

Chinese Musical Literacy on Dongying Folk Songs Preservation and Transmission

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ABSTRACT

Dongying folk songs are a vital component of the cultural heritage in Shandong Province, China, reflecting the region's history, customs, and collective memories. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the Chinese musical literacy on Dongying folk songs preservation and transmission in Shandong Province, China. The study was conducted in Shandong Province and involved in-depth interviews with eight key informants, including provincial-level intangible cultural heritage transmitters, experienced singers, and community participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations at local cultural events, and document analysis. The findings reveal that musical literacy within family and community settings plays a crucial role in maintaining the transmission of Dongying folk songs. However, challenges persist in formal education systems, where limited resources and a lack of specialized educators hinder the effective teaching of traditional music. The study suggests enhancing community-based initiatives and integrating digital media to bolster preservation efforts. This research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural preservation, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to musical literacy that includes technical, cultural, and emotional dimensions.

Key words: Dongying Folk Songs, Chinese Musical Literacy, Cultural Preservation, Shandong Province, Transmission Methods

INTRODUCTION

Dongying folk songs, a significant part of China's traditional music, are gaining importance in the cultural history of Shandong Province. These songs represent local customs, historical narratives, and collective memories of communities. However, due to modernization and globalization, these traditional forms of music are increasingly marginalized. Younger generations are less likely to engage with or recognize these traditional forms, raising concerns about their future. Chinese musical literacy is essential to address this, encompassing the ability to read and perform music and a deep understanding of these folk songs' cultural and historical significance (Howard, 2016; Jones, 2020; Tang & Sornyai, 2023; Zhang & Chonprirot, 2024).

The central problem addressed in this research is the alarming decline in the presence and practice of Dongying folk songs in Shandong Province. Despite having historical and cultural significance, modern music genres dominating the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape increasingly overshadow these songs (Long & Rattachaiwong, 2024; Zou & Wang, 2022). This decline is not merely a loss of a musical genre but signifies a more profound cultural erosion, where the younger generation is becoming disconnected from their heritage. The traditional methods of passing down these songs through oral tradition and communal participation are

no longer sufficient in the current socio-cultural environment. With fewer opportunities for young people to learn and engage with these folk songs, the continuity of this cultural practice is in jeopardy (Gong et al., 2024; Marsh, 2017; Nwamara & Okpala, 2020).

This research is significant because it addresses the broader issue of cultural preservation in a rapidly modernizing society. The study highlights the importance of education in maintaining cultural heritage by focusing on musical literacy. In the case of Dongying folk songs, musical literacy can provide individuals, especially the younger generation, with the skills and knowledge necessary to appreciate and perform these songs (Fung, 2017; Law & Ho, 2015; Zhou & Chuangprakhon, 2023). This appreciation goes beyond mere performance; it involves understanding these songs' cultural context and historical narratives. In a broader sense, this study contributes to the discourse on how traditional cultural practices can be preserved in the face of modernity. The findings of this research could have implications not only for the preservation of Dongying folk songs but also for other forms of intangible cultural heritage in China and globally (Su, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the Chinese musical literacy on Dongying folk songs preservation and transmission in Shandong Province, China. The study will explore how musical literacy, a comprehensive

understanding of musical theory, history, and cultural context, can be leveraged to keep these traditional songs alive in the modern era. This investigation will examine the current state of musical literacy in Shandong Province, particularly among different age groups, and assess how this literacy influences the ability to preserve and transmit Dongying folk songs. The research will utilize a combination of qualitative methods, including fieldwork, interviews with key informants, and analysis of educational practices related to folk music. Through this approach, the study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of musical literacy as a tool for cultural preservation (Howard, 2016; Lebaka, 2019; Qiu et al., 2024).

Research Question

- How does Chinese musical literacy contribute to preserving and transmitting Dongying folk songs in Shandong Province, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The preservation and transmission of traditional folk music have long been subjects of scholarly interest, particularly in the context of rapid social and cultural changes. This literature review explores the concept of musical literacy, its significance in cultural preservation, and its application to the case of Dongying folk songs in Shandong Province, China. The review is organized into three sections, each addressing key theoretical perspectives and empirical studies relevant to the research question.

