

A Study on the Vocal Characteristics and Inheritance and Development of Yunnan Ethnic Minority Folk Songs

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ABSTRACT

This paper systematically analyzes the historical origins, vocal art characteristics, inheritance status and innovative development strategies of the folk songs of Yunnan's ethnic minorities. In the historical origin part, the profound influence of ethnic migration and lifestyle on the formation of folk songs is discussed; in terms of vocal art characteristics, the uniqueness of vocalization techniques, breath use, melody and rhythm are sorted out; in the inheritance status, the advantages and challenges of group, family, social and school inheritance are summarized; finally, combined with modern music expression forms and communication methods, specific strategies for inheritance and innovation are proposed, emphasizing the key role of multi-party collaboration in the protection and development of folk songs. The article aims to provide theoretical reference and practical direction for the inheritance and promotion of Yunnan's ethnic minority folk songs.

Keywords: *Yunnan ethnic minority folk songs, Historical origins, Vocal art characteristics, Inheritance and innovation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Located in the southwestern frontier of China, Yunnan is known as the "Hometown of Singing and Dancing" and the "Ocean of Music." It is one of the provinces with the most ethnic minorities in China, home to 26 minority groups. Over the long-term production, life, and cultural integration, these ethnic groups have given birth to a rich and unique folk song culture. These folk songs are not only important vehicles for expressing emotions, recording life, and passing down history but also shining pearls in the treasure house of Chinese national music culture. They vividly display the unique folk customs and national spirit of Yunnan.

However, with the passage of time and the impact of globalization, the inheritance and development of Yunnan minority folk songs face severe challenges. On the one hand, modern popular music has attracted a large audience, especially teenagers, leading to a gradual decline in the attention paid to traditional folk songs. On the other hand, the traditional way of passing down songs orally and by ear can no longer adapt to the

development of modern society, and some folk song arts are on the verge of extinction.

Against this backdrop, it is of great significance to study the vocal characteristics of Yunnan minority folk songs and explore strategies for their inheritance. By analyzing their artistic charm and cultural connotations, we can not only provide theoretical support for the inheritance of folk songs but also formulate feasible innovative strategies to protect this valuable cultural heritage and bring it new vitality. Meanwhile, Yunnan folk songs play a positive role in promoting national unity, cultural exchange, and enhancing cultural identity. They contribute to the prosperity of Chinese national music culture and make it shine more brightly on the world stage.

2. HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF YUNNAN MINORITY FOLK SONGS

The formation and development of Yunnan minority folk songs are closely related to their long-standing historical origins. Throughout the long-

standing historical process, the migration, integration, and cultural accumulation of various ethnic groups have provided a rich soil for the birth and dissemination of folk songs. Especially during the process of ethnic migration, the spread and change of culture have profoundly shaped the content and form of Yunnan minority folk songs, becoming an important source of their unique charm [1].

2.1 The Impact of Ethnic Migration

Many ethnic minorities in Yunnan have experienced a long-standing migration process in history. For example, the Yi people, whose ancestors, in the process of seeking suitable places to live, integrated the cultural elements of their original places of residence with the local customs and human feelings along the way, and recorded the migration routes, hardships, and longing for new homes through oral singing. These contents gradually developed into a unique form of folk songs [2]. During the migration, people needed to use songs to unite strength, convey information, and relieve homesickness. Sitting together and humming simple-but-emotionally-rich tunes not only comforted the soul but also allowed the ethnic memory to be passed down.

2.2 The Evolution of Lifestyles

The evolution of lifestyles has had a significant impact on the formation of folk songs. In the early stages dominated by fishing, hunting, and gathering, people created rhythmic work songs to coordinate their labor rhythms and improve efficiency. For example, the rhythmic calls made by the Hani people during collective wild fruit-gathering or fishing gradually evolved into the embryonic form of folk songs with lyrics [3]. With the development of agriculture, ethnic minorities began to settle down and engage in farming and animal husbandry. As a result, folk songs related to spring sowing, autumn harvesting, and herding were born. For example, the Bai people's rice-planting tune and the Zhuang people's herding song vividly depict the production and life scenes of various ethnic groups.

