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# ‘If You Don’t Sing, Friends Will Say You are Proud’: How and Why Kam People Learn to Sing Kam Big Song \*

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The 2.5 million Kam people, known in Chinese as *dong zu* 侗族 (the character *zu*, meaning ‘group,’ is appended to the names of all Chinese ethnic groups), are a southern Chinese people designated by the majority Han Chinese as one of China’s fifty-five so-called ‘minorities’.<sup>1</sup> Most Kam people live in small towns and villages in the mountainous region of southwestern China that constitutes the borders of Guizhou, Guangxi and Hunan provinces (see Figures 1a and 1b). Life in these villages is based around subsistence agriculture, and many of the tall mountain slopes—as well as the valleys—are covered with terraced rice fields. The research presented in this article was undertaken mostly in Sheeam (in Chinese, *Sanlong* 三龙), a Kam region about 35 kilometres south-southwest of the centre of Liping county (黎平县) in southeastern Guizhou Province, and one of the most important areas where Kam ‘big song’ is still sung. Jai Lao, one of the two large villages in Sheeam, was my home and fieldwork base from December 2004 to March 2006 and from February to July 2008.<sup>2</sup> The residents of Sheeam speak a version

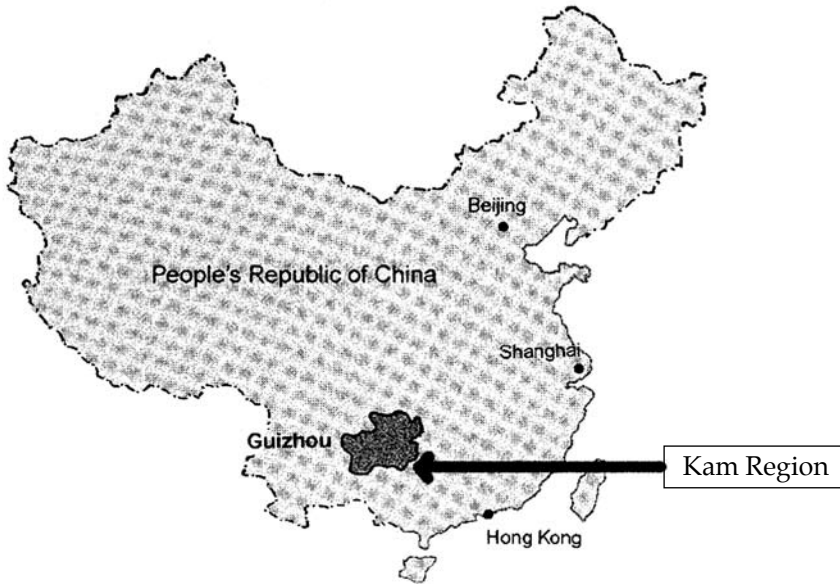
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<sup>1</sup> Jerold A. Edmondson, Somsong Burusphat and Zhou Guoyan, ‘Introduction,’ *Kam Chinese Thai English Dictionary*, ed. Jerold A. Edmondson, Yang Tongyin and Qin Qiaohang (Nakhonpathom, Thailand: Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University, 2000) iv.

<sup>2</sup> Jai Lao (literally, ‘village-big’) is one of the Kam names for the village known in Chinese as *Jiulong cun* 九龙村 [Jiulong village]. It is also referred to in Kam as Nngen, or simply as Jai (literally, ‘village’), and is one of two large villages (besides numerous small villages) in the region known in Kam as Sheeam. Officially, Jai Lao/Jiulong village is located in Yongcong township (永从乡).

**Figure 1a.** Location of Guizhou province within China. From Gina Corrigan, *The Odyssey Illustrated Guide to Guizhou* (Hong Kong: The Guidebook Company, 1995) 28.



of the second subdialect of Southern Kam; all six subdialects of this Kadai family language are varieties of the tonal and primarily oral Kam language, a language quite different from Chinese.<sup>3</sup> Most Kam people in Southern Kam areas are either monolingual Kam speakers or, more frequently, bilingual (at least to some degree) in Kam and Chinese. Another group of the Kam population, especially in the Northern Kam areas and in urban Kam centres, speaks only Chinese. Except for the use of Chinese in schools and in television broadcasts, in Southern Kam areas where big song is sung, Chinese is not often heard.<sup>4</sup>

Within the Kam region, different genres of traditional Kam songs are sung in different areas and on different occasions. Big song, the only Kam song genre to involve extensive part-singing, is one of these genres, and was traditionally only sung in a region of about 100,000 people in the Southern Kam dialect area.<sup>5</sup> Big song is mainly sung amongst communities of speakers of the second of the three subdialects of the Southern Kam dialect living in certain parts of Liping,

<sup>3</sup> The Kadai language group is sometimes also known as Tai, and includes Kam and other languages. Researchers within China refer to the group as the *Dong-Tai* family (侗台系), considered as a Sino-Tibetan subgroup; see Long Yaohong and Zheng Guoqiao, *The Dong Language in Guizhou Province, China*, transl. D. Norman Geary (Dallas: SIL & University of Texas, 1998) 9; Stephen Matthews, 'Cantonese Grammar in Areal Perspective,' *Grammars in Contact*, ed. Alexandra Aikhenvald and Bob Dixon (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming) 221. Outside China, most linguists regard the Kadai languages as 'having a contact relationship with Chinese ... and [they] have recently been argued to be a sub-branch of the Austronesian family' (Matthews, 'Cantonese Grammar' 221; see also Laurent Sagart, 'The Higher Phylogeny of Austronesian and the Position of Tai-Kadai,' *Oceanic Linguistics* 43.2 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Although I speak and read Chinese, the basic fluency I acquired in the local Sheeam dialect of Southern Kam was indispensable to my research and to my participation in various Kam cultural activities, particularly singing.

<sup>5</sup> The figure of 100,000 residents of Kam big-song-singing areas is according to experts from the Chinese Academy of Social Science and elsewhere. See He Yunjiang, 'Dongzu da ge: yinyue qi pa bin lin shi chuan 侗族大歌—音乐奇葩濒临失传 [Kam Big Song: An Exotic Musical Flower on the Verge of Extinction],' *Xinhua mei ri dian xun* 新华每日电讯 [*Xinhua Daily Dispatch*]: 11 Aug. 2003.

**Figure 1b.** Detailed map of the area of residence of Kam speakers in Hunan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. Kam speakers are distinguished according to their use of Northern or Southern Kam dialects. From Edmondson, Burusphat and Zhou, 'Introduction' iv.



Congjiang and Rongjiang counties (Guizhou Province) and Sanjiang county (Guangxi Province). Big song is publicly performed in Kam villages at each New Year,<sup>6</sup> and plays an important role in recording and passing down Kam history and culture. However, in the big-song-singing region various other song genres besides big song are also regularly sung at occasions such as weddings and engagements, celebrations after the building of a new house, or blocking the road when welcoming important visitors. At meals held for important guests, praising them with suitable 'wine songs' is as important as preparing food and drink. During the procession and other ritual activities carried out by the entire village of Jai Lao at New Year, *yeh* song is used to ask for blessings from the female deity *Sa* for the oncoming year.<sup>7</sup> Every day for over a week during the festive season, Kam opera performances or circle singing take place.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Kam people celebrate New Year at the same time that Spring Festival (or Chinese New Year) is celebrated in other parts of the country. Its date according to the Gregorian calendar varies each year, but usually falls between late January and mid-February.

