

The Evolution of Dong Small Songs and Cultural Change in Chinese Folk Music

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Abstract

This study investigates the cultural evolution and contemporary significance of Dong's small songs within the realm of Chinese folk music. Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, archival research, and thematic analysis, the historical roots and socio-cultural dynamics of Dong's small songs are explored. The literature review delves into the cultural significance, historical evolution, preservation efforts, and challenges faced by Dong small songs, highlighting their role in reflecting regional identities and cultural change. The material and methods section outlines the qualitative research approach, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival data collection. The research results illuminate the multifaceted nature of Dong small songs, showcasing their adaptability, transmission processes, and contemporary expressions. Suggestions for future research emphasize the need for continued preservation efforts, innovative presentation platforms, and collaborative initiatives to ensure the sustainability and appreciation of Dong's small songs in the context of evolving cultural landscapes.

Keywords: *Dong small songs; Chinese folk music; cultural evolution; ethnographic research; preservation efforts; regional identities.*

Introduction

Chinese folk music is a treasure trove of cultural expressions, reflecting the intricate tapestry of traditions, values, and histories woven across diverse ethnic groups (Liu & Natayakulwong, 2023; J. Tang & Sornyai, 2023). Among these vibrant musical legacies, Dong's small songs stand out as poignant echoes of the Dong ethnic group's cultural heritage. These small songs, steeped in centuries-old traditions, offer a window into the evolution of Chinese folk music and the dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and change (Qiu, Chuangprakhon, & Jian, 2024; Qu, 2015; Su, 2019; Zhao, Yeoh, & Loo, 2023).

The Dong ethnic group, primarily residing in southwestern China, has a rich cultural tapestry characterized by a deep reverence for nature, community bonds, and storytelling traditions (Huang, 2024; S. Zhang & Wu, 2023). Central to their cultural identity is the Dong small songs, which have been passed down orally through generations. These small songs serve multifaceted purposes within Dong society, from conveying historical narratives and moral teachings to celebrating communal festivals and expressing emotions. However, as China undergoes rapid economic development, urbanization, and globalization, traditional cultural practices, including Dong small songs, face numerous challenges (Fu & Choatchamrat, 2024; Song & Yuan, 2021). The younger generation's shifting interests, the influence of mainstream media, and the encroachment of modern lifestyles on rural communities raise concerns about the continuity and vitality of Dong's small songs. Moreover, the digitization of music, changes in social structures, and migration trends contribute to a complex landscape where traditional art forms must adapt to survive (Howard, 2016; Huggill, 2018; Kuanr & Mishra, 2023; Ma, 2023; Pegg, 2021).

Against this backdrop of cultural flux, the research delves into several key questions. Firstly, how have Dong small songs evolved, from their origins in ancient traditions to contemporary expressions? Secondly, what are the primary factors influencing the development, adaptation, or decline of Dong's small songs in the modern era? Thirdly, how do these musical transformations reflect broader cultural changes within

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Chinese folk music and the Dong ethnic group's cultural identity? Addressing these questions is crucial for understanding the resilience, challenges, and potential futures of Dong small songs as a vital component of intangible cultural heritage (Ceribašić, 2019; Hang, Woramitmaitree, & Karin, 2023; Yu & Karin, 2022).

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Dong small songs, tracing their historical roots, documenting their contemporary manifestations, and exploring the socio-cultural dynamics that shape their trajectory. By examining the intersections of tradition and modernity within Dong small songs, this study aims to shed light on the adaptive strategies, creative innovations, and preservation efforts undertaken by Dong communities and cultural practitioners (Bi, Vanneste, & Van Der Borg, 2016; Guo & Chiu, 2024; Kim, 2023; Sinha, 2015). Furthermore, the research seeks to identify the social, economic, political, and technological factors that impact the transmission, performance, and reception of Dong's small songs. Through qualitative research methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with Dong musicians and community members, archival analysis, and musical analysis (Ho, 2016; Mannay & Morgan, 2015; Motherway, 2016; Wang, Chuangprakhon, Jian, & Wang, 2024; N. Zhang, Rodsakan, & Jamnongsarn, 2023).

