

# The Analysis To Ritual Music Of "Po-Ya Song Book" Of Zhuang People In Yunnan, China

Bin Sun<sup>1</sup>, Asst. Prof. Dr. Chutima Maneewattana<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The communal gathering within a village, exemplified by the "Longduan Fair," signifies the integration of individuals into collective life. Antiphonal singing, serving as an intermediary between the individual and the collective, is recognized as a structured and systematic behavior. This encompasses traditional regularities, fixed procedures for antiphonal songs, and the intergenerational transmission of these songs. In the context of ritualistic exhibitions, music assumes a role as the patterned and structured component. The antiphonal singing, observed between male and female singers in various regions of China, manifests diverse forms. For instance, the antiphonal song of the Po-Ya songbook among the Zhuang people in Yunnan Province adheres to 81 distinct patterns from the songbook, thereby fully revealing its unique characteristics.*

**Key words:** *Po-Ya Songbook; Antiphonal Song; Zhuang Folk Song; Ritual.*

## 1. Introduction

Antiphonal singing in Chinese folk songs, particularly between male and female singers in village communities, exhibits a rich diversity, with unique forms such as the "flower antiphonal song" of the northwest temple fair, the "festival antiphonal song" of the Zhuang people in Guangxi Province, the "Zuo Tang song" of the Miao people, the "Lang Sao" of the Buyi people, and the Yi people's "Hua Yin Po" and "Shua Ge Tang," all representing distinctive local customs in antiphonal singing (Fowlie, 1990: 201). The author's recent focus on the Zhuang Po-ya songbook has involved exploring both the explicit and implicit ritual values embedded in this form of antiphonal singing (Fowlie, 1990: 202). Implicit rituals are discerned in the unconscious behaviors of singers, encompassing aspects such as ritual yearning for sacred places and times, group morality, communication and identity, predictable repetitive behavior, and object usage (Altizer & Beardslee, 1962: 120). Explicit ritual characteristics, distinct from the soundscape of religious rituals, contribute to the repetitive, structured, and patterned traditional behavior of the song (Altizer & Beardslee, 1962: 121-122). This structured antiphonal song, specific to the Yunnan Zhuang ethnic

---

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand.

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand.

group, unfolds within a defined context and refers to the patterned and standardized explicit behavioral processes in folk antiphonal singing traditions (Langer, 1980: 100-110).

The traditional structure preserved in the antiphonal singing process between male and female singers is continuously elaborated in the Po-ya songbook, featuring multiple steps and tune sequences. The music and form of antiphonal singing in the Zhuang dialect area of Yunnan Province differ from those in the Zhuang dialect area of Guangxi Province. The Po-ya Song Book of the Yunnan Zhuang ethnic group follows a fixed script, depicting the progression of a man and a woman from initial meeting to being together (Tian Liandao, 2001: 10-15). Typically, antiphonal singing commences in the afternoon or evening after large-scale festive gatherings, and participants often continue singing at night or even throughout the night in public venues nearby. The Po-ya songbook, specific to the Butu branch of the Zhuang people in Funing County, incorporates the oldest performance and song melodies, featuring flexible and varied singing styles in antiphonal fashion. With 2,000 to 3,000 songs preserved in the Butu branch, this collection is extensive (Chenli & QiQingfu, 2006: 30-31).

Due to its dual geographical location in the Pearl River Basin and the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, Po-ya Village's performance and songs are recorded in ancient Zhuang characters and sung in the southern dialect of the Zhuang language. The unique features of the Po-ya songbook include the incorporation of love songs for expression and narration, the use of "Fenbe" (spoken part) for collective lyric recall, and the close resemblance of the spoken tune to a form of "chanting" between speech and singing. These characteristics align with the "rites" and "etiquette" upheld in Chinese Han Nationality dramas and operas (Zhou Youguang, 1988: 28-30; Liu Chenghua, 2002: 40-42). The Po-ya songbook stands out for its transmission and summarization of scripts and singing through various forms, recorded and sung in the southern dialect of Zhuang (Wang Wenguang & Li Xiaobin, 2007) (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Tunes of Yunan Zhuang Po-ya Songbook

