

A STUDY ON THE “VIEW OF HARMONY” IN BENGAL BAUL SONGS AND CHINESE ETHNIC MINORITY SONGS FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE*

Gan Luting**

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Abstract

In the context of global multicultural development, music, as an important cultural carrier, possesses connectivity, coordination, and inheritance. Throughout history, folk songs from different countries have reflected the social life, cultural spirit, customs, and psychology of their time, forming a natural and rational harmony. Bengal Baul folk songs, as a model of “Harmonious Coexistence” in India, Bangladesh, and even South Asia, integrate different religious groups, emphasize spiritual cultivation, and have created a rich collection of Baul ballads. For hundreds of years, generations of Baul minstrels have told the historical stories of this region, showcasing their unique view of harmony. China and India are both ancient civilizations and friendly neighbors. China has 56 ethnic groups, among which the folk songs of ethnic minorities present a diverse ecological narrative. The view of harmony has been consistently present in China’s millennia-old cosmology and traditional cultural concepts. Therefore, by studying the song narratives of Baul singers in different periods, focusing on analyzing their cultural connotations, and using a cross-cultural perspective and oral literature viewpoint, this study compares and analyzes some typical songs from Chinese ethnic minority folk songs. Although there are certain differences, the core of both emphasizes the universal human’s “View of Harmony”.

Keywords: Bengal Baul Songs, Chinese Ethnic Minority Songs, View of Harmony, Cross-Cultural Comparative Perspective, Oral Literature

The Bauls are a group of mysterious folk singers from the Bengal region¹, whose songs are known as Baul Gan (Baul Song). Baul songs are oral ballads, simple and natural. During Bauls’s performances, they hold an Ektara (A Single-Stringed Instrument), a small drum at their waist, and bells on their feet, singing and dancing simultaneously. The performer sings solo or in a group of several people. They sing related themes about life philosophies, religious beliefs, social difficulties, independence and freedom, and true love, etc., in the rural areas.

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** Gan Luting, Ph.D., Lecturer of the School of Foreign Languages and South Asian and Southeast Asian Studies, Yunnan Minzu University, Yunnan, China. Research areas: Indian languages and literature, and South Asian socio-cultural studies. Email: ganluting_glt22@163.com.

¹ The Bengal region primarily refers to the areas influenced by Bengali culture and where the Bengali language is spoken, mainly including the present-day Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Historically, Assam, Bihar, Tripura, and Odisha in India have also been influenced by Bengali culture, and thus, Baul lived and performed in these areas as well.

The Bauls are also a unique religious sect, which historically was influenced by three religious praxis—Sahajiya (Bajrayana Buddhism), Bhakti (Hindu Vaishnavism, oftentimes embodied in the Tantric tradition), and Sufi mysticism (Islamic Marifat), and perform their spiritual tradition through songs as they travel around. In contemporary South Asia, there are conflicts and contradictions among multiple ethnic groups and religions. But the Bauls, adhering to a spirit of universal love and equality, live in peace and use songs to tell the story of Bengal's history. Therefore, the Baul songs are widely popular in India, Bangladesh and throughout South Asia, renowned for its unique philosophical system and captivating chanting style within the South Asian oral tradition. In 2005, UNESCO acknowledged this rich tradition as part of humanity's shared intangible cultural heritage, highlighting its importance for cultural diversity.

Many scholars have researched Baul and Baul songs. Charles Capwell says in his book that "When the word 'Baul' first came to be used to designate the sect and its members is unknown. It has been suggested that, etymologically, the word derives from Sanskrit 'Vatula'(Windy, mad), and in medieval Bengali literature of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, the term apparently meant 'mad' and did not refer to a religious sect. Today, Baul is used exclusively with reference to the religious sect, and although it still carries a connotation of 'mad', it no longer means simply that." Disha Mondal also mentioned in her book that "In the 18th to 19th centuries, Fakir Lalon Shah was a symbol of Baul tradition. His philosophy is the philosophy of searching for the 'Moner Manush' that has no caste, no religion, no gender bias, after all, on the realization of which presence men can attain the eternal bliss." Shamsad Begum Chowdhury says in her article that "Some of the Baul songs are indeed full of mysticism; generally, in this type of song, the Baul singers symbolize the souls as various birds. Individuality has been created in the language and lyrics of baul songs according to and on the basis of regional, environmental, and spiritual aims." Uttaran Dutta says "Bauls are a cultural group from the rural Bangla region that has been marginalized by socio-economic, political, and religious factors. They identify themselves outside of any organized religion or established caste system in India, and therefore are constituted at the margins of the contemporary global South. They sing praises of the beauty of nature, criticize inequalities, social discrimination, and injustice, and attempt to convey a humanistic spirit through their songs." In addition, one Chinese scholar, Yang Weiming, has also introduced Baul song types, philosophical ideas, and important representative Bauls in her article.

