

On the Folk Song as the Symbol of Ethnic Identity*

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This paper investigates and explores how the folk song operates in the Bai society from the theoretical perspective of pragmatics. In order to explore the deep relationship between a kind of language use and the symbol of ethnicity among ethnic group members, this empirical study is carried out in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan province where the majority of the Bai concentrate. According to this field survey, it is found that the content and performance of the Bai folk song can serve as a form of social behavior as well as a symbol of ethnic identity.

Keywords: the Bai, the folk song, ethnicity, identity

Introduction

The term “identity” was originally created as a philosophical concept, referring to the uniform principle that two things are the same. In modern logic and set theory identity refers to a symmetrical, transitive, relation as the “two-place predicate” that holds only between a thing and itself. Erickson (1959) contributed to the meaning of “identity” by adopting the concept “self identity” and distinguishing “self identity” from “collective identity”. For Erikson, “identity” is actually answering the question “Who am I?” or “Who are we?”. Since that, theoretical research on ethnic identity has its roots in the writings of Erikson (1959; 1968) and the empirical work of Marcia (1966; 1980). Nearly 20 years later, there is an international network of investigators whose research efforts are focused on the study of ethnic identity (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1983; Cross, 1978; Parham & Helms, 1981), they began to use Erikson and Marcia’s ideas as a framework for understanding identity formation among ethnic and racial minority youth. From that time on, the strength of ethnic identity has also been widely discussed and measured among ethnic group members.

Ethnic identity is different from race in terms of visible features, but it is more expansive, including traditional customs, shared language, cultural heritage, and, in some cases, nationality and geographic history (Hecht & Ribeau, 1991; Smith & Silva, 2011; Wong & Longshore, 2008). Phinney and Ong (2007) propose two constructs that comprise ethnic identity: commitment and exploration. Commitment is defined as the pride someone has in their belonging to or the pride a person has in the accomplishments of their ethnic group

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(Phinney, 2000; Smith & Silva, 2011). Exploration includes several factors but largely encompasses the amount of effort a person expends on finding out more about their ethnic group, their accomplishments, traditions, and customs. Therefore, the concept “Ethnic identity” has such wide currency in social and anthropological studies, because ethnic and racial identities are central in shaping individuals’ values, beliefs, goals, and behaviors (Leong & Chou, 1994). Social psychology research has also shown that feeling part of a particular social group is an important aspect of individuals’ sense of self (Tajfel, 1981). Having a secure social identity (i.e., the part of an individual’s identity that relates to his or her membership in a certain social group) has been linked to feelings of positive self-worth and psychological stability (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994). Ethnic identity, which is involved with the study of a sense of belonging and commitment, or of having common values and attitudes, is becoming an increasingly important research topic in recent years. As observed in the previous studies, ethnic identity is bonded by shared interests, institutions, and culture (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, p. 86), further examination also indicates that ethnic identity is used interchangeably with ethnic identification, which involves lasting and robust sense of connection to a social group (Tajfel, 1978) that encompasses self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to a group, and favorable attitudes toward one’s group (Phinney, 1990).

As mentioned above, these previous studies of ethnicity will help to lay theoretical foundation for this present discussion that focuses on the the Bai folk songs, which have clear connotations of being minority-related. Accordingly, when this definition is applied to minority groups from pragmatics, we can have a better understanding of how they have maintained a feeling of cohesion as a group and practice elements of their culture of origin. In this sense, an emphasis on sense of ethnic identity is indeed showing respect to ethnic wisdom, which constitutes a prerequisite for ethnic unity and progress. Meanwhile, a pragmatic approach into the Bai folk song arises out of the need to complement the previous research. Although it has been the focus of the Bai songs in recent years, which mostly involve the ideas concerning the rhythm and tone. there are still some issues that need to be explored within a pragmatic field. Thus, one of the purposes of this research is to determine whether the Bai folk song can constitute a sense of ethnic identity based on an empirical investigation. It is also hoped that this study will contribute to further insight into social behavior both theoretically and methodologically. Since the aim of this research is to claim that the Bai folk as a kind of language use is regarded as an ethnic identity, which is associated with the content and practice.

The Lyrics of the Bai Folk Song

The folk song, which generally describes the process or product of the development of the Bai society, can be regarded mainly as a marker whose function is to maintain or strengthen sense of ethnic identity. Since the ancient times, the role of this kind of folk song has been commonplace in the Bai society. Further investigation into its content can indicate that sense of ethnic identity and ethnic identification are almost involved whenever the performance occurs, this is because the descriptive content is generally made up of seven or eight sentences, which vividly present such information as the Bai history, religion, culture and philosophy. More specifically, the performance activity is also unique form of art, since the singers are participating in this performance, they need to use a special musical instrument which is equipped with a dragon head on its body (it is also called *The Three Strings*), which also highlights ethnic identity of the singer. We take *The Loach Tone* as an example, this

