

Suona Musical Instruments Literacy for Wedding through ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ Repertoire Piece

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ABSTRACT

The Suona musical instrument is a double-reed woodwind instrument renowned for its resonant and expressive sound, central to Chinese folk music. This study investigates the literacy aspects of Suona musical instruments in the context of wedding ceremonies by analyzing the repertoire piece ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ Specifically, it symbolizes prosperity and blessings, making it integral to wedding celebrations. This qualitative case study conducted in Tongsi Town, Sichuan Province, used interviews with senior Suona performers, field observations, and musical analysis to explore how this repertoire piece embodies the technical mastery, cultural symbolism, and communal interaction inherent in Suona music. The findings highlight the intricate techniques, such as trills and grace notes, required for effective performance and the oral traditions that transmit these skills across generations. Audience engagement emerged as a critical element, fostering shared cultural appreciation and reinforcing communal identity. However, modernization poses challenges to preserving these traditions, with live performances increasingly replaced by digital recordings. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating Suona music into education, promoting live performances, and leveraging digital tools to sustain oral traditions. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in a rapidly modernizing world.

Key words: Suona, Chinese Music Instruments, Chinese Wedding Music, Musical Literacy, Cultural Heritage Preservation

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese wedding ceremonies serve as rich cultural reservoirs, showcasing an interplay of music, rituals, and symbolism reflecting the Chinese heritage’s essence. Among the various elements, folk music is distinguished, enhancing the ceremonial experience with its vibrant expressions and cultural depth (Huang et al., 2024; Zhou & Chuangprakhon, 2023). The Suona, a double-reed woodwind instrument, is central to this musical tradition. Renowned for its resonant and festive sound, the Suona has become indispensable to weddings, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities. Its adaptability allows it to express celebratory and somber tones, making it versatile across various cultural events (Howard, 2022; Xiaohuan et al., 2023; Zhang & Li, 2020). A prominent example of Suona’s wedding repertoire is ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ translating to “A Lot of Money Falling to the Ground.” This piece symbolizes prosperity and blessings and acts as a medium for transmitting the cultural and technical literacy of Suona music to both performers and audiences. The present study delves into the role of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ as a case study to explore how Suona music literacy is cultivated in the context of traditional Chinese weddings (Chao & Nicolas, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Despite its cultural significance, Suona music needs help retaining its relevance in contemporary times. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and the advent of modern entertainment forms have led to the gradual decline of traditional music practices in many communities. Traditionally performed live, wedding music is increasingly replaced by digital recordings or modern ensembles, risking the erosion of age-old traditions. This transition threatens the transmission of Suona musical literacy, which relies heavily on oral tradition, practice-based learning, and community engagement (Sen & Sondhiratna, 2024; Wang & Li, 2024). Consequently, younger generations are becoming less familiar with the rich repertoire and techniques of the Suona, including iconic pieces like ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ Addressing this gap requires an in-depth understanding of how Suona music fosters cultural and musical literacy, exemplified by ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ By examining this repertoire piece, the study sheds light on the broader implications of preserving traditional music in a rapidly modernizing society (Qiu et al., 2023; Yu & Leung, 2019; Wu & Chuangprakhon, 2024).

This research investigates the literacy aspects of Suona musical instruments in the context of wedding ceremonies by analyzing the repertoire piece ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ Musical literacy encompasses performing and interpreting music and

understanding its cultural and symbolic meanings. This study examines how 'Luo Di Jin Qian' encapsulates the technical artistry, emotional expression, and cultural significance of Suona music. By focusing on this specific repertoire piece, the research provides a lens through which to understand the pedagogical and cultural processes involved in transmitting Suona music literacy across generations (Meihuan, 2023; Wang & Li, 2024; Zhang & Sornyai, 2024). Furthermore, the study examines the interaction between performers and audiences during wedding ceremonies, highlighting how live performances reinforce communal appreciation and participation in traditional music practices.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to preserving and revitalizing traditional Chinese music in the face of modernization. By documenting and analyzing the literacy aspects of Suona music through 'Luo Di Jin Qian,' the study not only underscores the importance of this art form but also provides insights into practical strategies for its preservation and transmission. The findings can inform educational initiatives, cultural policies, and community practices to sustain traditional music in contemporary settings (Du & Leung, 2022; Kelly, 2018). Moreover, this research adds to the broader discourse on cultural heritage, emphasizing the need to balance modernization with preserving intangible cultural assets. By drawing comparisons to similar double-reed instruments like the Zurna and Shenai, this study highlights how traditional instruments across cultures share common roles as carriers of communal identity, ritual symbolism, and musical literacy. By focusing on the Suona, an instrument deeply embedded in Chinese culture and a repertoire piece central to wedding traditions, this study seeks to ensure that the rich legacy of traditional Chinese music continues to thrive for future generations.

