READING CONTEMPORARY CHINESE MUSIC:
RECONSIDERING IDENTITY AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN
ANALYSIS

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A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF
MUSIC
Adviser: Paul Lansky

January 2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents i  
List of Figures, Tables and Musical Examples ii  
Abstract iii  
Prologue 1  
Introduction 5  
Chapter 1: Reconsidering Cultural Politics in the Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Music: the Case of *Ghost Opera* 13  
To Analyze or not to Analyze? 14  
Theatricality and Explicit Cultural Meaning in *Ghost Opera* 16  
Auditory Quotation Marks 19  
Reconsidering Cultural Politics 27  
Chapter 2: The Possibility of Authenticity: Sounding the Socialist China in the *Buddha Machine* 29  
The Buddha in the Machine 32  
Context for Intellectual Properties Infringement in Mainland China 34  
A Proud Knockoff 37  
Mass-Produced and Made in (Socialist) China 39  
The Machine of Meaning-Making 41  
Chapter 3: The Four Great Inventions and Utopianism at the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony 43  
Background 45  
The Four Great Inventions 46  
The Welcoming Ceremony 49  
Paper-making 51  
Movable Type 52  
Compass and Gunpowder 54  
The Problem of a United Front 57  
*Yuan and Liu, Ti and Yong* 60  
Chapter 4: A “Digital Opera” at the Boundaries of Transnationalism: The Synthesized Voices in Zuni Icosahedron’s *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* 65  
*The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*: A “Digital Opera” 68  
Voice, Technology, and Decentered Subjectivity 69  
The Sinister Resonance of Culture 80  
At the Boundaries of Transnationalism 86
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition 1: Electric Counterpoint</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition 2: I am thinking in a room, different from the one you are hearing in now (homage to Alvin Lucier)</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES, TABLES AND MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1.1. J. S. Bach, Prelude no.4 in C-sharp Minor, Book I, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, mm. 1-8. 21

Example 1.2. Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – Bach quotation first appearance. 21

Example 1.3. Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – Xiaobaisai quotation first appearance. 22

Example 1.4. Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – Bach quotation second appearance. 23

Example 1.5. Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – Xiaobaisai quotation second appearance. 24

Example 1.6. Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – Xiaobaisai and Bach quotation third appearance. 25

Example 1.7. Act three rehearsal letter C from Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* 27

Figure 2.1. The Buddha Machine, the first edition. 32

Figure 2.2. Zhang and Virant performing *Buddha Boxing*. 38

Figure 2.3. The Buddha Machine’s recycled paper packaging. 39

Figure 3.1. Thousands of *fous* formed giant Chinese and Arabic digits. 51

Figure 3.2. Large LED scroll painting at the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony in 2008. 52

Figure 3.3. Confucius’ disciples reciting excerpts from *the Analects* at the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony in 2008. 53

Table 4.1. Structure in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. 73

Example 4.1 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 1, mm. 30-34. 74

Example 4.2 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 1, mm. 129-131. 75

Example 4.3 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 1, mm. 167-174. 76

Example 4.4 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 3, mm. 54-62. 79

Example 4.5 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, prologue, mm. 1-18. 83

Example 4.6 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 4, mm. 19-24. 83

Example 4.7 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 2, mm. 18-27. 84

Example 4.8 *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 6, mm. 16-34. 85
ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on a number of key themes in identity politics in the study of contemporary Chinese music to date. The purpose is two-fold: firstly, to derive novel analytical approaches that will adequately address the socio-political implications of meaning making in a globalized age; secondly, to re-evaluate the role of technical analysis in the reading of contemporary Chinese music. I perform close reading in some of my discussions, and focus on meta-cultural narratives in other instances. Whenever technical analytical accounts are given, I take great care to articulate my intention and agenda as an analyst; in cases where note-to-note analysis is not necessary or appropriate, I read the sonic, visual, cultural and social features of the work as sets of interdependent texts. My goal is not to give a complete diagnostic overview of the field, but rather, to articulate a unique position as an artist born of multiple ethnic and national origins who considers himself a composer, sound artist and critic all in one.

The first chapter reconsiders the function of technical analysis in the reading of contemporary Chinese composition. The next two chapters turn to the question of meta-cultural frameworks, specifically, I elaborate on how a globalized Chinese modernity appears to manifest in the recent works of contemporary Chinese composers. The fourth and final chapter looks at the implications of this new transnational Chinese modernity for critics and analysts.

The dissertation concludes with two large scale compositions, namely Electric Counterpoint, a concerto for orchestra, tape and live improvised electronics; and I am thinking in a room, different from the one you are hearing in now, an audio-visual performance piece scored for two performers with brainwave sensors.
PROLOGUE

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. – Pablo Picasso

Identity politics was front and center in the public consciousness of the Australian people throughout the 1990s. For almost a decade, right wing politicians and conservative officials capitalized on the nation’s anxiety of being “swamped” by non-white foreigners. At school, we discussed at length the policy of assimilation, which would invariably lead to heated debates about race, nationhood, and distributive justice. During this time, Australia saw a large influx of Asian immigrants in most metropolitan areas. One could always count on a healthy mix of ethnic bodies on the playground of most public schools. My parents however insisted on placing me into a private institution, where there were only a few Asian children (an Anglican all-boys boarding school, to be exact). My parents made it quite clear that they did not want me to hang out with other Chinese-speaking children, for the fear that I would not learn to speak English “properly.” Owing to years of quality colonial education in Hong Kong, by the time we arrived in Australia I already spoke a reasonable amount of English with little hesitation. But of course, by “proper” my parents actually meant “without a Chinese accent.”

There were a handful of children of Chinese ethnic origin in our school. Some did better than others at “mixing” with white Australians. Those who were born in Australia and spoke English with an Australian accent had little problem. Curiously there was little evidence of self-segregation along ethnic lines, but instead those of us who spoke English with a noticeable accent – otherwise known as “FOB”² – would bind together in solidarity regardless of ethnicity. Some children who managed to erase their ethnic accent over time would eventually distance themselves from the FOB group, and assimilate into the social

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² FOB is a common abbreviation for “Fresh-Off-the-Boat,” a derogatory term that is often used to describe new immigrants who have not yet assimilated into mainstream culture.
circles of white Australians. In the classroom, some of the newly assimilated would snicker at immigrant children who read aloud with an accent. My own Chinese accent, which betrayed my origin as well as the level of assimilation into mainstream culture, was a constant source of anxiety throughout my teenage years. It was as though the banishing of ethnic accent was a way to achieve metaphorical whiteness. Visually, my body is forever marked ethnic, but I could at least aspire to become sonically opaque. Of course, one never shakes off one’s ethnic accent entirely. Unusual tonal inflection at the end of a sentence, slight mispronunciation of words here and there, logic of phrase structure that is more consistent with the native tongue – these moments of slippage creep up behind you as soon as you let your guard down, to reveal the fact that your Central Processing Unit (CPU) is still computing the world in the language of your ancestors.

Imagine for a moment that music is indeed a "language" of sort, what then could be the equivalent of “speaking with an accent” in musical terms? Would musing with a “Chinese accent” prevent one from being assimilated into the musical mainstream? If the language of the Western classical tradition were a transnational language of sort, then where is the threshold of a musical FOB? At the moments of linguistic slippage, where meaning becomes nonsense and ethnicity is unmasked, may we be able to find surplus of detail that will reveal the “truth content of a work”? 3

During my undergraduate years, I presented a composition for flute and piano at an Australian festival of new music. The composition drew its inspiration from a set of eighth century haiku poems. Admittedly, the composition exploited several clichés of traditional Japanese music, in a manner that I would now certainly call Orientalist. After its premiere, an Australian composer approached me and complimented the composition's attractiveness. She was however puzzled as to why my Chinese-ness did not come through. In my conversation with her, I also detected a sense of intense discomfort with my decision to affiliate with Japanese instead of Chinese culture. To recycle the music-as-language metaphor,

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I suspect few would take issue with a Chinese person conversing in Japanese, regardless of the level of fluency. Perhaps I was thought of as a Chinese speaking English with a forced Japanese accent? In this sense my fellow composer's discomfort might have stemmed from a suspicion over the purity of my intension, and the impression that I was “faking it.” But aren’t all acts of representation on the musical stage “faked” to some degree? What is the difference between “faking” and “dramatizing”? Who would go on stage and muse about exactly how they felt that day anyway? When it comes to the language of music, something of value seems to be at stake when identity is invoked.

As my own voice continued to mature as a composer, I found myself consciously resisting the use of Chinese elements. Exactly what I considered to be Chinese was never explicitly articulated; nonetheless Chineseness was a haunting, and a sinister resonance that I was anxious to distance myself from. I refused to write for mixed Chinese-Western ensembles. I refused to exploit historic Chinese subject matters to which I found no personal connection with. I found self-Orientalizing gestures distasteful and opportunistic. Thinking back, much of this discomfort with Chineseness was perhaps only a keen-jerk reaction of sort, a result of the tug of war between the prefix and suffix of my hyphenated identity. One evening, I and another composer from Hong Kong attended a concert that featured the music of one of the more prominent figures of the current generation of Chinese composers. My friend had previously accused this composer of insensitive misrepresentation of Chinese culture. At one point in the concert, when a Chinese gong was struck in what he considered to be a particularly obvious and distasteful manner, he snickered. Right there and then I was transported back to collective snickering in my high school classroom – have I also become one of the “newly assimilated,” the ethnically opaque? What is the nature of my reluctance to use Chinese elements in my music? Who and what am I resisting? Does the erasure of sonic accents constitute a resistance against essentialization, or does it actually imply the beginning of domestication?

The chapters that follow trace a personal journey as I untangle my insecurities as a composer, sound artist and theorist, who has chosen to operate with musical languages and analytical paradigms that I cannot take for granted.
Indeed, nothing can be taken for granted in the age of globalization: nuances of my schizophrenic hyphenated identity; musical gestures, genres and their histories; methods of analysis and their analytical biases; venues of presentation and the expectations that they invoke – as I become increasingly sensitive to the political implication of my creative acts, I find it necessary to interrogate every position and every history, every trace of sound, and every critical apparatus. In a world where identity is both a mark of burden and a commodity to be potentially exploited, it is only responsible that composers tread lightly over the boundaries of culture. This thesis focuses on a number of key themes in identity politics in the study of contemporary Chinese music to date. These are also the very same issues that I personally struggle with as an ethnic composer who is sensitive to the operative logics of globalization. In the process, I am conscious of the various other issues that will necessarily remain unmentioned. My goal here is not to give a complete diagnostic overview of the field, but rather, to articulate a unique position in the understanding of these questions, as an artist born of multiple ethnic and national origins who considers himself a composer, sound artist and critic all in one. That acknowledged, by noting these issues I also hope to converse with theorists and composers who deal with the issue of identity politics at large in music. All of the topics of discussion raised in my thesis are issues that remain insufficiently addressed in the current literature of contemporary Chinese music. My choice of case studies reflect my own interest as an artist, and they encompass works ranging from notated concert compositions, to sonic artifacts, to multimedia spectacles. What they share however is the same desire to articulate culture and identity through sound and music.

To echo Picasso’s statement on the truthfulness of art: if music is indeed a virtual reality, in which artist may freely reinvent her / his avatar of identity, it would also be an open space in which marginality and centrality are reimagined, albeit temporarily. To continue to speak of cultural politics in music is already a form of strategic resistance. It signifies an unwillingness to be integrated, tolerated, or domesticated. I hope that my intimate personal journey will ultimately offer novel tools for commentators and composers everywhere, to account for the peculiar contradictions of our times.
INTRODUCTION

After the Cultural Revolution when China finally woke up from the chaotic nightmare that paralyzed the nation for over a decade, a tremendous amount of previously suppressed creative energy was ready to explode. In 1978, a total of thirty-two young composers were admitted into the composition course at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, which had just re-opened its doors after a long period of inactivity. The incoming class list reads like a who’s who of contemporary Chinese music today: Tan Dun, Chen Qigang, Bright Sheng, Chen Yi, Guo Wenjing, Zhou Long, Xe Xiaoangang, Liu Sola, just to name a few. Collectively they are known as the “Class of 1978.” These young composers were forced to relocate to the rural areas for re-education during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution. In the countryside the young minds were exposed to regional dialects, rituals and folk songs. They then came into contact with the works of Western modernist masters such as Bela Bartok, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, and Karlheinz Stockhausen for the first time at the conservatory. The fresh sound worlds from the West infused the souls of the “Class of 1978,” in Tan Dun’s own words, like “spiritual medicine.” The musical manifestation of this spiritual infusion, as evident in the compositions by this group of Chinese composers, would be the subject of much critical writing and academic discourse in the decades to follow.

Meanwhile, a renewal of another kind was brewing within the academic circle of musicology. In 1978, Joseph Kerman read a paper at John Hopkins University on the role of technical analysis in academic music criticism. A year later, the paper was published under the title How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out. This article almost single-handedly declared the beginning of what is now known as the new musicology debate, which questions the basis of the assumption of an autonomous musical work. Scholars such as Lawrence Kramer, Susan McClary, Marcia Citron, Carolyn Abbate, Kofi Agawu, Nicholas Cook as

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well as Kerman himself contributed to a new approach in the criticism of musical texts, which seeks to compliment and enlarge technical accounts of music with critical, cultural and philosophical inquiries. The fact the inauguration of the “Class of 1978” and Joseph Kerman’s manifesto shared the same temporal point of departure is perhaps a mere coincidence, but the legitimacy of music and identity politics as a sub-field of music criticism is certainly indebted to the rise of new musicology. By extension, many of the key themes in the scholarship of contemporary Chinese music today continue to reproduce the tension between postmodern impulses and technical analytical accounts of music.

There is however at least one important difference between the way new musicology re-evaluated analysis, and the way technical analytical accounts entered into the discussion of contemporary Chinese music. The reason for this difference is mostly historical. Currently, the discourse of contemporary Chinese music is a complex and interdisciplinary field of study that mingle with Asian studies, anthropology, cultural criticism, post-colonial studies, Sinology and linguistics to name just a few. Some of the early pioneers of contemporary Chinese music scholarship were trained in one of the sub-disciplines of critical inquiry; others received training in music, composition, performance or ethnomusicology. While new musicology emerged out of an anti-formalist climate in which technical analytical accounts were seen as the normative paradigm that required destabilization, contemporary Chinese music scholarship approached analysis from an almost the opposite direction, where biographical and meta-cultural accounts were the default points of departure.

Musical analysis played only a marginal role in some of the key early publications of the discipline. Barbara Mittler’s Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China since 1949 was one of the earliest surveys of contemporary Chinese music. Although a large number of score excerpts were included throughout the book, references to musical examples were mostly descriptive in nature, and extensive close readings of musical texts were infrequent. As its title suggests, the focus of the book is

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cultural issues and identity politics. While Mittler’s publication focused mainly on the post-war generation of Chinese composers, Hong Kong music historian Liu Ching-chih traces new Chinese music all the way back to the turn of the century in his *Zhongguo Xinyinyue Shilun* (a critical history of new music in China).\(^7\) Liu’s seminal publication remains the most comprehensive overview of contemporary Chinese music to date. In 2009, Caroline Mason translated this important publication into English, and a new edition that includes information on younger Chinese composers is currently under preparation. Due perhaps to the large number of composers covered musical excerpts played only illustrative roles in Liu’s publication, and detailed technical analytical accounts were almost entirely absent. A number of Chinese language publications from scholars residing in Mainland China provided mostly historical and biographical accounts of contemporary Chinese music. The more comprehensive efforts include Feng Wen-chi’s *Zhongwai Yinyue Jiaoliushi* (the history of musical exchange between China and foreign countries),\(^8\) and *Xi Zhongguo Yinyueshi* (new Chinese music history) by Ju Qi-Hong.\(^9\) These publications received only limited attention from scholars outside of Mainland China, and in both cases, musical analysis was infrequently employed. More recently, ethnomusicologist Frederick Lau devoted a chapter to the contemporary Chinese music in his publication *Music in China*.\(^{10}\)

While new musicology stumbled to “get out of analysis,” there had been calls within the academic circle of contemporary Chinese music to get back into analytical modes. One of the earliest pleas came from Frank Kouwenhoven, scholar and director of the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research (EFCMR), who warned against the danger of neglecting “the music itself” in favor of cultural political issues.\(^{11}\) Composer and scholar Christian Utz, one of the most important and prolific critics of contemporary Chinese music, also endorsed a more technical approach and saw the absence of structural analyses in the

\(^7\) Liu Ching-chih, *Zhongguo Xinyinyue Shilun* (a critical history of new music in China) (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1998).


literature as a neglect that stands to be corrected.\textsuperscript{12} Several more recent edited volumes featured extensive analytical discussions of contemporary Chinese music, sometimes in the larger context of Asian music,\textsuperscript{13} other times focusing on the region of China-at-large.\textsuperscript{14} Other technical analytical accounts appear in various journals of musicological research, including those by Nancy Yunhwa Rao,\textsuperscript{15} Peter Chang,\textsuperscript{16} and Anthony Sheppard.\textsuperscript{17} This list could be greatly expanded of course if we include also writings that deal with traditional music or music of the popular culture. Today, there seems to be no lack of analytical literature in the study of contemporary Chinese music. Articles on contemporary Chinese composers and analysis of their compositional outputs appear in mainstream journals such as \textit{Contemporary Music Review}, \textit{Perspectives of New Music}, \textit{Journal of Musicological Research} and \textit{The Journal of Musicology}. As it were, the plea to focus on technical analysis now seems largely retrospective – or is it?

I have contributed articles to a number of edited volumes on contemporary Chinese music, and more than once I was asked explicitly to include technical discussions of musical examples in my contributions. While I do not cringe at hearing the word “analysis,” I do wonder what kind of questions we as a community of scholars expect analysis to help us answer in the study of this very specific body of music. If we accepted that contemporary Chinese music is a form of cultural hybrid, a result of the colliding of multiple cultures, then to what extent could we rely on conventional note-to-note analysis to help us explain the creative impulses behind this body of work? Is it even possible to press an inter-cultural

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narrative into the nuts-and-bolts of contemporary Chinese music vis-à-vis conventional methods?

