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Diffusion of Knowledge with the Movement of Experts among Settled Village Communities: A Case Study of the Dong People in Southwest China

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1. Introduction

Based on a case study of the movement of Dong opera experts in Southwest China, this study examines the power of communal knowledge in the forging of ethnic and micro-regional connectedness. This paper addresses the short-term movement of experts among settled village communities, rather than minority immigrants, refugees, or members of the diaspora.

This paper investigates how the movement of experts among settled village communities has facilitated 1) the diffusion of culture (knowledge and skills) pertaining to folk performing arts and 2) the emergence of cooperation within and among village communities.

I argue that the movement of experts has substantially contributed to recipient villages: it has provided them with knowledge of the folk performing arts and has facilitated communality and forged connectedness among village communities.

The Dong people, who number about 3 million (2000 Census), engage primarily in wet-rice cultivation but also engage in forestry; they are famous for their wooden architecture. In general, they are sedentary and live in village communities.

In my research area, northern Sanjiang County, Guangxi, I found that people frequently circulate among village communities. This movement of people is accompanied by flows of materials, knowledge, and skills. It can easily be seen that people such as migrant workers and hawkers circulate for economic and commercial reasons. However, people in fact circulate for a variety of reasons: as one example, people with specific knowledge and skills pertaining to religion, magic, and the folk performing arts circulate through villages where such knowledge and skills are lacking.

For the Dong, the folk performing arts—Dong opera, *doh yeeh*¹⁾ and *lusheng* (mentioned later)—are a crucial facilitator of connectedness both within and among village communities. Among the folk performing arts practiced by the Dong, Dong opera has been the latest to emerge and be introduced to Dong village communities.

Southwest China is a multi-ethnic region; alongside the majority Han, people of many ethnic minorities inhabit the area in a mosaic-like pattern. The Miao, Zhuang,

Dong, and Yao people inhabit areas close to the provincial borders of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi. In a custom called *datongnian* (打同年) in Chinese, people from pairs of rural Dong and Miao villages in this region visit each other on alternating occasions to collectively engage in the folk performing arts. The practice of *datongnian* forges connectedness between villages. Furthermore, *datongnian* is both an intra- and inter-ethnic practice. In this paper, I focus on the Dong engagement with *datongnian*, which is known as *weex yeek* in the Dong language.

Few studies have been conducted on *datongnian* practices among the Dong and Miao people. Peng Ye, a Chinese scholar, conducted research on *datongnian* among the Dong and Miao people in Rongshui Miao Autonomous County, Guangxi. Peng argues that *datongnian* forges connectedness both between Miao villages and between Miao and Dong villages (Peng 2013). Zhang's case study on *weex yeek* activities in Longsheng County, Guangxi (2013), focuses on the custom by which host villages gift the heads of pigs slaughtered during the *weex yeek* to guests from the guest village as they return home. Based on the number of gifted pig heads, both hosts and guests are conscious of what is owed and what remains to be paid back; this is the foundation that makes possible the next *weex yeek* event (Zhang 2013).

These studies have argued that the practice of *datongnian*, or *weex yeek*, forges connectedness among villages. However, these studies have not addressed the role played by the folk performing arts, such as Dong opera, *guiju* (桂剧)—a kind of local Han Chinese opera popular in Guilin and Liuzhou, Guangxi Province—and *lusheng*, a traditional bamboo-wind instrument, which are indispensable cultural resources, in the practice of *weex yeek*. Furthermore, these studies have not examined the role of experts from other villages in introducing and maintaining knowledge and skills pertaining to these folk performing arts in village communities.

In this paper, I focus on Dong opera and discuss how Dong opera has been introduced to villages by the movement of experts. Many rural Dong village communities have engaged in efforts to increase their *weex yeek* repertoires. How such village communities have managed to increase their *weex yeek* repertoires is a crucial concern of this paper; thus, I trace the history of such efforts diachronically.

This paper is structured as follows. In Part 2, I discuss the function of the folk performing arts in relation to the practice of *weex yeek* among the Dong people. In Part 3, focusing on Dong opera, I argue that villagers who have sought to learn folk performing arts have typically invited experts from other villages, and those experts subsequently introduce such folk performing arts. In Part 4, I examine how Dong opera has been introduced to village communities via the movement of an expert on Dong opera.

2. Village Communities and the Folk Performing Arts

In this section, I discuss the importance of the folk performing arts in the practice of *weex yeek* by enumerating the function that the folk performing arts, as communal knowledge, serve in regard to forging connectedness.

2.1 Connectedness among the settled village communities of the Dong

The Dong people belong to the larger Tai group (Photo 1). In Mandarin, they are referred to as the *Dongzu* (侗族). They themselves use the terms *gaeml* or *jaeml* to refer to their ethnic group. As they do not have their own written language, the Dong language is transcribed in Chinese characters. The Dong live in a multi-ethnic area close to areas in which the Han and other ethnic groups, such as the Miao and Yao, predominate.

