



Aesthetic Analysis and Historical Context of Shandong Folk Songs: Focus on 'Embroidering a Purse' from Cangshan, Shandong, China

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Abstract: This study presents an in-depth aesthetic analysis and historical contextualization of the Shandong folk song "Embroidering a Purse" from Cangshan, Shandong, China. Shandong folk songs are a vital component of the province's cultural heritage, reflecting the region's history, values, and daily life. "Embroidering a Purse," a lyrical folk song, narrates the story of a young woman embroidering a purse for her lover, symbolizing love and craftsmanship. This research explores the song's lyrical content, musical structure, performance practices, and cultural significance. By analyzing its lyrics, melody, and performance style, the study highlights how "Embroidering a Purse" encapsulates the cultural and emotional landscape of Cangshan. Additionally, the study traces the historical development of Shandong folk songs through different dynastic and socio-political periods, offering insights into their evolution and enduring significance.

Keywords: Shandong folk songs, Embroidering a Purse, Cangshan, Cultural heritage, Ethnomusicology, Aesthetic analysis, Historical context

I. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Shandong Folk Songs and Their Cultural Importance

Shandong, a coastal province in Eastern China, boasts a rich tradition of folk music that reflects its historical and cultural heritage. Shandong folk songs are a vital part of the province's cultural identity, embodying the values, emotions, and experiences of its people. These songs, often passed down orally through generations, play a significant role in various social rituals, festivals, and daily activities. They are known for their lyrical beauty, melodic simplicity, and profound connection to the natural and social environment of Shandong [1].

Shandong's folk music tradition is diverse, encompassing various forms such as work songs, narrative songs, and lyrical songs. These songs serve multiple functions, from labor coordination to storytelling and expressing personal or communal sentiments. The melodies are typically simple yet evocative, often employing pentatonic scales and reflecting the region's linguistic and cultural nuances [2]. This musical tradition not only provides entertainment but also serves as a repository of regional history and collective memory.

1.2 'Embroidering a Purse' from Cangshan

One of the quintessential examples of Shandong folk songs is "Embroidering a Purse" from Cangshan, a county in the southern part of Shandong province. This song, deeply rooted in the local traditions of Cangshan, exemplifies the region's aesthetic and cultural attributes. "Embroidering a Purse" is a lyrical folk song that narrates the story of a young woman embroidering a purse for her lover, symbolizing love, commitment, and craftsmanship. The song is celebrated for its melodic charm and poetic lyrics, which vividly depict the emotional landscape and daily life of the people in Cangshan [3]. The choice of "Embroidering a Purse" not only showcases the artistic qualities of Shandong folk music but also provides insights into the socio-cultural context of the region. By examining this song, we can better understand the broader tradition of Shandong folk songs and their role in preserving and transmitting cultural values [4].

1.3 Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to conduct an in-depth aesthetic analysis and historical contextualization of "Embroidering a Purse" from Cangshan. This involves exploring the song's lyrical content, musical structure, and performance practices, as well as its historical and cultural significance. The research aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the aesthetic and musical characteristics of the folk song "Embroidering a Purse" from Cangshan, Shandong?
- How do the lyrics, melody, and performance style of "Embroidering a Purse" reflect the cultural and emotional landscape of the people of Cangshan?
- What is the historical development of Shandong folk songs, and how have they evolved through different dynastic and socio-political periods?

II. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Shandong Folk Songs

The study of Shandong folk songs primarily focused on the lyrical content, musical structure, and socio-cultural functions



of these songs. Li provides a comprehensive overview of Shandong folk songs, highlighting their role in various social and cultural contexts. This work underscores the importance of folk songs in maintaining cultural continuity and expressing collective identity.^[5] Liu^[6] delves into the melodic and structural aspects of Shandong folk music, analyzing the use of pentatonic scales and traditional modes. This study emphasizes the simplicity and evocative nature of the melodies, which are characteristic of the region's folk songs. Similarly, Zhang ^[7] explores the narrative and lyrical elements, noting how these songs often tell stories of love, labor, and local traditions, thereby serving as a repository of communal memory.

