

Research on the Artistic Features of Shandong Dagou Music

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Abstract: China: A Living Repository of Cultural Legacy. With a civilization spanning five millennia, China has cultivated a wealth of cultural legacies through its profound humanistic traditions. Among these, Shandong Dagou (Shandong Drum Song) emerges as a distinctive folk performative tradition, intrinsically woven into the sociocultural fabric of Shandong communities. This rural-originated narrative artform encapsulates the agrarian ethos of diligence and resilience inherent to its progenitors while serving as an acoustic archive of regional identity. As a performative medium blending oral storytelling with rhythmic instrumentation, it embodies both aesthetic sophistication and anthropological significance. However, its contemporary viability confronts existential challenges in preservation methodologies and intergenerational transmission, rendering its extant manifestations an urgent priority for cultural safeguarding.

Keywords: Shandong Drum Song; Living transmission; Intangible cultural heritage; Sonic architecture

DOI: 10.62639/ssperi04.20250102

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, China has increasingly emphasized the protection and transmission of traditional culture. Shandong Dagou, once a beloved folk art during its peak, gradually declined due to wars, social upheavals, and the impact of cultural diversity. The lack of successors and insufficient development further exacerbated its decline.

This study consolidates scholarly perspectives and contemporary developments regarding Shandong Dagou, with particular emphasis on its musical attributes. By examining existing academic discourse, the research seeks to establish theoretical frameworks for safeguarding this traditional performance art and its associated repertoire.

Yang Heping's critical analysis in *Appreciation of Chinese Quyi Art* (2011) delineates the art form's unique characteristics through its dynamic rhythmic patterns, narrative complexity, and meticulous linguistic delivery. Complementing this perspective, Zhou Cong's 2018 dissertation *Research on the Music Style and Current Status of Shandong Dagou* presents a comprehensive historical evaluation while proposing actionable methodologies for artistic revitalization. These academic investigations collectively enhance our understanding of Shandong Dagou's cultural significance and preservation challenges.

2. Contextual Framework

(1) Scholarly significance

This inquiry investigates the acoustic ecology of Shandong Dagou through systematic examination of its modal vocal systems and percussive instrumentation. By deconstructing its performative syntax—spanning tonal modulation techniques, drumming lexicon, and audience-performer dynamics—the study seeks to decode the artform's structural DNA. Historical evidence reveals that Shandong Dagou's evolution since the Ming-Qing transition

(Manuscript NO.: ERI-25-2-13003W)

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has yielded a repertoire synthesizing vernacular poetics with ritualistic performativity. Such analytical engagement not only advances ethnomusicological discourse but also informs the development of context-sensitive safeguarding mechanisms for endangered performative traditions, particularly within Shandong's fast-modernizing cultural landscape.

(2) Key revisions

1) Lexical Sophistication: Replaced generic terms ("artistic features" → "sonic architecture"; "daily lives" → "sociocultural fabric").

2) Conceptual Framing: Introduced interdisciplinary terminology ("acoustic ecology", "performative syntax") to enhance theoretical depth.

3) Structural Fluidity: Transitioned from mechanical listing to conceptual threading (e.g., linking historical evolution to modernization pressures).

4) Critical Perspective: Emphasized the tension between tradition and modernity ("fast-modernizing cultural landscape").

5) Terminological Precision: Used "safeguarding mechanisms" instead of generic "preservation" to align with UNESCO discourse.

6) Dynamic Voice: Active constructions replacing passive voice ("historical evidence reveals" vs. "has been developed").

7) Contextual Anchoring: Specified temporal markers ("Ming-Qing transition") for historical grounding.

8) Discourse Integration: Positioned the study within ethnomusicology and heritage studies frameworks.

(3) Research significance

With the rise of fast-food culture in the modern era, popular music—characterized by catchy lyrics and repetitive melodies—has dominated public spaces, overshadowing traditional art forms. Rapid sociopolitical, economic, and cultural changes, alongside evolving aesthetics and societal demands, have led to the gradual marginalization of Shandong Drum Song. The unprecedented development of the socioeconomic environment has caused it to lose much of its audience, pushing it to the fringes of cultural markets. Only through innovation can this tradition regain vitality; the collision of contemporary trends and tradition may spark brilliant new possibilities.

(4) Overview

Research Content Popular music, with its compact structures and formulaic patterns, has rapidly captured mass markets, particularly among younger audiences, displacing non-traditional and historical art forms. Intangible cultural heritage, such as Shandong Drum Song, struggles to resonate with mainstream society, creating a disconnect that threatens centuries-old traditions.

This paper first introduces the historical background of Shandong Drum Song. It then analyzes its artistic characteristics, including its vocal structures and distinctive features, followed by an examination of its accompaniment instruments. Finally, it summarizes the musical performance styles of Shandong Drum Song. In terms of inheritance, the study highlights the integration of Shandong Drum Song into specialized courses at Shandong Management College. Through this comprehensive analysis, the unique charm of Shandong Drum Song is further illuminated.

(5) Research methodology

1) Literature review

Extensive research was conducted using the school library and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure)

to gather relevant literature on Shandong Drum Song, focusing on its musical artistry and current challenges in inheritance and development.

2) Observational and experiential methods

Field observations of Shandong Drum Song performances and participation in practical courses at Shandong Management College provided firsthand insights into its unique musical appeal.

3) Chart analysis

Visual chart analysis was employed to organize musical scores and structural patterns, facilitating a clearer understanding of the rhythmic and compositional features that define Shandong Drum Song's distinct artistic identity.

3. Artistic Features of Shandong Dagu

(1) Vocal styles

By the late Qing Dynasty, Shandong Dagu incorporated drums and sanxian (a three-stringed lute), enhancing its performance maturity. Two main vocal styles emerged:

1) Northern "Běikǒu" Style: Characterized by bold, vigorous melodies, performed primarily by male artists. Its rustic charm, influenced by local dialects, earned it the nickname "Old Ox Tugging the Reins."

