

Ritual Functions of Suona Performance in Contemporary Northern Dong Weddings in Tianzhu, Guizhou

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ritual functions of suona performance in contemporary Northern Dong weddings in Tianzhu County, Guizhou Province, China. It asks how the instrument helps wedding participants recognise and coordinate important ceremonial moments. The study draws on ethnographic participant observation at six weddings between 2021 and 2025, while the present analysis uses two weddings, held in October 2023 and December 2024, as its principal cases. Supplementary observations from two other weddings are used only to confirm recurring functions. Data include fieldnotes, interviews with wedding participants and a suona player, photographs, and audiovisual recordings. The findings show that suona performance serves three closely related purposes. First, it prompts dispersed relatives to gather, collect ceremonial objects, and form a procession. Second, its projecting sound announces departure, approach, and arrival before visual contact is possible. Third, locally recognised wedding *diaozi* help listeners identify the event as a proper wedding occasion and give experienced performers authority over musical timing. The discussion argues that these effects cannot be attributed to loudness alone. They depend on the relationship among acoustic projection, appropriate repertory, placement within the wedding sequence, and knowledge acquired through repeated participation. Suona performance works alongside verbal instructions, mobile phones, firecrackers, vehicles, and family organisation rather than replacing them. The instrument therefore reinforces and publicly marks actions that participants already partly anticipate. The study concludes that the suona remains important because it offers a flexible and widely recognisable means of coordinating movement across changing village and county-town wedding settings. The claims are limited to the observed cases and do not represent a comprehensive survey of Northern Dong suona repertory.

Keywords: suona, Northern Dong, wedding music, ritual function, ethnomusicology

INTRODUCTION

Ethnomusicology has progressively moved beyond treating music as an autonomous sonic object towards examining it as culturally organised behaviour and situated social action (Blacking, 1973; Merriam, 1964; Small, 1998). This orientation is particularly important in marriage ritual, where sound is embedded in the bodily, spatial, and temporal organisation of ceremonial transition. Although rites-of-passage theory identifies separation, transition, and incorporation as recurrent phases of marriage (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909/1960), ritualisation is accomplished through concrete practices that distinguish ceremonial conduct from ordinary activity (Bell, 1992). Sound contributes to this differentiation by rendering particular moments collectively perceptible. Listening can therefore operate as a culturally learned mode of orientation: participants do not merely hear an acoustic event but recognise its social relevance, spatial direction, and required response (Blessner & Salter, 2007; Feld, 2015; Schafer, 1977/1994).

The suona, a double-reed Chinese shawm distinguished by its penetrating timbre and strong acoustic projection, has long been associated with outdoor processions and life-cycle ceremonies (Thrasher, 2000). Ethnographic work on Chinese shawm bands has demonstrated that their performance is inseparable from local ritual

schedules, repertorial knowledge, specialist labour, and community expectations (Jones, 2007). In Northern Dong weddings in Tianzhu County, Guizhou Province, suona performance occurs at consequential points in the marriage sequence, including the formation and departure of the bride-receiving party, its approach to the bride's household, the bride's transfer from her natal home, and the procession's arrival at the groom's household. Its placement at these moments suggests that it performs practical ritual work rather than functioning only as festive accompaniment.

A clear gap nevertheless remains between existing scholarship on Chinese shawm traditions and the ethnomusicology of Dong, or Kam, expressive culture. Detailed suona research has largely examined instrumental ensembles, performer livelihoods, funerals, and temple ritual in North China (Jones, 2007; Thrasher, 2000). By contrast, international scholarship on Dong/Kam music has concentrated predominantly on Big Song, vocal participation, staged performance, cultural heritage, and ethnic identity (Ingram, 2012; Ingram & Wu, 2017). These studies provide essential accounts of Chinese ritual instrumentalism and Dong musical life, but neither body of scholarship adequately explains how suona sound operates within the micro-temporal and spatial organisation of contemporary Northern Dong weddings. Instrumental wedding practice in Tianzhu consequently remains underrepresented, particularly in relation to how sound coordinates people who may be distributed across household halls, roads, vehicles, thresholds, and apartment buildings.

