

(Re) Creating Modern Chinese Music: Yang Ying, Erhu, and World Music

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The small, Midwest, university town of Champaign, Illinois is home to a remarkable musician: Yang Ying. She plays the erhu, an instrument she learned to play from her father as a young girl in China.¹ A closer look at the life of this performer and at the direction she is taking her music today reveals much about preconceived boundaries and ways we can look beyond them. As I will demonstrate, Yang Ying's efforts to redefine the outer limits of her music – with regards to her chosen instrument as well as genres – come from a tradition already diverse and international in character.

A Concert

A recent concert given by Yang Ying – a performance in which she was celebrated as an erhu player, as the composer or arranger of the music, and as a pioneer in the blending of erhu music with various styles of Western music – was given at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and broadcast live on the university's radio station, WILLfm90. The title itself, "Traditional and Contemporary Music for the Chinese Erhu," suggests how the boundaries defining musical styles "for the Chinese Erhu" were challenged. We are led on an audible journey; one that traces the history of the erhu and maps out its limitless future.

Throughout this performance, Yang Ying seamlessly incorporates both Chinese and Western musical elements. This is more subtle in many of the pieces and becomes increasingly obvious as the show progresses. Further, the selection of 'traditional' Chinese songs was chosen by Yang Ying to show the diverse variety of Chinese erhu songs over various time periods and across different minority cultures within China. For example, during the first piece – *Han Gong Qiu Yue (Autumn Moon Over the Han Palace)* by an unknown composer from before 1589 – Yang Ying is accompanied by a flautist, Loba Chudak, who studied in Hamburg, Germany, and Tom Paynter on the melodica, a type of keyboard with a mouthpiece. For the third piece, *Sai Ma (Horse Race)*, a Mongolian song by Huang Hai Huai (date unknown), Yang Ying is accompanied by the classical guitarist, Jack Brighton. With these two songs we can see that the audience is being introduced to differences within China across time and between local cultures. At the same time, Western instruments are incorporated without a noticeable change to the sound one might expect had the musicians played instruments solely of Chinese origin. This subtle introduction of Western musical instruments and musicians blended with traditional Chinese songs prepares the audience for the more explicit blending of styles

to come. These first few songs, however, still 'sound' Chinese in style. It is the fifth piece, *Sanmen Gorge Capriccio* by Liu Wenjin (b. 1937), that is the first song to stand out as a more recognizable blend between Western classical music and the erhu, particularly for its inclusion of the piano. Liu Wenjin, famous for compositions on the erhu, was highly influenced by western classical music and this particular piece shows a Russian influence.² This piece is also the last before the intermission.

In the second half of the show, Yang Ying selected songs that would demonstrate how the erhu carries the potential to be incorporated in any genre or style. This second half of the performance begins with *Moon Reflecting in the Lake Erquan* by Ah Bing (1835 - 1950). For this song, the stage is filled with women from the lesbian/feminist choir *Amasong*. *Amasong* is a local choir from the Urbana-Champaign area and typically sings songs from around the world, particularly those written by women. The stage presence is also an important element here: the choir, wearing robes and standing in formation, is easily identifiable as Western. During the final three songs of the performance, Yang Ying is accompanied by Tom Paynter on piano and keyboards; Jeff Magby on drums; and Russell Clark on bass. They form a very Western looking band, in the standard set up for blues, rock, and jazz. The two original songs by Yang Ying, *Confiding in a Friend* (1999) and *Funky Chinese Jig* (1999), move between classical, funk, blues, rock, and.... something new. She playfully incorporates recognizable styles and then moves on to the next style. The last piece, *Around Midnight* by Thelonius Monk (1917–82) and Cootie Williams (1908?-85), is pure jazz. With this finale, Yang Ying proves that she can do it all: she can incorporate Western elements into Chinese songs, she can blend all sorts of Western and Chinese elements together in one song, and she can play the erhu as the spotlighted instrument in a standard jazz song.

An Instrument

The erhu has become one of China's most popular and recognizable instruments. Walk into any music store in China and you will find a wall decorated with erhus, with horsehair bows tight between two metal strings stretching from a snakeskin sound box to two large, wooden tuning pegs. It is commonplace for upscale hotels and restaurants in China's tourist cities to recommend traditional Chinese music on the erhu and pipa. The erhu is also a prominent instrument in what is arguably China's most internationally known musical tradition, the Beijing Opera. In addition to being so prevalent an instrument in China, or perhaps as a reason for its status, the erhu also has a recognizable and unique sound. This unique sound has much to do with the physical features of the instrument: the bow is threaded between the two strings, allowing for quick changes, called *huan*

ba (changing positions); the fretless and perpendicular strings are often played with *hua yin* (slides) and *rou xian* (vibrato). The overall tone of the instrument is very similar to that of the violin and the erhu has been dubbed the Chinese violin or Chinese fiddle. Violinist Anjana Srinivasan imitates such techniques to produce the sound of an erhu on “Greek Song,” from Rufus Wainwright’s 2001 album, *Poses*; timed just as he sings “All the Pearls of China,” the sharp but beautiful sound breaks in, transporting the listener East.

