

Dong Oral Poetry: *Kuant Cix*

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The Dong people are ethnic Chinese living primarily in the Guizhou and Hunan provinces of southwest and mid-south China and in the Zhuang Autonomous Region. According to the 1992 census, the Dong number some two and one-half million. Cultivation of paddy rice, forests, and other subsistence industries are their main means of support. Dong villages are typically situated on one or both sides of a river or a brook, with a small bridge over the rushing water in front of the village and virgin forest behind. The traditional Dong residence is a three-story wooden building: penned animals are kept on the ground floor, people live on the middle floor, and grain and other foodstuffs are stored on the uppermost floor. The most distinctive public buildings are the Drum Tower and the Wind-and-Rain Bridge; replicas of these important communal buildings are found in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. The Dong have received international attention via their folk homophonic chorus *Gal Laoc* (“Big Song”), which has performed many times in Paris, Rome, and Vienna, receiving enthusiastic accolades from the musicians of those countries. Two additional points about the Dong are important for understanding their oral poetry: they are animists whose most revered deity is the female god Sax Sis, and they have not developed a written form of their language.

In April 1986, a team of Chinese and Finnish folklorists conducted a ten-day survey of the Dong in the Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County of Guangxi. These participants—Jia Zhi, Lauri Honko, and others—developed a strong interest in the *kuant cix*, an ancient oral poem whose form and content embody features of Dong social structure, folk music, folk beliefs, and codes of conduct. This paper addresses five aspects of the *kuant cix*: origin, form, content, literary characteristics, and channels of transmission.



The Wind-and-Rain Bridge of the Dong people.

The Origin of the *Kuant Cix*

The *kuant cix* originated in the sacrificial words of primitive religion. From primeval times, the mystery of natural phenomena such as wind, rain, thunder, and lightening have inspired dread. In order to protect themselves from calamities and natural disasters, people used words and gestures to pray for the help of the gods, to win their benevolence and kindness. Such gestures were the earliest forms of religious and sacrificial activity, and the associated utterances were the earliest sacrificial words. Take, for example, “Words Offered to Gods for Hunting” (Pu 1985:164):

Hoh xaop duc dih jenc xeenp,
Wags kap laiv yak;

Dos maoh lagl kap,
Mec wox laens biac;
Biagl dal laiv neml,

Dos maoh pap dal,

We invite with respect the village gods,
To slam the red boar with all your might
on its ears;

Let it become deaf,
And not run through the mountains;
To slam the black boar with all your
might on its eyes,

Let it go blind,

Meeç xongp kuenp bac,	And stay where it is,
Songk juil laengx beengv	So that we can take good aim at it on
laengc daoh,	its first appearance,
Laengc songk laengc kaenp.	And knock it down with the first shot.

These words, known in Dong as *Leix Jiuc*, are offered to the gods at the sacrificial rites performed before departing on a hunting trip. In rhythm and melody they are quite similar to later versions of the *kuant cix*; it is therefore thought that they are its probable source.

Two major factors distinguish human beings from other animals: (a) they can consciously choose to engage in sexual relations for the purpose of reproducing; and (b) they can consciously undertake material production for the satisfaction of their own needs, such as creating goods. From this viewpoint, human society is a network created on the basis of these two modes of production. In one sense, human reproduction (the propagation of species) occurred much earlier than material production (the creation of material goods). The propagation of species was ongoing, consciously or unconsciously, while people still relied completely on nature for their sustenance: one could go up the mountain alone to gather fruits to live on, but neither male nor female could alone propagate the species. Sexual relations between man and woman constitute the earliest form of social interaction, from which all other marital relations derive. With the combination of marital relations and subsistence production, the primitive social organizations and structures of clan, tribe, and confederation of tribes took shape. These social organizations appear again in modern structures such as family, lineage, tribe, nation, guild, class, the party, the state, and the federation of states.

