

Literature Review on Dong Pipa Songs: Evidence From CNKI

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ABSTRACT: Based on nearly sixty publications indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), this study systematically reviews the research progress on Dong pipa songs. Scholarship on this musical form can be divided into three stages: the preliminary exploratory phase (1950s–1970s), the developmental phase (1980s–2005), and the flourishing phase following its inscription on China’s National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. Current research clusters into five main domains: overviews and general introductions, studies of musical style, analyses of social function, examinations of lyric features, and investigations into transmission and safeguarding. Methodologically, the field has shifted from descriptive, single-disciplinary accounts toward interdisciplinary approaches that draw on ethnomusicology, linguistics, sociology, communication studies, and heritage research. Nonetheless, limitations remain, including insufficient cross-disciplinary integration, limited comparative perspective, reliance on Western analytical frameworks, and a shortage of first-hand field data. Future directions call for deeper interdisciplinary collaboration, greater use of indigenous theoretical frameworks, enhanced fieldwork documentation, and the integration of educational and digital platforms into safeguarding strategies. Overall, sustained scholarly attention to Dong pipa songs not only contributes to the protection of intangible cultural heritage but also reinforces cultural diversity and ethnic identity.

KEYWORDS: Dong pipa songs; ethnomusicology; literature review; interdisciplinary research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dong pipa songs (侗族琵琶歌), so named for their accompaniment on the Dong pipa, constitute a widely cherished vocal genre among the Dong (Kam) people. They are disseminated across Dong-settled regions of Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan and form a vital component of the community’s traditional musical culture. In 2006, in recognition of their pronounced ethnic distinctiveness, pipa songs were inscribed on China’s National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Serving as a salient medium of affective expression, Dong pipa songs are frequently performed at festivals, weddings, and communal gatherings, and they function as an essential repository for historical transmission and collective memory. Their mellifluous melodies and textually rich lyrics vividly register multiple dimensions of Dong social life.

Using “Dong pipa songs” as the keyword, this study conducted a systematic search and screening of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), collating nearly sixty pertinent publications. Through analytical comparison and synthesis of these materials, it surveys scholarship in five domains—overviews and general introductions, studies of musical style, analyses of social function, research on lyric features, and transmission and safeguarding—in order to distil principal achievements and persistent challenges, delineate directions for future research, and furnish a robust theoretical basis for the sustained protection and transmission of Dong pipa songs.

2. AN OVERALL REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON DONG PIPA SONGS

Drawing on records compiled from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), scholarly inquiry into Dong pipa songs in China can be traced to the early 1950s and may be periodised into three broad stages. Across these stages, the research trajectory shows a clear evolution from descriptive, inventory-style reports toward analytical and interdisciplinary studies that

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integrate ethnomusicology, linguistics, cultural studies, and heritage safeguarding.

2.1 Preliminary Exploratory Stage (early 1950s–late 1970s)

The earliest extant publications already demonstrate academic attention to regional style, performance custom, and instrument organology. Xue (1953) introduced the tonal characteristics of pipa songs in locales such as Tongguan (Liping, Guizhou) and Shuangjiang, documented folk performance conventions, and discussed the tuning and construction of emblematic instruments—including the niutqin and the pipa—thus providing one of the first scholarly snapshots of the genre’s musical ecology (Xue, 1953). Building on this foundation, Nian (1960) offered a more substantial survey of repertoires circulating in Rongjiang and Liping counties, supplementing the prose description with staff-notation transcriptions and thereby furnishing materials usable for comparative and pedagogical purposes (Nian, 1960). Although concise and primarily documentary, these contributions effectively opened the field, established descriptive baselines for later analysis, and offered reference points for subsequent work on genre, region, and organology (Nian, 1960; Xue, 1953).

2.2 Developmental Stage (late 1970s–2005)

From the late 1970s through the early twenty-first century, scholarship diversified in topics and methods. Representative studies include Zhu (1979), Guo (1982), and Yang and Wang (1985), alongside further contributions that addressed lyric content, prosodic organisation, vocal style, and performance technique with greater systematicity (Guo, 1982; Yang & Wang, 1985; Zhu, 1979). During this period, analytical emphases broadened from “what exists” (repertoires, occasions, instruments) to “how it works” (text–melody relations, metric and rhythmic organisation, stylistic classifications). The stage also witnessed the introduction of more explicit analytical vocabularies—for example, work on mode and pitch organisation (Long, 1997)—as well as genre-sensitive discourse about performance practice and regional variants (Wu, 1989). Collectively, these studies enriched the descriptive record while laying conceptual groundwork for later, problem-driven research (e.g., on function, meaning, and change).