Musical Literacy as a Tool for Cultural Preservation

Musical literacy is often defined as the ability to read, write, and understand music, but it encompasses much more in the context of cultural preservation. It includes an appreciation of the historical and cultural contexts that give music meaning and relevance. Scholars argue that musical literacy is about technical proficiency and fostering a deep connection with the cultural heritage embedded in music. This perspective aligns with broader theories of cultural sustainability, emphasizing education's role in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of globalization. By teaching the younger generation about traditional music's historical significance and social functions, musical literacy can ensure that these traditions continue to be valued and practiced (Howard, 2016; Kelly, 2018; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018).

Challenges in the Transmission of Folk Music

The transmission of folk music, particularly in oral traditions, faces significant challenges in modern societies. As urbanization and modernization advance, the communal settings traditionally supporting folk music transmission are diminishing. The literature highlights the decline of intergenerational transmission, where older community members pass songs and stories to the younger generation. This

decline is exacerbated by the influence of popular culture, which often overshadows traditional music forms. Theories of cultural imperialism suggest that the dominance of globalized media can erode local cultural practices, leading to a loss of traditional knowledge and skills. This challenge is particularly acute in Dongying folk songs, as the younger generation in Shandong Province may have limited exposure to these traditional songs outside formal education settings (Leung, 2018; Tang, 2021; Qiu et al., 2024).

Integrating Folk Music into Educational Frameworks

Scholars advocate for integrating traditional music into formal education systems to counteract the decline in the transmission of folk music. This approach is supported by theories of cultural education, which emphasize the importance of teaching students about their cultural heritage as part of a holistic education. By incorporating folk music into school curricula, educators can ensure that students develop the technical skills and cultural understanding necessary to appreciate and sustain these traditions. The literature suggests that such integration requires not only changes in curriculum design but also the development of teaching materials that are culturally relevant and engaging. Dongying folk songs could involve creating music textbooks that include these songs, training teachers to convey their cultural significance, and organizing school events that celebrate local music traditions (Banks, 2015; Kertz-Welzel, 2018).

METHOD

The qualitative methodology for this study was meticulously designed and relies on in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to gather rich, contextual data that reflects the lived experiences and insights of those directly involved in preserving and transmitting these folk songs.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, collecting detailed and nuanced data from individuals with direct experience and expertise in Dongying folk songs. The methodology is grounded in ethnographic principles, allowing for an immersive investigation into the cultural practices surrounding Dongying folk songs. The data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, participant observations, relevant documents, and media analysis. This approach facilitates a deep exploration of the research question and supports investigating the research objective.

Selection of Informants

The selection of informants was a critical component of the research methodology. The study identified three categories of informants: key informants, casual informants, and general investigators. Eight informants were selected based on specific criteria that ensured their relevance and contribution to the study, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Selection criteria for informants

Category	Informants	Selection Criteria
Key Informants	2	Provincial-level intangible cultural heritage transmitters, outstanding performers, significant contributors
Casual Informants	3	Experienced singers of Dongying folk songs, knowledgeable in musical characteristics, involved in teaching
General Informant	3	Individuals involved in Dongying folk songs' preservation, supporters of cultural sustainability, active singers

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The following steps were undertaken during the data collection, as shown in Table 2.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved the transcription of interviews and organizing field notes. Key themes related to musical literacy, preservation practices, and transmission processes were identified. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and relationships between these themes. The study focused on understanding how musical literacy influences the preservation and transmission of Dongying folk songs. The findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis were triangulated to ensure the validity and reliability of the results, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research question.

RESULTS

Chinese musical literacy encompasses the ability to read and write music and the deeper understanding and application of traditional musical forms, techniques, and cultural nuances specific to Dongying folk songs. The findings offer insights into the critical role that musical literacy plays in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage in a rapidly changing society.

