“Listening to China: sonic articulations of a nation”: an introduction

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Listening to music is pleasurable. The simple joy brought on by music is ephemeral and ineffable. But is that all that music can do for us? Are there other possible responses that music elicits? As a form of human behavior and embodied cultural expression, music is produced by people in context and its expressive modalities are culturally constituted by performance code and sonic repertoire. Similar to using language and seeing images, listening to music is a process by which meaning is produced. It is a form of knowledge production about the world, culture, and society through sound.

The contributors to this special issue recognize music’s penetrating power as infinite and multidirectional. As the sounds of music reverberate beyond what meets the ears, we need new modes of critical sonic engagement. Beyond attending to and appreciating beautiful melodies and colorful timbres, what can we learn about China from its music? How does the affective power of Chinese music offer unique perspectives on modern China? This special issue positions itself in conversation with broader scholarship in ethnomusicology, historical musicology, sound studies, and media studies, applying these diverse disciplinary perspectives to the Chinese context. Together the articles address the multifarious ways China is produced in music and sound.

The idea of publishing a special issue on Chinese music came up during a meeting in Beijing with Austin Luo Jun and his students discussing how best to utilize Chinese expressive culture to learn about China. This special issue was a direct outcome of that conversation. I appreciate Austin’s enthusiasm for supporting the idea. I am grateful for the contributors for their thoughtful provoking articles. I wish to acknowledge the comments from Heather Diamond and Adam Kielman on an earlier version of this essay.

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Ethnomusicologists have long held that music is key to understanding culture and society. Alan Merriam's 1964 seminal work *The Anthropology of Music* argues that music and society can be studied through three analytic levels—music sound, conceptualization about music, and behavior in relation to music (Merriam 1980). His groundbreaking model opened up a new intellectual space to study the role of music in human life. Many scholars continue to refine his approach in exploring the social embeddedness of music in culture and society, resulting in nuanced understandings of the intricate relationship between music and the human (see for example Nettl 2005; Seeger 2004; Feld 1990; Stokes 1994; Seeger 2004; Turino 2008; Waterman 1990; Erlman 1991; Ochoa and Maria 2014, etc.). These scholars assert that the performance, production, and consumption of music are processes central to identity formation and the production of social values and cultural ethos. As Thomas Turino observes that music and public expressive cultural practices are “a primary way that people articulate the collective identities that are fundamental to forming and sustaining social groups” (Turino 2008, p. 2). Seeger (2004) and Stokes (1994) further maintain that a society can be located in music and songs.

Adopting these theoretical insights as a foundation, the nine articles in this special issue showcase a multi-dimensional Chinese soundscape spanning from the early twentieth century to the present. Each essay highlights a particular musical practice or phenomenon and explores how it is produced, consumed, and heard within the logic of the Chinese nation. The dynamic processes that go into various music productions unravel society's complex and often tumultuous conditions. Taken together, the articles explore some of the ways the shifting contours of China's sociopolitical landscape drastically transformed the Chinese soundscape, expressive culture, and aesthetics in significant ways since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The assumption underlying all these contributions is that modern China is a dynamic nation and not a static monolith. Its modernity was a construction based on processes of negotiation and compromise. By examining instances of modern sonic articulation in different temporal and spatial frames, contributors show that the concept of China was an aggregate of multiple actions, projections, and imaginations. They view all musical acts, including performance, composing, and listening as practices that help to produce the creates the nation and a sense of Chineseness. Each article engages the central question of how music and sound create meaning in contexts, be it national, social, religious, or cultural.

The musical genres represented in this issue include folk songs, ceremonial music, minority music, opera, Western-style composition, and pop music. Each genre is embedded in ideological particularities and modernist agendas. The content-rich case studies highlight the unique ways music is made meaningful in different contexts, thereby rendering musicians as active agents in broader cultural processes. The focus on the efficacy of sound, production, and audibility enables the disparate strands of sonic manifestation to be heard as part of the polyphonic reality of the nation. The collective goal is to challenge the omnipresence of hegemonic state power by privileging the creative intervention of people and action against the demand of constantly-shifting contexts.

The articles in this special issue are grouped into three themes: music in public ceremonies and spaces, music and identity, and music as ethnicity. By way of

different case studies, the contributors attempt to penetrate beyond the familiar constructs of China represented in language and images. Through critical analysis of sound and music, they reveal disjunctures and contradictions inherent in a seemingly seamless narrative of the nation.