The research problem is therefore not simply whether the suona remains present in contemporary weddings, but how its sound becomes intelligible and ritually effective. Describing the instrument as loud, traditional, or celebratory does not explain why participants respond by gathering, lifting ceremonial goods, taking up prescribed positions, or preparing a household entrance. Loudness can attract attention, but it cannot independently specify what listeners should do. Such responses depend on the convergence of acoustic projection, locally recognised wedding *diaozi*, repetition, ceremonial timing, performer experience, and knowledge acquired through previous participation. The suona also operates alongside verbal instructions, mobile-phone communication, firecrackers, vehicles, and visual observation. Its role must therefore be examined as part of a broader system of wedding coordination rather than treated as the sole cause of collective movement.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to examine the ritual functions of suona performance and the conditions through which it becomes a culturally intelligible cue for collective action in contemporary Northern Dong weddings in Tianzhu County. The study addresses one central research question: How does suona performance function as a culturally intelligible ritual cue that coordinates collective action at key stages of contemporary Northern Dong weddings in Tianzhu County?

Drawing on ethnographic observation and participant accounts, the article focuses on prompting preparation, announcing approach and arrival, marking movement between households, and establishing local ceremonial recognition. It does not attempt to reconstruct the complete history of Northern Dong wedding music or provide a comprehensive analysis of suona repertory. This delimited scope permits a focused account of how instrumental sound, culturally learned listening, and ritual action intersect in the selected wedding cases.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL APPLICATION

Scholarship on Chinese instrumental traditions establishes the suona's ceremonial prominence but does not, by itself, explain its efficacy in Northern Dong weddings. Thrasher (2000) situates the instrument within Chinese organology and ensemble practice, clarifying how its double-reed construction and acoustic projection support outdoor and processional use. Organological capacity, however, cannot account for why comparable sounds acquire different meanings across localities. Jones's (2007) ethnography of Shanxi shawm bands offers a stronger social analysis by embedding performance in repertory, apprenticeship, livelihood, procession, repetition, variability, and community expectation. Yet its principal settings are North Chinese funerals and temple fairs. Transferring those functions directly to Tianzhu would obscure the kinship obligations, wedding sequence, and local stylistic criteria through which Northern Dong listeners evaluate performance. For this paper, Jones therefore provides a methodological principle rather than a ready-made functional model: ritual efficacy must be established through locally situated practice.

Research on Dong, or Kam, expressive culture presents the complementary limitation. Ingram (2012) examines the mediation of Kam Big Song between village and staged settings, while Ingram and Wu (2017) analyse its entanglement with heritage discourse and ethnic identity. These studies demonstrate that Dong musical meaning is produced through performance context and social representation, but their vocal and heritage emphasis does not explain the micro-temporal work of instrumental sound in Northern Dong weddings. The literature gap is thus not simply an absence of suona research. It is an analytical disjunction between studies of Chinese shawm ritualism outside Tianzhu and studies of Dong music that privilege multipart singing, staging, and heritage. Neither body of work shows how a locally recognised suona performance becomes actionable within the unfolding sequence of a contemporary Tianzhu wedding.

To address this disjunction, the paper applies music-as-action scholarship selectively rather than treating it as a general theoretical preface. Merriam's (1964) relationship among sound, behaviour, and cultural concepts and Blacking's (1973) formulation of humanly organised sound establish the social orientation, but they do not specify how a performance contributes to a particular action. Small's (1998) concept of musicking is used here to define the analytical event as the relationship among players, listeners, moving relatives, ritual objects, and spaces; it is not used to assume that every co-present action is musically caused. Turino's (2008) participatory-presentational distinction is only partly adequate because sonic production is specialist while ritual uptake is collective and bodily. DeNora's (2000) account of music as a resource for social ordering is therefore more directly operational: the analysis compares performance onset with observable movement, while participant accounts and competing cues prevent temporal succession from being mistaken for causation.

Ritual theory is applied with the same restriction. The separation-transition-incorporation sequence proposed by van Gennep (1909/1960) and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality locate departure, transfer, and arrival within the broader transformation of marriage, but macro-structural labels cannot explain how participants recognise that a change of phase has become imminent. Bell's (1992) concept of ritualisation is the more appropriate lens for this paper because it directs attention to the practical differentiation of ordinary and ceremonial activity. It is applied to moments when conversation gives way to procession formation, when an approaching group becomes a ceremonially recognised wedding party, and when movement between households is publicly marked. Bell's framework nevertheless does not explain acoustic transmission. It identifies what is differentiated, whereas the sound-based analysis must explain how that differentiation becomes perceptible across roads, vehicles, thresholds, and apartment spaces.