2.3 The Role of Communal Living

Communal living has provided fertile ground for the birth of folk songs. In closed-off residential environments, people's social and entertainment activities mostly revolve around singing and dancing. By the campfire at night, villagers share

their experiences and express their emotions through songs, incorporating their joys and sorrows. Elders pass down ancient folk songs to the younger generation, telling them about the ethnic history, ancestors' deeds, moral norms, and customs. Thus, folk songs have become an important tool for passing down national culture [4]. Take the Miao ancient songs as an example. Their content covers historical stories such as the creation of the world and the origin of the ethnic group. These songs have been sung from generation to generation, continuing the history and culture of the Miao people.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VOCAL ART IN YUNNAN MINORITY FOLK SONGS

The vocal art of Yunnan minority folk songs is deeply rooted in the life practices and cultural traditions of various ethnic groups. Its uniqueness is first reflected in the vocal characteristics. Different ethnic groups, through long-standing singing practice, have developed their own unique vocal styles in combination with their language features, emotional expression, and life needs [5]. These vocal characteristics are not only an important basis for the artistic expressiveness of folk songs but also lay a solid foundation for their unique ethnic styles.

3.1 Vocal Characteristics of Yunnan Minority Folk Songs

The vocal characteristics of Yunnan minority folk songs not only reflect the unique skills of various ethnic groups in the use of true and false voices but are also closely related to their geographical environment, cultural background, and historical inheritance. In the long-standing process of evolution, these folk songs have developed a variety of vocal forms according to different life needs and artistic expression goals, showing high adaptability and creativity [6]. Through the flexible use of true and false voices, the folk songs of various ethnic groups not only meet the needs of specific emotional expression and singing scenes but also add unique artistic charm to their musical styles. This enables each folk song to display distinct regional characteristics and cultural connotations [7].

3.1.1 The Use of True and False Voices

Yunnan minority folk songs show rich and diverse characteristics in the use of true and false

voices. There are significant differences in the use of true and false voices among different ethnic groups and their branches, which reflect their respective singing styles and the needs of singing occasions.

The "Four Great Tunes" of the Jiangnei Yi people in Honghe (Hai Cai Tune, Shan Yao Tune, Wu Shan Tune, and Bai Hua Tune) are highly representative in the alternating use of true and false voices. Take the "Hai Cai Tune" as an example. The first tune requires steady breath, and the whole musical phrase should be sung in one breath. When singing, the vowels "ei" and "a" are sung in true voice, mainly using oral resonance to produce a crisp and bright timbre; the vowel "i" is switched to false voice, using nasal and head resonance to express a soft and delicate timbre. The transition between true and false voices requires seamless connection, fully reflecting the artistic characteristics of this tune, which are smooth and refreshing [8].

The "Zuo Jiao Tune" of the Chuxiong Yi people adopts a method of separating true and false voices. The low-pitch parts are sung in true voice, while the high-pitch parts are all sung in false voice. Due to the high pitch range (the highest can reach the e or f note in the third octave), the true and false voices do not blend but are presented in layers. This separated use of true and false voices enhances the sense of layers in the "Zuo Jiao Tune" [9].

The "Axi" and "Sani" branches of the Yi people's folk songs are characterized by the blending of true and false voices. When singing, they use a large number of embellishing notes and throat-singing techniques. The true voice carries the false voice, and the false voice carries the true voice. The pronunciation is relatively heavy, with the emphasis coming from the throat. The embellishing notes and sliding notes are also mainly produced in the throat. This vocalization method creates a unique timbre and expressiveness, highlighting the artistic charm of the "Axi" and "Sani" folk songs [10].

Dai folk songs are mainly sung in false voice, which is closely related to their living environment and cultural traditions. The Dai people live in the mild-climate plain areas, and their singing is gentle and reserved, reflecting the mild character of the Dai people. The use of false voice in singing has become a hallmark of Dai folk songs and also shows their unique cultural character.

The differences in the use of true and false voices among different ethnic groups and branches fully reflect the diversity of the vocal art of Yunnan minority folk songs. It also provides support for adapting to different singing situations and enhances artistic expressiveness.

3.1.2 Breathing Techniques

Yunnan minority folk songs have unique requirements for the use of breath. Different songs have developed a variety of breathing techniques to support vocal production based on their own characteristics.

