



Analysis of Shehuo Music in Xun County, Henan Province, China

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Xun County's Lantern Festival Shehuo performances trace back to ancient agrarian sacrificial rites. Although recognized on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list, their historical evolution, cultural significance, and musical characteristics remain underexplored. This study aims to (1) study the historical evolution and cultural significance of Chinese Lantern Festival Shehuo performances and (2) investigate the musical characteristics of the songs used in Shehuo performances.

Methodology: From March 2023 to March 2024, a multi-sited ethnographic case study was conducted using (a) archival research in local libraries and gazetteers, (b) semi-structured interviews with village historians, coordinators, elder performers (n = 10), and musicians (n = 8), and (c) non-participant observations and audio-visual recordings of twelve complete Lantern Festival performances. Musical excerpts were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis to identify thematic and structural patterns.

Results: Findings trace Shehuo's shift from earth-and-fire sacrificial rites to a syncretic folk spectacle incorporating opera melodies, yangge dance, and Buddhist ritual gestures that reinforce communal identity. Musically, songs rest on a pentatonic core enriched with minor-mode inflections, follow a four-phrase formal schema, and feature ornamentations such as sliding tones and delayed cadences. Rhythmic analysis reveals choreographically driven alternations between duple (2/4) and compound (6/8) meters aligned with Xun dialect prosody. The ensemble centers on suona solos layered over multi-tiered percussion, creating timbral textures distinct from neighboring traditions. However, youth disengagement, practitioner aging, and unstructured digital archiving threaten vertical transmission and risk "museumification."

Conclusion: This study highlights Shehuo's layered historical dynamics and unique sonic identity, emphasizing the need for structured, community-based education and systematic archiving of core musical elements. The results inform evidence-based strategies to sustain Shehuo as a living tradition rather than a static relic.

Keywords: Xun County Shehuo Music; Historical Evolution; Musical Characteristics; Cultural Significance; Intangible Heritage Preservation





Introduction

Xun County's Lantern Festival Shehuo performances constitute a dynamic synthesis of ritual, music, and embodied art, with origins tracing back to ancient sacrificial ceremonies honoring earth and fire deities (The Paper, 2025). Over centuries, this performance form has gradually incorporated local opera melodies, yangge dance vocabulary, and martial-arts acrobatics, evolving into a distinctive folk spectacle staged predominantly between the 15th and 17th days of the first lunar month (Zhang, 2023). These Shehuo events unfold across town squares and temple precincts, where lion dances, stilt walking, and land-boat races are coordinated with live ensembles featuring drums, gongs, cymbals, suona, and wooden clappers, collectively reinforcing communal identity during Lantern Festival celebrations (Guo, 2016; Fu, 2018).

Although Xun Shehuo has been inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list, scholarly research has predominantly focused on its theatrical forms and historical lineage, with limited systematic examination of its musical syntax (Qiao, 2009; Zhao, 2016). More critically, there remains a paucity of comprehensive studies addressing the historical evolution and cultural significance of Shehuo. Existing literature tends to emphasize performance forms and lineage transmission while neglecting how Shehuo, as a complex cultural practice, has adapted its ritual functions and community roles amid historical transformations (Zhang, 2023; Guo, 2016). This lacuna restricts a holistic understanding of Shehuo's multifaceted role within social structures and religious rituals, and hampers informed efforts toward its cultural valuation and preservation.

Concurrently, detailed analyses of key musical elements remain insufficient, impeding a thorough comprehension of how features such as the subtle pentatonic slides in the "Meng Jiangnu" minor tune, rhythmic alternations between 2/4 and 6/8 meters keyed to the local dialect, and the dialogic interplay between suona solos and layered bangzi percussion collectively shape Shehuo's distinctive sonic identity (Fu, 2018; Qiao, 2009). Furthermore, the role these musical characteristics play in fostering social cohesion and enhancing ritual efficacy during temple fairs is underexplored.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, Shehuo music exhibits three critical innovations that warrant focused study. First, its melodic ornamentation employs a four-phrase minor-mode motif with level-tone cadences, sharply contrasting with the broader intervallic repertoire characteristic of neighboring Henan folk songs (Zhang, 2023). Second, its rhythmic syntax alternates between duple and compound meters, incorporating syncopations that mimic the prosodic cadence of the Xun dialect, a phenomenon scarcely documented in Chinese folk music studies (Zhao, 2016). Third, its instrumental configuration privileges suona solos layered over multi-tiered percussion, producing timbral textures distinct from the drum-centric ensembles prevalent in adjacent traditions (Fu, 2018; Qiao, 2009).



