

*Musical Theatre*

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**Traditional Regional Features  
in *Xiangtong Xi* Musical Drama**

*Li Jianfu*<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Liupanshui Normal University,  
Liupanshui, Guizhou, People's Republic of China,

<sup>2</sup>Lomonosov Moscow State University,  
Moscow, Russian Federation,

✉ [jefflee99887766@gmail.com](mailto:jefflee99887766@gmail.com),

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9378-8462>



**Abstract.** This article presents a discussion about *Xiangtong Xi* (香童戏), a traditional musical theatrical form associated with the Baoshan area of China's Yunnan province. *Xiangtong Xi* drama originated from the folk religious and mystical rites of the southwestern regions of China. It organically combines elements such as singing, recitation, acting and martial arts techniques that are characteristic of the musical culture of the region. This genre has its own

cult music and traditional performance style. At the same time, supporting and preserving the traditions of their art, *Xiangtong Xi* artists throughout the history of its existence have developed and continue to develop *Xiangtong Xi* music by studying the singing melodies and musical styles of other cultures, musical genres and movements and introducing their elements into their performances. The basis for such borrowings is primarily local folk music and songs, as well as other traditional musical genres of the region.

**Keywords:** *Xiangtong Xi*, musical drama, ritual music, religious music, Prince's Chant, Even Chant, Universal Chant, Chant of the Black God, plague god's chant, percussion instruments

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## Музыкальный театр

Научная статья

### Традиционные региональные черты в музыкальной драме Сянтун-Си

*Ли Цзяньфу*<sup>1, 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Люпаньшуйский педагогический университет,  
г. Люпаньшуй, провинция Гуйчжоу, Китайская Народная Республика,

<sup>2</sup>Московский государственный университет  
имени М. В. Ломоносова,

г. Москва, Российская Федерация,

✉ [jefflee99887766@gmail.com](mailto:jefflee99887766@gmail.com),

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9378-8462>

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена музыкальной драме Сянтун-Си (香童戏) — традиционному музыкальному театрализованному представлению, исполняемому в районе Баошань китайской провинции Юньнань. Драма Сянтун-Си возникла из народных религиозных и мистических обрядов юго-западных регионов Китая. В ней органично сочетаются такие элементы, как пение, декламация, актерская игра и владение приемами боевых искусств, характерные для музыкальной культуры региона. Этот жанр имеет свою культовую музыку и традиционный стиль исполнения. В то же время, поддерживая и сохраняя традиции своего искусства, артисты Сянтун-Си на протяжении всей истории его существования развивали и в настоящее время продолжают развивать музыку Сянтун-Си, изучая певческие мелодии и музыкальные стили других культур, музыкальных жанров и течений и внедряя их элементы в свои представления. Основой для таких заимствований в первую очередь служат местная народная музыка и песни, а также другие традиционные музыкальные жанры региона.

**Ключевые слова:** Сянтун-Си, музыкальная драма, ритуальная музыка, религиозная музыка, напев принца, ровный напев, универсальный напев, напев черного бога, напев бога чумы, ударные инструменты

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### *Introduction*

In China, the form and content of various musical and dramatic performances in rural areas since ancient times have often been associated with magical rites and religious or sacrificial rituals. This is especially evident in the traditions of the southwestern border regions of China. According to the Chronicles of Baoshan County, primitive religious witchcraft was very popular in the Chinese province of Yunnan as early as the 1st century BC, involving the performance of sacrificial rites by so-called “shamans” [1, p. 45]. From the late Eastern Han Dynasty (early 3rd century AD) to the present day, the practice of magical and sacrificial rituals has been widespread in Baoshan [2].

Dances and theatrical performances accompanying ancient rituals exist in various regions of China, all of them having arisen under the influence of primitive religious beliefs [3]. One of the typical branches of such stage art is the *Xiangtong Xi* (香童戏) musical dramatic form, which emerged in the Baoshan region of the south-western border area of China. Its name originates from the religious cult of *Xiangtong* (香童), denoting an incense burner for burning incense, and *Xi* (戏) which means a musical performance. The *Xiangtong Xi* art form absorbed the local performance traditions of the Baoshan region, the Buddhist sacrificial-ritual rites of the Bai people popular during the Tang dynasty in the neighbouring Dali area, as well as elements of folk musical festive traditions that came from the Central Plains and spread in Baoshan during the Ming dynasty. Throughout the history of the development of *Xiangtong Xi*, all these elements have been closely interconnected and continue to influence each other today, borrowing various techniques from one another to gradually form an original local musical drama [4, p. 19].

