

Dong Pipa: Chinese Musical Instrument in Literacy Functions and Educational Occasions

Yan Liu^{1*}, Jarernchai Chonpairot¹, Sayam Chuangprakhon¹, Zhang Jian²

¹College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

²Henan University of Economics and Law, China

Corresponding author: Yan Liu, E-mail: 63012061012@msu.ac.th

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ABSTRACT

The Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, is a significant element of the Dong ethnic group's cultural heritage. The objective is to investigate the historical development of the Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, in literacy functions and educational occasions. The research was conducted in Liping, Congjiang, and Rongjiang counties in Guizhou Province, Tongdao County in Hunan Province, and Sanjiang in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Two key informants and four casual informants, including national transmitters and experts in Dong Pipa music, were interviewed, and data were gathered through fieldwork, interviews, and observations. The analysis focused on the integration of the Dong Pipa into educational settings and its role in fostering cultural literacy. The results indicate that the Dong Pipa has played a dynamic role both historically and in contemporary times, contributing significantly to cultural transmission and education. The study suggests that incorporating traditional instruments like the Dong Pipa into modern educational practices can enhance cultural literacy and support preservation efforts.

Key words: Dong Pipa, Literacy, Cultural Heritage, Educational Practices, Dong Ethnic Group

INTRODUCTION

The Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, holds a significant place in the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic group. The Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, holds significance in the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic group. The Dong people, primarily residing in southern China, have a rich musical tradition that has been integral to their cultural identity for centuries. Among the various musical instruments used by the Dong people, the Dong Pipa stands out due to its unique sound and historical significance (Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023; Shu, 2022; Yeye, 2023). This plucked string instrument has been used in various cultural and social contexts, including folk songs, dances, and ceremonial events. Historically, the Dong Pipa has evolved through several stages, from its early development in the pre-Tang Dynasty to its flourishing during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Despite its historical significance, the role of the Dong Pipa in literacy and education has not been extensively studied, leaving a gap in our understanding of its broader cultural impact. This study aims to explore the historical development of the Dong Pipa, shedding light on its role in literacy functions and educational occasions within Dong communities (Gao & Karin, 2024; Hang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022; Zhang & Lam, 2022). Moreover, this research uniquely contributes by exploring the instrument's integration into educational settings, a topic previously underexplored in existing literature.

The performance practices of the Dong Pipa and its integration into literacy functions and educational settings remain under-researched. While previous studies have focused on the musical characteristics and historical origins of the Dong Pipa, there is a lack of comprehensive research on how this instrument is used in educational contexts to promote literacy and cultural transmission (He & Sornyai, 2023; Jirajarupat & Yinghua, 2023; B. Zhang & Lam, 2022). The traditional music of the Dong people, including the Dong Pipa, is a crucial medium through which cultural knowledge and values are transmitted across generations (Ping & Chuangprakhon, 2023; Wu, 2024). However, the mechanisms through which this transmission occurs, in both formal and informal educational settings, have not been adequately documented. Addressing this gap is crucial for preserving the Dong Pipa's heritage and understanding its contemporary relevance. By investigating how the Dong Pipa is utilized in literacy and education, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the instrument's cultural and educational significance (Can & Chuangprakhon, 2024; Lu, 2022; Luo, 2018; Yang et al., 2024). This research, therefore, fills a critical gap by examining the educational applications and impacts of the Dong Pipa within contemporary settings.

