The Musical Characteristics and Creative Dimension of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi in Sichuan, China*

[1]Zeng Jing, [2]Pongsapich Kaewkulthorn and [3]Veera Phansue
Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand.
[2]Corresponding Author's Email: pongsapich@g.swu.ac.th

Abstract

The objectives of this article were: (1) to study the historical development of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi (a traditional labor chant) in Sichuan, China. (2) to analyze the musical characteristics and social-cultural identity of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi in Sichuan, China, and (3) to examine the musical creation and contemporary transformation of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi in Sichuan, China. This research employed a qualitative research design integrating historical analysis, field investigation, and music analysis. The research process consisted of five steps: literature review and theoretical foundation, field study and data collection, key informant selection, qualitative data analysis, and conceptual framework construction. The research population included historical documents of the Sichuan salt industry, traditional Yan Gong Hao Zi practices, local inheritors and cultural practitioners, and contemporary musical works represented by Crape Myrtle Tree and Crape Myrtle Flower. The instruments included document analysis, structured interviews, observation, and music analysis procedures. Data were analyzed by historical analysis, stylistic and descriptive analysis, and music theory analysis.

The research results were found to be: (1) The development of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi is closely related to the evolution of the well salt industry and labor organization, and it has gradually transformed from a functional labor chant into a form of intangible cultural heritage with cultural and symbolic value. (2) The musical characteristics of Yan Gong Hao Zi are shaped by labor practices, featuring strong rhythmic patterns, simple structure, and call-and-response performance, while also reflecting collective identity, regional culture, and social cohesion. (3) Contemporary musical creation transforms Yan Gong Hao Zi into new artistic forms by integrating traditional musical elements with modern compositional techniques, demonstrating a dynamic process of cultural inheritance and innovation.

Keywords: Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi; Labor Chant; Musical Characteristics; Cultural Identity; Inheritance and Innovation

*Received April 26, 2026; Revised June 10, 2026; Accepted June 20, 2026

Introduction

Folk music, as an important carrier of intangible cultural heritage, reflects the historical memory, social structure, and cultural identity of specific regions. In China, labor chants (hao zi) are a distinctive genre of folk music that originated from collective labor activities and are closely related to production modes and social organization. Among them, Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi is a representative form that emerged from the well salt industry in Sichuan Province, demonstrating a strong connection between music, labor, and regional culture (Xiao, 2006; Wang, 2008).

Zigong, historically known as the "Salt Capital" of China, has developed a well salt production system over nearly two thousand years. This long-term industrial practice gave rise to diverse forms of Yan Gong Hao Zi, which were applied in different labor processes such as drilling, transporting, and refining salt. These chants are characterized by strong rhythmic patterns, call-and-response structures, and close coordination with physical movement. At the same time, due to the migration and integration of workers from different regions, Zigong has formed a unique dialect and musical style, further enriching the expressive features of Yan Gong Hao Zi (Song, 2008; Zeng, 2009).

From an academic perspective, existing studies on Yan Gong Hao Zi mainly focus on historical documentation and basic musical description, including the evolution of salt industry culture and the classification of folk songs. However, there is still a lack of systematic research that integrates historical development, musical characteristics, and social-cultural identity. In addition, the connection between traditional labor chants and contemporary musical creation has not been sufficiently explored, which limits a deeper understanding of their artistic value and modern significance.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze Yan Gong Hao Zi from three dimensions: historical development, musical characteristics, and contemporary musical creation. By combining historical analysis, musical form interpretation, and case study of modern works, this research seeks to reveal the dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation. The findings are expected to contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, enhance public awareness, and provide theoretical and practical references for the creative transformation of traditional folk music in the modern era.

Objectives of the Research

1. To study the historical development of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi in Sichuan, China.

2. To analyze the musical characteristics and social-cultural identity of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi, China.

3. To examine the musical creation and contemporary transformation of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi, China.

Research Methodology

The 1st Step: Literature review

This step reviews and synthesizes literature related to the history of the Sichuan salt industry, well salt technology, and the musical form of Yan Gong Hao Zi. Previous studies have discussed the development of salt culture and its socio-economic background (Song, 2008), the evolution of well salt technology (Zeng, 2009), and the classification and musical features of Zigong folk songs (Zigong Mass Art Museum, n.d.). In addition, research on Yan Gong Hao Zi has analyzed its musical characteristics and current ecological status (Wang, 2008; Xiao, 2006). These studies provide a theoretical and historical foundation for understanding the development, musical structure, and cultural significance of Yan Gong Hao Zi, while also revealing the lack of integrated research on musical characteristics and contemporary creation.

