

Contemporary Educational Approaches to the Literacy and Development of the Dong Grand Songs

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ABSTRACT

The Dong Grand Songs, renowned for their polyphonic choral arrangements, are a vital cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic group. This study investigates the contemporary educational approaches to the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Songs in Guangxi, China. Employing a qualitative design, the research includes fieldwork, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Key informants comprise school administrators, teachers, song teachers, cultural inheritors, students, and community members. The findings reveal that integrating Dong Grand Song courses into primary and secondary school curricula, with support from song teachers and cultural inheritors, effectively enhances musical literacy and preserves this tradition. However, challenges such as youth migration, modern entertainment influences, and the aging population of song masters threaten the continuity of this cultural heritage. The study suggests comprehensive approaches, including economic support for rural areas, increased public awareness, and sustainable cultural programs, are necessary to address these challenges. This research provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners on preserving intangible cultural heritage and promoting musical literacy through education.

Key words: Chinese Folk Songs, Cultural Heritage, Educational Approaches, Cultural Transmission, Musical Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The Dong Grand Songs, also known as Kam Grand Songs, are a cornerstone of the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic group, predominantly found in the provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi in China. Celebrated for their polyphonic choral arrangements, these songs are traditionally performed during various social and cultural gatherings (Song & Yuan, 2021; Hang et al., 2023). The Dong Grand Songs are not merely musical compositions; they embody the Dong people's history, beliefs, and social values. Passed orally through generations, these songs have historically played a crucial role in preserving the Dong language, transmitting cultural knowledge, and strengthening community bonds. However, the sustainability of this rich cultural tradition is increasingly threatened by modernization and globalization, which significantly change the social and economic landscapes of Dong communities (Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2023).

One of the primary problems facing the preservation of Dong Grand Songs is the declining engagement of younger generations with this traditional art form. The migration of young Dong people to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities has led to a reduction in the number of individuals participating in and perpetuating these cultural

practices (Howard, 2016; Wang & Jiang, 2021). Additionally, the allure of modern entertainment and digital media has shifted the focus of the youth away from traditional cultural expressions. As a result, the oral transmission of Dong Grand Songs, which relies heavily on direct teaching and communal participation, needs to be more effective. This decline not only threatens the survival of the songs themselves but also impacts the cultural identity and continuity of the Dong people (Xu & Wang, 2021; Ping & Chuangprakhon, 2023; Wu & Boonsrianun, 2023).

In light of these challenges, this research aims to investigate the contemporary educational approaches to the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Songs among younger generations in Guangxi, China. This inquiry explores the strategies and methods currently employed within educational systems and community programs to promote the learning, appreciation, and literacy of Dong Grand Songs (Yang, 2023; Bing et al., 2024). By focusing on Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi, where significant efforts have been made to integrate these songs into school curriculums and community activities, the research will assess the effectiveness of these initiatives. The study will also examine the role of intangible cultural heritage inheritors and how their involvement can bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern educational practices,

enhancing literacy about the Dong Grand Songs (Li, 2022; Yan & Li, 2023).

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate context of the Dong Grand Songs. It contributes to the broader discourse on preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage in a rapidly modernizing world. By investigating contemporary educational approaches, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how traditional cultural forms can be sustained and revitalized in today's society, thus fostering musical literacy (Cummings et al., 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2023). The findings can inform policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners on effective strategies for integrating cultural heritage into formal and informal education systems to enhance literacy. Furthermore, this research supports global efforts by organizations such as UNESCO to safeguard cultural diversity and promote intercultural understanding, contributing to global musical literacy (Labadi, 2019). Ultimately, the study underscores the vital role of education in ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions, fostering a deeper appreciation and literacy of cultural heritage among future generations, and maintaining the cultural richness and diversity that define human society.

Research Question

- How do contemporary educational approaches facilitate the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Songs in Guangxi, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Functionalism and the Social Role of Dong Grand Songs

Functionalism, a theoretical perspective in anthropology and sociology, posits that all aspects of society, including cultural phenomena, serve specific functions that contribute to the stability and cohesion of the social system. Prominent functionalist anthropologists like Bronisław Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the role of cultural practices in fulfilling societal needs (Hann & James, 2024). In the context of the Dong Grand Songs, this perspective helps elucidate how these songs serve various social functions for the Dong people. Malinowski's notion of art's "non-utilitarian" playful function underscores that art can provide spiritual and emotional satisfaction beyond mere entertainment. The Dong Grand Songs, with their intricate polyphonic structures and rich lyrical content, fulfill multiple roles, such as historical narration, cultural education, social interaction, and emotional expression. These songs offer aesthetic enjoyment and reinforce social cohesion, cultural identity, and literacy within Dong communities (Shuwen, 2018; Chen et al., 2023).

