

Probe into the Debate on the Position of “New Folk Song”

DERRIERE LES CONTROVERSE DE L'EMPLACEMENT DES NOUVELLES CHANSONS POPULAIRES

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Received 13 December 2011; accepted 5 April 2012.

Abstract

The debate on the position of “new folk song” reflects changes of music thoughts in the field of music creation and performance and differences in the way of its expression. The boundary between the “new folk song” and traditional folk song is the meeting of minds of new and old music creation. The change of singing styles of the “new folk song” is the reflection of modern trend of arts in the area of music performance. It shows the tendency and confliction between tradition culture and modern multi-culture below its surface.

Key words: New folk song; Music trend; Modern art; Culture heritage

Résumé

Les controverses de l'emplacement des “Nouvelles chansons populaires” reflètent les changements et les différences de la conception de la musique dans le domaine de l'interprétation musicale et la création de la musique depuis la révolution culturelle. La définition des “Nouvelles chansons populaires” et des “Chansons populaire traditionnelles” c'est le croisement des conceptions de la création musicale. Le changement de style chant des “Nouvelles chansons populaires” se reflète dans le domaine d'interprétation de la musique dans la mode de la conception de l'Art Moderne. Derrière cet effet, ce dernière apparaisse la direction de l'orientation et les conflits des éléments de la culture moderne et de la culture traditionnelle.

Mots clés: Nouvelles chansons populaires; Conception musicale; Art moderne; Patrimoine culturel

ZHOU Xizheng (2012). Probe into the Debate on the Position of “New Folk Song”. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(2), 73-77. Available from URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120802.2600>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120802.2600>.

The term “New folk song” has been frequently used since late 1990s to early 2000s in music field, in addition, no matter musicology, music creation, and vocal music have been influenced by the “new folk song”. There have been fierce arguments, discussions, and controversies on “new folk song” since then. The emergence of those arguments, discussions, and controversies is closely related to current social life and change of ideas on basic aesthetic concepts of the Chinese. The discussions around “new folk song” mainly focus on two aspects: the concept of “new folk song” and the definition of ethnic style creative songs; Performance characteristics of “new folk song” in folk song singing performance. Apparently, discussions on the two aspects are different opinions and thoughts on “new folk song”; in fact, they have reflected that Chinese people tried to adapt foreign culture for the first time since the reform and open policy. It also shows that Chinese people have been getting rid of culture assimilation and beginning to get creative in their minds and thoughts under the influence of social development and changes. Besides, the transformation of thinking styles and aesthetic interests are also crash and competition between foreign cultures and artistic ideas and Chinese traditional culture and artistic ideas.

1. DEFINITION OF “NEW FOLK SONG”

1.1 Arguments in Theoretical Field

In 1980s, the journal “People’s Music” published a paper titled “The way of promoting Chinese folk”. The

discussion on development and creation of Chinese folk song in this paper was the start reason of the term "new folk song" which also brought great attention in music academia and set up arguments and debates in defining "new folk song". It was just like the old saying in Chinese that "a tossed stone raises a thousand ripples". The influence brought by arguments and discussions on "new folk song" has been spread to every aspect in the field of music.

Followed "The way of promoting Chinese folk" of SONG Daneng which was treated as a blasting fuse, DONG Weisong published a paper titled "New folk song creation and other". Dong's paper asserts that "new folk song" has developed and changed from existing tunes; The development and change of basic tunes is basic mode of folk music creation; All songs which are created by following the above standard can be called folk songs or new folk songs (DONG, 1983). MA Zhongguo has the same opinion with DONG. In his paper "An Exploratory Study on the Concept of New Folk Song", he thought that based on basic traditional tones, any newly created songs follow characteristics of ethnic, region, ethnical language, ethnical mode, tone, and rhythm and so on can be called new folk song (MA, 1988). While the opposite side of the above opinion asserts that typically speaking new folk song is newly organized song of creative songs of national program (HU, 2008).

In this period, the change of new folk song creation style has become a focus of both sides in debate. To define the boundary between new folk song and folk song turned into a core topic. If the argument on "new folk song" does not stop on discussing defining the boundary of music theory and music creation at that moment, it has turned into a debate not only in the theoretical field but also in the field of folk song singing style and ways of performance which turns into a confrontation between folk song performance skills and folk song aesthetic level.

