



REVIEW: THE YANDONG GRAND SINGERS BY PAN RECORDS 2122 CD

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ABSTRACT

This CD album provides an opportunity to hear the range of different forms of Kam songs currently featured in staged Kam singing performances, as well as the acoustic environment of Kam communities. This review offers an analysis of some of the many layers of history, meaning and significance of the songs featured, as well as commentary on the accompanying CD notes.

KEYWORDS

Kam people, Minority culture, China, Vocal traditions, Big song

It was a great pleasure to listen to the beautiful singing of this group of Kam singers from Ngum (in Chinese, Yandong 岩洞), in Liping 黎平 county, Southeastern Guizhou Province, that is recorded on this CD. While this group of four women and two men, aged in their 30s–50s, is named in English as the “Yandong Grand Singers”, on this 19-track album they perform a range of different Kam (pronounced “gum”, and known in Chinese as Dong 侗) songs besides “big/grand song”. The 12-page CD liner notes mainly provide the song lyrics in Kam orthography and English translation, with a very brief introduction to this minority group (including some colour images) and some aspects of Kam musical culture.

As the notes state, the recordings capture performances given especially for the sound recordist, Mu Qian, in May 2019 in two locations in Tong (Tongguan 铜关 village, in Yandong district). Given the types of songs featured and that the songs with instrumental accompaniment feature toward the end of the CD, the sequence of tracks seems likely to reflect the program the group uses in staged performances. As a whole, the album provides a glimpse into the current form of staged Kam performances that began in the 1950s, as well as the present form of the various audio and video recordings of Kam musical culture, which have been available at least from 1980 (including *Vocal Music* 1980, *Les Miao* 1996 and *Dong Folksongs* 2007).

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The first ten tracks, as well as tracks 13 and 14, feature only voices and no instruments, and the 13 songs on those 12 tracks (track 10 is a medley of two different songs, though this is unclear from the notes) are contemporary examples of the choral genre inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity that today is usually categorized in Chinese as *da ge* 大歌. This genre is known in English as “big song” or “grand song” and now often referred to as *ga lao* by many Kam people. While not explained in the CD notes, such post-1949 categorization of the Kam choral songs originating among communities speaking the second lect of the Southern Kam dialect varies from older conventions that persist in village contexts today, wherein choral songs are classified in different ways within each distinct regional repertoire (Ingram and Wu 2017: 81–82). For instance, my (Catherine Ingram's) teachers and friends in the Kam region of Sheeam (in Chinese, Sanlong 三龙), around 6 hours' walk from the centre of Ngum/Yandong, classify the songs on tracks 1, 2, 4, 9, second part of 10 (missing in the accompanying translation), 13 and 14 as *ga sor* (literally, “song” + “sound, melody, breath”) and the first song on track 10 as *ga ma*. Some songs can also be named for their region of origin, and it is wonderful that these singers have included a terrific rendition of the well-known Ngum/Yandong big song *Kong ma ban lai*, categorized by Sheeam singers as *ga Ngum*, on track 3.

On tracks 11, 12, and 15–18, the group perform songs with instrumental accompaniment. The Kam instruments used are pictured on the CD sleeve but the listener needs to seek further descriptions of them elsewhere (for example, Ingram and Wu 2014). Unfortunately, the instruments are labelled incorrectly on the back cover: *gor-gee*/govkgis should be labelled as a two-string bowed lute and *bee-ba*/biicbav as a four-string plucked lute. Some of these songs are typically a part of the repertoire of various big-song-singing areas, such as the narrative *ga jin* usually performed only by men accompanying themselves with a larger Kam *bee-ba* (track 12), and the love songs categorized as *ga lart* (“drawn-out songs”) in Sheeam. The latter includes *ga gharng* involving the two-string horizontally held Kam fiddle called *gor-gee* (track 15), and *ga bee-ba* usually involving the smaller Kam plucked lute called *bee-ba* (track 18). The remaining accompanied tracks feature adaptations of songs from other Kam areas that have been popularized through the various Kam performance troupes. These troupes have existed since ‘big song’ became known to and reported more widely by Han Chinese involved in Land Reform work in Kam areas 1950s, not initially through those individuals' fieldwork as claimed here (Ingram and Wu 2017: 71–72).

In the final track 19, the listener hears a field recording of flowing stream waters, crowing roosters, the sounds of birds and insects, and a small boy calling to his older brother. This track provides a sonic illustration of important components of the environment of Kam regions, as Kam villages are usually located in river valleys. To me (Wu Jiaping), as a Kam person who grew up in a remote Kam village, this creates a soundscape for fully appreciating big song.

The back cover of the CD states that “all songs are traditional repertoire”, while in the notes, the group is described as providing an “authentic representation of traditional Dong music” (p. 4). Although to our knowledge the word “tradition” has no direct equivalent in the Kam language, its ability to be used with various different meanings can make it helpful for understanding current forms of Kam musical culture (Ingram 2012a, 2012b). Here, its use is impossible to unpack briefly, as every song on the album has many layers of history, meaning, and significance that demand lengthier explanation. Perhaps the recording could be described as featuring an “authentic representation of the range of different forms of Kam songs currently featured in staged Kam singing performances”.

