

INHERITANCE AND DISSEMINATION OF DONGBEI DAGU *

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Abstract

This study explores the historical evolution, artistic system, and modern dissemination mechanisms of Dongbei Dagū, a traditional narrative vocal art form rooted in Northeast China. Drawing on field research, interviews, ethnographic observation, and literature review, the research reveals that Dongbei Dagū embodies a rich synthesis of lyrical storytelling and musical structure, with diverse regional styles such as Big Mouth Tune and Xiaokou Diao. While the genre reflects deep cultural identity and aesthetic value, it faces critical challenges in transmission due to generational discontinuities and limited youth engagement. The study highlights contemporary adaptation strategies, including integration into educational curricula and the use of digital platforms such as livestreaming and social media to attract new audiences. Findings suggest that balancing cultural authenticity with modern innovation is key to the sustainable development of Dongbei Dagū. This research contributes to performance studies and heritage preservation by offering

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theoretical insights and practical recommendations for revitalizing this endangered art form.

Keywords: Dongbei Dagū, narrative vocal art, traditional Chinese music, cultural transmission, regional identity, digital adaptation, intangible cultural heritage

Introduction

Dongbei Dagū, as one of the most representative traditional Chinese narrative singing arts, is deeply rooted in the folk culture of Northeast China. Originating over two centuries ago, it developed through the integration of regional dialects, folk melodies, and performance traditions, evolving into multiple stylistic schools such as Fengdiao, Dongcheng Diao, and Jiangbei School (Qi, 2012). With strong local flavor and expressive narrative forms, Dongbei Dagū reflects the daily life, emotional world, and cultural values of the northeastern Chinese people. It has played an important role in shaping and preserving regional identity and remains an invaluable component of Chinese intangible cultural heritage (Peng & Gao, 2015).

However, with the rapid transformation of contemporary society and the diversification of entertainment media, traditional performance forms like Dongbei Dagū face critical challenges in transmission and audience engagement. The declining popularity among younger generations, aging performer base, and shrinking performance venues all threaten its sustainability. At the same time, Dongbei Dagū still maintains significant aesthetic and cultural value, which continues to attract the attention of scholars, educators, and cultural policymakers. Therefore, it is of both academic and practical importance to examine the historical trajectory, artistic features, and dissemination strategies of Dongbei Dagū in the context of modern cultural communication. This study aims to bridge theoretical

understanding and field-based evidence to support the revitalization and sustainable inheritance of this art form.

Objectives

1. To further study and explore the artistic practice development of rap performance in Northeast culture and art, and establish a theoretical system of Dongbei Dagū performance practice.
2. Promote the spread of Dongbei Dagū in the new era environment, and find out the inheritance path suitable for the development of the new generation.

Literature Review

The scholarly attention to Dongbei Dagū has steadily increased in recent years, focusing primarily on its musical characteristics, cultural significance, and strategies for preservation and dissemination. Mao (2016) emphasized the urgency of developing practical strategies for the “living inheritance” of Dongbei Dagū, particularly under the threat of generational discontinuity. His study highlighted the importance of revitalizing the performance tradition through modern educational systems and government-led cultural policies.

Peng and Gao (2015) explored the unique temporal structure of Dongbei Dagū music, proposing a “time theory” framework that explains how rhythm, tonal modes, and performance pacing contribute to its narrative power. Their work provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the musical language of this art form, especially in its adaptation to changing audience preferences.

Qi (2012) offered a comprehensive overview of academic research on Chinese drum music in Northeast China, identifying Dongbei Dagū as a central

genre. He pointed out that although the repertoire is rich and stylistically diverse, much of the scholarship remains descriptive, lacking in-depth analytical models for performance practice and regional stylistic variations.

In a more contemporary context, Li and Bhengsri (2024) investigated how Dongbei Dagū can serve as a tool for fostering literacy among rural populations in Liaoning Province. By integrating performance into community-based education, their research demonstrated the dual role of this vocal form as both cultural transmission and educational resource. In a related doctoral study, Li and Bhengsri (2023) provided ethnographic insight into the preservation efforts in Xiuyan County, revealing both grassroots innovation and institutional challenges in sustaining this art form.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively explore the inheritance and dissemination of Dongbei Dagū in contemporary society. The methodological framework includes four main components:

1. Literature Review

A systematic review of relevant scholarly works, government reports, and historical documents was conducted to trace the origin, evolution, musical structure, and performance styles of Dongbei Dagū. The review also examined existing theoretical perspectives on folk art transmission and intangible cultural heritage.