The significance of investigating Dong Pipa's historical development in literacy and educational contexts is multifaceted. First, this research contributes to the preservation and appreciation of Dong's cultural heritage by documenting and

analyzing the traditional uses of the Dong Pipa. As a living tradition, the Dong Pipa is not only a reflection of historical practices but also a dynamic element of contemporary Dong culture. Second, this study provides insights into the role of music in literacy and education, highlighting the potential of traditional instruments in contemporary educational practices. Music, as a universal language, has the power to enhance cognitive and emotional development, and the Dong Pipa, with its rich cultural connotations, can serve as a valuable educational tool. Finally, this research can inform cultural policy and educational strategies aimed at promoting cultural heritage and literacy among ethnic minorities in China. By understanding the educational functions of the Dong Pipa, policymakers and educators can develop more effective programs to support cultural and linguistic diversity (Feng, 2020; Luo, 2018; Zhang, 2024; Zhang et al., 2021). The study's unique contribution lies in its detailed examination of the Dong Pipa's role in educational settings, providing a model for integrating cultural heritage into modern pedagogy.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the historical development of the Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, in literacy functions and educational occasions. This study aims to explore how the Dong Pipa has been used historically and continues to be utilized in modern educational settings to enhance literacy and cultural awareness among the Dong people. Through a combination of literature review, fieldwork, and interviews with two key informants, and four casual informants, this research seeks to document the evolution of the Dong Pipa and its integration into educational practices. By examining the Dong Pipa's dual role as a musical and educational tool, this research aims to bridge the gap between historical tradition and modern educational practices, ensuring that the cultural legacy of the Dong Pipa continues to thrive in the future. Ultimately, this study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of music, culture, and education, providing valuable insights for scholars, educators, and policymakers alike. This comprehensive approach not only highlights the historical importance of the Dong Pipa but also underscores its potential as a contemporary educational resource.

Research Question

- How has the historical development of the Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, influenced literacy functions and educational occasions within Dong communities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, has long been an integral part of the Dong ethnic group's cultural heritage. Its historical development is deeply intertwined with the literacy functions and educational occasions within Dong communities. This literature review explores the theoretical frameworks and existing research on the Dong Pipa, focusing on its historical evolution, performance practices, and its role in literacy and education.

Historical Development of Dong Pipa

The historical development of the Dong Pipa can be traced back to ancient times, with references found in mythological records and historical documents. Its evolution spans from the pre-Tang Dynasty through the Ming and Qing Dynasties to the Republic of China period. This trajectory highlights the instrument's transformation from a primitive music tool to a sophisticated instrument used in various social and cultural contexts. Understanding this historical context is crucial for appreciating the Dong Pipa's significance in Dong culture (Zhang & Lam, 2022; Zou et al., 2022).

Theories of Literacy Functions and Educational Occasions

The integration of the Dong Pipa into educational settings and its role in literacy functions can be understood through several theoretical lenses. Structural functionalism provides a framework for analyzing the role of the Dong Pipa within the social system of the Dong people, emphasizing the interdependence of societal components and how the Dong Pipa reinforces social cohesion and cultural continuity. Social change theory offers insights into how Dong Pipa's role in education has evolved in response to broader socio-political and economic changes. Diffusionism theory explains how the practices associated with the Dong Pipa have spread and been adopted within and beyond Dong communities (Campbell, 2018; Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

Significance of Dong Pipa in Literacy and Education

The Dong Pipa's significance in literacy and education is multifaceted. In traditional Dong society, the instrument was a vital tool for the oral transmission of cultural knowledge and social values. The phrase "the Han people have words to transmit books, and the Dong people have no words to transmit songs" encapsulates the centrality of oral traditions and music in Dong culture. The Dong Pipa's incorporation into school curricula and community education programs reflects its ongoing importance in fostering cultural literacy and identity among Dong youth. Efforts by cultural institutions and educational initiatives to preserve and promote Dong Pipa music underscore its educational value and its role in cultural preservation (Boyu, 2019; Li & Choatchamrat, 2024; Zhang & Wu, 2023).

In conclusion, the literature review highlights the Dong Pipa's historical development, performance practices, and its critical role in literacy functions and educational occasions within Dong communities. The theoretical frameworks of structural functionalism, social change, and diffusionism provide valuable insights into understanding the instrument's enduring cultural significance. This review sets the stage for further investigation into how the Dong Pipa continues to influence literacy and education in contemporary Dong society.