The significance of this research extends beyond academic inquiry to practical implications for cultural preservation, policy-making, and community engagement (Baron, 2016; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; C. Zhang & Liao, 2022). Firstly, by documenting the evolution of Dong's small songs, this study contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, ensuring that these musical traditions are safeguarded for future generations. Secondly, the research findings can inform cultural policy initiatives to support and revitalize traditional art forms amidst contemporary challenges (Cozzani, Pozzi, Dagnino, Katos, & Katsouli, 2017; Kurin, 2007; Y. Wu & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Yao, Sensai, & Junkate, 2023).

Moreover, the study's insights into the cultural change dynamics within Dong's small songs have broader implications for understanding the resilience and adaptability of folk music traditions in a globalized world. By highlighting the agency, creativity, and agency of Dong musicians and communities in navigating cultural change. The research on the evolution of Dong small songs and cultural change in Chinese folk music is timely and significant, offering valuable insights into the complexities of cultural heritage, identity formation, and artistic expression in a rapidly changing world. This study aims to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on cultural resilience, creativity, and continuity through interdisciplinary approaches and collaboration with Dong communities.

Literature Review

Theories of Cultural Change

Scholars studying the evolution of Dong's small songs within Chinese folk music have utilized several theoretical frameworks to analyze cultural change. One such framework is the theory of cultural evolution, which posits that cultures undergo gradual transformations over time due to various internal and external factors. This theory emphasizes the adaptive nature of cultures, where traditions may be modified, merged, or abandoned in response to changing socio-economic, political, and environmental conditions (Gebhardt, Carpenter, & Sherry Jr, 2006; Xu & Hamamura, 2014; Zerbe, 2022).

Another theoretical lens used in this context is cultural ecology theory. Cultural ecologists argue that folk music reflects how communities adapt their cultural practices to environmental realities, such as agricultural rhythms, seasonal cycles, and geographical landscapes (Chan, 2018; K. Tang, 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding Dong's small songs, as their lyrical themes often resonate with nature, agricultural rituals, and communal life.

Historical Perspectives on Dong Small Songs

Scholars have provided insights into the early development of Dong folk songs, highlighting their roles in religious ceremonies, agricultural rituals, and community cohesion during pre-modern eras. Comparative analyses across different historical periods reveal shifting themes, musical styles, and performance contexts, indicating the dynamic nature of Dong's small songs throughout history (Inglis, 2017; Nettl & Bohlman, 1991).

Contemporary Challenges and Adaptations

Recent discussions within the literature explore the impact of globalization, urbanization, and digital media on Chinese folk music traditions, including Dong's small songs. Studies also examine how Dong's small songs have adapted to urban settings, diasporic communities, and multicultural contexts. These analyses showcase the agency of Dong musicians in blending traditional elements with contemporary influences, reflecting ongoing cultural change within the realm of Chinese folk music (Hou & Seekhunlio, 2023; Schippers, 2009; Sosrowijaya, 2023; K. Wu, 2023).

In conclusion, the literature reviewed here demonstrates the multifaceted nature of cultural change in Chinese folk music, particularly concerning Dong's small songs. By employing theoretical frameworks such as cultural evolution and cultural ecology, scholars have elucidated the complex dynamics shaping the evolution of Dong's small songs over time. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural traditions interact with societal changes, technological advancements, and global interconnectedness, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of folk music traditions in the face of cultural change.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the evolution of Dong's small songs and cultural change in Chinese folk music. Qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring complex cultural phenomena, allowing researchers to delve into the meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences of participants (Rice, 2017).

Data Collection

The primary data collection methods include ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and archival research. Ethnographic fieldwork involves immersive engagement with Dong communities, observing musical performances, participating in cultural events, and documenting oral traditions. Semi-structured interviews with Dong musicians, scholars, and community members provide insights into their perspectives on cultural change, musical innovations, and socio-cultural contexts. Archival research involves accessing historical documents, recordings, and scholarly works related to Dong small songs and Chinese folk music.