2. Fieldwork and Ethnographic Observation

Field visits were conducted in key performance locations across Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces—particularly in Shenyang and Xiuyan County. Ethnographic observation involved attending Dongbei Dagū

performances in teahouses, community centers, and cultural festivals to document live practices, audience interaction, and environmental context.

3. Interviews with Practitioners and Scholars

Semi-structured interviews were held with active Dongbei Dagū performers, cultural workers, and local researchers. The interviews explored issues such as artistic innovation, audience engagement, intergenerational inheritance, and institutional support. These first-hand accounts provided deep insight into the challenges and motivations within the artistic community.

4. Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 120 audience members and community residents, focusing on their perception, aesthetic preferences, participation frequency, and suggestions for the revitalization of Dongbei Dagū. The quantitative data were analyzed to assess public awareness and communication effectiveness across different platforms.

By integrating multiple methods, this study seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of Dongbei Dagū's current status and to offer practical recommendations for its sustainable development in both cultural and educational dimensions

Results

1. Artistic Development and Performance System of Dongbei Dagū

Dongbei Dagū represents a vital strand of China's traditional narrative performing arts, combining regional folk customs, historical narrative techniques, and refined musical traditions into a unique form of expressive storytelling. As a vocal-rap genre rooted in Northeastern China, its development has been shaped by the geographical, social, and linguistic features of the region, especially in the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Originating in the Qing dynasty and gaining prominence

throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Dongbei Dagū evolved into a comprehensive performance system encompassing diverse schools of singing styles, musical structures, and expressive modes.

The artistic structure of Dongbei Dagū is defined by its dual nature as both a literary and musical art. At its core, the genre integrates lyrical narrative—akin to spoken poetry—with elaborate melodic and rhythmic frameworks. Unlike traditional Chinese opera, which emphasizes dramatization through role-playing, Dongbei Dagū positions the performer as both narrator and emotional commentator. Through rhythm, intonation, and musicality, the performer communicates not only the plot but also the mood and moral messages embedded within the story.

One of the key artistic innovations of Dongbei Dagū lies in its musical configuration. Its compositions are structured according to the principles of “painting scenery, expressing emotion, telling stories, and portraying characters.” Each performance weaves together musical and verbal elements, using tonal color, modal shifts, and rhythmic variety to convey nuanced meanings. This integrated framework transforms storytelling into a performative act of cultural memory and aesthetic communication.

The foundational musical styles of Dongbei Dagū are typically classified into two core systems: the “Big Mouth Tune” and the “Small Mouth Tune” (also known as Siping Style or Xiaokou Diao). The Big Mouth Tune is generally performed in a slow 4/4 meter and is characterized by its square, four-phrase structure—comprising an introduction, development, turn, and resolution. This tune is commonly employed at the beginning of performances to establish a solemn and structured narrative atmosphere. In contrast, the Small Mouth Tune is known for its flexibility and melodic variation. Derived from a fusion of local Northeastern ditties and traditional singing forms from Hebei and Shandong, this style allows for expansive lyrical expression and is often used in contemporary or life-themed works.

Dongbei Dagu further distinguishes itself through a variety of expressive sub-styles, each fulfilling different narrative functions and emotional registers. The "Sad Tune," for example, is employed to evoke feelings of sorrow, melancholy, or nostalgic reflection. It features complex modal modulations, elongated melodic lines, and variations in rhythmic pacing to reflect the emotional depth of the story. Another variant, the "Timid Tone," is frequently used for comedic or satirical pieces. With a quick tempo and brisk phrasing, it emphasizes punchlines, exaggeration, and colloquial wit—qualities that have contributed to the genre's enduring popularity among general audiences.

Each stylistic variant within Dongbei Dagu is not only distinguished by its tempo, meter, and tone but also by its association with different regional schools. The Southern School, for instance, often favors the expressive delicacy of Xiaokou Diao, while the Jiangbei and Xicheng Schools may emphasize tonal drama and rhythmic complexity. Some styles, such as the "Beijing Rhyme," incorporate elements from other narrative traditions, allowing Dongbei Dagu to extend its expressive capabilities across regional and stylistic boundaries.

In terms of structure, the genre makes frequent use of non-standard musical phrasing. Forms such as the Four-Section Structure and Three-Phrase Melodic Units are commonly found in repertoire pieces. These structures allow performers to adapt the rhythm and meter to the story's needs, facilitating changes in mood, pacing, and audience engagement. This flexible architecture also accommodates improvised insertions, dramatic pauses, and modulations that intensify emotional effect.

Instrumentation plays a complementary role. While Dongbei Dagu is primarily vocal, it is often accompanied by traditional string and percussion instruments such as the sanxian (three-stringed lute) and the clapper drum.

