

Whose Voice: a Perspective from Fieldwork

Prof. Xiao Mei
(Shanghai Conservatory of Music, China)

Introduction: a transformed tradition

Since the end of 19th century, the existence of traditional Chinese musics has experienced certain changes, of which the most remarkable one is the change of the existence from being in its original rural society to becoming an *Object* in the eye of *Others*.

This relationship between *Others* and *Object*, basically, represents transformation from top to bottom caused by the power of *Others*, which means that traditional Chinese musics, as a giant treasure house, is sensed differently by different *Others*. In this context, the Nation regards it as a symbol of national identity; political parties find a tool for political propaganda; theater companies find repertoires for adaptation and performance; composers find source material for music creation; scholars (musicologists) find evidence that supports their analysis and educators find a source for teaching materials. Due to the commercial involvement of contemporary media and tourism, all this would be considered as resources that can be converted to capital...The so-called transformation means reconstructed or remodeled folk musics by *Others*, as a result of transformation from top to bottom. If using a classical Chinese saying, different *Others* can “select the essence and discard dross” of folk musics at their own disposal.

The others' eyes: ideological & artistic

For example, the work of collecting and sorting folk musics was a great effort in the Chinese music annals of the 20th century. In this period, “political criteria” and “artistic criteria” were applied in collecting and sorting folk musics. Under these criteria, a large number of folk songs mirroring real folk lives, and songs with the theme of love and sex in particular, were often discarded as dross. Take “*Xintianyou*”, a Northern Shaanxi’s folk song genre, for example, it is a genre of “casual singing” of the local people. It had not been so favored by the local people in comparison with many other genres, such as “*xiaodiao*”, “*yangge*”, and some ritual music genres. Why only “*Xintianyou*” has become a symbol of Shaanxi folk music and even as a symbol of Chinese folk songs since 20th century? The answer is that Yan’an in Shaanxi Province used to be the center of the Chinese anti-Japanese revolutionary base; in 1938 the music department of Luxun Institute of Literature and Arts began collecting and recording folk songs, with the aim to deepen the new music movement and use folk songs as a political, educational and practical tool in the anti-Japanese war and the national salvation movement. Under this direction, “*Xintianyou*” was

selected as a genre that best represents the people's voice, as it has inherent features that its melody jumps linearly up and down, with a melody contour of "double fourth" of sol-do and re-sol; its lyrics use Chinese rhetorical method of "*Bi-Xing*" that is most suitable for loud, sonorous, deep, passionate, stirring style of music and especially met the spiritual requirements for national establishment in Chinese history. Therefore, the inherent features of "*Xintianyou*", as a symbol of morale boosting and national identity enhancement, have been continuously explored by musicians to meet the requirements of different historical periods from the anti-Japanese War and the national salvation movement, to the early days of new China reconstruction, to the "cultural revolution" and to the present time of "reform and opening up to the outside world". Unlike farmers' causal singing in the field, "*Xintianyou*" was highly valued in the course of national development in the 20th century and had become a fine genre of Northern Shaanxi folk musics and well accepted acceptance across China.¹

"*Dongzu-Dage*", a fine genre of multi-part singing of the Dongs -- a Chinese ethnic minority, was "discovered" by Chinese musicians in 1950s; ever since, its content, form, and expression, have been "reshaped" to a certain degree as a result of the involvement of "*Others*". Firstly, "*Dongzu-Dage*", a term translated from the Dong language, includes *al laox* (*Dage*, large and grand song), *al soh* (vocals) *al jenh* (mostly narrative songs for female voices) and *al jibl* (narrative songs for both male and female voices)². This is a brief description of the "multi-part folk songs" of the Dongs, which have considerable numbers and systems, generalized by scholars at that time. The characteristics of "multi-parts" contrast with the characteristics of Chinese folk songs or traditional Chinese music, which has long been regarded as "single-part" music. With references to the western musics of late 19th and 20th centuries, Chinese musicians have developed a view of music development in line with the Theory of Evolution in the course of analogizing polyphony and monophony. The "multi-parts" phenomenon in the ethnic musics of the Dongs and other ethnic groups, as an obvious evidence of polyphony in traditional Chinese music, has undoubtedly enhanced the nation's self-esteem and national self-confidence. Thus, interpreting the Dong's multi-parts folk songs has become a focus of many scholars in their classification and description of these songs using varied background knowledge. In the last half of the 20th century, "*Others*" interpreted "*Dongzu Dage*" in three phases: 1 the lyrics were studied from a literary point of view; 2 comparison was made of songs in the context of the world of music; 3 ethnic groups and their cultures were studied from a folklore point of view. And then, "*Dongzu Dage*" became a "door" accessible to others and a "window" of the Dongs for self-judgment.¹ It is worth pointing it out that subtle changes took place in the interaction of the Dongs and "*Others*". In order to amplify its artistic feature of "polyphony", "*Dongzu Dage*" often selects *al soh* (vocals) of the above-mentioned four sub-genres when publicly performed. These "vocals", or "*lasangzi*" as named by the local people, containing breaths and voices and rich in "*tuqiang* (melodic sustenance)" with flowing rhythm, melodic rise and fall, and a sustained melodic contour, well conform with the artistic features of music. All of these artistic features contribute to

