

# The Musical Life of Migrant Workers during the Southwest Third-line Construction Period from the Perspective of the “Danwei System”—A Case Study of Liupanshui, Guizhou

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the music life of migrant workers relocated during the Southwest Third-Line Construction period from the perspective of the “Danwei System”, with Liupanshui in Guizhou as a case study. By adopting the methods of literature review and oral interview, the study examines the music life of relocated workers from three dimensions: functional types, content patterns, and operation mechanisms. The research finds that the “Danwei” (work unit) provided comprehensive guarantees for music activities in terms of performers, audiences, equipment, and venues, constructing three functional types of music life—“political mobilization-oriented”, “spiritual satisfaction-oriented”, and “exchange and condolence-oriented”. The music content presented a coexistence of national mainstream music, Danwei-specific music, and folk music, which realized an interactive cycle of political mobilization, social control, and economic development mediated by music life during the Third-Line Construction. This study enriches the understanding of the social life of relocated workers during the Third-Line Construction and provides enlightenment for contemporary music life.

**Keywords:** third-line construction; liupanshui; music life; danwei system; oral history of music

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

The Third-Line Construction (1964–1980s) was a large-scale industrial relocation and construction campaign in China, aiming to develop national defense and industrial systems in the inland southwest and northwest regions. During this period, more than 100,000 workers were relocated to Liupanshui, Guizhou, a city established due to the Third-Line Construction, engaging in industries such as coal, electric power, and steel. The “Danwei System”, a core social organization form under China’s planned economy, characterized by high administratization, tight control, and the integration of political, economic, and social functions, became the basic carrier of the relocated workers’ life.

Existing studies on the Third-Line Construction have focused on marriage<sup>[1]</sup>, language<sup>[2]</sup>, identity<sup>[3]</sup>, and cultural changes<sup>[4]</sup> of Danwei workers using the “Danwei System” theory, but rarely paid attention to music life—a key dimension of workers’ social life. Collective music life, organized by the Danwei with explicit national and collective awareness, played an implicit role in strengthening workers’ value identity and collective belonging. Exploring this topic can not only present the vivid life of workers during the Third-Line Construction but also reveal the role of music in historical formation

and social maintenance.

## 1.2. Research Objectives and Questions

This study takes the collective music life of relocated workers in Liupanshui as a case, with the following objectives:

- (1) Clarify the functional types of music life of relocated workers under the Danwei System;
- (2) Analyze the content patterns of music life (mainstream, Danwei-specific, and folk music);
- (3) Explore the operation mechanisms of music life (selection of performers, audience organization, material procurement, and venue construction);
- (4) Reveal the interactive relationship between music life, political mobilization, social control, and economic development.

## 1.3. Research Significance

**Academic Significance:** It supplements the research on the social life of the Third-Line Construction, expands the application scope of the “Danwei System” theory in cultural and artistic fields, and provides new perspectives for the study of modern Chinese social and cultural history.

**Practical Significance:** It provides references for the construction of contemporary community cultural life and the inheritance of industrial cultural memory.

## 2. Theoretical Framework & Research Design

### 2.1. Theoretical Basis: The “Danwei System”

The “Danwei System” refers to a social system and institutional structure based on Danwei organizations, which was adopted to establish an industrial system rapidly during the planned economy period<sup>[5]</sup>. Its core characteristics include:

**Multi-functional Integration:** Combining political mobilization (propaganda of national policies), economic development (unified allocation of resources), and social control (comprehensive management of workers’ life)<sup>[6]</sup>;

**High Administratization:** The state’s instructions are transmitted to the grassroots through the Danwei, ensuring the consistency of social actions<sup>[7]</sup>;

**Closedness and Dependence:** Due to the “mountain-based, decentralized, and concealed” site selection principle of Third-Line enterprises, workers relied highly on the Danwei for food, clothing, housing, and transportation, forming a “small Danwei, big world” life pattern<sup>[8]</sup>.