<sup>7</sup> Transcriptions of Kam words are my own spellings of the Kam language rendered in an 'essay phonetics' system similar to that used by Jeffrey Hopkins (see *Meditations on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Books, 1983) 19–21), David Holm (see *Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors: A Zhuang Cosmological Text from Southwest China* (Illinois: Southeast Asia Publications, 2002) viii) and others to present foreign language terms clearly to a broader audience. Since I am writing in English, my 'essay phonetics' transcription of the Kam language is designed to be comprehensible to an English-language reader. English transliterations of Chinese words are given in the official *Hanyu pinyin* 汉语拼音 system of orthography used for Modern Standard Chinese; that they are transliterations of the Chinese language is contextually evident by the accompanying Chinese characters. Chinese names are given in Chinese language sequence with family name preceding given names. All Kam terms given in this article are those used in the second subdialect of Southern Kam as spoken in the Sheeam region, and I consequently use the term 'Kam language' to refer to the Kam language as spoken in Sheeam. A glossary of Kam words used in this article is appended.

<sup>8</sup> In *yeh* song (known in Kam as *ga yeh*) the vocable *yeh* is prominent in the song lyrics. *Yeh* song is structured so that each line of the song is first sung by a soloist or small group of singers, and then the same line of lyrics is repeated by the rest of the group using a similar melody. Circle singing is known in Kam as *mhyor* and involves participants singing *yeh* song while walking slowly around in a circle in single file.

In this article I discuss how Kam people learn to sing big song, describing both the traditional system of learning and also important changes to this system—particularly within the last decade. I also discuss why Kam people learn to sing big song and how participation in big song performance affects the reasons why many Kam people learn big song.

### *Ga lao* ('Big Song')

The Kam word *ga* can be translated as 'song,' and the word *lao* as 'big,' 'old' or 'important.' In the 1958 publication *dong zu da ge* 侗族大歌 [Kam Big Song], the first significant documentation of the Kam part-singing tradition, the Kam name *ga lao* was incorrectly taken as the name of all categories of Kam part-songs.<sup>9</sup> In fact, even today many older Kam singers still only use the name *ga lao* (in some areas the word *ma* is used instead of *lao*) to refer to the main category of part-song—that known in Kam as *ga sheeang*—and refer to each other category of part-song by its individual name. Although this indicates that pre-1958 there was no generic Kam term for all part-songs taught in the manner described below, in recent decades the conventional Kam usage of the name *ga lao* has widened to include all the different categories of part-songs.

The English name 'big song' probably derives from the Chinese translation of *ga lao*—namely, *da ge* 大歌—and it is likely that the recent use of the Chinese name *da ge* to refer to all categories of Kam part-songs was mainly responsible for the widening of the Kam definition of *ga lao*. Both the English and Chinese translations of *ga lao* are problematic; while they imply that the songs are both 'large' and 'important,' both translations lack the meaning 'old' that is contained in the original Kam name. However, since older singers sometimes still use the original, more specific meaning of *ga lao* (that is, one particular category of part-song), to avoid confusion I use the English name 'big song' to refer to all part-songs that are taught in the manner described below.<sup>10</sup>

### Typical Features of Big Song

In the traditional village performance context big songs are always sung by a group of singers (usually between four and ten people), all of the same sex. The songs are generally sung unaccompanied, and are never conducted.<sup>11</sup> All big songs involve two vocal parts, and the lower vocal part is frequently a drone. Big songs range in length from two or three to fifteen or even twenty minutes, and each village or region has its own repertoire of big song. Each

<sup>9</sup> Guizhou sheng wen lian [Guizhou Province Arts Association], ed., *Dong zu da ge* 侗族大歌 [Kam Big Song] (Guiyang: Guizhou People's Press, 1958). While there are brief records of earlier Kam music-making dating back nearly nine hundred years—particularly in *Lao xue an bi ji* 老学庵笔记 [Notes by an Old Student] by Lu You 陆游 and *Chi ya* 赤雅 [A Dictionary of the South] by Kuang Lu 邝露—big song is not mentioned by name and the music-making is only described in brief.

<sup>10</sup> For a similar discussion of this situation, see Yang Xiao, 'Nandong "ga lao" ming shi kao—jian lun dong zu da ge yi ci de duo zhong nei han 南侗《嘎老》名实考—兼论侗族大歌一词的多重内涵 [Research into the Definition of the Southern Kam "Ga Lao"—Concurrent Investigation into the Multiple Emphases of Kam Big Song], *Zhong guo yin yue xue* 中国音乐学 [Musicology in China] 2 (2008): 10-19.

<sup>11</sup> Only men's big song in the Kam villages in Congjiang county is performed with accompaniment, provided by a *biba lao* ('big pipa', a wooden, long-necked, four-string plucked lute). For further discussion, see Yang Xiao, 'Guo bu gang' yi shi: Ga lao chuan tong yu dong ren shi kong guan de yang cheng—xiao huang dong zhai nu xing ge ban ji si yi shi de kao cha yu yan jiu 《果卜冈》仪式：嘎老传统与侗人时空观的养成—小黄侗寨女性歌班祭祀仪式的考察与研究 [The Ritual of 'Gong Bu Gang': The Ga Lao Tradition and the Formation of Kam peoples' Views of Time—Investigation and Research into the Worshipping Ritual Conducted by Women's Singing Groups in the Kam Village of Xiao Huang], in Cao Benzhi, ed., *Zhongguo min jian yi shi yin yue yan jiu — hua nan juan* 中国民间仪式音乐研究—华南卷 [Research into Chinese Folk Music Rituals—Southern China] (Shanghai: Shanghai Institute of Music, 2007) 233–34.

repertoire is further divided into various categories that are also different in every village or region. Every category of Kam song—including big song—is distinguished by the melody, as all songs in the one song category of the one village share the same basic melodic framework.<sup>12</sup> Different sets of lyrics from within a particular range of subject matter suitable for the particular category of song are then set to this one basic melody, creating different songs.<sup>13</sup> The lyrics to many categories of big song are about love, and those for the category of big song known as *ga sor* (literally, ‘song – sound’) also involve vocal imitation of the sounds of birds and insects. In the Sheeam region the main categories of big song are currently *ga sheeang*, *ga sor*, *ga deeit*, *ga ma*, *ga gaow-sn*, *ga hwiew* and *oy-hoy-ding*; both men and women sing the same songs in all these categories of big song except for *ga sor* (sung only by women), *ga deeit* (sung mainly by men) and *ga sheeang* (men and women have different melodies and sets of lyrics). *Ga sheeang* is considered the most important category of big song, and its lyrics have the most serious content: they record and teach Kam people’s history, philosophy, social responsibilities, laws and aesthetics. For example, some *ga sheeang* big songs include instruction on how to view death, how one is expected to act within Kam village society, how to care for wet and dry ricefields, the hazards of opium smoking, and the legendary origins of the Kam people.

