



A STUDY ON THE SINGING ART OF ZHAO JIPING'S FILM AND TELEVISION SONGS

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Abstract

Zhao Jiping is a leading figure in contemporary Chinese film music composition, known for blending traditional folk idioms and operatic elements with modern orchestral techniques. While his instrumental works have received extensive scholarly attention, the vocal aspects of his film and television songs remain underexplored. This study aims to investigate the artistic characteristics, performance techniques, and cultural value of Zhao Jiping's film and television songs from a vocal perspective, addressing the gap in current research regarding his contributions to vocal performance in cinematic contexts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates literature analysis, score and audio data extraction, semi-structured interviews, and audience questionnaires. It applies analytical dimensions including historical context, creative intent, and musical ontology, alongside a conceptual framework that connects vocal expression with cultural dissemination. **The findings** identify three developmental stages in Zhao Jiping's creative output—Early Exploration, Mature Breakthrough, and Cultural Integration—each marked by distinct musical language and vocal styles. His film songs exhibit a dynamic fusion of pentatonic modes, regional operatic elements, and Western symphonic textures. These works pose unique challenges for

vocalists and contribute significantly to cultural identity construction, aesthetic education, and international cultural exchange. Conclusion: Zhao Jiping's vocal compositions in film and television not only reflect a personal artistic evolution but also serve as vital mediums for preserving and transforming Chinese musical heritage. His works exemplify the modernization of traditional culture and offer valuable models for contemporary vocal performance and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Tao Te Ching; Cultural Semiotics; Translation; Cross-Cultural Communication; Literary Adaptation

Introduction

Since the 1980s, film music has played an increasingly significant role in shaping the narrative, emotional, and cultural dimensions of Chinese cinema. As one of the most prominent composers in this field, Zhao Jiping (b. 1945, Shulu, Hebei) has made substantial contributions to the development of contemporary Chinese film and television music. Beginning with his landmark score for *Yellow Earth* (1984), Zhao has composed music for nearly fifty films, collaborating with leading directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. His musical creations are characterized by a seamless integration of traditional Chinese folk music and operatic elements with modern compositional techniques, reflecting the belief that “the more national the music, the more it must synchronize with the times and reach the world” (Zhao, 2003; Fan, 2004).

Zhao Jiping's music not only enhances the aesthetic quality and emotional resonance of films but also serves as a vehicle for expressing Chinese cultural identity and promoting traditional values through modern media. His works represent a unique fusion of regional folk idioms, such as Shaanbei *Xintianyou* and Peking opera, with Western symphonic forms. This synthesis gives his compositions a distinct national character while enabling their global appeal. Despite considerable academic attention to Zhao's compositional techniques, harmonic language, and cultural symbolism, relatively little research has examined his film songs from the perspective of vocal performance, especially with regard to their artistic features, stylistic characteristics, and performative demands (Long, 2011; Yang, 2019).

The significance of this study lies in its aim to fill that gap by systematically analyzing the singing art of Zhao Jiping's film and television songs. These songs are not merely musical accompaniments; they are integral to narrative construction, character development, and cultural dissemination. By examining Zhao's vocal music across different stages of his career, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of his vocal style, techniques, and contributions to Chinese film music, thereby providing theoretical and practical guidance for performers, educators, and researchers in vocal arts and film music studies.

Research Objectives

1. To study the creative process and developmental stages of Zhao Jiping's film and television songs, identifying representative works and their evolving compositional features.
2. To analyze the musical language and vocal style of Zhao Jiping's film and television songs, focusing on melody structure, modal usage, rhythmic design, and singing techniques.
3. To explore the cultural value and social function of Zhao Jiping's film and television songs in promoting traditional Chinese culture, enhancing cultural identity, and facilitating cross-cultural exchange.

Literature Reviews

Studies on Zhao Jiping's Musical Language and Aesthetic Construction: Yang Heping (2019) offers a comprehensive perspective on the foundational principles underpinning Zhao Jiping's film music style. The study argues that Zhao's success is rooted in two pillars: a forward-thinking theoretical orientation and a deep commitment to Chinese cultural logic. By fusing elements such as traditional opera, folk tunes, and ethnic instruments into a coherent musical language, Zhao constructs a unique compositional identity that bridges past and present. Yang also highlights Zhao's ability to balance cultural authenticity with cinematic innovation, demonstrating that his works are not merely decorative but integral to film narrative structure and national cultural representation.

