

Evolution and Literacy Transmission of the Suona Ensemble in Southwest Shandong Province, China

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the evolution and literacy transmission of the Suona ensemble in Southwest Shandong Province, China, which encompasses a rich tapestry of traditional and modern educational methods spanning familial inheritance, master-apprentice relationships, self-study, and formal training schools. Drawing on interviews with key informants and historical analysis, this study delves into the intricate web of practices that have shaped the evolution and preservation of Suona music over the centuries. From the oral traditions of family transmission to the structured curriculum of training schools, each method has played a vital role in sustaining this cherished cultural heritage and facilitating literacy transmission in music education. Despite facing challenges such as limited access to formal education and the scarcity of written scores, Suona artists have demonstrated remarkable resilience, adapting to societal changes while maintaining the essence of their craft. As economic growth and cultural shifts reshape rural communities, the demand for Suona ensemble music continues to grow, prompting innovations in teaching and learning methods. Through a blend of tradition and innovation, Suona ensemble music remains a vibrant and enduring expression of Chinese folk culture, enriching the lives of both practitioners and audiences alike.

Key words: Evolution, Transmission, Literacy, Suona, Shandong

INTRODUCTION

Suona ensemble music has a strong social value in southwest Shandong Province's rural districts, notably at wedding and burial ceremonies. It is a classic genre of Chinese percussion and wind-blown music with profound origins in Chinese culture. For many years, this musical style—characterized by upbeat percussion and wind instruments—has been significant in Chinese musical history (Thrasher, 1981).

Historically, Chinese percussion and wind-blown music fulfilled a variety of ceremonial functions. The upper class used it for royal processions, feasts, hunting excursions, military campaigns, victory celebrations, and soldier burials. Since the Qing period, this form of music has progressively expanded across the population, becoming an essential component of traditional rituals and ceremonial events (Eccles & Ye, 2007).

Suona ensemble music is very popular in rural regions, where it is often used for everyday occasions like weddings, funerals, and amusement. Its vivid and energetic character adds to the mood of these events, enriching the cultural experience while also conserving traditions passed down through the centuries. Understanding the historical and cultural significance of Suona ensemble music broadens our understanding of Chinese musical history and emphasizes its continued relevance in current culture (Mu, 2012).

Suona is culturally significant in China. It is regarded as a type of folk art. Experts and researchers have concentrated on its musical qualities and artistic characteristics over the years. Currently, there is a focused attempt to conserve and advocate for traditional culture and protect cultural assets. In 2006, the Suona in the southwest of Shandong was designated as a national intangible cultural asset. Since then, there has been an increasing focus on several topics, such as the successors of the tradition, spokesmen, and the procedures for inheritance (Liu, 2015).

In the southwestern region of Shandong Province, almost every township has a Suona ensemble, sometimes structured as family groups, with a strong emphasis on ensemble performance. The trumpet music from southwest Shandong is artistically valuable for investigation due to its diverse repertoire. This diversity is frequently shown through finger-shifting modifications, alterations in embouchure, and changes in technique. Qupai songs are often sung in rotation to ensure each performance is distinct (Houyong & Li, 1989). Moreover, musicians can improvise grace notes according to their own styles and preferences. This musical legacy is maintained via both informal familial passing down and institutional education and literacy initiatives (Liu, 2020).

An extensive study has been undertaken to explore these topics and provide productive outcomes. This research

focuses on the evolution and literacy transmission of the Suona Ensemble in Southwest Shandong Province, China, the people perpetuating the tradition, and the systems in place to guarantee its perpetuation. This study adds to the comprehension and conservation of Suona culture and also informs broader initiatives to protect intangible cultural assets in China.

Research Question

- How is the evolution and literacy transmission of the Suona Ensemble in Southwest Shandong Province, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shandong Arts and Culture

Shandong is a significant point of origin in Chinese culture. Over its long history, the people of Shandong have developed a wide variety of impressive folk art. Shandong's folk music has a rich legacy and deep historical origins. There are about 8000 unique folk songs, more than 4000 pieces of folk music, over 30 types of opera, more than 20 forms of Quyi (traditional Chinese storytelling and ballad singing), and over 1000 types of songs and dances documented in the region. This abundance displays a variety of information and a vast range of artistic interpretations. Southwest Shandong is a central location for a variety of art genres. This location is where famous opera genres, including Shandong Bangzi, Shandong Kuaishu, Shandong Qinshu, Shandong Luizi, and Shandong Fishing Taku, originated and developed. It is appropriately labeled as the "hometown of opera" because of the widespread presence and popularity of various art forms in the area. Shandong's folk music and art forms showcase the creative talent of its people and play a vital role in enriching China's cultural heritage. Shandong is a key hub for promoting and conserving traditional Chinese arts due to its cultural diversity (Tan, 1992).

