

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i3.859>

Posthuman Aesthetics and Indigenous Knowledge: Elunchun Folk Songs in Contemporary Music Education

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Abstract

This study explores the posthuman and pedagogical potential of Elunchun folk songs—an Indigenous musical tradition rooted in the forested ecologies of Northeast China—as a means of fostering aesthetic awareness, cultural empathy, and relational learning in music education. Drawing on qualitative methodologies, including ethnographic fieldwork, song analysis, and interviews with five key informants, the research centers on the song “Elunchun De Hui Yi”, which embodies the Elunchun community’s multispecies worldviews, ancestral memory, and adaptive resilience. The analysis reveals distinct musical elements—such as pentatonic modal frameworks, flexible rhythmic structures, and lyrical natural imagery—that challenge Western-centric models of music pedagogy. These findings situate Elunchun folk songs not only as tools for aesthetic development but as carriers of Indigenous epistemologies that resist erasure in the face of modernization and cultural assimilation. The study advocates for their integration into contemporary educational frameworks through culturally sustaining pedagogy, digital preservation, and intercultural dialogue. In doing so, it contributes to broader posthumanist conversations on the ethical reconfiguration of music education and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems as vital to a pluralistic and decolonial educational future.

Keywords: Posthuman pedagogy, indigenous knowledge, Elunchun folk songs, relational aesthetics, decolonial education.

Introduction

In a world increasingly shaped by technological acceleration, ecological fragility, and the redefinition of human identity, music education must extend beyond technical proficiency to engage with the ethical, aesthetic, and cultural questions that define posthumanist thought. From this perspective, aesthetic education involves not only cultivating sensitivity to beauty and emotion, but also rethinking the relational frameworks through which music mediates human and more-than-human experiences. Within this expanded vision, folk songs emerge as powerful pedagogical tools—living repositories of Indigenous knowledge that challenge dominant anthropocentric and Eurocentric narratives. Elunchun folk songs, rooted in oral traditions and embedded in the ecological consciousness of one of China’s smallest Indigenous communities, exemplify the potential of music to foster cultural empathy, environmental awareness, and aesthetic sensibility in posthuman contexts (Ping et al., 2024; Reimer, 2022; Smith, 2021).

The Elunchun people, traditionally forest dwellers in Northeast China, have long expressed their relationship to the natural world through music, storytelling, and ritual. Their folk songs are not simply artistic expressions; they are multimodal forms of knowing—intertwining memory,

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ecology, and identity. As Lilomaiava-Doktor (2020) and Xiaozhi (2024) note, oral traditions often function as epistemological systems, transmitting worldviews through embodied and performative means. However, modernization, urban migration, and the erosion of Indigenous languages have placed Elunchun musical practices at risk of extinction. In this context, preserving these songs is not merely an act of documentation but a reclamation of cultural agency and a confrontation with the homogenizing effects of global modernity (Brocken, 2022; Sukmayadi & Hidayatullah, 2023; Wu & Chuangprakhon, 2024). This research thus approaches Elunchun folk songs not as relics of a vanishing past but as living pedagogical tools with the power to reframe music education in more inclusive and relational ways.

The core objective of this study is to examine how Elunchun folk songs—particularly the song “Elunchun De Hui Yi”—can serve as aesthetic and cultural entry points within contemporary music education. Drawing on qualitative methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, song analysis, and interviews with cultural practitioners, the research explores the educational potential of this repertoire to bridge Indigenous knowledge with posthuman pedagogical frameworks. With its pentatonic melodies, free-flowing rhythms, and lyrical evocation of nature and memory, “Elunchun De Hui Yi” offers students a portal into a worldview shaped by interdependence, resilience, and ecological attunement (Dinh, 2023; Wadiyo et al., 2024; Wu, 2023).

This study contributes to two critical and interconnected conversations: the preservation of endangered musical traditions and the posthuman reconfiguration of education. In embracing Elunchun folk music as a site of knowledge production, it challenges the boundaries between learner and culture, subject and environment, tradition and innovation. By incorporating these songs into educational curricula, music educators can move beyond standardized models and cultivate a form of aesthetic awareness rooted in diversity, relationality, and cultural empathy. This aligns with global pedagogical goals that emphasize creativity, multicultural understanding, and the cultivation of ethical sensibilities in an increasingly interconnected world. Ultimately, this research affirms the power of Indigenous aesthetics to not only preserve cultural memory but to reshape how we learn, feel, and imagine in the posthuman age.

