

Review Article

Dong Pipa Songs of the Dong Ethnic Group in China: A Systematic Literature Review

Xinchao Huang and Chan, C. S. C.*

Department of Music, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article reviews music research on Dong pipa songs, a musical genre performed by the Dong people, one of the 55 ethnic minorities of the People's Republic of China. It analyses 46 English and Chinese articles published between 2006 and 2023, following the recognition of the Dong pipa song as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of China. Literature reviews demonstrate that the existing research is categorised into six main areas: historical origins, musical characteristics, accompanying instruments, lyrics features, social functions, and cultural inheritance and preservation. The systematic literature review revealed limitations in the research on these songs, including the depiction of their musical elements through the lens of Western musical systems, the homogenisation of diverse regional styles, and the lack of human agency in examining musical development. This article highlights existing research gaps and suggests directions for future investigations.

Keywords: Chinese ethnic musical culture, Dong pipa songs, intangible cultural heritage (ICH), systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Dong pipa song is a musical form of the Dong people (Chinese: 侗族; pinyin: Dòngzú), one of the 55 recognised ethnic minority groups in China. It is also known as “Ga Pipa (嘎琵琶)”, which is performed in the Dong dialect that blends oral folk literature with singing, and has approximately 600 years of history in China (Luo, 2012; G. H. Zhang, 2012a). These songs are intertwined with their daily lives, encompassing many themes, including history, mythology, marriage, love, customs and ethics.

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E-mail addresses:

gs62204@student.upm.edu.my (Xinchao Huang)

clarechan@upm.edu.my (Chan, C. S. C.)

*Corresponding author

Dong pipa songs are performed in various forms, including solos, male-female duets, and group singing. Characterised by the styles of Ga Chang (嘎常, singing only) and Ga Jin (嘎紧, singing and narrating), performances sometimes include improvised lyrics (Xiao, 2009). This art form is accompanied by the Dong pipa, an instrument made by the Dong people. It is predominantly observed in the Dong ethnic minority regions of Liping, Congjiang, and Rongjiang counties in Guizhou Province, as well as in Sanjiang and Rongshui counties in Guangxi Province and Tongdao County in Hunan Province, China (Chen, 2022).

The Dong pipa song is a significant part of the Dong ethnic group's cultural heritage in China, reflecting their communal identity, social ties, and artistic creativity. This musical culture captures local history, community values, and intergenerational narratives. Beyond entertainment, it plays a vital role in social ceremonies, fostering participation and strengthening community bonds (Hu, 2022). The complexity and aesthetics of these songs highlight the artistic talents of the Dong people, demonstrating their adaptability to modernisation and globalisation. Recognised in 2006 on China's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), the Dong pipa song gained elevated status and growing recognition, both within the Dong community and in the broader context of Chinese cultural heritage. Since its designation as an ICH, researchers have examined various aspects of this tradition, including its unique musical features, preservation strategies, and methods to promote its integration into

modern society (Yan, 2023). This attention underscores its importance in safeguarding and celebrating the Dong cultural identity.

Despite efforts, the systematic review of Dong pipa songs has been limited due to several challenges. As a minority music genre, it has historically been overlooked in favour of Han music and other mainstream forms. Geographical remoteness and limited academic resources in the Dong regions have hindered comprehensive documentation. At the same time, the oral transmission of Dong pipa songs has led to a scarcity of written records, restricting in-depth analysis. The absence of a systematic literature review on Dong pipa songs could create some problems. On the one hand, it would limit understanding of their historical and cultural contexts, risking misinterpretations. On the other hand, important musical characteristics might be overlooked, jeopardising preservation efforts. Additionally, researchers might miss existing studies, hindering collaboration and slowing the development of effective preservation strategies (Chan, 2022). Practitioners seeking to revive Dong pipa songs may lack crucial resources, resulting in inadequate representation of the tradition. Without a systematic review, efforts to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage could be diminished, affecting academic scholarship and community engagement.

The systematic literature review focuses on the main areas of Dong pipa research, including historical origins, musical characteristics, accompanying instruments, lyrical features, social functions, and cultural transmission and preservation.

The literature review and analysis explain the interrelationships between the various research fields and provide an overview of trends in the research object. The study also uses critical analysis to point out the shortcomings of past research. It seeks to identify significant gaps that warrant further exploration, providing a foundation for future studies and promoting a deeper understanding of this rich cultural tradition. It informs future research, supports intangible cultural heritage preservation, and emphasises the value of this unique art form. Additionally, situating Dong pipa songs within global musicological discussions fosters academic and cultural dialogue, promoting broader appreciation for this distinct tradition.

This paper systematically reviews the literature on Dong pipa songs, summarising previous research directions, identifying gaps and proposing future research orientations. This research recognises the inclusion of the Dong pipa songs on China's ICH list in 2006 as a crucial temporal milestone that marks a turning point in the scholarly focus on this culture. To facilitate a thorough literature review, the paper establishes explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature retrieval based on this significant designation.

METHODS

The research on Dong pipa songs employs a systematic literature review to comprehensively assess the existing literature, rigorously gathering, evaluating, and interpreting all relevant studies to

ensure a thorough understanding of the topic. The review involves formulating research questions targeting aspects of Dong pipa songs, such as origin, historical development, musical structure, and performance practices, to identify key themes and gaps in existing scholarship.

This section outlines a detailed plan for systematically analysing Dong pipa songs, including criteria for selecting high-quality, relevant sources to enhance the reliability and validity of findings. The review utilised respected academic databases, including the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), ProQuest, SpringerLink, Taylor and Francis (T&F), and JSTOR, which are known for their credibility and high-quality literature.

