

# **A LOCALIZED PERSPECTIVE ON CHINA'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE:**

## **THE CASE OF KAM BIG SONG\***

Catherine Ingram  
University of Melbourne  
ingramc@unimelb.edu.au

This paper presents a localized perspective on China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter, ICH), looking at the grassroots situation regarding a traditional Chinese song genre recognized as National-Level ICH in 2006, and inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the ICH of Humanity in 2009. The genre is that known in English as big song,<sup>1</sup> a genre of song that is learnt and performed by many Kam minority villagers living in a small region in southwestern China. In this discussion, I draw upon more than twenty months' musical ethnographic fieldwork in rural Kam areas between 2004 and 2009 to illustrate how Kam villagers, particularly married Kam women, have utilized features associated with big song's ICH promotion to re-fashion and thereby sustain the tradition of big song singing in their own villages. This situation demonstrates the critical role that creative grassroots involvement plays in sustaining musical traditions irrespective of their recognition and promotion as ICH,

---

\* This paper was presented to the 18<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Adelaide, 5–8 July 2010. It has been peer reviewed via a double referee process and appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright. This paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

I gratefully acknowledge the many Kam singers and song experts without whose assistance this research could not have been conducted, and particularly the singers and song experts of Sheam. I also acknowledge the financial support for this research provided by an Australian Postgraduate Award and by various grants and other support offered through the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Music, Asia Institute, and the Writing Centre for Scholars and Researchers. Thanks also to Anne McLaren for inviting the presentation of this paper as part of the panel "Cherishing Tradition: Region & Nation in the Promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China."

and the strategies for cultural maintenance that communities who are seemingly disempowered in relation to the state are able to enact in the absence of direct state control and support. My analysis of this process provides one example of the complex role of national and international ICH recognition and its associated activities in achieving the purported aims of maintaining tradition within the Chinese context.

The paper first offers a brief background to Kam people and the big song genre [the presentation also included some short video examples], and describes the major features of the utilization of big song within ICH-related discourse and activities. It then examines and analyses the effects of this utilization within Kam village traditions and Kam community activities.

### **Kam people and Kam big song**

The Kam minority group, known in Chinese as *Dongzu*, has a registered population of over 2.9 million (*2000 nian renkou* 2003: 3), most of whom live in southeastern Guizhou province and the bordering areas of adjacent Guangxi and Hunan, as shown in Figure 1. It is estimated that only 100,000 Kam people—or less than 4%<sup>2</sup>—live in the small area of Guizhou and Guangxi that is the place of origin of big song. In this area, people still speak, and sing songs in, a dialect of Kam, a tonal Tai-Kadai language quite different from Chinese, and a language that has no widely used written form.

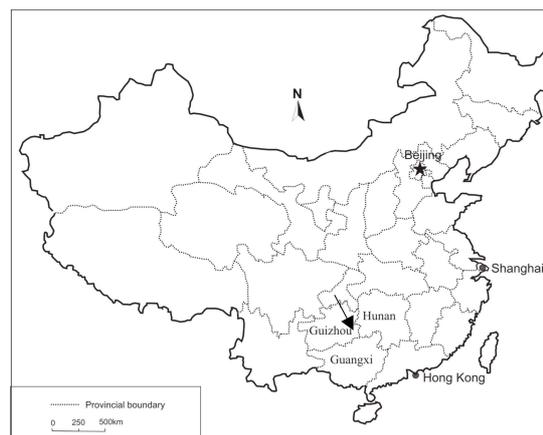


Figure 1: Map of China, showing major cities and the two provinces (Guizhou & Hunan Provinces) and one autonomous region (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region) where most Kam people reside. The approximate location of Sheeam (where fieldwork for this paper was undertaken) is marked with an arrow. Map by Wu Jiaping.

In Kam villages such as that pictured in Figure 2, where I conducted most of my research,<sup>3</sup> certain genres of Kam songs—especially big song—have been important for centuries for recording and transmitting Kam history, philosophy and aspects of social structure.

