INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 15, Issue 7, (2025) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

The Symbolic Functions of Musical Instruments in the Longhuahui Ritual of Shanxi, China

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To Link this Article: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i7/25982 DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i7/25982

Published Date: 16 July 2025

Abstract

This study explores the symbolic functions of musical instruments in the *Longhuahui* ritual of *Chituhua* Village, Shanxi Province, China. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the Spring Festival period from 2024 to 2025, the research draws on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, focusing on ritual instruments such as the *Guanzi*, *sheng*, *Yunluo*, *Shougu*, *Muyu*, and *Cha*. Employing Steven Feld's theory of *sonic symbolism*, the study examines how sound operates as a culturally constructed system of meaning and a mode of engaging with the world. In the context of the *Longhuahui* ritual, these instruments are not only used for musical performance; their sounds symbolize sacred actions such as spirit invocation, exorcism, and spatial purification. As sonic agents, they serve to mediate between humans and deities, activate collective memory, and reaffirm cosmological order. Through their timbral qualities, rhythmic patterns, and spatial deployment, these instruments help construct a ritual soundscape that conveys local religious values and embodies spiritual knowledge through the body. The study argues that, within the *Longhuahui*, ritual instruments are central carriers of sonic meaning, and listening itself becomes a way of participating in and reproducing ritual knowledge. This research contributes to a deeper ethnomusicological understanding of the relationship between sound, belief, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology, Ritual Soundscape, Sonic Symbolism, Musical Instruments, *Longhuahui* , Folk Religion

Introduction

In many traditional religious and folk belief systems around the world, musical instruments are not merely carriers of sound; rather, they function as sonic agents—actively mediating communication between humans and deities, constructing sacred spaces, and evoking collective emotion. Their roles go far beyond musical performance, embodying cultural meanings and local cosmologies. As Stokes (1994) argues, music is not only a symbolic resource for expressing social identity but also a key mechanism in the construction of collective belonging within vernacular religious and social practice. Similarly,

ethnomusicologist Nettl (2005) emphasizes that the study of music must move beyond surface elements such as pitch and rhythm, focusing instead on its symbolic and functional dimensions embedded in specific cultural contexts.

Against this theoretical backdrop, Steven Feld's theory offers a useful lens through which to understand the symbolic roles of sound in ritual. Feld (1996) proposes that sound is not simply an auditory phenomenon but a form of embodied knowledge through which people relate to space, belief, and memory. From this perspective, sound is simultaneously experienced and cognition, a generative mechanism of social meaning.

Situated within this framework, the *Longhuahui* ritual of *Chituhua* Village in Shanxi Province presents a concrete and representative case for examining how musical instruments function as sonic symbols embedded in local religious cosmology. Held annually during the Spring Festival, the three-day ritual centers on the veneration of Guanyin Pusa and local deities. Throughout this complex ceremonial process, instruments such as the *Guanzi*(管子), *Sheng*（笙）, *Yunluo*（云锣）, *Shougu*（手鼓）, *Muyu*（木鱼）, and *Cha*（镲） are employed at key ritual moments—including summoning, inviting, and sending off deities. Their sounds are believed to drive away evil, invoke spiritual presence, and purify ritual space. These instruments serve not only as tools for musical expression but also as sonic embodiments of memory, emotion, and religious experience, together creating a sacred soundscape that materializes through sound itself.

This study is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the 2024–2025 Spring Festival. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, and grounded in a sound-centered ethnomusicological approach, it analyzes: (1) the dynamic interaction between ritual structure and instrumental practice; (2) how instruments construct sacred sonic time-space; and (3) how they serve as mediators of cosmological order and collective memory. By foregrounding sound as symbolic knowledge, the research aims to reveal the internal logic of sacredness in Chinese vernacular religious music and to deepen our understanding of the relationship between ritual soundscapes and cultural meaning.

Literature Review

In traditional Chinese religious and folk rituals, musical instruments are far more than sound-producing tools; they embody layered cultural, spiritual, and social meanings. Existing research has extensively explored the symbolic functions of instruments within ritual contexts, emphasizing their role in structuring ceremonial order, transmitting sacred meanings, and reinforcing social hierarchies.

