

AN ANALYSIS OF THE MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SHANPOYANG IN LONGHUAHUI RITUAL OF SHANXI, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This study centers on the representative instrumental piece Shanpo Yang, performed during the Longhuahui ritual in Chitu Hua Village, Loufan County, Shanxi Province. Drawing on theories from traditional Chinese music and employing methodologies from ethnomusicology, the research conducts an in-depth analysis of the work's musical characteristics, including its modal system, rhythmic structure, melodic contour, and formal organization. The primary source materials derive from field recordings and notated transcriptions collected during ethnographic fieldwork. The analysis reveals that Shanpo Yang is fundamentally based on the pentatonic scale, while incorporating localized modal variations such as altered gong and zhi tones. Its rhythm alternates between free-meter passages and metrically regular sections. Structurally, the piece combines cyclical and segmented forms, aligning closely with spatial transitions and the temporal sequencing of ritual activities. This study not only elucidates the regional stylistic features and ritual functions embedded in the musical structure of Shanpo Yang, but also demonstrates how the piece contributes to the organization of ritual time-space and emotional expression through its sonic architecture. By integrating case-specific analysis with a broader theoretical framework, the paper deepens our understanding of the internal logic and cultural context of northern Chinese ritual music. Moreover, the findings offer a practical model for localized musical analysis and provide both theoretical justification and empirical support for the documentation and transmission of ritual instrumental traditions.

Keywords: Longhuahui Ritual, Shanpoyang, , Musical Characteristics

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In northern China, instrumental music plays a central role in folk religious rituals. It is commonly used to welcome deities, ward off evil spirits, guide processions, and enhance the emotional intensity of ritual climaxes. The sonic elements of this music carry significant functional and symbolic meanings. In Chitu Hua Village, Loufan County, Shanxi Province, the Longhuahui ritual is held annually. This three-day event includes a complete sequence of ritual practices, welcoming deities, incense offering, processions, scripture chanting, and thanksgiving rites—all accompanied by traditional wind and percussion ensemble music. The ensemble typically consists of suona, sheng, guan, gongs, and drums, performing approximately 18 instrumental pieces throughout the ceremony. These musical works not only mark ritual transitions and guide physical movements but also create a sacred atmosphere through specific modal choices, rhythmic shifts, and formal structures. They contribute

significantly to the construction of ritual space and the symbolic expression of human-divine interaction.

Although research on Chinese religious music has grown in recent years, existing scholarship predominantly focuses on vocal traditions, chanting systems, or bodily practices (Jones, 2017; Wong, 2020). In contrast, systematic structural analyses of instrumental pieces remain relatively scarce. Instrumental music is often treated briefly, with limited attention given to its melodic construction, modal systems, and rhythmic organization, particularly in relation to ritual context and symbolic function. These gaps indicate the need for deeper investigation.

Among the instrumental repertoire performed in Longhuahui, the piece Shanpo Yang stands out as particularly representative and expressive. It is a widely circulated traditional folk instrumental composition in northern China, known for its powerful and resonant melodic style, lively and forceful rhythm, and frequent use in rituals and temple fairs across Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Hebei provinces. Within the blowing and percussion traditions of northern Shanxi, Shanpoyang frequently serves as a core musical piece during key moments such as divine processions and deity welcoming ceremonies. It embodies both religious and symbolic meanings, while also motivating collective emotions and advancing ritual progression through its musical structure. In rural temple festivals in regions like Yanggao, the piece is typically led by high-pitched suona or guan, accompanied by gongs, sheng, and other instruments, creating a highly charged sonic landscape suitable for opening sequences, spirit elevation, and incense rituals (Jones, 2007). Its soaring melodic lines, sharp rhythmic contrasts, and complex modal structures construct an intense ritual ambiance. As one of the most emotionally expressive and structurally intricate pieces of the entire ritual, Shanpoyang offers a valuable case for structural music analysis.

This study presents a comprehensive musical analysis of Shanpoyang, examining its modal systems, rhythmic organization, melodic development, and formal structure. The goal is to deepen our understanding of how the aesthetics of traditional Chinese music are enacted in localized religious practice. At the same time, it seeks to address current gaps in the scholarship on ritual instrumental music by offering theoretical insights and empirical support for both academic discourse and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

In northern rural Chinese societies, religious rituals exhibit a deep integration of belief practices, sonic behavior, and local social structures. Traditional instrumental music plays an irreplaceable role in this context. Its functions extend far beyond deity invocation or procession guidance; through timbral texture, rhythmic design, and performative style, instrumental music actively participates in the construction of ritual space, regulation of temporal flow, and arousal of collective emotion. It serves not only as an audible marker of ritual sequence but also as a crucial medium for expressing sacredness and reinforcing communal experience.