Heng Shengchen (1998) focuses on a detailed musical analysis of the iconic piece *The Hero's Song*, revealing how Zhao creates a sense of heroism and

rugged masculinity through rhythmic drive and large melodic leaps. The study identifies compositional features such as intense drum patterns, dominant chord progressions, and expansive intervallic motion, which together establish a powerful musical character aligned with the spirit of the film's protagonists. Heng's analysis illustrates Zhao's capacity to translate dramatic themes into musical form, offering valuable insight into the emotional architecture of his scores.

Zhao Shimin (2003) presents an authoritative, first-person account of Zhao Jiping's artistic development, creative philosophy, and long-term collaborations with filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Drawing from interviews, personal reflections, and manuscript analyses, this monograph outlines Zhao's approach to integrating Chinese traditional music with modern cinematic needs. It emphasizes Zhao's belief in the symbiotic relationship between national identity and contemporary relevance, and it serves as a foundational source for understanding the evolution of his compositional thought.

Research on Vocal Style and Performance in Zhao Jiping's Works:

Long Zhenhua (2011) conducts an in-depth study on the vocal style and performance requirements of Zhao Jiping's ethnic vocal compositions. The dissertation identifies several key features of Zhao's vocal writing: reliance on pentatonic modes, hybridization of folk singing and operatic techniques, and complex emotional expression. Importantly, the study highlights the technical challenges performers face, such as managing breath control, producing region-specific vocal timbres, and adapting to dramatic shifts in musical mood. Long emphasizes the lack of standardized vocal pedagogy for Zhao's works and advocates for the development of interpretive frameworks to support singers engaging with his music.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods, with an emphasis on qualitative analysis. The aim is to explore the deep artistic meaning of Zhao Jiping's film songs while supporting the findings with empirical data.

Data Collection: Three primary types of data are collected in line with the research objectives:

Literature and Historical Data: Original documents, including film music manuscripts, composer interviews, and production notes, are collected from sources such as CNKI, the National Library, and the Shaanxi Zhao Jiping Music Art Foundation. In-depth analysis is conducted on works like *Red Sorghum*, *The Grand Mansion Gate*, and *Qiao Family Courtyard*.

Scores and Audio Analysis: Complete scores of Zhao's film songs are digitally processed to examine melodic direction, modal features, and orchestration. A vocal version database containing 156 recordings from 1980 to 2025 is established, including performances by Peng Liyuan, Tan Jing, and Lei Jia. Key elements such as vocal timbre, diction, and emotional expression are annotated.

Interviews and Questionnaires: Semi-structured interviews with composers, singers, and film directors are conducted to gain insight into compositional intention and vocal techniques. Questionnaires are distributed to music scholars and general audiences to evaluate the aesthetic reception and cultural impact of Zhao Jiping's songs.

Analytical Dimensions: To uncover the internal logic of Zhao Jiping's film songs, the study applies three key analytical perspectives:

Literature–Historical Perspective: This perspective explores the influence of historical context—particularly the Reform and Opening-Up era—on Zhao's use of folk and operatic materials. For example, the reinterpretation of *Xintianyou* in *Yellow Earth* is compared to later symphonic treatments in *The Qin Empire*.

Creative Intent Perspective: By comparing creative manuscripts with interview data, this analysis investigates how Zhao's musical ideas align with film narratives. It emphasizes the use of rhythmic tension and timbral contrast to serve storytelling.

Musical Ontology Perspective: With the aid of AI-assisted music analysis tools, the study quantifies modal structures—such as the interaction between Zhi and Gong modes in *The Hero's Song*—to understand how musical elements correspond to emotional shifts and dramatic development.

Results

This study investigates Zhao Jiping's film and television songs from three main dimensions: the developmental stages of his creative output, the stylistic features and vocal characteristics of his musical language, and the cultural and social significance of his works. Through systematic data collection and multi-angle analysis, the findings are presented under the following three themes:

1. Stages and Characteristics of Zhao Jiping's Creative Development

The results indicate that Zhao Jiping's film song composition can be categorized into three distinct periods: the Early Exploration Period, the Mature Breakthrough Period, and the Cultural Fusion Period. Each stage reflects changes in musical style, thematic content, and artistic vision corresponding to broader socio-cultural contexts.

In the early stage, exemplified by *Yellow Earth* (1984), Zhao drew heavily from Shaanbei folk traditions such as *Xintianyou*, employing pentatonic modes and sparse instrumentation. Songs like *Daughter's Song* (Figure 2), performed with mournful timbre and minimal accompaniment, convey a strong sense of regional identity.