Literacy in the Context of Family Transmission

Musical literacy within the context of family transmission plays a crucial role in preserving and maintaining Dongying folk songs. Families serve as the primary environment where the foundational elements of musical literacy are introduced and cultivated. In many cases, the transmission of Dongying folk songs begins at home, where children are exposed to the music from a very young age through their parents and grandparents. This early exposure is vital as it embeds the

Table 2. Data collection methods

Method	Description
Interviews	Involved semi-structured interviews with eight informants, each lasting 60-90 minutes, to explore their experiences and perspectives on the role of Chinese musical literacy in preserving and transmitting Dongying folk songs, focusing on their involvement and observations.
Observation	Involved participant observation during local cultural events and gatherings where Dongying folk songs were performed, providing contextual insights into their living practice. Field notes were taken to document participants' interactions and behaviors, focusing on the application of musical literacy.
Document Analysis	Relevant documents, including historical records, music scores, and archival materials, were analyzed to supplement the primary data collected from interviews and observations. This analysis provided a broader context for understanding Dongying folk songs' evolution and current state.

cultural and musical norms of Dongying folk songs into the child's consciousness, forming a natural and intuitive understanding of the music.

The oral tradition is a key component of this family-based literacy. Unlike formal education systems, which often rely on written materials and structured curricula, the transmission of Dongying folk songs within families is predominantly oral. Parents and elders pass down songs by singing them repeatedly in daily life, during work, or at family gatherings. This method teaches the melodies and lyrics and imparts the emotional and cultural contexts in which these songs are performed. The repeated exposure and practice within the family setting help children internalize the song's rhythm, melody, and structure, leading to a deep-rooted musical literacy beyond mere technical knowledge.

Intergenerational teaching is another critical aspect of literacy in the family context. The older generation, often possessing a rich repository of folk songs and the nuanced understanding required for their performance, plays a pivotal role in educating the younger members. This teaching process is typically informal and occurs through shared activities, such as community festivals, family rituals, and everyday chores, where songs are sung to mark the occasion or to pass the time. Through this hands-on learning experience, children learn the songs and the cultural values and historical narratives embedded within them. This form of literacy is dynamic and adaptive, allowing the songs to evolve with each generation while maintaining their core identity.

Moreover, the household is the first learning environment for Dongying folk songs, contributing to developing a personal and communal identity. Children learn to associate these songs with their family history, local traditions, and regional identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging and cultural pride. This connection to their heritage motivates younger generations to continue the practice of these folk songs,

thereby ensuring their transmission. The literacy developed in this context is holistic, encompassing the technical aspects of music and the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of the Dongying folk song tradition.

Educational Initiatives and Literacy Development

Educational initiatives are pivotal in fostering Chinese musical literacy and preserving and transmitting Dongying folk songs. This section explores how both formal and informal educational settings contribute to the development of musical literacy, emphasizing the unique challenges and opportunities that arise within these frameworks.

Integrating Dongying folk songs into the curriculum in formal educational settings, such as schools and universities, is crucial in nurturing musical literacy among students. These programs aim to comprehensively understand Dongying folk music's musical characteristics, cultural significance, and historical context. According to an interview with a key informant, "educational resources in many areas are limited, which prevents folk music courses from receiving sufficient support and attention." The lack of resources and emphasis on traditional Chinese music within a curriculum that frequently favors Western musical traditions highlight a significant challenge in formal education. Despite these challenges, the formal education system remains a critical avenue for cultivating a foundational musical literacy for preserving Dongying folk songs.

However, the development of musical literacy in formal settings has its obstacles. Another informant mentioned, "Folk music requires certain professional knowledge and skills to teach, but the lack of professional music education talents may be one of the reasons for the lack of courses." This shortage of qualified educators who are well-versed in Dongying folk music creates a gap in the effective transmission of this knowledge. To address this, targeted teacher training programs that focus on the specificities of Dongying folk music could enhance the quality of education and ensure that students receive a well-rounded musical literacy that includes traditional Chinese music.