The Longhuahui ritual in Chitu Hua Village exemplifies a large-scale folk religious practice deeply embedded in regional culture. Across its three-day duration, the core stages of deity welcoming, incense offering, processions, chanting, and thanksgiving are all underscored by music, which provides the structural backbone and emotional propulsion of the event. The ensemble—featuring suona, sheng, guan, and percussion instruments—performs 18 instrumental pieces, each functioning within specific ritual segments to deliver clear symbolic

cues and affective resonance. These works guide bodily actions and signal procedural transitions while shaping a ritual soundscape charged with emotional and symbolic tension through modal choice, rhythmic design, and melodic motion.

Despite increased attention to Chinese religious music in recent literature, the focus remains largely on vocal forms, liturgical recitation, and bodily performance (Jones, 2017; Wong, 2020). Structural analyses of instrumental music within religious contexts remain limited. Particularly under-researched are those complex and symbolically loaded pieces repeatedly used in local rituals. Often reduced to background or accompanimental roles, such works deserve deeper analysis to uncover the interactive mechanisms between musical structure and ritual function.

Within the Longhuahui repertoire, Shanpoyang stands as a paradigmatic work, both structurally rich and highly expressive. With its forceful melody, layered modal content, and rhythmic dynamism, it holds a central position in northern folk instrumental traditions. Frequently performed at pivotal ritual moments, it constructs a potent ritual soundscape and exemplifies the expressive capabilities of traditional instrumental music. This article focuses on Shanpoyang as a case study for structural analysis, exploring its modal framework, rhythmic patterns, melodic contour, and formal layout. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to the underdeveloped scholarship on ritual instrumental music, enhance understanding of traditional Chinese musical aesthetics in religious contexts, and provide new theoretical and empirical foundations for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, scholarly attention to ritual music in Chinese folk religion has gradually extended to the domain of instrumental music. Nevertheless, the overall body of research remains concentrated around four key dimensions:

(1) the social functions and spatiotemporal contexts of ritual instrumental performance; (2) the cultural symbolism and philosophical implications embedded in instruments and sound, particularly their connection to the rites and music tradition; (3) structural and musical analysis of selected instrumental pieces; and (4) the marginalization, transformation, and cultural reproduction of folk ritual instrumental practices in contemporary society.

First, in terms of social function and ritual context, Stephen Jones has conducted extensive fieldwork in areas such as Yanggao in Shanxi and parts of northern Shaanxi, focusing on local suona ensembles and their roles in ritual life. His work illustrates how instrumental music, especially in funerals and temple fairs, interacts closely with village social structures and individual identity formation (Jones, 2007; 2009; 2015). Similarly, the widespread use of suona ensembles in Shanxi's folk rituals demonstrates the instrument's sonic power and symbolic force: not only do they demarcate sacred and secular spaces, but they also serve as an auditory medium for connecting the human and spiritual realms (Mark, 2012). From an anthropological standpoint, Rawski and Watson (1998) have analyzed ritual instrumental practices in Yunnan and Taiwan, highlighting how music contributes to the construction of social authority and the transmission of collective memory.

In exploring cultural philosophy and historical legacy, numerous scholars have approached ritual music through the lens of Confucian aesthetics and the li-yue tradition, viewing instrumental sound as a tool for maintaining social order, reinforcing hierarchical relations, and transmitting moral values. In this view, ritual instrumental music operates as a symbolic system that reflects cosmic harmony (Zhang, 2010; Liu, 2024). The Research on Daoist Music in China notes that Daoist musical ensembles—typically comprising suona, sheng, and other wind instruments—play not only aesthetic roles but also mediate between the human and divine, forming a “sonic bridge” in ritual communication. Through changes in mode and rhythm, these pieces convey layered symbolic meanings, deeply rooted in local oral traditions (Yang, 2023).

