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A Study on the Artistic Expression of Cross-Border Ethnic Music Culture: A Case Study of the Chinese Russian Musical *Ergun Love*

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Abstract: This article takes the Chinese Russian ethnic musical *Ergun Love* as its primary research object. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation and engaging with scholarship on memory and ritual music, it examines how cross-border ethnic music culture is artistically expressed in contemporary stage works. The analysis focuses on four interrelated dimensions: the representation of love as a core narrative theme, the construction of collective memory through traditional folk songs, the staged presentation of ritual culture, and the integration of multi-ethnic musical elements. The study demonstrates that *Ergun Love* enters the emotional world of the Chinese Russian ethnic group through a love-centered narrative that mediates individual affection and collective identity. It constructs sonic memory via the thematic deployment and recurrent appearance of traditional folk songs, which function as carriers of history and cultural continuity. Ritual culture is presented through dramatized scenes such as weddings and birthdays, where music, gesture, and staging jointly encode social norms and symbolic meanings. Furthermore, the incorporation of traditional Chinese modes and Mongolian musical elements reveals the composite and frontier character of the *Ergun* cultural space. By transforming emotional experience, folk traditions, musical memory, and frontier life scenes rooted in local social practice into a visible and communicable stage text, the work accomplishes the artistic construction of the cultural image of the Chinese Russian ethnic group. The article argues that *Ergun Love* not only enriches musical theatre on Chinese Russian themes, but also exemplifies a broader pathway for transforming and expressing cross-border ethnic music culture in contemporary artistic contexts, offering a valuable case for the stage-based study of small-population and cross-border ethnic groups.

Keywords: ethnic music; musical theatre; cultural representation; ritual; memory; cross-border culture

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1. Introduction

The Chinese Russian ethnic group is an important component of China's ethnic minorities and is mainly distributed in Inner Mongolia, and Heilongjiang. Over the course of its long historical development, under the influence of population migration, border interactions, intermarriage and integration, as well as multi-ethnic cohabitation, the Chinese Russian ethnic group gradually formed a cultural tradition characterized by ethnic features, regional traits, and cross-cultural elements. Located on China's northern frontier, *Ergun City* is one of the more typical areas of Russian ethnic settlement in the *Hulunbuir* region of Inner Mongolia, and also an important space where the historical memory, folk traditions, and musical culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group are relatively concentrated. For a long time, *Ergun City* has preserved a rich body of Russian ethnic folk songs, ritual music, dance arts, and festive customs, reflecting distinctive regional cultural characteristics and features of multi-cultural integration. This unique cultural ecology not only provides a practical foundation for the inheritance of Chinese Russian ethnic culture, but also offers abundant source material for related stage art creation.

Against this background, the ethnic musical *Ergun Love* came into being. As the first musical in China on a Russian ethnic theme, it was recognized as an outstanding opening performance of a major cultural festival, produced by the Ergun Municipal Committee and the Ergun Municipal Government, organized by the Ergun Bureau of Culture, Sports, Radio, Film and Television, performed by the Ergun Ulan Muqir, directed by a prominent director, and written and lyrically composed by a notable composer. Based on real folk stories from Ergun City, Inner Mongolia, China, the work fully draws upon Russian ethnic cultural resources and, by combining the past and the present, incorporates Russian ethnic history, ethnic development, and frontier life into its stage narrative, becoming an important artistic text that presents more than one hundred years of historical memory of the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City. As a comprehensive stage work integrating music, drama, dance, and ethnic cultural narrative, *Ergun Love* offers a relatively multidimensional presentation of the life experience, emotional world, and cultural traditions of the Chinese Russian ethnic group, making the ethnic musical an important window for observing the cultural expression of cross-border ethnic minorities. Therefore, it possesses distinctive ethnic and regional characteristics and also provides a representative case for the stage expression of cross-border ethnic musical culture [1].

At present, research on the musical culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group has attracted a certain degree of attention. Relevant studies have mainly focused on historical origins, regional distribution, the current state of musical culture, aesthetic characteristics, and its integration with local culture, thus laying a foundation for understanding the formation, transmission, and aesthetic features of Chinese Russian folk music. In terms of research regions, existing studies have paid more attention to the musical culture of the Russian ethnic group in areas such as Tacheng in Xinjiang and Heilongjiang, while some scholars have also investigated and sorted out the folk music ecology of the Russian ethnic group in Ergun [2]. Overall, existing studies have tended to focus more on folk music itself, cultural conditions, regional ecology, and issues of transmission and development. At the same time, some studies have pointed out that, nourished by regional culture and adapting to the development of the times, Russian ethnic folk music has achieved creative transformation and extension. However, from the perspective of the comprehensive artistic form of the ethnic musical, research on how Chinese Russian musical culture as a whole participates in the artistic expression of cross-border ethnic musical culture remains relatively weak.