The 2nd Step: Field study and data collection

Fieldwork is conducted in Zigong, Sichuan Province, through observation and interviews. The researcher observes performances of Yan Gong Hao Zi and records musical features, performance contexts, and expressive elements. Structured interviews are conducted with inheritors and local practitioners to collect firsthand data on performance practices, transmission, and contemporary changes.

The 3rd Step: Key informants

Key informants include inheritors of Yan Gong Hao Zi, local musicians, and cultural practitioners. A purposive sampling method is used to ensure that participants possess relevant knowledge and experience. Their perspectives provide essential insights into both traditional forms and modern adaptations.

The 4th Step: Data analysis

The collected data are analyzed using qualitative analytical methods, combining historical analysis, stylistic analysis, and music theory analysis.

Historical analysis is applied to examine the evolution of Yan Gong Hao Zi within the context of the Sichuan salt industry, focusing on the relationship between production modes, labor organization, and musical development. This method helps to interpret the formation and transformation of the chant from a diachronic perspective.

Stylistic and descriptive analysis is used to identify the musical characteristics of Yan Gong Hao Zi, including rhythm, melodic structure, performance style, and vocal organization. At the same time, socio-cultural analysis is employed to interpret the relationship between musical expression and social identity, collective labor, and regional culture.

Music theory analysis is conducted to examine the structure and compositional techniques of contemporary works derived from Yan Gong Hao Zi. This includes the analysis of musical form, pitch organization, rhythmic patterns, and the integration of traditional elements with modern compositional approaches. Through comparative analysis, the study explores how traditional musical materials are transformed in contemporary artistic contexts.

The 5th Step: Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is constructed based on two main dimensions: musical characteristics and musical creation. Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi is positioned within the broader context of Sichuan folk music, reflecting its cultural foundation. The musical characteristics dimension includes historical development, aesthetics, inheritance, and social factors, while the musical creation dimension involves compositional techniques, innovation, music analysis, and contemporary influence. The interaction between these two dimensions forms the overall musical and creative structure of Yan Gong Hao Zi, demonstrating the dynamic relationship between tradition and modern transformation, and highlighting the integration of cultural continuity and artistic innovation (Figure 1).