Nicholas Cook took up these questions in a recent presentation entitled “inter-cultural analysis as relational musicology.” Cook detailed several historical attempts at deriving analytical approach that may apply to music across different cultures, including Jay Rahn’s “all-music system” that depended upon minimal units of sonic structure, and the more controversial effort by Jonathan Stock to apply Schenkerian analysis to Beijing opera. While Cook does not deny the possibility of cross-cultural universals in music (he cited emotional responses to accelerandi as an example), what is clear is that the decision to analyze is already in itself a discursive gesture. While the issue of analytical biases had been taken up a long time ago by scholars who deal with non-Western music and the music of popular culture, the neutrality and usefulness of formalist analysis is rarely questioned in the discussion of contemporary Chinese works. One may very well argue that traditional methods of analysis are applicable to this body of work, because the current generation of Chinese composers had received extensive training in the Western classical tradition, and that they are essentially operating within the Western concert hall tradition. While I cannot fully agree with the logical premise of the above claim, an explicit articulation of such a position would already be a step forward. Why do critics analyze, and what is the nature of this desire to support our claims as critics with traditional analytical methods when dealing with inter-cultural compositions? What are the consequences of neglecting analysis in this very specific context? If we desire to press an inter-cultural narrative into the patterning of musical materials, we should at least be aware of the implications and limitations of our chosen methodology. The new circumstances brought about by globalization demand an

18 Nicholas Cook, “Intercultural analysis as relational musicology” (paper presented at the International Conference On Analytical Approaches To World Music, University of Massachusetts Amherst, February 19-21, 2010).
21 I am aware only of one article by Christian Utz that attempted to tackle this issue in the context of contemporary Chinese music. See Christian Utz, “Komposition zwischen Konkretion und Abstraktion. Die Tradition des Chinesischen Musiktheaters als Folie des Schaffens heutiger chinesischer Komponisten,” Österreichische Musikzeitschrift 53/5 (1998): 35 – 45. [In German]
intensified level of communicative nuance at the level of discourse. To fully account for the range of impulses that continue to fuel the creation of contemporary Chinese music through analytical methods, we must first articulate our positions as critics and reconsider the function and limitation of analysis in the discussion of this body of work.

By extension, we could also take a fresh look at the intentions and positions of composers participating in acts of inter-culturation. Today, thanks to the many anti-essentialist apparatuses made available to us by post-modernism, Chinese composers are no longer exoticized Orientals. But now that this is self-evident, where do we progress from here? Are Chinese composers already speaking in a transnational musical language? Is there such a thing as a transnational musical language? What are the operational logics of Chineseness in a transnational world? In acts of musical inter-culturation, a composer’s choice of language, style and genre are necessarily discursive gestures. As Chinese composers become increasingly visible in the global musical stage, critics need to say more, not less, about cultural politics. In the following pages, I reconsider some of the key themes in the study of contemporary Chinese music to date, with a heightened awareness of the socio-political implications of meaning making in a globalized age. By doing so, it is my hope that we could derive explanations for acts of identification that will open new doors for critical inquiry – so that we may ultimately say more, and not less. I perform close reading in some of my discussions, and focus on meta-cultural narratives in other instances. Whenever technical analytical accounts are given, I take great care to explicitly articulate my intention and agenda as an analyst; in cases where note-to-note analysis is not necessary or appropriate, I attempt to read the sonic, visual, cultural and social features of the work as sets of interdependent texts.

In the first chapter, I reconsider the function of analysis in the reading of contemporary Chinese composition. Contemporary Chinese music has undeniably received much attention in recent scholarship. Despite this apparent bloom in academic interest, many writers feel that the discourse suffers from a lack of close reading, in favor of identity politics and meta-cultural issues. Using Tan Dun’s *Ghost Opera* as a case study, this chapter suggests that the issue is less
about “appropriate balance,” but has more to do with the type of question technical analysis has traditionally been employed to answer. Instead of focusing on the degree to which a signifier is “Chinese” or “contemporary,” I suggest that analysts could ask why ethnicity is performed when it is not always necessary, and potentially even distracts from the music itself. In chapter two I consider another key theme in the study of contemporary Chinese music, namely, authenticity and cultural representation. Indeed, authenticity as a demand places enormous symbolic weight upon Chinese composers as well as reviewers of their work to “perform Chineseness” in acts of creativity. It reduces ethnic artists into local informants, shamans, and conjurers. That much acknowledged, authenticity seems to continue to feature prominently in the public consciousness, as evident for example in the commercial success of the world music industry. In this chapter I outline and analyze several ways by which features of an authentic contemporary Chinese condition can be said to manifest in FM3’s *Buddha Machine*. The goal here is to address the over-stigmatization of authenticity in the literature. I seek to demonstrate that it is possible to talk about a nuanced and multi-faceted representation of culture when authenticity is seen not as an unattainable absolute but as an aspiration within a carefully defined cultural and geographical context.

In the next two chapters, my focus turns to the question of meta-cultural frameworks. Specifically, I elaborate on how a globalized Chinese modernity that goes beyond the “East-meets-West” dichotomy appears to manifest in the recent works of contemporary Chinese composers. In the third chapter, I look at how the ideals of a transnational utopia are celebrated in the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony in 2007. I argue that the multimedia spectacles at the Olympics opening ceremony signaled the arrival of a new expressive paradigm in the imagination of Chinese modernism, conveying a vision of transnational Chinese solidarity that even non-Chinese can participate in. The fourth chapter is a critical response to the conclusion of the previous chapter: I look at the implications of this new transnational Chinese modernity for analysts. I present an analysis of *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* – a “multimedia opera” by Hong Kong composer Steve Hui. This production featured Chinese operatic star Tian Hao-jiang, who is backed by
a computer-synthesized chorus. I focus on the interaction between the voice of the protagonist and the synthesized voices that sometimes represent the Chinese, and other times the ethnic minorities who are at the fringe of China proper. By attempting to read the work as transnational, my goal here is to expose the meanings, promises as well as perils of transnationalism as an analytical framework, and to confront the overtly optimistic celebration of transnational impulses that seems to be evident in the discussion of contemporary Chinese works to date.
CHAPTER 1
Reconsidering Cultural Politics in the Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Music: the Case of *Ghost Opera*

In the preface to Cartier-Bresson’s *D’une Chine à l’autre*, a book of photographs of China, Jean-Paul Sartre describes an episode of the staging of the picturesque:

[The photographers] seek out a Chinese who looks more Chinese than the others; in the end they find one. They make him adopt a typically Chinese pose and surround him with *chinoiseries*. What have they captured on film? One Chinaman?
No…the Idea of what is Chinese.

The idea of posing is an interesting one. Imagine that the Chinaman in Sartre’s snapshot of Oriental theatre is aware of the implication of his actions: under what circumstances then could one be *made* to pose? Can we imagine an *invitation* to pose, or even a *desire* to pose?

The economic and political successes of China mean that this once exoticized nation’s presence is no longer confined to explorers’ accounts. Today, we may have difficulty imagining a token Chinaman content to be passively mystified and culturally assembled. From the stock market to the Olympics to the musical avant-garde, China now actively participates in the production of her own international image. Similarly, contemporary Chinese music has received considerable attention in recent scholarship due to the success of the “New Wave” generation of composers. Writings on the nature of musical interculturation in contemporary Chinese music have at various times emphasized

22 Picturesque, literally meaning “in the manner of a picture,” is an aesthetic category that first came to prominence in England through the treaties of such writers as William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight. Picturesque is obsessed with the dispossessed, the destitute and the aged over the young and the heroic. The picturesque is also fascinated with the exotic other, gazing upon images of a mystified Orient through reports of travelers, missionaries, traders and soldiers
24 “New Wave” (*xin chao*) refers to a group of young composers who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and emerged out of China in the politically volatile early 1980s. Collectively, they reflected the social, economic and political changes at the time, and the impact of such changes on music.
different facets the practice, including but not limited to the broader cultural context for musical Orientalism in the Western experimental tradition;\textsuperscript{25} the historical development and political implications of contemporary music from within China;\textsuperscript{26} politics of representation, ideological issues, and patterns of reception.\textsuperscript{27}

To Analyze or not to Analyze?

Despite this apparent bloom in interest, some feel that the discourse of contemporary Chinese music suffers from a lack of close reading, in favor of identity politics and meta-cultural issues. In the words of Frank Kouwenhoven:

Western students of Sinology or Musicology occasionally visit me to discuss contemporary Chinese music. They always appear interested in one and the same theme: the impact of politics…it is unfortunate that so very little attention has been paid to the music itself. The works of young composers…are hardly ever viewed in an international musical context.\textsuperscript{28}

In “Against National Style – Individualism and Internationalism in New Chinese Music,”\textsuperscript{29} Barbara Mittler similarly argues that new Chinese music should be taken seriously as the expression of individualism, rather than always being defined by its relationship to China. A more recent endorsement of technical-analytical approach comes from Christian Utz:

Research on encounters between traditional non-Western music and contemporary compositional practice tends to neglect detailed musical analysis, in favor of extensive socio-cultural or political theoretical frameworks…Until


\textsuperscript{26} Mittler, \textit{Dangerous tunes}.


\textsuperscript{28} Kouwenhoven, “The Age of Pluralism,” 76.

now detailed structural analyses of musical works, for instance, have rarely been found in this field, in contrast to interpretations of their (cross-) cultural signification or their multi-textural impact.\textsuperscript{30}

In many ways, this question of meta-narrative as opposed to close reading replicates the competing categories of the new musicology debate. Chinese or not, when it comes to determining the appropriate tipping point of cultural symbolisms versus technical accounts, the verdict is still out.\textsuperscript{31} In the case of contemporary Chinese music however, the issue of appropriate balance is complicated by a number of factors. Scholars of the field, including some of its pioneers, have traditionally emerged from such diverse disciplines as cultural studies, sinology, post-colonial studies and literary studies. While musicology has come to embrace cultural-historical frameworks from a place where technical musical analysis is the norm, contemporary Chinese music scholarship approaches close reading from a different direction. This has implication for the way musical analysis functions in the reading of contemporary Chinese music.

How does technical analysis and cultural politics fit into a discussion of this body of work? One of the most important contributions by Kouwenhoven, Mittler, Utz and others is their questioning of Chinese-ness as an essentialized concept, which was inspired by similar development in post-colonial studies.\textsuperscript{32} This has led scholars to reconsider more technical analytical approaches. In more specific terms, Christian Utz suggests a re-examination of the relationship between “traditional” and “contemporary” idioms, towards a model that moves beyond this dualism in favor of a continuum of signifiers.\textsuperscript{33} This is where one encounters an interesting paradox. If we embraced the view that ethnic identities are constructs, then to what extent are we interested in how cultural signifiers function to reinforce these imaginary categories? To re-appropriate Sartre’s

\textsuperscript{30} Utz, “Listening attentively,” 7 – 8.
\textsuperscript{31} The new musicology debate first came to prominence in the 1980’s, though the philosophical grounding of the discourse has been around for much longer. Often inherent in the discussion is a suspicion of analytical methods and marginalization of formalist positions.
\textsuperscript{32} The imaginary nature of Chinese-ness as a fluid construct has been dealt with extensively in recent literature, most notably in a collection of essays edited by Tu Wei-Ming. See Tu Wei-Ming, ed., The living tree: The changing meaning of being Chinese today (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{33} Utz, “Listening attentively,” 7 – 8.
picturesque paradigm: if one were to capture the Orient on the busy streets of urban China today, our Chinaman would be an internationalized individual. This means that he may now choose to pose or not to pose in front of the camera, and in either case, he is fully aware of the implication of his own action. Therefore, it is perhaps less meaningful to ask how Chinese our Chinaman’s performative masquerade is, because it inevitably leads to the drawing of an arbitrary line on the continuum of signifiers. Instead of focusing on the degrees to which a signifier is “traditional” or “contemporary,” couldn’t one ask why is ethnicity performed when it is not always necessary, and potentially even distracts attention from the music itself? In the case of contemporary Chinese music, if sound can indeed be heard free of cultural contexts as these writers suggest, then why do composers and analysts continue to invoke culture?

In the following, I will present a reading of Tan Dun’s Ghost Opera, to demonstrate that contemporary Chinese music scholarship’s allergic reaction to analysis stems not entirely from an obsession with socio-cultural frameworks. The reason for choosing Ghost Opera is not only due to the important place it occupies in the repertoire and in Tan Dun’s musical career. But more importantly, the extensive use of musical quotations and theatrical elements, both of which are rich in explicit cultural meanings, makes Ghost Opera a particularly fruitful work to analyze.

Theatricality and Explicit Cultural Meanings in Ghost Opera

Tan Dun takes full advantage of the theatrical potential of the concert hall in Ghost Opera. Each member of the 5-piece ensemble is required to vocalize, move between stage positions, and play an assortment of percussion instruments at various times. Like many of Tan Dun’s compositions from the 1990’s, the use of theatrical elements in Ghost Opera serves to symbolically ritualize the performance space. The title of the composition points to two possible conceptual points of departure, both of which are related to folk rituals. The first one is the shamanistic practice of nuo. Nuo originates from exorcism ceremonies, the earliest surviving records of which date back to as early as the Shang dynasty (1700-1027 B.C.). In
nuo, it is believed that spirits communicate with the ritual’s mediator, as well as having conversations amongst themselves. The formal aspects of nuo theatre – the theatrical manifestation of nuo tradition – are not standardized, though it typically involves a masked performer who can be taken to represent deities, characters from folk legends, or historical figures, depending on the function of the occasion.

A second possible source of inspiration is a form of theater known as gui xi, literally meaning “ghost opera” or “ghost drama.”34 Gui xi consists of a vast repertoire dating back to the Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. Gui xi typically deals with the subject matter of death, and it involves at least one dead character. In gui xi, death finds its dramatic expression often in a narrative set in the underworld from where deities and spirits are summoned, or with characters whose spirits roam freely between the realms of the living and the dead.

Aside from the traditions of nuo and gui xi, the title of Ghost Opera also implicitly points to the musical genre of opera as understood in the Western concert hall tradition.35 To be exact, only the theatricality inherent in an opera, rather than the genre as most narrowly defined, is being referenced by the title. Ghost Opera is complete with a cast, a synopsis and a libretto. The “cast” is defined as various agents in the musical-dramatic narrative. The “synopsis” a graphical representation of Ghost Opera’s worldview. The “libretto” presents the flow of the composition as a conversation between sonic and theatrical events. It contains the opening bars of J. S. Bach’s Prelude no. 4 in C-sharp Minor from the first book of The Well-Tempered Clavier, the first stanza of the celebrated Chinese

34 The Chinese character xi can be used interchangeably to signify drama, play or theatre, such as in xiju; or games, such as in youxi; or used to represent regional opera when a stylistic or sub-genre prefix is attached, such as in jingxi, Beijing opera. At the time of writing, no consented English translation exists for the term gui xi.

35 An adequate definition of the genre of opera will no doubt require a book of its own; I am by no means suggesting that there even exists a normative understanding of opera, even within the confines of the concert hall tradition. It is a fluid concept that is open to repeated contestation and redefinition – Tan Dun’s very own effort here included. I deal in more detail with the issue of the definition and expectation of genre in chapter 4.
folk tune Xiaobaicai,\textsuperscript{36} two excerpts from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and monkish vocalizations.

*Ghost Opera*’s eclecticism, according to the work’s program description, is “cross-temporal, cross-cultural and cross-media,” and it “touches on the past, present, future and the eternal; employs elements from Chinese, Tibetan, English and American cultures; and combines performance traditions of the European classical concert, Chinese shadow puppet theater, visual art installations, folk music, dramatic theater and shamanistic ritual.”\textsuperscript{37} Tan Dun has also spoken publicly about his aspiration to create a musical-spiritual universe, where signs and sounds no longer function as traces of culture or history. Likening the process to a shamanistic ritual, Tan Dun expresses that in his music “there is no East or West, all is human.”\textsuperscript{38} It is precisely on these grounds that Tan Dun and some other members of the “New Wave” have rejected readings of their works limited to Chinese-identity related issues. Given composers’ discomfort with cultural identification, and with technical-analytical method’s deposition to the “how Chinese” type of questions, it is perhaps no surprise that scholars of contemporary Chinese music tend to avoid nuts and bolts close reading.

But despite the composer’s best intentions, *nuo*, *gui xi*, *The Tempest* and *Xiaobaicai* all carry with them explicit cultural associations. Therefore, the “summoning” of these elements in itself can also be read as an identity-marking gesture. On the one hand, we acknowledge the composer’s rejection of one’s being Chinese by descent; but on the other hand, in *Ghost Opera*, we are confronted with Tan Dun’s active summoning of identity markers by consent. Under these circumstances, how does one avoid being entangled in cultural politics? In the words of Allen Chun:

\textsuperscript{36} *Xiaobaicai* is sometimes also referred to as *Xiaobaitai*. More than seven versions of this folk tune are currently documented in different dialects. The version that exists in *Ghost Opera*, also the most widely circulated version of the tune, comes from the Hebei province, home to more than 50 minority ethnic groups.


[...Decolonization] does not mean...that one is free to invent culture as one pleases [...] only by demystifying the authority of interests that have deemed it necessary to define culture in particular way and to make people identify with prevailing communities would one then be free to choose, making the idea of multiple identities a meaningful reality. 39

Instead of regressing to purely technical analysis under the auspices of an all-is-human platform, analysts should reconsider the function of analysis when dealing with acts of musical inter-culturation. In the spirit of Allen Chun’s quotation above, I would suggest that we ask why identity markers are summoned even when they are not necessary, and to scrutinize the strategic nature of the act of identification. In Ghost Opera, this act of identity-marking is achieved largely through the use of musical quotations. Like theatrical elements, the cultural association of these quotations are explicit. This is precisely what makes Ghost Opera such a fruitful work to analyze, since we can by-pass the question of “how Chinese” or “how Western” are these quotations, and proceed directly to ask why they are used.

Comprehensive analysis of Ghost Opera has already been attempted in several publications. 40 In the following, I will focus my attention on musical quotations, paying special attention to the context and strategic nature of their use. Matters such as harmony, pitch organization and instrumentation will be considered only in so far as they are pertinent to the use of musical quotations.

