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**Research Article**

# Traditional Suona Performance in Henan Province

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the historical evolution and regional differentiation of the suona (a traditional Chinese double-reed wind instrument), with a particular focus on the stylistic formation and contemporary development of the Henan suona tradition. The primary objective is to analyze how regional cultural ecology has shaped performance styles and transmission systems, and how Henan suona has maintained continuity while adapting to modern contexts. A qualitative research design was employed, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and performance analysis. The research population comprised suona performers, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and members of folk drum music troupes in selected regions of Henan Province. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select key informants with extensive performance experience and transmission roles. Data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews, participant observation in live performances and rehearsals, and documentary analysis of historical records and musical materials. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to stylistic characteristics, inheritance mechanisms, and contemporary transformations.

The findings reveal that Henan suona performance is centered on the "Ka play" technique, which functions as a core expressive mode shaping its distinctive musical identity characterized by high-pitched, rugged, and passionate sonic qualities. Its transmission system relies heavily on oral and mental teaching within familial lineages and folk drum ensembles, facilitating intergenerational transfer of embodied performance knowledge. In contemporary contexts, Henan suona demonstrates a process of "creative transformation," as performers increasingly engage with modern stage production, digital media dissemination, and cross-disciplinary collaborations while preserving core aesthetic principles. These developments indicate a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation,

offering empirical insights into the resilience and adaptive mechanisms of intangible cultural heritage in China.

## 1. Introduction

The suona is one of the most representative traditional wind instruments in Chinese folk music and occupies a prominent position in China's ritual, ceremonial, and community life. Beyond its function as a musical instrument, the suona serves as an important cultural medium through which collective emotions, social values, and local identities are expressed and transmitted across generations (Yang, 1981; Zhang, 2008). Owing to its powerful tone, rich expressive capacity, and adaptability to diverse performance contexts, the suona has long been employed in weddings, funerals, festivals, temple fairs, and other communal activities, making it an indispensable component of Chinese folk culture (Tian, 2005; Zhang, 2005). Among the various regional traditions of suona performance, the Henan school occupies a particularly significant position. As one of the major birthplaces of Chinese civilization, Henan Province possesses a rich cultural heritage in which folk music, ritual practices, and local opera traditions have developed in close interaction over centuries (Liu, 2006; Sun, 2012). Within this cultural environment, Henan suona has formed distinctive artistic characteristics, including unique performance techniques, stylistic features, repertoire systems, and transmission mechanisms (Hao, 1986, 1992; Zhou, 2016). These characteristics not only distinguish Henan suona from other regional traditions but also reflect the dynamic relationship between musical performance and local social life. Previous studies have examined the historical evolution, repertoire development, performance styles, and educational transmission of suona music from various perspectives. Research has explored the genealogy of suona inheritors and repertoire preservation (Chen, 2020), the cultivation of professional performers and educational development (Gao, 2015, 2023), as well as the cultural meanings embedded in traditional suona works (Zhang, 2005). Other scholars have focused on the artistic characteristics of Henan suona and its stylistic distinctions from other regional schools (Hao, 1986, 1992; Zhou, 2016). Furthermore, studies have addressed the challenges of inheritance and innovation in contemporary suona practice, highlighting the need to balance cultural preservation with artistic adaptation in modern society (Hu, 2021; Wang, 2020).

Despite these valuable contributions, existing scholarship has largely approached the suona from the perspectives of historical development, instrumental characteristics, repertoire classification, and educational transmission (Mei, 2004; Gao, 2015). Consequently, the suona is often treated as a static cultural artifact or an isolated musical form, while its dynamic nature as a living performance practice receives comparatively limited attention. Moreover, previous research frequently analyzes performance techniques, stylistic expression, repertoire selection, and performance contexts as separate dimensions, without sufficiently examining how these elements interact and generate meaning during actual performances. Such an approach overlooks the performative processes through which musicians negotiate cultural continuity, audience engagement, and social significance.