Literature Review

The integration of folk music into education has drawn significant scholarly interest for its potential to cultivate cultural empathy, aesthetic sensibility, and ecological awareness. As living expressions of cultural identity and memory, folk traditions serve not only as artistic outputs but also as epistemological systems—modes of knowing rooted in lived experiences, environmental relationships, and oral transmission. Within the context of posthumanist inquiry, these traditions challenge dominant frameworks that privilege codified, textual, and anthropocentric knowledge systems. They offer instead a more entangled understanding of identity, sound, and place. While Chinese folk music has increasingly found space within educational research, specific ethnic traditions such as those of the Elunchun remain underexamined. This literature review thus aims to position Elunchun folk songs within a broader scholarly conversation that includes aesthetic education, cultural preservation, and the posthuman reconfiguration of music pedagogy.

Theoretical Frameworks in Folk Music and Aesthetic Education

Theories of aesthetic education emphasize music's transformative capacity to evoke emotional resonance, intellectual reflection, and cultural understanding. Constructivist models advocate for experiential learning, where knowledge emerges through active engagement and embodied

participation (Hadjikou, 2021; An et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2023). Folk music, with its embedded narratives and performative dimensions, provides a unique context for this form of meaning-making. For posthumanist education, this framework extends into an exploration of how music enables learners to develop a relational ontology—where sound, memory, environment, and emotion converge beyond individual cognition (Guobin et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2025).

Contextual and holistic approaches to music instruction further argue that the value of music is inseparable from its cultural, ecological, and historical origins. This aligns with posthumanist calls to de-center Western, technocentric models of learning in favor of more situated and responsive pedagogies. Elunchun folk music—shaped by hunting traditions, seasonal rhythms, and forest ecologies—demands such contextual attentiveness (Ellefsen & Karlsen, 2020; Yusoff et al., 2023). Its pedagogical potential lies not only in aesthetic exploration but in revealing the multispecies entanglements and spiritual logics that define Elunchun life.

The Role of Folk Music in Cultural Preservation and Identity

Folk music is increasingly recognized as a critical means of preserving cultural identity and resisting epistemic erasure. For communities like the Elunchun, music acts as both archive and lifeline—sustaining memory, affirming heritage, and asserting presence in a rapidly globalizing world (Chang et al., 2024; Sukmayadi & Hidayatullah, 2023). Posthumanism reframes cultural preservation not merely as conservation but as dynamic continuity—a process through which traditions evolve, hybridize, and adapt without losing their core relational values.

Elunchun folk songs—marked by pentatonic melodies, evocative imagery, and flexible rhythmic structures—offer pedagogical opportunities for learners to experience music as a relational and historical act. Their embedded references to nature, community rituals, and social transformations create multidimensional learning experiences that foster an awareness of music as a carrier of Indigenous agency and ecological ethics (Lyu, 2024; Ning et al., 2024). These dimensions challenge linear narratives of cultural loss and instead frame folk music as a site of resilience and adaptation.

Aesthetic Sensibilities in Music Education

Folk music's emotive depth and sonic particularity allow it to function as a catalyst for developing students' aesthetic awareness. Theories of aesthetic response emphasize the integration of emotional engagement and critical interpretation in appreciating musical works (Barrett, 2023; Buschkühle, 2020; Thompson et al., 2023). In Elunchun songs, aesthetic experience arises not only from melodic and rhythmic beauty but also from the affective landscapes they invoke—forests, animal calls, ancestral voices—thus engaging the listener in a multisensory, post-anthropocentric relationship with sound.

Improvisational elements and non-metric rhythmic structures found in Elunchun music invite students to rethink conventional notions of musical time, form, and authorship. These qualities align with the posthuman view of music as an open system of becoming—where tradition and innovation coexist and where artistic meaning is always relational and emergent (Ismail et al., 2021; Shi & Nicolas, 2023). Teaching such material cultivates aesthetic dispositions that are not only appreciative but critically situated in cultural and ecological contexts.

Implications for Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Education

In an era defined by planetary interconnection and cultural dislocation, music education has a vital role in cultivating intercultural literacy and ethical engagement. Folk music serves as a

medium for mutual recognition, offering students access to unfamiliar worldviews and inviting reflection on their own positionality. Elunchun songs, in particular, exemplify the power of music to transcend cultural boundaries and generate dialogical learning experiences (Dinh, 2023; Eden et al., 2024; Sen & Nagendra, 2023).