The Dong reside in three provinces in Southwest China: Guizhou (1.63 million people), Hunan (0.84 million people), and Guangxi (0.30 million people). In this research, I surveyed Dong people residing in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County (Fig. 1).

Most Dong hamlets are agglomerated rural settlements dense with houses. Almost every Dong village has three kinds of public space designed for the assembly of large groups of people: assembly halls (*gulou*), squares, and opera stages. Locals fill such facilities during folk performing arts and other village events (Photos 2–4). Dong operas are enacted on stages built in village squares; stages can be either temporary or permanent.

In addition to the blood and marital relations that exist among individuals, local villages have maintained traditional, collective connections through *kuants* (款) and *weex yeek*.

Kuants were local village unions and ceased to exist in the 1920s. In every *kuant*, there was a designated meeting place for members of the villages involved to gather. The villages that maintained relationships through *kuants* are not necessarily coextensive with those that practice the *weex yeek*²⁾.



Photo 1 Dong women in GD Village, Linxi Township, Sanjiang County.



Figure 1 Residential area of Dong people ralated to this article



Photo 2 Collective banquet held in a gulou.



Photo 3 Collective banquet held in a village public square, in front of a stage.



Photo 4 A *lusheng* performance in a village public square, in front of a *gulou*.

2.2 Folk performing arts and village communities

By explaining their function, I argue for the importance of the folk performing arts in Dong village communities (Photo 5). In regard to folk performing arts, the Dong have Dong opera, *lusheng* accompanied by dances, *doh yeeh*, and songs. The Dong perform folk performing arts during the Chinese Lunar New Year, the mid-autumn festival (the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month), and on other occasions.

The *lusheng* is a traditional wind instrument made from bamboo. Among the ethnic minorities of Southwest China, the Miao, Dong, Shui, Kelao, Yi, Wa, Jinpo, and Lahu people play the *lusheng*. While among the Miao and Dong, inexperienced commoners play the *lusheng* and participate in group dances, other ethnic groups allow only professional performers to play the *lusheng*, and not as part of group. It is characteristic of the Dong and Miao that they allow the *lusheng* to be played in a group context (Zhang 1964: 47).

Regarding the *doh yeeh*, *doh* means “to sing” in the Dong language. *Yeeh* is a kind of collective dance accompanied by the singing of numerous people, who make a large circle, put their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them, and tap a rhythm by stepping. A lone lead singer recites; others respond. *Doh yeeh* performances have between 10 and 200 participants, all of whom are directed by a powerful singer. The women make a large circle, hold hands, swing their bodies lightly, move slowly, and sing in harmony (Yang 1993: 53).

Most Dong villages have Dong opera and *lusheng* troupes. These troupes’ performances are well attended by local people. Sometimes, collective banquets are held to accompany such performances in village squares.



Photo 5 Dong opera actresses of Guizhou Province.

In Dong village communities, these collective folk performing arts events and collective banquets serve as cultural devices that facilitate the gathering and intermingling of local people. Thus, Dong opera forges village cooperation.

Dong opera also forges connectedness between village communities. As mentioned above, Dong village communities engage in the inter-village practice of *weex yeek*. *Weex*, a verb, means “to do” in the Dong language. *Yeek*, a noun, means “guests coming in a group.” In *weex yeek*, villages engage in collective visitation activities and stage entertainments through collaboration.

Dong operas are staged during the agricultural off-season and during village celebrations. They are typically staged in the members’ home villages and are played only occasionally in the villages that members visit as guests in the practice of *weex yeek*.

2.3 Basic types of *weex yeek*

In Sanjiang County, *weex yeeks* based on folk performing arts repertoires can be classified into three types, as follows.

1) August *weex yeek* (old lunar calendar)

In what is known as the August *weex yeek* (the name is based on the old lunar calendar), men and women perform antiphonal songs. In Linxi Township and Dudong Township, local people sing antiphonal songs to promote unity between villages and deepen friendships between young men and women.

2) *Weex yeek leenc*

The *lusheng* is referred to as the *leenc* in the Dong language. Local Dong people engage in inter-village *lusheng* games. Although villages differ in when they play these games, all *lusheng* games are friendly, regardless of who wins and who loses. After the games the hosts receive guests at their homes for a meal. In some cases, the host village slaughters pigs and sheep for a feast or collective banquet. Afterwards, the game is restarted. It starts drawing to a close when the guest team plays a farewell piece; this is answered by the host team playing a farewell piece. Once members of both villages have had their enjoyment, the *yeek leenc* ends.