Auditory Quotation Marks

According to Nelson Goodman, there are two defining conditions for quotations. First, a quotation must present replica-hood of the quoted. In the case of a musical quotation, replica-hood is loosely defined as exhibiting “closely similar

40 See Gooi Tah Choe, Making an identity: A study of three compositional strategies in the music of Tan Dun, (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2001); and Christian Utz, New music and interculturality: From John Cage to Tan Dun (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002).
auditory properties to the quoted, rather than always requiring a strict syntactic replica of the original as more often is the case in literary quotations. The second necessary criterion, the prerequisite that a genuine quotation must also refer to or denote its origin, is more problematic for music. Bicknell, Goodman, and others have all noted the difficulty in pinning down the act of referencing in musical quotations. One can imagine instances where a musical quotation escapes the notice of even the keenest of listeners, particularly when a composer makes deliberate effort to mask over the identity of the quoted material by weaving it underneath the musical fabric.

It is true that the recognition of musical quotation pre-supposes cultural and historical literacy. But even in the absence of extra-musical footnotes, quoted musical materials can be highlighted by being subject to the processes of de-contextualization. That is to say, a quoted passage can be distinguished by pitting the original context as familiar, against the musical quotation as foreign, and also as elements of stability and volatility. The distance between the quoting and the quoted is set up by conjuring up musical buffers. These buffers can be thought of as auditory quotation marks. Once these buffers are in place, they might dissolve again to obscure the identity of the musical quotation. In Ghost Opera, it is precisely the instability of these auditory quotation marks that gives rise to a multiplicity of readings of musical quotations as identity-making gestures, and provides a glimpse into their strategic nature.

The two quotations that appear most frequently in Ghost Opera are the first eight bars of J. S. Bach’s Prelude no. 4 in C-sharp minor from the first book of The Well-Tempered Clavier and the Chinese folk song Xiaobaicai. The Bach quotation makes its initial appearance in the first movement emerging out of the sounds of water. This quotation is not a literal replica of the original. Chord tone doublings and non-essential tones are omitted. Occasionally, rhythmic values are either

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halved or doubled (mm. 1, 6-8). Additional arpeggiations and octave transposition are also spotted in several places (mm. 6-8). The harmonic progression and the counterpoint, however, are strictly preserved (ex. 1.1, ex. 1.2).


EXAMPLE 1.2. Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – Bach quotation first appearance.
The Bach quotation is abruptly cut short by the sound of bowed gong and the first violin player’s vocalization. After another episode of water sounds and vocalizations, the Chinese folk tune *Xiaobaicai* is heard. This time the quotation is literal, sung by the *pipa* player over a low C pedal in the viola (ex. 1.3).

**EXAMPLE 1.3.** Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera* – *Xiao bai tsai* quotation first appearance.

When heard in the context of the Bach quotation, *Xiaobaicai* sounds strangely alienated. Its dissonant minor second relationship to the Bach quotation’s C-sharp is certainly partly responsible. *Xiaobaicai*’s strong sense of the tonality of C is further reinforced by the low C viola pedal that precedes its entry. The orchestration and physical arrangement of players also serve to heighten this sense of alienation. The Bach quotation is first played by the first violin, viola and cello in the centre of the stage directly in front of the audience. In comparison,
Xiaobaicai emerges in a single voice behind a shadow play screen, where the pipa player is positioned. It is sparse, far-removed and foreign. Tan Dun allows the Bach quotation to mount the blank sonic canvas with a first statement in three-part counterpoint, thus establishing itself as the context. A monophonic folk tune that is limited to a pentatonic pitch collection is then heard at a distance. The contrast here could not have been greater.

The second appearance of the Bach quotation is heard at the beginning of the second act Earth Dance. This time (rehearsal letter A), fragments of the dance-proper in D (m. 4) preempt the Bach quotation in C-sharp. The dissonance between these two sound worlds is augmented as the rising fifth dyad (d-a’) in the first violin increases in dynamics, pitch range and frequency. The dissonance resolves when the tonality of D finally gets established by phasing out of the Bach quotation. This is further reinforced by the repeated sounding of a fifth (d and a) in the cello (ex. 1.4), and the dominant pedal in the first violin (rehearsal letter B, m. 2). The rising fifth dyad violin figure soon reappears (rehearsal letter C, m. 1), but this time it is heard in the pipa, and is colored by a C-sharp that resolves upward to D.

EXAMPLE 1.4. Tan Dun, Ghost Opera – Bach quotation second appearance.

In no time at all, the 6/4 meter at the beginning of act two bursts into a dance in 2/4. With perfect fifth, perfect fourth and major second as the primary
intervals, the dance proper is firmly grounded in D and harmonically static. In fact, little harmonic drama can be found in the rest of the second act. The focus here is on rhythm. The stomping rhythmic figure (rehearsal letter A, m. 1) and new folk-like materials (rehearsal letter B, m. 11) are subjected to canonic treatments in various places (rehearsal letter B mm. 16-18; letter E mm. 6-8; letter M). In letter K, monkish vocalization returns, bringing the ecstatic dance into a climax of earthy and primal chaos, eventually converging into a variation of Xiaobaicai, this time in D (ex. 1.5). As it turns out, the two instances of the Xiaobaicai are set a minor second away on either side of the Bach quotation’s C-sharp tonality.

EXAMPLE 1.5. Tan Dun, Ghost Opera – Xiaobaicai quotation second appearance.

Tan Dun’s handling of the two quotations up until this point produces remarkably rich cultural gestures. The treatments that these two quotations receive are significantly dissimilar. When Xiaobaicai is summoned, it focuses on signifying the sparse and introspective, the nostalgic, the distanced, the rhythmic, and the primal. In contrast, whenever the Bach quotation is used, an image of Bach as the master of contrapuntal writing is called upon. In each case, the folk tune quotation appears to be deprived the very quality that the Bach quotation exemplifies. Ghost Opera promises a world in which Bach, Chinese, Shakespeare and Monks are not East nor West but simply human. But as we listen to how the folk materials are being consistently singled out as out of context by dissonant key
relationships, while with subsequent reappearance the Bach quotation remains largely intact and firmly in C-sharp, we are confronted with a different picture. Bach, his legacy and the importance of harmony and counterpoint are firmly centralized. By contrast, *Xiaobaicai*’s syntax is shaped to operate within the frames of the quoting agent, so that it may never threaten the buffers between the two sound worlds and destabilized the centre. It would be redundant to play the old tune and restate the point of colonial relative upper-hand. But more importantly, *Ghost Opera* seems to yield to the code of model minority[^45] and to the policy of cultural assimilation. Under these circumstances, one is customarily white but *palatably* ethnic when called upon – in expositions, in food fairs, and on dining tables. In other words, full expression of the quoted is only possible when the quoting agent deems it appropriate.

This metaphor of model minority plays out even more forcefully when the buffers between the two sound worlds dissolve. In the third act, *Dialogue with “Little Cabbage,”* Bach and the Chinese folk tune are finally heard together. A short *pipa* cadenza is followed by the third appearance of *Xiaobaicai*, this time featuring the pentatonic pitch collection centered around B. Played by the first violin, this is the only instance so far in the composition where the folk tune is heard unobstructed by the shadow play screen. Lasting only two bars however, the folk tune is soon overwhelmed by the return of the Bach quotation.

With the buffers gone, we should be on the brink of realizing the composer’s “no East or West, all is human” vision. But the awkwardness of *Xiaobaicai* in its new context keeps us grounded in reality. One of the most striking characteristics of *Xiaobaicai* is the melody’s metrical structure. Four bars of song proper are set in a slightly unusual 5/4 time, followed by two bars of coda in 4/4 time. In letter A of act three, the folk tune is broken up into pieces in

[^45]: Model minorities are defined by: (1) their economic exceptionalism and upward class mobility, (2) educational excellence, and (3) minimal contribution to their host nation state’s social problems. Model minorities are also more readily absorbed into the dominant culture in the expense of denying their ethnic identity, ultimately aspiring to become “more white than white.” See Paul Wong et al., “Asian Americans as a model minority: Self-perceptions and perceptions by other racial groups,” *Sociological Perspectives* 41 (1998): 95 – 188; and Jasbir K Puar and Amit Rai, “The remaking of a model minority: Perverse projectiles under the specter of (counter)terrorism,” *Social Text* 22 (2004): 75 – 104.
several places, leaving the tune sometimes exposed, other times fractured in the middle of a phrase. This allows the folk tune to accommodate to the 6/4 meter of the Bach quotation, which remains unchanged throughout the section. It also ensures that the folk tune lines up with the underlying harmonic framework of the Bach quotation. Consequently, Xiaobaicai’s characteristic sense of periodicity takes a back seat (ex. 1.6).

**EXAMPLE 1.6.** Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera – Xiaobaicai* and Bach quotations third appearance.

Such an awkward mingling soon turns into full-fledged deconstructing. In letter C, the Xiaobaicai quotation re-appears in the cello line, this time set in A and squarely in 6/4, while in the upper strings the same pentatonic pitch collection is now mapped onto the rhythm of the first bar of the Bach quotation (ex. 1.7). Here, Xiaobaicai yields to harmony and counterpoint in the expense of its defining 5/4 meter and usual phrase structure. The Bach quotation and what it represents are clearly privileged.
EXAMPLE 1.7. Act three rehearsal letter C from Tan Dun, *Ghost Opera.*

Reconsidering Cultural Politics

On more than one occasion Tan Dun has spoken publicly about how he perceives of his place in the world of Western classical music. Bach, Beethoven, Bartók, Schoenberg and Stravinsky are among some of the names he most frequently relates himself to.\(^46\) Tan Dun, like many of the “New Wave” generation, launched their international career over three decades ago, when composers of color were still fighting an uphill battle. In a world where ethnicity is also a commodity, identity-performing is one way to distinguish oneself in a crowded market place. Now that scholars of contemporary Chinese music have finally succeeded in debunking ethnic identity as an essentialized concept, composers find themselves still being viewed through their Chinese-ness instead of in an international context. It is easy to put on a performative masquerade of picturesque when the world is watching, but it is not always up to you to take it off when the audience becomes fixated.

It is not my intension to pass judgment on the ideological premise of Tan Dun’s “all is human” vision, or the extent to which he has succeeded.\(^47\) What is interesting in eclectic cultural collages such as *Ghost Opera* is why some frame of reference deems certain signifying strategies as more relevant. The strategic nature of musical quotations in *Ghost Opera* suggests that in the context of musical inter-


\(^{47}\) In my opinion, this is an important question that is best dealt with in reference to cultural expectation and audience reception.
culturation certain identity positions are more desirable than others. If our goal as analysts is to reaffirm Chinese composers' position as individuals in the concert world, then instead of turning away from cultural politics, we should take a fresh look at the operation of socio-cultural discourse in the reading of contemporary Chinese compositions. In particular, we must confront our discipline's general reluctance to deal with Chinese composers' agency and their new-found power in the age of post-picturesque. This reluctance stems from the fear that such a project might further hinder the empowerment of ethnic compositional voices. I would argue that when scholars begin to discuss this body of work in reference to Chinese composers' new-found agency, it will become obvious that there are still colonial machineries deep at work, imposing unfair demands on Chinese composers to put on and take off their identity hats. We must be mindful of the tension between these contesting paradigms, and to confront their implications. Rather than evade cultural politics pessimistically, there is still much left to be said and done in the socio-cultural discourse of contemporary Chinese composition. That said, we must also be cautious not to invoke identity markers in analysis simply to enlarge musical discoveries that might otherwise be less significant, and then exorcized them when one runs into tricky political debates that resort to a rejection of cultural-political narratives. Analysts cannot have their cake and eat it too.
CHAPTER 2
The Possibility of Authenticity:
Sounding the Socialist China in the *Buddha Machine*

Authenticity is an absolute, a goal that can never be fully attained, a quest. Sincerity and autobiography are techniques one can employ in the service of personal authenticity, just as having traditional instruments and singing old songs are techniques one can use in the service of cultural authenticity. But it's important to distinguish means from the end. 48

What do we really mean when we say something is authentic? In culinary art for instance one might make the claim that a dish is authentically prepared. In this sense, authenticity refers to the technical procedures as well as the ingredients involved in the production of the dish in question. The claim to authenticity in this case may be verified by way of comparison with its culinary origin. The problem here lies with the difficulty in locating an “origin” – a frozen moment in time, a single codified and authoritative tradition. In the manner of Jacques Derrida’s infinite deferral of meanings, there will always be an older, more “authentic” origin that underpins the one already identified. In the pursuit of the absolute authentic moment, where (and when) is this elusive tradition in which one is supposed to terminate?

The example above refers specifically to correctness of pragmatic details, but claims of authenticity are rarely so precise. In the same context, one could instead be referring to representational authenticity – a vague impression of truthfulness, a mysterious sentiment that it “tastes like home.” Who is making this claim, and what is the nature of this sentiment? When and where is home, and who has the final word? These questions are often masked over in claims of authenticity. More often than not, claims of authenticity are confused and muddled, straddling multiple semiotic boundaries. According to Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, if there were a common thread among all claims to authenticity, it could only be the fact that these claims are primarily defined in opposition to

“faking it.” But the question is: who isn’t faking it? Who and what could truly be called authentic in the purist’s definition of the term?

Authenticity is messy, and there are some reasons to do away with the concept altogether. Many scholars who deal with culture and identity have attempted to demonstrate the difficulty of authenticity as a strategic goal in cultural production. Writers such as David Murphy went as far as rejecting outright all notions of authenticity as vitally flawed.49 Regina Bendix calls authenticity the dirty “A-word.”50 Scholars and artists alike tread gently on this highly charged territory. In the context of contemporary Chinese music, there are even more reasons to be critical of authenticity both as a creative goal and an analytical focus. Global migration and centuries of foreign occupation meant that it is not easy to say where the Chinese ends and the non-Chinese begins. The pursuit of an authentic Chineseness in contemporary Chinese music runs the danger of essentialism. Authenticity as a demand places an enormous symbolic weight upon Chinese composers, as well as reviewers of their work to “perform Chineseness” in music and in analysis, reducing Chinese composers into local informant, shaman, and conjurer.

But despite its many problems and pitfalls, authenticity continues to feature prominently in the public arena. Chinese composers and artists alike continue to create works that claim to reflect an authentic Chinese essence, and analysts continue to read their works as indisputable texts of cultural China. The world music industry is generating substantial revenue despite of dwindling global music sales, and marketing executives rely on the impression of authentic representation as a draw. The yearning for cultural authenticity and the heritage industry that feeds on this yearning seem to be as strong as ever. Vincent J. Cheng calls this yearning “the anxiety over culture and identity.” What is the nature of this anxiety? In the words of Cheng, it is an anxiety over the loss of specificity and subjectivity in a globalized world, “the anxiety of a bleaching out of specific cultural, racial, ethnic, and national identities that threatens to render individuals

nondistinctive.” In the face of increasing cross-border migration and globalization, there is a paradoxical renewal of interest in the authentic self and other. While absolute authenticity is improbable, a total rejection of authenticity, which leaves no room for claims of truthful representation, seems to also harbor the purist fantasy of a nondistinctive global village. Is there a middle ground when it comes to authenticity?

The notion of identity as performance is a key point in this discussion. Performances by definition are to some degree always “faked.” In the words of Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor: “nobody goes out on stage and sings about exactly what they did and felt that day.” In works of art, the constructions of identities could also be understood as performative gestures. Are acts of identity performance in musical composition, or any form of cultural production, always inauthentic then? The point here being that an acknowledgement of the unattainability of absolute authenticity should not necessarily negate and discredit all efforts to represent a culture with a certain degree of authenticity. We habitually abstract features of a culture from works of fiction, from “faked” identity performances. Could we not speak of an “authentic enough” representation of contemporary China in music, with some sensitivity to the multiplicity of realities that exist across geographical regions and over time? In this article, I advocate that we employ authenticity as a productive strategy, as a form of strategic essentialism, with an insight of its failures as well as potentials. Instead of rejecting authenticity in haste, I suggest that we focus on the various elements that constitute a claim of authenticity – the where, when and who. In other words, what does authentic mean in this very specific context? These questions are rarely answered in the discussion of contemporary Chinese music. In the following, I will outline and analyze several ways by which features of a contemporary Chinese condition can be said to manifest in FM3’s Buddha Machine. My goal is to address the over-stigmatization of authenticity by demonstrating that it is still possible to talk about a nuanced and multi-faceted representation when authenticity is seen as an aspiration within a carefully defined and specific context.

51 Ibid., 171.
52 Barker and Taylor, Faking It, xi.
The Buddha in the Machine

The Buddha Machine (fig. 2.1) is the creation of musical duo FM3. FM3 is Zhang Jian from Beijing, and Nebraska native Christiaan Virant who has lived in China for many years. Christiaan Virant moved to Beijing at the age of 18, and is among the 150,000 foreign nationals who now call China home. When asked if he still feels like an outsider after all these years, he replied, “my adult reality is actually a Chinese one.” Virant is at ease with his identity, and regards his worldviews to be “similar to [that of] a Chinese person.”

In the spring of 2005, experimental music label Staalplaat began to distribute the Buddha Machine worldwide. Just a couple of months after its initial release, independent online vendor forcedexposure sold over three hundred units in a fortnight. Then the word got out that music legend Brian Eno purchased six units in Beijing, and the blogosphere went crazy. The Buddha Machine finally went from underground to mainstream when New York Times gave it a plug in its Christmas buying guide. To date, with over fifty thousand units sold worldwide,

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54 Ibid.
the Buddha Machine is a trademarked franchise complete with its own t-shirt, handbag, and a long list of celebrity patrons.

No larger than a pack of cigarettes in size, the Buddha Machine is a plastic box with a built-in speaker. It houses several original tracks composed by the duo, each lasting only several seconds. These tracks loop indefinitely until the user switches to another track, or turns the device off. Virant stated in an interview that the duo was originally inspired by the chanting machines found in temples across China. Cheaply produced and virtually unbreakable, the Buddha Machine makes modest claims and accomplishes what it advertises brilliantly. It is dedicated to one task only: music-making. In the age of technological convergence when music is transmitted as ones and zeros through devices that are at once camera, phone, web browser and music player, the Buddha Machine is stubbornly lo-fi and refreshingly limited. New York Times described the Buddha Machine as “beautifully useless.” Grooves magazine called it “anti-iPod.”