Within the Confucian-Daoist tradition, musical instruments and ritual propriety (*li*) together form a symbolic framework for envisioning ideal social order. Li (2022) has argued that the ancient notion of the "metal and stone sounds" (金石之音) symbolizes the aesthetic ideal of cosmic harmony and moral regulation. The *guqin* evolved as an emblem of personal virtue and celestial order. Philosophically, the *guqin* is not only an instrument for musical refinement but also a symbolic pathway to self-cultivation and sage hood, rooted in the Chinese cultural primacy of auditory over visual perception (Mazur, 2015). This ideological system is echoed in the Korean *Munmyo Jeryeak* ritual tradition, where nineteen ceremonial instruments are employed to represent the cosmological balance of heaven and earth, yin and yang, and

hierarchical relations between ruler and subject—embodying the Confucian model of musical governance (Peng & Cho, 2023).

From a religious studies perspective, instruments are endowed with sacred qualities in ritual contexts; they function not only as conveyors of meaning but also as triggers of transcendental experience. Yang (2023) notes that in Taoist rituals, the selection of specific instruments is directly linked to their timbral qualities. Percussion and wind instruments are frequently used for exorcism, spirit invocation, and deity transmission, constructing a sonic atmosphere distinct from the mundane world. These insights align with Aslanova's (2018) study of Central Asian shamanic practice, which identifies instruments such as the *kobyz* and frame drum as both rhythmic tools and embodied cosmological symbols capable of facilitating spiritual journeys. Similarly, Shen (2012) demonstrates that in *Dongba* rituals of the *Naxi* people, the drum and bell not only generate ritual ambiance but also enact a transformation of the ritual specialist's identity through an integrated system of sound and bodily performance.

From the standpoint of archaeology and historical musicology, musical instruments in early Chinese civilization were deeply embedded in religious, political, and hierarchical structures. Fang (2006) emphasizes that animal motifs carved onto Shang and Zhou dynasty instruments served as totemic signs rather than mere decorations, reflecting the instruments' ritual function as mediators between humans and deities. More recent archaeological work (Wang et al., 2025) on bronze instruments such as the *xun*(埙) and *qing*（磬）from sites like Yinxu demonstrates that these artifacts embodied three forms of cultural literacy: ritual cognition, political hierarchy, and technological mastery.

Additionally, ritual music is often framed as a performative mechanism that sustains social stratification and collective ideology. Hu (2023) argues that *li* (礼) is not merely symbolic and performative but also fundamentally public and regulatory. Musical instruments, within this system, function as structural symbols that uphold moral and social order. This theoretical framework is particularly useful for understanding how different instruments in the *Longhuahui* ritual are spatially arranged and socially assigned to participants based on roles and status.

In contrast to the state-sponsored ritual system, folk religious practices exhibit greater flexibility and community-based symbolism. In the case of *Baxian* music from Guangxi, Liu et al. (2025) observe that the *suona* is not only central to wedding rituals but also serves as a living marker of cultural memory within village communities. Tang (2023) similarly highlights how drumming in Baima Tibetan rituals—performed during funerals and weddings—functions as a medium for expressing ethnic identity, religious belief, and intergenerational transmission of tradition.

In existing scholarship on Chinese ritual music, much of the attention has been directed toward Confucian state ceremonies, temple traditions in southern China, or musical practices within institutionalized Daoist and Buddhist frameworks. By contrast, the symbolic functions and spatial roles of musical instruments in local folk religious rituals of northern China remain underexplored in a systematic manner. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the *Longhuahui*, a representative folk ritual in Shanxi Province. Drawing on extended

ethnographic fieldwork and semiotic analysis, it examines how musical instruments operate at the intersection of sound and symbolism, contributing to the construction of sacred space, collective identity, and local cosmological understandings. This perspective offers both empirical material and theoretical insight for ethnomusicology, ritual studies, and research on Chinese vernacular religion, while expanding current frameworks for interpreting the functions of ritual music.