3) *Weex yeek heengl nyinc*

This refers to large-scale social activities carried out during the Chinese New Year festival period. In some cases, entire villages participate; between 50 and 200 guests of all ages visit host villages. Performances consist mainly of Dong operas, *lusheng*, and *doh yeeh*. Guest groups are led by respected old men. Upon arriving at the host village, guest villagers encounter blockades to entering the host village. These have been set up by young people from the host village, who are singing road-blocking songs. In response, young people from the guest village sing road-opening songs. Singing to each other, obstacles are gradually removed and, finally, the guests are allowed to enter the settlement. In the daytime, the people stage operas; at night, they play the *lusheng* game, sing songs, drink, celebrate the harvest, and enjoy the Chinese New Year festivities [Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian minzushiwu weiyuanhui 1989: 80].

Weex yeek is constituted of collective entertainment activities centered on the folk

performing arts and banquets. *Weex yeek* activities promote friendship between villages of both the same and different ethnic groups and between young boys and girls (Yang and Deng 1983: 259).

Weex yeek activities strengthen and foster inter-village connectedness. During such activities, all villagers in the host village entertain guests, which is significant. These activities enhance cohesiveness in host villages and in guest villages simultaneously, as the guests visit host villages in groups.

2.4 The *weex yeek* process

First, a village sends an inquiry letter to the village they want to visit. Obtaining the consent of the village, they consult regarding the day of the visit. Guests, called *yeex* in the Dong language, stay several nights (in the past, three to five) in the host village. Host villagers entertain guests by killing pigs and making feast dishes.

There is also a principle of reciprocity. On the next occasion, the previous host village and guest village exchange roles. The reciprocal *weex yeek* is called *peih yeek*. Local people do not want relations to end after a single event; thus, they engage in reciprocal visits, alternating in the roles of guest and host.

In *weex yeek* activities, it is a rule that relations defined by owing and paying back are developed between villages; this rule results in successive, reciprocal *weex yeek* activities (Zhang 2013). An actual example is as follows. In one initial *weex yeek* event, one pig was eaten every night; when the guest villagers left to return to their village, the host villagers gifted them the same number of pig heads as the number of nights they had stayed. In general, when host and guest villages switch roles, new relations defined by owing and paying back are forged. As an example, take a guest village that owes a host village two pig heads. In the next *weex yeek* event, if the previous host village were to stay two nights in the previous guest village, the debt would be over and new relations defined by owing and paying back would not be forged. However, if the previous host village were to stay three nights, they would then be receiving a gift and would “owe” the previous guest village one pig head; so, one pig head would be given to the previous host village as they returned to their village. If the previous host village were to stay four nights, they would be receiving a gift and would “owe” two pig heads (Xu et al. 1992: 62–63).

Through mutual exchanges in the roles of host village and guest village, local Dong people build ties and strengthen inter-village friendship and connectedness.

2.5 Folk performing arts and experts

To learn new Dong operas and obtain *lushengs*, villages must invite experts. Local people and their villages require the support of experts in maintaining and learning the folk performing arts.

In Linxi Township, *weex yeek lusheng* activities are held every two years, from June to August in the lunar calendar. Preparing for this requires either new *lushengs* or the repair of old ones. Only experts can make or repair *lushengs*. Local people in Linxi Township ask experts from Dupo Township, Tongdao County, Hunan Province, to come

to their village to make and repair *lushengs*; for this they pay a considerable cost.

Local people and villages seeking to learn Dong operas invite experts from other villages. These experts' stays are long term, and villages must pay a considerable cost. When villages seek to establish Dong opera troupes, it is the scripts that are particularly indispensable (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 18).

Dong people believe that respecting Dong opera experts is a virtue. Even the master of the house providing accommodation to an expert is very respected and honored by villagers. Every house takes turns to provide the expert with a meal. Dong people like to entertain guests; they rush to invite such experts to their homes (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 17, 59).

3. Diffusion of Dong Opera and Its Influence

In this section, I examine the diffusion of Dong opera, village Dong opera troupes, and Dong opera experts.

3.1 Creation and diffusion of Dong opera

As mentioned before, Dong operas are operas performed in the Dong language. About 180 years ago, a Dong farmer by the name of Wu Wencai (吴文彩; 1799–1845) from Liping County, Guizhou Province, translated a Han Chinese opera into the Dong language, creating the first work of Dong opera. Later, by adding Dong folklore and songs to Dong opera, he increased the repertoire of Dong opera.

Dong operas are performed within villages by village troupes. Typically, there is only one troupe per village, though large villages may have separate troupes for smaller village segments. Dong operas are performed by guest villages in host villages during *weex yeek* activities. Villages without Dong opera troupes are hindered in participating in *weex yeek* activities. Therefore, in order to learn Dong operas and establish Dong opera troupes, many villages invite Dong opera experts.

Dong opera diffused from Liping County, Guizhou Province, to other Dong areas: first to Congjiang County, Guizhou Province, and then in the 1950s to Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province; Sanjiang County and Longsheng County, Guangxi Province; and Tongdao County, Hunan Province.

