

**Shaping Selves in the Diaspora: Contemporary Professional Chinese  
Instrumental Musicians and Transnational/Intercultural Music-Making in  
North America**

By

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the diasporic experiences of twenty-six professional Chinese musicians who play traditional Chinese instruments. They navigate across music scenes in Canada and the United States by employing intercultural musicianship, the special musicianship they began to develop when learning modernized Chinese music and continue to expand through diverse intercultural musical encounters in multicultural North America. China's national modernization movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in significant reforms to music education, particularly the embrace of Western musical instruments, theory, and compositional techniques. These reforms also had profound impacts on Chinese traditional music—from instruments and performance practice to notation and repertoire. Most Chinese musicians in this study were educated in China between the 1960s and the early 2000s. I argue that, despite their individual differences, these musicians' music-making has been heavily influenced by China's modernization.

Chinese music students who learn traditional instruments involuntarily embark on an intercultural journey through their Westernized music education. The result is that diasporic Chinese musicians in this study strategically manage the distinct features of their instruments and flexibly utilize their fusion musical knowledge to adapt to multicultural contexts in which both ethnicity and nation are highlighted. In addition to dealing with issues such as perceptions of authenticity and cultural appropriation, they must also manage cultural stereotypes and the expectations of North American music markets. In the process from deterritorialization to reterritorialization, these musicians develop heterogenous subjectivities and interpretations of their cultural identities, especially the concept of "Chineseness" that automatically marks their public personas in Western society. Through personal networks, participation in music

organizations, and access to public funding and sponsorship, they have built individual musical pathways through convoluted transnational routes.

I trace these pathways in several locations: a university centre for Chinese music in Tennessee (until recently funded by the Confucius Institute), the vibrant urban Chinese and intercultural music scenes in Vancouver, a Chinese music education conference in New York City, and the small city of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, where I study and work as a professional musician. To better understand the complexities of my diasporic consciousness, I also include autoethnographic and practice-based research to trace my own pathway as a Chinese zheng player in North America.

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# 1. Introduction

This dissertation explores the diasporic experiences of twenty-six professional Chinese musicians (immigrant, North American-born, and visiting) who play traditional Chinese instruments in North America and traces their strategic navigations across intricate political and cultural contexts in the globalized world. To better understand the intercultural music scenes in which they participate, I have also included in this study a number of Chinese and non-Chinese composers, organizers, musicians, and music fans who are heavily involved in Chinese music-making in North America. Through a close examination of Chinese instrumentalists' music educations, immigration routes, and career-(re)building in the diaspora, I investigate how intercultural and transnational music-making, in tandem with various interpretations of their national identities (which I characterize as their "Chineseness"), shape these musicians' subjectivities in the West (Davidson 2020; Zheng 1994).<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on Mark Slobin's (1993) concept of diasporic interculture, I argue that these Chinese musicians have developed considerable competence in what I call *intercultural musicianship*, the special musicianship formed from the amalgamation of Chinese and Western values that characterized Chinese music education in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century and that has been further developed through subsequent collaborations with musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds in North America. For Chinese musicians, coming to the West did not initiate a

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Chineseness," a controversial topic, can denote divergent meanings and render distinct interpretations. Shih Shu-mei (2011) advocates using the concept of "sinophone," meaning "Chinese-speaking" or "written in Chinese," as a "resistance to the hegemonic call of Chineseness" that has been related to what Shih calls China's "continental colonialism" (nationwide) and arbiters of identity among overseas immigrants (globally) (711-717). In this dissertation, I use "Chineseness" to emphasize the minoritized and ethnicized positionality that Chinese instrumentalists occupy in North America.

China-West musical encounter; rather, it was an extension of their intercultural musical journey beyond the China-West nexus to include various musical traditions from around the world. Indeed, the monolithic concept of Chinese musical tradition only exists in the imagination (Hobsbawm 1992; Stock 2013), especially when considering the intercultural music systems in contemporary China at both the educational and professional levels. The Chinese musicians I interviewed in the United States and Canada variously embody and/or dismantle this concept through their musical activities. In this dissertation, I use “traditional” or “tradition” primarily to indicate Chinese music or musical features before 1840 when Western music systems began to be employed in China’s modernization movements, though tradition and innovation are always entangled and interdependent as I discuss in chapter 2. Because the development of modern Chinese instrumental music was heavily influenced by Western classical music, some of my consultants found themselves working in contemporary art music contexts in North America, which added another level of complexity to their music careers. My research also includes an autoethnographic and practice-based research component. As a professional Chinese *zheng* (箏, long-string zither) player living in Canada since late 2015, I have documented and reflected on my own journey of participating along a broad spectrum of intercultural musicking within a multicultural environment.<sup>2</sup> Where available, I have included links to audio or video documentation of the performances I discuss in chapter 5. These links may be found in Appendix A, Appendix B, and within the chapter.

The term “Chinese” is used to describe musicians who consider Chinese to be their ethnicity, ancestry, and/or heritage. It includes Chinese immigrants to North America and their

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<sup>2</sup> In contemporary China, the word *gu* (古), meaning old and/or ancient, is commonly added in front of some traditional instruments’ names. For example, the qin is called guqin and the zheng called guzheng. Adding gu does not deliver a different meaning to the instrument or its music, and this nomenclature is interchangeable in most circumstances.

descendants, as well as visiting musicians who still hold Chinese citizenship. People of Chinese descent occupy a significant ratio of the total ethnic minority population in Canada and the United States. According to the 2016 Census, there are about 0.65 million Chinese immigrants in Canada, making up about 4.6% of the Canadian population and ranking as the second-largest immigrant population. It also showed that Mandarin, the official language in China, is the most widely spoken non-official language in Canada.<sup>3</sup> In 2019, the United States Census Bureau estimated the Chinese population to be 4.4 million, constituting 1.3% of the total population in the US.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of the Chinese population, Chinese culture has played an important role in mapping contemporary multicultural music scenes in North America (Rao 2009).<sup>5</sup> Chinese music is still a niche music culture, however, existing together with other minoritized music cultures in North America. Although countless Western scholars have done research on Asian music (e.g., Bakhle 2005; Rahaim 2011; Stock 1992) and Asian music in the diaspora (e.g., Wong 2004; Yoshihara 2007), there is a limited amount of research focusing on Chinese musicians in the West, let alone professional Chinese instrumentalists (Zheng 2010).<sup>6</sup> Through case studies of Chinese instrumentalists' diasporic musical lives in North America from the 1980s to the 2020s, I examine individual pathways of Chinese musicians, making an original contribution to the ethnomusicology of Chinese music.

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<sup>3</sup>The Census Program is conducted by the Canadian government every five years, and the 2021 Census took place in May 2021. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-can-eng.cfm?Lang=Eng&GK=CAN&GC=01&TOPIC=7>.

<sup>4</sup> See the 2019: ACS 1-Year Estimates Data Profiles at United States Census Bureau: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=race&y=2019&tid=ACSDP1Y2019.DP05&hidePreview=false>.

<sup>5</sup> North America is a huge continent comprising 23 sovereign states. Since Canada and the United States make up most of its population and land mass, this study uses North America to mainly represent Canada and the United States for the convenience of a more succinct statement. It is also important to note that my field research took place entirely in anglophone communities.

<sup>6</sup> In her book *The Chinese Zheng Zither: Contemporary Transformations*, Sun Zhuo (2015) examines contemporary zheng music-making by marrying fieldwork in China with her autoethnographic performance experience in the UK (a similar approach employed for this PhD project). However, her diasporic study focuses mainly on Chinese musical activities in Europe.

While writing this dissertation in 2020 and 2021, world events revealed deep tensions between China and North America, resulting in the rise of significant anti-Asian racism. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 has strained the relationships between China and many countries, including Canada and the United States. Many people blamed China for mishandling the initial outbreak and subsequent spread of the virus, and Donald Trump, then US president (2017-2021), directly named COVID-19 a “Chinese virus” on Twitter on March 16, 2020. Consequently, an anti-Chinese/Asian sentiment has grown on the internet and in real life, including the emergence of a series of anti-Asian related online hashtags. Six Asian women were shot to death in Atlanta on March 16, 2021, and 981 incidents of anti-Asian crimes across Canada were reported by the Fight Covid Racism website as of April 7, 2021.<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of Asian hate has caused psychological distress and anxiety in many people of Chinese heritage in North America, including some of my consultants and myself. By presenting the musical lives of diasporic Chinese instrumentalists and their negotiations within the complex power relationships present in Western society, I also hope to raise readers’ cultural awareness and promote cross-cultural inclusiveness, understanding, and respect.

Despite ample evidence of hidden and visible racial conflicts, both Canada and the United States espouse an ethos of multiculturalism that is supposed to celebrate and at the same time contain cultural diversity (Guibernau i Berdún and Rex 2011). With the multicultural state, however, cultural differences are also often amplified when people tend to remain attached to their ethnocultural heritage, which, from a certain perspective, separates different ethnic

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<sup>7</sup> See the news report about Atlanta Shooting from the New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/17/us/shooting-atlanta-acworth>. Fight Covid Racism is a website platform dedicated to tracking and reporting anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in Canada. It was established by the collaboration of four organizations: the Chinese Canadian National Council—Toronto Chapter; Chinese Canadian National Council Social Justice, Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, and Civic Engagement Network—Society of Canada. See <https://www.covidr racism.ca/about>.

communities and works against social unity (Attariwala 2013; Draisey-Collishaw 2017). Along with the rising Chinese population, more Chinese musical activities (domestic and transnational) have emerged in local multicultural scenes. Whether in concerts of Chinese music or shows featuring intercultural fusions, Chinese musicians find themselves representing “Chinese music culture,” at least from many non-Chinese organizers' and audience members' perspectives. No matter how long Chinese musicians live in North America, they are always marked as “Chinese” and are thus constrained by certain expectations and stereotypes.

In opposition to this cultural essentialism, as a result of modernization movements from the late 19<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, contemporary Chinese music systems are arguably already intercultural. In 1840, the Opium War between Great Britain and China broke the previous isolation and self-sufficient status of China and marked a turning point in China's modern history (Yu 2010). With the continual defeats of the Qing government, Chinese patriots realized the country's weakness in terms of technology and modern warfare and appealed for national reforms in various fields, including music. Since then, Chinese music has undergone a series of modernizing “reforms” (改革) patterned on Western music, affecting the construction of musical instruments, music education, and performance aesthetics (Lau 2008; Liu 2010). As a result, the contemporary music system in China is an amalgamation of Chinese and Western elements. It should, however, be noted that China's modernization should not be equated with Westernization. There was significant influence from Japan in China's modernization movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and non-Western elements have been widely employed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Melvin and Cai 2004; Wu 2012). I address this topic in chapter 2.

In Chinese conservatories and university music departments, students who major in Chinese instrumental performance not only learn their Chinese instruments but also Western

music theory, harmony, and piano. My Chinese consultants received their training between the 1960s and 2020s, meaning that their knowledge of Chinese instruments was already thoroughly modern. In effect, these students embarked on an implicit intercultural journey as an integral part of their music education. This hybrid music education model laid the foundation for these musicians to develop intercultural musicianship, although, to be sure, the exact foundation varies from one person to another, depending on exactly when and where they received their training (e.g., before, during, or after the Cultural Revolution; in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China).

I argue that intercultural exposure, whether involuntary or sought out, is an important asset to musicians, but that intercultural musicianship comprises more than just encounters with difference. Chinese musicians in this study (as well as many of their non-Chinese collaborators) possess openness, curiosity, and appreciation for different music cultures; furthermore, they are dedicated to building intercultural social networks and developing an intercultural musical mindset. The key point in transforming encounters with difference into intercultural musicianship is to incorporate these musical elements into one's own musical vocabulary and flexibly select and combine musical components according to the requirements of particular circumstances. Well-developed intercultural musicianship brings more opportunities to musicians and makes it easier for them to adapt to different cultural systems. In North America, my consultants have continued to enhance their intercultural musicianship with more intense multicultural encounters, and intercultural musicianship has given them the flexibility to strategically shape their musical directions and styles. Accordingly, they might emphasize "Chineseness" in their music by presenting traditional(-style) music or, alternatively, develop an intercultural music career with a focus on fusion music.