However, detailed analysis of the internal musical structure and specific functional mechanisms of ritual instrumental works remains limited. Although Picard and Jones (1999) provided overviews of various regional instrumental styles and melodic characteristics, their discussion remains largely descriptive, lacking in-depth examination of phrase structure or modal modulation in specific pieces. A few studies have explored instrumental music within labor contexts, emphasizing its dual role in organization and expression. Yet, these works generally center on labor songs rather than religious rituals (Huang, 2022). Kang (2012) introduced the concept of “temporal structure in ritual music,” offering a theoretical framework for understanding how instrumental performance organizes rhythmic flow and ritual sequence. However, empirical analysis of melodic and formal structure remains insufficient. In his ethnography of ritual music in Yanggao County, Jones emphasized that musical performance is not merely an artistic act but part of a broader “ritual soundscape,” in which even lower-status performers such as drummers contribute meaningfully to social and spiritual expression (Wong, 2019). While much research on northern Chinese folk ritual music continues to focus on social and cultural contexts, Jones himself has pointed out that the “musical” aspects—particularly melody and rhythm—are still under-analyzed, a gap that this study seeks to address (Jones, 2016).

In addition, broader commentaries and critical reviews have drawn attention to current research limitations. Shu-feng (2007), in a review of studies on the li-yue tradition up to 2006, noted the historical preference for vocal music in academic research, which has led to a lack of theoretical and methodological development in the study of instrumental music. Szczepanski (2015), adopting a perspective of cultural transformation, examined the marginalization and reinvention of ritual instrumental practices in contemporary China. He argues that these musical forms simultaneously continue tradition and act as arenas of cultural negotiation amid social change.

The volume *Chinese Folk Instrumental Traditions* offers preliminary analytical approaches to labeled melodies, structural forms, and modal systems in northern wind and percussion music, providing valuable methodological references for interpreting pieces like Shanpoyang (Jones & Picard, 1999). Although comprehensive musical analyses of Shanpoyang are still lacking, scattered descriptions of its musical function, melodic contour, and formal segmentation appear in studies of northern ritual music and related field reports. These existing works provide a foundation for this study’s analysis of pitch organization and rhythmic structure.

Together, these research trajectories constitute the current framework for the study of Chinese ritual instrumental music. Yet it is worth noting that, despite its central role in setting ritual

tempo, guiding action, and creating sacred ambiance, instrumental music is rarely analyzed in terms of its internal musical logic. Key elements such as melodic development, modal structure, and rhythmic organization require further systematic investigation within ritual contexts, using case-based approaches.

To summarize, while existing literature has yielded important insights into the social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of ritual instrumental music—particularly from the perspectives of sociology, anthropology, and history—musicological analyses remain relatively underdeveloped. In particular, there is a noticeable lack of detailed research on the melodic, rhythmic, and modal features of instrumental pieces within localized ritual settings. To address this gap, the present study takes the piece Shanpoyang, performed during the Longhuahui ritual in Loufan County, Shanxi, as a case study. Drawing upon methods of musical analysis and ethnomusicological fieldwork, this paper explores its melodic structure, rhythmic patterns, and modal system, aiming to uncover its multiple roles in ritual sequencing, spatial symbolism, and emotional expression.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comprehensive methodological framework that integrates ethnographic fieldwork with structural musical analysis. The research centers on the instrumental piece Shanpoyang, performed during the Longhuahui ritual in Chitu Hua Village, Loufan County, Shanxi Province. As a core musical segment repeatedly featured in the ritual process, Shanpoyang plays a crucial role in signaling ritual transitions, shaping sacred atmospheres, and guiding temporal progression. Its representative and functional significance makes it a valuable case for analysis. By closely examining this single piece, the study aims to reveal how instrumental music participates—at the levels of melody, rhythm, and formal structure, in constructing sacred time-space and orchestrating ritual behavior within the local religious context.

Fieldwork was primarily conducted after the Spring Festival of 2024, during which the research team visited Chitu Hua Village to observe and participate in the annual Longhuahui ritual. Throughout the ritual process, a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews was employed, with a particular focus on the performance of Shanpoyang during key ceremonial moments such as the deity procession and temple entry. Three high-definition audio-visual recordings of complete performances were collected. In parallel, detailed documentation of the ritual behavior, spatial arrangements, and environmental soundscape was undertaken to reconstruct the performance context as faithfully as possible.

In the data collection phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with five experienced instrumentalists and two ritual organizers. These interviews addressed the origins and evolution of Shanpoyang, its performance conventions, structural organization, and functional roles within the ritual. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, with participants' informed consent obtained prior to recording. All recordings were transcribed, and local dialectal terms used by performers were verified and standardized through follow-up clarification.