METHOD

Scope of Research Site

The research sites were selected based on their historical and cultural significance in the context of Dong Pipa

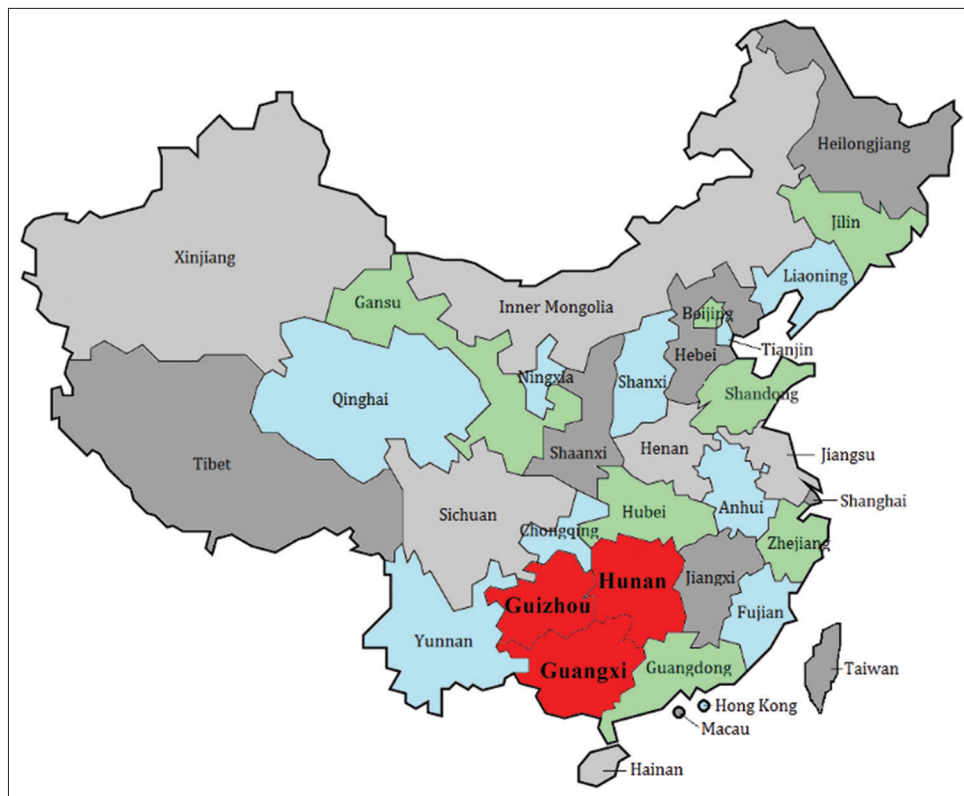


Figure 1. Map of research site
Source: Chinafolio (n.d.)

music. The process involved an extensive literature review, consultations with experts, and preliminary field visits to ensure the selected sites were representative of the broader cultural landscape of the Dong ethnic group including Liping County, Congjiang County, and Rongjiang County in Guizhou Province, Tongdao County in Hunan Province, and Sanjiang in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, as shown in Figure 1.

Data Collection Methods

The study explores how the Dong Pipa has evolved, the various settings in which it is performed, and its role in promoting literacy and education among the Dong people. Through a combination of literature review, fieldwork, interviews, and observations, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of Dong Pipa’s cultural and educational significance, as shown in Table 1.

Key Informants and Casual Informants

Key informants were selected based on their expertise and contributions to the field of Dong Pipa music, including their recognition as transmitters by cultural institutions, proficiency in playing and singing Dong Pipa, and active involvement in preserving and promoting of Dong Pipa songs. Casual informants included Dong Pipa producers, researchers, and educators familiar with the instrument’s structure, tuning system, and representative works, whose practical experience and knowledge provided valuable insights into the study.