A prominent theory of representation holds that cultural meaning is not a simple reproduction of real life, but is organized and produced through systems such as narrative, symbols, and performance. In the case of *Ergun Love*, the emotional experience, folk song traditions, ritual culture, and frontier life of the Chinese Russian ethnic group do not enter the stage in their original form; rather, they are transformed into an artistic text with cultural recognizability through the selection and reorganization of music, lyrics, dance, ritual scenes, and plot structure. Therefore, this article takes this theory of representation as its overall interpretive framework and regards *Ergun Love* as a stage text of the artistic expression of the cross-border ethnic musical culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group. At the same time, in the specific analysis, it draws on theories of collective memory and ritual music to explain, respectively, the construction of sound memory through traditional folk-song melodies and the presentation of ritual culture in ritual scenes [3]. This article mainly discusses the following questions:

1. How do musical themes represent the emotional world of the Chinese Russian ethnic group?
2. How can traditional folk song materials be used to construct a nation's sonic memory?
3. How do ritual music and dance participate in the stage presentation of Russian ethnic ritual culture?
4. How does ethnic musical fusion reflect the cultural complexity of the Ergun region?

Around these questions, this article analyzes four dimensions—love-theme expression, the construction of folk-song memory, the presentation of ritual culture, and the fusion of multi-ethnic music—in order to explore the artistic value and cultural

significance of Ergun Love in the inheritance, transformation, and contemporary expression of the musical culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group [4].

2. The Narrative Function and Cultural Orientation of the Love Theme

The love theme serves as an important pathway through which Ergun Love achieves the artistic expression of the emotional culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group. The significance of representation lies in giving meaning to things through systems such as language, symbols, and performance [4]. It is precisely through this process that cultural content becomes visible and comprehensible. As the central narrative thread running throughout the whole work, the love narrative in Ergun Love not only advances the development of interpersonal relationships but also provides a more concentrated and concrete stage presentation of the emotional experience of the Chinese Russian ethnic group.

The process in which the male and female protagonists meet in Russia, and Natasha comes to China in search of Zhang Chaoyang out of love and eventually falls in love with him, makes love an important narrative means of linking personal destiny, frontier life, and ethnic cultural experience [5]. In the duet sung when the two protagonists fall in love (Figure 1), the melody adopts the b harmonic minor mode commonly found in Russian ethnic music, preserving a relatively distinct Russian musical color. At the same time, the first phrase (bars 1--4) and the second phrase (bars 5--8) employ the Chinese traditional melodic development technique of *juju shuang*, so that the melodic organization of the passage presents a combination of Chinese traditional compositional methods and Western modal elements. In this way, the love song, through the integrated use of cross-cultural musical vocabulary, forms a concrete sonic shape of the emotional culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group and gives the love narrative in the work a distinct cultural orientation.



Figure 1. A section from the song Ergun Love.

In terms of vocal form, this passage is written as a duet for male and female voices. Such a singing form strengthens the emotional interaction between the characters, making love appear as a relationship of mutual communication and co-construction, while also giving the characters' emotions a stronger sense of exchange and immediacy on stage. At the same time, the lyrical expression in the text further intensifies the emotional density of the passage, so that love is presented both as the genuine revelation of the characters' inner feelings and as a life experience imbued with ethnic cultural meaning [6]. Especially in the plot setting where Natasha crosses geographical boundaries and comes to China

for love, love is endowed with deeper cultural implications. It is connected not only to individual destiny but also to the emotional imagination and cultural experience of the Chinese Russian ethnic group in frontier life. Thus, it can be seen that, through the musical writing of the love theme, Ergun Love transforms the emotional culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group into a perceptible stage expression.

