

Analysis on the Context of Four Pieces of “Affectionate Ballads” in Wuhua District, Kunming City

Zhao Ying-na

Yunnan Art University Wenhua College, Kunming 650000, China

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Abstract: Kunming is the political, economic and cultural center of Yunnan Province. With the integration of customs and cultures of different ethnic groups in this urban area, the local folk music system has developed its distinctive musical context in terms of musical patterns, emotions or notions. In this paper, four pieces of “affectionate ballads” in Wuhua District, Kunming are taken as the example to explore the musical context that is unique in Kunming ballads. By analyzing the musical context, the paper attempts to interpret the musical functions and values contained in these “affectionate ballads” of Kunming’s folk music system.

1. Introduction

Kunming is a multiethnic city. 26 ethnic groups have dwelled in the city for generations, among which Han, Yi, Hui, Bai, Miao, Hani, Zhuang, Dai and Lisu groups form their ethnic villages, or different groups live together in a villages or street. During the long period of production and living activities, they are mingling with each other while their own traditions, living styles, customs and cultural arts are still conserved. In Kunming, there are many genres of literature and arts, such as Dian drama, Huadeng opera, folk ballads and minority dramas, folk narrative poems and legends. After centuries of development, these literature and arts have become very popular in the public.

In Kunming, either Han people or minorities have always called the singing of folk songs “*Chang Diao Zi*” or “*Dui Diao Zi*”, and the meeting of singers “*Diao Zi Hui*”. A ballad is spread usually via the lips of singers who make enrichments to it and form the local “singing styles”. Singing styles are diverse. When classifying them by places of singing, they include “*Dong Men Qiang*”, “*Xi Men Qiang*” and “*Gun Gun Qiang*”. When by structure or theme of tune, they include “*Duo Duo Qiang*”, “*Kao Shan Diao*” and “*Si Ping Diao*”. When by singing techniques, they include “*Hai Cao Qiang*”, “*Bao Gu Qiang*” and “*Bai Cai Qiang*”.

The formation of all “tunes” and “tones” is closely related to the life of local people. “One piece of Kunming ballad can be performed in different styles due to disparity of geographical environment, pronunciation and intonation.”¹ “This singing style is preferred by people in Xiaocaiyuan village, but another style is preferred in Zhuantang village.”² This is the special musical context of Kunming ballad. In feudal times, the arranged marriage system was implemented. Young single men and women had no freedom in participating in social activities, not to mention the freedom in dating. So in rural areas, they sung ballads to express their feelings and yearning for freedom to love. Singing ballads was also a way for them to protest against the

arranged marriage. Under this historical and cultural background, the singing of “affectionate ballads” started to prevail and was more widely used in marriage-related customs like “blind date” and “match-making”. Its social functions and values were given into full play from this point. Furthermore, the affectionate ballads sung by Han people in the urban area of Kunming show a musical context totally different from that in the area of minority groups.

2. Contextual Analysis on the “Affectionate Ballad” from Musical Form

Among folk ballads, the affectionate ballads portray vividly the social activities of young single men and women and are sung in various forms, such as antiphonal, solo or chorus. The four pieces of affectionate ballads sung by Han people living in Wuhua District, Kunming adopt the solo form.

2.1 Verse Structure of “Affectionate Ballads”

From the perspective of verse structure, a piece of affectionate ballad is mostly presented with four verse lines, seven words in each line. The first line usually uses the metaphor and elation tactics to describe one of the singer’s moods. It does not have close connection with the contents of the next following lines.

*Gardenia flowers are white,
But yesterday I could not find,
Today it comes to my sight,
So I’m singing with great delight.*

This ballad adopts the most typical four-line seven-word structure. In some cases, a padding word is added at the tail of the sentence to make it a seven-word structure. However, ballads that expand the four-line structure by repeating the previous sentence are more common. For example:

*Looking into the water yah, (washing my face with it yah)
Then turning my face to that east door yah,
There standing that my loved girl,
In my arm, in my heart (dear),
But I wake up, why
There is (no) my loved girl,
Tears brim in my eyes,
Keep flowing into (that) tea (that) cup yah.*

The four lines constitute the basic structure of one piece of ballad. Based on this structure, some verbal padding words for emphasizing a certain adjective word or adverbial modifier, or some reduplicated words may be added. For example: “thousands of, hundreds of and tens of”³.

2.2 Theme of “Affectionate Ballads”

There is no doubt that “affection” is the main theme of affectionate ballads, and love is more skillfully described from different views of life.

For example, *Watching the Huashu Bay from the Other Side of the River* and *Looking at the Rosy Face of My Loved Girl* are two pieces of ballads that describe the “feeling of missing someone” from sceneries; *A Pair of Shoes Accompanying Me* and *You Are A Honeybee Coming from Afar* express the feeling of adoration in a humorous and witty way; *Missing My Sweet Boy While Eating Olives*, *Kunming Bajie Ditty* and *Seeing Off My Boy* are quite frank about passionate love; *Match-making Ditty* and *Mi Ao Cai Ditty* are sung during the marriage rituals.