Dong opera has diffused by the repeated circulation of experts. Although the movements of individual Dong opera experts and the routes by which diffusion has occurred have been reported (see Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986), such movements and routes have not yet been investigated in detail.

Dong opera experts are typically men. Most are peasants. Upon being invited by client villages, they travel to the villages to teach. They are quite different from traveling entertainers, such as wandering street performers. When invited from a distance, they live in the client villages they have been invited to, sometimes for in excess of a year. They provide Dong opera scripts for client villagers and teach them to perform.

3.2 Dong opera in Sanjiang County, Guangxi Province

In the following, I outline Dong opera in my study area, Sanjiang County. As mentioned above, Dong opera originated in Liping County, Guizhou Province, and diffused into Sanjiang County, Guangxi Province, by the movement of experts.

The history of Dong opera in Sanjiang County, Guangxi Province, is relatively short. In 1875, the first Dong opera script, which was from Guizhou Province, was disseminated in Guangxi Province (Sanjiang County). Since then, Dong operas have long been transmitted, intermittently, from Guizhou to Sanjiang. By 1984, 57 Dong opera experts from Guizhou had been invited to villages in Guangxi. This number reflects only people whose full names and home villages were known (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 23, 106–109).

Later, the apprentices from Sanjiang County, who had learned from experts from Guizhou, came to inherit Dong operas (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 23).

However, in addition to this practice of transmission to Sanjiang County, Sanjiang County has also produced its own Dong opera experts. In 1918, the Dong peasant Wu Jialong (吴家隆) from Jialie Village, Tongle Township, operatized a Han Chinese folktale to create the Dong opera “Liuzhiyuan” (刘志远). This is the first work of Dong opera to have been created in Sanjiang by local people (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 23, 104). It was reported that local peasants were heartened to see a Dong opera that they had originally created and written the script for performed by another village (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 102). It has also been reported that a government cultural center appointed a person specifically for the study of Dong opera (mentioned later).

Consequently, the number of experts of the Dong opera in Sanjiang County has substantially increased, as has the number of Dong opera scripts.

By 1985, 434 distinct Dong opera scripts could be seen in Sanjiang County, 28 (6.4%) of which had originated in Guizhou Province and 406 (93.6%) of which had been created in Sanjiang County.

By 1985, 125 authors and adapters of Dong opera had originated from Sanjiang County. The number of Dong opera scripts produced by experts from Sanjiang County is broken down by period in Table 1. Before liberation (1949), few Dong opera scripts were produced in Sanjiang, this number increased after liberation. However, in the 1960s,

Table 1 Sources of the Dong operas of Sanjiang County

Source	Number	%
Adaptations from traditional Han drama	165	40.6
Adaptations from modern Han drama	70	17.3
Adaptations from Dong folktales	45	11.0
Original works	136	31.1
Total number	406	100.0

production decreased because of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). After the Cultural Revolution, from the end of the 1970s to mid-1980s, the production of Dong opera scripts greatly increased in number.

Details regarding the origins of Dong operas in Sanjiang County are shown in Table 2. Dong villages have sought to acquire knowledge of operas that have originated from both Han and Dong cultures. There are more Dong operas that have been derived from Han folktales than from Dong folktales.

Table 2 Dong opera scripts produced by experts from Sanjiang County

Period	Number	%
Before liberation (1949)	10	2.5
1949–1960	57	14.0
1961–1970	26	6.4
1971–1980	140	34.5
1981–1985	173	42.6
Total	406	100.0

3.3 Changes in *weex yeek* activities in Sanjiang County

In the following, I outline changes in *weex yeek* activities in Sanjiang County from the Republican-era to after the reform and opening era.

A Local Gazette of Sanjiang County in the Republic of China Era ([民国] 三江县志), published in 1946, mentions *weex yeek*. Before liberation (1949), *weex yeek* activities typically included *lusheng* performances, dragon and lion dances, and antiphonal-style songs. Men played the *lusheng*. Antiphonal-style songs were sung by men and women to each other. The text mentions neither *guiju* nor Dong opera as part of *weex yeek* activities³). This is because neither *guiju* nor Dong opera had been introduced to most of the rural Dong villages in Sanjiang County at that time.

As mentioned above, the first Dong opera, which originated in Guizhou Province, first arrived in Sanjiang County in 1875. The opera arrived in Linxi Township, my study area, in the 1940s. I conducted fieldwork in Linxi Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Province. The township (*xiang*) is a rural administrative unit under the county. The total population of Linxi Township is about 34,100, of whom 32,500 were Dong as of the end of 2012. Linxi Township includes 65 villages; the village I researched was GD Village.