The *Kuant* organization in Dong society originally arose from an early form of marriage system. It probably developed during the historical period of group exogamy. During that time, sexual relations between siblings were already taboo and endogamy was prohibited. Group marriage, however, maintained its social position. Men from group A maintained group sexual relations with women from group B. Such an enduring relationship formed a kind of consolidated social confederation, which was the earliest form of the *Kuant* organization. Traces of that early social confederation are seen in certain customs of present-day Dong society. For example, it is customary for young men and women to practice *xingge zuoye*: males from village A, or clan A, go in groups of three to five to visit females from village B, or clan B, where they spend the night together singing. Males from village B or clan B can also visit groups of three to five females from village A or clan A, where they spend the night together singing. The so-called *xingge zuoye*

allows the young men and women to express their love with the aid of songs. From such heterosexual courting activities, frequent contacts develop between members of different villages or clans. In the Dong language, such contacts are called *weex Kuant*, meaning “*Kuant* behavior.” This is the origin of the Dong *Kuant* social organization. With the wider net of social contacts and further complication of social relations, *Kuant* organization developed into a series of political and military confederations between villages, becoming what are now called the Dong folk self-government and self-protecting organizations.

Since the Dong had no writing system in ancient times, it is difficult to locate the specific year in which the *Kuant* organization came into being. According to Chinese literature, the Dong were the offspring of the ancient Yue. In 218 BCE, the Qin Emperor Qingshihuang sent an army of 500,000 to conquer the *nanyue* (the South Yue). One of the army detachments was “stationed up at the highest mountain of the Tancheng” in the Dong area southwest of the Qianyang County, in what is now Hunnan province. At that time, the Yue “all entered into the thin forests and stayed up there together with the wild birds and beasts, rather than surrender to the Qin and be captured. They appointed their most talented and courageous men to be their generals and launched a night attack against the Qin, who dissolved before the Dong forces. The Dong killed an officer of the Qin army, Tu Sui, and left several hundred thousand corpses lying in their own blood” (*Huainanzi: Renjian Xun*). It is likely that this military organization was the *Kuant* organization of the day. Until the end of the Tang Dynasty (early tenth century), famous leaders of the *Kuant*, such as Pan Jisheng, Yang Chenglei, and Yang Zaisi, emerged from what are now the communities of the Dong compact. The term *Kuant* also appeared in some works of Chinese literature. From this evidence it can be seen that an organization like the *Kuant* has been in existence in the Dong areas since before the tenth century (see Deng and Wu 1995).

After the appearance of the *Kuant* organization, the formulaic language of the primitive sacrificial rites was often used to promulgate *Kuant* rules and regulations, as well as to relate the history of the *Kuant* organization. This was *kuant cix* in its earliest form. To enliven their performances, the eloquent leaders used vivid descriptions; as the rhythm and melody of *kuant cix* gradually grew more polished, it developed into a work of great artistic achievement.

The Form of *Kuant Cix*: Rhyme, Image, Syntax

Kuant cix is a special, stylized recitation replete with rhymes and sound harmonies. Its form, called *Leix Kuant* (“Kuant speech”), was developed by the ancient judicial organization—the Kuant. The rhyme of *Leix Kuant* is complicated, usually involving both end and internal rhyme, but less rigid than the prosodic requirements of folk ballad. For example (Zhang and Deng 1988:90):

Memx laox deil douv bic,	The tiger left its skin when it died,
Guix laox deil douv guaol;	The ox left its horns when it died;
Ongs lebx daol.	Grandpa passed it to papa,
Bux lebx daol.	Papa passed it to me.
Nyence angx nyenc qingk,	People tell and people listen,
Nyenc nguingv nyenc deic.	People listen and people follow. ¹

These lines illustrate how a *kuant cix*'s complicated rhyme patterns can stitch together the entire poem. The last syllables of the second and the fourth lines fall on the “ao” end rhyme, demonstrating the rule that end rhymes usually occur in even lines, with some exceptions. For example, the last syllable of the sixth line is not “ao,” and there is no internal rhyme between the first and second sentences.