Research Question

- How does the repertoire piece 'Luo Di Jin Qian' contribute to the literacy and understanding of Suona musical instruments in the context of traditional Chinese wedding ceremonies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Suona, a traditional Chinese double-reed woodwind instrument, has played a central role in Chinese folk music for centuries, particularly in rituals and ceremonies such as weddings. Its cultural and musical significance extends beyond entertainment, serving as a medium for transmitting traditions and values across generations. The repertoire piece 'Luo Di Jin Qian' is a cornerstone of wedding music, encapsulating the instrument's vibrant character and symbolic meaning. This review explores three key areas: the role of the Suona in Chinese folk traditions, the cultural significance of wedding music as a cultural artifact, and the concept of musical literacy in performance contexts, focusing on its relevance to Suona music.

The Role of Suona in Chinese Folk Traditions

The Suona, a traditional Chinese folk music instrument, is known for its versatility and dynamic sound. It is a

significant part of celebratory and ceremonial events like weddings, funerals, and festivals. Its ability to mimic human voices allows it to convey various emotions, from jubilant celebration to solemnity. Traditional Suona music is preserved through oral transmission, emphasizing experiential learning and practical application in musical literacy development. However, with the rise of modern musical styles and instruments, traditional practices face challenges, making exploring their educational and cultural significance more urgent. Analyzing pieces like 'Luo Di Jin Qian' offers insight into how the Suona can be sustained and adapted in contemporary settings (Cai, 2024; Chao & Nicolas, 2024; Jiang & Zou, 2024).

Wedding Music as a Cultural Artifact

Wedding music in China is a cultural artifact reflecting societal values, traditions, and aspirations. Pieces like 'Luo Di Jin Qian,' symbolizing prosperity, harmony, and a successful marital union, are deeply rooted in Chinese wedding culture. The title, "A Lot of Money Falling to the Ground," emphasizes wealth and abundance. The piece's melodic, rhythmic, and tonal characteristics convey these symbolic messages. Its performance during weddings reinforces communal participation and cultural identity. The piece's repetitive structure makes it quickly recognized and enjoyed by audiences, making it an integral part of the wedding atmosphere. Understanding its role in weddings helps us appreciate how music functions as a cultural and educational tool, fostering emotional engagement and cultural literacy among performers and listeners (Garrido & Davidson, 2019; Jiayang & Su, 2024; Lebaka, 2019).

Musical Literacy in Performance

Suona's performance involves musical literacy, which goes beyond technical proficiency. It involves interpreting and expressing cultural meanings within the music. Traditional Suona musicians acquire this literacy through oral transmission, learning from masters, and participation in performances. The piece 'Luo Di Jin Qian' exemplifies this, requiring musicians to use various Suona techniques to convey its festive and symbolic character. The flexibility of Suona's performance, which emphasizes improvisation and adaptation, allows musicians to personalize their interpretation while adhering to traditional frameworks. In wedding ceremonies, musical literacy extends to understanding the social and ceremonial functions of the music. Performers must tailor their rendition to suit the event dynamics, ensuring it resonates with the audience and aligns with cultural expectations. This contextualized approach highlights the interconnectedness of technical skill, cultural knowledge, and audience engagement in traditional Suona performances (Jingfang, 2023; Xiaohuan et al., 2023; Zhang, 2018).

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the literacy aspects of Suona musical instruments

through the lens of the repertoire piece ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ The research is centered on wedding ceremonies in Tongsi Town, Sichuan Province, where Suona music plays a significant role in cultural and ceremonial practices. Data collection methods include field observations, semi-structured interviews with key informants, and analysis of audio-visual recordings and musical scores (Chao & Nicolas, 2024; Chen, 2021; Zhao & Sornyai, 2024). These diverse methods aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ contributes to the literacy and appreciation of Suona in wedding contexts.

