

Kam Singing

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1. Origin

Once upon a time, there was a singing Banyan tree at the edge of a village. Its fruit was eaten by birds and as a result, many kinds of birds were able to sing. The thrush and the woodpecker were the most gifted. Beside the tree, however, lived an old woman named Sà Yáng (萨阳). She really disliked the tree, with its constant singing—singing by day, singing by night. To her, it was a terrible nuisance, so one day she cut it down and pushed it into the river.

A passing fish happened to eat some of the fruit from the tree and its whole belly was filled with songs. Further down the river, a man named Xì Yá (细崖) caught the fish and cut it open. He was startled to see a belly full of songs and quickly shoved them all in a bamboo basket and locked it in a barn. Later, he decided to carry the songs to Lóngtú (龙图, with 700 families) and Guàndòng (贯洞, with 900 families), to entertain friends there. All of a sudden, as he was crossing the bridge at Lándòng (兰洞) and switching his carrying pole from one shoulder to another, the pole snapped in two and all the songs in the basket spilled out. They landed everywhere, in the water and on the river bank, and although Xì Yá tried frantically to collect them again, he could only manage to grab a handful. With these, he became a famous song teacher, but the other scattered songs spread far and wide. Ever since, the sound of singing has filled Kam villages, by the rivers and mountains.

2. Southern and northern Kam

The Kam language has two dialects, southern and northern. The dialect boundary is taken as a line through Jǐnpíng (锦屏) county in Guìzhōu (贵州) province. The 2.5 million Kam people are divided into approximately 75% who live in the southern dialect area and 25% who live in the northern dialect area. About 68% of all Kam people speak the Kam language; with a greater percentage in the south than in the north. Southern Kam is generally less influenced by the Chinese language, and a smaller proportion of southern Kam people are bilingual in Chinese, than northern Kam.

Singing in the southern Kam area is different in several ways from singing in the northern area. In the south, people often sing at home, near to one another, with low or moderate volume. In the north, they are used to singing on the mountains, at a distance from one another, with very high volume. In the south, songs are usually sung using only the Kam language. In the north, Kam and Chinese are often used together in the same songs; or perhaps one song uses Kam and the next uses Chinese. In the south, songs can be very long, lasting up to forty minutes. In the north, they follow the pattern for Chinese songs and are typically four lines long. In the south, choirs of men usually sing to choirs of women. In the north, men can sing to men and women to women. Singing tends to be more regulated in the south and more spontaneous in the north. In the south, love songs are sung mostly in the evening, in the north often by day. Melodies in the south tend to be more level, those in the north more fluctuating.

In other respects, however, the Kam singing culture is a unified one. Whether south or north, singing is used as a major tool in social relationships. Through singing, Kam people test one another's wit and character, remember and uphold accepted morals in society, compete with one another, appeal to and express thanks to their gods, give vent to their frustrations, and relax! As the Kam saying goes, just as rice is food for the body, so singing is food for the spirit.

Singing is a source of pride. There is a village in Cóngjiāng (从江) county named Xiǎohuáng (小黄), famous out of proportion to its size for its prowess in singing. It might be called the current capital of Kam singing and its inhabitants are naturally proud of its exalted position in Kam society.

Finding a life-partner is often a matter of singing. Singing for your supper is subsumed by singing for your husband or wife. Groups of young people visit one another in "teams." Eight young men of the same age from one village, for example, may visit a neighbouring village and sing to a group of about eight young women. Not all the men will be equally intelligent or equally good at singing. But there is an inbuilt community spirit, reinforced by the elders of the respective villages. The less gifted are helped and compensated for by their more gifted companions. It is assumed that eventually, the good talkers will match up with the good talkers, those who don't talk much will match up with those who don't talk much, those who can't really sing will match up with those who can't really sing, and so on. The whole courtship process will often take several years.

In the past, Kam women expressed their feelings of injustice through song. The custom of having a Kam girl marry her cousin—her mother's brother's son—or at least, giving her uncle first say in whom she should marry, led to much opposition from the women. They frequently sang against the custom, with some measure of

success. According to Kam women in Húnán province, they also fought a successful campaign through song to gain women a share in their parents' land, to be granted after they married and gave birth to a child. Their share would be used for planting cotton. There is a tendency to view boys as "more important" than girls, even today, and there is still often an air of suffering and pain in the women's songs, reflecting a feeling that their lot in life is unfair. Slowly their lot improves.