The study focused on materials published between January 2006, the date marking the milestone of Dong pipa songs being listed as an ICH, and December 2023, the end of data collection. Both Chinese and English keywords, including “侗族琵琶歌”, “琵琶歌” or “嘎琵琶” (Chinese); “Dong pipa song” or “Kam music” (English), were used, along with a manual literature search to ensure comprehensive results. This rigorous approach increased the depth of analysis and ensured all relevant literature was included. Detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria are provided in Table 1.

As shown in Figure 1, 176 relevant publications were identified based on the established criteria, including 150 in Chinese and 26 in English. The researcher evaluated the quality of the articles, including scholarly originality and journal

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria for retrieved articles

Criteria	Type	Description
Exclusion	Fundamental information lacking (FIL)	Incomplete information on authors, organisations, abstracts and journals
	Without full text (WFL)	Unable to access full text
	Not related (NR)	NR-1: Non-academic articles, such as newspapers NR-2: General journal articles that did not fall within the inclusion criteria NR-3: Articles published beyond the designated period
Inclusion	Related (R)	R-1: Title or abstract contains keywords: “侗族琵琶歌”, “琵琶歌” or “嘎琵琶” (Chinese); “Dong pipa song” or “Kam music” (English) R-2: High-quality journals related to research topics, including articles from Peking University Chinese Core Journals and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index [CSSCI], master’s and doctoral theses; articles from Social Sciences Citation Index [SSCI], Science Citation Index [SCI], and book chapters R-3: Articles published during the period from January 2006 to December 2023

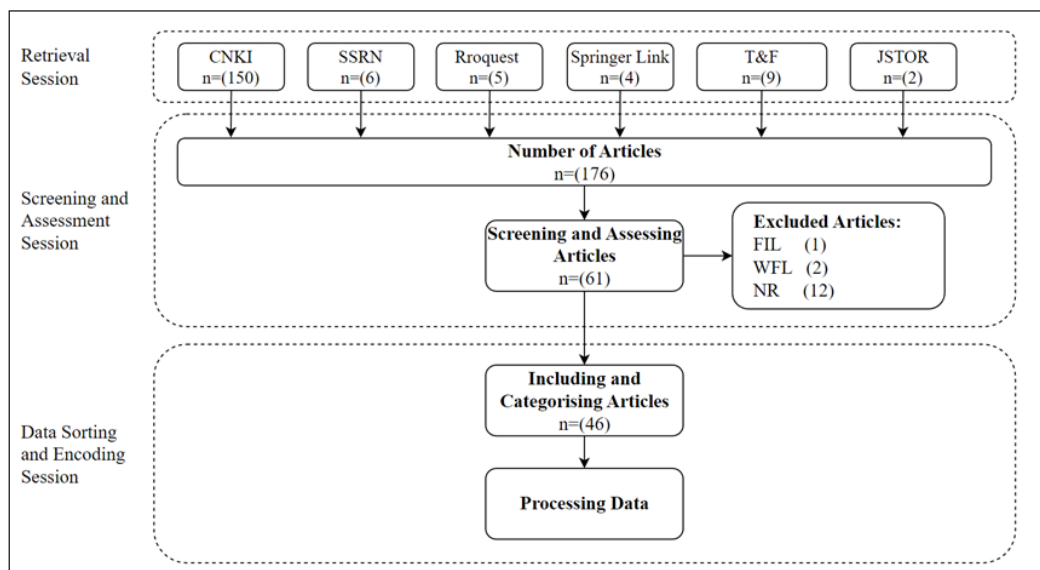


Figure 1. The flow of article assessment and screening

ranking, to select those that aligned with the research orientation and criteria of the study. After removing duplicates, titles and

abstracts underwent an initial screening to exclude less relevant articles. A detailed review of 46 publications (31 Chinese

Table 2
Theory on the classification of musical research

Type	Description	Purpose
Historical	Historical research explores music's origins, evolution, and transformative processes. Yu (1997) emphasised going beyond chronology to understand genre emergence, key influences, and cultural impacts, using documents and oral. This kind of research reveals music's intricate ties to its broader historical context.	This dimension serves as a foundational layer, revealing the intricate connections between music and the broader historical context in which it is embedded.
Stylistic	Yu's (1997) framework analyses melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, lyrics, and instruments to define musical styles, revealing their aesthetic principles, cultural significance, and emotional content.	By examining these characteristics, researchers can classify different musical styles and understand how they convey meaning, emotion, and identity.
Functional	Functional research examines the role of music within societal and cultural contexts, exploring its significance in various social settings, from religious ceremonies to political movements. Yu (1997) highlighted music's role in shaping community identities, fostering social cohesion, and transmitting cultural heritage.	This category investigates how music serves as a medium of communication, an educational tool, and a source of individual and collective expression, emphasising its multifaceted influence on both personal and social levels.

Source: Yu (1997)

and 15 English) followed, examining their relevance, contribution, and adherence to the research focus. Articles failing to meet the rigorous criteria set at the start were excluded from further analysis.

Data extraction entailed compiling detailed information from each selected source into a standardised format, including author details, publication year, research scope, methodologies used, key findings on Dong pipa songs (such as lyrical content, cultural context, and musical analysis), and notable conclusions or insights. This step ensured the systematic capture of relevant information for synthesis. The extracted data is then synthesised and analysed. Depending on the nature and diversity of the studies included, this synthesis involved a qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on identifying overarching themes such as the

role of songs in Dong culture, the stylistic features of pipa performance, its evolution over time, and how it has been preserved or transformed in modern contexts. Finally, the review is documented following established guidelines like the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Page et al., 2021) framework, ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and comprehensiveness.

