

Cantonese Children's Songs in Hong Kong

Lily Chen-Hafteck

Roehampton Institute London & University of Pretoria

Introduction

A century of British colonial rule over a population of Chinese majority has resulted in a special culture of Hong Kong. While the local people have maintained a considerable amount of the traditional Chinese culture, a very strong Western influence is also prominent. Thus, there is a mixture of Chinese and Western culture in all aspects of life.

In music education, however, most teachers adopt Western methods. The songs used at school are frequently Western nursery rhymes or composed children's songs in Western styles with Cantonese text. This paper attempts to investigate the children's songs in Hong Kong and to explore the pitch relationship between text and melody in Cantonese children's songs.

The pitch relationship between text and melody in Cantonese songs

Most people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese as their mother-tongue. Cantonese is one of the Chinese dialects in southern China. It is a tonal language with nine tones: High Falling/ Constant, High Rising, Middle Constant, Low Falling, Low Rising, Low Constant, High Clipped, Middle Clipped and Low Clipped (Chao, 1947¹). The characteristics of these linguistic tones include pitch properties such as the relative pitch levels, the contour of pitch movement as well as duration of pitch, within each syllable. Linguistic tones can determine the meaning of words — when the same syllable is spoken with a different tone, it can be a different word with a different meaning.

Due to the restricted relative pitch levels of the language, there are certain limitations to the melodic contour of songs created by Cantonese text. Writing Cantonese songs in which the melodies fit the characteristics of the language is not as free as writing songs in other non-tonal languages. To make the text sound most meaningful in the songs, the pitch relationship between text and melody has to be observed.

If the melodies in Cantonese songs are not matched with the linguistic tones of the text, it sounds like singing songs with nonsense texts. Furthermore, Blacking (1967) has commented that setting tones to match a melody is not just a matter of intelligibility, but it is also a feel of aesthetic impulse. However, in collections of Cantonese songs, such considerations in song-writing are only observed in pop

songs and traditional operas. No attempt of this kind is made by the composers and lyric-writers of most children's songs used at schools in Hong Kong.

Songs commonly sung at schools in Hong Kong

The local Chinese culture is overshadowed by Western influence in the area of music education. Traditional Chinese children's songs have not been preserved and most children's songs now sung at schools in Hong Kong are slightly modified translations of Western nursery rhymes. They have adopted melodies, usually in an unchanged form, to which translated Cantonese texts are added. Even those children's songs that are newly-composed have Western melodies and their Cantonese texts almost always disregard the relationship between melodic contour and linguistic tones. For example, there are Cantonese versions of the famous English nursery rhymes such as 'London Bridge is falling down' and 'Twinkle twinkle little star' which are very popular among Hong Kong children.

An example of such commonly sung children's songs is provided in Figure 1 located at the close of this paper. It has an adapted melody from 'London Bridge is falling down'. Both the melodic contour and the tonal inflections of the text² are provided so that we can compare and see the degree of 'mismatch' in those songs.

It has been a long time during which children have been taught tone-mismatched songs at school. These songs originated in the 1960s during which there was a trend towards westernization. Everything that is western was favoured. At that time, songs in Cantonese were mainly Cantonese operas and film songs. Both were considered as interesting only for the lower classes. In education, the more 'high-class' Western songs were taught, translating the foreign languages directly into Chinese without considering that they were not tone-matched. The first batch of songs were mainly taken from songbooks used in the U.K. and published by the Oxford University Press (W. W. Chan, personal communication, March 1, 1996).

Such songs have been sung for such a long time that they have become 'normal' and nobody bothers to match the tones of their text. In fact, tone-mismatch has been regarded as a characteristic of children's songs and their popularity among children in Hong Kong shows that children actually enjoy singing them.

Traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes

Although traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes are regarded as songs by the Cantonese people, they do not follow the definition of songs in the Western sense which always implies fixed melodies and rhythm. They are not meant to be sung to music, but are recited. Due to the linguistic tones that the Cantonese words carry, the recitation has a 'melody' within it. This 'melody' can be regarded as the natural melody of the language. In fact, they represent a genre of children's songs in which music and language integrate.

