

## China's Multicultural Population: Insights from Minority Nationalities and their Music

With my bags full of pens and pads of paper, video camera and recorder, and research notes on China's minority nationalities, I arrived at the Beijing International Airport, where I was met by my hosts from the Ministry of Culture, the Central Nationalities Institute and a couple of friends made during my visit of 1983.

At my temporary quarters at Beijing Central Nationalities Institute (Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan) there were ten days of introductions, briefings, video training sessions with my three newly assigned assistants, and last minute plans to be made for living, travelling and carrying out my research in the remote regions of South China's Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. Then, with my crew of three (only one of whom spoke fluent English), I waded through a sea of humanity at Beijing railway station to board the train compartment which was to be my home for the next thirty-four hours. This first leg of my trip was the beginning of the more than 7,000 miles we were to cover over the next three months. We eventually arrived in Ruyuan and Liannan counties of Guangdong province, one of the homelands of the Yao ethnic groups who were the primary focus of my research in China. By mini-van and sometimes by foot, we battled over mountain ridges and slopes to several Yao regions located in Ruyuan and Liannan counties. We resided at various times in villages with musical sounding names like Bibei, Youxi, Dongtian, Dongping, Daping, San Pai, Nan-Gang, Jiou Zhai, and Bai Mang. According to county officials and Yao villagers, I was the first American ever to reside in and/or visit a number of these villages.

Two large communities in Guangdong were

used as headquarters and planning locations: Rucheng in Ruyuan and San Jiang in Liannan. After about six weeks in the upper slopes of the valleys and the mountain masses of Guangdong province, we journeyed to Guangxi province where we continued our research while residing in Guangzhou, Liuzhou, Nanning, and by making daily excursions to several small rural communities outside these cities. Travel throughout both provinces was mostly up and down movement among and around some of the most breathtakingly beautiful, rugged, and mountainous terrain I had ever seen. We experienced some of the rarest moments of our lives, many of which can only be felt, never



Turshan Yao from Jinxiu village (Guangxi) singing folk-song.

*The author, Professor James A. Standifer, is Professor of Music (Music Education Department) at the University of Michigan and Director of the Eva Jessye Afro-American Music Collection at the University's School of Music. The article is the result of his work (1983-85) in his continuing study of China's multinational family's music culture.*

described. We also saw places that appeared as desolate as a moonscape; some that make the famous steep-sided hills and Karstic landscapes surrounding Guilin seem ordinary; and others that surely rival places people have seen and called 'Shangri La'. We were also to find that the Chinese saying that 'in Guangdong and Guangxi, behind every mountain and hill, there is a Yao or Yao village' is true.

My mission in these wooded valleys was to determine what the folk-songs and -dances of the Yao minority nationality were really like as practised in the natural habitat; how this habitat influenced the folk-songs and -dances; and how these musics and associated activities reflect and assume a principal role in the life of the Yao nationality. I also wanted to learn how these and other minority nationalities were treated by their central and local governments, and how they were responding to their government's efforts to acknowledge and preserve minority nationality arts contributions to Chinese culture.

I discovered these things and many more. I found a country with satisfactions and dissatisfactions among the nationalities. My information that China is a country with many nationalities was confirmed. The Han population is indeed the most numerous, but there are 56 other ethnic groups currently given official recognition. I also found that provincial Chinese youths were as suspicious of their central government and its motives as American youths are of their government and its motives. Most interestingly, I found that the music traditions of the nationalities are unparalleled in richness, variety, and beauty. Many of these traditions still exist in their original forms. I found how one minority nationality—a sub-group of the Yao people—has successfully managed to elude many of the 'culturally diminishing' forces of China's modernisation process, and thus has retained many unique musical customs that are an integral and highly important part of their lives.

Once branded as 'barbarians of the four directions' surrounding China, the minority nationalities were of little interest to the Han majority who regarded them with disdain while flaunting their own presumed superiority. This type of Han chauvinism is now forbidden, and the 67 million minority nationalities—of the country's population of one billion—are coming out from under the Han shadow and domination, but not without problems to be sure.