Cultural Transmission and Educational Integration

Cultural transmission theory is central to understanding how cultural knowledge, values, and practices are passed down through generations (Fang & Chuangprakhon, 2024). Education is pivotal in this process, especially ensuring the continuity of intangible cultural heritage like the Dong

Grand Songs. Traditional methods of oral transmission face challenges in the modern era, making formal educational approaches increasingly important. Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County schools have introduced Dong Grand Song courses in primary and secondary schools, integrating these cultural practices into the formal education system. By developing teaching materials, designing lesson plans, and inviting song teachers and cultural inheritors to conduct classes, these schools aim to instill cultural pride and literacy among young Dong students. This approach preserves the songs and promotes continuous development and adaptation in contemporary contexts, enhancing musical literacy (Yan & Dapradit, 2022; Yao & Chaotchamrat, 2023).

Contemporary Approaches in Education

Modern educational methods have been increasingly employed to facilitate the transmission and literacy development of Dong Grand Songs (Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023). In Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, dozens of schools have incorporated Dong Grand Song courses, collaborating with song teachers and music educators to create age-appropriate teaching materials and structured lesson plans. These educational initiatives ensure that students receive a comprehensive understanding of Dong Grand Songs, including their historical background, lyrical meanings, singing techniques, and cultural significance. Integrating these courses into regular school curriculums provides students with consistent exposure to their cultural heritage, fostering a more profound appreciation, literacy, and ongoing engagement with traditional Dong music (Rajan, 2017; Chung, 2022).

Aesthetic Education and Cultural Values

The concept of aesthetic education, rooted in the philosophical ideas of Friedrich Schiller and further developed by Alexander von Humboldt, emphasizes the importance of cultivating aesthetic sensibility and appreciation through art and culture (Louden, 2023; Chytry, 2024). Aesthetic education involves teaching students to appreciate the artistic and cultural significance of cultural practices like the Dong Grand Songs. Schools in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County have implemented programs that emphasize the historical background, lyrical meanings, singing techniques, and cultural significance of the Dong Grand Songs. This holistic approach to education helps students develop a deep appreciation and literacy for their cultural heritage, fostering personal and communal growth. The aesthetic education function of the Dong Grand Songs combines emotional and moral education through artistic expression, enriching the spiritual world of the Dong people and providing a vivid and compelling means of cultural transmission, thereby enhancing musical literacy (Danhong, 2019; Qi, 2024).

In conclusion, the literature on functionalism, cultural transmission, contemporary educational methods, and aesthetic education provides valuable insights into the educational approaches used to preserve and develop the literacy and cultural heritage of the Dong Grand Songs in Guangxi, China. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this

study explores how contemporary educational initiatives contribute to the literacy and adaptation of this important cultural heritage, ensuring its vitality and relevance in modern society.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the contemporary educational approaches used in the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Songs in Guangxi, China. The research utilizes ethnographic methods, including fieldwork, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. This comprehensive approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how educational practices are implemented and their impact on the literacy and preservation of the Dong Grand Songs.

Research Site

The primary research site is Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, a key area for the Dong ethnic group. Sanjiang County is known for its rich cultural heritage, including the Dong Grand Songs, and has implemented various educational initiatives to preserve this tradition. The study focuses on county-level ethnic primary and secondary schools and township-level primary schools that have integrated Dong Grand Song courses into their curriculum, as shown in Figure 1.

Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the educational literacy development and transmission processes of Chinese folk songs in Southern Shaanxi under contemporary status with key informants. Data collection methods include interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Fieldwork

Involves extended stays in the research site to gain an in-depth understanding of the local context. This includes

observing school activities, cultural events, and community interactions related to the Dong Grand Songs. Fieldwork helps capture educators' and students' lived experiences and literacy practices.

In-depth interviews

Interviews are conducted with key stakeholders. These interviews aim to gather detailed insights into the motivations, challenges, and outcomes of the educational approaches and their impact on literacy, including:

- School administrators and teachers involved in the Dong Grand Song programs.
- Song teachers and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage.
- Students are participating in the Dong Grand Song courses.
- Community members and cultural experts.

Participant observation

Involves the researcher actively engaging in educational and cultural activities related to the Dong Grand Songs. This includes attending classes, workshops, and performances and interacting with participants to observe firsthand the teaching, learning, and literacy processes.