Interpreting culture as something that people use to inform and justify behavior, Ann Swidler (2001) states, “Culture and social structure are... in the widest sense, reciprocal” (132). In the context of a multicultural society, I suggest, intercultural musicianship is developed through reciprocal exchanges in which each of the cultural elements is influenced by the others with which it comes into contact. Such reciprocal exchange also indicates a flexible musicianship that is subject to change and development according to the lived realities of Chinese musicians. In other words, the intercultural assemblage is socially mediated. Georgina Born (2012b) argues that music is mediated through four intersecting planes (266-267): performance sociality, imagined community, wider social identification, and institutional forms. Born’s framework offers a useful way for me to trace the social relationships in Chinese instrumentalists’ music-making in the diaspora, an analysis that I present in chapter 3. The most frequent social contacts that Chinese instrumentalists have are often with musicians and composers (both Chinese and non-Chinese). My fieldwork demonstrates that, in Chinese music communities, new immigrants often learn from elder musicians, and forming an ensemble together is a common means of mutual support. There are also conflicts among Chinese musicians in cities like New York, Vancouver, and Toronto as a result of stiff competition for work and limited numbers of students. Outside of the Chinese community, many musicians cultivate new networks with non-Chinese musical partners in the host country, in which they must conquer a series of language and cultural barriers to gain entrance to local music scenes and markets. Sometimes, my consultants have received criticism from the public, concerning issues like cultural appropriation, Orientalism, and perceived (in)authenticity. Many consider it to be part of their jobs as “ethnic” musicians to negotiate with their fans, journalists, and other listeners to make their music more acceptable and less controversial in the West.



One of the most significant issues many Chinese musicians face in North America is the idea of cultural identity, which, for musicians in the diaspora is often bound up with the concept of “Chineseness.” Although intercultural musicianship provides the flexibility for musicians to choose their musical directions and languages, what Chinese instrumentalists hope to present does not always coincide with the public’s perception. Stereotypical impressions of Chinese music culture and Chinese musicians may prevent listeners from grasping the essential emotions and feelings expressed by Chinese instrumentalists. For instance, *pipa* (琵琶, pear-shaped lute) player Qiuxia He said she does not want her audience to tie her music with Chineseness but some performance organizers have required her to do so. As Mari Yoshihara (2017) indicates, most audiences in the West think about Asian American musicians’ race before appreciating their music. Some Chinese musicians accept the fact of their music being labeled as “Chinese” and even employ it as a beneficial and commodifiable element in their music projects. Others produce intercultural musical performances as a way of combatting Chinese/Asian stereotypes. In reality, most of my consultants navigate between these two modes to make a viable living from their music. It is important to note that the development of Chinese instrumentalists’ intercultural musicianship in the West is driven by various forces, which include not only personal passions and professional development but also external forces, such as political forces and economic incentives. Public policy (in both home and host countries) is a significant factor that influences Chinese musicians’ lives in the diaspora.

In North America, Chinese musicians are affected by public policies from both China and their host countries. In Canada, many musicians apply for public arts funding at municipal, provincial, and federal levels; grants are an important supplement to their incomes and facilitate concert production, recording, and touring. Publicly funded projects, however, are inevitably

influenced by the policies and guidelines of the funders, which change over time forcing musicians to adapt to shifting priorities such as multiculturalism or technological innovation. To improve China's cultural "soft power" (Nye 1990), the Chinese government established Confucius Institutes, which, between 2004 and 2020, supported a program of visiting musicians in North America. This overseas music program presented both opportunities and challenges: on the one hand, many diasporic Chinese musicians were able to participate in well-funded transnational musical events, while on the other hand, the influx of visiting Chinese musicians created a more competitive musical market.

Boosted by governmental supports, personal pre-and post-migration networks, and efforts made by musical associations and organizations, there were increasing transnational flows of music between China and North America in the early twenty-first century, a topic I take up in chapter 4. Although there is some overlap between transnational and intercultural music-making, this research distinguishes between them by emphasizing "transnational" as "crossing national boundaries" (Ma 2003; Zheng 2010) and "intercultural" as "mutual cultural exchange" (Machart et al. 2016; Um 2005). In the diaspora, Chinese instrumentalists' transitional music-making has contributed to enhancing their intercultural musicianship, and their transnational and intercultural music-making with musicians around the world is part of the globalization process of Chinese music (Lam 2008).<sup>8</sup> Since China's doors were forced to open to the world in 1840, China has been extensively learning and Sinicizing cultures (especially Western) from around the world. In the early twenty-first century, there has been a reverse cultural flow between China and the world where Chinese culture has played a more influential role in cross-cultural exchanges (Lau 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> There is a long history of globalization, and the related intercultural musical exchanges can be traced back to centuries ago, such as the time of the Silk Road (202BCE-208CE) and the Age of Exploration (15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Hijleh 2018; Gills and Thompson 2006). In this dissertation, my use of the term "globalization" focuses on the intensification of economic interdependence and transnational migration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In my view, diasporic Chinese instrumentalists' efforts to mingle with other music cultures in the West has already started another wave of Chinese music's modernization in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is partly due to the intensive cultural exchanges in the globalized world.<sup>9</sup>

Within multilayered social, cultural, and political interactions, Chinese musicians in this study have formed complex subjectivities in the diaspora. Some consider themselves to be cultural ambassadors in the West and believe their music represents Chinese culture. Others have developed cosmopolitan mindsets and reject the idea of associating their music with any particular nation. No matter what kind of subjectivities they embrace, Chinese musicians have developed their various musical pathways and careers as ways of expressing themselves in the West.

### **1.1 Field Sites and Research Participants**

Through multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009), my research focuses on case studies of individual professional musicians whose subjectivities have been shaped by participating in local intercultural and transnational music scenes in Canada and the United States. In addition to Chinese instrumentalists, such as Chinese Canadian Mei Han, Chinese American Haiqiong Deng, and visiting Chinese musician Zhusong Du, I have also included Chinese composers and non-Chinese musicians and composers who are heavily involved in intercultural music scenes. They include Yuan-Chen Li (a Taiwanese composer living in the United States), Randy Raine-Reusch (a non-Chinese Canadian expert in Chinese music who has taught improvisation to many Chinese musicians in the Vancouver scene and who is currently active in Murfreesboro, Tennessee and also in China), Mark Armanini (a Vancouver-based non-

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<sup>9</sup> It seems possible that this intense globalization is currently undergoing a change in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in part due to hardening nationalism across the globe (Stacey 2021; Taylor 2016; Tsing 2005).

Chinese Canadian composer who has written many compositions for Chinese instruments), and Vi-An Diep (a Vietnamese Canadian self-taught zheng player living in Calgary). To better understand the operation of interrelated social networks, I also interviewed music fans, administrative staff, and organizers, including Christian Hannah (an audience member in Murfreesboro), Guanping Zheng (Associate Vice Provost, Middle Tennessee State University), and Susan Cheng (the executive director of Music from China, a chamber music organization in New York City). I completed eight months of fieldwork in Murfreesboro and New York City in the US, and Vancouver and St. John's in Canada. My ethnographic methodology included participant observation, forty interviews, and audio/visual documentation. In addition, I employed autoethnography and research-creation (performance and recording) which I discuss in chapter 5.

My main field sites are Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and Vancouver, British Columbia. These two places were chosen because of their great contrasts: the former is a small city with a Chinese community organized around the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) established at Middle Tennessee State University in 2016. The latter is a large and modern metropolis where 16% of the people speak Chinese and a well-established Chinese community has lived since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Although an in-depth comparison between these two sites is not a major focus of this dissertation, Murfreesboro and Vancouver provide good examples of places where Chinese music is taking root in diverse ways. With a few key exceptions, most of my consultants in Murfreesboro were visiting musicians, while those in Vancouver were immigrants. My study of intercultural musicianship focuses more on the Vancouver site where many of my Chinese consultants have settled and started new lives. While working in Tennessee,

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<sup>10</sup> According to the 2016 Census Population for the City of Vancouver. <https://vancouver.ca/news-calendar/population.aspx>.

I also attended a conference themed “Tradition and Discovery: Teaching Chinese Music in the West” in New York City in March 2019 and conducted several interviews there. Since this project uses autoethnography as one of its research methods, St. John’s – where I study and live in Canada – is also an important site for including my own experience of intercultural and transnational music-making in the West. This six-year experience includes developing a practice as a zheng improviser, performing with diverse ensembles (e.g., Shanneyganock, a Newfoundland trad-rock band), making a recording with musicians from different cultural and musical backgrounds, and forming a Chinese music ensemble in St. John’s.

In March of 2016, the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) officially opened at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in Murfreesboro. It is directed by ethnomusicologist and zheng virtuoso Dr. Mei Han. As a Chinese immigrant who was influential in the Vancouver scene for two decades before taking up her post at the CCMC, she is an important connection between my two major field sites, and this research greatly benefitted from her generosity and insights. The establishment of CCMC was originally a collaboration between MTSU and the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban, also known as Confucius Institute Headquarters) in China, a partnership that lasted until 2020 when MTSU severed its ties with the Confucius Institute. According to its website, the CCMC promotes “cultural diversity and mutual understanding through learning, scholarship, and service opportunities throughout MTSU and our communities.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> CCMC website 2021, <https://www.mtsu.edu/chinesemusic/index.php>. Many American universities closed their Confucius Institutes, especially after the enactment of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bills/115/congress-house/5515/text>) which prohibits universities hosting Confucius Institutes from receiving funding for Chinese language programs from the Department of Defense. Some Canadian universities severed ties with the Confucius Institute around the same time.

When I was at CCMC in 2019, its major activities included providing music courses to MTSU and kindergarten-to-12<sup>th</sup> grade students, hosting concert series, festivals, and academic exchange programs between MTSU and other institutions in China and the United States, and performing outreach cultural programs in schools, senior living centers, and other local communities in Tennessee. I arrived in Murfreesboro in January, when CCMC was preparing for the second Murfreesboro Festival of Chinese Arts. I participated in the preparations and performed with musicians at CCMC during the festival. During my four-month stay in Murfreesboro, I was involved in most of CCMC's musical events, including instrumental courses, concerts, MTSU lectures, and school tours.

Many musicians in Murfreesboro that I played with were visiting artists from China. Hanban sponsored visits by many Chinese musicians to different states through the Confucius Institute, and the China Scholarship Council (CSC) also had a special project to support music teachers at Chinese universities to come to the United States (Hartig 2016; Hubbert 2019; Zheng and Wei 2018). In the case of CCMC, when it was still associated with Hanban, musicians were usually visiting musicians or scholars sponsored by Hanban for one or two years. These musicians had jobs in China, usually as music professors in a university, and participation as visiting musicians was through a competitive process. When I was there, the visiting musician was a multi-instrumentalist named Zhusong Du who is a professor at Zhejiang Conservatory of Music. *Erhu* (二胡, bowed fiddle) player Jing Cao and zheng player Anwei Wang were two graduate exchange students from Hangzhou Normal University, also sponsored by Hanban. When I finished my fieldwork in April, their contracts were about to end, and they were preparing to leave. Here, I list the consultants I interviewed either during my fieldwork in Tennessee or as a result of contacts I made through the CCMC. Participants' affiliations and

status are as of 2019 when my fieldwork took place. Although I name them here, see chapter 2 for detailed descriptions of their Chinese instruments.