Although preliminary field observations and archival records have revealed these musical distinctives, there remains a lack of systematic musicological research situating Xun Shehuo within a broader theoretical framework of folk music syntax and lacking comparative analyses linking its internal musical structures to wider regional traditions. This gap not only limits theoretical understanding of folk music evolution in the Yellow River basin but also undermines the development of evidence-based strategies for cultural heritage preservation.

In light of these gaps, the present study aims to: (1) investigate the historical evolution and cultural significance of Xun County's Lantern Festival Shehuo, elucidating how shifts in ritual function and community roles are reflected in transformations of its musical form; and (2) conduct a detailed musicological analysis of Shehuo songs, focusing on melodic ornamentation, rhythmic structures, and instrumental arrangements.

This research seeks to illuminate the unique sonic identity of Xun Shehuo, deepen scholarly understanding of Yellow River folk traditions, and provide a robust theoretical foundation for its effective preservation.

Objectives

1. To study the historical evolution and cultural significance of Chinese Lantern Festival Shehuo performances.
2. To investigate the musical characteristics of the songs used in Shehuo performances.

Literature Review

Shehuo music in Xun County represents a living embodiment of folk performance tradition, fusing ritual function, melodic structure, and community participation into a culturally rich sonic experience. Originating from ancient sacrificial rituals dedicated to earth and fire deities, Shehuo has evolved into a central festive performance during the Lantern Festival (An & Wang, 2013; He, 1987). Unlike static genres such as regional opera or courtly music, Shehuo's soundscape must strike a balance between solemn ceremonial atmosphere and collective exuberance. Its musical organization is designed to accommodate physically intense and choreographically complex activities such as lion dances, stilt walking, yangge, and land-boat races (Zhang & Huang, 2019). This dual role has positioned Shehuo's melodic construction, rhythmic language, and instrumental arrangement as key sites for exploring its artistic expression and cultural function. However, while previous scholarship has approached Shehuo from various perspectives, detailed musicological investigation remains insufficient (Xue, 2024; Zhou, 2016).

About melodic design and modal structure, existing literature consistently identifies the predominance of the pentatonic scale, occasionally embellished with minor-mode inflections



that imbue certain phrases with the emotive coloring associated with “Meng Jiangnu” tunes (Wang, 2021). Through comparative modal analysis, Wang (2021) illustrates that although the five-tone framework remains stable across repertoires, specific melodic segments incorporate small-interval slides and level-tone cadences—distinctive features that differentiate Shehuo from other Henan folk traditions. Nonetheless, no extant study has provided fully notated examples that track how such motifs vary across different Shehuo repertoires. As a result, the underlying logic of melodic construction remains obscure, and potential correlations between ornamentation and dialectal tonal patterns remain unexplored (Lin, 2010).

In terms of rhythm and tempo, scholars have noted that Shehuo performances often alternate between duple (2/4) and compound (6/8) meters, producing a distinctive rhythmic tension (Xiao, 2020). Based on field observations, Xiao points out that the alternation of eighth- and sixteenth-note groupings forms the rhythmic basis for synchronizing movement-intensive performances such as martial arts and lion dances. Moreover, he suggests a possible correlation between rhythmic syncopation and the tonal contours of the local Xun dialect. By contrast, Zhou and Cui (2020) argue that such rhythmic variations stem more from choreographic invention than from linguistic alignment. Due to the lack of systematic cross-repertoire rhythmic comparison, these interpretive differences remain unresolved, and the semantic and structural functions of Shehuo’s rhythmic syntax remain insufficiently understood.