3. The Construction of Sound Memory of the Russian Ethnic Group in China Using Traditional Folk Song Materials

The thematic use and repeated recurrence of traditional Russian folk-song melodies construct the sound memory of the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City. The function of representation lies in endowing objects with meaning through systems such as language, symbols, and performance [7]. In the first act, the aria sung by the heroine Natasha provides a concentrated illustration of the thematic use of Landysh (a Russian folk-inspired musical theme) (Figure 2). This passage adopts musical material from Landysh; its modality shifts from d harmonic minor to d natural minor, thereby forming the first section. The second section is a newly composed passage that employs new musical material, expands the vocal range, and heightens the lyrical quality. Set against a dream background, the image of a "distant place" emerges with the unfolding melody, thereby opening up the main body of the story. In this passage, Landysh performs multiple functions: it advances the narrative, shapes character, and represents Russian ethnic musical culture.

Ландыш

Lento

SOPRANO
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

Пом-ню в рё-ще со-ло выи-ной Я гу-ля-ла ве чер ком Статный паре-нь чей не

зна-ю Подошёл ко мне со ц-вет ком По-до-

шё-л По-до шё-л Подошёл он и не с-ме-ло

Figure 2. Chinese Russian folk songs.

The value of Landysh throughout the musical is further reflected in the sound-memory effect created by its repeated recurrence. Symbols are able to carry cultural meaning precisely because their repeated appearance in different contexts continuously generates new layers of significance. In addition to its use in the first-act aria, Landysh recurs many times in lyrical songs, narration, and background music for plot dialogue (Figure 3). The continuous return of the melody allows the audience to accumulate a stable auditory impression, while the Russian ethnic musical theme is thereby repeatedly reinforced. As the plot unfolds, the same melody acquires different emotional meanings

in different scenes, and the connections between the musical material, the characters' destinies, the narrative progression, and the stage atmosphere become increasingly deepened. As a result, the musical organization of the whole work gains a stronger sense of unity [8].



Figure 3. A section from the song Ergun Love.

The theory of collective memory points out that memory does not exist in isolation within the individual, but is sustained and confirmed through group sharing and social frameworks. In the final scene, the closing song retains the original melody of Landysh [9]. The song is lyrical in genre, and the melody itself remains unchanged, while the vocal form shifts from Natasha's solo in the first stanza to choral singing in the second. At the same time, the lyrical content also changes: in the process of recalling the past, the aged Natasha transforms personal experience into a deep attachment to Ergun as her "second homeland." The lyrics read:

Natasha:

The sky is clear, birds are singing, and the river runs through a sea of flowers [10].

Ergun, homeland of life, cradle of love, paradise in my heart [5].

Here are the mountains, lofty and vast, and also the quiet white birch forest.

My homeland, Ergun---there is no place more beautiful than you.

Even when heaven and earth fade away, your beauty will remain in my heart [11].

Chorus:

Green hills drift like clouds, and flocks of wild geese linger in flight.

Ergun, homeland of life, cradle of love, paradise in my heart.

Thus, the thematic use and repeated recurrence of Landysh complete its transformation from a folk melody in circulation into stage-based sound memory, and enable the cultural memory of the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City to achieve sustained artistic construction within the musical narrative.

4. Ritual Music and the Stage Presentation of Russian Ethnic Customs and Culture

Ergun Love achieves the stage presentation of Russian ethnic ritual culture through the musical writing of ritual scenes. As one of the oldest, most universal, and most enduring cultural phenomena in human history, ritual is typically accompanied by corresponding musical activities in the course of its unfolding. Ritual music is music whose form and style are consistent with the environment, mood, and purpose of a specific ritual, and which can produce physiological and psychological effects on the participants. This definition indicates that ritual music is not a musical form independent of social life, but one deeply rooted in the ritual traditions of a specific ethnic group. Wedding and birthday rituals among the Chinese Russian ethnic group are both accompanied by corresponding musical practices. By incorporating wedding and

birthday rituals into its stage narrative and presenting them through ritual songs, Ergun Love gives Russian ethnic ritual culture concrete and vivid artistic expression.

The musical treatment of the wedding scene demonstrates this especially clearly. Stakanchiki granenye, a folk song circulated among the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City, was originally a folk song on the theme of tragic love. In Ergun Love, however, this melody is adapted and used in the wedding scene. The song adopts the musical material of Stakanchiki granenye, while the tonality is changed and the vocal form is presented as a mixed two-part chorus for male and female voices. At the same time, the wedding ritual also incorporates the traditional Russian ethnic dance "double dance," allowing the whole scene, through the cooperation of music, performance, and dance, to present a warm and joyful atmosphere. On the one hand, this treatment displays the cultural characteristics of the traditional Russian ethnic wedding ritual; on the other hand, it also reflects the creators' absorption and transformation of Russian ethnic folk-song resources from Ergun City in their musical composition (As shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5).