Major research participants in Tennessee include:<sup>12</sup>

- **Mei HAN:** zheng master who immigrated to Canada in 1996; leader of the Vancouver-based Chinese ensemble Red Chamber; director of the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) in Murfreesboro; Associate Professor of the School of Music at Middle State Tennessee University (MTSU).
- **Randy RAINE-REUSCH:** Canadian composer and multi-instrumentalist whose expertise includes various Chinese instruments, including the zheng, *bawu* (巴乌, side-blown reedpipe), and *xiao* (箫, vertical end-blown flute).
- **Zhusong DU:** visiting multi-instrumentalist working at CCMC between 2017-2019; music professor at Zhejiang Conservatory of Music in China, playing both Chinese and non-Chinese instruments, such as the *dizi* (笛子, transverse flute), guitar, and *suona* (唢呐, double-reed horn).
- **Jun XIE:** visiting *yangqin* (hammered dulcimer) player sponsored by CSC between 2018-2019; associate professor at Wuhan Conservatory of Music.
- **Guanping ZHENG:** Associate Vice Provost at MTSU.

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<sup>12</sup> In Chinese name order, family name comes first. For example, the dizi player Chen Tao's family name is Chen. However, some Chinese musicians changed their name order after moving to the West, including Mei Han whose family name is Han. In this dissertation, names are written in the order of people's stated preference or consistent with their public statements. To clarify the confusion, each person's family name is capitalized here. In general, I use the term "player" to indicate the instrumental practice of a musician (e.g., pipa player). This is analogous to the convention in Western music of calling someone who plays the violin a violinist. In a few cases, where my consultant is a noted senior musician, I use the appellation "master."

- **WU Fei:** composer and zheng player who moved to the United States in 2000; composer-in-residence for the Nashville-based ensemble Chatterbird.

The major research participants in New York City are:<sup>13</sup>

- **CHEN Tao:** dizi master who immigrated to the United States in 1993; director of the New-York based Chinese ensemble Melody of Dragon; artistic director and conductor of the Chinese Music Ensemble of New York; music director of chamber and ensemble music at Bard College-Conservatory of Music.
- **Feifei YANG:** singer and erhu/*banhu* (板胡, two-string bowed instrument) player who moved to the United States in 2010; Founder of FFY Arts Production and Consulting Inc. in New York City.
- **Gary LUCAS:** American guitarist and composer; Feifei Yang's musical partner.
- **Susan CHENG:** New York-born yangqin and *ruan* (阮, fretted lute) player; the executive director of Music from China, chamber music organization in New York City.

In addition to Tennessee and New York, I also interviewed several Chinese musicians who live in other parts of the United States:

- **Haiqiong DENG:** zheng and qin player who moved to the United States in 2000; director of the Chinese Music Ensemble at Florida State University where she received a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology in 2020.
- **Xiaodong WEI:** erhu player who immigrated to the United States in 2005; lecturer at the University of Michigan residential college.

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<sup>13</sup> Because of my limited time in New York, some of the interviews were conducted later by phone.



- **Yuxin MEI:** pipa player who came to the United States in 2012; director of the University of North Texas (UNT) Chinese Ensemble; Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at UNT.
- **Jing XIA (US):** zheng player who came to the United States in 2014; member of the zheng and guitar Duo Chinoiserie in Tucson; Ph.D. student in ethnomusicology at the University of Arizona.<sup>14</sup>

Compared to Murfreesboro, there is a larger and more diverse Chinese music scene in Vancouver. Rated one of the top cities in the world for liveability and quality of life (despite its famously expensive housing), Vancouver has continuously attracted immigrants from numerous countries, which makes for a dynamic local multicultural scene.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, some of my consultants, such as Geling Jiang and Jun Rong, immigrated to Vancouver to provide their children with a better education and a healthier environment to grow up in. There are many Chinese and intercultural music ensembles and organizations in Vancouver, including the Vancouver Inter-Cultural Orchestra (VICO), British Columbia Chinese Music Association (BCCMA), and Sound of Dragon Society (SDS). While doing fieldwork in Vancouver from May to August 2019, I performed in concerts organized by VICO and BCCMA and attended the rehearsals and performances of SDS. The majority of BCCMA members are of Chinese heritage, and they communicated mainly in Mandarin or Cantonese. This association is like a Chinese musical “clan” in Vancouver, and almost every Chinese musician in Vancouver has some connection with it. On the contrary, VICO is a multicultural organization that often invites Chinese musicians to perform in their concert series. VICO’s musical repertoire is mostly

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<sup>14</sup> Imagine my surprise at discovering a second zheng-playing ethnomusicology doctoral student named Jing Xia; to avoid confusion I will put (US) after her name.

<sup>15</sup> The Global Liveability Index 2019, released by the Economist Intelligence Unit, ranked Vancouver the sixth most livable city in the world. See the full report at <https://www.ebcinternational.ca/pdf/Liveability-Free-report-2019.pdf>.

intercultural and improvisational new music, which is different from BCCMA's Chinese-style performances. Although it is smaller than VICO and BCCMA, SDS often presents new compositions inspired by Chinese traditional music and culture. Compared to Murfreesboro, in Vancouver, Chinese musicians have more choices to find musical groups that are suitable for them, and it is not unusual for them to take roles in different organizations simultaneously.

Major research participants in Vancouver include:

- **Lan TUNG:** erhu player who immigrated from Taiwan to Canada in 1994; artistic director of Vancouver-based Orchid Ensemble, Sound of Dragon Music Festival, and Proliferasian.
- **Qiuxia HE:** pipa player and composer who immigrated to Canada in 1989; member of the fusion ensemble Silk Road Music, VICO, and multicultural quartet ASZA (disbanded in 2001); faculty at Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (VSO) School of Music.
- **Geling JIANG:** multi-instrumentalist who immigrated to Canada in 2004; member of Red Chamber, VICO, and former member of the Orchid Ensemble; Faculty at VSO School of Music.
- **Zhimin YU:** ruan player who immigrated to Canada in 1990; member of Red Chamber, Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble, and Sound of Dragon Ensemble; World Music Department Chair of VSO School of Music.
- **Nicole Ge LI:** erhu player who immigrated to Canada in 2008; member of Sound of Dragon Ensemble; initiator of the "PEP-Piano and Erhu Project," ensemble in residence at the University of British Columbia; director of the BC Chinese Music Association; faculty at VSO School of Music.

- **Zhongcai YANG:** erhu player who immigrated to Canada in 2001; member of the Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble; president of the Canada Y.C. Music Academy.
- **Dailin HSIEH:** zheng player who immigrated to Canada in 2019; member of the Orchid Ensemble, VICO, and Sound of Dragon Ensemble.
- **Jun RONG:** erhu player who immigrated to Canada in 2003; member of VICO.
- **Charlie LIU:** dizi player who immigrated to Canada in 1996; member of the Sound of Dragon Ensemble, VICO, and British Columbia (BC) Chinese Orchestra.
- **Zhongxi WU:** suona player who moved to the United States in 1999 and immigrated to Canada in 2000; member of the BC Chinese Orchestra; faculty at VSO School of Music.
- **Michelle KWAN:** Vancouver-born Chinese zheng player.
- **Nathania KO:** Vancouver-born Chinese *konghou* (箏篎, harp) player.
- **Mark ARMANINI:** Canadian composer; producer of the BC Chinese Music Ensemble; co-artistic director of VICO.
- **Moshe DENBURG:** Canadian composer; founder and program director of VICO.
- **John OLIVER:** Canadian composer; a frequent collaborator with VICO and Sound of Dragon Ensemble.

Other major research participants in Canada include:

- **Patty CHAN:** Toronto-born Chinese erhu player; president and music director of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra.
- **Vi-An DIEP:** Vietnamese Canadian zheng improviser with a mixed Asian heritage; independent recording artist.

There are some other consultants whom I interviewed, including Chih-Sheng CHEN, the founder and director of the Little Giant Chinese Orchestra in Taiwan, Yuan-Chen LI, Portland-based Chinese composer, and Yangqin ZHAO, chair and executive/artistic director of the San Francisco-based Chinese ensemble Melody of China. Because of a comparatively small portion of content concerning them, I will introduce these consultants where I mention them in the dissertation.

In this dissertation, I discuss in most depth the musical works and diasporic experiences of Mei Han, Lan Tung, Haiqiong Deng, Qiuxia He, and Chen Tao. All of these musicians have long navigated between both Chinese and intercultural music scenes in North America. From those with whom I played (e.g., Mei Han and Geling Jiang), I gained embodied experience of their music-making and through our collaborations am better able to understand their musical projects.<sup>16</sup> I have also built a great friendship with musicians with whom I spoke at length (e.g., Haiqiong Deng and Zhusong Du), and their detailed explanations of the challenges and opportunities they encountered after immigrating help me to situate my own musical experiences in the broader context of North America. The views of the non-Chinese consultants I interviewed are also important and thought-provoking; they prompt me to conduct a more comprehensive analysis from different points of view.

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<sup>16</sup> The concept of “embodiment” has been widely used in interpreting human-music interaction (DeChaine 2002; Leman 2007; Jackson 1989). As Susan McClary (1994) states, “by far the most difficult aspect of music to explain is its uncanny ability to make us experience our bodies in accordance with its gestures and rhythms” (23). Leman, Lesaffre, and Maes (2017) also indicate that “music is something that the listener interacts with, using sensorimotor, cognitive, emotional, and energetic abilities that optimize the interaction; it can be seen as an expression of the embodied mind” (1). In this dissertation, I use the term “embodied” to express an active individual experience between mind and body while listening and/or playing music.

## **1.2 Methodological and Theoretical Approaches**

Through qualitative interviews (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016), participant observation (Graham 2009), and extensive field notes (Sanjek 2019), I worked closely with my consultants in various musical activities and events. Most research data were collected between January and September 2019 when I conducted fieldwork in Murfreesboro and Vancouver, but this dissertation also draws on my twenty-four years of being a zheng player, including six years of diasporic musical experience in North America. I participated as a performer or audience member in most of the musical events I attended in the field and took many roles during the research process. In Murfreesboro (Jan.—Apr. 2019), most of my activities were around CCMC, where I performed in concerts and festivals, assisted the director in compiling CCMC’s historical events, and served as a zheng teacher and lecturer for private instrumental lessons and school shows. In Vancouver (May—Sept. 2019), I built connections with more musicians and organizations. I performed in concerts organized by VICO and BCCMA; I was an instructor at the VICO Summer Academy and improviser at the Vancouver International Jazz Festival; I participated in Sound of Dragon Ensemble rehearsals and helped them set up instruments during the concerts. In St. John’s (2015—present), I am active in the local music scene, including playing in various musical events, teaching Chinese music, and improvising and exploring new musical possibilities with musicians from different traditions. For my practice-based research, discussed in chapter 5, I formed a Chinese ensemble with a wide-ranging repertoire and recorded a CD including experimental music practices. These first-hand experiences have increased my knowledge and understanding of my own and, by extension, my consultants’ musical lives in the diaspora. My musical projects provided me with embodied experience through what in Canada is called research-creation (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012; Stévanne and LaCasse 2018; Loveless 2019), “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices and

supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation.”<sup>17</sup>

My documentation includes videos and audio recordings of the musical events I attended, musical scores used in intercultural musical collaborations, and hundreds of photos taken in different cultural contexts. All photos in this dissertation were taken by me unless otherwise indicated. These digital data allowed me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural and transnational music-making through analyzing the scores, returning to the musical events in memory, and examining musicians’ performances and behavior in more detail. I also kept extensive fieldnotes and an autoethnographic journal (Nelson 2013). I have consulted secondary literature in both English and Chinese, among which the most influential theoretical works include those of Mark Slobin (1992; 1993), Georgina Born (2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2017), Will Straw (1991; 2001; 2004), and Su Zheng (1994; 2010). Because of limited access to Chinese literature, most Chinese resources used in this study were downloaded from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure, 中国知网), a key national research and academic journals database in China. English translations throughout the dissertation are by me, and I put the original Chinese content in the body of the text or a footnote wherever applicable.