In terms of formal structure, Shehuo is frequently described as adhering to a four-phase model—introduction, development, transition, and conclusion—which reflects broader Han Chinese musical narrative logics (Guo, 2016). However, Li (1997) observes the presence of non-standard structures in certain regional variants, where transitions may be skipped or codas repeated, rendering the four-part model analytically unstable. Without detailed transcriptions marking phrase boundaries and motivic recurrence, it is difficult to assess how such structural adaptations function within performance or narrative contexts.

Alongside these musicological inquiries, interdisciplinary studies have constructed a broader socio-cultural framework for understanding Shehuo. Musicologists such as Fu (2018) and Li (1997) have documented instrumental configurations and rhythmic schemes; folklorists (He, 1987; Gu, 2013) have emphasized Shehuo’s collective role in village ritual life; historians (An & Wang, 2013) have traced its evolution from court ritual to vernacular entertainment; and anthropologists have chronicled its transmission via oral apprenticeship (Zhou & Cui, 2020). While these studies offer a comprehensive view of Shehuo’s cultural ecology, they rarely establish direct links between shifts in ritual function and changes in musical syntax, such as whether transformations in ceremonial roles have affected melodic ornamentation, rhythmic preference, or instrumental hierarchy.



Research on Shehuo's adaptive capacity and innovation has largely remained descriptive rather than analytical. For example, Ma and Zhang (2008) document how Shehuo historically incorporated melodic elements from local operas such as Qu and Yu opera, and Wang (2021) highlights recent experiments with amplified instrumentation and enhanced stage design intended to engage younger audiences. Similarly, preservation and transmission efforts—whether through oral pedagogy, school-based curricula, or digital archiving initiatives (Xiao, 2020; Fu, 2018; Guo, 2016)—demonstrate a commendable commitment to safeguarding Shehuo. However, these initiatives lack a unified framework to determine which musical elements—core melodic motifs, characteristic rhythmic patterns, or distinctive timbral textures—warrant prioritization in transcription, teaching, and archival metadata. Without such a rigorous musical taxonomy, preservation strategies risk neglecting the very sonic features that define Shehuo's unique identity (Liu, 2015; Wang et al., 2023).

Despite extensive documentation of Shehuo's sociocultural context and general performance features, two critical gaps persist. First, no research has systematically traced how its transformation from a sacrificial rite to a Lantern Festival spectacle has reshaped its musical forms, leaving the historical evolution and cultural significance of Shehuo performances incompletely understood. Second, while broad melodic and rhythmic traits are acknowledged, the absence of precise song transcriptions, motif-level analyses, and formal syntactic studies prevents a full appreciation of the internal musical logic of Shehuo's repertoire. These gaps provide the foundation for the present study, which aims to reconstruct Shehuo's historical trajectory, analyze its musical structure in depth, and examine its position within the broader network of northern Chinese folk musics, with a focus on the urgent need for its preservation and transmission to future generations.

To better interpret how musical elements within Shehuo performances have evolved alongside shifts in cultural meaning, this study draws partial insight from Cultural Transmission Theory (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981). Rather than treating Shehuo as a static tradition, this perspective helps frame it as a dynamic cultural practice, where songs, styles, and meanings are selectively preserved, reinterpreted, or marginalized across historical and generational lines. Such a view complements previous ethnographic and musicological studies by emphasizing not only what changes in Shehuo music, but also how these changes reflect broader processes of cultural memory, ritual adaptation, and local identity construction.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts Cultural Transmission Theory (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981) as the foundational framework to analyze the intergenerational and communal transmission of Shehuo performances during the Chinese Lantern Festival. Integrating this with musical anthropology, the framework guides the investigation into both the historical-cultural evolution of Shehuo and the musical characteristics of its music in performance. The conceptual framework (see Fig. 1) reflects how Shehuo music operates as a vehicle for cultural continuity, ritual meaning, and stylistic variation across time.