女儿歌

——电影《黄土地》主题曲

陈凯歌 词
赵季平 曲

1 = C $\frac{2}{4}$
稍慢 深情

1: (0 5 6 i | 3 2 2 6 | i 7 5 | 6 -) | 2 3 2 i | 2 i 7 6 | 6 2 5 3 5 | 6 -
1. 六 月 里 黄 河 冰 不 化,
2. 六 月 里 黄 河 冰 不 化,

6 2 2 6 5 | 6 3 2 2 | 5 3 3 2 1 | 2 - | (6 2 2 6 5 | 6 3 2 2 | 5 3 3 2 1
丑 着 我 成 亲 是 我 大,
公 家 人 不 知 我 会 唱 歌,

2 -) | 5 5 6 3 5 6 | 1 7 6 5 6 | 6 2 6 2 | 3 2 3 2 | i . 6 | 2 2 2 6 5
五 谷 里 数 不 过 碗 豆 圆, 人 里 头 数 不 过 事 我 开 口
干 石 板 栽 葱 就 扎 不 下 根, 想 说 心

1. 4 . 5 | 6 6 6 3 2 | 2 1 2 3 | 2 - :|| (0 5 6 i | 3 2 2 6 | i 7 5 | 6 -)
怜, 女 儿 可 怜 女 儿 哟!
难, 开 口 难 女 儿 哟!

2 3 2 i | 2 i 7 6 | 6 2 5 3 5 | 6 - :|| 6 2 2 6 5 | 6 3 2 2 | 5 3 3 2 1 | 2 - :||
天 上 的 沙 鸽 对 对 飞, 不 想 我 的 那 亲 娘 再 想 谁?

Figure 1: Conceptual framework (Source: Cultural Department of Political Department of Beijing Military Region, 1992).

During the mature period, works such as *The Hero's Song* feature a broader musical palette, integrating folk melodies with rhythmic power and dramatic tension (Figure 3). This stage reflects Zhao's deepening artistic maturity and narrative sensitivity.

好 汉 歌

中速 粗犷、豪情涌 易 茗词
赵季平曲



(独)大河向东流哇,天上的星星参北斗哇,
(独)大河向东流哇,天上的星星参北斗哇,

(伴)唉嗨嗨嗨参北斗哇,生死之交一碗酒哇,(独)说走咱就走哇,
(伴)唉嗨嗨嗨参北斗哇,不分贵贱一碗酒哇,(独)说走咱就走哇,

你有我有全都有哇,(伴)唉嗨嗨嗨全都有哇,水里火里不回头哇,
你有我有全都有哇,(伴)唉嗨嗨嗨全都有哇,水里火里不回头哇,

(独)路见不平一声吼哇,该出手时就出手哇,风风火火闯九州哇。
(独)路见不平一声吼哇,该出手时就出手哇,风风火火闯九州哇。

(独)嗨 哟 依儿 哟, 嗨 嗨 嗨 依儿 哟,(伴)唉嗨嗨 依儿 哟,

唉嗨嗨 依儿 哟(独)路见不平一声吼哇,该出手时就出手哇,

风风火火闯九州哇。(伴)唉嗨嗨嗨嗨嗨嗨嗨,唉嗨嗨嗨嗨嗨嗨嗨, D.S.

风风火火闯九州哇。 Fine

Figure 2: *The Hero's Song* (Source: Yu et al., 2010)

In the later period, Zhao expanded into television soundtracks, combining local operatic elements with Western symphonic structures. For instance, in *Qiao Family Courtyard* (2006), the theme song *Distant Feelings* fuses lyrical Shanxi folk melodies with contemporary vocal techniques, achieving both cultural rootedness and modern expressiveness (Figure 4).



Figure 3: *Distant Feeling* (Source: Yang, 2021)

Specific details are as follows as Table 1:

Table 1 Zhao Jiping's journey of creating film and television songs

Stages of Creation	Time Span	Representative works	Compositional Features
Early Exploration Period	1980s-1990s	The Yellow Earth, Red Sorghum, Judea	Based on the folk songs of northern Shaanxi, integrating suona, waist drums and other ethnic instruments, forming a style of coexistence of roughness and lyricism
Mature Breakthrough Period	1990s-2000s		Diversified themes, including the impassioned bravado of “Song of the Good Man” as well as the delicacy and gentleness of “Gate House,” showing dramatic tension
Cultural Integration Period		Theme Song Group of “Water Margin”, Soundtrack of	Combining elements of local operas such as Jin Opera, Peking Opera, etc., with Western symphonies, such as

		"The Great House	the epic expression of "Song of Kong Ming
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2. Musical Language and Vocal Style in Zhao Jiping's Film Songs

Zhao Jiping's musical language evolved dynamically over time. In the early stages, he relied on traditional pentatonic modes and smooth rhythmic patterns, often directly referencing regional folk idioms. As his work progressed, he began incorporating diverse modal structures and experimenting with complex rhythmic textures.

