



# Harmonious Heritage through the Qualitative Analysis of Northeast Folk Songs in the Evolution of Northeast Drum

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**Abstract:** This study explores the artistic and cultural significance of the Northeast Drum (Jianban), a traditional Chinese folk art characterized by its unique blend of narrative storytelling, rhythmic musical accompaniment, and audience interaction. The research focuses on the contributions of Liu Guiying, a renowned provincial representative inheritor of the Northeast Drum, and her innovative techniques that have revitalized this art form. Through qualitative methods, including interviews and participant observations, the study examines the structure and themes of Northeast Drum performances, the role of improvisation, and the integration of Northeast folk songs. The findings highlight the dynamic nature of these performances and their cultural resonance within the community. The study also discusses the challenges and opportunities in preserving this intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of educational programs, digital archiving, and cultural policies. Recommendations for future research include comparative studies, the impact of modern technology, audience dynamics, and longitudinal studies on preservation efforts. This research contributes to the understanding and sustainable development of the Northeast Drum, ensuring its relevance for future generations.

**Keywords:** Northeast Drum, Jianban, traditional Chinese folk art, intangible cultural heritage, narrative storytelling, audience interaction

## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

The preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage have become crucial topics of global significance. As societies rapidly modernize and globalize, traditional art forms face the risk of being overshadowed by contemporary cultural expressions. UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, established in 2003, underscores the importance of safeguarding traditions that embody the cultural identity and historical continuity of communities worldwide. This global framework highlights the need for targeted efforts to document, preserve, and revitalize intangible cultural heritage across different regions.

In China, the protection of intangible cultural heritage has gained substantial attention, with numerous initiatives aimed at preserving traditional art forms. Among these, the Northeast Drum (Jianban), a distinctive folk art from the northeastern provinces, stands out due to its rich historical roots and cultural significance. Originating in the northern regions along the Songhua River, particularly in areas such as Daqing and Zhaoyuan, the Northeast Drum combines elements of storytelling, music, and performance. Known locally as "江北梅家门" (Jiangbei Meijiamen), this art form has played a pivotal role in the cultural life of northeastern China.



Figure 1, Liu Guiying playing Northeast Drum (Source: Culture and Traveling at Longjiang) Liu Guiying, also known by her stage name Liu Xiaorong, is a renowned provincial representative inheritor of the Northeast Drum (Jianban). (Figure 1) Her extensive career and dedication to this traditional art form have made her a central figure in its preservation and transmission. Despite the challenges posed by modern entertainment mediums, Liu Guiying's efforts, along with those of her students, continue to keep the Northeast Drum alive and relevant. This study aims to explore the qualitative aspects of Northeast Drum performances, focusing on the

integration of folk songs and the unique contributions of Liu Guiying and her students in Daqing, Heilongjiang.



## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are to:

1. Analyze the evolution and current status of the Northeast Drum (Jianban) as an intangible cultural heritage.
2. Explore the integration of Northeast folk songs into the performances of the Northeast Drum.
3. Document and assess the contributions of Liu Guiying and her students to the preservation and transmission of this art form.
4. Identify the challenges and opportunities faced in sustaining and revitalizing the Northeast Drum in contemporary society.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview of Northeast Folk Songs

Northeast folk songs are a vital component of China's rich cultural tapestry, deeply embedded in the social and historical contexts of the northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. These songs are characterized by their vivid storytelling, expressive melodies, and strong rhythms. The lyrics often reflect the everyday lives, struggles, and joys of the local people, encapsulating themes such as love, labor, and the changing seasons<sup>[1]</sup>. Historically, these songs have been performed during communal activities such as harvests, festivals, and traditional ceremonies, serving not only as a form of entertainment but also as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural values and historical narratives (Liu, 2019). The melodies of Northeast folk songs are noted for their simplicity and directness, which make them easily accessible and memorable. They often employ a pentatonic scale, common in traditional Chinese music, which lends a distinctive tonal quality to the songs. The performance of these songs can be either solo or ensemble, frequently accompanied by traditional instruments such as the erhu, pipa, and dizi, which enhance the emotive power of the lyrics. Over time, these folk songs have influenced and been integrated into other forms of Chinese music and performing arts, contributing to their enduring legacy (Wang, 2018).