Shandong Folk Songs

Shandong folk songs include a variety of subjects and genres, showcasing the region's unique cultural heritage. These include work songs, folk songs, life ditties, and children's songs, each providing a distinctive view of the daily lives and customs of Shandong's residents. Shandong's musical legacy included labor songs like the Dezhou ramming songs and the Jinan labor chants. Ship music echoes throughout the Jining Canal, while coastal regions showcase sounds reminiscent of ocean excursions and fishing trips. Shandong's folk music culture is centered around life ditties that vividly depict local customs and traditions. There are two primary types of children's songs in Shandong. Children's play songs provide lively tunes that enhance games and activities. Shandong folk songs showcase the region's cultural heritage and customs via a variety of subjects and genres, enchanting listeners with their timeless melodies and narratives (Liu, 2013).

Shandong Folk Music Instruments

Shandong's folk music instrumentals have a wide variety of styles, using many instruments that create a complex and diverse spectrum of sounds. Primary music categories include wind instruments, string instruments such as the Guqin and Guzheng, and plucked instruments like the Liu Qin and Lei Qin. The Sanxian, soft bow Jinghu, and percussion instruments are essential in influencing Shandong's musical scene (Li, 2022). Two very impactful styles of Shandong folk instrumental music include trumpeting music and Guzheng music. Shandong's traditional music repertoire has major trumpeting music with strong and resonant tones produced by instruments like the Suona and other brass instruments. Lively songs frequently enhance celebratory celebrations and ceremonial events, contributing a dynamic vitality to the festivities. Guzheng music played on the ancient Chinese zither known as the Guzheng, is recognized for its subtle and delicate melodies. Guzheng music, originating hundreds of years ago, embodies beauty and grace, encapsulating ancient Chinese aesthetics. Both musicians and listeners greatly value the tranquil tunes' ability to evoke a sense of serenity and introspection. The two genres of Shandong folk instrumental music showcase the region's cultural legacy and creative variety, providing insight into centuries-old traditions and musical inventions that are still prominent in Shandong today (Chu, 2006).

Shandong Quyi Music

Shandong Quyi music features a variety of characteristic genres, such as Shandong Qinshu, Shandong Dagu, Shandong Kuaishu, Jiaodong Dagu, and Fishing Taku. Shandong Qinshu is the most plentiful and important among them, featuring different subgenres. Shandong Qinshu includes a range of musical genres, such as Banqiang style, Lianqu style, and a combination of the two. Banqiang style is known for its dynamic and rhythmic performances, typically showcasing solo vocalists supported by percussion instruments like drums and gongs. The Lianqu style emphasizes melodic storytelling, where artists adeptly intertwine storylines using song and speech. The combination of various forms creates a vibrant and engaging musical performance that highlights the diverse cultural legacy of Shandong Quyi music. Shandong Quyi Music showcases a variety of styles and genres that represent the region's folk traditions and cultural identity. It captivates audiences with unique melodies and narrative skills (Guo, 2018).

Suona Ensemble Music

Suona ensemble music, popular in southwest Shandong Province, is a significant kind of percussion and wind music in China. Some texts also describe it as percussion and wind music in southwest Shandong Province. There are several understandings of percussion and wind music. As to the "Concise Course of Chinese Music History," percussion and wind music include playing percussion and wind

instruments, primarily Takus, pan flutes, and Jia. Moreover, it may incorporate vocal components within its musical framework. The “Dictionary of Chinese Music” classifies percussion and wind music as a classic style of Chinese music originating from the Han Dynasty. It highlights the predominance of percussion and wind instruments in this genre, traditionally utilized in palace, military, ceremonial, and banquet contexts. The “Encyclopedia of China Music and Dance Volume” characterizes percussion and wind music as a historical genre that has been notably important since the Han and Wei Dynasties. It emphasizes its connection to formal and ceremonial settings, focusing on its use of percussion and wind instruments. Various viewpoints exist about percussion and wind music, but it is certain that they hold considerable cultural and historical value within Chinese music heritage (Sun, 2015).