Sampling

The study employs purposive sampling to select participants who possess in-depth knowledge and experiences relevant to Dong's small songs and cultural change. Key informants may include elder musicians, community leaders, music historians, and cultural experts. Sampling criteria consider factors such as expertise, cultural background, geographical diversity, and generational perspectives to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis techniques, including thematic analysis and content analysis, are employed to analyze the collected data. The thematic analysis involves identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings within the data, while content analysis focuses on categorizing and interpreting textual or visual content related to Dong small songs and cultural change. Data triangulation, wherein multiple data sources are compared and corroborated, enhances the validity and reliability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and respecting cultural protocols and traditions. Researchers maintain transparency, honesty, and reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging their own biases and positions within the cultural context under study.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations of the study, such as the subjective nature of qualitative research, the influence of researcher bias, and the challenge of generalizing findings beyond the specific cultural context of Dong small songs and Chinese folk music. Nonetheless, these limitations are addressed through methodological rigor, reflexivity, and transparency in reporting the research process and outcomes.

Results

Dong's small songs are distinguished by their diverse vocal styles, including high-pitched, fast-paced, and flat-toned singing. The high-pitched style, known as Gaoqiang, serves as the primary vocal style from which the others have evolved. Gaoqiang songs, also called Loud Songs, demand true singers who can produce loud, natural, and straightforward tones. This style, characterized by free tunes, long phrases, and a slow tempo, is often performed at large gatherings or events.

The flat-toned style, Pingqiang, is a variation of high-pitched songs but with a lower pitch, typically used for narrating stories and creating a peaceful atmosphere. Kuaiqiang, the fast-tempo style, can be sung in a false voice, characterized by soft and delicate tones. This style requires precise control and breath management due to its softer volume and intricate emotional expression. Fast-paced songs often require a specific emotional backdrop and gentle, soft singing to convey their sentiments effectively.

Dong's small songs predominantly revolve around themes of love and utilize the "Zheng" mode, a pentatonic scale common in Chinese folk music. However, Dong songs add modified accents based on emotional needs and regional variations, enhancing their local folk music characteristics. These songs feature varied melodies and unique forms for each vocal style, often incorporating improvisation into their lyrics and performances.

Dong folk songs exhibit a sense of freedom, cheerfulness, and improvisation in their rhythm and beats. The songs utilize multiple beats, such as 2/4 or 3/4, with an emphasis on improvisation and rhythmic changes. Dong's small songs rarely adhere to a fixed beat, allowing singers to control the pace and emotional depth of their performances spontaneously.

The Niutuiqin song of the Dong ethnic group, known as "gaiyi" (gaig) in the Dong language, combines the rich history of Ming Dynasty documentation with its long-standing cultural presence. Ming Hongzhi's "Guizhou Tujing Xinzhi" from Liping Mansion Customs mentioned the Dong people's leisure activities, including playing the reeds, wooden leaves, pipa, and the two-stringed qin, which is the corbel qin. This instrument, with a history dating back more than five or six hundred years, was known as the "two-stringed qin" in earlier times before evolving into the Niutuiqin as known today.

The Niutuiqin stands out as the most beloved bowed stringed instrument among the Dong people, owing to its corbel-like shape. Its unique design includes a sound column on the resonance box's right side, inserted directly into the piano's belly with slight exposure on the surface for sound adjustment. The bow, crafted from fine bamboo with brown or horsetail hair, resembles that of an erhu bow. Tuned to 5-2 by Zhang Erxian, it primarily plays in the first position, offering a balanced tone with bright treble, soft middle ranges, and a subtle nasal quality in the low range. The instrument's distinctive sound, often featuring perfect fifths, adds elegance and charm to its melodies. Variants like the treble qin and alto qin cater to different regional preferences, with the high-pitched corbels finding popularity in Rongjiang, notably in places like the Sanbao Dong village, where they often accompany pipa performances, delivering lively and spirited tunes.

The singing style of Niutuiqin songs is straightforward yet deeply expressive. Singers either perform solo with the corbel qin, narrating tales, or act as accompanists in duets, typically focusing on themes of love and relationships. This duality in performance adds to the versatility and cultural significance of Niutuiqin songs among the Dong people.