There are four major theoretical themes in this project that are reflected in the chapter organization:

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<sup>17</sup> Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) “Definitions of Terms.” Accessed December 5, 2021. <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programs-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx#a22>.

## **Chapter 2: Tradition and Innovation, Modernization and Westernization**

Chapter 2 begins with a very brief outline of the Chinese instruments played by my consultants for those who may be unfamiliar with their construction and history. I then provide a brief history of the influence of Western music in China in order to demonstrate how this influence shaped my consultants' early formation as musicians. Since my consultants received modern musical education on traditional Chinese instruments, I ground my exploration of the changing contexts of Chinese instrumental music in theories of tradition and innovation, and modernization and Westernization, drawn from Folklore Studies and Ethnomusicology. Chinese modernization movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries adopted and adapted many aspects of Western music resulting in what I argue is an intercultural music system that differs significantly from musical traditions that existed before 1840. As a result of a century of dramatic musical changes to instruments, repertoire, performance practice, and pedagogy, contemporary Chinese musicians often have divergent understandings of what constitutes "traditional Chinese music." Such divergences persist in my consultants' musical lives in the diaspora, and some of them only began to form a comprehensive understanding of Chinese musical traditions after emigrating to North America where the multicultural context reinforces cultural difference.

Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's (1992) concept of invented tradition and Jocelyn S. Linnekin's (1983) interpretation of tradition as a conscious model of past lifeways, I argue that, by continuously changing, adapting, and evolving, traditions in the contemporary world are not only invented, but also selected. Throughout history, people have invented and selected traditions out of necessity and there are complex power relationships embedded in these processes of selection. Modern Chinese music systems are products of such selection. Whether consciously or not, Chinese music students, including my consultants and me, first begin our intercultural journeys through our hybrid and modern music education in China.

In discussing Chinese music's modernization, I am aligned with Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (1999) who emphasizes every nation's own fashion of appropriating modernity.<sup>18</sup> Modernization and Westernization are, of course, not coterminous (Nettl 1985; Bakhle 2005; Rahaim 2011). In my view, Chinese intellectuals have strategically Sinicized Western music systems and have also drawn influences from Japan and other countries, leading to a Chinese-style modernization. Chinese musicians in the diaspora have continued those Sinification activities by continuously incorporating non-Chinese musical elements in their repertoires. It should be noted, however, that cultural exchange is never unidirectional. The West has also been impacted by Chinese culture, and, as my fieldwork demonstrates, Chinese musicians have played important roles in supporting vibrant multicultural music scenes in North America. Although it may perhaps be on a small scale, diasporic Chinese musicians have contributed to Chinese music's modernization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through their intensive intercultural interactions in North America and elsewhere.

### **Chapter 3: Intercultural Music-Making and Social Mediations**

From their early intercultural music background in China, many of my consultants continue to enhance what I have termed their "intercultural musicianship" in North America. Diasporic Chinese musicians in this study have consciously adapted their music to suit the multicultural context in which they work in North America. Many Chinese instrumentalists in this study, including Mei Han, Haiqiong Deng, and Lan Tung, have taken private lessons from

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<sup>18</sup> In this dissertation, I use modernization to indicate the historical process by which China transformed from a "traditional" and self-sufficient society to a "modern" and international society, including a series of cultural, political, and economic reforms. China's push toward modernization began in 1840 when the first Opium War broke out and China started to learn from and interact with countries around the world. This process continues to the present day, though China has employed many different modernization strategies over the past two centuries.



non-Chinese local musicians or masters in other countries. Their intercultural musicking is driven by various forces, which include not only personal passion and professional development but also the complex political, economic, social, and cultural factors in a multicultural society (Attariwala 2013).

Strategically managing the idiomatic features of their instruments, Chinese musicians in this study constantly move between “the margin” and “the center” while navigating across music scenes in Western society (Straw 1991). Through a discussion of several intercultural compositions, and drawing on Benjamin Brinner’s (2009) analysis of musical fusion through ideas of contrast, dominance, and blend, I show that Chinese musicians’ intercultural music-making is complex, and that it requires multifaceted negotiations with people with different cultural backgrounds, musical values, and personal tastes. Examining their intercultural music-making, I focus on five aspects: timbre, techniques, styles, aesthetics, and philosophies. When examining the social layers of Chinese musicians’ complex intercultural encounters, I am influenced by Georgina Born’s (2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2017) four planes of music’s social mediation. In the first two planes, music animates micro-level “performance socialities” and “imagined communities” in the context of music-making. The third and fourth planes concern “social identity formations” and “institutional forms” with which music is entangled. In addition to receiving support from expatriate Chinese musicians, my consultants have also gradually integrated into non-Chinese musical communities. They also face many challenges in developing music careers in North America, such as language barriers, different social conventions, and intense competition caused by limited musical resources and opportunities. I examine the intersecting planes through which intercultural music is mediated, discussing issues of cultural appropriation, discourses of authenticity, problems of stereotyping, patronage, and labour.

## **Chapter 4: Diasporic Subjectivities, Transnationalism, and Globalization**

Chinese instrumentalists' musical activities in the West occur in intercultural and transnational encounters under conditions of globalization that were prevalent in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When analyzing my consultants' diverse musical lives, I borrow Ruth Finnegan's (2013) term "pathways" to emphasize the overlapping and intersecting musical routes they have built in the North American diaspora.

Immigrant Chinese musicians must navigate the expectations and bureaucracies of both their home and host countries. For example, they are subject to the shifting priorities of national arts funders, whether the Confucius Institutes or the Canada Council for the Arts. Public arts funding always carries implicit expectations such as those related to cultural diplomacy and national identity. In chapter 4, I examine the continuing influence of China on my consultants' lives and work in North America.

Drawing on Stuart Hall's (2003) theory of identity as always in the process of both being and becoming, I examine the heterogeneity of my Chinese consultants' identity formations and subject positions in the diaspora. If their Asian appearance puts them into a minority group in North American society, traditional Chinese instruments add a more foreign and exotic tonality to their public personas. It is, however, a misunderstanding to have stereotypical interpretations of those Chinese musicians' identities. Inspired by the works of Lisa Lowe (1996), Yoshihara Mari (2007), and Su Zheng (2010), I explore the different roots and routes of my diasporic Chinese consultants and illustrate the complex reality of multicultural music scenes in North America.

Some of my consultants have developed cosmopolitan mindsets, which are related to but not necessarily dependent upon, the enhancement of their intercultural musicianship. Examining my consultants' diasporic lives, I have been most strongly influenced by the scholarship on transnationalism and globalization, which form the theoretical foundation of my project. In this

chapter, I offer a more select engagement with theories of cosmopolitanism. I draw on Daniel Hiebert's (2002) concept of cosmopolitanism as a way of living based on the openness to, interaction with, and appreciation of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition to promoting egalitarian values, however, my consultants who express a cosmopolitan mindset also indicate a sense of loss; they no longer have a solid attachment to a particular culture or home. Whether they live a cosmopolitan life or are enmeshed in Chinese communities, diasporic Chinese musicians have extended intercultural musical journeys in heterogeneous ways in the West.

## **Chapter 5: Autoethnography and Practice-based Research**

Chapter 5 is an autoethnographic account of my own experience of receiving a modernized music education in China and developing a diasporic consciousness in North America. I combine my autoethnographic journals with current reflections in several short vignettes of my musical encounters in both St. John's, the city I live in, and my fieldwork destinations, which I interpret as an assemblage of "micro" and "macro" points and views. Through these episodes, I present the various opportunities, challenges, and issues I have dealt with from the first-person point of view.

My autoethnographic writing is mostly inspired by the works of Tami Spry (2016) and Sonja Boon (2019), while Linda Candy's (2006) and Robin Nelson's (2013) theories on practice-based research and Sophie Stévanec and Serge LaCasse's (2018) discussion of research-creation provided an important foundation for my music projects. Throughout the research process, I followed Nelson's advice to "realize" rather than "apply" theories to my musical practices. As a Chinese zheng player living in Canada for more than five years, I have gained rich experience in intercultural music-making in the diaspora. St. John's has a small Chinese community, and its

local multicultural scene is significantly different from my other field sites in North America. In this chapter, I provide readers with field data that was collected from different standpoints by combining the ethnomusicological methodology of participant-observation in Murfreesboro and Vancouver with autoethnography and practice-based research in St. John's.

## 2 Changing Contexts of Chinese Instrumental Music

Chinese instrumentalists in this study are of various ages and backgrounds, but all of them have received modernized Chinese musical training, which is based on educational systems significantly influenced by the West since the eruption of the First Opium War in 1840 (Han 2013).<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I trace the transformational routes of modern Chinese instrumental music and examine the changing contexts that shape the creation of contemporary music culture in China. My goal is not to provide a thorough history, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Rather, I seek to provide background information and context relevant to my analysis of the diasporic experiences of my consultants. I begin by introducing the Chinese instruments that my consultants play, not only for readers who are not familiar with the instruments but also to provide brief histories of each instrument's development in China. I briefly outline the musical traditions attached to these instruments before 1840 when Western music came to China through the military, churches, and schools (Yoshihara 2017). Drawing on Yu Keping's (2010) division of three historical phases of China's modernization, I explore the profound changes made to instrumental music through the adoption of elements of Western music in China during these modernization movements since 1840. I discuss the causes and effects of these changes including political interventions, instrument construction, music education, and performance aesthetics. I then work through contemporary debates about Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> There were two Opium Wars between China and Western powers: Great Britain started the First Opium War (1839-1842) to cut its trade deficit with China, and the Second Opium War (1856-1860) was initiated by Great Britain and France for more economic and political profits in China. According to Chinese official textbooks, such as *The Outline of Modern Chinese History* (中国近代史纲要)(2018), the First Opium War started in 1840 when there were military encounters between Great Britain and China, and China's modern history thus begins in 1840. In this dissertation, 1840 is marked as the beginning of the First Opium War as well as a turning point in Chinese history. Although it took generations for China to gradually implement a series of concrete musical reforms, I use 1840 to indicate a vital event that set the changes in train.

music's modernization around two topics: tradition and innovation, modernization and Westernization. Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's (1992) concept of invented tradition and Jocelyn S. Linnekin's (1983) interpretation of tradition as conscious model of past lifeways, I argue that tradition is both invented and selected by those in power, and it is always entangled with innovation. Chinese music's modernization is not Westernization, and China has developed a Chinese-style modernization with influences from around the world. In the final section, I review the educational background of participating Chinese instrumentalists to understand how Chinese music reforms affected their music education and continue to influence their intercultural music-making in North America.

## **2.1 Traditional Chinese Instrumental Music and Culture**

According to archeological records, the oldest known instrument from China is the *Jiahu gudi* (贾湖骨笛, bone flute) (Huang 1989). In 1986, a batch of *gudi* was excavated from Jiahu ruins in Wuyang county in Henan province, and their history can be traced back to about 6000 B.C. Most of these *gudi* have seven finger-holes, and Chinese experts assert that they have a heptatonic scale and can be used to play melodies (Zhang 1988). This finding demonstrates that China already had a well-developed instrumental music culture several thousand years ago (Wu [1998]2013). Throughout history, instrumental music, no matter if originally from China or adopted from other countries, has played an important role in Chinese people's cultural life.