Most big song lyrics conform to strict rhyming patterns involving the final sound (but not the linguistic tone) of syllables at particular points within each line and section.<sup>14</sup> New big songs are made by creating a set of lyrics with suitable rhyming patterns and then singing the lyrics using the melodic framework of one big song category which allows that particular lyrical content. While new big songs are continually being made (recent topics in Sheeam include the nationally publicised policies of ‘Three Represents’ (*san ge dai biao* 三个代表) and ‘Opening of the Western Regions’ (*xi bu kai fa* 西部开发), and also thanks to the Communist Party for building a new concrete water reservoir near Jai Lao), within Kam singers’ living memory very few new big songs have permanently entered the standard big song repertoire.

### Big Song Performance in Kam Villages

In the villages within the big-song-singing region public performances of big song take place in the evenings following New Year.<sup>15</sup> In recent years in Jai Lao big song singing continued

<sup>12</sup> The practice of all songs in the one category sharing one melodic framework has been known and used across China for centuries amongst the largely illiterate common people. Since the time of the songs recorded in the *Shi jing* 诗经 [Book of Songs], described by Liang Mingyue as ‘the earliest Chinese anthology of poetic songs representing a period from the eleventh to the sixth centuries BCE’ (see Liang Mingyue, *Music of the Billion: An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture* (New York: Heinrichshofen Edition, 1985) 54), the practice of fitting different sets of lyrics to the same melodic framework is believed or known to have occurred in various eras in many different Chinese musical or poetic genres (Wang Liren, personal communication, 2006); see also Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, *Chinese Folk Songs and Folk Singers: Shan’ge Traditions in Southern Jiangsu* (Leiden: Chime Foundation, 1997). It also occurs in the musical traditions of non-Chinese cultures who also possess oral languages. For example, Myfany Turpin has commented that, ‘as is common throughout Central Australia, all songs within a song series have the same melodic structure. Melody is a defining feature of the song series’ (Myfany Turpin, ‘Phonological and Rhythmic Correspondences in a Central Australian Aboriginal song series,’ *Musicology Australia* (forthcoming)).

<sup>13</sup> In Sheeam the one exception to this rule is the *ga sor* category, where each song has a unique melody. Even then, the introductory and concluding phrases to many *ga sor* are similar.

<sup>14</sup> Linguists call this final sound of the syllable the ‘rhyme,’ the nucleus and coda of a syllable, or the part of the syllable following the onset (the first consonant or consonant cluster).

<sup>15</sup> Very occasionally, big song may also be publicly performed at other times of the year as part of certain inter-village visiting activities.

**Figure 2.** The largest of the three *dare low* in Jai Lao, February 2008 (photo by the author)



for between four and seven nights, and took place each night from around 8 or 9 p.m. until 1 or 2 a.m. Big song is usually performed in one of the tall pagoda-shaped towers called *dare low*—the impressive wooden buildings rising above the patchwork of roofs in many Kam villages (see Figure 2). In Jai Lao, on a number of evenings following the 2005–2008 New Years, performances took place simultaneously in one, two, or sometimes all three *dare low*, and some Jai Lao singing groups also sang for several nights in the village’s two sacred houses devoted to the deity *Sa*. In performances the singers sit around the fire in the middle of the *dare low* or other building (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Singing big song in the *dare low* in Jai Lao, February 2005 (photo by the author)



Big song performance was originally one part of various traditional activities organised between young people of different clans or villages (or one of the activities a Kam opera group would take part in when invited to perform in another Kam village), and hence it generally involves two groups (one male and one female) who represent different clans or different

villages. Originally, big song performances were only given by young people between the ages of around fourteen until the birth of their first child.<sup>16</sup> The lyrics to many categories of big song suggest that the purpose of singing the songs is to develop romantic relationships, for example:

The second month is warm and sunny  
 In the morning I go to the mountain to work  
 And hear the trees blowing in the wind  
 I think back of you, and talk about you  
 I think of you all the time ...<sup>17</sup>

Despite this lyrical content, big song performance does not give young people the opportunity for direct interaction—in big-song-singing regions this originally occurred through the private singing of *ga lart* late into the night.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in a number of different song genres young people also use these kinds of phrases to express their respect for members of the opposite sex to whom they are not related, thus indicating that they think highly enough of the person to be able to consider them as a suitable marriage partner.

In performance, each big-song-singing group takes turns singing one *gup* of big song (that is, any three big songs of the same category). At the conclusion of the *gup* the group seated opposite praises the singers by chanting a set recited phrase or *deeuu*, and the singers immediately chant another *deeuu* in response to the praise. As is typical in both Kam and wider Chinese social etiquette, this praise is modestly declined. For example:

*Deeuu 1* (praise): These songs are good, really good, and long, really long, they can wrap right around your shoulders and still leave enough to make a belt for your husband's trousers! Quick, other people's wives,<sup>19</sup> sing more!

*Deeuu 2* (response): Ay, our sound is not good, our songs are not long!

*Deeuu* are often humorous and chanted with much laughter—a contrast to the previously sung big songs, which are sung in relative solemnity and often without making eye contact with the opposite group. Unlike the songs, the *deeuu* comment directly on the singing or singers of the opposite group. The audience standing behind the seated singers in the *dare low* appreciates both the *deeuu* and the songs, and in their reactions (laughter, willingness to stay and listen longer, subsequent conversations) demonstrate praise for both the way that the singers sing the songs and conduct the social interaction through *deeuu*.

It is only since big song first became known outside the Kam region in the 1950s that public performances of big song outside Kam villages and at times other than the post-New Year period have become frequent. The first Kam performance troupes were formed in the

<sup>16</sup> In Kam villages, although many guests are invited to celebrate a marriage, it is not until the birth of the first child (when the wife goes to live permanently at her husband's house) that the couple are fully recognised as married. Kam women usually give birth to their first child between the ages of 18 and 25.

<sup>17</sup> Opening lines to a *ga ma* category of big song from Sheeam, translated by Wu Pinxian, Wu Xuegui, Wu Meifang and Catherine Ingram.

<sup>18</sup> *Ga lart* is a generic name for love songs sung when groups of young men visit the home of a young woman and sing with the group of female friends gathered there.

<sup>19</sup> In Kam song it is polite for singers to refer to those of the opposite sex as 'other people's husbands' or 'other people's wives'.

1950s, and since that time professional performances of Kam big song have been staged at local, national and international level.<sup>20</sup> Since around 2000, big song has been the focus of increasingly intense, largely government-sponsored promotion as a symbol of an artificially constructed pan-Kam identity. Concurrently, there has also been an increase in the use of big song within the developing Kam tourism industry, as exemplified by the performance of ‘Ten Thousand People Singing Big Song’ organised to celebrate the opening of the Liping County airport in November 2005.