The literature review on Dong pipa songs required a thoughtful approach to categorising and classifying the various research topics. To achieve this, this paper drew upon Yu's (1997) music research classification theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for analysing music by dividing it into three main categories: historical, stylistic, and functional, as shown in Table 2. This research

goes beyond a simple reproduction of Yu's work by applying this foundational theory to the specific context of Dong pipa songs. It innovatively refines its classification system to better fit the unique musical tradition of the Dong people. Based on an in-depth analysis of the literature specific to Dong pipa songs, the study delineates six refined topics for further exploration: historical origins, musical characteristics, accompanying instruments, lyrical features, social functions, and cultural transmission and preservation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research on the Dong pipa song can be categorised into six main areas: historical origins, musical characteristics, accompanying instruments, lyrical features, social functions, and cultural transmission and preservation. Each area offers unique insights into this musical tradition, thereby enhancing our understanding of its role within the Dong ethnic community and its broader cultural significance. This section delves deeper into each category, discussing key findings from the literature.

Historical Origins

Cultural practices' origins support a civilisation's entire structure. Whether tracing a ritual's lineage or an art form's genesis, the origins of cultural history offer us profound insights into the human condition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The historical perspective seeks to explore the continuity and transformations within the cultural tradition of Dong pipa songs and

elucidate the factors that influence Dong's social structures, contemporary practices, and conservation policies. Scholars focused on the history of these songs and analysed how these cultural forms have been shaped, transmitted and transformed throughout history. As the Dong minority lacks a written script, their traditions, including Dong pipa songs, are perpetuated through oral transmission and embedded in their collective memory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995).

Scholars discussed the origins of Dong pipa songs by examining oral histories provided by bearers of this tradition, attributing these origins to various mythological accounts. Numerous accounts detail their genesis, highlighting differing historical perspectives. C. Z. Yang (2010) suggested the genesis of these songs in the Yongle era (1403–1424) of the Ming Dynasty in Hongzhou Town, Guizhou Province, China. According to local Dong folklore, these songs originated from the tradition of love song duets accompanied by the pipa, performed during courtship rituals between young men and women.

Luo (2014) expanded upon C. Z. Yang (2010) by documenting various historical legends concerning the origins of Dong pipa songs, as detailed in Table 3. Besides, Luo posited that the Dong pipa originated during the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1368); thus, these songs emerged during this era rather than in the later Ming and Qing Dynasties. However, Luo failed to provide any supporting evidence for the emergence of the Dong pipa during the Tang and Song

Dynasties, such as historical documents or sources. Consequently, the precise origin of Dong pipa songs remains elusive. J. C. Zhang (2020) also pointed out three historical legends about the origin of these songs, presenting claims that corroborate and differ from Luo (2014), as shown in Table 3.

Overall, scholarly research on the origins of the Dong pipa song presents three distinct perspectives: creationism, artificialism, and functionalism. However, there is a notable absence of historical evidence to substantiate these claims, as neither written records nor archaeological discoveries have been found. This is mainly due to two factors: first, the Dong ethnic group is traditionally non-literate, limiting their ability to document information before interacting with the Han Chinese. Many culture details, including the origins of the pipa song, may have been distorted or lost through oral transmission. Second,

although the Dong pipa as a musical instrument has existed for hundreds of years, its rudimentary craftsmanship and the perishable nature of wood make it difficult to trace its origin archaeologically. As a result, no definitive historical evidence can be established, and scholars must rely on oral folklore to construct a historical narrative of this significant musical tradition.

Musical Characteristics

As a singing-based musical form, Dong pipa songs have attracted scholarly attention primarily for their musical structure. Scholars have conducted extensive analyses on the scores of songs, and there is a consensus that these songs predominantly utilise the Chinese pentatonic scale, specifically the *yu* (羽) mode (Huang, 2009; Luo, 2014; Zhou, 2016). However, this consensus is problematic since the analysis relies on the Western tonal system, based on equal temperament, while the tonal system of

Table 3
The legends of the origin of the Dong pipa song

Type	Luo (2014)	J. C. Zhang (2020)
Creationism	Dong boys and girls beseech the Heavenly Emperor to bestow upon their village music and instruments, such as lusheng, pipa and songs.	
Artificialism	The folklore recorded in the religious poem described Wu Mei carving a pipa from wood to perform a song	The folklore recorded in the lyrics describes Wu Mei carving a pipa from wood to perform a song.
Functionalism	Ritualistic function: The song, originally sung by a daughter-in-law in memory of her deceased father-in-law, evolved into a pipa song Interactive function: An arhat and a young girl establish a love relationship through the Dong pipa songs	Entertainment or educational function: Mr Siye, the founder of pipa songs, used it to preach around

Source: Luo (2014), J. C. Zhang (2020)

Dong pipa songs is influenced by regional aesthetics, varying across regions, counties, and villages, and does not conform to the Western twelve-tone scale.

Huang (2009) identified common rhythmic patterns, including four-two, four-three, and four-four beats, with occasional mixed meters during improvisational segments. There is a disagreement regarding how the musical sections in Dong pipa songs are divided and structured. Huang (2009) and Luo (2014) contend that the frequent incorporation of quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes defines the musical texture. In contrast, Zhou (2016) maintained that the prevalent use of dotted and syncopated rhythms distinguishes the musical structure of these songs. These statements are problematic because the rhythmic patterns defined are based on the Western notation system. This creates boundaries to rhythmic patterns in Dong pipa songs that cannot be notated using this system.

The dissemination of Dong pipa songs across various regions of Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan in China (Luo, 2015) has led to the development of distinctive regional styles influenced by local cultures, prompting interest in their musical characteristics, particularly in Guizhou. J. G. He (2017) examined the Dong pipa songs in Guizhou, employing the core melodic pattern (核心歌腔) concept introduced by Pu (1987). This analytical method resembles Schenkerian analysis (1935), which includes foreground, middle-ground, and background levels. J. G. He (2017) contended that the core melodic

pattern of these songs comprises four pitches—E, D, C, and A—derived from the Chinese pentatonic scale. However, using Western notation to compare these regions' tonal systems fails to capture the accuracy of these songs in terms of tonal systems, rhythmic patterns, musical structures, singing techniques, and vocal production, as well as the unique extra-musical sounds and timbres.