Although they make up only 6.7% of China's population, the minority nationalities occupy more than half of the country's territory. Further-



Two Pan Yao after singing a 'dialogue' folksong (in Jinxiu village).

more, not only do most of them inhabit 90% of the land which borders China's frequently hostile neighbours; these border regions are also very rich in precious oil and other mineral deposits. It is little wonder that successive Chinese governments have used highly creative means to promote and win over the allegiance of the minority nationalities.

Until recently, most outside observers viewed China as a nation with a homogeneous culture and a common racial stock. The Chinese themselves have done little to dispel this impression. In the past, minority nationalities were simply not mentioned, or great emphasis was put on the common origins of the peoples of China.

In China from 1911 to 1949, the Nationalist Chinese government aimed to assimilate the minorities into a single Chinese nation. The ethnic differences were recognised but severely minimised, while the government vigorously pursued policies of blending the minority nationalities into the mainstream of Han society. The Nationalists made it abundantly clear that China's ethnic groups should recognise that the dominant population, the Han, was superior and, in order to progress, the minorities must adopt Han culture, customs, and language. In short, the government's

aim was systematically to force China's ethnic groups to become part of the majority Chinese nationality. It was not interested in helping, or even permitting, them to cultivate a sense of ethnic identity and loyalty of their own.

The Nationalist Chinese Government saw education as an effective weapon for reducing cultural differences and bringing about its goal of a single cultural and political nation. It was common to see national policies which required, among other things, ethnic place names to be replaced by Chinese names, adoption of Chinese surnames, the use of Mandarin, the wearing of Chinese dress, and the practice of intermarriage. The authentic music and dance customs of the minority nationalities often ran counter to the assimilationists' policies, so they were discouraged.

Some of this may sound a bit familiar, as past and current policies toward minority nationalities in China are strikingly similar to the old American 'melting pot' theory—the one that calls for the many ethnic groups in the U.S. to be 'moulded' or acculturated into a common group which has similar customs, values, and language patterns. Under this schemata, language—in our case, English, and in China, Mandarin—was the pot in which much of the 'melting' would take place. In both of

these theories cultural diversity was seen by many to be a source of division and conflict rather than a source of past, present, and future richness, creativity, and strength.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, as a result of the 'melting pot' theory of both America and China resulting pressures toward conformity led to the suppression of many native and ethnic contributions, perspectives, and cultural traditions. China is just beginning to follow America's example of trying to salvage and preserve the rich cultural treasures lost in that process.

Another interesting parallel between the past policies of China and America toward ethnic minorities is that both societies continue to use formal and informal education to implement and promote the various governments' policies toward ethnic minorities and to increase possibilities for a culturally unified society. In China, however, there has been a much greater emphasis on developing a unified curriculum, and too little on developing local languages, materials (e.g., text books), and relevant activities unique to the various nationalities. In America, the problems of multiculturalism appear to be approaching various forms of tentative resolution. However, the highly complex problems of teacher preparation—intellectually



Two Turshan Yao singing a Dialogue Song (they're from Jinxiu village (Guangxi)).

and attitudinally—coupled with the general public's resistance to enforced adherence to *any* law having to do with personal values and rights are yet to be worked out to anyone's satisfaction.

After Mao Zedong's government came to power in 1949, ethnic groups in China were invited to become officially listed as 'national minorities'. To everyone's surprise, more than 400 groups registered. Ethnographers are still very busy trying to identify groups to add to the 57 nationalities now recognised.

Under Mao's government and the current Chinese Communist Party leadership, many changes have been made while building on the Nationalists' developed network of schools for national minorities and the various policies regarding them. Both of these governments began by recognising the right of self-determination by ethnic groups as the country began gradually moving toward a culturally pluralistic society. Today, the Chinese Communist government acknowledges that the Han majority is but one of the more than 57 recognised national groups in China. The term, 'assimilation' (*hung-hua*) (with the related policies), which was embraced by the Nationalists, has been replaced by the Chinese Communist Party's concept of 'amalgamation' (*jung-ho*). This concept's emphasis and implications are primarily ideas of unity and cultural pluralism. The concept is very much like the often heard 'salad bowl' concept regarding the ethnic minorities in the U.S., where each minority makes important contributions to the whole while retaining its unique and individual identity.

