

VOCAL TECHNIQUES AND DIALECTS ON SELECTED NORTHERN SHAANXI FOLK SONGS

SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

2025

VOCAL TECHNIQUES AND DIALECTS ON SELECTED NORTHERN SHAANXI
FOLK SONGS

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 05-4506832  pustaka.upsi.edu.my  Perpustakaan Tuanku Bainun
Kampus Sultan Abdul Jalil Shah  PustakaTBainun  ptbupsi
CREATIVE WORK DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE REQUIREMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Time always slips away in a hurry, looking back on my doctoral career, there were too many difficulties. The sudden onset of the COVID-19 epidemic added some obstacles to the road of my study. After the epidemic was lifted, I am decide to go on my doctoral thesis after discussing it with my family, negotiating with my workplace, and overcoming difficulties in language, life, and other aspects. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Yap Jin Hin, he is a knowledgeable and patient teacher who is academically rigorous and has helped me a lot in writing my thesis. Secondly, I would like to thank my examiners, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kamarulzaman bin Mohamed Karim and Dr. Chiu, Ming Ying, for them sincere suggestions on revising my thesis. Moreover, I am very grateful to my external examers, Dr. Bernard Tan Yong Boon and Datuk Syafinaz Selamat, whose very practical suggestions have taught me a lot. Besides, I also would like to thank my family and friends for their support during my studies in Malaysia, which allowed me to devote myself to studies. In addition, I would like to express my special thanks to the school leaders and teachers for their help and to the school for providing a good learning environment. I am a person who is not good at expressing myself, but on my learning path, when I encounter difficulties, always get help from many people. I think I am the lucky one, At the same time, also understand that all gains require hard work. I cherish this learning opportunity even more and work harder than many students. I am eager to graduate as soon as possible and use more diligent work to repay the unit and the people who care about me. In the past few years of my Ph.D, I may have missed many opportunities to get together with family and friends, that I have gained extremely precious knowledge and abilities, which is the most important.





ABSTRACT

Northern Shaanxi folk song refers to the folk song in the north of Shaanxi province, China, specifically YuLin City and Yan'an City. These folk songs serve as a genuine reflection of the emotions experienced by the local population, encompassing both moments of sorrow and joy as well as themes of love and hate. They encapsulate the multifaceted human experiences, offering a window into the profound depths of the people's lives in this region. This study focuses on researching the vocal techniques and dialect of northern Shaanxi folk songs. This study employs a practice-led research approach to bridge theoretical insights with practical performance strategies, offering a comprehensive understanding of vocal techniques and dialects of northern Shaanxi folk songs. Through research found that the vocal technique is not single but diverse of northern Shaanxi folk songs include "高腔 (*Gao Qiang*)," "平腔 (*Ping Qiang*)," glissando, trill, and staccato, among them "*Gao Qiang*" is representative. The northern Shaanxi dialect has a unique pronunciation compared with Mandarin; there are five basic characteristics, Chinese character reduplication, nasal sounds, special initial pronunciation, flat tongue and curled tongue words, decorative words. Among them, Chinese character reduplication are the soul word of the northern Shaanxi dialect, with local characteristics. This study will have certain reference significance for people researching northern Shaanxi folk songs, especially for people specializing in vocal. It aims to solve the vocal technique difficulties and summarize the characteristics of the northern Shaanxi dialects, thereby making a certain contribution to the better development and popularization of the northern Shaanxi folk songs.



TEKNIK VOKAL DAN DIALEK DALAM LAGU RAKYAT TERPILIH SHAANXI UTARA

ABSTRAK

Lagu-lagu rakyat Shaanxi Utara ialah lagu-lagu rakyat yang berasal dari wilayah Shaanxi Utara, khususnya di Bandar Yulin dan Bandar Yan'an. Lagu-lagu rakyat ini mencerminkan pengalaman sebenar rakyat tempatan, merangkumi detik kesedihan dan kegembiraan, serta bertemakan cinta dan benci. Mereka menyimpulkan pelbagai pengalaman yang dialami manusia, juga memberikan tingkap untuk memahami kehidupan rakyat tempatan secara mendalam. Kajian ini memfokuskan pada teknik vokal dan dialek lagu-lagu rakyat Shaanxi Utara. Metodologi kajian ini adalah kajian literatur dan pendekatan practice-led, yang akan digunakan untuk menggabungkan teori dengan amalan untuk mendapatkan dapatan yang lebih teliti. Kajian mendapati bahawa teknik vokal bukan hanya satu sahaja tetapi merangkumi kepelbagaian teknik termasuk “高腔 (Gao Qiang)”, “平腔 (Ping Qiang)”, glissando, trill, dan staccato. Gao Qiang merupakan ciri utama. Dialek Shaanxi Utara mempunyai sebutan yang istimewa berbanding dengan Mandarin, iaitu bahasa rasmi China. Lima ciri yang asas ialah: perkataan berganda, bunyi nasal, sebutan awal yang tersendiri, sebutan lidah rata dan lidah melengkung, perkataan hiasan. Perkataan berganda merupakan ciri utama kepada dialek Shaanxi Utara. Kajian ini penting bagi individu yang membuat penyelidikan tentang lagu-lagu rakyat Shaanxi Utara, terutamanya bagi individu yang pakar dalam vokal. Tujuannya adalah untuk menyelesaikan kesukaran yang dihadapi dalam teknik vokal dan meringkaskan ciri-ciri dialek Shaanxi Utara, menyumbang kepada pembangunan dan mempopularkan lagu-lagu rakyat Shaanxi Utara.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