Most children's songs in Western culture belong to a separate category, with their own style, which is usually simpler than other adult songs (Campbell, 1991). However, this fact cannot be generalized to other cultures. Blacking (1967) found that the Venda children's songs are not easier than adult songs, though they still have a different style. I find that this is also true for the traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes. Many of these traditional nursery rhymes, with their long and

complicated texts, can be quite difficult for children. This is because many of them are written to be sung by adults to children, and not to be sung by children themselves. However, from my experience I found that Cantonese-speaking children enjoying listening to them even though they cannot reproduce them fully. This is like children who enjoy listening to classical music although they do not have the means of reproducing it.

Each of the Cantonese traditional nursery rhymes has many different versions. This is because the songs are transmitted orally and the performers are always creative when singing the songs. They usually make alterations to reflect the newly-changed conditions or their own personality. Some songs are created by adults and some are created by children. Tam (1981) argues that they have four main functions: to reflect the life-style of the common people; to offer moral lessons; to voice complaints about the inequality of society; and to help children to acquire knowledge about everyday life, facilitate in children's games, lull children or babies to sleep, develop children's imagination and provide amusement. Thus, they are valuable source for the sociological study of the life in old China and Hong Kong.

However, I have observed that such traditional materials have disappeared from Hong Kong modern society and nowadays, they are known only by the elderly. Kwok (1986) proposed two main reasons for their rapid decline in recent years. The first cause is the decline of professional Chinese baby-sitters, the last people to transmit Cantonese nursery rhymes, who were replaced by Filipino or Thai maids. Another cause is the rapid changes of Hong Kong during the last few decades which has transformed Hong Kong from a small village into a big city. The content of those traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes are no longer appropriate in the context of modern Hong Kong. Parents nowadays consider them too 'old-fashioned' for their children and do not feel it important to transmit them.

Kwok (1986) also discovered some linguistic characteristics in traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes which are found in classical Chinese poems, such as the use of end rhymes, the use of regular pulse, the frequent repetition of words, the presence of metaphors and similes. Not only do these techniques help to give a sense of cohesion to the lengthy and varied texts, but they also give certain artistic value to the rhymes. Thus, in spite of their colloquial style which resembles everyday speech, they never sound merely like conversation.

An example of a Cantonese nursery rhyme, *Dim chung chung* (Touch the bug) is shown in Figure 2. Pronunciation is given. Figure 2, located at the end of this paper, shows the tones of each syllable below the pronunciation, and their rhythmic value is listed above the words.

An empirical study on the singing of Hong Kong children

In view of the present situation of Cantonese children's songs in Hong Kong, I (Chen-Hafteck, 1996) had conducted an empirical study to look at the effects of the pitch relationship between text and melody in Cantonese songs on young children's singing. It consisted of two experiments on Hong Kong children aged three to five. Experiment One involved twelve Cantonese-speaking children who sang three Cantonese children's songs: a tone-mismatched song (where the melody mismatches the linguistic tones in the text); a tone-matched song (where they match); and a traditional Cantonese nursery rhyme. In Experiment Two, 194 children sang a diatonic song with three different texts: two groups of Cantonese-speaking children

singing the song with tone-mismatched and tone-matched Cantonese texts respectively; one group of English-speaking children singing the song with an English text.

In both experiments, individual singing of the experimental songs of all children was recorded at the end of one month. Pitch analysis was performed by aural transcription in the former experiment and computer in the latter. Then, scores of pitch accuracy was calculated. Other aspects of singing were also observed and analysed.

One of the most interesting findings from this study is that there was no significant difference in the overall pitch accuracy between singing the Cantonese tone-matched and tone-mismatched songs. This tells us that pitch accuracy cannot be affected by simply singing songs with different texts, but rather, it is influenced by more long-term factors such as training. As mentioned earlier on, children in Hong Kong always sing tone-mismatched songs at school and so they are in fact well-trained in singing these songs. Thus, though the text-melody relationship in tone-mismatched songs is not as close as tone-matched songs, the children performed both kinds of songs similarly in terms of pitch accuracy.