Zhu (2019) expanded previous research, which focused on the musical characteristics of Dong pipa songs within a specific locality, by conducting a comparative analysis across multiple regions. Zhu's study examined three varieties of pipa songs from the southern Dong region in Guizhou, as detailed in Table 4. However, Zhu did not explain the reasons for the stylistic differences between regions. One of the significant improvements made by Zhu (2019) was that he included an arrow to indicate that the pitches on the Dong pipa tonal system, depicted using the Western equal temperament, were either sharper or flatter (shown in Liudong tone row in Table 4). Perhaps Zhu realised that forcing each region's musical aesthetics into fixed pitches based on equal temperament was inaccurate.

The pitch range of Dong pipa songs is a topic of debate. Zhu (2019) challenged Q. J. Yang's (2014) assertion that the Chejiang pipa song spans an octave, asserting instead that their range is limited to a major sixth. L. He (2021) examined the musical characteristics of the Liudong Ga Pipa, disagreeing with Zhu (2019) by suggesting the range does not exceed five degrees, with a notable five-degree descent from E to A as

Table 4

Musical characteristics of Dong pipa songs in three regions of Guizhou

Characteristic	Liudong Ga Pipa (六洞嘎琵琶)	Chejiang Ga Pipa (车江嘎琵琶)	Hongzhou Ga Pipa (洪州嘎琵琶)
Classification			
Pitch Range	Within a significant sixth interval	Within a major sixth interval	Within an octave interval
Register	f ¹ - g ²	f ¹ - g ²	f ¹ - a ²
Mode	Pentatonic Yu mode containing uncertain variable tones	Pentatonic Yu mode	Pentatonic Yu mode
Tone Row	6 1 1↑2 3 4↑5 (The arrow indicates that the pitch of the preceding note is slightly higher than the actual pitch)	5 6 1 2 3	5 6 1 2 3
Musical Tempo	♩= 65–75	♩= 89–98	♩= 105–115
Rhythmic Characteristics	Freer	Relaxed and smooth	lively
Song Structure	The opening part and the central part	The opening part, the central part, and the ending part	The opening part and the central part

Source: Zhu (2019)

a key melodic feature. Furthermore, Zhu's (2019) interpretation of the tonal mode of Hongzhou pipa songs also contrasts with C. Z. Yang's (2010) perspective. C. Z. Yang contended that Hongzhou pipa songs are tuned using alternating pentatonic gong (宫) and yu modes instead of solely the pentatonic yu mode. Conversely, Zhu (2019) argued that these songs are characterised by pentatonic yu mode, and gong mode is rare.

While Huang (2009), Luo (2014) and Zhou (2016) have enlightened researchers on the tonal systems of Dong pipa songs in various regions of China, they have utilised an "Orientalist" (Said, 1978) approach to examining these songs. Their musical analysis was conducted through the "lens" of Western musical notation systems. In

addition, the musicological analysis remains a crucial and fundamental issue. All these scholars did not discuss human agency in the variations of Dong pipa songs performed by the various regions of China (Merriam, 1964). The denial of humans in the variation of musical production about political, social, cultural, and economic phenomena across time and space presents a problem in the research of these scholars.

Understanding how to sing Dong pipa songs constitutes a crucial aspect of this research area, with prior studies focusing on performance procedures and forms as well as vocal techniques. Zhou (2016) and H. W. Wu (2018) maintained that performances of these songs follow a defined sequence: introductory, central and concluding.

Conversely, Zhu (2019) examined the performance practices of Chejiang Ga Pipa within Dong cultural activities, highlighting its role in various social and ceremonial contexts, such as Wei Ban (social gatherings for youth), Wei Ye (inter-village collective visits), and celebrations of New Year's Eve and weddings.

Luo (2014) distinguished the performance forms of Dong pipa songs based on their content, categorising them into three types: duet songs, encompassing female and mixed-gender duets; Xiu Yin, where Dong women sing pipa songs while weaving and embroidering; and pipa songs and dances, which combine playing, singing, and dancing, typically performed during marriage celebrations, harvests, and village festivals.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Dong pipa songs prevalent in Dong

settlements across Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan Provinces exhibit regional features influenced by local cultures, manifesting in diverse linguistic characteristics and performance styles. Research indicates that the primary performance forms remain consistent across different regions. However, there are slight differences in the regulations regarding the singers' gender, as shown in Table 5.

Q. J. Yang (2014) examined the customs and taboos associated with singing Chejiang Dong pipa songs, emphasising that performers must adhere to specific cultural practices. Q. J. Yang asserted that these songs inherently social behaviours focused on marital relationships and strictly prohibit singing among relatives. However, Zhu (2019) argued that in the contemporary context, there are no such taboos on singing pipa songs, and these songs can also be a

Table 5
Performance forms of pipa songs in different regions.

Region	Types	Performance form
Guizhou Province	Chejiang pipa songs	Group duets, with a man playing and a woman singing (Q. J. Yang, 2014; Zhu, 2019)
	Hongzhou pipa songs	A male-female duet; a man playing and singing; a man playing and a woman singing (C. Z. Yang, 2010; Zhu, 2019)
	Forty-eight village pipa songs	No limitation on the number and gender of singers and performers (Zhu, 2019).
	Liudong pipa songs	A male-female duet; a man playing and singing; a man playing and a woman singing (L. He, 2021; Zhu, 2019)
	Judong pipa songs	Group duet or men playing with women singing (L. He, 2021)
	Pingjiang pipa songs	Group duet or men playing with women singing (L. He, 2021)
Guangxi Province	Xunjiang pipa songs	No limitation on the number and gender of singers and performers (H. Q. Wu, 2013)

Source: C. Z. Yang (2010), H. Q. Wu (2013), Q. J. Yang (2014), Zhu (2019), L. He (2021)

daily entertainment form within the clan or family.