In the Yi "Four Great Tunes," the "Hai Cai Tune" requires deep and steady breath. The first tune needs to be sung in one breath, which lays the foundation for the transition between true and false voices and the change of resonance methods. This breathing technique not only highlights the bright and smooth characteristics of the "Hai Cai Tune" but also gives it a clear-layered artistic effect [11].

Tibetan folk songs have unique breathing techniques. They are mainly sung in pure true voice with a bright and high-pitched timbre. When singing long-drawn-out notes, a technique called "Zhen Gu" is used, which produces a unique staccato effect through the coordination of the throat and breath. This technique is particularly evident in songs such as drinking songs and arrow songs. It not only shows the artistic style of Tibetan folk songs but also enhances the expression of emotions [12].

The Hani labor chant originated from the need to coordinate the rhythm of labor and has strict requirements for breath. When singing, the breath needs to be even and forceful, matching the rhythm of the labor scene to make the connection between musical phrases smoother. By breathing properly, the singer can vividly express the labor scene and a positive and optimistic attitude towards life, creating a genuine emotional atmosphere.

3.2 Melodic and Rhythmic Characteristics of Yunnan Minority Folk Songs

The melodic forms of Yunnan minority folk songs not only reflect the unique musical styles of various ethnic groups but are also deeply rooted in their living environments and cultural backgrounds. The diverse melodic features reflect the aesthetic pursuits of different ethnic groups and their diverse needs for emotional expression. From gentle and

delicate to dramatic and undulating, these melodic forms constitute the rich and colorful expressiveness of Yunnan minority music, infusing national culture with vibrant vitality.

3.2.1 *Melodic Features*

Yunnan minority folk songs exhibit distinct ethnic characteristics in their melodies, primarily based on the pentatonic scale, which creates a unique auditory experience through the combination of simple tone groups.

For example, the Yunnan folk song "Xiao He Tang Shui" revolves around a few specific tones, featuring stepwise and fourth-interval leaps in its melody. The song's gentle and beautiful tune transports listeners to a tranquil moonlit night, conveying the deep affection between a young couple. The Yi "Four Great Tunes" (Hai Cai Tune, Shan Yao Tune, Wu Shan Tune, and Bai Hua Tune) combine stepwise motion with leaps of fourths, fifths, sixths, octaves, and even larger intervals. This results in a melody that is sometimes gentle and delicate, and at other times dramatic and undulating. The alternation of drawn-out and narrative-like tones gives the song a dual character of being both poignant and passionate, reflecting the Yi people's rich emotions and unique aesthetic sensibilities.

In addition, the Yi song "Shy Shy" features a gradual-progression melody that is smooth and mellow. The song "Guessing Tune," on the other hand, is composed of the tones La, Do, Re, and Sol. Its cheerful melody and clear rhythm exemplify the combination of stepwise and leapwise motion. These diverse melodic forms, each with its own unique characteristics in the folk songs of different ethnic groups, together create a rich and varied artistic landscape of Yunnan minority folk songs. They highlight the strong ethnic flavor and regional characteristics [13].

3.2.2 *Rhythmic Features*

The rhythmic forms of Yunnan minority folk songs are diverse, featuring both lively and brisk rhythms as well as free and relaxed ones to meet the needs of different occasions and emotional expressions. The rhythmic characteristics of Dehong Dai folk songs are particularly distinct. Some folk songs have prominent accents and a strong sense of rhythm, making them suitable for collective singing and dancing activities that encourage people to dance to the beat. Others have

a free-flowing rhythm, narrating the life stories and delicate emotions of the Dai people [14].

This rhythmic characteristic is closely related to the language habits and life scenes of various ethnic groups. For example, the folk songs derived from the Hani labor chants have rhythms that closely match the labor movements and frequency. The unified rhythm makes collective labor more efficient while showcasing the tension, orderliness, and vitality of the labor scene. The folk songs sung during the Yi Torch Festival have a cheerful rhythm and an uplifting melody. Accompanied by joyful dances, they create a festive and enthusiastic atmosphere. People release their emotions in the rhythm, expressing their love for life and expectations for the future.

