

Function of Melody in Asian Antiphonal Singing

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Many groups and people living in East and Southeast Asia have unique custom, antiphonal singing. There are many types of it in this area, and we can also see many different kinds of modalities, especially on the function of melody. In Southwest China and Southeast Asia, antiphonal songs in an area have only one or a few kinds of very simple melodies, and improvised diverse words (created, or edited from old words). On the contrary, antiphonal songs in Amami region, at present, have many kinds of melodies, and their words are scarcely improvised. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the function of melody in antiphonal singing.

In this paper, Buyi Shan'ge (mountain song) recorded in 2004 by me, is taken as a sample of examination. This is an antiphonal singing of Buyi people in Southwest China. As a result, I found that its melody is as simple as other ethnic groups in China, and if melody differs, they can't understand the words of the song. Besides, they are indifferent to the songs with unfamiliar melody.

Azami called the scales of it “verbally oriented scales”, because of its function not as beauty and object of appreciation, but as recording and verbal communication. But from Buyi's example, the melody's function will not be only as these, but also as grammar, which means ground of understanding and origin of diverse words. Of course, as Turino argued semiotically, antiphonal singing should also have affective function, but it is not the main function.

From this point of view, songs in Amami can be interpreted as the songs whose melody lost this aspect of grammar. In Amami, the function of melody is shifted from grammar to musical beauty, object of appreciation. We can know unique musicality from these Asian antiphonal singing.