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A Comparative Study of the "Lamenting Voice" in Chinese Han and Yi Ethnic Bridal Lament Songs: Musical Morphology and Emotional Expression in *Ban Sheng Lüdou* and *A Mo Ni Re*

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Abstract

How do bridal laments give musical form to experiences of marriage and separation? This article compares aural transcriptions of two performed versions of *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* and *A Mo Ni Re* through their pitch organization, melodic closure, rhythmic patterns, melodic contours, and relationships between music and lyrics. In *Ban Sheng Lü Dou*, closure on E in the jue mode, a progression from narration to direct address, and the repetition of a concluding passage concentrate marital experience in the appeal "Oh Mother, you have brought me misery." The resulting lament combines attachment with blame through repeated address to a close relative. In *A Mo Ni Re*, recurring closure on A in the yu mode, parallel statements introduced by "they say" and "but," and conclusions marked by "only" turn conventional associations of mountains and grasslands with happiness and freedom into an implicit question about human circumstances. Expansion into a higher register and the ensuing rests help articulate this rhetorical process. The comparison identifies two ways of organizing lament: repeated address and contrast followed by a reversal of the initial claim. It argues that the expressive force of these songs emerges from the temporal coordination of melody, pauses, repetition, and verbal meaning. This approach connects specific musical relationships with the articulation of personal experience, kinship, and constrained autonomy.

Keywords

bridal laments, *Ban Sheng Lü Dou*, *A Mo Ni Re*, melodic structure, text–music relationships, emotional expression

1. Introduction

Bridal laments give voice to separation, marriage arrangements, attachment to relatives, and accounts of personal misfortune. As a singing practice, lament involves what is said, how it is sung, and to whom it is addressed. Melodic expansion, repeated phrases, and sustained phrase endings give complaints, metaphors, and implicit questions a form distinct from everyday speech. An account of lament expression must therefore explain how music organizes emotional content into a process that can unfold, pause, return, and be stated again.

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Ban Sheng Lü Dou (半升绿豆, "Half a Sheng of Mung Beans") and *A Mo Ni Re* (阿莫尼惹) provide a focused comparison. The former is associated with the banjiage tradition of Jiahe, Hunan, comprising songs performed to accompany the bride; the lyrics examined here concern marriage and an appeal to the mother. The latter is associated with the Liangshan Yi bridal-lament repertoire; the selected lyrics contrast mountains and grasslands with happiness and freedom. The two transcriptions draw on the same pentatonic pitch-class collection but use E and A, respectively, as their principal finals. Their phrase organization, rhythms, and verbal structures also differ. Comparing them shows how similar pitch materials can support distinct ways of lamenting.

Previous research provides a literary and cultural context for these songs. Studies by Sunzi Gaga [1], Yi [2], and Yang [3] address oral formulas, textual transmission, and narrative features in Mama de Nü'er (妈妈的女儿, "Mother's Daughter"). Jishi Wage [4], Fan [5], and Li [6] examine related repertoires through wedding ritual, musical expression, and cultural change. Shen [7] and Luo [8] consider gender relations and contemporary transmission. Research on Jiahe banjiage by Zhou and Li [9], He [10], and Duan [11] addresses artistic characteristics, women's roles, and local culture. These studies situate the songs' accounts of suffering within kinship, marital experience, and the contexts in which repertoires circulate.

Cai and Chen's comparison of Yi narrative materials [12] draws attention to the different meanings that related texts can acquire through changes in reciter, addressee, and occasion. McLaren and Chen [13] and McLaren [14] situate bridal lament within oral tradition and ritual practice. Ho's concept of "counterpoint obedience" [15, p. 77] identifies a tension between conformity to marriage rites and the public articulation of personal suffering; her analysis also considers the interaction of words, music, and crying. These perspectives inform the present inquiry into the relationships through which lament takes shape. Celen et al.'s research on cross-cultural similarities and differences in music-emotion vocabulary [16] further supports attention to the contexts in which emotional terms acquire meaning.