4. STRATEGIES FOR THE INHERITANCE AND INNOVATION OF YUNNAN MINORITY FOLK SONGS

Over the long-standing historical development, Yunnan minority folk songs have formed a rich variety of inheritance methods. These methods are not only an important guarantee for the continuation of folk songs but also the core bond for the inheritance of national culture. However, with the changes in the social environment, the traditional inheritance methods are facing new challenges. Group inheritance, family inheritance, and inheritance at the social and school levels each have their own characteristics and together constitute the basic current situation of the inheritance of Yunnan minority folk songs. Analyzing the current situation and challenges of these inheritance methods will provide important references for subsequent innovative strategies [15].

4.1 *Current Situation of the Inheritance of Yunnan Minority Folk Songs*

The inheritance of Yunnan minority folk songs is rooted in the daily life and cultural activities of the ethnic groups. Under different scenarios and contexts, inheritance methods such as group, family, and social and school-based inheritance each play a unique role [16]. In particular, group inheritance, as the most traditional and widespread form of inheritance, has always been an important way for Yunnan minority folk songs to be passed down. However, with the transformation of social structure and lifestyle, the vitality of this

inheritance method is also gradually being challenged.

4.1.1 Group Inheritance

Group inheritance has always been an important way to pass down Yunnan minority folk songs, carrying profound national culture. In the past, collective labor and traditional festivals provided ideal occasions for the singing of folk songs. For example, the labor chants shouted by the Hani people during collective wild fruit-gathering or fishing gradually evolved into distinctive folk songs. During the Yi Torch Festival, men and women, old and young, dressed in their finest clothes, gather around the torches and sing cheerful and uplifting folk songs, showing their love for life and hope for the future [17].

However, modern-day lifestyles have changed dramatically, posing severe challenges to this form of group inheritance. With the accelerated pace of life, young people are more attracted to popular culture and electronic entertainment, and their participation in traditional folk song-singing activities is gradually decreasing. For example, there are fewer scenes of collective labor in ethnic minority settlements, and young people working outside have fewer opportunities to come into contact with folk songs during labor. In festive activities, folk song performances are more often undertaken by folk art troupes, and the active participation of ordinary people, especially young people, has significantly decreased, leading to a decline in the vitality of group inheritance.

4.1.2 Family Inheritance

Family inheritance holds a special place in the transmission of Yunnan minority folk songs. Passed down orally from generation to generation within families, these songs have been preserved over time. The He family of the Naxi ethnic group is a prime example of family inheritance. He Wenguang, as the third-generation inheritor, not only collated dozens of ancient songs passed down from his mother but also published "Naxi Love Songs," making these folk songs a valuable cultural asset.

Family inheritance has a certain degree of stability, relying on kinship and family emotional bonds to continue the songs within a specific scope. However, its limitations are also quite evident. On the one hand, the scope of inheritance within the family is relatively narrow, and the dissemination is limited. On the other hand, changes in the family's

population structure can affect the sustainability of the inheritance. For example, a decrease in the number of family descendants or a lack of enthusiasm and energy among the younger generation for inheritance may lead to the potential loss of these folk songs [18].

4.1.3 Social and School-based Inheritance

At the social and school levels, various folk song activities and educational promotions have injected new vitality into the inheritance of folk songs. The government, by organizing folk song competitions and folk culture festivals, has provided platforms for the dissemination of folk songs, attracting more people to participate. In addition, some primary and secondary schools have incorporated minority folk songs into classroom teaching, helping students to get in touch with and learn about their ethnic music from a young age and fostering a sense of cultural identity.

Despite these efforts, there are still shortcomings in social and school-based inheritance. There is a shortage of teaching staff. Many schools lack professional music teachers who are familiar with minority folk songs, which makes it difficult to ensure the quality of teaching. The existing music textbooks do not comprehensively cover Yunnan minority folk songs. The content is fragmented and cannot meet the teaching requirements. At the social level, the publicity and promotion of folk song activities are limited in strength and scope, and the influence of the activities needs to be further enhanced. These issues have all had a negative impact on the effectiveness of folk song inheritance.

4.2 Exploring Innovative Approaches for the Inheritance and Development of Yunnan Minority Folk Songs

The inheritance and development of Yunnan minority folk songs not only require the preservation of their traditional charm but also the exploration of new forms of expression within the contemporary cultural context. By innovating in musical expression, it is possible to expand the dissemination of folk songs and attract a wider audience, especially the younger generation, thus infusing traditional culture with new vitality.