Table 1. Data collection methods

Method	Description
Fieldwork	The crucial part of the research involved visits to Dong villages in Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi provinces, including observations, interviews, and participation in local cultural events to collect primary data
Interviews	Conducted with key informants such as national, provincial, municipal, and county-level transmitters of Dong Pipa songs, folk artists, and Dong Pipa makers to gather detailed information on performance practices, historical development, and educational functions
Observations	Focused on the training, performance, and management of Dong Pipa musical activities in the field, documenting cultural events, educational settings, and daily practices

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with two key informants, recognized as national transmitters of Dong Pipa songs, providing rich oral accounts for studying the historical development of Dong Pipa. Additionally, four casual informants, known for their contributions to the making, teaching, and research of the Dong Pipa, were interviewed to offer diverse perspectives on the instrument’s cultural and educational significance.

Research Tools

- Interview Forms were designed to capture detailed information from key and casual informants. The forms

included questions tailored to elicit comprehensive responses about Dong Pipa music's historical and contemporary practices.

- Observation forms were used to systematically record observations made during fieldwork, ensuring that all relevant details about the performance practices and educational use of the Dong Pipa were documented.

Data Management and Analysis

Upon completion of fieldwork, the collected data, including recordings, videos, pictures, and interview transcripts, were categorized and managed systematically. The data were organized based on historical and musical characteristics to facilitate subsequent analysis. The data analysis involved multiple methods as follows:

- **Field Data Analysis:** To interpret the musical characteristics of the Dong Pipa and summarize findings based on field observations and interviews.
- **Comparative Analysis:** To explore the reasons and trajectories behind changes in Dong Pipa performance practices over time.
- **Interviews and Observations Analysis:** Using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the cultural and educational functions of the Dong Pipa.

RESULTS

The Dong Pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Dong ethnic group. Its historical development reflects significant socio-cultural transformations within Dong communities. The objective of this research is to investigate the historical development of the Dong Pipa, emphasizing its role in literacy functions and educational occasions.

Historical Development of the Dong Pipa

Pre-1949 development stages

Pre-1949, the Dong Pipa was in the traditional stage of its development. This period can be segmented into several historical stages: the gestation period before the Tang Dynasty, the formation period during the Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties, the flourishing period in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and the transformation stage during the Republic of China.

1. **Gestation Period:** Mythological records suggest the origins of the Dong Pipa date back to the primitive society period. These myths highlight the close connection between Dong Pipa music and the universe, emphasizing the Dong people's desire to make a living and their emotional expression through music.
2. **Formation Period:** During these dynasties, Dong Pipa songs began to appear, with the instrument and its music becoming more structured. This period saw the establishment of foundational musical traditions that would influence later developments.

3. **Flourishing Period:** The Ming and Qing Dynasties marked the peak of the Dong Pipa's traditional development. This era produced numerous classic works, such as "Niang Mei Song" and "Xiuyingjimei Song." The narrative pipa songs became well-established, showcasing the maturity of the Dong Pipa music tradition.
4. **Transformation Period:** During the Republic of China period, the Dong Pipa saw significant changes. While traditional practices continued, new forms of pipa music emerged that reflected the social and political changes of the time. Songs began to address contemporary issues, including revolutionary themes, highlighting the adaptability of the Dong Pipa music to new contexts.

Post-1949 development

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Dong Pipa has entered a stage of diversified development. This era has been characterized by significant efforts in cultural preservation and innovation, supported by both governmental and local initiatives.

