

Folk Songs of China

Diversity and Development

by Miao Jing

As the most populous country in the world, China has a long history and covers a vast territory. Her culture has a special position in the world and possesses its own system. This is also the case with her musical culture. China is a continental nation. Her agricultural society occupied a leading position and the feudal patriarchal system exerted its influence over a long period of time. So Chinese folk songs took shape on a half-closed and continental geographical environment. This state of being half-closed was not very obvious in the coastal areas in the east, but quite obvious in the hinterland in the west. In some regions, people of many different nationalities live together and they have a lot of exchanges in musical culture.

In the social and economic structure before 1949, some ethnic groups kept the feudal landlord economic system. Some ethnic groups retained serfdom. Some ethnic groups maintained conspicuous remnants of the primitive commune system and in individual cases, there were elements of matriarchal society. With regard to languages, the 56 ethnic groups belong respectively to the Han-Tibetan language family, the Al-



Old peasants in Central China singing with their gongs.

tai language family, the Malayo-Polynesian language family, the South Asian language family, and the Indo-European language family. As a result of the historical amalgamation, some ethnic groups have abandoned their own languages and taken up the Han language. The above-mentioned factors, in light of the different cultural background and geographical environment, have exerted influences on the distribution of folk songs in different degrees as well as the styles and features of their folk songs.

The Seven Folk Song Regions

Chinese folk songs can be divided into seven folk song regions with their different styles and colours.

North China folk song region with grassland culture.

Located mainly in present-day

Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, this folk song region is represented by folk songs of the Mongol nationality, known as "a nationality of music" and "a nationality of poetry". Popular in the livestock-breeding areas are "long-tune" folk songs characterized by only a few words, prolonged tunes, loud and clear singing, and free rhythm. They represent the greatness of the grasslands and the frankness of the honest herdsmen. Popular in the half-agricultural and half-livestock-breeding areas are "short-tune" folk songs characterized by regular rhythm and fixed metres. These two kinds of representative folk songs bring out the simple, bright, fervent and bold character of the grassland herdsmen in northern China. Among the famous musical compositions are Gadameilin and Senzidama. The Mongol-Han Tune is a product of interchanges between

the Mongol nationality and the Han nationality, a mutual assimilation of music between the two ethnic groups. The Mountain-Climbing tune popular around the Great Bend of the Yellow River in northwestern China is also a form of singing loved by the Mongol and Han peoples in that area.

Xinjiang folk song region with the influence of Islamic culture.

Located in Xinjiang, this folk song region is represented by the folk songs of the Uygur nationality. They have the influence of the traditional Islamic culture and maintain certain ties with Arab music. The Uygur peo-



Above : Singing and dancing at the Flower Lantern Festival in Canton.



Left : Choral singing by group of village girls in Yunnan Province.

ple are good at singing and dancing. The Twelve Mukams (12 suites) is an epic of music and dance created by the Uygur people in ancient times. Consisting of more than 340 classic narrative songs, suites of narrative folk songs, dance suites and impromptu melodies, the Twelve Mukams have been popular among the Uygur people for a very long time.

Tibet folk song region with the influence of Buddhist culture.

Tibet is the main region inhabited by people of the Tibetan nationality. There, most of the folk songs are in the form of songs and dances. The numerous songs such as Nangma, Duixie, Guoxie and Guozhang have been popular among the Tibetan people since ancient times. Nangma prevails in Lhasa, Xi-

gaze and Gyangze. It gained fame because it was once performed in the Potala Palace. The tune is refined and the rhythm is melodious. Duixie is a kind of singing and dancing performed to hail a good harvest or pay homage to a deity. Most of the songs are related to religion, while some others express the singers' affection for their native place or their devotion to love. The singing of folk songs in this region is mostly related to religion. The influence of the traditional Buddhist culture is obvious.

Southwest China multi-ethnic folk song region with age-long culture.

This folk song region mainly covers Yunnan and also embraces some areas in Guizhou and Guangxi inhabited by minority nationalities. The local people belong to more than

twenty ethnic groups. Their folk songs have the characteristics of age-long culture and “special social functions”, presenting a combination of poetry, songs and dances. The complex and varied folk songs belong to different historical stages and indicate particular and multi-layered cultural existence. This region boasts the greatest number of multi-part folk

and earth, the origin of mankind, the travels of Buddhist and Taoist monks, etc. The tunes are highly recitative. Most of the singers are old people. This is one of the indications of the age-long culture in the region

Northeast China folk song region with hunting culture

This region is mainly around the Greater Hinggan Mountain

Range and the Lesser Hinggan Mountain Range and the representative songs come from the Oroqen nationality. The Oroqen nationality, like the Ewenki, Hezhen and Daur nationalities, is fond of singing and dancing. They have a carnival of singing and dancing whenever they have a successful hunt or celebrate a festival. They sing of their hunting life, the great nature and love. The rhythm is bright and melodious

Northwest China plateau multi-ethnic folk song region with half-agricultural and half-livestock-breeding culture

Located in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, this region includes the areas in Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia inhabited by the Han, Hui, Tu, Salar, Bonan, Dongxiang, Tibetan and Uygur nationalities. Since ancient times, this region belonged to half-agricultural and half-livestock-breeding culture. Historically the amalgamation of national culture resulted in “hua’er”, a form of singing shared by the eight ethnic groups.



