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The Development of Popular Music within the Han–Wei Yuefu System and its Role in Shaping the Forms of Folk Music

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Abstract: The Han–Wei period marked a significant turning point in the development of musical literature; during this era, Yuefu popular music experienced unprecedented growth, and its role in shaping the forms of folk music was particularly profound. Using Yuefu popular music as a focal point, this paper examines the bidirectional interactive relationship between this genre and folk music, conducting an in-depth analysis from perspectives such as melodic structure, performance techniques, instrumental ensembles, thematic content, and dissemination patterns. The study reveals how popular music, through institutional collection practices and the reinterpretation by literati, gradually transformed the landscape of folk music. The research demonstrates that Yuefu popular music served not only as a repository for folk vocal expressions but also as a force driving the standardization and artistic refinement of folk music. Furthermore, the integration of court-sponsored musical institutions with grassroots artistic traditions facilitated a unique cultural synthesis. Through their long-term interplay, these two dimensions mutually reinforced one another and collectively laid the foundation for the flourishing of musical literature in later periods. Ultimately, this comprehensive analysis highlights the enduring legacy of Yuefu traditions in preserving indigenous cultural identities while simultaneously elevating their aesthetic and structural complexities within the broader historical context of Chinese musical evolution. This evolution underscores the dynamic nature of historical soundscapes and their profound impact on subsequent artistic generations.

Keywords: yuefu music; folk music; musical forms; han-wei period; popular music

1. Introduction

The folk music of the Han and Wei dynasties, as institutionalized through the Yuefu system, functioned as a vital conduit between imperial authority and popular musical practice; its historical importance has long been acknowledged [1, 2]. However, the precise mechanisms by which this system influenced subsequent folk music traditions remain insufficiently examined. Tracing the developmental trajectory of Yuefu-related folk music helps clarify the authentic interplay between official musical institutions and grassroots musical practices, while also enriching understanding of broader patterns in musical form evolution.

2. The Original Relationship between Han–Wei Yuefu Folk Music and Folk Music

The original relationship between the popular music of the Han–Wei dynasties' Yuefu system and folk music can be understood through the bidirectional interaction between the establishment of the Yuefu institution and traditional folk singing practices. The creation of the Yuefu agency during the Han dynasty marked the formal establishment of an institutional link between the official music system and the folk music ecosystem. Under Emperor Wu's reign, the Yuefu system was extensively expanded to assume the specific responsibility of collecting regional folk songs; as a result, songs from Zhao, Dai, Qin, and Chu territories were incorporated into the imperial music system [3, 4]. This institutional measure laid the foundation for sustained exchange between popular

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and folk music. The Yuefu's poetry-collecting practice extended the ancient tradition of 'collecting songs to observe the customs of the people'; it aimed to gauge public sentiment through folk songs while bringing lyrics—originating from local streets and neighborhoods—into the official sphere of attention. From then on, a long-lasting and frequent dialogue emerged between the two realms.

When folk music, with its simple lyrics and flexible melodies, entered the Yuefu system, it underwent transformation from its original form toward standardization. According to the specific requirements of court performances, music officials organized, expanded, revised, or adapted these folk musical pieces, making corresponding adjustments to rhythm, scale, and orchestration. This refinement preserved the core emotional and lyrical essence of the folk music while adapting it to the demands of banquet and ceremonial performances. As a result, the folk music of the Yuefu system differed structurally from unmediated folk singing; yet it continued to draw upon fundamental melodies and thematic sources of folk music, ensuring that its 'folk' character remained grounded in authentic tradition [3, 5].

Conversely, musical compositions compiled by the Yuefu agency were subsequently reintroduced to the public through court performances, imperial grants, and oral transmission, facilitating the integration of diverse musical traditions across regions. Through the Yuefu's collection and recreation efforts, folk music acquired more stable textual forms—lyrics were recorded in writing, and melodies spread widely—transforming previously fragmented oral performances into a continuous musical heritage [6]. By the Han–Wei period, the folk music associated with the Yuefu agency, while upholding traditional practices, continuously absorbed new musical styles; its interaction with folk music became increasingly frequent, and their mutual influence deepened. This foundational relationship between Yuefu-associated folk music and grassroots folk music was, in essence, a process of mutual shaping—where institutional needs and popular vitality reinforced one another, jointly establishing the basis for the flourishing of later musical literature.