Schafer's (1977/1994) soundscape approach and Blesser and Salter's (2007) account of aural architecture help identify the spatial conditions under which suona sound travels, but audibility cannot be equated with ritual meaning. Feld's (2015) acoustemology is applied to examine how listeners know through sound before visual confirmation, while avoiding the assumption that all community members possess identical aural competence. The paper therefore separates three analytical relations. Audibility concerns whether timbre and projection carry across space; recognisability concerns whether listeners identify local wedding *diaozi*, repetition, timing, and ceremonial placement; actionability concerns whether that recognition intersects with procedural knowledge strongly enough to orient preparation or movement. Fieldnotes, audiovisual records, and interview explanations are compared across these relations rather than treating loudness as a sufficient explanation.

Taken together, the literature and theoretical application support a conjunctural, not additive, analysis. Small's (1998) musicking defines the relational field, Bell's (1992) ritualisation tests whether performance differentiates a ceremonial stage, and Feld's (2015) acoustemology tests how that differentiation becomes knowable and actionable. Their combination is justified because single-factor accounts produce weak explanations. If projection alone were sufficient, any comparably loud sound would prompt the same response; if symbolism alone were sufficient, local *diaozi*, performer timing, and spatial placement would be incidental; and if the wedding sequence alone determined action, the audible cue would add no coordinating effect. Accordingly, this paper examines when the suona begins, where performers and listeners are located, which sonic features are recognised, what actions follow, how participants interpret the event, and which alternative cues are present. Theory is thus used to structure the ethnographic test of suona efficacy, not to substitute abstract explanation for evidence or to claim a new general theory.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and case selection

This paper adopts a qualitative, event-centred ethnographic design. Ethnomusicological fieldwork is not treated as the extraction of musical objects from their social setting, but as a reflexive inquiry into performance, listening, movement, and locally situated knowledge (Barz & Cooley, 2008). Ethnography is appropriate because the research question concerns how suona performance becomes intelligible and actionable during an unfolding wedding, a process that cannot be reconstructed adequately through a questionnaire or isolated from its ceremonial environment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The unit of analysis is therefore the suona-marked ritual episode: a bounded moment in which performance onset, spatial placement, participant response, and local interpretation can be examined in relation to one another.

The wider fieldwork corpus comprises six weddings observed in Tianzhu between 2021 and 2025. Within this corpus, the present article concentrates on two principal cases selected for the density and relevance of their suona-specific documentation. The wedding held from 1 to 3 October 2023 supplies the most complete multi-day sequence and includes departure, travel, approach, threshold interaction, bride transfer, and arrival. The Diliang Village wedding of 17-18 December 2024 provides a second intensive observation of departure coordination and a documented conversation with an experienced suona performer. Observations from October 2021 and October 2024 are used only where they corroborate the limited claim that suona sound may precede visual contact with an arriving party. Case selection is thus purposive and analytically driven rather than statistically representative.

Participant observation and documentary records

Participant observation was the primary data-collection method because the suona's ritual function is manifested through embodied and temporally ordered conduct rather than through verbal accounts alone. During the 2023 wedding, the researcher participated as a groomsman while observing how musicians, relatives, vehicles, ceremonial objects, and household spaces were coordinated. This dual position made it possible to register the practical uncertainty of the event and to compare activities immediately before, during, and after performance. Following reflexive ethnographic practice (Barz & Cooley, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), participation is treated as a source of situated access rather than as evidence of interpretive neutrality.

Contemporaneous fieldnotes recorded the sequence and location of events and were expanded as soon as practicable after observation. Photographs and audiovisual recordings were subsequently reviewed to refine descriptions of performance onset and cessation, performer-listener positioning, repetition, timbral projection, participant movement, and concurrent cues. Emerson et al. (2011) treat fieldnotes as constructed analytical records rather than transparent reproductions of experience. Audiovisual materials permitted repeated micro-temporal inspection, but they were not used as acoustic measurements or as the basis for a comprehensive repertorial survey. Their function in this paper is evidential: to check the ordering of sound and action and to reduce dependence on retrospective memory.