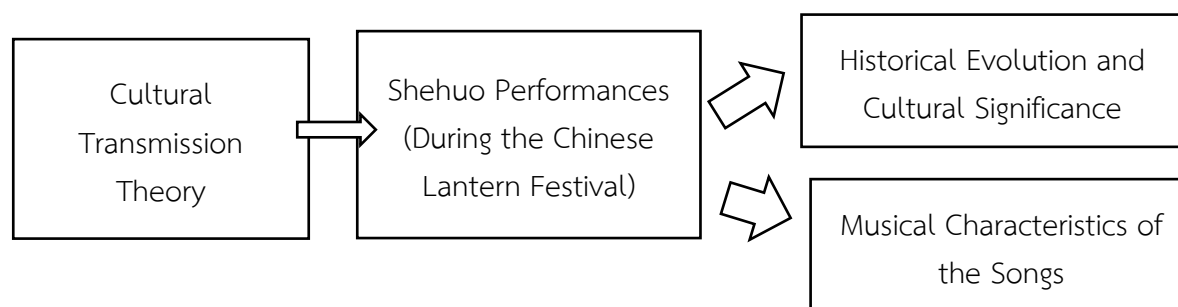


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a multi-sited ethnographic case study design situated within the frameworks of interpretivism and cultural musicology, to address two core research objectives: (1) to investigate the historical evolution and cultural significance of Shehuo performances in Xun County, particularly in terms of their origins, cultural integration, and transmission challenges; and (2) to analyze the musical characteristics of Shehuo songs, focusing on their performative context, instrumental structure, and melodic-rhythmic patterns. This qualitative design enables a holistic understanding of Shehuo as both a living heritage and a musical tradition shaped by local history and community practice.

Participants and Materials

To explore the historical evolution and cultural significance of Shehuo, participants included five village historians, three Shehuo coordinators, and two elder performers (aged 55–80) selected through purposive and snowball sampling. All had long-term involvement in Shehuo or documented its cultural history. Archival materials used for this purpose included local gazetteers, ritual manuals, and county-level cultural heritage reports from the Qing Dynasty to the present.



These materials provided essential insights into Shehuo's origin as a sacrificial rite, its evolution into a popular folk performance, and its contemporary status in intangible heritage frameworks.

For the investigation of musical characteristics, participants included eight seasoned musicians and vocalists (aged 45–75), each with more than 10 years of performance experience. Their input illuminated the functional role of songs in different performance settings (temple fairs, street parades, home altars), the use of percussive and melodic instruments (such as gong, drum, suona), and the stylistic traits of melodies and rhythms. Musical materials included field recordings of 12 full performances, transcriptions in staff notation, and contextual documentation via video and field notes.

Research Instrument

The semi-structured interviews were designed to investigate both the evolving form and cultural significance of Shehuo in Xun County. Discussions with community elders, cultural organizers, and senior performers focused on how Shehuo has transformed from an ancient sacrificial ritual into a popular folk performance over time. Participants described how religious symbols, operatic gestures, and collective dance traditions have been gradually incorporated into its structure. These interviews also explored local perceptions of Shehuo's role in expressing community identity, as well as the social and institutional challenges involved in its transmission and protection, particularly in the context of aging populations and youth disengagement.

In addition to the historical and cultural dimensions, the interviews delved into the musical features of Shehuo performance. Musicians and vocalists provided insights into how songs are selected and used in various ritual and entertainment settings, and how the interaction between percussion instruments and vocal delivery shapes the overall performance atmosphere. Respondents also explained the use of recurring melodic motifs, modal centers, rhythmic formulas, and tempo variations. To support further analysis, audio recorders and video cameras were used during fieldwork, while detailed field notes documented performance contexts. Musical excerpts were transcribed with notation software (e.g., MuseScore) for comparative study and structural analysis.