The Suona is a traditional Chinese musical instrument that has been widely popular in many parts of China for a long time, earning the moniker “trumpet.” It is often used in solo performances, ensemble settings, and as accompaniment for diverse musical compositions. After the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, both the Party and the state focused on promoting culture and the arts. Simultaneously, developers of the Suona instrument focused on ongoing innovation and research. This collaborative endeavor elevated the Suona to a broader platform, allowing its adaptability and qualities to be demonstrated to a larger audience. The investigation of Suona-related ideas and the dissemination of scholarly works were essential in supporting the instrument’s growth and preservation (Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023). The Suona is known for its resonant and powerful sound, which has earned it tremendous praise and affection from the audience. This research examines the pitch of the Suona, analyzes its tonal characteristics, and investigates methods to optimize its musical capabilities. A more profound comprehension of Suona’s pitch may be achieved by conducting a thorough investigation and analysis, which will help in its continuous development and the preservation of its lasting impact on Chinese musical heritage (Cao, 2020).

Research Theory

This study uses ethnomusicology theory to provide a great lens through which to explore the peculiarities of Suona ensemble music in southwest Shandong Province, delving into its complex links with history, geography, folk culture, and more (Fan, 2016; Stone, 2015). Into this rich musical legacy by applying descriptive methodologies, which include the following:

- 1) **History:** The historical backdrop of Suona ensemble music in southwest Shandong Province sheds light on its evolution and development. Understanding the historical events, social institutions, and cultural dynamics that have influenced this music might help to explain its distinct traits. Investigating the impact of imperial court music, military traditions, and folk rites on Suona ensemble music, for example, might provide useful historical insights (Berger & Stone, 2019).
- 2) **Folk Culture:** Suona ensemble music is firmly based on local folk culture, representing the values, beliefs, and customs of Southwest Shandong Province’s people. Examining Suona music’s involvement in traditional rites, festivals, and social gatherings reveals its cultural value and metaphorical implications. Furthermore, studying the transmission of musical knowledge and abilities via oral tradition, apprenticeship, and formal education might shed light on the survival and longevity of Suona ensemble music in traditional culture (Mu, 2003).
- 3) **Education and Literacy Transmission:** Understanding Suona ensemble music’s sustainability and evolution requires an investigation of educational practices and literacy transmission techniques. Analyzing the role of schools, academies, and cultural institutions in teaching Suona performance, composition, and appreciation might shed light on the formalization of music education. Exploring written artifacts such as musical scores, teaching manuals, and scholarly papers can also shed light on literacy’s role in documenting and spreading (Harrop-Allin, 2005; Hou & Seekhunlio, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Selection of the Research Site

Zaozhuang City, Shandong Province, is a prominent city in southwest Shandong, featuring Suona ensemble music groups in almost every township. Zaozhuang is a lively and dynamic group of musicians with more than 1000 practitioners of Suona ensemble music. The researcher chooses information providers with extensive performance experience, such as Suona ensemble proprietors, male and female actors, and performers who have passed down the practice in their families. These people provide important knowledge about the practice, history, and cultural importance of Suona ensemble music in Zaozhuang City.

Key Informants

The selection criteria for the researcher’s informants are twofold. Firstly, they must be individuals who belong to the research area, which focuses on Suona ensemble music in southwest Shandong Province. Secondly, the informants should possess extensive experience as transmitters of Suona ensemble music and have practiced for more than 10 years in this field. Based on these criteria, there are three key informants.

Data Collection

Literature review

Conduct a comprehensive assessment of current literature on Suona ensemble music, ethnomusicology, Chinese folk music, and regional culture studies in order to develop a theoretical framework and identify major topics, theories, and research needs.

Fieldwork

Conducting fieldwork activities to acquire primary data directly from the research region. This includes:

- a) Participant Observation: Immersion in the cultural setting of southwest Shandong Province, including attendance at Suona ensemble performances, festivals, and community gatherings, to watch Suona ensemble music practices, interactions, and expressions.
- b) In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with important informants as well as other practitioners, scholars, and community members involved in Suona ensemble music. These interviews will delve into the history, repertoire, performance skills, cultural relevance, transmission mechanisms, and issues experienced by Suona ensemble musicians.

