

Field research on *Dong Ka Lau*: A case study of **Dong villages** in Liping County

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Abstract | As an artistic and cultural phenomenon, *Dong Ka Lau* (Dong Chorus) ontology and its associated social, cultural and natural environment have begun to concern many experts and scholars at home and abroad, as well as local governments. On the basis of a field survey, this paper makes an investigation as to whether *Dong Ka Lau* will continue to manifest Dong minority people's aesthetic consciousness and pursuits amid today's rapidly developing local tourism economy. In addition, the influence on contemporary young people is also of great concern. The study found that commercial performance of *Dong Ka Lau* heritage in some Dong villages has lost its original cultural significance, while in other villages it has been a vital and inspirational tourism product, of which forms and cultural essence can still exist over a prolonged period of time. This research asserts that cultural ecological self-sustainability and identity can be strengthened and nourished by both external regulations on cultural displays as well as the endogenous power of ethnic minority villages.

Keywords | *Dong Ka Lau*, External regulations, Endogenous power, Participation, *Zhaoxing*.

Resumo | Como um fenómeno artístico e cultural, a ontologia de *Dong Ka Lau* (Refrão Dong) e o seu ambiente social, cultural e natural associado começaram a preocupar muitos especialistas e estudiosos nacionais e estrangeiros, bem como os governos locais. Com base numa pesquisa de campo, este trabalho de investigação tem por objetivo saber se *Dong Ka Lau* irá continuar a manifestar consciência estética pelos grupos minoritários Dong, num período de rápido desenvolvimento da economia do turismo local. Além disso, a influência sobre os jovens contemporâneos também é de grande preocupação. O estudo constatou que o desempenho comercial do património *Dong Ka Lau*, em algumas aldeias Dong, perdeu o seu significado cultural original, enquanto noutras aldeias, tem sido um produto turístico vital e inspirador, em que as formas e a essência cultural podem, ainda, existir durante um prolongado período de tempo. Esta pesquisa afirma que a identidade e a auto-sustentabilidade cultural e ecológica podem ser fortalecidas e 'alimentadas', quer pelos regulamentos externos sobre manifestações culturais, bem como pelo poder endógeno das aldeias de minorias étnicas.

Palavras-chave | *Dong Ka Lau*, Regulamentações externas, Força endógena, Participação, *Zhaoxing*.

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1. Research background

Experts and scholars at home and abroad have made some field investigations and published countless papers on the Dong Chorus. *50-year studies on the Dong Chorus*, which was issued under the general editorship of Professor Zhang Zhongxiao, traces scholars' unwearied footprints into the exploration of *Dong Ka Lau* over many years. As Zhang stated, "the multi-tone choral art not only belongs to Dong communities, also the art treasure of the Chinese nation, as well as a precious cultural wealth of all mankind" (Zhang, 2003, p. 36). The Australian researcher Dr. Ying Qianlei studied Dong language and songs by staying with the residents of *Sanlong village*, *Yongcong* township over the course of approximately one year. As one of the performers, she took part in the cultural art festival's performance, and her research has exerted an important influence on the international stage. From the perspective of visual anthropology, Shanlan argued, "Dong Chorus widely won the attention of the society from all walks of life after stage packaging as artwork by the film and television media to the market in great quantities. Tourism is booming in the show and literary work" (Shanlan, 2012, p. 25). Maoping put forward to "build culture industrial institutions and locate the songs into the classroom, train creative professionals and big song celebrities" (Maoping, 2006, pp. 77-78). Research papers on Dong songs expound its historical origin, distribution status, music forms, cultural characteristics, tourism value and social function.

As an artistic and cultural phenomenon, *Dong Ka Lau* ontology and its associated social, cultural and natural environment have concerned many experts and scholars at home and abroad, as well as local governments. In 2005, Dong songs were declared to be part of the list of the first Chinese state-level human intangible cultural heritage representative work list. Furthermore, 2009 witnessed the declaration and inclusion of Dong Chorus on United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO)'s world human intangible cultural heritage representative work list.

