

On Dongbei Renaissance

Tian Jin and Yutian Yang

NYU Shanghai

DURF Program

Prof. Weixian Pan

Abstract

The idea of “Dongbei Renaissance” was first raised by Gem Dong in 2019, arousing a heated discussion about the Northeast (Dongbei) area of China. Our research, attracted by the popularity of this topic, aims to explore a deeper understanding of “Dongbei Renaissance” and interpret further about Dongbei arts mainly through theoretical analysis and our fieldwork. This report starts from the background of regional history and cultures, which contributes to our definition of the concept as a one-sided shift in the attitudes of people out of Dongbei. We argue that “Dongbei Renaissance”, means gaining popularity after years of unconcern among the outsiders, referring to a shift of the attitudes towards Dongbei arts of people outside of northeastern China. By conducting the fieldwork, we then experienced the local atmosphere in person from an “insider” perspective, finding that the passion for the various arts actually has been internalized into the life of people in Dongbei. Furthermore, digital media mostly supports the revival of both traditional and emerging Dongbei arts. Upon further research and analysis, we reached the conclusion that it is the correspondence between the properties of digital media and the region as well as the masses that pushes forward the phenomenon both objectively and subjectively.

Keywords: Northeast China, the arts of Dongbei, digital media

On Dongbei Renaissance

The concept of “Dongbei Renaissance” was first proposed by Gem Dong, a pop singer from Northeast China (aka. Dongbei) and made the song “野狼Disco” (The Wolf Disco) last year. The song and its music video went viral overnight after initial online release on September 2nd, 2019, and later became one of the most popular songs of China due to its appearance at the 2020 Spring Festival Gala. The song contains many northeast elements, including Dongbei dialects and glimpses of everyday life, and consequently has struck a strong regional chord with people from Northeast China. These regional-specific elements evoke listeners’ memories of local culture and lifestyles especially at the end of the last century. In this sense, when Gem Dong raised the idea of “Dongbei Renaissance” on the TV program for the first time, it rapidly drew the public's attention and even became a Sina Weibo Super Topic late before long.

Interested in this concept, we therefore would like to start a research on both the word choice of “Renaissance” and the meaning behind. In this research, we will first focus on the background of both Dongbei (Northeast China) as a region and its folk-art forms. Besides, by conducting fieldwork as a case study, we will try to give “Dongbei Renaissance” a clear definition, which could be greatly different from its literal meaning. We will then introduce the main observations of our fieldwork, thus leading to a deeper analysis of the two driving forces behind “Dongbei Renaissance”.

Background

Dongbei, interpreted as northeast, is a geographical region of China which often corresponds specifically to the three provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang and sometimes includes parts of Inner Mongolia. In modern Chinese history, Dongbei has

experienced a series of changes since the late Qing dynasty. During the Second Opium War (1840-1842), tsarist Russia invaded northeast China and made it a semi-colony (Yi, 1998). Throughout the 19th century, due to the severe famine in the lower Yellow River area more and more local people emigrated to Dongbei, which greatly increased the population of the Northeast. In 1931, Japan staged the September 18th incident in the Northeast and later established "Manchukuo", a severe disaster for China. Stimulated by the foreigners' invasion, the economy of Dongbei got rapid development, specifically, the heavy industry (Yi). After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the northeast industry continued to develop rapidly with the help of the government, yet the economic development of Dongbei was not always plain sailing. When it came to the 1990s, a tremendous laid-off wave due to the state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform caused numerous Dongbei people to lose their means of livelihood, and the heavy industry that they once prided themselves on was collapsed. According to the document, the rigid state enterprise system has caused a growing number of large SOEs to suffer large losses. The government, to fix this problem, closed down and reorganized those loss-making enterprises, causing eight million workers to lose their jobs (Feng, 2017). Until today, the northeast economy still hasn't completely get rid of the shadow of the laid-off wave.

On the other hand, speaking of the Northeastern regional culture, Dongbei has its northeastern mandarin dialect, which is often considered highly characteristic and humorous that many Chinese sketch comedians choose to perform. Besides, Dongbei has a long tradition of folk entertainment, and two of the most popular art forms are *Er'ren zhuan* and *Yang ge*. *Er'ren zhuan*, known as a song-and-dance duet, is normally performed by one man and one woman, whereas people who play *Yang ge* are often in groups, and there is no gender requirement.

