



## Ethnomusicological Perspectives on Gaomi Miaoqiang: Unveiling the Cultural Tapestry

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**Abstract:** This ethnomusicological study delves into the vibrant tapestry of Gaomi Miaoqiang, a traditional Chinese folk opera hailing from the Shandong province, exploring its historical evolution, linguistic intricacies, musical characteristics, and cultural implications. With a foundation rooted in the "肘鼓子" (Zhou Guzi) series of Shandong local operas, Gaomi Miaoqiang has evolved over centuries, blending folk singing styles and incorporating influences from Huagu yangge and Lüqin opera. Acknowledged as China's 67th National Intangible Cultural Heritage, Gaomi Miaoqiang represents a profound cultural legacy. The study scrutinizes the language features of Gaomi Miaoqiang, emphasizing simplicity, clarity, and the integration of local dialects, reflecting the rural life of the Gaomi community. Musical analysis unveils the operatic singing styles, instrumental accompaniment, and the evolution of musical composition. From the authentic tones of the "Original Board" to the intricate patterns of the "Dayoutou Board," Gaomi Miaoqiang's musical journey embodies emotional depth and narrative complexity. The study also explores the roles, makeup, costumes, and stage art, highlighting the art form's transition from grassroots performances to professional troupes. Furthermore, Gaomi Miaoqiang's cultural significance is illuminated, portraying its role as a conduit for spiritual solace and emotional release within local communities. Recognizing its enduring influence, the study advocates for the preservation of Gaomi Miaoqiang's distinctiveness amid urban influences. As Gaomi Miaoqiang navigates the intersection of tradition and modernity, it emerges as a cultural beacon, casting light on the rich legacy of Chinese folk opera and emphasizing the critical role of ethnomusicology in unraveling the intricate threads of cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Gaomi Miaoqiang, Ethnomusicology, Chinese Folk Opera, Shandong Local Operas, Cultural Heritage, Linguistic and Musical Analysis

### I. Introduction

In the rich landscape of Chinese traditional performing arts, regional folk operas stand as vibrant threads weaving the tapestry of cultural diversity and artistic expression. Among these gems, Gaomi Miaoqiang, originating from Shandong province, unfolds a tale of deep historical roots and a unique vocal tradition<sup>[1]</sup>. This paper, titled "Ethnomusicological Perspectives on Gaomi Miaoqiang," embarks on a journey to delve into the intricacies of this traditional art form through the lens of ethnomusicology.

Gaomi Miaoqiang, also known as Gao Mi Opera, represents the "肘鼓子" (Zhou Guzi) series of Shandong local operas, tracing its origins to the folk singing style of "肘鼓子" (Gu Niang Qiang). Over time, it evolved by incorporating elements from Huagu yangge, a traditional Chinese folk dance, giving rise to its distinctive vocal system. With historical roots dating back to the mid-19th century, Gaomi Miaoqiang emerged on the foundation of the popular folk tune "周姑子" (Zhou Guzi)<sup>[2]</sup>.

Predominantly popular in regions such as Weifang, Qingdao, and Rizhao, Gaomi Miaoqiang transitioned from a humble village hum-along known as "周姑调" (Zhou Gu Diao) to an esteemed art form. Recognizing its cultural significance, Gaomi Miaoqiang attained the status of the 67th entry in China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006<sup>[3]</sup>. This acknowledgment highlights its enduring influence on the cultural heritage of the nation, further solidified by its inclusion in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Expansion Project in May 2021.

Represented by numerous productions such as "东京" (Dongjing), "西京" (Xijing), "南京" (Nanjing), and "北京" (Beijing), Gaomi Miaoqiang boasts a repertoire of over a hundred distinct performances. With titles like "四大京" (Four Capitals) and "八大记" (Eight Records), Gaomi Miaoqiang weaves a complex narrative. In exploring Gaomi Miaoqiang through an ethnomusicological perspective, this study aims to unravel the musical intricacies, historical evolution, and cultural significance that define its place in the vibrant tapestry of Chinese folk opera<sup>[4]</sup>.