2.2 Key Theories and Methodologies from Previous Studies

The theoretical frameworks employed in the study of Shandong folk songs often draw from ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and folklore studies. Ethnomusicological approaches focus on the music's structural and performance aspects, analyzing elements such as melody, rhythm, and instrumentation ^[8]. Cultural anthropology provides insights into the socio-cultural contexts in which these songs are performed and transmitted, exploring their roles in rituals, festivals, and daily life ^[9].

Methodologically, researchers have employed a combination of fieldwork, archival research, and textual analysis. Fieldwork typically involves ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews with local performers and community members. This approach allows researchers to gather firsthand accounts and understand the lived experiences associated with the music^[10]. Archival research, on the other hand, involves examining historical documents, recordings, and previous studies to trace the evolution of folk songs over time ^[11].

2.3 Studies Related to 'Embroidering a Purse'

Research specifically focusing on "Embroidering a Purse" is relatively limited, though several studies touch upon its significance within the broader context of Shandong folk music. Zhang ^[12] briefly discusses the song in the context of lyrical and narrative traditions, noting its evocative portrayal of local customs and personal emotions. This study highlights the song's thematic focus on love and craftsmanship, which are central to its narrative. Liu ^[13] examines the song from a performance perspective, analyzing vocal techniques and the use of dialect in "Embroidering a Purse." This research emphasizes the importance of local dialect in conveying the song's emotional depth and cultural specificity. Additionally, Liu's work points to the song's role in local festivals and its function in expressing regional identity.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the literature concerning a comprehensive aesthetic and historical analysis of "Embroidering a Purse." Existing studies tend to focus on either the lyrical content or the performance aspects, with few attempts to integrate these perspectives into a holistic understanding of the song.

2.4 Research Gaps

While significant progress has been made in understanding Shandong folk songs, several research gaps persist. First, there is a need for a more integrated approach that combines aesthetic analysis with historical contextualization. Most studies either focus on the musical and lyrical aspects or explore the socio-cultural context, without adequately bridging these dimensions. Second, specific studies on "Embroidering a Purse" are sparse, particularly those that provide a detailed examination of its aesthetic features in conjunction with its historical and cultural significance. Existing literature often treats the song as a part of broader thematic studies, lacking focused analysis.

III. Historical Context of Shandong Folk Songs

3.1 Overview of Shandong's Geographical and Cultural History

Shandong province, located on the eastern coast of China, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and historical significance. The province has played a pivotal role in Chinese history, being home to significant historical figures such as Confucius and Mencius, and serving as a center for the development of Chinese civilization. Shandong's geographical landscape, characterized by its mountainous regions, plains, and coastal areas, has significantly influenced its cultural and social development ^[14].

Shandong's cultural history is marked by its contributions to Chinese philosophy, literature, and arts. The region's diverse topography and historical interactions with various dynasties have fostered a unique cultural identity. This identity is reflected in the province's folk traditions, including its music, which encapsulates the lived experiences, values, and aesthetics of its people. Folk songs in Shandong are a testament to the province's historical journey, mirroring the socio-economic changes and cultural continuity over centuries ^[15].

3.2 Historical Development of Folk Songs in Shandong

The development of folk songs in Shandong can be traced back to ancient times. These songs originated as expressions of the daily lives and emotions of the local people, evolving through various historical periods. During the Tang and Song dynasties, Shandong's folk music began to gain prominence, influenced by the cultural flourishing of these eras. The songs from this period were characterized by their lyrical beauty and melodic simplicity, often centered around themes of nature, love, and labor ^[16].

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Shandong folk songs further diversified, incorporating elements from other regional musical traditions. This period saw the emergence of narrative songs that told stories of historical events, legendary heroes, and moral tales. These narrative songs were not only a source of entertainment but also a means of education and cultural transmission. The folk songs from this era reflect the social hierarchies, economic conditions, and cultural norms of the time ^[17].

