

Who is the audience?

Local Religious Music Popular in Yunnan Province

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1. The Questions

Chinese traditional music is not only a historical heritage but also a living culture. Since the beginning of the 20th century, traditional music has faced one of two situations: disappearance, which happens to most traditional musical genres, and modernization, which especially happens to Chinese instrumental music. Thus, localization and globalization are the topics most discussed amongst musicologists.

In recent years, an interesting phenomenon has developed. Traditional music genres in present China seem to have recovered, and their rejuvenation can be realized. What are the essential reasons for the initial disappearance and later rejuvenation of traditional music?

The second question is then what is the concept of a music performance? The general understanding is that music performance involves three parts: composers, performers, and audiences. However for ethnomusicologists, this definition is not suitable, since the process of music making varies. So according to ethnomusicology, the three parts of music performance are: performers, performing environment, and audiences.

In comparing the two concepts of a music performance, we find that the audience is an important part in both. Here I would like to ask, “Who is the audience?” The audience, as is generally understood, is a person who listens to the music. I would like to show several photos I took during a field trip to Datun county, Yunnan province in 2006. The photos show that there is no audience during the whole process of the performance.





2. *Dongjing* （洞经）Performance

Dongjing music is a local genre popular mainly in Yunnan. This music was very popular, but it disappeared for some time after 1949, until recently being recovered.

Map of China



A. Music

It is generally recognized that Yunnan *Dongjing* spread from central China, but the time of its expansion is disputed. The music also varies in different areas of Yunnan, however they are all referred to as *Dongjing* music. The orchestra of *Dongjing* music can be large or small. The larger one contains more than 50 performers, and many kinds of Chinese musical instruments are used.

The *Dongjing* Music Orchestra of Kunming uses 64 performers according to the Taoist concept of $8 \times 8 = 64$. The smaller orchestra contains about 10 performers. The most frequently used instruments are erhu (Chinese fiddle), suona (cornet), sanxian (three-stringed lute), gu (drum), cha (cymbal) and muyu (Fish clapper).

Dongjing music is a kind *Qupai* music (labeled music), in which separate labeled pieces are used to form a larger structure. In a whole performance, the music is normally classified into two types: vocal and instrumental. The instrumental part can be further classified as melodic and percussive. The musicians of *Dongjing* call all these labeled pieces *Jingpai* (labeled piece for reciting religious text), *Qupai* (labeled piece for pure music performance) and *Luogu Pu* (percussion notation) (see Zhang Xingrong 1998). Vocal music is used when the text of a religious book is sung, whereas instrumental music is used when a ritual process is going on such as praying to gods.

B. Organization

According to this author's investigation, *Dongjing* music is now mainly popular

in three areas. The first area is the middle of Yunnan, such as Kunming and the surrounding area; the second area is southern Yunnan, centered around Dali; and the third is northwest Yunnan, such as Lijiang. The music in these three areas is very different from one another, both the music itself and also the performance style. *Dongjing* performances in both the Kunming and Dali areas are mostly associated with folk religious activities, whereas in Lijiang the performances are for tourists.

There are two features that describe the circumstances of *Dongjing* music performance. The first feature is that many people perform the music. Almost every county in these three areas has one or more *Dongjing* organization (*Dongjing Hui* “洞经会”). According to an initial estimate, in the Dali area alone, there are more than three hundreds *Dongjing* organizations.

The second feature is that there are many performance opportunities. Every *Dongjing* organization provides a performing service for a specific area. Each organization can be invited to give a performance for various local traditional activities. The members of a *Dongjing* organization can also earn their living offering a performing service, so that now *Dongjing* performance is a specialized profession that involves many people.

C. Social Functions

Dongjing music is a part of *Dongjing* performance. *Dongjing* performance is a local tradition in which religious classics (scriptures) are sung. These classics vary among *Dongjing* organizations. However, some of the commonly used classics are, for example, *Dadong Xianjing* (大洞仙经 “Deep Meaning of the Spirit Scripture”), *Guandi Jueshi Zhenjing* (关帝觉世真经 “Enlightenment of Guangong”), and *Dacheng Miaofa Lianhua Tanjing* (大乘妙法莲华谈经 “Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma”).

The texts of these scriptures reveal that they have been mixed with Buddhism, Taoism and local folk beliefs. At present, because of political and ideological reasons, some of the texts have been changed. Words praising the great China and great Communist Party have been added.

Dongjing performance is a folk tradition. The settings of the performance include folk festivals, birthdays, and ceremonies for building a new house. Locals call the performances *Zuohui* (做会 “having a meeting”). In northern China, there are many kinds of popular folk bands. These folk bands also give performances at different occasions. Although one of the most important occasions is a funeral, the Yunnan *Dongjing* organization does not perform at such occasions.