This exploration is guided by a review of existing literature on the historical evolution of Miaoqiang, the broader genre to which Gaomi Miaoqiang belongs. Understanding Miaoqiang's roots provides a contextual foundation for the detailed analysis of Gaomi Miaoqiang's language features, musical characteristics, and theatrical elements, including roles,



makeup, costumes, and stage art. The synthesis of these perspectives contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Gaomi Miaoqiang's unique position in the rich mosaic of Chinese traditional performing arts<sup>[5]</sup>.

## II. Literature Review: Historical Evolution of Maoqiang

### 2.1 Maoqiang's Historical Evolution

Maoqiang, stemming from the era of "Elbow Drumming" individual singing, underwent a transformation that led to the establishment of more formal Maoqiang opera troupes. This progression witnessed consistent growth, affiliations with diverse theatrical groups, and alterations in singing background, form, and content across distinct periods.

#### 2.1 Development from the Foundation of "Girl's Tone" Influenced by Flower Drum and Yangge

According to the "Shandong Opera Music Overview," Maoqiang's vocal style, initially rooted in the folk minor tune known as "Girl's Tone," intertwined with legends of the time and bore the influence of Flower Drum and Yangge. The term "Girl's Tone" or "Wu Niang Qiang" primarily revolved around singing related to female shamans or activities associated with them. Concurrently, Elbow Drumming, influenced by Flower Drum and Yangge, emerged as a folk minor tune. Gradually shaped by the influence of Flower Drum and Yangge, Elbow Drumming established itself with "Girl's Tone" as its primary vocal style<sup>[6]</sup>.

#### 2.2 Era of Individual Singing

In the 25th year of Qianlong (1760), as recorded in the "Gaozhou County Chronicles," adverse natural conditions forced impoverished farmers in the Lu'nan region of Shandong into a life of wandering and singing for sustenance. To earn a living, some individuals replaced traditional "calling" with "singing." This marked the period of "Shooting Drum," a precursor to Maoqiang, predominantly performed by a single individual. The repertoire centered around dispelling evil spirits, fulfilling wishes, or celebrating festivals.

#### 2.3 Transition to Settled Life

As a folk creation, Elbow Drumming not only represented a form of folk opera but also vividly depicted rural life within its performance content. Influenced by the local way of life and the actual needs of the population in Gaomi, the performance gradually transformed into a genre reflecting themes of folk love and family ethics, gaining popularity among the masses.

The influx of Elbow Drumming artists into Jiaozhou, Gaomi, and surrounding areas led to the transformation of the original "Shooting Drum" into "Local Elbow Drumming." As life stabilized, changes occurred in the performance style, marking the "Ground Set" period. Performances during this period often involved one or two performers playing all the roles in the drama.

In the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty, Elbow Drumming from areas such as Luqi and Rizhao entered regions like Zhucheng, Gaomi, Jiaozhou, and Gaonan. The spread of Elbow Drumming was intertwined with economic development, particularly in areas such as Jiaozhou, which had become a significant port city and a crucial market for goods in eastern Shandong. This interplay influenced the local people's cultural and artistic expressions<sup>[7]</sup>.

#### 2.4 "Two Xiaoxi and Three Xiaoxi"

During the Shooting Drum performances, the emergence of "Two Xiaoxi" (comedy and female roles) and "Three Xiaoxi" (comedy, female, and male roles) signaled a departure from simplistic storytelling. This marked the inception of a representational theatrical performance where individuals played singular roles, transforming performers from mere storytellers into characters within the drama. Plots within these small plays were relatively uncomplicated, involving fewer characters. Around [specific year not mentioned], Suzhou's northern Liuqin opera artists, Hai Maizi and his wife, confronted economic hardships due to consecutive poor harvests. They embarked on a journey with their daughter, "Old Manzhou" (name unknown), eventually settling in Juxian County. The union of Old Manzhou with a local Elbow Drumming artist named Ding symbolized the fusion of two regional theatrical forms. Artistically, this union aligned Liuqin opera with local Elbow Drumming, birthing a new singing style—a precursor to "Maoqiang." Hai Maizi and his wife are thus recognized as Maoqiang pioneers.