Much of the commentaries on the Buddha Machine have focused on the device's novelty as a nostalgic relic of pre-digital age. But the Buddha Machine is also unmistakably rich in cultural meaning: as a product of the market economy, it encapsulates a certain contemporary Chinese condition that is linked to patterns of production and consumption. As an artistic creation, the Buddha Machine represents a novel strategy in domesticating the cultural self and other beyond Orientalist gestures. These two narratives are inevitably intertwined. In the following, I will present a reading of the Buddha Machine as an authentic representation of a temporally and geographically defined China. I attempt to achieve this by making finer distinctions between the different Chinas, detailing some of the social and cultural conditions of the specific China that I intend to investigate. I will then look at ways by which these conditions could be said to manifest in the Buddha Machine.

56 Ibid.
Contexts for Intellectual Properties Infringement in Mainland China

The first edition of the Buddha Machine contains nine short original audio clips of no longer than a couple of seconds each. These clips can be listened to through the built-in speaker or through personal headphones. A clip loops infinitely until batteries are exhausted or when user switches track by pressing a button. The playback possesses a distorted quality that is reminiscent of an old radio.

The Buddha Machine is an astounding success in Europe and North America. Back in Mainland China however, sales are slower. One could attribute the discrepancy to the popularity of chanting machines in the Mainland, which takes away from the novel appeal of the Buddha Machine. But a more likely cause is the habit of intellectual property (IP) acquisition in the Mainland. Not only is the duo economically affected by patterns of IP circulation; I would argue that the Buddha Machine actually embodies the very social and cultural contexts that gave rise to IP infringement in the Mainland.

In the Mainland cheap bootlegs are readily available, and the purchase of illegitimate intellectual properties is much less of a stigma than in other industrialized nations. Even if one wanted to do the right thing by the law, to locate legitimate copies of DVDs and CDs is no easy task. In a typical shopping arcade or book mall, pirated recordings of foreign musicians are habitually displayed alongside legitimate Chinese versions of the latest Hollywood blockbusters. Pirated materials are so finely produced that there is no way of distinguishing them from legitimate ones. Long gone are the days when bootlegs were sold in bags of plastic. Pirated copies now come in color-printed card boxes complete with inserts, “anti-piracy” laser stickers, even exchange policies. Currently, only five state enterprises own legitimate distribution right of Hollywood films in the Mainland. Pirate brands often adopt names that are similar to their official counterparts, making it even more difficult to distinguish between genuine and pirated materials. A number of “reputable” pirate brand names are actually known for their “superior quality.” According to one report,

59 Park, “FM3 Buddha Machine.”
up to 95 percent of the transactions in audiovisual materials in Mainland China are carried out in the black markets.\textsuperscript{60}

The issue of IP protection is a constant source of diplomatic conflict between the White House and Beijing, with the US accusing China of uncivilized disrespect for IP. Despite complaints from the international community, some have pointed out that at least on the legislative level Mainland China is actually one of the most committed to IP protection, with an impressive body of laws against copyright infringement.\textsuperscript{61} What then are the reasons for Mainland China’s failure to impose IP protection laws? One must not simply attribute the lack of IP respect in Mainland China to a certain Chinese cultural conditioning. Rather, it is the result of a unique set of social and economic conditions that are specific to the Mainland. To understand the current predicament, one must examine the contexts for the circulation of copyrighted materials in “other Chinas.”

Across the straits in Hong Kong and Taiwan where anti-piracy law enforcement is strict, illegitimate copies of audio-visual material can only be found in back alleys, or in shopping malls tucked away in the suburbs where adult entertainment DVDs are also sold. Decades of anti-piracy clampdown and education have paid off in these regions, and there is tremendous social pressure to purchase copyrighted materials in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. There are other political incentives for stopping piracy trade: IP theft is a major source of revenue for organized gangs in these regions, second only to drug trafficking. The dwindling movie industry in Hong Kong in particular suffers major loss of profit from these illegal activities, and it constantly lobbies the administration to take tougher measures. The social and economic reasons for imposing IP protection are therefore paramount. The contexts for IP protection in the Mainland are quite different. First of all, factories that produce pirated material are in many cases staffed by workers who lost their jobs to economic rationalization and state enterprise downsizing.\textsuperscript{62} Remote rural communities are often the most affected by such reforms. Some villages depend entirely on the manufacturing of pirated

\textsuperscript{60} Laikwan Pang, \textit{Cultural control and globalization in Asia: Copyright, piracy, and cinema}, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 98.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, 105.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}, 103.
materials for their livelihood, so on a pragmatic level pirated material trade serves as a cushion to the social problems brought about by rapid economic reform. There is some social benefit therefore in allowing the market to slowly ease into a piracy-free environment.

Another major difference between Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland is the degree to which music and moving images are able to freely circulate in the public sphere. Censorship in Mainland China is a complex machine that functions on many levels in service of a multitude of state interests. It is no secret that films containing controversial subject matter are habitually banned from public screening. Even in materials that are officially sanctioned one may still detect evidence of heavy editing. The progressive Southern Metropolis Daily reported that subtle yet significant changes were made to the dialogues in the Mainland release of The Warlords, a film by Hong Kong director Peter Chan that is set against the Taiping Rebellion. Pirated DVDs of the film were duplicated mostly from the uncensored Hong Kong version of the film. Since the majority of transactions were carried out in the black market, many were able to enjoy the film uncensored. Films that are prohibited from public screening altogether find their way into the hands of the culturally-aware citizens also through acts of piracy, both online and offline. Many directors of films that contain sensitive subject matters see the black market as a functional alternative distribution network. Film scholar Laikwan Pang in Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia pointed out that the black market of audiovisual materials explicitly aided in undermining state censorship, and therefore warrants a re-examination of its transgressive values:

Movie piracy in China is particularly pertinent to an examination of the relationship between copyright and reception rights, as the country's film

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63 Ibid.
65 Pang, Cultural Control, 103.
distribution does not operate in the ideal ‘free market’ from which the notion of intellectual property supposedly derives its meaning. 66

Pang argued that acts of piracy could be politically productive, particularly within a rigid and hegemonic system. In Mainland China, arts organizations are still by-and-large self-financed. Art spaces struggle to balance the book through box office or rental incomes. Arms length arts funding is scarce, and in cases where some city level funds are available they often come with the hefty price of content compliance. Piracy trade serves to overcome the limitation of a profit-oriented distribution network and lack of state subsidies for the arts.

When discussing the issue IP infringement in Mainland China, it would be a mistake to rely solely on capitalist logic. Here I painted a complex picture of the social and economic features that gave rise to IP infringement activities in the Mainland. These features are specific to Mainland China circa now. They are also precisely the kind of conditions that defy domestication by Orientalist strategies. I will now look at several ways by which these features can be said to manifest in the Buddha Machine.

A Proud Knockoff

With the record industry so fixated on combating piracy, being able to tie a physical object to music must be the dream of many record company executives. The duo however explicitly denied that they created the Buddha Machine to combat IP infringement. FM3 maintained that piracy impacted their career positively, and that Soulseek and other similar music sharing services have in fact contributed toward a wider global fan base. 67

The Buddha Machine could also be understood as a celebration of the acts of free appropriation and re-appropriation. The Buddha Machine’s audio circuit is a replica of that of the chanting machine down to the smallest resistor, while the

66 Ibid., 104 – 107.
chanting machine in turn is a creative re-adaptation of the circuit commonly found in answering machines. In the spirit of the open source movement, the chain of creative appropriation and re-appropriation continues as musicians sample the Buddha Machine to create remixes, many of which eventually become commercially available.\(^6\) This sort of community-initiated creative appropriation was an important aspect to the Buddha Machine’s original conception. Zhang and Virant often perform live sets using multiple machines in combination. The duo calls these live sets *Buddha Boxing* (fig. 2.2). They also intended for the musical community to freely experiment with the Buddha Machine as a musical instrument, and encouraged musicians to claim authorship in these acts of appropriation – a musical creative commons of sort. Many bands now regularly use the Buddha Machine in their live sets.

The dynamics between FM3, the Buddha Machine and its community of creative appropriators is one of mutual enrichment. The act of “knocking (each other) off” not only enabled the production process of the Buddha Machine itself, but it also activated a creative defiance of capitalist logic, in much the same way that Pang has argued for the potential political value of IP infringement. Here, the authentic picture of contemporary Mainland China that the Buddha Machine paints is a far cry from nostalgic Orientalist imagination, and it could not be

\(^6\) The fact that the samples contained within the Buddha Machine are mediated via cheap and easily replicable audio hardware is significant. This distinguishes FM3’s strategy from the sanctioned sampling that is already common in the West. I would argue that the deliberate downgrading of audio quality is in itself a political and anti-establishment gesture. See the next section for details.
understood as a general representation of all Chinas. The China we speak of is geographically and temporally specific.

**Mass-Produced and Made in (Socialist) China**

From the distorted quality of playback, to the kitsch recycled paper packaging and skewed logo printed on it (fig. 2.3), to the ultra low-cost and virtually indestructible PVC plastic casing – features of the Buddha Machine exemplify a shameless insistence on sub-par mass-produced quality. In fact, much of its appeal comes from an honest and open display of crudeness.

![Figure 2.3. The Buddha Machine’s recycled paper packaging](image)

The first edition of the Buddha Machine contains samples of traditional Chinese instruments, including the plugged string instrument *guqin* and the Chinese flute *dizi*. The sub-par quality of the built-in speaker meant that playback quality is normally low and at times distorted beyond recognition, and the identity of the sampled instruments is masked over. Distortion and occasional clipping of volume however did not take away from the authentic appeal of these instrumental samples. To the contrary, imperfections bestow these sounds with a distinctive quality that can be said to authentically reflect the social reality of a contemporary socialist China. While on the surface the socialist nation is aspiring
to the peak of technological innovation, a significant portion of its economy is still being driven by the export of cheaply manufactured or counterfeit products. From cellphones to brand name sneakers, from search engines to micro-blogging services, for every popular Western innovation there is a crude socialist Chinese “alternative.” And they are not at all ashamed of it: crudeness could be an attitude by choice, a gesture of resistance against transnational capitalist logic, and an insistence on non-conformity. In any event, what other choices does the socialist nation have at this point in history? The Buddha Machine is a naked display of the nation’s current predicament. It has emerged out of the contradictory social, cultural and economic realities of the socialist nation. It is a knock-off product that took advantage of the abundance of cheap labor, but it is also a creative re-adaptation that is inspired by a local invention, one that implies a kind of spiritual-ideological pragmatism. Instead of resisting sub-par qualities as aspects that are inferior and need improvement, the Buddha Machine fully domesticates the reality of mass manufacturing and pragmatically accepts the process' consequences. The Buddha Machine represents an acute self-realization. In this sense it is truly anti-iPod, a gesture against the tyranny of endless commodity refinement and technological advancement. In the words of Virant:

Part of the reason we made the Buddha Machine was because we couldn't make an iPod...with limited resources and technological knowledge, why bother? So we created what we knew how to: a humble 12-bit plastic box.  

Out of pirated circuit board and cheap PVC plastic enclosures was born a new aesthetic of kitsch. The China that the Buddha Machine represents is messy and fuzzy around the edges. It is both inside looking out and outside looking in, and it defies simple explanation.

There are signs that this way of understanding socialist China is entering into the international conversation. In 2009, the New Museum organized an exhibition entitled Urban China. Counterfeit Nike flip-flops and bright-colored

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70 This exhibition took place at the Lobby Gallery of the New Museum in New York, between February 2, 2009 and March 29, 2009. Benjamin Godsill, Curatorial Associate of the New Museum, curated the exhibition.
nylon handbags were among its exhibits. The exhibition explored the notion of a “vernacular” (socialist) China – a set of descriptors that is not reflective of an unadulterated Orient, but of the social realities of a modern nation whose development defies normative trajectories. There is something authentic about the way socialist China is portrayed here. Ed Gillespie commented on the exhibition:

Urban China...captures the imagination around what Chinese urban development is, could and perhaps should be. It forces those outside the Chinese economic expansion looking in to think about the Chinese mode of development more objectively whilst simultaneously challenging Chinese Ministries and developers to consider the legacy and longer term impacts of their explosive urban growth.  

In an interview, Virant explained how he navigated through the “hidden protocols” of the socialist nation’s manufacturing process in the initial stages of production. What is so remarkable about the Buddha Machine and Urban China is that they managed to encapsulate a self-contradictory and complicated China through an actual engagement with the social systems and economic processes that produce these contradictions in the first place. Regardless of the intentions of its creators, Nike flip-flops and the Buddha Machine are reasonable candidates for a contemporary representation of socialist China. Again, I stress that the representation under discussion is specific only to contemporary socialist China, not the democratic Taiwan, Hong Kong or other diasporic Chinese communities. A claim to authenticity must always be temporally and geographically defined.

The Machine of Meaning-Making

According to cultural theorist Theo Van Leeuwen, we might say that something is authentic when its origin can be established scientifically, but we might also call something authentic when it is a faithful reconstruction of the subject in question. Due to a variety of difficulties we have already identified, the first
definition of authenticity seems logically improbable. The many potentials of the second definition of authenticity, which calls for faithful reconstruction of the subject, are at the heart of my argument. Authenticity as a concept allows us to generate potent social and cultural descriptors out of acts of representation, which in turn help to keep the machine of meaning-making alive. As a strategy for signification, it affords composers the opportunity to create works that speak *vis-a-vis* contemporary cultural lexicons. Perhaps most importantly, as a framework for understanding cultural texts authenticity actually assists us in foregrounding ways by which representation complicate rather than affirm normative assumptions of cultures and nations. Authenticity as an aspiration has the potential to be transgressive.

What then constitutes “faithful representation” in acts of creativity? Let us be clear that authentic representations of culture in music will not and cannot be pure archival phonographs. That said authenticity is not an all-or-nothing matter either. Instead of asking “is X authentic or not,” analysts and composers could ask “on what basis are claims of authenticity made in X,” with full awareness of the impossibility of the authentic absolute. As the notion of authenticity comes into crisis in post-modern times, so do forms of representation. Yet without the means to produce new and contemporary meanings, composers and analysts have no choice but to resort to either Orientalist nostalgia or transnational definitions of culture. But as cultural theorist Arif Dirlik has pointed out, transnationalism is not without its problems either. It runs the danger of neglecting the rich contradictions that activate the curiosities for border-crossing in the first place.74 Discourse and practice are interdependent – we may theorize about transnational cultural spaces or even globalized composers, but where is a truly transnational Chinese music to be found? In light of the increasing interest in the authentic self and other, I argue that authenticity may continue to be a worthwhile pursuit in composition and in analysis as long as we put its purist definition behind us. At the same time, we must bear in mind that any claim to authenticity must be geographically and temporally specific. The strategic essentialism of authenticity must do justice to the plurality and complexities of multiple Chinas.

CHAPTER 3
The Four Great Inventions and Utopianism at the 2008 Beijing
Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of
direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society in a
perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias
are fundamentally unreal spaces. – Michel Foucault

The Chinese did all they could to ensure a victory in their second bid to host the
Olympics. The narrow defeat in 2000 was a loud and clear wake-up call for the
leaders in The Zhongnanhai, a reminder that economic prosperity and free trade
do not necessarily translate into friendship and leveraging power in the
international diplomatic arena. It is not difficult to see why many from within and
outside of China would consider the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics as the
nation's come of age. While the communist nation's economic success and rapid
ascendance preceded the games by almost two decades, the 2008 Olympics
represented a truly rare occasion. Through the games, China has an opportunity
to actively engage in the construction of an international self-image while the
world is attentively tuning in. More importantly, the Olympics allowed the nation
to construct this self-image upon a decidedly positive framework of peaceful
coeexistence, fair competition, and international diplomacy. This was no easy task:
ever since China “turned red,” the predominant attitude towards the nation had
been one of suspicion, confusion, and anxiety. Despite China's newfound wealth
in recent years, the nation continues to face an uphill battle on the diplomatic and
media relation fronts. To quote cultural theorist Rey Chow, “every time a major
event occurs in China, [the Cold War] narrative returns with a vengeance.”
The Olympics was a remarkable opportunity for China to respond to this narrative.
There was only one other such rare occurrence in recent Chinese history: in 1997,
international media descended into Hong Kong to witness the handover

76 The Zhongnanhai is the central headquarters for the Communist Party of China and the Central
77 Rey Chow, “King Kong in Hong Kong watching the 'handover' from the U.S.A.” Social Text 55
ceremony, which saw the staging of a two-day celebration to commemorate the transference of Hong Kong's sovereignty back to China. In 1997 however, the subject position of representation was relatively unstable, as there existed multiple cultural stakeholders that needed to be addressed throughout the handover ceremony; in 2008, China alone had the limelight.

Several scholars have attempted at decoding the cultural symbolisms of the 1997 handover ceremony. Their efforts served as inspirations as well as models for the current study. Here, my primary focus is the cultural symbolism of the musical multimedia at the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, and their significance at China's current historic juncture. In the following, I will scrutinize the choice of cultural symbols throughout the evening, to make the case that the opening ceremony signaled a paradigm shift in the expressive strategies employed by Chinese artists to articulate their vision of modern China. Instead of a sole reliance on the East-meets-West rhetoric as a main strategy for portraying Chinese modernism, which replicated the age-old dictum of zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong (Chinese knowledge as essence, Western knowledge as function), there were signs at the opening ceremony that artists are also adopting the position of utopianism. This utopianism rests upon a transition from using geographically defined opposites (East and West), to using temporally defined ones (technology and tradition) in the imagination of self in China. The “geographically empty” opposites of new technology and ancient tradition together served to neutralize, generalize, and virtualize China. The success of these expressive strategies aside, they provided interesting answers to issues regarding the stability of the category of Chinese-ness raised by post-colonial and cultural theorists. At times, I will read the music and the visuals in conjunction with the commentaries that accompanied the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) broadcast of the opening ceremony, to

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79 The dictum was first introduced during the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861 – 1865) of the Qing Dynasty in China. Following the series of humiliating military defeats, officials lobbied the state to reform by adopting Western technology in all matters pertaining to practical application, while striving to maintain the essence of Chinese knowledge. See Mary Clabaugh Wright, The last stand of Chinese conservatism: The T’ung-Chih Restoration, 1862 -1874 (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957).
explicate on the way in which the message of a new Chinese modernity is entangled and in tension with state-sanctioned ideology.