Obviously, China and America are poles apart in social and political philosophy. But each country is vigorously pursuing policies and actions to ensure the ethnic integrity of its minority nationalities. Some of the most important and also the most fragile laws in both countries attest to this.

In America, we have Public Law 92-318 established by the 92nd Congress of the United States in June 1972. This law emphasises the heterogeneous composition of the Nation and the fact that in a multiethnic society a greater understanding of the contributions of one's own heritage and those of one's fellow citizens can contribute to a more harmonious, patriotic and committed populace. It also emphasises that all citizens of America should have an opportunity to learn about the nature not only of their own cultural heritage, but of the contributions and cultural heritages of other ethnic groups in the Nation.

To encourage teachers, school administrators, and parents to capitalise on culturally relevant past

experience, and to combine forces to develop appropriate frames of reference for constructing and putting into action approaches to multicultural education, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education came out, also in 1972, with its own pronouncement that reinforces that of the United States Congress. The result has been the establishment of government-funded programmes of Educational Opportunity and Sex Equity charged with assisting education institutions nationwide to develop and implement multicultural instruction, and to avoid sex-role stereotyping in all areas of education.

In China, there is the law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities, adopted by the Second Session of the Sixth National People's Congress. In addition, the Common Programme of the Chinese People's Political Constitution of the People's Republic of China combined to put into law that all people in China 1) are equal; 2) have the right to administer their own affairs; 3) may develop and use their own dialects and language; 4) have the freedom to keep or alter customs and habits without interference from outsiders; 5) may freely practise their religious beliefs; and 6) have the right to develop their own written language.

Both the American and Chinese laws are very practical. But perhaps the most important thing they have in common is that they both echo a fundamental contribution of the humanities: 'they remind us of the difficulty and the complexity of life, as well as the richness, worth, and significance of our most fundamental loyalties and obligations.'<sup>2</sup>

During my visit to the rural and urban communities of China I found the young people were as suspicious of the motives behind these laws as are the youth in America of the motives behind our similar laws. The Chinese youths of the ethnic minorities told me in 1983 and again in 1985 they feel their government is more interested in its own needs than the concerns of the ethnic minorities. I think they have reason to feel this way. It seems, in many respects, that the present Chinese government policies have been designed to accelerate inter-ethnic relations not for their own sake but for some extraneous political end. Knowing family and community feelings are always strong throughout the country, it is reasonable to believe that such traits have been systematically capitalised on in modern China for purely political purposes.

Taking into account similarities and differences between the approaches to pluralism of China and America, neither country's policies and actions seem wholly good or entirely bad, whatever the



Bai nationality dancer dances to the accompaniment of a 3-stringed Chinese guitar

motivations are in the two countries. That both countries continue to struggle with the massive problem of multiculturalism is at least a step or two in the right direction. Further, positive results are already apparent in both countries, especially among the youth. One sees 1) an increased sense of self-esteem, particularly among minority nationalities; 2) a motivation of the mainstream culture members to learn about and respect the contributions and standards of other cultures; 3) an increased sensitivity among politicians regarding the needs of ethnic groups; and 4) a national recognition of the vast importance of the various cultures in the pursuit of pluralism.

Both the Chinese and the American governments demonstrate, in countless ways, their commitment to this last point. Almost on a daily basis, there are activities in both China and America which dramatise each country's belief that the arts can and do provide a strong basis for comparing the aesthetic contributions of its various ethnic groups; that a society's religious, political, and social climate influences its art forms, its individual artists, and a culture's way of seeing and creating aesthetic objects; that participating in and learning about these various objects provides important in-

sights into the being and behaviour of a people; and that such knowledge is invaluable for increased sensitivity regarding relationships between cultures and individuals. This is not a romantic notion in either country. Past experience in both countries has shown that it is a very pragmatic and aesthetically satisfying approach to the deep and abiding problems of multiculturalism.