Participants

The study involved three key informants with extensive knowledge and experience in Suona music in Tongsi Town, including senior performers and cultural transmitters. Their insights into the technical, cultural, and historical aspects of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ were crucial to the research. The participants were selected based on their roles in preserving and innovating Suona techniques and their involvement in wedding ceremonies, providing a multidimensional perspective on the study topic.

Data Collection

Data collection involved three primary methods: interviews, field observations, and musical analysis. Each method was designed to address different aspects of the research question and objective.

Interviews

The three key informants were interviewed semi-structured to explore their experiences, knowledge of Suona techniques, and cultural understanding of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ The interview questions were tailored to elicit information on the repertoire’s technical and symbolic elements and the challenges and strategies involved in transmitting it.

Observations

Live performances of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ during wedding ceremonies were observed to understand the dynamics between musicians and audiences. These observations focused on the interaction of Suona players, their improvisational techniques, and the role of percussion in supporting the melody. The observational data included video and audio recordings, which were later analyzed to identify recurring patterns in performance styles and audience engagement.

Musical analysis

The structure, melody, rhythm, and tonal system of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ were analyzed using a combination of Chinese and Western music theories. This involved transcribing the piece into musical notation and examining its use of traditional Chinese modes and rhythmic patterns.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in data on ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ focusing on its cultural significance in wedding ceremonies and its symbolic representations of prosperity and joy. It also analyzed Suona techniques, such as trills, grace notes, and rhythm embellishments, to understand their role in conveying the piece’s character and mood. The study also examined the methods of teaching and learning ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ emphasizing oral tradition and experiential learning practices among Suona performers in Tongsi Town.

RESULTS

The results of this study provide a multifaceted understanding of the repertoire piece ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ in the context of Suona musical literacy for wedding ceremonies. The findings reveal how this piece embodies the heritage of Chinese folk music by examining its cultural symbolism, technical mastery, and transmission methods. The study also highlights the dynamic interaction between musicians and audiences, showcasing how ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ contributes to individual and communal musical literacy. These insights underscore the vital role of this repertoire in preserving and perpetuating the traditions of Suona music within celebratory contexts.

Enhanced Literacy Skills

The performance of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ in Chinese wedding ceremonies significantly enhances the literacy of Suona musical traditions. This literacy encompasses cultural understanding, technical mastery, and the transmission of knowledge, shaping the comprehensive appreciation and application of Suona music within its traditional context.

The repertoire piece ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ meaning “A Lot of Money Falling to the Ground,” is laden with cultural symbolism that directly resonates with themes of prosperity and blessings in Chinese weddings. According to informants, this piece is traditionally played during the welcome of wedding guests, symbolizing the arrival of good fortune and wealth. One informant explained that the joyful and rhythmic melody “brings a sense of celebration and auspiciousness as if showering the space with positive energy and blessings.” Another informant added, “The music serves as a way to uplift the wedding atmosphere, almost as if it ‘speaks’ to the guests, welcoming them with hope and happiness.” These symbolic elements are reflected in the music score, as shown in Figure 1.

Through performances of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ musicians enhance their cultural literacy by internalizing the significance of its symbolism. The performers utilize techniques like trills and grace notes, which add liveliness to the melody and amplify its celebratory mood, connecting the music to its broader cultural narrative. An informant mentioned that “these decorations in the music are not random but deliberate choices that align with the festive purpose of weddings.” Such embellishments demonstrate technical prowess and reflect a deep understanding of the music’s intended meaning.

Luo Di Jin Qian (落地金钱)

Suona: Lai Zhongcheng
Percussion: Zeng Xianyin
Recorder: Ying Ren

The musical score is presented in a system of staves. The top staff is for the Suona (唢呐), followed by Small Cymbal (小镲), Er xing (二星), and Drum (鼓). The score is divided into three systems, with measures 1-4, 5-7, and 8-10. The Suona part includes various techniques such as trills (tr) and grace notes (丁), which are indicated by specific symbols above the notes. The percussion parts provide a rhythmic accompaniment to the melodic lines.