The field investigation on such a project would produce little meaning if we fell into a rote investigation according to the outline listed in *The Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Census Manual*. Therefore, given its domestic and international concern, the focus will be on the possible places, the proper situations and the content, as well as whether Dong songs could be something indispensable in people's cultural life amid today's rapidly developing social economy. Its influence on contemporary young people is also one of the main contents of our field work research.

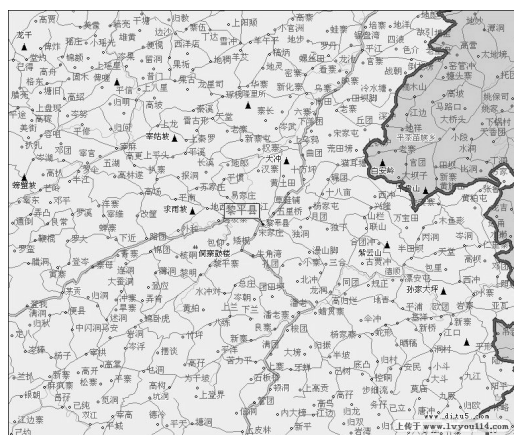
2. Research and methods

This research mainly adopts anthropological methodology to make a survey of Dong songs in Dong villages. The specifics are as follows: (i) literature review of government documents and related literature; (ii) field observations at Dong villages in 2010, including community observation of local customs; (iii) interviews held in local language according to the different needs of different objects selected, and the design of different interview outlines. Open-ended interviews are to obtain further information about Dong songs' protection and inheritance; (iv) an ethnographic study including field work and ethnographic descriptions.

3. Field work results

3.1. Background information

Located in the east of Southeastern Guizhou province, China, Liping County features many typical Dong communities, including Long'er township,



Source: <http://www.lvyou114.com/>

Figure 1 | Map of Liping County.

with several villages such as Shangdiping village, Tangmian village, Long'er village, and Meigeng village (Figure 1). Zhaoxing village, Jitang villages, and Cen village are in Zhaoxing township; and the towns of Yongcong, Shuangjiang, Koujiang and Shuikou are all located in southern Guizhou province, which borders the Guangxi province and Congjiang County. They are all Dong villages along the Duliujiang river, which is the transition area from the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau to the Guangxi hilly area, with its lowest elevation of 134 meters at Shuikou river exit in the Guizhou area.

The low amount of trade and traffic in this area has resulted in Dong people's lack of contact with the outside. As the concept of economic development has changed people's mindsets, people no longer take the time to visit with other villages for drinking and singing, rather, they ponder about ideas for how to earn money. 2005 saw rapid economic development with the opening of oil pipelines, which changed Dong people's ideas that their leisure Dong songs, Dong plays, as well as stories are no longer just their own concerns; instead they became increasingly concerned with how to make money with these traditions rather than limiting their use to visits to other villages for drinking and singing. The year 2007 saw the beginning of construction on the Xia-Rong (Xiamen and Chengdu) Expressway at the

section from Shuikou to Duyun and measurements for the new Gui-Guang rapid railway (Guiyang to Guangzhou). Therefore, the Liping County towns of Shuikou, Zhaoxing, and Shuangjiang will become a major transit area for both a major expressway and rapid railway. These Dong villages will become in turn economic zones in the Pan-Pearl River Delta, or 'Pearl River Delta' backyard, which will be a great support for the economic development of these areas.

3.2. The current status of Dong Ka Lau

Located on the boundary between the Yangtze River and the Pearl River, with several low mountains staggered across, the Dong communities of Guizhou are principally located near water. These communities are usually situated in open valleys with flat dams, or on low mountains and hills. Such geographical characteristics and administrative boundaries have left Dong people a large development space for their own culture, allowing the preservation of independent Dong culture and different styles of folk songs. Dong song is a representative of the important cultural tradition (Figure 2).

Dong songs are spread among Dong people in their daily life. There are a large number of local proverbs, such as 'without rice there is hunger; without songs there is trouble'. The Dong area is a typical rice farming area, in which the daily living arrangements



Source: Own authorship.