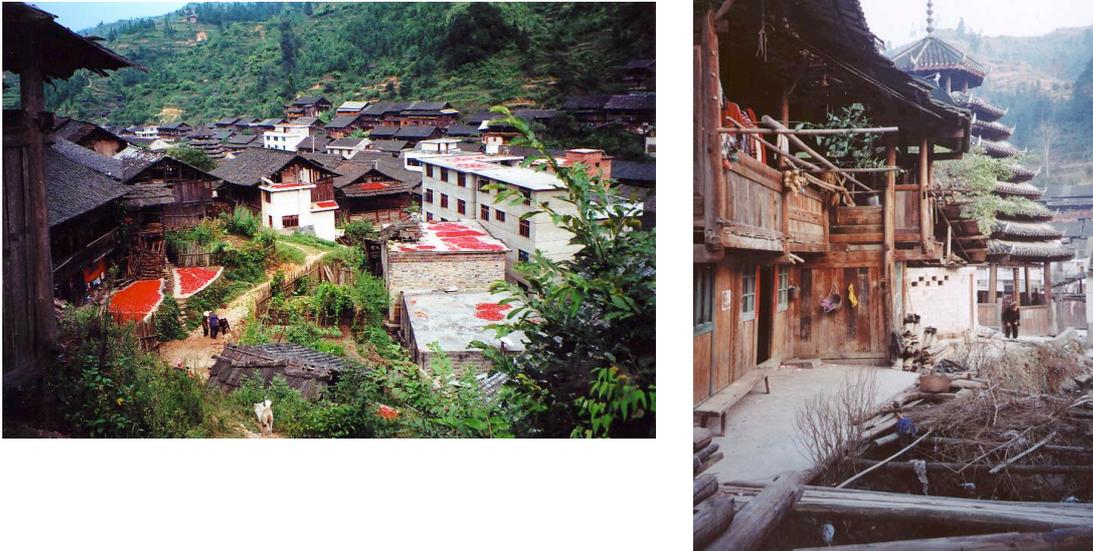


Figure 2: The largest village in Sheeam (in Chinese, Sanlong), a well-known big-song-singing region in Liping county, southeast Guizhou. The largest of the village’s pagoda-shaped *dare low* is evident in both these views, dating from 2005 and 2006. Photographs by Catherine Ingram.

The songs that comprise the big song genre are always sung by a small group of around four to ten singers, enabling the singing of the two simultaneous vocal lines that feature in all these songs. The songs range in length from two or three to fifteen or even twenty minutes, and each region has its own unique big song repertoire that includes many different categories. Within the original village context the songs are taught to singing groups by a male or female village *sang ga* or “song expert,” and are then sung in various celebrations following New Year, as shown in Figure 3. The public New Year singing usually takes the form of a song exchange between a women’s singing group and a men’s singing group and is held in the village’s huge pagoda-shaped *dare low*.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3: Left: Sheeam, 2005. Young people learning big song with *sang ga* (“song expert”) Wu Zhicheng. Right: Sheeam, 2006. Older women singing big song in the *dare low* at New Year. Photographs by Catherine Ingram.

Since the 1950s big song has also featured in staged performances, and over the last decade the number of these staged performances and the degree of Kam villagers’ involvement have increased dramatically. Many village singers have now participated in staged big song performances, including performances given in international concert halls, major Chinese cities, county centres and even within villages. These have included ten thousand people singing big song, a performance in southeast Guizhou in 2005 that I also participated in, and a series of performances in New York’s Carnegie Hall in late 2009. Big song has also increasingly featured in other contexts such as television programmes, song classes in school, and nation-wide song competitions. The focus on and promotion of big song as ICH, dating from at least 2002, is intimately related to the production of these staged performances.

[In the original presentation, this introduction to Kam people and big song was followed by a short video illustrating big song singing in the Kam village context and in staged performances. The first excerpt on the video showed the village context of big song singing at New Year in the village *dare low* in 2006. The second excerpt showed the staged performance format, with women singing big song in rehearsal for and performance of the 2005 “Ten Thousand People Singing Big Song” performance. Both excerpts were taken from fieldwork footage currently being archived with the Pacific and Regional Archive of Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC); see [www.paradisec.org.au](http://www.paradisec.org.au)]