According to my interviews, as in other Dong areas⁴), *guiju* was introduced to Linxi Township before Dong opera. *Guiju* began to be introduced in Sanjiang County in 1913. In the Republic of China period (1911–1949), there were 14 private *guiju* troupes in Sanjiang County, including in Dong areas and in Linxi Township. Between liberation (1949) and 1985, the county had 73 private *guiju* troupes, including in Dong villages (Liuzhou diqu xiquzhi bianxiezhu 1986: 40–41).

Guiju was exclusively performed by men. After being introduced in these communities, it was added to *weex yeek* repertoires. In my research area, *guiju* was introduced earlier than were Dong operas. *Guiju* is a kind of local Han Chinese opera popular in Guilin and Liuzhou, Guangxi Province. *Guiju* was performed in a Chinese dialect from Guangxi; consequently, in the past, female Dong audience members could neither understand nor perform *guiju* because only men were able to speak Chinese. In GD Village, works of *guiju* military opera were introduced (Photo 6).

Subsequently, Dong operas were introduced in Dong villages and added to *weex yeek* repertoires (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 94). To ensure that their *weex yeek* activities were consistently interesting, it was necessary for local villages to gain new operas to enhance their repertoires. One local person said to me that without the Dong opera troupe, it would be difficult to pass the time during the *weex yeek*.

After liberation, *guiju* gave way to Dong opera. The main *weex yeek* performance is referred to as the *weex yeek xil* in the Dong language; operas are the main *weex yeek* performances. *Xil* means drama or opera. The first instance of Dong opera experts being invited to a village to teach Dong opera occurred in 1947, when a village invited Dong opera experts from Pilin Village, Liping County, Guizhou Province, to teach them two Dong opera scripts (Table 3).

After 1950, locals stopped sending invitations to Dong opera experts from Guizhou Province and began to create operas on their own. In 1952, Huangchao Village established a Dong opera troupe. An intellectual in the village, Wu Jujing (吴居敬),



Photo 6 A temporary revival of *guiju* opera in GD Village in 2007.

Table 3 Introduction of Dong opera to Linxi Township

Period	Number of established <i>Dong opera</i> troupes	%
Before 1949	1 (in 1947)	4.3
1950–1959	9	39.1
1960–1969	2	8.7
1970–1979	5	21.7
1980–1985	6	26.3
Total	23	100.0

adapted Dong folk songs to create Dong opera scripts. Later, the scripts he created were disseminated to neighboring villages.

However, during the Great Leap Forward (大跃进), which began in 1958, customs that in the judgment of the local authorities hindered agricultural production were prohibited. In Sanjiang County, *weex yeek* activities were prohibited as a “wasteful habit”. From the Four Cleanups Movement (四清运动) to the end of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命), even playing the *lusheng* was prohibited. Dong operas were forcibly transformed into revolutionary model operas (革命样板戏).

With Deng Xiaoping’s shift to a policy of reform and opening-up in 1979, prohibited folk performing arts such as Dong operas and the *lusheng*, as well as *weex yeek* activities, were revived.

3.4 Influences of the introduction of Dong operas in villages

Regarding the introduction of Dong operas in villages, the following two points are relevant.

- 1) Both Han Chinese and Dong folktales became dramatized in Dong operas, substantially expanding village entertainment repertoires.
- 2) Villagers without Chinese language skills, especially women (who in the past could neither understand nor enjoy Han Chinese folktales), could act in Dong operas.

Before liberation, Dong operas were exclusively performed by men⁵⁾. After liberation, women began to perform in Dong operas. The Chinese Communist Party’s gender equality policies influenced this⁶⁾ (Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqu bianjizu 1987: 20; Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 59; Wu 2004: 51). However, the most important factor promoting the participation of Dong women in Dong operas was that there were no linguistic barriers to their participation.

4. Role of Dong Opera Experts and Reasons for Inviting Them

I focus on one male expert who has taught in several villages. I present field data related to his history of being invited to various villages as well as the knowledge and skills he offered his clients.

Using interviews with a famous Dong opera expert living in GD Village, Master QWZ, I examine the role of Dong opera experts in villages to which they are invited and the reasons villages invite experts.

Among Dong opera experts who were inhabitants of Sanjiang, at least 36 experts had been to other villages in Sanjiang County or other counties to teach Dong opera between 1942 and 1984. Destinations in other counties included Rongshui County, Guangxi Province (one expert); Congjiang County (three experts) and Liping County (two experts), Guizhou Province; and Tongdao County, Hunan Province (seven experts) (Sanjiang Dongzu zizhixian wenhuaguan 1986: 110–112).

4.1 Brief biography of Master QWZ

To briefly introduce the entertainment career of Master QWZ, he was born in 1943 and grew up in GD Village. On February 6, 1966, he passed an audition and was hired by the Sanjiang County Cultural Center. In the capital of Sanjiang County, he learned dance from students of the Central Institute for Nationalities (中央民族学院) from Beijing, and performed in a Han Chinese political drama, *Quanjia bing* (全家兵), with them.

