

Chinese Community Choirs in Melbourne, Australia: the intangible heritage of cultural migration in a western society.

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In Melbourne there are many Chinese community choirs that are composed of mainly older people who have migrated to Australia, often many years before. These choirs frequently practise popular traditional Chinese songs, and are similar in many respects to choirs of older people in China. However, there are important differences related to the cross-cultural environment within which the Australian Chinese choirs exist. These differences include the type of performance context, the type of accompaniment that is typically used, the strong desire to perform “Australian” songs. The choirs have extra-musical functions for their membership, including the enacting of their cultural heritage, remembering their homeland, doing physical exercise and enriching their social life. The performances of the Australian Chinese choirs are also acts of integration into a multi-cultural context as they perform in community events that are inclusive to people of all origins. This paper demonstrates an Australian Chinese and a European Australian experience of performing with Chinese community choirs in Melbourne, which will lead to an extensive research on the topic in the future by offering a detailed comparison between the Chinese choirs in China and Australia respectively. This comparison will indicate how the transplanted culture of the diaspora is shaped by local circumstances.

This research is intending to complete a comparative study of community choirs comprised of older Chinese in China itself, and in Australia amongst the diaspora communities that the authors are presently undertaking. While the research is still in progress, the authors are able to make some preliminary predictions and descriptions of their engagements with community choirs so far, in the context of the recent and also longer-term history of the Chinese diaspora in Australia. The authors have created the research program from their work within the Australian context, and also as a response to what they have seen occurring within China, especially in common outdoor recreational settings in the public parks by community choirs within major cities, for example in the Temple of Heaven, Beijing. The term “cultural communities” is employed in this paper because it describes both a group of people and an approach to artistic production that specifically requires the involvement of non-professional “community” participants in performance. There is not an emphasis on the “authenticity” of the cultural product, and the repertoires, and forms of performance have not been subjected to any “test for authenticity” in the sense of ethno-musicological enquiry. It is assumed that these communities are “authentic” by virtue of the fact that they present themselves as such. This approach was until the end of 2004 in Australia, termed “Community Cultural Development” or CCD, by the peak Australian Arts Funding Body, the Australia Council, or OZCO. The approach of CCD explicitly articulates the notion of cultural/artistic production as a means for effecting social renewal or cohesion through cultural expression within particular communities.

The research program is oriented towards the area of performance research – the choir that the authors are engaged with is developing repertoire gathered from the experience and knowledge of the choir members, particularly material that is recalled songs from their previous lives in their homeland. An important aspect of the

research will be to attempt to determine the integrity of the cultural enactments, as intangible cultural heritage. This integrity will apply to repertoire, but in our experience, repertoire is only a part of the integrity that encompasses the whole enactment in all its aspects. Thus a particular song, popular with the choir members, may be a very common Chinese song, such as *Mo Li Hua*, or even an Australian nationalistic song, such as “I Still Call Australia Home” can be a heritage enactment, if performed in particular ways, in the sense articulated in the UNESCO convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, in particular, if the enactment or artefact fulfils the following criteria:

- is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history;
- provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity;

The comparative study of choirs in China and Australia will provide a kind of a test of cultural heritage amongst the diaspora communities. The ease of travel and transmission of information, makes knowledge of the contemporary choral, even recreational and community choral, scene in major Chinese cities easily accessible to Chinese living in Australia. The desire to perform and sing in a group is also a well-known and popular contemporary trend in China, (particularly senior Chinese regard to sing in the morning at the park is a type of physical exercise.

This contemporary choral scene may be contrasted with an observed performance mode among some members of the choir of our experience. One older male member recalled his days singing in Shanghai as a young man over fifty years previously. The recalling and enactment of his style of performance, as he recalls and reconstructs its characteristics, is surely an example of intangible heritage according to the UNESCO criteria. The extent to which these recalled performances occur within China is an aspect of our investigation. However, previous research with other diaspora communities have unearthed a kind of preserved cultural enactment that has disappeared from the originating country.

Diaspora musics – doubly intangible

The research project of Roland Bannister and others has shown that there is an imperative for newly-immigrant cultural groups to seek solace and identity within their existing culture (Bannister, 2003). This imperative has been shown to be particularly strong amongst older immigrants, and that with each succeeding generation, the maintenance of cultures of origin diminishes (Bannister, p207). The result of this imperative has been the preservation of an otherwise vanished cultural heritage:

The tale of Nonno Tony’s songs is a tale of the oral/aural process in action. It is a tale of communal music making and of a commitment to the remembering and documenting of precious musical artefacts which connect their owners to events, people, places, and experiences in earlier parts of long lives (Bannister p209).

In Bannister’s study, it was possible to compare the origin and “authenticity” of actual repertoires from Italy in the pre-World War II period. The recalled repertoire was later included in an important collection of early songs from the region of origin in Italy of the Griffith residents.