Data Analysis

The research on the learning and literacy transmission of the Suona ensemble in Southwest Shandong Province encompasses a comprehensive qualitative analysis of interview records, audio recordings, and historical materials. The investigation seeks to provide important insights into the educational aspects involved in preserving and disseminating this cultural legacy. The study enhances comprehension of the larger importance of traditions such as the Suona Ensemble in cultural education and literacy transmission by examining their intricate network of influences and practices. The study aims to reveal important mechanisms, problems, and pedagogical implications related to the transmission of Suona ensemble music by thoroughly analyzing and interpreting the collected data. This will enhance our knowledge of cultural heritage preservation and teaching.

RESULTS

Traditional Transmission of Suona Skills

Music education has been a persistent presence throughout history, adapting to diverse techniques and methods both ancient and modern. Traditional Chinese folk culture heritage is an important educational stream, but it differs from current methods. Despite changes in transmission pathways, music, and culture have endured for millennia via conventional techniques. Prior to the establishment of organized schools, traditional Chinese music education was based on family heritage and mentoring. Jia Jiqiao, a Suona artist contacted for this study, stated that the basic way of teaching Suona skills is "oral teaching, word teaching, and example teaching." Suona performers often have little formal education, making it difficult to learn from written recordings or notation. They learn melodies through diligent listening, memorization, and practice. Suona performers pass on their abilities through oral instruction and on-site presentation, emulating the ancient transmission techniques of Xiang Xian culture, as illustrated by Suona ensemble music.

Family Transmission

Family transmission is a fundamental aspect of the evolution of Suona performance art, representing the traditional method of passing down Chinese folk art that has persisted for millennia. This process guarantees the durability and continuity of art preservation, frequently lasting for centuries, while maintaining the distinct style and appeal of the collection. Ge Ling explained the two primary forms of familial transmission: vertical and horizontal. Vertical transmission is the process by which a father imparts the art to his offspring, maintaining the family lineage's continuance. Horizontal transmission is the sharing of creative information across family members, like siblings or spouses.

Ge Ling's personal experience demonstrates how her father passed on his knowledge of the Suona to her and her brother, creating a legacy of musical ability that spans many generations. Family transmission is an example of a traditional tactic with a strong feudal system influence from ancient Chinese culture. Although it provides stability and maintains traditional style, there is a danger of disruption and loss if future generations cannot carry on the custom. The desire for male inheritance, cultural restrictions on women learning the Suona, and the idea that women were not physically capable of playing the Suona all contributed to making this danger worse in the past.

Since the 1980s, societal developments have increasingly dismantled obstacles, enabling women to engage in Suona performance and inherit family culture equally. This change has broadened the opportunities for preserving family heritage, guaranteeing its lasting impact for future generations.

Transmission of Master and Apprentice

Suona ensemble music In southwest Shandong Province is predominantly transmitted through the master-apprentice relationship, focusing on traditional oral instruction and practical learning. Apprentices, many of whom come from non-family backgrounds, pay tribute to tutors and complete a rigorous apprenticeship lasting three years. During this period, they not only learned but also labored for the master, helping with housework and farming. The exchange of festive gifts marks significant holidays like the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival. Apprentices who have completed their training may continue to work with their master or create their practice.

The learning procedure normally proceeds from rudimentary percussion to Sheng and lastly to Suona, with a focus on steady skill improvement. Oral education is essential, with the fundamentals of music understood before diving into more complex parts. However, the scarcity of written Suona scores causes difficulties, as many performers come from disadvantaged families with little access to formal music instruction. As a result, transmission relies significantly on auditory learning and memory, which contributes to practitioners' limited theoretical comprehension.

The importance of the master-apprentice connection is profoundly established in the Suona business, with individuals who have not properly paid tribute to a master facing

limited performing chances. Virtue is highly prized in succession planning, reflecting Confucian values of moral integrity. The term “master” holds great prestige and responsibility, and apprentices are expected to demonstrate respect and obedience. Corporal punishment might be used as a disciplinary method. The master-apprentice transmission system assures the preservation and expansion of Suona ensemble music, with masters passing along their distinctive talents and styles to students. While familial transmission remains common, masters may recruit pupils from beyond their lineage if they have a real love for Suona and musical skills. This strategy enables specialized education and the spread of Suona musicianship to a larger audience, safeguarding the instrument’s long-term history and cultural relevance (Figure 1).

Self-study in Learning Suona

Self-study in learning Suona, known as “stealing the art,” entails trainees acquiring abilities via observation, imitation, and personal practice without official instruction from a master. Self-teaching is not a frequent practice among Suona musicians, since only a few use this method to enhance their playing abilities. Self-learners require a robust memory, musical acuity, and self-discipline to learn and practice without the instruction of an expert effectively.