In sum, the various multicultural approaches in China today (e.g., arts festivals, touring nationalities' dance and folk-song troupes, educational reforms regarding minority nationalities' contributions to society, professional and government programmes for minorities) provide arts laboratories in which students and the citizenry may experience, first hand, the cultural expressions of a number of nationalities. And this, in turn, provides fine opportunities to acquire knowledge which will better prepare individuals to cope with the inevitable problems of living together in a pluralistic society and of developing creative means to approach, and perhaps solve, some of these problems.

Today in China, one of the most visible means of educating others about the minority nationalities' contributions is through a systematic display of, and publicity about their distinctive festivals and rich traditional arts and crafts. Music and dance, in particular, are highly important among many of the minority nationalities, with literally every major occasion celebrated with song and dance festivals. The Chinese have lost no time at all in capitalising on these rich, colourful, and informative traditions. And, according to some informants in the Chinese government and in various academic institutions I visited, scholars from many countries are impatiently waiting to enter the country to observe, study, and collect these unique multicultural treasures. The government and these institutions, however, are charting their course very carefully. For above all, they want to adhere to the fundamental requirements of official policies and, while in the process, attempt to retain the integrity of the minority nationalities.

Ethnic music and dance treasures have made their appearance in a veritable explosion in China in the past few years with the help of new government policies and subsidies. In 1982, a folk-song festival had more than 30 singers from 20 different minority nationalities appearing in China's capital city of Beijing. In the same city, in 1983, minority nationalities gathered with more than 400 artists displaying ethnic customs and performances, and integrating ethnic traditions with present-day life. In 1984 in the Guangxi capital city of Nanning, a festival devoted exclusively to minority nationali-

ties' songs and dances was held at the Guangxi Minority Nationalities Institute. Selected reporters and scholars were in attendance, and activities were documented by the Institute and by the National Arts Research Institute of Guangxi (also in Nanning) using highly sophisticated audio and colour video equipment ... means which are still very scarce in most of the PRC. Similar festivals are planned for the coming years in various autonomous regions and capital cities throughout China.

The collection, preservation, and study of ethnic music, literature, and crafts now comprise major projects of various organisations in the PRC. Folk-music and -dance materials in particular have for some time been a major preoccupation of organisations such as the Chinese Ministry of Culture, the State Nationalities' Affairs Commission, the Chinese Musicians' Association, and the Chinese Dancers' Association. Two very important collections were being edited during my research in China during the Spring/Summer of 1985. The collections are entitled *Collections of Chinese Folk Songs* and the *Collection of Chinese Folk Dances*, both being compiled and edited by individuals associated with the abovenamed organisations. In May 1986, there was an International Colloquium on the Origins and Contributions of the Yao minority nationality, with their music and festival traditions receiving some central attention. The Colloquium began at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and ended with a field trip to Yao Nationality Regions in Guangdong and Guaugxi Provinces. This and other such conferences should lead to the development and appropriate use of modern techniques to record, study, and disseminate the folk-songs and -dances of China's minority nationalities and thus preserve them for posterity.

In this way and in countless other ways, folk arts, music, and the cultural attainments of minority nationalities are being widely popularised in and outside China today. Folk-dances and -songs are of special interest to scholars and educators seeking evidence of the non-Chinese peoples' origins, and various reasons for the many similarities and differences that exist between them. Also, with the use of the advanced technologies of today coupled with the increasing opportunities to document minority nationality folk-songs, -dances and related customs, interest in these areas increases daily. But with this interest there are the inevitable dangers of how to preserve the purity of traditional music and dance while meeting the requirements of the new times; how to enable the unique dances, folk-songs, and other arts of the minority nationalities

to keep their original characteristics in the face of increasing public exposure and the inevitable and increasing interaction among the nationalities themselves; how to sensitise the minority nationalities about exploitation and about the possible motivation to satisfy someone else's idea of what the public should see and know regarding the art of minority peoples.