Стаканчики граненые



Figure 4. Chinese Russian folk songs.



Figure 5. A section from the song Ergun Love.

In addition, the birthday ritual scene further strengthens the stage presentation of Russian ethnic ritual culture. For example, the birthday song in the finale serves as an important means through which Russian ethnic ritual culture enters stage expression. This passage appears in the final part of the musical, in a scene where relatives and friends celebrate the ninetieth birthday of the heroine, Natasha [12]. The song is performed as a mixed chorus for male and female voices and employs the traditional Russian ethnic mode of F natural major, expressing both heartfelt blessings for the mother and the elevated significance of maternal love. At the same time, the use of a 6/8 meter gives the melody a strong sense of grace and dance-like quality, and the scene also features the Russian ethnic folk dance known as the "scarf dance." In this way, the birthday ritual song, through the integrated organization of mode, meter, choral form, and dance movement, jointly presents the aesthetic mode of Russian ethnic ritual culture in relation to kinship, blessing, and collective participation. The combination of music and dance in this scene transforms ritual culture from lived experience into a stage form that can be seen, heard, and perceived (As shown in Figure 6).



Figure 6. A section from the song Ergun Love.

5. The Artistic Expression of the Integration of Multi-Ethnic Musical Elements

The composite nature of the frontier cultural space of Ergun is reflected through its absorption of traditional Chinese modes and other minority musical elements. Representation can be understood as the production of meaning and its communication among members of a culture, rather than a simple reflection of reality [10]. In this sense, the integration of multi-ethnic musical elements in the work is not a direct borrowing of the cultural reality of the Ergun frontier; rather, it gives the cultural experience of multi-ethnic interaction a perceptible artistic form through the selection, organization, and combination of different musical symbols.

In its overall musical creation, Ergun Love not only uses melodic materials circulated among the Russian ethnic group, but also absorbs traditional Chinese musical modes and other minority musical elements, thereby producing a more complex frontier cultural atmosphere at the auditory level and giving concrete artistic expression to multi-ethnic cultural integration. From a constructivist perspective, meaning is constructed by representational systems through symbolic practice [13]. Located on China's northern frontier, Ergun has long existed within a socio-cultural environment shaped by the cohabitation, interaction, exchange, and integration of multiple ethnic groups. This regional background determines that its cultural form is not the closed continuation of a single ethnic tradition, but rather one marked by distinct complexity and hybridity.

A clear example can be found in the transitional music of the first act (Figure 7). This passage appears in the scene where a group of Chinese youths set out to seek a living in today's Olochi Village in Russia. In musical terms, this passage employs the pentatonic mode of traditional Chinese music, uses long note values of two to five beats, and at the same time draws on the Mongolian "long-song" style as an important melodic development technique. The resulting musical style is gentle and extended, with a strong sense of space and lyricism. This treatment makes the transitional music aurally distinct from the earlier melodic lines marked by the folk musical atmosphere of the Russian ethnic group, thereby creating a striking stylistic contrast.



Figure 7. A section from the song Ergun Love.

The integration of multi-ethnic musical elements in *Ergun Love* constitutes an important means of artistically expressing the frontier cultural space. Russian folk music forms the main ethnic musical line of the work, while the incorporation of traditional Chinese modes and Mongolian musical elements further expands the cultural dimension of this main line. Through this comprehensive organization of musical language, the work presents on stage the cultural complexity formed through the interaction, exchange, and integration of multiple ethnic groups in the Ergun region. It also elevates the artistic expression of cross-border ethnic musical culture beyond the display of a single ethnic musical style to an aesthetic presentation of the overall structure of frontier culture.

6. The Artistic Value and Cultural Significance of Ergun Love

The creation and performance of *Ergun Love* have provided an important practical foundation for the formation and development of Russian ethnic musicals in China. In terms of plot construction, the work takes the early twentieth century as its temporal background, is grounded in the real historical life of the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City, China, and uses real events that occurred among Russian ethnic people as the basic source of its plot development [5]. On this basis, it carries out artistic processing and stage reconstruction, thereby endowing the work with both historical authenticity and artistic narrativity. This mode of creation, based on real historical experience, gives *Ergun Love* not only strong narrative appeal but also a relatively complete stage presentation of the historical memory and lived experience of the Chinese Russian ethnic group.