Figure 1. Music score: ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’

Source: Ying Ren, from fieldwork in 2024

These elements, demonstrated during live performances, as shown in Figure 2, reveal how musicians convey the emotional and symbolic essence of the piece to their audience.

The study highlights the advanced technical literacy required to perform ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ effectively. Informants discussed their use of distinctive Suona techniques, such as the trill (cui er) and grace notes, which are integral to the expressive quality of the piece. One informant remarked, “We play the trill to make the song shine—it’s like adding a bright color to a painting.” Another informant emphasized, “The ability to control the trill or add variations shows the depth of understanding a musician has for the Suona and its traditions.”

The transmission of Suona literacy through ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ is a cornerstone of its role in wedding traditions. Informants described how this piece is taught through oral

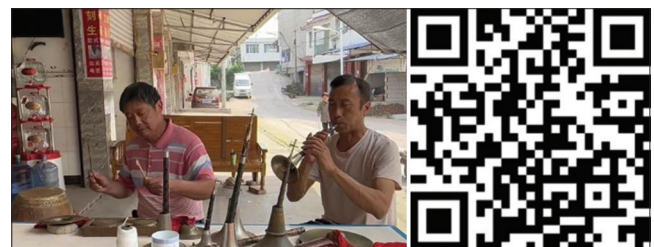


Figure 2. QR Code for a video of music performance: ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’

Source: Ying Ren, from fieldwork in 2024

tradition and observation. Younger musicians learn by watching and imitating their elders during rehearsals and live performances. One musician shared, “When I was young, I sat next to my father, watching his fingers and listening to

how he played. Over time, the melody naturally became part of me.” Another informant explained, “Teaching happens through the ear and the eye. A student might miss a note, but they won’t miss the story and feelings embedded in the song.” This method ensures that the piece’s technical and cultural aspects are preserved and passed down.

The audience plays a critical role in enhancing communal literacy around ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ Informants noted that audiences familiar with the piece often respond with visible appreciation, such as clapping and cheering, reinforcing the shared cultural knowledge of the music’s significance. One performer observed, “When we play the final section of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ the clapping always grows louder because people know it marks the peak of the celebration.” This interaction validates the performers’ skills and deepens the audience’s connection to the tradition.

Technical Mastery

The technical mastery demonstrated in the performance of “Luo Di Jin Qian” is a testament to the performers’ deep literacy in Suona techniques and ability to convey the celebratory spirit of Chinese wedding ceremonies. The research highlights that Suona players in Tongsi Town utilize advanced techniques such as trills (*cui er*), grace notes, and rapid transitions between pitches to enhance the expressive quality of the piece. These techniques are integral to the Suona repertoire and contribute significantly to the performer’s literacy, allowing them to adapt the music dynamically to the event’s emotional context.

One informant described the challenge of perfecting the trill technique: “It’s not just about speed or movement; it’s about timing it to bring out the song’s emotions.” Another

added, “Sometimes, I add an extra trill during live performances if I feel the guests’ energy—our technique responds to the audience.” Such comments emphasize that technical mastery extends beyond mechanical skill; it involves adapting the music in real-time to suit the cultural setting.

According to one informant, the trill technique (*cui er*), as shown in Figure 3, alternates rapidly between the fundamental tone and the note above it. This embellishment adds energy and a vibrant, pulsating character to the music, aligning with the joyous atmosphere of wedding ceremonies. The trill is particularly effective in phrases a and a1, where its rhythmic consistency underscores the dynamic progression of the piece. The informant explained that mastering this technique requires years of practice, involving precise control over the airflow and rapid manipulation of finger positions.

Grace notes, another prominent feature, ornament the main melodic line, as shown in Figure 4. These short, decorative notes provide a sense of fluidity and spontaneity to the performance, often serving as a transition between core melodic motifs. The performers utilize single and multiple grace notes to create a seamless flow in the melody, showcasing their literacy in applying ornamental techniques to enhance musical storytelling. For instance, the descending sequence in Bars 6 and 7 demonstrates how grace notes are strategically placed to emphasize the celebratory tone of the piece.