This article uses lament expression to describe the articulation of sorrow and grievance through music and words together. It asks how melodic closure and rhythmic pauses organize the course of lament, how melodic contours interact with narration, address, and verbal turns, and how these relationships direct emotion toward a particular person or circumstance. Close readings of the two versions identify lament through repeated address and lament through contrast and reversal. These are analytical descriptions developed from the selected songs, rather than inherited formal classifications.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Performed Versions and Aural Transcriptions

The two staff-notation transcriptions were made by the author by ear. The source for *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* is a recording on QQ Music whose shared listing identifies the performer as Wangluo Geshou (网络歌手, "Online Singer") [17]. The source for *A Mo Ni Re* is a Xiaohongshu video of a male singer accompanying himself on guitar, shared under the Chinese title 阿嫫尼惹 [18]. The title in the transcription, 阿莫尼惹, is retained throughout the analysis. Its romanization, *A Mo Ni Re*, follows the Chinese characters used in that score. Examples 1 and 2 reproduce the melody transcriptions and their Chinese lyrics; English lyric translations are supplied alongside them.

The analysis combines comparison of the notated melodies with close reading of the Chinese words in the transcriptions. Pitches, durations, and measure references describe the notation. Accompaniment texture, vocal timbre, and fine variations in performed timing require separate examination of the recordings. The argument concerns text–music relationships in the selected versions, with wedding traditions and the relevant literature providing an interpretive context. Lyric translations are prose renderings for analysis, rather than singable adaptations or translations made directly from a Yi-language text.

2.2 Analytical Categories and Pitch Notation

The analysis considers pitch organization and closure, rhythmic patterns, melodic contour, and phrase structure. Recurring structural pitches and phrase-final notes establish a point of reference for each melody. The distribution of durations, ties, and rests then shows how phrases proceed and end. Local intervals, pitch
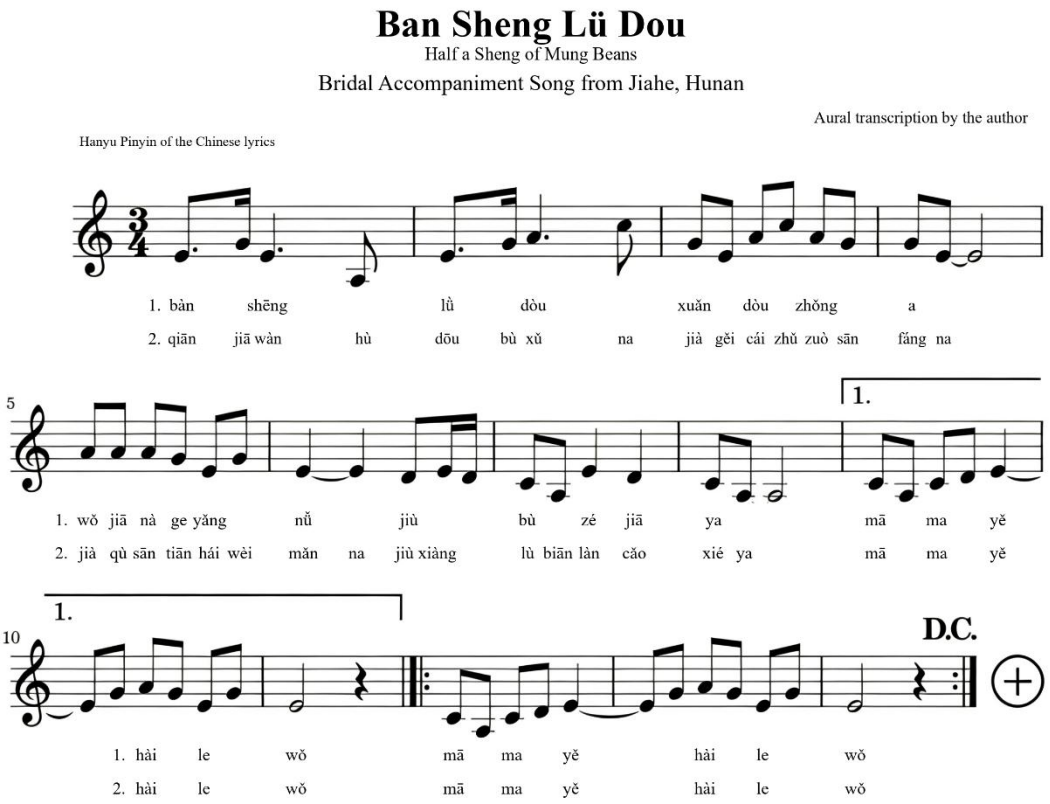
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ranges, and melodic trajectories are related to the accompanying words to explain how music articulates narration, direct address, and rhetorical turns. Interpretation of emotional expression proceeds from these specific relationships.

