

MY FLOWING LIFE [我如水漂泊的一生]: THE SONGS OF THE MIAO CLEANING WOMEN IN THE DEMON CITY [魔都] SHANGHAI

EVENT REVIEW

Xiong Manyu [熊曼谕]

Shanghai Conservatory of Music

Contact: khuneven@gmail.com

Abstract

This review is about the event “My flowing Life: the Songs of the Miao cleaning women in the Demon City Shanghai”, which took place on the afternoon of 29th December 2019, at the ceremonial hall of the Shanghai Aurora Museum. The event was designated as a workshop for practical reasons and is a “heart and sound” interaction among specific urban groups. Miao cleaners, students, scholars and the public interacting in the Demon city. The term Demon city comes from a novel written by Muramatso (1924?). It describes the city character of Shanghai in the beginning of the 20th century and reminds of long-term views of people coming from outside into the city. The cleaners came into town with their cultural habits and expectations long after that time. The event reviewed was to provide an opportunity to express these habits.

Keywords:

Miao, Cleaning women, Songs, Performance, Workshop

INTRODUCTION

Hearing a Miao song in the toilet of the Shanghai Art Industrial Park was the beginning of the acquaintance between a group of the Miao cleaning women and myself, a master student of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (SHCM) majoring in ethnomusicology.

For more than a year, I have been trying to get close to their daily life, and participating in their small family gatherings in Shanghai. Few months ago, I followed them back to their hometown Guizhou. I found that they always sing their Miao songs with relatives and friends through online WeChat groups.

However, the strenuous job on top of the poor living condition makes it impossible for them to enjoy songs as if they were at home. Subsequently, I had the idea of organizing an event for them to sing together Miao songs in Shanghai. Also, this event should introduce these Miao songs to a public audience.

With the support of my tutor, Xiao Mei [萧梅] and the financial support of the Research Institute of Ritual Music in China (RIRMC) at SHCM, we organized a group consisting of the Miao cleaners. These women performed within the framework of a workshop titled “My Flowing Life: The Song of the Miao cleaning women in the Demon City [魔都] Shanghai” to the public in the afternoon of 29th December, 2019 at the Shanghai Aurora Museum.

Here are the lyrics of the flying song set as Miao *Feige* [苗族飞歌/flying song, traditional lyrics as they were presented on the stage, for the readers’ convenience, the core lyrics were translated into English.

“Flying song”

*Climbing on the mountains of my hometown,
looking at the pleasant scenery,
the scenery of the mountain is charming,
the life in hometown as beautiful as flowers.*

Dressed in costumes with fine Miao embroidery, and wearing heavy silver necklaces brought from their hometown, four Miao cleaning women sang the first song, a Miao *Feige* [飞歌/flying song] “Climbing on the Mountains of My Hometown [爬上高山好地方]”.

It was the first time that they performed their Miao songs on a public stage in Shanghai. These Miao cleaning women haven't been together to sing for a long time. In China of the past three decades, poverty has driven many rural women to leave their villages and become migrant workers in different cities. Three years ago, these ladies came to Shanghai. Some fellow-townsmen of Guizhou introduced them as cleaners at subway stations, shopping malls, and other places. Because of overtime work and excessive workload, they rarely meet each other and almost never ask for leave.

One of the Miao cleaning women who is called Yang Mei [杨梅] told me that she has been in Shanghai for more than three years, and her wish is to have a chance of hanging out and singing with her hometown sisters.

The smooth melodies of Miao songs and the clear voices of the Miao women who presented their skills brought the audience to the Miao villages.

In Guizhou, some people emphasize the proverb “Without song and dance, one is no longer a traditional Miao.” Singing is deeply rooted in their life, dining together, chatting, and singing Jiuge [酒歌/wine songs] and Xiangyuege [相约歌/meeting songs], are the joys of life. On the occasion of a specified ceremony, such as New Year celebrations, the Miao are used to sing antiphonal songs continuously for several days and nights.



Figures 1 and 2: Scenes of the workshop (photos by courtesy of Zhang Shan [张珊]).

SONGS OF LIFE

After the Miao Feige [飞歌/flying song], I asked them to sing the Xiangyuege [相约歌/meeting song] "Land is the host and people are the guests [江山是主人为客]", which I usually listened to when I spent time with them. Middle-aged Miao women prefer to sing Xiangyuege [相约歌/meeting song] to share their feelings about life.

*"Land is the host,
people are the guests.
Like flowers on branches,
Like duckweed in wells."*

(traditional core lyrics as presented in that performance)

Actually, the sequence of songs was only determined about ten minutes before the start of the performance. Whenever we discussed the details of this performance, the ladies would say: "These songs come from my heart." That means most Miao songs are presented ad hoc to express the true feelings and emotions of a person.

After a short discussion, the Miao cleaning women sang a song called "Working in Shanghai", which narrates their own life experiences and flowing memories. Yang Mei interpreted the song based on a traditional tune. The improvised knowledgeable lyrics accompanied by the charming voice instantly surprised the audience.