In terms of melodic and modal literacy, the performers skillfully navigate tonal transitions within the piece, as shown in Figure 5. Starting in the D Shang mode (Bars 2-4), the melody modulates into the A Yu mode (Bars 5-10), reflecting Suona’s capacity for tonal versatility. The transition between modes is marked by rapid shifts between notes, requiring precise finger coordination and a firm grasp of the

The figure shows a musical score in 4/4 time. The first line contains bars 2, 3, and 4, labeled as 'Phrase a'. The second line contains bars 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. Bars 5 and 6 are labeled as 'Phrase a1'. Bar 10 is labeled as 'Expanded section' and is enclosed in a box. The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some trills indicated by a double line over a note.

Figure 3. The piece is into three primary phrases: ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’

Source: Ying Ren, from fieldwork in 2024

The figure shows a musical score in 4/4 time, focusing on the melodic core. The first line contains bars 2, 3, 4, and 5. The second line contains bars 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. A red box highlights the notes in bars 3 and 4, labeled 'Core motivation: E-D-C-E-D'. A blue arrow points to the notes in bars 5 and 6, labeled 'Descending fourth progression'. The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some trills indicated by a double line over a note.

Figure 4. The structural and melodic core: ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’

Source: Ying Ren, from fieldwork in 2024

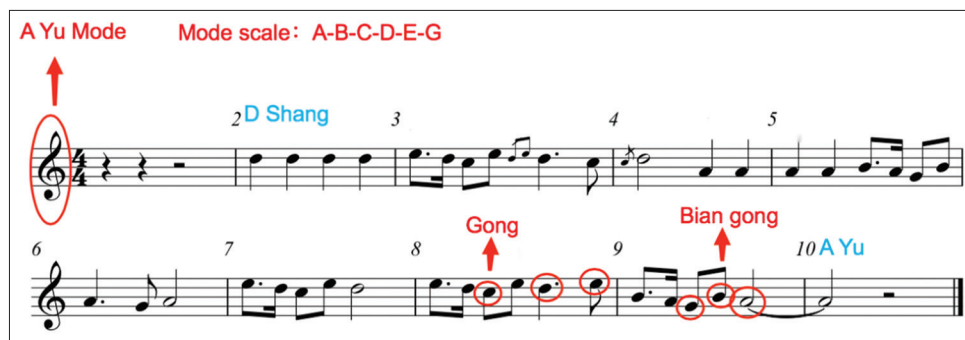


Figure 5. The tonal structure and modal characteristics: ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’
Source: Ying Ren, from fieldwork in 2024

piece’s structural framework. This ability to modulate between modes seamlessly highlights the performers’ technical proficiency and deep understanding of traditional Chinese musical systems.

The informants emphasized that these technical skills are not merely mechanical but deeply rooted in cultural and contextual literacy. Mastering techniques such as *cui er* and grace notes enables the performers to connect with their audience, eliciting emotional responses that resonate with the wedding’s themes of prosperity and joy. Additionally, the improvisational elements introduced during live performances, such as variations in the trill’s duration or the addition of extra grace notes, further demonstrate the performers’ literacy in adapting the music to real-time contexts.

Musical Literacy Transmission and Audience Interaction

The transmission of musical literacy associated with ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ highlights the role of oral tradition and practical demonstration as primary methods of knowledge preservation and dissemination in Tongsi Town. Informants revealed that the performance techniques, cultural significance, and contextual nuances of the Suona repertoire are handed down from elderly musicians to younger generations, fostering a lineage of musical expertise deeply rooted in community traditions.

One informant explained, “We don’t use written notes because the music lives in us. You play it, repeat it, and learn to make it your own.” Another described, “The rehearsal spaces are where we talk, play, and tell stories about the music, making sure the next generation understands more than just the notes.”

The communal setting of weddings is a dynamic platform for reinforcing musical literacy among performers and audiences. An informant highlighted, “You don’t learn Suona in isolation. It’s learned in front of people—whether rehearsals or performances—because the audience is part of the music.” Audience members, in turn, contribute to this process. Their familiarity with ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’ enhances their appreciation, creating a shared musical experience that strengthens communal bonds. Performers often observe the audience’s reactions to guide improvisational decisions, ensuring the music remains lively and relevant.