### 2.2. Case Selection: Liupanshui, Guizhou

Liupanshui was selected as the case for three reasons:

**Historical Background:** It was a typical “city built by the Third-Line Construction”, with a large number of relocated workers (over 100,000) and diversified industries (coal, electric power, steel)<sup>[9]</sup>, laying a foundation for the prosperity of music life;

**Rich Materials:** The author has collected a large number of archives (e.g., *History of Shuicheng Mining Area Trade Union*), local chronicles (*Liupanshui City Chronicle*), and conducted in-depth interviews with 41 witnesses from different industries;

**Representativeness:** The music life of Liupanshui’s relocated workers, including Danwei-organized performances and folk music exchanges, reflects the common characteristics of music life in the Southwest Third-Line Construction.

## 2.3. Research Methods and Dimensions

### 2.3.1. Research Methods

**Literature Review:** Sorting out official archives, local chronicles, and memoirs to construct the historical context of music life;

**Oral Interview:** Conducting semi-structured interviews with witnesses (e.g., former propaganda team members, Danwei managers) to collect first-hand information on music activities.

### 2.3.2. Research Dimensions

Based on the functional logic of the Danwei System, this study sets three core dimensions:

**Functional Types:** Focusing on the role of music life in political mobilization, spiritual satisfaction, and communication;

**Content Patterns:** Analyzing the composition and characteristics of mainstream music, Danwei-specific music, and folk music;

**Operation Mechanisms:** Exploring the guarantee system of music life supported by the Danwei.

## 3. Social Life of Relocated Workers Under the “Danwei System”

The social life of relocated workers is the basis of their music life, and the Danwei’s all-round management shaped the unique life pattern of workers.

### 3.1. Trinity Function of the Danwei

**Political Mobilization:** The Danwei set up party-mass organizations (trade unions, propaganda departments) to transmit national policies and Danwei values through cultural activities<sup>[10]</sup>. For example, Fang Huiqun, a former propaganda team member of Shuicheng Mining Bureau, recalled: “We were often woken up at midnight to arrange programs to convey new requirements from superiors in a popular form.”

**Economic Development:** The state controlled scarce resources, and the Danwei was responsible for the hierarchical allocation of production materials and living materials. Zhang Jinhe, a former leader of the Southwest Coal Mine Logistics Transportation Team, recorded: “All materials transported by train were first stored in the warehouse of the second branch, and then transported to three mining bureaus and mines by 600+ vehicles.”

**Social Control:** Due to the confidentiality and geographical isolation of the Third-Line Construction, the Danwei became a “cultural island”. Workers relied on the Danwei for food, clothing, housing, and transportation—“almost every family had the same meals every day” (interview with Fang Fushou). The Danwei also built hospitals, schools, and cultural venues to meet workers’ daily needs.

### 3.2. “Small Danwei, Big World” Life Pattern

The Danwei undertakes almost all matters of workers from birth to death, forming a highly closed and dependent life pattern<sup>[11]</sup>. Liupanshui, known as a “city pulled by trains”, relied on trains and trucks to transport materials to the mountains, and the Danwei distributed them to each factory and mine, making the Danwei the core of workers’ social life.

## 4. Music Life of Relocated Workers: Types, Contents & Operation Mechanisms

As an important part of “Danwei Literature and Art”, music life was an important tool for the Danwei to realize political mobilization and social control.

### 4.1. Functional Types of Music Life

#### 4.1.1. Political Mobilization-Oriented Music Life

It refers to ritual music activities carried out on special political festivals or major historical events, aiming to strengthen collective cohesion<sup>[12]</sup>. For example:

During festivals such as May 1st, August 1st, and October 1st, the propaganda team of the infrastructure troops

presented policies, model deeds in the form of “soldiers performing for soldiers” (interview with Yang Wenti);

During the 1970 “Coal Seizing and Steel Protecting Campaign” in Huopu Mine, Pan County, the propaganda team created works close to workers’ lives and performed on various occasions (recorded in *Red Songs in the Third-Line Years* by Lu Hansheng).

It also included music activities for celebrating mine commissioning and completing targets.