Although tone-matched and tone-mismatched songs did not show any differences in effects on pitch accuracy, effects on other aspects of singing were evident. Firstly, the tone-matched songs were learnt more easily and quickly. The children had expressed their view that they found the tone-matched songs much easier to learn than the tone-mismatched songs. In fact, it was found that they needed less time to be able to recall the tone-matched songs completely than the tone-mismatched songs. Furthermore, the linguistic tonal articulations were manifested more clearly in tone-matched songs than tone-mismatched songs. For instance, the tonal inflection of rising tones was demonstrated in children's singing of tone-matched songs, characterized by an upward glide in pitch within the word with rising tone. This phenomenon did not occur in the singing of tone-mismatched songs. Concerning text recall, children also showed a better performance in tone-matched songs than tone-mismatched songs. Therefore, to sum up the findings of all these effects, the pitch relationship in Cantonese songs indeed has illustrated some influence on children's singing.

Another important finding is that although diatonic songs are Western and it was assumed that they match English text more appropriately than Cantonese text, the English-speaking children did not perform the experimental song in English text as accurately as the Cantonese-speaking children who performed it in Cantonese text. This suggests that pitch ability in tonal language can also be a factor affecting pitch accuracy in singing. The differences between the Cantonese- and English-speaking children may be due to the pitch ability in Cantonese language, which has given the Cantonese-speaking children some advantages in singing accuracy over English-speaking children. This is a significant finding which needs to be further explored in future research.

Conclusion

Children's songs are important to the music education of future generation. Their significance should not be ignored. In Hong Kong, there is a need to review the repertoire of children's songs. Due to the tonal nature of Cantonese, the relationship between text and melody in songs should be considered. Although whether a song is tone-matched does not seem to affect pitch accuracy, other effects such as level of

difficulty, rate of learning, singing style and text recall have been found. Furthermore, it seems that the pitch ability in Cantonese language can possibly enhance the singing accuracy of children. Then, children should be encouraged to sing songs which respect the pitch reflections of Cantonese so that they are more sensitive to the pitch in their language while singing. It is suggested that music teachers in Hong Kong should include some traditional materials in their teaching as they are songs which are most suited to the mother-tongue of children.

On the whole, text-melody relationship in songs is a complicated issue, especially with regard to tonal languages. The research reported in this paper is inadequate to clarify this issue. Future research in this area is highly recommended.

Reference List

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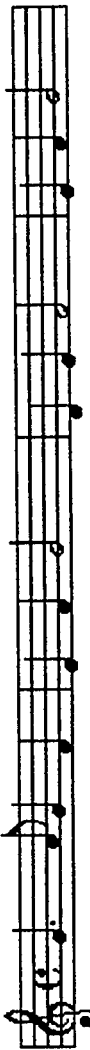
Endnotes

1. I have followed Chao's classification of Cantonese tones but modified their names. This is because Chao translated directly from the Chinese names of the tones and I find it more difficult for non-Chinese speaking readers to grasp the concept of the different tones with such direct translations.

2. The graphic representation of Cantonese tonal inflections adapted in this paper follows the system illustrated in Chen-Hafteck (1996).

Figures 1 and 2 follow:


Melody



Text

有 雙 雀 仔 跌 落 水 跌 落 水

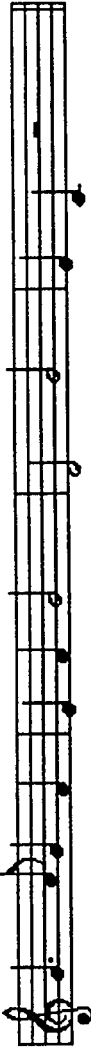
Tones



Translation

There is a birdie, falling into water (3 times),

Melody



Text

有 雙 雀 仔 跌 落 水 被 水 冲 去

Tones



Translation

There is a birdie, falling into water, washed away by the water.

Figure 1 - A popular children's song in Hong Kong: Cantonese version of *London Bridge is Falling Down* (A Birdie is falling into water).

Figure 2 - A traditional Cantonese nursery rhyme: *Dim chung chung* (Touch the bug)

Rhythm	
Text	點 蟲 蟲 蟲 蟲 飛 飛 去 邊 飛 去 荔 枝 樹
Pronunciation	<i>dim chung chung chung chung fei fei heui bin fei heui lai ji get</i>
Tones	
Translation	Touch the bug, the bug fly, fly to where, fly to lychee fields,
Rhythm	
Text	荔 枝 熟 無 定 價 價 去 邊 價 去 你 個 鼻 哥 尖
Pronunciation	<i>lai ji suk mou deng buk buk heui bin buk heui nei go bel go jim</i>
Tones	
Translation	Lychees are ripe, no-where to land, land on where, land on your nose's tip.