The sentence pattern of *kuant cix* is flexible: most lines are anywhere from three to six syllables long, but some contain more than seven syllables. There is no theoretical limit on the number of sentences in the *kuant cix* form. A recitation may be as short as a dozen lines or surpass hundreds or even thousands of lines. *Kuant cix* makes use of parallelism and its rhythm is especially strict. The opening lines of *kuant cix* serve as an example (Deng and Wu 1995:63):

Baov jaix angx,	I tried to persuade the elder brother to talk,
Jaix eis angx;	And he does not speak;
Baov nongx angx,	The younger brother was asked to talk,
Nongx buh eis angx;	And he does not speak;
Baov jaix angx,	I tried to persuade the elder brother to talk,
Jaix baov ebl jeml nanc eip;	He said he could not open his golden mouth;
Bao nongx angx,	The younger brother was asked to talk,

¹ Tiger skins and buffalo horns are highly prized by the Dong, who hunt tigers in the mountains and enjoy traditional bullfight festivals. Whole villages invite one another to a bullfight held at a customary spot; there the villagers renew friendships and generally enjoy themselves. After the bulls are killed, their horns must be hung from the Drum Towers, then passed on to later generations as a symbol of the tradition.

Nongx baov ebl nyenc
nanc jangs.

And he said he could not open his
silver mouth.

These lines are a formulaic invitation to the audience and an expression of modesty on the part of the performer. “Elder brother” refers broadly to the senior members of the audience, “younger brother” to the younger people in the audience. “Golden mouth” is a metaphor for the most valuable speech of the older and wiser audience members, and “silver mouth” symbolizes the still valuable speech of the younger crowd; these images imply that the speech of the performer is the least valuable.

Kuant cix is largely composed and passed on orally, but in modern times some pieces have also been recorded in written form. These written records are Chinese-character transcriptions of the Dong language, termed *leec kuant*; they are limited in scope, however, and are not standardized. Consequently, only the fieldworkers responsible for making these written records, or those who are very familiar with *kuant cix*, can read and understand *leec kuant*. For this reason, *kuant cix* continues today to be a Dong verbal art dependent mainly on oral transmission.

The Content of *Kuant Cix*

Kuant cix subsumes a wide variety of subjects. *Yuefa kuant*, for example, describes Dong customary law. Types of *yuefa kuant* include *liumianh yingui*, *liumianh yanggui*, and *liumianh weigui*. The geographical distribution of *kuant cix* organizations is described by the *kuantping kuant*; examples include *shier kuantping* and *shishan kuantping*. *Zuyuan kuant*, meaning “tribal origins,” recounts ancient Dong mythology and historical legends. Examples of *zuyan kuant* include *Guipo Fudan* (“Grandma Turtle Nurtures the Egg”), *Jiangliang Jiangmei*, *The Origin of the Dong Ancestor*, and *The Grand Ancestor Up the Big River*. *Kuant* told in praise of heroes include *Sasui Kuant* and *Mianhwang Kuant*. Other *kuant cix* reflect a variety of folk beliefs and customs, such as *God-Inviting Kuant*, *Bumper-Harvest Kuant*, *Bullfighting Kuant*, *Birthday Celebration Kuant*, and *Funeral Kuant*. *Kuant cix*, then, acts like an encyclopedia of Dong beliefs and practices passed along orally among the people: it is a very important oral tradition.

Yuefa kuant is the oldest and most important of the *kuant cix*. At its core is a description of Dong customary law, known as *leix yed*. The origin of the *yuefa kuant* is told in *kuant cix* (1987:43):

Jus Fup daengv al,
 Liogx Lang jiv xeih,
 Dengv leis nyih liogx xibc
 nyih miinh,
 Nyih jus xibc beds banc.

Yanc meec siv wangp,
 Tangp meec siv Yangp;
 Yanc meec siv wangp dags,
 Xeih meec beds miinh xup.
 Meec naenl liogx miinh yeml,
 Meec naenl liogx miinh yangc;
 Meec naenl liogx miinh nal,
 Meec naenl liogx miinh mangl;
 Meec naenl liogx miinh xangh,
 Meec naenl liogx miinh hak.

Zhu Fu created songs,
 Liu Lang created the law,
 Creating two-times-six-equals
 twelve facets,
 Two-times-nine-equals eighteen
 clauses.