Methodology

This study employs an ethnographic methodology to investigate the symbolic meanings and cultural functions of musical instruments within the ritual practice of Longhuahui in Shanxi Province. Ethnography here is understood not only as a method of field data collection, but also as a dialogic and collaborative process that centers the emic perspective—the insider's view—and emphasizes the symbolic role of sound within specific ritual contexts (Barz & Cooley, 2008). The research focuses on the vernacular sacredness embedded in local religious practices, treating ritual music as a dynamic system of symbolic communication and social interaction.

Fieldwork was conducted between 2024 and 2025 across multiple Longhuahui ritual settings in rural Shanxi. The researcher engaged as both observer and collaborator, participating in all major ceremonial stages, including "welcoming the deities," "worship," "inviting deities to the altar," and "sending off the deities." Long-term engagement with ritual specialists and musicians enabled a high degree of immersion, including partial participation in musical performance and organizational tasks. This embodied involvement significantly influenced the depth of data collection, the building of mutual trust, and the contextual understanding of ritual processes. To enhance reflexivity, the researcher maintained continuous field journals and engaged in member checking with local participants, critically reflecting on positionality, interpretive biases, and fieldwork power dynamics (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Data collection included eight semi-structured interviews with ritual masters (Fashi), ensemble musicians, elder villagers, and event organizers. Interviews were conducted in local dialects, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and anonymized. The transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic coding in combination with interpretive phenomenological analysis. Through repeated iteration and triangulation with fieldnotes and audiovisual materials, four central themes emerged: sacred communication, cosmic symbolism, emotional resonance, and ritual authority.

The study also employed acoustic mapping and observation of embodied sensory responses during key ritual moments to analyze how sacred space is constructed through sound. The analysis draws on ritual soundscape theory (Feld, 1996) and performance space theory (Schechner, 2003) to interpret how instruments such as the *Guanzi, Sheng, Yunluo,* and *Muyu* create symbolic meaning through their timbral identities, spatial positioning, and sonic metaphors.

Fieldwork Context

This study is based on immersive ethnographic fieldwork conducted from February 2024 to February 2025 in Chituhua Village, Loufan County, Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. Chituhua is a

representative Han Chinese rural village renowned for its well-preserved local religious ritual traditions. The research focuses on the *Longhuahui*, a recurring community ritual that integrates elements of Buddhism and northern folk religion. The event combines deity processions, sacrificial offerings, and ritual music performances, forming a comprehensive system of sound-based religious practice. Within this structure, musical instruments are not merely sound-producing tools; they are consecrated objects imbued with sacred power, functioning as mediators between human participants, divine beings, and ritual space.

In February 2024, the researcher was granted full access to a major three-day *Longhuahui* event, during which five hours of video footage, 30,000 words of interview fieldnotes, and eight hours of recorded interviews were collected. Field observations focused on three principal ritual spaces: ancestral altars, the central village square, and the village entrance. The study's primary interviewees were ten members of the ritual ensemble, most of whom were male and over the age of 50, including *fashi* (ritual masters) responsible for leading the ceremonies. These individuals were not only performers but also custodians of ritual order, religious discourse, and musical knowledge.

In total, ten ritual instrumentalists and four lay participants were interviewed. Their narratives and performance practices offered critical insights into how musical instruments operate as symbolic agents that construct sacred temporality, regulate ceremonial structure, and mediate between cosmological belief and collective experience.

The Symbolic functions of Musical Instruments

The *Longhuahui* ritual in Chitu Hua Village, Shanxi Province, represents a highly syncretic form of local religious practice, integrating elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and Northern Chinese folk beliefs. Within this complex ceremonial structure, music plays a central role, not only in regulating rhythm and atmosphere but also in activating sacred symbolic meanings through specific instruments. This section analyzes seven core ritual instruments, drawing on field interviews and theoretical frameworks from semiotics, anthropology, and particularly Feld's (1996) theory of sound symbolism, to explore how their acoustic properties embody and transmit ritual meaning.