### **2.1.1 Defining “Chinese” Instruments**

Although China is one of the world's oldest cultures, it has not always been a united nation. There were frequent vicissitudes of imperial dynasties and political fighting among

different ethnic groups over four thousand years. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Communist Party of China announced that China is composed of 56 ethnic groups, among which the Han people occupy 93% of the population (Fei 1989).<sup>2</sup> The Chinese government emphasized the unity of different ethnic minorities with the Han people, and it is thus common for Chinese people to call Chinese music *minzu yinyue* (民族音乐, national music). Most instruments that are popular in contemporary China are from the Han majority, such as the zheng and the dizi. Several instruments from ethnic minorities are also prevalent in Han communities. For example, the *hulusi* (葫芦丝, cucurbit flute) is originally from the Dai people and other minority groups in Yunnan province, but it has been favored by many Han music lovers and has become one of the most popular ethnic instruments in China.

In the book *The Ethnography of Minority Musical Instruments in China* (中国少数民族志) compiled by the Minority Literature and Art Research Institute of the Central University for Nationalities (1986), the authors collected more than five hundred different ethnic instruments in China. From this huge collection, however, only a small group of instruments are actively learned and played by Chinese people today. Due to the dominant status of Han culture, minority instruments are often put in a separate category in Chinese music education, which is similar to ethnic instruments' status in a multicultural society. In the West (e.g., North America), musicians tend to group musical instruments uniformly according to their country or region of origin rather than specific cultural origins. For instance, it is common to see a Chinese concert posting information like "Chinese", "East", "Asian" etc. but "Han", "Dai", and other ethnic descriptions rarely appear in public announcements. As a result, few non-Chinese people know the ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> According to the official website of the State Council of the Chinese Republic of China, the Han population accounted for 91.6% of the total population of the country in 2010. [http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2015-03/17/content\\_2835377.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2015-03/17/content_2835377.htm)

background of the Chinese instruments that they encounter in the West. Indeed, one audience member at the Murfreesboro Chinese Spring Festival in 2019 told me that if he is going to imagine Chinese music, he hears the zheng (personal interview, February 24, 2019). Only a few Chinese instruments have been brought to and performed in North America, and local people's interpretations of Chinese music are based on the limited performances they have attended.

In addition to coming from diverse ethnic cultures, some instruments that are commonly known as being Chinese were introduced to China from other countries (Wang and Du 1999). As one of the most popular Chinese instruments around the world, the erhu was imported from Central Asia to China before the tenth century (Lau 2008). After a long period of intermingling with Chinese culture, the erhu gradually became a traditional Han instrument. Similarly, the *yangqin* (扬琴, hammered dulcimer) which is derived from the Iranian *santur* came to China in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and has been played by Chinese people for more than four hundred years (Li 2001). Another adopted instrument is the *pipa* (琵琶, pear-shaped lute), which was brought to China through the Silk Road, an ancient network of West-East trade routes originally built by China in the Western Han Dynasty (202BCE-208CE), before the fourth century (Zhao 2003, 35). Although instruments like the erhu, yangqin, and pipa were not originally from China, Chinese people have embraced and Sinicized them to serve their own musical aesthetics. For example, when it first appeared in China, the yangqin was played by metal or wooden hammers. Eventually, the yangqin came to be played with bamboo sticks, a local, readily accessible material.<sup>3</sup> Xie Jun, a Chinese yangqin player and teacher, indicated in our interview that the hammered dulcimer he encountered in the United States is similar to the one originally

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<sup>3</sup> The yangqin was not directly introduced to the court and for a long time was only popular as a folk instrument. As a result, there are limited resources about when and how Chinese people started to make changes to this instrument (Zhao 2001).



introduced to China, while the modern Chinese yangqin has more Chinese features, such as widened bridge placements.

Acknowledging their different ethnic backgrounds and origins, I use “Chinese instrument” as an umbrella term to describe instruments that either were invented by Chinese people of various ethnic backgrounds or were adopted in China in the distant past and gradually became an integral part of Chinese culture.

### 2.1.2 Chinese Instruments in this Study

This study features thirteen instrument groups played in North America. Except for the hulusi, my consultants’ Chinese instruments are of Han ethnicity, including those that originated elsewhere but were Sinicized by the Chinese.

- The zheng/guzheng (箏/古筝)



Figure 2.1 Standard 21-string zheng

With more than 6 million players, the zheng is one of the most popular Chinese instruments around the world (Xu 2020). It is a plucked zither native to Han Chinese culture and has more than two thousand years of history. The contemporary standard zheng used by most players is the twenty-one-string zheng with S-shaped tuning pegs, which was created by Xu Zhengao and Wang Xunzhi in 1960 (Han 2013). There are several other zheng variations, such as the *multiple-tuning zheng* that has extra strings on the left side of the standard zheng body, the

*butterfly zheng* with a butterfly shape, and “*W*” *shaped zheng* which is a chromatic version of the butterfly zheng. In addition to me, there are nine zheng players in this study: Mei Han, Haiqiong Deng, Wu Fei, Jing Xia (US), Dailin Hsieh, Gangqin Zhao, Michelle Kwan, Randy Raine-Reusch, and Vi-An Diep. All of them play the standard zheng in North America.

- The erhu (二胡) and the banhu (板胡)



Figure 2.2 Erhu, photo provided by Jing Cao

Many people call the erhu “Chinese violin,” while critics claim that this moniker ignores the distinct feature of the erhu – vocalized sliding tones. Chinese is a tonal language, and tonal inflections change the meaning of a word. Unlike the violin, the erhu does not have a fingerboard, which gives musicians the flexibility to change the tension of the string while sliding from one tone to another. This sliding movement creates tonalities that are similar to the four tones in the Chinese language. The erhu was introduced to China before the tenth century, and it was mostly used for ensemble playing or accompanying regional operas before the twentieth century (Lau 2008; Stock 1992). Although the erhu only has two strings with a bow fed in between, musicians

have developed many inventive playing methods. In addition to imitating the Chinese tonal language, some musicians use it to mimic birds chirping, the wind, and other nature sounds.

The banhu is a bowed instrument developed from the erhu. It shares a similar shape and design with the erhu but has a brighter sound because of its coconut-shell soundbox covered with a wooden board. The soundbox of the erhu is covered by python skin, which gives it a comparatively mellow timbre. Both the erhu and the banhu belong to the *huqin*, meaning instruments from the Hu tribe, family (Xiang 1992). Because of their similar playing techniques, many erhu players play several bowed instruments in the huqin family. In this study, Lan Tung, Feifei Yang, Nicole Ge Li, Patty Chen, and Jun Rong play the erhu and the banhu.

- The yangqin (扬琴)



Figure 2.3 Yangqin, photo provided by Jun Xie

As mentioned above, the yangqin, a Chinese hammered dulcimer, is an imported instrument derived from the Iranian santur. It came to China in the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and is now considered a traditional Han instrument. Although the yangqin was not accepted and included in the court music by the Ming government, it took deep root in Chinese

folk music at the end of the eighteenth century (Zhao 2001, 107). At first, Chinese people called the yangqin *yangqin* (洋琴, foreign instrument, the same pronunciation “yang” but with a different Chinese character), *hudie qin* (蝴蝶琴, butterfly instrument), *tiexian qin* (铁弦琴, metal string instrument) and *daqin* (打琴, striking instrument). Eventually, Chinese musicians changed the first character of its name from the original yangqin (洋琴) to the current yangqin (扬琴, literally meaning rising instrument) to give it a Chinese identity (ibid.). The yangqin has been widely played in *Jiangnan sizhu* (江南丝竹), a traditional silk and bamboo genre popular in the Shanghai region in China. Like many other traditional instruments, the yangqin has mainly become a solo instrument in contemporary concerts. Xie Jun is the only yangqin player in this project.

- The dizi (笛子)



Figure 2.4 Dizi, photo provided by Peng Lanting

Dizi is an umbrella term for the family of Chinese transverse flutes. There are generally two types of dizi according to pitch: the *qudi* (曲笛), a longer version from Southern China with a darker tone and more lyrical repertoire, and the *bangda* (梆笛), a shorter version from Northern

China with a brighter tone and dramatic repertoire (Lau 2008, 44). Because they have different ranges, a player usually plays several instruments in the dizi family. Traditionally, a dizi is made of one piece of bamboo tube with several (normally 8) holes on its body, including six finger holes, one embouchure hole, and one hole covered by a special membrane called *dimo* (笛膜). The dimo is made of a thin skin of bamboo cells; when the player blows across the embouchure hole the air vibrates the dimo causing the distinctive buzzing sound of the dizi (like a kazoo). Because of its portability, clear sound, and simple materials, the dizi has become a popular instrument in China. As more dizi players come to the West, it has also become a well-known Chinese instrument in North America. Zhusong Du, Chen Tao, and Charlie Liu are the three dizi players in this project.

- The pipa (琵琶)



Figure 2.5 Pipa, photo provided by Zhao Kepan

Through the Silk Road, different types of pipas (*quxiang pipa*, *wuxian pipa*, etc.) were brought from Central Asia to many Asian countries, including China, Japan, and Vietnam (Zhao

2003). Like many imported instruments that later became part of Chinese traditional culture, the contemporary pipa has adopted Han musical features and aesthetics, such as the pentatonic melodies and tonal changes in the music. The Chinese pipa is a four-stringed lute with a series of 12 to 26 frets. There are different styles in traditional pipa playing, such as Wuxi, Pudong, and Pinghu schools, and they are mainly named according to their geographic locations.

Contemporary pipa students in Chinese conservatories are required to learn different styles, and pipa compositions are generally not composed according to such regional style divisions. In this research, Qiuxia He and Yuxin Mei play the pipa.

- The ruan (阮)



Figure 2.6 Daruan (left) and zhongruan (right), photo provided by Zhimin Yu

The ruan is another Chinese fretted lute with a circular wooden body. Unlike the pipa, the ruan is a Han instrument that was invented by Chinese people more than two thousand years ago (Kong and Zhao 2014). The ruan can be further divided into five categories according to size: the *gaoyin ruan* (高音阮, high pitched), *xiaoruan* (小阮, small), *zhongruan* (中阮, medium), *daruan*

(大阮, large), and *diyin ruan* (低音阮, low pitched). In the ruan family, the zhongruan and the daruan are most commonly used in Chinese musical ensembles. Compared with the zheng and other solo instruments, the ruan is not that popular in China. However, ruan master Zhimin Yu in Vancouver indicated that it is well received in North America. Besides Yu, Mei Han, Zhusong Du, and Geling Jiang in this project also play the ruan.

- The sanxian (三弦)



Figure 2.7 Sanxian, photo provided by Geling Jiang

There are still debates about the origin of the sanxian. According to Chinese music theorist Wang Yaohua (1991), the sanxian was imported to China from the Middle East before the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) (113). A form of spiked lute, the sanxian is a three-stringed fretless plucked instrument that has been widely used in Chinese traditional ensembles and operas, such as the *Suzhou pingtan* (苏州评弹), storytelling, and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect, and the Peking Opera (Wang 2018). Not many musicians in North America play the sanxian, but, in this study, the multi-instrumentalist Geling Jiang has participated in several intercultural musical collaborations in which Western composers wrote music for the sanxian.

- The sheng (笙)



Figure 2.8 Sheng, photo provided by Zhongxi Wu

With more than three thousand years of history, the *sheng* (mouth organ) is an ancient free-reed instrument of the Han Chinese people (Mei 2005). For free-reed instruments, the sound is produced through a vibrating column of air which causes a small strip of reed to move. Many Western instruments, such as the harmonica and accordion, were invented after the sheng was introduced to Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Meng 1983, 68). Although the sheng has played an important role in transnational musical exchanges, there were almost no solo musical compositions written for it before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Mei 2005, 36-37). In Contemporary China, the sheng, which was mostly played in loud and outdoor ensembles is unpopular compared to the zheng, the dizi, and some other prevailing instruments. Only a few Chinese musicians play the sheng in North America. Among the participants in this study, Zhongxi Wu plays and teaches the sheng in Vancouver.