The house has four directions,
 The barn has four sides;
 The house has four interior walls,
 The law has eight bundles.
 There is *liumianh yin*,
 There is *liumianh yang*;
 There is *liumianh* that is thick,
 There is *liumianh* that is thin;
 There is *liumianh* upwards,
 There is *liumianh* downwards.

The first two lines name the founders of Dong culture: Zhu Fu (or Jus Fup), a legendary composer of songs, and Liu Lang (or Liogx Langc), a legendary lawmaker who codified early folk law. *Yuefa kuant* presents twelve aspects and eighteen clauses that all people should observe. The basic rules stated are these: mete out severe punishment to offenders of *liumianh yin*, but show leniency to transgressors of *liumianh yang*; and mete out severe punishment to offenders of *liumianh* “that is thick,” but show leniency to transgressors of the *liumianh* “that is thin.” Those judged to be in the right are *liumianh* “upwards,” and those found to be in the wrong are *liumianh* “downwards.” The most influential of the eight aspects today are *liumianh yin* and *liumianh yang*; the others have greatly changed or have been lost.

Liumianh yin refers to six types of criminal actions meriting severe punishment; these are described by a series of clauses. Transgression of these clauses warrants capital punishment in one or another form: being buried alive, drowning, or suffering death by beating. The clauses of *Level One and Part One* are exemplified in the following passage from *liumianh yin* (*kuant cix* 1987:45):

Maoh lagx nyenc nouc,
 Bov mags lags guas,
 Longc banc sais jongv,
 Dedl oc nganh,
 Sonp duh liongc.
 Jic wenc sangv juh,

Whichever family’s son,
 Should he be bold enough and
 hardened,
 With a stretched heart and winding
 bowels,
 Cutting the neck of the goose,
 Poking the belly of the Dragon.
 Straddling the tomb of the dead

Weds wenc loul muh,
 Weds nyogc xeengp,

 Gueengv lags sos;
 Eip binv nuv nyenc,

 Yeds mzix jibl lags.

 Dos jih nyenc xeengp donc sais,
 Dos jih mungx deil
 nees ngail ngaic.
 Xeih mags yunv menl,
 Os yeml deml heis;
 Mangv xeih naih nal,
 Lags xeih naih qaenp,
 Mangv xeih naih mags
 deml xebx,
 Lags xeih naih qaenp
 deml begs.
 Eis gonh maoh yongh
 douh beeuv,
 Eis gonh maoh yax
 douh memx,
 Maenl naih yac daol,
 Ugs yak saip maoh dens,
 Ugs tent saip maoh aemv;
 Eis saip jeml nyaenc
 map qaot,
 Nyouc max map beenh.
 Deic maoh samp bux
 lagx jungh buv not,
 Deic maoh ngox bux
 lagx jungh buv saoc.
 Maengl mags saip
 maoh nyaoh,
 Aox magx saip maoh nunc.
 Sagl maoh samp peek
 magx mant,
 Jinc maoh jus peek
 magx yak!

and conducting a repeated burial,
 Digging up tombs,
 Throwing out the body of the
 newly dead,
 Casting out the old bones;
 Raising the board cover and looking
 at the body,
 Opening the coffin and picking up
 the bones.
 Making a living person sad,
 Making the dead cry out.

 The crime shocks heaven,
 The evil is as deep as the sea;
 This kind of crime is grave,
 This crime is heavy,
 This crime is as great as
 Degree Ten,
 This piece of crime is as heavy as
 Degree One Hundred.
 In spite of it he is as ferocious as a
 leopard,
 In spite of it he is as evil as a tiger,

 Today we,
 Let him put on a red coat,
 Let him wear a jacket;
 No ransom of gold and silver is
 allowed,
 Nor payment of oxen and horses.
 Let the father and sons, the three of
 them, share a mouse hole,
 Let the father and sons, the five of
 them, share a water hole.
 Let him live in the deep pool,

 Let him sleep in the deep hole.
 Bury him as deep as three *peek* in the
 yellow soil,
 Cover him as thick as nine *peek* in
 the reddish mud!²

² The “peek” is a unit of measurement equaling two outstretched armlengths, about one and one-half meters.