Document analysis

Reviewing teaching materials, lesson plans, educational policies, and publications related to the Dong Grand Songs. This helps understand the educational programs' formal structures, content, and literacy components.

RESULTS

The findings focus on three primary components: the origins and history of the Dong Grand Song, the current state and challenges of its literacy and inheritance, and strategies for its development and preservation through educational initiatives. The findings are based on an extensive literature review, fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and participant observation.



Figure 1. Map of research site

Source: China folio (n.d.) and Zhangjiajieholiday (n.d.)

Historical Origins and Development

Historical origins

The Dong Grand Song is a significant cultural artifact of the Dong ethnic group, with its origins tracing back to ancient Chinese dynasties. Historical records suggest that the form of the Dong Grand Song might have emerged as early as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. One of the earliest references to a form of song that may have influenced the Dong Grand Song is found in the book “Shuo Yuan Shan Shuo” by Liu Xiang of the Western Han Dynasty. This text describes the “Song of the Yue People,” which shares lexical and phonetic similarities with contemporary Dong ballads. Although it is impossible to directly equate the “Song of the Yue People” with the Dong Grand Song, it is clear that the Dong Grand Song has inherited phonetic and stylistic characteristics from this early form.

During the Southern Dynasties, the development of similar folk songs further advanced, leading to the creation of works such as “Zi Ye Ge” (Midnight Songs). By the Song Dynasty, the Dong Grand Song had developed into a more structured form, as evidenced by historical records describing group singing gatherings and the use of instruments. Ming Dynasty records, such as those in Kuang Lu’s “Chi Ya,” further illustrate the established presence of Dong musical elements, including lusheng and pipa, which are still integral to Dong’s musical culture today.

Despite the need for comprehensive historical records, the origins of the Dong Grand Song can be pieced together through fragmented texts and folk legends. These sources highlight the rich and complex history of this musical form, reflecting its deep roots in the cultural and social practices of the Dong people.

Developmental trajectory

The developmental trajectory of the Dong Grand Song showcases its evolution and resilience through various historical periods. The Ming Dynasty marked a period of widespread popularity for the Dong Grand Song in certain areas, with detailed descriptions of performances and the cultural significance of the music in Dong communities. The tradition of collective singing and the social functions of the Dong Grand Song were well-established during this period, emphasizing its role in cultural and social life.

In the modern era, the Dong Grand Song achieved significant international recognition. A key milestone was the performance of Dong Grand Songs in Paris, France, in 1986, which caused a sensation and brought global attention to this unique musical tradition. This international exposure highlighted the artistic and cultural value of the Dong Grand Song, positioning it as an essential cultural export for China.

The concerted efforts to preserve and promote the Dong Grand Song culminated in its inclusion in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. This achievement underscored the global cultural and musical significance of the Dong Grand Song, recognizing it as a shared treasure of humanity that requires collective protection and promotion. The inclusion in the

UNESCO list also provided a platform for increased awareness and support for preserving and developing this cultural heritage.

Overall, the developmental trajectory of the Dong Grand Song reflects its enduring cultural importance and the successful efforts to ensure its continuation and recognition in both national and international contexts. The ongoing commitment to its preservation highlights the Dong Grand Song’s role as a vital component of the cultural identity and heritage of the Dong ethnic group, as well as its literacy.

Current Conditions and Problems

Current status

Fieldwork and interviews reveal that the Dong Grand Song is still actively practiced in specific regions, particularly in the southern dialect areas of the Dong ethnic group. The core areas for its transmission include Liping County, Congjiang County, and Rongjiang County in Guizhou Province, as well as Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The Dong Grand Song remains integral to community life in these regions, performed during festivals, ceremonies, and social gatherings. Local schools and cultural institutions have also incorporated the Dong Grand Song into their curriculums and community programs, further promoting its practice, appreciation, and literacy among younger generations, as shown in Figure 2.

Despite its vibrant presence, the Dong Grand Song faces significant challenges. While there is a strong sense of cultural pride and community support for maintaining this tradition, the overall participation rates have fluctuated due to various external pressures. Efforts by local governments and cultural organizations have been instrumental in preserving the Dong Grand Song. However, these efforts must be scaled up and supported by broader, more sustainable initiatives.