The *Xiangtong* cult members are a kind of shamanic order that has existed in the Baoshan area since ancient times. Their sociocultural functions including leading people in prayer, performing religious rituals, and communicating with the gods by making sacrifices to them to eliminate disasters and solve various problems in life.

*Xiangtong Xi* is a form of dramatic performance in which men wave incense, sing, and perform ritual acts and games as part of a sacrificial offering. In this case, music becomes a kind of communication bridge between people and gods. Thus, *Xiangtong* cult performances play the role of the main bearer of cultural traditions and the living embodiment of local history.

The main ceremony in *Xiangtong Xi*, widely known as “dojo,” is also called the “divine ritual.” It is a religious ritual practice believed to assist in atoning for sins, praying for blessings, preventing disasters, developing moral character and saving the souls of the dead. In addition to various elements of local folk customs and features of singing, performance and instrumental music, the *Xiangtong Xi* sacrificial ritual has absorbed some forms and traditions of Chinese Taoist ritual singing and instrumental musical performance. Nevertheless, it can be said that without the element of sacrificial rituals there would be no *Xiangtong Xi*.

*Xiangtong Xi* musical drama has a long history. According to *The Travels of Marco Polo*, the prototype of *Xiangtong Xi* was formed in the early Yuan Dynasty; however, more mature forms of this art appeared during the Ming Dynasty. The period between the Qing and Ming dynasties was a time of active development and flourishing of *Xiangtong Xi*. [5, p. 174] As a locally significant artistic and cultural symbol, in 2017, *Xiangtong Xi* was included in the Fourth List of Protected Intangible Cultural Heritage of Yunnan Province, China [6].

#### *Characteristics of the Xiangtong Xi Repertoire*

*Xiangtong Xi* drama is famous for its singers, each of whom becomes a *Xiangtong* – that is, a shaman of the *Xiangtong* cult. As a general rule, such shamans are men. In olden times, they practiced magic to achieve certain goals, while today they still enjoy a reputation among local ethnic groups as wielding a “supernatural force” that can help in various life situations. Typically, a *Xiangtong Xi* performance was ordered from shamans by community residents in order to appease the gods and obtain their help in solving their problems. There is no specific period or season for singing *Xiangtong Xi*, which may be performed all year round.

A *Xiangtong Xi* performance is always preceded by the so-called “opening ceremony.” Through prayers, ritual divination and in accordance with the wishes of the people who ordered the performance, the *Xiangtong* shamans determine an auspicious day for its performance. These are considered to be

the days of the spring festival according to the lunar calendar, as well as the first and second months of the year. As a rule, *Xiangtong Xi* performances are rarely held after the end of March, since in the Taoist theological system the most auspicious months are January, February and March [7]. Today this art form has become a purely theatrical, “entertainment” phenomenon, i.e., largely shorn of its magical function.

Traditionally there were a total of thirty-six traditional plays making up the *Xiangtong Xi* repertoire. These are passed down orally by artists from generation to generation; there are no written records. However, in this regard, according to the masters of *Xiangtong Xi*, only about thirty plays have survived to this day.

According to the performers, the demands of the residents for the production vary depending on their financial situation. If the family's income is high enough, all of *Xiangtong Xi*'s plays will be included in a single session. The performances last at least six days, usually with three or four shows during the day and one at night. If the host family's income is average or low, then several plays or even just one may be selected for production, which will in this case be performed for no more than three days. The limitation on the number of days may also be related to the numbers three and six, which are considered auspicious in Taoism – [8]. A *Xiangtong* performance generally takes place in the courtyard of the house in which the people who ordered it live. Usually, the entire village comes to see the performance, and the courtyard becomes not only a stage where theatrical performances and religious rituals take place, but also a place for neighbours to communicate, thus helping to forge closer and more friendly relationships, and uniting the community.

*Xiangtong Xi* plays can be divided into three types according to the theme.