- The suona (唢呐)

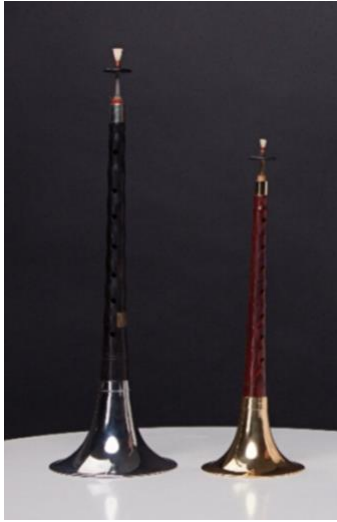


Figure 2.9 Suona, photo provided by Zhusong Du

The suona is a double-reed horn that is well-known for its distinctive loud and high-pitched sound. When the suona player begins to play in the orchestra, it is all you can hear. Although the suona is commonly considered to be a Chinese instrument, it was imported to China from the Middle East about five hundred years ago (Zhong 2006, 66). Traditionally, the suona was mostly played with the sheng, drums, and some other instruments in wedding and funeral processions. Like most traditional instruments, since the twentieth century, the suona has become a professional instrument taught in Chinese conservatories. Zhongxi Wu and Zhusong Du are suona players who have participated in this study.

- The qin/guqin (琴/古琴)



Figure 2.10 Qin, photo provided by Haiqiong Deng

As one of the most ancient Han Chinese instruments with more than 3000 years of history, the qin (seven-string zither) has rich lore concerning its construction, musical repertoire, and aesthetics. For example, each physical part of the qin and many of the finger techniques bear symbolic significance (Yung 2009). Being deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, it was an important part of China's elite and refined culture before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed the qin as one of the twenty-eight "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."<sup>4</sup> After this proclamation, the qin "became a symbol of the best in China's own music and a way to counteract the rampant dominance of pop music, an import from the West" (Yung 2009, 152). Because of its long history, particularly its ideological and philosophical connotations, the qin has been widely studied by both Chinese and Western musicians and scholars. However, it is less common for it to be played in a Chinese ensemble. Primarily a zheng master, one participant in this study, Deng Haiqiong, is also developing her career as a qin player in the United States.

- The konghou (箜篌)



Figure 2.11 Konghou, photo provided by Nathania Ko

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<sup>4</sup> More details about the proclamation available on UNESCO's website: <http://en.unesco.kz/twenty-eight-masterpieces-of-the-oral-and-intangible-heritage-of-humanity-proclaimed>

The konghou is an adapted Chinese version of the *balang* (harp) from ancient Mesopotamia (Zhou 2010). There were three different types of konghou in ancient China: *wo konghou* (卧箜篌, horizontal konghou), *shu konghou* (竖箜篌, vertical konghou), and *fengshou konghou* (凤首箜篌, phoenix-headed konghou). Although this instrument was popular in both court and folk music in the Tang dynasty (618-907), it became almost extinct during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). There was a revival of the konghou in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the contemporary konghou is similar to the Western harp (Li 2019). There are not many konghou players in contemporary China, let alone in North America. Nathania Ko is the only konghou player I came across during my fieldwork.

- The Hulusi (葫芦丝)



Figure 2.12 Hulusi, photo provided by Peng Lanting

Originally from minority communities in Yunnan province, the *hulusi*, a free-reed cucurbit (gourd) flute, is one of the few popular non-Han instruments in China. The earliest record of the *hulusi* in Chinese history is about 2200 years ago in the Pre-Qin era (He 2007). It is well-known among the Dai minority for traditionally being a communicative medium between lovers and is often played with Dai dancing in contemporary performances. In this study, multi-instrumentalist Zhusong Du plays the *hulusi*, and I also studied it as a child in China.

- Chinese percussion instruments



Figure 2.13 *Muyu* (left) and *gu* (right)

Numerous percussion instruments have existed throughout Chinese history, and some of them are no longer in use, such as the *guijia xiangqi* (龟甲响器, a tortoiseshell instrument). The earliest record of Chinese percussion instruments is about 6800 years ago, including the *qing* (磬), sounding stone, and the *tugu* (土鼓), clay drum (Pu 2013, 202). Many Chinese musicians have transported Chinese percussion to North America for performance purposes, and some Westerners, especially percussionists, also include them in Western percussion repertoires. It is common to see *muyu* (木鱼, woodblock), and *gu* (鼓, assorted frame and barrel drums) in

traditional Chinese ensembles, and fusion music ensembles tend to include unusual Chinese percussion. Jonathan Bernard, a percussionist in this study, utilizes many percussion instruments, such as muyu and qing, he collected from different regions in China.

### **2.1.3 Chinese Instrumental Music and Culture Before 1840**

In 1840, the First Opium War between Great Britain and China broke the previous isolation and self-sufficient status of China and marked a turning point in Chinese history. Since then, every field in China has developed under Western influence. All of my consultants received contemporary musical training, meaning Western-influenced music education, and some of them started to trace the traditional culture of their Chinese instruments only after immigrating to the West. They hope to better understand the Chinese characteristics of their music and provide a deeper understanding of Chinese music and culture to non-Chinese audiences. This section examines Chinese musical traditions before 1840 when the elements of the Western music system began to be adopted in China, affecting the classification and construction of instruments, musicians and musical styles, and musical transmission and aesthetics. The history of Chinese musical tradition is an enormous topic and full coverage would require a dissertation in itself. I provide this brief explanation to underline the dramatic transformations that subsequently occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

- **Instrument classification and construction**

In ancient China, musical instruments were classified based on the materials used for making them (Wu [2013]1998, 2). This method is called *bayin* (八音, eight sounds). It was used in China for more than one thousand years and was adopted by Korea, Japan, and other Asian

countries (Du 1987). There were eight categories: *jin* (金, metal), *shi* (石, stone), *si* (丝, silk), *zhu* (竹, bamboo), *pao* (匏 gourd), *tu* (土, earth), *ge* (革, hide), and *mu* (木, wood). The *zhong* (钟, bronze bell) which was developed in the Bronze Age (approx. 2000-221BCE), is the main instrument in the *jin* category. Being mainly used for ceremonies and rituals, it was not only a precious musical instrument but more importantly a symbol of power. Only those who had high social status, such as the royal family and government officials, could afford to keep a *zhong* ensemble (even though the players were typically slaves). The *qing* (磬, sounding stone) is a representative instrument in the *shi* category. On rare occasions, such as religious performances, both the *zhong* and the *qing* are still in use today. Instruments in the *si* category often have silk strings, including the *qin* and the *zheng*. In the contemporary versions of these instruments, however, the silk strings are commonly replaced by metal and nylon. The *dizi* is a popular *zhu* instrument and the *sheng* belongs to the *pao* category. *Ge* instruments are mostly drums, which are commonly used in Chinese ensembles and orchestras. It is less usual to see *mu* instruments today, but the *muyu* (woodblock) is still used in some Chinese ensembles. In general, Chinese instruments before 1840 used simple materials and had a relatively narrow musical range.

As more materials were employed in making instruments, the *bayin* classification was no longer suitable for categorizing instruments. For example, the *dizi* is commonly made of bamboo, but other materials, such as jade and clay, are also used. Because multiple materials could be deployed to create different versions of a single instrument, it is hard to define the category based on its material. In the later Qing dynasty (1636-1912), a new classification with four categories emerged (Wu 1998, 4): *chuiguan* (吹管, blowing, i.e., wind instruments), *tanbo* (弹拨, plucking, i.e., plucked instruments), *laxian* (拉弦, bowing, i.e., bowed instruments) and *daji* (打击, striking, i.e., percussion instruments). According to Chinese ethnomusicologist Du Yaxiong

(1987), this classification follows the traditional Chinese way of thinking about music through the actions of the performer. For instance, by saying *chuiguan* instruments, one must think of the blowing movement when a musician plays the instrument. Although Hornbostel's and Sachs' classification of instruments was introduced to China by Wang Guangqi in the 1930s, it has not been widely used to categorize Chinese instruments (47).

- Musicians and musical styles

Before music became a professional field in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese musicians who played music for a living had a low social status. In the historical period known as the Slave Society (2070 BCE - 475 CE), *jiyue* (伎乐, music performer) was considered a humble occupation and musicians were slaves owned by their sponsors (Wang and Du 1999). As a result, many musicians came from musical families who occupied a lower class in the social hierarchy.

During the Feudal Times (475 CE -1840 CE), there were four types of instrumental players in China classified according to their purposes (Chen 2008): playing for religious ceremonies, court performances, folk entertainment, and self-cultivation (a category that also predates this period). Although the first two types of musicians often worked for the imperial family and there were musical institutions established by the government such as the *Yuefu* (乐府, music office) in the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) and *Liyuan* (梨园, pear garden) in the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), instrumental musicians still had a low social position. Folk musicians were the main force propelling the development of Chinese music. Since the Spring and Autumn period (771- 476 BCE), the well-educated literati had also become a group of instrument lovers, but they played only for self-cultivation and did not perform in public. Traditionally connected to Confucianism, literati were supposed to learn four categories of self-

cultivation and entertainment (Wu [1998]2013, 6): *qin* (琴, musical instruments, particularly the qin), *qi* (棋, chess), *shu* (书, calligraphy), and *hua* (画, painting). As a result, literati contributed to the development of Chinese music by creating elegant and self-cultivating music that was distinct from folk musicians' repertoires. The principle of playing for oneself is linked to both Confucianism and Taoism, with the former aiming to strengthen one's moral character and the latter for achieving oneness with the universe (Yung 2009, 144).

Until 1840, however, most Chinese music was categorized by regional characteristics. As Wang Yaohua and Du Yaxiong (1999) state,

传统音乐具有相当强的稳定性。我国各民族地区的传统音乐总是力图保持其原来面貌，很自然地形成了一个封闭循环状态，具有很强大的组抗力，以致接受外来的音乐信息比较滞慢。可能正因为如此，一个民族的音乐方能保持浓郁的民族风格，一个地域的音乐不致失去独特的地方色彩。造成传统音乐稳定性的愿意是多方面的。它既受各民族、各地区人民的审美观念所左右；又有长期以来封建社会小农经济的影响；还与某些地域封闭性的地理环境密切相关。

Traditional music has strong stability. Music in each ethnic and geographic area in China always tried to keep its original form, a naturally generated status of closed circulation, and had strong resistance to change. Because musical exchanges between different regions were rare and slow, ethnic music could keep its original style, and regional music did not lose its local flavor. There were many reasons for the stability of traditional music, including the influence of regional and ethnic aesthetics, long-term feudal natural economy, and closed geographical environment in certain areas. (8)

Most Chinese instruments had various regional styles before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but there were no systematic records of these stylistic details. Historically, *liupai* (流派, river tributary, denoting different schools or genres of an art form) was used only among certain well-recorded high art forms, such as qin music, poetry, and calligraphy (Han 2013). In the twentieth century when the social and cultural status of instrumentalists was raised to a professional level, various liupai of each instrument were recorded and transcribed by musicians and scholars. Some of the



Chinese instrumentalists in this study learned from pioneer folk musicians who were masters of specific styles. For example, Mei Han's first zheng teacher was Gao Zicheng, an accomplished zheng master of the Shandong style. In contemporary China, however, very few musicians and teachers focus only on one particular style, and it is more common for students to learn the music of diverse styles during their conservatory training, as I discuss further below.

- Musical transmission and aesthetics

There were several Chinese musical notations used by musicians before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the *wenzi pu* (文字谱, character score) and *jianzi pu* (减字谱, simplified score developed from the *wenzi pu*) were widely used in compositions for the qin, and the *ersi pu* (二四谱) and *gongche pu* (工尺谱) are two traditional methods for writing zheng scores.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Western staff notation that mainly provides “strict” pitch and rhythm information, Chinese notations commonly use characters and curves to show skeletal notes, finger positions, and playing variations (Liu 1999). Musicians often added their interpretations on top of these scores to enrich the playing, which was achieved mostly through improvisation.