Scientific pitch notation is used, with middle C designated C4. Both transcriptions use the pitch classes C, D, E, G, and A. Within the C gong system, these correspond to gong, shang, jue, zhi, and yu. The distinction between a pentatonic collection and its modal final follows the terminology discussed by Lam [19]. *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* is interpreted as E jue mode because E is its principal final; *A Mo Ni Re* is interpreted as A yu mode because its phrases repeatedly close on A. These labels describe modal centers within the shared pentatonic collection. They do not imply Western functional-harmonic relationships.

Measures are numbered consecutively as written, from left to right and system by system; performed repetitions do not create additional measure numbers. *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* contains 14 notated measures, and *A Mo Ni Re* contains 10. The discussion distinguishes the overall pitch range from local leaps and retains octave numbers when giving melodic sequences. References to "closure" concern melodic phrase endings, without presupposing a harmonic cadence.

Example 1: Ban Sheng Lü Dou



Source: Author's aural transcription of the version cited in [17].
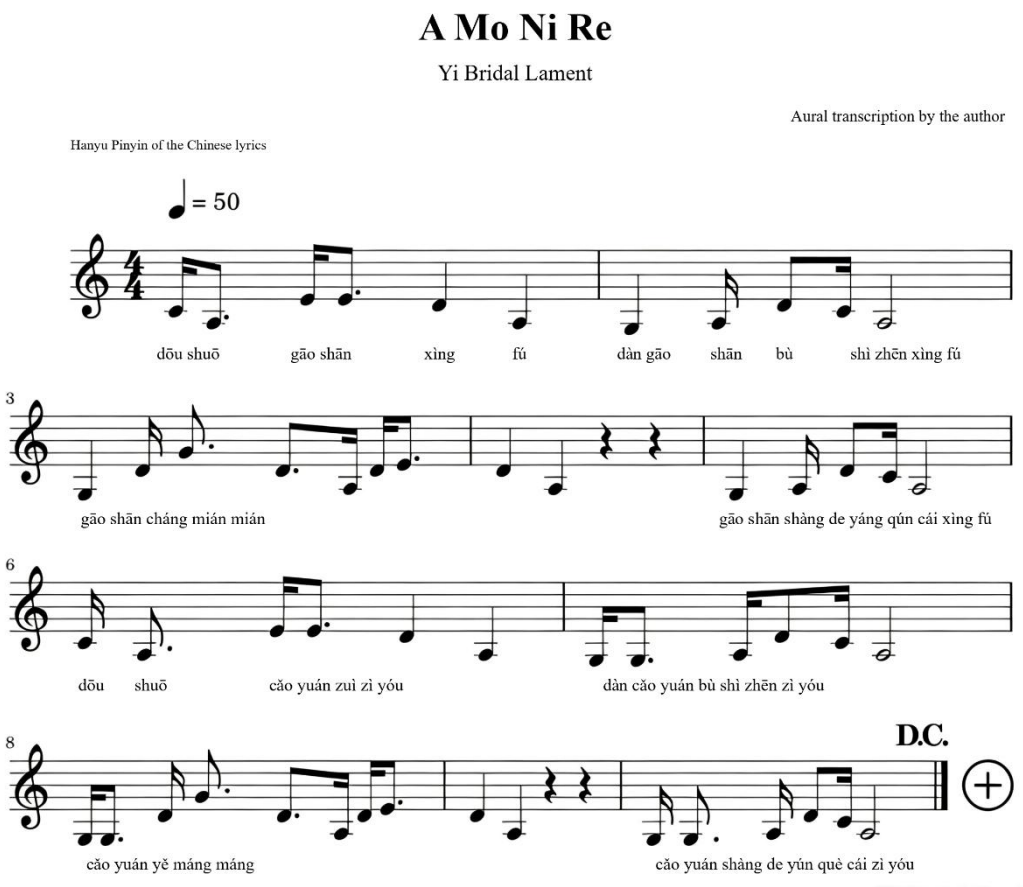
English Translation of the Transcribed Lyrics