The first type are plays based on historical events and stories about Chinese ruling dynasties. These include such works as *The Tea Inn* (茶房酒店), *The Sheep-Headed Prince* (羊头太子), *Brother Jin Leng Yin Leng* (金灯银灯哥哥) and others. The second type is based on plots from Chinese classical literature, such as the story of Prime Minister Zhuge Liang's southern expedition in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义) and some plot lines from *Romance of the Gods* (封神演义). This type includes such plays as *The Fifth Master of the Black Wind* (黑风五爷), *The Violent General* (猖狂猛将), *The Marshal's Examination* (考兵元帅). The third type uses the content of myths and legends, such as *The Crown Prince* (哪叱太子), *The White Crane Fairy* (白鹤仙娘), *The Dragon God Barin Duan* (段爷龙神) and so on.



The selection of repertoire is subject to a number of rules. The content of the performance cannot be chosen arbitrarily; while it is usually determined based on the wishes of the host or the particular life situation for which they have sought the help of Xiangtong cult practitioners, it also depends on various external factors, such as whether the performance falls on the days of certain festivals or during the conduct of specific rituals. For example, if rituals of giving thanks to the soil and opening the gates of wealth are held on this day, then in the evening, before the rituals of worshipping the gods and dancing, such performances as *The Dragon Emperor of Wealth* (财龙天子), *The Emperor of the Black God* (黑神大帝) and *The Mountain God of the Earth* (土地山神) are usually held. If the person who ordered the performance has no heirs and prays for the continuation of the family line, then the play *Tea Hotel* will be performed for him. If the host family is the culprit of an emergency or accident and has the intention to atone for the guilt, then they will perform the *Pioneer Judge* (先锋判官). If the host wants to get a good harvest, the play *The Grain Man* (五谷郎君) can be performed. If any family member suffers from eye pain or a serious eye disease, the *Lady with Eyes* (眼光娘娘) will be presented, while in case of natural disasters, the *Third Master of the Army* (统兵三爷) or *Fifth Master of the Golden Spear* (金枪五爷) will be given preference.

### Stage Roles

The stage roles in *Xiangtong Xi* are similar to those in Peking opera: the characters are also divided into four main roles: “sheng” (生), “dan” (旦), “jing” (净) and “chou” (丑) [9].

In *Xiangtong Xi*, “sheng” is invariably a male role; moreover, the actor playing it must be tall and have a strong figure. Typically, this is a positive character – a nobleman, a hero. “Dan” is a female character. “Jing” is used for male roles that demonstrate an open and bold character [10, c. 76]. The “chou” role includes comical but good-natured characters, as well as cunning, clever, but at the same time stupid villains. Of the four roles, “chou” is the widest in terms of character and role coverage [11, p. 93]. It depicts both men and women, commoners and nobles, good guys and bad guys, heroes of all ages and people with disabilities [12].

For example, Dou Mu in *The Bee Fairy* (蜜蜂小姐) is a “dan” role. Her character is full of tenderness and charm, her voice is high and sweet, and her dance



poses are graceful and moving; she displays the gentle and delicate side of the role. The role of “sheng” is represented in the role of the prince in *The Peach Blossom Prince* (桃花太子). The presentation of such a character is usually distinguished by energetic, temperamental stage behaviour; the text is pronounced in a loud voice, while the actors’ accompanying movements are rapid and frenetic. The role of the prince, who demonstrates beauty, masculinity and strength, epitomises qualities characteristic of the “sheng.” The “jing” role includes the roles of the Black Wind King and Shuixi Manzi in *The Five Masters of the Black Wind*. These characters are usually mysterious, reserved, their performers have deep and calm voices, but at the same time they are excellent martial artists, and their movements are fast and energetic. The “chou” characters include the shopkeeper and the county magistrate in *The Tea Inn* and the land official and Zhengcai Land in *The Mountain God of the Land*. These images are grotesquely ugly and comical with caricatured features; the actors speak in shrill voices and their actions are emphatically absurd. These four acting roles form the basis of *Xiangtong Xi*’s performing arts.