#### 4.1.2. Spiritual Satisfaction-Oriented Music Life

Against the background of material scarcity and spiritual poverty, the Danwei organized music activities to meet workers’ spiritual needs, mainly in three forms:

**Immediate Performances by “Cultural Cavalry”:** Small teams of 3–5 people performed songs and dances at construction sites to relieve fatigue, such as “pre-shift and post-shift performances” (interview with Zhang Guohua);

**Internal Performances:** The Danwei organized annual cultural performances. *History of Shuicheng Mining Area Trade Union* records that 14 units participated in the 1975–1985 performances, with 360+ performers and 200+ programs each time<sup>[13]</sup>;

**External Troupes’ Performances:** National professional troupes (e.g., National Coal Troupe, Guizhou Song and Dance Troupe) were invited to perform. For example, China National Children’s Theatre performed *Malantou* 22 times in Shuicheng Mining Bureau in 1978.

#### 4.1.3. Exchange and Condolence-Oriented Music Life

Music activities accompanied the exchange and condolence between sister units, serving as a bridge for emotional communication and problem-solving:

In 1966, the first propaganda team of Liuzhi Special District performed 47 times for factories, mines, and the 41st Detachment of the Infrastructure Engineering Corps, with an audience of over 100,000 (memoir of Lu Xiangfu);

In February 1975, Shuicheng Mining Bureau sent a propaganda team to Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan to condolences to steel, railway, and forestry units, alleviating the shortage of pit wood, steel, and transportation (recorded in *Shuicheng Mining Records*)<sup>[14]</sup>.

### 4.2. Content Patterns of Music Life

#### 4.2.1. Mainstream Ideological Music: Revolutionary Songs and “Revolutionary Model Operas”

**Revolutionary Songs:** During the Third-Line Construction, a large number of revolutionary songs emerged, such as *We Walk on the Broad Road* and *Mao Zedong’s Soldiers Obey the Party’s Orders*. The five volumes of *New Songs on the Battlefield* (published since 1972) included influential songs like *I Love Wuzhi Mountain*, *I Love Wanquan River*, which deeply influenced workers’ music life.

**Revolutionary Model Operas:** With the support of political forces, model operas were widely spread<sup>[15]</sup>. The 41st Detachment of the Infrastructure Engineering Corps retained *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* and *Sha Jia Bang* as regular programs; Shuicheng Mining Bureau adapted the chorus *Azalea Mountain* for the 1974 Guizhou Cultural Performance, which was widely learned by sister units.

#### 4.2.2. Danwei Ideological Music: Odes and Labor Songs

**Odes:** They eulogized outstanding figures in the Danwei. For example, after Xu Jizhi sacrificed to protect his teammates in 1971, the Danwei created the opera *Live to Compose New Music for the People, Die to Write Heroic Songs*; the 1972 *Jiang Maoming Album* eulogized the martyr who rescued colleagues; works like *Singing Peasant Wang Auntie* praised ordinary workers;

**Labor Songs:** They depicted production scenes, divided into “realistic description” (e.g., *Battling the Fire Sea*, *Happy Bucket Operator*) and “lyrical expression” (e.g., *Tempering Red Hearts in the Coal Sea*, *Heroes Fighting on the Great*

*Coal Mountain*), reflecting workers' hard work and fighting spirit.

#### **4.2.3. Folk Music: Integration of Migrant and Local Music**

Workers from all over China brought their local folk music, while absorbing local music of the relocation area:

Migrant folk music included Guizhou Lusheng, Shaanxi Yangko, Yunnan Huadeng, Northeast Gaoqiao, etc<sup>[16]</sup>.

The propaganda team learned local ethnic music from Yunnan National Defense Song and Dance Troupe and local villagers, and the national song and dance programs were warmly welcomed during condolences (interview with Yang Wenti and Qu Youxin).

#### **4.3. Operation Mechanisms of Music Life**

The Danwei's institutional advantages guaranteed the smooth development of music life, which showed a gradual optimization process.

##### **4.3.1. Selection of Performers: From Amateur to Professional**

**Early Stage (1960s):** The Danwei selected workers with musical talents to form amateur propaganda teams. For example, Liuzhi Special District established the first propaganda team in 1966 with outstanding performers from the 1965 workers' cultural performance;

**Middle and Late Stages (1970s–1980s):** With the improvement of economic benefits, the Danwei established professional troupes. In March 1981, Shuicheng Mining Bureau established an amateur cultural propaganda team with an actor group, band group, and art design group (document [1981] Shuimeigongzi No. 009); the 41st Detachment recruited students from Guizhou Art School to form a professional performance team in May 1969.

