



Ethnomusicological Perspectives on Chinese Liu Dong Songs of the Dong Nian Festival

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Abstract

Background and Aims: The Dong Nian Festival, celebrated annually by the Dong ethnic group in Zhaoxing Village, Guizhou Province, is a culturally significant event that showcases the community's musical heritage, particularly through Liu Dong songs. This study aims to investigate Chinese Liu Dong songs performed during the Dong Nian Festival through an ethnomusicological approach.

Methodology: Employing a qualitative ethnomusicological approach, fieldwork was conducted during the 2023–2024 Dong Nian Festival in Zhaoxing Village. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine informants, participant observation, and audiovisual documentation. Analysis focused on song development, performance formats, identity expression, and preservation strategies.

Results: Liu Dong's songs reflect three historical phases: Origin, Maturity, and Steady Development, each linked to evolving cultural contexts. Performance formats include traditional choruses, competitive events, and educational rehearsals, all contributing uniquely to cultural transmission and community cohesion. The songs articulate themes of romantic longing, ancestral reverence, and gender harmony, conveyed through falsetto singing and pipa accompaniment. Preservation efforts spanning school curricula, youth workshops, and digital platforms highlight opportunities and tensions between performative and essentialist authenticity.

Conclusion: Liu Dong's songs are essential to preserving Dong ethnic identity and enabling intergenerational cultural dialogue. Ethnomusicological analysis reveals their enduring relevance and potential as a model for sustainable intangible heritage preservation in rapidly changing societies.

Keywords: Liu Dong Songs; Dong Nian Festival; Ethnomusicology; Cultural Preservation; Intergenerational Transmission





Introduction

The Dong Nian Festival is one of the most vibrant and culturally symbolic celebrations held by the Dong ethnic community in southern China, particularly in Zhaoxing Village, Guizhou Province. Occurring annually at the end of the agricultural year, the festival marks a time of renewal, gratitude, and spiritual reconnection (Goshu & Woldemariam, 2024; Li, 2024). While rooted in agrarian and ritual cycles, the festival is distinguished by its communal musical traditions, especially the Liu Dong songs that convey shared cultural memory and ethnic cohesion. Central to this experience are the Chinese Liu Dong songs, a traditional form of folk singing that combines poetic storytelling, falsetto vocal style, and pipa instrumental accompaniment. These songs have been passed down orally through generations and are performed in various contexts, from intimate gatherings to large-scale public celebrations (Ping et al., 2024; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018; Tang & Sornyai, 2023). Their prominence within the Dong Nian Festival situates them as dynamic embodiments of Dong social values and identity performance.

Despite the rich cultural value of Liu Dong songs, they are increasingly at risk in the face of rapid modernization, urban migration, and the homogenization of cultural expression. Younger generations, influenced by global pop culture and modern education systems, are less interested in traditional forms like Liu Dong songs. Furthermore, tourism and commercial performance have shifted the context of these songs from authentic communal settings to staged displays, sometimes altering their original meanings and performance practices (Skandalis et al., 2024; Wang, 2025; Yao et al., 2023). Existing research has explored the musical structure and preservation efforts of Liu Dong's songs. However, few studies have critically examined how they continue to reflect lived cultural identity in contemporary contexts. As a result, there is a growing concern that the deeper ethnocultural meanings embedded in Liu Dong songs, such as their connections to seasonal rituals, ancestral worship, and gendered communication, may be diluted or lost (Liu & Song, 2025; Ping et al., 2024). These challenges call for a more nuanced, culturally sensitive investigation into how Liu Dong songs continue to serve as a living form of identity among the Dong people, especially during significant events like the Dong Nian Festival.