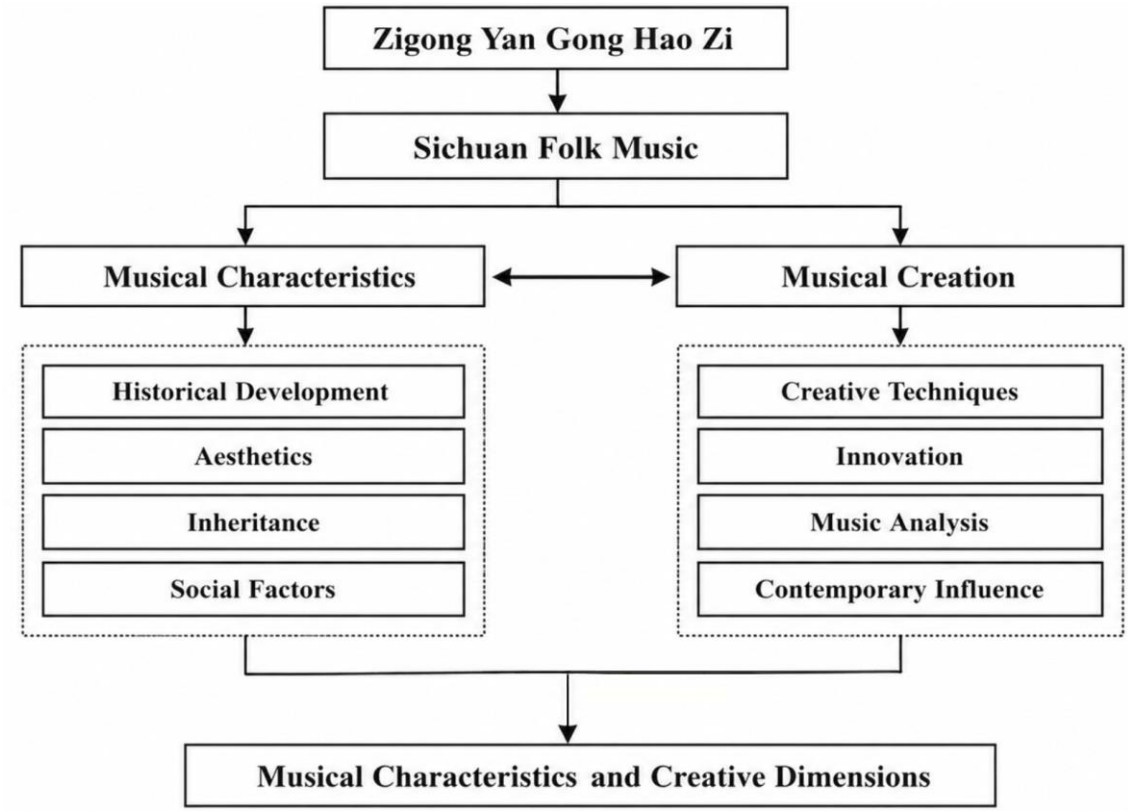


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
(Constructed by the researcher)

Research Results

The 1st objective is to study the historical development of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi in Sichuan. From the research result, it was found that:

1.1 Historical Development of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi

The development of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi is closely linked to the long-term evolution of the well salt industry in Zigong, forming a typical interaction between production systems and musical culture. Zigong, located in the southern Sichuan Basin, has a salt

production history of nearly two thousand years, beginning in the Eastern Han Dynasty and gradually taking shape during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. During this early stage, salt production relied heavily on manual labor, which required coordination among workers and led to the emergence of rhythmic vocal expressions as practical tools. With the development of the salt industry during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, production became increasingly organized, and major centers such as Fushi Salt Well and Dagong Well were established. The expansion of labor scale and complexity strengthened the need for coordinated action, prompting the evolution of simple vocal signals into more structured rhythmic chants.

A major turning point occurred during the Song Dynasty with the invention of the Zhuotong well, which introduced mechanical drilling techniques and significantly improved productivity. This technological advancement intensified labor coordination and further promoted the development of Yan Gong Hao Zi as a structured chant form. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the salt industry reached a peak of prosperity, and labor division became highly specialized. By 1939, there were as many as 73 occupational roles in the Zigong salt fields, reflecting a highly complex production system. Under these conditions, Yan Gong Hao Zi diversified into multiple forms corresponding to different labor processes, becoming more refined in both rhythm and function. In the modern period, especially after the 1980s, mechanization gradually replaced manual labor, reducing the practical necessity of work chants. However, Yan Gong Hao Zi did not disappear; instead, it transformed into a form of intangible cultural heritage, shifting from functional use to cultural and artistic value, thereby preserving the historical memory of the salt-working community.

1.2 Transformation from Labor Function to Cultural Heritage

The historical development of Yan Gong Hao Zi not only reflects changes in production technology but also demonstrates a transformation in its social and cultural functions. In its early stage, Yan Gong Hao Zi primarily served as a practical tool for labor coordination, with rhythmic patterns closely aligned with physical movements to ensure collective synchronization and improve efficiency. At the same time, it helped regulate labor intensity and alleviate fatigue, functioning as an essential part of the production process. As the salt industry developed and labor organization became more structured, Yan Gong Hao Zi gradually took on additional roles beyond coordination, including communication and emotional expression. Workers used chants to express hardship, perseverance, and collective solidarity, which strengthened interpersonal relationships and fostered a sense of belonging within the labor community.

With the decline of traditional labor modes in the modern era, the functional role of Yan Gong Hao Zi weakened, but its cultural significance became increasingly prominent. It began to be preserved and performed as an element of intangible cultural heritage, representing the historical identity of Zigong. This transition from a labor tool to a cultural symbol illustrates how traditional practices adapt to changing social conditions while retaining

their symbolic meaning. Therefore, Yan Gong Hao Zi embodies a dual identity: it is both a product of labor and a carrier of cultural heritage, reflecting the transformation from practical utility to cultural representation.