Baul song is not only a unique form of intangible cultural heritage music within the Bengali folk tradition, but it can also be classified as folk oral literature. Oral literature, also known as folk literature or oral and intangible cultural heritage, is a form of literature passed down orally. Its main genres include stories, folk songs, folk dramas, and proverbs. Oral literature emphasizes factors such as space, time, and ritual, and is characterized by its national character, oral nature, performativeness, collectivity, fluidity, and transmissibility. These characteristics

determine the internal structure and narrative form of the literary genre, promote the effective dissemination of historical and cultural memory, and shape a unique literary style. In oral traditions, some elements can be expressed not only through language but also through gestures and dance, allowing for interaction and communication with the audience and the transmission of cultural information. Therefore, oral traditions and literature are not only a form of narrative but also a form of performance (Mbube Nwi-Akeeri, 2017). Indian history is a mythological history, with the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, passed down orally among the local people. Oral narrative has been the core of South Asian literature in the early days and even now (Aashi Bains, 2022). The South Asian region is rich in ethnicities, religions, and languages, renowned for its unique geography, complex history, and diverse cultures. Oral literature is the earliest source of South Asian literature and a cradle of South Asian culture. Traditional oral literature holds an important place in South Asia, especially in India (Ramanujan A. K, 1997).

According to the research views of some Chinese scholars, the Indian Enlightenment first arose in the Bengal region, and Bengali literature was the first to reflect nationalist ideas and promote the development of new literature throughout India (Jiang Jingkui, 2014). Bengali literature is rooted in the Bengali language, culture, religion, history, and art. Bangla region not only boasts numerous folk myths but also a wide variety of traditional folk songs. The lyrics primarily revolve around themes of tradition, spirituality, mysticism, faith, and love. One of the most common folk songs is the “Baul”, an oral tradition sung by local singers, often containing philosophical reflections and praises to the gods (He Chaorong, 2015). The Bengali people are known for their singing and dancing, and their rich folk song tradition serves various social functions. Folk music is used to celebrate daily work, harvest seasons, weddings, and births. The folk song “Baul” is particularly rich in local flavor, and its fame is largely attributed to Tagore's promotion, extending its influence far beyond the South Asian subcontinent (Liu Jian, 2010).

The cultural relationship between China and India has a long history. The Chinese and Indian people are warm and passionate, with a rich musical tradition. Songs are an important part of the lives of people, and folk songs are inextricably linked to religion, literature, society, and daily life. China has 56 ethnic groups, including one Han nationality and 55 minority nationalities. Chinese minority folk songs are characterized by their oral transmission, fluidity, and inheritance. They employ folk musical melodies, draw on the linguistic features of folk songs, and utilize traditional singing methods, possessing a distinct and rich ethnic flavor that is widely loved. (Wang Yan, 2023). Influenced by Confucian culture, from the ancient Chinese character for “He” (Harmony) to its modern usage, the concept of harmony exists not only in music but has also been a part of traditional Chinese cultural values for thousands of years (Zhou Fengping, 2012). The Bengali Baul songs, as a unique form of oral literature, this article will take it compared with

Chinese ethnic group folk songs through a cross-cultural comparative perspective. Exploring the “Harmonious Concept” presented in the folk songs of both countries not only helps us understand the social landscape and humanistic spirit under the historical and social changes in both countries, but also helps to strengthen the emotional connection. Through language and literature research and cultural bridging, it is hoped that more people can understand the rich diversity of the two countries’ cultures.

