

Lecture for The University of Chicago Center in Beijing
“Workshop on Cosmopolitanism, Popular Song, and Asian Musical Responses to the Cold War”

Propaganda Folk or Propaganda Kitsch: Listening Again to Traditions.

I.

Our generation was born in the era of propaganda arts, so when i was little, what i heard or see, most of the music I heard could be called ‘propaganda music’.

But early political propaganda music was full of folk music traditions. because it inherited a rich body of traditional music knowledge. Music composers like Xie Xinghai, Ma Ke, Liu Zhi and so on, did a lot of music field work to study and collect folk music.

In addition to propaganda music, I remember as a child hearing a lot of traditional xiqu - which is Chinese local operas, or story telling music. Their melodies and singing styles formed the music atmosphere of China in the late fifties and early sixties. Except for songs from western opera, most of the songs we heard during that period were sung in folk style, and every folk singer sang in a different way.

When these traditional artists performed, they were able to display their life experience in their performances, Each singer had an individual singing style and a unique view of vocal aesthetics. They performed their uniqueness in their voice.

At that time, whether from traditional songs or propaganda music, we could still hear many old sounds.

From these singing masters’ voice, we can hear their different life stories and their body energy, We find in their way of singing the trace of their life experiences, No matter what they do, their voices are purely wonderful and colorful. They make me think of Aretha Franklin, Etta James, Janis Joplin..

I remember my mother playing this music to me. but today, when i listen to them again, I feel they are still fresh and contemporary, as if they could travel across time. in the 80’s, when i went to do music field work, I immediately recognized the vitality that rural folk singers

and traditional singing masters have in common. Later, when I had a chance to travel, the more music I heard, the more I valued those old sounds I heard when I was a kid.

II.

But such voices gradually disappeared after the Cultural Revolution. Probably during the Cultural Revolution, though I do not know exactly when, a new style emerged called 'scientific vocalization'. It is a combination of Western opera vocal technique and Chinese folk style, a combination that smoothed out the individuality of folk singing, at the same time as it erased the purity of the operatic vocal aesthetic. It produced a kind of beautiful kitsch, gradually, spreading everywhere in Chinese music, but especially in the propaganda songs.

These kinds of sound are not always cheap or sloppy productions, in fact, they are usually the production of academically trained composers and vocalists. The scientific vocalizations made all singers have a unified aesthetic standard, eliminating the distinction between their personalities. They emitted a beautiful but standardized sound, and one singer was more or less like the others. The impact of this kind of sound could be felt throughout the country. There I am not going to play the examples, but just give an argument for discussion.

The songs for scientific vocalization were technically very well produced, a mix of traditional and Western sources, designed to meet both academic and political needs. Both composers and performers, obviously trying to show off some kind of professional training, in order to establish a clear boundary between themselves and farmers or street musicians. More and more, we hear excellent kitsch music with folk style, but this music does not come from the folk tradition. Rather, the opposite but is true: such music is trying to influence and change folk tradition, and it has already succeeded. For example, when I went to Henan recently to do music field work, I heard the local performers singing Henan Bangzi. The bigger the stars they were, the more fake their vocal style was. Many of those prize-winning Henan Bangzi stars used the scientific vocal technique to sing Henan Bangzi! You don't hear any trace of tradition in their voice; or any relation to Cui Lantian, or Chang Xiangyu in their singing. Rather, they sounded like they have attended some kind of conservatory system and have been specially trained to sing propaganda songs. And they poured this false voice into the ancient music theaters.

III.

We often use the word ‘propaganda’, to describe an art work created to serve a political or religious or commercial purpose. Very often , we simply depreciate propaganda art. But in fact, many examples of great propaganda art exist, such as what we find in Bach, or African-American gospel. Not all propaganda art is kitsch, on the other hand, not all traditional art is real, because of the kitsch invasion.

Especially today, when so many musical genres co-exist, we need to be more careful with our ear training, if we want to distinguish between original, traditional or kitsch. We can think of kitsch not just as art that lacks originality, but more accurately as art that plays it safe. Kitsch dose not challenge or provoke; it just tries to make us accept and agree. And there is propaganda kitsch where a beautiful but standardized style of singing is used to manufacture consent. *

Such a large number of kitsch work have been produced in China, that it has made Chinese folk music and original creative music even more rare and attractive.

Chinese traditional music is like all the other traditions in the world, full of personality, colorfulness, and rich aesthetics. This traditional aesthetics is the topic that today’s composers, singers, and producers always return to. The social situation in China is very complicated, and research in music aesthetics cannot be any less complicated.

To conclude, let me play one of my early composition [a chicken at the country fair]. because this piece was inspired by many Chinese folk music styles, and also by many singing masters , such as ms. Wang Kun, Xiao Caiwu and so on. This live performance recording is from my new album [Celebration of Darkness & Light], performed by the [Liu Sola & Friends] ensemble, I am using this piece to pay tribute to our old masters.

