curriculum and activities was mainly concentrated in two schools: Pingguo No. 2 Middle School and Pingguo No. 2 Primary School. (Zhang, 2019, p. 65)

Discussion

Modernization has had a decisive impact. In the context of globalization, international exchanges are not performed only on the economic and trade level, but also on the cultural level.



It can be said that the current world has become a global village. This is mainly due to the development of modern technology. Technology has changed the mode of communication and exchange between people. The traditional Chinese music culture has been impacted by the diversified modern culture. Under this kind of global cultural impact, Western music culture is seen by many as advanced and noble. Chinese folk music is seen as outdated and rustic and is gradually left out. Guangxi Pingguo *Liao* songs is no exception.

Nowadays, the Chinese traditional music culture is facing a huge problem. Chinese culture and art have been greatly impacted, and many excellent traditional music cultures are slowly disappearing. They are lost and no longer loved and valued by the people as much as before. Most people pay more attention to obtaining higher economic standing, and ignore the study of traditional music culture.

According to *Liao* Song scholar Nong Minjian, *Liao* songs have a history that is older than 2000 years. They are the crystallization of the wisdom of the Zhuang people in Guangxi and a treasure of the music culture of the Zhuang people. In spite of their long history of development and status as masterpieces, *Liao* songs have seen a shift from the high social status of the past to the decline in social status at present. Nong Minjian believes this is due to the weakening of *Liao* songs' social functions. The researcher agrees with him. The researcher also believes that since many people aim only to make more money nowadays, *Liao* songs have lost their importance in today's society. People no longer use *Liao* songs for dialogues, making friends and entertaining as they did in the past. More and more people leave their hometowns to work in big cities to earn more money. *Liao* songs have declined in popularity since they do not necessarily bring the people any income. This has led to the decline of *Liao* songs' status in the Chinese society.

According to the writer Yu Zhi, the development of *Liao* songs is limited by *Liao* songs themselves. *Liao* songs have improved the music, costumes, etc. but the effect is not yet good. The researcher believes that *Liao* songs are also limited by their own slow development.

Compared with Thai traditional folk music, it can be perceived that Thai people respect their traditions and culture. Regardless of their various customs and aspects of life, the traditional culture that has been passed on for thousands of years is still preserved. Various ceremonies and celebrations feature traditional musical performances throughout. This is the characteristic of Thailand. As for China's historical development, after the reform and opening up, a large number



of western elements have poured in, and the national customs of the Chinese have begun to fade and to be dominated by the world's popular rhythm.

According to Professor Jarernchai Chonpairo, *Thai Molam is a kind of traditional folk music in Northeastern Thailand. It has always been part of the entertainment life of the people in Northeast Thailand. Molam Art is valued by the government and has many incentives. The social status of the artists performing Molam is also getting higher and higher.*

Molam has undergone a series of changes, from the initial Molam Phean to the current Molam Sing. (Chonpairo, 2009)

In summary, the researcher believes that Molam can continue in Thailand and is very popular in northeastern Thailand because of several reasons. First, Thailand is a country with a relatively complete preservation and continuation of traditional culture, and national music culture has been deeply rooted in people's lives. Second, the Thai government attaches great importance to national music culture and has many powerful measures to protect it. Finally, Molam has historically continued to innovate and adjusted to social environments and has always been welcomed by the public.

Although Thai music culture is also impacted by Western culture, it is still able to maintain its own musical characteristics, which is commendable. China needs to learn from Thailand's transmission and protection of national music culture.

Recommendations

The investigation of the history and development of Pingguo *Liao* songs provides a concrete reference for scholars whose areas of study are in the Chinese traditional musical culture and beyond. Furthermore, a number of commonalities that people faced with the decline of cultural treasures can serve as a stimulus for different work groups to find ways to alleviate ongoing threats in the future.



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