### The Place of Singing within Kam Society

Before discussing the learning of big song it is important to consider how singing in general is viewed within Kam society. Since many researchers acknowledge that the link between a particular concept and how it is expressed linguistically is evidence of shared, specific perceptions of that concept amongst that particular group of people, the Kam language provides an important means of understanding Kam views about singing in general.<sup>21</sup> In the Kam language,<sup>22</sup> *dor* is the verb used to describe the singing of *ga* or songs.<sup>23</sup> However, the verb *dor* corresponds most closely to the English verb ‘do’, and is used in many other situations to refer to many other activities besides singing. For example:

- dor baert* (fish) = to go fishing
- dor dor* (beans) = to plant beans
- dor lair* (books) = to go to school
- dor nam* (water) = to pour water into a pot or kettle

In the Kam language, this use of the same verb for singing and other social or daily life activities thus clearly indicates that the ‘doing’ of song was—and invariably still is—considered to be one of many things people naturally ‘do’ as part of their daily lives. This view of singing as one of many typical activities can also be seen as providing a foundation for the learning of big song as detailed below.

### Gaow ga (Big-song-singing Groups)

Within the context of the village big song tradition, big songs are always sung by *gaow ga* (*gaow* = group, *ga* = song) or ‘big-song-singing-groups’. The groups are same-sex and generally of fixed membership. They are traditionally first formed when children are around ten to fourteen years of age; until the late 1950s almost all Kam children sang in a singing group for a period of time. However, during the terrible famines of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) singing activities of

<sup>20</sup> The Liping Kam Chorus, the largest and most well-known of these early groups, was formed by the Liping County Cultural Bureau in 1958, and gave performances for several years. The types of staged performances in Kam areas have always been affected by political events; during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, arranged versions of big songs praising the Communist Party and Chairman Mao were popular, while during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) performances were only given by ‘propaganda troupes’ (*xuan chuan dui* 宣传队) and were almost exclusively performances of Han Chinese revolutionary songs.

<sup>21</sup> For an example of this in relation to music, see Catherine Ellis, *Aboriginal Music: Education for Living* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1985) 70–71.

<sup>22</sup> In this and other contexts in the following sections of this article I use the terms ‘Kam people’ and ‘Kam language’ to refer mainly to those 100,000 people who have familiarity with big song through its ongoing practice in their communities, and to the dialects of Kam that they speak. While other Kam people may have learnt to sing some big songs and will have certain views about the genre, it is the views of the indigenous practitioners of big song and the dialect of Kam that they use that I mainly refer to from this point onwards.

<sup>23</sup> These important Kam words are pronounced ‘door – gar,’ using a high, flat tone followed by a descending tone.



all kinds were suspended: as many Kam people explained to me, ‘when you didn’t have enough to eat, who wanted to sing?’ In the 1960s traditional big song singing in Kam villages resumed to some degree, but then stopped completely during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the 1980s many young people formed singing groups once again, but in the 1990s—as a result of fewer inter-village visiting activities, the promotion of Chinese education, and the increase in other types of contact with wider Chinese society—it gradually became more common for singing groups to be formed only by children who were particularly keen to do so, rather than being formed as a regular social activity. Today, in Jai Lao and many other Kam villages, three different types of singing groups are formed: amongst children who are same-age members of the one clan, amongst students of the one class or school, and amongst adults. Prior to about the year 2000, only the first of these three types of singing groups were formed in Sheeam.

Singing groups of the first type are formed amongst children of one of the four or five clans that make up most larger Kam villages, and the group represents the clan in big song singing that occurs as part of various traditional activities organised between young people of different clans or villages.<sup>24</sup> The groups are established by the children themselves, often with some degree of parental encouragement or because the children see that others of the same age are also forming singing groups. These groups usually learn a repertoire of local big songs by the traditional method described below.

Since around 2000 many schools in Kam areas have introduced Kam song classes (*dong ge ban* 侗歌班) into the school curriculum. The classes are usually taught by a song expert who can write Chinese or by a schoolteacher who can sing Kam songs. In most cases, students learn arranged versions of big songs popularly sung in staged performances—often referred to by many Kam villagers as *ga shor shee-aow* (literally, ‘song-school’)—although they may also learn some of the local repertoire as well. Songs are taught by writing the lyrics on the blackboard in Chinese characters (an unofficial Kam orthography with characters representing either the sounds or meaning of the Kam words) for the students to copy down. Then the teacher will sing a line and the students will sing the same line, and so on with each subsequent line. Sometimes singing groups are formed from within these classes to represent the class or school in staged performances, but never for performances in the *dare low* at New Year.

In Jai Lao and many other Kam villages, adults’ big-song-singing groups have only been formed since the recent use of big song in large-scale staged performances. Because most young people over about the age of twelve are now absent from Kam villages for large periods of time (either for work or for post-primary schooling), and because many Kam men are also employed outside the villages, there are very few young adults still living in Kam villages. Hence state promotion of big song during the last six or seven years has relied on older generations of Kam villagers remaining in their homes, particularly women. Despite an earlier social taboo regarding the performance of big song by married people (especially married women), as staged performances of big song by older people have become popular they have gradually also become accepted within the village domain. Thus in Jai Lao and many other villages in the big-song-singing region some middle-aged and older people once again gather privately

<sup>24</sup> Today, singing groups are also formed amongst friendship groups to represent the village, but this is less common than clan groups. However, according to Wu Pinxian, in her youth (during the 1950s) groups were formed amongst friends to sing in inter-village activities, but not inter-clan activities within the same village (Wu Pinxian, personal communication, 2008).

in the evenings to sing, and at New Year go to sing publicly in the *dare low*. In some cases the members of these singing groups re-learn big songs from their childhood. In other cases, because of prohibitions on singing big song in earlier periods, the middle-aged singers are learning many of the big songs for the first time. When men form these groups they are often singing with former members of their childhood singing group and all know basically the same repertoire of songs. When adult women form these groups they are usually formed amongst friends living in the same section of the village. However, in Kam villages most women go to live with their husband's family after the birth of their first child, and hence the members of newly formed groups of middle-aged women often include singers from several different villages. Since each village has its own way of singing and its own repertoire of big song, and since even within the one village different singing groups may sing differently because they have learnt from different teachers, when adult women form singing groups they often spend a lot of time in rehearsals ensuring that everyone is singing the same version of the same song.

In each of these three situations the community social structures—whether the individual's clan, school, or adult friendship group—influence how an individual participates in the big song tradition. Moreover, Kam people generally interpret willingness to participate in a singing group as evidence of how an individual views him- or herself in relation to wider society. When Nay An-ping (a middle-aged Sheeam singer) described to me how her friends had coerced her into joining their singing group, she said: 'I can't sing; I'm terrible at singing, but they kept asking me, so I had to join.'<sup>25</sup> Had she refused to join the group, her friends would have understood this to mean that she considered herself above them. The lyrics to a number of big songs, including the most well-known big song sung in Jai Lao and other Kam villages in the Sheeam region (and quoted in the title of this article), confirm this view. This song begins:

If you don't sing, friends will say you are proud;  
Sit down and sing, and friends will say you are good and honest...<sup>26</sup>

Other reasons why Kam people learn to sing Kam big song are discussed in further detail below.

<sup>25</sup> Nay An-ping (personal communication, 2005). Although her comments are clearly modest, as Kam etiquette demands, they are also influenced by the views of participation as described here.