Guanzi (管子)

The Guanzi, a double-reed aerophone with a piercing and sustained tone, serves as the lead melodic instrument at the beginning of the Longhuahui ritual. It is prominently featured during segments such as qing shen (inviting the deities) and kai tan (opening the altar). The opening melodic line typically ascends rapidly, symbolizing the opening of a vertical sound channel between humans and the divine. A senior musician remarked, *"The first note must shoot upward—only then will the heavenly gate open"* (M2024-02). From a semiotic perspective, the Guanzi functions as a sonic signifier, where its vertical tonal contour embodies a spatial metaphor of the axis mundi (Eliade, 1964), akin to the kobyz in shamanic traditions, linking the earthly and celestial realms. According to Feld's (1996) theory of acoustemology, villagers do not merely "hear" the Guanzi, but rather "know" through its sound that the ritual has commenced and the gods are being summoned. Thus, the Guanzi constructs a sacred acoustic space and serves as an epistemological conduit for engaging with the divine.

Sheng (笙)

The *Sheng,* a polyphonic free-reed mouth organ, is employed during the offering and chanting phases. Its continuous harmonies create a solemn and tranquil sonic field. One ritual master described, *"The sheng circles the ears of the deities like clouds, calming them to descend"* (P2024-01). From the perspective of Buddhist symbolism and anthropological theories of meaning, the lotus-shaped sheng evokes the visual metaphor of the *Jile jingtu* (pure Land), signifying transcendence, rebirth, and the manifestation of Buddha-nature (Yeh, 2015). Its alternating inhalation and exhalation are interpreted by villagers as the flow of qi, resonating with both Buddhist cosmology and traditional Chinese medicine's theories of vital energy.

In the framework of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the performance of the sheng integrates breath, posture, and tone, forming a concrete "bodily cosmology." It is thus not merely a harmonic instrument but a sonic architecture for circulating spiritual energy within the ritual.

Yunluo(云锣)

The Yunluo, composed of multiple small gongs with bright, penetrating timbre, is played at critical moments such as ru tan (entry of the deity into the altar) and jin xiang (incense offering). A senior villager explained, "*Striking the yunluo is like knocking on the god's door,it signals that we are ready"* (F2024-02). According to Peirce's (1932) semiotic theory, the yunluo functions as an indexical sign. Its sound does not mimic divine presence but indicates it through performative action. From Feld's (1996) theory of ritual soundscape, the clear temporal demarcation created by the yunluo redirects participants' attention and transforms the spatial experience through sound. Upon hearing it, participants often adjust their posture and bow in silence, making the yunluo not only a signal but also an activator of sacred space and a builder of ritual boundaries.

Cha (镲)

The *Cha* (Chinese cymbals), with their explosive sound, are used during divine procession and obstacle-breaking segments. The instrument's intense acoustic impact is believed to expel evil spirits and purify liminal spaces, especially at night or at crossroads. One villager referred to it as *"the sound that blasts away filth"* (M2024-03). According to Hoppál's (2007) theory of sound as apotropaic force, the cha does not carry melody but functions through vibration. Its powerful sonic shockwave acts as a protective force field, scattering or warding off inauspicious energies. Symbolically, its thunderous resonance evokes the divine power of Leigong (Thunder God) in Chinese cosmology, representing both deterrence and moral purification.

Muyu(木鱼)

The Muyu is primarily used during mourning and ancestral rites. Its steady rhythmic pulse is perceived as the "guiding sound" for the spirits of the deceased. A local woman noted, *"The Muyu keeps the soul from getting lost, like a heartbeat in the dark"* (P2024-02). Within Buddhist symbolic language, the Muyu represents mindfulness and alertness. Its fish shape, whose eyes never close, signifies vigilance, while its stable rhythm embodies the cyclical nature of karmic rebirth. Chau (2006) argues that the Muyu is central in Buddhist ritual timing, linking rhythm with cosmological views of life and death. From an ethnomusicological perspective, it is a rhythm-directing ritual instrument that synchronizes participants'

breathing and bodily responses, generating a shared temporal-spiritual space between the living and the dead.