Previous studies demonstrated that musical characteristics are integral to understanding Dong pipa songs. Research highlights stylistic variations across transmission regions like Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan, involving differences in pitch range, tonality, rhythm, beat, singing style, and performers' gender. However, most findings remain introductory and are often confined to specific geographical areas, with limited comparative research across regions. This gap restricts understanding of broader trends in pipa songs. More critically, the causes behind these stylistic differences, such as cultural integration, governmental policies, and evolving aesthetic preferences, have not been fully examined, leaving critical aspects of musicals insufficiently addressed.

Accompanying Instruments

Discussing Dong pipa songs, a musical genre that integrates both playing and singing, is essential to understanding their associated instruments. While it is widely accepted that these songs are typically accompanied by the Dong pipa (Luo, 2014; Zhou, 2016), Q. J. Yang (2014) highlighted an exception in Chejiang Township, Guizhou Province, where these songs are also accompanied by the niutuiqin (牛腿琴), an ancient Dong stringed instrument named for its resemblance to a cow's thigh, is frequently used as an accompaniment in the region.

Scholars have categorised the types of Dong pipa in detail. According to H. Q. Wu

(2013) and Luo (2014), the Dong pipa is classified into three sizes: large, medium, and small. The large pipa is a bass, called bibalao (比巴劳) in the Dong dialect, produces a low, soft tone and primarily accompanies narrative songs. The medium pipa is an alto, called gaheiyuan (嘎黑元), which features a thicker tone and supports narrative and lyrical pipa songs. Lastly, the small pipa is soprano, known as bibala (比巴拉), is played with a light, active touch and is predominantly used in lyrical songs performed during folk activities such as Nightly Love Songs (行歌坐夜).

Scholars have also examined the distribution of the Dong pipa in the counties and villages of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi. Wei (2015) highlighted that the large Dong pipa predominates in Rongjiang and Liping Counties of Guizhou Province, whereas the small Dong pipa is primarily found in Hongzhou Town, Liping County. H. Q. Wu (2013) observed that the medium Dong pipa is common in Sanjiang County in Guangxi Province and Tongdao County in Hunan Province. Additionally, Wu pointed out the small Dong pipa's popularity in Hongzhou Town, Liping County. Contrarily, Zhou (2016) concurred with the widespread presence of the large Dong pipa in the Guizhou region yet contested Wei's (2015) assertion regarding the distribution of the small Dong pipa. Zhou argued that it is predominantly found in Dong settlements within Hunan Province instead of Guizhou Province.

Moreover, scholars have proposed various perspectives on the performance

techniques of the Dong pipa. Luo (2012, 2014) identified two primary techniques: swept-string and plucked-string. The sweep-string method is predominantly used to amplify the rhythm during climactic sections of songs, thereby enhancing their appeal. In contrast, plucked-string accompaniment often involves the repetition of melody and rhythm at phrase transitions to ensure a seamless integration of voice and accompaniment. However, Zhou (2016) argued that the instrument has four playing techniques: plucking, picking, double plucking, sweeping and stroking the strings. H. W. Wu (2018), from a more objective perspective, contended that the techniques are not clearly defined and that it is feasible to name or perform them according to the performer's habits.

Research has revealed notable differences in the shapes and sizes of instruments accompanying Dong pipa songs. Scholars largely agreed that the distinctions made by Dong insiders are primarily based on the instruments' sizes. However, classifying these instruments is challenging, as terms like "large" pipa lack standardised definitions. Beyond size classification, further study is needed on playing techniques, including developing unified practice materials. These resources would aid in teaching the instrument while promoting its cultural significance and technical mastery.

Lyrics Features

The lyrics of Dong pipa songs reflect their artistic characteristics. C. X. Wu (2011) and

Luo (2012, 2014) noted that these lyrics typically comprise pairs of lines, each with an odd number of characters, although the specific count can vary. Notably, while individual lines contain an odd number of characters, the number of lines must be even. Through extensive analysis, Y. P. Shi (2016) observed that lines frequently contain 7, 9, or 11 characters but range from 3 or 5 characters to a maximum of 35 or 37 characters. Contrarily, Huang (2009) contended that the lyrics predominantly feature odd-numbered characters, though even-numbered character sentences are also present. Typically, odd-numbered sentences contain 3, 5, or 7 characters, while even-numbered sentences most commonly consist of 4 characters. These patterns can occur individually or in alternation. Furthermore, Wei (2015) suggested that although the predominant pattern in lyrics is odd-numbered, there are exceptions, such as some lyrics from Tongdao County in Hunan Province, which consist of even-numbered sentences with six characters.

Furthermore, investigating rhyme schemes in Dong pipa song lyrics constitutes a significant component of this research. C. X. Wu (2011) identified three primary traditional rhyming techniques in Dong folk songs: interleaved rhyme (正韵), mid-sentence rhyme (腰韵) and internal rhyme (内韵), a classification widely accepted (Huang, 2009; Q. J. Yang, 2014). Despite this consensus on categories, scholars diverge on the specifics of these rhyming methods. C. X. Wu (2011) and Q. J. Yang (2014) explained interleaved rhyme as

occurring at the ends of even-numbered lines, while midsentence rhyme involves a rhyme between the final character of odd-numbered lines and any character from the middle of even-numbered lines. Contrarily, Huang (2009) interprets midsentence rhyme as the rhyme linking the last character of one sentence to the first character of the next. Regarding internal rhyme, Huang (2009) defines it as a rhyme between two characters within a sentence section, specifically between the final character of one metrical unit and the first character of the next.