2.3 Flourishing Stage (2006–present)

The inscription of Dong pipa songs on China’s National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006 catalysed a marked expansion of research activity. According to CNKI, nearly fifty items have been published in this phase, reflecting both thematic breadth and methodological pluralism. Music-ontological topics—vocal production, lyric prosody, rhythm/meter—continue to attract attention, but there is also sustained growth in studies of social function, cultural meaning, and language use, together with a visible rise in interdisciplinary approaches that link ethnomusicology with discourse analysis, education, communication, and heritage studies (Huang, 2009; Shi, 2007, 2010; Shi, Yao, & Li, 2010; Xiao, 2009). This shift aligns with broader trends in Chinese intangible-heritage research, including documentation, pedagogy (“bringing songs into classrooms”), and digital dissemination, which together reposition Dong pipa songs as both living practice and safeguarded cultural asset.

On the basis of the CNKI dataset compiled for this review, the proportional distribution of outputs across the three stages is approximately 3.3%, 15%, and 81%, respectively. These figures suggest that the 2006 heritage inscription constituted a watershed—under sustained policy support and expanding public visibility, Dong pipa songs have drawn increasing scholarly interest, and research outputs have proliferated while becoming more problem-focused and theoretically articulated. Figure 1 charts this trend from the 1950s to the present.

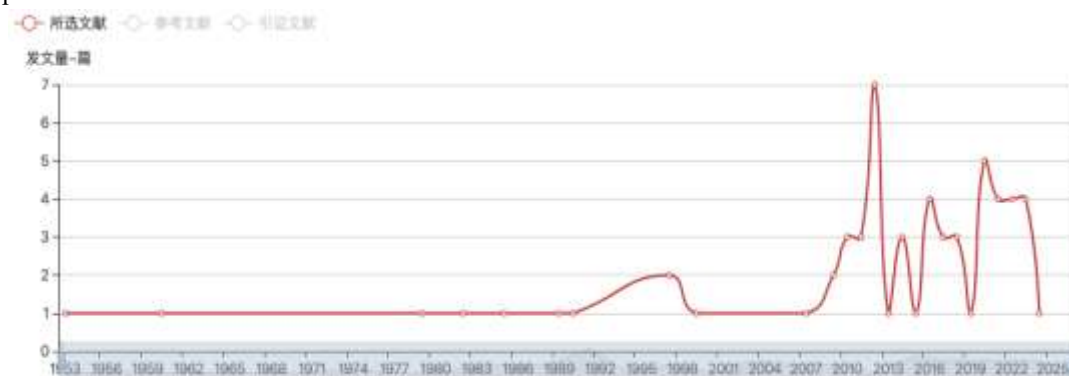


Figure 1. Trend chart of Dong Pipa song research achievements (CNKI data from the 1950s to present)

3. CLASSIFICATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS ON DONG PIPA SONGS

Based on a systematic review of publications indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), scholarship on Dong pipa songs can be divided into five interrelated thematic streams: overviews and general introductions, studies of musical style, analyses of social function, research on lyric features, and studies on transmission and safeguarding. This classification not only provides a structured overview of existing research foci but also highlights the intellectual trajectory from descriptive documentation toward more problem-driven, interpretive, and interdisciplinary approaches. The following sections examine each of these research categories in detail, demonstrating their contributions, limitations, and evolving trends.

3.1 *Overviews and General Introductions*

Overviews and descriptive studies form the earliest and broadest foundation of Dong pipa song research. CNKI records indicate nineteen publications of this type, ranging from early works by Xue (1953), Nian (1960), Wu (1989), Zhu (1979), Guo (1982), and Zhang (1990), to more recent syntheses such as Xiao (2009), Wu (2013), and Wei (2015). Collectively, these studies provide macro-level surveys that establish the basic contours of the field.

The earlier publications are primarily concerned with documentation. Xue (1953), for example, offered a pioneering introduction to Dong folk music in *People's Music*, describing the tonal features of pipa songs in Tongguan (Liping, Guizhou) and Shuangjiang, as well as performance customs and instrument morphology. Similarly, Nian (1960) provided not only descriptive commentary on repertoires circulating in Rongjiang and Liping counties but also included simplified staff notation, thereby making this music accessible to a broader readership and laying the groundwork for systematic comparative research.