Informal educational settings, including community programs and cultural initiatives, offer an alternative and often more immersive approach to developing musical literacy. These programs are typically more flexible and responsive to the community's cultural needs. For instance, community workshops and folk music festivals allow participants to engage directly with experienced practitioners of Dongying folk music. One informant noted, "Folk music events are an important part of the art ecosystem. They help promote the growth of musical talents and the creation of artistic works by providing a platform for performance, exchange, and display." These community-driven initiatives are vital for preserving the living tradition of Dongying folk songs and play a significant role in transmitting musical literacy across generations.

Moreover, informal educational settings often encourage intergenerational learning, crucial for transmitting folk music. This approach fosters a deeper understanding of the music and strengthens the community's cultural bonds. The

flexibility of informal education allows for adapting teaching methods to suit the needs of different age groups, thereby making musical literacy more accessible and relevant to a broader audience.

Musical Literacy and Performance Practices

Musical literacy is crucial in preserving and enhancing Dongying folk songs, mainly through the skills and knowledge necessary for their performance. This section explores how musical literacy contributes to sustaining the tradition of Dongying folk songs, explicitly focusing on the song "Wo Hao." The analysis covers various musical elements, including lyrics, rhythm, beat, melody, and mode, all integral to the performance of Dongying folk songs, as shown in Figure 1.

Musical literacy in the context of Dongying folk songs encompasses a deep understanding of the cultural and historical significance of the music, as well as the technical proficiency required to perform it. One informant emphasized, "The ability to perform Dongying folk songs goes beyond just singing; it requires a deep connection to the cultural roots and a strong grasp of the musical elements that define the genre." This highlights the importance of musical literacy in preserving the authenticity of these folk songs.

"Wo Hao" lyrics are deeply rooted in Dongying's local dialect and cultural context. The use of specific linguistic features, such as the de-vocalization of certain syllables, is a critical aspect of the song's performance. This linguistic nuance is a key component of musical literacy, as performers must accurately convey the lyrics' intended meaning and emotional depth. The words of "Wo Hao" reflect the daily life and labor of the people of Dongying, making the accurate delivery of these lyrics essential for preserving the song's cultural significance.

Rhythmically, "Wo Hao" is structured in a 4/4-time signature, which is both common and stable, aligning with the labor-intensive activities often associated with this type of song. The strong beats are synchronized with the physical actions involved in tasks like tamping, making the rhythm an essential part of the song's performance. The rhythm also shifts to a 2/4-time signature in certain sections, adding complexity and requiring performers to have a high level of rhythmic literacy. This ability to navigate changes in rhythm is vital for maintaining the song's traditional structure while allowing for expressive performance.

The beat structure of "Wo Hao" further exemplifies the connection between music and labor, with each strong beat marking the completion of a specific task, such as a stroke in the tamping process. The clear distinction between strong and weak beats provides a framework for the song, guiding performers to maintain the appropriate tempo and intensity. Mastery of this beat structure is a critical aspect of musical literacy, ensuring that the song remains true to its traditional roots while being performed with precision.

Melodically, "Wo Hao" features a wavy progression characterized by small intervals and gradual movements. This melodic structure reflects the narrative and emotional content of the song, requiring performers to have a keen

gu lu zi na tiao dan chu dian na ge fang hai hei ai hai yao hai hu ya

5 yi yao hai hai hai ya hu hai ya li tiao qi na ge dan zi lai ai

9 you si na ge li ai hai yao hai hu ya yi yao hai hai hai ya hu hai ya

Figure 1. The song "Wo Hao" of Dongying folk songs

Source: Yuanyuan Guo, transcription from fieldwork in August 2022

ear and control over their vocal techniques. Accurately executing and expressing these melodic contours is a hallmark of musical literacy in Dongying folk music. Additionally, the melody's gradual progression and occasional four-degree jumps demand a high level of technical skill, further emphasizing the importance of musical literacy in performance.