Problems faced

The Dong Grand Song, a traditional Chinese singing instrument, faces numerous literacy, inheritance, and protection challenges. Economic development has led to migration



Figure 2. The sanjiang meilin dong grand songs festival in guangxi

Source: Manliang tang, from fieldwork in may 2022

from rural to urban areas, disrupting generational continuity. The influence of modern media and changing entertainment preferences among youth has also shifted the cultural landscape, leading to a decline in interest and participation in the Dong Grand Song. The aging population of song masters and the lack of younger successors pose a critical threat to the continuity of this cultural heritage. Many current practitioners and masters are elderly, and their knowledge and skills are at risk of being lost if not passed down. The rigorous training and cultural understanding required to master the Dong Grand Song make finding and cultivating new talent among younger generations difficult.

Structural issues concerning preserving and promoting the Dong Grand Song include insufficient funding, lack of infrastructure, and limited public awareness. These issues hinder the effectiveness of preservation efforts and limit the reach and impact of cultural programs designed to support the Dong Grand Song and enhance its literacy.

In conclusion, while the Dong Grand Song remains a vibrant part of Dong culture in its core regions, it faces significant threats from economic, social, and demographic changes. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes supporting economic opportunities in rural areas, promoting cultural education and literacy, and ensuring adequate infrastructure and resources for cultural preservation.

Educational Approaches to Literacy and Development

School literacy and development

Integrating Dong Grand Song education into the formal school curriculum in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County is a critical step toward its preservation. Recognizing the importance of early education in cultural transmission and literacy, local educational authorities have introduced Dong Grand Song courses in various schools, including county-level ethnic primary and secondary schools and township-level primary schools. These courses are designed to familiarize students with the historical background, lyrical meanings, singing techniques, and cultural significance of the Dong Grand Song.

Developing teaching materials and structured teaching plans has been a collaborative effort between song teachers, cultural experts, and educators. These materials are tailored to be age-appropriate and engaging for teenage learners. By scheduling regular sessions dedicated to Dong Grand Song education, schools ensure that students have ample opportunities to learn and practice these songs. This structured approach helps maintain the musical tradition and instills a sense of cultural pride, identity, and literacy among the students.

Furthermore, extracurricular activities and school festivals often include performances of Dong Grand Songs, providing students with platforms to showcase their skills and celebrate their cultural heritage. Such initiatives foster a supportive environment for the younger generation to appreciate and carry forward their traditional music, enhancing musical literacy.

Role of song teachers and inheritors

Song teachers and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage play a vital role in the educational approach to preserving the Dong Grand Song and enhancing literacy. Their involvement in teaching and demonstration sessions provides students with a direct and immersive learning experience, which is crucial for understanding the nuances of this musical tradition.

Notable examples of such dedicated educators include Wu Guangzu and Wu Chunyue. Wu Guangzu, a nationally recognized inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, has been instrumental in teaching Dong Grand Songs at Meilin Township Central Primary School. His extensive collection of over 100 Dong Grand Songs, compiled into manuscripts, is a valuable resource for students and scholars, as shown in Figure 3. Wu Guangzu's passion for preserving this art form has significantly impacted the community as he continues to teach and inspire the next generation of singers, as shown in Figure 4.

Similarly, Wu Chunyue, another prominent song teacher, has been actively involved in the education and dissemination of Dong Grand Songs. Her efforts include conducting workshops and participating in school programs, where she

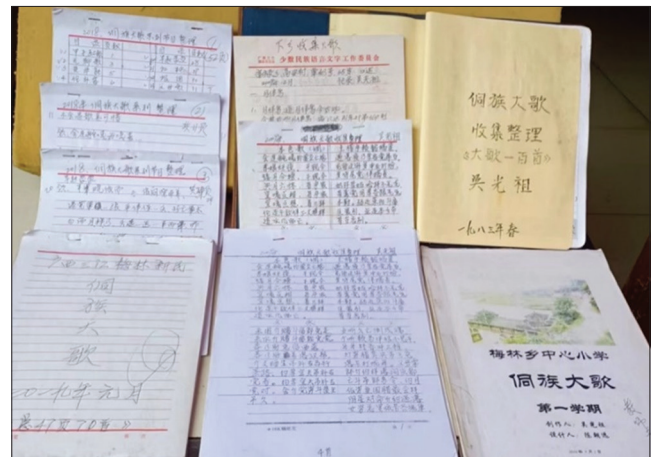


Figure 3. The Dong Grand Song Manuscripts Compiled By Wu Guangzu

Source: Manliang tang, from fieldwork in may 2022



Figure 4. Teaching activities of the intangible cultural heritage inheritor wu chunyue

Source: Manliang tang, from fieldwork in may 2022

teaches students the intricacies of Dong Grand Song performance. Through her work, she imparts technical skills and conveys the cultural and emotional depth of the songs, enriching the student's understanding, literacy, and appreciation of their heritage.