1.2 Diversification of Ways of Singing Performance

The concept of "new folk song" first appears in the field of singing performance starts from Guangxi Nanning International Folk Song Festival. In the opening and closing ceremonies, the international folk song festival invited many famous and popular pop singers from the mainland China, Taiwan, and Hongkong. They sang many best-known classic folk songs in an anti-traditional way in the festival which soon brought both questions and applause. The opponent thinks there are less and less real folk songs in Nanning international folk song festival and there is only a empty shell of the festival. While the other side thinks that ways of performance, singing styles of "new folk song" is a perfect combination of tradition and fashion. In the trend of "new folk song", a lot of people labeling themselves "new folk song" singers come out. For example, Teng Geer, the "pioneer of new folk song",

is recognized by certain media. This media also said in "pioneer of new folk song" and "new wave brought by new folk song" that new folk song is a unique singing style and performance created by Teng Geer with his own understanding about folk song, his fashionable way of tuning, and mix of electronic musical instruments and traditional music instruments.

With the influence of "new folk song", there are Dao Lang who sings songs about ethnical culture or folk songs in Xinjiang, China, Southwestern ethnic group Yirezhizao, and Siqingerile from Inner Mongolia, and many other starlets calling themselves "new folk song" singers. They follow Teng Geer's "new folk song" style which introduces other new elements, new music materials more daringly and freely when using modern methods, skills, and techniques to compose and perform and finally create new folk song with modern feelings. This kind of music is exaggerated by some media companies and TV ceremonies pursuing commercialization and audience ratings and finally turns into the main stream of music.

There is another trend of thoughts about new folk song at this moment. Some thinks that to add pop music and rock music into folk song can be the creation of folk song which can be sang vigorously and powerfully. ZENG Jiaxin explained in "Yun Ling Ge Sheng" 2000 Vol.6 that "new folk song" is not like traditional folk song purely with regional elements. It is a combination of subjective understanding of the composer on nature and music. It absorbs inspiration and materials from Yunna, Guizhou, Tibet, Inner Mongolia ethnic groups' ballads, borrows features from European Jazz, Blues, Rap and other music genres, and gives strong pop song characteristics to folk song in its performance (Zeng, 2000)." Under the influence of the trend of thoughts, the position of "new folk song" has been more and more diversified and broad. Compared with the previous thought which thinks that new folk song is traditional folk song played by modern instruments that the explanation about new folk song changes more obviously again from both composing and singing with the trend of folk song development. New folk song has turn from original pure positioning to a repositioning in a higher level of composing and performing.

The author of "Where is your root? New Folk Song" published in the journal Northern Music Vol.24 2007 thought: "beyond the above types, new folk song should include urban folk song which supposes to be the main field for "new folk song". One foot step into the industrial society and another in the information society is the main stream of current age in China. All needs and requirements under this background should be taken care of and these requirements will expand to countryside. From the public function and function of spreading folk customs, this paper recognizes that "Xing Xing Dian Deng", "Sailor", "Thirty-three Kuai", "Da Guomin" sang by ZHENG Zhihua must be counted as "new folk song" in urban life and be examples of the diversification and wideness of

new folk song position (Zhu, 2007)."

In conclusion, the discussion on drawing the boundary of new folk song is in fact a division of its outside appearance. While only analysis on new folk song's inside has real significance and thoughtful value. From the emergence of the term "new folk song" in Song Wen's paper until currently the statement of diversification of new folk song, what we can do to find out the detailed inside of new folk song when doing research into these changes is where the real value lies.

2. ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF "NEW FOLK SONG"

2.1 Ways and Changes of Creating New Folk Song

To create a diversified unified system from music creation to performance is the heritage of traditional culture in the field of music thoughts and also a result from subliming traditional art thoughts, aesthetic conceptions to get the new folk song.

There is an official definition about folk song in the music academic circles that "folk song is created by the masses together during their laboring work. Only songs that are always popular and spread among people can be called folk song." Written creations and individual composed work, even though they are very similar to folk song, they cannot be called folk song. This is a common view among folk music researchers and scholars in the past and there was no final verdict in theory (Dong, 1993). However, Song Wen discussed the established view again and no matter agree or disagree there can be several reasons but its inside meaning hidden behind cannot be ignored.

As a new trend of music thought in the modern music creation field, the grow up of "new folk song" is a signature of ideological emancipation of music creation.

Folk song is created by the masses together and spread in the masses as well. In the process of its spreading, the function of reflecting public thoughts and lives is shown up. All dominators in history felt the special function of folk song which is an important reason for the ruler sending special organization to the public to collect folk songs since Yuefu Songs of Han dynasty. About the new folk song written by certain person, it is new from traditional folk song because it is different in the way of expression. Song Wen said that "new folk song has creativity from the view of history development".