3. The Developmental Trajectory and Evolutionary Characteristics of Folk Music in the Han–Wei Dynasty Yuefu System

3.1. Western Han Dynasty: The Establishment of the Yuefu System; Comprehensive Collection and Preliminary Organization of Popular Music.

The ritual and musical system of the early Han Dynasty inherited the structural framework established during the Qin Dynasty; however, the Ya Music tradition had largely disappeared following the widespread destruction caused by the late-Qin wars. After establishing the capital at Guanzhong, Emperor Gaozu (Liu Bang) recognized the urgent need to restore temple music and dance, commissioning Shusun Tong to compose new sacrificial music grounded in Qin-era musical conventions. Court music and dance at the time continued to draw significantly from Chu regional styles; for example, the "Great Wind Song," composed by Emperor Gaozu himself, employed tonal characteristics distinctive to the Chu region—a choice that marked an early institutional openness to local folk melodic idioms. Under Emperor Wu, the Yuefu agency underwent substantial expansion, and Li Yannian was appointed Assistant Music Commissioner with explicit responsibility for collecting and organizing regional folk songs—a practice documented in historical records concerning rituals and music. The agency systematically gathered songs and ballads from the Zhao, Dai, Qin, and Chu regions, often performing them during nocturnal recitations [7]. Li Yannian led this effort, supported by dozens of scholars—including Sima Xiangru—who composed new poetic texts and provided technical explanations of musical scales and tonal systems aligned with the traditional eight-note framework. This process confirms that the Yuefu repertoire originated predominantly in vernacular song traditions, which were then subjected to official standardization and refinement. Consequently, folk songs and ballads from these regions underwent their first phase of systematic collection and organizational integration. Later

compositions, such as the nineteen-chapter "Song for Jiao Temple Sacrifices," were formally adopted for suburban and temple rites; yet their melodies were largely derived from newly collected folk tunes. Thus, popular music gained formal recognition within the state-sanctioned musical and dance system, laying the institutional foundation for comprehensive folk music collection and preliminary standardization.

3.2. Eastern Han Dynasty: The Yuefu System Was Streamlined; Popular Music Became More Secular and Integrated into Everyday Life.

The Eastern Han Dynasty inherited the Yuefu system established during the Western Han period but significantly streamlined its institutional structure; dedicated poetry collection efforts were considerably scaled down compared to earlier periods. However, popular music continued to evolve along a path of secularization and deeper integration into daily life. Lyrics increasingly reflected the lived experiences of ordinary people—the sorrow and longing of spouses separated by distance, the uncertainties of travel, and the tribulations faced by soldiers—becoming recurring themes in song, with narrative elements growing more pronounced. In the *Treatise on Literature* within the *Book of Han*, the significance of the Yuefu's folk song collection initiative was noted: since Emperor Wu of Han instituted the Yuefu, regional musical traditions such as those of Zhao, Qin, and Chu emerged, all grounded in authentic human emotions of grief and joy and inspired by real-life circumstances. This observation reflects a defining feature of popular music—it arises from everyday experience and, in turn, sustains emotional resonance. During this era, Xianghe songs rose in prominence; performed with a lead vocalist and group harmonization, their melodies were straightforward and accessible, facilitating widespread adoption in public spaces and marketplaces. In contrast to the ritual-focused music of Western Han imperial temples—which emphasized formal ceremonial functions—the Eastern Han Yuefu system shifted thematic emphasis decisively toward quotidian life. Music no longer prioritized the solemnity of rites but instead centered on the sincerity and immediacy of human feeling. This reorientation broadened its social appeal, allowing popular music to thrive at the periphery of traditional ritual frameworks and laying a substantial lyrical and textual foundation for later literati contributions to musical composition.