Informants and interview procedure

Informants were selected purposively according to their direct involvement in the observed suona-marked episodes. They included relatives from the bride's and groom's households, members of the bride-receiving party, a gatekeeper, and one experienced suona performer. This role-based selection was necessary because ritual knowledge is distributed unevenly: family participants can explain what they understood the sound to require, whereas the performer can account for repertorial appropriateness, repetition, and decisions about when to begin, prolong, or conclude performance. The informants are not presented as a demographic sample of Northern Dong society.

Semi-structured interviews and informal follow-up conversations were used to elicit emic interpretations while allowing informants to describe events in their own terms, consistent with qualitative interviewing as a situated production of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Questions concerned what the suona signalled, which

actions were expected, how local wedding *diaozi* were recognised, and how performer timing related to the movement of people and vehicles. Interview statements were treated as situated testimony rather than as self-validating facts: they were compared with fieldnotes, audiovisual records, and accounts from differently positioned participants. Locally specific terminology was retained where analytically necessary, and English renderings were checked against the recorded or written source before inclusion.

Data analysis and methodological rigour

Analysis proceeded in three connected stages. First, chronological event logs were produced for the principal cases by aligning fieldnotes with audiovisual records. Each relevant episode was examined for six variables: performance onset and cessation; the location of performers and listeners; salient sonic features, including projection and repetition; actions occurring immediately before and after the sound; participants' subsequent interpretations; and alternative cues such as verbal instruction, mobile-phone communication, visual contact, vehicle movement, or firecrackers. This event-sequence procedure operationalises the article's distinction among audibility, recognisability, and actionability.

Second, interview and fieldnote materials were coded through a theoretically informed thematic procedure adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes derived from the research question included preparation, departure, approach, arrival, household transfer, local recognition, and performer judgement; these were revised when recurrent field evidence required a different grouping. Third, a cross-case matrix compared whether the same relationship among sound, interpretation, and action recurred in the two principal weddings and whether the limited supplementary observations supported or complicated it. The analysis did not infer causation from temporal succession alone. A functional claim was retained only when an observable sequence was supported by participant interpretation, recurrence, or both, and when plausible competing cues had been considered.

The researcher's Northern Dong background and family relationships enabled access to domestic spaces, local terminology, and informal explanation, but familiarity also created a risk that routine practices would be taken for granted. Reflexive notes, repeated review of recordings, participant clarification, and an audit trail separating direct observation, informant testimony, documentary evidence, and researcher inference were used to manage this tension (Barz & Cooley, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Discrepant moments and delayed responses were retained rather than removed to make the *suona* appear determinative. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, identifying details were controlled where public identification had not been authorised, and field materials were stored with restricted access. The findings consequently seek analytical transferability through transparent contextual description, not statistical generalisation to all Northern Dong weddings. They do not constitute a catalogue of Tianzhu wedding *diaozi* or a comprehensive study of regional performer networks.

RESULTS

Prompting preparation and departure

In the 2023 principal case, event-sequence evidence linked performance onset to an observable change in collective conduct. At approximately 15:00 on 1 October, sixteen members of the bride-receiving party were smoking, talking, and moving between the household and the vehicles. They knew that departure was approaching, but they had not formed a procession. When two invited *suona* players began near the front of the convoy, conversation ceased, remaining baskets and ceremonial objects were collected, and relatives moved towards their assigned positions. Within several minutes, the dispersed gathering had become an ordered bride-receiving party (Fieldnotes, October 1, 2023). The claim of ritual prompting is therefore grounded in the recorded sequence before and after performance onset, rather than in retrospective description alone.

A comparable sequence was documented in Diliang Village on 17 December 2024. Before the performance, eighteen relatives were distributed around the main hall. Following the opening *suona* phrases, cigarettes were extinguished, gift baskets were lifted, red scarves were tied, and participants aligned for departure (Fieldnotes, December 17, 2024). Figure 1 records the instrumentalist performing inside the household and the immediate

proximity of wedding-party members. The photograph corroborates the spatial setting and co-presence of performers and participants; the temporal change in conduct is established by the fieldnotes.