At every major life-event and at every major festivity observed by the Kam people, singing features highly in the celebrations or commiserations. The exception to this rule is when someone "dies young," before the age of seventy.

Singing has preserved Kam history and legend down through the ages. There was no Kam script until the late 1950s and song became the unwritten Kam literature, the link between ancestors and descendants.

In 1988, a choir of Kam girls made a trip to Paris and took part in an Autumn Art Festival there, receiving wide acclaim from reviewers. The truth is, however, that Kam singing is not an art that transfers easily to the public stage. The girls were trained to sing several songs. In the villages, however, there are hundreds of songs that might be sung, on a variety of themes that might leave the Western listener nonplussed. The Paris-type songs were judged mainly according to their musical appeal and quality. The village-type songs may not always be as good in musical *terms*, but in function and atmosphere, they are richer by far. There will probably never be a Kam Spice Girls or a Kam Elton John, because what makes Kam singing so special is not so much its musical quality (though it *has* a special quality), as its functions and associations, things which are not readily reproduced on the stage.

Karaoke is currently very popular in China. In some respects it is an attempt to do what Kam singing has been doing for generations at the heart of Kam culture: to help people enjoy one another's company and understand one another better. But karaoke does not enjoy massive support from society at large, it does not have the roots that make Kam singing so special. Among the Kam, singing lies at the heart of much communication. It is not so much entertainment as food for the spirit, of which entertainment is only one of many elements.

3. Kam songs

There are many types of song, used in different contexts in Kam society. Chinese New Year is the occasion for some of the most celebrated.

In the southern Kam area, it is common at New Year for a whole village to receive an invitation from a neighbouring village to go and spend the New Year holiday there. Such invitations reflect warm relations between the two villages and it is in the context of warm relations that singing competitions between the two villages are entered into.

On the day before leaving home, the guest-villagers meet near the altar to the goddess Sà (萨). Each village has someone responsible for looking after Sà's altar and this lady (or man—if it is a man, he dresses up in lady's clothing), carrying a half-open umbrella, leads a procession of ladies in a circle near the altar. The lady represents Sà and does not say anything. A different lady, a good singer, leads the others in a song to Sà. She sings one line and the others sing it after her. Each line of the song ends with the phrase “Yee ya ye,” which has no particular meaning of its own. The song typically explains to Sà that the villagers are going to visit their neighbours. Would she please go with them? If so, she could guarantee their safety and give them a good chance of winning the singing competition. This “singing to Sà” might last about half an hour.

The next day, the first competition takes place at the entrance to the host village, where the hosts have a singing group of young ladies ready to block the way. The ladies block the entrance to their village with a variety of articles. Before entry is granted, the ladies test the singing ability of the visiting village's male-voice choir. The host ladies sing first, the visiting men reply. One by one, the articles blocking the way are removed, until eventually the way is clear. In the course of the singing, both teams size up the others' ability, preparing for the activities of the evening. If the visitors have come from a long way, the blocking songs may only last twenty minutes; but if the visitors are near-neighbours, the songs may last up to five hours.

In the evening, the two choirs re-convene over a meal, and then at the village drum-tower. In addition, a choir of men from the host village “does battle” with a choir of ladies from the visiting village, at another location in the host village. These singing events actually last the whole night through. Women sing questions, men sing answers. At the outset, these questions and answers typically follow a predictable pattern, and the choirs can sing in turn, songs that they have memorised. After a while, the elements of surprise and spontaneity come more into play. When this happens, one member of each choir may take up the baton in words, while his or her colleagues sing only the tune. The songs on these occasions are choral songs, so called because they involve singing in parts.

While the young adults sing, the older folk and children retire to various homes in the host village, as organised by host elders. During the next day, the singers and revellers find a place to get some rest in preparation for the next night's

singing. These events last an odd number of days between three and thirteen, usually three or five days; never an even number of days. At the conclusion, it is clear to everyone which village has the better choirs. Typically, the women beat the men. This is partly because the women's role is usually to sing questions to which the men reply in song: it is easier to sing questions than to sing answers. In addition the women are generally more practised in singing and this too has its effect. At the end of such a singing and relaxing festival, the host village sends the visitors home with a gift—a pig or a water buffalo, for example. The visitors go home and sing more Yee songs to Sà, thanking her for her help. In a year or two, the visitors extend a reciprocal invitation to their former hosts. In the interim, both villages regroup their forces, keep their spies at work, and prepare for the next singing competition.