1. **Instrument Improvement:** Efforts to improve the Dong Pipa have led to innovations in its design and construction, resulting in enhanced musical capabilities. These improvements have been driven by collaboration between folk musicians and professional instrument makers.
2. **Folk Inheritance Groups:** The formation of groups like the Wanzhai Female Pipa Song Team has played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of Dong Pipa music. These groups have participated in numerous cultural events and competitions, helping to keep the tradition alive.
3. **Performance and Exchange:** The Dong Pipa has gained prominence on both national and international stages. Performances at cultural festivals, academic seminars, and other events have raised awareness of the Dong Pipa's cultural significance.
4. **Educational Integration:** The Dong Pipa has been integrated into school curricula, with educational programs aimed at teaching the instrument to younger generations. This integration has ensured that the knowledge and skills associated with the Dong Pipa are passed down, fostering a sense of cultural continuity.

In conclusion, the historical development of the Dong Pipa reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation. From its mythological origins to its contemporary role in education and cultural expression, the Dong Pipa has evolved significantly. This research highlights the importance of the Dong Pipa in literacy functions and educational occasions, underscoring its enduring cultural significance within the Dong ethnic group, as shown in Figure 2.

Dong Pipa in Literacy Functions and Educational Occasions

Pre-1949: performance occasions and functions

Pre 1949, the traditional performance occasions for the Dong ethnic group's pipa included the Moon Hall (Yuetang),

Drum Tower (Gulou), Dong Opera Stage (Xitai), and Wind and Rain Bridge (Fengyuqiao). These venues played a crucial role in the social and cultural life of the Dong people, serving as important sites for musical literacy and education.

1. Moon Hall (Yuetang): Served as the living room in a girl's house and was the venue for the activity known as "Xing Ge Zuo Yue." Every evening, young men and women gathered in the girls' home to play and sing pipa songs and love songs. This activity, a form of collective courtship and social interaction among Dong ethnic youth, was essential for transmitting musical and cultural literacy. The young men and women engaged in singing and sitting activities, sometimes in the hall and sometimes by the firepit. Particularly during the late autumn, winter, and early spring seasons, most activities took place by the firepit.
2. Drum Tower (Gulou): A place for discussing major matters and holding entertainment activities within the village. It was a symbolic cultural icon in Dong culture, embodying the most important cultural elements of the Dong ethnic group. The Drum Tower was the core public space for colorful folk culture performances, including pipa songs, which were integral to the community's literacy and educational practices. The spacious and flat area in front of the Drum Tower, known as the Drum Tower Square, hosted various cultural and entertainment activities, including playing the Lusheng (reed-pipe wind instrument), dance halls, and singing Yege (a traditional Dong festival song).
3. Dong Opera Stage (Xitai): Used for performing Dongxi, or Chinese dramas. Dong regions were renowned as "seas of songs and villages of dramas." The architectural style and structure of Dong opera stages across Dong regions were generally similar, mostly constructed with wooden structures. Together with Drum Towers, Wind and Rain Bridges, and stilted houses, these buildings formed a distinctive traditional architectural and cultural system of the Dong ethnic group. These stages facilitated the performance of pipa songs, contributing to the community's musical literacy.
4. Wind and Rain Bridge (Fengyuqiao): Also known as the "flower bridge" among the Dong people, Wind and Rain Bridge served as a pedestrian passageway to shelter from wind and rain and was a significant place for Dong youth to sing love songs and enjoy music. The bridge was not only a major transportation route but also a daily public cultural space for Dong villagers. It provided an excellent

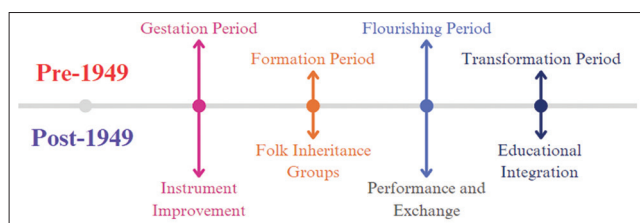


Figure 2. Timeline of historical development of the Dong Pipa

Source: Yan Liu, from fieldwork in April 2023

venue for daily activities such as seeking shelter from the wind and rain, cooling off, welcoming guests, and engaging in singing and entertainment, thereby playing a role in the transmission of musical literacy.