Figure 1: A suona player sounds inside the groom's household while members of the bride-receiving party gather for departure, Diliang Village, December 17, 2024. Field photograph by the author.

Interview evidence supports the interpretation of this sequence as a locally understood convention. Wu (personal communication, December 17, 2024) explained that once the *suona* sounded, people knew that the ceremony had begun and that they should prepare to depart. A groomsman in the 2023 case (personal communication, October 1, 2023) stated, "When we hear the sound of the *suona*, we have to quickly get into position." Neither account suggests that the music specified which basket to carry or where each person should stand. Rather, both informants described a shared cue that made previously assigned responsibilities immediate. Agreement between two observed events and two differently positioned informants supports the finding that performance onset conventionally prompted preparation.

Announcing approach and arrival

The 2023 case also provided direct evidence of signalling across distance. After several minutes of departure performance, the players remained silent during much of the approximately one-hour journey and resumed as the convoy approached the bride's village. Relatives near the household heard the *suona* before every person and vehicle was clearly visible, which gave them time to complete wine and threshold preparations and take up positions at the entrance (Fieldnotes, October 1, 2023). Figure 2 documents the two players immediately in front of a decorated wedding vehicle on the village approach. The image corroborates their mobile position within the procession, while the fieldnotes and participant accounts establish how the approaching sound was interpreted by the waiting household.



Figure 2: Two suona players at the front of the groom's procession near the bride's household, Shidong Township, October 1, 2023. Photograph courtesy of the groom.

Accounts from the two supplementary cases clarify the practical content of the signal. At the 2021 wedding, the bride's mother (personal communication, October 24, 2021) explained that hearing the approaching *suona* meant that family members should arrange themselves at the entrance and prepare to control the groom's party's entry. In the county-town case, the bride's family lived on the fourteenth floor and could not see the procession below; her elder brother (personal communication, October 3, 2024) reported that the *suona* alerted them to move towards the apartment threshold. These accounts do not imply that the instrument communicated an exact distance. They show that listeners used it to identify proximity and ceremonial status before direct visual contact.

The coordinated responses observed in these cases suggest that the cue was widely understood among those present, but the interviews did not systematically compare ritual knowledge by age, gender, residence, or prior wedding experience. Younger relatives, county-town residents, visitors, and people with limited participation in local weddings may not recognise or act on the cue in the same way as experienced community members. The evidence therefore supports shared recognition within the observed episodes without establishing a homogeneous interpretive community. Comparative research is needed to examine how ritual competence is distributed and whether changing participation patterns affect the transmission of *suona*-related knowledge.

Marking movement between households

The temporal distribution of performance in the 2023 wedding shows that the *suona* punctuated movement rather than supplying continuous accompaniment. It began when the groom's party formed for departure at approximately 15:00, stopped after several minutes during the journey, and resumed near the bride's village. On 2 October, it sounded again when the bride reached the wedding car; dowry items were loaded, firecrackers sounded, and the convoy moved from her natal village towards the groom's county-town household (Fieldnotes, October 1–2, 2023). The alternation of sound and silence is evidentially important: renewed performance coincided with formation, approach, bridal transfer, and onward movement, whereas extended travel and waiting did not require continuous playing.

Across these episodes, the instrument did not create the marriage transition independently. Relatives, vehicles, ceremonial goods, firecrackers, verbal direction, and household preparation were already necessary. The recurrent observation was narrower: *suona* performance was concentrated at moments when movement between households had to become publicly recognisable as wedding procedure. This observed distribution provides the basis for describing the instrument as marking separation and transfer, without assuming that every instance of *suona* performance carries an identical meaning.

Local diaozi and performer experience

Wu (personal communication, December 17, 2024) provided emic evidence that acoustic projection alone was not considered sufficient. He emphasised that a Tianzhu wedding required locally appropriate wedding *diaozi*, rather than an arbitrary melody associated with another region or occasion. His explanation identifies repertorial appropriateness as part of the cue's intelligibility: participants were expected to recognise not only the instrument's timbre but also a locally legitimate melodic type performed at the proper ceremonial moment. This article uses that testimony to establish local evaluation, not to claim a complete classification of Tianzhu *suona* repertory.