A look into the history of the instrument, similarly, shows global interaction across time and space. The very name of the instrument, erhu, reveals its complex history. The original name of the instrument is ‘huqin’: meaning a non-Han (hu) stringed instrument (qin). According to Yang Ying, because of its barbarian origins, the instrument was associated with the lower classes. It has only been in recent years that the instrument has become prominent in Chinese music.² The origin of the instrument can be traced back to Tang Dynasty (618-907): it initially came from *Xi Yu* (central Asia) and was common among minorities throughout the northwestern part of China. In the past, the erhu was often used by street artists to make a living and so it was associated with folk music. This is quite different from what happened during the twentieth century when it was elevated as the ‘Chinese style violin’ and made part of Chinese national music.

It is important to note that music, like any cultural production, is neither fixed nor stagnant; local Chinese music – both minority as well as Han music – is always changing. Also, music travels easily across borders. Such inter-ethnic and inter-cultural influences, seen in the history of the erhu, help us to look beyond the national and geographic ties with which it has been associated. Yang Ying strives to make the inherent fluidity in music generally, and in the erhu specifically, clearer than ever.

A Musician

Yang Ying’s music today communicates a bold desire to break from tradition, a desire to move beyond set boundaries and expectations. Before coming to the United States, Yang Ying was well known for both her position as an erhu soloist with the Chinese National Song and Dance Ensemble and also as a founding member of *Cobra*, China’s first all-female rock band.

Yang Ying first became renowned as one of the most important erhu instrumentalists from China; she worked as a featured solo instrumentalist in the Chinese National Song and Dance Ensemble (Zhong Yang Ge Wu Tuan), an elite traditional musical troupe under the national government (1978-

1996).³ The troupe frequently traveled outside China, performing for the world. It is important to understand such performances as more than the actions of those on stage. The significance of the *audience* as well as those *behind the scenes* – production teams from China and also on location – should not be ignored. It can be seen from Yang Ying's salient time abroad as a traditional Chinese instrumentalist that *minyue* (music for Chinese instruments) is not just Chinese music, located in China, played by Chinese musicians, and for Chinese audiences. It has joined the virtual global cultural network: the 'authentic' Chinese musical experience it inherently claims to provide is often performed for and consumed by foreign audiences.⁴ Audiences play an important role in the process of music making with performance in mind through reflexivity.⁵ *Minyue* as an experience reaches beyond local space and actually belongs to an intangible global track: the local is already global.

Performing on the *erhu* not only brought her fame but also marked her as a traditional Chinese musician. As such, she served to represent China, showcasing 'authentic' Chinese music to various chiefs of state including three American presidents: Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter. Notably, *minyue* has not only become a feature of Chinese national identity, but has also transformed into a cultural capital drawn upon by such ensembles as a means to distinguish Chinese music as unique in global terms.

Yang Ying was also one of the pioneering figures who contributed to the flourishing rock subculture of post-1989 Beijing. Andrew Jones has divided Chinese popular music into two grand genres: "officially-sanctioned popular music and underground rock music."⁶ Quite apart from the music produced and mediated through the state-run musical industries, Chinese rock music is an anomaly: it is often produced and circulated beyond official-authorized institutions, usually with the support from foreign forces, be it cultural, emotional, musical or economic. Unlike musicians who work within government work units, rock musicians work outside the mainstream and live on the edge: they reclaim their agencies and create a discursive milieu of resistance, a locale for social and political change. Chinese rock music has reflected extensively on contemporary society and life in China, addressing such struggles as the future place for tradition, government hypocrisy, and repression, etc. Because of its evident antagonistic and rebellious stance against the state, Chinese rock music has been designated as 'decadent,' 'subversive,' 'underground,' 'dissident' and is often under scrutiny of state officials. One of the most salient characteristics of burgeoning rock bands in Beijing's 1980s-90s rock music scene is the close affiliation bands had with foreigners. First of all, their music styles are greatly indebted to the rock styles directly imported from the West such as jazz, hard rock, punk rock, and heavy metal. Moreover, Chinese rock bands gained support from many foreigners who live in Beijing.