Methodology

The study is based on the collection of data and analysis of relevant literature texts from several research studies. While many scholars have generally focused on the Baul tradition through the lenses of sociology, religious studies, philosophy, ethnomusicology, and art studies, few have investigated the Bengali social landscape, ethnic characteristics, and cultural concepts embodied within the song texts from the perspectives of literature, anthropology, history, social psychology, or linguistics. Secondly, many research works have primarily focused on this subject as a form of minstrel balladry, while overlooking its role in perpetuating collective and social memory, as well as its function in the transmission of social civilization. Furthermore, relatively few scholars have explored the Bengali oral tradition from a literary perspective. Finally, few scholars have compared Bengali Baul songs with the folk songs of Chinese ethnic minorities, nor have they analyzed the deep-seated cultural connotations of the “Harmonious Concept” embedded within this literature; and there is a lack of comprehensive study regarding how to approach a cross-cultural comparative perspective to the study of Baul oral literature. In this context, conducting a comparative and analytical study of the Bangal Baul oral tradition alongside the folk songs of Chinese ethnic minorities—viewed through the lenses of cross-cultural comparison and literary studies—holds academic value.

Discussion

THE “VIEW OF HARMONY” OF THE BAUL SONGS

The Baul is an eclectic group with multiple religious influences. But the songs of Baul transcend religious boundaries and evoke open interpretations of the “Supreme”. Throughout different periods in the Bengal region, there have been various Baul singers, whose music reflects their humanistic thoughts and social landscape. It can be seen from some songs that they renounce religious practices and criticize the superficiality of religious divisions. The lyrics from a Baul song say, “Fakiri koribi khyapa kon raag-e/ Ache Hindu-Musalman dui bhaghe”—which means, how can one preach peace in a country that is divided based on two major religious groups—Hindu and Muslim. Also, “Je ja bhabe sei rupe se hoy, Ram-Rahim-Karim-Kala ek atma jogotmoy,” which again reinforces that Ram, Rahim, Karim, and Kala are the names of the same supreme power.

The renowned Baul singer Lalon Shah composed over a thousand songs, of which approximately seven or eight hundred survive today. He is a unique singer who

renounced religious practices and criticized the superficiality of religious divisions. He sings:

Everyone asks: "Lalon, what's your religion in this world?"

Lalon answers: "How does religion look?"

I've never laid eyes on it.

Some wear malas [Hindu rosaries] around their necks,

Some tasbis [Muslim rosaries], and so people say
they've got different religions.

But do you bear the sign of your religion
when you come or when you go?

Lalon's song reflected the spirit of humanism, which rejects all distinctions of caste, class, and creed, and should not use religion as a guise to divide people into different classes. He believes that music can help people better understand life. The world will be better if we respect and love each other. At the same time, this song also reflects Lalon's pursuit of a "Harmonious Concept." Throughout the long history of the Indian subcontinent, the encounter between Hinduism and Islam has always been intertwined with conflict and dialogue, exclusion and absorption. The true path to harmonious coexistence lies not in eliminating differences, but in transcending them. When both sides realize that "Supreme" transcends all names and forms, each other's temples and mosques cease to be a threat. Harmony does not stem from compromise or submission on one side, but from confidence in their own traditions and genuine openness to others. Whether Hinduism or Islam, both are human beings. Harmony is not merely an ideal, but a living reality, when both sides regard each other as brothers and sisters sharing the same land and breathing the same air. The most profound theme in Lalon's songs is his reaction against religion, class, and the caste system. His age-old songs are still relevant in contemporary society.

The spirit of Lalon has not only had a profound influence on Bengali literature and culture, but also on Rabindranath Tagore's literary works. Inspired by the melody of the song "Where to Find Him (Ami Kothay Pabo Tare)" by the Baul singer Gagan Harkara. Tagore composed "My Golden Bengal (Amar Sonar Bangla)" in 1905. This is a patriotic song:

My Bengal of gold, I love you

Forever your skies, your air set my heart in tune
as if it were a flute,

In Spring, Oh mother mine, the fragrance from
your mango-groves makes me wild with joy-
Ah, what a thrill!

In Autumn, Oh mother mine,
in the full-blossomed paddy fields,

I have seen spread all over - sweet smiles!

Ah, what a beauty, what shades, what an affection
and what a tenderness!