Diverse rhetorical devices notably characterise the lyrics of Dong pipa songs. Huang (2009) noted that these songs frequently employ parallelism, metaphor, antithesis, and repetition, enhancing the artistry and appeal of the lyrics. Wei (2015) concurred with this perspective. Liu (2012) conducted a case study on 238 love-themed pipa songs from five collections and concluded that metaphor is the most frequently employed rhetoric.

In addition, Y. P. Shi (2016) analysed the classical pipa songs of the Sanbao Dong ethnic group in Guizhou, focusing on the four-tone format (四音格), a key phonological feature in Sino-Tibetan languages. This format plays a significant role in structuring the rhymes within these musical compositions. Using four distinct pitch variations, it enhances the rhythmic and melodic qualities of the songs while aligning closely with the linguistic characteristics of the Dong language. Furthermore, X. T. Shi (2016) examined the lyrical content of four types of pipa songs—romantic, educational,

lyricism, and ceremonial—analysing the distribution of Chinese components and discussing the trends and implications of the Dong language's Sinicization, which pertains to the assimilation and integration of neighbouring ethnic groups by the Han Chinese, who are the predominant ethnic group within the Chinese nation as reflected in these lyrics.

Studies on pipa song lyrics focus mainly on linguistic and literary aspects, uncovering their meaning and recurring themes. However, many analyses neglect the crucial interplay between lyrics and music. While examining lyrics provides semantic and emotional insights, the relationship between phrasing, phonological elements, and musicality is often overlooked, despite its importance in performance.

Social Function

The significance of music to human existence warrants extensive discussion (Blacking, 1973). Merriam (1964) highlighted that understanding the functions of music is crucial for addressing the “why” behind its use, particularly in terms of its broader purposes. Within this framework, scholars agree on the role of Dong pipa songs in reinforcing social norms. Historically, the Dong people, lacking a written language, relied on singing for memory retention, communication, and cultural transmission (C. Z. Yang, 2010). These songs imparted knowledge and guided moral behaviours, promoting virtues and discouraging vices (Luo, 2014; Wei, 2015; G. H. Zhang, 2012a, 2012b; J. C. Zhang, 2020). Luo

(2014) contended that their influence lies in subtle indoctrination through musical interpretation, helping individuals discern right from wrong. C. Z. Yang (2010) and Wei (2015) further highlighted the crucial role of these individuals in imparting knowledge and moral education to the Dong community.

Luo (2014) noted that, besides their indoctrinatory role, pipa songs primarily serve as entertainment in the Dong community, a remote, mountainous area with limited recreational options. Moreover, these songs provide a means for emotional expression. C. Z. Yang (2010) emphasised the role of these songs in allowing young men and women to convey love and affection. However, these functions diminished due to modernisation. G. H. Zhang (2012a) concurred that the advent of modern networks and social media has profoundly reduced the opportunities for young individuals to engage in the cultural practices of playing and singing these songs. Consequently, Dong pipa songs have increasingly become a passive and government-led cultural exhibition.

Several scholars have posited that Dong pipa songs transcend mere emotional expression, serving as a bidirectional communication and interaction with a primary focus on communication. Liu (2012) highlighted that the prevalence of love-themed songs in the repertoire underscores its communicative role, including mate selection, love and marriage. Conversely, L. He (2021) argued that these songs facilitate communication between Dong men and

women, irrespective of marital status. He (2021) cited the Nightly Love Songs music events as evidence, noting that these songs primarily support the formation of marital ties for single attendees. In contrast, for those already in romantic or marital relationships, these gatherings help to expand their social networks.

Wei (2015) elucidated the multifaceted roles of Dong pipa songs, asserting that their functions extend beyond cultural transmission and aesthetic enjoyment to shape and reinforce the Dong people's identity. However, Wei did not specify which kind of identity was formed through these songs. Conversely, G. H. Zhang (2012b) delved into the pipa songs' contributions to ethnic identity and cohesion. Zhang stated that these musical practices foster a folkloric realm that facilitates ethnic gatherings, enhancing opportunities for interaction and communication among community members and strengthening ethnic cohesion.

Previous studies have examined the various social functions of Dong pipa songs, broadly classified using Merriam's (1964) framework for understanding music functions, including emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, and the reinforcement of social norms. However, much research focuses on traditional roles while overlooking contemporary relevance. Urbanisation and modernisation have shifted performance contexts, diminishing traditional functions and introducing new roles, such as political propaganda and cultural display, extending beyond entertainment and emotional expression.

These transformations underscore the need to examine how traditional music functions in modern contexts.

Cultural Transmission and Preservation

In China, cultural heritage has been used to foster national cohesion, identity, and socio-economic development, enhancing the country's international image (Tan, 2018). Since recognising pipa songs in China as intangible cultural heritage in 2006, most studies have focused on the challenges and strategies for their preservation and transmission. In the study of ethnomusicology, "preserving" music has been replaced by "sustaining," as the former refers to "freezing or hindering" the natural movement of music as it interacts with various dynamics. Sustainability refers to the continuity of musical practices in the context of current social and cultural dynamics and the acceptance of musical changes as a human phenomenon. In this sense, the perception of conducting research among these scholars still connotes the notion of "preserving" musical traditions.

Luo (2014) examined how Dong pipa songs are preserved in Yangchong Village, Guizhou, noting that government and civil support have been crucial. Conversely, J. C. Zhang (2020) argued that their persistence mainly relies on spontaneous folk traditions, identifying family, master-disciple, and social folklore as key transmission modes. However, J. C. Zhang (2020) overlooked modern sustaining approaches, notably the systematic teaching facilitated by the government in educational settings.