4.2.1 Innovation in Musical Expression

In the context of the diversified development of contemporary culture, Yunnan minority folk songs need to combine with modern forms of musical expression. While preserving their traditional charm, they should explore new ways of expression to broaden their reach and attract more listeners.

The "Folk Song Grand View" program provides a successful example. The program presents classic folk songs through formats such as duets between veteran and young singers and a cappella vocal harmonies. Veteran artists present traditional folk songs in their authentic form, conveying ethnic memories and emotions. Meanwhile, young singing groups like the "Five Golden Flowers" give folk songs a new sense of the times through a cappella and pop-style singing, appealing to a younger audience. This combination of old and new respects tradition while bridging the gap between folk songs and the younger generation, allowing audiences of all ages to appreciate the charm of folk songs.

In addition, folk songs can be integrated into various art forms such as dance, musicals, and TV dramas. For example, in dance performances, folk songs serve as background music, complementing the dancers' movements and enhancing the audience's understanding of the songs' meanings through a combination of visual and auditory experiences. Musicals can weave individual folk songs into a coherent story through narrative-driven performances, showcasing the life scenes and emotional intensity of Yunnan's ethnic minorities. TV dramas, when depicting the local customs of Yunnan's ethnic minorities, can also skillfully incorporate folk song elements. This not only adds cultural depth but also provides a broad platform for the dissemination of folk songs, allowing more viewers to encounter these musical treasures.

4.2.2 Innovation in Dissemination Channels

The development of information technology has provided a new platform for the dissemination of Yunnan minority folk songs, with new media and live-streaming becoming important means of promoting these songs.

On short-video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, many ethnic singers, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and folk song enthusiasts upload singing videos to showcase the unique charm of Yunnan folk songs. Some videos focus on the

authentic flavor of traditional folk songs, emphasizing the profound cultural heritage of ethnic cultures. Others combine modern musical elements with short-video shooting techniques, such as special effects and situational dramas, to increase entertainment and their appeal and watchability. These contents, leveraging the platform's recommendation algorithms, spread rapidly, not only break geographical barriers but also bring Yunnan minority folk songs to a national and even international stage [19].

Live-streaming is also an important way to promote folk songs. Singers interact with the audience through live-streaming, sharing the stories behind the songs, singing techniques, and ethnic cultural knowledge, which enhances the audience's sense of identification and participation.

However, modern means of dissemination also bring challenges. First, there is the issue of copyright protection. With the expansion of the dissemination scope, unauthorized use and adaptation occur from time to time, infringing on the rights and interests of creators and inheritors. It is necessary to establish and improve copyright protection mechanisms, strengthen supervision, and ensure that the dissemination of folk songs is legal and compliant. Second, there is the issue of content quality. Some content, in order to attract attention, may be overly entertaining or distort the original meaning of folk songs. Therefore, creators, disseminators, and platforms need to work together to adhere to cultural bottom lines and ensure that the content disseminated accurately reflects the cultural connotations and artistic value of Yunnan minority folk songs.

4.3 Multi-Party Collaboration to Promote the Inheritance and Development of Yunnan Minority Folk Songs

The inheritance and development of Yunnan minority folk songs cannot be separated from the joint efforts of all parties. The government's guidance and policy support, as the core of top-level design and resource allocation, play a key role in overall planning and implementation. They have created a favorable external environment for the protection and inheritance of folk songs.

4.3.1 Government Guidance and Policy Support

The government has played a leading role in the protection and inheritance of Yunnan minority folk

songs. By introducing special policies and setting up financial support, it has provided strong guarantees for inheritors. For example, He Wenguang, the third-generation inheritor of the Naxi ethnic group, has sorted out the nearly-lost "Leba Dance" and "Naxi Folk Songs" with government funding and published "Naxi Love Songs," preserving these cultural treasures and making them important resources for Lijiang's cultural tourism.

In addition, the government actively organizes various cultural activities, such as folk song competitions and folk culture festivals, to provide a platform for the display of folk song inheritance. The "Folk Song Grand View" program innovatively interprets classic folk songs through formats such as duets between veteran and young singers and a cappella. It not only authentically conveys ethnic memories but also attracts young audiences through modern means, achieving good results.