In the middle of the male-centered rock world, Yang Ying and three other female musicians: Yu Jin, Wang Xiaofang, and Xiao Nan, founded the first all-female rock band in China: *Cobra*. *Cobra* performed at the '1990 Modern Music Festival' in Beijing. The concert was an unprecedented success and celebrated as a milestone in Chinese rock history. The music *Cobra* played in these formative times consisted mostly of remakes of Western rock music such as songs by The Beatles, Tina Turner, and the Rolling Stones. It can be said that they served to translate Western music for Chinese audiences. It is arguable that *Cobra's* music at her earliest stage was a copy of Western music. According to Andrew Jones, "rock musicians believe that individual Chinese must repudiate what the critic Fan Weiqiang calls the 'prescriptive power of traditional culture.'" ⁷ In privileging Western music as the model for modern music, local Chinese music is marginalized and forgotten by many rock musicians. In the face of Western cultural imperialism intensified in an age of globalization when everything, including music, has become increasingly transportable, some immediate questions to be asked are: Is Chinese rock music merely a replica of its Western counterpart? If not, then what kind of music is it? Is it Western rock music with Chinese characteristics? Can cultural borrowing also be innovative? I would argue that imitation – located within a different setting, situated in a different temporal background and accommodated for different groups of people – will undoubtedly take on new, self-contained meanings and signal a unique presence. Undeniably, such borrowing is in itself a form of creativity. Chinese rock music that thrived after 1989 might be Western influenced in *style* but was certainly Chinese in *content*. The autonomous meaning it entails is significant not only musically, but also socially and politically; the music was inseparable from larger discourse, within Beijing and internationally, on democracy, political freedoms, and social conditions. Indeed, the rock scene in Beijing opened up an alternative civil space for people to articulate views which were otherwise suppressed and submerged in the national discourse launched by the central government. ⁸

It seems here that Yang Ying's identity as a musician was divided into two, distinct parts: 'Chinese National Song and Dance Ensemble' vs. underground rock subculture, erhu player vs. bass guitarist, traditional musician vs. modern rocker, 'Chineseness' vs. foreignness; all these seemingly polarized and incongruous oppositions were fused. Of course, it can be argued that these two areas were not so separate after all. From the discussion above we already know that *minyue* was in fact *already* in dialogue with various cultural forms, blending diverse musical elements although being presented as uniquely Chinese. In addition, besides the Western musical aspects it borrowed, *Cobra* in its early stage also adapted some Chinese folk songs into rock styles; a trick which became common practice for many rock musicians. Even so, the extent to which the boundaries between Yang Ying's various musical loves would be blurred was simply not realised until after she put down the bass guitar and returned to the erhu.

Since her time in *Cobra*, Yang Ying has envisaged her musical destiny as to combine Western styles of music such as Jazz, blues and rock with diverse styles of traditional Chinese music. Such ambition enables Yang Ying to transcend conventional entities and create her music beneath, between and beyond fixed genres and stagnant borders. Indeed, traveling between fluid identities and situating herself in various positionings, Yang Ying has freed herself from the nationalized discourse of music and reunites with the universal; a place where anything is possible.

A Beginning

An impressive aspect of Yang Ying's music today is her agency. She has been able to *assert* her own vision in a concerted effort to *shape* erhu music in the eyes of others. This is very relevant to changes in the academic study of music around the globe. Steven Feld has given an account of the development of the category 'world music' from relative obscure and academic usage – which, in effect, served to further the distinction of music from the study of 'third world' music traditions – to the massive marketability of world music as a commercial genre.⁹ Ethnomusicology soon experienced a shift "from studying bounded and discrete musical worlds to ones created out of contact histories and colonial legacies, out of diaspora and hybridity, out of migration, urbanization, and mass media."¹⁰ Yang Ying's dissatisfaction with rigid categories for music and with limitation on the place and role for erhu music seems very much connected to this wider vision of ethnomusicology.

Yang Ying has lived with the erhu from childhood to adulthood; a familiar tool that allows her to seek out new and uncharted territory. She has clearly expressed her volition: "collaboration with different kinds of music is something that I am really interested in. I would like to collaborate with classical jazz, blues, rock and blue grass.....anything. That is the thing I am interested in doing and I am going to do that."¹¹

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Notes

- 1 Yang Ying, "Yang Ying: Biography," Yang Ying: Erhu Player, Composer, Improviser, <http://www.yangying-music.com/bio/index.html>.
- 2 "Yang Ying: Traditional and Contemporary Music for the Chinese Erhu." *Second Sunday Concerts*. Willfm90.9. Urbana, IL: WILL, October 12, 2003. Available online at <http://www.will.uiuc.edu/fm/programs/secondsunday/secondsunday031012.htm> (accessed December 27, 2009).
- 3 Op. cit. note 1.
- 4 For an excellent example of music performance playing an active role in social-political representations abroad as well as within identity construction see Rasmussen, Susan, "A Temporary Diaspora: Contested Cultural Representations in Tuareg International Musical Performance," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 8, no. 4, Fall 2005, 793-826, focusing on West African traveling performers, primarily from Mali.
- 5 For a discussion of different meanings attached to 'reflexivity', see Berger, Harris M. and Giovanna P. Del Negro, "Bauman's Verbal Art and the Social Organization of Attention: The Role of Reflexivity in the Aesthetics of Performance," *Journal of American Folklore* 115 (2002), 63-64.
- 6 Jones, Andrew, *Like a Knife*, Cornell East Asia series ; no. 57. Ithaca, NY : East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992.
- 7 Jones, p146.
- 8 I am thinking here of Homi Bhabha's description of theory existing side by side with 'activists,' equally engaged in political discourse. Bhabha, p.23.
- 9 Feld, Steven, "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, Number 1, Winter 2000, pp. 145-171.
- 10 Feld, p148.
- 11 Op.cit. note 2.

Bibliography

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