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The Process of Transferring Knowledge through Grand Songs Among the Dong Ethnic Group in Southeast Guizhou, China

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Abstract

This study used the qualitative research method. The objectives were to describe the process of transferring knowledge through the grand songs of the Dong ethnic group in Southeast Guizhou, China. There are three main informants. The research process includes literature reviews, field investigation methods, and interview methodologies. The study's results show that people not only learn songs but also gain education, enjoyment, history, and personality from singing. Moreover, the Grand Song, with its important academic value, unique artistic value, elegant style, and green ecological economic value, has become a symbol of the integration of ethnic culture.

Keywords: Grand Song, Dong Ethnic, Transferring Knowledge

1. Introduction

"Dong Zu Da Ge" is choral music of the Dong ethnic group in China. This unique folk music is distributed in the southeast of Guizhou Province and Sanjiang County of Guangxi Province, and its core area is in Liping County, Congjiang County, and Rongjiang County in the southeast of Guizhou Province. The local Dong people call this traditional form "Ga Lao" in their dialect. It is called in Chinese: "Dong Zu Da Ge," where "Dong Zu" is the Chinese pronunciation of "Dong ethnic group" and "Da Ge" is the Chinese pronunciation of "Grand Song." Dong Zu Da Ge was added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, and the Commission designated it as the "grand song of the Dong ethnic group" (UNESCO, 2009). This is a type of unique and regional folk music that is popular in Guizhou's southeast. Since the choral music of the Dong ethnic group was discovered by musicians in the 1950s, it has steadily gained worldwide recognition for its own musical beauty.

There is a common saying among the Dong people: "Food nourishes the body, and songs nourish the soul." It can be seen that Dong people treat singing and eating equally, and "singing" is an indispensable part of the Dong

family's survival. In the early 1950s, Xiao Jiaju (1909–1996) and Xue Liang (1917–1999) first discovered "Dong Zu Da Ge" during their fieldwork in Liping County, Guizhou Province. Later, they introduced the ancient folk music to people for the first time in the form of words, pictures, and videos. (Pan Yonghua, 2012) Following that, it drew a lot of interest from the music business, both at home and abroad. More and more people are involved in the research of the Grand Song, and it is still a topic of concern today. It is uncommon to encounter creative choral music without accompaniment or director, such as Grand Song, which has significant scholarly and appreciative worth. "In the study of multi-voice folk songs of various ethnic groups in China, musicologists have spent the greatest time studying the Grand Song, which also highlights the unique status of the Grand Song in China's multi-voice folk songs on the other hand" (Zuyin, 2003). Over the years, musicians have recorded, edited, and analyzed the Grand Song in depth and achieved remarkable results. This shows the status of the Grand Song in Chinese folk music culture and academic research. With the influence of modern technology and media in today's multi-cultural society, the traditional customs of Dong ethnic areas, as well as the functions and era values of the Grand Song, have undergone profound changes (Tianrao, 2019). On the one hand, contemporary life raises the Dong people's income and living standards while also expanding their communication channels and professional opportunities with the outside world. In contrast, certain traditional cultures face the unpleasant dilemma of being displaced and forgotten.

China unveiled its "No. 1 central document" for 2022 on Feb. 22, outlining key tasks to comprehensively push forward rural vitalization this year (GOV, 2022). Eight sections, including "promoting rural construction steadily," were highlighted. According to the important strategic layout, the researcher believes that the unique "Grand Song" art can be taken as one of the supports for the revitalization of Dong villages in southeast Guizhou. The Grand Song is the embodiment of the national spirit and the representative of Dong music culture (Jiashuang, 2011). The revitalization of "Grand Song" is critical to "consistently promoting rural construction." An in-depth study of the traditional culture, musical characteristics, and existing situation of the Grand Song is an intrinsic requirement for the revitalization of the Grand Song. In the process of research, The following points need to be studied about transferring the knowledge of "grand song" to the next generation, based on the data from fieldwork.