¹ Stage acceptance stressed here means "*Xintianyou*" is recognized and accepted as a folk song variety mainly through stage performance. Unlike the "flowers" and "shaonian" of northwestern China folk song genre, which root in local people's normal music lives. According to my fieldwork in northern Shaanxi, I found the liveliest musical lives contain many music genres: xiaoqu, yangge, storytelling, or Shawn, within which the highest rate of coverage and most pervasive xiaodiao genre is *Suanqu*. Normally it is described as harmful dross by government's mainstream culture.

² Classify after "*Dongzu Dage*", Guizhou People Publishing House, 1958.

“Dongzu-*Dage*” as a representative music genre to the outside world. But in fact, these “vocals” function only as “interludes” in “Dongzu *Dage*” represented by “Gulou-*Dage*” (al laox *Dage*). However, in the reshaping of “Dongzu *Dage*” caused by “the artistry of music”, “Gulou-*Dage*” is seldom heard by general audiences though it is rich in folklore features of the folk songs of the Dongs.

Of the above two examples, one better reflects changes activated by the mainstream ideology while the other mainly comes from the enhancement of the artistic features of music. We can sense from these changes that the local people as the main stakeholders on the cultural arena are “involved” in the two situations: to keep a distance from the reshaping by *Others* (People in northern Shaanxi Province still favor *xiaodiao*, *yangge*, storytelling and wind & percussion music in addition to *xintianyou*, which is now mainly performed on the stage), or to choose the form of their appearance by responding to the restructuring of *Others*’ theory (participating in outreach performances or joining in the Dongs’ own performing groups). In fact, our cultural tradition or our cultural heritages we wish to conserve, as describable “texts”, have been appropriated, excluded, dissolved, broken down, changed, reconstructed or criticized by “*Others*” in the 20th century. This paper does not intend to evaluate the value of these changes, neither denying the rationality of the changes in its historical context, nor maintaining such a so-called “original” tradition. My intension is to identify various factors behind the changes in contemporary culture and the potential significance of these factors in our rethinking of cultural issues. For example, we need to consider seriously how to “coexist” with the stakeholders on the cultural stage of ethnic minorities to experience the tradition and participate in its restructuring.

Cultural bearer and the Other: a reconstruction

In order to further explore the issue, I would like to give another example that comes from my involvement in a project of restructuring the “Cultural Space” in recent years in northeast China’s Orochen area.

“Cultural Space”, or “*Chenderdiren*” in the Orochen language, is an arts festival of the Orochen people organized by the Orochen Foundation in Hongkong.³ “*Chenderdiren*” means “contest” in the Orochen language, which is a traditional Orochen event including wrestling, canoeing, shooting, etc. These daily-life-based contests do not take place at a fixed time and place, unlike the traditional festivals of the Hans, such as the Spring Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival.

In the last two sessions of the “Arts Festival”, people could see the entire process of making a traditional canoe with the birch bark, watch wrestling, different types of trial of strength, canoeing, and tug-of-war and appreciate traditional handicrafts made of the birch bark, in addition to folk dance and singing competitions. The event was filled with the elements of traditional Orochen culture, but means of modern arts were utilized in an obvious manner (for example, the well adapted and choreographed Orochen and Mongolian dancing, and the pre-recorded music

³ This Art Festival has been held twice, first time in the summer of 2005, baiyingna Orochen autonomous region (settlement), Kumar County, Heilongjiang province; second time in the summer of 2006, shibazhan Orochen autonomous region, tahe county, Heilongjiang.

accompanied by the electronic synthesizer). To the outsider, this “*Chenderdiren*” was a reconstructed ‘cultural space’.

Perhaps, before having personally experienced the “Arts Festival” at Kumar River, I would not pay attention to such a ‘space’ and might look upon it critically, deeming it not a “true” tradition worth studying by scholars in their research of Orochen traditional music. At most, I would, based on my professional sensitivity, pick up some traditional elements from the dance and singing competitions.