1.1 Introduction and Background

Northern Shaanxi folk songs have had a long history rooted in the Loess Plateau since Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.-256 B.C.). Northern Shaanxi refers explicitly to Yan'an City and Yulin City, where its folk songs were passed down for dynasties as special ways for the locals to express their aspirations. Since ancient times, the daily lives of people in northern Shaanxi have formed a bond with folk songs. They sang for





expressing emotions as well as for events such as weddings, harvests, funerals, and so on. The development and inheritance of northern Shaanxi folk songs mainly come to life, the folk songs vividly reflect life's joys and sorrows, giving birth to many touching stories on the vast Loess Plateau (Zhang, 2021). In short, they can all find emotional support in folk songs.

Northern Shaanxi folk songs developed rapidly from the late 1930s to the 1950s, during the period of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. People in northern Shaanxi expressed their feelings of separation by singing, which played an important role. Works of this period include "三十里舖 (*San Shi Li Pu*)," "兰花花 (*Lan Hua Hua*)," "走西口 (*Zou Xi Kou*)", and so on. From the founding of the People's Republic of China to its reform and opening up (1949-1978), it was another important development cycle. In order to celebrate the founding of the People's Republic of China, people created many classic northern Shaanxi folk songs, such as "高楼万丈平地起 (*Gao Lou Wan Zhang Ping Di Qi*)". After the reform and opening up, with the improvement of people's living standards and a higher demand for spiritual culture, the folk songs were further developed. The representative works include "走三边 (*Zou San Bian*)" and "黄土高坡 (*Huang Tu Gao Po*)".

In recent years, the development of northern Shaanxi folk songs has shown a prosperous scene, not only have new songs appeared one after another, but some old



songs have also been recovered and are afresh edited by the people. The folk songs, rich in rhythm and power, align with modern people's aesthetics, so they have developed relatively quickly (Qin, 2014). Original features: the lyrics are composed of traditional folk song melodies, and the tunes are often slightly changed due to new words. This type of song includes " 拥军花鼓 (Yong Jun Hua Gu)," " 秋收 (Autumn Harvest)," and so on. Up to date, the compositions have gone beyond the initial period of adapting the melodies of traditional folk songs but are personalized and closely follow the core characteristics of local music, and the length structure of new folk song is generally longer than the traditional (Bai, 2022).

The singer in the performance usually puts on the singing role of the clothing.

The traditional custom of the male is the northern Shaanxi local sleeveless jacket made of sheepskin, white shirt, scarf, and cloth belt; white or light yellow. The customary of female is braid, cloth shoes, and clothing in red, purple, and blue.



Picture 1.1 Common Performance Costumes for Male and Female



Northern Shaanxi folk songs can be divided into three categories in terms of styles: "信天游 (*Xin Tian You*)," "号子 (*Hao Zi*)" and "小调 (*Xiao Diao*)". "*Xin Tian You*" is a sole singing style without the accompaniment of instruments, usually features a single melody with multiple verses, the singer improvises in dependence on circumstances, while "*Hao Zi*" and "*Xiao Diao*" generally have instrumental accompaniments, the melody and lyrics are more standardized (Dong, 2012). "*Xin Tian You*" is usually performed informally, and singers rarely wear special performance costumes. It is to welcome friends and relatives and show hospitality. "*Hao Zi*" and "*Xiao Diao*" are usually sung on stage, and performers wear costumes and stage makeup.



In the busy leisure or harvest season, three or five people sit together, freely talk, and casually sing the songs. This form of singing is generally more casual, and the lyrics are mostly improvised for expressing emotions. Therefore, farming leisure time or festival celebrations could be the materials of the folk songs.