#### *Musical Accompaniment: Percussion Instruments*

The basis of the musical accompaniment of *Xiangtong Xi* is made up of percussion instruments, typically including wooden fish or muyu (木鱼), gongs (钹钹), drums (鼓), bells (铃), as well as small and large cymbals (小钹、大钹). Among these the most important are gongs and drums, which can be played both during the ritual and in dramatic episodes outside of it. Sometimes, wind and string instruments are added to the percussion instruments, such as the suona (唢呐), horn (号角), erhu (二胡), and others. The use of such instruments gives the music a fuller multi-layered sound, further emphasising the originality of the *Xiangtong Xi* musical style. However, in most performances, strings and brass instruments are absent, and the accompaniment is limited to gongs and drums. This is also one of the important differences between *Xiangtong Xi* and other religious musical dramas.

The ancient Chinese believed that the sound of the drum could reach the heavens; as such, it could drive away ghosts, frighten enemies, welcome the gods and serve as a means of communication with them. In traditional beliefs, there is often a God of Thunder, who makes loud sounds with the help of a drum [13, p. 36]. In the *Book of Mountains and Seas*, this deity is described as a creature with the body of a dragon and a human head, “his belly protrudes, and he strikes at it” [14, p. 153].

This image is also present in other sources; sometimes it is depicted as a strong man holding a drum in his left hand and a beater in his right. Such a character is intended to evoke respect, awe and reverence in a person [15, p. 43]; the peals of thunder that he produces with the help of a percussion instrument are considered to be of divine origin. The drum played an important role in ancient sacrifices and wars – serving, in particular, as a means of communication between people and gods. At the same time, the ancients believed that gongs and drums represent two opposite but interacting artifacts, one of the manifestations of the principles of “yin” and “yang” in ritual music [14, p. 136].

Since the striking of gongs and drums is subject to strict rules In Xiangtong Xi, the order of playing a piece of music using these instruments cannot be changed at the will of the performer or anyone else. The purpose of the performance is not only to emphasise the solemnity and sacredness of the sacrificial ceremony, but also to fully comply with the traditions of Chinese culture that this art has absorbed, such as the belief in the power of nature and the concept of balance between Yin and Yang. At the same time, permissible changes in the rhythm, intensity and volume of percussion instruments can be used to change the atmosphere of the performance. For example, the sound of percussion instruments during the performance of tense scenes enhances their emotionality, increases drama, emphasises the artistry of the performers, and brings additional stage effects to the performances.

Since gongs and drums form the basis of the musical accompaniment of Xiangtong Xi, the performers playing these instruments become the most important participants in the performance. It is the rhythm set by the drums that can be called the “soul” of Xiangtong Xi music.

#### *Vocal Chants in Performances*

As for the vocal parts, the music of *Xiangtong Xi* has its own unique traditional chants, which exist in different versions, such as *Taizi-qiang* (太子腔, *Prince's Chant*), *Ping-qiang* (平腔, *Even Chant*), *Cixiong-qiang* (雌雄腔, *Universal Chant*), *Heisheng-qiang* (黑神腔, *Chant of the Black God*), *Wensheng-qiang* (瘟神腔, *Chant of the Plague God*) and others.

The expressive melody of the *Prince's Chant* has a wide range and rhythmic variety (*Example 1*). It is usually found in the games of heroes representing members of the royal family or courtiers. The verbal text in the chant

strictly preserves the written language style of classical literary sources. Performing the *Prince's Chant* requires special skills from the artist: the ability to sing high notes, to hold oneself in an appropriate manner, portraying the nobility, grandeur, confidence, and grace of noble characters. Examples of its use include the roles of Yang Xuewen in *The Sheep-Headed Prince* and the title character in *Prince Wang Lin* (王林太子).



Example 1. *Prince's Chant*  
(fragment of the play *The Sheep-Headed Prince*)

The *Even Chant* is distinguished by simplicity of rhythmic and melodic movement, and the clarity of its structure (Example 2). The range is narrow, not extending beyond the small and first octaves, with a small number of high and low sounds. The melody is actually composed of several notes; the typical measure is 2/4. The performance includes singing and recitative, slow and fast fragments. Singing often involves repeated phrases and words that are meant to more accurately express the character's emotions. The most striking examples of the use of the *Even Chant* are the plays *The Fifth Master of the Golden Spear* and *Empress Doumu* (斗姆娘娘).