When personally involved in the “Cultural Space”, I began to understand the significance of this “reconstructed” space to the present-day Orochen, which should be understood in their own cultural context of Orochen. The Orochens began settling down in 1950s, a shift from hunting-gathering life to farming as a result of the government policy. (Though its process was following the tapping of the forest resources of the Greater Khingan Mountains and the “concept of happiness” of *Others* about changing the hunting-gathering livelihood.) I am not in a position to comment it here in this article, but would like to point it out that the consequences from the change have caused the Orochen people far apart from their forest culture.

I made a field survey of Orochen and Ewenki communities in Alihe, Heihe and Aoluguya in 1999. The deepest doubt that troubled me at the time was whether the Orochens, after parting away from hunting and leaving behind the forests, had lost their spiritual home when they passively changed their original way of life? Dancing around the bonfire after hunting could never come back to their tribal gatherings and singing in the mountains somewhat disappeared in their settlements, especially the song “The High, High Khingan Mountains” created by a Han composer which had represented the image of Orochen for half a century. In that song, the lyrics say, “A vast forest in the Khingan Mountains where courageous Orochens live; everyone rides a horse with a shotgun in hand to hunt wild deers all over the mountains”. But the Orochens have now altered the lyrics into “it is hard to find wild deers anywhere in the mountains.” Not only have the animals disappeared together with the forests, more importantly, can they still be identified as “hunters” when they have left the forests and settled down in rural villages?

In the “*Chenderdiren*” activities, when I saw a group of elderly Orochen women singing the song of the Orochen horoscope in a discontinuous tune; when I heard their melodic conversations recalling the joys and sorrows in their married life; when I watched them performing ritual dedications in the old Orochen fashion and getting drunken on the river bank; and when I heard an elderly woman with shamanic background talking about her experiences in therapeutic practices in a language no longer used among the younger generations, I realized that these elderly women were the only existing “memories” that we are going to collect about the Orochen forests, though their memories were limited of their ancestor’s forest culture as they had begun to settle down at their young ages.

More important is the attitude of the Orochens who participated in “*Chenderdiren*” Those elderly Orochen women led their family members to participate in the contests, all brilliantly dressed. Recalling the memories and passing them down, again and again...The 2006

“*Chenderdiren*” was held on August 20. The day before, I had worked with the young people of the Shibazhan Village preparing for the event. Perhaps the participants all wanted to win, therefore, everyone wished to have more time for preparations and rehearsal. In the heated discussion, an Orochen young man named Xiao Long said, “Of course it would be nice to have more time for rehearsal, but in my opinion, the most important thing about this event is to demonstrate our own voices. The results of the competition are not the most important; the most important is that we sing and dance for our own people.” His remarks are typical. Only those familiar with the Orochen’s experiences in modern history can be better touched by Xiao Long’s remarks. It is not important for a people like the Orochens, who have kept silent and been covered by hearsay about excessive drinking and idling along for such a long time, to hear their own singing and see their own dancing anew, no matter the dancing has traces of foreign civilization or the dancing keeps whatever elements of the Orochen characteristics; the important thing is that in the reconstructed space of “*Chenderdiren*”, the Orochen’s voice is being rejuvenated and the Orochen traditions are being recalled. Therefore, when watching boys and girls from Bayina village performing dances choreographed by themselves during the “*Chenderdiren*” Festival on the bank of the Kumar River, I was deeply moved to tears.

I once talked to a scholar about “*Chenderdiren*”. He was interested in my experiences with a traditional festival of the Orochen people. When he realized what I was talking about was not the festival of “traditional” Orochens held at a particular time and place but a newly “reconstructed” space incorporating the traditional elements of the Orochens, he responded: “That makes no sense!” I understand what he meant by this; on one hand, he worried about that the cultural traditions or heritage might be misled by certain false appearances; on the other hand (or maybe to a greater degree), out of his professional instinct, he hoped to study the “true” Orochen to explore the historic value of its musical tradition. But I could not agree with him, for I know the Orochens, as an ethnic group of China that was losing the features of its own language and traditional culture at such a fast pace, have been in a state of passively changing their way of life, production and cultural inheritance, and hence suffering serious “aphasia”. Faced with such a reality, we should not keep on, as “*Others*”, identifying what tradition in their cultural life is worth preserving and what is mixed with the civilization from outside. What we should do is to let them speak for their own culture. Such a reconstructed “*Chenderdiren*” is just a cultural space that integrates their self-awareness and self-identity.

As a scholar, I have realized in the process of restructuring the cultural space “*Chenderdiren*” that we cannot ascertain the typicality of a traditional culture or judge its essence and dress simply based on the knowledge typical of a certain age. But more importantly, we should let the stakeholders on the arena speak for their own culture and carefully address the issues of who is to be protected, and by whom? What is to be protected, and how?

Tuesday, August 07, 2007