When the Cultural Revolution began a few months later, QWZ and the students were intensely criticized for political reasons. He fled to his home village. By 1974, he had worked in construction in Sanjiang County for five years. Between 1974 and 1981, he taught drama and performed in the county as a temporary staff member of the Sanjiang County Cultural Center. At the end of the 1970s, he was offered a job at Linxi Township Cultural Station but refused because of its low salary: 40 yuan per month.

While working in the cultural center, he received a salary of 75 yuan per month from the center. However, when he taught Dong opera in rural farm villages, he was able to get 100 yuan or more a month from the villagers. Moreover, villagers offered good meals for him every day. Teaching in farm villages, he had to pay one yuan a day (30 yuan a month) to the county cultural center in return. In the end, he decided to resign his post at the Sanjiang County Cultural Center and began a series of long-term stints teaching Dong operas in farming villages.

4.2 Master QWZ's instruction in GD Village

Before liberation (1949), GD Village had a *guiju* troupe but not a Dong opera troupe. Villagers learned *guiju* operas by inviting experts from among the Liujia people (六甲人), a Han sub-group. At the time, local people came to perform *guiju* in *weex yeek* activities.

After the Four Cleanups Movement in 1964, Dong operas began to be performed in GD Village. However, these operas were political works espousing the propaganda of Mao Zedong's thought and learning from Lei Feng's spirit of serving others.

After leaving his home village, QWZ worked in other villages until February 6, 1992. He occasionally went back to his home village to teach Dong operas and cultivate disciples. After returning to his home village in 1992, QWZ began to spread Dong opera in his home village in earnest. Nowadays, *guiju* has completely given way to Dong opera in GD Village.

QWZ has developed new Dong operas and produced many scripts (Photo 7).

Traumatized by his experience of political criticism in 1966, he has carefully avoided political content. He has taught village lines, songs, and actions to village actors and actresses (Photo 8).

Master QWZ's works can be classified into the following three categories.

- 1) Adaptations from Han drama
- 2) Retellings of Dong operas written by others
- 3) Dramatizations of folktales

The majority of his works belong to the third group. Master QWZ has dramatized Dong, Han, and Miao folktales; most of the folktales he has dramatized originate from the Han.

Although Master QWZ has written few original works of Dong opera, he has also produced secondary materials—both published books written in Chinese, which include Han, Dong, and Miao folktales, and texts on the oral tradition of the Dong language.

4.3 Master QWZ's instruction in other villages

Master QWZ accepted offers to teach Dong opera from nine villages, not only in Sanjiang County but also in Longsheng County, Guangxi, and Tongdao County, Hunan; each of these stints lasted for one or two years (Tables 4, 5 and Fig. 2). His scripts have been disseminated not only within Sanjiang County but also in Tongdao County, Hunan Province.

Not all of the villages where he taught Dong opera were Dong villages; Table 6 shows the villages he taught in by ethnic group. The non-Dong villages that extended invitations to Master QWZ were of three ethnic groups.

1) Miao (Hmong)

Master QWZ taught Dong opera in Meng Village and Ao Village between 1981 and 1984; the villages face each other across a river. The villages are both part of Tongle Township, Sanjiang County. The population of Miao people in Tongle Township is relatively large: as of 1992, there were 16,496 Miao people and 17,410 Dong people. Whereas Meng Village is Dong, Ao Village is Miao. The Miao language and Dong language are quite different from each other. However, the Miao people of Ao Village learned to perform Dong operas in the Dong language.

2) Cao Miao (Grass Miao)

Master QWZ taught Dong opera in Shangya Village between 1985 and 1986. Shangya Village is part of Dudong Township, Sanjiang County; the village is inhabited by Cao Miao (Grass Miao) people. The village is located on a mountain. The Cao Miao are an ethnic group in a strange position. Although they are classified as Miao people by the national ethnic classification, their language is almost identical to that of the Dong people. Nevertheless, the Dong and Miao do not recognize each other as part of the same ethnic group.

3) Yao

Master QWZ taught Dong opera in Shifu Village in 1992. The village is part of Pingdeng

Table 4 Master QWZ's teaching experience in other villages

Period	Village	Township	County	Province
I: 1981 and 1982, two years	Meng	Tongle	Sanjiang	Guangxi
II: 1983 and 1984, two years	Ao	Tongle	Sanjiang	Guangxi
III: 1985 and 1986, two years	Shangya	Dudong	Sanjiang	Guangxi
IV: 1987, one year	Jiangtou	Bajiang	Sanjiang	Guangxi
V: 1988, one year	Guitang	Bajiang	Sanjiang	Guangxi
VI: 1989, one year	Dima	Tuantou	Tongdao	Hunan
VII: 1990, one year	Fengmu	Linxi	Sanjiang	Guangxi
VIII: 1991, one year	Mapan Ai	Bajiang	Sanjiang	Guangxi
IX: 1992, one and a half months	Shifu	Pingdeng	Longsheng	Guangxi