2. Review literature

The research areas for the Grand Song in this dissertation were selected from the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, located in the southeast of Guizhou Province. They are Zhaoxing Dong Village in Liping County, Xiaohuang Dong Village in Congjiang County, and Zaidang Dong Village in Rongjiang County. As the southeast of Guizhou is a place inhabited by ethnic minorities, there is a special place name here: "Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in the southeast of Guizhou". As the saying goes, "soil and water nurture people." It is because of the unique natural environment and cultural environment in the southeast region of Guizhou Province that such honest, optimistic, and kind Dong people are bred. According to the research objectives of the thesis, the researcher chooses "three Dong villages" among the three counties under the jurisdiction of Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in southeastern Guizhou Province as the research site. The following is an introduction to these three places:

1) Zhaoxing Dong Village, Liping County is the largest county with the largest area and population in the Miao and Dong autonomous prefectures in southeastern Guizhou Province, as well as the county with the largest population of Dong people in China. It is the birthplace of Dong culture and has the reputation of being "the hometown of Dong people." Zhaoxing Dong Village is in Liping County, covering an area of 180,000 square meters with more than 1,100 households and more than 6,000 residents. It is one of the largest Dong villages in China and is known as "the first village of Dong Township." Zhaoxing Dong Village is most famous for its Gu tower group, which is the only one among the Dong villages in China. It has been recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records and is honored as "the hometown of Gu tower culture and art." village in the five groups, together with five Gu towers, five flower bridges, and five stages. The five Gu Towers vary in appearance, height, size, and style. Zhaoxing is not only the hometown of Gu Tower but also the hometown of song and dance. During festivals or when guests are near the door, Dong people gather at the Gu tower and Sax altar to hold ethnic recreational activities such as "stepping on the song hall" and "carrying officials."

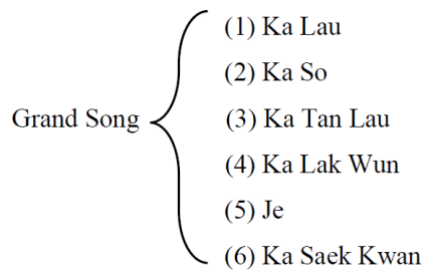
2) Xiaohuang Dong Village, Congjiang County is adjacent to Rongjiang County in the north; Libo County and Huan Jiang County in Guang Xi Province in the west; Rong Shui County in Guang Xi Province in the south; and Liping County and San Jiang County in Guang Xi Province in the east. The county is 94 kilometers long from east to west and 77.5 kilometers wide from north to south, with an area of 3225 square kilometers. Xiaohuang Dong Village is in Congjiang County, more than 20 kilometers away from Congjiang County. It is known as the "hometown of Grand Song." Xiaohuang Village has more than 600 households and more than 3,000 residents, all of whom are of the Dong ethnic group. This is "the hometown of poetry, the sea of songs." Not only can everyone sing, but they love to sing. There are more than 20 official troupes in the village, with more than 1,000 members. A stream slowly flows through the village, which is surrounded by green mountains and hundreds of wooden buildings with suspended legs leaning against mountains and rivers, forming a Dong Village with mountains, water, and songs all blending together. Xiaohuang Village, deep in the mountains, has limited communication with the outside world. The whole village has maintained its primitive style and a strong ethnic atmosphere (Qifang, 2007).

3) Zaidang Dong Village, Rongjiang County is located in the center of the three provinces of Hunan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. Liping County, Congjiang County in the east, Lei Shan County, San Du County on the west border, Jian He County in the north, and Li Bo County in the south the county has covered an area of 3,316 square kilometers since ancient times. Rongjiang has "Southeast Guizhou Province Key," the first area of Miao Xinjiang, Zaidang Dong Village is in Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province, 26 kilometers away from the county seat. The village has 265 households and 1277 people, all of whom are members of the Dong ethnic group. The Dong people living here belong to one of the six branches of the Dong people in Rongjiang. The Dong buildings here are also very distinctive, among which the "Gan lan" building embodies the traditional architectural style of the Dong people. There is a Gu tower of the Dong ethnic group in the village. It was built during the reign of Emperor Qian Long of the Qing Dynasty. It is grand in appearance and unique in shape (Government of Southeast Guizhou, n.d.).

