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Hearing the Sea in Labour Chants: The Musical Characteristics and Cultural Significance of Zhoushan Fishermen's Chants

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Abstract: ***Zhoushan fishermen's chants form an integral part of the traditional music of the Zhejiang coast and serve as an auditory record of the long history of maritime labour and life among Zhoushan fishermen. Originating from traditional fishing labour, they are closely linked to specific work processes such as weighing anchor, raising the sail, rowing and hauling in the nets. This paper takes the Zhoushan fishermen's work songs as its subject of study. Based on a review of relevant materials and using representative songs such as 'Weighing Anchor' and 'Rowing' as examples, it analyses their musical characteristics and cultural significance. With changes in modern production methods, the original contexts in which Zhoushan fishermen's work songs were used have gradually diminished; however, the labour practices, collective cooperation and memories of maritime life they preserve continue to hold significant cultural value.***

Keywords: Zhoushan fishermen's work songs; Traditional music of Zhejiang; Labour work songs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Labour chants are deeply rooted in specific contexts of production and daily life, and their musical forms are closely intertwined with the scenes of labour. If interpreted solely from an intrinsic perspective—such as melody and rhythm—it is easy to overlook the vibrant folk life experiences that lie behind the music. Zhoushan, blessed with excellent fishing grounds, saw the development of oral music with distinct island characteristics—the Zhoushan Fishermen's Chants—during the era of wooden sailing ships, which were used for marine fishing and shipping operations. As a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs originated from collective maritime labour such as weighing anchor, hoisting sails, rowing and hauling nets; their rhythm, vocal forms and even the dialectal interjections are inextricably linked to the practice of fishing. Drawing on existing literature, this paper first examines the labour context in which the Zhoushan Fishermen's Chants took shape, then analyses their musical characteristics—including categories, rhythm, melody and lyrics—before elucidating the island's productive memory, communal spirit and folkloric aesthetic values embodied within them. This paper goes beyond a mere introduction to the musical form, seeking instead to explore the intrinsic connection between the sounds of these chants and the maritime society of Eastern Zhejiang.

2. THE ORIGINS AND LABOUR CONTEXT OF ZHOUSHAN FISHERMEN'S WORK SONGS

Work songs, also known as labour songs, are folk songs that originated and were used in the context of labour, serving the practical functions of coordinating and directing labour [1]. Initially, work songs were merely the chants of labourers, intended to regulate breathing, synchronise their pace and relieve physical strain; they later gradually evolved into a more refined musical form. During labour, work songs not only serve to organise and direct the collective, regulate mood and boost morale, but also possess a certain artistic value. As a genre of folk song, work songs originated as early as prehistoric times when people first began engaging in collective labour; they gradually disappeared with the advent of industrialisation and mechanisation in modern society, which replaced certain forms of collective labour [2]. Zhoushan fishermen's work songs originated on the various islands of the Zhoushan fishing grounds; they are the collective term for the work songs of fishermen and boatmen across the Zhoushan Archipelago. They constitute a form of maritime folk oral music passed down through generations by fishermen and boatmen on these islands, and are closely linked to the production and daily lives of these communities [3]. In the past, Zhoushan fishermen relied primarily on sea fishing and transport to sustain their livelihoods. In the era of wooden sailing ships, much of the work on board had to be carried out by hand; tasks such as weighing anchor, hoisting sails, rowing and hauling nets often required the joint participation of several people. During labour, the movements of all involved needed to be coordinated; otherwise, work efficiency would be compromised. Over time, through their daily lives and work, the fishermen gradually developed a method of

synchronising their movements and regulating their rhythm through chanting, and it was in this context that the Zhoushan Fishermen's Chants came into being.

Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs were included in the second batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection List in 2008; they are also known as Zhoushan Fishing Songs or Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs [4]. The Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage states: 'Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs are a form of maritime folk oral music passed down through generations by fishermen and boatmen across the islands of Zhoushan; they are inextricably linked to the operations of fishing and transport vessels, as well as to the labour of fishermen and boatmen both at sea and on shore' [5]. These sources demonstrate that the relationship between Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs and fishing labour is not merely superficial; the songs themselves form an integral part of traditional maritime production and daily life.

Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs possess distinct characteristics. Whilst ordinary songs can still be sung independently even when removed from their original context, work songs are more closely tied to specific labour activities. When the pace of labour changes, the tempo of the work song adjusts accordingly; when the intensity of labour increases, the volume of the singing may also change. The environment in which the singers find themselves, the number of workers involved, and their physical condition at the time can all influence the actual performance of the work song. Shi Wangwei once summarised the characteristics of Zhoushan fishermen's work songs as 'having rules but no fixed patterns' [6]. This summary is quite accurate. The work songs are not without structure; the basic rhythm, melody and singing style remain, but it is difficult to follow a fixed score entirely at the labour site. The same work song may undergo a certain degree of variation depending on the labour environment and the singer. Such variations are not arbitrary alterations, but are intrinsically linked to the labour process.

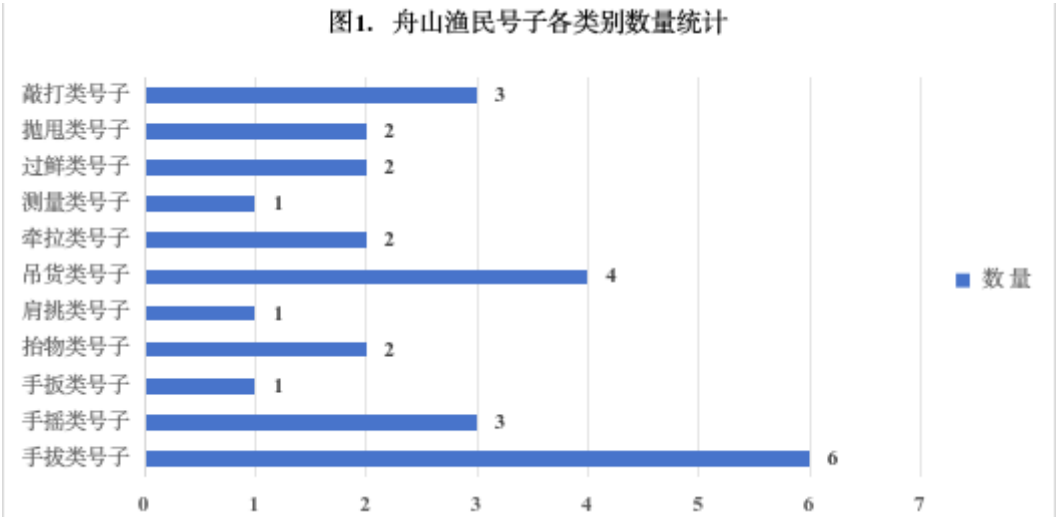
3. MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ZHOUSHAN FISHERMEN'S WORK SONGS

For centuries, wooden sailing vessels have been the primary means of fishing and maritime transport across the Zhoushan archipelago. These vessels relied on natural wind power to propel them, whilst every stage of their operations was carried out by human labour—a process that was extremely complex and labourious. To alleviate the physical strain of the work, regulate emotional fluctuations and ensure the coordination and unison of movements, a wide variety of fishermen's work songs emerged [7]. Zhoushan fishermen's work songs have been preserved to this day through oral tradition amongst the working people. Workers sing different types of work songs whilst carrying out various maritime tasks; they typically adopt a 'lead-and-response' singing style, whereby during collective maritime labour, a lead singer calls out the opening notes and the rest of the group responds in unison, with the aim of synchronising the collective labour movements.

3.1 Types of Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs

There are numerous types of Zhoushan fishermen's work songs. Based on different stages of labour, they can be categorised into more than twenty varieties, including songs for weighing anchor, raising the sail, rowing, and hauling in the nets. Depending on the speed and intensity of the labour rhythm, these chants can be further subdivided into various categories such as hand-pulling chants, hand-rowing chants, hand-hoisting chants and measuring chants. Examples include the hand-pulling chants 'Weighing Anchor Chant' and 'Hoisting the Sail Chant'; the hand-rowing chant 'Rowing the Oars Chant'; and the measuring chant 'Pole-Pushing Chant', amongst others.