##### **4.3.2. Audience Organization: From Public Notice to Welfare Distribution**

**Early Stage:** Performances were held in open spaces. The Danwei announced through loudspeakers and posted posters, and workers "carried stools to occupy seats early" (interview with Chen Guixiang, the second generation of Third-Line constructors);

**Middle and Late Stages:** With the completion of clubs, the trade union distributed tickets as welfare. For high-level performances (e.g., national troupes), tickets were preferentially given to outstanding workers (interview with Tang Huaiyong).

##### **4.3.3. Purchase of Performance Materials: From Self-Made to Danwei Procurement**

**Early Stage:** Musical instruments (bamboo flutes, erhu) were self-made or brought by workers; sound equipment was made by themselves (e.g., loudspeakers covered with iron buckets) (interview with Chen Mingcai, lighting and sound engineer);

**Middle and Late Stages:** The Danwei purchased professional equipment. For example, in 1973, Shuicheng Mining Bureau sent staff to Shanghai to buy orchestral instruments, sound, and lighting equipment; the 41st Detachment purchased brass instruments after a performance failure in rainy weather (interview with Yang Wenti).

##### **4.3.4. Construction of Performance Venues: From Open-Air to Clubs**

**Early Stage:** Performances were held in open spaces. Shuicheng Mining Area had no clubs in 1964, and films and performances were held outdoors;

**Middle and Late Stages:** The Danwei built clubs. From 1979 to 1985, Shuicheng Mining Bureau built 6 clubs with a total area of 5,801 square meters and 5,273 seats; Liuzhi Mining Area completed its first club in 1970 with 1,228 seats<sup>[17]</sup>.

## 5. Comparative Case Studies: Generalization of Music Life in Southwest Third-Line Construction

The music life of Liupanshui's relocated workers is a microcosm of the Southwest Third-Line Construction, and similar characteristics exist in other Danweis:

**Huaguang Instrument Factory (Guang'an, Sichuan):** Established a cultural troupe in 1966. In 1971, it participated in the modern Peking opera performance in Nanchong and achieved success; in the 1980s, it held regular dances in the staff canteen (memoir of Yang Xiaohong);

**Changzheng Machinery Factory (Kaili, Guizhou, 083 Base):** Set up a choir, band, and dance team. In June 1975, it rehearsed full-time to welcome the inspection of Minister Wang Zheng, and the factory assigned tool workshops to make music stands; it toured 20+ times in 1975–1976 (interview with He Zongdong, chief of the band).

These cases show that under the Danwei System, the functional types, content patterns, and operation mechanisms of music life in the Southwest Third-Line Construction have obvious commonalities.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Main Findings

Under the Danwei System, the music life of Liupanshui's relocated workers presented three coexisting functional types—political mobilization-oriented, spiritual satisfaction-oriented, and exchange and condolence-oriented—covering mainstream, Danwei-specific, and folk music;

The Danwei guaranteed the operation of music life through the selection of performers, audience organization, material procurement, and venue construction, which strengthened workers' emotional identity to the state and Danwei, enriched their spiritual life, and boosted morale;

Music life realized the interactive cycle of political mobilization, social control, and economic development: the Danwei used music to mobilize workers, who then devoted themselves to construction with enthusiasm, and the improved economic benefits further optimized music life.

### 6.2. Evaluation and Enlightenment

**Sociological Significance:** In the planned economy era with a single communication medium, music life shaped a strong sense of collective consciousness and cooperation, helping to transmit the party's policies to the grassroots quickly.

**Musicological Limitations:** The "state-Danwei" management model emphasized political mobilization and model shaping, weakening the aesthetic function of music and the diversified expression of personal inner world, leading to a relatively single music model.

**Contemporary Enlightenment:** It provides references for the construction of community cultural life—paying attention to both the social function of culture and the aesthetic needs of individuals.

### 6.3. Future Research Directions

Future research can expand the scope of cases to the entire Third-Line Construction area and explore the inheritance and transformation of Danwei music culture in the market economy era.

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