Figure 2 | Antiphonal singing at Drum Tower.

are closely linked with the growing season of rice. Therefore this link has formed a set of traditional life ethos and folk customs, and a variety of folk activities related to Dong songs have been developed against the backdrop of rice-growing culture.

Dong songs are sung mainly in the idle-season as a lifestyle, mode of communication, form of entertainment and way of resting (Figure 3). In the yearly traditional festivals and etiquette, Dong song heritage and performance is the most necessary and common custom. With farming rice as a representation of work for every household in spring, summer and autumn harvest, the performance of Dong songs as a representative of the rest of idle time, the Dong people’s lives are organized around a set of production/life, work/rest, and busy/idle social life rhythms. In Dong communities farming work is usually primitively done at every family throughout the crops growing and harvest time, but cultural activities are habitually carried out between neighbour villages for the rest of the season, usually in winter.

The southern villages of Liping are the centre of popularity for Dong songs. We were informed from the village chief at Shangdiping that *Chiye* (antiphonal singing) is held on the 8th of the lunar new year as a memorial ceremony for Sax (who is regarded as the original great grandmother god of Dong people) in Shangdiping, where this culture has been preserved well. In the daytime, *Chiye* is the traditional ceremony for Sax, while at night there are Grand songs. Among the singers at Shangdiping, Yang Liuge and Gong Xiaodan always offer their help to train young people in Dong songs. It is required that the young families in each household should attend the memorial ceremony for Sax on the 8th of the lunar new year. Only then would they be allowed to go out to work in the cities. In the eyes of the village people, only after paying tribute to the Sax for the blessing, they could begin to earn money. Here, the songs are mostly ancient ones for ‘offering to Sax’, and its lyrics express praise to Sax for her greatness and ask her blessing for the whole village by the single male or female singing with smooth emotion, without features of



Source: Own authorship.

Figure 3 | Dong chorus singers.

warm and humorous antiphonal singing. It is just on the 8th that the villagers sing songs, at ordinary times they do not. In the Liujia area the other villages next to Shangdiping, people don’t practice any more, even on festivals, with the exception of the old. According to our survey, at Tangmian village only three people can sing Dong songs. At present these three people do not have any students. The same situation is prevalent in many other villages.

But, at Long’e High School, a teacher named Luo Deming has introduced Dong songs into the classroom, allowing students to have the opportunity to once again study the songs. In 2005, they participated in a Dong song competition in Zhaoxing (Figure 4) and won first prize. Even so, students’ study of Dong songs is primarily for performance with simple melody and content, and the students are not clear on what the songs mean, nothing of Dong songs’ profound cultural connotations is explained to them. Additionally the primitive simplicity of the musical form must be seen as a kind of important tourism resources of modern society.

The Dong songs at Gubang in Long’e differ from



Source: <http://www.likefar.com/>

Figure 4 | Map of Zhaoxing, Liping County.

the other places with its multi-part harmony, tones and different sounds. The songs of Gubang are practiced only in the local village. However in the neighbouring Shuikou town where we interviewed the local people, we were told that no Dong songs were practiced among the villagers except the elder.

These days, ethnic cultural tourism has gradually become the main industry in Zhaoxing, the culture centre of Liudong area. According to the Chinese Tourism Bureau, each year more than 600,000 visitors pass by Zhaoxing, and consolidated revenue for tourism has been more than 2,000,000 RMB (*Rénmínbì*). Here there are six song teams, in which singers practice songs in the evening after work. At first sight, there seems to be a lively tradition of Dong songs here, where the students receive and practice Dong songs. However the purpose for that is clear: they sing to earn money. They will not sing under the drum tower if there are no visitors, not even during the Chinese New Year festival. But if there are visitors, they will lay out a performance for 600 to 800 RMB. The payment to small number of people is surely a result of making of Dong songs a touristic product. The village committees attempt to revive the traditions by encouraging massive community participation, using profit sharing schemes instead of bonuses to tie the whole villagers.