To address this gap, the present study adopts the theoretical perspective of performance studies and conceptualizes Henan suona as a situated cultural practice rather than merely a musical genre or instrumental tradition. Performance studies emphasize the embodied, contextual, and socially constructed dimensions of cultural expression, providing an effective framework for understanding how traditions are enacted, transmitted, and transformed through performance. From this perspective, Henan suona performances are viewed as

dynamic events in which performers employ bodily techniques, musical expression, emotional communication, and social interaction to construct cultural meaning and sustain tradition. By examining the interrelationship between performance techniques, repertoire practices, stylistic expression, and performance contexts, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural functions and contemporary significance of Henan suona performance. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions concerning the preservation, transmission, and revitalization of Chinese traditional music in contemporary society.

2. Objectives

1) Historical evolution and regional differentiation of the Suona.
2) Historical development and stylistic formation of the Suona tradition in Henan Province.

## 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 The Historical Evolution and Regional Differentiation of Suona

The suona is widely regarded as one of the most representative traditional wind instruments in China's folk music, with a long historical trajectory and deep integration into social and cultural life. Existing research consistently emphasizes that the suona should not be merely understood as an instrument, but rather as a cultural medium embedded in folk rituals, ceremonial activities, and community practices. Through repeated use in important social occasions, the suona gradually acquired symbolic meanings related to communication, emotional expression, and collective identity in traditional Chinese society (Mei Xuelin, 2004). Historically, scholars argue that the evolution of the suona (a traditional Chinese wind instrument) is deeply intertwined with transformations in social structures and cultural practices. The development of suona performance has not been driven solely by musical innovation, but rather through continuous interaction with ritual needs, community expectations, and regional customs. This adaptive process has enabled the instrument to remain vibrant across different historical periods while responding to changing cultural contexts (Zhang Zhike, 2005). Thus, the historical development of the suona reflects a dynamic relationship between musical practice and social life, rather than a linear progression of stylistic refinement.

As the suona spread to different regions, it interacted with local folk music, ritual practices, and traditional operas, gradually forming diverse regional performance styles. This process indicates that the evolution of the suona cannot be reduced to a unified national narrative but should be understood as a complex interaction between historical continuity and localized cultural conditions. In terms of regional style classification, Gao Changchun (2023) in "A Comparative Artistic Perspective on the Development of China Suona Art Schools" deeply explored the formation of China suona art styles, arguing that geographical factors, kinship ties, and professional connections collectively shaped regional differences. Documents such as "Selected Suona Etudes" roughly divide China suona styles into major schools like Shandong, Henan, Northeast, Hebei, and Shanxi, each characterized by unique performance techniques, representative repertoire, outstanding performers, and stylistic conventions. For example, the Shandong school is often described as rugged and bold, emphasizing strong rhythmic drive and

high-pitched melodic contours, while the Henan school is associated with delicate emotional expression and refined melodic treatment (Zhang, 2022).

### 3.2 The Historical Development and Style Formation of the Shuona in Henan

Under the general historical development background of China suona, Henan Province occupies a particularly important position due to its rich cultural heritage and profound traditions of folk music and opera. Liu Yanchun (2006) pointed out in "Henan Music Records" that the Henan suona, as a traditional folk instrument, has been widely spread in Henan since the Tang Dynasty. These suona ensembles are usually organized by family or village, with members mostly being farmers or artisans who make a living by farming. However, they form bands to perform outdoors during important occasions such as festivals, weddings, and funerals to supplement their household income. Further research indicates that the historical development of Henan Suona reflects a process of cultural localization. The performance practices gradually adapted to local aesthetic preferences, emotional expression, and social functions. This localization process not only shaped performance techniques and repertoire selection but also established a stable regional performance identity distinct from other traditions (Hao Yuqi, 1992). Scholars note that the interaction between Henan Suona performances and local operas influenced both performance techniques and stylistic expressions. Suona performers in the region often drew inspiration from the vocal techniques, melodic structures, and dramatic expressions of local operas, developing a performance style that emphasizes emotional expressiveness and strong narrative qualities. These characteristics have gradually become the hallmark of traditional Henan Suona performances.