Music plays an important role in social, national, and religious rituals. The performance of music whether it is live or prerecorded, not only enhances the atmosphere and liveness of the event, it symbolically reinforced social hierarchy, authority, and state power. Levi Gibbs provides vivid descriptions of banquet scenes and drinking sessions spontaneously ends in improvisation of folksong. Based on long sustained fieldwork among professional folksingers in Shaanxi Province and the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, Gibbs examines the banquet culture in the region where singers are often hired to offer praises through songs, either to the host or honored guests. Utilizing recurring oral formulae and knowledge of the people and place, singer's performance add value to those toward whom praises were directed. Gibbs argues that singing in social and public banquet contexts promotes and consolidates group solidarity and social hierarchy.

Focusing on a different aspect of contemporary Chinese life, Adam Kielman takes readers into a world of sites and sounds of the National Day celebration ceremony in Beijing. He examines the roles of music and sound in cultivating national identities and as affective bonds to the nation and state. Describing scenes of the National Day parade, he analyzes the televised broadcasts of the celebration ceremony. Apart from live music, he discusses diegetic sounds, voiceovers, and music in several sequences from both the military parades and evening gala concert, and explores how various kinds of sound and music have acquired physical and symbolic power. He argues that "mediatized emplaced sounds create senses of liveness and presence essential to the performative manifestation of national community." His treatment of these sounds provides an excellent introduction to the sound world that would otherwise be considered by some as mundane background music.

Along similar lines, Shzr Ee Tan focuses on a sonic phenomenon familiar to most tourists and frequent visitors to Chinese temples. At present, it is almost a standard that temples are equipped with powerful sound systems on their grounds. This recent practice is in stark departure from the traditional temple where silence was the norm except for the sound of prayer and chanting. Rather than enhancing the temple as a place of worship, meditation, spiritual reflection, and religious contemplation, sound systems interrupted the religious atmosphere. Blasted through loud-speakers are different kind of sounds ranging from deliberately-engineered sounds of nature, traditional Chinese music, descriptions of tourist attractions, civic educational messages, and prerecorded religious music and chants. Rather than dismiss these sounds as ambient noise, Tan argues that they are didactic tools to inculcate certain civic awareness and ecological consciousness against the constantly changing ecological practices and Anthropocene in China.

If music can empower national and social spaces, it is equally effective in the production of sentiments, nationhood, and subjectivity. Three articles highlight the power of music in the production of identity. Helan Hon-lun Yang investigates the interrelationship between China's symphonic music, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism. She explores how China as a modern nation was created in three

compositions: *In Memoriam* composed by Huang Zi (1904–1938) in 1929, *The East is Red*, created in 1964 to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, and the Violin Concerto (Op. 29/39) by Wang Xilin (b. 1936). Utilizing the concept of acousmatic listening developed by Pierre Schaeffer and Nina Eidsheim, she argues that it is possible to hear nationalism and cosmopolitanism as sonic articulations of China's shifting identity as a modern nation. As China was fast becoming a global power, its composers also captured international attention. Though well-versed in western compositional techniques, they preferred indigenous elements over western idioms to appeal to an international audience. Her analysis reveals that nationalism and nationalistic aspirations are results of individuals meditating with their immediate environment. The changing context of modern China produces unexpected results that are captured in music.

Frederick Lau explores similar issues of nation and modernity by ways of two pop music case studies produced in 1940 and 2000. He examines the production, reception of circulation of the 1940s hit song *Meigui meigui Wo ai ni* [Rose, rose, I love you] and the 2000 rock band Ershou meigui to uncover the ways in which musical production reveals different notions of modernity in China. *Meigui meigui* was first recorded by the Shanghainese cabaret songstress Yao Lee (1922–2019) and later remade by Frankie Laine in the US and Petula Clark in the UK. In each instance of the remake, the song invoked different perspectives of China as a modern nation. The question of modernity continues to attract attention in the new millennium albeit different in nature. Focusing on the sonic characteristics and appearance of the rock band Ershou meigui, Lau explores how the band's emergence captured the anxiety and zeitgeist of the time. Lau argues that to understand China's musical expressions of modernity, it is instructive to explore how different practices of musical production and consumption led to the inscription of society by way of agency, power, context, and subjectivity.