Self-study enables individuals to cultivate their distinctive performance traits and artistic style through hands-on learning and introspection. Self-learners can develop a unique creative style and skill in playing music, leading to new ideas in music selection and presentation. Self-study can have negative effects when learners include personal interpretations in their work without proper direction, which may result in technical and artistic discrepancies.

Self-study is a helpful method for exploring and developing skills in Suona performance, despite its difficulties. Many artists have the skill to self-teach and inspire their students to adopt autonomous learning to nurture creativity and self-expression. Self-study enables individuals to explore innovative methods in music creation and play a role in the continuous development of Suona ensemble music.



Figure 1. Suona ensemble performance
Source: Cheng Chao

Training School Teaching Suona Ensemble

Since the 1990s, economic growth in rural parts of southwest Shandong Province has caused a rise in the popularity of Suona ensemble music. As families became more financially stable, they started hiring Suona troupes for events like weddings and festivals, increasing the need for talented Suona artists. Yet, the current quantity of Suona groups and artists could not satisfy the increasing demand, leading many artists to enlarge their activities and enroll additional pupils.

Artists have introduced new teaching techniques, such as Suona training programs and schools, to meet the increasing demand for studying Suona. These institutes provide organized programs similar to formal music education, including thorough training in Suona performance, music theory, and repertoire. The emergence of “quasi-professional teaching” approaches indicates a trend towards structured education and training in the Suona community.

The Ruyunge Suona Art School stands out for its dedicated faculty and capacity to draw students from various backgrounds. The intensive training program consists of daily practice sessions lasting a minimum of 8 hours, together with theoretical lessons and personalized coaching. Graduates of these schools take many pathways, such as joining folk Suona orchestras, applying to music universities, or enrolling in the military. In the last ten years, schools such as Ruyunge have been crucial in developing Suona talent and preserving this cultural legacy. These institutes maintain the vitality and relevance of Suona ensemble music in modern culture through organized education and professional development opportunities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The discussion and conclusion of the evolution and literacy transmission of the Suona Ensemble in Southwest Shandong Province, China, embodies a fascinating narrative of cultural continuity and adaptation amidst changing social and economic landscapes. Rooted deeply in tradition yet responsive to contemporary demands, the journey of Suona music reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, societal transformations, and educational advancements.

Traditionally, Suona ensemble music has been nurtured through family transmission and the master-apprentice relationship, where knowledge and skills are passed down orally from generation to generation (Eraut et al., 2000; Sriken & Seekhunlio, 2024). This transmission mode, characterized by reverence for tradition and a deep sense of cultural continuity, has long been the bedrock of Suona performance art. However, as rural communities in southwest Shandong Province experienced economic growth and increased prosperity, the demand for Suona music expanded beyond the capacity of existing artists and clubs (Liu, 2000).

In response to this burgeoning demand, Suona artists began to adopt new teaching methods and educational structures (Wang & Farmer, 2008). Suona training classes and

schools emerged as formal institutions that cultivate Suona talent. These institutions offer structured programs that mirror professional music education, providing students comprehensive training in Suona performance, music theory, and repertoire. The rise of such “quasi-professional teaching” methods represents a significant departure from traditional modes of transmission, signaling a shift towards formalized education within the Suona community (Gong et al., 2024; Tan, 2016).

The Ruyunge Suona Art School stands as a prominent example of this evolution. With a team of dedicated instructors and a rigorous training regimen, the school attracts students from across the region, allowing them to develop their skills in a structured and supportive environment. Graduates of such programs go on to contribute to the vibrancy of Suona ensemble music in various capacities, whether as performers in folk orchestras, students in music colleges, or even members of the military (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023; Su, 2003; Guocheng et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the story of Suona ensemble music in southwest Shandong Province is one of resilience, adaptation, and innovation. By embracing innovation and adapting to changing societal dynamics, they have enriched the cultural tapestry of not only southwest Shandong Province but also China as a whole. Their dedication to excellence and passion for Suona music is a testament to tradition’s enduring power in a rapidly evolving world. Through their efforts, Suona’s ensemble music continues to captivate audiences, bridging the past with the present and inspiring future generations to cherish and celebrate this cherished cultural treasure. While deeply rooted in tradition, Suona music has demonstrated an ability to evolve and thrive in response to changing societal dynamics. By embracing new teaching methods and educational structures, Suona artists ensure the continued vitality and relevance of this cherished cultural heritage, enriching the cultural tapestry of China and beyond.

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