#### 2.5 Transition to the "Ground Set" Period

The shift to "Ground Set"—performances established in open spaces—signaled a new phase in local Elbow Drumming's development. During gatherings or festivals, artists would attract spectators with a misleading drum before seamlessly transitioning into singing while drumming. In this phase, one or two performers often assumed all roles in the drama. This marked the evolutionary shift from original Shooting Drum performances to the "Ground Set" period. As Elbow Drumming artists expanded to Jiaozhou, Gaomi, and neighboring regions, small-scale performances evolved into larger troupes comprising seven or eight individuals. During this period, actors and musicians lacked distinct roles. Accounts from seasoned artists reveal that performers, freshly off the stage, would promptly engage in drumming to enable the original drummer to perform. This "Seven Busy, Eight Not Idle" performance style necessitated the engagement of all members for the show's seamless progression. This stage vividly depicted the flourishing Maoqiang scene, reflecting Gaomi locals' fervor for Elbow Drumming. This phase served as a pivotal transition from "Shooting Drum" to the formalization of "Maoqiang."

#### 2.6 Professional Maoqiang Troupes

As the vocal style of "Mao Elbow Drumming" matured, the infusion of new vitality by "Old Manzhou" marked a pivotal phase in the evolution of this theatrical form. Influenced by major theatrical genres and spurred by heightened aesthetic

demands, larger professional troupes began to emerge. These troupes, characterized by increased membership and enhanced capabilities, continually expanded their repertoire, gaining significant popularity in the local area. Consequently, they played a crucial role in shaping a stable cultural entertainment landscape within the rural hinterland. During rural celebrations, festivals, or significant events, village elders routinely invited these troupes to perform. Performances unfolded in open spaces like village squares, where each village erected makeshift stages using wooden boards and poles covered with mats. This communal spectacle became an integral component of rural cultural and entertainment life. Wealthier families further contributed to the elevation of these performances by engaging troupes for weddings, funerals, or celebrations, underscoring their elevated social status. This practice played a pivotal role in propelling the development and maturation of Mao Elbow Drumming folk troupes.

In contrast, Maoqiang encountered challenges in competing with Peking opera in music, scripts, and programming during this period. It lacked elite cultural participation and struggled for acknowledgment. However, owing to its grassroots origin and development, reflecting the real-life experiences and local spirit of the densely populated masses, Maoqiang possessed a distinctive "folk" quality absent in Peking opera. Despite lagging behind Peking opera in areas like music, scripts, and programming, Maoqiang established a profound connection with the everyday lives and cultural needs of local people.

### III. Characteristics of Gaomi Maoqiang

#### 3.1 Language Features

Language is a fundamental element of drama, and drama, as an art form, is centered around linguistic expression. The frequently cited phrase among Maoqiang performers, "seven parts dialogue, three parts singing," vividly illustrates the pivotal role that language plays in the dramaturgical context.

A prominent characteristic of Maoqiang language is its simplicity and clarity. The lyrics and dialogues predominantly utilize colloquial language, rendering them easily comprehensible. Another distinctive feature is the extensive incorporation of local dialects and slang, imbuing the language with humor and charm<sup>[8]</sup>. In the linguistic realm of Maoqiang, the rich and creative expressions of the local Gaomi community, redolent with the rustic fragrance of rural life, are vividly depicted. For instance, in the lyrics of "Poor Chaonian":

*(Dan Sings) "You, a big shot, took a seat, and we sat cross-legged for a long chat. Since you stirred trouble in the yamen, you've neglected our women's food and clothing. Today is the twenty-second of the twelfth lunar month, and tomorrow is the twenty-third. In the east room, sister-in-law steams persimmons, and in the west room, sister steams rice noodles. All the neighbors celebrate the New Year, and the news spreads like a small whistle inside and outside the village. (Note: "You, a big shot" is a local dialect, referring to the child's father. "Sat cross-legged" refers to sitting with legs crossed. "Shi shi" refers to steamed buns. "Steams rice noodles" refers to making a type of cake from ground millet. "Small whistle" refers to the children of the whistle team.)*

With just a few words, the performer paints a vivid picture of a rural woman in conflict with her husband working in the yamen. The frequent use of regional colloquialisms and everyday expressions in the script adds authenticity and familiarity, enabling the audience to establish a profound emotional connection.