Throughout the 20th century, Shandong's folk music continued to evolve, influenced by the socio-political upheavals and modernization processes. The early 20th century, marked by the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China, brought about significant changes in the themes and forms of folk songs. The songs from this period

often depicted the struggles and aspirations of the common people, mirroring the broader socio-political landscape [18].

3.3 Socio-Political Influences on the Folk Traditions

The socio-political landscape of Shandong has profoundly impacted the development and themes of its folk songs. During the feudal era, the songs often reflected the agrarian lifestyle, social hierarchies, and Confucian values prevalent in society. Themes of filial piety, loyalty, and moral conduct were common, aligning with the dominant socio-political ideologies [19]. The 20th century brought about dramatic socio-political changes that were mirrored in the folk traditions of Shandong. The May Fourth Movement of 1919, which advocated for cultural and intellectual reform, influenced the content and style of folk songs. Songs from this period began to incorporate themes of nationalism, social justice, and modernity. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) further transformed the folk music landscape, as traditional songs were adapted to align with the political ideologies of the time. During this period, many folk songs were rewritten or newly composed to propagate revolutionary ideals and the collective spirit [20].

In contemporary times, Shandong folk songs continue to evolve, reflecting the region's ongoing socio-economic development and cultural shifts. The preservation and revitalization of traditional folk songs have become a focus, with efforts to document and perform these songs in various cultural and educational contexts. These efforts highlight the enduring significance of folk music as a cultural heritage and its role in fostering a sense of identity and continuity in Shandong [21].

IV. Aesthetic Analysis of "Embroidering a Purse"

4.1 Analysis on the Song's Lyrics

"Embroidering a Purse" intricately weaves a narrative that unfolds in three distinct segments. Initially, it introduces a character engaged in the specific act of embroidering a purse, setting the stage for a deeper exploration. The lyrics vividly describe the tangible content embroidered on the purse, creating imagery that resonates with traditional craftsmanship and cultural heritage. This imagery extends beyond the literal act of embroidery, delving into deeper layers of meaning and symbolism associated with the purse. (Table 1)

Table 1, Lyrics of the "Embroidering a Purse" (source: <https://www1.gdjyw.com/>)

Lyrics in Chinese Language	English Translation
姐儿房中啊绣呀就荷	In the room, the young girl embroiders a lotus.
得儿包儿啦啾	She carefully wraps it.
手拿着那钢针儿轻上描儿描	Holding the steel needle, she gently traces.
显显你手段儿高嚎呢	It shows your skill is high.
哎哎哟显显你手段儿高嚎呢	Oh, it shows your skill is high.
上绣星辰啊共啊日得儿月啦啾	She embroiders stars with the sun and the moon.
下绣上就凉船水波上儿漂	Below, she embroiders a cool boat floating on water.
黄莺你站树梢儿嚎呢	The yellow oriole stands on the treetop.
哎哎哟黄莺你站树梢儿嚎呢	Oh, the yellow oriole stands on the treetop.
小小荷包啊	The small sachet.
绣呀就完得儿了啦啾	Is now finished.
扬州的那穗子绿把丝儿条	With tassels from Yangzhou and green silk threads.
再用那红纸包儿嚎呢	Wrapped again with red paper.
哎哎哟送给那郎瞧瞧嚎呢	Oh, to give it to the young man to see.
哎哎哟送给那郎瞧瞧嚎呢	Oh, to give it to the young man to see.

Lyrics Features

The folk song "Embroidering a Purse" from Cangshan, Shandong, exemplifies the distinctive linguistic characteristics and regional aesthetics of Shandong folk music. The lyrics are marked by their simplicity and colloquial tone, effectively evoking vivid imagery and emotional depth. This song, through its use of everyday language and poignant expressions, conveys the heartfelt emotions of a young woman embroidering a purse for her beloved, encapsulating her affection and admiration.