1.2 Inspiration and Motivation

In 2022, the "Northern Shaanxi Folk Song Talent Cultivation" project funded by the China National Arts Fund was held at Yan'an University of China, aiming to promote and carry forward northern Shaanxi folk song better, cultivate more senior talents in the field of northern Shaanxi folk song, and make contributions to the vigorous development of China's vocal. The researcher participated in the training for this project, which lasted 36 days for intensive teaching and one month for collecting styles and independent discussion and research. During the training, the team visited most parts of northern Shaanxi and participated in an exceptional performance of northern Shaanxi folk songs in the Yulin Grand Theatre. The whole team is deeply attracted by the unique charm of northern Shaanxi folk songs, which have unique charm and singing characteristics, and their performance art is unique.

Northern Shaanxi folk songs have beautiful melodies and unique vocal techniques, especially the "高腔 (*Gao Qiang*)" vocal technique, which has aroused researcher's intense curiosity. The study found no research about the vocal technique in "*Gao Qiang*"; other vocal techniques, however, such as glissando, trill, and staccato, that appear in western classic vocal works have a huge number of references. Therefore, the northern Shaanxi folk song has significant research value. The study can not only improve the vocal techniques of the northern Shaanxi folk song but also





improve the research results, which has a positive effect on the further development of the folk songs.

For those who are engaged in vocal field of China, whether teachers or students, northern Shaanxi folk songs appear quite frequently in vocal textbooks and other works. After searching for relevant information, the researcher found that among the commonly used vocal textbooks in various universities in China, such as the book "声乐 (二) Vocal Music 2," by Southwest Normal University Press, there is a northern Shaanxi folk song "想延安 (Thinking of Yan'an)". In the book "声乐基础实用教程 Practical Basic Course of Vocal Music," Southwest University Press (July 2022), there are four northern Shaanxi folk songs: "南泥湾 (Nan Ni Wan)," "绣金匾 (Embroidered gold plaque)," "三十里铺 (San Shi Li Pu village)" and "九里山疙瘩十里沟 (Nine miles of mountain bumps and ten miles of ditch)". "民族声乐全集 Complete Collection of National Singing Songs," Shanxi Education Press, which includes songs such as the song "羊肚子毛巾三道道蓝 (Sheep towel with three blue lines)". In addition to the above examples, many more fully illustrate the importance of northern Shaanxi folk songs in Chinese vocal.

Northern Shaanxi folk songs give the fixed impression that they should be sung in the northern Shaanxi dialect, significantly limiting the promotion of the folk songs. However, the researcher found that the northern Shaanxi dialects are very





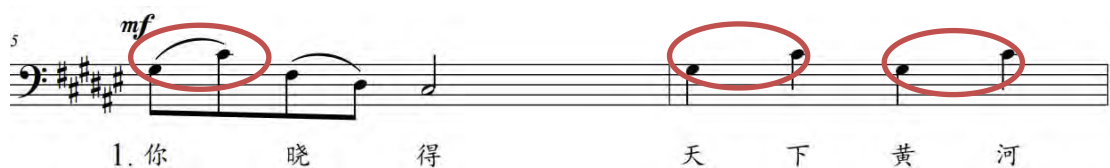
distinctive, most of them are very similar to Mandarin, and only a few of them are not easy to understand. Based on this point of thinking, it would be helpful to summarize the representative features of the northern Shaanxi dialect and draw analogies between it and Mandarin, thus making it easier to understand the diction of the northern Shaanxi dialect.

1.3 Problem Statement

The research found that for a considerable number of people singing northern Shaanxi folk songs, there will be a variety of issues, such as "*Gao Qiang*," "平腔 (*Ping Qiang*)," glissando, trill, and staccato, the northern Shaanxi dialect and so on. Among these, the most common can be summarized into two aspects: The first issue is in the vocal technique; many singers are struggling with the vocal technique called "*Gao Qiang*". The origin of "*Gao Qiang*" is "弋阳腔 (*Yi Yang Qiang*)", it is a Chinese opera of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) that is characterized by simple performances, popular lyrics, and high-pitched, exciting singing (Cai, 2012). "*Gao Qiang*" appears in many local folk songs in China, presenting different characteristics depending on the region. The "*Gao Qiang*" is integrated with the local folk song of northern Shaanxi to form a unique style. Which refers to the melody that appears in the northern Shaanxi folk songs with a large interval span (usually four degrees and above), higher pitch



sung with real voice or a combination of real and falsetto voices, which is characterized by free rhythm, long and high-pitched, wide range, and with free prolonged tones, thus singing freely and spaciouly (Zhang, 2021), common technique issues with "*Gao Qiang*" include voice breaking and the quality of the sound.