<sup>26</sup> The opening lines to *Ban Bao Juuee*, a *ga sheeam* category big song from Sheeam. An arranged version of this song is sung by the Liping County Arts Troupe on the commercially released CD *Dong Folksongs from Liping, Guizhou Province* (Hong Kong: Guizhou Wenhua Yinxiang Chubanshe [Guizhou Cultural A/V Publishing House], 2002) track 4. The full lyrics, in English translation, are:

If you don't sing, friends will say you are proud  
Sit down and sing, and friends will say you are good and honest  
Friends sing that way, and so do I  
*Sor Yam* [an underworld figure] decides how long [our lives are]  
*Sor Yam* decides how far [our lives continue for; that is, how much time]  
If the mountain-top does not fall, the valley between the peaks will fall  
If the mountain-top falls and covers the water channel, the water cannot flow  
If the mountain-top falls and covers the field, one is very sad  
If the mountain falls and blocks the stream it can flow around  
When we reach old age there is no path but towards death

Translation by Wu Meifang, Wu Pinxian, Wu Xuegui, Wu Zhicheng and Catherine Ingram (2005). The lyrics include a metaphor explaining that older people must die, otherwise—tragically—younger people will die first (for example, 'If the mountain-top does not fall, the valley between the peaks will fall ... if the mountain-top falls and covers the field, one is very sad'). The song emphasises that since death is unavoidable it must be acknowledged and accepted, especially in old age.

### **Sang ga (Song Experts)**

*Sang ga* (literally, 'expert-song') are the main people responsible for teaching big song (occasionally an older, experienced singer may also take on the role if necessary). Song experts are not officially appointed, but those people who like singing and who have musical aptitude, a good memory and proven teaching ability are gradually recognised as song experts by the village community. Except for the groups who learn big songs in school, all other singing groups spend many evenings together during the year learning and rehearsing with their teacher, usually in the teacher's home (as seen in Figure 4). In the last two years (2007, 2008) children's singing groups in Sheeam have all selected teachers from their own clans, mainly because of the renewed focus on singing groups as representatives of the clan (as discussed below), and rehearse together every night in the two or three weeks leading up to New Year.<sup>27</sup>

The designations of 'song expert' and of people as belonging to a particular singing group are recognised beyond the context of singing big song and affect the social structure of the community by emphasising certain clan, friendship or teacher-student affiliations and interactions. These musical roles also carry certain social obligations: the teacher must give up a large amount of time to teach the singers, and all the singers must attend rehearsals regularly.<sup>28</sup> At New Year the singers are expected to take gifts to the teacher's home, and the teacher must prepare a meal and eat together with the students. Hence the recognition of individuals in particular roles within the big song tradition influences social structure and the patterns of daily life.

**Figure 4.** Song expert Wu Zhicheng teaching big song to a group of Kam girls in Jai Lao, January 2005 (photo by the author)



### **Learning to Sing Big Song: Selection of Roles within the Group**

Every big song involves the roles of *chee ga* (literally, 'begin song', referring to the solo introductions sung to begin each section of every big song), *wair may* (lower vocal line) and

<sup>27</sup> If a singing group had had to resort to inviting a teacher of another clan to teach them the whole clan would 'lose face' and be laughed at as being Kam people who are so ignorant that they do not know how to sing Kam songs.

<sup>28</sup> A singing group will often fine singers who do not come to rehearsals; usually the 'offender' must bring rice and the group will cook sweet rice porridge together and eat it during rehearsal.

*wair say* (upper vocal line).<sup>29</sup> Most singers in the group sing the lower vocal line in unison, but during rehearsals the song expert allots the tasks of singing the other two sections to singers with particular abilities. The singer who is responsible for *chee ga* is always someone with a good memory, a strong and clear voice, and who can set and hold a constant pitch. This singer has an important role as each section of every big song begins with a solo *chee ga* that assists others in the group to remember the lyrics and to sing at a suitable pitch (selected according to what is comfortable for that particular group). During the main body of the song, the singer responsible for *chee ga* may sing either the upper or lower vocal line.

In each group, between one and three singers with good musical ability and strong voices are selected to sing *wair say*. While this upper vocal line only occasionally diverges from the lower line (or *wair may*), the rest of the group take their cues for many of the musical changes in their line from the phrasing and timing of the *wair say*. In Kam, singers say *say yit may*: the upper vocal line must 'pull' the lower vocal line. Thus *wair say* plays an important role in keeping the group coordinated without need for a conductor. The structural *chee ga* and *wair say* sections of big song thus facilitate involvement of singers of varying ability in the singing of big song.

If the singers are unfamiliar with the melodic framework of the song usually the lower vocal line is taught first, and later the *wair say* singers are taught to *ep* ('decorate') this line by singing the upper vocal line. Usually children begin to learn big songs by learning *ga lak ooin* ('children's songs'). These big songs are about various topics that appeal to children, such as visiting Grandma's house or playing together. Except for some concluding phrases to each section, these songs are sung mostly in unison, giving children a chance to become familiar gradually with holding their own vocal line.

### Learning to Sing Big Song: How Songs are Taught

By the time Kam children come to learn big song formally they have had many years of exposure to singing activities, and so already have some familiarity with the melodic frameworks of the different categories of big song. Although the big song melodies may initially be taught together with the lyrics (particularly to show how the melodic framework must be adapted in that particular song), when the song is revised on subsequent occasions the teacher will often chant or recite each line of the song, and the children chant the same line, a process then replicated with each subsequent line. The rhyming patterns used for chanting the lyrics have no relationship at all to the sung rhythm of the lyrics in the actual song, but instead relate to the complex and highly structured arrangement of rhymes contained in the lyrics.<sup>30</sup> The Kam lyrics to the closing phrases of the big song called *Ban Baow Juuee* demonstrate typical big song syllabic and rhyming structure. The syllables for each line are usually ordered as 4 + 3 or 4 + 5, and contain main rhymes (given in bold, all rhyming on '-an') and internal rhymes

<sup>29</sup> *Wair say* is sometimes further divided into two parts sung alternately by separate individuals or groups of singers and known as *wair say guuin* ('upper part at the front') and *wair say luuin* ('upper part following/behind'). In Kam, *wair* = 'do'. Although the terms *say* and *may* are used as adjectives in other contexts to refer respectively to male and female animals, and also to small and large objects, it seems that the use of these terms in a singing context is for their reference to complementary division rather than with gender-related implications.



<sup>30</sup> The use of complex and highly structured rhyming patterns is also a well known and important feature of many other Chinese poetic forms.

(underlined, rhyming variously on ‘-aŋ’, ‘-a’, ‘-eŋ’ and ‘-i’):

... pet **ɬin** **kɛi** paŋ / **ɬin** pu **paŋ**  
 paŋ **ɬin** mok mjaŋ / **nɛm** **kɛi** ta  
 paŋ **ɬin** mok **ɾa** / **pa** sai **njaŋ**  
**ɬin** sak kui **kɛŋ** / **wɛŋ** **ɬi** li  
 ɬa hɛu mən **si** / **kɛi** li kun wɛŋ **njaŋ**<sup>31</sup>

Figure 5 shows two (of many) possible ways that the lyrics to the opening two phrases of the same song might be chanted. The chanting emphasises the syllables in bold and the length of time between each phrase is not fixed; despite the use of Western rhythmic figures to represent approximately the rhythms used by singers in a manner intelligible to a Western reader, in this chanted form of the lyrics there is no feeling of meter that continues from phrase to phrase. Regardless of which chanting rhythm might be utilised, the same rhythm would be used to chant both of the phrases.