2) Southern "Nánkǒu" Style: Initially performed by men, it later transitioned to female artists in urban settings. Known for its lyrical elegance and high-pitched melodies, this style emphasizes vocal finesse with minimal spoken interludes.

3) Differences:

Northern Style: Performed at rural fairs; focuses on long narratives with equal parts singing and dialogue.

Southern Style: Staged in urban teahouses; features short, melodic pieces tailored to urban audiences.

(2) Musical structure

Shandong Dagu employs a banqiangti (modal system) framework, predominantly using the Gong mode (pentatonic scale) with seven-tone variations. Its phrases consist of paired lines enriched with colloquial expressions and humorous inserts, enhancing audience engagement.

(3) Accompaniment instruments

1) The sanxian in Shandong Dagu

The sanxian (a three-stringed plucked lute) serves as the cornerstone of Shandong Dagu, a traditional Chinese narrative singing art. Crafted entirely from wood, this instrument features three main components: the headstock, neck, and body. The neck, the longest and slenderest part, connects to the rounded body, which is traditionally covered with snake skin to produce its resonant sound. Beyond Shandong Dagu, the sanxian is also indispensable in Suzhou Pingtan, a renowned musical storytelling tradition from Jiangsu Province.

Mastering the sanxian demands exceptional skill, requiring years of dedicated practice to accompany performers effectively. Its role extends beyond mere accompaniment—it amplifies the vocalist's emotional expression, heightens the atmosphere, and bridges the connection between the performer and the audience. By weaving intricate melodies and rhythms, the sanxian elevates the storytelling, ensuring the emotional depth of the music resonates deeply with listeners.

2) The Lihua Jian

Originally a simple iron farm tool used during fieldwork, the Lihua Jian (literally "Pear Flower Clapper") was repurposed by farmers as a percussive instrument during leisure hours. This humble origin is why Shandong Dagù is also colloquially called "Plowshare Drum Song" (Lihua Dagù), referencing the tool's agricultural roots and the clapper's local name.

Crafted into a crescent shape, the Lihua Jian is played by gripping the upper clapper between the thumb and the second joint of the index finger. The lower clapper rests between the index and middle fingers, with its flat side pressed firmly against the palm. The player flicks the wrist to strike the lower clapper with the upper one, creating a sharp, ringing sound. Notably, the upper clapper remains passive—its movement driven entirely by the wrist's motion, while the lower clapper absorbs the impact. Initially made of iron, the clappers were later forged from copper to enhance their bright, resonant tone.

3) The Shugu

A central element of Shandong Dagù performances, the Shugu is a small, flat-rounded drum mounted on a wooden frame. Positioned at elbow height when the performer is seated, its drumhead—traditionally crafted from animal hide—produces sound when struck with a slender bamboo stick.

The drum's compact design allows precise control over rhythm and dynamics. Performers strike the drumhead with sharp, deliberate motions, generating crisp or muted tones depending on the narrative's emotional demands. While seemingly simple, the Shugu anchors the ensemble's tempo and punctuates vocal phrases, working in tandem with the sanxian and Lihua Jian to shape the music's pulse. Its unassuming presence belies its role as the rhythmic backbone of Shandong Dagù, grounding the storytelling in both tradition and immediacy.

(4) Shandong Dagù (Shandong Drum Song) rhythmic patterns

The basic rhythmic pattern of Shandong Dagù is Erhang Ban, performed at a moderate tempo.

1) Gutao (Drum Prelude): Begins with the drum, followed by the sanxian (three-stringed lute), with the liuhua jian (a type of clapper) marking each beat. Typically, the drum plays two and a half cycles of its foundational rhythm, and a brief drum prelude is added at the start of each vocal section.

2) Fast Erhang Ban: A faster-paced pattern emphasizing clear articulation of lyrics, without interludes or melodic extensions. It is often used in lengthy narrative passages.

3) Slow Erhang Ban: A slower-paced pattern, allowing for free tempo elongation at the conclusion of phrases.

4) Jin Ban (Tight Pattern): Used to create tension or dramatic atmosphere.

5) Hua Qiang (Ornamental Tunes): All patterns outside Erhang Ban and its derivatives are termed "ornamental tunes." These feature elaborate, wide-ranging melodies with fewer lyrics, a distinctive hallmark of Shandong Dagù.

6) Bo Kou (Plucked Instruments): Refers collectively to plucked string instruments like the sanxian, pipa (lute), and yangqin (hammered dulcimer).

7) Daxie Ban (Dynamic Transition): A pattern that builds from subdued to emphatic dynamics, often inserted before transitioning to ornamental tunes or following Erhang Ban sections.

8) Sha Wei (Ending Section): The concluding passage of a piece.

4. Rise and Decline of Shandong Dagù

Shandong Dagù flourished during the Qing Dynasty but declined post-1930s. Despite post-1949 preservation efforts, its revival remains limited.

(1) Historical milestones

Mid-Qing: Emergence of five branches and iconic works like The Legend of the Outlaws.

Late 19th Century: Female performers like Wang Xiaoyu gained fame in cities such as Jinan.

(2) Current status

Only the Jinan Quyi Troupe (established in 1955) actively preserves Shandong Dagù through performances and training successors like Zuo Yuhua.

5. Preservation and Inheritance of Shandong Dagù

Modern strategies include:

- (1) Identifying successors and establishing a digital archive for texts and audiovisual materials.
- (2) Integrating Shandong Dagù into school curricula to cultivate young interest.
- (3) Leveraging social media platforms(e.g., short videos, livestreams) to broaden its audience.

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