

## A Study on Dong Chorus of Dong Minorities

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**Abstract:** Dong Chorus is a Chinese folk music art with its own unique characteristics. Dong Chorus is an important way to understand Dong's social structure, marriage and love relationship. Through studying the language features, cultural and artistic characteristics and cultural functions of Dong Chorus, this paper explores the musical and social value of Dong Chorus, aiming at helping more people to have a deep understanding of Dong's local customs and further promoting the spread of Dong's traditional culture.

### 1. Introduction

Dong Chorus is originated in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. It is a folk chorus form in Dong area of China. In 2006, it was listed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Dong Chorus is famous for their unique polyphonic harmony and unaccompanied natural sound quality. Its natural, harmonious and ecological singing comes from Dong people's love for the landscape of their hometown and their true feelings for the beauty of life and labor. It reflects Dong's ancient history, lifestyle and customs through magnificent art forms. Dong Chorus is not only a music art, but also an important way to understand Dong's customs.

### 2. The Characteristics of Dong Chorus

Dong Chorus has three main features: first, its music style is plain and popular; Secondly, its rhythm of language is harmonious and beautiful. Finally, its cultural connotation is rich and colorful. Dong Chorus has high artistic quality, suitable for public singing. Its lyrics have certain poetic characteristics. Dong Chorus has rich cultural connotation and reflects the unique ethnic customs of Dong area. They perform folk songs to fulfill multiple social functions. Dong Chorus is not only a precious music heritage, but also an important cultural and literary heritage.

#### 2.1. Simple and Rustic Music Style

Dong Chorus has high artistry. Due to its singing characteristics with the multi-voice, no conductor, no accompaniment, it has the style of popular music. Dong Chorus is literally translated from Dong language “kgal laox”. “kgal” means “song” and “laox” means “ancient and huge”. There are many different kinds of Dong Chorus. First, some of them are mainly about music tunes, with few lyrics, and most of them imitate the sound of insects and birds. They are harmonious symphonies between nature and man, such as “Cicada Song”. They reflect that Dong people are close to nature and love nature. And some of them express love, which are Dong people's love songs such as “Panwen Song”, “Zuoye Song” and so on. Some give priority to reasoning and persuasion, aiming at persuading Dong people to abide by Dong social ethics, such as “Parents’ song” and “Advice on idle person song”. Some give priority to narrating the story, and sing in the form of one person or many people taking turns to lead the singing and all the others to accompany, such as “Mianwang song”, “Ji Jin” and so on.<sup>[1] 412-440</sup> Dong Chorus is suitable for public singing. When Dong Chorus is sung, its sound range is relatively stable and peaceful, reflecting the harmonious relationship between Dong people and nature.

## 2.2. Beautiful and Harmonious Rhythm of Language

A song is the art of combining melody and lyrics. The lyrics of ethnic minority folk songs have the characteristics of poetry, with rhyme, beautiful language and strong literariness. Some ethnic minorities in China only have spoken language, no written language. Some of their songs were recorded only in Chinese, some were translated and reserved, and some were even written in Chinese. For a long time, Dong Minority have no written language of their own. Most of their songs have been compiled into Chinese versions.

Dong Chorus is usually sung in Dong language, without written records. In December 1956, language experts from Institute of Linguistics in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Central Institute for Nationalities, Central South Institute for Nationalities and Guizhou Institute for Nationalities, accompanied by language authorities from Guizhou, Hunan and Guangxi provinces, investigated, sorted out and studied Dong language in various places. After two years, the plan of Dong language was finally worked out, with southern dialect as the base dialect and Zhanglu language as the standard sound in Chejiang town of Rongjiang county. It was adopted in August 1958. Since then, Dong people have their own language.<sup>[1]392</sup> However, with more and more young dong people entering the schools of Han people, the form of recording and inheriting Dong songs with Chinese characters as an auxiliary means is more acceptable to young people.<sup>[2]155-156</sup>

The lyrics of Dong Chorus are also of high literature and unique language structure. For example, the lyrics of Dong Chorus are usually composed of multiple dual sentences with dual forms, and most of the syllables in each sentence are singular sentences. The rhymes of Dong Chorus have unique characteristics, which can be divided into three situations: first, the rhymes at the end of the lyrics are called “positive rhyme” or “foot rhyme”, and sometimes one rhyme lasts to the end. This kind of rhyme is similar to that of Chinese poetry and English poetry. Secondly, a lyric has internal rhymes, that is, rhymes in the sentence, which is the internal rhyme of Chinese poetry and English poetry. The last kind of rhyme is unique, which is not found in Chinese poetry and English poetry. The final vowel of the last syllable is the same as the vowel of the first, second, fourth or fourth syllable of the next sentence, which is called “hook rhyme” and “waist rhyme”.<sup>[3]27</sup>