Name of the tunes		The form of the melody	Mood	Branch	Distribution area	Form of Performance
Zhuang Language	Chinese					
Fen Da Lao	Da-he Tune	Monophonic	Moderate narration	Butu branch	Boai River bank	Antiphonal singing between male and female singer
Fen E Ai	Po-ya Tune	Monophonic	Strong emotion and fast-paced	Buyue branch	Guichao, Naneng areas	Antiphonal singing between male and female singer

Fen Guo Mang (Ma)	Ba-Jiao Tune	Monophonic	Long narration, calm and emotional	Butu branch	Zhesang, Boai, Gula areas	Antiphonal singing between male and female singer
-------------------	--------------	------------	------------------------------------	-------------	---------------------------	---

While the aim of exploration of antiphonal singing in Chinese folk songs, particularly within the context of the Zhuang Po-ya songbook, has shed light on various ritual values and cultural nuances, several research gaps still persist, that's identification of study gaps.

## 2. Analysis of the Three Melody Tunes

The melodies in the Po-ya songbook can be categorized into three distinct terms, each representing a characteristic musical form of Zhuang folk music in Yunnan due to differences in their musical structure (Kuang & He, 2022). The Po-ya songbook, a cultural treasure in Yunnan, unveils a fascinating array of melodies, each contributing to the diverse musical landscape of Zhuang folk music. Recent research by Kuang and He (2022) sheds light on the classification of these melodies into three distinct terms, revealing the intricate musical structures unique to Zhuang traditions.

Unraveling Musical Diversity; Zhuang folk music, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Yunnan, is characterized by its rich diversity. The Po-ya songbook, a reservoir of cultural expressions, serves as a valuable repository for understanding the nuances of Zhuang musical traditions. Kuang and He's (2022) research discerns three distinct terms within this songbook, each representing a specific musical form.

Categorization of Melodies; The three identified terms offer a structured framework for comprehending the musical variations present in the Po-ya songbook. Among these, the Antiphonal Song of Da-he Tune, locally known as "Fen Da Lao," stands out as a significant representative (Liu Bingshan, 2009: 90-92). This term encapsulates a unique blend of male and female monophonic voices, portraying a neat form of antiphonal singing that spans several hours. The intricate musical series, termed "Anticipation," forms the basic unit of the antiphonal song, showcasing the deep-rooted traditions preserved in the Po-ya songbook.

Cultural Significance; The musical diversity uncovered in the Po-ya songbook is not merely an auditory delight but a testament to the cultural richness of the Zhuang people. These distinct musical forms not only contribute to the sonic identity of Zhuang folk music but also offer a glimpse into the historical, social, and labor-related aspects of their lives. Da-he Tune, with its origin linked to riverbank activities, reflects the symbiotic relationship between Zhuang culture and the natural environment.

Future Explorations; Kuang and He's (2022) work paves the way for future explorations into Zhuang folk music. Understanding the musical structures and cultural contexts embedded in the Po-ya songbook opens avenues for further research on the evolution of

these melodies, their role in ceremonies, and their impact on the cultural identity of Zhuang communities.

The Po-ya songbook serves as a treasure trove of Zhuang folk music, and Kuang and He's (2022) categorization provides a valuable framework for comprehending the musical intricacies within. As we delve deeper into the melodic nuances of Zhuang traditions, we uncover not just musical notes but the vibrant tapestry of a rich cultural heritage.

### **3. Antiphonal Song of Da-he Tune "Fen Da Lao"**

The Da-he tune, locally known as "Fen Da Lao" (Liu Bingshan, 2009: 104-105), initiates with men singing "A-Nuo-Wo-Nee..." while women commence with "A-Guo-Wo-Nee..." in Zhuang language, where "A-Nuo" means "girl" and "A-Guo" means "boy." The term "Da Lao" in "Fen Da Lao" translates to river bank, suggesting its origin from tunes sung during fishing and work along the river. Popular in the Putu branch along the Boai Town river in Funing County, locals in Po-ya village refer to it as "Da-he Mountain Song." Situated in a low-lying area, meters above sea level, with merging rivers, fishing along the rivers became a significant labor activity, giving rise to the "Fen Da Lao" tune. Typically, the songs consist of three lines, termed 3-line songs, with end rhymes, structured in 7 or 8 lines per period during the antiphon. Each line comprises seven characters, with rhymes of one and two characters. Contrary to a fixed tune in antiphonal singing, the lyrics fluctuate, strictly adhering to the antiphonal song steps (Tuohy, 1991). Da-he tune is the predominant melody in the Po-ya songbook.