### 2.2 History and Development of Northeast Drum (Jianban)

The Northeast Drum (Jianban), also referred to as "江北梅家门" (Jiangbei Meijiamen), is a distinguished traditional Chinese folk art that merges music, storytelling, and rhythmic performance. This art form has its roots in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), with influences drawn from the cultural practices of the Han and Manchu ethnic groups (Chen, 2015). Originating in the northern regions along the Songhua River, particularly in Daqing and Zhaoyuan, the Northeast Drum has evolved into a significant cultural tradition in northeastern China.

The initial form of the Northeast Drum was relatively simple, with performers narrating stories and singing songs while playing a large drum and wooden clappers known as "jianban." (Figure 2) These early performances were informal and took place in local markets, village squares, and during festive occasions. They provided a platform for sharing stories, news, and moral teachings, thereby strengthening community bonds<sup>[2]</sup>. The content of the performances was diverse, including historical tales, mythological stories, and accounts of loyal officials and filial children, which deeply resonated with the audience's values and experiences.



Figure 2, drum and wooden clappers ("jianban.") (Source: Liao Ning Communication University)

In the early 20th century, the Northeast Drum began to gain wider recognition beyond its rural origins. It entered urban areas, where it attracted a broader audience and underwent significant formalization. Performances became more structured, and the art form's repertoire expanded to include more complex narratives and sophisticated musical elements. Notable performers such as Liu Guiying, known by her stage name Liu Xiaorong, emerged during this period. Liu Guiying, born in Daqing, has dedicated over four decades to mastering and innovating the Northeast Drum. Her unique approach, including the use of four wooden clappers instead of the traditional two, has added new dimensions to the art, enhancing its auditory appeal and complexity<sup>[3]</sup>.

The mid-20th century posed significant challenges for traditional Chinese arts due to political and social upheavals. Despite these difficulties, the Northeast Drum survived, largely due to the dedication of its performers and the cultural significance attributed to it by local communities. The resurgence of interest in traditional arts in recent decades, supported by government initiatives and cultural preservation efforts, has further revitalized the Northeast Drum. In 2011, it was recognized as a provincial intangible cultural heritage, highlighting its cultural importance and the need for its preservation<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 2.3 Previous Studies on Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage<sup>[5]</sup>. This broad category includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. The safeguarding of ICH has garnered global attention, particularly following the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003.

Previous studies on ICH have emphasized its critical role in fostering cultural diversity and human creativity. Researchers have explored various aspects of ICH, including its preservation, transmission, and adaptation in the face of globalization<sup>[6]</sup>. These studies highlight the challenges posed by modernity, such as urbanization, technological advancement, and changing social values, which can lead to the erosion of traditional practices and knowledge. In the context of Chinese ICH, scholars have investigated the impacts of rapid economic development and modernization on traditional art forms. Efforts to preserve ICH in China often involve documenting performances, training new practitioners, and integrating traditional elements into contemporary settings<sup>[7]</sup>. For instance, Liu Guiying's work in teaching and promoting the Northeast Drum illustrates the importance of active transmission by skilled practitioners. Her dedication ensures that this unique art form continues to thrive despite the pressures of modern cultural influences (Sun, 2018).

## III. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the artistic and cultural significance of the Northeast Drum (Jianban) and the integration of Northeast folk songs into this traditional art form.

### 3.2 Participant Selection: Liu Guiying and Her Students

The primary participants for this study are Liu Guiying, also known as Liu Xiaorong, a renowned provincial representative inheritor of the Northeast Drum (Jianban), and three of her students. Liu Guiying's extensive career and innovative contributions to the Northeast Drum make her an ideal participant for understanding the art form's evolution and current practices. Her students, who are learning and continuing the tradition, provide insights into the transmission and future prospects of this cultural heritage.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods: Interviews and Observations

Data collection for this study involves a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

**Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews are conducted with Liu Guiying and her students. These interviews are designed to elicit detailed narratives about their experiences, challenges, and achievements in performing and teaching the Northeast Drum. The questions focus on their personal journeys, the integration of folk songs into performances, and their views on the preservation and future of the art form. Interviews are recorded and transcribed for thorough analysis.