For example, tracks 2 and 14 are two different *ga sor* that Sheeam singers claim as part of their own local repertoire. Sheeam singers typically refer to track 2 as *Ga neng* (rather than by its opening line of lyrics, as here), since its lyrics feature the cicada called *neng*; track 14 is usually known as *Ga numleng* and imitates the cicada called *numleng* or *leng-lee*. Here, the women-only performance of *Ga neng* closely resembles the way I (Catherine) have observed Kam *sang ga* (song

experts) born in the 1940s teach the song. However, the mixed-voice performance of *Ga numleng* resembles the version I learnt together with Sheeam singers for the 2005 performance of 10,000 people singing a big song for the Liping Airport–Opening Arts Festival. Kam friends and teachers in Sheeam sometimes referred to this version as *ga Yuanlong* due to its having been altered by Kam composer Wu Yuanlong from the Liping Arts Troupe, and laughed when singers accidentally sang this version in village contexts.

Track 10 consists of a medley of two songs. The first is a version of a well-known *ga ma* from Sheeam, adapted here for mixed voices and with some minor alterations to verse endings, followed immediately by the song *Da long lai low* that is popular in the song and dance troupe repertoires. The two songs are seamlessly combined in a manner typical of the so-called *yuanshengtai* 原生态 (“authentic”) big song performances popular from the early 2010s. Track 12 is based on a men’s *ga jin* melody also known in Sheeam; the performance of it here is clearly intended for staged entertainment, with interjections from women that are almost certainly based on the performance of these songs in the various state-operated performance troupes.

It would be fascinating to hear from the singers involved in making this CD as to their decisions regarding the songs they include in their performance – especially since I have recently heard some Kam friends describe many of these versions of Kam songs using the new phrase *ga gaibian*. *Ga* is the Kam word for “song”, while *gaibian* is a Chinese word meaning “changed”. Many questions about the performances emerge, reminding us of the incredible importance to Kam musical culture of Kam song experts who, as living repositories of song, hold onto and pass down these understandings of musical meaning and history.

The CD notes make several further claims about Kam musical culture that warrant attention: first, that the vocal drone acts as a base for two singers to “take turns to deliver the main melody” (p. 2), and second, that “the transitions between dissonance and consonance are one of the most interesting parts of the song, and they remind one of a similar process in the chirping of cicadas” (p. 2). These ideas were never presented to me (Catherine) by Kam singers or song experts in any of the Kam areas where I have conducted research. To my understanding, the closest approximation of a “main melody” would be the *wair may* (lower vocal line) that is sung by most singers, and which delivers the main lyrics. The sections where *wair may* provides a drone and *wair say* (upper vocal line/s) takes a different melody above are mainly those passages that conclude song sections, and the *wair say* acts as a kind of aural conductor to coordinate the singers. The Kam description of poor singing as *git*, a word that refers to a “bite that wounds” and used to describe singing that is uncoordinated or out of tune, is the only concept I have encountered that very remotely connects to an idea of dissonance. However, unlike Western musical concepts of dissonance, *git* is to be avoided at all times. The intervals between musical lines are not considered to have any connection with the sound of cicadas; while they may be interesting to outsiders, older singers in Sheeam always take the greatest interest in big songs with lyrical content considered as important, deep, or educational.

The song lyrics are provided in Kam orthography, usually without including the many vocables typical of Kam songs. The English translations are generally clear, though sadly the lyrics and translation for track 5 are for a different song, and the notes to track 10, as mentioned, are missing the entire second song. Occasionally, the standard Kam orthography provided does not reflect local word pronunciations – for example, *sins juh* rather than the *hen juh* used by the singers (track 10). In the Kam orthography, the final letter is used to indicate linguistic tone, and given this orthography is based on the tonal systems for a different Kam lect not used in big-song-singing regions, it becomes somewhat redundant and awkward – therefore, the use of alternative systems.

Overall, this CD and accompanying notes provide a welcome contribution for music lovers and researchers alike to appreciate Kam song and the acoustic environment of Kam communities. The album further illustrates how big song is rapidly becoming an icon and a cultural symbol of the Kam people, moving from its core region of second lect Southern Kam dialect speakers to the

entire Kam area and beyond. As the “staged tradition” (Ingram and Wu 2017: 77–80) is a more effective “marketing” form, it has been a viable means for cultural diffusion and, to some degree, conservation. But it also raises some questions about tradition, authenticity, and the transformation of big song singing – particularly because of the close connections between village and staged singing and the fact that more research is needed on the main characteristics and values of the different regionally specific Kam village traditions. We would do well to carefully consider what constitute the crucial musical differences among the different Kam villages, and how we might work to preserve them.

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