

MUSIC AND MEMORY IN CHINESE FOLK SONG PERFORMANCE

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Background

Over the past sixteen years, much of our on-going field research on folk songs in China has focused on monothematic song regions. We try to answer questions like: why do certain people sing all the lyrics they know to only one, or a small handful of tunes? What does music mean to them in such a sharply delineated context? And what can we learn, if anything, from such limiting circumstances, about the way in which the brain shapes, reshapes, remembers and reproduces music?

Many Chinese rural regions harbour only one (or at best two or three) preferred tunes to which all the local folk singers sing all (or most) of their lyrics. This situation may be rare in many other parts of the world, though it is not entirely unfamiliar – ‘monothematic’ folk song regions are known to exist, or to have existed, among Balto-Finnic and Finno-Ugric peoples, in parts of Russia and the Ukraine, and in American Indian communities, amongst others. In China, the phenomenon is remarkably widespread, and part of a living tradition.

Aims

Monothematic song regions offer an ideal laboratory for research on the reproduction and actualization of melodies. The limited nature of the musical material and the potential for

endless repetition offer attractive conditions for comparative study, and for musical experiments with singers (who may be fed with deliberately modified or ‘distorted’ versions of tunes, to test their responses).

Method

Transcription and computer analysis of repeated performances. Performance experiments with singers, as indicated above.

Results

In this presentation it will be argued that many basic features of Chinese folk melodies are in fact directly determined by the nature of the mnemonic tools and brain mechanisms involved. In other words, a number of memory processes can be ‘read’ and identified directly from the contours of the tunes. Meanwhile, our experiments in dialogue singing seem to indicate that the singers CAN be influenced in their own performances by exposure to ‘wrong’ melodies, but only marginally so.

Conclusions

We think that the (historical) social and psychological functions of the songs inhibit a large degree of tune variation, and will set out to explain why.