The four pieces of affectionate ballads in Wuhua District, Kunming do not have their names. They are only noted as Kunming Ballads – Affectionate Ballads. In view of the contents to be sung,

they all express the feeling of missing someone. And Kunming vernacular language is quite distinctive in the creation of lyrics.

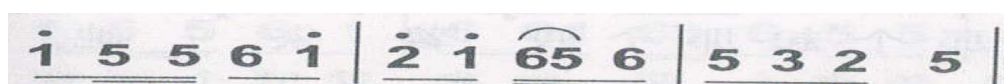
2.3 Melody and Rhythm of “Affectionate Ballads”

Ballads sung by different ethnic groups have different rhythms. The ballads in Kunming are more typical in rhythm. Firstly, the pentatonic (five-tone) scale is used and unfolds around the tone “Zheng”. In this mode, less strayed tones are involved and the tune is quite smooth.

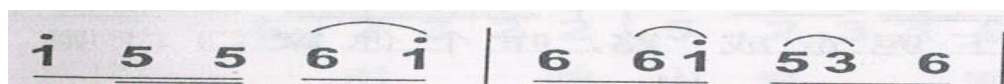
The four pieces of affectionate ballads are sung by Han people in Wuhua District. All of them have the same melody in the first bar⁴:



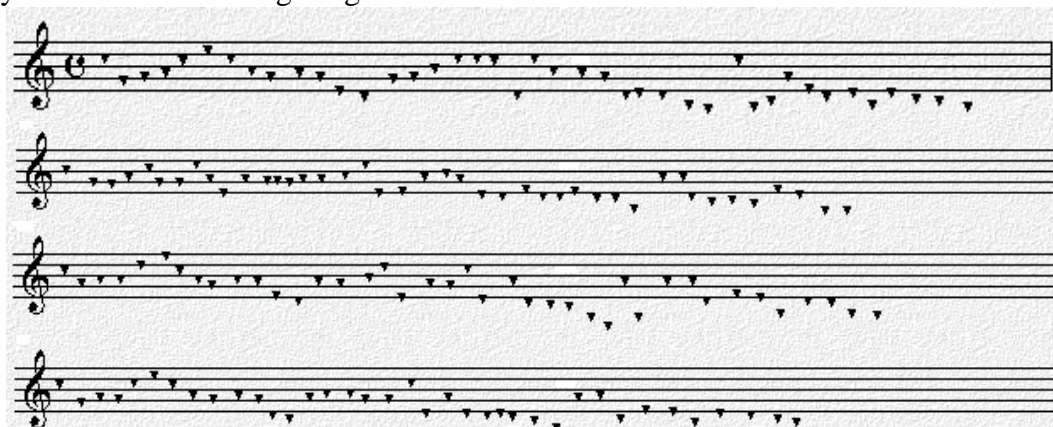
1=A is used to set the tone, and some phrases are similar, which should be a very indigenous melody mode.



Or:



From the point of rhythm, although the melody is similar, the change of rhythm makes this ballad very different while being sung:



The four figures above show the melody of the first phrase of the four pieces of affectionate ballads, respectively. Similarity in the melodic contours can be seen clearly, but the rhythms of phrases are totally different and change variously. Each ballad has its own characteristics and rules in the alternation between 2/4 beat and 3/4 beat.

3. Contextual Analysis on the “Affectionate Ballad” from Musical Emotion

Behind the special musical context of affectionate ballads are musical moods and emotions that singers are sharing with others. This context is established on the “unity in diversity of cultural inheritance”⁵.

3.1 SINGER’S Musical Moods and Emotions

For a singer singing the affectionate ballad, music is a way of expressing feelings and exchanging ideas as well. Since the affectionate ballads are evolving with the time, there has not

been so many chorus or antiphonal singing as before. This change can be attributed to the change of musical emotions of the singer.

During the economic development of Kunming, such places as Zhuantang, Xiaoximen, Xishan and Cuihu, which used to be venues of “*Diao Zi Hui*”, have gradually been occupied by business districts. The loss of these places results in the evolution of some ballads from being sung in chorus and antiphonal styles to solo style. The expression of feelings and emotions of the singer is more or less influenced by lack of the targeted listener. Some humorous and mutually-pleasing ballads that were previously sung in antiphonal style turn to be sung in solo style. In this case, the feeling of missing and caring for someone is what the singer wants to express more. And in the course of evolution of these chorus and antiphonal ballads, the melody does not change significantly but the lyrics change significantly, since the singer may improvise the lyrics based on the change of his/her moods and emotions. Perhaps this is the reason why the four pieces of affectionate ballads mentioned above are similar in melody.

3.2 Musical Moods and Emotions of the Listener

Of course, the change of musical moods and emotions of the listener can affect the emotional expression of the singer.