The Da-he tune involves mixed male and female monophonic voices, creating a neat form of antiphonal singing that may span several hours. Despite lyrical and thematic changes, the melody typically revolves around a musical series, often repeated until the song's conclusion. In the Po-ya region, Da-he tune is generally composed of three phrases, occasionally refined into variations by the singer. Each musical series comprises four notes: G, A, C, and D, with G and D appearing at the beginning and end. This melodic cycle, continually starting and concluding, constitutes the basic unit of the antiphonal song, known as "Anticipation." The melody, structured into three phrases, emphasizes G as the main note in the tetrameter, with brief appearances of E notes in ornamentation. G exerts a strong centripetal force over A, C, and D. The ending pattern involves a constant repetition of the G note, culminating in a wandering pattern at the end. The last two phrases serve as an emphasis and variation of the preceding melody, signaling the end of a musical series. Following a brief pause, the singer proceeds with the next musical series of the song. (See Figure 2)



**Figure 2** Antiphonal Song of Da-he Tune "Fen Da Lao"

#### 4. Antiphonal song of Po-ya tune "Fen Er Ai"

The song starts with the padding words "Yiyo Niwoyee ....." (Liu Bingshan, 2009: 90). The Zhuang people in Funing, Guizhao, Dongpo, and Naneng often use this tune in antiphonal songs. The melody is mostly composed of "Er" and "Lien" (Wang Yuanlu, 1996: 112-114), which are used alternatively. The song usually contains at least five lines, some of which are more than ten. The combination of adding words and tones always makes for improvisation and flexibility. "Er" is used in the invitation and farewell parts of the song as the beginning and the end. The "3-phrases" song of "Fen Da Lao" and "Fen Er Ai" of Po-ya tune both refer to improvised and short songs, which are flexible, versatile, random and improvisational, except for the specific scenes of the Po-ya song book, they are used in the rest of the time and different scenarios, as well as in the invitation and farewell songs as the opening and conclusion in the antiphonal singing. In addition, "Er" is also applied in expressing the development process of the friendship and sentiment between the male and female singers.

"Fen Er Ai" tune is similar to "Fen Guo Ma" tune, which is a male and female duet in the form of heterophony, in other words, it is a variation of repeatedly revolves around a musical series in a existed unique form of Chinese folk music. The main characteristic of the song is that it is sung in accordance with the words. The melody is composed of five phrases, and revolves around the four tones of Gong, Shang, Zhi and Yu, each phrase being completed at one stretch. Although the tone structure of "Fen Er Ai" is similar to that of "Fen Da Lao", but the musical character and color of the two are very different. Although the range of "Fen Er Ai" tune spans from the e of unaccented octave to the c of one-lined octave, the tones involved mostly flow between the minor and major second of the e of unaccented octave to the c of one-lined octave, with the B of unaccented octave only stopping briefly as a passing tone. This is different from the form of "Anticipation" and "revolve around" of "Fen Da Lao", where the keynote is the 5th. The melodic tones are densely distributed, except for the beginning and ending tones, which are in the varied second interval, and the singers usually embellish their voice on the position of "Shang" (Liu Bingshan, 2009: 110-113), which makes the tune very characteristic and often gives people a sense of melancholy. (See Figure 3)