The Dong are ancestor worshippers who believe the soul never perishes. Their dead are placed in firwood coffins from where they can eternally protect their descendants. As animists the Dong believe the hills and the land are endowed with souls. Every lineage has its own carefully chosen public burial ground, and members of the lineage who die a normal death are interred in the public tomb; there they receive frequent offerings. The above-cited lines “Cutting the neck of the goose” and “Poking the belly of the Dragon” refer metaphorically to crimes involved in the the destruction of public tombs. “Straddling the tomb of the dead and conducting a repeated burial” refers to criminals who bury the dead in already occupied graves or disinter the body of an ancestor, not their own, and throw it into the wilderness. *Yuefa kuant* ranks such a crime among the most serious: “This crime shocks heaven,” and “the evil is as deep as the sea.” Offenders deserve the most severe punishment. The statement “let the father and sons, the three of them, share a mouse hole,” means that the offender and his family are to be buried alive; “let the father and sons, the five of them, share a water hole” describes how their bodies are to be weighted with stones and drowned in the river. Among the Dong, the “red coat” and “jacket” are emblematic of criminals, who in ancient Dong society were obliged to distinguish themselves from others by wearing such garments. The “three peek” and “nine peek” are ballpark figures, implying a deep grave.

The Dong developed *yuefa kuant* in the matrix of their work and life experiences. As was mentioned above, the Dong mainly grow paddy rice: without water the seedlings cannot grow, and without oxen the people cannot plow. To safeguard these key elements in the process of production, *yuefa kuant* deals severely with criminal actions that harm rice production, such as draining off water or stealing fish, cattle, rice, or grain, examples stipulated in *Level Five and Part Five of Liumianh Yingui (kuant cix 1987:50)*:

Nuv baov lagx nuc,
 Jiv semp eis jiangc,
 Jiv sais eis lail,
 Janl dangc ul,
 Loul dangc dees,
 Aox dangc liagc bal,
 Aox yav liagc oux.
 Luix oux semh jail,
 Luix bal semh guenv.
 Yac daol dos dinl mudx,
 Yac daol yudx dinl laiv.
 Dos dinl leis luh dah,

Whichever family's son,
 Who is treacherous,
 Who is evil-hearted,
 Digging at the upper mound,
 Digging at the lower mound,
 Stealing fish from the pond,
 Stealing grain from the fields.
 Losing grain we trace the crumbs,
 Losing fish we trace the scales.
 We will find his footprints.
 We will follow his footprints,
 The footprints can betray the route,

Dos bav leis luh bens.	The footprints give a clue.
Yiv leis ul miac,	The real evidence was found,
Lah leis ul sap.	The real object was uncovered.
Deic qax xibx samp bingc duh,	Together with <i>Shisan pingtu</i> ,
Liut qak xibx jus bingc <i>Kuant</i> .	<i>Shijiu ping kuant</i> were captured.
Jibl eel douh jibl louv,	Take his snails,
Qoup jil douh qoup yibc.	Ransacking the home as <i>lian</i> .
Dos maoh bux ongp yanc nyaoh,	Let his father have nowhere to live in the village,
Dos maoh lagx ongp senl jiangc.	Let his son have nowhere to live in the village.
Jianx maoh bux bail samp menl dih yais,	Drive him three days' journey away,
Jais maoh lagx bail sik menl luh jiangc,	Drive him four days' journey away,
Bai eis saip juanv yanc,	Away and not allowed back home,
Ganx eis saip map senl.	Not allowed back to the village.

Theft of fish or grain, although not punishable by death, is cause for seizure of the thief's personal property. The lines "take his snails, / ransacking the home as *lian*" in fact mean the confiscation of all of his possessions, such as his snails and fishnets. Other images and words here also require explanation. Both *Shisan pingtu* and *Shijiu ping kuant* are permanent sites where village activities are organized, while "three days' journey away" and "four days' journey away" are general references to a great distance. Confiscation and expulsion are the usual punishments given out to thieves who steal cattle, horses, fish, grain, chickens, ducks, or other property. Punishment of serious chronic offenders may include live burial or drowning by water. For example, in 1923, two young men, Wu Xinyou (age seventeen) and Yang Xinnong (age sixteen) were caught stealing chickens. The local *kuant* organization investigated the crimes, substantiated that the two were repeat offenders, and the thieves were punished by being buried alive (Deng 1991:15).