What a quilt have you spread at the feet of
banyan trees and along the banks of rivers!
Oh mother mine, words from your lips are like
Nectar to my ears!
Ah, what a thrill!
If sadness, Oh mother mine, casts a gloom on your face,
my eyes are filled with tears!

This song is a tribute to the mother of Bengal. This song, along with another song, were both composed by Tagore during the British colonial period in India, against the 1905 partition of Bengal. Another song's name is "Soil of Bengal, Water of Bengal (Banglar Mati Banglar Jol)", the lyric is:

Soil of Bengal, water of Bengal,
Air of Bengal, fruits of Bengal.
Let them be sacred, O Lord.
Homes of Bengal, markets of Bengal,
Forests of Bengal, fields of Bengal.
Let them be brimming, O Lord.
Bengali feats, Bengali hopes,
Bengali goals, Bengali tongues.
Let them be true, O Lord.
Bengali lives, Bengali minds,
In Bengali home as kins.
Let them be one, O Lord.

In these two songs, Tagore expressed his deep gratitude and profound love for his beloved "Bengal Mother". "Sky, Mango Groves, Paddy Fields, Banyan Trees, Riverbanks, Soil, Water, Air, Fruits, Markets, and Forests, etc," symbolize the mother's body, highlighting this holistic beauty and reminding us to cherish and protect her (Bengal Mother). The creation of these two songs embodies the spirit of Bengal unity, encouraging the people to unite against British colonialism. At the same time, they also reflect Tagore's yearning for love and harmony in the nation. In the crisis of religious antagonism and ethnic division triggered by the 1905 partition of Bengal, Tagore's concept of harmony reflected his cultural and political stance. He strongly opposed narrow nationalism that drew boundaries based on religion or region, advocating a harmonious concept of diversity within unity. He emphasized that India's true vitality lay in the long-standing symbiotic tradition between Hindus and Muslims in terms of language, customs, and local sentiment. In his works, harmony was not a forced uniformity, but rather mutual assistance and tolerance among those who differed—an idea that directly addressed the violence of the logic of division, attempting to rebuild a spirit of community based on emotional connection rather than identity labels in the then-damaged colonial society. It is worth mentioning that, "My Golden Bengal" was adopted as the national anthem by Bangladesh in 1971. And the song "Banglar Mati Banglar Jol" was made the official state song of West Bengal in 2023.

In addition, contemporary Baul singers also told the story about the turbulent period of the country and their inner hopes. Khabir Dewan composed a song about the history of language movements and expressed his views. He sings:

O heroes and martyrs
Take my salute
We didn't forget you, never we will.
O the people, who laid down their lives
For our mother tongue
They remained immortal forever.

Though we know that we have long way to go, long way to go.

He used his song to commemorate the martyrs who died in the 1952 language movement, to praise the spirit of the Bengalis in their fight for independence and freedom against oppression, and to awaken people with his voice, calling on everyone to raise awareness of language rights and defend cultural sovereignty. He hoped that people would learn from this history in the future, use rational appeals to seek justice, and promote social harmony and national peace.

From Lalou, Tagore to Khabir Dewan, from the pre-colonial period, colonial period to the modern era, different Baul singers have told stories of different times, covering diverse themes such as love, family, society, economics, politics, and culture. However, their pursuit of the “Harmony Concept” remains constant. Through their musical social landscape, we can see that the “Harmony Concept” is not a simple erasure of differences, but rather a search for balance amidst tension and unity within diversity. True harmony is not static, but a dynamic, emotional, and spiraling process of integration.

THE “VIEW OF HARMONY” OF THE CHINESE ETHNIC MINORITY SONGS

China and India are ancient civilizations having learned from and influenced each other throughout their long history, achieving harmony amidst diversity, resulting in a vibrant culture. The Bauls are a model of harmonious coexistence in the Bengal region, India, Bangladesh, and even South Asia. While China does not have a religious group like the Bauls, it boasts 56 ethnic groups with a rich and diverse musical culture, whose various songs also reflect the Chinese people's ideals and determination to pursue harmony. Despite differences in geography, ethnicity, and religion, the two countries' peoples share a common pursuit of harmony.