These traditional performance occasions were integral to the cultural and social life of the Dong ethnic group, providing spaces for both communal interaction and the transmission of cultural heritage. They facilitated the development of musical literacy among the Dong people, ensuring the continuation of their rich musical traditions.

Post-1949 performance occasions and functions

After 1949, the performance occasions for Dong Pipa have evolved significantly, reflecting changes in social, political, and cultural contexts. The contemporary performance occasions for Dong Pipa include stage performances, educational settings in schools, and livelihood performances. These occasions vary from government or grassroots initiatives to village life spaces or locations beyond villages and can be permanent or temporary, professional or amateur, emphasizing the role of literacy in the transmission and education of Dong Pipa music.

1. Stages for Public Performances: Following the development trajectory of traditional Chinese performing arts, fixed performance stages for Dong Pipa emerged, particularly in professional theaters. These stages offer elevated platforms for optimal viewing angles, enhancing audience engagement and focus. Initially, Dong Pipa songs were performed in village life spaces without dedicated stages. However, with organized performances by the government and other entities, these songs are now performed on both indoor and outdoor stages, such as the performance area in the Zhaoxing Scenic Area. Temporary stages are set up in diverse locations like conference podiums, community squares, shopping malls, and basketball courts, allowing for flexibility in performance venues. These stages facilitate artistic, cultural, and entertainment activities, making Dong Pipa accessible to wider audiences and enhancing its educational and cultural literacy, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. The performance stage in Zhaoxing Dong Village
Source: Yan Liu, from fieldwork in December 2021

2. Stage for School Education and Heritage Performance: Elementary and Middle Schools, educational settings in elementary and middle schools in Dong areas serve as primary singing spaces for Dong Pipa songs. These schools, including general and ethnic schools, integrate Dong Pipa into their curricula, promoting cultural literacy and heritage among young students, as shown in Figure 4. Universities with Dong Song majors, such as Guizhou Minzu University, Guizhou University, and Guizhou Kaili University, provide advanced platforms for the study and performance of Dong Pipa. These institutions not only enhance the cultural literacy of students but also ensure the transmission of Dong Pipa through academic programs and public performances. After schools carry out ethnic and cultural education, students are often required or invited to perform on various societal stages, including cultural transmission displays, competitions, public welfare performances, and even commercial shows, as shown in Figure 5.
3. Stage for Livelihood Performances: In traditional society, Dong Pipa songs provided economic benefits and improved livelihoods. Skilled singers, known for their narrative pipa songs, traveled to villages during off-seasons, earning income through their performances. This tradition, initiated in the Qing Dynasty, continues today, with performances observed during festivals such as the Guzhuang Festival and Dong New Year, as well



Figure 4. Guangxi, County Guyi Town Central Primary School
Source: Yan Liu, from fieldwork in January 2022



Figure 5. Guizhou Minzu University
Source: Yan Liu, from fieldwork in January 2022

as customary events like weddings, initiation ceremonies, and housewarming parties. In contemporary society, changes in social development have expanded livelihood performance spaces to include scenic areas, restaurants, and hotels. Scenic area performance spaces are divided into large-scale stages for the entire area and small performance stages within restaurants and hotels. These venues attract business and tourists, providing additional platforms for Dong Pipa performances. Non-scenic performance spaces, such as urban restaurants and banquet halls, also serve as venues for mobile pipa song performances, often featuring themes like “High Mountains and Flowing Water Toasting.”

These various performance occasions and functions highlight the significance of Dong Pipa in promoting cultural literacy and education. By integrating Dong Pipa into public performances, educational settings, and livelihood activities, the Dong community ensures the preservation and transmission of this traditional musical instrument, enriching the cultural and educational landscape.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The historical evolution of the Dong Pipa, from its origins in the pre-Tang Dynasty to its flourishing in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, underscores its enduring cultural significance (Zhang & Lam, 2022; Zou et al., 2022). This instrument has not only served as a medium for musical expression but has also been a critical tool for the oral transmission of cultural knowledge and social values. The phrase “the Han people have words to transmit books, and the Dong people have no words to transmit songs” (Boyu, 2019) encapsulates the centrality of music in Dong culture, emphasizing the role of the Dong Pipa in fostering cultural literacy.