Based on the transcribed materials, the study carried out a detailed musical analysis of Shanpoyang using Western staff notation. The analysis encompassed melodic contour,

Figure 2 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

In summary, the piece employs six distinct scale degrees, forming a Yu-centered hexatonic modal structure. The complete pitch set consists of: Yu (B) – Biangong (A) – Gong (G) – Shang (F#) – Jue (E) – Zhi (D) – Yu (B), as shown in Figure 3. This type of expanded pentatonic structure is typical in northern ritual instrumental traditions and exemplifies how local musical cultures adapt and extend traditional modal systems to accommodate both functional ritual needs and expressive artistic goals.



Figure 3 Shanpoyang Scale Diagram

4.2 Modes

The modal structure of this piece reflects a characteristic feature commonly found in northern Chinese ritual instrumental music: the extension of the traditional pentatonic system into a hexatonic framework. According to traditional Chinese music theory, modal identification primarily depends on determining the "Gong" note (i.e., the tonic), which functions as both the structural center of the melody and the tonal anchor of the entire pitch system. While the tonic often appears as the final note of the piece, a more rigorous modal analysis must also consider its recurrence throughout the melodic progression, its cadential function, and its structural relationship to other degrees scale.

As shown in Figure 4, the final note of the piece is B. According to the pitch-to-scale-degree correspondence in the Chinese pentatonic system, B corresponds to the "Yu" degree. Further analysis of the melodic flow reveals that B frequently appears at the ends of phrases, often functioning as a cadential tone with clear stability and emphasis. This confirms that B is not only the final note but also the primary pitch around which the melody is organized. Therefore, the modal classification of this piece can be identified as Yu mode (羽调式).



Figure 4 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

In addition, the pitch system remains stable throughout the piece, with no evident modulation or modal shifts. This reinforces the unity and consistency of the Yu mode. From the perspective of melodic motion, there are no occurrences of semitones or chromatic alterations that might suggest Westernized modal inflections. Instead, the piece demonstrates a conservative and restrained pitch vocabulary, typical of traditional ritual music. This adherence to a single, unaltered mode aligns with the performance practices of many northern ritual ensembles in

Shanxi and neighboring regions, where the maintenance of modal consistency plays a key role in establishing a solemn, continuous, and unified ritual atmosphere. The aesthetic strategy of modal unity, as seen in this piece, reflects a broader cultural emphasis on ceremonial coherence and symbolic integrity.

4.3 Melody

The melodic contour of this piece spans more than an octave, demonstrating a relatively wide pitch range. Within this register, the melody unfolds primarily through stepwise motion and small skips, with intervals predominantly consisting of seconds and thirds within the diatonic scale. As shown in Figure 5, such close intervallic movement contributes to the smoothness and internal coherence of the melodic line, resulting in a stable and continuous overall direction.



Figure 5 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

At the same time, the melody also incorporates larger intervallic leaps, such as perfect fourths, perfect fifths, and even minor sevenths (see Figure 6). These wider intervals are strategically positioned in specific parts of the melody, enhancing contrast and dynamic tension without undermining the overall coherence. Their presence adds depth and expressiveness to the melodic structure.



Figure 4.6 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

In addition, the piece makes extensive use of melodic repetition techniques, including motivic repetition and phrase-level recurrence, as shown in Figure 7. This use of repetition not only enhances the recognizability and memorability of the melody but also reinforces its symbolic meaning and collective resonance within the context of ritual music. Repetitive structures function as ritual anchors, guiding participants into a specific psychological or ceremonial state, while maintaining a sense of temporal order and continuity throughout the ritual.



Figure 7 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

In summary, the melodic structure of the piece achieves an organic balance between fluidity and emphasis. The continuity generated by stepwise motion, the expressive contrast created by

leaps, and the structural clarity established through motivic repetition interact closely, endowing the melody with both aesthetic tension and strong functional and symbolic resonance appropriate to ritual music.

4.4 Rhythms

In terms of metric structure, the piece is notated 4/4 time, a duple meter commonly found in ritual music. This meter provides a stable and regular rhythmic pulse, aligning with the processional and organizational needs typical of ritual performance. The rhythmic framework of the melody is primarily constructed from quarter notes, eighth notes, and dotted eighth notes, which form recurring basic rhythmic units and constitute the foundational rhythmic patterns of the entire piece (see Figure 8).