3.3. Cao Wei: Reform of the Yuefu System; the Literarization and Standardization of Popular Music.

At the beginning of the Cao Wei period, the Yuefu system underwent significant evolution, characterized prominently by sustained engagement from literati. Cao Cao pioneered the use of traditional Yuefu titles to reflect contemporary themes; works such as "Hao Li Xing" and "Short Song Xing" retained the formal designations of Han Dynasty musical pieces while infusing them with new thematic content, shifting Yuefu lyrics—originally composed for musical performance—toward texts intended for recitation and scholarly engagement [8, 9]. Under Cao Pi and Cao Zhi, Yuefu composition expanded in thematic range and artistic refinement; rhythmic structures and literary expression became increasingly integrated, and formal conventions were systematically consolidated. During the reign of Emperor Ming of Wei, the Qingshang Office was reconstituted to administer popular music; its staff undertook revisions of both musical notation and lyrical texts for inherited compositions, restoring melodies to relatively stable forms. Throughout this era, literarization and formal standardization progressed concurrently: popular music entered the aesthetic framework of the literati, and its musical function gradually receded in favor of its literary function. Consequently, Yuefu completed a historical shift from folk-derived song texts to literati-authored compositions; though grounded in oral tradition, it acquired renewed significance through literati reinterpretation, becoming a pivotal development in the evolution of musical literature.

4. The Specific Shaping of Folk Music Forms by the Popular Music of the Han–Wei Dynasty Yuefu Systems

4.1. Shaping the Structural Form of Folk Melodies

The influence of folk music on melodic development during the Han–Wei transition was first evident in the gradual standardization of compositional structures. Prior to official collection, folk songs largely consisted of brief rhymes and oral sayings. Following their incorporation into the Yuefu system, both lyrics and melodies underwent progressive stabilization through transmission and performance practice [10]. Musical forms evolved from simple, unstructured patterns toward increasingly systematic sectional arrangements. The emergence of Xianghe songs exemplifies this shift: performances featured a lead vocalist followed by group harmonization. Instrumental accompaniment expanded beyond basic percussion to include coordinated string and wind ensembles; as these instrumental layers became more integrated, the role of the instrumentalist-singer coalesced into the foundational performance model for Xianghe songs, introducing polyphonic and multi-part textures to folk singing.

Within musical composition, the Yuefu system played a key role in refining the structural organization of folk melodies. Vocal passages were frequently interspersed with instrumental interludes termed "xie," enabling division of a single piece into multiple sections whose number corresponded to the emotional arc of the work, thereby establishing a clear hierarchical framework. The Daqu form exhibited even greater structural sophistication: each complete composition unfolded sequentially through distinct sections—"Yan," "Qu," and "Luan." The "Yan" served as an introductory segment, setting lyrical tone and mood; the "Qu" followed with a gradually accelerating rhythmic profile; and the "Luan" concluded the piece, intensifying emotional expression to its peak. This arrangement conferred upon folk music a coherent formal logic aligned with the classical principles of introduction, development, transition, and conclusion [11]. Regarding tonal classification, Yuefu officials organized collected melodies into three principal modal categories—Pingdiao, Qingdiao, and Setiao—commonly referred to as the Three Harmonious Tones. As recorded in the *Yuefu Shiji*, Xianghe songs were systematically grouped under these tonal classifications and associated titles, integrating folk melodies into a consistent modal framework. Through successive stages of refinement, folk singing evolved from fragmented, improvisational expression into structured musical texts characterized by balanced phrasing and identifiable tonal organization. Such structural standardization not only supported accurate notation and reliable transmission among performers but also supplied a stable vocal and textual foundation for lyric composition—demonstrating the decisive role of Yuefu popular music in shaping the formal architecture of folk traditions.