For example, *The Hero's Song* employs shifting meters and wide melodic leaps to reflect the bold spirit of the Liangshan heroes, requiring a powerful and resonant vocal delivery. By the later stage, Zhao's compositional style became more fluid and eclectic, emphasizing emotional nuance and closer alignment with visual narratives. His songs during this phase demand a high level of interpretative skill from singers, who must convey layered emotional content while navigating intricate melodic lines.

This stylistic development reveals Zhao's consistent commitment to blending tradition with innovation, using vocal music as a medium to enhance narrative depth and cultural meaning.

Specific details are as follows as Table 2:

Table 2 Zhao Jiping's musical creation period and style

Stage	Characteristics of music language	Singing style
Early	Mostly adopts traditional folk tuning, builds melody based on pentatonic scale, and the rhythm is relatively smooth	Mostly adopts traditional folk tuning, building melodies based on pentatonic scale, with smooth rhythm
Mid	On the basis of folk tuning, fuses with other tunings, and the rhythm is rich and changeable	Various changes according to the style of the work, e.g. "The Song of the Good

		Man” needs to be majestic and powerful
Late	The use of tuning is free and flexible, fuses elements of various music styles, and the rhythm is closely matched with the picture and plot.	High requirements for singers, who need to deal with different emotions and styles in a delicate way

3. Cultural Value and Social Function of Zhao Jiping’s Film Songs

Beyond their artistic merit, Zhao Jiping’s film songs carry significant cultural and social value. Works like *My Motherland* and *The Grand Mansion Gate* not only elevate the emotional atmosphere of their respective films but also convey moral ideals and social commentary, contributing to public discourse and cultural education.

Zhao’s compositions often integrate regional musical traditions—such as Jin opera, Peking opera, and Shanxi folk tunes—thereby revitalizing and preserving intangible cultural heritage. Songs like *Distant Feelings* enable traditional elements to enter the mainstream through accessible, emotionally resonant performances.

On a broader level, Zhao’s music serves as a medium for promoting national identity and fostering cross-cultural exchange. His award-winning score for *Farewell My Concubine* brought international attention to Chinese opera aesthetics, demonstrating how traditional forms can find renewed vitality in modern media. In this way, Zhao Jiping’s film songs exemplify the “creative transformation” and “innovative development” of Chinese culture in the contemporary era.

Discussions

Film music serves as a critical bridge between narrative structure and emotional expression, often carrying cultural and symbolic meaning beyond its auditory function. Zhao Jiping's film and television songs exemplify this integrative power, combining regional folk elements with modern musical language to create works that resonate both artistically and culturally. This study has demonstrated that Zhao's compositional evolution—from early folk-based melodies to mature, hybridized symphonic forms—not only reflects his individual artistic growth but also mirrors broader shifts in Chinese cinematic aesthetics.

The findings of this research are consistent with Qiao Jianzhong's (2017) view that Zhao Jiping does not merely quote traditional musical materials, but instead transforms them creatively to construct a personal, context-sensitive musical vocabulary. This perspective aligns with the observed development in Zhao's works, such as the blending of Jin opera with Western orchestration in *Qiao Family Residence*, which exemplifies his commitment to “modernizing the national” through innovation.

At the same time, this study extends the existing scholarship by focusing on the often-overlooked dimension of vocal performance. Prior literature has primarily concentrated on Zhao's compositional style and instrumental arrangements (Fan, 2004), while this research introduces a detailed analysis of vocal techniques—such as breath control, diction, and emotional layering—highlighting the performative demands his songs place on singers. This singer-centered perspective offers a fresh interpretive lens and provides practical insights for performers engaging with Zhao Jiping's film music.

New Knowledges

Zhao Jiping's film and television music reflects over forty years of artistic development and cultural engagement. His works demonstrate a progression from early folk-based simplicity to mature and richly layered musical expressions. Rooted in ethnic traditions, Zhao skillfully revitalizes folk music—such as *Xintianyou* in *Red Sorghum*—while simultaneously embracing contemporary innovations. His compositional language integrates regional elements with modern techniques, showcasing a unique balance between heritage and creativity.