Luo(锣)

The Luo serves a pivotal temporal function in the *Longhuahui* ritual, played during inviting the deity and sending off the deity phases. Its deep reverberation is recognized as the auditory signal of the deity's entrance and exit. A ritual host noted, *"If the gong doesn't ring fully, the gods won't leave"* (M2024-02). The Luo initiates ritual time, while its fading tone signals the conclusion of the sacred moment. Turner's (1969) concept of communitas and liminality frames the Luo as the sonic threshold that opens and closes ritual space. Feld (1996) further conceptualizes its lingering resonance as a "sonic envelope" that suspends profane time, gathering participants into a shared acoustic experience. The Luo thus acts not only as a signal but as the acoustic gatekeeper of sacred-temporal transformation.

Summary

A systematic analysis of these seven core instruments reveals a highly structured and symbolically charged sound system. These instruments are not merely acoustic tools but constitute a complex triadic network linking gods, humans, and objects through sound. Each instrument possesses distinctive tonal and rhythmic properties, embedded within specific ritual sequences and spatial arrangements, thereby fulfilling multiple roles in constructing sacredness, evoking emotional states, and maintaining ritual order.

Structurally, the instrument system displays a symbolic division of roles. The *Guanzi* symbolizes vertical ascent and divine descent; the sheng and yunluo evoke horizontal continuity and the sustained presence of deities; the Muyu and Luo govern temporal cycles. This division aligns with Eliade's (1964) theory of ritual space as a reflection of cosmic structure, where sound becomes a key technique for shaping ritual architecture.

Emotionally, these instruments generate embodied experiences of the sacred. Participants are not passive listeners but actively respond through bowing, silence, and physical resonance. This transformation from auditory reception to embodied participation illustrates Feld's (1996) concept of acoustemology, where sound not only communicates meaning but organizes cognition and emotion.

Culturally, the instrument system forms an "acoustic cosmology," wherein each instrument's shape, sound, placement, and timing corresponds to local beliefs about the cosmos, ancestors, and deities. Instruments are not neutral devices but animate, symbol-laden entities. As Geertz (1973) noted, ritual symbols work to render the world intelligible; here, musical instruments materialize the invisible cosmic order through audible expression.

Finally, the use, transmission, and interpretation of these instruments reflect patterns of authority and hereditary knowledge. Many performers are simultaneously ritual specialists and cultural heirs, and their exclusive rights to certain instruments uphold both ceremonial order and religious orthodoxy. Ritual sound, therefore, is not democratically accessible but embedded in local structures of gender, age, and lineage.

In conclusion, musical instruments in the *Longhuahui* ritual are not isolated sound-makers but dynamic symbolic agents that activate belief, regulate order, and evoke emotion through sound. Together, gods, people, and objects are interwoven in a local cosmology of efficacy and meaning, producing a unified sacred universe articulated through ritual acoustics.

Musical Instruments in Ritual Time, Sacred Space, and Sonic Authority

This section explores the role of musical instruments in the *Longhuahui* ritual as more than sound-producing devices. Rather, they serve as temporal markers, spatial constructors, and expressions of ritual authority. Through close analysis of ritual sequences, sonic symbolism, and fieldwork from Chituhua Village, Shanxi Province, this section demonstrates how sound—when shaped through rhythm, instrumentation, and performance, structures sacred time, maps religious space, and reflects hierarchies of power and legitimacy. This tripartite framework offers insight into how musical instruments operate within a broader ritual system, embedding belief, memory, and authority into sonic practice.

Ritual Time: How Sound Constructs the Flow of Sacred Temporality

In the *Longhuahui* ritual of Chitu Hua Village, musical instruments are not merely background accompaniment. They function as structural organizers of time, segmenting the ceremony into distinct phase-inviting deities, making offerings climax, and sending off the deities through specific rhythmic shifts, instrumental groupings, and changes in sound intensity. Each sonic act becomes a temporal cue, allowing both ritual leaders and participants to locate themselves within the unfolding "*sacred time."*

Field observations reveal that each phase of the ritual employs different instrumental combinations to audibly mark transitions. For example, inviting deities phase opens with an ascending melody on the *Guanzi*, accompanied by softly struck *Muyu* and *Luo* (gong), creating a slow, solemn atmosphere that signals the beginning of sacred time. In contrast, sending off the deities' segment features accelerated rhythms and explosive cymbal crashes, indicating the ritual's conclusion and the departure of divine presence. These changes are not random but negotiated between musicians and ritual specialists using an implicit "sonic code." As one *Fashi* (ritual master) explained, "*Rhythm is the breath of the entire ritual. When the gods arrive, it must be slow and steady. When they depart, it must be fast and free. Everyone can feel the shift"* (LS2024-02). Thus, rhythm and timbre serve not only technical purposes but also symbolic functions that encode divine movement and presence.