**Figure 5.** Two possible ways of chanting the opening lines to the big song known as *Ban Baow Juuee*, a *ga sheeang* big song from Sheeam (accented syllables given in bold)

Two phrases of lyrics	hai <b>kɛi</b> to <b>ka</b> , pan pau <b>ɬui</b> Soi ti to <b>ka</b> , pan pau <b>saŋ</b>
Possible chanted rhythm 1	
Possible chanted rhythm 2	

In comparison, Figure 6 shows the way that the same two lines of lyrics might be sung. While the spacing of sung notes in the first phrase corresponds in a very general sense to the quicker beginning and slower ending of both the rhythms used for the chanted lyrics, the rhythm used in the second sung phrase has no relationship at all to either of the chanted rhythms. This clearly demonstrates the rhythmic differences between the sung form of the big song and the rhythms used to chant the lyrics of the songs as part of the learning process.

The process by which new big songs are created also confirms the absolute precedence of rhyming patterns over melodic or rhythmic material. As previously mentioned, to make a new big song the individual (or group) first devises new lyrics with appropriate rhyming

<sup>31</sup> *Ban Baow Juuee* (see footnote 26 for English translation; from ‘If the mountain top does not fall’). Transcriptions of the Sheeam dialect in IPA (as used here and in Figures 5 and 6) are based on the analysis outlined by Pan Yongrong in ‘Liping xian yong cong xiang jiu long cun dong yu diao cha bao gao 黎平县永从乡九龙村侗语调查报告[A Report on the Investigation of the Kam Language in Jiulong village, Yongcong township, Liping county],’ *Guizhou min zu diao cha juan er shi yi 2003* 贵州民族调查卷二十一 2003 [*The Twenty-First Volume of Research into Guizhou Ethnic Groups, 2003*] (Guiyang: Guizhou sheng min zu yan jiu suo [Nationalities Research Centre, Guizhou Province] and Guizhou sheng min zu yan jiu hui [Nationalities Research Council, Guizhou Province], 2005). The transcriptions given in this article do not include indication of the linguistic tones.

**Figure 6.** The same two phrases as given in Figure 5, as sung in a performance of the song by Jai Lao singers in June 2005. Since there is no regular sense of meter the placement of noteheads indicates their approximate occurrence in time (five second time intervals are marked in boxes above the stave). Vocables are given in brackets; the actual pitch centre (transcribed here as A below middle C) begins at ~209Hz (between A $\flat$  (~207Hz) and A (~220Hz)) and rises by the end of this excerpt to ~213Hz.

*Chee Ga* (solo section introductions) & *Wair Say* (upper vocal line: two or three singers divided at some points into 2 groups - *WS1* & *WS2*). *Chee Ga* & *Wair Say* singers sing with *Wair May* except during syllables indicated on this stave

*Wair May* (lower vocal line sung by all other singers). Where no sounds or lyrics are notated, the singers are silent.

(*Chee Ga*) , **5 sec**

Hai kei to ka pan pau zui ,

(*Wair May*)

Soi \_\_\_\_\_

(*Wair Say*) , **10** (*Wair Say*) **15**

to ka saŋ

ti to ka pan pau saŋ (e) (i) (i) (e)(əŋ)

(*WS1*) **20** , (*WS2*) , (*Chee Ga*) **25**

(ja) (ei)(ei) (ei) (ju) pan pau saŋ

(ei) (ja) (ei) (ju)

patterns and lyrical content, and only when the lyrics are complete are they then fitted to the melodic framework of one appropriate big song category.

Interestingly, in recent years when children learn to sing big song in the home of a song expert they sometimes write down the song lyrics using Chinese characters as they would in the school classroom. Most adult Kam women in Sheeam have never attended school, so spend a large amount of time chanting song lyrics to memorise them. However, many of the small number of Kam women who have attended school are encouraged by their friends to write down the song lyrics to help remind others in the group of the words during rehearsals.

### Learning to Sing Big Song: Aesthetic Considerations

Once the singers can remember the lyrics and melody of a song, the teacher may begin to comment on the quality of the singing. When the timing or pitch of a big song is not accurately co-ordinated song experts describe the singing as *git*, a term which in other contexts is used to refer to bites that wound (for example, *myong git* means 'mosquito bite'). In contrast,

when the singing is highly co-ordinated it is praised as being *dong* ('together').<sup>32</sup> Big songs are never conducted, so for this co-ordination to occur a remarkable degree of auditory and physical awareness is required. Besides achieving this through listening to the upper vocal line (as previously mentioned), such co-ordination also relies heavily upon co-ordinated breathing. In some phrases the singers must learn to sing together and breathe together, while in other sections the lower-part singers must stagger their breathing to produce a smooth and uninterrupted drone while two or three upper part singers sing alternating phrases. When a singing group does not achieve this correctly, sometimes the song expert will remind the singers of when they must all *wan sor* (literally, 'change breath') or 'breathe together.'

### Why Kam People Learn to Sing Big Song

When Kam villagers undertake various activities—whether going to work on the mountain, going to visit relatives or sitting at home in the evening—most people feel that these activities are more enjoyable when done together with others. Many Kam people enjoy singing, and so singing big song is thus an appealing way of spending time together with friends. For Kam women, many of whom cannot read and often cannot understand Chinese television broadcasts, learning to sing big song together in the evenings is also a particularly important form of entertainment. As mentioned previously, Kam people view singing as one of many activities one 'does' as a normal part of life, and in many instances people take part in the learning and performance of big song just as they would take part in any other village (or school) activity.<sup>33</sup> Agreeing to participate in a big-song-singing group also has important social significance, demonstrating mutual respect and the integration of an individual within the community.<sup>34</sup>

Although many Kam people enjoy the process of learning to sing big song, it is still considered important to have a purpose for learning—namely, an occasion for performing the songs.<sup>35</sup> In March 2008, when an adult women's singing group from Jai Lao was invited to sing at a festival in a nearby village, the group enjoyed spending many evenings learning and rehearsing a large repertoire of big songs in the weeks leading up to the festival. However, when the women attended the festival and were only asked to sing two big songs, many women commented that: 'it was a waste of time learning all those songs'. Although they had enjoyed the process of learning to sing, and although participation in the festival was welcomed as an opportunity to dress up and perform, a change from regular farm tasks and responsibilities, and a chance to visit another village, their reasons for learning big song were also related to being able to give a performance of the songs. This indicates that Kam singers gain certain

<sup>32</sup> The high degree of synchronicity achieved by big song singing groups is evident in the only commercially available recording of big song village performance in Sheeam (*Dong Folksongs from Liping, Guizhou Province*, track 11).

<sup>33</sup> With changes in Kam society earlier views of singing as something that everyone always does are changing; although people are no longer expected to learn to sing, singing is still accepted as a normal part of everyday activities.

<sup>34</sup> This perception of the self in relation to the wider community recalls Bakhtin's argument for the falsity of 'the "social" [as] usually thought of in binary opposition with the "individual"' (see V.N. Volosinov, transl. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [New York: Seminar Press, 1973] 34). Kam naming systems also refer to a person not as an individual but in terms of their relation to others (especially other family members).