Figure 1. Niutuiqin, a folk musical instrument.

The musical arrangement of Niutuiqin songs typically comprises three sections: the introduction, the main body, and the conclusion. The main section often employs a repetitive development technique, focusing on the repetition of "upper and lower sentences." These phrases, typically ranging from two to ten, follow a pattern of even-numbered repetitions and are tailored to the lyrics of the song. During performances, singers frequently incorporate improvisation, leading to variations in the rendition of the same song by different individuals. This variability in tune and style adds to the dynamic nature of Niutuiqin songs, where each rendition may offer a unique interpretation. While the structure of the thematic section varies, the song's title typically features fixed lyrics, resulting in a corresponding fixed melody. This ensures consistency in the overall presentation of the song.

Niutuiqin songs predominantly utilize the pentatonic mode, particularly favoring the feather mode. The melody typically consists of a combination of "minor third + major second" intervals, with a vocal range usually confined to one octave and a moderate interval span. This melodic structure, characterized by twists and turns, conveys a profound sense of emotion, as shown in Figure 2.

天 天 找 你 呢, 草 鞋 烂 了 几 多
tian tian zhao ni e, cao xie lan le ji duo

双 呢, 就 像 雀 崽 找 窝
shuang e, jiu xiang que zai zhao wo

呢, 鱼 儿 找 呢 深 呢 塘 呢。
e, yu er zhao e shen e tang e.

Figure 2. Example song for Niutuiqin.

Regarding rhythm in Niutuiqin songs, the lyrics vary in length and often incorporate numerous line words, resulting in a somewhat free-flowing beat. Many compositions cleverly employ changing beats and diverse rhythm patterns to enhance expressiveness. In the given example, alternating rhythms of 2/4 and 3/4 are used alongside triplets, creating a patchwork of rhythms that enriches the music's style and color. This dynamic rhythm scheme vividly captures the singer's emotional fluctuations.

Cultural Change in Chinese Folk Music

The study also examined broader trends of cultural change within Chinese folk music, contextualizing the evolution of Dong's small songs within this framework. The post-Cultural Revolution era witnessed a resurgence of interest in traditional cultural forms, including folk music, as China embraced economic reforms and cultural revitalization.

Globalization and technological advancements contributed to shifts in music consumption patterns, introducing younger generations to diverse musical genres beyond traditional folk songs. The influence of popular music and modern media posed challenges to the preservation of traditional musical practices, leading to debates about authenticity and cultural identity.

Nevertheless, the recognition of Dong's small songs as intangible cultural heritage both nationally and internationally underscored their enduring significance in representing Dong's cultural identity and heritage. Efforts to integrate traditional music education into formal schooling systems and promote intergenerational transmission of musical knowledge emerged as strategies for sustaining Dong folk music amidst cultural change.

Evolution of Dong Small Songs

The analysis revealed a nuanced evolution of Dong's small songs over different historical periods. During the enlightenment period before the Tang Dynasty, Dong folk songs primarily focused on themes of labor, sacrifice, and harmonious coexistence with nature. The songs were characterized by simplicity and casual singing, reflecting the early stages of Dong's cultural expression.

In the Tang and Song Dynasties, Dong small songs experienced a transition towards entertainment and diversification. With improved productivity and societal advancement, the content of the songs expanded to include love themes, nursery rhymes, and musical innovations such as Dong Pipa and Lusheng instruments. This period marked a shift towards more structured and varied musical expressions within Dong culture.

The Ming and Qing Dynasties witnessed a prosperous period for Dong folk songs, marked by extensive cultural activities, large-scale performances, and the emergence of diverse singing forms such as female vocals, male vocals, and mixed voices. Festivals became vibrant platforms for showcasing Dong musical traditions, fostering community cohesion, and enriching cultural exchange.

Changes in Dong Small Songs under Social Development

The Dong ethnic group has a rich tradition of using songs to preserve history, cultural education, and social communication. Dong Small songs, characterized by their magical and beautiful melodies, have evolved over generations, conveying historical legends and cultural values. These songs originated from the primitive society of the Dong people, reflecting aspects of daily life, knowledge, moral values, and emotional expressions, the summary is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Changes in Dong small songs under social development.

