

## Research on the Practice of Singing Folk Songs by porters in Bashan on the Stage——The Artistic Features of Folk Songs by porters in Bashan and the Deficiencies in the Singing Progress on the Stage

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### Abstract

Folk songs by porters in Bashan are an important component of folk songs in Baqu and one of China's intangible cultural heritages. They are mainly distributed in Bashan in northeastern Sichuan province, south to Micang Mountain. As one of intangible cultural heritages, Folk songs by porters in Bashan have been inherited to the present, and have unique charm. Their way of formation is the same as other types of folk songs. All of them were produced during labor, expressing the feelings and wishes of people while laboring. However, with social progress, improvement of living environment and the convenience of traffic, the characteristic local folk song culture gradually declines, leaving music and cultural workers feeling sorrowful. It is imperative to find out the deficiencies obstructing the development of folk songs by porters in Bashan, namely, the deficiencies in the progress of singing them on the stage, so as to find out the appropriate ways to solve these issues for the inheritance and development of the national intangible cultural heritage in a true sense.

### Keywords

Folk songs by porters in Bashan, origin, singing progress.

#### 1. Folk songs by porters in Bashan, origin, singing progress

Folk songs by porters in Bashan, as one of China's intangible cultural heritages, are mainly distributed in Bashan in northeastern Sichuan province, south to Micang Mountain. As one of intangible cultural heritages, Folk songs by porters in Bashan have been inherited to the present, and have unique charm. Their way of formation is the same as other types of folk songs. All of them were produced during labor, expressing the feelings and wishes of people while laboring. The creation of folk songs by porters in Bashan is closely linked with an existing profession that is called "porter" (Bangbang'er, meaning "stick"), since each of the porters holds a stick with wide rope in hand, the stick is a tool of carrying and bearing when moving goods for others. The predecessor of "porter" (Bangbang'er) is the hero of the article "Second Brother Porter in Bashan". The songs sung by them are the research object of the article "folk songs by porters in Bashan". They were originated in 2000 years or more ago, since as early as in Qing and Han Dynasties, people started building the transportation lines in Micang Mountain, which were drilled arising from people's needs. In other words, they were produced when settlers in this area had the need to communicate with the outside world over goods in the early times of Qing and Han Dynasties. Later on, these workers carrying goods on their backs were called "Bei Lao'er" or "Second Brother porters in Bashan". The songs sung by these people were then called "folk songs by porters". Their lives are arduous: They get up to work before sunrise, and can't retire at sunset. Their two feet and waist combined with "three treasures", namely, jar-type basket with trumpet made from T-shaped wooden pestle, military water jug and dried tobacco leaves they plant, they measure the vast Bashan, Micang Mountain and Qing Mountains step by step. When their sweat dampen their clothes, their hands and feet become limp making them feel powerless, they will rest by supporting their jar-type baskets with trumpet by T-shaped wooden pestle, drink some water or wine and smoke self-made "cigar" before chanting "folk songs by porter in Bashan", "boy support their waists while beating for acorns, girls are anxious

when the boys bear fruit, if only their feet are larger, they can bear acorns for me,” or, “Chicken’s faces become red when they lay eggs, whores are different from women, they walk like willows in the wind, and their eyes are like lanterns.” “I get up early in the morning to climb up slopes, the buckwheat are laughing with dews on them, I ask the buckwheat what it is laughing at, it says that it is laughing at both of you last night.”, etc. They relieve the exhaust in labor. Just like the porters chant: “Without singing the east and west, the sun won’t go down in the west.” When they become energetic again, they will start off to measure the mountains again. The decline of “folk songs by porters” since its origin is caused by the impact of external culture and the influence of modernization construction. Why? First of all, modernization makes the traffic more and more convenient, accessing and flattening roads in all towns and villages. Secondly, the development of modernization makes transportation by cars a commonplace phenomenon. Above all, “porters” who used to be engaged in long-distance transportation gradually evolve into “Bangbang’er” engaged in short-distance transportation. The change in the nature of their work makes the screaming of porters on the mountains lose artistic carrier and evolve into the “gossip” of “Bangbanger” in the cities. After all, their work in the cities should not be disturbing. Another main cause is the impact of external culture, people’s horizon and mind are becoming wider and higher due to reform and opening up and the 30 years after it. Absorption of external culture has become ordinary, in particular, young college students show special preferences for external culture. For example, students who have learned bel canto bury their heads in the ocean of Western music, and few of them can go ashore to appreciate the blooming local artistic flowers. As artistic workers, we’re obliged to protect the blooming artistic flower, so that they can enjoy the sea breeze, sunshine and raindrops of the world, integrating the merits of external culture into local culture, and making the artistic flowers more brilliant.