<sup>35</sup> Usually this involves performance at New Year or at staged festivals; because staged performances provide a reason for learning big song they are helping in some respects to maintain the big song tradition.

benefits from big song performance that they do not gain from the process of learning big songs, and that Kam people learn to sing big song so that they will be able to benefit in some way from big song performances.

### Acquiring Cultural and Symbolic Capital from Big Song Performance

Through successfully performing big song Kam singers may acquire cultural and/or symbolic capital that brings the group material or economic benefit or higher status. Furthermore, in many instances the singing group is viewed as representative of a particular area of the village, or of an entire clan, village or region, and in such situations the acquired capital is also conferred on the entire community the group represents.<sup>36</sup> The successful big song performance depends on three criteria: the quality of the group's singing, the size of their big song repertoire, and the types of songs that comprise their repertoire. Thus big-song-singing groups who sing well and who have a large repertoire of what are deemed to be 'good' big songs are the groups that are praised and which are able to acquire these two forms of capital. In this usage, capital refers to 'anything that can be used to influence the behaviour of others or to aid in achieving desired goals.'<sup>37</sup>

When a singing group gains in a material way from performing big song, they do so via the acquisition of cultural capital. This form of capital has been defined as 'what the agent knows and is capable of doing; it can be used to generate privilege, products, income, or wealth.'<sup>38</sup> In the case of the Jai Lao singers attending the festival, their ability to sing Sheeam big song accorded them cultural capital which was an important factor in allowing them the privilege of being invited to sing and to enjoy several days of food and lodging in the host village. As previously mentioned, each big-song-singing district has its own specific repertoire of big song, and different groups from the one village or region each learn different songs from within that repertoire. Not only is the idea of big song as 'belonging' to a particular district also reflected in the Kam language—for example, when Sheeam big song (particularly *ga sheeam* from Sheeam) is sung in other districts it is known as *ga Sheeam* (literally, 'song-Sheeam')—but Sheeam singers are also considered to be the best performers of Sheeam big song.

In the past, members of a big-song-singing group would sometimes perform or teach their songs to Kam people in other areas in exchange for items that the group required, such as rice, cotton, tea oil (camellia oil) or chillies.<sup>39</sup> The material gain from this exchange shows that big songs functioned as a form of cultural capital. The recent use of Kam big song performances within the developing Kam tourism industry, and the payment of Kam singers, are further examples of how big song operates as a form of cultural capital to create financial benefits.

Discussion about big song amongst Kam villagers is frequently based on the view of big song as a form of communal symbolic capital or 'a form of honour or prestige ... that

<sup>36</sup> For example, at the March 2008 festival after the Sheeam singers sang two big songs, many of the host villagers were overheard commenting that 'Sheeam really sing well.'

<sup>37</sup> Alan Smart, 'Gifts, Bribes, and Guanxi: A Reconsideration of Bourdieu's Social Capital,' *Cultural Anthropology* 8.3 (1993): 390.

<sup>38</sup> This definition of Bourdieu's use of the term cultural capital is that given by Smart in 'Gifts, Bribes, and Guanxi' 392, drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital,' *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986) 243–48.

<sup>39</sup> When a category of newly taught big songs is absorbed into another village's repertoire, the category always retains the name of the home village in its title.



does not necessarily depend on particular relationships. Instead, it seems to be a generalised resource, so that breeding or social status may be generally influential within a society and open doors for those who possess it.<sup>40</sup> This is a widespread Kam understanding of big song, as the following story reveals.

In 2003, several big song groups (including a group from Sheeam) were invited to Guiyang (the capital of Guizhou Province) to perform at meetings for the development of an application to UNESCO for 'protection' of big song as World Intangible Heritage.<sup>41</sup> According to Wu Pinxian, a Sheeam song expert and one of my main song teachers, when the Sheeam group arrived to rehearse for the performance they discovered they would not be able to sing their most well-known big song (quoted in the title of this article). The song was to be sung instead in a so-called 'improved arrangement',<sup>42</sup> a form generally disliked by the village singers, by the professional county Arts Troupe.<sup>43</sup> After the Sheeam singers told the professional troupe that they 'had no more songs left because you [professionals] took this song and all our other good songs' they were 'given' the song back to sing; eventually even the professional group agreed that the performance of the song given by the Sheeam village singers was better than any other group could give.<sup>44</sup> In this account, the symbolic prestige accorded to performing big song is clear.

### Conclusion

In this article I have outlined the process of big song learning that occurs in Jai Lao and many other Kam villages in the big-song-singing region. This process includes the formation of big-song-singing groups, the allocation of different musical responsibilities within each group, the important role Kam song experts play as teachers for these groups, and how Kam song experts teach the singers to sing big song. I have also discussed the most important changes to this process of learning to sing big song that have occurred in recent years: the formation of big-song-singing groups within many Kam schools, and the involvement of adults in the learning and performance of big song. Both these changes are influenced by government promotion of big song as a symbol of an artificial pan-Kam identity and the increase in use of big song within the developing Kam tourism industry.

Many Kam people learn to sing big song because it is an enjoyable activity that is a part of the normal activities of Kam village life, and because learning to sing with others has important

<sup>40</sup> Summary of Bourdieu's definition of symbolic capital as given by Smart, 'Gifts, Bribes, and Guanxi' 393.

<sup>41</sup> China's applications (such as the one mentioned here) to the UNESCO Masterpieces Program received much national media coverage, and Intangible Cultural Heritage continues to feature prominently in awards, meetings, and media promotion. In Sheeam and many other Kam regions, besides the staging of biannual large-scale big song performances, the alleged importance placed on 'protecting' such intangible cultural heritage has not been enacted in any practical way.

<sup>42</sup> Such 'improved arrangements' are those which have undergone a process that is known in Chinese as 'artistic improvement' (*yi shu jia gong* 艺术加工). Usually this involves altering the melody, lyrics, rhythm, timbre and other basic musical parameters so that the song conforms more closely to either mainstream Chinese musical aesthetics or to the aesthetic expectations mainstream Chinese composers have regarding the music of China's minority groups. In either event, the purpose is to make the song marketable to a wider audience.

<sup>43</sup> This version of the song can be heard on *Dong Folksongs from Liping, Guizhou Province*, track 4. Sheeam village performances are currently being archived with the Pacific And Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) <[www.paradisec.org.au](http://www.paradisec.org.au)>.

<sup>44</sup> Wu Pinxian, personal communication, 2006.

social significance. They also learn big song in preparation for big song performances, and the cultural and symbolic capital singers acquire through performances in both these contexts is also an important reason why many Kam people learn big song.

In examining how and why Kam people learn to sing big song, it is apparent that in both cases there is a close relationship between the learning of big song and other aspects of Kam society beyond the context of singing big song. During my fieldwork in Sheeam, a number of people in their sixties, seventies and eighties told me stories from their childhood of inviting a song expert to their village to live and teach for weeks or months at a time in order to prepare singing groups for performance in the *dare low* at New Year. When families could barely maintain their own subsistence lifestyles, the difficulty in feeding an extra person for such a long time demonstrates the importance placed on big song learning. It is unlikely that this situation would have occurred had the tradition not been so closely interrelated with so many different aspects of Kam village life.