Stanza 1. From half a sheng of mung beans, seeds are carefully selected; yet no care is taken in choosing the marital household for a daughter raised in our family. Oh Mother, you have brought me misery.

Stanza 2. No family would agree to marry a daughter to a rich man as a third wife in his household. Not even three days married, I am like a worn-out straw sandal by the roadside. Oh Mother, you have brought me misery.

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Example 2: A Mo Ni Re



Source: Author's aural transcription of the version cited in [18].

English Translation of the Transcribed Lyrics

They say life in the high mountains is happy, but it is not true happiness. The high mountains stretch on and on; only the sheep on the mountains are happy.

They say the grassland offers the greatest freedom, but it is not true freedom. The grassland stretches vast and open; only the skylarks over the grassland are free.

3. Narration and Repeated Address in *Ban Sheng Lü Dou*

3.1 The E Jue Center and Levels of Closure

Ban Sheng Lü Dou uses the pitch classes C, D, E, G, and A, with a range from A3 to C5, a minor tenth. Measure 4 ends on E4; measures 11 and 14 conclude with an E4 half note followed by a quarter rest. These endings establish E as the principal final. Measure 8, by contrast, ends on A3. The placement of E and A at different phrase endings creates distinct levels of melodic closure: an intermediate point of arrival and the more conclusive ending of the final passage.

This differentiation helps organize the emotional progression. Measures 1–4 form the opening statement, measures 5–8 develop the account of marriage and personal circumstances, and measures 9–11 and 12–14 give repeated expression to "Oh Mother, you have brought me misery." The low A3 at the end of measure 8 connects the earlier narration with the subsequent address. The two written endings on E4 return the concluding words to the same emotional focus. The modal center thus helps integrate the phrases and concentrate their statements.

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3.2 Long–Short Patterns and Phrase Progression

The transcription is in 3/4 meter. In measures 1 and 2, a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note divides a quarter-note beat into a long–short pattern with a 3:1 durational ratio. The more continuous eighth notes in measures 3 and 5 provide a more even subdivision as the words proceed. Alternation between these patterns allows the narration to linger at some points and move more continuously at others.

Phrase endings use a different arrangement. Ties prolong the same pitch in measures 4 and 8, whereas measures 11 and 14 divide a 3/4 measure into two beats of sustained sound and one beat of rest. Forward motion in the earlier words gives way to a more sustained ending. In particular, the conclusion of "you have brought me misery" leaves one beat of rest after the sustained E4. This placement brings the attribution of blame into focus and provides space before a renewed appeal.

The emotional sequence is therefore traceable in the notation. Experience is narrated phrase by phrase; direct address enters a more concentrated recurring unit; and sustained endings followed by rests emphasize the concluding accusation. Differences in note density and the duration of phrase endings articulate the move from narration to a more concentrated expression of feeling.

3.3 Melodic Contour and the Recurring Appeal

The opening melody combines expansion and return. In measure 1, E4–G4–E4–A3 moves around a minor third before descending a perfect fifth. Measure 2 rises from E4 through G4 and A4 to C5. Measure 3 moves among G4, E4, A4, and C5, and measure 4 returns to E4. This contour gives the opening statement a sense of completion after upward expansion and local descents.

Measure 5 begins with repeated A4s before turning toward a lower register. In measure 9, the melody accompanying the address to the mother descends from C4 to A3, then rises through C4 and D4 to E4. Measure 10 continues upward to G4 and A4 and turns back; measure 11 ends on E4. This concluding unit spans A3–A4, a perfect octave, within the song's wider overall range of a minor tenth. Its descent, rise, and closure form a complete melodic gesture for the appeal.