Later overview studies expand upon these foundations. Wu (2013) analysed the pipa song traditions of the Xunjiang area, situating them within their historical context and emphasising distinctive musical features. Wei (2015) combined descriptive analysis with an exploration of cultural functions, particularly in Tongdao County, thus bridging the gap between stylistic description and socio-cultural interpretation. Overall, the literature in this category serves as a descriptive baseline that underpins the more specialised research streams examined below.

3.2 *Musical Style*

A second major body of scholarship, comprising sixteen identified publications, focuses on the stylistic and structural features of Dong pipa songs. Research in this category typically examines four dimensions: melodic modality and tonal organisation, rhythm and meter, vocal technique and timbre, and instrumental accompaniment.

In melodic modality and tonal organisation aspects, Long (1997) analysed “mode inlay tones” in Guandong pipa songs, opening an important line of inquiry into pitch organisation and modal systems. Shi (1997) offered reflections on artistic features and reform strategies, extending the discussion beyond analysis into applied cultural policy. Yan (2023), based on fieldwork in Banpo Village, Tongdao County, argued that lyrical pipa songs should be understood as “semi-improvised” forms in which improvisation operates within the constraints of established harmonic and textural idioms. This study highlights the complex interplay between creativity and convention. Complementing these works, Yang (2014) systematised three rhyming types—zhengyun, gouyun, and neiyun—showing how rhyme interacts with musical phrasing to produce distinctive stylistic outcomes.

Research on rhythm and meter is less extensive but includes a seminal contribution by Zhang (2017), who identified three forms of mixed meter in Dong pipa songs. Zhang demonstrated that rhythmic organisation not only shapes expressive meaning but also mirrors linguistic rhythm, thereby linking music to the prosodic structure of the Dong language.

The vocal technique and timbre of pipa songs is another significant topic. Xiao, Y. and Xiao, X (2021) provided a multidimensional analysis of singing techniques, distinguishing between chest-voice and falsetto timbres and emphasising the holistic performance skillset required of pipa singers. Chen (2011) contributed to this discourse by analysing Hongzhou-area pipa songs, including the origins and pedagogical transmission of falsetto singing. Together, these studies underscore the importance of timbre, technique, and embodied knowledge in the genre's stylistic identity.

Instrumental accompaniment practices vary considerably across regions. Xiao, Y. and Xiao, X (2020) demonstrated how local performance environments shape both instrument morphology and stylistic conventions, comparing variants in Sanbao, Wanzhai, Hongzhou, and Liudong. Their work shows how the physical characteristics of the pipa interact with vocal performance styles, highlighting the interdependence of instrument design and regional aesthetics.

Taken together, research on musical style illustrates the complexity and variability of Dong pipa songs, while also drawing

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attention to the need for further comparative and interdisciplinary analysis.

3.3 Social Function

Beyond stylistic description, another significant research stream addresses the social and cultural functions of Dong pipa songs. This perspective situates the genre within broader frameworks of cultural practice and ethnic identity.

Zhang (2012a) differentiated functional profiles across sub-genres, identifying lyrical pipa songs as vehicles for courtship and social interaction, while narrative songs often serve didactic purposes, recounting moral tales and reinforcing social norms. Responding to contemporary cultural shifts, Zhang observed that the traditional functions of pipa songs have gradually diminished under the influence of popular and internet culture, resulting in a transformation from community-oriented practices to staged entertainment. Complementarily, Zhang (2012b) elaborated the multi-layered functional ecology of pipa songs, highlighting their aesthetic integration of song and music as well as their role in sociality, memory, and value creation.

The social-function literature demonstrates that Dong pipa songs cannot be understood solely as musical artefacts. Rather, they constitute a living practice deeply embedded in communal rituals, cultural values, and processes of identity formation. Such research aligns with broader currents in ethnomusicology and cultural heritage studies, underscoring the interconnections between music, society, and cultural continuity.

3.4 Lyric Features

A fourth line of scholarship, represented by approximately eight publications, focuses on lyric structure and discourse. This research has introduced methods from functional linguistics and discourse analysis into the study of pipa songs.

For example, Shi (2007) introduced the concept of “theme” identification in folk-song discourse, proposing that performance pauses in Shangzhong pipa songs should be treated as criteria for delineating thematic units. This approach enhances the analysis of coherence and cohesion in oral texts. Shi (2010) examined the distribution of six process types within the transitivity system, demonstrating how these align with genre meanings and social functions. The study established the discourse-constructive role of transitivity in pipa songs, thereby bridging ethnopoetics and systemic functional linguistics.