These song teachers bring authenticity and expertise to the classroom, bridging the gap between traditional folk practices and formal education. Their direct interaction with students helps preserve the oral traditions and ensures that the unique singing styles and techniques of the Dong Grand Song are accurately transmitted.

The collaborative efforts of schools and song teachers have created a robust framework for the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Song. By integrating this cultural heritage into the education system, they provide a sustainable model for its preservation, ensuring that future generations continue to cherish and uphold this vital aspect of Dong culture.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that contemporary educational approaches play in the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Songs in Guangxi, China. Integrating these songs into school curriculums and community programs demonstrates a practical application of cultural transmission theory, emphasizing the importance of formal education in sustaining intangible cultural heritage and promoting literacy (Yan & Li, 2023; Yao & Chaotchamrat, 2023). This aligns with the broader discourse on preserving cultural heritage in the face of modernization and globalization, highlighting the need for innovative strategies to engage younger generations in musical literacy (Labadi, 2019).

The research conducted in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County reveals that incorporating Dong Grand Song courses into primary and secondary school curriculums has effectively promoted cultural pride, literacy, and knowledge among young Dong students. This approach preserves the songs and fosters their continuous development and adaptation in contemporary contexts (Bing et al., 2024; Chung, 2022). The findings are consistent with the theoretical perspectives of functionalism and aesthetic education, which emphasize the roles of cultural practices in fulfilling societal needs and cultivating aesthetic sensibility and appreciation through art and culture, thereby enhancing literacy (Shuwen, 2018; Danhong, 2019).

However, the study also highlights several challenges. The migration of young Dong people to urban areas and the influence of modern media have led to a decline in participation and interest in traditional cultural expressions, impacting musical literacy (Howard, 2016; Wang & Jiang, 2021). This is consistent with the concerns raised by Xu and Wang (2021) and Ping and Chuangprakhon (2023) about the threats posed by economic and social changes to the sustainability of traditional cultural practices and literacy.

The involvement of song teachers and cultural inheritors, such as Wu Guangzu and Wu Chunyue, has been crucial in bridging the gap between traditional knowledge and modern educational practices. Their direct interaction with students

ensures the accurate transmission of the unique singing styles and techniques of the Dong Grand Song, thereby promoting musical literacy (Li, 2022; Yan & Dapradit, 2022). This approach is consistent with cultural transmission theory, which underscores the importance of knowledgeable individuals in preserving and passing down cultural heritage and literacy (Yang, 2023).

Despite the success of these initiatives, the study identifies structural issues related to the preservation and promotion of the Dong Grand Song, including insufficient funding, lack of infrastructure, and limited public awareness. These issues hinder the effectiveness of preservation efforts and limit the reach and impact of cultural programs designed to support the Dong Grand Song and its associated literacy (Duan & Choatchamrat, 2023; Mao et al., 2023).

This research highlights the significance of contemporary educational approaches in the literacy and development of the Dong Grand Songs in Guangxi, China. Integrating these songs into school curriculums and community programs has proven effective in fostering cultural pride, literacy, and knowledge among young Dong students. The involvement of song teachers and cultural inheritors has been vital in ensuring the accurate transmission of this musical tradition, bridging the gap between traditional practices and modern educational methods.

However, the sustainability of the Dong Grand Songs faces significant challenges due to economic and social changes, including the migration of young people to urban areas and the influence of modern media. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes supporting economic opportunities in rural areas, promoting cultural education and literacy, and ensuring adequate infrastructure and resources for cultural preservation.

The findings of this study have broader implications that extend beyond the local context of the Dong Grand Songs, contributing to global cultural preservation efforts. This research aligns with UNESCO's initiatives to safeguard cultural diversity and promote intercultural understanding by demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating intangible cultural heritage into educational systems. The successful implementation of Dong Grand Song courses in schools provides a model that can be adapted and applied to other cultural heritages worldwide, fostering musical literacy and cultural pride among younger generations. Moreover, this study underscores the importance of economically and culturally supporting rural communities to ensure their traditions' sustainability. By linking local preservation efforts to international frameworks, the research advocates for a collaborative approach to cultural heritage protection, emphasizing that preserving and revitalizing traditional music forms is a local responsibility and a global imperative. This holistic strategy can enhance cultural resilience and enrich the global cultural tapestry, ensuring that diverse cultural expressions thrive in the face of modernization and globalization.

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