Example 1.1 "*Gao Qiang*" style of northern Shaanxi folk song

Without "*Gao Qiang*," the artistic charm of northern Shaanxi folk songs will be significantly reduced. However, whether in teaching or performance, the northern Shaanxi folk song is rarely involved in the "*Gao Qiang*". This phenomenon is because it is challenging to master the "*Gao Qiang*," and there will be some psychological fear in teaching and performing, technical mishaps and dreaded memories can result from this fear. Despite the extensive documentation of glissando and trill in Western classical music, the unique vocal technique demands of "*Gao Qiang*" require localized methodologies that embrace subjective and embodied experiences of performers. Zecher, K (2018) said that some anxiety or fear related to an event originates from a previous unsuccessful attempt at a similar situation, as a matter of fact, high levels of performance anxiety are experienced by performers who cope with

this kind of fear, they unintentionally ruin their own shows. In fact, their drive for success hurts their performances because it breeds tension, anxiety, high expectations, mistrust, and a lack of confidence. When the desire to perform and the fear of performing coexist, a mental conflict arises. Musically speaking, conflict can be defined as clashing polytonalities and discordant mental counterpoints. Put another way, someone wants to give a great performance on stage but also fears failing miserably.

At times, physical symptoms that are associated with stage fright may reveal what the mind conceals. Dependence on one's body to function properly and fears that it will not due to technical or memory slips are hallmarks of stage fright fears and psychological remnants from the past, since the body is one's first and most important instrument (Nagel, 2017, P.60).

During practice training and further in-depth thinking, the study found that "*Gao Qiang*" is far from challenging to master. How does one adjust vocal techniques when singing the "*Gao Qiang*," and improve people's confidence to sing the folk songs? Besides, some singers also have difficulty in singing "*Ping Qiang*," as well as techniques like glissando, trill, and staccato.

The second issue is the challenge with the diction of northern Shaanxi dialects. Modern northern Shaanxi folk songs are component songs in both Shanxi dialect and Mandarin, which basically retain words with typical dialect characteristics while other lyrics are sung in Mandarin (Dong, 2008). This maintains the original style and



characteristics of folk songs and makes them understandable and acceptable to most people. For singers who are unfamiliar with the northern Shaanxi dialect, it is very challenging to pronounce accurately, but their Mandarin pronunciation is very good. Due to this issue, the study will distinguish the typical pronunciation characteristics of the northern Shaanxi dialect and compare these characteristics with Mandarin. Such as Chinese character reduplication, nasal sounds, and special initial consonants, etc., present both in tabular form so that the basic pronunciation characteristics of the northern Shaanxi dialect can be clearly understood at a glance and correctly grasped. In this way, it is easier for non-northern Shaanxi singers to understand the lyrics who learn northern Shaanxi folk songs can directly grasp the main characteristics of the



1.4 Research Objectives

(1) To identify and practice the vocal techniques of northern Shaanxi folk songs.

To implement the vocal techniques of "*Gao Qiang*" in terms of voice leaps and switching between real and falsetto. To implement the vocal techniques "*Ping Qiang*," glissando, staccato, and trill in selected songs.





(2) To practice the northern Shaanxi dialect and Mandarin in selected northern Shaanxi folk songs.

To implement the difference between the northern Shaanxi dialect and Mandarin. To compare training on the main characteristics of northern Shaanxi dialect and Mandarin on selected songs.

1.5 Research Questions

(1) Vocal techniques: How does one sing the northern Shaanxi folk songs with the correct vocal techniques?

(2) Diction: How does one use Mandarin and northern Shaanxi dialects when performing northern Shaanxi folk songs?

1.6 Program for Recital 1

In the program of recital 1, the study selected 12 songs according to the theme type: love, characters, life, and the Chinese revolution.