#### 3.2 Musical Characteristics

The distinctive musical features of Maoqiang play a pivotal role in setting it apart from other theatrical genres. The analysis will focus on singing style, instrumental accompaniment, and musical composition.

##### 3.2.1 Singing Style

Maoqiang's singing style revolves around folk narrative local tunes (old twisting tunes), incorporating certain characteristics of external opera music ("Hai Maozi"). Simultaneously, it organically assimilates local melodies from other music genres (such as Gaomi folk songs, ground drum tunes, Xihe drumming, Jiaozhou's large yangge, etc.), forming a unique flat-tone system. Maoqiang's singing is melodious, diverse, and characterized by significant fluctuations<sup>[9]</sup>. Happy tunes can evoke joy and refreshment, while sad tunes bring forth a profound sense of desolation and sadness, almost moving listeners to tears. This singing style excels in expressing emotional highs and lows and adeptly shapes various character images. Therefore, Maoqiang is well-suited for performing grand tragic narratives<sup>[10]</sup>.

Another notable feature of Maoqiang's singing style is the tight arrangement of most lyrics. The phrasing is compact, with minimal space between words, resulting in relatively concise singing. This brisk pace creates a swift and rhythmic performance, akin to flowing water in the mountains, exceptionally smooth<sup>[11]</sup>.

##### 3.2.2 Musical Accompaniment

The musical accompaniment of Maoqiang manifests distinct characteristics across various developmental phases, evolving and refining over time. During the "Original Shooting Drum" era, there was an absence of stringed instruments in the accompaniment, relying solely on percussion instruments such as drums, cymbals, and gongs. Transitioning into the "Ground Shooting Drum" period, the accompaniment expanded to include the Liuqin, subsequently influenced by Peking opera and other genres, with the Jinghu becoming the primary accompanying instrument. Following liberation, as living conditions improved and governmental support increased, the musical ensemble's strength expanded from around six or seven members to nearly twenty<sup>[12]</sup>.<sup>[13]</sup> Ethnic instruments took precedence, supplemented by Western instruments like the cello and bass. Consequently, the musical accompaniment of Gaomi Maoqiang troupes evolved from improvised accompaniment to the execution of fixed musical scores.

### 3.2.3 Musical Composition

The musical composition of Maoqiang incorporates imported elements, influenced and borrowed from Peking opera, Bangzi opera, and other traditional Chinese operas during its developmental journey. Examples include "Jishengcao," "Suonanzhi," "Shuahaier," "Huangying'er," among others. However, in contemporary times, the use of musical scores for singing has become rare, occasionally observed in spoken segments and more frequently employed in instrumental performances. While Maoqiang has developed its musical compositions, their scope remains limited. Artists commonly refer to them as "Huqin gua," such as "Lü'erduo," "Sibuxiang," "Qiangxian," "Sandengyan," etc. These musical names lack profound literary connotations, often derived from daily life scenes or objects closely linked to local customs, folklore, and legends. Due to their strong local flavor, loose structure, and ease of comprehension, they have been orally transmitted and remain prevalent today.

### 3.2.4 Style

The genesis and progression of Maoqiang opera generally underwent a transformation from folk and colloquial tunes to the establishment of musical patterns and their amalgamation. Maoqiang's musical styles encompass "Original Board," "Dayoutou Board," "Erban Board," "Rocking Board," among others. Among these, "Original Board" represents the authentic tone of Maoqiang, serving as a primary tone for both male and female singing. Its notation employs beats, resulting in a one-beat, one-eye pattern<sup>[14]</sup>. The rhythmic pattern involves a rise after the board, commencing from the second half-beat and extending to the strong beat afterward. The Original Board injects Maoqiang's musical rhythm with dynamism, effectively conveying narrative, emotional, and contemplative elements. "Dayoutou Board," also known as slow Original Board, decelerates the four-two beats of the Original Board, transforming it into a four-four beat and creating a slow board<sup>[15]</sup>. It is often employed in tragic tones, featuring a slower pace and becoming a primary musical pattern for female characters expressing sorrow and lamentation. In the classic Maoqiang segment "Xiaoguxian," (Figure 1) when the male protagonist Wang Dengyun confronts his mother's insistence on divorcing his wife, he utilizes the slow board singing style to convey the inner turmoil and conflicting emotions.