The repertorial evidence remains preliminary because the present account relies on one performer's testimony and does not include comparative transcription or recognition testing. Future research should record and transcribe performances by multiple Tianzhu *suona* players, compare how performers classify wedding *diaozi*, and use carefully designed listening tasks to examine whether participants identify those items consistently and associate them with the ritual responses documented here. The present finding therefore establishes the local importance attributed to repertorial appropriateness, not a complete or independently corroborated classification of Tianzhu wedding repertory.

Observation complemented the interview evidence. In both principal cases, the players watched the movement of relatives and vehicles, repeated phrases while preparations remained incomplete, and concluded or altered

performance when the party was ready to move. Their timing was therefore responsive rather than mechanically fixed. The combined evidence of participant response, performer explanation, and repeated event-sequence observation supports the finding that families employed musicians for situational judgement as well as instrumental technique.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Making ritual stages audible

The findings clarify how a wedding phase described in ritual theory becomes perceptible in practice. The sequence of separation, transition, and incorporation described by van Gennep (1909/1960) identifies the broad structure of marriage rites, but participants must still know when a particular phase is beginning. In the observed weddings, the suona helped make that change audible. The start of performance did not create the social meaning of departure by itself; rather, it concentrated attention on a moment already prepared through kinship roles, objects, vehicles, and family plans. Sound made the transition public and easier to recognise collectively.

This finding supports Bell's (1992) emphasis on ritualisation as a practical differentiation of actions and spaces. The household hall remained physically the same place, yet its social use changed when relatives stopped informal conversation, collected ceremonial goods, and aligned for departure. The suona contributed to this differentiation by marking when ordinary waiting should give way to ceremonial conduct. The result is more specific than saying that music symbolises marriage: performance participates in the timing and organisation of the ritual itself.

Why loudness is not sufficient

The cases also show the limits of an explanation based only on acoustic power. A loud sound can attract attention, but it cannot by itself tell people which baskets to carry, where to stand, or what relationship an arriving group has to the household. Those responses depended on previously learned knowledge. Feld's (2015) account of listening as a way of knowing is useful here, but the ethnographic material adds an important qualification: acoustic knowledge is socially specific. Participants interpreted the performance through familiarity with weddings, local *diaozi*, and the expected sequence.

This relationship between sound and convention also explains the performer's insistence on local repertory. If projection were the only requirement, any amplified melody or loud instrument could perform the same task. The local distinction between appropriate and inappropriate *diaozi* shows that recognition depends on stylistic fit as well as volume. The cue works because listeners hear both acoustic presence and ceremonial appropriateness.

Coordination within a larger communication system

The suona should not be treated as the sole cause of coordinated movement. Wedding participants usually knew the approximate timetable, received direct instructions, observed what older relatives were doing, and communicated by mobile phone. Firecrackers, vehicle movement, and visual contact also announced changes. In this wider system, the distinctive contribution of the suona was to provide a public cue that many people could hear at once and identify as ceremonial rather than merely logistical.

Firecrackers require particular caution in this comparison. In the documented episodes they accompanied celebration and selected transitions, including the bride's transfer and convoy departure, whereas suona performance recurred at preparation, approach, departure, and arrival. This distribution suggests that firecrackers offered a broad festive announcement while the suona could acquire more specific procedural relevance through local *diaozi*, performer placement, and timing within the wedding sequence. Because the study did not systematically record every onset of both cues or directly test how participants differentiated them, this interpretation remains provisional. A larger comparative study should align the timing and placement of both sounds with participant explanations before stronger claims are made about their distinctive functions.

This qualification is important because the close timing between sound and movement does not prove that the music independently produced every action. The interviews indicate that participants regarded it as a recognised signal, while observation shows that it reinforced preparations already underway. It is therefore more accurate to say that *suona* performance synchronised and formalised action than to claim that it controlled participants.

Continuity across changing wedding spaces

The observations suggest practical adaptability. The same basic functions were found around village households, roads, vehicles, and a county-town apartment building. The instrument could be inserted at selected points without requiring continuous performance, and repeated phrases could be extended while people or vehicles were delayed. These features made the practice compatible with wedding schedules that combined household ritual and motorised travel.

