

The multiple meanings of tradition



Since the 1950s, villagers from Kam (in Chinese, 侗) minority communities in Guizhou Province and adjoining areas of Guangxi and Hunan in south-western China have not only sung Kam songs in many different centuries-old village rituals and festivals, but also in many staged performances. As evident through my recent ethnographic research into Kam singing, these staged Kam performances have gradually formed a new ‘tradition’ of Kam singing that is simultaneously promoting, challenging and transforming Kam village singing in a variety of unanticipated and complex ways.

Catherine Ingram

UNDERSTANDING these contemporary developments in Kam singing requires acknowledging and carefully investigating how the multiple meanings of tradition proposed by Phillips and Schochet¹ operate within the Kam context, as outlined in this article. However, a discussion of the meanings of tradition within the twenty-first century Kam context also illustrates that a greater attention to the nature of tradition is vitally important for effectively promoting cultural heritage and helping ensure its survival.

The most recent vigorous debates over the meanings and nature of ‘tradition’ occurred in the early 1980s, following the publication of *The Invention of Tradition*.² While the book became a classic in its field, its authors’ assertions that many apparently long-standing traditions were relatively recently invented were questioned on a variety of political and socio-historical grounds. In subsequent decades, declining interest in this debate – as well as perceived difficulties in re-engaging with earlier arguments – has meant that in many academic contexts the word tradition has almost disappeared from use.

However, developments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century demand a re-evaluation of this situation. Recent large-scale socio-economic changes and migrations are having an unprecedented impact upon small communities and cultures worldwide. New developments are challenging – and often endangering – longstanding cultural practices, whilst sometimes also creating new roles and functions for local heritage. Community- and state-sponsored programs aiming to protect and promote ‘traditional cultural expression’ and ‘cultural heritage’ – both of which are necessarily based upon concepts of tradition – are increasing in number and scope, especially within Asia. Moreover, there has been considerable financial investment in national and international programs, which support heritage maintenance efforts. For example, extensive national heritage programs have been established in Japan, Korea and China,³ whilst UNESCO’s international heritage programs are known worldwide.

Above: Kam villagers file through a village gate in Sheem (Liping county, south-eastern Guizhou), February 2011, in a new version of Kam people’s centuries-old *kwun* communal ritual activities. Photograph by Catherine Ingram.

As the following discussion of the Kam situation illustrates, actions undertaken through external programs and stakeholders can be directly or indirectly helpful in maintaining local traditions. However, they can also challenge pre-existing traditions by promoting misunderstandings of local traditions, producing new traditions, or introducing ideas that influence local concepts of tradition. In these ways, they can potentially lead to irrevocable changes in the transmission of traditions and to cultural loss. Consequently, improved understanding of the meanings and nature of tradition within the contemporary context is critical not only in understanding local cultures, but also in ensuring effective support in sustaining valuable – and often endangered – cultural heritage.

Kam singing today

In many Kam villages, Kam songs are still sung in contemporary versions of different centuries-old village rituals and festivals. Singing takes place at engagements and weddings, after the building of a new house, or on the arrival of important visitors. Praising important guests with suitable songs is just as important as giving them food and drink. During the procession and other ritual activities carried out in many Kam villages at New Year, singing is used to ask for blessings from the female deity *Sa* for the oncoming year. Every day for over a week during the festive season, Kam opera performances or communal *yeh* singing take place. And in villages in one small Southern Kam region, in the evenings during New Year celebrations singing groups gather in the tall pagoda-shaped *dare low*, the impressive wooden tower built in many Kam villages, to carry out a sung exchange of the songs known in English as ‘big song’.

Since Kam singing traditions first became widely known outside Kam areas in the early 1950s, they have undergone many unprecedented changes. The most prominent of these are the use of Kam songs in staged performances held anywhere from Kam villages and small Chinese cities to Beijing and New York’s Carnegie Hall, and the ongoing creation of arrangements of local Kam songs specifically for performance within

the staged context. Many other significant changes to Kam singing since the 1990s have been caused by the absence of almost all young Kam people for work or education outside Kam villages, resulting in major shifts in the roles that different generations of villagers assume in village-based systems of musical transmission and performance and changes to the social context for music making.

Recently, the recognition of four Kam song genres as National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage (2006), and the inscription of the Kam big song genre on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2009), have altered the context within which the singing and state-sponsored promotion of Kam songs take place. Over the last decade, with awards for arranged versions of Kam songs performed in ‘authentic’ (原生态 *yuanshengtai*) singing divisions of high-profile Chinese song competitions, representations of ‘authentic Kam traditions’, which Kam people themselves recognize as inauthentic, have been promoted to both Kam and non-Kam audiences. Finally, as indicated by the results of my research into Kam singing and the understandings I have gained through participation in many Kam song performances, in some cases Kam peoples’ fundamental concepts about their traditions are also undergoing change.