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Figure 1, the classic Maoqiang segment "Xiaoguxian"

### 2.3.5 Content

Emerging from folk traditions, Maoqiang serves as a significant conduit through which local communities find spiritual solace and emotional release. Many Maoqiang plays delve into themes of marriage and family, offering spontaneous expressions of emotions that mirror local perspectives on love, ethics, and family dynamics<sup>[16]</sup>.

A quintessential work in this regard is the classic Maoqiang segment "Xiaoguxian," portraying intricate family relationships. Essentially, it narrates the tale of a disapproving mother-in-law coercing her son into divorcing his wife. However, with the intervention of a wise and compassionate sister-in-law, the mother-in-law undergoes a change of heart, leading to reconciliation with the daughter-in-law. A poignant dialogue from the sister-in-law attempting to persuade the

mother unfolds as follows:

"Dear mother, please don't be angry. Allow me to explain the family matters in detail. Our brother and sister-in-law live harmoniously together. Why do you harbor such dislike for her? Our neighbors praise our sister-in-law, and friends speak highly of her. Forcing our brother to divorce our sister-in-law would subject you to ridicule from the neighbors. If our sister-in-law returns to her family, she would lose face. Have you considered the pain you would inflict on our

*brother? A harmonious husband and wife are inseparable, like fish and water. Separating them is impossible. If our sister-in-law takes her life because of you, have you contemplated the impact on our brother? You will bring shame to our sister-in-law's family, and who will you turn to for support if our brother leaves home? As our mother often says, unmarried daughters can't support parents. I'll be married in one or two years and move to my in-laws' home. Faced with a harsh mother-in-law like you, who scolds me without reason every day, life would be challenging. It's the same everywhere; understanding yourself is understanding people's homes. For a harmonious family, you should let our sister-in-law stay. After a few years, when she has children, our mother will have grandchildren, and our brother will have sons. How joyful would that be? Even if I marry off, I still have my mother's family. If you don't want to manage a married daughter, enjoy yourself. Our sister-in-law happily embracing her children would be much better than your grumpy presence here. Mother, think about it. Is it good or bad?"*  
---words from classic Maoqiang segment "Xiaoguxian"

These candid and heartfelt words reflect the local community's appreciation for virtuous qualities and harmonious family relationships, offering an authentic portrayal of rural life, the simple and benevolent rural spirit, and the steadfast rural character.

### 2.3.6 Maoqiang's Roles, Makeup, Costumes, and Stage Art

In Maoqiang's early stages, three primary roles existed: Sheng (male), Dan (female), and Chou (clown). However, as Maoqiang evolved and more intricate plays were developed, the need for actors with specific roles increased. Consequently, role classifications expanded to include Sheng (Lao Sheng, Xiao Sheng), Dan (Lao Dan, Qing Yi, Hua Dan, Cai Dan), Jing, Mo, and Chou, following the Peking opera mode<sup>[17]</sup>.

According to seasoned Maoqiang artists, actors refrained from using makeup in the art form's nascent stages. The practice of makeup emerged later, with performers applying a touch of "official powder" to their faces and sketching "Dai Mei" (eyebrows) with potash. As Maoqiang transitioned to urban areas and encountered influences from diverse theatrical genres, coupled with enhanced lighting, performers adopted makeup styles akin to Peking opera. In the post-establishment era of the People's Republic of China, Maoqiang actors gradually refined their makeup techniques, closely resembling the Yue opera style while retaining some distinctive features of their own.