Example 2. *Even Chant*  
(vocal part of a peasant from the play *Empress Doumu*)

The *Universal Chant* is suitable for expressing the passion, courage and determination of heroes or warriors (*Example 3*). The singing of his cantilena melody is emphasised by the perfect plasticity of the dance performed simultaneously. The developed melodic line, which is built on the alternation of smooth rises and falls, is characterised by its modal variability. The unique charm of the energetic singing style is rich in local ethnic characteristics. The *Universal Chant* is used in the performances *The Fifth Master of the Black Wind* and *The Bee Fairy*.



*Example 3. Universal Chant (Aria of the Master of the Black Wind)*

When performing the *Chant of the Black God*, vibrato and glissando techniques are often used, which contributes to the softness and sophistication of the style (*Example 4*). Sustained tones are widely used, with one syllable in each word usually sung longer than the others. The pitch often changes from low to high or vice versa to create a sense of vertical variegation. A typical example is the melody from the play *The Emperor of the Black God*.

The *Chant of the Plague God* is reminiscent of simple and unpretentious folk melodies and ancient songs (*Example 5*). The accompaniment most often uses traditional instruments such as dizi, jinghu, banhu, gongs, drums, which give the music a unique brightness and attractiveness. The performer is required to have clear pronunciation and use guttural sounds. The *Chant of the Plague God* is represented by the work *Duan Lao Zong Bing* (段老总兵).



*Example 4. Chant of the Black God*  
(Emperor's aria from the play *The Emperor of the Black God*)



*Example 5. Chant of the Plague God*  
(excerpt from the play *Duan Lao Zong Bing*)

Some *Xiangtong Xi* performances include musical styles borrowed from Yunnan opera, local music, Baoshan lantern show and folk songs. For example, in the play *The Tea Hotel* part of the musical material is taken from the “melody of the rolling lantern” and the “melody of the rubber band” that sound in the lantern performance. In addition, *Xiangtong Xi* may use religious music of various genres, including Buddhist, Taoist, and various local spiritual chants. In many vocal numbers one can feel the fusion and mixing of, for example, the “chant of lamentation,” the “divine chant,” the “chant of the Human Bodhisattva” and some others. The borrowed styles and elements that enrich the music of *Xiangtong Xi* simultaneously reflect the diversity of the musical and theatrical culture of Yunnan Province.



### *Recitative*

An important part of the *Xiangtong Xi* performance is the “divine ritual” ceremony, which consists of reading ritual texts while making sacrifices to the gods. This element, which is present in all *Xiangtong Xi* performances, has special rules and represents an integral part of each play. During the ceremony, the Xiangtongs recite sacred texts while holding incense in their hands. This procedure, which represents the main form of religious behaviour practiced in the Xiangtong cult, is used by its priests during prayers to the gods and sacrifices. The intonations of the readers constantly change from low to high, from fast to slow corresponding to emotional high and low points, which gives the process of prayer itself a special expressiveness, attracting the attention of believers and making them think more deeply about the meaning of the text being spoken. Sacred texts are recited verbatim in accordance with the canon, which regulates such factors as the rhythm of reading and the expression of certain emotions. This performance invariably evokes a lively response in believers and enhances the feeling of solemnity and spirituality of the entire ceremony.

### *Conclusion*

The history of the existence and development of *Xiangtong Xi* art thus demonstrates the constant interaction and integration of Han culture with the musical culture of ethnic minorities in the border regions, as well as embodying the close connection of Taoist traditions with local culture. The form and content of the *Xiangtong Xi* performance, which serve as a vivid expression of local cultural heritage and folk customs, are associated with the magical rituals and sacrifices practiced by the population. However, over time, this type of art gradually transformed from the genre of “entertaining the gods” into the form of “entertaining the people.” Nevertheless, by listening and watching the drama, audience members gain spiritual satisfaction along with a sense of unity and ethnic identity.

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Information about the author:

**Li Jianfu** — Cand. Sci. (Art Studies), Assistant Professor, Music Art Department, Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts, Music Art Department.

Сведения об авторе:

**Ли Цзяньфу** — кандидат искусствоведения, доцент, кафедра музыкального искусства; доцент, факультет искусств, кафедра музыкального искусства.

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