At Jitang, near Zhaoxing, on New Year's Day or other festivals, singing Grand songs during *Yueye* has been a common practice. *Yueye* involves many social customs in which young men and women from one village would pay visits to another village, during which they will play *lusheng* (a bamboo mouth organ), sing in antiphonal style and do other activities. Now, tourists to Zhaoxing are simply immersed in the village landscape instead of the songs which they had already seen and heard in other nearby villages; therefore, there are no songs performed here. According to the survey, traditions are better conserved in villages such as Huanggang, Tianping, Kengdong, Sanlong, Zhuping, Yandong, Tongguan, where children are taught Dong songs, which are practiced on festivals, marriages or other celebratory

ceremonies. They can be proud of singing Dong songs, which have become nourishment for their mind and, whose perfect forms and cultural essence can still continue here.

4. Discussion

The current situation of Dong songs in the region is the result of the cultural ecological environment in conformity with natural ecological environment. In this society undergoing rapid economic development, the survival prospects for Dong songs are not good even though there are numerous people practicing Dong songs. During our field work, we did not hear the old teaching children their songs, nor any *Yueye* between villages, rather people talking about how to seek their fortune. Even in Zhaoxing, a national cultural tourism village and Tangan, an ecological museum, or even in Huanggang and Sizai, where there are good male singers, the hot topics were on how to participate in construction projects to earn more money, or to make preparations for economic production. Actually the local people should be aware that the highly ornamental value and participatory of Dong songs which obviously can become a public tourism culture resources. According to (Honggang & Meirong 2004, p. 137),

Curiosity and the pursuit of 'truth' make ethnic songs and dances far more participatory activities, thus prolonging the visitors staying time. Tourists would succeed in introducing unceasingly their unexpected discovery into tourism market, promoting the development of remote villages.

Dong Ka Lau is a kind of folk singing tradition, penetrating into all details of Dong people's lives and all kinds of folk customs, but at the Dong villages, singing grand songs could meet the need of the public cultural psychology. It should be developed into some entertainment activities participated by visitors

to achieve dual goals: the continuation of ethnic Dong songs and commercial success development of cultural products.

In 2010 to protect, extend, and carry forward this outstanding human cultural heritage and to make good use of the global cultural brand, Liping County Government specifically formulated the *Protection Act for Dong Songs*, which was presented in the fourth Session of the 15th National People's Congress of Liping County in May 2010. According to Article 14 of the act, all relevant departments should actively establish incentive mechanism for Dong songs protection, development, expansion and publicity. All members of society should cultivate consciousness for the protection, inheritance and learning of Dong songs. This includes building a good publicity atmosphere in the whole of society that includes the respect of Dong songs, customs and traditional villages.

In 2011, the Guizhou provincial Cultural Bureau emphasized humanism, the principle of the protection of basic public cultural rights and interests, relying on the Dong people for protection work. Overall, a methodical understanding of the protection, inheritance, and passing down of Dong songs is a long-term and arduous task. It would take five years or more to perform work such as rescuing Dong songs traditional repertoire, tuning and speeding up the cultivation of inheritance people; carrying out the plans of Dong songs into primary and secondary schools; building an incentive mechanism for the grand songs' inheritance and development; and elaborately building a 'house' (Guizhou Dong songs heritage museum), 'room' (chamber for learning Dong songs in villages), and 'venue' (for Dong songs traditional performances and contests) (Cultural Affairs Bureau of Guizhou Province, 2010).

The above regulations and exogenous forces aim to promote Dong songs' central role in society, so as to strengthen local villagers' culture pride and cultural identity, as well as Dong village culture's endogenous power; that is, the protection preservation of local culture.

Actually the effects by government to protect and exploit the national cultural tourism resources including grand songs are still in an experimental stage, needing legislative work strengthened. The local government should play a role of administrative protection, establishing and perfecting laws, regulations and coordination mechanism to keep the original ethnic characteristics. The essence of sustainable tourism development of Dong Chorus is to keep the tourists increasing cultural identification with the cultural heritage product and its authenticity. After all, tourism for ethnic songs can be a good alternative for the less-developed Dong communities to alleviate poverty.

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