Based on the body parts used to exert force during labour, they can be categorised into the following major types [8]:



As shown in Figure 1, the work songs of the Zhoushan fishermen are divided into 11 categories, including hand-pulling, hand-cranking and hand-levering songs. Among these, hand-pulling songs are the most numerous, comprising six types, such as the 'weighing anchor' song, the 'raising the sail' song and the 'pulling the sampan' song; 'Lifting cargo' chants rank second in number, comprising four types: 'lifting water' chants, 'hoisting the hold' chants, 'lifting the dinghy' chants and 'swinging the hook' chants; 'striking' and 'hand-cranking' chants each comprise three types; 'throwing and flinging' chants, 'handling fresh catch' chants, 'pulling' chants and 'carrying loads' chants each comprise two types; the 'measuring' category, 'shoulder-carrying' category and 'hand-pulling' category each comprise one type. Among these, the 'hand-pulling', 'hand-cranking', 'hand-pulling', 'lifting' and 'shoulder-carrying' categories, as well as the 'cargo-hoisting' category, all fall under the category of labour-intensive, strength-based work songs, characterised by rugged melodies and a steady rhythm. Pulling chants, measuring chants, fresh catch chants, tossing chants and beating chants involve relatively less labour intensity and are classified as light-work chants, characterised by their melodious tunes and lively rhythms.

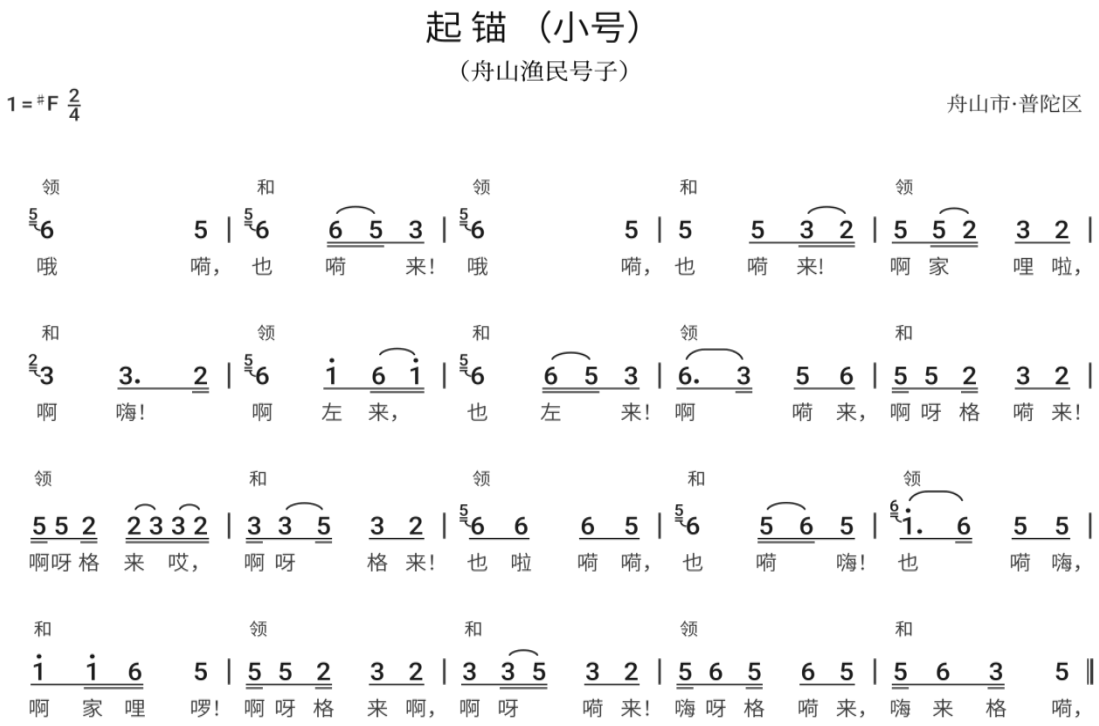
3.2 Musical Characteristics of Zhoushan Fishermen's Work Songs

Zhoushan fishermen's work songs belong to the genre of labour songs, employing a form of singing where one leads and the others respond in unison. The lead singer sets the tone and calls out, whilst the rest respond in chorus to coordinate collective labour movements; there is no instrumental accompaniment, and the songs are performed purely a cappella. According to records, most work songs are composed of a pentatonic scale. In terms of tonality, they are predominantly in the Gong mode, followed by the Jiao and Yu modes; as for form, to suit the nature of the labour and the requirements of the performance—and to adapt to the duration of the work—most employ concise, easily repeatable structures. These can be categorised into monophonic, polyphonic and linked-suite forms. The single-section form consists primarily of a single phrase or a pair of consecutive phrases; during repeated singing, variations in rhythm and the addition of ornamental elements are often employed to create a sense of variation. The compound-section form creates contrast between musical sections on the basis of varied singing, constituting a two-part form with recapitulation; the linked-suite form is primarily used in complex, physically demanding tasks such as 'raising the anchor' and 'hoisting the sails'. Its melody, rhythm, metre and even mode and tonality undergo changes [9].

