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).
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 Tai people, refer to folksong as lun (偏) 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 Tai 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 “Tai people sing lun folksong and Nong people sing shi (xi) folksong”. Tai 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 Tai people in both southern China and northern Vietnam to elaborate how folksong genres maintain ethnic identity and the diversity of folksong traditions.

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 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 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.

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.