To ensure content validity, the interview protocol was developed based on existing literature and refined through expert consultation with two ethnomusicologists and a cultural heritage specialist familiar with northern Chinese folk traditions.

Data Collection

For the study of Shehuo's historical evolution and cultural significance, data were collected through archival research in local libraries and cultural bureaus of Xun County, alongside semi-structured interviews conducted from March 2023 to March 2024. Each interview, held in Mandarin at community centers or private homes, lasted 45–90 minutes. Additional observations at village



temples and communal gatherings helped document informal narratives and local perspectives on Shehuo's heritage and preservation.

To investigate the musical characteristics of Shehuo songs, ethnographic fieldwork was carried out during the 2023 and 2024 Lantern Festivals across five townships. Non-participant observation was conducted at temple fairs, parades, and evening performances. Twelve complete performances were audio-visually documented. Songs were later transcribed, with field notes capturing performance context, instrumentation, performer roles, and audience interaction.

Data Analysis

For the historical and cultural dimension, interview transcripts and archival materials were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. Recurring expressions and patterns were grouped into key thematic categories such as “sacrificial origins,” “religious-theatrical fusion,” and “community transmission.” These categories were then integrated into broader analytical themes, including “origin and development,” “cultural synthesis,” and “heritage protection,” reflecting the evolution and contemporary relevance of Shehuo practices.

In the musical analysis, transcribed song materials were examined to identify recurring structural features. The analysis focused on three aspects: the contextual function of songs across ritual and festive settings; the interplay between percussion (e.g., tangu, cymbals) and melodic components (e.g., suona, vocals); and melodic and rhythmic structures, including modal tendencies, syncopation, and phrase repetition. This approach highlighted both stylistic consistency and expressive variation within northern Chinese folk aesthetics.

All research procedures adhered to ethical standards for qualitative interviews and fieldwork. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly outlining the study's purpose, methods, and the right to withdraw at any time. Permissions for recording public performances were secured from local village committees and cultural authorities. Pseudonyms were used when requested to protect participant confidentiality. Data were encrypted and securely stored, used exclusively for academic purposes. Upon completion, community reciprocity was upheld through feedback visits and the donation of digital materials to local cultural centers.

Results

The first research objective of this study is to investigate the historical evolution and cultural significance of Shehuo performances in Xun County, focusing on their origins, cultural integration, and challenges in transmission and preservation.

Extensive archival research revealed that Shehuo originated as an agrarian sacrificial rite dedicated primarily to earth and fire deities, aimed at ensuring good harvests and communal well-





being. Xue (2024) and Zhou (2016) both describe Shehuo as a solemn religious ceremony deeply embedded in rural ritual practice. A local historian noted, “Shehuo began as a sacred ritual meant to appease the gods and secure the fertility of our lands. It was the spiritual backbone of agrarian life.” This aligns with Li’s (1997) analysis of sacrificial rites across northern China, emphasizing Shehuo’s religious and ecological functions. Over time, Shehuo performances underwent a significant transformation, absorbing diverse cultural elements. Interviews with three Shehuo coordinators highlighted that starting from the late Qing and Republican eras, Shehuo increasingly incorporated elements of regional opera, folk dance, and Buddhist ritual gestures, resulting in a rich cultural syncretism. One coordinator explained, “*Shehuo today is not merely a ritual; it has evolved into a complex performance combining music, dance, theater, and symbolic storytelling that reflects the local people’s lived experience.*” This evolution reflects the concept of cultural hybridity in folk traditions (Zhang & Huang, 2019).