In short, despite the short history with twists and turns in the process of regional development, Dongbei continues to uphold its regional traditions and cultures in various art forms.

Dongbei Renaissance: A Shift from Outsiders' Eyes

Talking about Dongbei arts, it has been known for long for its distinctive regional characteristics across the country. Back to the 1990s, a group of comedians from Northeast China vigorously developed comic sketches, and they took the national stage by storm, most famously represented by Zhao Benshan, a regular guest to Spring Festival Gala. Featured with traditional cultures such as *Er' ren zhuan* and northeastern elements such as Dongbei dialects and humor, comic sketches rapidly became the mainstream form of northeastern folk literature and art from the eyes of people outside of Dongbei. In the following decades, however, the comedy of sketches has been gradually stereotyped as the only label of Dongbei, more or less shaping into a kind of aesthetic fatigue on the cookie-cutter cultural content. It to some extent resulted in the bottleneck period of both cultural variety and regional popularity later after 2009. To be more specific, audiences from other areas no longer focus on or are aware of the northeastern cultural traditions behind the often-exaggerated performances. Instead, they gradually only take pleasure in the vulgarization and entertainment of those regional features. It was until about 2016 when the short video era came that Dongbei area reappeared in public view. As is shown in the statistics, “Currently (2018) half of the top 20 anchors on almost every platform are from the northeast” (Su & Dong, 2018, p.11). Though the northeast region at a time was marginalized in the Internet field due to its backward economy, it is hard to deny that it indeed occupies the most popular mobile live broadcast industry at present.

Compared with the European Renaissance in the late Middle Ages - the literal meaning of “Renaissance”, therefore, “Dongbei Renaissance” should not be defined as a resurgence of classical cultures and arts. Rather, in this research, we argue that the concept of “Dongbei Renaissance”, meaning gaining popularity after years of unconcern among the outsiders, actually refers to a shift of the attitudes towards Dongbei arts of people outside of northeastern China. Though Gem Dong used the term “Renaissance” more or less for the purpose of catching the digital public's eyes, we closely explore the concept within the Dongbei context of cultural tradition and redevelopment after the 1990s, particularly drawn from our fieldwork as a case study. We therefore conducted a one-week field trip to Changchun, the capital of Jilin Province and a major northeastern urban center, expecting to collect some firsthand experience and observations from an “insider” perspective.

Field trip Observations

Compared with the shifts happening among the outsiders throughout the years, we found that the city in fact shows the consistent vitality of traditional literature and art very directly in local daily life. For instance, the Changchun Film Studio, as the first film studio of the People's Republic of China established in 1945, has witnessed the development of China's visual arts, especially the film industry. According to Wang (2019), since its establishment, CFS has created, shot, and dubbed more than 3,300 films, vividly recording the magnificent struggles of the new China over the past 70 years. Until today, Changchun Film Studio keeps reproducing classic movies, showing high respect to the regional and even national art and history. Similarly, *Er'ren zhuan*, one of the most classical northeast performing arts, has never been left out. During our field trip, *Er'ren zhuan* performing groups (whether organized or not) could be found in

almost every park and the public square. The Northeast *Er'ren zhuan* Museum, furthermore, introduces its origins and development in great detail, embodying the vitality of northwestern folk performing arts throughout the times. In this sense, unlike the shift of outsiders' attitudes, Dongbei arts has already been internalized and absorbed as a regional atmosphere as well as the most common part of their daily life ever before it came on the national stage - in other words, there has been a consistent passion for long for traditional arts among the locals.