The Miao, Dong, Han, Shui, Yao, Zhuang, Buyi, and Tujia nationalities live in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture. For a long time, the Miao and Dong ethnic groups, as the main body of a multi-ethnic friendly and harmonious social form, have laid the groundwork for ethnic art's prosperity. Natural landscapes represented by terraces, mountains, and hot springs; folk skills represented by batik, silver jewelry, and paper cutting; characteristic buildings represented by Gu towers and stilted buildings; delicious dishes represented by fish in sour soup and glutinous rice; and folk music represented by the Flying Song of the Miao ethnic group and the Grand Song of the Dong ethnic group jointly build a colorful cultural environment in southeast Guizhou.

Take folk music as an example. There are four kinds of folk music that are rated as national intangible cultural heritage. They are: "the grand song of the Dong ethnic group" and "the pipa song of the Dong ethnic group," popular in Congjiang County, Liping County, and Rongjiang County; "the lusheng music of the Miao people with awn popular in Danzhai County; and "the miao multi-voice folk song" and "the miao popular in Jianhe, Taijiang, and Leishan counties. Moreover, people of all ethnic groups are also happy to sing their own songs in their daily lives. For example, the Han people living in Danzhai, Jinping, and Shibing counties sing folk songs and dittys, while those in Sansui County sing ritual songs. Miao people in Kaili City and the counties of Danzhai, Majiang, Leishan, Jianhe, Taijiang, Jinping Shibing, Shantou, Zhenyuan, and Huangping can sing the "flying song" and the "toasting song," while Shui people in Leishan County can sing "Xuji," a monophonic song (Chinese Folk Song Integration Editorial Committee, 1995).

According to the song's style, function, singing age, content, singing style, and folk customs, the Grand Song has been classified by various scholars in different ways. The classification is from Zhang Zhongxiao (2010).



1) Ka Lau: "Ka" is "Ge," and "Lau" can be translated as "Da." Therefore, "Da Ge" is the literal translation inversion of "Ga Lao."

2) Ka So means "sound song" in Chinese. "So" means sound, breath, and voice. The main purpose of this kind of song is to show off the beauty of the tune and the sound of the chorus.

3) Ka Tan Lau: Translated into Chinese as "narrative song." According to the different forms of singing and the different structural characteristics and narration of the lyrics, there are two kinds: Ga Jin and Ga Jie Mu.

4) Ka Lak Wun: Translated into Chinese as "Children's Song," this refers to a multi-part song performed by a children's chorus.

5) Je: The Chinese translation of "Cai Tang song," that is, the folk collective etiquette activity of "singing and dancing in the right places."

6) Ka Saek Kwan: "Saek" is "blocking," "trapped" is "road," so the Chinese translation is "Road Blocking." The Chinese pronunciation is "Lan Lu." Lan Lu Song is a cluster exchange activity in which the main team greets visitors at the village gate at the intersection according to the etiquette of the song sung.

Xiaoyin, (2007). stated in his thesis, "Dong Ethnic Group Da Ge: Ritual and Poetic Imagination of Ethnic Groups in the Perspective of Aesthetic Anthropology," that, from the perspective of anthropology, this way of performing music has a strong color of ritualization. The ritual spirit of Da Ge serves the function of uniting ethnic groups and integrating social culture in Dong village communities. It is also the process of socialization through aesthetic education in the growing process of Dong Village children from the standpoint of cultural inheritance. In the Dong culture, the Da Ge ceremony has the power to transcend concrete, realistic demands and elevate people to a poetic and aesthetic clarity of pure selflessness. This wonderful work of sound art shows the Dong people's extraordinary imagination and creative ability with sound.