### **The utilization of big song within ICH-related discourse and activities**

A 2009 article by Wu Dingguo outlines the process leading to the recognition of this song genre as ICH. According to Wu, the process formally began in 2002 when scholars and other participants attending the combined first Symposium on Kam Big Song and the Ninth Annual Conference on Chinese Minority Music suggested that big song would be suitable for consideration as National ICH (Wu Dingguo 2009: 37).<sup>5</sup> Clearly, local and international developments prior to 2002 had already encouraged many Chinese officials and researchers to think of big song and other minority musical genres in the context of ICH, and such conceptualization was almost certainly well known and discussed in informal situations prior to that time. Many of the papers presented at the 2002 conference, which were subsequently collated and published (in Yang and Wu 2003), link ideas relating to ICH discourse—such as “preservation” and “protection”—with government policy, obligations of various non-local bodies such as the Minority Music Research Association, and both economic and cultural “development,”<sup>6</sup> implying ICH’s association with the promotion of cultural tourism. Generally, in these and subsequent publications, such varying ideas are not considered in opposition but are described as interrelated.

Notably, these processes of so-called cultural development—within which ICH recognition is seen as an important part—involve a range of changes to the genre. Many of these recent changes, which fall outside the natural processes of change that have been accepted for centuries within Kam cultural traditions, have given rise to vast differences in performance and social context. For example, the relatively intimate village learning and performance, which builds and develops important local social ties, transmits important Kam epistemological and socio-historical concepts, and is closely connected to unique local song repertoires, differs quite obviously from the large-scale big song performances of a small pan-Kam repertoire of songs that are rehearsed en masse and directed towards an audience outside the village communities.

Another major difference in the performance and social context of the two formats is the use of *yishu jiagong*. This Chinese term translates as “artistic processing,” and has involved altering aspects of the melodies, lyrics, pitch and other basic features of some big songs. It has been utilized in the creation of a big song repertoire considered by officials as suitable for these staged performances. Another

change is the focus in both staged performances and within ICH discourse upon what Kam song experts consider to be relatively unimportant songs from the genre, but which have greater melodic variation and interest. To educated Kam listeners, the quality of a big song is determined by its *lak* or “bones”—an expression used to refer to the song lyrics. However, not only are song lyrics not emphasized within the context of ICH or such associated performances, but in these contexts there are instances when the lyrics are not even accurately translated into Chinese. In other cases, the discourse of *yuanshengtai* or “authenticity” is used in association with promotion of big song as ICH, although the so-called “big songs” that are claimed to be authentic are often composed of a medley of phrases from different songs, and thus their all-important lyrics are entirely meaningless.

Consequently, the international inscription of big song in the UNESCO Representative List of the ICH of Humanity, as was preceded and made possible by its national recognition, has been enacted through a process that has promoted a “big song genre” quite distinct from that of its village context, and the village context of this singing receives little attention or promotion.

### **The local effects of such utilization of big song**

Within Kam village traditions, the utilization of big song as has had several interesting effects within the local domain. My fieldwork in rural Kam areas revealed that the big song genre had been sustained in some rural communities. However, this had occurred not through direct result of its recognition as ICH, but rather through its being re-fashioned by Kam villagers themselves. It had also occurred despite the very real challenges to the form of the tradition represented by its use in ICH promotion and associated activities, as noted above.

One of the most important recent developments has concerned the composition of big song singing groups. Until very recently, it was expected that female singing groups that learnt big song and went to sing it in New Year celebrations in the *dare low* were composed only of unmarried women, or married women who had not yet given birth to their first child;<sup>7</sup> men were expected to adhere to a somewhat relaxed version of this prohibition, as younger fathers were also permitted to be involved. However, the 1990s onwards have seen the almost complete absence of this youth cohort from Kam villages for work or study elsewhere, thus few

villagers of the originally appropriate age for learning or performing big song are now present in village communities. Following the involvement of older Kam villagers—particularly married women—in recent staged performances of the genre, in some areas the same singers then also began singing in the village context, leading to a relaxation of the earlier prohibition. In many Kam areas it is now this group of middle-aged singers [seen in both the earlier videos] whose actions have been critical in sustaining the tradition, and who have become its main singers and thus its primary custodians. In this respect, the use of big song in staged performances and promotion as ICH has acted as a foundation for villagers to support the changes that they wish to make to the form of the tradition. Although the actions of Kam villagers themselves have evidently been of greatest importance in continuing the performance of this song genre, while the utilization of big song in staged formats and ICH discourse is not directly intended to support local actions for change it has nevertheless been of indirect benefit.