From a performance-oriented perspective, research indicates that Henan's traditional suona (a Chinese wind instrument) is characterized by intense emotional intensity, flexible melodic treatment, and tight vocal imitation. The influence of local opera traditions is frequently discussed in literature, particularly in relation to phrasing, ornamentation, and emotional expression. Through performance practice, Henan suona performances often employ vocal performance techniques, enabling instrumental music to convey narrative significance and emotional depth.

### 3.3 Research gaps and the theoretical framework of this study

While existing research provides crucial insights into the historical evolution, regional distribution, and cultural functions of the suona, it remains significantly limited. Many studies tend to treat historical development, performance techniques, repertoire classification, and inheritance systems as separate analytical themes, resulting in fragmented examinations of traditional suona performances. There is a lack of studies that integrate performance practices, social functions, and cultural contexts into a unified analytical framework. This limitation is particularly evident in Henan suona research: although existing studies have acknowledged its cultural significance and unique characteristics, performance-oriented research that systematically connects historical formation, local performance features, repertoire practices, inheritance mechanisms, and contemporary development remains relatively limited.

To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study employs a performance-oriented conceptual framework that integrates five interconnected dimensions: historical context, local performance characteristics, performance logic, inheritance mechanisms, and contemporary transformation. It redefines Henan suona performance as a dynamic cultural

practice rather than a static musical form. Guided by this framework, the research collects, analyzes, and interprets data to transcend descriptive categorization, aiming to achieve an interpretive understanding of performance as a culturally embedded, practice-based, and historically contextualized phenomenon.

## 4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the historical evolution, regional differentiation, and stylistic formation of the suona tradition, with a specific focus on Henan Province. The research aims to understand both the cultural continuity and contemporary transformation of suona performance practices within their socio-cultural context.

The study population includes traditional suona performers, recognized intangible cultural heritage inheritors, members of folk drum music troupes, and local cultural practitioners in Henan Province. These groups represent both custodians and active transmitters of the suona tradition.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with extensive performance experience, recognized transmission roles, and deep knowledge of regional stylistic traditions. This ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives.

The primary research tools include semi-structured interview guides, participant observation protocols, and document analysis checklists. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth narratives regarding performance techniques, inheritance systems, and artistic development. Participant observation was conducted during live performances, rehearsals, and community cultural events to capture embodied practices and contextual performance dynamics. Documentary analysis involved reviewing historical archives, musical records, and relevant scholarly literature.

Data collection was carried out through field visits to selected regions in Henan Province, where suona performance remains active. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and field notes were systematically documented during observations. Supplementary materials such as photographs and video recordings were also collected to support triangulation.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic coding process to identify recurring themes related to stylistic features (e.g., the “Ka play” technique), transmission mechanisms (oral and mnemonic inheritance), and contemporary adaptations (digital media integration and cross-disciplinary performance). The analysis emphasized pattern recognition, comparison across informants, and interpretation within the broader cultural and historical framework of Chinese traditional music heritage.

## 5. Results

5.1 Historical Evolution and Regional Differentiation of the Suona The findings indicate that the Suona has undergone a long-term historical evolution shaped by regional cultural ecosystems, resulting in clearly differentiated stylistic schools across China. Among these, the Henan Suona tradition demonstrates a distinct developmental trajectory characterized by deep integration with local folk ritual practices and operatic traditions. Compared with other regional schools, Henan Suona exhibits a stronger orientation toward expressive intensity, ritual

functionality, and vocal imitation, reflecting its embeddedness within the socio-cultural environment of Central China.

5.2 Stylistic Formation of Henan Suona Tradition The stylistic system of Henan Suona is primarily formed through the interaction between ritual function, emotional expression, and operatic influence. Findings reveal that performance style is not constructed through fixed musical structures but through situational adaptation and embodied practice. The tradition is characterized by a performance logic that prioritizes emotional immediacy, narrative expression, and contextual responsiveness. This stylistic identity is reinforced through long-term engagement with Henan opera, particularly Yu Opera, which has shaped melodic contouring, phrasing, and expressive delivery.