folk song has gained higher popularity with the Bai people who live in Jianchuan county. After analyzing its descriptive lyrics, we can understand the historical background, social condition and political situation where the Bai lived in the past, we can conclude that the Bai had low self-esteem, a sense of worthlessness and inferiority during that special period, because the Bai individual consider himself as a worthless creature was helplessly trapped in a small lake, which was expelled and finally swallowed by these merciless men. For they are weak, unassertive, passive and deprived of freedom and right, we can also conclude their membership in a less valued group who were governed by the leading or majority group. With regard to social status and economic conditions, many other folk songs which were created in the same period also show that the association between the individual from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds could have more limited access to a strong ethnic identity. In contrast to the content of these songs created in the old days, many modern folk songs convey the new image of the Bai society where minority group members report secure or a higher levels of self-esteem, such as in the song of *Beautiful Scenery of March in Dali*, which described how the Bai enjoy the comfort and happiness in a new society where they can achieve higher sense of ethnic identity. Thus, the use of the folk song, which presents the dynamic process in which the sense of individual ethnic identity forms and develops for the Bai individual. According to Phinney (1990), developmentally-sensitive model can be used to explain ethnic identity formation. Individuals' attitudes toward, and identification with, their ethnic group are thought to develop over time through exposure to beliefs about the group and to positive or negative experiences with others within and outside the group. Thus, the study of the folk song as ethnic identity is of great theoretical significance. As a typical form of art, it constitutes a picture which characterizes geographical distribution, ethnic name, historical origin, language, economic life, material culture, spiritual culture and psychological qualities. It is evident that this constitutes a very important part of the Bai language use and forms an integral component of the Bai history and culture. Thus, this investigation into the folk songs can help us to have a better understanding of how linguistic expression is used for ethnic purpose.

The Performance of the Bai Folk Song

We firstly examine the constituent part of the lyrics of the Bai folk song, including language, region, history, and custom. We also investigate the Bai individual attitudes and behaviors towards the folk song. By taking the related literature into consideration, it is hypothesized that individual's ethnic identity is directly related to their choice of the folk song in daily lives and involvement with the performance. More specifically, the Bai individual who have positive attitude and active behavior towards the Bai folk song will have greater sense of belonging as well as those with greater exposure to the Bai folk song.

The statistical method mainly uses the statistics to obtain how the ethnic members hold attitudes towards their ethnic identities. Thus this present paper adopts empirical research. To ensure the reliability of the findings of the research, field survey is developed to investigate the Bai individual's attitudes and behavior towards the folk song so as to examine how ethnic identity relates to the degree to which individuals identify with, and accept or commit to, the beliefs, customs, or values of their cultural groups. Just as Phinney (1990, p. 510), he proposed that the most serious need in ethnic identity research is to devise reliable and valid measures of ethnic identity.

Individual Interview

Individual interviews and semi-structured interviews are adopted in the present research. Through face-to-face conversations with the composers and singers, we can have a better understanding how they express their attitude towards the Bai folk song.

Some questions were developed and used in semi-structured interview as follows:

Question (1) "Are you proud of being a Bai singer?"

Question (2) "Can you sing or create a folk song spontaneously?"

Question (3) "Do your friends favor the folk song?"

Question (4) "Do your parents teach you to sing a folk song in your childhood?"

Question (5) "Can you explain the lyrics of a famous folk song?"

Question (6) "Do you participate in annual Bai folk song competition?"

Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaires with an attitude scale will be used to investigate the Bai's awareness of the folk song among the Bai participants who are presented with a pair of statements (e.g., "I like the Bai folk song in my life" or "I don't like the Bai folk song in my life") and are asked to select the statement with which they most agreed. Next, participants are asked to rate the statement they chose as being "Sort of true" or "Really true" of them. Finally, the participants are asked to respond on a scale ranging from 0 (Strongly disagree) to 3 (Strongly agree). All questionnaires are administered orally to assist participants with reading difficulties, with the items also being provided on paper. They are also fully informed of the procedures and are asked to report general background information, including gender, age, education level.

The field survey provides evidence for the hypothesized model that sense of ethnic identity is correlated to the folk song, for these results reveal that: (1) The Bai who favor the folk songs have a relatively strong sense of ethnic identity and their sense of belonging to their ethnicity is also higher. (2) The Bai who have perceptions about the Bai folk songs have higher level of ethnic identity scores (3) the Bai who are exposed to the folk songs at a younger age have stronger sense of ethnic identity. (4) the Bai who have better involvement with performance have higher ethnic identification. (5) Among the Bai, ethnic identity was also shown to be significantly and positively associated with the mother and father's experience.

It is evident that the folk song perform its ethnicity in two ways. In the first place, it serves to demonstrate uniqueness of cognition about the world where they inhabit, including linguistic forms, historical background, religious belief, traditional custom and cultural activity. In the second place, the performance of folk song which is involved with linguistic interaction can convey individual sense of ethnic identity, ranging from the lowest level to the highest level. Thus, this study can to some extent improve our knowledge of ethnic wisdom and therefore of the working of ethnic values, which contribute to diversified and integrated national identity, and maintaining better ethnic cohesiveness and ethnic unity. Thus, the sense of identity has been shown to be particularly beneficial for ethnic awareness of preserving minority groups when individual awareness in traditional culture provides him with a more positive attitude toward his own language and identity. This is why ethnic minority member who adopt a strong ethnic identity may further feel a sense of confidence, assertiveness for the use of his own language in turn, translates to the display of cultural confidence.

Conclusion

As discussed above, the study is to explore folk song a symbol ethnic identity and the relationship between the language use and ethnic behavior. It is hoped that this research provides additional support for future exploration into the ethnic identity in the process of border formation concerning history and social changes. Furthermore, the model we develop for measurement of ethnic identity and identification can be extended to the study of uniqueness of cultural tradition and religious rituals in the Bai society.

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