Two additional aspects of the effects of the utilization of big song within ICH-related discourse and activities also indicate the activities outside the long-standing musical practices of Kam communities have not had a central role in sustaining the tradition. Firstly, as part of the recognition of big song as ICH, some Kam villagers have been identified by the state as *chuanchengren* or “cultural transmission people.” However, to date it is unclear how Kam villagers are supported in this role, and during my fieldwork it appeared to have no effect on the maintenance of the genre within the village context.

Secondly, villagers consider their involvement in staged performances and competitions associated with the promotion of big song as ICH as quite separate from the maintenance of regional big song repertoires or big song learning and singing within the village context. They not only identify differences in the repertoires of songs used for performance in each context, but also many other differences in musical transmission, performance and aesthetics (see Ingram 2010). At the same time, there is also evidence of interaction between village and staged formats, indicating that this situation is not static. There remains the potential for aspects of big song’s wider promotion to both be absorbed into current village practice and to challenge the very form of the tradition to be transmitted to the next generation.

## Conclusion

I suggest that, at least to date, the absence of state control of and support for village big song singing has been advantageous because it has allowed Kam villagers to retain control over the village form of their own musical tradition, and to control (at least to some degree) the influence of broader recognition and promotion of big song within village activities. However, these developments are very recent and the future of big song is uncertain. Its recognition as ICH is undoubtedly having indirect influence on the maintenance of the genre by providing a foundation for villagers to make changes necessary to the continued singing of big song in the village context. However, the staged performances and the developments that I have described as associated with this recognition have a complex role. This is mainly because the form of the genre that they promote is quite different from its village form, and thus the entire basis of the genre.

The localized perspective on China's ICH presented in this paper shows one way that broader promotion of a traditional artform and its international ICH recognition is mediated within the national context, and consequently impacts upon grassroots cultural practice. It shows that while cultural maintenance might be the central theme of international aims of ICH recognition,<sup>8</sup> in this case it is not ICH recognition or state action which have been most significant in achieving big song's continued maintenance and relevance within the community in which it originates, but rather the actions of the genre's custodians themselves.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Prior to the first research in Kam areas during the 1950s there was no generic name for all the many categories of Kam songs involving the simultaneous performance of two vocal lines (that is, songs referred to in Chinese as *duoshengbu* ("multi-part") songs), and each was known by its own name. These names of these song categories are still used today. However, researchers in the 1950s identified all the categories of such songs using the Chinese name *dage* or "big song," and now this name is also accepted within Kam communities in particular contexts. It derives from and is one of several possible translations of the Kam name *ga lao*, the name of the main category of big song, and so sometimes the Kam term *ga lao* is now also used to refer to all categories of Kam part-song (see also Ingram 2007: 88; Ingram 2010; Yang Xiao 2008). Because of this confusion in naming practices, and because of the awareness and growing acceptance in Kam communities of the concept of a song genre with the

unified Chinese name *dage*, I use the English translation of this Chinese name (namely, “big song”) to discuss the genre in its current state and in both “village” and staged formats.

<sup>2</sup> Luo and Wang (2002) quote figures provided by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences giving the population in big-song-singing areas as 100,000.

<sup>3</sup> My research was primarily conducted in Sheem (in Chinese, Sanlong), a well-known big-song-singing region in Liping county, southeast Guizhou.

<sup>4</sup> *Dare low* are the impressive multi-eaved, pagoda-shaped wooden towers that are built in many Kam villages, and which have become well known as a symbol of the Kam. They are sometimes referred to in English as “drum towers.” However, Kam people state that the name *dare low* is only used to refer to these tall, wooden, pagoda-like buildings and has no other meaning; it does not translate as *gulou* (“drum tower/building”), as is usually used in Chinese and sometimes thence translated into English. To my knowledge, Kam conceptualizations of these buildings are not focussed upon the notion of them holding a drum, and the destruction of most drums (and many towers) during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) may have further reinforced such Kam conceptualizations.

<sup>5</sup> The dates given in his outline are also confirmed by Fan Zuyin (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Further details on this notion of “development” in relation to big song appear in Ingram et al. (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> The distinction surrounding childbirth was significant, because in Kam villages a married woman only lives permanently with her husband when pregnant with their first child (see Ingram et al. forthcoming; Yen Fang-tzu 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The aims of ICH have also been critiqued by many scholars: see, for example, Nas (2002), Brown (2005) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006).