Not only that, with the development of the Internet, in recent years various forms of digital media came to reality, including short videos and live streaming. Those platforms, serving as an online medium, enable people to share whatever they want to almost everyone regardless of their locations. Digital media has therefore become one of the key prerequisites that not only realizes the “revival” of Dongbei traditional arts and culture, but also gives birth to various new art forms. On one hand, the regional traditional arts successfully took advantage of digital media. During our field trip, we saw people use mobile phones to broadcast live *Er'ren zhuan* and *Yang ge* to the online audience almost everywhere. By blending old-fashioned traditions with popular platforms, a larger audience outside Dongbei has been attracted to get deeper into regional cultures, which truly interprets the meaning of renaissance. On the other hand, in the context of the new era, more and more young people from Northeast China tend to speak their words in a more creative way. According to Hou (2019), Dongbei has the highest penetration degree of video-sharing apps among China's six administrative regions, with a rate of 56.6%. Among them, Laosi, one of the most representative creators of Northeast China, is famous for his humorous short videos about drinking stories happening in his normal life. Born and raised in Northeast

China, Laos represents a group of producers who create artistic works with their own creativity, showing their lifestyles and attitudes only belonging to Dongbei.

In brief, no matter what they are spreading via the Internet, either traditional cultures or emerging art forms, they are actually demonstrating the real lifestyles and cultures of Dongbei to the outside people through different forms of works and re-catch public focus on this region after years of unconcern - they are all the core pieces of the great blueprint of the Dongbei Renaissance.

Why Dongbei? Driving Forces Behind

Dongbei is surely not the only region that has aroused great attention from the public especially on the Internet, yet it might be the one that gains the most popularity. So, why Dongbei? Driven by this question, we combined the theoretical research and the fieldwork, attempting to analyze the justification from two aspects, that are, the objective correspondence in the features of the region and the digital media and the subjective driving force of the masses.

Firstly, according to the article "The purpose and characteristics of digital media," the advantages of digital media embody in three aspects: distribution and access, manipulation, and cost (Weebly). It is quite convenient to access and even distribute things on those online platforms. Together with the low cost of creating and sharing via the Internet, it saves much time and energy while attracts the largest audience around the world. Not to mention, users can easily create and manipulate whatever they like without professional skills, which highly stimulates people's passion. As for the regional features of Northeast China, "entertaining", "superficial" and "secular" are the three words that well depict Dongbei literature and art, according to Liu and Yang (Liu & Yang, 2003). As is mentioned above, Dongbei is not an area with quite a long

history. This results in a lack of continuous and profound cultural deposits. Additionally, since the region underwent an economic recession due to the policy mistakes, it more or less gave birth to the self-mockery and entertainment spirit among the public.

As a result, instead of pursuing economic development, people in northeast China have gradually formed a lifestyle of enjoying and entertaining, and the general atmosphere of literature and art has become increasingly secular and grassroots. Without a profound cultural deposit, the regional culture hence has stronger adaptability and comprehensiveness, enabling it to well take advantage of nonprofessional media and easily strikes a chord with people whatever cultural backgrounds they have. A remarkable chemical reaction therefore happens without doubt, reaching the “one plus one greater than two” result, that is, Dongbei Renaissance.

Though the correspondence between the properties of digital media and regional culture has objectively laid a solid foundation for the “revival” of Dongbei literature and art, there must be another powerful driving force that pushes forward the dramatic shift in a subjective sense. We hence proposed to mainly focus on two aspects - the masses (specifically some folk-art groups) and the government, trying to figure out their attitudes and contributions in terms of promoting the development of the Dongbei Renaissance.

During the field trip in Changchun, we in total visited nine related sites of Dongbei Renaissance in which four are open areas, three are museums, and the other two closed due to the COVID-19. To take a macroscopic analysis of these sites, a Table is made with several necessary components in it: a) From the perspective of a behavioral agent, all local artistic activities we met could be defined as either non-government behavior or government behavior. (As the name implies, non-government behavior here refers to arts activity that is sponsored by

the masses while the government behavior is the opposite); b) The number of Dongbei arts performance represents the dynamic condition of each site. The more performances, the greater potential relevance a site has to the Dongbei Renaissance; c) Main content is used to give a brief introduction of one's artistic activity; d) Popularity is a comprehensive index based on our intuitive feelings and interview results, thereby a reasonable inference is that one's popularity is positively correlated with its influence.

Table 1 : Behavioral Agent, Content, and Degree of Popularity.