The third article in this cluster focuses on the regional theatrical genre of Cantonese opera popularized in Hong Kong and Guangdong in mainland China since the early twentieth century. Priscilla Tse examines the construction and performance of gender identity to interrogate the dynamics between cultural ideals and political powers enacted in women's cross-dressing performance. Women's cross-dressing to play a leading male role, called *wenwusheng*, is a distinguishing feature of Hong Kong's Cantonese opera style. Rather than viewing *wenwusheng* as an expression and discourse of masculinity, she suggests that this unique expression has to do with Hong Kong's marginal position as China's cultural periphery. The formation of gender identity is associated with that of the cultural authenticity of Chineseness. She argues that the female cross-dressing body in Cantonese opera is not an appropriation of privileged masculinity or Chineseness. Tse argues that *wenwusheng* is a performative means for problematizing orthodox and peripheral Chineseness.

The final group of articles focuses on national minority music and representation. The essays by Wong, Ingram, and Yang explore music of national minority. They problematize the categories of minority music and reveal the roles of musicians and institutions in creating and representing the genres of minority music.

Although outnumbered by the Han majority, ethnic minority groups occupy a crucial place in the narrative of modern China. The treatment of ethnic minorities

historically adopted the policy of cultural assimilation. In 1949, the PRC departed from this practice and official recognized 56 *minzu* or nationalities that make up the Chinese nation. Under the image of a harmonious multi-ethnic society belies the harsh reality that minority groups have been subject to policies and cultural practices branding them as exotic others.

To further this claim, Chuen-Fung Wong focuses on the repertoire of minority-themed compositions written for solo instruments and ensemble since the 1950s. He contends that exotic elements were presented to mainstream audiences in ways that made them sound familiar, palatable yet exotic. He argues that the popularity of these pieces in concerts and conservatories trivialized ethnic elements and rendered them inaudible.

His examination of the 1961 Uyghur plucked lute Rawap solo "Spring on the Tianshan Mountains" indicates that the use of ethnic musical devices such as minor mode, accidentals, syncopated rhythms, grace notes, vibrato, repetitions, and sequences were sonic markers of minority identity frequently used by Chinese and Western composers through intertextual references. While a large number of exotic repertoire portrayed modern China as a multiethnic and multicultural society, Wong argues that the celebration of musical difference relies on strategies of stereotyping, assimilation, and narrative framing to portray China as a progressive and normative nation.

Equally important in the study of minority musics is the question of representation, a process of connecting meaning to an object, a group, or a phenomenon. It is inevitably shaped by one's perspective, cultural condition, or political stance. In an essay based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, Catherine Ingram investigates the way the Kam (or Dong called by the Chinese) minority communities in southwestern China were represented as a cultural heritage, sponsored by the state and the tourism industry. Since Kam's "big song" was listed as UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, this genre has become the most well-known of all Kam musical genres. State-sponsored events in presenting "big song" ultimately changed its function, performance practice, and repertory by homogenizing its style. Kam's big song transmission has also been codified as part of a state-sponsored heritage-making mechanism under the pretense of enhancing the transmission process. Ingram asserts that personal gains and motivations play a large part in the process of heritage making, revealing that some state representatives, local officials, and judges are also Kam people. Ingram argues that only through careful study at the local level can clarify the heritage-making process and provide clues in understanding the difficulties of representing the Kam communities.

In 2006, China adopted the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) System to preserve precious cultural traditions across the country. The system has enriched the cultural landscape and motivated officials at all levels to identify and preserve valuable cultural assets. But the system unexpectedly prompted local organizations and musicians to compete for the label of national cultural heritage to receive recognition and funding. In her study of the northwest Chinese folk song tradition *hua'er*, Beryl Man Yang describes in detail the effect of ICH on *hua'er* singers. She observed that the implementation of the ICH system greatly altered the image of the genre from a low-brow local song form into become a respectable national form. *Hua'er* singing

is now frequently presented on the concert stage with singers dressed up in colorful ethnic attire. In reporting responses from singers, state officials, and participants during fieldwork, she presents various situations in which singers have to carefully negotiate between resources, recognition, personal gains, and the demands of the state. She argues that new images and representations of *hua'er* have elevated singers' status from being marginal people to national artists. With the ongoing official promotion of the genre at various levels, *Hua'er* sheds its regional identity to become an art form representing a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural China where all ethnic groups live together in harmony.

The intention of this special issue is to promote the idea that music matters in the study of China. By focusing on a diverse range of music and sound, it reinforces the notion that Chinese sonic expressions are multiple, culturally constituted, and shaped by context, history, and agency. Beyond the joy that Chinese music brings, listening to Chinese music is a form of knowledge production about the Chinese world. By listening critically to music as a product of complicated negotiations between musicians and their environment, we can arrive at a more nuanced and meaningful understandings of China.

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