Moreover, whether formally organised or informally propagated by the management company, the transmission is predominantly facilitated by adept practitioners—the culture bearers. Consequently, scholars (Lang, 2014; Lin, 2023; X. F. Yang, 2011) have employed a narrative methodology to elucidate the learning, preserving and transmission processes of these bearers of Dong pipa songs.

Traditional Dong pipa songs inherently deviate from modern life in form and content, presenting significant challenges to their transmission. Luo (2014) noted that modernisation, including media influences, rural youth migration, insufficient education, changing values, and popular music, has created a crisis for transmission. Similarly, Q. J. Yang (2014) identified changes in the ecological environment and agricultural practices as critical factors impacting the practice and transmission of pipa songs. Li (2022) attributed the declining influence of these songs to inadequate government promotion and highlighted issues with the synchronous cooperation between the government and the public in the transmission process.

Researchers have proposed strategies to address the challenges in transmitting pipa songs. Luo (2014) emphasised school education, suggesting the development of textbooks for primary and secondary schools on these songs and blending modern elements with traditional compositions to attract younger audiences. This recommendation is generally recognised by scholars (Q. J. Yang, 2014; J. C. Zhang,

2020). Conversely, L. He (2021) critiqued the classroom-based model, noting that integrating pipa songs into higher education tends to standardise styles. While this may improve vocal skills and stage presence, it risks diluting its authenticity and regional uniqueness.

The transformation of practice contexts has a significant impact on the transmission of pipa songs. Luo (2014) proposed establishing a folk culture preservation village to maintain its original context, support their transmission, and attract tourists. Additionally, adopting digital media technology is essential for revitalising traditional pipa song culture. J. C. Zhang (2020) highlighted the role of modern audio and video technologies in documenting performances and creating databases to consolidate research findings, making the preservation and retrieval of knowledge more accessible.

Furthermore, Li (2021) stressed the need to broaden the appeal of Dong pipa songs, especially among young people, beyond merely recording data for conservation. Li recommended using social media platforms like TikTok, Kwai, and Bilibili to share instructional videos or live courses and suggested government-supported competitions and performances with incentives. Li also highlighted the importance of policies that promote cultural protection, such as better remuneration for practitioners, to enhance their creative motivation and commitment to transmitting these songs.

Other Research Perspectives

As research progresses, scholarly perspectives on Dong pipa songs have become increasingly diverse and in-depth. Several scholars have discussed the interaction between pipa songs and other musical forms in the Dong region. For instance, Ingram (2011) examined the Dong grand songs, another significant cultural expression of the Dong ethnicity, highlighting a mutual exchange and influence with pipa songs. However, Ingram only acknowledged the presence of Dong pipa songs and failed to clarify the specific dynamics of the cultural exchange, such as the direction of influence. Subsequently, Ingram (2020) analysed state power's impact on preserving Dong's cultural heritage, including pipa songs, stressing the importance of localised listening to accurately capture local perspectives on cultural protection measures rather than solely relying on official statements and declarations. This approach aims to assess cultural policies' true impact and reception among the local population, offering a more nuanced critique of heritage protection strategies.

Mao et al. (2023) analysed Dong's musical forms, including pipa songs, within the framework of soundscape studies to examine the broader acoustic environment surrounding these traditions. By including pipa songs alongside Dong grand songs, the study highlighted the diversity of Dong musical expression and the influence of environmental factors. This research encourages further interdisciplinary

exploration of musicology, anthropology, and environmental studies to better understand the role of music in Dong culture. Watkins (2020) discussed the connection between various musical forms of the Dong ethnic group and their festival celebrations, noting its role in reflecting social and religious facets and reaffirming collective memory, including history, customs, and aesthetics. However, Watkins focused on the general characteristics of Dong music and omitted the unique aspects of pipa songs.

Several scholars have examined the dynamic musical changes of Dong pipa songs. L. He (2021) utilised an ethnographic approach to compare the historical and contemporary states of pipa songs in Congjiang County, Guizhou Province, examining their manifestations and the underlying causes of these changes. He observed alterations in various aspects, such as teaching approaches, musical instruments, gender roles in performances, learners' motivations, vocal techniques, lyrical content, performance style, and social functions. According to L. He (2021), these transformations are primarily driven by shifts in aesthetic preferences and the quest for economic benefits, leading to a continuous evolution towards a more commercial and utilitarian orientation.

Hu (2022) adopted Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to examine the transformations in Dong pipa songs. Hu identified several singing fields, including village life, stage performances, school education, livelihood performances and virtual networks. Hu contended that the

influence of capital and society has led to significant changes in the style and modes of interaction of pipa songs. Moreover, Ping and Chuangprakhon (2023) discussed the transformation of these songs in Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province, and noted the shifts in Dong people's lifestyle and the diminishing role of these songs in marriage and romantic functions.

Overall, the support for intangible cultural heritage policies has boosted the international recognition of Dong pipa songs, attracting research interest beyond China. Scholars have shifted their focus from textual analysis of the song as a musical form to an interdisciplinary approach that views it as part of culture. This shift examines how pipa songs interact with modern life, including social change, identity, and cultural representation, highlighting the importance of recognising living traditions as dynamic entities evolving with the communities that preserve them.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature highlights significant scholarly contributions to Dong pipa songs but also reveals limitations, guiding future research directions. Academic interest in Dong pipa songs, recognised as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, has grown substantially, as shown by the diversity of research perspectives. Predominantly, researchers studying this subject have backgrounds in music and are affiliated with higher education institutions in Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan Provinces. Additionally, pipa songs, which represent

the rich local cultures of these regions, have attracted scholarly interest, supported by local government and university policies. Moreover, China's promotion efforts have boosted international interest in pipa songs.