The 2nd objective is to analyze the musical characteristics and social-cultural identity of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi. From the research result, it was found that:

2.1 Musical Characteristics of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi

The musical characteristics of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi are primarily shaped by its function as a labor chant, resulting in a structure that emphasizes practicality, clarity, and rhythmic coordination. From a structural perspective, Yan Gong Hao Zi is typically concise and repetitive, allowing for easy memorization and immediate participation by workers during labor. This structural simplicity is not a limitation but rather a functional adaptation that ensures the chant can effectively serve its purpose in coordinating collective activities.

Rhythm is the most prominent feature of Yan Gong Hao Zi, as it directly corresponds to the pace and intensity of labor. In tasks requiring significant physical effort, such as lifting heavy objects or transporting materials, the rhythm is strong, regular, and clearly accented. This rhythmic stability enables workers to synchronize their movements and apply force collectively, thereby improving efficiency and reducing physical strain. In contrast, during lighter tasks or leisure periods, the rhythm becomes more flexible and expressive, allowing for greater variation and emotional expression.

Melodically, Yan Gong Hao Zi is based on the pentatonic scale typical of Chinese folk music, with a relatively narrow range and direct melodic contour. This melodic simplicity ensures that the chant can be easily projected in open environments and understood by all participants. The melodic lines are generally straightforward and unornamented, reflecting their practical function rather than purely aesthetic considerations. However, within this simplicity, subtle variations in pitch and phrasing can convey different emotional tones and functional meanings.

The performance style of Yan Gong Hao Zi is characterized by a call-and-response structure, in which a lead singer initiates a phrase and the group responds collectively. This structure not only facilitates coordination but also enhances participation and interaction among workers. The lead singer often has a degree of improvisational freedom, while the chorus maintains rhythmic stability, creating a dynamic balance between variation and consistency.

Furthermore, Yan Gong Hao Zi can be classified into several types based on labor context, including lifting chants, transport chants, construction chants, and leisure chants. Each type exhibits distinct musical features adapted to specific work conditions. For example, lifting chants emphasize strong rhythmic regularity, while leisure chants are more lyrical and expressive, reflecting personal emotions and social experiences. This functional diversity highlights the adaptability of Yan Gong Hao Zi as a musical form.

2.2 Social-Cultural Identity of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi

In addition to its musical characteristics, Yan Gong Hao Zi embodies significant socio-cultural meanings and serves as an important medium for constructing collective identity. As a form of spontaneous oral creation, it originates from the labor activities of salt workers rather than professional composition, reflecting collective creativity and shared experience. Through group singing, workers establish a sense of unity that transcends individual differences, reinforcing social cohesion within the labor community. The roles of lead singer and chorus also reflect the hierarchical structure of labor organization, mirroring broader social relationships.

The linguistic characteristics of the chant further strengthen its cultural identity. Zigong, as an immigrant city shaped by the salt industry, has developed a distinctive dialect, which is reflected in the lyrics of Yan Gong Hao Zi and contributes to its unique regional style. At the same time, the chant serves as a medium for emotional expression, allowing workers to convey feelings such as fatigue, hope, and solidarity. It also acts as a cultural bond that connects individuals to the collective memory of the community. Even in modern contexts where the original labor function has diminished, Yan Gong Hao Zi continues to symbolize regional identity and cultural heritage, demonstrating its enduring social significance.

The 3rd objective is to examine the musical creation and contemporary transformation of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi. From the research result, it was found that:

3.1 Musical Form in Contemporary Creation

The contemporary transformation of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi is reflected in modern compositions that reinterpret traditional elements within new artistic contexts. A representative example is Crape Myrtle Tree, Crape Myrtle Flower (Figure 2 and Figure 3), composed in 2013 as part of the opera Salt Goddess. This work adopts a binary structure (A–B), extending the short and repetitive form of traditional chants into a more developed musical framework suitable for stage performance. The A section presents a stable and lyrical theme, while the B section introduces contrast and emotional development, enhancing dramatic expression.



Figure 2: Crape Myrtle Tree, Crape Myrtle Flower Sheet Musi Part 1
(Constructed by the researcher)



Figure 3: Crape Myrtle Tree, Crape Myrtle Flower Sheet Musi Part 2 and 3 (Constructed by the researcher)

Melodically, the composition retains core pitch elements derived from Yan Gong Hao Zi, particularly pentatonic patterns and characteristic tone combinations, while expanding the melodic range and refining expressive detail. Rhythmically, traditional patterns are combined with more varied structures, such as dotted rhythms, creating a balance between functional energy and artistic expression. The alternation between solo and chorus reflects the traditional call-and-response style, preserving the musical identity of the chant while adapting it to modern performance contexts.