In spite of the Chinese government's ostensibly genuine concern regarding China's minorities and the preservation of their cultures, these are very real and serious dangers that are yet to be dealt with in this time of incredibly rapid change in the PRC. Unfortunately, many minority nationalities have already begun to jettison some of their customs in favour of the fruits of the Han culture and rewards resulting from increased wages and an influx of foreign currency. Perhaps the most difficult and persistent question for all is: How much separate cultural identity should be compromised for the sake of modernisation? While many are cautioning against the government reformers' push for increased contact with the outside world and the long leap toward modernisation, others are applauding this unprecedented open door policy and the fact that China has sent more scholars to study outside its borders than any other Communist country. The minority nationalities, regrettably, are caught right square in the middle and are understandably tantalised by the mind-boggling changes and new experiences which are now beginning to swirl around them.<sup>3</sup> One thing is certain—the varied ethnic groups in China are now being put to one of the greatest tests in their history. Some of my experiences during my visit suggest that many will not fare too well.

There are promising rays of hope, however, for China's minority groups are tempered by centuries of struggle with adverse natural circumstances and unusual social forces. In spite of current problems—indeed because of them—they are also presented with some exciting opportunities. In efforts to preserve the authentic musics of the various minorities, the government has sent teams of researchers into most nationality regions to learn from the artists there and identify those who might be employed to teach new generations of dancers and singers. The government has also provided financial aid to all minorities interested in preserving and displaying their arts and crafts. This, in turn, has allowed these groups to establish professional song and dance troupes whose major task it is to travel throughout China to display their arts and to introduce others to the culture that produced them. Further, these troupes are strongly en-

couraged to continue to enrich their repertoire by collecting and learning new songs and dances from their own group's folk art, and to build repositories for these treasures.

Many such Yao troupes, historians, elderly informants, and their environments were primary subjects of my investigations sponsored by the National Academy of Science, during my recent stay and travels in the remote and precipitous regions favoured by the Yao people of South China. Both Yao and Han cadres informed me that hundreds of Yao folk-songs, -dances, and folk-tales, along with those of other minority nationalities, had been collected and were soon to be published in a multi-volume, *A Survey of China's Folk Dances and Songs*. This work, it was noted, had been aided by a number of minority nationality festivals in almost all of China's provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities.

The musical courtship festival and folk-song courtship customs highly popular among a number of minority nationalities (e.g. Yao, Miao, Dong) are especially instructive and provide numerous examples of these unique customs so pervasive among these groups. Many Yao and other minority nationalities practise these customs and clearly demonstrate their reputations for being exceptionally musical people. Their songs, usually with simple melodies, are direct in expressiveness and meaning. Young men and women (boys and girls) are fond of gathering in special village places to express their love for each other in song. The practice underlines the fact that, unlike the Han people who are generally shy about publicly expressing affection for the opposite sex, the minority nationalities literally 'sing out' their love for all to hear, observe, and appreciate. Two elderly Yao parents, speaking with me about their youthful years, how they met and fell in love at one of the courtship festivals laced their tale with one very striking main theme: 'Art (i.e. folk-song and -dance) and the art of love are one and the same thing. We don't hide them, we openly share them.'

These musical courtship festivals are not only a kind of rites of passage for many minority nationality youth just reaching maturity; they are also opportunities to display their new status by sitting long into the night softly singing love songs to each other and testing their cleverness in improvising new words to old songs. Moreover, these musical courtship practices are excellent opportunities to observe the exceptional musical talents of China's varied minorities. At this time, more than at any other, the trained observer is able to discover important information and insights about the web of

music and life as practised in the remote mountainous villages where many ethnic minorities live for most, if not all, of their lives.

This is an important fact for researchers as there is still a serious lack of knowledge about many of China's ethnic minorities. As far back as 1951, steps were begun to overcome this lack and Research Institutes were opened with the express purpose of discovering more about the minority nationalities. An All-China Minority Nationalities' Education Conference resulted in the opening of the prestigious Central Nationalities' Institute in Beijing, also in 1951. (These and many other such efforts were stopped under the turmoil of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—1966–1976—but restarted in the late 1970s.) There are now ten of these Nationalities' Institutes scattered throughout China. They are devoted primarily to training people from China's ethnic nationalities in the liberal arts and sciences. They also put emphasis on the training of cadres in their own folkways



*Long drum dancer performing for a potential lover. The long drum dance is one of the most popular dances among the Yao, it commemorates the totem king Pan (dragon dog).*

so they can return to their people and provide appropriate leadership. The object in teaching the folkways—traditional music, songs, dances, and handicrafts in particular—is to ensure that the cadre will be as skilled as anyone in his/her community in traditional music, costumes, and other folkways. This, it is believed, will significantly diminish the distrust of the cadres returning to the villages after long periods in the ‘outside’ world of the Hans.