In terms of musical creation, the work takes traditional Russian folk songs as an important musical axis and emphasizes localized expression in both content and form. On one hand, it extensively draws on traditional folk-song melodies circulated among the Chinese Russian ethnic group and adapts and recreates them on this basis. On the other hand, it incorporates musical elements from other ethnic groups, enabling the work to maintain the stylistic characteristics of Russian ethnic music while also displaying a relatively distinct feature of ethnic integration. In this way, *Ergun Love* demonstrates both locality and innovation in its musical selection and reveals the openness and creativity of Chinese Russian musical culture in the process of stage transformation.

In terms of performance form, the work comprehensively employs a variety of vocal forms, including solo, duet, chorus, and mixed two-part choral singing, and interweaves them throughout the development of the plot. This diversified organization of singing enhances the dramatic expressiveness of the musical and reflects the richness of Russian vocal forms. At the same time, through the musical writing of ritual songs in scenes such as wedding rituals and birthday rituals, the work incorporates the ritual culture of the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City into stage expression, further enriching the artistic presentation of Russian folk music and demonstrating the diversity of Russian musical genres.

In terms of dance performance, *Ergun Love* presents solo dances, duet dances, trio dances, scarf dances, and dance tunes such as *Gabachok*, *Badagorana*, and *Leise* from the Russian ethnic group in Ergun City, thereby offering a relatively systematic presentation of the diversity of Chinese Russian dance culture. This integrated expressive mode, in which music, dance, and drama work together, enhances the stage expressiveness of the work and renders the bodily culture, ritual behavior, and aesthetic traditions of the Chinese Russian ethnic group in a more multidimensional way.

In terms of story content, the work features clear narrative threads and a relatively compact structure, presenting in a comparatively comprehensive way the multiple dimensions of the lives of Russian ethnic people living in Ergun City, China, including festivals, rituals, and everyday life [14]. Whether through the presentation of traditional festivals such as the *Baske Festival* and the *Willow Festival* or through the depiction of folk wedding rituals, labor scenes, and dietary customs, the work provides a relatively rich stage expression of the social life and cultural landscape of the Chinese Russian ethnic group. For this reason, *Ergun Love* is not merely an ethnic musical centered on a love story but also a comprehensive artistic text of cultural display significance.

Folk music must continue to innovate in the course of its development in order to fully reveal its unique artistic charm through interaction with other musical types. Ergun Love exemplifies this point. The work possesses authenticity and historicity in its story content, locality and innovation in its musical selection, and clear diversity in its vocal forms and dance expression. It is both a product of the inheritance and development of Chinese Russian music and an important starting point for the creation of Chinese Russian ethnic musicals. Through the comprehensive integration of music, drama, and dance, the work provides a representative practical model for the creation of musicals on Chinese Russian ethnic themes and, to a certain extent, expands the artistic path for the contemporary expression of Chinese Russian musical culture [3].

7. Conclusion

This article examines the artistic expression of the cross-border ethnic musical culture of the Chinese Russian ethnic group on the modern stage through four dimensions: the expression of the love theme, the construction of memory through traditional folk songs, the presentation of ritual culture, and the integration of multi-ethnic musical elements. The study demonstrates how Ergun Love successfully constructs the emotional experience, sound memory, ritual traditions, and frontier life scenes of the Chinese Russian ethnic group, transforming these cultural elements originally embedded in local social life into an artistic text with visibility, perceptibility, and communicative power.

The core significance of Ergun Love lies in its transformation of Chinese Russian ethnic culture from a collection of folk resources into a stage expression. Through its love narrative, the work delves into the emotional world of the ethnic group; through the thematic use and recurrence of traditional folk songs, it constructs sound memory; through ritual scenes such as weddings and birthdays, it presents ritual culture; and through the incorporation of traditional Chinese modes and Mongolian musical elements, it highlights the composite structure of frontier culture. These artistic arrangements enable Chinese Russian ethnic culture to achieve a more complete stage representation, while historical memory, lived experience, and aesthetic tradition are unified and concentrated through the integrated coordination of music, lyrics, dance, and plot structure.

On a deeper level, Ergun Love represents a fundamental approach to the contemporary expression of cross-border ethnic musical culture: grounding itself in local tradition, utilizing the modern stage as a medium, and achieving cultural transformation through selection, reorganization, and reinterpretation. The work retains the ethnic and regional characteristics of Chinese Russian musical culture while fostering its creative evolution within the framework of modern art. In this regard, Ergun Love serves not only as a successful example of a musical centered on a Chinese Russian ethnic theme but also as a practical pathway for small-population ethnic groups and cross-border ethnic cultures to establish forms of expressive subjectivity.

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