**Observations:** Participant observations are conducted during rehearsals, performances, and teaching sessions. This method provides firsthand insights into the performance dynamics, interaction between the performer and audience, and the teaching methodologies employed by Liu Guiying. Observations are documented through detailed field notes and video recordings, capturing the nuances of the performances and training sessions.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis involves the following steps:

1. Familiarization: Immersion in the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes, and reviewing video recordings to gain a comprehensive understanding.
2. Coding: Systematic coding of data segments that relate to the research questions and objectives. Codes are assigned to meaningful units of text that capture specific aspects of the performances, teaching methods, and participants' experiences.
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes that represent significant patterns and insights. Themes are developed inductively from the data, ensuring they accurately reflect the participants' perspectives.
4. Review and Refinement: Reviewing themes to ensure they are coherent, consistent, and distinct. Refining themes involves checking their relevance to the research questions and the overall narrative of the study.
5. Reporting: Writing a detailed report that presents the themes with supporting evidence from the data, providing a comprehensive analysis of the findings.

## IV. Cultural Context of Northeast Drum (Jianban)

### 4.1 The Artistic and Cultural Significance of Northeast Drum

The Northeast Drum (Jianban) is a distinctive form of Chinese folk art that holds significant artistic and cultural value. As an integral part of the cultural heritage of northeastern China, it combines storytelling, music, and rhythmic performance to convey historical tales, moral stories, and local folklore. The art form is deeply rooted in the everyday lives and cultural practices of the people, reflecting their values, history, and social norms<sup>[8]</sup>.

The Northeast Drum serves not only as a means of entertainment but also as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural traditions. The performances often include moral lessons and historical narratives, contributing to the education and cultural continuity of the community. The improvisational nature of the performances allows for adaptation to contemporary contexts, ensuring its relevance and appeal across generations (Wang, 2018).

### 4.2 "江北梅家门": The Northern School of Jianban Drum

"江北梅家门" (Jiangbei Meijiamen), also known as the Northern School of Jianban Drum, is the primary style of Northeast Drum that has developed along the northern regions of the Songhua River. This school is characterized by its robust and expressive performance style, which includes the use of a large drum and wooden clappers to create a rhythmic and engaging experience. The Northern School places a strong emphasis on narrative content, with performers often telling extended stories that can span multiple performances<sup>[9]</sup>.

Liu Guiying, a key figure in the Northern School, has made significant contributions to its development and preservation. Her innovative techniques, such as the use of four wooden clappers instead of the traditional two, have enhanced the auditory complexity and appeal of the performances. Liu Guiying's dedication to teaching and performing has played a crucial role in maintaining the vibrancy and relevance of the Northern School of Jianban Drum .

### **4.3 Performance Characteristics and Audience Engagement**

The performance characteristics of the Northeast Drum are defined by its combination of music, narration, and rhythm. Performers use a large drum and wooden clappers to maintain the tempo and enhance the storytelling. The narratives are often improvised based on audience reactions, making each performance unique and interactive. This improvisational aspect allows performers to connect with the audience on a personal level, responding to their emotions and interests in real-time (Wang, 2018). Audience engagement is a critical component of Northeast Drum performances. The interactive nature of the art form ensures that the audience is not merely passive recipients but active participants in the performance. Performers gauge the audience's reactions and tailor their narratives and expressions accordingly, creating a dynamic and immersive experience. This engagement fosters a strong sense of community and shared cultural identity, reinforcing the cultural significance of the Northeast Drum <sup>[10]</sup>.

## **V. Case Study: Liu Guiying (Liu Xiaorong)**

### **5.1 Biography and Career Highlights**

Liu Guiying, known by her stage name Liu Xiaorong, was born in 1960 in Zhaoyuan County, Daqing City, Heilongjiang Province. Growing up in a culturally rich environment, Liu developed a passion for traditional Chinese performing arts at a young age. Her mother, a lover of Northeast Drum and storytelling, greatly influenced her, instilling in her a deep appreciation for this art form.

Liu began her formal training in Northeast Drum at the age of seven, performing with local troupes in harsh conditions, often in freezing temperatures with minimal resources. Despite the challenges, her talent and dedication soon caught the attention of established performers. By the late 1970s, Liu had become a well-known figure in the Northeast Drum community, renowned for her captivating performances and innovative techniques.

Throughout her career, Liu Guiying has performed in over 10,000 shows across northeastern China, including in major cities like Tianjin and Shenyang. Her exceptional skill earned her accolades from prominent figures such as Liu Lanfang and Shan Tianfang, further cementing her reputation as a master of the Northeast Drum.