3.2 Creative Ideas and Artistic Transformation

The creative approach of this work demonstrates a transformation from functional labor music to artistic expression. By integrating operatic vocal techniques, including extended vocal range and sustained melodic lines, the composition enhances the expressive potential of Yan Gong Hao Zi. At the same time, the use of Western harmonic accompaniment, particularly piano, replaces traditional unaccompanied singing, creating a richer and more layered sound texture. This transformation reflects a key creative principle: preserving the core identity of traditional music while adapting it to contemporary aesthetic standards.

Through this process, Yan Gong Hao Zi is no longer limited to coordinating labor but is reinterpreted as a medium for expressing broader cultural and emotional themes. It transforms practical function into symbolic representation, allowing traditional musical elements to convey modern artistic meanings. This shift significantly expands the expressive scope of Yan Gong Hao Zi and enhances its artistic value.

3.3 Influence on Contemporary Musical Development

The influence of modern adaptations extends beyond individual works and contributes to the broader development of traditional music in contemporary contexts. By extending musical structure, incorporating compositional techniques, and integrating traditional and modern elements, these works enhance both artistic quality and dissemination potential. They provide a model for the dynamic inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, demonstrating how tradition can be preserved while continuously evolving.

This approach ensures that Yan Gong Hao Zi remains relevant in modern society, not only as a historical artifact but as a living cultural form capable of adaptation and innovation. It also offers valuable insights for the transformation of other traditional musical forms, highlighting the importance of balancing preservation and creativity in cultural development.

The New Body of Knowledge

This study proposes a dynamic model of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi that integrates historical development, musical characteristics, and contemporary transformation into a unified analytical framework. The new knowledge lies in revealing that Yan Gong Hao Zi is not only a labor chant but a multi-dimensional cultural system shaped by the interaction of production mode, social structure, and artistic creation.

The model demonstrates that traditional musical characteristics, including rhythm, structure, and performance style, are rooted in collective labor practices, while contemporary musical creation transforms these elements through compositional techniques and modern aesthetics. The interaction between these two dimensions forms a continuous process of cultural inheritance and innovation, in which functional music evolves into artistic expression without losing its cultural identity.

This framework provides a systematic approach for understanding the transformation of intangible cultural heritage, offering both theoretical insight and practical guidance for the preservation and creative development of traditional folk music (Figure 4).



Figure 4: New Body of Knowledge
(Constructed by the researcher)

Discussion of Research Results

From the research result of the 1st objective, it was found that the emergence and transformation of Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi are strongly dependent on changes in production mode and labor structure. This is because the well salt industry required highly coordinated collective labor, and rhythmic vocalization provided an effective mechanism for synchronizing movement and improving efficiency. As labor division became more specialized and production scale expanded, Yan Gong Hao Zi gradually evolved from simple vocal signals into structured chant forms. In addition, the transition from manual labor to mechanized production explains its shift from a functional labor tool to a cultural heritage form. This is

because when the original production context diminishes, the practical function of the chant weakens, while its symbolic and cultural value becomes more prominent. This is consistent with the view of Alan Lomax (1968), who argued that work songs are shaped by labor patterns and social organization, and their evolution reflects broader changes in production systems.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it was found that the musical characteristics of Yan Gong Hao Zi, including strong rhythm, simple structure, and call-and-response performance, are directly related to its functional role in labor coordination. This is because music used in collective work must prioritize clarity, regularity, and accessibility to ensure effective synchronization. Therefore, rhythm becomes the dominant element, while melody remains relatively simple and direct. At the same time, Yan Gong Hao Zi also plays an important role in constructing social identity, as collective singing strengthens group cohesion and emotional connection among workers. This is because shared musical practices create a sense of belonging and reinforce collective consciousness within the labor community. This is consistent with the theory proposed by Alan P. Merriam (1964), which emphasizes that music in traditional societies serves important social functions, including regulating behavior and maintaining group unity.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, it was found that modern compositions have significantly expanded the expressive form of Yan Gong Hao Zi by integrating traditional musical elements with contemporary compositional techniques. This is because modern performance contexts require greater structural complexity and expressive diversity than traditional labor environments. As a result, traditional chant structures are extended, and elements such as harmony, vocal technique, and accompaniment are incorporated to enhance artistic expression. At the same time, this transformation reflects a process of cultural inheritance and innovation, in which traditional music is reinterpreted rather than simply preserved. This is consistent with the concept proposed by Martin Stokes (2004), which suggests that new musical forms often emerge through the interaction and integration of different musical systems.