Integrating Elunchun folk music into educational curricula extends beyond cultural appreciation—it constitutes a form of pedagogical resistance to homogenization. It fosters cosmopolitan empathy while honoring cultural specificity. From a posthumanist standpoint, such integration foregrounds distributed cognition, multispecies relationality, and the dismantling of hierarchical binaries in education. This is not simply about preserving tradition but about re-imagining what it means to learn, to feel, and to co-exist through music in a shared, more-than-human world.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative, ethnographically informed methodology grounded in posthumanist and decolonial research paradigms. Recognizing that Indigenous knowledge systems such as those embedded in Elunchun folk music are produced and transmitted through embodied, relational, and performative practices, this research resists extractive modes of inquiry and instead privileges immersion, dialogue, and co-presence. The methodological framework emphasizes situated knowledge, non-hierarchical researcher-participant dynamics, and an attentiveness to the more-than-human world that informs Elunchun musical cosmologies (Liu et al., 2025; Lulu et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2024). The inquiry unfolded through four interrelated phases: fieldwork in Elunchun communities, folk song selection and analysis, interviews with key cultural informants, and a thematic synthesis of the data.

Fieldwork in Elunchun Communities

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Elunchun communities located in forested regions of Northeast China. The researcher engaged in participant observation, attending local music performances, rituals, and informal gatherings. Rather than treating the field as a passive site of data collection, the approach centered on relational co-presence—an effort to experience the sonic, ecological, and cultural lifeworld of the Elunchun people. This immersive engagement allowed for the observation of how music operates as a living force—embedded in everyday life, seasonal cycles, and spiritual expressions. Table 1 below summarizes the primary activities and foci of this fieldwork.

Table 1. Overview of Fieldwork Activities

Activity	Detail
Location	Elunchun communities in Northeast China
Focus Areas	Song performances, cultural rituals, and intergenerational interactions
Observational Focus	Role of music in ecological practices and ceremonial life

Song Selection and Analysis

A selection of representative folk songs was chosen based on their cultural significance, pedagogical potential, and musical diversity. The focal piece, “Elunchun De Hui Yi” (“Memories of the Elunchun”), was identified in consultation with community elders and musicians as a canonical work reflecting the group’s history, spiritual orientation, and relationship with the natural world. Song analysis employed a post-structuralist lens to interpret not only musical form

(melody, rhythm, lyrical content) but also the relational aesthetics that animate its performance contexts, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Characteristics of “Elunchun De Hui Yi”

Aspect	Description
Melody	Pentatonic scale with gentle and evocative tonal flow
Rhythm	Free-flowing, flexible temporal structure
Lyrics	Infused with natural imagery and historical narrative
Pedagogical	Encourages cultural reflexivity and aesthetic engagement

Interviews with Key Informants

To further contextualize the folk music within Elunchun cosmology, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with key cultural informants, including musicians, local educators, and oral historians. These individuals were not positioned merely as subjects but as co-creators of knowledge, whose narratives offered deep insights into the transmission, meaning, and adaptation of Elunchun folk songs across generations. Interviews focused on memory, ritual, performance practice, and reflections on cultural continuity in an era of rapid socio-environmental change.

Thematic Analysis of Data

The final phase involved thematic analysis of field notes, interview transcripts, and musical interpretations. Thematic coding was informed by a non-linear, iterative process, foregrounding themes that emerged from within the community’s own epistemological frameworks rather than imposing external analytical categories. This approach ensured fidelity to the cultural logics of the Elunchun people and aligned with posthumanist commitments to de-centering Western universalism in knowledge production, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Identified Themes and Descriptions

Theme	Description
Connection with Nature	Songs express a symbiotic relationship between people and the forest ecosystem
Cultural Identity	Music preserves and affirms collective memory and Indigenous worldviews
Educational Applications	Songs act as multisensory pedagogical tools for cultural and aesthetic learning

This methodological framework, anchored in relational ethics and Indigenous knowledge systems, offers a holistic and culturally responsive pathway for exploring the educational value of Elunchun folk songs. By privileging lived experience, non-linear temporality, and more-than-human relationality, the study contributes to a posthumanist reimagining of how research and education can engage meaningfully with cultural difference and sonic heritage.

Results

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of Elunchun folk songs as posthuman cultural artifacts—sonic expressions that interweave ecological sensibility, collective memory, and pedagogical possibility. Rather than viewing these songs as static heritage, this section foregrounds their dynamic role in fostering aesthetic appreciation, preserving Indigenous worldviews, and reshaping the epistemic boundaries of music education. The results are

organized into three interconnected domains: the musical characteristics of Elunchun folk songs, their cultural significance, and their educational implications within a posthuman pedagogical framework.