Measures 12–14 write out the same concluding unit again. The recurrence of the words with the same melody makes "Oh Mother, you have brought me misery" a passage to which the singer can return. Repetition has a clear verbal reference: the preceding account can change or be extended, while the appeal returns to the mother and her relationship to the marriage experience.

3.4 Attachment and Blame within Lament

The lyrics begin with selecting mung beans for seed and move to the complaint that no care is taken in choosing a marital household for a daughter in the family. A second stanza describes a devalued position after marriage: "Not even three days married, I am like a worn-out straw sandal by the roadside." Everyday objects and experiences give concrete form to personal suffering before the words turn to direct address.

"Oh Mother" identifies an intimate addressee; "you have brought me misery" immediately connects that relationship with the consequences of marriage. Their juxtaposition places the mother in two positions at once: a source of emotional attachment and a person held responsible. The lament thus brings together a desire to be understood by someone close and a grievance concerning the arrangement of the speaker's life.

Music gives this tension a recurring form. The address descends into a low register, rises, turns back, and lingers on E4. Repetition of the same unit keeps the accusation within the relationship established by the kinship term. This article describes the process as lament through repeated address: an account of personal circumstances becomes a sustained appeal to a particular person, allowing grievance to recur within an intimate relationship. Its expressive force comes from the transition between narration and address, the juxtaposition of attachment and blame, and the melody's repeated articulation of that relationship.

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4. Contrast and Reversal in *A Mo Ni Re*

4.1 The A Yu Center and Parallel Sections

A Mo Ni Re uses the pitch classes C, D, E, G, and A, with a range from G3 to G4, a perfect octave. Measures 2, 5, 7, and 10 end with a relatively long A3. Measures 4 and 9 likewise descend through D4–A3 before rests. A3 repeatedly marks the completion of a phrase and provides a common point of arrival across the sections.

Music and lyrics form two parallel sections: measures 1–5 concern mountains and happiness, and measures 6–10 concern grasslands and freedom. Measures 1 and 6, 3 and 8, and 4 and 9 use corresponding musical materials. Different images are placed within similar sequences of expansion and return, allowing the second section to extend the question raised by the first.

Closure on A3 connects the initial assertion, its negation, and the concluding judgment. The same final pitch supports different propositions, making the changes in verbal meaning more apparent. A consistent modal center links phrases whose accounts of happiness and freedom change as the lyrics unfold.

4.2 Short–Long Patterns and the Placement of Pauses

The transcription is in 4/4 meter, with a tempo marking of quarter note = 50. In measure 1, a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note produces a short–long pattern with a 1:3 durational ratio; measure 6 uses a similar pattern. The brief onset followed by a longer note initiates the assertion introduced by “they say.” Its local durational order differs from the opening long–short pattern in *Ban Sheng Lü Dou*.

Measures 4 and 9 have a particularly clear structural role. Each descends through D4 and A3 as quarter notes, followed by two quarter rests, leaving the second half of the measure silent in the transcribed melodic line. At the notated tempo, those two beats correspond to 2.4 seconds. This value describes the duration implied by the score, rather than an acoustic measurement of the recording.

The pauses occur after the landscape description and before the concluding judgment. In the mountain section, the expansion and descent of measures 3–4 precede “Only the sheep on the mountains are happy” in measure 5. In the grassland section, measures 8–9 precede “Only the skylarks over the grassland are free” in measure 10. Both pauses therefore mark the same rhetorical juncture. After the initial assertion and its negation have been extended through landscape imagery, the clause marked by cai (才, rendered as “only”) enters after a pause and acquires a distinct position.

4.3 Registral Expansion and Closure in the Low Register

The opening sequence C4–A3–E4–E4–D4–A3 in measure 1 includes a descending minor third, an ascending perfect fifth, and a return downward. Measure 2, G3–A3–D4–C4–A3, begins low, rises, and returns. Through these movements, recurring A3 endings establish a common reference for the phrases.

