Grassroots Musical Resilience in Southwestern China: A Focus on Tai-Speaking Communities of Guangxi and Guizhou, with a response drawing on the Australia-Pacific context

2018 Workshop

Sydney Conservatorium of Music - Room 4026

Tuesday 7 August 2018

sydney.edu.au/music/our-research.html

Invited guest presenters

- Associate Professor KAO Ya-ning (Department of Ethnology, National Chengchi University, Taiwan)
- Associate Professor LU Xiaoqin (College of Liberal Arts, Guangxi University for Nationalities, Guangxi)
- Dr PAN Yanqin (College of ASEAN Studies, Guangxi University for Nationalities, Guangxi)
- Professor WU Ninghua (Department of Art Research, Guangxi Arts Institute, Guangxi) and WANG Wei (Independent researcher)

Funding and organisation

This workshop is supported by funding from the China Studies Centre, the University of Sydney and the Australian Research Council. We are also grateful for support from our visitors' institutions: Guangxi University for Nationalities, Guangxi Arts Institute and the National Chengchi University.

The workshop is co-organised by Dr Catherine INGRAM (Sydney Conservatorium of Music) and Associate Professor KAO Ya-ning (National Chengchi University).

The workshop includes a response drawing on the Australia-Pacific context, organised and led by Dr Clint BRACKNELL (Sydney Conservatorium of Music).

Abstracts and Presenter Biographies (in order of presentation)

Associate Professor LU Xiaoqin
College of Liberal Arts, Guangxi University for Nationalities

"Lun Tay Shi Nong": Ethnic identity and folksong genres among Zhuang people in the Sino-Vietnamese border areas

In the process of the construction of the Zhuang as a southern Chinese nationality, various local song genres were generalized and simplified to become identified as Zhuang folksong (*Zhuangzu shange* 壮族山歌). However, Zhuang sub-groups in the Sino-Vietnamese border areas still emphasize their ethnic boundaries through their folksong genres. One example of this is the maintenance of different folksong practices in two different Zhuang sub-groups in southwest Guangxi and eastern Yunnan. In Napo county and Jinlong town of Longzhou county in Guangxi, and in Wenshan prefecture in Yunnan, local Zhuang people, known as Tay people, refer to folksong as *lun* (倫) and sing *lun* folksongs known as *ruan lun* (软伦), *hua lun* (话伦) and *ha lun* (哈伦). However, in Jingxi, Daxin, and Longzhou counties of Guangxi, local Zhuang people, known as Nong people, use *shi* 詩 (or *xi* 西) to refer to "folksong" (*shange* 山歌) and use *yin shi* (吟诗), *ruan xi* (软西), and *ni xi* (泥西) to refer to the singing of folksongs.

During the ethnic identification project conducted by the Chinese government from the 1950s to 1980s, both Nong and Tay people in the abovementioned areas were identified as members of a united "Zhuang Nationality" (壮族). However, the people in Longzhou, Guangxi have a saying *lun Tay shi Nong*, which means "Tay people sing *lun* folksong and Nong people sing *shi* (xi) folksong". Tay and Nong peoples in Northern Vietnam also share a similar differentiation between folksong genres and ethnic groups. Therefore, the classification of *lun* and *shi (xi)* enhances the boundary of ethnic groups on the one hand, while on the other hand it develops the identification of individual nationality. In this presentation, I will demonstrate several cases of song practices among Nong and Tay people in both southern China and northern Vietnam to elaborate how folksong genres maintain ethnic identity and the diversity of folksong traditions.

Professor WU Ninghua
Department of Art Research, Guangxi Arts Institute
WANG Wei
Independent Researcher

Changes and reconstruction in Zhuang folksong rhyming patterns among Zhuang people in China

Zhuang folksongs comprise at least five genres: *huan* 欢, *bi* 比, *shi*诗, *jia*加, *and lun*伦. The *Aojia* style is most popular among Zhuang people resident in Chongzuo in central south Guangxi, and falls into the *jia* folksong genre. The songs in this genre are each composed of verses containing four seven-syllable lines with the addition of vocables such as *jiao lian*娇莲, *jiao rong*娇容, *jiao e*娇娥, *jiao mei*娇媚, *and jinyin*金银 at the end of the first line. Within each verse, the last syllables of the second and fourth lines (and sometimes also the first line) must rhyme, a feature that is essential in traditional antiphonal *Aojia* singing. The pattern for selecting and altering rhymes is fixed, and the ability to master rhyming patterns is an important criteria for becoming a song expert. In the last decade or more, governments have held numerous folksong competitions which have impacted on the way traditional rhyming patterns are used in the performance of these songs. The competitions often aim to promote and praise the government or party's policies, and the lyrics are composed beforehand. The singers' ability to improvise songs employing proper rhyming patterns has increasingly been ignored. In this presentation, we describe both traditional song practices and current song competitions, and analyse how both the *jia* folksong genre and its rhyming patterns have been changed and reconstructed under the state's authority. Although governments dominate the rules of song competition, the song experts have gradually come to realise how the government-dominated competitions have destroyed their song tradition. In the last few years, the local people have negotiated with official authorities and were eventually able to change the competition rules. As a result, traditional song practice now continue in song competitions.