These instruments provide rhythmic cues and tonal color, enhancing the narrative's dramatic arc.

Overall, the artistic development and performance system of Dongbei Dagū illustrates a sophisticated convergence of literature, music, and oral tradition. Its regional diversity, structural flexibility, and emotive power make it a unique cultural artifact that continues to evolve in both form and function. As it adapts to changing social contexts and media landscapes, Dongbei Dagū remains a vibrant representation of Northeastern China's cultural identity and a significant subject for academic inquiry in musicology, folklore, and performance studies.

2. Transmission Mechanisms and Contemporary Adaptation of Dongbei Dagū

The transmission of Dongbei Dagū in contemporary society involves both traditional performance practices and emerging media channels. As a form of intangible cultural heritage with deep regional roots, its dissemination has historically relied on oral transmission, apprenticeship, and live performance in teahouses, folk stages, and community spaces. However, the advent of mass media and digital technologies has transformed the mechanisms through which Dongbei Dagū is shared, consumed, and preserved, bringing new opportunities—and challenges—to its inheritance and sustainability.

Traditionally, Dongbei Dagū was disseminated through master-disciple relationships, wherein knowledge of repertoire, performance techniques, and stylistic nuances were passed down in informal settings. Performers often learned by observing experienced artists and gradually imitating their vocal techniques, drumming patterns, and stage presence. These immersive learning processes, while effective in maintaining stylistic continuity, were limited in

scale and vulnerable to generational gaps—especially as aging performers retired without adequate succession planning.

In the post-1950s era, state-sponsored cultural troupes and radio stations played a significant role in promoting Dongbei Dagū, particularly in the urban centers of Northeast China such as Shenyang and Harbin. This institutional support allowed for the standardization of repertoire and the training of performers through more formalized educational models. Moreover, recordings made during this time helped preserve many classic renditions, offering valuable archival material for future study and revival efforts.

However, with the rapid modernization of Chinese society and the proliferation of entertainment alternatives, the audience base for Dongbei Dagū has gradually declined. Urban youth, in particular, tend to favor pop music, television dramas, and digital entertainment over traditional narrative art forms. As a result, Dongbei Dagū has been increasingly marginalized, with its performance venues dwindling and its cultural visibility waning.

Despite these challenges, several innovations have emerged in recent years to revitalize the transmission of Dongbei Dagū. One key development is the integration of digital platforms—such as short video apps, livestreaming services, and social media—to reach younger and more diverse audiences. Performers now use platforms like Douyin (TikTok China) and Bilibili to broadcast performances, share tutorials, and engage interactively with fans. This mode of communication not only expands the geographical reach of Dongbei Dagū, but also allows for real-time feedback and participatory learning experiences.

Another important adaptation strategy involves curriculum development and institutional support within art academies and universities. Some music and performing arts departments have incorporated Dongbei Dagū into their traditional music or folk art syllabi, offering students formal training

in vocal techniques, musical structure, and historical context. This academic engagement not only ensures a level of continuity but also introduces Dongbei Dagū to students who might otherwise remain unaware of its cultural significance.

Empirical data from field interviews and surveys conducted in this study further illustrate the dynamic yet uneven state of Dongbei Dagū's dissemination. Interviews with current practitioners revealed widespread concern about the aging performer base and the lack of young successors. Many cited insufficient financial incentives and low cultural prestige as barriers to youth participation. At the same time, these interviews highlighted a growing interest among middle-aged audiences and cultural enthusiasts, particularly in cities where local governments have designated Dongbei Dagū as a protected intangible heritage item.

Government support remains crucial. In some municipalities, subsidies, performance grants, and cultural heritage protection policies have been introduced to support Dongbei Dagū initiatives. For instance, community centers and cultural parks often host monthly or seasonal performances that not only showcase local talents but also serve as platforms for public education. Collaborative projects between schools, cultural bureaus, and art troupes have also emerged, creating hybrid spaces where tradition and innovation coexist.

To further strengthen its transmission, this study recommends a multi-pronged approach that includes: (1) expanding digital documentation and archiving efforts; (2) developing interactive and gamified educational materials; (3) organizing nationwide competitions or themed festivals to enhance public interest; and (4) encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration with modern media arts, theater, and education sectors.