The process of a *Dongjing* performance is rather complicated, involving making alters, welcoming gods, praying, scripture singing, instrumental music playing, going around villages, seeing gods off, etc. The function of *Dongjing* performance is multifaceted. It can be considered as a spiritual activity since it has a deep religious meaning. It can also be considered as a cultural activity since it has a long historical background and is a local tradition. Most of the people who come to see the performance are old women.

The question is asked again: who is the audience?

3. “*Huashan Tan*” (化善坛), *Dongjing* Organization of Datun County, Gejiu Area

A. Location

“*Huashan Tan*” is the name used for a *Dongjing* organization in Datun. Datun is a county in the area of Gejiu, a city in southern Yunnan province, on the border with Vietnam. This area is occupied by Han, Yi, Miao, and Hani ethnicities.

Map of Yunnan



History

According to Min Shoushu, group leader of the organization, *Huashan Tan* was established in 1919. The first group leader was Min Chunchu. Min Chunchu taught six students. One of them was Guan Zibin. Min Shoushu’s father was a rich person in this area and loved music very much. Min Shoushu’s uncle Min Guanxue, under the

financial support of his brother (Min Shoushu's father), learnt the music from Guan Zibin. Min Guanxue took over the leadership of Huashan Tan from Guan Zibin in 1946 and taught the music to his nephew, Min Shoushu. Min Shoushu took over the leadership when Min Guangxue died ten years ago.

B. Organization

Right now, the Datun *Dongjing* organization (*Huashan Tan*) has more than 180 members. They are divided into five groups. These five groups play *Dongjing* music separately, and sometimes have competitions. The relationship between the groups is not good, but since they are popular in the same area, they all recognize themselves as “*Huashan Tan*” or *Datun Dongjing Organization*. The group led by Min Shoushu is the biggest one, containing more than 50 people.

There is no condition required if someone wants to join the organization. There are three reasons that I found that prompted the current members to join the organization. One is as a hobby. They like to play the music; two is belief. They want to do something good for the society and the texts in the scriptures tell people about good behavior; three is money. They can get a small amount of payment after each performance.

C. Performers

The performers are divided into two groups. One group is called Wensheng (文生), meaning literary members. This is the group that sings the text. The other group is called Yuesheng (乐生), meaning music members. This is the group that plays the instruments. There is also a person who is in charge of writing and reading the sacrificial orations, called Dujiang Sheng (督讲生). Most of the members are more than 60 years old. Some of them are even over 70. Their backgrounds vary. Some of them were farmers, and some of them did different kinds of work, for example as schoolteachers.

Min Shoushu (闵守书), group leader, was born in 1933. He was an art director of a local performing group, and is now retired. He learnt *Dongjing* performance from his uncle, Min Guangxue.

D. Music

(1) Music categories

The music played by the Datun group is divided into two categories: instrumental and vocal. The instrumental pieces can be further classified into four types: music played at the beginning of the ceremony, called *Kaichang Qu* (music for beginnings) in Chinese, mainly played by wind and percussion instruments; big instruments ensemble (*Dayue* 大乐) played by suona (cornet) and other wind instruments; refined music (*Xiyue* 细乐) played by bamboo flute and stringed instruments; and rough music (*Cuyue* 粗乐), a short part in each section played by all kinds of instruments.

Vocal music is the music for singing the scriptures. Although there are more than ten scriptures, the scope of vocal music contains only six short pieces and one suite, formed by 28 sections. So the melodies are repeated, while the text varies.

(2) Instruments

Melodic instruments include: erhu (Chinese fiddle), laohu (old fiddle), gehu (renovated fiddle), banhu (coconut fiddle), pipa (Chinese lute), sanxian (three stringed lute), yueqin (moon lute), ruan (four stringed around lute), dizi (bamboo flute), and ganzi (杆子cornet).

Percussions instruments include: da tanggu (big barrel drum), daluo (big gong), dacha (big cymbal), jiaozi (铙子small cymbal), lingzi(铃子small gong), dangluo (钹gong), yunluo (韵锣 set gongs), yingzi (引子gong), muyu (fish clapper), and paiban (clapper).

Pictures of the main instruments



erhu



sanxian



ganzi



dizi



gehu



daluo



xiaoluo



yunluo



xiaobo



yinzi



yunluo



paiban

4. Conclusion: Who is the audience?

There are different definitions for music performance. It is not only considered as entertainment, but it is also considered a social and cultural activity. It is a contribution of ethnomusicology that music is not only understood as a form of human entertainment, but also a form of social or cultural organization. From this perspective we can understand that the essential reason for the disappearance and rejuvenation of traditional music is that it is part of a belief system. If the belief system is threatened, the traditional music disappears, and if the belief system is allowed to flourish, the traditional music also flourishes.

If we understand that a belief system is the basis for traditional music, we can then find out who the audience is for *Dongjing* performance. On the surface, the audience is the gods. What is more significant is that when performers play before the statues of gods, they are not only satisfying the gods, but they are also satisfying themselves by believing that the gods are satisfied. In fact, the performers are also playing for themselves in addition to the gods.

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