In former times, trials were held following traditional Dong customary law: the *kuant* chief would call a meeting of village or lineage heads and the matter was resolved by collective decision. According to the degree of their crimes, offenders were sentenced by being buried alive, drowned in water, beaten to death with sticks, expelled from the village, or forced to eat pig and dog feces—this was smeared on the lips. A wide range of punishments was available. Lineage membership could be revoked. A criminal could be shunned or his property confiscated. Criminals were fined, or ordered to forfeit wine and meat to the village or make public restitution by building village roads and cutting firewood for the Drum Tower. Other penalties

included: “to wash face,” a public face-to-face apology to the offended person; “meat offerings,” taking meat to each household as a expression of repentance; or, finally, walking throughout the village beating a gong in self-condemnation. If the case was a complicated one, there was recourse to “divine judgment.” This could involve a variety of divinatory rituals: “calling heaven,” by which each suspect was asked to take an oath against heaven; or “cooking rice,” in which two suspects in a cooking contest were either exonerated or condemned on the basis of whether or not their rice was well-cooked. Another divine trial required slitting the neck of a chicken, throwing the bird at the suspects, and leaving it to die. The suspect towards whom the chicken’s head was pointing when it died was deemed the offender. Yet another test involved pulling an axe from a pot of boiling oil: the oil was brought to a boil, an axe was dropped into the pot, and the suspects were made to fish it out barehanded. The one whose hand was burned was condemned; otherwise he was found innocent (Deng 1991).



Drum Tower of the Dong People.

With the help of *yuefa kuant*, the people in the Dong region have long lived in peace and harmony. For example, until the 1940s many Dong were ignorant of the existence of locks. Their plowing-oxen were pastured in the mountains for long periods and never lost. People left their grain outdoors in the sun secure in the knowledge that no one would steal it. According to the *Record of the Sanjiang County* (1911-49), in the areas populated by the Dong,

rules made by the locals are rigid. When cases of theft occur, no matter how big or small, people are called to a meeting and the offender is put to death, without reporting it to the authorities. For that reason people dare not steal. Cattle and sheep can pasture freely and the owner need never go in search of them because they come back on their own and are never stolen.

Such rigid codes have exercised a great influence over the minds of the Dong people. In 1933, a young singer by the name of Wu Hongmiao, from the Gao Ding village of the Sanjiang County, Guangxi, succumbed to his greed and foolishly stole property from the people of the village. Since it was his first offense, the local *kuant* organization fined him 40 *liang* of silver and another person offered to pay the fine. Dissatisfied with his sentence, Wu Hongmiao insisted on death by live burial, and asked that he be allowed to sing a farewell song. The court relented and granted his request. His tomb may still be seen in the village, and his *Farewell* song has survived to the present time via oral transmission (Deng and Wu 1995:14-16).

The Artistic Style of *Kuant Cix*

The artistic style of *kuant cix* relies on two main features: the continuous expansion of its content and the continual perfection of its art. The first *kuant cix* was limited to issuing *kuant* rules and regulations or telling the history of the *kuant* organization. With the increased needs and complications of social life, the subject matter gradually incorporated new, richer content.

Kuant cix first invokes and honors celestial, terrestrial, and village gods, including Sax Sis, the female god most revered by the Dong, and Zaisi, also called the “Flying Mountain-god,” the greatest *kuant* leader in Dong history. The first expansion of the content of *kuant cix* would have included the myths and legends about Dong history, e.g. *Opening up Heaven*

and *Breaking up the Earth, The Tortoise Grandma Hatches Eggs, Jiangliang and Jiangmei, Zugong Shanghe, Breaking up the Lineage for Internal Marriage, King Wu Mianh*, and other such narratives. These works, polished and revised by *kuant* narrators over many generations, gradually developed into an epic oral history. These episodes now supply some of the most striking passages in *kuant cix*. Dong social customs are reflected in such lovely and vivid works as *Bull-fight Verse, Longevity Verse, Marriage-Congratulating Verse, Completion of New House Verse, and Funeral Verse*, which are widely known and enthusiastically received. The following example is from *King Wu Mianh*, which contains a lengthy passage from the story of Wu Mianh, leader of the Dong peasant uprising of the late fourteenth century CE, who fought bravely against the Ming army (*kuant cix* 1987:77):

Mianhx sangx dogl dih,
Biac xees deic leec,
Biac wap deic bianl.
Wul leec meec fux,
Fux xuh qinp xul.

