

A brief study on the succinctness of the Kam culture: The Great Song of the Kam people

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1. Starting from the sticky rice

In October 1986, nine girls from the Kam ethnic group went to Paris to attend the Golden Harvest Artist Festival and performed the Great Song of the Kam people there. This was the first time for the Kam people to display the artistic charm of their music in an international arena and the French audience was overwhelmed with admiration. When the hosts, who wanted to show their hospitality, asked girls from the Kam group what they wanted to eat, they smiled and said that they wanted to eat sticky rice. This is an answer with deep significance. It expressed not only the common feeling of missing the homeland that all people living abroad share, but also the deeper significance of the sticky rice within Kam culture. The Kam people have a proverb saying that “rice is helpful for your body and song is helpful for your heart.” This expresses the two basic aspects of material life and spiritual life common to all human beings. Eating rice can maintain one’s life, but life without a spiritual component is meaningless. From the point of view of the Kam people, sticky rice is the most nutritious and delicious of foods. In the Kam language, sticky rice is called “Kam rice” or “the best rice.”

In the past, sticky rice was the main food of many of the Kam people. Now most of them have changed to *indica* rice - but during festivals or occasions such as weddings and funeral services, people still use sticky rice to feed their guests or as gifts. Sticky rice is closely linked to the customs of the Kam people, and symbolizes the deep feelings they have. For them, French food is good, but cannot take the place of sticky rice. The homeland of the Kam has the reputation of being “the sea of songs.” In everyday life, every place is full of songs. Singing songs is a way in which the Kam people maintain their culture, trace their history, express their feelings and conduct social communication. Kam people are proud of their talent for singing. Sticky rice has nourished the Kam people who like singing so much. Among the Kam people there is a saying, “one more piece of sticky rice will help you create just one more song.” After eating sticky rice, the song composers can create more good songs, and singers can sing more vividly.

The songs of the Kam people are of various types. It would be difficult to introduce them all in this paper, so instead we will focus on the Great Song of the Kam people.

2. The famous song of the Kam people, the Great Song

The Great Song is a kind of multi-part song sung by a choir. Its values are mainly reflected in its music and literature.

Musically speaking, it is composed of many kinds of structural forms and modes of expression, but what is most important is the use of many parts in group singing. The Great Song is polyphonic and its harmonizing combines leading and group singing together. The voices can be divided into a high voice and a low voice. In the Kam language, the high voice is called male voice or high sound (tenor), the low voice is called female voice or low sound (alto). No matter how many people there are in the choir, only one of them sings the high voice, the others sing the low voice. The main melody of the song is in the low voice part, the high voice part is a variation of it. This practice is the opposite to the chorus in other musical styles where the high voice part usually carries the main melody. The Great Song of the Kam is the most intricate folk choral music found in China today.

The Great Song can be divided into four categories according to their contents: The first one is the lyric Great Song which is mainly used to express the emotion of mutual adoration between young men and women; the second one is the narrative Great Song which mainly tells a story or conversation; the third is the epic Great Song which teaches people to be honorable; the fourth one is the voice Great Song which mainly emphasizes the melody. The contents of the Great Song involve a wide range of elements from the life of the Kam people. Some of them reveal aspects of the social life of the ancient Kam people; some of them reflect the characteristics of the thoughts and feelings of the Kam people in specific historical periods; some of them praise the good and deprecate the evil; some of them pursue the ideal of seeking happiness and freedom. The first three kinds can also be performed as Pipa songs with a lute, but the voice Great Song can only be performed a capella.

Usually the Great Choral Song has very few words but is rich in sound symbolism, most of them having wonderful and vivid melodies. This kind of choral music skillfully imitates the sounds of cicadas, birds singing, goats leaping and the

changes of seasons and weather. For example, in “the Song of the Cicada,” the sound of the cicada is imitated, and “the Song of the Goat” depicts the scene of the goats jumping with joy. These have developed into a unique artistic style and achieved good artistic results - as well as having a very touching artistic charm. The Great Choral songs are typical of their melodies and although the words are simple and short they are still meaningful and full of the rich flavor of life. For example, “the song of the third lunar month”: “in the third lunar month, the weather is fine, a couple of grasshoppers jump highly, cuckoo birds sing loudly, people are scattering seeds in a hurry, the (busy) season is coming, puku... puku...” All of the choruses appeal to the audience and have their own artistic merits.