## 2.3. Colorful Ethnic Customs

Dong Chorus reflects the living habits and cultural traditions of Dong people, and is a true portrayal of the way of life of Dong people. Dong is said to be a people who use songs to cultivate their hearts. Dong people regard singing Dong songs as a way of spiritual and emotional sustenance. They communicate emotions and participate in social activities by singing Dong songs. Dong Chorus is widely involved in all aspects of dong people's life and has many social functions. The social functions of Dong songs mainly include making friends and choosing partners, ethics education, emotional expression, cultural inheritance and so on. There are ethical education songs such as “Parents’ song”, and lyric songs. The main function of Dong Chorus is to make friends and choose a mate. Dong girls accept the idea that they must learn to sing Dong Chorus from an early age. Their parents tell them from an early age that if a girl can't sing, she can't find a husband. About two to three years old, Dong parents set out to find their daughters of the same gender and the same age to form a singing class, for the children to learn Dong songs, singing Dong Chorus in the drum tower in the future. At the age of six or seven, Dong girls begin to learn to sing Dong Chorus, and then carry out long-term and strict chorus training.<sup>[3]51</sup> They learn to sing Dong songs, receive traditional marriage education, and learn how to build good interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex through singing. The members of the choir and their parents will also develop a close interpersonal relationship with each other. The male singing class was relatively later, but the organization was the same. At the age of 11 or 12, Dong girls began to sing in public with male singing classes in the drum tower under the name of independent singing classes. The first public duet in the drum tower in the name of the chorus was one of the most important moments in their lives<sup>[2]150</sup>. They take the opportunity to show their talent and appearance to the public. On the one hand, male singers can take this opportunity to know their favorite members of the opposite sex. On the other hand, women's public appearances also create opportunities for male singers to learn

about the women. The duet of Dong drum tower is a social platform for unmarried young people to look for marriage opportunities. Generally speaking, once a woman marries, her singing class disbands. It can be seen that learning to sing Dong Chorus is not simply to learn singing skills, but to learn a life customs and culture.

### **3. The Research Review on Dong Chorus**

The research on Dong Chorus started early, and some scholars began to study Dong Chorus in the 1950s. Since the 1980s, some research results have been published on the Internet. Among them, Zhang Yong wrote a paper “A Brief Introduction to Dong Chorus” in *Guizhou Nationality Research* in 1982. This paper is an early research of Dong Chorus. Since the 1990s, the research on Dong Chorus has become more and more popular, with more than 200 research papers. Existing research results mainly include the following three aspects. First, the research on artistic features of Dong Chorus, such as Guo Lilin(2018) published her paper “A Rsearch on Artistic Features of Dong Chorus in Guangxi Province” in *Journal of Mudanjiang University*; Yang yi (2014) published in *Journal of Guizhou Social Science*, and so on. These research results mainly analyze the music characteristics, singing skills, artistic characteristics of Dong Chorus, which have certain reference value for understanding the artistic characteristics of Dong Chorus.

Secondly, researches on the cultural value and source of Dong Chorus. For example, Hu Mu (2015) sorted out the research literature of Dong Chorus in his paper, revealing the diversified appearance, rich folk music culture, unique aesthetic connotation and harmonious beauty of Dong Chorus. Du Chengcai (2009) published “Dong Chorus: for a Harmonious Life” in *Journal of Chinese Nationalities*; Huang Ming-zheng(2008) published “ Cultural Ecology of Dong Chorus “in *Music of Nationalities*. These research results of Dong Chorus have explored the background, cultural value and significance of Dong Chorus.

Thirdly, the researches on the spread of Dong Chorus. The research achievements in this field are mainly made in recent years. Although the research results are not many, Dong Chorus attracted many scholars’ attention. For example, Tan Rongrong’s (2013) paper “On Contemporary Communication Strategies of Dong Chorus “ in *Journal of Original Ecological Ethnic Culture*, and Yang Zhuyuan’s (2013) paper “A Research on the Cross-cultural Communication Value of Dong Chorus “ in *News Communication*, etc. These research results are on the spread of Dong folk songs.

These findings are ground-breaking. Some researches have been relatively mature, such as the research on the musicality of Dong Chorus, the research on artistic characteristics and so on. However, some researches are relatively weak, and there is still much room for academic expansion in research methods and contents, which need to be further improved, such as the research on text features of Dong Chorus lyrics, language features, and the research on the translation of Dong Chorus.

### **4. Conclusion**

To sum up, the research on Dong Chorus needs to be strengthened in the following two aspects. Firstly, the text arrangement of Dong Chorus lyrics, the study of language characteristics, literature and art characteristics, text characteristics and so on deserve to be strengthened. Although some achievements have been made, they are not systematic enough and are mainly discussed sporadically. Secondly, the research on the English translation of Dong Chorus deserves to be vigorously promoted. At present, the English translation of Dong Chorus is not paid enough attention and the research is very weak. In order to enhance the mutual trust and understanding between different nationalities in the world, it is necessary to improve the quality of translation.

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