Maoqiang's costumes predominantly align with those of Peking opera and Yue opera<sup>[18]</sup>. Before liberation, actors often rented costumes from "costume keepers" due to financial constraints. However, post-liberation and with Maoqiang's growth, costumes became more sophisticated. Drawing inspiration from Peking opera and Yue opera costumes, Maoqiang gradually developed its distinct dressing style<sup>[19]</sup>.

## IV. Implication of Gaomi Maoqiang

The exploration of Gaomi Miaoqiang through ethnomusicological perspectives carries profound implications that resonate across cultural, academic, and societal realms. Firstly, the identification of Gaomi Miaoqiang as a recognized entry in China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage underscores the imperative of preserving and safeguarding traditional art forms. By delving into the historical evolution, language features, and musical characteristics of Gaomi Miaoqiang, the paper contributes to a broader initiative aimed at preserving China's rich cultural heritage. The detailed analysis serves as a blueprint for future endeavors in cultural preservation, emphasizing the importance of understanding the nuanced dynamics that shape regional operas. This preservation effort is not merely an academic pursuit; it's a commitment to maintaining the diverse cultural tapestry that defines different provinces within China.

Furthermore, the ethnomusicological methodology employed in the study sets a precedent for approaching traditional Chinese performing arts with a multidimensional lens. By focusing on language, musical composition, and theatrical elements, the paper establishes a robust framework for understanding the complexities of Gaomi Miaoqiang and, by extension, other regional operas. This methodological approach has implications for broader scholarship and educational initiatives. It encourages scholars and educators to adopt ethnomusicology as a valuable tool for unraveling the layers of traditional art forms, bridging the gap between academic research and public awareness. As a result, the integration of ethnomusicological perspectives in the study of traditional Chinese performing arts can enrich educational materials, cultural exhibitions, and public discourse, fostering a deeper appreciation for the diverse musical landscapes that contribute to China's cultural identity. Ultimately, the implications of this exploration extend beyond scholarly inquiry, emphasizing the cultural vibrancy embedded in traditional operas and the importance of dynamic preservation efforts that acknowledge both the historical roots and contemporary relevance of these art forms.

## V. Conclusion

The ethnomusicological exploration of Gaomi Miaoqiang provides a comprehensive understanding of this traditional Chinese folk opera, unraveling its historical evolution, language features, musical characteristics, and cultural significance. The journey through the intricate tapestry of Gaomi Miaoqiang reveals not only its artistic uniqueness but also its profound roots in the cultural heritage of Shandong province. As recognized by its inclusion in China's National

Intangible Cultural Heritage, Gaomi Miaoqiang stands as a testament to the enduring influence of regional folk operas, symbolizing the cultural diversity that enriches China's performing arts landscape.

The paper's in-depth analysis of Gaomi Miaoqiang's language features, musical styles, and theatrical elements showcases the intricate interplay of tradition and innovation within this art form. The identification of specific vocal styles, such as the "Original Board" and "Dayoutou Board," sheds light on the diverse musical patterns that contribute to the emotional depth and narrative complexity of Gaomi Miaoqiang performances. The meticulous examination of language nuances, incorporating local dialects and slang, emphasizes the cultural authenticity embedded in the operatic scripts, establishing a unique linguistic identity reflective of the Gaomi community.

Moreover, the recognition of Gaomi Miaoqiang's pivotal role in local cultural life, offering spiritual solace and emotional release to the community, underscores the enduring relevance of traditional folk operas in contemporary society. As Gaomi Miaoqiang adapts to urban influences and continues to evolve, the preservation of its distinctiveness becomes a shared responsibility. This study not only contributes to the academic understanding of Gaomi Miaoqiang but also advocates for the continued preservation and appreciation of traditional Chinese performing arts. It is a call to recognize the cultural treasures embedded in regional operas and to embrace ethnomusicology as a vital tool for unraveling the intricate threads that weave China's diverse cultural heritage. As we navigate the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, Gaomi Miaoqiang stands as a cultural beacon, illuminating the rich legacy of Chinese folk opera for generations to come.

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