The lyrics of the Great Song manifest a unique rhythmic form, which enhances the music. Each song consists of two parts, i.e. the call-and-response singing between men and women. Each part consists of more than ten (even dozens) of mutual contrastive sections, and many sections form a unit. In a unit, the last syllable of each section should rhyme, and connect each part to the next. Each section is divided into two smaller subsections, and each of these contains many sentences. The last sentence is an odd-syllable sentence lyric, the others are all even-syllable sentence lyrics. Within a small section, the last syllable of the first sentence should be rhymed with a syllable in the middle of the second sentence, the last syllable of the second sentence should be rhymed with a syllable in the middle of the third sentence, and so the pattern continues. The rhyme features above illustrate a structure of the Great Song that is a transitional stage between the ancient and modern song styles of the Kam people. Each small section has even-syllabic sentences and odd-syllabic sentences, which is similar to ancient songs. If we regard each section as a long sentence, and each sentence in the section as the small sections in the long sentence, this is similar to modern songs. We can therefore surmise about the development of the long sentence songs of the Kam people. They are the result of a process of evolution - ancient songs that have evolved into modern ones.

The Great Song stresses the use of words. Those words which are seldom used in colloquial language frequently appear in the Great Song: e.g. *jus xangp* (lover), *singc nyih* (lover), *xongl kap* (listen), *anl wanp* (comfortable), *angl hac* (itinerant entertainers), *jinc dangc* (pool for cultivation) *ngeenx liuih* (tears), *huh siip* (husband and wife), *nyic siis* (son), *biedl magc* (pen and ink), etc. Disyllabic words combining both Kam and Chinese morpheme are also often used. This kind of word combines a Kam single syllable morpheme and a Chinese single syllable morpheme - these two morphemes have the same (or similar) meanings. The Kam morpheme comes first, and is followed by the Chinese morpheme. The meaning of the combination is the same as that

of the single syllable morpheme: e.g. *sox sangp* (barn), *nyangt saot* (grass), *jenc xanp* (mountain), *naemx suit* (water), *meix mogc* (tree), *taot wanh* (exchange), etc. This makes the words of the Great Song more elevated and dignified. As these words have been gradually introduced into spoken language, the Kam language has begun to exhibit a tendency toward disyllablization in word formation.

3. The development of the Great Song

The Great Song of the Kam people has existed for a long time - in a developing self-sufficient society with a small-scale agrarian economy. After 1980, as China's society opened to the world, this kind of traditional culture, like many others, is facing the challenge of a modern market economy. Identifying how the Great Song of the Kam people can fit into this modern society is of utmost importance to its survival.

The first issue is one of dissemination and succession. In the past, the Great Song was passed on by the folk singing groups from generation to generation. The traditional singing groups were formed on the basis of the clan. The formation of singing groups had the auxiliary function of a marriage group. Usually only unmarried youngsters could join. The singing group was divided into male group and female group according to gender, and according to age. It was further divided into adult group, middle-aged group and young-aged group. The singing group was taught and managed by an elder song composer. When most of the main singers in the singing group got married, then the singing group was automatically dissolved, and a younger group took its place. In this way, the Great Song of the Kam people was handed down from generation to generation. In the past, it was not difficult to organize a singing group, as most of the youngsters were born in, and had been brought up in, the local areas. However, today in Kam areas, more and more young people leave their hometown to get an education or to make a living. In some places where Great Songs were once popular, not even one singing group can be formed. It seems that the organizational system of the singing group needs to evolve. The singing group no longer has the secondary role of a marriage group, it is a purely artistic organization. The limits of blood relationship, age and marriage status are no longer relevant either. In some villages, middle-aged and old women have already broken their singing habit and have entered the drum tower to sing Great Songs, and this kind of thing is now commonly accepted by people. This tendency may be the first sign of a reform of the Great Song. Another exciting new phenomenon is that in the areas where Great Songs were once popular, the Great Song has become a part of the musical teaching program in the local

primary schools. Not only can this add something unique to the education in schools - it can also raise the level of artistic accomplishment of pupils. It is a new way to disseminate and pass on the Great Song and worth popularizing.

Secondly, I want to talk about the reform of the Great Song itself. I am a layman when it comes to music, and dare not make any comments on that. However, the content of the Great Song is the same as that of all other literature and art - they all need renewing from time to time in order to develop. The Great Song is a kind of ancient song genre, and undoubtedly the outstanding examples of these should continue to be performed as they always have been-but at the same time, new ideas and thoughts which accord with the spirit of the day must also be reflected in the songs. This is inevitable in the development of the Great Song. Some brilliant song composers can do this work. Translation is important for the Great Song to become a nation-wide and even world-wide art form. Several (at least) outstanding songs need to be translated into Chinese and performed first. The difficult part of translating the Great Song is how to associate the translated words with the music. It should not be difficult to resolve after making clear the musical features and rhythmic rules of the Great Song - determining the rhyme syllables first, and then determining the number of the words according to the number of syllables in the original sentences. Any language can be translated into another one. The Great Song itself has this kind of precedent. Among the Great Songs, "the Song of Confucius" is a special female voice narrative song. Usually, this song is not sung as a narrative tune, but as a most vivid sounding Great Song tune. The words of the song include such languages as; Kam, Chinese, Miao and Zhuang. This shows that using other languages to compose and sing a Great Song is possible. The writer hopes that the cultural authorities will make the right choices in this regard.