Measure 3 ascends from G3 through D4 to G4, successively traversing an ascending perfect fifth and perfect fourth, before returning to D4, A3, and the following notes. Measure 8 has a corresponding expansion to G4. These local peaks occur during descriptions of mountains and grasslands. The spatial imagery is accompanied by a wider upward reach, followed in measures 4 and 9 by a descent to A3 and rests. Registral expansion and contraction thus participate in the verbal elaboration of the scenes.

The concluding judgments return to the low register. Measure 5 begins on G3 and moves through A3, D4, and C4 before returning to A3; measure 10 likewise unfolds low and ends on A3. Upward expansion in the landscape passages, followed by a pause and a low-register conclusion, gives the verbal sequence a corresponding melodic shape. It distinguishes the scenic images from the ensuing judgments and gives “freedom” in the second section a treatment comparable to “happiness” in the first.

4.4 The Implicit Question about Happiness and Freedom

The verbal rhetoric unfolds in four stages. “They say” introduces a received judgment; “but” negates it; the landscape description places that judgment within a concrete scene; and “only” assigns happiness or freedom to sheep or skylarks. Similar verbal structures question happiness and freedom in turn, allowing the two sections to reinforce one another.

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The irony arises from a shift in who is said to possess these desirable conditions. The opening invokes positive associations with life in the mountains or grasslands, while the conclusion assigns true happiness and freedom to animals. Human circumstances become the implied point of comparison: among those who inhabit these landscapes, the sheep and skylarks are explicitly identified as happy or free. Through natural imagery, the lyrics call a reassuring view of life into question.

Music helps articulate that questioning. Parallel melodic passages give the two propositions corresponding forms. Registral expansion elaborates the landscape imagery; descent and two beats of rest separate the final judgment from what precedes it; and renewed closure on A3 completes the statements concerning happiness and freedom. This article describes the process as lament through contrast and reversal. Emotion accumulates through parallel verbal structures, a change in the subject of the claim, and a conclusion placed after a pause, giving the lament a reflective orientation toward the speaker's circumstances.

5. Comparison and Cultural Interpretation

5.1 Different Organizations of Shared Materials

Both transcriptions use the same pentatonic pitch-class collection and employ leaps, returns, repeated notes, and sustained endings. Their differences concern how these materials are coordinated with the words. *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* moves from an account of experience to a concluding appeal whose musical unit is written out twice. *A Mo Ni Re* develops different images through two parallel sections, placing pauses and conclusions at corresponding points. Table 1 summarizes these relationships.

Table 1: Musical organization and expressive functions in the two versions

Aspect	*Ban Sheng Lü Dou*	*A Mo Ni Re*
Pitch center	E jue; E and A mark different levels of closure	A yu; repeated phrase endings on A3
Organization	Opening, mm. 1–4; narration, mm. 5–8; address, mm. 9–11 and 12–14	Parallel mountain and grassland sections, mm. 1–5 and 6–10
Range and contour	Minor tenth overall; the concluding address spans a perfect octave	Perfect octave overall; fifth and fourth leaps expand the landscape passages
Local rhythm	Opening long–short 3:1 patterns alternate with even subdivisions	Opening short–long 1:3 patterns, sustained notes, and rests
Pauses	Mm. 11 and 14: a two-beat note followed by one beat of rest	Mm. 4 and 9: two beats of rest before the concluding judgment
Verbal relations	Narration returns to "Oh Mother, you have brought me misery"	"They say," "but," and "only" structure assertion, negation, and reassignment
Expressive focus	Attachment, grievance, and blame within kinship	Questioning human circumstances through natural imagery
Organization of lament	Repeated address	Contrast and reversal

Note: Pitch and duration refer to the aural transcriptions; the comparison concerns the selected versions.

The distinction between overall range and local contour clarifies these different organizations. *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* spans a minor tenth, while its concluding address occupies a perfect octave. *A Mo Ni Re* spans a perfect octave overall, yet its successive leaps of a fifth and fourth in measures 3 and 8 give the landscape passages particular prominence. The former concentrates its address within a broader overall range; the latter expands selected passages within an octave. Each arrangement serves a different verbal emphasis.