**Figure 3** The Voice on the Position of “Shang”

### 5. Antiphonal song of Ba-jiao (star anise) tune “Fen Guo Mang(Ma)”

“Fen Guo Ma” starts with the lyric of "Beya-nyee ....." (Liu Bingshan, 2009: 114). The meaning of "guoma" is "star anise", which means that this tune was originally sung during the harvesting of star anise. Funing is one of the main production areas of star anise in China. Star anise, commonly known as main fragrance spice in the northern China, is an evergreen broad-leaved tree. Its fruit, leaves and tree trunk are valuable, and is considered as the "money tree" by farmers in Funing. Picking star anise became an important production activity for the Zhuang people in Funing. Since Zhuang people love to sing during working, they soon developed Ba-Jiao (star anise) tune basis on their rich resources of folk songs “Fen Guo Ma”. “Fen Guo Ma” was originated from Ba-jiao (star anise) tune. It is mentioned that “Fen Er Ai” tune is similar to "Fen Guo Ma" tune, both of them repeatedly revolves around a musical series. “Fen Guo Ma” is composed of 8 lines with 2 lines as a pair. Each song is based on G, A, C, D, E and G as the keynote of the pentatonic mode, G in A, C, D has a strong centripetal force, the female voice range from G of one-lined octave to the G of two-lined octave, male and female voices start at the same time steadily. Although the range is mostly progressive, the transition between Falsetto and Real Voice is natural, frequent and flexible. The Falsetto and Real Voice transform between major second, minor third and perfect fourth respectively, making and the whole piece melodious and graceful like a bird song. In particular, the coda ends with a real-falsetto transition between major second and minor second, which sounds like a virtuosity on real-falsetto transition (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4** The Falsetto and Real Voice

The three types of melodies mentioned above in Po-ya songbooks have similarity, which is the essential steps of antiphonal song: invitation, answer, narration, and farewell. The ritual process and the dramatic twist of antiphonal singing are based on the course of life: meeting, acquaintance, affection, deep love and finally farewell between male and female singer (Liu Bingshan, 2009: 113-114). Each procedure has a fixed content, especially the narrative song sung after affection, according Po-ya song book as reference. Nowadays, few singers can memorize the contents of songbooks, and most of them have a strong reliance on songbooks, lacking the spirit of improvisation and battling. Zhuang people rely on the songbook to aid their memory, and sometimes the new antiphonal songs are developed from the fixed lyrics in the songbook by few variations. Although there are a large number of antiphonal songs in the history of the Zhuang in China, the Po-ya song of Boai Village is the highlight of Zhuang antiphonal songs in Yunnan. Parts of Zhuang nighttime antiphonal songs seem to follow the theatrical performance with a fixed script, displaying the "structuring" (Perin, 1980: 189-190). It constitutes the symbolic imagery of ritual antiphonal songs together with implicit ritual features such as sacred time, sacred place, group morality and values, communication and identity, and games (Schettler, 1997: 230-233); the literary script of the antiphonal songs ritual of the Po-ya songbook also presents a "non-daily" symbolic communication meaning, in which the members of the ritual are able to find local cultural identity and share transcend daily experience in the process of antiphonal songs interaction. The two parties share the dramatic rhythmic tension during antiphonal singing and during the transition in a structural process (Stewart, 1996: 98-100). The attitude of Zhuang people toward the antiphonal singing can be seen from the cultural arrangement of duet singers and the elaborate ritual scripts in antiphonal songs in the southern Zhuang dialect area. They attach importance to a certain antiphonal singing experience with someone in a certain village, and even long after that, both singer remain deeply immersed in it. Since from invitation ---answer--- affection to deep in love, the mutual understanding and affection between the male and female singer are pushed forward as the singing progressing (Li Kunsheng, 2001: 30-31), meanwhile, in the common respect and recognition of national traditions and value orientation, the social and emotional interactions between the male and female singers are established. As the antiphonal singing goes ups and downs, the beautiful voice of singing and the sound of flipping the songbook can be heard by the audience. The perfect match of male and female voices, the long lasted singing and the deep love and friendship between the singers will become their unforgettable life experiences.

## 6. Conclusion

In this research, we delved into the enchanting world of Zhuang folk music through the lens of the Po-ya songbook, situated in the dual geographical expanse of the Pearl River Basin and the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. By exploring the unique features of this cultural treasure, our analysis has unearthed profound insights into the ritual music practices embedded within the Zhuang community in Yunnan, China.

Cultural and Geographical Context of Po-ya Village's dual geographical location, encapsulated in ancient Zhuang characters and sung in the southern dialect of the Zhuang language, forms the backdrop of this musical journey. The significance of this region lies not only in its geographical diversity but in the cultural richness woven into the musical traditions of its people. Distinctive Features of the Po-ya Songbook of the Po-ya songbook stands out for its distinctive characteristics, incorporating love songs for expression and narration. The utilization of "Fenbe" for collective lyric recall, coupled with the close resemblance of the spoken tune to a form of "chanting," aligns with established "rites" and "etiquette" observed in Chinese Han Nationality dramas and operas. This unique blend of cultural elements is documented in ancient Zhuang characters, creating a multifaceted tapestry of cultural expression.