Folk song comes from folk lives while traditional folk methods have changed a lot until now. Folk song born in the village lives does not have its social environment in the post-industrial era and information age. The generality of gregarious life and joint interdependent in the time of lower productivity has been replaced by the current

epochal characteristics of showing personality. "Urban folk song" and "new folk song" are all created and spread by individual and then get known by the public. From the function of folk song, this way of creation can also be included in folk song. The reason of calling it "new folk song" is that the way of create it is different and it expand the scope of folk song and therefore promote the development of folk song.

2.2 The Original Purpose of Folk Song Creation

New folk song has brought music creation to the path of art development. As long as the foundation of the Republic of China, music creation in China always focuses on continuous political movements. Due to its artistic characteristics, folk song goes especially well with the publicity of Chinese Communist Party. The proletariat must exercise their leadership over culture once they build socialist country. They take various means to transfer their own will into the masses' common will and make this common will unified. In the process of culture unifying construction, folk song has made great contribution to Chinese main political propaganda in its own way: there were many excellent works with epochal characteristics appeared and folk song's development has been promoted as well (Hayek, 1997). For instance, "The story of spring" created an outstanding "new folk song" of the political affair Open and reform. "Walking into the new era" shows the Communist party in China leads its people to build new country. With the fast development of China Open and reform, economy development, and politic openness, folk song creation starts to reconsider its loss in thoughts and culture resources in the process of constructing unified culture. The emergence of new folk song is a transformation of music creation from being an instrument of propaganda to its original art form and has made music creation once again connected with reality perfectly. Thus, to call individual created music the "new folk song" is also change and liberation in mind.

2.3 Extension of Theme and Style

"New folk song" has created new field in the theme of folk song. Many current affairs and important events have been written into the lyrics of "new folk song" which have expanded the original scope of folk song subjects. From the aspects of lyrics themes and ways of inheriting styles, "new folk song" reflects that individual creation is more flexible and variable than group creation. The flexibility of new folk song shows more inside emotion and feelings of the author in a more authentically way which turns into a phenomenon of art openness and music innovation. The development of folk songs needs new blood which comes from the diversity of "new folk song" creation.

The way of singing "new folk song" and its anti-traditional performance is a reflection of modern art trend in the field of music performance.

As is known, even there is no conclusion reached on

the debate on the position of “new folk song”, the new folk song movement has started in the field of vocal performance which has brought the debate from theoretical aspects to practices. The “new folk song” singing style goes gradually and finally out of the traditional way of singing folk song. New folk song singers such as Zu Hai, Tang Can, Teng Geer, and Siqingerile and recently talked the best singer of folk song movement Hong Qi represent the development and change of new folk song singing styles. Zu Hai and Tang Can sing new folk song by adding pronunciation and breathe of pop songs into traditional folk song to differ from the traditional ways of singing. There are more breakthroughs in Teng Geer and Siqingerile’s singing styles which do not follow the traditional singing styles of folk song and throats are used more freely. However, Hong Qi has totally broken away from the frame of folk music and shows more elements of shout and rock. From these gradual changes of singing styles, we can feel strong personality of the singer and their personal styles.

We can see from this phenomenon the influence of modern art trend on folk song’s singing methods and styles. Modern art is a react against industrial modernization when the society goes into the development stage of industrialization. In the past, the creation work is almost like a screw which can be made from the beginning until finish totally by one person. The perfection of creation work of human being can be shown from the original manuscript to the real product. However, currently we are all the same as Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times* showed that people are all divide into different groups of producing a small screw. Each person is only a part of a modern industrial production line and people have been “objectified”. While artistic aesthetic appreciation does not follow the “objectification”, it resists the “objectification”. Therefore, modernization of aesthetic appreciation is based on disclosing and resisting “objectification” and the way it resist is to turn artistic aesthetic appreciation into appreciation of the ugly – it does not wish to see the art of the past to sing for country life’s beauty and then it turns art into an art of resist (Wang, 2009). The shape characterized by art is more exaggerated than the original form of life. The artistic thoughts first starts from painting then goes gradually into the music performance field and therefore the diversification and variability of “new folk song” singing styles come out.