This study aims to investigate Chinese Liu Dong songs performed during the Dong Nian Festival through an ethnomusicological approach. Ethnomusicology, which examines music within its cultural and social contexts, provides a valuable framework for exploring the sound and form of these traditional expressions and their function, meaning, and evolution. Such a perspective is particularly appropriate in this case, as it enables a holistic understanding of how vocal traditions mediate the Dong people's relationship to ritual, space, ancestry, and cultural continuity. The research focuses on how the performances unfold during the festival, what themes are conveyed, how performers and audiences interpret them, and how they articulate and sustain the cultural





identity of the Dong ethnic community. By examining vocal styles, lyrical content, performance settings, and modes of transmission, the study seeks to understand how music is embedded in lived experience and communal memory (He et al., 2025; Li & Bhengsri, 2024; Li & Choatchamrat, 2024; Liu et al., 2024). It also considers how these practices respond to contemporary shifts through integration in education and dissemination via digital platforms, while preserving their authenticity. The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural sustainability, intangible heritage preservation, and the role of music in shaping collective identity. By situating these vocal traditions within the context of the Dong Nian Festival, the study highlights the interplay between continuity and innovation, showing how musical performance serves as entertainment and a medium through which values are affirmed, relationships negotiated, and history remembered. Furthermore, the findings may offer insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners safeguarding minority traditions in rapidly changing societies (Palazzolo, 2024; Nouman, 2020; Van der, 2018). This study addresses the research question: How do Chinese Liu Dong songs performed during the Dong Nian Festival reflect the cultural identity of the Dong ethnic community from an ethnomusicological perspective?

Literature Review

Understanding Liu Dong songs within the context of the Dong Nian Festival requires a multidimensional approach, drawing from musicology, cultural anthropology, and heritage studies. Scholarly research can be organized thematically into three major areas: performance practice, transmission and intergenerational learning, and modernization and cultural transformation.

1. Performance Practice

Studies on performance practice have primarily focused on the structural and stylistic dimensions of Liu Dong songs. These works highlight their falsetto vocal technique, antiphonal singing, and the pipa's role in providing rhythmic and melodic continuity (Guo & Karin, 2024; Peiheng & Kaewbucha, 2025). Researchers interpret the songs as poetic expressions of nature, kinship, and Dong cosmology, often performed in communal settings with symbolic significance. However, most of these analyses center on the musical product rather than the interactive, embodied act of performance during festivals, ceremonies, or rehearsals.

2. Transmission and Intergenerational Learning

Transmission and intergenerational learning form another core focus in existing literature. Scholars have documented how Liu Dong songs have transitioned from informal courtship singing to structured performances in schools and local competitions (Prakobboon, 2022). These works





often highlight how elders serve as cultural transmitters and how the Dong Nian Festival functions as a social platform for intergenerational exchange. However, little attention is given to the nuanced ways performers emotionally engage with the songs, or how younger generations experience this learning process through embodied participation.

3. Modernization and Cultural Transformation

Modernization and cultural transformation have been extensively addressed in recent studies, especially in light of globalization, tourism, and digital media (Liu, 2024; Lovell & Hitchmough, 2019; Norton & Matsumoto, 2018). Scholars have expressed concerns over the commodification and staged reproduction of Liu Dong songs, which may dilute their ritual meanings. Others note that social media platforms and school curricula have enabled wider access and audience engagement. While these works provide valuable insight into shifting contexts, they often neglect how community members negotiate these changes at the local level and preserve meaning through performance rituals.

4. Contribution of the Present Study

This study builds on the aforementioned scholarship but diverges by adopting an ethnomusicological approach that prioritizes lived experience and contextual interpretation. Rather than analyzing Liu Dong songs solely as sonic artifacts or historical texts, this research focuses on their role in articulating cultural identity through real-time performance during the Dong Nian Festival. Drawing on performance theory and cultural identity frameworks (Brackett, 2023; Sandberg-Jurström, 2022; Thornton, 2021), the study explores how the songs act as a dialogic space where tradition, emotion, and social meaning converge. Additionally, it incorporates heritage sustainability perspectives to examine how authenticity is maintained amid adaptation. By combining participant observation and community interviews, this research offers a more embodied and socially grounded understanding of Liu Dong songs as evolving cultural practice.

Research Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an ethnomusicological perspective to investigate how Liu Dong songs performed during the Dong Nian Festival reflect the cultural identity of the Dong ethnic community. As such, it is particularly suited to exploring traditional music embedded within community rituals, such as the Dong Nian Festival. Scholars such as Guo (2024), Lama and Sherpa (2022), and Zhou et al. (2024) have emphasized that examining music in situ reveals how it functions as a living tradition, carrying meanings shaped by history, belief, and identity.

As shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework is built around the relationship between the Dong Nian Festival and Liu Dong songs, which are examined through four interrelated lenses: 1) Historical Background, 2) Performance Contexts, 3) Transmission Practices, and 4) Cultural



Identity. These dimensions are interpreted through an ethnomusicological perspective, connecting musical practice with the sociocultural processes that sustain it.

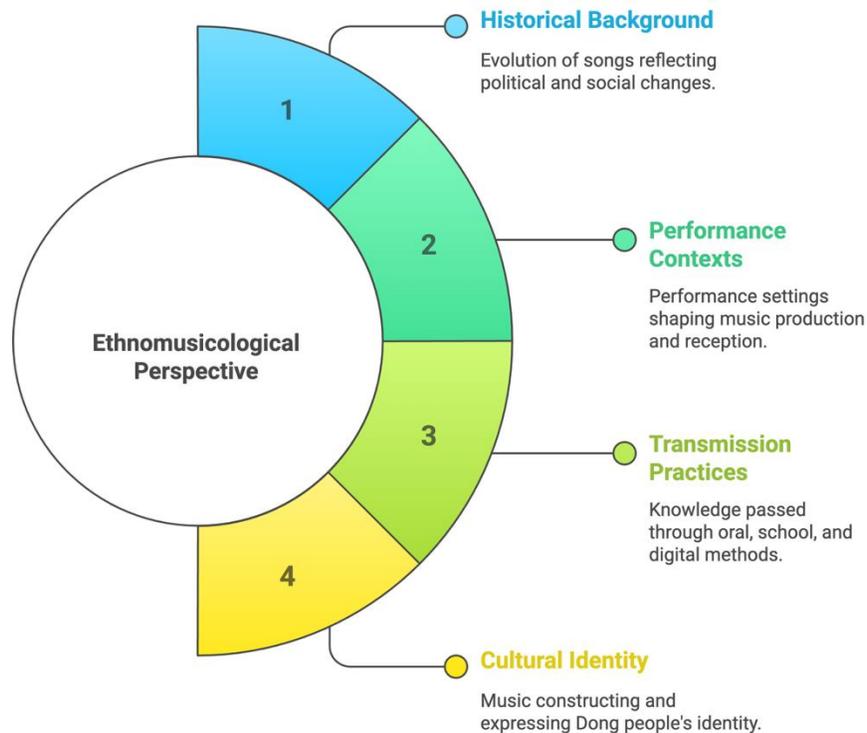


Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

The research conceptual framework integrates four key dimensions to understand how Liu Dong songs performed during the Dong Nian Festival reflect Dong cultural identity. First, the historical background traces the evolution of the songs from traditional courtship rituals to contemporary expressions, revealing how they adapt across time and political contexts. Second, performance contexts ranging from informal gatherings to staged events highlight the dynamic ways music is shared and experienced within the community. Third, transmission practices include oral heritage, formal education, and digital dissemination, showing how the songs are taught and preserved across generations. Lastly, the cultural identity dimension focuses on how the songs convey themes of kinship, gender, emotion, and collective memory, offering insight into how the Dong people maintain and express their unique identity through music.

Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative ethnomusicological methodology because it allows for a deep, culturally embedded understanding of musical traditions as lived experiences. Ethnomusicology's emphasis on music-in-context makes it particularly suitable for studying Liu



Dong songs as artistic and social phenomena, performed during a culturally significant festival (Pang & Sensai, 2025; Qiu et al., 2024). Qualitative methods were used to capture the subjective meanings, transmission practices, and communal dynamics surrounding these songs, which are not easily quantifiable through standardized tools. The study site, Zhaoxing Village in Guizhou Province, is recognized as a key center for Dong ethnic cultural practices. Fieldwork was conducted during the 2023–2024 Dong Nian Festival season, using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and audiovisual documentation to explore the lived realities of performers and audiences.