Kam ideas of ‘tradition’

The way that ideas of tradition are expressed and discussed in Kam, a Tai-Kadai family language with no widely used written form, is an important starting point for understanding ‘tradition’ in Kam singing. In Kam, as in many other languages worldwide, there is no term directly equivalent to the word ‘tradition’ or 传统 (*chuantong*). Nevertheless, Kam people name, discuss and carry out certain Kam singing activities in ways that directly correspond with concepts of a ‘tradition/传统’; that is, sets of customs that are distinctive and significant, have been practiced over a period of time, and have a particular pattern of development. Accordingly, these activities can – and should – be understood as types of singing traditions.

Kam singing in southwestern China

Different village singing traditions that involve the singing of different genres of Kam songs are referred to using various Kam names. For instance, a female singing group and a male singing group gathering in the *dare low* to take turns singing choral songs around a large fire is described as *nyao dare low song lao ga* (exchanging songs in the *dare low*). The singing of visitors from the groom's clan at a wedding is referred to as *dor ga go-dan* (singing songs to get quilts), while that of members of the bride's clan is *dor ga dee-dan* (singing songs to offer quilts). For performances of Kam opera, a genre now recognized as China's National-Level Intangible Heritage that is said to have been created by Wu Wencai 吴文彩 (1798–1845) by combining elements from various pre-existing Kam song genres and certain characteristics of various styles of regional Han opera, the Chinese expression 唱戏 *chang xi* (to sing opera) is borrowed directly into Kam.

These various traditions have recently undergone obvious unprecedented changes. For instance, choral songs are now sung mainly by married women and men rather than by unmarried youth, and married men no longer join married women in singing *ga go-dan* and *ga dee-dan*. In the 1950s young unmarried women began to perform Kam opera within previously all-male casts, but that has changed once again and today most opera performers are married women. Continued use of the earlier names for contemporary forms of these Kam singing traditions suggests that, despite the fact that different performers are now involved in singing these genres and the social context for the performances has therefore altered, recent adaptations do not obscure recognition of the current format as a continuation of long-standing traditions.

New Kam 'traditions'

Staged performances of Kam songs, sung either in the form used within village activities or in various arrangements based upon village versions, have occurred since the 1950s. These performances have their own largely distinct musical repertoire, performance norms, modes of preparation and history of development. Although staged performances, like the forms of Kam singing described above, are contemporary variations of Kam singing that have their roots in village activities, they are unusual in being recognized by Kam people as an activity and tradition with its own unique name: *cha tai dor ga* (going onstage to sing songs).⁴ It is thus clear that such performances are not seen as part of pre-existing village traditions, but are still seen as a Kam tradition. Such recognition of a new tradition within Kam musical culture may parallel the creation and introduction of Kam opera at least 150 years earlier, which is now identified as a Kam tradition by both Kam communities and the Chinese state.

Big song, the Kam song genre inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is another example of a new Kam tradition.⁵ The songs classified as big songs include all the different genres of choral songs 'exchanged in the *dare low*', as well as various arrangements of those songs that are used in staged performances and almost never sung in the village *dare low* exchanges. This big song tradition has gradually emerged over the last sixty years, with origins dating back to the 1950s when Han Chinese researchers involved in Land Reform work in Kam villages first heard Kam people's unusual choral singing. The researchers erroneously labelled all the different genres of songs that groups of Kam people sing in the *dare low* during lunar New Year celebrations to be sub-genres of just one Kam singing genre. They used 大歌 *dage* (big song) – a Chinese translation of the Kam name *ga lao* (big/old/important songs) that was originally used to refer to just one of the many choral genres – to label all the choral songs that they heard.

Despite extensive subsequent promotion of big song, use of the Kam name *ga lao* to refer to this entire choral singing tradition has not been universally accepted within Kam communities. Kam views on this matter became particularly clear when many Kam villagers were involved in singing a Kam choral song in a 2005 performance of 'Ten thousand people singing Kam big song'. The song performed was from the choral genre known to Kam people as *ga sor*, not the choral genre that Kam people call *ga lao*. Songs from both *ga sor* and *ga lao* genres are promoted using the Chinese name *dage* (big song), and also using the Kam *ga lao* from which the Chinese name derives. However, numerous older singers maintained that the performance was not actually of *dage* (that is, big song) since only *ga sor* was performed. Many younger Kam villagers who were unaware of the historical development of their own Kam choral 'tradition' could not understand the reasons for their elders' claims, illustrating the changing perceptions of the nature of Kam choral singing traditions amongst Kam people themselves.