Table 5 Examples of the Dong operas Master QWZ taught in other villages

Village	Dong operas taught
I: Meng Village	粉妝樓、喜隊長
II: Ao Village	秀銀与吉妹
III: Shangya Village	粉妝樓、姐妹回娘家、通洲相会、李旦鳳姣、小包公、二度梅大審張奎
VI: Jiangtou Village	粉妝樓、尋兒記、春草園堂
VII: Guitang Village	鉄郎与茶妹、粉妝樓、姐妹易嫁、李旦鳳姣
VI: Dima Village	粉妝樓、尋兒記、難公淚、李旦鳳姣、苦三娘、毛洪玉英、門龍肖女
VII: Fengmu Village	粉妝樓、親兄怒
VIII: Mapan Ai Village	難公淚、李旦鳳姣、鉄郎与茶妹、張三李仕、蒋興哥重会珍珠衫、尋兒記
IX: Shifu Village	—

Township, Longsheng County, Guangxi Province, and is inhabited by Dong and Yao people. The village is 15 kilometers away from the center of Pingdeng Township, which is majority Dong. The village has about 40 houses. Dong men of this village are married to women from the village of Yao. Even though the Yao language differs greatly from the Dong language, the Yao residents of Shifu Village sought to learn Dong opera from a Dong opera expert. Because their lifestyle was too unsanitary for QWZ to endure, he fled in about a month and half. He gave very little instruction on Dong opera in Shifu Village. However, what is important is the fact that these Yao villagers were interested in learning Dong opera and expressly invited an expert to their village.

Non-Dong ethnic villagers have sought to learn Dong opera itself. They have not sought to learn Dong opera to determine how to establish operas in their own languages; rather, as Master QWZ indicated, such villagers learn Dong operas in order to join *weex yeek* activities.

The three villages of non-Dong people that sought to learn Dong opera from Master

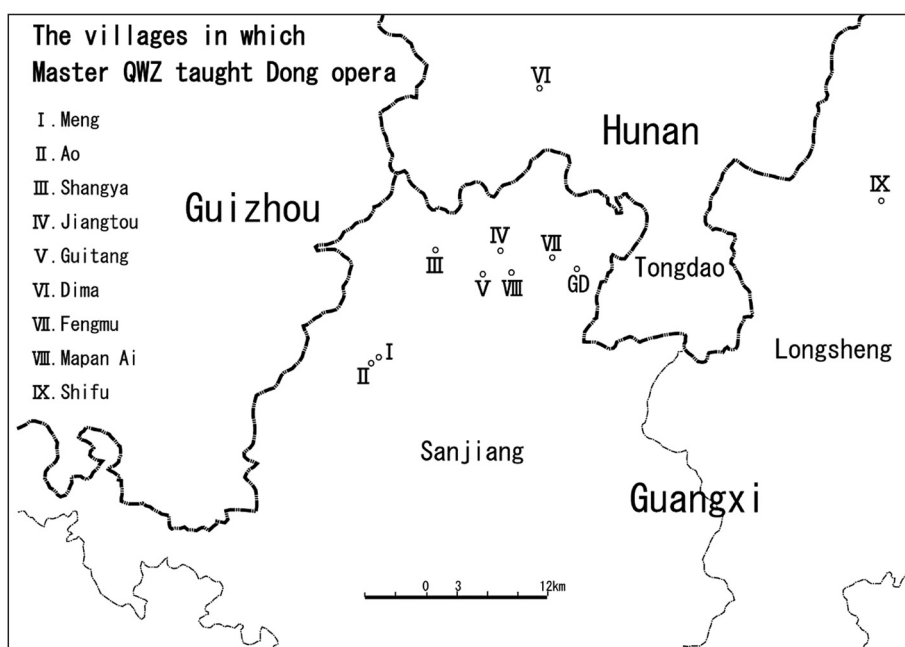


Figure 2 The villages in which Master QWZ taught Dong opera

Table 6 Breakdown by ethnic group

Village	Ethnic group
I: Meng Village	Dong
II: Ao Village	Miao
III: Shangya Village	Cao Miao
VI: Jiangtou Village	Dong
VII: Guitang Village	Dong
VI: Dima Village	Dong
VII: Fengmu Village	Dong
VIII: Mapan Ai Village	Dong
IX: Shifu Village	Dong & Yao

QWZ were all adjacent to Dong areas. *Weex yeek* is a crucial cultural device to forge connectedness between Dong and non-Dong villages. Among the folk performing arts that villages participating in *weex yeek* activities are expected to have in their repertoires, Dong opera takes pride of place.