1. Selection of Informants

The study utilized key and general informants to gain insights into the preservation and transmission of Liu Dong songs in a village. Key informants were cultural heritage inheritors who provided information on the songs' origins, symbolic meanings, and traditional pedagogies. General informants, including elder community singers, younger performers, pipa instrument makers, and educators, provided a broader understanding of how Liu Dong songs are interpreted and practiced across generations and social roles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Informant Categories and Roles

Informant Type	Number	Role and Contribution
Key Informants	3	Cultural heritage bearers; in-depth historical and symbolic insight
General Informants	6	Community singers, educators, and artisans; contextual perspectives

All participants provided informed consent, with interviews conducted in Dong or Mandarin depending on preference. Ethical considerations included respecting local customs during interviews and performances, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring that all audiovisual recordings were shared and approved by participants before analysis or publication. Cultural sensitivities, such as sacred songs not meant for outsiders, were observed, and any restricted content was excluded from formal analysis.

2. Data Collection Techniques

Multiple ethnographic techniques were employed to triangulate data and ensure validity. Semi-structured interviews were held in both formal and informal contexts, allowing for guided yet flexible discussion. Topics included song meaning, gendered performance roles, intergenerational knowledge, and modernization. Participant observation was conducted during rehearsals, rituals, and festival performances, yielding over 20 hours of audiovisual material and



detailed field notes documenting performer-audience interaction, spatial dynamics, and ritual symbolism, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Data Collection Techniques

Technique	Purpose
Interviews	Capture lived experiences, interpretations, and perspectives
Participant Observation	Observe performance practices in natural settings
Audiovisual Recording	Document songs for later analysis and reference

3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data, including transcribed interviews, field notes, and recordings, were coded using thematic analysis. Analytical rigor was ensured through member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with three informants for validation and feedback. Researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing also supported the trustworthiness of the analysis, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Main Analytical Themes

Theme	Description
Identity Expression	How songs reflect Dong worldview and communal values
Cultural Transmission	Mechanisms of teaching, learning, and preserving songs
Performance Context	The role of setting and occasion in meaning-making
Intergenerational Dialogue	How songs are received and reinterpreted by younger members

Results

The findings of this study on Chinese Liu Dong songs within the cultural framework of the Dong Nian Festival are organized into four main themes: historical development, performance formats, expression of cultural identity, and preservation and innovation processes. These themes highlight the dynamic interplay between tradition and transformation, offering insights into how the Dong community preserves and redefines its cultural heritage through music. Field notes, informant narratives, and visual documentation support the findings.

1. Historical Development and Phases of Liu Dong Songs

The evolution of Liu Dong songs over time reveals a profound relationship between music and the cultural history of the Dong ethnic group. Based on ethnographic interviews and field documentation, Liu Dong songs have developed in three distinct phases that mirror the broader transformations within Dong society. As illustrated in Figure 2, these phases are identified as the Origin Stage, Maturity Stage, and Steady Development Phase.