Improved understanding of the meanings and nature of tradition within the contemporary context is critical not only in understanding local cultures, but also in ensuring effective support in sustaining valuable – and often endangered – cultural heritage.

Changes to fundamental concepts of tradition?

The acceptance of recent adaptations of Kam singing as a continuation of earlier traditions, the recognition of staged performances as a new tradition of 'going onstage to sing songs', and the different views concerning the tradition called *ga lao* are important areas for further analysis. Such analysis will help determine how fundamental concepts of tradition are currently understood by Kam people, and whether or not recent social and cultural shifts have influenced the underlying ways in which tradition is conceptualized.

The radical changes to *nyao dare low song lao ga* (exchanging songs in the *dare low*) are particularly remarkable, and seem to strongly indicate that fundamental concepts concerning such singing have undergone significant change. The contemporary involvement of married women – an indirect result of the women's involvement in staged performances – has been critical for the continuation of this tradition. However, it represents the relaxation of a very strong longstanding prohibition concerning their involvement in such village singing, and has consequently involved marked shifts in the social context for such performances.

It appears that the staged tradition is also influencing the concepts of the village tradition of 'exchanging songs in the *dare low*' in other, direct ways. For instance, preparations for a large-scale exchange of song in the *dare low* at New Year 2011 saw village song experts in my field site in rural Guizhou regularly going to listen to and advise many singing groups on vocal quality and other purely musical issues. Such activity is typical in preparing for staged performances. However, I had never known it to occur within the village tradition; previously, most singers preparing for village song exchanges were more concerned about learning a large enough quantity of songs (to avoid the embarrassment of having no more songs to perform during a song exchange) than about attending to musical details of their performance.

Conclusion

This brief overview of major issues concerning tradition in relation to Kam singing highlights both the complexity of the Kam situation and the importance of detailed investigation of the meanings and nature of tradition in a range of contexts. The Kam case also demonstrates how governmental and international organizations, through making certain decisions about local culture, have the ability to substantially impact local communities. More thorough inquiry into the meanings and nature of tradition thus has clear value in assisting such

organizations to limit their inadvertent interference in the very cultural activities they are (presumably) seeking to encourage, and to better promote and support cultural practices.

In their decision-making processes regarding external support of local cultures, governmental and international organizations rely upon both academic research and concepts of tradition prevalent within the general community. By researchers and other community advocates pursuing and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the meanings of tradition, such individuals can influence those decision-making processes and play an important role in facilitating future access to the valuable knowledge transmitted by and associated with singing and other cultural activities. The use of research and advocacy to increase awareness and understanding of the nature of tradition today therefore has an important role in supporting the transmission of cultural heritage, and offers crucial benefits for future generations.

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Notes

- 1 Phillips, Mark Salber & Gordon Schochet. 2004. "Preface." In *Questions of Tradition*, M. S. Phillips and G. Schochet (eds.), ix-xv. Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, page xi.
- 2 Hobsbawm, Eric & Terence Ranger (ed.). 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 3 As noted in Howard, Keith (ed.). 2012. *Music as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Policy, Ideology and Practice in the Preservation of East Asian Traditions*. Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate.
- 4 Descriptions of these staged performances appear in Ingram, Catherine, with Wu Jialing 吴家玲, Wu Meifang 吴美芳, Wu Meixiang 吴梅香, Wu Pinxian 吴品仙, and Wu Xuegui 吴学桂. 2011. "Taking the Stage: Rural Kam Women and Contemporary Kam 'Cultural Development'." In *Women, Gender and Rural Development in China*, edited by T. Jacka and S. Sargeson, pp.71-93. Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- 5 See <http://tinyurl.com/748yv52>, where the Chinese 大歌 *dage* is translated into English as 'grand song'.



Top left: A performance of big song during the tour of the 'Wind of Colourful Guizhou' large-scale staged performance to Melbourne, Australia, February 2012 (see also Catherine Ingram. 2012. "Kam 'Big Song' Down Under," *New Mandala* (<http://tinyurl.com/7v95lev>))



Top right: Villagers from the Kam regions of Sheeam and Bee exchange big song in the newly-built *dare low* in Bee, February 2011.

Below: Visiting photographers, researchers and government officials – as well as many local residents – prepare to enjoy a staged performance of big song given by hundreds of Sheeam villagers in February 2011. The largest *dare low* in the village appears behind the crowd.

All photographs by Catherine Ingram.