## **2. Folk Songs in Baqu—The Artistic Features of Folk Songs by porters in Bashan and the Deficiencies in the Singing Progress on the Stage**

### **2.1 Artistic Features of Folk Songs by Porters in Bashan**

“Folk songs by porters in Bashan” can be listed among intangible cultural heritage in China and chanted until today, even though the songs have declined and disappeared in modern society, the artistic features of “folk songs by porters in Bashan” still attract artistic workers for exploration, analysis and research. There is no fixed teacher-student relationship between porters in Bashan, many porters in Bashan learn from and communicate with each other while they are moving goods, oral teaching inspiring true understanding within and inheritance on their own. As “folk songs by porters” have fluent and beautiful melody, the lyrics are realistic and interesting, they are widely sung among folks. After years of analysis and reorganizing of relevant data, it is found out that the artistic features of “folk songs by porters in Bashan” are mainly demonstrated in two aspects——lyrics and music.

Lyrics: the lyrics of “folk songs by porters in Bashan” are mostly seven-character regulated poems with the same rhyme in the first two lines, the third and fourth lines and the last three lines. Most of the lyrics use fu bi xing, the vivid and lifelike expression can be subtly appreciated but not put into words. According to “Records of Bazhou·Customs”: “During the reign of Kangxi and Yongzheng, seedlings are planted in fields in spring, two singers are selected to beat Cheng-ku in Gansu, their songs are graceful and sung till today, they are so beautiful that cultivators forget about their tiredness and regain their energy.” The added lyrics can be divided into notional lyrics and syntactic lyrics, which is also one of the distinctive features of folk songs by porters in Bashan. For example, “Xian you’er” “Qing xiong’er” are the added words used by porters when they greet each other, “Xian mei’er”, “Qing mei’er” or “Qing xiong’er” are the added words used to sing their lovers. The lyrics of “folk songs by porters in Bashan” are bitterly romantic and imaginative, for example: “The pestle is 94cm long, it is indispensable climbing up and down the mountains, it can be used to test the depth of river, and is more endearing than your biological son.” These short lines of lyrics describe the “pestle” that accompanies you day and night, in particular, the last line “more endearing than your biological son” is a vivid metaphor, all sorts of feelings will well up in people’s mind. Porters travel over land and water, their way is full of hardships, with every step a pestle is beat, when they lack of

physical strength, they can use the pestle as a pad to back the goods so that they can take a rest temporarily. When they cross the river they can test the depth of rivers and the road condition with the pestle when they tread the water. The pestle is their only company to the hardships and solitude on the road, they hold it during the day and place it nearby at night. Without pestles, how can the porters move ahead! The weight of pestles in the mind of porters is imaginable, the lyric, “it is more endearing than your biological son”, shows the feelings and monologues of porters. There is another example, “My legs, don’t feel like jelly, after another climbing up the ridge, we will arrive at Liangfengya. The landlady of the store is waiting for you, she opens up her chest and feeds her babies. If you want to eat her hot steamed buns (breast), you should climb up slowly.” “Porters” carry heavy goods across mountains and hills, ditches and slopes, when they are exhausted and reach their physical limit, what do they rely on to climb ahead? Spirit and will. But where do they come from? For porters, young married women who can warm up their body and mind are most attractive and practical. “Hold on, my legs, after the slope, we will arrive at Liangfengya, the while and soft ‘breasts’ of the landlady is waiting for me to bite.” On this thought, the porters have to clench their teeth and climb up step by step. The lyrics read pornographic and vulgar, but they are the reflection of the true state of mind of porters and the frankest, most direct, imaginative and romantic lyric of the “folk songs by porters”. The above two lines of lyrics use the rhetoric device of metaphor. Think it over, “son” and “woman” are the closest to men, covering the most important place in men’s mind. What else is more important than these? Maybe only the porters shuttling between mountains and hills, bearing heavy physical labor unbearable for ordinary men can scream out the essence of humanity, it looks so natural and pure. The following lyrics are authentic compared to the above-mentioned lyrics: “my hands and feet are limp and unable to move ahead, Xian mei’er becomes pregnant, but who to blame? I can’t blame anyone else, you are the one who carries me on your back. My hands and feet are limp, it is the fault of Xian mei’er? You blame me for limp hands and feet, who can I blame for my swollen belly?” Look closely, these are lyrics of duet between men and women, but think for a while, where to find “Xian mei’er” for company between steep and dangerous hills and mountains while carrying goods? The porters are just singing their thoughts. The lyrics don’t have to be sung by two people, the porter along can chant gently or in a bold and unrestrained way, making the porters different from the porters we know. There is no screaming and crying, but the whispers between the porters and their wives at night. These allow us to see the gentle side of the bold and tough swarthy men of Bashan. This “duet” by one man reveals to us the unique romantic and artistic aesthetic interest of “folk songs by porters of Bashan”. Another example is when a porter feels tired and sees a woman washing clothes in the river, he wants to tease the woman, beats his pestle and starts to sing: “The river is full of water, sand and waves, girls become dizzy on crossing Tiaodeng. What is your name, madam, do you want me to carry you?” The woman won’t feel angry and sings in response: “don’t carry me, brother, I’m like a flower with flying bees. I’ve blossomed and yielded fruits, don’t take advantage of me.” The porter on hearing this won’t insist any more, after taking a rest, he will move on. A porter sings instantly: “the tilted back pad is like a shuttle”, then others will join him: “I am a porter in Bashan”, the porter leads the chorus: “the sun sends me off on Bashan”, others will join him again: “the moon accompanies me across Ba river.” The porter leads again: “beat a pestle and sing a folk song.” Others will join again: “people say I’m so happy.” These lyrics show us a group of naughty, happy, practical and obedient porters. These lyrics that can create pictures in our mind instantly are an important artistic feature of “porters of Bashan”.