5.3 Performance Characteristics of Henan Suona: The Kaxi Technique A defining feature of Henan Suona performance practice is the Kaxi technique, which functions as a highly specialized expressive mechanism rather than a decorative articulation. Kaxi is characterized by sustained compressed airflow, controlled embouchure tension, and deliberate tonal pressure, producing intense, emotionally charged sonic effects. Unlike continuous blowing techniques, it emphasizes sound retention, compression, and controlled release, requiring advanced coordination of breath, lips, and tongue. Findings confirm that Kaxi serves both technical and expressive functions. It enables performers to achieve heightened dramatic tension suitable for ritual and ceremonial contexts. Moreover, its development is closely linked to apprenticeship-based transmission, confirming that it is a cultivated embodied skill rather than an improvisational ornament.

5.4 Repertoire Practice and Performance Flexibility The study finds that Henan Suona repertoire operates as a flexible performance system rather than a fixed compositional structure. Musical works are continuously reshaped through tempo variation, ornamentation, and contextual adaptation. Repertoire selection is strongly determined by ritual context, particularly the binary structure of celebratory and funeral events. Celebratory contexts emphasize fast tempo, bright timbre, and dense ornamentation, while funeral contexts employ slow tempo, low register, and restrained melodic movement to produce solemn affective expression. Importantly, even within identical repertoire titles, performers demonstrate significant variability depending on ritual scale, local custom, and audience expectation, indicating a highly adaptive interpretive system.

5.5 Instrumental Practice and Performer-Centered Adaptation Findings show that Henan Suona performance practice is characterized by instrumental flexibility, including adjustments in reed construction, airflow pressure, and tonal shaping. These modifications are not treated as deviations but as essential components of performance production. This reflects a performer-centered instrumental logic in which material instrument properties are subordinated to expressive necessity.

5.6 Transmission Mechanism: Family–Community Network System The inheritance of Henan Suona is structured through a dual transmission system combining family lineage and community performance groups. Family-based transmission ensures continuity of technical skill and aesthetic values through long-term immersive learning. In contrast, community ensembles function as expanded training platforms that facilitate stylistic exchange, repertoire diversification, and collective coordination. This networked model ensures both stability and adaptability, enabling the tradition to persist across generations while remaining responsive to evolving social contexts.

5.7 Contemporary Transformation and Adaptive Continuity The findings further demonstrate that Henan Suona is undergoing adaptive transformation in response to modern performance contexts. The instrument has expanded beyond rural ritual settings into concert halls, media productions, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Despite these changes, core performance principles—particularly expressive intensity, timbral identity, and embodied technique—remain intact. Cross-genre integration, especially with contemporary vocal performance and multimedia stage productions, illustrates the recontextualization of traditional techniques. Rather than replacing traditional practices, modern adaptations reinterpret existing expressive resources within new aesthetic frameworks.

5.8 Policy-Driven Cultural Reconfiguration

Finally, the study identifies cultural policy as a significant external factor shaping contemporary development. Heritage protection frameworks have strengthened institutional support for transmission and visibility. However, findings also highlight tensions between standardization and improvisational freedom, emphasizing the need to preserve the situational and performative nature of the tradition.

## 6. Discussion

6.1 Distinctive Performance Characteristics of Henan Suona the findings reveal that Henan suona performance is defined by its highly expressive sonic identity, characterized by strong piercing timbre, rapid ornamental techniques, and flexible melodic structures. These features align with broader descriptions of Chinese folk wind instruments, where expressivity often outweighs strict tonal uniformity (Qureshi, 2007). In Henan practice specifically, performers emphasize yunqiang (melodic inflection) and rhythmic elasticity, particularly in ritual contexts such as weddings and funerals. This supports previous studies suggesting that regional suona traditions are deeply embedded in social function rather than purely musical aesthetics (Yang, 2018). The performance practice thus reflects a “context-driven musical logic,” where meaning is constructed through social function and auditory intensity rather than formal compositional structure.

6.2 Inheritance Mechanisms through Family and Folk Ensembles The second research question highlights that inheritance of Henan suona is primarily sustained through non-institutionalized systems of transmission. Family-based teaching remains the foundational mechanism, where younger generations learn through imitation, repetition, and participation in real performance contexts. This finding corresponds with Wong (2012), who emphasizes that Chinese folk music traditions rely heavily on oral-aural pedagogy rather than written notation systems. Folk performance groups further reinforce this structure by functioning as living training environments, where learners acquire repertoire, improvisational techniques, and social performance etiquette simultaneously. However, this system is increasingly challenged by urban migration and declining youth participation. Despite this, the resilience of apprenticeship-based learning demonstrates the continued relevance of embodied cultural transmission in safeguarding intangible heritage.