Binl samp qigs yais,
Qoup jienc jienc bengl,

Joul bial bial qamt.

...

Yinl yuih yuh yinl yuih,
Yinl yuih wang Mianhh luih
jienc,
Bingh nyaoh ul xangc,
Saip gax sebl leis,
Guanl miax dedl nyunh,
Nyenc daol nees samp maenl,
Nyenc daol nees samp janl;
Nees guh guh,
Nees huh huh.
Neix Mianhh aol gaos map sibs,
Sins qit idl leix,
Mianhh jonv soh;
Sins qit nyih leix,
Mianhh junc lingh;
Sint qit samp soh,
Mianh yuh daiv junl qac gaos
jienc.

Mianh was born on the floor,
Holding a book in his left hand,
Holding a whip in his right.
There are magic figures in the book,
The magic figures are from the
heavenly book.

The whip measures three *chi* long,
When it struck the mountain, the
mountain broke,
When it drove the stone, the stone went.

...

Because and because,
Because King Mianh came down the
mountain,
And was ill in bed,
Caught by the official army,
And his neck cut with an axe,
People cried for three days,
People cried for three nights;
“Guh Guh,” they cried and cried,
“Huh huh,” they cried and cried.
Mianh’s mother caught his head,
And let out a first shout,
Mianh began to breathe;
And she let out a second shout,
Mianh stood up;
She let out a third shout,
Mianh went up the mountain with his
army.

By means of this vivid description, a heroic leader of the Dong peasant uprising lives in the hearts of the people.

Although the artistic repertoire of *kuant cix* is broad, its outstanding feature is figurative language. Even works that recount *kuant* rules and regulations describe them in a figurative mode. The prologue of the *yuefa kuant* offers a useful example (Zhang and Deng 1988:90):

Xibx jiuc weex nyut, Jus jiuc weex bedc; Gaenx liemc dinl bedl,	Ten pieces as one bundle, Nine pieces as one handful; All connected as the duck's webbed foot,
Bix miidl dinl aiv.	They do not separate like the chicken claw.
Miidl dinl aiv, Duih janl daol; Liemc dinl bedl,	Separated like the chicken claw, He wins over me; Connected like the duck's webbed foot,
Daol janl duih.	I win over him.

Each sentence of this passage is an analogy exhorting solidarity in the fight against the common enemy. "Ten pieces" and "nine pieces" are analogies for collective force, and the importance of unity is expressed by "the chicken claw" that separates and "the duck's webbed foot" that is connected. The example illustrates how the language of *kuant cix* is figurative and artistic rather than reasoned and logical.

Artistic language often appears in other clauses of *kuant cix*, for example the first part of the *First Facet* in *Liumian Yingui* tells about how to deal with conflicts born of love affairs between young men and women (*Kuant Cix* 1987:54):

Lingx pangp deev wenp donc dangc, Lingx nyangt dos oux wangc ngac; Aox songp beev nangc, Aox bangc beev eus. Nyangt sup lingx jih, Ah meix qengp wap. Yuh baov henl maenl aol, Yuh baov henl maenl eev.	The high mountain was opened up and became the fields, On the grassy slope sorghum grew; Bamboo shoots were growing in the pot, Fiddlehead grew in the wooden bucket. Green grass grew dense on the mountain, Fresh blossoms were full on the trees. It was ordered that the bride be taken in time, It was ordered that the bride be married off in time.
Dah maenl dengv, Ugs maenl guangl.	Send away evil days, Receiving good times.

Nouc vox duil bianv
 wenp yeic,
 Jingv bianv wenp ah.
 Banl piat semp daov sais,
 Miogs nanc dogl yanc bas.