Category	Description
Music Content	Dong small songs transitioned from simple calls and labor-related songs to more varied and entertainment-focused themes such as love songs, nursery rhymes, pipa songs, and etiquette songs.
Music Form	Traditional singing styles diversified into female vocals, male vocals, mixed voices, children's voice ode, narrative ode, sound ode, and etiquette ode. New musical instruments like Dong Pipa, Dong Di, and Lusheng were invented, expanding performance forms.
Social Impact	Dong Small songs played a cohesive role during festivals and large-scale events, promoting community unity and cultural exchange. They became a vital part of Dong people's cultural identity and a means of cultural transmission and education.
Modernization Influence	With modernization, Dong music incorporated modern elements like dance, altered antiphonal singing, and introduced new performance venues. Exposure to popular music impacted traditional Dong music's aesthetic appeal and performance styles.
Function Transformation	Traditional functions such as marriage communication and sacrificial ceremonies evolved, adapting to changing social dynamics and environments. Singing continued to hold social significance but with shifts in context and practices.
Musical Heritage	The traditional oral transmission of Dong songs faced challenges, leading to innovations like school-based music education and recording technologies for preservation. Dong songs gained recognition internationally and received support for cultural preservation and education initiatives.

Discussion

The exploration of Dong's small songs and their evolution within the broader context of Chinese folk music reveals a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and contemporary factors. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as cultural evolution and cultural ecology, this research sheds light on the dynamic nature of cultural change and adaptation within Dong's musical traditions.

The literature review establishes a foundation for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of cultural change theories applied in this study. Scholars like Gebhardt et al. (2006) and Xu and Hamamura (2014) have contributed valuable insights into how cultures evolve in response to internal and external influences. Similarly, cultural ecology theory, as discussed by Chan (2018) and K. Tang (2021) provides a lens through which to analyze Dong's small songs' adaptation to environmental and social contexts.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach, incorporating ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and archival research. Such methods are apt for capturing the nuanced meanings, perspectives, and experiences embedded in Dong's small songs and their cultural evolution (Mannay & Morgan, 2015; Rice, 2017). By engaging with Dong communities and key informants, this study ensures a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics shaping Dong's musical heritage.

The research results highlight the diverse vocal styles, thematic richness, and musical forms encompassed within Dong's small songs. From the traditional Gaoqiang style to contemporary adaptations and instrumental innovations like the Niutuiqin, Dong's musical heritage reflects a blend of continuity and change (Hang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023).

In analyzing broader trends of cultural change in Chinese folk music, the study reveals the impacts of globalization, modernization, and technological advancements on traditional musical practices. Despite these challenges, Dong's small songs retain their cultural significance and resilience, as evidenced by their recognition as intangible cultural heritage (Pegg, 2021; Su, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on Dong's small songs and cultural change in Chinese folk music offers valuable insights into the complexities of cultural heritage preservation, identity formation, and artistic expression. The evolution of Dong's musical traditions, from ancient origins to contemporary adaptations, underscores the dynamic nature of cultural change and adaptation.

Theoretical frameworks such as cultural evolution and cultural ecology provide analytical tools for understanding the processes driving cultural transformations within Dong's musical heritage. Methodologically, qualitative approaches facilitate a nuanced exploration of the meanings, practices, and socio-cultural contexts surrounding Dong's small songs.

The study's findings demonstrate the enduring significance of Dong's small songs as a cultural reservoir, embodying historical narratives, communal values, and artistic creativity. While facing challenges from modernization and globalization, Dong's musical traditions showcase resilience, adaptation, and innovation, reaffirming their place within China's diverse folk music landscape.

By documenting the evolution of Dong's small songs and contextualizing them within broader cultural change dynamics, this research contributes to the discourse on cultural heritage preservation, policy-making, and community engagement. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and supporting traditional art forms like Dong's small songs as vital components of intangible cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

Funding

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

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