Background

The Beijing Summer Olympics opening ceremony was held at the Beijing national stadium on August 8, 2008. The multimedia spectacle was directed by filmmaker the Zhang Yimou, a prominent figure from the “Fifth Generation” of Chinese film directors.\(^{80}\) The director of music was French-Chinese composer Chen Qigang. The list of composers involved in the making of the opening ceremony reads like a Who's Who of the “New Wave” generation: Chen Qigang, Ye Xiaogang, Guo Wenjing, to name a few. According to Chen, the accompanying score was the fruit of group effort by over a hundred composers and musicians from within and outside of the People's Republic of China, of whom only around twenty made it into the final credit list.\(^{81}\) Since almost 210 minutes of music were required for various formalities, proceedings as well as entertainment, outsourcing was both of practical and artistic necessity. Chen admitted that the 160 minutes of music that accompanied the athletes' entrance into the stadium were out-sourced to a production company overseas, leaving around 90 minutes of music for which Chen and his team of twenty or so composers were personally responsible. Overseas contractors worked anonymously, and much of this music were intended to serve only as a backdrop to officiating formalities. The remaining 90 minutes of music were created specifically for the wenyi biaoyan\(^{82}\) (culture and art performance) segment of the evening, and this segment will be the focus of our analysis. Several themes were repeatedly articulated throughout the wenyi biaoyan segment, among these, The Four Great Inventions of ancient China

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80 The filmmakers who constitute the so-called “Fifth Generation” included Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige, Zhang Junzhao and others. These graduates constituted the first group of filmmakers to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy since the Cultural Revolution.


82 Wenyi biaoyan refers to a type of variety show that is geared towards reception by the general public. Wenyi biaoyan enjoys a long and distinguished history in communist China as a form of entertainment, and a way of marking celebratory occasions. Typically, an evening of wenyi biaoyan is an eclectic mix of dance, music, theatre, acrobatics, Chinese opera, revolutionary song, poetry reading, and sometimes even standup comedy. The Chinese character wen can be translated into “art” or “humanism.”
were the most frequently recurring. Additionally, there seemed to be a conscious
effort to juxtapose ancient innovations with images of a technologically advanced
China.

This juxtaposition of the new and the old, the cultural and the
technological yields to rich readings, especially when considered in reference to
the historiography of the Four Great Inventions. Before I expound on the ways by
which the Four Inventions manifested visually and musically, I will take a
moment to reflect on their history as Chinese cultural canons.

The Four Great Inventions

The Four Great Inventions of ancient China are the compass, gunpowder, paper
making, and movable type printing. The Four Inventions are often featured in
contemporary folklore, children's stories, as well as student's textbooks.
Discovered between the 4th century BC and the 9th century AD, these technologies
were exported to various parts of the world through international exchange, and
subsequently evolved into more sophisticated applications.

The Four Inventions occupy a special place in the collective psyche of the
Chinese people from within and outside of Mainland China. I remembered being
a student in colonial Hong Kong, and having the greatness of these discoveries
pounded into my little head. There would be entire classes devoted to the Four
Inventions, and teachers went to great lengths to ensure that we could recall them
and their significance from memory. Great emphasis was placed on the fact that
these Chinese technologies superseded their Western counterparts by centuries: we
did it before them. Hong Kong was not yet a part of communist China at that
point, and so my childhood classroom experience cannot be reduced to simple
state propaganda. In fact, in my conversation with other individuals of the
Chinese diaspora, many seem to recall similar know-your-Four-Inventions
experiences. Whether you are an Australia-born Chinese who was sent to Sunday
Chinese culture school to learn about your heritage, a school-age child in colonial
Hong Kong, a Taiwanese attending elementary Chinese history class, or a
Malaysian-Chinese reading up on your tradition – the Four Inventions were indispensable components of a quintessential Chinese education experience.

The Four Inventions are celebrated first and foremost for their significance as signs of ancient China’s superior scientific achievement. They seem to be important parts of a healthy Chinese ego. That said, anybody with a passing knowledge in modern Chinese history would find this notion curious. The history of modern China was decidedly not one of impressive scientific advancements. The long succession of military defeats during the Qing Dynasty, which led to a century of Western colonization, was to a large extent the result of the nation's technological backwardness. An over-emphasis on science and technology without a contemporary perspective could easily sound like reminiscence of a glorious by-gone era.

Unlike the Four Beauties or the Four Great Classical Novels, both of which were extensively discussed in native literature, the concept of the Four Inventions was first conceived in the West, and was only subsequently re-appropriated by the Chinese in the 20th century. Discussion of the Four Inventions' significance first appeared in writing in 1620, in the works of British philosopher Francis Bacon. In 1861, Karl Marx commented that “gunpowder, the compass, and the printing press were the three great inventions which ushered in bourgeois society.” The notion of ancient China being technologically superior to Europe was popularized in the 20th century by Joseph Needham, most notably in his seminal publication *Science and Civilization in China*. According to historian John King Fairbank, Needham and his colleagues almost single-handedly “restored to the Chinese people the record of their pioneer accomplishments in making chinaware and cast iron, paper and printed books,

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83 The Four Great Classical Novels are pinnacle of China’s literary achievement. They are *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Both the Four Great Beauties and the Four Great Classical Novels were established and popularized by native writers and historians, and had their roots in literature dating back to the Ming Dynasty.


lock gates and sternpost rudder, gunpowder, compass and a host of other devices and inventions.” After having been subject to almost a hundred years of colonization it is not difficult to understand the Chinese’s excitement over the “re-discovery” of the Four Inventions. This knowledge was seized upon by theorists, historians and patriots alike as a newfound source of national pride.

The details of the processes by which the Four Inventions became canonized in China are outside the scope of the current discussion. But given the reasons outlined above, the choice of the Four Inventions as themes for the opening ceremony is not as obvious and uncontested as it may first appear. Indeed, scholars have long questioned the importance historians place on the Four Inventions, criticizing at various times its focus on science over other disciplines, its arbitrary number of four, and its relatively insignificant contribution to the improvement of domestic life when compared to some of the other native inventions. While the revival of the Four Inventions contributed towards restoring national pride, this is done so in the disguise of a deeply entrenched Western subject position. Karl Marx theorized that gunpowder “blew up the knightly class,” the compass “discovered the world market and founded the colonies,” and that the printing press “was the instrument of Protestantism and the regeneration of science in general.” But we must also bear in mind that the rise of capitalism, the founding of colonies and Protestantism were specifically instruments of European modern enlightenment. In other words, the Four Inventions were upheld by Marx and other Western scholars specifically for their prominent position in the history of science outside of China. The history of modern China is hardly one of international trade, colonial exploration, scientific enlightenment, and expansionist militarism. For one, if gunpowder has had a central position in the history of scientific development in China, the nation might not have suffered such a humiliating defeat to the Eight-Nation Alliance.

87 Wen-yuan Qian, The great inertia: scientific stagnation in traditional China (London: Croom Helm, 1985), vii.
89 Marx, Selected writings, 185.
90 The Eight Nation Alliance is made up of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The alliance defeated China during the Boxer Uprising of August of 1900, which led to the signing of the Boxer Protocol in 1901.
would be presumptuous to speculate that Chinese theorists and historians were not aware of the Four Inventions' foreign origins and their complicated history, but it is not surprising to see that communist China was not opposed to the canonization of the Four Invention given their theoretical association with proletarian class struggle. The truth remains that implicit in the Four Inventions narrative is the machinery of Orientalism, the notion that the value of China hinges upon its potential to enrich the West.

There is no way of telling whether or not Zhang Yimou and his colleagues were aware of the complicated politics behind the popularization of the Four Inventions, in any case my aim here is not to accuse them of misuse. The absence of this knowledge however should not bar us from deriving cultural meanings from the use of the Four Inventions at the Olympics opening ceremony as identity-performing gestures, especially given the towering significance of the event at China's current historic juncture. There were a host of other cultural symbols too, and it is precisely by examining the way that the intricate history of the Four Inventions was set in relief and tension with other elements of symbolic nature that we might uncover the artists' vision of a modern Chinese state. Before launching into a critical discourse, I will systemically describe some of the specifics of the multimedia at the opening ceremony, paying special attention to the ways in which the Four Inventions interacted with other signifying elements.

TheWelcoming Ceremony

The CCTV broadcast of the opening ceremony began with the following on screen commentaries:

MALE COMMENTATOR. Hundreds of years of anticipation, seven years in preparation.

FEMALE COMMENTATOR. The Olympics, after one hundred and seventeen years of history, is finally setting foot in the most populated nation of the world.
FEMALE COMMENTATOR. The Olympics symbolize solidarity, friendship and peaceful coexistence of the human race. It is also the realization of a hundred-years’ dream (bainian meng) of the Chinese people, an affective embrace between the five thousand years' old Chinese civilization and the people of the world.

The Olympics was not just an opportunity for China to flex its muscles. It was an undeniable confirmation of the nation's acceptance into the roster of the great peaceful nations of the world. From its entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) to the recent Chinese directorship at the World Health Organization (WHO), for decades China has aspired to become a nation to be reckoned with across multiple levels of the international diplomatic arena – and the Olympics was the most sought-after of the trophies. The successful bid to host the Olympics was seen as the realization of a bainian meng (one-hundred years' dream). The temporal dimension of this dream, the long anticipation before its final realization, was repeatedly articulated. What is the nature of this dream?

After the officiating party's entrance, the image of an ancient sun-clock was projected onto the rim of the stadium, to once again articulate the passing of time. Meanwhile, two thousand and eight fou drummers stood by on the central field of the Olympic stadium. Fou is an ancient bronzeware dating back to the Xia Dynasty (2205 BC to 1766 BC). Originally a container for wine, fou evolved into a casual musical instrument to be played at welcoming ceremonies due to its availability as wine containers at festive occasions. The fou featured at the opening ceremony were embedded with LED lights that reacted to drummers' beating. Thousands of fous formed giant Chinese and Arabic digits, transforming the stadium central field into a massive human-LED clock that counted down to 8:00 p.m. local time (fig. 3.1). The concept of time in the present tense was expressed through the combination of a cultural artifact and modern technology, whereas moving images of an ancient sunclock points to time in the past tense.

91 The Chinese habitually use the term bai nian (literally “a hundred years”) as a way of expressing the conception of a very long duration; it is most often used to quantify the distance between two historical events. Therefore, bai nian should not be taken literally to mean only one hundred years.
The dynamics between the old and the new were brought to the forefront. The notion of passing time was more forcefully visualized in the next section. Entitled “footprints of history,” twenty-nine footprint-shaped fireworks shot out from the ground, forming a path of light that ran across Beijing city, extending from the Tienanmen Square to the Olympic stadium. As we shall see, this strategy of contrasting the old and the new to articulate a lineage was recycled throughout the evening, particularly when the Four Inventions came into full play.

![Figure 3.1. Thousands of fous formed giant Chinese and Arabic digits.](image)

**Paper-making**

The *wenyi biaoyan* proper began with a short film directed by Zhang Yimou, accompanied by a score composed by Chen Qigang. The film featured serene imageries of paper-making – the first of the Four Great Inventions. Meanwhile, on the stadium central field, a gigantic LED scroll rolls open to reveal images of ceramics, porcelains, and other Chinese fine arts artifacts. The accompanying score was performed by *guqin* virtuoso Chen Leiji. As the segment progressed, Western strings entered the soundscape to compliment *guqin*’s sparse articulation with hazy pentatonic clusters – a Chen Qigang signature. The relationship between the strings and the *guqin* was not one of solo and harmonic underpinning. Instead, the strings clusters were extended from the *guqin* melody,

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93 *Guqin* is the modern name for a plucked seven-string Chinese musical instrument of the zither family.
adding multiple layers of pedal that served to sustain the guqin’s resonance. The two weaved into a seamless heterophony (fig. 3.2).

![Figure 3.2. Large LED scroll painting at the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony.](image)

Visually there were three active points of interest: the moving images on the LED scroll, the dancers in the center of the scroll, and guqin player Chen Leiji to the right of the scroll. These three points of interest were temporally parallel but narratively independent of each other. The lack of one single unifying focus can be seen as a mimic of the multi-vanishing point perspective technique common in Chinese scroll paintings.94

**Movable Type**

The music in the next segment was composed by Guo Wenjing.95 In this segment, the entrance of the next Great Invention was ushered in by mass recitation of several excerpts taken from the Confucius classic *the Analects*.96 A male voice was heard over loudspeakers. Thousands of actors, each holding a

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94 Also known as cavalier perspective, multi-vanishing point perspective is a way to represent a three-dimensional object on flat surface. See O. Siren, *A History of Later Chinese Painting* (London: Medici Society, 1937).

95 Guo Wenjing, one of the most prominent figures of the “New Wave” generation of Chinese composers. He resides in Beijing and is currently the head of composition department at the Central Conservatory of Music.

96 *The Analects* is a collection of writings that record the teachings and sayings of Chinese thinker Confucius (ca. 475 BC – 221 BC).
bamboo slip, reacted to the voice and recited the excerpts in a call-and-response style. This mass recitation was sometimes punctuated by the sound of woodblocks, drums, bronze bells, and rattling bamboo slips (fig. 3.3).

![Figure 3.3. Confucius’ disciples reciting excerpts from the Analects.](image)

Meanwhile, the LED scroll was moved aside to reveal numerous movable type tablets underneath. These tablets soon started to thrust outward from the ground. As the percussive music hastened, the tablets formed ancient and modern versions of the Chinese character \textit{he} (harmony), to demonstrate the evolution of the Chinese script over time. When the modern version of the Chinese character \textit{he} was finally revealed, the CCTV hosts commented thus:

\textbf{MALE COMMENTATOR.} At this moment, the contemporary version of \textit{he} is revealed to us.

\textbf{FEMALE COMMENTATOR.} The character \textit{he} is thousands of years old. It developed and changed over time. It expresses Confucius's humanist vision of \textit{heweigui} (the pursuit of harmony is virtuous), to demonstrate the long and distinguished history of China's aspiration for peace and harmony.

At the end of this segment, it was revealed to the audience that the movable type tablets were independently operated by some eight hundred human performers. This was a surprise as the pattern movements were timed and
executed with almost mechanical precision. The human machine of the movable type tablets and the massive human-digital clock at the welcoming ceremony both seemed to point to a kind of humanism that is paradoxically enabled by technological advancement. As the accompanying commentary suggests, the ultimate goal of this humanist vision is *he*, or harmony. Of course, we could see this as a desire to suppress individual voices and subsume them under the collective. We shall revisit to this point later.

**Compass and Gunpowder**

After a short Chinese opera interlude, the next segment focused on China's history of intercultural exchange. This history was exemplified by the Silk Road – an extensive network of land and sea trade routes that connected ancient China with the rest of the road. At the onset of this segment, the LED scroll beamed images of a desert and a map of the Silk Road's land trade route. A female dancer in costume was suspended in mid-air directly above the LED scroll. Shortly the focus switched to the sea route when hundreds of actors, each holding a large oar, lined up on either side of the LED scroll. Projectors beamed images of roaring ocean onto the rim of the stadium, while the LED screens displayed images of fleets of junks. An performer danced on the open scroll while holding a compass, presumably to portray Zheng He's direction of the Ming Dynasty sea voyage. The CCTV host commented at this point:

> The Sea Silk Road not only illustrated the superior standard of ancient Chinese marine technology, but also forcefully demonstrated the ancient civilization's friendliness and passionate pursuit of friendship.

Here, one must be reminded that although Zheng He by-and-large sought to foster exchange through diplomacy, the enormous army that accompanied his fleet would in any case have ensured that militarism was not necessary. Indeed, one of the aims of the Ming expedition was to impressed foreigners with Chinese

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97 Zheng Hu was a Chinese diplomat who directed the Chinese voyages sponsored by the Ming court between 1405 and 1433. A series of seven expeditions were designed to establish a Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean basin. See Suryadinata Leo, *Admiral Zheng He & Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).
military might, cultural sophistication, and technological advancement – to awe “uncivilized and barbaric” foreign regimes into submission. The voyage was not always peaceful either: along the way Zheng He fought pirates, intervened in civil unrest, showed off his army to hostile natives in Arabia and East Africa. In the context of the Olympics however, it is easy to speculate on why the military aspect of Zheng He's voyage was masked over. The Olympics was an opportunity to portray China not only as a peace loving nation of the 20th century, but also as an ancient civilization that has always been interested in harmonious co-existence since antiquity. This rhetoric is all the more obvious in the conspicuous absence of gunpowder as a motif at the opening ceremony. Regarding the Chinese's relationship to the invention of gunpowder, historian Kenneth Chase comments:

The earliest known formula for gunpowder can be found in a Chinese work dating probably from the 800s. The Chinese wasted little time in applying it to warfare, and they produced a variety of gunpowder weapons, including flamethrowers, rockets, bombs, and mines, before inventing firearms. One can speculate that gunpowder was represented in the impressive display of fireworks throughout the opening ceremony; but fireworks are relatively standard affairs in Olympics Games. In any case, gunpowder was not given the same elaborate audio-visual treatment that the other three of the Four Inventions received. The absence of gunpowder, the repeated articulation of the concept of (harmony), and the selective representation of Zheng He's expeditions all seemed to be consistent with the rhetoric as articulated by the CCTV commentaries at the beginning of the broadcast, and as expressed by the Beijing Olympics' official motto of “One World, One Dream.” The Olympics is equated with a long-due Chinese awakening, the revival of a historically peaceful nation that was once fallen victim to military aggression. On the point of China's debatable “history of peace,” the CCTV commentaries were more forcefully positivist than what was evident in the performance itself; though without a doubt the Olympics was portrayed as the last nail in the coffin of the nation's part induced, part self-imposed exclusion from the international community.