Impromptu singing after work, in a small town of Guang Xi Province.

songs in China and most of the ethnic groups here have two-part folk songs. The most representative forms of singing are “greater songs”, “lesser songs” and “ancient songs”. The most famous “greater songs” from the Dong and Bouyei nationality have two-part male voice and female voice. The male voices in the “greater songs” generally have strong rhythm and lively tunes while the female voices in the “greater songs” have free rhythm and soft melody. The “ancient songs” of the Miao nationality are the oldest of all. In content they relate the formation of heaven



Yi farmer also singing after work.

The tune of "hua'er" is sonorous and long and its style is deep and agreeable. "Climb the High Mountain and Look at the Open Country" is one of the famous folk songs. "Hua'er parties" are held in various places from spring to the end of summer every year. Most of these parties coincide with the local festivals. The number of participants may come to about 10,000 in some cases. During the "Hua'er", a good many people, men and women, old and young, dressed in their best. Holding umbrellas and colourful fans, they attend singing competitions almost round the clock. Young men and women sing "Hua'er" to communicate their feelings of love, trying to find their life partners.

Central China and east coast folk song region with the ancient culture of the Han nationality

Among the seven folk song regions, the folk song region of the



Stick-walking performed at a local folk song and dance festival, Northeastern China.

Fang Rong and Fang Ming performing a Zhuang song.



Han nationality is the largest, extending from the cold north to the subtropical south and from the southwest plateau to the coastal plains in the east. The geographical conditions, life styles and production modes vary from place to place. The people in this region speak the Han language, but there are a great variety of local dialects. So the folk songs have different styles and characteristics. Accordingly, the folk song region of the Han nationality may be broken down into 10 subregions and one special region as follows:

- a. folk song subregion of the northeast plains,
- b. folk song subregion of the northwest plateau,
- c. Jianghuai folk song subregion,
- d. folk song subregion of Jiang Su and Zhe Jiang plains,
- e. Fujian and Taiwan folk song subregion,
- f. Guangdong folk song subregion,
- g. Jiangnan folk song subregion,
- h. Hunan folk song subregion,
- i. Jiangxi folk song subregion,
- j. folk song subregion of the southwest plateau, and
- k. Hakka folk song special region.

The folk songs of the Han nationality have a great number of forms and types which is rarely seen in other parts of the world. In Hubei province alone, there are 10 forms and more than 80 types of folk songs. Generally speaking, most folk songs of Han nationality fall into the following 10 categories:

- a. haoz (or labouring chant),
- b. mountain air,
- c. suburban ditty,

- d. farming song,
- e. fishing song,
- f. Yougko and lantern songs, both belonging to folk dance music,
- g. tea song,
- h. special customary song,
- i. children song, and
- j. lullaby.

With regard to the distribution of forms, ditty is the main form on the coastal plains where culture is relatively developed. While mountain airs sung in the fields during or after work are the main form on the plateaus in the hinterland where transportation is not convenient. The farming song is popular mainly in the rice-growing areas in Southern China. With regard to scale and mode, folk songs of Northern China mainly take the seven-note scale and six-note scale while folk songs of Southern China mainly use the five-note scale. In terms of distribution, the seven-note scale moves gradually to the five-note scale from the north to the south. The Yangtze and Yellow River valleys are the transitional zones.

Development of Chinese Folk Songs in the Future

From the current situation of folk songs, we may find that the folk songs of the Han nationality are not so well-developed as those of the national minorities; and the folk songs of coastal areas are not so welldeveloped as those of interior areas. Since Han nationality's traditional operas and narrative singing are highly developed, folk songs have retreated to a secondary position. But things in the national minorities are the opposite. Folk song is their main artistic form, and these songs are needed on various

kinds of occasions. Actually, singing folk songs has become indispensable in their life. Thus folk songs have great vitality among minorities. But since the various factors, including national, cultural, language, geographical, environmental and so on, that go into forming the specific feature of folk songs, are constantly changing, folk songs naturally are bound to change. Therefore, people cannot help but feel deeply interested in the trend of folk song's future development. Three aspects of the future prospect of folk songs are going



to be dealt with.

Remoulding of Chinese folk song singers.

Folk songs are popular mainly in the countryside and most of the singers and composers are farmers and herdsmen. At present, farmers have undergone great changes. In terms of development, machines are to replace manual labour, and individual farmers are to become agricultural workers. With the development of modernization, a portion of farmers have flown into towns to take up other jobs. Furthermore, with the popularization of education, more and more farmers will become educated labourers. Many families have radios and television sets. Young farmers are adopting a wider

For the Lisu people, Yunan Province: songs, dances and poetry are presented simultaneously.