The performative aspects are inseparable from communal participation. Coordinators emphasized that Shehuo’s vitality relies heavily on local engagement during temple fairs and Lantern Festival celebrations, which serve as social glue for community identity. As one coordinator expressed, “*Shehuo is a mirror of our community spirit—it brings people together, young and old, through shared heritage and festive joy.*” This communal dimension corresponds with Smith and Akagawa’s (2009) theory on intangible cultural heritage sustaining collective memory. However, challenges in the transmission of Shehuo loom large. Elder performers aged 60-80 revealed concerns about generational discontinuity. An elder performer lamented, “*When I was young, Shehuo was everywhere. Now, many young people are more interested in smartphones than in our traditions. Without new blood, Shehuo risks fading away.*” This generational gap reflects findings by Wang (2021) and Wang et al. (2023), who identify aging practitioners and youth disengagement as major threats to folk performance heritage. The lack of institutional support and formal education on Shehuo further exacerbates the problem. Community members also expressed complex feelings regarding modernization pressures. While proud of Shehuo’s cultural value, villagers noted the economic hardships and outmigration that disrupt traditional practices. One villager said, “*Our festivals bring joy, but sustaining Shehuo is hard when young people leave for cities. We fear losing this part of who we are.*”

Table 1 summarizes the key thematic findings on the historical evolution and cultural significance of Shehuo in Xun County, drawing from archival records, expert interviews, and field observations. These sources collectively portray Shehuo as a living heritage that embodies centuries of ritual transformation, cultural integration, and community identity, while also confronting pressing challenges of transmission and preservation in the face of contemporary social change.



Table 1 Historical Evolution and Cultural Significance of Shehuo

Theme	Description	Supporting Evidence
Sacrificial Origins	Rooted in agrarian sacrificial rites to earth and fire deities for agricultural prosperity	Li (1997); local archives
Cultural Integration	Gradual absorption of opera, folk dance, and Buddhist ritual elements creating hybrid cultural form	Interviews with coordinators; Zhao (2021)
Communal Identity	Shehuo as social glue, reinforcing collective memory and local identity during festivals	Villager observations: Smith and Akagawa (2009)
Transmission Challenges	Aging performers, youth disengagement, economic hardship, and lack of institutional support	Interviews with elders; Wang (2021); Zhou and Cui (2020)
Modernization Pressure	Rural outmigration and shifting cultural values impact Shehuo's sustainability	Community interviews and ethnographic field notes

Research objective 2 is to investigate the musical characteristics of the songs used in Shehuo performances, particularly in terms of their performative functions, instrumental arrangement, melodic structures, and cultural significance. Drawing on field observations, interview data, and musical transcriptions, four key thematic areas emerged.

Performance Contexts and Functions

Shehuo songs in Xun County are primarily performed during the Lantern Festival (15th–17th day of the lunar January), with core venues including public squares, village roads, and temple precincts. These performances are embedded in local ritual calendars and carry layered meanings that transcend entertainment. As one elder performer stated, "*These songs are not just sung—they carry the ancestors' voices and tell stories that young people must remember.*"

The musical elements serve multifaceted functions:

- (1) Community cohesion: Songs foster collective identity and shared memory, reinforcing values like filial piety and local heroism.
- (2) Cultural transmission: The lyrical content often conveys Confucian and Taoist moral teachings using the regional dialect.
- (3) Atmospheric resonance: Melodies reflect the tonal and prosodic features of the Xun dialect—particularly rising and falling contours and front-heavy syllables—thus heightening local familiarity and emotional engagement.

Instrumentation and Ensemble Practice

The instrumental ensemble of Shehuo is dominated by percussion and wind instruments, tailored to the nature of each performance scene—martial or civilian. According to a veteran ensemble leader, "You can hear the scene before you see it—the beat tells you whether it's a battle or a prayer."

Key instruments (see Figure 2) include:

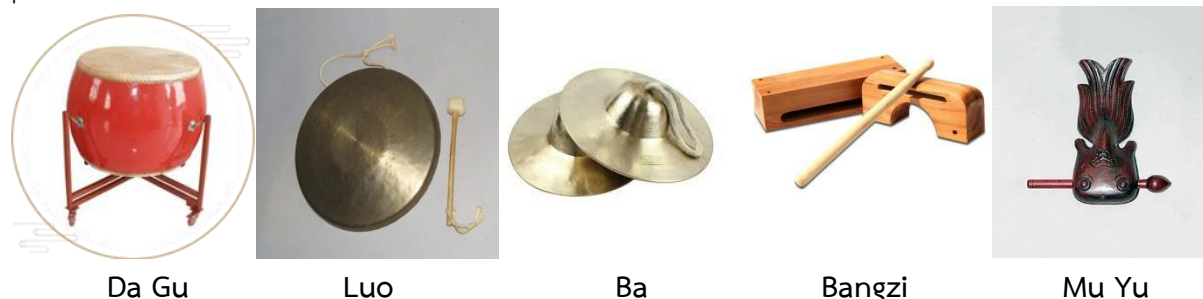
Da gu (big drum): Sets tempo and dramatic mood with dynamic variations (single/double/roll strokes).

Luo (gongs): Offer tonal contrast—large gongs provide deep resonance; small gongs add sharp punctuation.

Ba (cymbals): Signal climactic shifts through volume and articulation.

Bangzi & Mu yu: Add rhythmic accents and support vocal pacing.

Figure 3 (Shehuo percussion ensemble) illustrates the typical stage layout and interaction among percussionists, showcasing the ritualistic and theatrical synchronization essential to the performance.



Da Gu

Luo

Ba

Bangzi

Mu Yu

Figure 2 Key Instruments of Shehuo Performance

Note. Adapted from Yueqi Xuexi (n.d.)



Figure 3 Shehuo Percussion Performance in Xun County

Noted. Photograph by the authors

Melodic Structure and Rhythmic Patterns

The analysis of five folk songs revealed three distinct characteristics:

(1) Scale and Mode:

Dominance of pentatonic modes (e.g., Zhi mode in Meng Jiangnu).

Narrow intervals (e.g., minor 2nd, minor 3rd) echo the tonal flow of local speech.

Phrase Structure and Form:

Classical “qi–cheng–zhuan–he” four-phrase model is common (e.g., Nun Sifan).

A notable local innovation is the “two-and-a-half” form in Flying a Kite, with an 8+8+6 bar phrasing, ending on the tonic (“do”), creating an unfinished, open-ended feel.

(2) Rhythm and Dialectal Integration:

Front-heavy phrasing (e.g., dotted eighth followed by sixteenth notes) mimics the Xun dialect’s cadence.

Exclamatory interjections (e.g., “ai hei yo”) intersperse songs, reinforcing folk vitality and spontaneity.

Score 4 (Meng Jiangnu) exemplifies the integration of Han melodic aesthetics and dialectal rhythms, while Score 6 (Flying a Kite) highlights rhythmic innovation and expressive idioms.



Figure 4 Musical Scores: Meng Jiangnu looking for her husband in Xun County Folk Song Noted. Adapted from Yueqi Xuexi (2018)



Figure 5 Musical Scores: Flying a Kite
Noted. Adapted from Yueqi Xuexi (2018)

Lyrical Themes and Cultural Connotations

The lyrical content of Shehuo songs weaves together personal emotion, ethical instruction, and seasonal celebration:

- (1) Grief and resistance in Meng Jiangnu, representing the archetype of loyal womanhood.
- (2) Secular longing and renunciation in Nun Sifan, offering moral reflection.
- (3) Pastoral joy and childhood nostalgia in Flying a Kite, evoking natural harmony.

Rhyme schemes are tightly structured (e.g., -ang/-u or -ng endings) and rely on regional phonology. However, much of this lyrical tradition faces endangerment: as noted by one cultural coordinator, “*Many old scores are gone. What remains is what we remember—and even memory fades.*” Most civil tunes today rely on oral transmission, with gongche notation manuscripts largely lost or fragmented.

Discussion

This study’s findings demonstrate that Shehuo performances in Xun County embody a layered historical evolution and serve a vital cultural function. Archival research and interviews confirm that Shehuo began as an agrarian sacrificial rite to earth and fire deities—“the spiritual backbone of agrarian life” (local historian)—and over centuries transformed into a Lantern Festival spectacle (Xue, 2024; Zhou, 2016). Yet the music retains “ritual residues” in its solemn pacing and ceremonial gestures. This continuity between sacred origin and public celebration resonates with An and Wang (2013) and He (1987), who trace Shehuo’s shift from court ritual to folk festival,



and underscores Zhang and Huang's (2019) concept of cultural hybridity, whereby Buddhist gestures, opera, and dance fuse into a syncretic performance.