Such public festivals are the prelude to romance. In the south, if a young man likes a young lady, he will visit her village, at first with two or three friends, and sing to her and her friends. On such occasions, parents usually retire conveniently to their bedrooms; but if a daughter finds herself at a loss in knowing what to sing next, it is not unheard of for a mother to pop out of the shadows to assist her. Eventually, a young man may visit his girlfriend alone. Their communication will then still be in song. If the young lady really does not wish to encourage the man, she may think of an excuse—she does not feel well, for example—to send him away. Parents do not normally rebuff a prospective son-in-law to his face, but if they have misgivings about a certain man, they can and do express these to their daughter privately. In the end, freedom of choice with respect to marriage partner is usually respected.

After marriage, men can still sing in the public gatherings; women can too, until they go to live in their husbands' homes (usually when they are pregnant with their first child, which may be more than a couple of years after their marriage). When the new wives move homes, they frequently lose their singing companions, friends with whom they have played and worked from an early age. They have no choir then with which to sing. The men, on the other hand, do not typically need to relocate after marriage and can continue singing with their friends. Under this system, if the head of a female singing group marries and relocates, the whole group is immediately disbanded.

Six excerpts of different genres of Kam songs—including Yee songs, “blocking the way” songs and choral songs—are presented in the Appendix to this paper.

4. Training

Each singing group normally has a leader, groomed from an early age. Children begin learning to sing at the age of five or six. Usually, they are first trained by their mothers. Often they will begin to sing together in groups at this time, boys with boys and girls with girls. In the past, because many girls did not attend school and would spend long hours at home with their mothers making clothes and doing housework, they would have many opportunities to practise singing under their mothers' supervision. Even today, girls often leave school earlier than boys and enjoy "home schooling" by song.

An important feature of learning to sing is that it is usually carried out within an extended family. That is to say, people with the same family name learn together. So it turns out that the Yangs, for example, in a given village, may gain a reputation for their singing prowess.

When children reach the age of twelve or so, a singing teacher is sometimes called in to enhance their training. The teacher is usually highly respected in society, and not without reason. Particularly in the past, song teachers were those who were most "well educated." They knew most about Kam history, legend, and morality, because all these things were learned through song.

If a singing teacher is from the local area, he or she may come in the evening, after the day's work in the fields is finished, to teach the children. If, however, a teacher is invited from another village, he—it is usually a man—may spend some days or weeks lodging in the home of the hosts, and will teach the children by day. His main purpose is to teach children appropriate words to their songs, not to focus on singing technique. To recompense the travelling teacher, one or two men may be sent from the host village to work the teacher's land. Further payment is not usually made with money, but with a gift at the end of the teaching stint.

By the age of fifteen or sixteen, young people are encouraged to sing in society at large, representing their village in singing festivities. This typically continues until marriage, usually between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Men can carry on singing with their peers after marriage and often do so up to the age of forty; but as mentioned above, women usually stop group singing after they become pregnant with their first child and move to stay in their husband's home.

5. Changing scene

One morning in 1968, in the countryside in Tiānzhù (天柱) county, a young Kam man was supposed to be ploughing the land. Instead he went up the mountain with some girlfriends and sang love songs with them. His misdemeanour was discovered and he was arrested. (At that time, love songs were not officially approved.) Thereafter, he became a travelling prisoner, paraded in villages in the area as an example of how not to behave. For the next ten years, people in that area did not dare to sing publicly.

A new lease of life for Kam singing and culture came in 1978, when cultural practices were again permitted and encouraged. Since then, however, there has been a gradual erosion of the singing that has traditionally characterised the Kam people. In this, television has played its part. Instead of singing at the drum tower, people sit at the box; and there is no Kam singing on television. Education has also played its part. There are no classes in Kam singing at school, no singing examinations, and therefore no chance that ability in singing will lead to a University place. As more Kam children do well at school, more leave home in search of lucrative work away from the fields. Professor Yáng Quán (杨权) discovered this when he led television crews from Běijīng to observe Kam New Year festivities early in 1998. In most of the villages in Lípíng (黎平) county, the young people who would normally make up the village singing teams had removed themselves to the towns. Only in Xiǎohuáng was the traditional scenario preserved.