Soprano soloist Buniyaz performing an Uygur song.

view on artistic appreciation. Under such circumstances, folk song is no longer their only artistic favourite. As time goes on, and with the narrowing of distance between city and rural area, between workers and farmers, these changes will certainly deepen. The situation that folk song singers only sing local folk songs is also changing. Some of them have begun to follow the music score to learn, instead of the traditional way of oral instruction. Their singing style is no longer so "pure"



For Bai Girls, singing and working are inseparable.

Transforming the social functions of chinese folk songs.

An important factor which makes it possible for folk songs to be handed down from generation to generation are its many-sided social functions. These functions have not disappeared in the 1980s, but there have been changes. The existence or disappearance of these functions concerns the survival of folk song.

The function of assisting labour – This is one of its primitive functions. As a result of the modernization of tools of production, the function has long changed. In China, the boatmen's haoz of Yellow River has seldom been sung in the past 20 years, and the farming songs of the Yangtze River region can hardly be heard. It is an inexorable trend that



A Naxi girl dressed up for a local song festival.

labouring haoz gradually declines, and folk song gradually loses this function. However, in China, the level of agricultural modernization is not high. The rural area is vast and the development in different places is uneven. Therefore, various kinds of labouring chants which go with labour will not disappear completely.

The function of communication – Love songs, songs of welcoming guests, and songs of drinking actually play a role which language cannot play in human communication. This is especially so in the life of national minorities. The words of these songs constantly change to adapt to different kinds of situations. This function has lasted for more than 3,000 years in some nationalities with no sign of decline. Certainly, it will not vanish in the coming years.

The conventional function – For a long time, quite a number of folk songs live with certain

convention, and also change with these conventions. These changes can obviously be found in the replacement of folk songs in modern life. For instance, songs praying for rain, mourning songs, witch songs have almost vanished. Traditional folk songs and dance are no longer limited to traditional festival performances, but have become indispensable part of entertainment in many new holiday activities. With the popularization of scientific knowledge and the deep understanding of the objective world, some kinds of folk songs that belong to feudalistic, superstitious and primitive conventions have already faded into nonexistence. This tendency will continue in the future.

The function of seeking knowledge and the function in games – These functions are indispensable in children's life. They can be seen in songs of seasons, songs about history, songs of counting numbers as well as in children songs in various kinds of games. Since they are simple and easy to learn, children seem to be able to sing them by nature. These songs can only change with children's ways of playing, and take on new content. Certainly as type of songs they will not become extinct.

Besides, there is the religious function. In China however, there are only a small number of folk songs for this purpose. They are being reduced continuously. These songs will exist with people's religious belief, so they will not disappear in a short period. Generally speaking, most of the folk song's social functions will continue to exist. Some will change and a small part will disappear. The change is gradual and will take a long time. As

long as these functions have not become extinct, folk songs will not only continue to exist, but also to develop.

Persisting tunes of Chinese folk songs.

The tune of folk songs has been carried on for several thousand years, and is relatively stable. It is a highly generalized musical mode, formed and adjusted through the aesthetic judgment of the masses over a long period of time. The folk song's musical language, just like our daily oral language, is highly expressive. Like language, it is flexible, but cannot be easily changed. Viewed from a different angle, we may find that folk song preserves the tradition of music culture which is helpful to the continuity of cultural heritage in the field of social sensation and perception. The appreciation habit of the farmers is also relatively stable. In fact, the various factors involved in Chinese folk songs are constantly changing and forming combinations as to enrich the power of reflecting new life, but the basic tune changes slowly. Take the folk songs of the Han nationality as an example, The tune of these songs do change. Some change from suburban ditty to labouring chant and from mountain airs to farming songs. Some turn to the traditional Chinese narrative singing or opera singing. Therefore, though some folk songs cannot be heard any longer, their tunes still remain in other kinds of musical forms. If we probe deeper, we are sure to see that this kind of traditional musical form will not vanish.

Finally, we must take into consideration the shock which "pop music", a kind of highly commercialized music, has given to traditional

music, including folk songs. This is a universal problem, and China is no exception. And such a situation may exist for quite a long time in the future. In China, to solve the problem, we mainly try to lead pop music onto a healthy road through various channels, draw it close to national music, and enlarge its way of reflecting life. In addition, the state will strengthen music education at schools and protect the heritage of traditional music as to ensure that it will not vanish or be polluted.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing the past of Chinese folk songs and looking into its future, it is not difficult for us to see that the existence of folk songs has its objective law. Those arguments which hold that song will quickly become extinct, deny the value existence of folk song on grounds of modernization, or even

attempt to replace folk songs with professional composition, do not conform to reality at all. Folk songs will not vanish in our generation. They will not disappear in the following two or three generations, either. Though great changes may take place in production style and life style, the dissolution of the gap between areas and nations, workers and farmers cannot be realized in several decades, nor in several centuries. In future society, as a result of unbalanced cultural development among nations and even in highly advanced society, there will still be differences among occupations, national languages, and living environment. There will still be people engaged in farming, animal husbandry, fishery and forestry. So there is still soil for folk music to grow and still exist. At that time, people will have acquired a high level of musical culture and a greater number of appealing folk songs will be composed.



A Nu girl singing a melodic folk song as she crosses the river.