Zhoushan fishermen's work songs are sung in the local Zhoushan dialect; the lyrics are mostly improvised, changing at any moment in response to the wind and waves and the state of the labour. The language is simple and unadorned, featuring a profusion of Zhoushan dialect interjections (such as 'ah jiali', 'ho' and 'hai yo'). The pitch of the Zhoushan fishermen's work songs is closely linked to their labour; the fishermen often raise the pitch to extremely high levels, with some notes even reaching C3, as they need to steel their nerves amidst the wind and waves, boost their spirits whilst working, and help themselves forget their fatigue. The music of the Zhoushan fishermen's work songs is highly practical; fundamentally, the songs serve labour in musical form, whilst changes in the intensity of labour also bring about changes in the music's dynamics and tempo, the two complementing and interpenetrating one another.

3.2.1 Characteristics of rhythm, metre and vocal range

Fishermen's work songs are categorised as 'da hao' (large) or 'xiao hao' (small), depending on the physical exertion and intensity of the labour undertaken by the workers. For example, 'Weighing Anchor (Xiao Hao)' [10]:

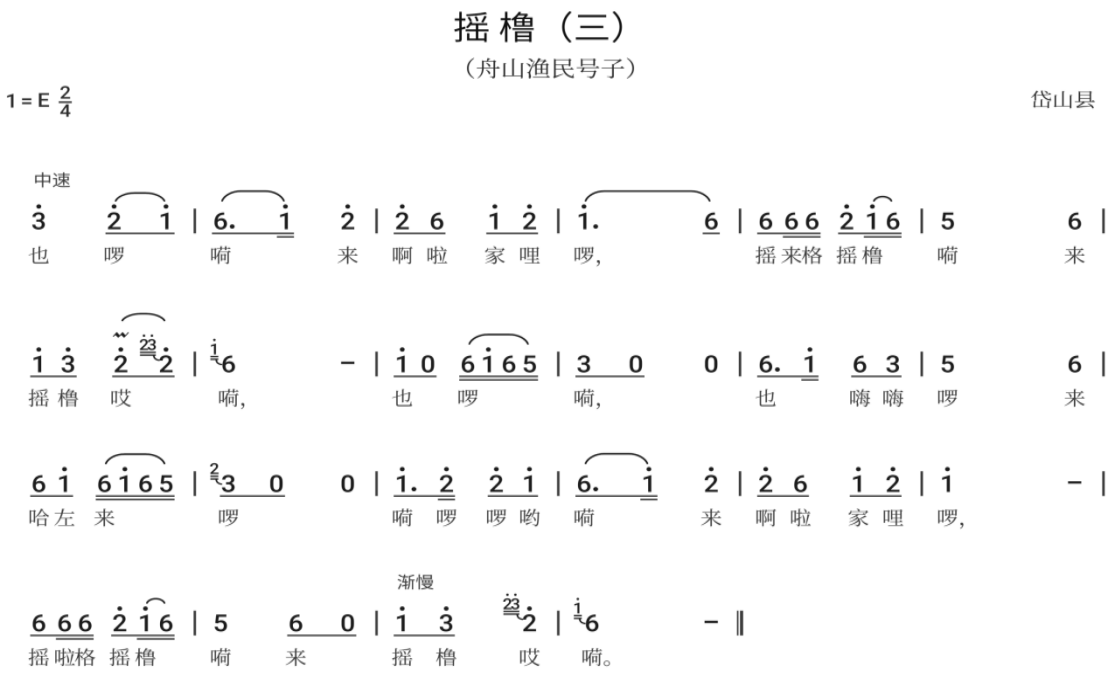


When a vessel is moored, it is necessary to drop anchor to prevent it from being driven off course by wind and waves and running aground. When first raising the anchor, the anchor is loose and requires little effort; this is referred to as the 'small'. As the anchor chain gradually tightens, and due to the pressure of the seawater and the resistance from being deeply embedded in the silt, raising the anchor becomes more laborious; at this point, the 'small' is switched to the 'large'. Once the anchor has broken free from the silt and is floating in the seawater, the buoyancy of the water lightens the anchor rope, at which point the 'da hao' reverts to the 'xiao hao' [11]. The 'da hao' is generally used during periods of high labour intensity requiring great effort, whilst the 'xiao hao' is employed during lighter, less strenuous tasks. Differences in work rhythm and melodic tone are also among the reasons why the anchor-raising chants are divided into 'da hao' and 'xiao hao'. The 'Anchor-Ho' is sung with one lead voice and a chorus. The 'Da Hao' generally has a range of b1-a2(c3), is mostly in 4/4 time, and features a heavy, slow rhythm with the accent on the seventh beat; as the 'Da Hao' requires considerable physical exertion, the rhythm typically employs dotted notes and syncopation with longer durations. This is necessitated by the intensity of the labour and the rhythmic demands of the work [9]. The 'small' version has a range of a1-a2and is in 2/4 time, matching the action of repeatedly raising the anchor. It mostly employs rhythmic patterns such as X.X X X、X X X X X 、X X X XXXX, with the accent on the first or third beat; the rhythm is distinct in its dynamics, light-footed and compact. The distinctive feature of 'Anchor-Raising Work Songs' lies in their musicality, which stems from labour. Viewed in isolation, the musical material may not appear particularly complex; however, when listened to in conjunction with the process of weighing anchor, the connection between physical movements, vocal dynamics and rhythm becomes much more apparent. What was originally a simple chant takes on a more distinctive musical character through its integration with the labour itself.