Further, Shi, Yao, and Li (2010) analysed the use of metaphor in Dong pipa song lyrics, highlighting its pragmatic and symbolic functions. Complementary work on metrical form, particularly the four-syllable verse, has revealed how phonological, grammatical, and semantic constraints interact to shape poetic expression. This research situates Dong pipa song lyrics in comparative perspective, connecting them both to classical Chinese poetic traditions such as the Shijing and to broader patterns across the Sino-Tibetan language family.

Overall, lyric-focused studies demonstrate the richness of textual artistry in pipa songs and contribute to a broader understanding of how oral traditions encode and transmit cultural knowledge.

3.5 Transmission and Safeguarding

The final major research stream addresses questions of inheritance, transmission, and safeguarding. Studies in this area typically distinguish between oral/master–apprentice transmission and systematic or modern instructional pathways.

One aspect is oral transmission. The traditional master–apprentice model, in which accomplished singers train disciples through long-term apprenticeship, has preserved stylistic integrity and tacit performance knowledge. However, this system faces challenges such as ageing bearers, shrinking participation, and weakened communal contexts (Kang, 2024; Wang & Lu, 2016). In contemporary contexts characterised by digital media consumption, traditional oral channels are increasingly supplanted by visual and online platforms. Scholars therefore recommend leveraging digital communication pathways to amplify the visibility and attractiveness of intangible cultural heritage, including Dong pipa songs.

Another aspect is systematic instruction and digital safeguarding. To address the limitations of oral transmission, governments, cultural institutions, and universities have initiated systematic safeguarding projects. Gao (2023) noted the role of intangible heritage programmes in funding documentation and education, while Wei and Guo (2021) highlighted the importance of digital recording and dissemination. The oral history of Tongdao inheritor Wu Yongchun exemplifies the integration of personal repertoires into publicly accessible digital resources, linking community knowledge with broader educational and research contexts. He (2012) argued that safeguarding must also involve cultural adaptation, with strategies such as integrating pipa songs into school curricula and promoting innovative reinterpretations.

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Collectively, the safeguarding literature converges on the need to balance authenticity with innovation, combining respect for tradition with proactive engagement with contemporary pedagogical and technological opportunities.

4. REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE RESEARCH OF DONG PIPA SONGS

A systematic review of CNKI-indexed literature demonstrates that scholarship on Dong pipa songs has made significant strides across descriptive, analytical, and safeguarding domains. Nonetheless, several recurring limitations constrain the field's cumulative development. The following reflections synthesise these shortcomings into four interrelated problem areas, followed by recommendations to advance the research agenda.

4.1 *Predominantly Single-Disciplinary Approaches*

Most existing studies employ narrowly defined disciplinary perspectives, primarily musicology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, or communication studies, without fully integrating cross-disciplinary insights. For example, Shi (2007) offers a rigorous linguistic analysis of thematic structures in Shangzhong pipa songs, but the study does not compare linguistic findings with musical analysis to illuminate how text and melody interact in performance. Likewise, Kang (2024) investigates the communicative ecology of Sanjiang pipa songs, yet the analysis privileges media dissemination and largely omits musical features that condition reception. Such compartmentalisation limits the explanatory power of scholarship. Future work would benefit from frameworks that bridge ethnomusicology and linguistics (e.g., prosody–melody mapping), musicology and sociology (e.g., performance roles and community organisation), and musicology and folklore or geography (e.g., ritual contexts and cultural landscapes).

4.2 *Limited Comparative Consciousness*

Another evident limitation is the lack of comparative research. Many studies either aggregate Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan repertoires into a single descriptive frame or focus on individual case studies. Yet regional variation in geography, ecology, and inter-ethnic contact produces stylistic diversity that merits systematic comparison. For instance, repertoires from Guizhou often reflect mountainous isolation, while Guangxi traditions reveal stronger inter-ethnic exchange. At present, however, few works engage in controlled comparison across provinces, and even fewer juxtapose Dong pipa songs with other ethnic accompaniment traditions. A comparative approach—drawing on matched descriptors such as melodic contour, rhyme scheme, and performance setting—could clarify how regional and inter-ethnic dynamics shape stylistic trajectories and cultural meanings.

4.3 *The Preponderance of Western Analytical Frameworks*

Current music-ontological analyses are often anchored in Western theoretical constructs. Zhang (2017), for instance, employs Western rhythmic categories to describe mixed meters (“single-accent dominant,” “multiple-accent dominant,” and “combined forms”). While conceptually serviceable, such frameworks risk obscuring the emic tonal and rhythmic logics of Dong music. Because pipa songs do not adhere to equal temperament, Western staff notation frequently misrepresents “in-between” tones, producing inaccuracies and divorcing notation from performance practice. This epistemological gap can be bridged by privileging Chinese and Dong indigenous theories, such as gong-diao modal systems or rhyme-based prosody, and by incorporating the cognitive categories of insider performers. Computational tools (e.g., pitch-tracking software) could complement indigenous frameworks, capturing microtonal inflections and stylistic ornamentation without the distortions of equal temperament.