## APPENDIX

Glossary of Kam words used in this article (according to pronunciation of the second subdialect of Southern Kam as spoken in Sheeam).

'Essay phonetics' orthography used in this article <sup>1</sup>	Spelling in IPA (also used in musical transcriptions) <sup>2</sup>	Spelling in official Kam orthography <sup>3</sup>	English translation
baert	[pet]	beed*	Fish (n.)
Ban Baow Juuee	[pan pau ɰui]	Banx baov juiv	Literally, 'Friends say you are proud'. This is the title of the most well-known big song from Sheeam.
biba lao	[pi pa lau]	bi* ba* laox	Literally, 'pipa – big'; all Kam pipa are 4-string plucked lutes.
chee ga	[tɰi ka]	qit kgal	Literally, 'begin song'; used to refer to the solo beginning to each section of a big song.
dare low	[te ləu]	dee* lou*	Large wooden tower built in many Southern Kam villages where public performances of big song are held.
deeuu	[tɰiu]	diu*	Chanted sentences or short verses exchanged between groups in the <i>dare low</i> after the conclusion of each <i>gup</i> .

<sup>1</sup> This orthography attempts to conform to commonly accepted English pronunciation, including the following: *ai* as in 'eye'; *air* as in 'air'; *am* as in 'arm'; *ang* as in '(y)oung'; *ao/aow* as in '(c)ow'; *ee* as in '(s)ee'; *j* as in J(une); *oh* as in (t)oe, *oo* as in (w)oo(d); *ts* as in '(bi)ts'; *up* as in '(c)up'; *uu* as in '(y)ou'.

<sup>2</sup> IPA notation of Sheeam dialect is according to Pan Yongrong's analysis in 'A Report on the Investigation of the Kam Language in Jiulong village.' However, indication of the linguistic tone is not included here.

<sup>3</sup> Ou Hengyun, ed., *Cic Deenx Gaeml Gax [Kam/Han Dictionary]* (Beijing: Min zu chu ban she [Nationalities Press], 2004) was used to derive the Kam orthographic notation. In the single official orthography that has been developed for all the various dialects of Kam, the final letter of each word is used to indicate tone not sound. There is significant variation between the pronunciation of different dialects, and I have used an asterisk instead of a final tone-marking letter for words where I am uncertain of the standard orthographical tone for that particular word as it is spoken in Sheeam dialect.

Article	IPA	Kam	English Translation
dong	[toŋ]	dongc	Together, 'togetherness'
dor (falling tone)	[to]	doh	Bean(s)
dor (high flat tone)	[to]	dos	A verb that is used before various nouns to describe the 'doing' of various activities including singing, fishing, planting, studying, etc.
ep	[ep]	ep*	Word used to refer to the decoration of the upper vocal line above the lower line. Literally translates as 'to change in an unusual way.'
ga deeit	[ka tit]	kgal did*	One category of big song known in Sheeam, said by some to originate from the place <i>Deeit Wang</i> (known in Chinese as <i>Wang Dong</i> 往洞, in Congjiang county, Guizhou province).
ga gaow-sn	[ka qɛu sin]	kgal gaos sin*	One category of big song known in Sheeam, said by some to originate from the place <i>Gaow-sn</i> (known in Chinese as <i>Gaozeng</i> 高增, in Congjiang county, Guizhou province).
ga hwiew	[ka hweu]	kgal hwiu*	One category of big song known in Sheeam.
ga lak ooin	[ka lak un]	kgal lak* uns	Literally, 'song – children'; a category of big song that children learn when they first begin to learn big song.
ga lao	[ka lau]	kgal laox	Big song. (In Kam, <i>ga</i> = song, <i>lao</i> = big, old)
ga lart	[ka lat]	kgal lad*	Literally, 'song – drawn-out'. A large Kam song genre including various categories of song. <i>Ga lart</i> are sung privately, late in the evening, between a small group of young men and women.
ga ma	[ka ma]	kgal ma*	One category of big song known in Sheeam. In some other Kam subdialects the word <i>ma</i> has the same meaning as the Kam word <i>lao</i> , so in some areas <i>ga lao</i> is known as <i>ga ma</i> .
ga sheeang	[ka ʂan]	kgal xang*	One category of big song known in Sheeam and in many other big-song-singing regions (although there is a different repertoire in each region). The most important big song category and the one considered indigenous to each region.
ga shor shee-aow	[ka ʂo ʂau]	kgal xot xau*	Literally, 'song – school'; name by which many Kam villagers refer to the arranged versions of Kam songs that their children learn at school. The Kam word for 'school' derives from the local pronunciation of the Chinese word for 'school'— <i>xue xiao</i> 学校.
ga sor	[ka so]	kgal soh	One category of big song known in Sheeam and in many other big-song-singing regions. Songs in this category often feature imitation of the sounds of birds or insects.

Article	IPA	Kam	English Translation
gaow ga	[kau ka]	gaos kgal	Literally, 'group – song'; the name for a big-song-singing group.
git	[kit]	gids	A bite that wounds (eg. <i>myong</i> (mosquito) <i>git</i> = mosquito bite); also used to describe bad singing.
gup	[kup]	gabs	In the <i>dare low</i> , big songs are always sung in sets of three that are called <i>gup</i> .
lair	[le]	leec	Book, study (equivalent to the Chinese word <i>shu</i> 书)
mhyor	[mjo]	mjo*	Translated in this article as 'circle singing'; the name of the activity when participants sing <i>yeh</i> song while walking slowly around in a circle in single file.
nam	[nɛm]	naemx	Water
Nhgen	[ɲen]	Hgen*	Older name for Jai Lao.
oy-hoy-ding	[oi hoi ting]	oil hoic jingh	One category of big song known in Sheeam, usually used to begin singing in the <i>dare low</i> . In Sheeam it is referred to as <i>may oom geng</i> .
Sa	[sa]	Sax	Name of the most important Kam deity; also translates as 'paternal grandmother.'
sang ga	[saŋ ka]	sangh kgal	Song expert
Sheeam	[ʃeum]	Xum*	Big-song singing region in Liping county, Guizhou province where I was based from 2004 to 2006; known in Chinese as <i>Sanlong</i> 三龙.
Sor Yam	[so jɛm]	so* yaem*	An underworld figure (mentioned in many Kam songs) who has a book in which he writes the date we will die.
wair	[we]	weex	Do
wair may	[we mɛi]	weex meix	Lower vocal part in big song.
wair say	[we sɛi]	weex seik	Upper vocal part in big song. When this part is further divided into two, the two upper parts are sung alternately by different singers and are known as <i>wair say guuin</i> and <i>wair say luuin</i> .
wan sor	[wan so]	wan soh	Literally, 'change – breath'; to breathe in.
yeh	[je]	yeeh	Kam song genre involving solo statement and choral repetition of the statement using a similar melody. Sung during <i>mhyor</i> circle singing at important celebrations.
yit	[jit]	yit*	To pull (e.g. the upper vocal line 'pulls' or 'leads changes to' the lower vocal line).
Jai Lao	[ʃai lɛu]	xaih laox	'Big Village', officially known in Chinese as <i>Jiulong cun</i> 九龙村, one of the two large villages in Sheeam