Music: The rhythm of “folk songs by porters in Bashan” is fresh, natural, sonorous and beautiful, the style of singing is bold and full of local characteristics. Their mode prove to have pentatonic tone in the data reorganized, which is another distinctive artistic features of “folk songs by porters in Bashan”. In order to show the readers the artistic features of the music of “folk songs by porters in Bashan” in a clearer way, we will share two music scores as examples: (Score example 1-1, score example 1-2). Just as we have mentioned above to the readers, “folk songs by porters in Bashan” are labor chants, but through the two examples, it is easy for us to find out that they are not full of intense sense of rhythm and pattern like labor chants. The melody and voice in free rhythm are also quire free.

Although they look like ragtime, the structure of their musical form tend to be solo segments composed of phrases of question and answer one after another, the rhythm is clear. Therefore, the rhythmic “free-running tunes” can be called a musical artistic feature of “folk songs by porters in Bashan”. Of course, the post of “porter” is not unique in Northeastern Sichuan, the singing form of “folk songs by porters” is not unique to Bashan, either. However, the free style of singing, toughness and boldness, fresh and fluent melody, tactful, loud and sonorous and bright voice and the momentum across mountains and hills and head straight into the clouds are so unique that they were listed among the first batch of intangible cultural heritage on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006 after being approved by the State Council.

## 2.2 The Deficiencies of Original “Folk Songs by Porters of Bashan” in the Progress of Singing on the Stage

The deficiency of “folk songs by porters of Bashan” in the progress of singing on the stage is mainly manifested in the gradually repelling of the ways of singing and voice of the original singers on the stage. The main reasons are as follows:

(I) The promotion of people’s appreciation ability: with the spreading and influence in our country, more and more people begin to accept the foreign culture of bel canto. The “scientificness” of bel canto makes more and more people start to “enjoy” and study it, in the process of “enjoyment” and learning, people’s appreciation ability is unconsciously promoted. The promotion of appreciation ability gradually widens the gap between people and the original “folk songs by porters in Bashan”.

(II) The changes of the singing environment. “Folk songs by porters in Bashan” are the folk songs about the inner feelings in specific labor environment. However, with the disappearance of the profession of “porter”, the folk songs sung by porters can only be performed to audiences in specific performing circumstances. The change in the singing environment makes the “porters” become the original singers now, losing the energy and atmosphere of singing while doing labor. The inner world and encouragement that used to be sung become the purpose of singing to the audience so as to inherit and protect the national intangible cultural heritage, resulting in the missing of the truthful inner feelings, the audience used to be the porters or the passersby around, but now they come out of their way to appreciate, the specific performing environment is lost, meanwhile, it is difficult for the singers to be inspired and sing out their true state of mind.

(III) The singing style is hard to meet the additionally promoted appreciation abilities of people: The inheritance of such original singers is by oral teaching inspiring true understanding within, they lack of scientific material for support and singing methods as the means of exercise, they only have the “screaming and telling” from the inner world generation after generation under specific circumstances. When the “truthful” “screaming and telling” are performed in specified environment, they have lost the “real” coat, and how can the remaining “screaming and telling” meet people’s promoted appreciation abilities? For example, in the score 1-3 “walk on the top bar in the morning”, the melody of this folk song by porters stays in the treble, most of the singings by original singers I have heard in Eastern Sichuan are quite strenuous, most of the time, they bellow throughout the song instead of singing it beautifully. The audience who buys ticket to appreciate “beauty” will not like the “screaming” naturally.

The above-mentioned reasons make artistic workers anxious, the pressing need is for us to join hands and find appropriate methods to solve these issues so that the national intangible cultural heritage can be inherited and developed.

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