Table 1.1*Recital 1 Program*

No	Repertoire	Composer/Lyrics	Duration
1	三十里舖 (San Shi Li Pu) San shi li pu Village	Unknown	3'
2	二月里见罢到如今 (Er Yue Li Jian Ba Dao Ru Jin) I haven't seen you since February	Xiang Yin	4'
3	上一道道坡下一道道梁 (Shang Yi Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Liang) Up a beam and down a slope	Unknown	3'
4	挂红灯 (Gua Hong Deng) Hanging red lanterns	Unknown	4'
5	小桃红 (Xiao Taohong) Xiao Taohong	Li Xingchi	4'
6	山丹丹开花红艳艳 (Shan Dan Dan Kai Hua Hong Yan Yan) The flowers blooming on the mountain are bright red	Tang Keshen/Hong Yuan & Liu Weishi	6'
7	黄河船夫曲 (Huang He Chuan Fu Qu) The Yellow River boatman's Song	Li Siming	4'
8	赶牲灵 (Gan Sheng Ling) Driving a carriage	Unknown	2'
9	九里里山疙瘩十里里沟 (Jiu Li Li Shan Ge Da Shi Li Li Gou) Nine miles of mountain bumps and ten miles of ditch	Lv Yuan	3'
10	满天的花满天的云 (Man Tian De Hua Man Tian De Yun) The sky is full of flowers and clouds	Unknown	4'
11	羊肚肚手巾三道道蓝 (Yang Du Du Shou Jin San Dao Dao Lan) Sheep towel with three blue lines	Feng Xiaoquan	4'
12	黄河里划浆船对船 (Huang He Li Hua Jiang Chuan Dui Chuan) Rowing boat to boat in the Yellow River	Zhao Jiping/Bai Aying	4'
Total			45 minutes

1.7 Program for Recital 2

Recital 2 was based on the recital 1, and the number of songs was increased by five in order to better perform Shaanxi folk songs, making the recital even richer.

Table 1.2

Recital 2 Program

No	Repertoire	Composer/Lyrics	Duration
1	三十里舖 (San Shi Li Pu) San shi li pu Village	Unknown	3'
2	二月里见罢到如今 (Er Yue Li Jian Ba Dao Ru Jin) I haven't seen you since February	Xiang Yin	4'
3	上一道道坡下一道道梁 (Shang Yi Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Liang) Up a beam and down a slope	Unknown	3'
4	挂红灯 (Gua Hong Deng) Hanging red lanterns	Unknown	4'
5	小桃红 (Xiao Taohong) Xiao Taohong	Li Xingchi	4'
6	山丹丹开花红艳艳 (Shan Dan Dan Kai Hua Hong Yan Yan) Morningstar lily bloom with brilliant red colour	Tang Keshen/Hong Yuan & Liu Weishi	6'
7	黄河船夫曲 (Huang He Chuan Fu Qu) The Yellow River boatman's Song	Li Siming	4'
8	赶牲灵 (Gan Sheng Ling) Driving a carriage	Unknown	2'
9	九里里山疙瘩十里里沟 (Jiu Li Li Shan Ge Da Shi Li Li Gou) Nine miles of mountain bumps and ten miles of ditch	Lv Yuan	3'
10	满天的花满天的云 (Man Tian De Hua Man Tian De Yun) The sky is full of flowers and clouds	Unknown	4'
11	羊肚肚手中三道道蓝 (Yang Du Du Shou Jin San Dao Dao Lan) Sheep towel with three blue lines	Feng Xiaoquan	4'
12	黄河里划桨船对船 (Huang He Li Hua Jiang Chuan Dui Chuan) Rowing boat to boat in the Yellow River	Zhao Jiping/Bai Aying	4'
13	绣金匾 (Xiu Jin Bian) Embroidered gold plaque	Unknown	4'

No	Repertoire	Composer/Lyrics	Duration
14	一对对鸳鸯水上漂 (<i>Yi Dui Dui Yuan Yang Shui Shang Piao</i>) A pair of mandarin ducks floating on the water	He Guofeng	5'
15	五哥放羊 (<i>Wu Ge Fang Yang</i>) Fifth brother herding sheep	Unknown	5'
16	摇三摆 (<i>Yao San Bai</i>) Swaying when walking	Unknown	4'
17	兰花花 (<i>Lan Hua Hua</i>) Lan Huahua	Wang Zhixin	7'
Total			70 minutes

1.8 Limitation

Singing northern Shaanxi folk songs in dialect has become a fixed impression in people's minds, many people think that folk songs in northern Shaanxi should be sung in dialect. However, for people who are non-natives of northern Shaanxi, especially people in southern China, it is not easy to sing in the northern Shaanxi dialect.

The repertoire of this research is limited to the region of northern Shaanxi due to its distinction in vocal performance and dialect compared to other regions in Shaanxi province. The selected songs also limit this study, there are many folk songs in northern Shaanxi, and only a few songs can be selected.



Moreover, the research had limited information and good resources. Some information could only be learned through personal singing experiences, making the study difficult to develop.

Due to economic conditions and time constraints, recital accompaniment can only be based on the piano, it can only use two instruments with Chinese characteristics *SuoNa* and China *ZhuDi* accompaniment. The northern Shaanxi folk song art charm display has a certain limit, the repertoire was chosen mainly on the basis that I'm a tenor.



Future research should be undertaken to explore more vocal techniques and the rich performances of northern Shaanxi folk songs. More work will be done later in the research.