Musical Characteristics of Elunchun Folk Songs

Elunchun folk songs exemplify a form of relational musicality, wherein melody, rhythm, and voice are deeply entangled with environmental cues, affective memory, and ancestral knowledge. The song “Elunchun De Hui Yi” emerged from the fieldwork as a focal composition embodying these interconnections. Through melody, rhythm, vocal techniques, and imagery, this piece reveals a sonic cosmology that challenges Western formalist paradigms.

Melodic Structure

The melodic contour of “Elunchun De Hui Yi” is shaped by a Db pentatonic scale, unfolding in smooth and contemplative motion from Db to B. This structure evokes a sense of temporal fluidity and emotional tranquility, qualities often aligned with the forest ecology from which the song emerges (see Figure 1). Informants described the melody as “harmonious with the forest,” illustrating how the pitch sequences mirror natural rhythms, such as bird calls or rustling leaves.



Figure 1. Melodic characteristics

In educational contexts, the pentatonic mode invites students into an exploration of sonic minimalism and affective nuance—training their ears to attend not only to intervals but to the non-verbal storytelling embedded in melodic flow.

Rhythmic Fluidity

The song integrates multiple time signatures—2/4, 4/4, 6/8, and 9/8—producing a non-linear, improvisational rhythmic texture (see Figure 2). This rhythm is not merely a structural element but a reflection of seasonal and bodily rhythms, echoing hunting movements, ritual steps, and environmental cues. As one informant explained, “The rhythm follows the forest, not the clock.”



Figure 2. Rhythmic pattern

Such rhythmic flexibility serves as an educational portal into experiential time, encouraging learners to engage with music not as metric regularity, but as a responsive, embodied phenomenon.

Vocal Expression and Ornamentation

The vocal technique in Elunchun singing emphasizes expressiveness over precision, utilizing glissandos, microtonal shifts, and breath as aesthetic tools. These gestures convey emotional intensity, ancestral invocation, and affective immediacy, enriching students' understanding of voice as a relational medium. Figure 1 also marks these vocal ornaments, which expand students' concept of performance beyond notation and into empathic listening.

Ecological Imagery

The lyrics of “Elunchun De Hui Yi” are infused with references to stars, trees, rivers, and seasons. These metaphors establish a non-anthropocentric worldview, presenting the forest not as background but as kin. The QR code (see Figure 3) provides access to a performance video that further illustrates this deep ecological entanglement.



Figure 3. Qr code link to the video

This ecological aesthetic opens pedagogical possibilities for discussions on climate consciousness, biocultural diversity, and music as environmental ethics.

Cultural Significance

Elunchun folk songs function as living archives—storied soundscapes where history, place, and identity converge. Their significance lies not only in their content but in their capacity to resist epistemic erasure and mediate collective belonging.

Nature as Cultural Memory

As expressed in “Elunchun De Hui Yi”, natural imagery is not decorative but constitutive of identity. The sun, moon, and forest are invoked as ancestors, guides, and co-participants in communal life. One informant noted, “The forest is not scenery—it is spirit, it listens and responds.” Teaching these metaphors helps students encounter a worldview where the human is decentered, and relationality is foregrounded.

Narratives of Struggle and Resilience

The song also preserves memories of subsistence hardship, colonial displacement, and cultural revival. References to hunger and transition are juxtaposed with hope and gratitude for present stability under new governance. This duality invites interdisciplinary exploration of political ecology, social transformation, and Indigenous resistance.

Intergenerational Continuity

As one elder explained, “Every song we sing is a story of who we are, where we come from, and what we hold dear.” Songs thus operate as non-linear temporal bridges, transmitting ethics and emotions across generations. Their inclusion in curricula affirms the Elunchun’s voice in shaping educational discourse and counters the narrative of cultural obsolescence.

Educational Implications

Elunchun folk songs hold immense pedagogical potential as posthuman educational tools—fostering aesthetic, cultural, and affective literacies. Their integration into music education promotes relational pedagogy, intercultural empathy, and decolonial imagination.

Aesthetic and Emotional Engagement

Students engaged with “Elunchun De Hui Yi” reported feeling calm, curious, and emotionally connected. One informant shared, “When students listen deeply, they don’t just hear—they feel the forest’s breath.” This supports the use of active listening exercises to develop sensitivity to sonic affect and aesthetic embodiment.

Cultural Empathy and Critical Thinking

By situating Elunchun songs within broader discussions of migration, resilience, and environmental change, educators foster cognitive-emotional integration. Students begin to understand music not as abstract art but as lived expression. As one interviewee said, “The song becomes a bridge to see through another’s eyes.”