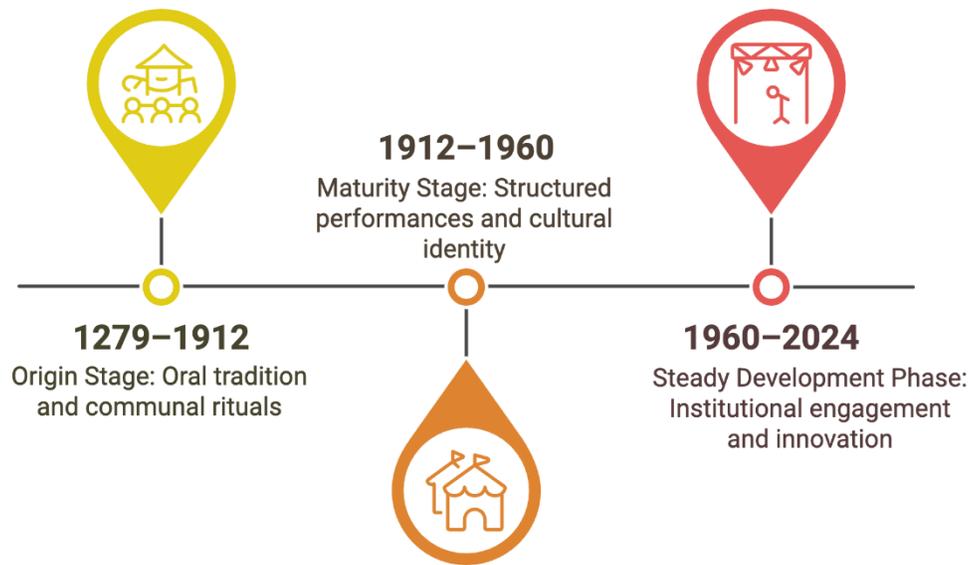


Figure 2 Timeline of Liu Dong Songs Development Phases

Figure 2 depicts three primary stages from oral courtship rituals to formalized contemporary expressions. Liu Dong's songs originated in the late Yuan and continued through the Ming and Qing dynasties. Initially transmitted orally, they were closely tied to courtship practices, agrarian life, and spiritual beliefs. The Maturity Stage (1912–1960) aligned with the early Republican era and the rise of nationalism, as Liu Dong songs became more thematically structured and recognized in public education. The Steady Development Phase (1960–2024) introduced institutional engagement and preservation efforts. These phases reveal a historical continuum in which Liu Dong songs transitioned from intimate cultural expression to codified heritage, influencing how they are performed and interpreted today.

A key insight is that historical changes such as urban migration, educational reform, and media exposure have altered the performance contexts and meanings of Liu Dong's songs. However, core values and vocal techniques remain rooted in Dong tradition.

2. Performance Formats and Contexts

The Dong Nian Festival provides a rich context for Liu Dong songs to be performed in various formats, each with distinct cultural meanings. These formats balance tradition and adaptation, showcasing communal spirit and evolving artistic expressions.



Figure 3 Traditional Group Chorus



Figure 4 Competitive Format



Figure 5 Educational Settings



The traditional group chorus (Figure 3) involves singers forming a circle and engaging in antiphonal singing. Informants highlighted this format as a communal and inclusive act, reinforcing kinship ties and ritual symbolism. The competitive format (Figure 4) emerged recently, enabling structured, performative versions of Liu Dong songs before an audience and judges. Younger informants viewed this as a platform for personal growth and a cultural responsibility. The educational setting (Figure 5) fosters everyday learning, where performance etiquette, vocal nuance, and cultural knowledge are passed down. Each format plays a distinct role in community engagement: while the traditional format maintains continuity, the competitive and educational ones extend outreach and pedagogical depth.

3. Expression of Cultural Identity

Liu Dong's songs are a powerful medium for expressing Dong cultural identity. Their lyrical content, performance structure, and communal significance reveal how identity is negotiated, affirmed, and transmitted.

Informants expressed that singing these songs “feels like speaking to our ancestors” and “keeps our hearts tied to the village even if we live outside.”

Themes of longing, nature, familial duty, and communal solidarity are embedded in the lyrics and performance practice. A hallmark is the alternating vocal lines between male and female singers, symbolizing balance and relational harmony. This gendered structure is aesthetic and deeply social, encoding norms of emotional expression and gender respect.

The collective singing rituals, whether formal or informal, serve as acts of cultural renewal. As one elder stated, “We do not just sing for sound. We sing to remember who we are.” These performances are a mode of cultural resistance against assimilation and a tool for reconstructing Dong identity in contemporary contexts.

A summary: Liu Dong songs serve as cultural memory, emotional release, and symbolic affirmation of Dong identity through structure, theme, and group participation.

4 Preservation, Innovation, and Community Involvement

Preservation efforts involve both grassroots traditions and institutional strategies. Schools incorporate Liu Dong songs into curricula, and local cultural centers host youth workshops and inter-village exchanges. Digital recordings and social media uploads are increasingly common, though concerns over commercialization are frequently mentioned. One informant shared, “It is good that people outside see our songs, but we worry about losing the real meaning when they become a show.”