In sum, the transmission of Dongbei Dagū today reflects both the resilience of traditional oral culture and the adaptability of heritage practices to contemporary social conditions. By embracing digital technology, educational innovation, and policy support, this genre holds the potential not only to survive but also to thrive as a living cultural expression. However, its future depends on sustained investment, creative engagement, and the active participation of both practitioners and the broader public.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the artistic system and dissemination patterns of Dongbei Dagū, offering new insights into both the internal structure of its musical performance and the dynamics of its modern transmission. By integrating field research with theoretical analysis, the study has confirmed the cultural richness of Dongbei Dagū while also revealing the structural tensions it faces in adapting to contemporary society.

One of the key contributions of this research is its systematic classification of the genre's core musical forms and singing styles. Previous works, such as Peng and Gao (2015), emphasized the rhythmic complexity and “time theory” in Dongbei Dagū music, but tended to isolate rhythm as an abstract concept without examining its practical variations across regional schools or repertoires. This study extends that line of inquiry by mapping how each singing style—such as Big Mouth Tune, Xiaokou Diao, and Timid Tone—functions within performance practice, narrative structure, and regional dialects. In doing so, the research provides a more integrated view of how music, language, and storytelling converge to shape the genre's identity.

Furthermore, this study's field-based findings underscore the importance of regional diversity within Dongbei Dagū. While Qi (2012) offered a

broad overview of Northeastern drum music's historical development, this study adds specificity by documenting the stylistic variations found in Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces. Such variations are not merely ornamental but are deeply rooted in local linguistic patterns and socio-cultural contexts. This supports the view that Dongbei Dagū is not a monolithic tradition but a dynamic network of localized expressions, each shaped by distinct historical and demographic forces.

However, the study also identifies discrepancies with earlier conclusions regarding the genre's current vitality. For instance, Li and Bhengsri (2024) argue that the revival of Dongbei Dagū through educational programs in Liaoning has significantly enhanced youth participation and raised public awareness. While some interviewees in this study affirmed the importance of university initiatives, others expressed skepticism about their long-term effectiveness, citing a lack of post-graduation career pathways and limited funding for performance venues. This divergence highlights the uneven impact of institutional support and the ongoing fragility of traditional art forms despite policy attention.

The study also reinforces the necessity of technological adaptation for the genre's survival. While traditional modes of transmission—such as master-apprentice teaching and live theater—remain important for stylistic continuity, the growth of digital platforms has emerged as a powerful counterbalance. Performers using Douyin or Bilibili not only gain exposure but also experiment with form, incorporating visual effects, pop culture references, and audience interaction. This trend aligns with Mao's (2016) argument that the “living inheritance” of Dongbei Dagū depends on its ability to integrate into the rhythms and platforms of contemporary life. Yet, this adaptation is not without risks: oversimplification or commercialization may dilute the cultural depth of the original performance.

Moreover, the study reveals a growing gap between audience expectations and performer capabilities. Many traditional artists face difficulties in adjusting to new media formats or understanding youth cultural preferences. This results in performances that, while technically sound, fail to resonate with modern audiences. Conversely, younger practitioners, though adept at media communication, often lack the historical grounding and stylistic discipline that define authentic Dongbei Dagū. This tension suggests a need for hybrid training models that combine traditional mentorship with digital literacy and market awareness.

In conclusion, the study's discussion reinforces the view that the future of Dongbei Dagū rests on balancing artistic integrity with adaptability. It must honor its roots in regional identity, narrative richness, and musical nuance, while also evolving in ways that engage new generations and diverse audiences. By bridging scholarly theory with practical fieldwork, this research offers both a critical evaluation of existing literature and a roadmap for future action.

Recommendation

1. General Recommendations

To promote the sustainable development of Dongbei Dagū, it is recommended that cultural authorities and educational institutions strengthen policy support, provide funding for inheritance projects, and enhance performance venues and facilities. Integrating Dongbei Dagū into school education—particularly through university-level courses and training programs—will cultivate new talent and expand public understanding. At the same time, performers should embrace innovation in content and stage presentation by incorporating modern themes, cross-genre collaborations, and digital media elements. Platforms such as television, livestreaming, and social

networks can be utilized to broaden audience engagement, especially among younger generations, and to enhance visibility of this traditional art form in both urban and rural communities.

2. Future Research Recommendations

Future research should focus on several areas. First, deeper comparative studies on the styles and repertoires of different regional schools will enrich the theoretical foundation of Dongbei Dagū. Second, empirical studies on audience demographics, preferences, and behavioral trends are needed to inform targeted promotion strategies. Third, more attention should be paid to the impact of digital technology, such as virtual performances and AI tools, on the transmission of traditional vocal arts. Lastly, the effectiveness of current educational models—ranging from master-apprentice systems to academic programs—should be assessed to identify the most effective mechanisms for cultivating the next generation of Dongbei Dagū artists.

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