Musical diversity in term of three melody tunes involve of the melodies within the Po-ya songbook reveal a rich tapestry of Zhuang folk music. Kuang and He's categorization into three distinct terms—Da-he Tune "Fen Da Lao," Po-ya Tune "Fen Er Ai," and Ba-Jiao Tune "Fen Guo Mang(Ma)"—provides a structured framework for understanding the diverse musical forms embedded in this cultural heritage. Significance of melodies in antiphonal song of Da-he Tune of the in-depth analysis of the Da-he Tune, locally known as "Fen Da Lao," unravels the cultural significance deeply rooted in the daily life and labor activities of the Zhuang people. Its connection to riverbank activities, fishing, and the subsequent evolution into a structured antiphonal singing tradition demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between Zhuang culture and the natural environment.

Cultural significance and future explorations of the research underscores that the Po-ya songbook is not merely a compilation of melodies but a repository of cultural significance. These melodies, with their fixed scripts and structured performances, serve as a medium for symbolic communication, sharing cultural identity, and transcending daily experiences within the Zhuang community. As we conclude this exploration into the ritual music of the "Po-Ya Song Book" of Zhuang People in Yunnan, China, it is evident that the research by Kuang and He has opened a gateway for further exploration. Future endeavors could delve into the evolution of these melodies, their role in ceremonial contexts, and their impact on preserving the cultural identity of Zhuang communities. In essence, this research contributes not only to the understanding of Zhuang folk music but also to the broader discourse on the intersection of cultural practices, musical traditions, and the preservation of rituals within distinct ethnic communities. The Po-ya songbook, with its melodic intricacies, becomes not just a cultural artifact but a living testament to the enduring spirit of Zhuang traditions in Yunnan, China.

## Reference



- [1] Altizer, T. J. J., Beardslee, W. A., Young, & J. H. (Eds.). (1962). *Truth, Myth and Symbol*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall INC.
- [2] Chen Li, & Qi Qingfu. (2006). *The cultural heritage of China's ethnic minorities*. Kunming: Yunnan Education Publishing.
- [3] Fowlie, W. (1990). *Poem & Symbol: A Brief History of French Symbolism*. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- [4] Kuang, J., & He, L. (2022). From Oblivion to Reappearance: A Multi-Faceted Evaluation of the Sustainability of Folk Music in Yunnan Province of China. *SAGE Open*, 12(3), 21582440221117806.
- [5] Langer, S. K. (1980). *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- [6] Li Kunsheng. (2001). *Art History of Yunnan*. Kunming: Yunnan Education Press.
- [7] Liu Bingshan. (2009). *Po-ya songbook of Funing Zhuang Nationality, China*. Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House.
- [8] Liu Chenghua. (2002). *The humanistic interpretation of Chinese music*. Shanghai: Shanghai Music Press.
- [9] Perin, N. (1980). *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- [10] Schettler, I. (1997). *Symbolic Worlds: Art, Science, Language, Ritual*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Stewart, J. (Ed.). (1996). *Beyond the Symbol Model: Reflections on the Representational Nature of Language*. Albany: State University of New York.
- [12] Tian Liandao. (2001). *Traditional music of Chinese ethnic minorities*. Beijing: Minzu University of China Press.
- [13] Tuohy, S. 1991. "Cultural Metaphors and Reasoning: Folklore Scholarship and Ideology in Contemporary China." *Asian Folklore Studies* 50(1): 189-220. DOI : 10.2307/1178190
- [14] Wang Wenguang & Li Xiaobin. (2007). *History of development and evolution of Baiyue Nationality — From Yue, Liao to Zhuang Dong language ethnic groups*. Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House.

- [15] Wang Yuanlu. (1996). An Introduction to general philology. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House.
- [16] Zhou Youguang. (1988). Preliminary study of comparative philology. Beijing: Chinese Language Press.