Since traditional music notation was only referential, scores were not major tools for musicians to pass on musical knowledge. Before 1840, oral teaching was the main means of traditional music transmission. Through the face-to-face teaching method, students learned the

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<sup>5</sup> Er (二) in Chinese means two, and si (四) means four. In ersi notation, numbers are used to represent notes: two, three, four, five, six symbolize sol, la, do, re, mi respectively. While other numbers may change in different situations, the second and fourth notes remain unchanged all the time. Therefore, this spectrum is called ersi notation. Gongche notation is a character notation, and gong (工) and che (尺) are two characters used in it.

*yun* (韵, charm) in the playing of their teachers. According to the well-known Chinese composer Liu Wenjin (2003),<sup>6</sup>

所谓“韵”、“韵味”和“韵律”，在诗歌中原来是指和谐的声音、含蓄的意味以及声韵和节奏的各种组合，而在音乐中则可理解为声腔、声调和节奏因素在流动中所形成的综合印象。它可能是对单个音种装饰的体现，可能是对一串音组合方式的体现，进而还包含着音乐在形成过程中的高低、疏密、强弱、快慢（或抑、扬、顿、挫）的某些特征。

“yun”, “yunwei”, and “yunlü”, originally mean the harmonic sound, implicit connotation, and the combination of sound and rhythm in poetry. In music, it can be understood as the comprehensive impression created by the flow of acoustic space, tonality, and rhythmic elements. It can be a reflection of single note ornament or a series of note combinations, therefore, including some features formed during the process of playing, such as high-low [pitch], intensive-scattered [rhythmic density], strong-weak [dynamics], and fast-slow [tempo]. (14)

*Yun* is an important concept in traditional Chinese music culture, and it is widely used in describing various arts, including music, poetry, painting, and architecture. From a certain point of view, *yun* is created by elements such as timbre, rhythm, and melody in music; speed and tone in poetry; and design, harmony, and color in architecture. However, simply reproducing the expected elements does not necessarily create the desired *yun*. That might be explained by understanding that musicians often have different playing styles even when they rigorously follow the same score. Like the English word “beauty,” which is highly subjective, people can have different understandings of *yun*, especially when describing it in a particular context. In addition, different instruments generate various *yun* through the playing styles associated with them. Mei Han describes the *yun* in *zheng* music as “lingering tones that carry designated pitch movements and embody subtlety and nuance, which resonate with emotion, sophistication, and

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<sup>6</sup> The *yun* is often presented in combination with other words rather than in a single word form. For example, *yunlü* (charm of rhythm), *shenyun* (charm of expression) and *yunwei* (charm of flavor).

charm” (Han 2013, 68). When discussing erhu music, Zhao Zhi’an (1998) emphasizes the important role that the Chinese language plays in creating the erhu’s yun. The language’s tonality inspires the tonal inflections in delicate erhu playing, and that tonal dynamic generates the yun in erhu music.

Due to oral teaching, referential notation, strong regional features, and the low social status of musicians, there was no single, centralized music system that covered all genres and styles of playing in China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese solo instrumental music-making was mostly an amateur activity for entertainment or self-cultivation. After 1840 when elements of the Western music system began to be introduced, Chinese music gradually became Westernized and systematized, factors which, from certain perspectives, have deemphasized the yun in contemporary Chinese music appreciation.

## **2.2 Music Reforms in Modern China**

Although it is a controversial topic in Chinese academia, the Chinese government defines the Opium War in 1840 as the beginning of Chinese modern history.<sup>7</sup> At that time, China launched on its modernization voyage and began to look toward the rest of the world. Chinese politician Yu Keping (2010) divides China’s modernization into three historical phases: the Qing government (1850-1911), Kuomintang of China (KMT)/the Republic of China (1912-1948), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)/People’s Republic of China (PRC) (1949-present). Yu further explains the three modernization modes as “the feudalism modernization of the Qing dynasty, the capitalist modernization of the KMT, and the socialist modernization of the CCP”

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<sup>7</sup> In Chinese official textbooks, the Modern Period of Chinese history is set to be 1840-1919, the New Democratic Revolution Period 1919-1949, and the Contemporary Period 1949 to the present.  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ljzg\\_665465/zgjk\\_665467/3576\\_665477/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ljzg_665465/zgjk_665467/3576_665477/).

respectively (153). In the inexorable tide of China's modernization after 1840, Chinese music was a crucial target to be modernized and the patterns used were drawn from the Western music system. Drawing on Yu's three modernization modes, this section teases out the major political and social movements that influenced the Chinese music reforms after 1840, especially those in the twentieth century. I then discuss the new music culture in modern China from three aspects: changes to instruments, musicians' status and musical styles, and pedagogy and aesthetics.

If China's doors were forced to open in 1840 when Great Britain started the war with the Qing government, the musical modernization afterwards signaled China's active embrace of Western culture. The movements toward incorporating Western concepts of composition, music theory, and performance practice significantly altered the direction of contemporary Chinese instrumental music, which resulted in a hybrid and complex music culture. As I discuss in detail in chapter 3, as a result of this hybrid system, all of my consultants received an intercultural music education, even though most of them regard themselves as having been educated in traditional Chinese music. The following historical outline of music reforms and policies shows the intercultural route that Chinese reformists followed to create modern Chinese music.

### **2.2.1 Political Turmoil and Embracing Western Music**

Before 1840, China was a feudal society that had existed for more than two thousand years and had a self-sufficient peasant economy. In the Sino-British trade relationship, China sold silk, tea, and other products that were in huge demand in the West, but British industrial goods were hard to sell in China. To manage the trade gap, the British illegally nurtured an opium market in China (Li 2003; Qu and Jia 1990). When the Qing government suppressed British opium smugglers, the British initiated the first Opium War in 1840. With the continual defeats of

the Qing government, Chinese patriots realized the country's weakness in terms of technology and modern warfare and appealed for national reforms in various fields, which led to China's modernization.

- The Feudalist Modernization of the Qing Dynasty (1850-1911)

According to Yu (2010), Westernization is the key term to understanding the Qing modernization movement. At first, the Qing government tried to comprehensively adopt Western economics and politics. Then in 1898, the method of “*Chinese essence, Western means*” (中学为体, 西学为用) proposed by Zhang Zhidong was accepted and became the official policy (154).

Western music, especially religious songs and military songs were gradually introduced to China together with technology, science, and other areas of Western knowledge (Li 2015, 128).

Learning from Western and Japanese education, the Qing government implemented a policy to include singing classes in schools in 1902, which led to the emergence of a new music culture called *school songs* (学堂乐歌), a type of singing adopting tunes from Japan, Europe, and the United States with Chinese lyrics (Wu 2012, 117).<sup>8</sup>

Some music scholars consider the creation of school songs as the beginning of Chinese music's modernization (Li 2015, 128). In the early twentieth century, a group of returning musicians who had studied in foreign countries played an important role in promoting and adopting elements of Western music systems in China. In 1903, Shen Xingong, commonly known as “the father of the school song,” finished his studies in Japan and returned to China. During the following four years, he wrote the first book of school songs, which was popular in

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<sup>8</sup>Many school song writers had studied in Japan, which led to a substantial Japanese influence on their school song styles (Guan 2014, 44).

China until 1930 (Wu 2012, 117). With interesting Chinese lyrics and easy Japanese and Western melodies, these hybrid school songs significantly bridged the gap between Chinese and Western music culture.

- The Capitalist Modernization of the KMT (1912-1948)

The establishment of the Republic of China in 1911 marked the end of China's imperial era that had lasted for more than two thousand years. According to Yu (2010), the reforming focus gradually shifted from Westernization to modernization, that is, to "the question of what kind of modernization China should realize" (155). It began before the 1919 May Fourth Movement (五四运动), an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political campaign which erupted with the upsurge of Chinese nationalism among students and scholars. Embracing Western "science" and "democracy," Chinese intellectuals promoted Western culture and revolted against traditional Chinese culture.

The May Fourth Movement planted a seed in many Chinese people's minds that traditional Chinese music was backward and underdeveloped compared to its Western counterpart. Since many Chinese people believed that music represents a nation's spirit, a reform in the musical field was considered important. However, Chinese people had various opinions on how to establish a brand-new music system, among which three approaches were popular: 1) replacing Chinese music with Western music; 2) creating a new type of Chinese tradition; and 3) improving Chinese music by borrowing Western models (Han 2013, 106-107). With the lead of Xiao Youmei, one of the most distinguished music educators in contemporary China, the third strategy of learning from the West finally became the guiding principle for Chinese music reforms (ibid.).

In 1927, Liu Tianhua initiated the National Music Reform Society (国乐改进社). As one of the most influential music educators in the twentieth century, Liu was the first person to advocate *new national music* (新国乐). Together with Liu, Zheng Jinwen put forward the idea that “if one wants to promote (Chinese) national music, the current urgency is to improve old instruments” (quoted in Huang 2018, 19).<sup>9</sup> As a result, the National Music Reform Society began to collect traditional music from rural areas and reform Chinese instruments based on Western models. In the same year, the Chinese government established the National Conservatory of Music (国立音乐院), the first independent conservatory in China, with Xiao Youmei appointed as the president. It was the first time that the ruan, pipa, erhu, and qin were included in music conservatories as independent performance art forms, which broke the tradition of oral teaching and family transmission in Chinese musical history (Hou 2019, 70). The establishment of the National Musical College was an important step for professionalizing traditional Chinese instruments.

- Knit a Chinese Hat: The Socialist Modernization of the CCP (1949-present)

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the relationship between Westernization and modernization appeared to be a debate about Westernization vs. “anti-Westernization” (Yu 2010, 69). To protect China from Western dominance, the Chinese government was concerned with the question of “how to effectively learn from Western countries while still preserving national independence” (180). In 1956, the first National Music Week was held in Beijing. Chairman Mao Zedong (1956) had an almost 2-hour conversation with musicians and other musical workers after the closing ceremony, during which he stated,

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<sup>9</sup>今欲提倡国乐，尤当以改良旧乐器为急务。

艺术的基本原理有其共同性，但表现形式要多样化，要有本民族形式和民族风格……音乐可以采取外国的合理原则，也可以用外国乐器，但是总要有民族特色，要有自己的特殊风格，独树一帜……说中国民族的东西没有规律，这是否定中国的东西，是不对的。中国的语言、音乐、绘画，都有它自己的规律……我们接受外国的长处，会使我们自己的东西有一个跃进。中国和外国的重要有机地结合，而不是套用外国的东西。学外国织帽子的方法，要织中国的帽子。

There is common ground for arts, but artistic manifestations should be diverse, and we should have our own ethnic forms and styles... We can adopt rational principles and instruments from foreign countries to develop our music. However, we should keep our unique ethnic characteristics ... It is wrong to say Chinese ethnic traditions do not have rules. Chinese language, music, and painting all have their own laws... We accept foreign advantages, which will greatly advance our goals. Western knowledge should be organically combined with, rather than mechanically applied to, Chinese knowledge. Learn the Western method of knitting but knit a Chinese hat. (Quoted in Wang 2007, 148)

After the talk, music workers followed Mao's instruction that "the past serves the present; the foreign things serve China; create the new through getting rid of the old" (古为今用, 洋为中用, 推陈出新), and many students who were then playing Western instruments (especially piano) switched to Chinese ones. On the one hand, these students' Westernized musical training contributed greatly to the contemporary development of Chinese instruments, including new compositions and modern pedagogy. On the other hand, contemporary Chinese instrumental music reflects a strong Western influence, such as the use of Western harmonies which necessitated changes to playing techniques.