<i>Site</i>	<i>NGB/ GB</i>	<i>No. of Dongbei arts performance</i>	<i>Main content</i>	<i>Popularity</i>
<i>Labor Park</i>	NGB	4	Dongbei Arts Performance	5
<i>Children's Park</i>	NGB	3	Dongbei Arts Performance	4
<i>Cultural Square</i>	NGB	6	Dongbei Arts Performance	5
<i>Wenmiao Square</i>	GB	1	Dongbei Arts Performance	3
<i>Northeast Er'ren zhuan Museum of Jilin Province</i>	GB	0	Er'ren zhuan History Exhibition	1
<i>Northeast Asian Cultural Creative Technology Zone</i>	GB	0	Enterprise training, culture creation and investment attraction	1
<i>The Former Site of Changchun Film Studio</i>	GB	0	The exhibition about the development history of CFS	2
<i>Liulaogen Big Stage</i>	NGB		Closed	
<i>Northeast Style Er'ren zhuan Theatre</i>	NGB		Closed	

Notes: *NGB*=Non-government Behavior;
GB=Government Behavior
Popularity: '1—5' signifies 'unpopular—very popular'.

As far as the Table is concerned, the activities belonging to non-government behavior have greater popularity than government behavior. A good case in point is Changchun Starlight Stage, a performing place whose contents cover *Er'ren zhuan*, *Yang ge* and many other folk arts with Dongbei characteristics. Upon further investigation, we learned that the stage was first initiated by an ordinary person. Laofan, out of interest in Dongbei arts, spontaneously formed the Starlight Troupe to invite like-minded people to perform. Having held the performance for nearly 20 years, the Stage has got great popularity in Changchun, gathering a huge number of citizens, either performers or audience, to come every night. In recent years, it even successfully combines with digital media, using the Kuaishou app to broadcast all the live performances for those who cannot be there in person and even around the world. This greatly promotes the spread of Dongbei performing arts, in a larger sense contributing to the true “Dongbei Renaissance”. In sharp contrast to the Starlight Stage is the Northeast Asian Cultural Creative Technology Zone. As the data shows, the zone cost 32 billion yuan in total and was completed in 2010. In October 2017, Northeast Asian Cultural Creative Technology Zone was granted the qualification of the first batch of state-level cultural industry demonstration parks (Baidu Baike). However, initially established by the government to promote cultural development, the park eventually turned into an area mainly waiting for investment projects. The greatest irony would be the huge poster hanging on the very first building, speaking out to “Initiate the Renaissance of a City”. Taking into account all the factors, therefore, the masses play a much more important role in Dongbei Renaissance without doubt compared to the government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research aims to explore a deeper understanding of “Dongbei Renaissance” and interpret further about Dongbei arts mainly through theoretical analysis and our fieldwork. We first started from the background of regional history and cultures, which contributes to our definition of the concept as a one-sided shift in the attitudes of people out of Dongbei. We argue that “Dongbei Renaissance”, means gaining popularity after years of unconcern among the outsiders, referring to a shift of the attitudes towards Dongbei arts of people outside of northeastern China. By conducting the fieldwork, we then experienced the local atmosphere in person from an “insider” perspective, finding that the passion for the various arts actually has been internalized into the life of people in Dongbei. Furthermore, digital media mostly supports the revival of both traditional and emerging Dongbei arts. Upon further research and analysis, we even reached the conclusion that it is the correspondence between the properties of digital media and the region as well as the masses that pushes forward the phenomenon both objectively and subjectively.

Speaking of “Dongbei Renaissance” as a shift, great development has been achieved for Dongbei arts to regain public attention. Yet regarding the difference existing between outsiders' and insiders' perspectives, it actually reflects further problems about the future of the shift : In what direction should “Dongbei Renaissance” be led to narrow the gap between these two views? Does digital media do all good to the spread of Dongbei arts? How can the government play a more important role in the revival? Even, what's the sustainability of “Dongbei Renaissance”? Despite these doubts, “Dongbei Renaissance” itself as a phenomenon would surely be developed for another period of time. Though we now cannot jump into conclusion whether Dongbei Renaissance would have a far-reaching effect just like the European

Renaissance, there's still every reason to believe that it will call for deeper thoughts on both Dongbei arts and regional development (maybe even combining with the times). Therefore, in order to find a clear way out of this topic, further research is always waiting to proceed.

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Appendix

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