In our research project, we intend to meet and observe the growing community singing and choral movement in China, particularly the outdoor choirs of older Chinese, as well as organisers of major singing competitions popular in China. This experience will assist in the further development of community choirs in Melbourne, both Chinese and non-Chinese, particularly through collection of repertoire, and through the establishment of links for possible touring parties, and an increased understanding of why this movement is growing in popularity, particularly amongst more senior members of the community. The reception of this influx from the homeland will help to identify those aspects and the forms of their enactment that remain important for the cohesiveness of the community.

Another aspect of our research is to highlight the integrity and importance of minority cultural presence, as cultural heritage within the broader cultural environment of a “new” country. The cultural identities of expatriate communities are often presented in a kind of temporary and superficial light, even as a parody of national cultural characteristics (for example, Australians of Anglo-Celtic origin are painfully aware of the image of the “Aussie ocker” celebrated by certain groups of Australians travelling overseas). Our investigation of something longer-term (which is more the sense of diaspora, rather than expatriate community) creates a new area for research into cultural identity within “foreign” countries, and a particularly striking juxtaposition that occurs as the minority, immigrant cultural identity is contrasted with mainstream cultural enactments and appearances.

Two meanings for integration concerning a cultural group.

The term “integration” is often applied in analysis of multi-media or multi-modal performances and enactments. Integrated performance has been celebrated in numerous analyses of non-western cultural traditions (For example, I Wayan Dibia, 1992 and 2006), and more recently has become an object of intense interest amongst musicologists (for example, Cook 1998 and Damsholt 1992).

A second meaning for the term is also applicable in the case of the community choirs in Melbourne – this term has been presented as an alternative to “multi-culturalism” and has suffered recently as both a pejorative term but also as a rallying call for social conservatives keen to promote a more singular Australian cultural identity.

The “second” sense of integration has assumed that varied cultural identities of immigrant minorities become incorporated into the dominant cultural identity of the adopted country. Previously, this incorporation was held to mean obliteration for the immigrant culture, as defined entities in their own right. However, as Wang Zheng Ting points out, more recently integration in the sense of incorporation has been a more positive development, especially as the “dominant cultural identity” has come to consciously seek out and celebrate cultural enactments and fusions from in Australia, with the glaring exception of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, is an entirely immigrant culture. Reviewing the history of Chinese in Australia, during the Gold-rush days, Chinese people in Australia was ill treated, and discrimination against Chinese was severe. Under this environment, the Chinese isolated their cultural activities within their own communities. Cultural integration with the mainstream society was polarised.

Interestingly, the two meanings become overlaid in cases where community cultural development is the justification for mainstream support for cultural enactments by distinct cultural groups within the dominant culture. It is precisely in those cultures whose brief for cultural enactment extends beyond as sense of “art” or

“performance”, into vital and literally-held assumptions for the functioning of the society itself, that we experience the most complete multi-modal “integration”, where it is not only a nonsense to distinguish *artistic* modalities, but also a nonsense to conceive of the enactment/performance as somehow “art” that can be considered as distinct from the vital functioning of the society itself.

As the former doctrine of Community Cultural Development intended it, cultural enactments will approach those forms of vitality and necessity for the health and well-being of communities, which is also an important part of the UNESCO resolutions regarding intangible cultural heritage.

In the specific examples of choirs at the Moon Lantern and Kite Festivals, each work that is created with a particular cultural community is an integrated cultural expression that is presented and received from the communities themselves. They are also directed towards the production of an “integrated cultural event”, that is, a festival featuring music, dance and multi-media elements in various degrees. In an enlightened political climate, “Subcultural musicians keep one eye on their in-group audience and the other on the superculture, looking out for useful codes and successful strategies, while a third, inner eye seeks personal aesthetic satisfaction” (Slobin, p89).

Taking the second sense of integration, that is, the incorporation of the expression of a cultural community by a dominant culture, the forms of cultural expression from the different communities are “integrated” into a the dominant cultural form, in the cases mentioned, however not obliterated. The integration takes the shape of a legitimisation of the enactment of different musics, dance and other expressions that are otherwise “hidden” from broader society and artistic enactments within a tradition and enacted largely internally. The festivals, and other similar events, broadcast certain cultural expressions as valid cultural acts for the entire “broader” community. This validation, integration and legitimisation are mediated as a process of cultural production by the contracted professional artists, and the artistic imprimatur of the official government funding bodies, such as OZCO.

We hold a similar sense to Bannister of the possibility that important cultural heritage may emerge in our encounters with the choir communities and other performers involved in the community festival enactments. This emergent cultural heritage can have a musicological form as well as the heritage of cultural cohesiveness (and its distinctive indicators in so many modalities). We find it important that these communities can experience a strong sense of validation from a broader cultural context that is receptive to distinctive cultural identities. In this way, material may be recalled and enacted with full institutional cultural support, instead of languishing in largely hidden “ethnic community”. The preservation of significant intangible cultural heritage relies on the larger, less-specific and dominant culture allowing its voice.

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