98 Leo, Admiral Zheng He, 150 – 167.
“One World, One Dream” is both a statement, and a plea to the international community for inclusion. No one will deny the fact that the post-Cold War China is an economic powerhouse to be reckoned with. Despite China's new found wealth however, the nation continues to face an uphill battle on the diplomatic and media relation fronts. In his study of the international media's general attitude of reportage towards China, Rey Chow points out:

Despite the virtual disappearance of the actual political configurations of the Cold War, the Cold War narrative never quite dies – every time a major event occurs in China, this narrative returns with a vengeance...I used the term 'King Kong syndrome' to refer to this structure of cross-cultural, cross racial representation aimed at producing China as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders. 100

The so-called “King Kong syndrome” refers to Western media's practice of broadcasting news about China as a moral crisis that requires foreign invention and benevolent salvation. The Olympics opening ceremony's diligent emphasis on the utopian vision of harmonious coexistence and the historically impossible notion of the forever-peaceful nation can be understood as reactions to this media bias. For the purpose of our discussion it suffices to take the “King Kong syndrome” and China's counter message at their face values. What we are interested in are the strategies with which this utopian vision was constructed, and what these strategies say about the artists' imagination of the nation circa 2008. Several questions remain unanswered in this regard. Firstly, in this massively public act of self-imagination, which spoke to the international community on behalf of all of the Chinese, how was a subject position of speaking established in the first place? How was the notion of global Chinese solidarity imagined, assumed, and consumed at the opening ceremony, and what role did the Four Inventions play in this imagination of a united Chinese front? Secondly, as we have already observed, the concept of time and the juxtaposition of ancient artifact and modern technology seemed to be central to the expressive strategies employed at the opening ceremony performance. We have already established

100 Chow, “King Kong in Hong Kong,” 94.
that the vision of a friendly modern Chinese state was the expressive goal of these
gestures, but can we speculate on the rationale behind the choice of these
elements as operative tools to accomplish the task of nation-building at hand?
Specifically, what is the cultural significance of these strategies at China's current
historic juncture?

The Problem of a United Front

The CCTV broadcast of the Chunjie lianhuan wanhui (Spring Festival gala, or
chunwan) is watched by billions of Chinese from within and outside of Mainland
China each year. Chunwan is quite a phenomenon: the preparation for the gala
receives wide national press coverage,\textsuperscript{101} and the show itself consistently receives
one of the highest ratings of all television programs in China. The spring festival is
traditionally an occasion for family reunion, and chunwan is an integral part of the
spring festival culture itself. The popularity of CCTV's chunwan transcends
national boundary, it is also watched by overseas Chinese through satellite
broadcast. Symbolically, chunwan unites Chinese across geographical boundaries.
It induces a sense of national pride through the satellite dish and directly into the
homes of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diasporic Chinese communities. Due to its
transnational popularity, chunwan is also a perfect platform for the communist
party to accomplish ideological thought-work on a global scale. Zhao Bin wrote
of the Chunwan:

\begin{quote}
The carefully orchestrated 'happy gathering' on television induces an instant sense
of national belonging that transcend both immediate family and narrow localities.
The classical Confucius notion of the state as an enlarged family is brought into
full play...whereby happy family gatherings are turned into grand national
reunions, and the Confucian dream of 'great oneness' (da yitong) is brought to an
atmospheric and symbolic realization on Spring Festival Eve.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

The ideological and operative frameworks of the Olympics opening

\textsuperscript{101} Zhao Bin, “Popular family television and party ideology: the Spring Festival Eve happy

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 43 – 44.
produced by CCTV, they share the same global Chinese audience demographic, and they are both concerned with imaging a *da yitong* across geographical boundaries *vis-a-vis* the celebration of a festive occasion. Both are examples of the centre (CCTV, and the communist party, Beijing, and the artists of the Olympic opening ceremony performance) speaking to and for the periphery (the divergent Chinese diaspora). In both cases, the idea of *tuanyuan* – reunion of estranged family members – plays out forcefully. One of the major trends in Chinese diasporic study has been the energetic debunking of “Chinese” as a category with fixed, uncontested contents. Central to this critique are the questioning of China's hegemony, of Mainland China's cultural and geopolitical centrism, and of a distinctively Chinese version of biological determinism, or what I would call the *my-Chinese-blood-makes-me-an-expert-in-Chinese-food* paradigm. In the words of Michelle Yeh:

> If contemporary theory has taught us anything, it is that China is not an unchanging, homogeneous entity and that Chinese-ness is a continuing process of self-constitution. To interpret China is always already to construct China discursively. 103

In light of these theoretical challenges, the success of the ideological work in the *chunwan* and the Olympics opening ceremony seem to rest upon the presupposition of two conditions: firstly, a united front of Chinese across national boundaries; secondly, China proper's legitimacy to speak for all of the Chinese across geopolitical boundaries. In the case of *chunwan*, a united front is founded upon the common experience of lunar New Year celebration, though the problem of agency is trickier as lunar New Year celebratory customs vary greatly from one region to another even within Mainland China. 104 In the case of the Olympics opening ceremony however, I would argue that a united front was rested upon the Four Inventions. The tale of the Four Inventions is told in countless variations to Chinese all over the globe. Implicit in the retelling of this tale is the notion of

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104 For instance, it is common for Chinese in the north to enjoy dumplings at Chinese New Year’s Eve. Chinese in the south however do not customarily consume dumplings at festive occasions. The gala’s focus on the lives and customs of northern Chinese people has at times alienated southern viewers.
motherland, a reminder that one's Chinese origin is inescapable: once Chinese, forever Chinese. Furthermore, the potency of the Four Inventions as cultural symbols does not end with their unifying power – these were also real economic activities that made real impact across multiple nationalities. In the words of Derk Bodde:

Without paper and printing, for example, we should still be living in the Middle Ages. Without gunpowder, the world might have been spared much suffering, but on the other hand the armored knights of the medieval Europe might still reign supreme in their moated castles, and our society might still be held in feudal servitude. Nor would the building of the Panama Canal or of Boulder Dam have been possible! And finally, without compass, the great age of discovery might never have come, with its quickening of European material and intellectual life, and its bringing to knowledge of worlds hitherto unknown, including our own country.105

There is certainly an air of exaggeration in Bodde's statement, and it is true that the Four Inventions contributed more significantly towards European enlightenment than it did towards China's own modernization. However, I would argue that it is precisely the importance that the West tends to place upon the Four Inventions that make them such powerful tools for constructing a transnational Chinese identity. In “Can One Say No to Chinese-ness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm,” cultural theorist Ien Ang advocates the use of a “post-Chinese” identity as a fluid category of imagining the divergent Chinese diasporic reality, which is to say, to allow for the possibility of rejecting the category of Chinese altogether when the circumstances call for it.106 To flip this fluidity around, instead of resorting to patriotic sentiments that lack transnational relevance to people outside of China, which one can say “no” to, what the Olympics opening ceremony managed to achieve was a China that is categorically irresistible. Put simply, by highlighting the significance of the Four Inventions, the Olympics opening presented itself as an invitation to embrace

Chineseness regardless of ethnic origin. The China in question is no longer an exotic Other, but rather, an integral part of the history of global enlightenment that we can all relate to. The category of China, through the vision of global utopia, acquired transnational qualities. Its ethnic specificity was effectively emptied out, so that the nation became a Foucaultian “unreal space” – a virtual China, or, the notion of China that can be enjoyed by all. This is a Chinese solidarity that even Westerners can now say “yes” to, and those who no longer call oneself a Chinese are welcomed give it another try.

**Yuan and Liu, Ti and Yong**

Even if we established that a Chinese united front was created through the Four Inventions, the problem of agency to speak still remains a complicated one. The cultural authority of geopolitical China has been increasingly contested in the writings of cultural theorists, most notably in Tu Wei-Ming’s *The living tree: The changing meaning of being Chinese today.* In it, Tu elaborates on the concept of “cultural China,” a transcendental Chinese cultural space that is limited neither by geographical boundary nor ethnicity. Part of the agenda of Tu's cultural China is to reinstate the diasporic Chinese periphery as the center:

The center no longer has the ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate the agenda for cultural China. On the contrary, the transformative potential of the periphery is so great that it seems inevitable that it will significantly shape the intellectual discourse on cultural China for years to come.

In her study of the construction of cultural identities in Southern China, Helen Siu similarly remarks:

If Beijing does not occupy the privileged position as the center of Chinese history, that cultural distance from it does not mean marginality or anomaly, then the

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107 Tu, *The living tree.*
entire process of becoming Chinese needs to be seen as involving a much wider range of players and voices.\textsuperscript{109}

How were the different players, voices and stakeholders of China addressed in the Olympics opening ceremony? One can speculate that Zhang Yimou and his team were at least aware of these issues, as there was evidence of conscious efforts to represent the ethnic minorities of China at the Olympic opening ceremony. At the welcoming ceremony for instance, the Chinese flag was ushered in by fifty-six young children dressed in ethnic costumes to represent the fifty-six ethnic groups of modern China. While ethnic minorities could be marked by custom and costume, there is no easily identifiable equivalent for, say, a Hong Kong child, a Macau child, or an Australian Chinese child. Not only was the diasporic community invisible at the opening ceremony, they were in fact symbolically excluded. As we have seen earlier, throughout the opening ceremony there was an emphasis on the notion of China as an ancient civilization. The\textit{ yuanyuan liuchang} (as long standing and well established as a stream that runs a long course from a remote source) nature of Chinese civilization was painstakingly enunciated. Linguistically, \textit{yuanyuan} (remote source) and \textit{liuchang} (long course) are co-dependent concepts within a single compounded phrase. There could be no \textit{liu} (stream) without a \textit{yuan} (source). The relationship between the two is dynamic yet unidirectional. By placing emphasis on the notion of passing time, the Olympics opening ceremony similarly re-contextualized the lineage between China proper and the Chinese diaspora as one of \textit{yuan} and \textit{liu}. By spotlighting the ancient and remote origin of the \textit{yuan}, we were symbolically transported back to a pre-diasporic moment when Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Chinese America, Chinese Australia and other overseas Chinese communities were not problematic, to a moment when they did not exist to taint the purity of the source. This concern for cultural purity can also be seen in the choice of musical instruments in the Four Inventions segment. The purity of Chinese music is a myth, the history of music from China has always been one of constant adaptation and domestication of outside influences. Musical instruments from foreign cultures were freely incorporated.

into the musical fabric and artistic live of imperial China.\footnote{For a detailed discussion see Lee Yuan-Yuan and Shen Sinyan, \textit{Chinese musical instruments} (Washington D.C.: Chinese Music Society of North America Press, 1999).} The \textit{erhu} for instance, now widely regarded as a bona fide Chinese instrument, originated from the \textit{xi} people of Central Asia and came to China in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century.\footnote{See Jonathan Stock, “A historical account of the Chinese two-stringed fiddle erhu,” \textit{Galpin Society Journal} 46 (1993): 83 – 113.} In fact there are only very few native Chinese musical instruments, and among them are \textit{fou} and \textit{guqin}.

\textit{Yuan} is a comparatively manageable moment in acts of representation. After all, China is an ancient civilization by any account. It is much more difficult to represent a Chinese \textit{liu}, the post-diasporic moment. To account for the Chinese diaspora means to construct a vision of modern China that is ideologically complicated, culturally tainted, and socially impure. Cultural symbolism inevitably privileges China proper and hegemonizes the living tree of global China. If one cannot rely on cultural symbolism in the imagination of a post-diasporic moment, then how does one say anything at all about modern China at all? This is where technology comes in: at the Olympics opening ceremony, a vision of modern China was expressed through the use of modern technology. The Four Inventions were given face-lifts through the use of spectacular foldable LED, high definition video projection, interactive light installation, and gigantic illuminated structures. It was as though the ancient civilization was resurrected by the promise of technology, light, and electricity. One can say that modern China was synonymous with modern technology at the Olympics opening ceremony. The task of imagining the “modern-ness” of modern China – the present tense \textit{liu} of the \textit{yuan} – was thus achieved by first emptying out geographically defined opposites, and subsequently inserting temporally defined ones in its place; in other words, to focus on the dynamic flow between the \textit{yuan} and the \textit{liu}, China proper and its scattered seeds, instead of the contents of the categories of \textit{yuan} and \textit{liu} itself. In fact, a definition of the \textit{liu} was entirely evaded.\footnote{One could certainly speculate that the diversity of the \textit{liu} is partly acknowledged in the choice of artists and their current location of residence, for instance Shen Wei (New York, USA) and Chen Qigang (France). That said, all of the chosen artists were born in Mainland China, and artists of disporic origins were only acknowledged as being on the receiving end of the broadcast.} In its place was the geographically neutral category of technology, a category that transcends national
as well as ethnic boundaries. The fact that the Four Inventions were popularized by the West and not by the Chinese themselves made them even more fitting as ideological apparatuses for a utopian vision. If the yuan was (and can be) enjoyed by all regardless of race, the liu could surely also be universally appreciated. This is nothing short of classic technological utopianism: modern China is transcendental because the Chinese are now technologically empowered proletarians. We should not be surprised to see technological utopianism manifest in the communist nation's first Olympics – after all, it was Karl Marx who argued that advances in science was instrumental in delegitimizing the ruling class.\footnote{Marx, \textit{Selected writings}, 185.} Technological utopianism, as it were, is quite in line with communist ideology.

The communicative success of this utopian vision is perhaps the subject of another paper. What is interesting is that when compared with the 1997 Hong Kong handover ceremony – the last historic watershed and massive media event – the Olympics opening ceremony seemed to signal the arrival of a new expressive paradigm in the imagination of Chinese modernism. The so-called Fifth Generation of Chinese directors and the New Wave generation of Chinese composers, to which all of the major creative artists of the Olympics opening ceremony belong, are known to have achieved international stardom in the 70s and 80s through the “East-meets-West” rhetoric. But as we have seen, not only is “East-meets-West” theoretically problematic and potentially self-Orientalizing, it is in fact very out-of-date. Some of the most prominent artists of the “New Wave” and Fifth Generation have at various times expressed their discontent with “East-meets-West” as a relevant contemporary framework. There is nothing modern about the Chinese modernism that “East-meets-West” envisions: it replicates the centuries-old dictum of \textit{zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong} (Chinese knowledge as essence, Western knowledge as function). This dictum dates back to the self-strengthening movement during the waning years of the Qing Dynasty, when reform-minded Chinese officials lobbied the government to adopt Western technology in all practical matters while maintaining the integrity and spirit of Confucianism. This dictum was put into practical application again in Deng Xiaoping’s 1980s economic policies, which was, to borrow capitalist techniques to
reform the economy while maintaining the Leninist system in matters of political nature.

The *ti-yong* dichotomy essentializes both China and the West. Utopianism is not without its problems either, but I would argue that it is a relatively progressive position that Chinese artists may now be willing to adopt. At the very least, utopianism puts a stop to the endless self-strengthening that only served to perpetuate the nation's internal insecurity. As Chinese artists become aware of the theoretical problems of Chinese-ness that were continuously expounded in the able hands of cultural theorists, their artistic output will also call for expressive apparatuses that are equipped with a higher level of communicative nuance. In this sense, the Olympics opening ceremony served a didactic purpose. Through the broad reach of the CCTV network and the monumental historic significance of the Olympic games, the event invited Chinese community worldwide to collectively reimagine themselves as one. Of course, I could also be naively optimistic: but are we willing to imagine the larger-than-life multimedia spectacles at the opening ceremony as being the nation's attempt to awe foreigners into submission, like Zheng He did in his Silk Road expeditions?
As a Hong Kong-Chinese Australian who has lived the majority of his life outside of China, I have many tales of the lived interiority of ethnicity to tell. The vast majority of these tales recount the dynamics between my ethnic body on the margin and the institutions of whiteness at the center, but one such tale that involved my grandmother reveals the possibility of an opposite structure. Multiculturalism and the policy of assimilation were firmly on the social agenda in Australia of the 1990s. At the high school I went to, Asians who only made friends with other Asians were frowned upon as self-segregating and unwilling to blend into local culture, so I made quite a conscious effort to befriend a roughly equal number of white Australian and Asian-Australian friends. My grandmother on the other hand lived happily in Australia for over a decade not speaking or knowing a word of English. She did all her grocery shopping in Chinatown, socialized with Chinese-speaking friends, watched Chinese language drama on TV, and got around town on the train by memorizing the color of each station’s platform. One afternoon, my grandmother flipped through my yearbook and tried to name all of my friends by their faces. She had a recollection of all Asian faces, but failed to recognize any of my white Australian friends. I reminded her that many of these white Australian friends actually came around to the house frequently, to which she replied, “but I cannot tell them apart, their faces are the same, and their voices sound the same to me!” The face is among the most commonly referred to features of the stereotypical Chinese body on the school playground and elsewhere—the slanted eyes, the wide cheekbones, and the flatter facial features. While the face carries physiological features that mark one’s ethnicity, the voice suggests ethnicity through invisible mechanics such as subtleties of accent, word choice consistent with dialects, and tonal inflection. The derogatory term of “Ching Chong Chinaman” for instance refers explicitly to the sound of the Chinese language. There is evidence suggesting that the voice as a marker of identity operates outside of language and speech. A number of studies
propose that the formant structures in the voices of English speakers of different racial backgrounds may be distinguishably different,\textsuperscript{114} although one study from the University of Florida suggested the contrary.\textsuperscript{115} In any case, the face and the voice remain highly charged territories in racial politics, so much so that the mere mentioning of them might offend many. In 2011, Australia cable network anchor John Mangos made international headline with explicit descriptions of a Chinese man’s facial features. Mangos reported on a Chinese lottery winner who wore a Spiderman mask to conceal his identity while collecting his reward. Mangos remarked that he did not understand why the man bothered to wear a mask, as his “straight black hair […], squinty eyes and yellow skin” clearly betrayed his Chinese identity.\textsuperscript{116} In the news footage the lottery’s winner’s eyes were not visible, so there was no way of telling whether his eyes were in fact slanted. In any case, for a news story that took place in Mainland China, Mangos’ comments were redundant to say the least. Mangos’ remarks triggered an immediate public outcry, which led to an official apology from the network on the next day, and Mangos’ eventual dismissal from the station soon after. Another tale involves American conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh, who imitated a speech in Chinese given by the Chinese President Hu Jintao at the White House in a childish manner that resembled the “Ching Chong Chinaman” stereotype.\textsuperscript{117} Limbaugh’s actions were swiftly denounced by a number of politicians of Chinese ancestry, including House Representative David Wu, and California State Senator Leland Yee.

The two tales above demonstrate the significance of the face and the voice as sites where collectivity, individuality, and anonymity are constantly negotiated.