Audience interaction significantly shapes and perpetuates the literacy surrounding ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ The familiarity of local audiences with the piece enhances their appreciation of its performance, creating a shared musical experience that reinforces communal identity. During interviews, performers noted that audience members often recognize and respond to the symbolic elements of the music, such as the celebratory tone conveyed by trills and grace notes. This reciprocal relationship between performers and audiences deepens the communal engagement with Suona music, allowing literacy to be distributed beyond the performers to the broader community.

Additionally, the interactive nature of Suona wedding performances allows for improvisation and adaptation, further enriching the literacy process. Performers often incorporate subtle variations in phrasing or ornamentation based on the audience’s reactions, ensuring that the music remains vibrant and contextually relevant. This adaptability reflects the performers’ nuanced understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of ‘Luo Di Jin Qian’, underscoring the dynamic nature of musical literacy as a living, evolving practice.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted nature of Suona’s musical literacy in the context of traditional Chinese wedding ceremonies, as exemplified by the repertoire piece ‘Luo Di Jin Qian.’ Consistent with prior research, this study confirms the vital role of Suona music in fostering cultural and communal literacy (Cai, 2024; Howard, 2022). Precisely, the cultural symbolism embedded in ‘Luo Di Jin Qian,’ such as its association with prosperity and blessings, aligns with the broader theoretical principle that traditional music functions as a medium for transmitting societal values and cultural narratives (Jiang & Zou, 2024; Lebaka, 2019).

The study’s findings highlight the integral role of oral tradition in transmitting Suona literacy. This aligns with Chao and Nicolas (2024), who emphasize that traditional music relies on experiential learning and mentorship, which ensure the preservation of the music’s technical and symbolic elements. Informants in this study confirmed that younger musicians acquire literacy through observation and imitation, a process consistent with Jingfang’s (2023) perspective that oral tradition fosters technical proficiency and cultural understanding.

However, this study also underscores challenges inconsistent with the theoretical principles of sustained cultural preservation, as discussed by Wang and Li (2024). While Suona music traditionally thrives in communal settings, modernization, and digitalization lead to its gradual decline. Replacing live performances with recorded music at weddings diminishes the interactive and communal aspects essential for transmitting literacy. This finding aligns with Wu and Chuangprakhon (2024), who noted similar challenges in preserving traditional vocal folk music.

Audience interaction emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing Suona literacy, consistent with theories of participatory performance (Garrido & Davidson, 2019). Performers' improvisations in response to audience reactions exemplify how communal engagement enriches the literacy process, enabling the music to remain contextually relevant and emotionally resonant. This dynamic interaction underscores the importance of maintaining live performances to preserve the vibrancy of traditional music.

This study underscores the significance of 'Luo Di Jin Qian' as a vital cultural artifact that encapsulates Suona's musical literacy in Chinese wedding ceremonies. The repertoire piece serves as a lens through which the technical artistry, cultural symbolism, and communal interaction inherent in Suona music can be understood and preserved. By examining the interplay between performers and audiences, this research highlights how live performances foster individual and communal musical literacy, ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage.

However, the study also reveals challenges posed by modernization, including the declining prevalence of live Suona performances at weddings. Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies to revitalize traditional music practices. This includes integrating Suona music into educational curricula, promoting live performances through cultural festivals, and leveraging digital platforms for documentation and dissemination while maintaining the essence of oral tradition.

The significance of regional studies in understanding and preserving traditional musical literacy cannot be overstated. Regional variations in Suona's performance styles, techniques, and repertoire reflect China's cultural expression diversity. Examining these differences can provide deeper insights into localized practices of oral transmission and community engagement, which are critical to sustaining traditional music. Future research should explore how Suona traditions in northern, southern, and central China differ in structure, symbolic meanings, and performance contexts. Such studies can inform targeted preservation strategies that respect and celebrate regional uniqueness while addressing broader challenges posed by modernization.

Future research should compare Suona music practices across different regions of China to understand regional variations in musical literacy and transmission methods. This could include case studies of specific communities where Suona traditions remain vibrant or are being actively revitalized, offering best practices for cultural preservation. It should also investigate the impact of modernization

on other traditional Chinese musical instruments and their repertoires. Finally, it should explore the effectiveness of integrating Suona music into formal educational settings to preserve traditional musical literacy. Additionally, studies should focus on audience perceptions and cross-cultural analysis to identify shared practices and unique adaptations in transmitting musical literacy.

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