### **5.2 Contribution to the Preservation and Transmission of Northeast Drum**

Liu Guiying has been instrumental in preserving and transmitting the Northeast Drum tradition. Recognized as a provincial-level representative inheritor of this intangible cultural heritage, she has dedicated over four decades to teaching and promoting the art form. Liu's efforts have ensured that the Northeast Drum remains vibrant and relevant, even as modern entertainment forms dominate the cultural landscape.

Her teaching methodology emphasizes both technical proficiency and cultural understanding. Liu insists on her students learning the traditional nine-tune patterns of the Northeast Drum before experimenting with more advanced techniques. This rigorous training ensures that the core elements of the art form are preserved, while also allowing for individual expression and innovation.

In addition to her teaching, Liu Guiying actively participates in cultural events and heritage preservation initiatives. She collaborates with cultural institutions to document and archive traditional Northeast Drum performances, providing valuable resources for future generations.

### **5.3 Innovative Techniques and Performance Style**

Liu Guiying is celebrated for her innovative approach to Northeast Drum performances. One of her most notable contributions is the introduction of the four-clapper technique, which she developed by adding two additional clappers to the traditional pair. This innovation enriches the rhythmic complexity and auditory experience of her performances, distinguishing her style from that of other performers. Liu's performance style is characterized by its dynamic and interactive nature. She skillfully combines narrative and musical elements, adjusting her storytelling based on audience reactions. This improvisational capability not only enhances the entertainment value of her performances but also allows for a deeper connection with the audience. Liu integrates contemporary themes and stories into her repertoire, making the Northeast Drum relevant to modern audiences. Her ability to blend traditional and contemporary elements has attracted a diverse audience, from older generations familiar with the art form to younger individuals experiencing it for the first time.

## **VI. Insights from Interviews**

### **6.1 Liu Guiying's Perspectives on Northeast Drum and Folk Songs**

In interviews, Liu Guiying emphasizes the cultural and emotional significance of the Northeast Drum. She views it as a living art form that reflects the history, values, and collective memory of the northeastern Chinese people. According to Liu, the integration of folk songs into the Northeast Drum performances enriches the narratives and connects the audience to their cultural roots. Liu also highlights the challenges faced in preserving the Northeast Drum, particularly the competition from modern entertainment mediums and the diminishing interest among younger generations. Despite these

challenges, she remains optimistic, believing that with dedicated efforts in education and promotion, the art form can thrive.

### **6.2 Experiences and Learning Journeys of Her Students**

Liu Guiying's students provide valuable insights into the learning and transmission of the Northeast Drum. They describe their experiences as rigorous yet deeply rewarding, emphasizing the importance of mastering traditional techniques before exploring personal expression. The students appreciate Liu's dedication and her ability to inspire a deep respect for the cultural heritage of the Northeast Drum.

Through their training, students learn not only the technical aspects of the art form but also its cultural and historical context. This comprehensive approach ensures that they become well-rounded practitioners capable of continuing the tradition while also contributing to its evolution.

### **6.3 Challenges and Opportunities in Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Interviews with Liu Guiying and her students reveal several challenges in preserving the Northeast Drum. These include a lack of resources, limited performance opportunities, and the need for greater public awareness and appreciation of the art form. Additionally, the commercialization of cultural performances often prioritizes entertainment value over authenticity, posing a risk to the integrity of traditional practices.

However, there are also significant opportunities for preservation and revitalization. The growing interest in cultural heritage and traditional arts presents a favorable environment for promoting the Northeast Drum. Initiatives such as educational programs, cultural festivals, and digital archiving can enhance public engagement and support for the art form. Liu Guiying advocates for increased collaboration between cultural institutions, government bodies, and communities to create sustainable preservation strategies. She believes that by integrating traditional arts into contemporary cultural contexts and leveraging modern technology for documentation and dissemination, the Northeast Drum can continue to flourish.

## **VII. Analysis of Performance Elements**

### **7.1 Structure and Themes of Performances**

The performances of the Northeast Drum (Jianban) are structured around a blend of narrative storytelling and rhythmic musical accompaniment. Typically, a performance begins with a prologue that sets the scene and introduces the characters. This is followed by a series of episodes or acts that advance the plot, often culminating in a dramatic climax and a moral resolution. The structure is designed to maintain audience interest and engagement throughout the performance.