During the Dong Nian Festival, tourism increased visibility and funding for cultural programs, but it also introduced tensions between authenticity and performativity. Community participation remains the backbone of sustainability. Youth groups, family choirs, and local mentors actively





shape new modes of expression while preserving traditional values. Examples include integrating modern harmonies or fusing folk melodies with contemporary lyrics.

A summary insight: Preservation is dynamic, involving negotiation between tradition and innovation. The Dong community's active participation ensures that Liu Dong songs evolve meaningfully rather than being passively consumed.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the theoretical principles of ethnomusicology, which emphasize the inseparability of music and cultural context. Through participant observation and interviews conducted during the Dong Nian Festival in Zhaoxing Village, the research demonstrates that Liu Dong songs are not merely musical artifacts but living embodiments of the Dong people's identity, social values, and cosmological worldview. This is consistent with Brackett's (2023) assertion that folk music often serves as a dynamic site of meaning-making and Norton and Matsumoto's (2018) view that music functions as historical memory and social practice. The structure of the songs, their performance contexts, and the interaction between performers and audiences all reflect a deep intergenerational engagement that is integral to the community's continuity.

From a performance theory perspective, the study validates the idea that performance is a ritualized act of cultural negotiation. Liu Dong's songs are contextually embedded in specific social spaces, ritual, recreational, and educational, collectively reaffirming cultural identity and reinforcing communal bonds. This supports Sandberg-Jurström's (2022) notion of performance as a space for reflection and transformation. The gendered vocal interplay within Liu Dong songs also aligns with Thornton's (2021) emphasis on how musical structure can reflect relational values and societal norms. In the case of the Dong people, the alternating melodic lines sung by men and women not only express harmony but also enact the social ideal of gender complementarity.

Moreover, the research findings resonate with studies on cultural preservation and adaptation. Liu Dong's songs have significantly transformed through institutional support, education programs, and digital media dissemination (He et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024). While such changes increase visibility and engagement, especially among youth, they also raise concerns about performative authenticity, where cultural expression is adapted for new platforms, versus essentialist authenticity, which emphasizes adherence to traditional norms (Lovell & Hitchmough, 2019; Skandalis et al., 2024). This duality between preservation and performance innovation highlights a tension previously noted by Van der Hoeven (2018), where popularization can sometimes dilute original meanings.





Liu Dong songs, a unique Chinese folk tradition, are distinguished by gendered vocal alternation, falsetto technique, antiphonal structure, and pipa use. These songs maintain a more formal structure and institutional integration, which may enhance resilience but may reduce spontaneity and emotional nuance. This highlights the uniqueness and vulnerability of Liu Dong traditions. The study's implications span three domains: theory, suggesting context-sensitive transmission models to retain emotional depth and community involvement, and policy, calling for heritage programs that support authentic, community-led innovation.

Notably, the findings extend current literature by situating Liu Dong songs in a real-time festival environment, capturing not only formal performances but also informal teaching moments and community rehearsals. This ethnographic approach allows a richer understanding of how the Dong people actively negotiate tradition in changing socio-cultural landscapes. Therefore, the study contributes meaningfully to the theoretical and applied dimensions of ethnomusicology, offering insight into how traditional music can remain resilient and relevant amid rapid modernization.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Applying the Research Findings

1.1 Integrate Liu Dong songs into school music curricula and local cultural education programs to promote intergenerational transmission. This could include project-based learning and collaborations between schools and village elders to ensure both formal and informal pedagogical elements are included.

1.2 Support community-led workshops and festivals, emphasizing authentic performance practices to strengthen cultural identity and continuity. Cultural bureaus should provide targeted support for these initiatives to ensure sustainable funding and coordination.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

2.1 Conduct comparative studies with other ethnic minority song traditions in China to explore broader patterns of musical preservation. This could include cross-case analyses with Miao, Yi, or Hani communities, using structured frameworks such as thematic comparison or typology mapping.

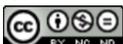
2.2 Investigate the role of digital platforms in transforming traditional music practices and their impact on cultural authenticity. Future research should employ digital ethnography methods, such as platform analysis, comment tracking, and user interaction mapping, to assess how online audiences interpret and reshape folk music content.





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