Theoretically, this use of musical time aligns with Victor Turner's (1969) theory of ritual process and liminality. The sonic differences between ritual phases create an "auditory scaffolding" that enables participants to experience transitions from separation to liminality and reintegration. Furthermore, the emotional resonance generated by rhythm supports Small's (1998) concept of *musicking* as a socially embedded practice of temporal coordination. From an ethnomusicological perspective, the ensemble functions as a "sonic clock" that synchronizes bodily action, emotional tension, and spiritual awareness. Ritual time, in this context, is not linear but cyclical, embodied, and symbolically constructed—transformed from secular duration into sacred temporality through sound.

Sacred Space: The Construction of Ritual Fields through Sound

In *Longhuahui*, musical instruments operate on both temporal and spatial levels to construct sacred order. Within the village's local religious cosmology, the sounds produced by instruments not only delineate physical boundaries but also signal the initiation of sacred time, the arrival of deities, and the transformation of profane space into sacred domains. As a village elder noted, *"The drum opens the heavenly gate, the gong invites the gods to sit, and the cymbal disperses impurity"* (W2025-2). This understanding resonates with Eliade's (1964) theory of the sacred-profane dichotomy and illustrates how sound mediates between the transcendent and the mundane.

Fieldwork indicates that the *Longhuahui* ritual space comprises three major zones: the inner altar (ancestor shrine), the village square (public ritual ground), and the outer path (processional route). Each space is acoustically distinct and symbolically meaningful, with corresponding changes in instrumental deployment. In the inner altar, sound is used sparingly, with a focus on low-frequency, soft timbres. The *sheng* and *Muyu* dominate during chanting and offering, producing a contemplative soundscape suitable for spiritual intimacy. As one *Fashi* explained, *"You can't play loudly here—the gods will be uneasy. The sheng sounds calm, perfect for inviting the gods to descend"* (P2024-02). Here, sacredness is not tied to volume but to sonic restraint, reflecting reverence and inward dialogue with ancestral spirits.

In contrast, the village square—serving as the primary public space—features more extroverted and resonant sonic arrangements. During segments like *procession*, *sending off*, or *altar transition*, the *Guanzi*, *Luo*, and *Cha* (Chinese cymbals) combine to create a powerful, energetic sound field. An elder musician noted, *"In the square, the sound must be released, the gods enjoy it, and the people feel the momentum"* (ZL2024-02). Here, sound embodies divine presence and creates a sensory experience of collective awe.

The outer path functions as a transitional space, often used for deity processions and ritual obstacle-cleaning. High-pitched gongs and cymbals are used here to "open the way" and dispel spiritual pollution. A villager remarked, *"When the gong sounds, the wind in front disperses. Children know the gods are coming"* (F2024-02). In this context, sound acts as both a warning system and a sonic mechanism for purifying space and preparing it for divine passage.

These spatialized soundscapes align with Feld's (1996) concept of "ritual soundscape," in which sound is not a neutral physical event but a socially and spiritually embedded practice. Timbre, rhythm, volume, and reverberation help structure the layered perception of space and produce culturally specific expectations of divine presence. Moreover, these sonic-spatial systems sustain the internal hierarchy of ritual practice: only *Fashi* and senior musicians may enter the inner altar (acoustic center), while the square remains semi-open to villagers and deities, and the village gate serves as an acoustic frontier between community and cosmos. As one *Fashi* summarized, *"The closer the sound is to the god, the steadier it must be. The farther it is, the louder—so people know the gods are powerful"* (M2025-02). Sound here becomes a tool for symbolizing proximity, sanctity, and power.

Furthermore, these spatial sound dynamics construct an imagined "sacred geography," where altar sound represents the seat of divinity, square sound marks divine manifestation, and gateway sound signals divine arrival. These spaces are simultaneously physical, acoustic, and symbolic—together forming what might be called an "acoustic sacred cartography" in North China's vernacular religious culture.