In the first tale, the Chinese lottery winner might have succeeded in masking his individuality, but as a result of the act of masking, his ethnicity became the primary instrument of identification; his face was both physically and metaphorically “lost.” In the Chinese language, the face also carries a socio-psychological dimension. *Gei mianzi* (literally “giving face”) is to show respect, and to willingly subsume oneself under another in the social hierarchy. *Shi mianzi* (literally “losing face”) on the other hand refers to lost honor, damaged reputation, or public humiliation. The Chinese socio-psychological face\(^{118}\) is a commodity that can be gained, lost, or operated upon like a tangible object. In the words of famed Chinese intellectual and scholar Lin Yutang:

> [The Chinese face] can be ‘granted’ and ‘lost’ and ‘fought for’ and ‘presented as a gift’ […] it is the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated.\(^{119}\)

If identity may also be operated upon like commodities, what is at stake and what is gained when it is masked, downplayed, or conveniently forgotten? The face and the voice are important instruments for personal identification, but also political minefields. That much acknowledged, by concealing distinct faces do ethnic bodies on the margin then become integrated, easily tolerated or domesticated by the institutions of whiteness at the center? What hidden power structure does the act of masking reveal? These are some of the issues surrounding my analysis of Hong Kong multimedia troupe Zuni Icosahedron’s multimedia opera *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (2010). The purpose of this article is to deconstruct the various ways by which the identities of the characters in this opera are obscured. By doing so, I hope to confront a problem in the recent studies of contemporary Chinese music, namely, an overtly optimistic celebration of transnational impulses that run the risk of neglecting hidden power structures and oversimplifying the music.

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\(^{118}\) The notion of a socio-psychological face is not unique to the Chinese. Dorinne Kondo described the face as a stereotypical Oriental trope that signifies “a presumed Asian preoccupation with social reputation.” See Dorinne Kondo, *About face: Performing race in fashion and theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24,

Zuni Icosahedron (Zuni) has been at the forefront of Asian experimental theatre for nearly three decades. Founded in 1982 in Hong Kong, Zuni has since staged more than 150 productions internationally. It is now one of the eight flagship performing arts organizations that receive annual institutional funding from the Home Affairs Bureau of Hong Kong. A signature of Zuni’s productions is the troupe’s seamless integration of moving image, dance, theatre, and experimental music into rich multimedia experiences. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* was commissioned by the 2010 New Vision Arts Festival\(^\text{120}\) and produced by Zuni, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of Matteo Ricci. Based on Jonathan D. Spence’s book of the same title, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* was labeled a “digital opera” in the publicity materials, with a libretto by Diana Liao and a score by emerging Hong Kong composer Steve Hui Ngo-shan. Liao is an established writer, translator and librettist who has worked with a number of important Chinese composers and stage artists of the “New Wave” generation. Liao is experienced in topics that deal with cultural border crossing. In 2004 she assisted Dutch filmmaker Frank Scheffer in translating his documentary on Tan Dun’s opera *Tea* (2002). In a biographical sketch she mentions a “life long fascination with words in various languages and their relationship with perceived realities.”\(^\text{121}\) Hui on the other hand is a younger and emerging figure. Born in Hong Kong in 1974, Hui graduated from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts with a degree in composition and electronic music in 2010. Before his entrance into the academy, however, Hui was already maintaining an active and high profile career, producing music for various commercial and artistic projects. Hui has worked closely with Zuni since 1999, and has previously collaborated with the local popular music label People Mountain People Sea (PMPS). In addition to his work as a composer, he is also a member of the Hong Kong electronic music group VSOP, and a resident DJ at the underground

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\(^\text{120}\) The New Vision Arts Festival is a publicly funded, bi-annual festival of performing arts that is directed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong (LCSD). The festival features experimental and adventurous performing art productions staged by both local and international performing art groups.

\(^\text{121}\) Diana Liao, *Poet Li Bai*, liner notes, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong, December 6, 2009.
electronic dance event Headroom. Before completing *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Hui had produced three orchestral pieces, one of which was *Re-Autumn* scored for laptop and orchestra, which received its premiere by the Hong Kong Sinfonietta in 2004.

Hui’s unusual background, particularly his interest in and engagement with popular and electronic dance music, led naturally to experiments in the implementation of music technology in the classical concert hall. One of the most striking features of *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* has been the technologically mediated virtual presence of the various characters that Matteo Ricci encounters. The protagonist of the story, Matteo Ricci, was portrayed by Beijing native “basso cantante” Tian Hao Jiang. Tian’s voice was in fact the lone *human* singing voice in the entire opera. All the other vocal parts were “sung” by digitally synthesized voices, which were rendered using Yamaha’s *Vocaloid* voice synthesis technology. On stage, these synthesized singer-characters were represented by large-scale computer-generated “talking heads” created by German video artist Tobias Gremmler, which were projected onto the back of the performance space. A number of non-singing characters also appeared in the opera, including members of the Taiwanese puppetry troupe *The Puppet & Its Double Theater*, and Japanese dancer-choreographer Takao Kawaguchi. The non-singing characters wore masks throughout, so that Ricci’s was the only visible human face in the entire production. It is precisely through the use of technology that the production team was creating a space of fantasy in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, establishing a situation in which the borders of cultures and the definition of opera as understood in the classical tradition are brought into question.

**Voice, Technology, and Decentered Subjectivity**

In an interview by local press, Steve Hui spoke of his vision for the opera and a creative space that exists beyond the boundaries of classical and non-classical, Western and non-Western:

> Opera as an art form is seductive, but I could never write a traditional opera, the kind of opera Mozart has composed. It is impossible for me and I am not
interested in it. The structure and format of traditional Western music is very rigid, and that’s where the fun is, since my work is about the exploration of the boundaries of Western music, and I think about the world that exists outside of these boundaries. 122

In the printed concert program to *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Hui puts his intention to challenge the tradition and institution of Western opera in even more unambiguous terms,

> Opera as a genre has a long history in the world of Western classical music [...] [it] has been strictly defined by tradition as to what does and what does not constitute an opera. Electronic music, however, with its decades-long only history, is a relatively new form of expression made possible by science and technology. Its aesthetics, techniques and skills as well as parameters are still evolving. Interactive dialogues between electronic music and traditional opera offer ample room for dialectical exchanges, both as a challenge and reaction to established forms of musical expressions and as an inspiration for us to test the limits of crossing over and enriching two totally different disciplines. 123

Many Chinese composers of the “New Wave” generation, who came to international prominence in the 1980s, had also spoken publicly of their vision of a music that transcends cultural boundaries, in which there is no East or West. 124 Commentators of contemporary Chinese music have also advocated looking beyond the “East Meets West” binary in the reading of music by Chinese composers. 125 While this point is well taken, and composers’ individual impulses must certainly be respected, what is sometimes unclear is how exactly does the music itself transcend culture when the composer employs musical elements with explicit cultural meanings (folk songs or elements of regionally Chinese opera, for

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122 Gary Chan, “*The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*: Interview with composer Steve Hui.” *Milk Magazine*, October 21, 2010. [In Chinese]
example) or musical genres with a perceived historical lineage (operatic and
orchestral music of the classical concert hall tradition, for instance). Despite
composers’ best intentions, musical elements and genres may still exert a
persuasive cultural force that frames the responses of listeners. Here I refer to
what Jeffrey Kallberg calls music genre’s “horizon of expectation.” According
to Kallberg, musical genre is not simply a category for classification. Genre is a
communicative concept and “a social phenomenon shared by composers and
listeners.” This communicative concept actively frames responses to a piece of
work, for it evokes a set of expectations and cultural meanings that are in turn
based on some social, historical, and contextual constructs that is associated with
the genre. When a composer chooses to evoke a particular genre, he or she is
willingly entering into a “generic contract” with the audience, under which the
composer agrees to adhere to certain conventions, while the audience agrees to
interpret the composition under certain specific conditions necessitated by the
genre in question. How do composers deal with the persuasive force of musical
genre, or the cultural meaning of musical elements in the age of transnationalism?

Composers and commentators have advocated frameworks that emphasize
transnational impulses: fusion, syncretism, and hybridity have been suggested at
various times—and sometimes interchangeably—as ripostes to the
essentialization of China. But could we also confront the many assumptions
about the West with equal rigor? Where is a truly transnational music to be
found? Debunking the “East Meets West” binary involves not only a
destabilization of the essentialized concept of China, but also an equally rigorous
interrogation of the essentialized concept of the West. How do we take seriously
the question of “how these two large geo-cultural regions of the world end up
coinciding?”

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126 Jeffrey Kallberg, Chopin at the boundaries: Sex, history and musical genre (Cambridge: Harvard
127 Ibid., 243.
128 Ibid.
129 For a more detailed discussion of the cultural and social weight musical genre, specifically in
relation to compositions by contemporary Chinese composers, see Samson Young, “The voicing
of the voiceless in Tan Dun’s The Map: Horizon of expectation and the rhetoric of national style,”
It seems to me that whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged, at the center of many discussions regarding the nature of border crossing in music is the question of inclusion into and exclusion from musical traditions. To create and then label a musical production an “opera” is an invitation to be considered as belonging to and/or in tension with a specific history of music making. In the context of The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, what is the nature of opera’s seductive aura that Hui spoke of in the interview quoted above? Given the subject matter and the libretto’s strong focus on border crossing, Hui’s approach to the whole issue of culture is quite unusual. Instead of identifying with a specific cultural origin, he sidesteps the question by identifying with the “decade-long only history” of electronic music and technological advancement in the concert hall. “Digital opera” could then be seen as a strategy intended at destabilizing the definition of opera as taught in textbooks of Western music history, and as exemplified by the operatic canon\(^{131}\) that continues to circulate in the concert halls and opera houses. This also allows Hui’s music to maintain an abstracted distance from the common understanding of opera, and to approach the established musical form with an attitude of playfulness. As we shall see, this abstracted distance between the music and genre or style that the music is referencing is maintained by the act of identity masking in Hui’s score.

The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci depicts the life and works of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the Jesuit priest who went on a mission to China in the sixteenth century. It is scored for the Chinese mouth organ *sheng*, viola, piano, percussion and electronics. In the opera, Ricci recalls pivotal events in his life by journeying through an imaginary memory palace, in which people and events are represented by biblical images and Chinese ideograms. Ricci made every effort to blend into Chinese culture: he dressed in Chinese robes as a display of humility, observed Chinese social customs, and mastered the Chinese language in both its spoken

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\(^{131}\) I am referring to the operatic warhorses that are most frequently performed by the major institutions of opera, ranging from works by Mozart, Verdi and Puccini, to Zemlinsky and Wagner. According to a statistical study of the operatic canon by Siobhan McAndrew for the UK Treasury, the United States currently has world leadership in the production of new opera. Despite the continuous creation of new works, the top 148 most frequently performed operas comprise 81.3% of all operatic productions around the world. See Siobhan McAndrew, “Opera composition and the operatic canon,” accessed April 14, 2012, http://www.fokus.or.at/fileadmin/fokus/user/downloads/acei_paper/McAndrew.pdf.
and written forms (Scene 3). In order to earn the trust of Wanli (1563–1620), the Emperor of China, Ricci taught his scientific expertise to the Chinese. While Wanli eventually did grant Ricci patronage in recognition of his scientific knowledge, Ricci was kept out of the Forbidden City’s innermost chambers, and he never met the Emperor in person (Scene 5). The rich European culture that Ricci represented might have gained currency among the Chinese, but the price of admission was the exclusion of his foreign body.

The opera’s narrative is structured around four Chinese ideograms and three biblical images (table 4.1). As explained above, Ricci’s voice, sung by Tian Hao Jiang, is the only human voice in the entire production and the other vocal parts are “sung” by Yamaha’s Vocaloid voice synthesis technology. The use of Vocaloid is central to the claim of the production being a “digital opera.” Vocaloid was jointly developed by Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona, Spain) and the Yamaha Corporation in 2005. To synthesize singing, the user enters the lyrics and the corresponding pitches into a piano-roll style editor that is typical of software music sequencers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>SUBTITLE</th>
<th>IDEOGRAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>Building the Palace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>The First Image: The Warriors</td>
<td>Wu 武</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>The First Picture: The Apostle in the Waves</td>
<td>Yao 姚</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>The Second Image: The Huihui</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 4</td>
<td>The Second Picture: The Road to Emmaus</td>
<td>Li 利</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 5</td>
<td>The Third Image: Profit and Harvest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 6</td>
<td>The Third Picture: The Men of Sodom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 7</td>
<td>The Fourth Image: The Fourth Picture</td>
<td>Hao 好</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>Inside the Palace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1. Structure in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci.

Score information is passed into a synthesis engine, which will then select the appropriate singer library for voice generation. The resulting sound is reminiscent of the human voice, and at times the realism is uncanny. The

synthesized voice certainly takes on an eerily cyborg quality, but in Hui’s “digital opera” its pure tone and lack of vibrato also provided an intriguing contrast to Tian Hao Jiang’s more typical operatic singing. The Vocaloid makes its first appearance in the opera in the first scene. Here, the synthesized voice of a character named “the mother” is doubled by the solo viola and answered by the sheng, against a drone-like ostinato provided by the piano (ex. 4.1).

**EXAMPLE 4.1.** *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 1, mm. 30–34.

The personal identity of the mother is uncertain at this point. The character could be at once referring to the Virgin Mary, Ricci’s mother, or simply a pacifying and nurturing spiritual presence. We are also unsure of her ethnic background. She is devoid of a body, and the computer-generated singing voice possesses a generic English accent. On stage she is represented by a large computer-generated talking head, which has facial features that could be Asian or Western. The use of the synthesized voice also renders the character somewhat sexually ambiguous. The Vocaloid software provides a number of parameters for vocal quality adjustment including “breathiness,” which controls the amount of artificial breathing heard in the voice, and timbral parameters such as “brightness” and “opening.” One of the more interesting parameters, however, is the “gender factor.” The higher the gender factor, the more masculine the synthesized voice would supposedly become. That said, it is sometimes unclear to
the ear at which point does the voice cross over from the female range into the male range, particularly at the extreme ends of the pitch spectrum. This configuration presents gender not as a binary, but as a continuum. As a character, the mother is deprived of personal characteristics and her identity is deliberately masked. The act of masking provides the basis of the re-imagination and reconfiguration of identity later in the scene. In the next section, the mother’s lullaby breaks into a primal, rhythmic and highly syncopated dance that is reminiscent of Stravinsky’s orchestral music (Scene 1, mm. 69–128). The synthesized voice soon enters again, this time to represent a fellow priest who brings the news of King Sebastian’s demise (ex. 4.2).


Ricci’s brief encounter with the virtual priest is soon answered by the voice of a slave from Africa. Synthesized in the male vocal range, the slave sings about his longing for Africa and his mother. The construction of the slave’s vocal line is the least “human-like” of all vocal timbres thus far, with leaps of up to a major seventh (Scene 1, m. 168) and a large range of three octaves and an augmented fourth. Here, the slave refers to his “teary mother in Mozambique” (Scene 1, m. 167), which further obscures and confuses the true identity of the mother who appeared earlier in the scene. Towards the end of the passage, the slave laments

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133 Sebastian was the king of Portugal and the Algarves from 1557 to 1578. He was killed in battle during a crusade to the Kingdom of Morocco in 1578.
that he will soon “die in peace [...] nameless, faceless, penniless” (ex. 4.3, Scene 1, mm. 168–174).


The slave's aria is swiftly interrupted by another episode of syncopated dance. This time the ensemble is heard in rhythmic unison, combining into clusters of tones that “mask” the timbre of the individual instruments (Scene 1, mm. 178–188). The next section features a carefully engineered transition from the *sheng*'s cluster chords (Scene 1, m. 188) to an improvisational *sheng* solo that repeatedly ascends to D5 (Scene 1, mm. 194–206), which acts as a bridge to the
electric organ’s drone on a low D3. The effect is one of a smooth timbral modulation, from the rich and complex overtones of mouth organ clusters to the purity of a single note on the organ. Ricci’s voice enters against this sustained drone with a prayer to Virgin Mary before the synthesized voice of the mother returns in the female vocal range (Scene 1, m. 225), joining Ricci in a duet—the first time that human and synthesized voice are heard together in the opera.

Throughout this scene, cultures and identities are presented on a network of overlapping continuums: the movement of the synthesized voice from the feminine to the masculine vocal range; the modulation of the Chinese mouth organ into the electric organ; the human voice set in tension with the synthesized voice. Musical elements move back and forth on these continuums with a high level of mobility. Sounds and musical gestures are continuously reconfigured, and the movement between one “node of identity” to another is seamless. This mobility is activated, to a large extent, by the process of identity masking in Hui’s score. The ambiguity of the synthesized voice and the race-less, genderless computer-generated talking heads turns the operatic stage into a space of fantasy, where groups of very unequal power relationship and background may coincide. The perceived origins of these groups are individually acknowledged, each is given a musical-theatrical nod as it were: Africa, Europe, China; male, female; humans, puppets, cyborgs; classical opera and electronic music. Each of these “nodes of identity” is deliberately and consciously masked, obscured, and downplayed. This act of identity masking is achieved through technological means. To gain further understanding of these gestures, I refer to Allucquére Rosanne Stone’s *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* in which she discusses the new forms of identity that emerge from complex human-machine interactions. Cyberspaces, according to Stone, can be thought of as social spaces inhabited by “refigured humans.” The original bodies of these refigured humans are parked in the normal physical space. The interactions between persons and their refigured identities in cyberspaces are disruptive of

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traditional attempts at categorization and identification. Specifically, identities that emerge from these interactions are decentered and pluralistic:

The identities that emerge from these interactions—fragmented, complex, diffracted through the lenses of technology, culture, and new technocultural formations—seem to me to be, for better or worse, more visible as the critters we ourselves are in the process of becoming, here at the close of the mechanical age.\textsuperscript{136}

While face-to-face meetings (in which the body is in plain sight) and telephone conversations involuntarily reveal aspects of identities such as gender, age, and ethnicity, virtual identities allow for simultaneous presences in multiple contexts. The reproduction of the self in the techno-social space is devoid of a body, and affords the new possibility of continuous reinvention. The reconfigured body maintains an abstracted distance from the physical body. Subjectivity is decentered, and fluidity is foregrounded. The Vocaloid-synthesized voices and the computer-generated talking heads in \textit{The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci} also afford this possibility of identity reinvention and re-imagination. Here, identity markers are acknowledged only as nodes of contradictions, and authenticity is no longer held to the highest esteem. To again quote Allucquère Rosanne Stone:

Complex virtual identities are real and productive interventions into our cultural belief that the unmarked\textsuperscript{137} social unit, besides being white and male, is a single self in a single body.\textsuperscript{138}

In this sense, the metaphysical and musical “losing” of faces and voices in \textit{The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci} are necessary steps in redefining the operatic stage as a space where fantasies in ethnicity, gender, centrality, and marginality are played out. In this space of sanctioned fantasy, unequal powers collide on

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Ibid.}, 36.