The integration of the Dong Pipa into educational settings, as observed in both traditional and contemporary contexts, aligns with the theoretical frameworks of structural functionalism and social change (Campbell, 2018). These frameworks highlight how the Dong Pipa reinforces social cohesion and cultural continuity within the Dong community. Moreover, the diffusionism theory explains the spread and adoption of Dong Pipa practices within and beyond Dong communities (Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

The study’s findings on the performance practices of the Dong Pipa before and after 1949 illustrate the instrument’s adaptability to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. In traditional settings, performance occasions such as the Moon Hall, Drum Tower, Dong Opera Stage, and Wind and Rain Bridge played pivotal roles in musical literacy and education (Hang et al., 2023). These venues facilitated communal interaction and the transmission of cultural heritage, ensuring the development of musical literacy among the Dong people (Ping & Chuangprakhon, 2023).

Post-1949, the diversification of performance occasions, including public performances, educational settings in schools, and livelihood performances, reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation (Duan

& Choatchamrat, 2023). The incorporation of the Dong Pipa into school curricula and community education programs highlights its ongoing importance in fostering cultural literacy and identity among Dong youth (Li & Choatchamrat, 2024). This integration is consistent with the principles of educational ethnomusicology, which emphasizes the role of music in promoting cultural heritage and literacy (He & Sornyai, 2023).

The findings of this research are consistent with theoretical principles from structural functionalism, social change theory, and diffusionism. The role of the Dong Pipa in promoting social cohesion and cultural continuity aligns with structural functionalism, which views cultural elements as integral to the stability of social systems (Campbell, 2018). The adaptability of the Dong Pipa to changing social contexts supports social change theory, highlighting the instrument's evolving role in education and literacy (Feng, 2020). Lastly, diffusionism theory provides a framework for understanding how the practices associated with the Dong Pipa have spread and been adopted, both within Dong communities and beyond (Zou et al., 2022).

In practical terms, this research underscores the necessity for educators and policymakers to incorporate traditional instruments like the Dong Pipa into modern educational frameworks. Specific recommendations include developing culturally responsive curricula that integrate Dong Pipa music to enhance literacy and cultural awareness among students. Additionally, supporting community-based programs that promote the teaching and performance of Dong Pipa can further reinforce its cultural significance and educational value. Future research should explore the impact of these educational practices on students' cultural identity and literacy skills, as well as investigate the potential of digital platforms in preserving and disseminating Dong Pipa traditions.

In conclusion, the Dong Pipa's historical trajectory, from its mythological origins to its contemporary applications, reflects its enduring cultural significance. Traditional performance occasions, such as the Moon Hall and Drum Tower, provided essential spaces for the transmission of musical literacy, while contemporary settings have expanded to include public performances, educational institutions, and livelihood activities. This evolution underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, ensuring the continued relevance of the Dong Pipa in promoting cultural literacy and education.

The study's findings are consistent with theoretical principles from structural functionalism, social change theory, and diffusionism, providing a comprehensive understanding of Dong Pipa's role in literacy and education. By documenting and analyzing the traditional and modern uses of the Dong Pipa, this research contributes to the preservation and appreciation of Dong's cultural heritage.

The Dong Pipa serves as a vital instrument for fostering cultural literacy and education among the Dong people. Its integration into educational settings and its continued performance in various social contexts highlight its significance as a tool for cultural transmission. This research provides valuable insights for scholars, educators, and policymakers,

emphasizing the importance of music in promoting cultural heritage and literacy among ethnic minorities in China.

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