Chen's, (2007) master's thesis is "Research on the Contemporary Communication Mode of Guizhou Dong's Da Ge." Based on some methods and theories of communication, combined with the results of a field investigation and its social background, the paper conducts an in-depth study on the communication network of Dong's Da Ge, namely, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and mass communication, by means of the table method and the graphic method.

3. Method

The researcher chose the Southeast Guizhou Province as the research area for the Grand Song of Dong ethnic group and used qualitative research methods. Since this area is the birthplace of Grand Song, the researcher chose key informants in the area as research clues. Therefore, the study is conducted according to the following steps:

3.1 Research site

Located in the southeast of Guizhou Province, China, the Xiaohuang Dong Village of Congjiang County, the Zaidang Dong Village of Rongjiang County, and the Zhaoxing Dong Village of Liping County.

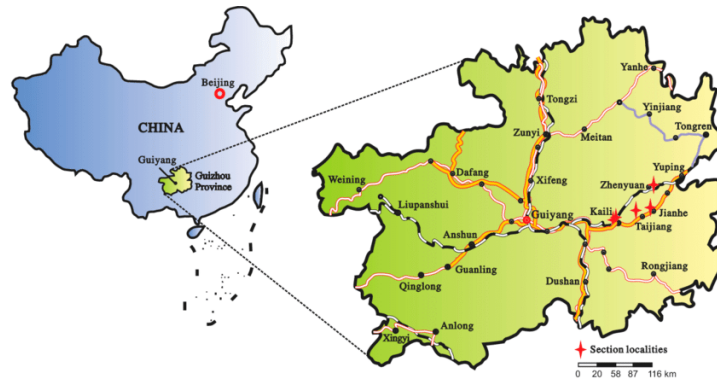


Figure 1: Map of Guizhou Province, China.

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-China-left-showing-location-of-Guizhou-Province-and-right-locations-of-the_fig8_305215792.

3.2 Key informants

According to the research objectives, the researcher selected three groups of people to interview in the field. They are key informants, casual informants, and general informants. The following selected criteria and selected personnel will be presented. The criteria for selecting key informants are:

- 1) He or she was a local, born and raised in Dong Village.
- 2) He or she knows the culture and development of the Grand Song.
- 3) He or she is the Grand Song's national representative heir of national intangible cultural heritage projects announced by China's Ministry of Culture.
- 4) He or she is older and has many years of experience in teaching the Grand Song.

Based on the above selection criteria, three key informants were selected, including Ms. Pan Sa Yinhua, Mr. Jia Fuying from Xiaohuang Dong Village, and Ms. Hu Guanmei from Zaidang Dong Village. (See Figs. 2–4.)



Figure 2: Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage: Ms. Pan Sa Yinhua.

Source: Cao Hang, (2022)



Figure 3: Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage: Mr. Jia Fuying.

Source: Cao Hang, (2022)



Figure 4: Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage: Ms. Hu Guanmei

Source: Cao Hang, (2022)

4. Results

The Grand Song itself has a vast and comprehensive "library" of songs reflecting levels of technical difficulty and different cultural depths, which provides clearly targeted material for step-by-step teaching (Shunqing, 2011). In the long missionary process, the singers have formed a set of stable singing teaching modes that are centered on word-of-mouth transmission and practical interaction and provide the possibility for everyone in the community to effectively master and sing songs. In the Gu Tower duet, the chorus interacted. Skills, in the form of invisible and intentional improvement, such as Grand Song, are passed down in such an environment. In 2006, Grand Song was included in the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list. In 2009, Grand Song was listed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The judges of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage believe that the Grand Song is "the voice of a nation and a human culture." In the list of 4 batches of representative inheritors of national intangible cultural heritage projects published by the Ministry of Culture, there are 6 national representative inheritors of Grand Song. They are Wu Pinxian, Wu Guangzu, Qin Meihao, Wu Renhe, Pan Sa Yinhua, and Hu Gua. The Dong