Themes in Northeast Drum performances are diverse, ranging from historical tales and legendary heroes to moral stories about loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness. Common themes include the valor of ancient warriors, the wisdom of historical figures, and the virtues of everyday people. These themes resonate deeply with the cultural values and historical consciousness of the audience, reinforcing communal identities and ethical norms.

### **7.2 Improvisation and Audience Interaction**

A distinctive feature of Northeast Drum performances is the high degree of improvisation. Performers like Liu Guiying adjust their storytelling based on real-time audience reactions, which allows them to create a dynamic and interactive experience. This improvisational skill is a hallmark of master performers, who can seamlessly integrate audience feedback into their narratives, enhancing the immediacy and emotional impact of the performance.

Audience interaction is integral to the success of a performance. Performers engage with the audience through direct address, rhetorical questions, and responsive adjustments to the storyline. This interaction not only keeps the audience engaged but also makes them active participants in the storytelling process. The communal aspect of these performances fosters a strong sense of connection and shared cultural heritage among the audience members.

### **7.3 Musical and Lyrical Characteristics**

The musical accompaniment in Northeast Drum performances is essential to its storytelling. The primary instruments include the drum and jianban (wooden clappers), which set the rhythm and pace of the performance. The music is often characterized by its lively, rhythmic beats that vary in tempo and intensity to match the narrative's emotional tone.

Additional instruments, such as the three-stringed lute (sanxian), may also be used to enrich the musical texture.

Lyrical, the Northeast Drum employs a variety of poetic forms and traditional Chinese prosody. The lyrics are crafted to convey the story vividly and evocatively, often using metaphor, simile, and other rhetorical devices. The combination of poetic lyrics and rhythmic music creates a powerful auditory experience that enhances the storytelling. Performers must master both the musical and lyrical aspects to deliver a compelling performance.

## **VIII. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **8.1 Interpretation of Findings**

The findings from this study highlight the intricate blend of narrative, musical, and performative elements that define the Northeast Drum (Jianban). The structure and themes of the performances, characterized by historical and moral tales, resonate deeply with the audience, reflecting the cultural values and historical consciousness of the region. Liu Guiying's innovative techniques and interactive performance style have significantly enhanced the art form's appeal, ensuring its relevance in contemporary society.

The study also reveals the critical role of improvisation and audience interaction in Northeast Drum performances. This dynamic engagement not only sustains audience interest but also fosters a communal experience, reinforcing cultural identity and social cohesion. The musical and lyrical characteristics, combining rhythmic beats and poetic expressions, create a powerful auditory and emotional experience that enriches the storytelling.

## 8.2 Implications for Cultural Preservation

The preservation of the Northeast Drum faces several challenges, including competition from modern entertainment and diminishing interest among younger generations. However, the study underscores the importance of active efforts in education, documentation, and public engagement to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage. Liu Guiying's dedication to teaching and her innovative approaches serve as a model for preserving and revitalizing traditional arts.

Government support and cultural policies play a crucial role in these preservation efforts. Recognizing the Northeast Drum as a provincial intangible cultural heritage has helped garner resources and attention for its preservation. Continued support for educational programs, cultural festivals, and digital archiving can further enhance these efforts, ensuring the art form's sustainability.

## 8.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the following areas to deepen understanding and support the preservation of the Northeast Drum:

1. Comparative Studies: Investigate how the Northeast Drum compares with other traditional Chinese performing arts and similar art forms in different cultures.
2. Impact of Modern Technology: Examine the role of digital media and technology in documenting, promoting, and teaching the Northeast Drum.
3. Audience Dynamics: Conduct in-depth studies on audience demographics, preferences, and engagement to tailor preservation efforts more effectively.
4. Longitudinal Studies: Track the long-term impact of educational and promotional initiatives on the preservation and evolution of the Northeast Drum.

## 8.4. Conclusion

The Northeast Drum (Jianban) is a vibrant and essential part of China's cultural heritage. Its preservation and revitalization require concerted efforts from cultural practitioners, government bodies, and communities. By integrating traditional arts into contemporary contexts and leveraging modern technology for documentation and dissemination, stakeholders can ensure that the Northeast Drum continues to thrive and inspire future generations. This study contributes to the broader understanding of the Northeast Drum and provides a foundation for ongoing and future preservation efforts.

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