Language study is another major emphasis in these Nationalities’ Institutes. Since there are over fifty ethno-linguistic groups in China, and since most of the national minorities’ languages are quite different from Han Chinese, bilingualism has become a necessity in the country and a major aspect of educational policy. Not only do the minority students learn Mandarin, there are also Han students who are learning minority nationality languages and culture. It is noteworthy that cadres commonly use the minority language in school education, and in radio and TV broadcasting in the various autonomous regions. Aside from helping to meet the great need for specialised technical personnel in autonomous regions of the various nationalities, Han students have also become much needed teaching resources existing between the Han and the minority nationalities. The Yao village music teaching and observation in which I participated clearly revealed some of the fine mutual advantages resulting from such Han and minority co-operation in the school and community settings.

Since festivals and other celebrations of all the minorities are observed in the Nationalities’ Institutes, future cadres have ample opportunities to practise and perfect many and diverse skills prior to graduation. Thus, whether it is learning a language or developing the important nuances needed to perform traditional folk-songs and dances, much knowledge about and instances of commitment to minority nationality culture occur well before any cadre is assigned to a particular nationality region. This seems to be a common outcome of the training received by cadres in minority Nationalities’ Institutes.

I found it extremely tantalising to see the most populous country in the world—and a communist one to boot—using the arts in and outside educational institutions to deal with the complex problems of pluralism in society.

Music, song, and dance provide creative vehicles for China’s multinational family to cement the social bonds necessary to their survival and the survival of their culture. During my visits it was apparent that the Chinese government knew and

respected this fact about its minority populations. Evidence of this is shown by the gradual but very cautious return to learnings typical of the humanities and fields of knowledge such as history, literature, philosophy, and culture. The way seems to have been paved by the government’s need to assume a major role in its policies toward, and education of the minority nationalities. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, instruction and research in the aforementioned areas were discontinued and the specialists in these fields were deposed. It was as if a government tried to erase the record of what had been done and thought by those who had gone before. The elderly scholars I spoke with echoed a famous theme frequently spoken by humanities scholars here in the U.S.: ‘This [the Humanities] is an area where involvement of the government, at any level, is a matter of great sensitivity, where there is perhaps as much danger that the government may do too much as that it will do too little. Our past leaders tried to discourage the cultural forms our citizens used to translate their thoughts and feelings for others to contemplate and learn from. But the success of these efforts—although terribly damaging—were short-lived.’

In spite of China’s current modernisation process, there continue to be fears of a return to past excesses, understandable in an incredibly paradoxical country where just over a decade ago educated people were scorned and denounced as ‘the stinking ninth category’.<sup>4</sup> But now, throughout China, we are definitely beginning to see encouragement of those qualities of mind and enquiry which sharpen the capacity to think critically and feelingfully. I guess this might be expected in a country such as China because its leaders know such learnings and qualities of mind can also effectively encourage a collective sense of tradition and solidarity. Music and dance are inviting and easily trod bridges which exist between peoples who have all sorts of differences that divide them.

China is increasingly demonstrating today that she is not afraid to look outward for models. But even the most casual observer can see that if the humanities and a sense of history and culture are encouraged in today’s China, these things are still not universally admired there. Indeed, according to scholars with whom I spoke, officials have yet to resolve the nagging question of how to treat the ‘history’ of this complex ancient country. At the many academic institutions I visited, I was told that study groups meet regularly with the purpose of attempting to come to some kind of consensus on this persistently controversial (for the Chinese) issue. It was stressed that today’s leaders are keenly

*(continued on page 30)*