4.1.1. Symbolism and Emotive Expression

A prominent feature of the lyrics is their use of symbolic objects to convey emotions. The act of embroidering a purse serves as a metaphor for the woman's affection and longing for her lover. This indirect expression of feelings through objects is a traditional motif in many folk songs, allowing for a nuanced and layered narrative. The lyrics state, "In the sister's room (ah), embroidering, holding the steel needle lightly sketching," which not only describes the physical act of embroidery but also subtly highlights the skill and care involved, mirroring the woman's feelings of devotion. The language is straightforward yet richly evocative, mirroring the unadorned and sincere nature of Shandong locals. By embedding deep emotions in mundane activities, the song paints a vivid picture of the woman's inner world and her romantic aspirations.

4.1.2. Distinctive Use of Refrain and Decorative Words

This song is also notable for its extensive use of refrains and decorative words, which are typical of traditional folk melodies. The original lyrics, comprising nine stanzas, follow a seven-seven-five syllable structure, similar to the "two and a half sentences" form found in other folk compositions. This structure, rare outside southern Shandong, includes a substantial use of refrain words, creating a distinctive stylistic feature and regional linguistic flavor.

Refrain words, often semantically nonsensical, serve as musical ornaments that enhance the melody's rhythmic and lyrical flow. These can be categorized into different types: initial, medial, and terminal refrains. For instance, in the line "Sister in the room (ah) embroidering (oh) purse (la yi)," the refrain words "ah," "oh," and "la yi" contribute to the song's rhythmic diversity and melodic richness.

The incorporation of these refrains highlights the song's rhythmic precision and broadens its structural framework, thus enriching its artistic expression. Additionally, they facilitate a more natural and engaging singing experience, deepening the song's emotional resonance and vivid imagery.

4.2 Themes, Motifs, and Cultural References

Figure 1: The sheet music for "Embroidering a Purse" (Source: <http://www.Jianpuw.com>)

The song embodies themes of craftsmanship, tradition, love, and sentimentality. Through motifs like the embroidered purse, it symbolizes dedication, artistry, and the timeless expression of love. Cultural references are subtly woven into the lyrics, reflecting the rich heritage of Shandong's folk traditions and the nuanced expressions of emotion and identity.

4.3 Musical Structure and Composition

Musically, "Embroidering a Purse" follows a structured yet expressive format. Its composition adheres to the bB hexatonic mode typical of Shandong folk music, showcasing a harmonious blend of tradition and artistic expression. The song comprises three major phrases, embellishment phrases, and a supplementary phrase, highlighting the song's structured yet dynamic nature.

4.4 Melody, Rhythm, and Harmonic Characteristics

The melody of the song exhibits a wave-like development, characterized by intervals within a perfect fifth and predominant use of minor third intervals. This melodic progression, coupled with rhythmic patterns in a steady 2/4 tempo, creates a captivating musical journey that mirrors the emotional depth of the lyrics. Harmonically, the song's use of traditional tonal techniques adds layers of complexity and authenticity to its sound.

4.5 Vocal Techniques and Performance Style

Vocally, "Embroidering a Purse" showcases a blend of local dialect, vocal embellishments, and stylistic features unique to Shandong folk songs. The frequent use of embellishments like "la" and "yi" punctuates the song's melody, adding a distinct regional flavor and enhancing its emotive delivery. The performance style captures the essence of Shandong's

cultural identity, reflecting the nuances of everyday life and storytelling traditions.

4.6 Symbolism and Imagery in the Song

Symbolically, the embroidered purse serves as a central motif representing love, dedication, and artistic expression. The visual imagery evoked by the lyrics paints a vivid picture of a young girl immersed in the act of embroidery, conveying moments of intimacy, anticipation, and heartfelt sentiment. These symbols and imagery resonate with audiences, transcending cultural boundaries and tapping into universal emotions.