4.4 *Insufficient First-Hand Field Data*

A substantial proportion of existing research relies heavily on anthologies such as *The Anthology of Chinese Folk Songs* and *The Anthology of Chinese Quyi Music*, which, while valuable, often contain transcriptional errors, incomplete metadata, or decontextualised excerpts. Over-reliance on such compilations can introduce distortions in analysis, particularly when detached from live performance contexts. Fieldwork-based materials, including high-quality audio/video recordings, field notes, and oral histories, remain limited. Yet as music is a temporal and embodied art, first-hand field data are indispensable for capturing rhythm, intonation, and interactional dynamics. Without such data, analyses risk losing fidelity to lived practice. Triangulating legacy notations against field recordings would both correct earlier errors and highlight diachronic transformations.

4.5 *Recommendations for Future Research*

To address these challenges, several directions are proposed:

Cultivate interdisciplinary integration. Scholars should deliberately combine theories and methods from musicology, linguistics,

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anthropology, sociology, and communication studies. Cross-disciplinary designs, such as analysing rhyme structures through both prosodic linguistics and melodic contour analysis, can reveal deeper interrelations between form and meaning.

Strengthen comparative research. Systematic comparison across Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan repertoires should be conducted, attending to stylistic, linguistic, and ecological variables. Comparative inquiry should also extend to neighbouring ethnic traditions, thereby situating Dong pipa songs within broader patterns of cultural exchange.

Re-centre indigenous theoretical frameworks. Analyses should incorporate Chinese and Dong insider categories, such as gong-diao modal families, rhyme-based prosody, and sanban/banqiang rhythmic distinctions, while employing digital tools to enhance, rather than overwrite, indigenous conceptual schemas.

Reinvest in first-hand fieldwork. Ethnographic documentation, multimedia recording, and oral history projects should be prioritised to build living archives. Such archives, openly curated and annotated, would serve both scholarly analysis and community safeguarding, while enabling diachronic comparison across generations.

Align safeguarding with education and media ecologies. Traditional master, apprentice transmission should be supplemented by school-based instruction and digital platforms. Integrating pipa songs into curricula and disseminating performances via online media would foster both authenticity and accessibility.

5. CONCLUSION

In recent years, Dong pipa songs have increasingly attracted the attention of scholars across disciplines. Researchers have examined their musical characteristics, cultural connotations, lyrical structures, and mechanisms of transmission, thereby underscoring their unique position within the broader landscape of Chinese traditional music. These efforts have enriched our understanding of Dong pipa songs as both an artistic form and a bearer of cultural memory. At the same time, however, the accelerating processes of modernization have introduced new challenges to their safeguarding. Urbanization, large-scale population mobility, and global cultural flows have contributed to the marginalization of certain traditional practices, raising concerns about the long-term vitality of this repertoire. Against this backdrop, sustaining the relevance and cultural significance of Dong pipa songs has become a central concern for contemporary research. The study of Dong pipa songs is therefore not only a matter of preserving musical forms, but also an affirmation of cultural diversity and a reinforcement of ethnic identity.

The reviewed literature highlights both the achievements of current research and the urgent need to balance continuity and innovation. The transmission and development of Dong pipa songs must be pursued through a dual approach. On the one hand, it is essential to respect and protect traditional forms of inheritance in order to preserve the authenticity of performance practices. On the other hand, it is equally important to explore innovative pathways of transmission that leverage digital technology, educational platforms, and media networks to expand both the reach and the impact of the tradition. These dual strategies require collaboration between government institutions, academic researchers, and civil society, creating a coordinated effort that ensures sustainability.

Ultimately, the safeguarding of Dong pipa songs should be understood as a complex and long-term process. It demands sustained commitment from multiple stakeholders, including state agencies, cultural institutions, community bearers, and the academic community. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern resources, and by fostering cooperative networks that cut across institutional and societal boundaries, it is possible to secure the vitality of Dong pipa songs for future generations. If pursued with both cultural sensitivity and innovative vision, the tradition can continue to flourish on the cultural stage, offering renewed insight into the richness of China's musical and ethnic heritage.

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