So the Kam singing scene is changing. There is a Kam choral song that captures something of the change. It refers nostalgically to the swift passage of time, and has the title “You only cherish being eighteen when you’ve turned nineteen.” Could it be that the culture of Kam singing will only cherish the youth of its first eight centuries when it has reached old age in its ninth (the 21st)?

It is easy to climb mountains in their thousands,
 Easy to cross ravines in their tens of thousands;
 But if you don't sing when you are young,
 You may just worry yourself to death!
 Seedlings in a field that has been well weeded grow quickly,
 Everyone loves to see those kinds of crops.
 Days of youth pass faster than any others.
 It didn't feel like any time at all, when suddenly old age was approaching.
 Only those never-ending mountain peaks
 Can exist for ever.
 When the grain is ripe, it is gathered in.
 When a person dies, he is buried under the soil.

You only cherish being eighteen when you've turned nineteen.
 Days of youth pass easily by.
 Why does old age come so quickly?

Appendix: excerpts from Kam songs

Yee song to Sà

Into the field singing,
 Yee ya ye.
 Hand in hand we go round the field,
 Yee ya ye.
 One step left then one step right,
 Yee ya ye.
 I sing, you answer, full of joy,
 Yee ya ye.
 We first invite Sà to lead the way,
 Yee ya ye.
 Only when Sà leads, can we have a wonderful time,
 Yee ya ye; yee luo ya.

The New Year has come and we have all come to dance,
 Yee ya ye.
 There is singing and dancing everywhere, we are having a good time,
 Yee ya ye.
 Sà and her daughters share our joy,
 Yee ya ye.
 Everyone in the village, old and young, is absolutely delighted,
 Yee ya ye.
 Only with ample food and clothing can we enjoy peace and tranquillity,
 Yee ya ye; yee luo ya.

"Blocking the way" song

Women: Asking you:
 Are you called Zhang or Li?
 Zhangs and Lis should not enter,
 Our village has no relatives of yours.

Men: Answering you:
 We are not called Zhang or Li.
 Our paternal grandmother was born in your village
 And she is one of your village community.
 Our maternal grandfather and grandmother use the same drum tower as
 you.
 What do you think, do we or don't we have relatives here?

Women: Asking you:
 Do you want to go this way or that way?
 Are you thinking of stealing our water buffalo or horses?
 Or are you thinking of doing business here?

Men: By day you shouldn't interrogate pedestrians,
 If they come by night, you can ask them their background.
 We haven't come to steal water buffalo or horses,
 And we haven't come to do business.
 The things we have carried on our shoulders are all precious gifts,
 Carried here to this village to give to our relatives.

Choral song 1 (sung in the hearing of parents)

Women: We are all alike raised by fathers and mothers.
 How is it that you are stronger than us?
 We women are raised like piglets:
 As soon as we reach maturity we are sold off.
 When *you* mature, you inherit family property and people praise you.
 In contrast, parents trip over themselves to hurry us out of the home.

Men: We are all alike raised by fathers and mothers.
 How come you say such strange things?
 Our forefathers have always done this,
 Women have always left home to be married.
 This is an ancient practice.
 How is it that you now say you are being sold?

Choral song 2

No matter what era you speak of,
 The age of eighteen cannot be beaten.

It's just the time when the sun is above your head,
When the moon is round.

Men, you may gain a good wife,
But you are well advised not to rush into marriage.
Women, you may find a good husband,
But whatever you do, don't rush into marriage.
Young people, sit a little while longer together,
Free and unrestrained, like the sparrow hawk in the sky.

Pipa song (sung by men)

She is like a pale green cherry tree on the mountain side.
He is like a fresh wind, gently rocking the tree all year round;
The branches sway backwards and forwards with the wind.
Does she really not know that he loves her?
If she married him, firstly, he would not let her go and dig the earth.
That's because her hands are expert at embroidery.
Secondly, he would not have her go and rake the field.
That's because her feet are skilled in dancing.
And thirdly, he would not allow her to shoulder manure.
That's because her slim waistline could not take it.
Why entreat her over and over again?
Because if she married him, life would be happy ever after.

Northern dialect mountain song

To row a boat you don't wait for the May rains.
To plant flowers, you don't wait for the July sun.
To love someone, you don't wait until the next life.
If you wait, fate will not favour you.

Beautiful flowers grow on the high cliff slopes.
I want to stretch out my arm and pluck one.
Stretching out my arm, I find it is too short.
If I don't take it, someone else will seize it.