4.7 Interpretation of Symbolic Elements and Visual Imagery

The song's portrayal of craftsmanship, tradition, and love reflects the enduring values cherished in Shandong's cultural tapestry. The imagery of a young girl embroidering the purse becomes a metaphor for heartfelt expressions, romantic ideals, and the timeless pursuit of artistry and affection. In essence, "Embroidering a Purse" emerges as a profound exploration of Shandong's folk heritage, blending lyrical depth, musical intricacies, and emotive storytelling to create a timeless piece that celebrates tradition, craftsmanship, and the enduring power of love.

V. Performing Studies

The performance practice of "Embroidering a Purse" encompasses various elements that combine to create a deeply expressive and culturally rich rendition. These elements include emotional expression, clear articulation, ornamental phrasing, breath control, and stylistic interpretation, each contributing to a holistic and authentic performance.

5.1. Emotional Interpretation

The song demands a nuanced approach to emotional delivery. The singer must convey the woman's tranquility and focus while embroidering, as well as her pride in her needlework skills. For instance, the phrase "Holding the steel needle, showcasing your skill," should be sung with a sense of pride and meticulousness, reflecting the woman's dedication and joy. As the lyrics progress, they reveal the woman's aspirations and dreams about her beloved, which should be performed with a mix of tenderness and anticipation, capturing the essence of young love and hopeful longing.

5.2. Clear Articulation

In Chinese folk singing, clear articulation of words is paramount. This principle, known as "word clarity and roundness of tone," ensures that each word is pronounced distinctly and resonantly. The Shandong dialect, characterized by its straightforward and solid enunciation, must be faithfully rendered in the performance. For example, the word "purse" should be articulated as "baoao" to preserve the dialect's phonetic texture. Additionally, the use of "ni" instead of "ne" for refrain words adds a regional flavor, and the distinct pronunciation of sonorants like "ang" should be emphasized to maintain authenticity.

5.3. Ornamentation and Phrase Shaping

The song features numerous ornamental elements, such as grace notes, slides, and turns. These should be performed with precision to enhance the melodic line without disrupting the flow. For example, in the phrase "Sister in the room (ah)," the grace note preceding the main note should glide smoothly, creating a seamless transition. Proper control over these ornaments is crucial to avoid rigidity and maintain the song's lyrical fluidity.

5.4. Breath Control

Effective breath control is essential, especially given the song's frequent use of refrains and decorative syllables. Singers should practice techniques like chest-abdomen combined breathing and quick inhalation to manage their breath efficiently. The ability to sustain long phrases and navigate rapid ornamental passages without losing breath support is vital. For example, the transitions between phrases in "Holding the steel needle lightly sketching" require controlled and continuous breath to maintain the melodic line's integrity.

5.5. Stylistic Interpretation

Understanding the stylistic nuances of Shandong folk music is crucial for an authentic performance. This involves grasping the cultural and historical context of the song, which reflects the simplicity and directness of the Shandong people. The song's overall style is plain yet subtly intricate, with elements like sliding tones and nasalization adding regional color. Singers should strive to balance the song's straightforward melodic line with these intricate stylistic details to capture its full emotional and cultural depth.

VI. Conclusion

"Embroidering a Purse" serves as a quintessential example of Shandong's rich folk music heritage. Its lyrics, imbued with simplicity and emotional depth, reflect the everyday life and romantic sentiments of the local people. The song's melodic structure, characterized by the use of pentatonic scales and traditional modes, underscores the region's distinctive musical style.

The study elucidates how the song's narrative and symbolic elements convey themes of love, craftsmanship, and cultural identity. The embroidered purse, as a central motif, encapsulates the values of dedication, skill, and affection, offering a window into the socio-cultural fabric of Shandong. In contemporary times, efforts to preserve and revitalize traditional folk songs like "Embroidering a Purse" highlight their enduring cultural importance. These songs continue to foster a sense of identity and continuity, serving as a testament to Shandong's rich cultural legacy.

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