The government also encourages the establishment of folk song inheritance bases and cultural transmission centers in ethnic minority settlements through scientific planning, providing a fixed space for the inheritance of folk songs. These measures have effectively promoted the revitalization of Yunnan minority folk songs in the new era, allowing their ethnic spirit and cultural value to continue.

4.3.2 Professional Artistic Talent Cultivation

Cultivating professional artistic talents is an important way for the inheritance and innovation of Yunnan minority folk songs. Colleges and art schools lay the foundation for talent cultivation by reasonably setting up related majors and courses.

Some institutions have opened majors such as ethnomusicology and vocal performance (ethnic direction), and have set up characteristic course modules such as Yi folk song singing skills and Dai folk song cultural interpretation. In terms of course content, it not only includes traditional vocal skills but also integrates ethnic music theory, folk song history and culture, and music creation to improve students' comprehensive artistic quality [20].

Professional talents play multiple roles in the development of folk songs. In terms of adaptation and creation, professional talents can integrate modern musical concepts into traditional folk songs. For example, the modern adaptation of the Jino folk song "Quiet Night" not only retains the flavor of the

original melody but also enhances the song's artistic expressiveness and their appeal and watchability. In teaching and research, professional talents convey the artistic value of folk songs, enhance their influence in the field of ethnic music culture, and provide a continuous driving force for the inheritance of folk songs.

4.3.3 Civil Forces and Social Participation

Civil art groups and folk song enthusiasts have contributed important forces to the inheritance of Yunnan minority folk songs. Folk song meetings are an important form of folk inheritance. In Yi villages, villagers pass on and exchange traditional folk songs, allowing the younger generation to come into contact with them. At the same time, they integrate modern musical elements to make the songs more contemporary and easier to spread.

Social activities, such as cultural tourism festivals, also provide a platform for the promotion of folk songs. For example, the Bai folk song performance in Dali has become a highlight of the tourism festival. Singers attract a large number of tourists with their melodious folk songs, showcasing ethnic charm. These tourists spread Yunnan minority folk songs to a wider area through social media and word-of-mouth.

In addition, the rise of online platforms has injected new vitality into the dissemination of folk songs. Folk song enthusiasts expand the audience of folk songs and form a positive dissemination atmosphere by uploading singing videos and sharing folk song stories.

5. CONCLUSION

Through an in-depth study of Yunnan minority folk songs, we have systematically reviewed their vocal characteristics and the current situation of inheritance and development. In terms of vocal characteristics, Yunnan minority folk songs possess unique and diverse vocal techniques. The use of true and false voices varies among different ethnic groups and their branches, presenting a rich artistic style. The Yi "Four Great Tunes" effortlessly alternate between true and false voices. The Tibetan folk song technique "Zhen Gu" creates a staccato effect through the coordination of breath and throat. The Hani labor chant matches breath with the rhythm of labor, demonstrating its practicality and artistry. The combination of breath control and vocal production not only shapes the unique

expressiveness of folk songs but also reflects the cultural characteristics of various ethnic groups. Melodies are mostly based on the pentatonic scale, constructing a strong ethnic style through simple tone groups. Rhythms vary due to differences in ethnic languages and life scenes.

Regarding inheritance and innovation, Yunnan minority folk songs face challenges but have also made certain progress. Group inheritance is limited due to decreased interest and participation among young people. Family inheritance, though stable, has limitations due to its narrow scope and significant influence from internal family factors. Social and school-based inheritance, thanks to the promotion of the government and social organizations, has expanded its reach through activities and educational integration. However, it still faces issues such as insufficient teaching staff, imperfect textbooks, and inadequate publicity.

To address these challenges, innovative approaches lie in combining modern musical expression with new ways of dissemination. For example, integrating folk songs with dance, musicals, and film and television can give them new vitality. Expanding their reach through new media platforms and live-streaming is also effective. Collaborative efforts from multiple parties, including government policy guidance, social participation, and the cultivation of professional artistic talents, jointly promote the protection and development of folk songs. These strategies provide solid support for the inheritance and development of Yunnan minority folk songs in the new era.

Yunnan minority folk songs are not only treasures of Chinese national music culture but also important bonds for promoting national unity and enhancing cultural exchange. In the future, through the joint efforts of all parties, Yunnan minority folk songs will surely shine more brightly on the world stage of music culture, showcasing the endless charm of Chinese national culture.

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