Sonic Authority: Sound, Hierarchy, and Ritual Legitimacy

In the *Longhuahui* ritual, questions of who may produce sound, when, and how are not technical matters but expressions of cultural order tied to ritual authority, gender roles, and social hierarchy. Instruments are not neutral tools; they are markers of position, lineage, and spiritual legitimacy. The conventions governing their use constitute the foundation of what may be termed "sonic authority."

Field data show that the primary instruments—*Guanzi*, *Luo*, and *Sheng*—are typically played by men over the age of 50, almost exclusively from hereditary musician families. Many of these performers also hold the title of *Fashi*, taking on responsibilities such as summoning deities, arranging altars, and leading chants. As one elder *Fashi* noted, *"Not just anyone can strike the gong—you must have learned the ritual. If you get the order wrong, it confuses the gods"* (LS2025-02). Thus, playing certain instruments becomes symbolic of possessing the right to communicate with divine entities.

Some instruments also carry exclusivity. The *Yunluo* is typically struck only by the chief *Fashi* to signal the exact moment of divine descent, while the *Muyu* is reserved for inner altar rituals and may not be played by general musicians. These restrictions reflect both sonic sanctity and the division of ritual labor.

Sound production is hierarchical. The *Guanzi* leads the melodic and structural flow, with other instruments following its cues. A younger musician explained, *"We follow the lead Guanzi player). If he slows down, we slow down. If he starts, we start"* (ZL2024-02). This reveals a centralized sonic structure in which musical leadership mirrors ritual authority.

Despite their important roles in the broader religious life of the village, women are generally excluded from playing core ritual instruments. One elder woman remarked, *"We can't strike the gong—the gods don't like women making sound"* (F2024-04). This restriction is not incidental; it reinforces a symbolic boundary of voice and power. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Feld's concept of "audible identity," one can argue that the right to sound in ritual space defines who may symbolically exist within sacred order. Silence, in this context, becomes a mechanism of exclusion.

Overall, sonic authority in the *Longhuahui* ritual is structurally embedded across generational, gendered, spatial, and ritual lines. As Feld (1996) states, sound is a "*socialized form of action*" and an "*audible expression of identity.*" In this ritual context, who makes sound and whose sound represents divine will reflects the hierarchical and symbolic organization of the entire ceremonial system. Sound, therefore, is not just a tool of communication but a central medium for enacting legitimacy, mediating access to the divine, and maintaining communal structure.

Musical Instruments as Carriers of Religious Experience and Collective Memory

Within the rhythmic resonance of gongs and drums in the *Longhuahui* ritual, villagers do more than fulfill ceremonial duties—they summon generations of religious experience and collective memory. The sounds produced by ritual instruments transcend the immediate ritual context, each strike echoes ancestral faith and long-standing traditions. As elder musician Master Liu explained, *"The drums and gongs we play were passed down from our ancestors. Every time I strike them, I feel the gods are right beside me"* (LZ2024-02). This experience reflects not only an individual's perception of the sacred but also the collective reproduction of cultural memory through musical performance. By engaging in intergenerational transmission of instrumental practice, villagers continuously reaffirm their understanding of deities, ancestors, and cosmic order, turning ritual into a dynamic process of cultural continuity.

As Barz and Cooley (2008) note, music as a cultural symbol can evoke emotional resonance and affirm identity, awakening a shared sense of history and belonging. In Chitu Hua Village, ritual sound serves as a recurring reaffirmation of collective identity, forming what Assmann (1995) terms an "aural archive," in which villagers recall ancestral teachings and local stories through the sounds of drums and gongs. As one elder woman, Granny Zhang, recounted, *"When the drums start, all the old stories and words of our ancestors come back to me"* (Z2025-02). Thus, sound functions not merely as an aesthetic element but as a cultural vessel carrying faith and memory.Connerton (1989) emphasizes the role of bodily memory and ritual repetition in the transmission of cultural knowledge. In *Longhuahui*, performers internalize belief through bodily rhythm and movement, transforming ritual music into a tangible expression of religious experience. As Ritual Master Li remarked, *"Music evokes reverence and solemnity,it's something you can't express just by talking"* (LS2024-06). Through embodied performance, sound becomes a medium for transmitting religious emotion, allowing belief to resonate and be shared in sensory form.