3.2.2 Melodic Progression and Lyrical Characteristics

The essence of labour chants lies in their use of musical form to serve labour. The melody of these chants is subordinate to the labour itself, with rhythm taking precedence and melody serving as a complement; as each type of labour has its own fundamental working rhythm, the melody, metre and rhythm emerge from this labour rhythm, serving to unify movements and facilitate coordination and organisation.

For example, 'Rowing the Oars' [10]:



Oar-rowing chants are categorised into solo, two-person and three-person oar-rowing. Solo oar-rowing is mostly used for small, light sampans; two-person oar-rowing requires two people to row a large oar in unison, demanding a high degree of coordination and cooperation between the rowers. At the outset, the rowing movements are not immediately synchronised; therefore, the rhythm serves to help adjust the movements. Once the movements are coordinated, the chant proceeds in an alternating call-and-response pattern, with the rowers pulling whilst singing and pushing whilst pausing.

Rowing chants are relatively light in terms of physical exertion and are in 2/4 time; unlike anchoring chants, they do not feature frequent repetitions of the same note. The mode belongs to the pentatonic Yu mode, and the melody predominantly employs second and third intervals, with a few fourth leaps; there are no large leaps throughout. This produces a gentle, undulating melodic line that complements the oar-rowing motion, as in ‘Oar-rowing (I): 1665 5 6 |6535 6. The continuous stepwise progression is melodious, with the lead singer (Part A) frequently employing glissandos, whilst Part B consists of the chorus’s harmonising vocals, predominantly involving note repetition, resulting in a smoother melodic line that serves to provide a backdrop and support the lead singer. The inclusion of ornamental notes (descending glissandos and appoggiaturas) mimics the intonation of the Zhoushan dialect, lending the melody a colloquial quality. In ‘Rowing (III)’, the solo rowing chant features neither a lead singer nor a chorus; the melody is more coherent and complete than that of the duet. The tempo slows in the penultimate bar, simulating the conclusion of labour, as the rowing motion slows down and the music comes to an end.

The lyrics of rowing chants consist predominantly of labour-related interjections, with the only substantive words being the two characters ‘rowing’. For example, in *Rowing (I)*: ‘Yě luó hāi, hē luó hāi’; and in *Rowing (III)*: ‘Yě luó, hē lái, ā lā jiā lǐ luó’, etc. These have no specific meaning; they are the natural cries of fishermen as they exert force. The interjections directly carry the melody, following the intonation of the local dialect, and are relatively lacking in narrative content. The lyrics and melody work in tandem to serve the rhythm of the oar-rowing movements; short phrases are repeated in a cycle, closely matching the rhythmic cadence of pushing and pulling the oars at sea, reflecting both the functional nature of the Zhoushan fishermen’s work songs and their unadorned maritime musical style.