Let's begin with the types of the listener at first. There are two types of the listener during the singing of affectionate ballads. The first type of listener is a real person who hears the chorus or antiphonal ballad. The second type is imagined by the singer, or in other words, the singing may not be heard by the listener.

As to the first type of listener who is a real person, the singer participating in the antiphonal and chorus performance is also the listener, and the context of musical emotions is rendered by both the singer and listener. As the singing proceeds, the simultaneous participation in the singing and listening is fading away. Consequently, the influence on the musical context of singing from the change of moods and emotions of the listener is decreasing and accompanied by the appearance of the second type of listener whose moods and emotions also have influence on the musical context. In this case, some melodies that are popular or catchy will be sung more frequently. Perhaps this is the reason why the four pieces of affectionate ballads begin with the same rhythm, beat and melody in their first bars.

In addition, the change of moods and emotions of the second type of listener is more reflected by the performance of the singer who tends to mumble to himself/herself for expressing the feeling of missing and caring for someone. This influence on the musical context is subtle and silent, and life details are more concerned in the singing. For example, “I have cooked the eggs with a handful of sugar, but you don't show up”⁶; “Alone me waiting for my girl, with light up through the midnight”⁶. When some padding words are added in particular, the bitterness that the singer suffers while waiting is revealed extremely:

I am watching, and waiting someone,

Why my love she doesn't come,

I should have cooked that chicken with sugar, that egg, that firewood, for her.

From this melody, the changes of emotions of the listener and musical context of the singer can be felt via the repeatedly emphasized padding words, such as “that my central room”, “light that fire with oil, that lamp”⁶, etc.

4. Contextual Analysis on the “Affectionate Ballad” from Musical Notion

The process of urbanization is causing great changes to the folk music in an unprecedented way, and the evolution of musical form and context of ballads in Kunming is just a proof. Viewing from

the notions of “politics, techniques, aesthetics and culture”⁶, the conventional context of ballads is exerting a silent influence on their inheritance.

4.1 Notion of Urbanization

The process of Kunming’s urbanization is changing with each passing day. Places like Xiaozimen, Zhuantang, Xishan and Dianchi, where the meeting of ballad singers used to be held, have been completely urbanized so far and only Cuihu and Zhuantang parks in Wuhua District are left for singing the ballads, making it rare and difficult to hear the singing of “affectionate ballads” at these places today.

Under the influence of urbanization, the affectionate ballads have had remarked changes in the melody. Compared to those ballads in the minority region, Kunming ballads show a smooth trend of melody and the octave is the highest interval relationship. Moreover, the contents of lyrics are almost expressed by Kunming dialects. In the minority region, the affectionate ballads are often sung in a “bold and forceful manner”. In Kunming, privacy is more focused and the grace note and sliding note are not common during singing, which is closely related to the fast pace of urban life and implicit expression of personal feelings.

The accelerated process of urbanization has given rise to the musical notion in this context of urbanization. Now in Kunming, it is not as common as before to see the creation of lyrics in which a kind of feeling is expressed by referring to something. What replaces is frank description of emotional sustenance. At this point, there is a close connection between the smoothness of melody and the frankness of lyrics.

4.2 Notion of Aesthetics

In terms of the aesthetic context, the affectionate ballads in Kunming have made a transition from confiding the feeling of affection to purely singing, and thus the angle of musical aesthetics is converted “from the consciousness of social culture (collective) to the consciousness of individual (ego)”. Due to this conversion, the consciousness of individual is highlighted during singing and the ballads in the aesthetic context are sung from the perspective of egoism. Using the metaphor tactic is infrequent. “I cooked the eggs but you didn’t show up”; “I lit the lamp on at midnight and wiped my tears away”. Under this notion of aesthetics, the role of listener is weakened and the role of singer who pours out his/her emotions and feelings is strengthened, which caters more to the public taste. Nowadays those affectionate ballads sung at Cuihu Park and Zhuantang Park are just for listening, and their social functions of sharing and communication for young men and women at old times are gradually weakening and even have vanished.

So, the smooth trend or the similarity of melodies becomes fairly understandable. As the lyrics contain some improvised parts, the change of beat and rhythm is always associated with the tone of voice. One of the distinctive features is that when describing one thing, the singer raises a question with 2/4 beat at the beginning but changes the tone with repeated lyrics or padding words at the end of the verse or melody. In this way the aesthetic context of the ballad is presented.

By comprehensive analysis of musical forms of the four pieces of affectionate ballads, the conventional musical context will vary accordingly with the change of musical moods and emotions of the singer and listener. Folk music, especially the folk ballads, always evolves with the development of the regional characteristics, politics and economy. In the course of city urbanization, Kunming ballads keep developing and updating, so does the aesthetic context.

Discussions about folk music should be dynamic. The folk ballads, carrying a culture of music, should be interpreted from the up-to-date musical context to explore the difference in their meanings and values.

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