At the same time, the evidence does not establish that *suona* tradition is unchanged or secure. The study did not systematically investigate apprenticeship, the number and age of active performers, payment arrangements, or variation among local repertoires. Continued use at the observed weddings demonstrates current ritual relevance, but it cannot by itself demonstrate the long-term health of transmission. A broader claim would require interviews with more performers and comparative musical documentation across Tianzhu.

Implications

The findings have an analytical implication for ethnomusicological research on ritual sound. They show that ritual efficacy should not be inferred from audibility or symbolic association alone. In the observed cases, the cue became actionable only when acoustic projection, locally appropriate wedding *diaozi*, placement within the wedding sequence, performer judgement, and participants' prior knowledge converged. Future studies of processional or life-cycle music can therefore distinguish audibility, recognisability, and actionability and test each relation against event sequences and participant accounts.

The study also has a practical implication for cultural continuity. The *suona* remained usable across village households, roads, vehicles, and an apartment building because performers adjusted repetition and timing to changing movement. Preservation initiatives should consequently document not only melodic items or instruments but also how experienced players read situations, select appropriate *diaozi*, and coordinate with family procedures. This implication is provisional: the present cases demonstrate current adaptability, but broader recommendations about teaching, transmission, or policy require more performer interviews and comparative documentation.

Several preliminary measures follow from this finding. Community-based projects could document performances together with performers' explanations of how they select *diaozi*, read unfolding situations, and coordinate with family procedures, while observing participants' consent and control over access. Local cultural organisations could consult experienced players and families about supported apprenticeship, including compensation for teaching time and opportunities for younger learners to observe wedding practice. Schools and community music programmes could introduce the local tradition through performer-led workshops without detaching it from its social context. Continued employment of local musicians by wedding families may also sustain practical knowledge. These possibilities require consultation with performers, families, educators, and local cultural authorities; they are not presented as a complete preservation policy.

Limitations

The study has four main limitations. First, the number of observed weddings is small and the cases differ in duration and access. Second, the researcher participated in the 2023 wedding as a groomsman, which provided close access but also required reflection on familiar assumptions. Third, participant explanations were retrospective and may simplify the uncertainty of the event. Fourth, the study did not measure sound levels or document a complete *suona* repertoire. The conclusions should therefore be read as an ethnographic account of recurrent ritual functions, not as an acoustic experiment or comprehensive regional survey.

The small case base places an additional limit on the geographical and social scope of the claims. Recurrence across the two principal cases, together with the limited supplementary observations, supports the conclusion that the documented functions occurred more than once, but it cannot establish their representativeness across Tianzhu County. Villages, families, performer networks, wedding schedules, and locally preferred *diaozi* may vary, and the practice may also change over time. The findings are therefore best understood as a detailed account of how suona performance functioned in the observed cases, with a proposition that comparable functions may occur more widely, rather than as a comprehensive survey of Northern Dong wedding suona practice. Testing that proposition would require a larger, more diverse sample of weddings and performers and systematic comparison across localities and periods.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined a limited question: what the suona does at selected moments in contemporary Northern Dong weddings in Tianzhu. The evidence shows that the instrument prompts preparation, announces approach and arrival, marks movement between households, and makes the occasion locally recognisable through appropriate wedding *diaozi*. These effects depend on acoustic projection, but they also depend on performer timing and knowledge shared by listeners.

The discussion has shown that the suona works within a larger communication system that includes spoken instructions, mobile phones, vehicles, firecrackers, and observation of other participants. Its distinctive role is to turn an expected action into a public ceremonial moment. The instrument can perform this role in changing village and county-town spaces because its sound travels, its phrases can be repeated, and experienced performers adjust to the pace of movement.

The findings are limited to the ritual functions documented in the selected cases. A full comparison with vocal genres and a regional survey of suona repertory remain beyond the scope of this paper. Future research can address those questions through detailed musical transcription, performer life histories, and comparison of apprenticeship and performance practice across localities.

Declarations

Ethics and consent statement

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Identifying details were controlled where public identification had not been authorised, and field materials were stored with restricted access. The study did not involve an intervention, clinical procedure, or experiment.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The fieldnotes, photographs, audiovisual recordings, and interview materials supporting this study are not publicly available because they concern private wedding events and may contain identifiable information. De-identified materials may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant consent and ethical restrictions.

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