## References

N.B. Names of Chinese authors are given in Chinese-language sequence (surname followed by given name).

2000 *nian renkou pucha Zhongguo minzu renkou ziliao*. 2003 [Chinese Nationalities Population Materials from the 2000 Population Census]. Edited by Guojia tongjiju renkou he shehui keji tongjisi [Department of Population Social Science and Technology Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics] and Guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui jingji fazhansi [Department of Economics and Development, National Ethnic Affairs Commission]. Beijing: Minzu chubanshe [Nationalities Press].

Brown, Michael F. 2005. “Heritage Trouble: Recent Work on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Property.” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 12: 40–61.

Fan Zuyin. 2006. *Dui baohu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan ruogan wenti de sikao* [A Reflection on Several Issues Concerning the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage]. [webpage]. The Intangible Cultural Heritage in China [*sic*], Last updated 2006 [accessed 17 December 2008]. Available from [http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/detail/jsp?info\\_id=879](http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/detail/jsp?info_id=879).

Ingram, Catherine. 2007. “‘If You Don’t Sing, Friends Will Say You are Proud’: How and Why Kam People Learn to Sing Kam Big Song.” *Context: A Journal of Music Research* 32: 85–104.

———. 2010. “*Hwun hwun jon ka* (Listen): Kam Villagers Singing Big Song in Early Twenty-First-Century China.” Unpublished PhD thesis, Music/Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

- Ingram, Catherine, with Wu Jialing, Wu Meifang, Wu Meixiang, Wu Pinxian, and Wu Xuegui. forthcoming. "Taking the Stage: Rural Kam Women and Contemporary Kam 'Cultural Development'." In *Women, Gender and Development in Rural China*, edited by T. Jacka and S. Sargeson, Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2006. "World Heritage and Cultural Economics." In *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, edited by I. Karp, 161–202. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Luo Xiaoyan and Wang Xiaomei. 2002. "Guniang xiaohuozi waichu dagong, Minzu geshou yanzhong duanceng, Dongzu dage chuancheng jixu" [Young People Go to Other Areas to Work, the Traditional Methods of Song Transmission are Broken, the Transmission of Kam Big Song Must Urgently be Addressed] [e-article]. *Renmin wang* [People's Net], Last updated 22 October 2002 [accessed 25 March 2004]. Available from: [http://unn.people.com.cn/GB/channel1265/267/807/200210/22/22215\\_8.html](http://unn.people.com.cn/GB/channel1265/267/807/200210/22/22215_8.html).
- Nas, Peter J. M. 2002. "Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Culture: Reflections on the UNESCO World Heritage List" [forum comprising article, comments & reply]. *Current Anthropology* 43(1): 139–48.
- Wu Dingguo. 2009. "Dongzu dage shenyi zhi yanjiu: Dongzu dage shenbao shijie renlei feiwuzhi wenhua yichan de licheng" [Research into the Application for Kam Big Song as Heritage: The Course of Applying for Kam Big Song as World Humanity Intangible Cultural Heritage]. *Guizhou minzu xueyuan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of Guizhou Nationalities Institute (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)] 2: 37–40.
- Yang Xiao. 2008. "Nandong 'ga lao' ming shikao: jianlun Dongzu dage yici de duozhong neihan" [Research into the Definition of the Southern Kam "Ga Lao": Concurrent Investigation into the Multiple Emphases of Kam Big Song]. *Zhongguo yinyuexue* [Musicology in China] (2): 10–19.
- Yang Xiuzhao, and Wu Dingguo, eds. 2003. *Dongzu dage yu shaoshu minzu yinyue yanjiu: Dongzu dage yantao huiji Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yinyue xuehui di jiujie nianhui lunwenji* [Kam Big Song and Research Into Minority Music: Collected Works from a Symposium on Kam Big Song and the Ninth Annual Conference on Chinese Minority Music]. Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe [China Literary Press].
- Yen Fang-tzu. 2007. "The Impact of Gender and Hierarchy on Women's Reproductive Health in a Kam Village, Guizhou Province, China." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9 (1): 55–68.