Throughout history, China's various ethnic groups have created numerous outstanding and splendid ethnic cultures. Folk songs are one such culture, a collective creation formed through long-term and widespread oral transmission by the people of each ethnic group. For centuries, they have accompanied people's lives, reflecting their thoughts, feelings, character, psychological qualities, and aesthetic tastes.

The Dong ethnic group is mainly distributed in Guizhou, Hunan, etc., provinces of China. Their traditional folk song, known as “Ga Lao” in the Dong language,

is a polyphonic, unaccompanied, natural harmonies-based singing style, typically requiring a group of three or more singers for collective chanting. Originating in the Spring-Autumn Warring States period, it has a history of over 2500 years. The Dong ethnic group's Big Songs have no written musical scores; their transmission relies entirely on oral instruction. Their content can be categorized into various types, including Drum Tower Big Song, Sound Big Song, Narrative Big Song, and Children's Big Song, and also includes male, female, and children's voices. In Dong society, there is a saying, "Food nourishes the body, song nourishes the soul," highlighting its importance as a carrier for inheriting historical culture and maintaining social harmony. In 2009, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

"The Song of the Cicada" is a representative work of the famous Dong ethnic group's big song. The local people sang in the Dong language, if written a few lines of the lyrics in Chinese Pinyin: "Fanfan Jiangka, Raoduo Meiga, Nengsai Xiaoting, Duoga Nenglang Sai Xiaoka Ma..... Ai ke ai, Jindang ai ke ai, Jindang ai, Anggai Ai Ke Ai." The lyrics contain many reduplicated words, and the transliterated parts make extensive use of filler words such as "lang" and "ai," vividly simulating natural sounds like cicada chirping, flowing water, and wind, perfectly blending human voices with the sounds of nature. This reflects the characteristics of Dong folk songs, which use sound to convey meaning and imitate nature, and convey the Dong people's yearning for life. Although our voices cannot be as melodious as the chirping of cicadas, we have love in our hearts, and we sing of our beautiful life.

The Dong people have long upheld the concept of "Harmony Between Human and Nature," believing that nature is the foundation of human survival. The song's delicate depiction of all things in nature is imbued with reverence and love for it, conveying an ecological view of adapting to, protecting, and living in harmony with nature. In Dong villages, this song has been passed down through generations, not only as an artistic treasure but also deeply rooting the concept of respecting nature and harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature in the national consciousness.

The happy scene of people living in peace and contentment is vividly depicted in many songs of ethnic minorities. The Mongolian folk song "Mu Ge" (Pastoral Song) is a prime example of this, and in June 2008, this song was approved for inclusion in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists in China. This song belongs to the Mongolian long-tune folk song category, and its melody possesses the typical characteristics of long-tune songs: a free and relaxed rhythm, a long and expansive melody, and long, drawn-out phrases, carrying a rich grassland atmosphere. "Mu Ge" was adapted and written by An Bo. Mongolian singer Amu Guleng has performed this song many times, and its lyrics are beautiful:

Blue, blue sky with white clouds drifting by,
Beneath the clouds, snow-white sheep herds run high.

The boundless grassland is our homeland dear,

The white clouds and blue sky are our tent and cheer.

With just a few words, the song paints a peaceful picture of lush grasslands, herds of cattle and sheep, and herdsmen working leisurely. Without ornate language, the song, through its melodious long-tune tune, sings of the Mongolian people's peaceful and prosperous life, conveying a harmonious atmosphere of coexistence between humanity and nature. This song is not only a celebration of the beautiful life on the grasslands, but also embodies the shared aspirations of all ethnic groups for national peace and prosperity, and the happiness of the people; it is a true reflection of social harmony and the well-being of the people.

The musical system of Xinjiang Uyghur folk songs is also very rich. In 1956, renowned Chinese composer Shi Fu adapted the Xinjiang folk song "Wahaha" into the song "Wo Men De Zu Guo Shi Hua Yuan" (Our Country is a Large Garden). The lyrics depict a vibrant and lively scene, reflecting the Uyghur people's praise for their new country through the imagery of gardens and flowers. The song's lyric is:

Our country is a large garden,
The flowers in the garden are blooming so bright.
With good weather, they burst into full bloom,
So many colors, so gorgeous.
The beautiful flowers never fade,
Our country is spring forever.
Our country is a large garden,
The birds in the garden are singing so happily.
This wonderful life makes us feel so good,
Our bright future is even more brilliant.
How could the birds not sing,
In such a happy and peaceful year?
Our country is a large garden,
You can never see all the beautiful sights.
The old look changes every day,
Good news comes from everywhere.
In this large garden,
People of all ethnic groups smile with joy.
Yes, everyone smiles with joy.