people affectionately call them "Song Masters." This is a respectful title for a skilled singer. Song masters have a high reputation in the folk villages of the Dong ethnic group. Besides learning to sing from song masters, people will entertain them at birth, marriage, birthday celebrations, and funerals. Because the song masters are knowledgeable and intelligent, inviting them to attend social gatherings and ceremonies will add luster to the host family or even the whole village. In addition, song masters act as teachers in ethnic groups and teach students to sing the Grand Song through "oral instruction." Some well-known singers are chosen by the villagers and then named glorious inheritors by the government (CICHDM, 2018). The transmission of the Grand Song has evolved from "transmission within the family" and "transmission from the elders" to the coexistence of "transmission with school" today. However, no matter what changes have taken place in the inheritance mode of the Grand Song, the inheritance of the Grand Song cannot be separated from the participation of "song masters." (Yonghua & Hongyan, 2013) "Song master" is the connection and bridge that connects the Grand Song to the present day. To understand the inheritance and connotation of the Grand Song, it is necessary to understand each link of the "song master" teaching singing, the way of thinking used by the "song master," the aesthetic concept of the "song master" mastering the chorus voice, and to investigate.

There is a song circulating in the Dong ethnic area: "Trees have roots; springs have sources; ancient things have music; Han people have written history; Dong people have no written language but have disseminated it orally." In the specific application of Grand Song, it has the function of "civilizing customs" and "inheriting deeds." The transmission mode of "word-of-mouth" in Dong ethnic groups replaces words and documents to inherit Dong's history, culture, and stories. The essence of the Grand Song includes the recording and appraisal of life experience, ethics, and an ethnic legacy passed down through generations of Dong people, which is one of the primary reasons why the Dong cannot remain without it.



Figure 5: Children in Xiaohuang village with the Song master in summer.

Source: Pan Yingxiang, (2022)

Figure 5: In summer, when the temperature is high, the clothes are made of thinner materials. The children's clothes are mainly white, and the singers' clothes are mainly dark. The elderly person in the picture is Ms. Pan Sa Yinhu, an intangible cultural heritage inheritor. From the looks of all the people, this corner of the room was full of joy. Most of the Dong ethnic communities are in remote mountains and rivers; before the founding of modern China, communication with the outside world was extremely difficult, both in terms of transportation and network. Therefore, "singing behavior," as a necessary life skill for everyone in the ethnic group, is valued by people: children here immerse themselves in the singing environment created by their parents and elders in the village from the beginning of singing. In addition, from the beginning of speaking, children are required to follow the village's highly respected "song master" to systematically learn Dong songs. Students will also start in beginner classes and move on to different classes as they grow older. Therefore, although there is no school in the Dong village, the "singing class" of the Dong people is equivalent to the role of the "student group." The "song master" of the Dong people assumes the responsibility of teaching everyone and thus acts as a teacher. In this way, students learn not only singing skills but also, more importantly, the wisdom of the Dong ethnic group, which is carried in songs. They are transferring the knowledge via the "grand song" for the example as follows: In primitive society, humans' cognitive ability and transformation ability toward nature are limited, so people are full of awe for all kinds of mysterious forms and natural phenomena in nature. Dong people use concrete language

to describe the unknown with awe in their hearts. For example, the Dong ethnic group's work is "Zu Gong Shang He," which means "ancestors looking for a place to live." It seems to "clearly" describe the migration process of *our ancestors* (Guihua & Guanghua, 2015).