In Rongshui County, Miao and Dong villages hold *datongnians*; in these events, the *lusheng*, not Dong opera, has pride of place (Peng 2013: 11, 19, 28). Consequently, there are no ethnic limitations to *datongnian* participation. People of all villages, as long as they can play the *lusheng*, are allowed to participate (Peng 2013: 45). Peng argues that it

is possible to call the villages that participate in *datongnians* as comprising a “*lusheng* cultural sphere” (Peng 2013: 28). All *lushengs* used in Peng’s study area had been introduced from Guizhou. In the view of local people, the *lusheng* was invented by people from Guizhou and *lushengs* should thus be made by experts from Guizhou. *Lusheng*-making is not a skill anyone can grasp but, rather, is an inherited skill (Peng 2013: 29).

The Dong villages in my study area were not satisfied with the *lusheng* performances that were already part of their repertoires. They introduced Dong operas and included them in their *weex yeek* activities. In response to this trend among Dong people, nearby non-Dong villages began to invite Dong opera experts to their villages to learn Dong opera in order to participate in *weex yeek* activities; in so doing, they have tried to make this cultural resource their own.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the core function of the folk performing arts has been to forge intra-village cooperation and inter-village connectedness. Originally, *weex yeek* activities practiced by the Dong forged connectedness among villages. The folk performing arts are indispensable to participation in *weex yeek* activities. *Weex yeek* repertoires have changed over time. The *lusheng* and *doh yeek* were introduced first; operas were introduced later. *Guiju* operas were added to *weex yeek* repertoires before Dong operas.

Dong villages have varying levels of knowledge and skill related to the folk performing arts. Learning Dong operas requires learning from experts. Villages have facilitated the movement of experts by inviting them to come teach.

Dong opera experts are able to write original scripts. Originally, Dong living in Guangxi Province had no Dong opera experts; however, later, Guangxi Province came to produce its own experts. The experts from Sanjiang County went on to teach in Guangxi and Hunan Provinces. Many villages have invited renowned Dong opera experts to come teach.

Gender roles in the folk performing arts were transformed by the introduction of Dong operas to villages alongside the promotion of gender equality policy by the government after the 1950s. Dong women, who were not able to speak Chinese, came to be able to enjoy operas and participate as performers.

There are many cases of Dong operas being introduced in non-Dong villages. These non-Dong villages have been located close to Dong areas and have sought to learn Dong opera in order to participate in *weex yeek* activities and forge connectedness with Dong villages. For this purpose, residents of non-Dong villages have paid out of their own pockets to invite Dong opera experts to their villages.

Like the Miao and Dong villages that constitute the “*lusheng* cultural sphere” in Rongshui County, in associations that have been forged among Dong villages in Sanjiang County, Dong opera has been the nucleus. Furthermore, such associations have included nearby Miao and Cao Miao villages. The villages participating in these associations may be referred to as a “Dong opera cultural sphere”.

The Dong opera cultural sphere has been formed by the circulation of Dong opera experts. In the future, more examples of the movement of the Dong opera experts are necessary to clarify how connectedness is forged among villages in this area.

Notes

- 1) The Dong language has nine tones. In Romanized Dong, the last letter of each phoneme denotes the tone of the phoneme as follows: l(55), p(35), c(11), s(323), t(13), x(31), v(53), k(453), h(33).
- 2) For the concrete geographical range of each *kuan*, refer to Hunan shaoshu minzu guji bangongshi 1988: 7–43.
- 3) 打同年 侗人之走同年、尤為熱烈、擴大、暇時村与村間之相悅者互相邀集、女子皆青年、男則無分老少、結隊以應隣村之約、侗話曰「月也」、赴約時、奏蘆管、更有舞龍舞獅者、徒手而往者甚少也。甲村邀乙村、至時、甲村男女老少必出迎、宰猪牛以款客、日夕集於鼓樓或曠坪、男女排列對坐、或至二三十人、奏笙歌、互酬答、長夜聚叙不倦、必盡其歡。居二三日始返、亦有隣村遙相迎致者。翌年乙村必邀甲村以答情、款待歡叙如之、侗話曰“卑也”(Jiang 1975 [1946]: 153).
- 4) In many Dong areas, Han operas were introduced earlier than were Dong operas (Yao 2012: 34–35, Zhang 2013: 93, and Lu 1992: 457).
- 5) In Dong villages in southeastern Guizhou Province during the Republic of China era, young village men performed Dong operas for audiences of young women, both from the same village and from other villages. Women made the actors' clothes; the men expressed their appreciation by performing Dong operas (Wei 1947: 78).
- 6) The Dong opera troupe of Zhuping Village, Liping County, Guizhou Province, consisted of men until 1958; men played women. With the emphasis on gender equality during the Great Leap Forward in 1958, women began to perform in Dong operas in Zhuping Village. At the time, some elderly people felt that women performing in operas was a mark against public morality. In 1991, the 11 actors in the village Dong opera troupe were all women and women played men (Wu 2004: 51–52).

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