Dr PAN Yanqin
College of ASEAN Studies, Guangxi University for Nationalities

From Ding to Tianqin: The development of a musical instrument of the Zhuang

Taking the *Tianqin* (two-string plucked lute) of the Budai People of the Zhuang Nationality in Longzhou County as a case study, this paper explores how the *Tianqin* has been transformed from a religious instrument into a popular musical instrument of the Zhuang, and how these transformations have influenced local villagers' understanding of the instrument.

The *Ding* is an instrument that is played by religious specialists of the Budai people of the Zhuang Nationality in their rituals. In the early 21st century, a famous musician came to Budai villages to collect folk songs, and he created a song inspired by the rhythm of the *Ding* and local folk songs. This song was sung and performed with *Ding* by a women's singing group named the *Tianqin* Singing Group. The *Tianqin* Singing Group first performed with the instrument in public at the Nanning International Folk Song Festival in 2004, causing a sensation. With almost 20 years of development, *Tianqin* has been developed as a musical instrument of the Zhuang and is now listed as an intangible cultural heritage. Thus, while

the *Tianqin* was previously a religious instrument only used by ritual specialists, it is now performed on stage by local villagers, especially women villagers. The *Tianqin* and its concept is accepted by the Budai people and they employ it as a cultural symbol to show their cultural traditions in public.

Associate Professor KAO Ya-ning
National Chengchi University

Song spirits and the role of singing in Zhuang spirit medium rituals in China

Who is the most famous song spirit among the Zhuang? Most Chinese people would answer Liu Sanjie, after the image of the legendary Zhuang singer was made popular in a 1960s film. However, many Zhuang people also pay respects to local song spirits in their hometowns. This paper discusses the image of spirits of song, as well as the interactions between the spirit singers and audiences, and the meaning of singing in Zhuang community rituals in Jingxi, Guangxi. I will focus on the non-mainstream image of song spirits in Zhuang society and illustrate the social, political and cultural meaning of singing in spirit medium rituals. The spirits of song in Zhuang society are the spirits of some individuals who were not only good at singing when they were alive but were also able to compose their own song lyrics. After they died, they were able to become powerful spirits and people worshipped them for a variety of reasons, including the hope of cultivating their own singing talents. In Ande, Jingxi, the wife of Zhuang hero Nong Zhigao is recognised as an exceptionally talented song spirit by the local people. According to legend, she died in a nearby karst cavern. Prior to the 1950s, people entered the cavern for an annual ritual on the first day of the second lunar month. The aim of the ritual was to predict the rainfall of the coming year; during the rites, Nong Zhigao's wife would possess a female audience member and sing a sorrowful song about a battle. In 2005 I participated a ritual in which the spirit of Nong Zhigao's wife appeared again after an over 50-year interruption to the annual rite. This paper explores this rite in the context of mainstream representation of the Zhuang song spirit as a heroine of limited means who, due to her talent, is able to overcome great obstacles responds to the expectations of both Zhuang and non-Zhuang people. It seeks to understand the significance of antiphonal songs sung between the spirits and audiences and how these challenge efforts that aim to marginalise song spirits themselves.

Dr Catherine INGRAM
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney

Symbolising diversity: Staged big song performances and Kam Village singing in Southwestern China

One of the most significant recent developments in UNESCO-recognised Kam (in Chinese, Dong 侗) big song singing over the past six decades has been the emergence of two big song "traditions". The village tradition of big song singing continues within celebratory events in rural areas at each lunar new year, and remains rooted in regionally specific big song repertoires. The staged tradition of big song singing began in the 1950s, in parallel with China's 1954 ethnic classification project, and has developed distinctive features that include the performance of a limited range of "artistically processed" big songs drawn from many different regional repertoires. Today, staged big song singing has acquired increased significance and authority, whilst having a crucial and ongoing role in symbolising the official Kam identity within the post-1949 multi-ethnic socialist state. This paper draws on research over a 13-year period to explore how these sung symbolisations of the position of Kam people in an ethnically diverse sociopolitical landscape have been influential upon village big song singing. I consider issues such as the dynamics of big song canonisation in the early twenty-first century and recent flexibility in big song performance protocols in terms of the resilience of the tradition as a whole.

Dr Clint Bracknell
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney

SCM response, drawing on the Australia-Pacific context Co-ordinated and led by Dr Clint Bracknell.