Moreover, Shehuo's communal significance—in fostering collective identity and intergenerational memory—was repeatedly affirmed by coordinators: “It brings people together...through shared heritage and festive joy.” This reflects Smith's (2006) theory of intangible heritage as a living practice maintained by active community engagement. Yet, elder performers' lament about youth disengagement echoes Wang (2021) and Wang et al. (2023), highlighting a critical transmission gap worsened by outmigration and limited institutional support.

On the musical front, our analysis confirms Wang's (2021) identification of a pentatonic foundation enriched with minor-mode inflections, and further reveals genre-specific ornamentation—e.g., sliding tones and delayed cadences in lion-dance pieces—that amplify narrative tension. These nuances extend beyond general modal shading to illustrate expressive flexibility within Shehuo subgenres. Rhythmically, the documented alternation of duple (2/4) and compound (6/8) meters to suit stilt-walking and parade formations supports Xiao's (2020) view of choreography-driven meter shifts, while also indicating that Xun dialect prosody influences phrasing—complicating Zhou and Cui's (2021) claim of a purely visual rhythm driver and suggesting a bidirectional model of folk rhythm formation.

Regarding form, most songs follow Guo's (2016) four-phase schema (introduction–development–transition–conclusion), yet repeated codas and skipped transitions—particularly in temple ceremonies—validate Li's (1997) observation that folk musical structures are contingent and adaptive. This challenges structuralist rigidity and emphasizes the need for flexible analytical frameworks reflecting functional constraints.

Finally, while oral teaching and peer apprenticeship remain dominant (Fu, 2018; Guo, 2016), this study documents a steep decline in youth and female participation. Digital archiving efforts (Xiao, 2020) are promising but often lack a clear taxonomy of core melodic and rhythmic elements, risking what Gu (2013) terms “museumification”—the preservation of form at the expense of living function. This reflects what Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981) describe as a disruption of vertical cultural transmission, where traditional knowledge fails to pass effectively across generations. Similarly, documented incorporations of regional opera elements (Ma & Zhang, 2008) and modern staging innovations underscore Shehuo's adaptive capacity, yet also raise concerns about balancing innovation with community vitality.

Several limitations should be noted in this study. First, the focus on Xun County limits generalizability to other Shehuo regions, many of which exhibit different stylistic profiles. Second, relying primarily on active performers and organizers may introduce perspective bias and marginalize dissenting voices. Third, while this study provides in-depth examples of melody,





rhythm, and form, the limited number of complete transcriptions restricts broader comparative analysis. These limitations reflect ongoing challenges in folk music documentation.

Recommendation

In practical terms, this study recommends enhancing youth engagement through formal education programs that integrate Shehuo's musical and performative heritage, supported by apprenticeship and community-based participatory initiatives. Digital archiving efforts should be expanded to systematically document core melodic, rhythmic, and structural features, thereby preserving the dynamic essence of Shehuo rather than reducing it to static "museumified" artifacts. Encouraging creative innovations that balance traditional elements with modern staging and regional operatic influences may also help revitalize public interest and sustain Shehuo's cultural vitality. Additionally, targeted policy support and resource investment in rural areas are essential to address transmission gaps caused by demographic shifts and economic pressures.

Future research should extend beyond Xun County to encompass a broader range of Shehuo styles and regions, facilitating comparative studies that deepen theoretical understanding and practical preservation strategies. Further exploration of the interaction between local dialect prosody and musical rhythm could enrich the field of ethnomusicology and inform flexible analytical frameworks that account for folk performance adaptability. Investigating the effects of modernization, outmigration, and institutional support on transmission processes will also provide critical insights for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in rapidly changing social environments.

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