The "Wo Hao" mode is based on the A six-tone scale, frequently using Shang and Zheng tones. The modal structure of the song contributes to its overall mood and character, making an understanding of these modes essential for authentic performance. The transition between modes within the song, from Zhengdiao to Gongdiao styles, adds another layer of complexity, requiring performers to be adept in modal literacy. This knowledge allows them to navigate these shifts seamlessly, preserving the song's traditional sound while enhancing its expressive potential.

Cultural and Social Impact of Musical Literacy

Musical literacy in the context of Dongying folk songs extends beyond the technical aspects of performance and into cultural identity, community cohesion, and social continuity. This section explores how the cultivation of musical literacy among practitioners and audiences contributes to preserving Dongying folk songs, reinforcing a shared cultural heritage, and fostering a collective identity within the community.

Musical literacy fosters a sense of cultural identity among those who practice and engage with Dongying folk songs. One informant highlighted, "The ability to understand and perform Dongying folk songs is not just about knowing the music; it is about connecting with the stories, values, and history of our ancestors." This deep connection to cultural roots through musical literacy helps individuals and communities maintain a strong sense of identity, even with modern influences and cultural shifts. The preservation of Dongying folk songs, therefore, is not just about safeguarding music but about sustaining a way of life and a worldview that has been passed down through generations.

Community cohesion is another significant impact of musical literacy. As individuals engage with Dongying folk songs through performance or as part of the audience, they

participate in a shared cultural experience that strengthens community bonds. The social activities surrounding the transmission of these songs, such as festivals, performances, and communal singing, provide opportunities for individuals to come together and reinforce their sense of belonging to the community. The guidelines for transmitting Dongying folk songs include strategies for integrating these songs into social activities, thereby ensuring that musical literacy continues to play a vital role in community life. Through these activities, musical literacy fosters a sense of unity and mutual understanding, essential for maintaining the community's social fabric, as shown in Figure 2.

The role of musical literacy in cultural continuity cannot be overstated. As younger generations acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to perform and appreciate Dongying folk songs, they become the custodians of a living tradition. This transmission of musical literacy ensures that the cultural practices associated with Dongying folk songs are not lost but continue to evolve and thrive in contemporary society. One informant emphasized, "By teaching our children these songs, we are passing on more than just music; we are passing on our history, values, and identity." The structured efforts to support musical education and incorporate Dongying folk songs into formal and informal educational settings, as shown in Figure 2, play a critical role in this process. These initiatives help bridge the gap between generations, allowing the cultural knowledge embedded in Dongying folk songs to be passed down in a meaningful and relevant way to today's youth.

Moreover, the social impact of musical literacy extends to the broader cultural landscape of Shandong Province. As Dongying folk songs gain recognition and appreciation beyond their immediate community, they contribute to a richer, more diverse cultural identity for the region. Integrating these songs into cultural festivals, public performances, and the media further amplifies their reach, ensuring that the cultural heritage they represent is celebrated and preserved on a larger scale. This broader cultural impact underscores the importance of initiatives aimed at enhancing musical literacy, as they not only support the preservation of a specific musical tradition but also contribute to the overall cultural vitality of the region.



Figure 2. The guidelines for the preservation and transmission

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results align with the theoretical principle that musical literacy is more than just the ability to read and write music; it encompasses a profound understanding of the cultural and historical contexts in which the music is embedded (Howard, 2016; Kelly, 2018). The study found that in the context of Dongying folk songs, musical literacy involves a deep connection to the cultural roots and a nuanced comprehension of the musical elements that define the genre, as demonstrated in the performance practices of the song “Wo Hao.” This supports the idea that musical literacy can serve as a powerful tool for cultural preservation by ensuring that traditional music forms remain relevant and accessible to future generations (Jones, 2020; Kertz-Welzel, 2018).