\textsuperscript{137} Stone is referring to the generic body in cyberspace, which is often assumed to be white and male, possessing a singular biological body. In my opinion, Stone’s story of multiple virtual selves may also help to undermine “the story of the straight, white, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual man of property as the ethnical universal.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a word: Interview with Ellen Rooney,” \textit{Differences} 1 (1989): 124 – 156.

\textsuperscript{138} Stone, \textit{The war of desire}, 75.
equal footings. Virtual characters embody multiple personalities, to challenge the
notion that there is an unproblematic and singular “I” within each of us.

The lone human voice of Ricci’s explicitly sympathizes with this notion of
identity re-imagination in the third scene. In one of the most lyrical passages in
the opera, Ricci sings a duet with a synthesized voice that represents a woman of
the Hui\textsuperscript{139} ethnic minority in China. Ricci introduced her as “a Christian, a Jew
and a Muslim [...] all in one” (Scene 3, mm. 29–35). Historically, the people of
the Han majority in China made little distinction between foreigners of different
geo-political origins. The synthesized voice addresses Ricci also as a “fellow
foreigner” (Scene 3, mm. 59–60) against a background of constantly sliding tones
of the viola and a tonally ambiguous ostinato in the piano (ex. 4.4).

EXAMPLE 4.4. The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, Scene 3, mm. 54–62.

\textsuperscript{139} In the opera the Hui woman was called a “Huihui.” The term was originally used only to label
Muslims residing in China, but later the Chinese labeled all foreigners of all religions “Huihui,”
regardless of their ethnic origins and religious beliefs. See Donald Leslie, Islam in traditional China:
A short history to 1800 (Canberra: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986).
While the synthesized voice is often rendered to perform humanly impossible leaps or angular vocal lines elsewhere in the opera, the passages that are sung by the virtual Hui woman and the mother from the first scene represent some of the most lyrical and melodic writings in the entire production, featuring a smooth contour with stepwise motions and small leaps. The scoring is sparse, and the sound world is bright and consonant, with perfect fourths and octaves in the accompaniment.

**The Sinister Resonance of Culture**

*The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* is the product of a predominantly Hong Kong-based creative team. It was commissioned by a publicly funded festival of art in Hong Kong. In the program notes, Diana Liao, the librettist, spoke of her vision for a Hong Kong production that is "proud and honored to have its world premiere in Hong Kong, [...] able and willing to compete on the world stage."140 In our reading of *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, it is also important to address the contexts out of which the production arose.

Hong Kong, a former British colony and now special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China, is an open and international city. The inhabitants of Hong Kong have for decades consumed a vast amount of imported culture. Some of its oldest institutions of Western classical music date back to the nineteenth century.141 Despite its historical reliance on imported culture, the city manages to yield an impressive repertoire of unique cultural artifacts through the process of systematic hybridization and strategic reconfiguration. According to cultural critic and writer Chan Koon Chung, at the core of Hong Kong's creative impulses is the desire to replace foreign imports with localized hybrids.142 Historically, this desire to replace foreign imports was in many instances motivated by the need to provide access to acts of cultural consumption and

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141 The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HKPO), one of the oldest institutions of classical music in Hong Kong, was first established in 1895 as an amateur orchestra.
142 Chan Koon Chung, *Xia Yige Shinian* (the Next Ten Years) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2007). [In Chinese]
production for local people. The tea food hall (Cha Chaan Teng) style of “Western” cuisine is one such example. Tea food hall serves a “Western food” inspired menu. In its heydays in the 1950s, tea food hall provided affordable alternatives to the novel “Western” style cuisine served in up-market establishments, which were patronized mostly by foreigners and explicitly excluded the locals.\textsuperscript{143} To this end, local chefs re-interpret—and “mis-interpret”—imported food culture. The tea food hall experience is activated and mediated by the seductive aura of “Western” cuisine executed according to regional habits of cooking. Tea food hall may be conceived of as a cross-cultural contact zone and a designated space of fantasy, where essentialization of the West serves a pragmatic purpose. We could similarly see composition as a designated space of fantasy, and the act of composing as a free cross-cultural play. In *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* border crossing is specifically activated by the use of technology. It is also further enabled by the seductive aura of the operatic tradition, which is to say, the privileged position that opera occupies in Western music tradition. When a Hong Kong-born composer is commissioned to write an opera, is she or he automatically granted access to this very specific mode of cultural production? And if so, what is the price of admission? These are perhaps important questions, but they are also misleading as they draw attention away from movements, currents, and fluidity in actual compositional practice. Seeing composition as a free cross-cultural play has the distinct advantage of sidestepping these questions altogether, without ignoring the pressure that cultures and histories exert on composers. In such acts of free play, cultural gestures are detached from the origin to which they refer and become acts of reconfiguration and misconfiguration. This is in line with what Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* calls “creative misreading”—the way by which a poet clears imaginative space for oneself through deliberately and creatively misreading a precursor.\textsuperscript{144}


Theorist Ien Ang described such an instance of cultural free play. In 2001, the Art Gallery of New South Wales mounted a large-scale exhibition of Buddhist art. The presenter vacated a spacious “Wisdom Room” in the middle of the exhibition space where Buddhist communities from various backgrounds were invited to put their living culture on display for one week at a time. Participating groups included Taiwanese monks, Tibetan Gyuto monks, and the Vietnamese Buddhist community. According to Ang, the Wisdom Room turned into a “cross-cultural contact zone” where encounters between groups with unequal power took place, “groups who normally exist out of sight from the dominant culture gained visibility—if only temporarily—in a very privileged site of that dominant culture itself.”

Within such a cross-cultural contact zone, essentialization of culture serves a pragmatic purpose—to enable participation and to allow marginalized groups to temporarily reclaim cultural spaces. Simultaneously, a composer's precursors might be Western, Chinese, the institutions of classical music, popular or electronic music. When these precursors are summoned as musical gestures, these gestures are likened to acknowledgements or “musical nods.” The composer reconfigures culturally referential musical materials to evoke a horizon of expectation, while at the same time maintaining an abstracted distance from the source itself. These “musical nods” may depart significantly from the source that is being referred to. Departure and reconfiguration are creative gestures, which serve to maintain a buffer between acts of appropriation and their precursors. There are many such moments of “musical nods” in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci. The opera begins with a prologue performed on the toy piano. The prologue is written in a carefully constructed two-part harmony, and accompanied on stage by the movements of three puppeteers (ex. 4.5). The puppeteers represent a trio of children, to whom Ricci would introduce the art of memorization. Hui’s contrapuntal writing points to the music of the baroque period (possibly alluding to the style Ricci, who introduced the clavichord to China, grew up with), but

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146 Ibid.
when combined with the timbre of a solo toy piano and an unusual phrase structure (5+6, 4+3), the resulting sound is stylistically intentionally vague.

**EXAMPLE 4.5.** *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, prologue, mm. 1–18.

**EXAMPLE 4.6.** *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, scene 4, mm. 19–24.
Another moment of musical tribute happens in the fourth scene, in a passage labeled “baroque.” The passage begins with the Chinese mouth organ outlining the theme of a quasi-fugue (Scene 4, mm. 1–6). Soon the mouth organ is joined by the viola (Scene 4, m. 6) and later by the keyboard-player performing on a synthesized harpsichord (Scene 4, m. 20, ex. 4.6). This unconventional baroque trio continues for another 80 measures.

In the second scene Ricci recounts his missionary expedition to India. Here Hui refers to the sound of Indian music with a strange trio of taped drone, bongos, and sliding viola solo (ex. 4.7).

**EXAMPLE 4.7. The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, Scene 2, mm. 18–27.**

Towards the end of Scene 6 Ricci encounters a beggar, who is performed by a masked dancer. Although the composer labeled the passage “kunqu,” he used only minimal musical means to invoke the impression of regional Chinese opera, while the dancer attempts to vocalize in a style that is vaguely reminiscent of *kunqu* singing (ex. 4.8).
EXAMPLE 4.8. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Scene 6, mm. 16–34.

It is of course entirely uncertain which India, which baroque, what kind of *kunqu* singing, and which period of Western classical opera is being referred to in Hui’s score, but to ask such questions is to miss the point. It is not the precursor or the origin of culture itself that is being called upon in these musical gestures. What is invoked is the haunting of a culture, an aura, a sinister resonance. In this
sense, misreading and essentialization are both sanctioned and necessary as they allow the music to maintain a certain abstracted distance from the perceived source of culture. This abstracted distance resonates with the technologically mediated multiple selves of the virtual characters in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, and the possibility of identity reinvention that this fluidity affords. There is no unproblematic and singular “I,” only multiple avatars. While maintaining this distance, Hui is able to re-interpret and “mis-interpret” cultural artifacts within a very privileged site of cultural production that is known as the opera. To label *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* a “digital opera” is therefore to acknowledge an art form and its contradicting set of histories, conventions and assumptions, to give opera a “nod.” It is also to give oneself permission to misread, mis-interpret and re-interpret, and by doing so, reclaim opera as ones own. Through the act of creative misreading, marginality and centrality may be re-imagined, albeit temporarily.

**At the Boundaries of Transnationalism**

As conceptual fashions come and go, various frameworks have been suggested by both commentators and composers of contemporary Chinese music in place of the “East Meets West” model, sometimes as a way to highlight the individual faces and voices of composers. While the progressive potential and theoretical necessity of these frameworks are acknowledged, an overwhelmingly positive celebration of transnational impulses also runs the risk of ignoring the rich contradictions that fuel the act of border crossing, which are nonetheless evident in the “grounded practices of everyday life.”

In the words of Arif Dirlik:

> Transnationalism […] shares with globalization a propensity to an exaggerated emphasis on flows, border crossing and cultural hybridizations against […] the proliferation and reification of boundaries, and the persistent attachment to real or imagined cultural identities. The oversight raises questions about the ideological biases built into the concept, as with globalization, which has ignored

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147 Dirlik, “Transnationalism in theory and practice.”
the marginalization of populations as they were left out in its processes. The consequences are problematic intellectually and politically.\textsuperscript{148}

Border crossings are about movements and mobility of the individual, but they are also about the extremities that activate these processes in the first place. We must respect and acknowledge a composer’s agency and debunk any framework that attempts to lump individuals into one-size-fits-all identity markers, but we must also interrogate, with equal theoretical rigor, the political implication of Chinese composers’ engagement with the Western music tradition. Music that transcends culture need not become an empty and hegemonic concept, or a convenient sleigh of hand for an unchallenged assumption about the tradition of Western classical music. Analysts should be mindful not to perpetrate the presupposition that Western music is the “musical universal.”

In a discussion about Hong Kong rap music, cultural theorists Chan Kwok-bun and Chan Nin commented on the danger of accepting transnationalism and hybridity as new forms of unchallenged solidarity, for it masks hidden power structures and renders the cultural products of ethnic artists culturally indistinct and critically uninteresting. It is sometimes fruitful for theorists and artists to italicize the distinction between East and West in acts of creativity. That said, if we then view these creative acts only through ready-made artistic formulae that are assumed to be culturally neutral, the resulting discussion may warrant little critical interest.\textsuperscript{149} While transnationalism, hybridity, agency and individualism are all very useful and progressive frameworks, it is my opinion that they do not fully explain the forces that continue to fuel the creation of contemporary Chinese compositions in our age of globalization. They also do not help to explain “the persistent attachment to real or imagined cultural identities”\textsuperscript{150} that seem to be evident in works by artists of Chinese backgrounds. This is particularly so if one took into account the lived interiority of race and ethnicity, the “grounded practices of everyday live” as it were, which arose out of local and specific contexts. By way of conclusion, let me quote extensively a

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Dirlik, “Transnationalism in theory and practice.”
remark by Allen Chun in his controversial essay “Fuck Chineseness: On the ambiguities of ethnicity as culture as identity.”

What appears at the global level to be a contest of identities inevitably becomes transformed at the local level into a contest of meaning that pits the desirability of one set of values over another […]. More important than the notion of multiple identities, which represents a loose code word for counterhegemonic discourse of various sorts, in my opinion, is the need to articulate the various contexts (of speech or practice) wherein facets of identity (such as ethnicity) are deemed to be relevant. That is to say, what kinds of contexts demand that one speaks from a position of identity, and what contexts do not?¹⁵¹

Chun’s insights from nearly a decade ago still ring true in the new millennium. Today, Chinese composers are certainly more than just Chinese, “Eastern,” or Oriental. Ethnic artists are undeniably respected agents with individual artistic impulses. But now that these points are self-evident, where do we go from here? Chinese composers might have found their voices, but are they speaking in their own transnational language? If not, then what are the operational logics of Chineseness, under the new circumstances brought about by globalization? To take seriously the question of how two large geo-cultural regions of the world end up coinciding¹⁵² is to reconsider Chun’s question on the politics of identification with renewed critical rigor. I hope that my analysis of The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci has shown that at the boundaries of transnationalism, it might be possible to derive explanations for acts of identification that will open new doors for critical inquiry.

Perhaps the loss of face and voice is not such a negative event after all—it signifies the beginning of a strategic resistance, an unwillingness to be integrated, “tolerated,” or domesticated. At the limits of transnationalism, it affords new and exciting opportunities for centrality and marginality to be reconfigured within the dominant culture itself, and offers new tools for commentators and composers alike to account for the peculiar contradictions of our times.

EPILOGUE

Love Thy Prosthesis

0ooPriestoo0: wanna hunt some stone golems together?
DarkKnight20101010: what are your stats / male or female?\textsuperscript{153}

I started with the idea that music is a virtual space. I would like to close this essay by referring to another such virtual reality, one that I engage with on a daily basis – the world of online multiplayer game. In an online game world, we embody fictional characters of our own creation. Our true identities are shielded from sight while we roam through vast virtual lands in privacy. It would be tempting to conclude that under such circumstances issues of race, ethnicity and identity are inconsequential. This is only true if a player chose to accomplish in-game tasks alone: as soon as contact with another avatar is established, as soon as an attempt at communication is made, identity politics comes back with a vengeance. In the same way that China is geographically ambiguous and indefinable, it is also impossible to say where the (authentic) human ends and (virtual) technological prostheses begin. Between the infinitely permeable threshold lines of culture and identity, of the real and the virtual, we seem to still take authentic personas for granted in moments of utterance.

I grew up in a small apartment on the 23rd floor in colonial Hong Kong. As a child, I played video games made by the Japanese and the Americans. I heard kunqu Chinese opera for the first time in a world music class during my undergraduate years in Australia. This is not to say that I don’t think of myself as Chinese in some way, but I probably don’t believe in, and certainly do not want to play any part in, reaffirming the notion of a singular, unproblematic “China proper:” the communist China, the China that sits behind firewalls, the China that suppresses freedom of speech and individual liberty. Artists do not operate in vacuums. Works of art circulate, generating real cultural, social and political consequences. It is my belief that an artist as a free agent ought to reflect upon the values she / he abides by in all acts of creativity – and this essay represents my

\textsuperscript{153} In-game conversation between author and player DarkKnight20101010, inside of the multiplayer online game Lineage II, May 15, 2012.
modest attempt at untangling a set of complicated issues that are very close to my heart. The age globalization demands an intensified level of communicative nuance. In times of conflicts, turbulence and confusion, we need to say more, not less, about issues of race, ethnicity, culture and politics. Hopefully, my personal meditation will inspire other composers and artists to embrace their authentic prostheses with renewed critical rigor.
COMPOSITION 1


Concerto for orchestra, tape and improvised electronics

*Electric Counterpoint* was commissioned by the Hong Kong Sinfonietta for the Hong Kong Arts Festival in 2009. The composition was subsequently revised in 2012. When composing this piece, I had in mind the glitchy visual nonsense and lush sonic chaos that are caused by forcefully ejecting a video game cartridge from its console while the game is still running. The system would freeze up, producing poetic and transient moments of error that are not anticipated by the programmers. I particularly like to perform this glitch on side-scrolling platform games. The result is a constantly morphing, slowly crumbling sort of horizon: a wonderland that unfolds like a pixelated scroll painting. The sound sources used in the improvised electronics part of the composition include a hacked Nintendo Gameboy, several Super Mario figure keychain toys that contained samples of vintage video game sound effects, a computer laptop, and Korg’s hardware synthesizer *Kaoss Pad*. This composition was dedicated to the Hong Kong Sinfonietta. It concluded my tenure as the orchestra’s Artist Associate.
To Hong Kong Stefanesse

ELECTRIC COUNTERPOINT
concerto for orchestra, tape and improvised electronics


With the utmost evenness, in strict tempo M.M = 84 - 90

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92
Electric Counterpoint
Electric Counterpoint
Electric Counterpoint
Electric Counterpoint
Electric Counterpoint
Resonant, fill the entire room with sound. M.M. = 45
COMPOSITION 2

I am thinking in a room, different from the one you are hearing in now (homage to Alvin Lucier) (2011)

For two performers with EEG sensors, woodblocks, snare drums and electronics

I am thinking in a room, different from the one you are hearing in now is a non-performance realized through sound.

The actors in this work are entirely immobile throughout the performance. While the actors sit still, brainwave sensors are monitoring their focus levels. Several solenoid motors are connected to the sensors. When focus level is above a certain threshold, motors will become activated. Focus level is pre-determined and scored into musical notation, which the actors attempt to “execute.” The actors perform focus and distraction at various points. While focus is a state of becoming and less predictable, actors can reliably induce distracted state by moving the eyeballs quickly, thus overloading the brain with visual stimulation-distractions.
There is tension between the performative setting of this work and the conditions of a “successful performance,” which paradoxically rest on the actors’ ability to ignore this setting, and also the presence of an audience. The constant struggle between focus and failure-to-focus, absence and presence, virtuosity and the lost of control is amplified through sound. Additionally, as soon as the actors become aware of the activation of the instruments, they become distracted. This constitutes a mind-to-ear “feedback loop,” and puts the actors’ failure on display.

A video trailer of this work is available online. Please see http://www.thismusicisfalse.com/?portfolio=2011-i-am-thinking-in-a-room-different-from-the-one-you-are-hearing-in-now-homage-to-alvin-lucier.
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http://www.poetlibai.org/Poet_Li_Bai/Interview_Guo_Wenjing.html