Performance as Experiential Knowledge

Learning to sing the song—especially with its unique phrasing and ornamentation—becomes a form of kinesthetic cultural translation. It bridges theory and feeling, thought and motion. Informants emphasized that performance deepens respect for tradition and enhances students’ aesthetic reflexivity.

Toward Lifelong Learning and Ethical Engagement

Exposure to Indigenous music at a formative stage inspires students to seek out unfamiliar voices and develop musical cosmopolitanism. Informants remarked that such engagement prepares students not just as performers, but as cultural stewards and global citizens attuned to diversity and justice.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study affirms the significance of Elunchun folk songs as dynamic pedagogical instruments capable of fostering aesthetic sensitivity, cultural empathy, and critical reflection in contemporary music education. Through the lens of posthumanism, these songs are more than cultural artifacts—they are embodied expressions of multispecies relationships, ancestral memory, and decolonial knowledge systems. The analysis of “Elunchun De Hui Yi” reveals how pentatonic melodies, fluid rhythmic structures, and evocative lyrics constitute an aesthetic and epistemic landscape that invites learners into more inclusive and relational understandings of music, identity, and pedagogy.

The findings support long-standing theories in aesthetic and holistic education, which emphasize the transformative power of music to cultivate both emotional and intellectual engagement (Barrett, 2023; Thompson et al., 2023). Constructivist models of experiential learning, which encourage students to derive meaning through active participation, are particularly compatible with Elunchun folk music’s performative and narrative qualities (Hadjikou, 2021; Yao et al., 2023). By singing, listening to, and analyzing these songs, learners engage not only with musical form but with lived cultural realities—stories of resilience, ecological belonging, and intergenerational care.

Moreover, this research reinforces the value of contextual and culturally situated pedagogies. As Ellefsen and Karlsen (2020) argue, embedding music education within its socio-historical and environmental milieu enhances student understanding of music’s broader meanings. Elunchun folk songs, grounded in forest life and ceremonial practice, reflect a worldview where human and non-human life are co-constitutive. Their integration into curricula represents a step toward post-anthropocentric education, one that de-centers Western paradigms in favor of pluralistic, land-based knowledge systems.

However, the study also identifies critical tensions. The pressures of modernization, linguistic erosion, and cultural assimilation threaten the transmission of Elunchun folk traditions—echoing broader global patterns of Indigenous marginalization (Sukmayadi & Hidayatullah, 2023). Informants voiced concerns about the loss of oral transmission pathways and the disconnect between younger generations and traditional practices. These findings resonate with Eden et al. (2024), who highlight the importance of inclusive pedagogical strategies for sustaining minority cultural expressions. This urgency compels a rethinking of educational infrastructures: how might we co-create curricula that do not merely consume Indigenous artforms but actively sustain the communities that produce them?

The qualitative, ethnographic approach adopted in this research—combining field immersion, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis—proved essential for engaging with the embodied, situated, and relational dimensions of Elunchun musical life. As Dinh (2023) demonstrates in his study on the Ta Oi community in Vietnam, proximity to cultural practice is vital for respectful and accurate interpretation. This research contributes to that tradition of

inquiry, offering both a methodological and ethical framework for engaging with Indigenous sonic traditions.

That said, the study's scope was intentionally narrow focusing on a single representative song to enable in-depth analysis. Future research should broaden this lens to include a wider repertoire of Elunchun songs, encompassing diverse genres, seasonal cycles, and ceremonial functions. Comparative work with other Indigenous groups could further illuminate shared strategies for cultural continuity in the face of globalizing forces. Longitudinal studies might also examine the lasting impacts of integrating such music into formal education systems.

Technological innovation also holds promise. Digital tools—archiving platforms, immersive audio-visual resources, and mobile applications—can aid in bridging generational gaps and revitalizing interest in endangered traditions. Yet these tools must be deployed with ethical care, ensuring that community autonomy and cultural sovereignty are respected.

In sum, this research positions Elunchun folk songs as living pedagogical agents—not relics of a distant past, but bridges to alternative futures. By integrating these songs into music education, we do more than preserve cultural forms; we open pathways for learners to experience music as relational ethics, cultural dialogue, and posthuman imagination. Consistent with the principles of aesthetic education (Reimer, 2022) and decolonial pedagogy (Ellefsen & Karlsen, 2020), this work contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for culturally responsive and ethically grounded arts education. The Elunchun voice, long underrepresented, becomes here a resonant force—challenging us to listen differently, teach more responsibly, and imagine more inclusively.

Acknowledgments

This research project was financially supported by College of Music, Mahasarakham University.

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