Figure 8 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

In addition to standard rhythmic figures, the piece also incorporates syncopated rhythms and off-beat accents as shown in Figure 9. These techniques introduce subtle tension and forward momentum within the stable metrical context. While maintaining rhythmic clarity, they add variety and dynamism to the musical surface. The alternation between regularity and rhythmic variation enriches the music's temporal dimension, creating a sense of contrast and preventing monotony during repetition.



Figure 9 An excerpt from the melody of Shanpoyang.

From a functional perspective, the flexible use of rhythmic variation within a fixed meter reflects an organic balance between structural clarity and expressive freedom, a hallmark of ritual music. Such rhythmic nuances may also correspond to shifts in ritual movement or gesture, reinforcing the coordination between sound and physical action and enhancing the music's performative and symbolic roles within the ceremonial context.

4.5 Form

In terms of formal design, this piece adopts a single-part structure consisting of six phrases. Although it lacks a clear multi-sectional division, the phrases exhibit a well-defined internal organizational logic and structural progression. The first phrase (a) introduces the main thematic material, establishing the melodic and rhythmic framework of the piece. The second phrase (b) develops this material by introducing subtle variations in melodic contour and rhythmic detail, thus advancing the thematic evolution.

The third phrase (c) introduces a new element—syncopated rhythm—which creates a marked contrast with the previous phrases and enriches the overall sonic texture. The fourth phrase (d) continues and expands upon the rhythmic motives introduced in phrase c, further consolidating the newly established rhythmic character. The final two phrases (e and f) serve as varied recapitulations of phrase c. While maintaining motivic coherence, they demonstrate flexibility through nuanced modifications in rhythm and melody. The overall structure of the piece is as shown in Figure 10

|a | b | c | d | c' | c'' |

Figure 10 Form and Structure Analysis Diagram of Shanpoyang

Although formally concise, the internal structure reveals a well-ordered hierarchy. The logical progression from thematic exposition to contrast, development, and motivic variation reflects a clear sense of structural planning and aesthetic intention. This strategy of balancing unity and variation is characteristic of ritual instrumental music, where musical continuity and rhythmic stability serve symbolic and performative functions essential to the ritual context.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has conducted a systematic and in-depth musical analysis of Shanpoyang from multiple dimensions, including scale structure, modal characteristics, melodic progression, rhythmic and metric design, and formal layout, with the aim of uncovering the internal logic and stylistic features of this instrumental ritual piece, as well as its cultural and functional implications.

From the perspective of pitch organization, the piece is based on the pentatonic scale, embodying the essential characteristics of traditional Chinese modal systems. The mode is identified as Yu mode, established by the presence of Zhi (Gong) as the tonal center and Yu as the final note. This reflects both the theoretical logic and practical application of traditional Chinese modal thinking. The Yu mode not only provides structural stability but also aligns with the solemnity and spiritual orientation demanded by ritual function.

In terms of melodic construction, the melody spans more than an octave and combines stepwise motion with intervallic leaps, reinforced by motivic and phrase-level repetition. This design results in a melodic line that is both fluid and coherent. The alternation and integration of different intervallic motions enhance the memorability of the melody and evoke a sense of temporal continuity and symbolic order required in ritual contexts.

The rhythmic aspect of the piece is grounded in a stable 2/4 meter, enriched by the interplay of regular rhythmic patterns and syncopations. This rhythmic variation introduces dynamism and tension while maintaining metric clarity. It supports the functional demands of ritual performance, such as synchronized bodily movement and the experience of cyclical time.

Structurally, the piece adopts a single-part form consisting of six interrelated phrases. Although the form is simple, it displays a logical internal structure, moving from thematic exposition to development, contrast, and variation. This organic phrase progression can be seen as a musical

reflection of ritual flow—from invocation through transformation to closure—creating a symbolic “sonic ritual” through musical form.

In conclusion, Shanpoyang demonstrates a refined interplay between modal stability, melodic expressivity, rhythmic vitality, and formal clarity, achieving a balance between structure and expression. Its musical language is deeply rooted in cultural function while also displaying a high level of compositional sophistication. This study not only enhances our understanding of Chinese ritual instrumental music but also offers a methodological reference for future research in ethnomusicology and musical analysis.

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