The research approach in Dong pipa songs predominantly focuses on qualitative methods, with ethnography being the principal technique for data collection. From a musicological perspective, most scholars analyse Dong pipa songs, covering a broad spectrum of aspects, including history, musical characteristics, accompanying instruments, lyrical features, functions, and the preservation and transmission of the music. The discussions emphasise musical characteristics and strategies for preserving and transmitting these songs. Furthermore, since 2020, the influence of Western musical theories in China has prompted some scholars to expand their research on pipa songs beyond merely describing musical characteristics to examining the underlying reasons for its persistence in society, applying an ethnomusicological lens.

Implications of the Study

The systematic literature review on Dong pipa songs significantly contributes to understanding and preserving Dong's ethnic heritage. The review synthesises existing research by employing a rigorous and transparent methodology. It identifies key themes and critical gaps in the current literature, highlighting areas requiring further exploration, which pave the way for future research initiatives that can deepen our understanding of the complexities

surrounding Dong pipa songs and their societal implications. In addition, it enriches the academic discourse surrounding Dong pipa songs and serves as a knowledge structure for those dedicated to safeguarding this intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

Specifically, this review highlights the need for ongoing research into Dong pipa songs, emphasising their cultural significance within intangible cultural heritage. It identifies gaps, including the impact of urbanisation on performance practices and the role of digital media in dissemination, which are crucial for understanding how modern realities shape musical expression. Research on intergenerational transmission and social cohesion offers insights into cultural preservation mechanisms. Addressing these areas will enhance our understanding of the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of pipa songs, enriching scholarly discourse and informing effective preservation strategies.

The findings reveal that policymakers and cultural institutions need to implement measures to preserve and promote Dong pipa songs. The institutional support, such as funding for research, community programs, and educational workshops, is essential for sustainability. Grants for community-led performances can engage locals and encourage young people to learn from their elders. Integrating pipa songs into festivals or heritage tourism boosts visibility and appreciation among wider audiences (J. Wu, 2020). By fostering a supportive ecosystem,

policymakers can help pipa songs adapt to contemporary contexts while preserving their rich heritage.

The study emphasises the critical role of education, particularly combining cultural knowledge and skills training, in preserving pipa songs, as informed by insights gathered from the literature. Incorporating curriculum modules on its history and significance enhances students' appreciation, while workshops led by skilled musicians offer hands-on experience with playing and singing. This dual approach develops technical skills and fosters cultural identity, ensuring the heritage of Dong pipa songs is preserved and passed down through generations. Besides, this research highlights the potential of digital technology as a modern tool for preserving pipa songs, an area that has been insufficiently examined in the literature. Previous studies suggest that digital platforms, such as social media for sharing performances or tutorials, can engage younger generations and spark interest in this tradition. Online archives can also store and showcase recordings, providing access for researchers, students, and enthusiasts. These digital resources help pipa songs adapt to the modern era, reaching new audiences while preserving their authenticity and cultural significance.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

Despite extensive research on Dong pipa songs, several shortcomings remain. Firstly, the use of the Western equal temperament system to analyse elements

like melody, rhythm, and tonality reflects an “Orientalised” (Said, 1978) approach. While functional, this method overlooks local musical elements, such as microtonal musical techniques, diverse rhythmic patterns, and tonal systems outside equal temperament. Additionally, there is a need to identify local musical terms for discussing the techniques used in pipa songs.

Second, research on pipa songs shows an imbalance across different regions. While these songs are central to the cultural heritage of Dong communities in Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan, academic focus has predominantly been on Guizhou, often generalising its characteristics to represent regional styles universally. However, this overlooks the nuanced variations in musical style across different regions. This homogenisation risks fostering a monolithic view of pipa songs, marginalising the unique attributes of Guangxi and Hunan's music, and failing to reflect the diversity of practice. Additionally, there is a lack of discussion on human interactions in these songs. With regards to changing “ethnoscapes” (Appadurai, 1990) that refer to the myriad types of people—migrants, international traders and merchants, tourists, and others, that may be found in a particular location at different historical moments, these regional styles may have influenced each other to create new “hybridised” pipa songs. In short, a lack of research studies on these songs in their changing social-cultural context (Merriam, 1964).

Additionally, there is a notable lack of innovation and prevalent homogenisation

in research outputs. Existing studies often adopt a singular, musicological perspective, treating pipa songs as a library-like collection of records, scores, and performances. This approach lacks interdisciplinary innovation, omitting broader discussions on their cultural significance and reasons for persistence from perspectives such as anthropology or folklore. Additionally, research tends to follow a uniform pattern, broadly outlining it with limited in-depth analysis. Studies typically include a three-part format: an introduction to the pipa song's historical context, detailing its musical or performance characteristics, and considerations for its continued preservation and transmission.

Finally, research on pipa songs often overlooks the evolving dynamics of musical changes. While acknowledging distinctions between historical and contemporary practices, most studies attribute these changes solely to modernisation, neglecting other factors like politicisation. Furthermore, there is a lack of detailed discussion on the mechanisms and reasons behind these musical alterations.

In future research on Dong pipa songs, it is imperative that scholars not only broaden their investigative scope but also deepen their analytical rigour. This research could benefit from diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration, incorporating anthropology, folklore, and sociology. Methods include ethnographic interviews, comparative analysis, participant observation, and studying the socio-cultural impact of pipa songs. Advanced

technology, such as recording software and AI, can also aid in analysing musical details. Concurrently, researchers should focus on the nuanced factors influencing the preservation and evolution of pipa songs within society, ultimately contributing to a comprehensive and systematic body of knowledge about this musical tradition.

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