In the garden, the warm sunshine shines, the flowers are vibrant and dazzling, and everyone's face is filled with smiles. This is not only a gift from nature, but also a symbol of the prosperity of our country. The lyrics mention "Our motherland is a garden, and the flowers in the garden are blooming so bright," which is not only a description of the external scenery, but also an expression of the inner feelings of all ethnic groups. In this big family of our country, everyone can find their own place in the world, where they can shine with their most brilliant light. In this peaceful and prosperous era, 56 ethnic groups are closely united, feeling happy

and joyful in the embrace of the new country. It is this spirit of harmony that makes people's lives better.

Yunnan, a border province of China inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, embodies the concepts of religious harmony, inclusiveness of beliefs, and spiritual coexistence among its various ethnic groups in many of its folk songs. "Ashima" is a folk song adapted from a long oral narrative poem of the Yi ethnic group's Sani people in Yunnan, with lyrics written by Fan Yu in 1953. In 2006, the long poem "Ashima" was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage representative projects. The song "Ashima" is based on ethnic music, with bold and innovative arrangements, diverse performance styles and melodies, and rich artistic techniques. The singing incorporates folk singing techniques, such as the syllable variations of the ethnic language and elements of local performance. This work has a long history of being sung in the lives of the Sani people and is widely performed in weddings, funerals, festivals, and other occasions.

One excerpt of the folk song "Ashima" embodies the fusion of nature worship and polytheistic beliefs in the Yi people's primitive religion. The lyrics use imagery of mountains, streams, and the sun and moon to express reverence for nature spirits and convey the concept of harmonious coexistence among different faith groups. The song does not emphasize religious division but rather advocates a benevolent and inclusive attitude through its simple melody, showcasing the harmonious state of mutual respect in faith and cultural integration between the Yi people and neighboring ethnic groups. It is a vivid manifestation of religious harmony and cultural symbiosis in the Yunnan border region.

The classic folk songs of different ethnic groups demonstrate that the ecological wisdom of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature is the most distinctive harmonious connotation in these songs. Throughout history, China's 56 ethnic groups have formed an inclusive and symbiotic cultural ecosystem within a diverse cultural landscape, and their various folk songs all embody the harmonious concepts of religious harmony, ethnic unity, peaceful and prosperous lives, and the coexistence of humanity and nature.

Conclusion

Research has found that this cross-cultural comparison not only reveals the different aesthetic paradigms of the two cultures but also provides an interactive perspective for understanding ethnomusicology and oral literature. Although Bengal Baul folk songs and Chinese ethnic minority folk songs are rooted in different cultural soils, comparative studies reveal both formal differences and profound spiritual resonance. The Baul tradition, centered on bodily practice and spiritual cultivation, expresses rebellion against divine love and social hierarchy, and a philosophical reflection on the unity of the universe through simple singing and symbolic lyrics. Its musical structure is free, possessing a strong sense of improvisation and personal mysticism, emphasizing individual spiritual liberation and a marginalized stance against the system. In contrast, Chinese ethnic minority

folk songs (such as those of the Dong, Mongolian, Uyghur, and Yi peoples) emphasize collective ethnic memory, nature worship, and emotional projections of labor and life. They often employ polyphony and melisma to construct rich ecological and communal narratives, carrying symbolic systems of ethnic identity, customs, and regional ecology.

Whether it's the Baul folk songs of the Bengal Region or the songs of China's ethnic minorities, both are rooted in oral tradition, with music inextricably linked to rituals and beliefs. Through beautiful music, they integrate harmonious views of religious inclusiveness, national unity, people's well-being, and coexistence with nature, embodying the essence of various national cultures and serving as an important component of excellent traditional culture. These songs, transcending time and space, not only record the wisdom and spiritual pursuits of different countries and ethnic groups but also continue to convey the "View of Harmony" in the contemporary world—a humanistic value that is needed globally.

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