There is one more to be emphasized that traditional aesthetic appreciation is a sense of appreciating the harmony and beauty between man and nature. The singing style of traditional folk song is sweet, clear, resonant, lively, beautiful and harmonious. Nevertheless, the “Fauvism” and “Art of Resist” in modern art reflect singing of folk song. Pure aesthetic appreciation is no longer the same as in the past. It is just like Marcuse said that “art turns into resist from aesthetic appreciation”. Hence, from this point we can answer the question why

there are no many noisy electro acoustical instruments replace melodious folk instruments, hoarse voice replaces clear and smooth voice, and exhausted shout take place of beautiful singing? The answer is that they call it a perfect combination of fashion and tradition with innovation and originality. On the other hand, from the content and thoughts of “new folk song”, we can see that there is too much personal emotion, Individual struggle, and ego world included. Some of them even randomly assert that they are students of WANG Luobin or Leader of new folk song, etc.. The author of this paper thinks that new folk songs like the above mentioned ones are most products of commercial speculation and personal shows of some people. A deeper understanding about this phenomenon is that this is an erosion of orientation traditional culture from the cultural convergence of industrial culture. If “new folk song” lose Chinese traditional national and ethnical personality, and add western modern art characteristics forcibly to Chinese local culture and art and think it is innovation, then the loss of Chinese culture can be more.

3. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 Folk Song Should Keep Up with the Development of Society

“New folk song” is an external superficial characteristic of folk song variation and features of times in the development of folk song. Folk song is expression of Chinese civilized culture. It generated in the farming culture ecosystem. The emergence of folk song had its own foundation to survival and media to spread in the era of farming culture. During the process of its spreading, folk song develops certain social functions which depend on it. The most important feature of these functions is to pass on ethnical original customs, cultures or social intentions and be a carrier of regional and ethnical culture. Therefore, the spread and development of folk song, in fact, is a process of culture heritage. However, the process does have certain epochal characters. For example, in ancient times, the content of folk song mainly reflects people’s unknowns about nature which generated many folk songs about respecting heaven and the earth, praising ghost and spirits; in feudalism times, folk song usually shows hardships, sufferings, and complaints of people under the feudal rules; in the period of semi-colonial semi-feudal society, people’s dissatisfaction and resist mode can be found in folk song of that time. In the preliminary stage of socialism in China, folk song has turned into main carrier of singing about new life and new constructions. Among all these periods of history, folk song always has its own social characteristics and vivid epochal characters. Although social functions of those folk songs appeared in different periods still exist, the custom of relying on folk song is still alive, characteristics of folk song are kept, and the peculiarity of folk song

does not change, from which we can see that new folk song has no difference with the traditional ones, folk song come out and spread with certain customs which indicates that if certain customs change or disappear, the folk song relying on it will definitely change its form of existing. For instance, Daqu of Tang dynasty turned into Xiaoqu and dance music and so on in Song dynasty. This is a normal phenomenon which is the same with folk song (Wang, 2009). We can treat the recently appeared "new folk song" as an epochal characteristic of folk song under the new social form and new mode of production and also form of expression of folk song pursuing its development and change positively. The music form of new folk song does not change fundamentally and the social function still exists in the process of social development. There is no "new" or "old" folk song. As long as it is folk song, its internal attribute will never change even with the change of time. The arguments around "new folk song" and its multiple ways of performance is imposed unnaturally by people in the field of folk song.

3.2 Folk Song's Mission

As one carrier of ethnic culture, folk song also plays important part in inheriting traditional ethnic culture in human history. Every ethnic has its own traditions and cultures. Forms of these culture traditions are combinations of customs to nature environment, life experiences and ethnical behaviors. How to pass on ethnic traditions? Folk song has been an important media since there were no words or written records. In the process of composing "new folk song", many works are injected with personal emotion and style and get spread gradually on the original tunes which is just as we emphasized that folk song come out of life and is a common feeling of the public about life. Of course, newly organized "new folk song" does have the same function of culture heritage. Every composition will use certain ethnical music elements and genes which can influence composer's thoughts and ideas in some degree with different amount of these music elements and traditional culture materials.

This is what we call the solid foundation of traditional culture which is always showed out by composers who wrote popular and well-known "new folk songs".

On the other hand, some "new folk songs" that were performed differently and stepped far out of traditional culture do not get too much sense of identity and sense of belonging from the audience at the point of culture heritage. From the aesthetic point, they are not even traditional folk song performances at all. However, this new type of "new folk song" is getting more and more popular nowadays and has a lot of teenager fans in the market which alerts us that the debate on the position of "new folk song" is not only about denying or admitting its definition, the global culture convergence behind it has already cut out the relation between teenagers and traditional culture. The prevalence of the so called "new folk song" will take away our own culture and our next generation will be a generation without root of national culture.

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