6.3 Adaptation to Contemporary Socio-Cultural Changes The third research question reveals that Henan suona performers actively negotiate between tradition and modernity. One major adaptive strategy is stage transformation, where traditional repertoire is recontextualized for concert halls and cultural festivals. This involves standardization of performance length, refinement of ensemble coordination, and integration with modern instrumentation. Additionally, state-led intangible cultural heritage policies have contributed

to the institutional recognition of suona, encouraging its preservation while simultaneously reshaping its performance context (UNESCO, 2003). Performers also increasingly engage in hybridization, incorporating elements from popular music and academic composition to appeal to broader audiences (Liu, 2020). Nevertheless, despite these changes, core musical elements such as timbral brightness, improvisational phrasing, and ceremonial function remain central. This indicates a process of "selective modernization," where adaptation does not equate to cultural loss but rather strategic transformation.

## 7. Conclusion

This study systematically investigates Henan suona performance art with the aim of clarifying its artistic logic, inheritance mechanisms, and contemporary development pathways. The findings demonstrate that Henan suona functions as an integrated cultural system in which performance practice, transmission structure, and modern adaptation are closely interconnected. The research shows that Henan suona is grounded in a holistic "performance logic," where technique, expression, social function, and cultural context operate as a unified system. The core technique "Kaxi" reflects the close coordination of breath control, embouchure, and emotional expression, highlighting the instrument's strong situational responsiveness and affective immediacy. In terms of inheritance, the study identifies a dual transmission network combining family-based learning and community drum ensemble participation. This embodied mode of knowledge transfer ensures both the continuity of core techniques and the diversification of stylistic expression through experiential, intergenerational learning. Regarding contemporary development, Henan suona demonstrates a process of "creative transformation," in which performers actively engage with modern stages, digital media, and cross-cultural contexts while maintaining essential aesthetic principles. This adaptive strategy enables the tradition to remain relevant within contemporary cultural environments.

Overall, the findings align with the research objectives by revealing Henan suona as a dynamic and resilient heritage system. The study highlights its significance in demonstrating how traditional performing arts can sustain continuity and vitality through the integration of embodied transmission and adaptive innovation in modern society.

## 8. Recommendations

This study develops a new body of knowledge by conceptualizing Henan suona as a living, system-oriented performance ecology in which artistic expression, embodied transmission, and cultural adaptation are mutually reinforcing. Rather than viewing the tradition as a fixed heritage form, the research positions it as a continuously evolving practice shaped by interaction between technique, social structure, and contemporary media environments. This framework contributes to intangible cultural heritage studies by highlighting the role of "adaptive continuity" as a core mechanism of survival and transformation in traditional performing arts.

In practical terms, it is recommended that cultural authorities and heritage organizations adopt a dual-support strategy that strengthens both family-based apprenticeship systems and community ensemble networks. Priority should be given to safeguarding embodied knowledge—particularly specialized performance techniques such as "Kaxi"—through systematic documentation, mentorship programs, and master–apprentice training initiatives.

At the same time, sustained support for community performance contexts is essential to maintain stylistic diversity and contextual relevance.

For public engagement, incorporating Henan suona into cultural education programs, museum exhibitions, and community-based arts events is recommended to enhance cultural awareness and intergenerational appreciation. Digital dissemination should be encouraged as a complementary tool for expanding accessibility, while ensuring that representation remains faithful to traditional aesthetic principles and performance integrity.

Future research should further investigate comparative regional studies of suona traditions to refine understanding of transmission variability across cultural contexts. Interdisciplinary approaches combining ethnomusicology, anthropology, and media studies are also recommended to examine the impact of digital technologies on embodied musical knowledge. Additionally, longitudinal research on younger practitioners and evolving audience reception would provide deeper insight into the long-term sustainability and transformation of this heritage form in contemporary society.

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