Conclusion

This study systematically examined Zigong Yan Gong Hao Zi from the perspectives of historical development, musical characteristics, and contemporary transformation. The findings show that Yan Gong Hao Zi originated from the well salt production system and evolved in close relation to changes in labor organization and technology. Its musical features—such as strong rhythmic patterns, concise structure, and call-and-response performance—reflect its functional role in coordinating collective labor, while also serving as a medium for emotional expression and social cohesion. As traditional production modes declined, Yan Gong Hao Zi gradually transformed from a practical work chant into a form of

intangible cultural heritage, preserving the historical memory and cultural identity of the Zigong region.

At the same time, contemporary musical creation has demonstrated that Yan Gong Hao Zi can be effectively adapted to modern artistic contexts through the integration of traditional elements and new compositional techniques. This transformation highlights a dynamic process of cultural inheritance and innovation, in which tradition is not only preserved but also reinterpreted to meet contemporary aesthetic and cultural needs. Therefore, the study suggests that the sustainable development of Yan Gong Hao Zi depends on balancing preservation with creative transformation, ensuring that it remains a living cultural form with both historical depth and modern relevance.

Suggestions

From the results of the research, the researcher has the following suggestions:

1.The suggestions from the research

From the research result of the 1st objective, i t was found that Yan Gong Hao Zi is closely related to the historical development of the salt industry and labor system. Therefore, it is suggested that local cultural institutions should strengthen the systematic documentation and preservation of historical materials related to Yan Gong Hao Zi, including oral history, performance records, and traditional practices, in order to maintain its authenticity and historical continuity.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it was found that Yan Gong Hao Zi possesses distinctive musical characteristics and strong social-cultural identity. Therefore, it is suggested that educational institutions and cultural organizations should incorporate Yan Gong Hao Zi into music education and cultural promotion programs, allowing younger generations to understand its musical structure, cultural meaning, and regional identity, thereby enhancing public awareness and participation.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, it was found that contemporary musical creation can effectively transform Yan Gong Hao Zi into new artistic forms. Therefore, it is suggested that musicians and creative practitioners should actively explore innovative approaches by integrating traditional musical elements with modern compositional techniques and media platforms, such as stage performance, digital media, and interdisciplinary collaboration, to expand their artistic expression and dissemination channels.

2. The suggestions for future research

2.1 Future research should further explore the interdisciplinary perspectives of Yan Gong Hao Zi, particularly in relation to cultural anthropology, musicology, and digital humanities, in order to deepen the theoretical understanding of its cultural significance and transformation process.

2.2 Future research should focus on comparative analysis between Yan Gong Hao Zi and other types of Chinese labor chants or international work songs, to identify similarities and differences in musical structure, social function, and cultural context, thereby enriching the academic discourse on labor music.

2.3 Future research should examine the application of digital technology in the preservation and dissemination of Yan Gong Hao Zi, including virtual performance, digital archiving, and interactive media, so as to promote its sustainable development in the contemporary cultural environment.

References

Lomax, A. (1968). *Folk Song Style and Culture*. Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Merriam, A. P. (1964). *The Anthropology of Music*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.

Song, L. (2008). A Collection of Essays on Salt History. Sichuan, CN: Sichuan People's Publishing House.

Stokes, M. (2004). Music and the Globalization of Culture. In A. Bennett & R. A. Peterson (Eds.), *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. Tennessee, USA: Vanderbilt University Press.

Wang, Y. (2008). *Chinese National Music*. Shanghai, CN: Shanghai Music Publishing House.

Xiao, C. (2006). *An Overview of Chinese Folk Music*. Chongqing, CN: Southwest Normal University Press.

Zeng, F. (2009). *A Collection of Essays on Salt Culture Research*. Sichuan, CN: Bashu Publishing House.

Zigong Mass Art Museum. (n.d.). *Selected Folk Songs of Zigong*. Guangdong, CN: Rongxian Printing House.