4. MARITIME LIFE AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE IN ZHOUSHAN FISHERMEN’S WORK SONGS

Having evolved from the maritime labour practices of wooden sailing vessels, the Zhoushan fishermen’s work songs have long since ceased to be merely a vocal accompaniment to physical labour. Each chant carries the imprints of generations of islanders who have tilled the sea and tended their fisheries; they embody the collective

values and folk aesthetic sensibilities unique to the fishing community, serving as an auditory medium through which to glimpse the inner workings of the maritime society of Eastern Zhejiang [11].

The work songs vividly preserve authentic scenes of maritime labour from the era of wooden sailing ships. In days gone by, maritime operations in Zhoushan were heavily constrained by tides, winds and waves; arduous tasks such as raising the sails, weighing anchor and hauling in the nets were all carried out by hand. The varying intensity of the labour directly shaped the distinct character of the work songs—sometimes high-pitched, sometimes lyrical—with the rhythm and dynamics of the music always serving the labour itself [3]. As maritime conditions are ever-changing, work songs do not adhere to fixed lyrics; instead, the words and melodies are flexibly adjusted according to the strength of the wind and waves and the size of the catch, giving rise to rich variations within the stable framework of labour.

The form of singing, in which one person leads and the others respond in unison, reflects the collective spirit underlying the society of fishing communities. Fishing at sea cannot be carried out by a single person alone; through the act of singing, the 'haozhi' bring scattered individuals together into a cohesive and unified labour collective. During the fishing season, fishing boats from all over gather at the Daiqu Fishing Grounds, where the work songs transcend the geographical divides between the islands to become a shared cultural language amongst the fishing communities [8]. Passed down orally, these work songs lack comprehensive written musical scores; young fishermen learn the singing techniques by following their elders whilst out at sea, whilst simultaneously inheriting the maritime survival wisdom accumulated over generations, thereby ensuring the intergenerational transmission of the islands' collective memory. A wealth of local dialect interjections aligns with the breathing rhythm of labour; through the alternating call-and-response between the lead singer and the chorus, they fully reveal the fishermen's fearless, united and open-minded character.

Fishermen's work songs embody the unique folk aesthetic of the islands. Based on the Zhoushan dialect, the vast majority of the songs consist primarily of interjections, with substantive lyrics accounting for only a limited proportion. Most of the extant substantive lyrics were improvised on the spot whilst working, with some incorporating maritime folk legends, revealing the fishermen's reverence for and imagination regarding the sea. The working environment shapes the auditory style of the work songs: during heavy physical labour on the high seas, the melodies are powerful and high-pitched, whilst for lighter work in coastal waters, the melodies are melodious and gentle, forming a maritime aesthetic distinct from that of inland folk songs [6].

Following the widespread adoption of motorised fishing vessels, the scenes of labour on wooden sailing boats gradually disappeared, and the original practical labour function of the 'haozi' steadily diminished [4]. However, its cultural value has not faded as a result; the melodies and oral lyrics of the 'haozi' preserve a wealth of folk knowledge regarding fishing grounds and fishing seasons, serving as vivid oral records for understanding the history of fisheries on the islands of eastern Zhejiang. Today, the 'haozi' has evolved from a tool of maritime labour into an intangible cultural heritage symbol embodying the collective memory of the islands; only by comprehending the authentic maritime life behind these sounds can one truly grasp the intrinsic significance of this maritime cultural heritage.

5. CONCLUSION

The sounds of the 'haozi' rise from the waves, serving as a spiritual echo of the maritime way of life practised by the people of Zhoushan for thousands of years. Through their melodies and lyrics, we see not merely a form of work music, but an entire system of production knowledge, community ethics, folk beliefs and aesthetic values rooted in the sea. Today, as traditional labour scenes gradually fade away, the preservation of the Zhoushan fishermen's work songs involves not merely safeguarding the melodies and lyrics, but also comprehending the profound maritime way of life and cultural significance that lie behind them. This will preserve the collective memory unique to the island communities and ensure that this intangible cultural heritage, born of the sea, continues to thrive in the present day.

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