Who knew that peaches became
 pears,
 True became false.
 Man has changed heart,
 Woman did not stay with her aunt-in-law.

The first six lines metaphorically tell of sexual relations, conception, and pregnancy. Then a vow of mutual devotion is taken, “the bride [should] be taken in time,” and “the bride [should] be married in time.” As a result, “peaches became pears,” “true became false,” and “female did not stay with her aunt-in-law.” According to the Dong custom, the female should return to the home of her mother’s brother and the son of the maternal uncle has the right to marry the daughter of his father’s sister; for that reason the bride calls her mother-in-law by the term aunt-in-law. A romantic comedy becomes a tragedy. For unreliable, unfaithful, and deceiving men, *yuefa kuant* proposes a punishment: let them eat the feces of pigs and dogs. The reason for the widespread popularity and dissemination of *yuefa kuant* must be connected with its artistic style.

Channels of Transmission for *Kuant Cix*

As a cultural and artistic classic of Dong society, *kuant cix* was naturally as well received and publicized among the Dong as were China’s “Four Books” and “Five Classics” and the Western Bible among their respective audiences. How did *kuant cix* spread among the Dong? This question entails an examination of *kuant*-telling during the festivals of *yueqing* in March and *yuehuang* in September.

The so-called *yueqing* in March is the annual recitation and explanation of *kuant cix* before the spring plowing that month, as determined by the Chinese lunar calendar. When spring plowing is imminent, plowing-buffaloes roam the wilds and water for irrigation is abundant; all kinds of crops, wild animals, and plants grow and reproduce. This is the appropriate time for reminding people to protect the plowing-buffaloes and the spring waters, tend their crops, and protect the wild plants and animals. In order to exhort and educate the people, the regional *kuant* organizations hold meetings at which the head men of the *kuant*, and other talented people, recite *yuefa kuant* and other *kuant cix* for their audience. This is in fact a traditional way of popularizing folk customs. At present, the “Village Regulations and Folk Disciplines” written in Chinese have replaced the tradition.

The so-called *yuehuang* in September involves the recitation and explanation of *kuant cix* before the autumn harvest, again as determined by the Chinese Lunar calendar. On the eve of the harvest, the crops have matured and the public celebrates with many social activities. The autumn recitation is a reminder to protect the achievements of their labor, and to guard against any violation of the rules observed during the large-scale celebrations. In addition, the relative dryness of autumn and winter places the Dong's wooden houses in some peril from fires; the grass and wood on the mountains also dessicate and turn yellow, increasing the likelihood of wildfires. To ensure the safeguarding of lives and the protection of property, all regional *kuant* organizations call mass meetings at this time to perform important passages of *kuant*. Such good traditional customs have been absorbed by the township-level administrations in present-day Dong regions.

The so-called *kuant*-telling during the Spring Festival, or other important festivals, makes possible the recitation of *kuant* and its explanation for the public. In some regions where large-scale competitions are held the winners are often honored with the title of *Kuant* Master. For example, during the Qianlong reign (1736-95) of the Qing Dynasty, in what is now Liping County in Guizhou province, a major *kuant*-telling competition was held. An outstanding Dong girl, Wu Peiyao, fulfilled the people's hopes by defeating all her competitors and was selected to be the first local female *kuant* master and head *kuant*. She enjoys great renown and stature in Dong history, and many stories about her circulate today.³ Such festivals involve many aspects. In addition to *yuefa kuant* there are also *kuant* on ethnic origin, heroes, a bumper harvest, and impromptu creations. The style and artistic quality of these works are quite polished. These activities occur as part of a competition, where displays by talented performers are exchanged to the enjoyment and appreciation of their audiences. Each village and lineage is excited if its representatives win, and disappointed if their showing is poor. Even today such *kuant*-telling activities are an ongoing part of life in many Dong villages.

The attractions of modern cultural and recreational activities, and the disappearance of the social functions that *kuant cix* traditionally regulated, are displacing *kuant cix* from its historical role. As an art form, however, it continues to be favored by the Dong and by specialists in oral traditions because of its unique charm.

³ For details, cf. Deng and Wu 1995:165.

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