*"life is rough, we must be tough.
All the way to Shanghai for our children.
Working as a migrant worker,
Money is hard to earn,
Nobody cares about my complaints."*

(Lyrics by Yang Mei)

In fact, the title of the workshop 'My Flowing Life' is a Feige [飞歌/flying song] of which the lyrics were written by another Miao cleaning lady, called Xiao Liang [小梁]. Similar to Yang Mei, Xiao Liang came to Shanghai from her Miao village three years ago. The district in which she works is dotted with expensive condominiums and high-rise office blocks. However, she lives under appalling conditions where five people are crowded in one room. As a cleaner, she is allowed to live and work in Shanghai, but she has to remain registered in their home region. In effect, that means, their labour is desired but their presence is not, and with few exceptions, they have no permanent residency.

It was in the songs such as "Working in Shanghai" and "My Flowing Life" that these cleaning women tell the truth of their life, and this is especially true in large cities like Shanghai, where the "floating" population counts more than 3 million. They live in the city as "floaters".

SONGS AS GIFTS

In order to make the audience become aware of their everyday life in Shanghai, I made a short video of the workshop, which included the performance.

During the film, I put on the Miao dress that they prepared for me. It was the wedding dress of Yang Mei's daughter brought from her home. I sang a song "spring of the Miao village" with them on the stage to express my gratitude. It was the first song they had taught me, which describes the beautiful spring scene of their hometown.

I was deeply touched by a special Jiuge [酒歌/wine song] titled 'Thanks to Xiong' which they prepared for me. They did not tell me anything about it. As known to me, in some Miao villages, writing a song for someone is the greatest honour for a guest, so they made up the lyrics especially for me and sang the song as a gift, which made me burst into tears.



Figure 3 (left): The Miao cleaning women with Xiong Manyu; Figure 4 (right): There are nearly a hundred people in the audience. (photos by courtesy of Zhang Shan [张珊]).

Near the end of the 90-minutes set, Yang Mei hold her sisters' hands and all sang the final song to send off the guests.

Throughout the performance, the Miao cleaning women showed how they integrate their personal living experience into their way to sing Miao folk songs. It was a rare and precious treat for the audience to hear live Miao songs and to experience the hidden ceremony within the songs (Wu Tong [吴桐], 2020).

One discussant from the audience, Chen Jin [陈晋], a sociologist from Tongji University, said that "The song is very simple, but just as Heidegger described Van Gogh's painting a pair of shoes, a distinctive way in which truth comes into being. Art lets truth originate, and I think this is the greatest significance of art."

HOW FAR IS RESEARCHING GOING?

Prior to the performance, we discussed about the format of the program many times. Some important questions were put: why should I organize such an event for the Miao cleaning women? Will the audience just come to seek sensational feelings? Will the event cause them some problems as the performance will be introduced and discussed?

However, on the way home, these Miao women told me: "Today is the happiest day for me since I came to Shanghai. Thank you for inviting us." (Yang Mei, 2019).

I presume the performance of Miao songs during this workshop event was a good attempt. It makes these performing ladies have a sense of home in the city. As long as the Miao songs are sung, any place can be called homeland. Furthermore, as an implicit expression, these songs makes us get close to their lifestyle and thoughts, it provides a platform for us to understand each other.

As an inter-subjective product (Barz & Cooley 2008), the workshop's emphasis on urban groups relationships, it is hoped that the relationship between different groups of people, between different spaces, and different times can be rebuilt.

On the other hand, their singing is influencing me imperceptibly. I often reflect on the question of my fieldwork: how far is researching going?

Thinking about my Miao 'musician' friends, I wonder what I can do for them. In fact, I had already 'observed' them for a long time and proceeded to interview them for writing my master thesis. I asked questions such as what kind of work their families did, when they first learned music, how they sung Miao songs after a hard day's work; and they answered them. I was asking for their oral history and I was interested in obtaining facts of their lives that related to their songs. In short, I was collecting data.

However, I had discovered that my fieldwork thrust me into thinking about relationships: it was not just about surveying and collecting. It also was about my own identity. In the past year, the Miao cleaning women shared with me a lot of stories about their life and their songs. At the same time, I felt their disappointment about their inability to sing together. What I could do is to create an opportunity for them to sing Miao songs in Shanghai without being worried about sacrifices of working time or personal issues.

In this workshop, I pondered about different kinds of knowing. Those Miao songs, created in a 'real life' situation, could not just simply be a form of data deliveries. They also served as a means of deeper understanding. For me, my relationship with these Miao ladies added a dimension to my research: I became an 'involved researcher' who might be able to offer the ladies' talented songs to a much wider audience, instead of just a young girl hanging around them and writing something in a notebook. Besides friendship, now, I also had a tacit contract with them.

Finally, I would like to say, maybe all the doubts mentioned disappeared when people heard of the Miao women's songs. These songs connected the Miao cleaners with me and different groups in the Demon city Shanghai.

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