4.2. *Shaping Folk Singing Traditions*

The influence of folk music from the Yuefu period on the shaping of traditional folk singing practices is clearly evident. Early folk singing was predominantly performed by a single singer, emerging spontaneously with the singer freely determining vocal pitch; after systematization by the Yuefu institutions, the performance style gradually evolved from impromptu chanting to a structured, codified format. The use of choral participation in the Xianghe songs best illustrates this transformation: the lead singer would first sing a phrase, followed by others responding in unison; solo and group singing alternated during these performances, and the division and integration of vocal parts added greater depth and complexity. Historical records from the Jin Dynasty provide a clear account of this practice; however, since the song in question dates back to the Han Dynasty and lacked string instrument accompaniment, it was performed by a solo singer with three others joining in response—this accurately reflects the actual situation in Han Dynasty folk singing, where solo and choral singing coexisted.

The method of singing the lyrics also underwent certain adjustments. Singers primarily used the human voice in accordance with melodic pitch, while string and wind instruments provided accompaniment to enhance the performance and create a festive atmosphere. In discussions of singing within the Yuefu poetry collection, singing is described as an expression of human joy; yet the human voice remains the most emotionally resonant, whereas instrumental sounds, though aesthetically pleasing, lack

the authenticity of vocal expression. Thus, voice and instrument complement each other, endowing singing with multidimensional expressive power. When compiling folk songs, Yuefu musicians incorporated supporting vocal elements—namely, auxiliary words inserted at the beginning or end of each line—which preserved the lively spirit of folk singing while rendering the melodic QiFu more seamless and coherent. The contexts of singing also shifted: folk singers originally sang for personal enjoyment in public spaces or rural areas; after integration into the Yuefu system, they became professional performers presenting before an audience. Consequently, emotional conveyance became more nuanced in terms of variation and restraint, and singing techniques were progressively refined. The shaping of folk singing traditions by Yuefu popular music ultimately elevated dispersed rural songs into structured, emotionally rich musical performances, laying a sonic foundation for the later tradition of reciting song poetry.

4.3. The Shaping of Folk Musical Instrument Ensembles and Orchestration Forms

The use and combination of folk instruments in Yuefu popular music shaped the fundamental character of traditional folk ensemble performances. Originally, folk songs were often accompanied by rhythmic percussion; the percussive patterns guided vocal delivery, and instrumental accompaniment remained minimal. After systematization by the Yuefu, instruments were assigned to each song according to its expressive intent, leading to greater consistency in instrumentation. The ensemble for Xianghe songs is especially representative; historical records indicate these songs employed eight instruments—sheng, flute, jie, drum, qin, se, pipa, and zheng—integrating stringed, bamboo-reed, and percussion instruments, with the drum providing rhythmic foundation. Each instrument fulfilled a distinct function, and the scale and structural sophistication of these ensembles clearly exceeded those of traditional rural singing.

Functional differentiation among instruments became increasingly refined. The qin, se, and pipa, relying on plucked strings, produced sustained, resonant tones; the sheng and flute, as aerophones, generated clear, lyrical melodies; while percussion instruments established rhythmic framework and shaped the overall dynamic contour. Within these ensembles, instruments engaged in coordinated interaction while maintaining hierarchical roles—their numbers adjusted to match the emotional character of the piece, and string and wind sections retained distinct functional identities, yielding a coherent ensemble architecture. A separate category—the drum-and-flute ensemble—primarily featured percussion and wind instruments such as drums, zheng, jia, and xiao; its sonority was bold and commanding, commonly deployed in military and ceremonial settings, forming a marked contrast with the delicate, lyrical quality of Xianghe songs. Consequently, folk instruments were systematically matched to diverse performance contexts. Gradual standardization transformed folk ensembles from informal groupings into rigorously organized formations, where timbres and functions interlocked synergistically, significantly strengthening the music's expressive capacity.