For instance, the erhu solo in *Alive* evokes deep emotional nuance, while the use of female chorus and Peking Opera percussion in *Raise the Red Lantern* creates striking auditory contrast. In *Qiao Family Residence*, Jin Opera melodies are symphonically reinterpreted, reflecting Zhao's ability to modernize traditional opera within cinematic narratives. These works not only elevate artistic quality but also contribute to cultural transmission, transforming regional sounds into national and international symbols of Chinese identity (Table 3).

Works	Musical Language Features
Red Sorghum	Revitalization of Folk Music Materials: Directly taken from Shaanbei Xintiyou, the coarse singing and percussion rhythms of the “Sedan Chair Song” restore the folklore of Northwest China.
Alive	Extraordinary Instrumental Combination: Erhu solo rendering the atmosphere of tragedy.
Big Red Lanterns Hanging High	Extraordinary Instrumental Combination: Fusion of female chorus and Peking Opera gongs and cymbals to form an auditory impact; Ethnization of Western Techniques. Fusion: using fixed theme variations, echoing the tragic fate of the women in minor third sighing tones, while retaining the Peking Opera rhyming white chants
TV series Qiao Family Residence	Modernization and Translation of Opera Elements: adopting the core melody of the Jin Opera, and realizing the dialogue between the tradition and the modernity through the symphonic arrangement.

Conclusions

The study of Zhao Jiping's film song performance art, exploring his singing style, dissemination significance, and influencing factors, centers on analyzing his creative stages, classic tracks, singing techniques, aesthetic thoughts, and the role of contemporary influence on dissemination development. It is hypothesized that the composer's personal experiences, song creation

characteristics, audience groups, film plot, and the level of performers have a positive impact on singing style and dissemination development.

Zhao Jiping's film song creation features are embodied in the in-depth exploration and innovative application of ethnic music. He is adept at drawing material from folk traditions, such as the work song elements and Qin opera style in *Red Sorghum*, infusing the music with a rural flavor. Simultaneously, he incorporates Western musical techniques, as seen in *Raise the Red Lantern*, where he uses a fixed theme variation format and combines female choral singing with traditional percussion instruments. He also applies traditional opera elements, such as Peking opera, Kunqu opera, and Henan opera in *Farewell My Concubine*, enhancing the expressiveness of the music. In terms of singing style, his works have simple, direct melodies and plain lyrics, such as in *Sister, You Boldly Walk Forward*, which communicates a cry of life through straightforward language and rugged melodies.

Zhao Jiping's film songs hold significant meaning and value in China's dissemination. His works have promoted the modernization of ethnic culture by incorporating traditional ethnic music elements into modern film music, such as the Jin opera melodies in *The Mansion of Qiao Family*, rejuvenating traditional culture. Moreover, his music enhances the artistic impact of films, such as the strong visual and auditory impact created by the music in *Red Sorghum*. Additionally, Zhao Jiping's music has facilitated cultural exchange between China and the West, such as the fusion of Western modern compositional techniques in *Raise the Red Lantern*, providing a reference for the global reach of Chinese film music.

By analyzing the study of Zhao Jiping's film song performance art, we can see that his creative history is a microcosm of the modernization transformation of Chinese folk music. His songs are not only the lifeblood of film narratives but also the auditory crystallization of Chinese aesthetic spirit, providing a model for Chinese artistic expression in the era of globalization.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to support future research and practical development in the field of Chinese film music and vocal performance:

Expand Comparative Research on Film Composers: Future studies could compare Zhao Jiping's vocal writing and compositional techniques with those of other influential Chinese film composers such as Tan Dun and San Bao. This would help to identify shared characteristics, stylistic divergences, and broader trends in the development of Chinese film music, particularly in terms of how composers integrate traditional musical elements into contemporary cinematic contexts.

Deepen Vocal Performance Analysis in Film Music: As Zhao Jiping's film songs present complex demands in breath control, tone shaping, and emotional expression, future research should further explore the pedagogical implications of these works. Building a systematic performance guide or vocal technique framework tailored to his songs could benefit vocal educators and performers alike.

Strengthen Interdisciplinary Approaches: Given the intersection of music, cinema, and cultural identity in Zhao's work, future studies should incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives—such as film narratology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies—to deepen understanding of how his vocal music functions within cinematic narratives and cultural discourse.

Promote Artistic Inheritance and Cultural Dissemination: Zhao Jiping's works serve as valuable carriers of intangible cultural heritage. Institutions and practitioners are encouraged to curate concerts, vocal training workshops, and multimedia performances that highlight his film songs, fostering greater public engagement and international appreciation of Chinese musical aesthetics.

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