Rhythmic placement also differs. In *Ban Sheng Lü Dou*, dotted and evenly subdivided patterns carry the narration forward, while a two-beat sustained note followed by one beat of rest emphasizes the concluding accusation. In *A Mo Ni Re*, a short–long pattern initiates the statement, and two beats of rest in the melodic line mark the interval before the final judgment. Sustained notes and rests contribute to lament in both songs, but at different points in their phrase structures: the ending of repeated address in one, and the juncture preceding a rhetorical turn in the other.

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5.2 Addressing a Relative and Questioning One's Circumstances

Ban Sheng Lü Dou has a specific, intimate addressee. The account of marriage is repeatedly directed toward the mother, combining attachment with blame. Repetition of "Oh Mother" sustains the relationship, while repetition of "you have brought me misery" renews the question of responsibility. The melody joins these elements into a recurring unit, giving sorrow the form of an ongoing address within kinship.

In *A Mo Ni Re*, the focus emerges through the relationships among the statements. "They say" introduces a shared judgment; "but" and "only" alter the conditions under which it holds. Contrasts among mountains, grasslands, sheep, and skylarks place human circumstances at the implicit center of the question. Melodic parallelism, expansion, pauses, and low-register closure turn this rhetorical progression into a sequence unfolding in musical time.

The songs therefore follow two expressive paths. Repeated address moves from "what has happened to me" toward "my relationship with you," sustaining sorrow and grievance within kinship. Contrast and reversal move from "how people describe life" toward "who actually possesses happiness and freedom," extending sorrow into a question about one's circumstances. The distinction rests on the interaction of addressee, verbal relations, and musical phrase structure.

5.3 Marital Experience and the Position of the Speaking Subject

Marriage arrangements, kinship structures, and gender norms provide a historical context for interpreting bridal lament [20], [21]. Within that context, *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* connects the speaker's devaluation after marriage with choices made by her natal family. The mother is both someone to whom the daughter can turn and a person addressed when the daughter explains the consequences of marriage. The attribution of blame gives voice to a tension between being raised within a family and being married out of it. Melodic repetition sustains that tension within the appeal.

A Mo Ni Re places constrained human circumstances against natural imagery by changing who is said to possess happiness and freedom. Read in relation to bridal-lament experience, its treatment of separation and marriage can be connected with a broader desire for autonomy. The expression is indirect, but its question is clear: does living in a particular environment necessarily bring the happiness and freedom associated with it?

Both forms of lament give the speaking subject an active role in interpreting experience. In the first, kinship address and the attribution of blame establish a position from which to speak; in the second, the negation of a received judgment establishes a position from which to question it. These readings enter into dialogue with the tension between obedience and dissent discussed by Ho [15]. Lament can hold attachment, the maintenance of relationships, grievance, and criticism of one's circumstances together. Musical analysis locates these meanings in specific structural relationships: recurring units of address, parallel passages, sustained notes, and pauses placed at particular verbal junctures.

6. Conclusion

Comparison of the selected versions of *Ban Sheng Lü Dou* and *A Mo Ni Re* identifies two ways of organizing lament: repeated address and contrast followed by reversal. In *Ban Sheng Lü Dou*, differentiated levels of closure around E jue, the move from narration to direct address, and the repetition of the concluding passage concentrate personal experience in the appeal "Oh Mother, you have brought me misery." In *A Mo Ni Re*, recurring A yu endings, registral expansion within parallel sections, and rests before the concluding judgments turn statements about happiness and freedom into an implicit question concerning human circumstances.

The expressive force of lament can thus be traced through specific relationships: where a melody expands, where it pauses, how words return, and toward whom or what emotion is directed. Repetition sustains attachment and grievance within kinship; contrast and reversal gradually articulate reflection on constrained circumstances. By identifying these relationships, the article explains how music participates in emotional narration and interpersonal expression and offers an approach for comparing further bridal-lament repertoires.

These conclusions concern the aural transcriptions and Chinese lyrics of the selected versions. Further comparison with verified recordings, other performances, and ritual materials can examine how similar expressive processes continue or change across performance settings.

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