Moreover, the role of family transmission highlighted in the results resonates with the theoretical concept of oral tradition as a vital component of cultural literacy. The study found that families play a crucial role in embedding the foundational elements of Dongying folk songs into the consciousness of younger generations, thereby facilitating the intergenerational transmission of these songs (Fung, 2017; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018). This finding is consistent with Leung (2018) and Marsh (2017), who argue that familial and communal participation are essential for maintaining cultural continuity in the face of modernization and globalization.

The research also reinforces the value of integrating traditional music into formal and informal educational frameworks, as Banks (2015) and Su (2019) suggested. The findings show that while formal education systems in Shandong Province face challenges, such as a lack of resources and qualified educators, they still offer a crucial avenue for developing musical literacy among students. For example, establishing specific teacher training programs focused on Dongying folk music and incorporating the songs into music textbooks could enhance students’ access

to traditional music. Informal settings, such as community workshops and festivals, provide a more flexible and culturally responsive approach, enabling participants to engage deeply with Dongying folk music. Additionally, community-driven initiatives such as local singing competitions and folk music exhibitions can help generate interest and support from the younger generation. This dual approach aligns with the broader theoretical perspective that education is vital in sustaining cultural diversity and heritage (Howard, 2016; Kertz-Welzel, 2018).

However, the study also reveals certain inconsistencies with existing theoretical principles. For instance, while the literature suggests that formal education systems are pivotal in developing cultural literacy (Law & Ho, 2015; Zhou & Chuangprakhon, 2023), the findings indicate that formal education alone may not be sufficient in the context of Dongying folk songs. The lack of specialized educators and limited school resources has led to a reliance on informal educational settings to transmit these songs. Collaborative efforts between schools and local communities, such as inviting folk song performers to give workshops or organizing field trips to cultural events, could bridge this gap and provide students with more hands-on learning experiences. This suggests that the theoretical emphasis on formal education may need to be reconsidered or supplemented with a greater focus on community-based initiatives and family-led transmission (Lebaka, 2019; Qiu et al., 2024).

Another inconsistency arises in the application of musical literacy within performance practices. While traditional theories emphasize the importance of technical proficiency in maintaining the authenticity of folk music (Howard, 2016; Leung, 2018), the findings suggest that performance practices of Dongying folk songs, such as those seen in “Wo Hao,” require not only technical skills but also an intimate understanding of the cultural and emotional contexts of the music. This finding indicates that existing theoretical frameworks may need to expand to include a more holistic view of musical literacy that incorporates cultural and emotional literacy alongside technical proficiency.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on cultural preservation by examining the role of Chinese musical literacy in preserving and transmitting Dongying folk songs in Shandong Province, China. The research confirms that musical literacy, encompassing technical skills and a deep cultural understanding, is essential for preserving traditional music forms in a rapidly modernizing society. The study’s findings are consistent with existing theoretical frameworks, particularly the role of musical literacy in cultural preservation and the importance of family and community-based transmission.

However, the research also highlights certain inconsistencies, particularly regarding the sufficiency of formal education systems in transmitting Dongying folk songs. The study suggests that informal and community-based educational initiatives may foster the holistic musical literacy required for preserving these traditional songs more effectively. Furthermore, the findings indicate that performance practices necessitate a

broader conception of musical literacy, including cultural and emotional dimensions alongside technical proficiency.

In practical terms, integrating Dongying folk songs into school curricula through collaborative efforts between educators, cultural practitioners, and the local community could help bridge the gap identified in formal education. Additionally, developing targeted teacher training programs and including folk music in digital media platforms may offer innovative ways to sustain and promote these traditions in a rapidly changing world.

This study suggests that future research should focus on the challenges faced by formal education systems in China in transmitting traditional music forms, particularly exploring how curriculum reform can incorporate indigenous music education more effectively. Moreover, the impact of digital media on Dongying folk songs, such as the potential for online platforms to serve as new spaces for cultural transmission and engagement, comparative studies of regional folk music traditions in China, and the broader implications of musical literacy for cultural preservation, especially in the context of globalization, are key areas for further investigation. Addressing these aspects could lead to more robust strategies for preserving and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage in the 21st century.

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