In this context, musical instruments in Chituhua Village are not merely vehicles of sound; they serve as embodied channels of spiritual experience and temporal capsules of cultural memory. Through the repetition of rhythm and the resonance of sound, ritual becomes a core mechanism for sustaining collective identity and preserving the village's spiritual cosmos.

Conclusion and Theoretical Contributions

This study has examined the symbolic functions of ritual instruments in local folk religious practices, using the *Longhuahui* ritual of Chituhua Village, Shanxi Province, as a case study. Through an in-depth analysis of how sound operates across multiple dimensions, including ritual time, sacred space, religious authority, and collective memory, this research reveals the complex meanings and cultural depth embedded in the use of ritual instruments within religious performance.

Firstly, ritual instruments construct a structured experience of sacred time. Rhythmic variation and instrumental combinations across ritual stages not only demarcate the ceremonial process but also guide participants into an experiential realm of sacred temporality. Sound thus serves not only as a rhythmic cue but as an auditory marker that symbolically encodes the flow of ritual time.

Secondly, instruments establish the acoustic boundaries of sacred space. By deploying distinct timbres, volumes, and rhythms in different ritual zones, sound differentiates the religious functions of the ancestral altar, village square, and village gateway. This spatialized sonic organization enables the divine presence to be perceived audibly—signaling the arrival, presence, and departure of deities—thus positioning sound as a key medium that connects the human and divine realms.

Third, the sound within the *Longhuahui* ritual reflects a highly structured system of authority. Questions of who may produce sound, when, and how are governed by religious identity, gender roles, and ritual hierarchy. Sound functions not only as a symbol of religious legitimacy but also as a mechanism for maintaining internal ceremonial order. Within this system of "sonic authority," musical instruments become tools for delineating status and expressing symbolic power.

Furthermore, ritual instruments serve as carriers of religious experience and collective memory. The intergenerational transmission of musical practice not only reinforces belief in ancestors and deities but also constructs a shared cultural identity and historical continuity through embodied memory and auditory resonance. The sound of instruments forms an "aural archive" that preserves the spiritual experience and communal memory of the village.

In sum, ritual instruments in the *Longhuahui* are not merely sound-producing devices. They function as constructors of sacred time, delineators of sacred space, vessels of authority, and transmitters of belief. On the sonic level, they express and organize a local religious cosmology, social hierarchy, and spiritual structure—offering a rich lens into the lived experience of North China's vernacular ritual life.

This study also contributes meaningfully to broader academic discourse in several keyways: From a theoretical standpoint, the study challenges the instrumentalist view that reduces ritual instruments to mere sound-making devices. Instead, it foregrounds their symbolic and cosmological functions, demonstrating how sonic practice is deeply embedded in systems of belief, spatial imagination, and social hierarchy. By linking sound to the construction of sacred temporality, spatial order, and ritual authority, the study advances an integrated analytical model that connects ethnomusicology, the anthropology of religion, and ritual theory. This interdisciplinary perspective opens new possibilities for theorizing the performative and mediating roles of sound in religious experience. Methodologically, the research highlights the value of combining immersive ethnographic fieldwork, phase-specific sonic analysis of ritual sequences, and attention to local epistemologies of sound. By emphasizing sensory perception, embodied performance, and vernacular semiotics, the study contributes to the expanding field of acoustic ethnography. It demonstrates how listening, movement, and sound-making can be studied not only as aesthetic or technical acts, but as culturally meaningful, lived practices embedded in local ritual systems. Empirically, the study provides a rare, in-depth account of the *Longhuahui*—a scarcely documented ritual tradition in rural northern China. Through detailed analysis of instrumental practice, spatial-symbolic organization, and sound-based authority, the study offers a grounded case that enriches global understanding of the sonic dimensions of Chinese folk religion. It further enhances the scholarly visibility of northern China's vernacular religious traditions within international ethnomusicological and anthropological scholarship.

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