*The ancestors are bitter,
And fled the world with his family,
In search of fields and fields,
Search the ends of the earth;
Up to the Banyan River there is no shelter,
Even Jiubao could not settle down;
The Sitang is a good place.
Thousands of acres of fertile land water,
Dragon hui Baodian people auspicious,
The seas run dry and the rocks crumble
We're not going anywhere
Let's make it this place*

The song describes in detail why a new home should be explored and how fields and water should be found. The reason why the ancestors of Dong Village finally chose Sitang as their home is that there are excellent fields and water sources nearby. Through the cordial descriptions of people and events, the joy of finding a new home for the ancestors is reflected, as is the gratitude and love of the people for their ancestors. In addition to describing the historical origin of the ethnic group, the theme of describing, understanding, and transforming nature is also one of the important contents of Grand Song. Some scholars have vividly called the Grand Song "the culture of cicada sound" (Dingguo & Minwen, 2005). Thus, Dong people gain enlightenment from "cicadas": in the widely circulated "Cicada's Song," people imitate cicadas' sounds, trying to understand the nature of the insects, gradually opening the art of the unknown, thus forming a lot of imitations of the sounds of nature, for example, "Small Sheep", "Little Squirrel", "Frog Songs", and so on. The music uses many onomatopoeia words to imitate the sounds of animals. By using this method, children can quickly recognize the characteristics of animals and learn some life philosophy behind the behavior of animals through the stories described in the songs. Take the

*lyrics of the ant song:
Little ant, little ant
A carry, can not carry
They carried it as fast as flying
Even lofty mountains can move when the hearts of all are united
Good idea, little ant
The heart can put all kinds of difficulties
Drums beat for victory (Yong, 2003)*

At first glance, the song is about ant behavior, but more importantly, the researcher uses anthropomorphic figures of speech to describe the group behavior of ants as "uniting as one, united struggle." Under the educational concept of "teaching through entertainment," the Dong people use the form of the grand song as the medium to skillfully combine the life truth with songs, leading children not only to know nature but also to cultivate the ecological concept of loving and protecting nature. Educate people to love the land on which they live, cherish the achievements of their ancestors' struggles, and correctly face the hard-won life today.

5. Conclusion

Following a description of the Grand Song of Dong ethnic group's social function and historical significance in Southeast Guizhou, China, the researcher has learned that: The Dong people have formed an indissoluble bond with Grand Song since the day they were born. The alternation of cold and heat in nature symbolizes the endless life of the Dong people. The simplicity and tranquility of the buildings show the diligence and sincerity of the Dong people, while the harmony and melodies of Grand Song have an influence on the native accent and feelings of the Dong people. On the one hand, singing provides them with education, entertainment, socialization, and personality development. Moreover, the Grand Song, with its important academic value, unique artistic value,

elegant spread, and green ecological economic value, has become a symbol of the integration of ethnic culture. Grand Song is the treasure of the Dong people, and the Dong people are the guardians of Grand Song. With the increasing prosperity of the tourism industry, the government has built a bridge for the people of Dong Township to communicate with travelers. The Grand Song has attracted attention from all over the world. They also promoted communication among a plurality of ethnic groups and brought a new economic growth point to Dong Township.

6. Discussion

Firstly, in terms of "development," the researcher put forward a new name and set of characteristics after sorting out the ways that scholars divide the period, especially the "revival stage" of Grand Song in the new era. Secondly, in terms of "classification," after summarizing the text subjects of about 300 pieces of music, the researcher made a comprehensive analysis together with previous research results and opinions from fieldwork interviews, examined the classification method of the Grand Song, and analyzed the characteristics of each type.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, especially in the context of the implementation of "nine-year compulsory education," schools were set up in the communities of the Dong ethnic group, and children of school age began to receive education under the unified leadership of the state. The Grand Song was arranged in the Second Classroom as a characteristic course, and song masters were hired as teachers. It found a happy medium between "popularizing advanced scientific knowledge" and "passing on excellent national culture." Driven by the policy of "integrated development of urban and rural areas," most villages have carried out cultural tourism projects based on grand song, giving full play to the value of grand song.

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