4.4. Shaping the Themes and Content Forms of Folk Music

The selection and refinement of folk musical themes by the Yuefu system shaped the content framework of folk singing. Originally, folk singing primarily focused on depicting everyday life—any family's joys or sorrows, or any local customs and landscapes could be set to song; these themes were scattered and spontaneous [12]. After being collected and recorded by the Yuefu system, these emotional narratives were preserved alongside the melodies themselves. Certain recurring motifs, through repeated performance, gradually coalesced into enduring themes that remained prominent in later generations. The suffering of military conscripts, the grief of separated spouses, the sorrow of wandering travelers, the joy of banquets, and the aspirations associated with immortality—all emerged sequentially through this process; individual, momentary feelings were thus elevated into songs with universal resonance, and the content of folk music evolved from impromptu expressions into recurrent thematic forms amenable to repeated performance and reflection.

A gradual correspondence developed between thematic orientation and emotional expression. Xianghe songs often conveyed sorrow and grievance, while Qingshang melodies frequently expressed intimate emotional states; each genre paired its thematic content with an appropriate musical mode, enhancing expressive appropriateness and listener resonance [8]. The Music Bureau's compilation of folk themes involved more than transcription—it entailed deliberate selection and artistic refinement, transforming fragmented observations of daily life into lyrical texts imbued with deeper significance, thereby enriching the emotional depth of folk experiences through song. By the Cao Wei period, literati began composing new works, integrating contemporary events, historical contemplation, and legendary tales of immortals into established Music Bureau frameworks; thus, thematic scope broadened significantly, and folk music content acquired layered dimensions—encompassing both grounded social observation and imaginative aspiration. Through this evolution, folk music transitioned from straightforward documentation of life toward an artistic form distinguished by emotional profundity and lasting resonance, establishing a foundational basis for the development of poetic themes in subsequent eras.

4.5. Shaping the Dissemination Patterns of Folk Music

Folk music played a transformative role in the transmission of traditional music, shifting regional melodies from exclusively oral practices to more stable forms. Historically, folk singing depended entirely on oral transmission: each performance relied on the singer's recitation, and lyrics were preserved solely through memory; when singers passed away, musical pieces were often lost, and circulation remained limited to local communities. Systematic documentation by the Yuefu agency enabled lyrics to be recorded in written form and melodies to be transmitted and taught using musical notation. For the first time, folk music acquired a textual existence independent of live performance, greatly enhancing the reliability and longevity of its transmission.

The Yuefu institution served as a central conduit for musical transmission. Folk songs and ballads collected from diverse regions were brought to the imperial court, where court musicians arranged and performed them, facilitating broad circulation. This process fostered convergence between northern and southern musical styles and enabled regional melodies to travel beyond their places of origin, transforming transmission from localized, intermittent practice into a coordinated, institutionalized system. Banquets and official performances provided public platforms for these works, extending their reach beyond rural fields and marketplaces into scholarly and bureaucratic circles. Court musicians acted as cultural intermediaries—introducing rural melodies to the imperial court and returning adapted versions to local communities—creating a sustained two-way exchange that expanded the geographical scope of folk music [12]. Written records of these works ensured temporal continuity, allowing later generations of performers and literati to reconstruct and reinterpret them based on historical sources. As a result, folk music evolved from transient oral expressions into a durable cultural heritage—capable of preservation, replication, teaching, and performance—achieving unprecedented breadth and depth in its transmission.

5. Conclusion

The folk music of the Han–Wei dynasties, as systematized through the Yuefu framework, underwent systematic collection and scholarly reconstruction. This process comprehensively shaped its melodies, performance practices, instrumentation, thematic content, and modes of transmission—transforming it from fragmented, spontaneous rural songs into a musical heritage characterized by discernible structural patterns. Crucially, this formalization preserved the core emotional and expressive qualities of the tradition while introducing normative and artistic dimensions, thereby enhancing its cultural vitality. Looking forward, the musical sensibilities and literary conventions cultivated within the Yuefu folk repertoire continue to inform the evolution of poetry, opera, and

narrative singing arts. As societal contexts shift, this enduring folk music tradition remains a dynamic source of renewal and creative adaptation.

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