In 1966, Chairman Mao instigated the Cultural Revolution with the goal of purging remnants of capitalism and maintaining the purity of the Communist party (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 42). The government determined almost all previous music to be related to feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism and only allowed new revolutionary songs and model plays (initially eight in total although more were later added) to be performed in public (Liang



1996).<sup>10</sup> These model plays described stories from China's revolutionary struggles against foreign and class enemies, eulogized Mao Zedong's wisdom, and glorified the People's Liberation Army and common people's bravery. Many excellent musicians were humiliated, persecuted, and executed in the violent class struggle. For example, He Luting, an outstanding composer, was accused of being an "anti-socialist" and was put in prison for seven years, during which he suffered from numerous physical abuses and struggle sessions (Liang 1996, 18).<sup>11</sup> Under this circumstance, the destruction of traditional music culture was significant. Chinese musicians and scholars commonly consider the Cultural Revolution to be the darkest and the most miserable ten years in Chinese musical history.

With Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution ended. Prohibited musical repertoires were allowed to be played again and conservatories resumed regular music education.<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, modernist music came back to China with renewed strength and created another wave of Western cultural influence (Huang 2018, 22). One of the most significant innovations was the emergence and popularity of *xin minyue* (新民乐, new folk music), a genre of Chinese instrumental music characterized by the integration of Chinese instruments and Western musical styles (mostly popular music). Chinese instrumentalists also started to play atonal, avant-garde, and other innovative musical compositions (21). From that time on, Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> The first eight model plays include five modern operas: The Legend of the Red Lantern (红灯记), Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (智取威虎山), Shajiabang (沙家浜), Raid on the White Tiger Regiment (奇袭白虎团), On the Docks (海港), and two ballets: Red Detachment of Women (红色娘子军), The White-Haired Girl (白毛女) (Liang 1996, 18).

<sup>11</sup> A struggle session (批斗会) was a form of public humiliation and torture, in which the victim was often forced to admit to various crimes.

<sup>12</sup> I am referencing the Cultural Revolution in particular ways related to my consultants. For a more detailed analysis of music in the Cultural Revolution, see Clark, Pang, and Tsai (2016).

instrumental music started to develop in diverse directions and Chinese instrumentalists became more active on world stages.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.2.2 New Instruments and Culture

In his book *A Critical History of New Music in China*, Liu Ching-Chih (2010) uses the term “New Music” to refer to “historical and musicological exploration of twentieth-century Chinese music which has been influenced by European music” (9). He states that the term “new music” is more appropriate than “modern music” when describing Westernized Chinese music since 1840, especially in the twentieth century, because the latter covers various musical forms and genres in China, including religious, folk, and New Music that was influenced by Europe. Liu’s use of “new” to describe Westernized and modernized Chinese music shows the dramatic changes that happened in the Chinese musical field after the modernization movements discussed above. In this section, I present some important features of Chinese “New Music” in terms of instruments, musicians’ social status, musical styles, pedagogy, and performance aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

- Modernizing Musical Instruments

Historically, Chinese instruments were commonly played in a small ensemble, or to accompany opera and dance. Most instruments had a narrow range and nonstandard tunings, and many were modified over time. For example, the zheng had twelve strings in the Han dynasty

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<sup>13</sup> This research primarily concerns art music, but Chinese instruments have also increasingly played a part in popular music in China (He 2003; Long 2020; Su 2006). There were some earlier migrations and musical tours in the early twentieth century (Rao 2017; Riddle 1983), but the migrations of elite artists that occurred after the end of the Cultural Revolution sparked a new wave of Chinese musical activity in the West. Specifically, this wave was led by the new conservatory-trained musicians, who are the main focus of this dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> New music is also a generic term that is often applied in Canada and the United States to contemporary art music in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

(202 BCE - 220 CE), thirteen in the Sui and Tang dynasty (581-907), fourteen and fifteen in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and sixteen before the twentieth century (Wang 2007, 5-8).

Instruments were modified, especially after the establishment of the PRC, to make them suitable for solo and orchestral performances. For example, the resonator of the sheng used to consist of a gourd, but it was replaced by copper in the modern version (Wu 2016, 94).

Traditionally, strings were made of silk, which was soft, produced relatively quiet sounds, and were hard to keep in tune. Silk strings were replaced by steel and other metal materials to create a louder amplitude sound and more stable pitch. Materials included steel and copper for the zheng (Han 2013, 1) and steel and nylon for the erhu (He 2011, 21). Instrument makers also changed the shapes of some instruments to achieve a more penetrating timbre. For instance, the qin, which was originally played by literati at home, had a small body and could only produce sound at a low amplitude. To make it suitable for the stage, Wu Jinglue used paulownia, a light and warp-resistant wood, to make a thicker bottom board and wider body capable of louder sound production (He 2011, 14-15). Chinese music reformists also extended the range of instruments by adding more strings, holes, reeds, or frets and as well as a larger soundbox to many instruments. For example, the 21-string S-shape zheng replaced the 16-string one, the standard sheng had 30 reeds, and the pipa had 24 frets.

Many novel versions of instruments were created, though these did not become widely adopted. For instance, as discussed above, there were butterfly zheng and W-shape zheng among others, but the 21-stringed S-shape zheng was the most popular because of its portability and design and became the standard while other versions are mainly used in specialized, often academic, performances. Some instruments developed into a family of instruments with similar characteristics. For example, many two-stringed bowed instruments were developed from the erhu but later became members of the huqin family, such as the banhu described above, the

*gaohu* (高胡, high-pitched erhu), and the *dihu* (低胡, low-pitched erhu). All these newly invented “hu” instruments are now widely used in solo playing, ensembles, and orchestras. In North America, most of my consultants play the standard versions of their instruments.

- Instrumentalists’ Social Status and New Musical Styles

As mentioned above, solo performers of traditional instruments were accorded a low social status in ancient China. The only high-class instrumental players were literati, who did not consider themselves to be musicians and only played for self-cultivation. The earliest record of a school including an instrumental course is in 1906 when Private Huashi Hongmo High Primary School appointed Zhou Shaomei, an erhu musician, composer, and innovator, to be the director of the department of national music. However, folk musicians were not recruited by conservatories and universities until the 1950s when the Communist Party encouraged institutions to recruit more musicians from rural areas (Shi 2010, 1-5). Since then, the social status of folk musicians has been dramatically raised, including those who are not employed by universities.

Because of dialects, regional aesthetics, and geography, people in different regions often had distinct understandings and appreciation of the same instrument. Therefore, many schools were formed based on geographical divisions and musicians commonly played the style from their region. Music was transmitted orally so that the unbroken lineage of many regional instrumental practices can only be traced back to the nineteenth century (Han 2013, 33). In the late twentieth century, music educators and musicians collected repertoires from regional schools and compiled them into academic textbooks and research materials (Shi 2010, 24). In the twenty-

first century, music students learn different musical styles via these compilations and new compositions generally do not have regional distinctions.

In traditional Chinese music culture, instrumental players were both musicians and composers. Musical scores only provided skeletal notes, and instrumentalists improvised idiomatically to enrich the main musical structure with their regional styles and genres. Thus, the majority of traditional tunes are anonymous. In the early twentieth century, influenced by concurrent practices in Western music, the concept of composer and musician as separate occupations was adopted in China. Between the 1940s and the 1970s, a few professional composers, such as Liu Jinwen and Gu Guanren, began to compose for Chinese instruments; however, most of the compositions written in this period were arrangements of existing tunes based on Western classical composition techniques. It was not until the 1980s that more diverse compositions were written for Chinese instruments (Hou 2019, 71-72).

One of the most significant changes for Chinese instrumental music was the gradual shift from heterophonic to polyphonic musical structures. Chinese traditional music emphasizes melody, while new compositions focus on harmony and counterpoint. In the trend of learning from the West, some people commonly considered polyphonic music to be more advanced than heterophonic music. Some musicians and scholars, however, criticized this trend. In his article *The Linear Thinking in Chinese Music*, Tian Qing (1986) argues that the differences between Chinese and Western musical thinking are the historical results of ethnic and environmental complexities. In feudal Chinese history, Confucianism compared the five notes in the pentatonic scale to different social classes. The *gong* (宫, the tonic) represented the emperor, and the other four notes were subordinate to the *gong*. Therefore, all notes should go in order and not be mixed/played together, just as in the strict social hierarchy. Tian criticizes those who look down

on the Chinese heterophonic tradition and appeals to Chinese musicians to understand and appreciate the *yun* created through linear melodies. However, Western influence on Chinese instrumental composition became overwhelming and unstoppable by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the 1980s, Western modern composition techniques, such as the use of diverse modes and unusual timbres, were also employed in Chinese instrumental compositions.

- Musical Pedagogy and Performance Aesthetics

Before 1840, Chinese musicians used various notations to write down music, including *gongche*, *wenzi*, and *suzi* notations.<sup>15</sup> Because of the oral teaching tradition, however, these notations only gave as precise an amount of playing instructions as they were intended to, so that the teacher was the central repository of information about musical interpretation and regional styles. As a result of this oral tradition, students developed close relationships with their teachers.

Some Sino-West musical exchanges pre-date the First Opium War, and this includes the introduction of Western notation. In 1807, the British missionary Robert Morrison brought large numbers of Christian musical scores to China, which were circulated in Chinese communities (Zang 2000, 26). From 1807 to 1947 when the last musical score in *gongche* notation was printed out by the government, Western staff and cipher notations have gradually replaced Chinese traditional notations (27).<sup>16</sup> The numbered musical notation uses numbers (1-7) to indicate notes,

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<sup>15</sup> *Gongche* notation (工尺谱), *wenzi* notation (文字谱), and *suzi* notation (俗字谱) were commonly used for writing Chinese instrumental music before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They use characters to indicate pitches and finger techniques (Zang 2000).

<sup>16</sup> The numbered notation has been widely used in contemporary Chinese music, but it actually has a Western origin. Its earliest form can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, and Pierre Galin, a French music educator, developed a complete system, known as Galin-Paris-Chev  system, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since this system is not ideal for writing harmony, the numbered notation was not favored by European composers. Japan used it for school music education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was introduced to China by Chinese students who studied in Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the reasons for its popularization in China was that numbered notation is comparable to the *gongche* notation. The former uses numbers to indicate musical notes, while the latter uses Chinese characters (Qi and Zhao 2003, 28).

corresponding with “do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-si” in solfège. The key is important because the number “1” always represents “do” (e.g., C in C major and D in D major in staff notation). Although numbered notation was introduced to China in the twentieth century, Chinese people have Sinicized this system and added new features to make it suitable for playing Chinese music (Du 2005, 49). For example, Yang Yingliu added the symbol “++” to denote free rhythm and expression in Chinese numbered notation (ibid.) Figure 2.1 shows the zheng composition *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight* in staff and numbered notations.

The figure displays two versions of the musical score for 'Fisherman Singing in the Twilight' (渔舟唱晚). The left side shows the staff notation, which is a standard Western musical score with a treble and bass staff. The right side shows the numbered notation, which uses numbers 1-5 and various symbols (like dots, lines, and arrows) to represent pitch and rhythm. The numbered notation is a Sinicized system that incorporates traditional Chinese musical concepts. The title '渔舟唱晚' is written in Chinese characters at the top of both versions. The left version is attributed to '曹 正订谱' (Cao Zheng), and the right version is attributed to '姜 树华曲 曹 正译谱' (Jiang Shuhua composition, Cao Zheng translation).

Figure 2.14 *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight* (Lou Shuhua 1938) in staff (left) and numbered (right) notations<sup>17</sup>

The popularity of staff and numbered musical notations further boosted the dissemination of Western music in China. In the twentieth century, especially after 1949, many folk musicians at universities started to compile music books. They transcribed folk tunes and playing techniques in numbered and staff notations. Examples include the book *Pipa Qupu* (琵琶曲谱, Pipa Scores)

<sup>17</sup> Scores downloaded from <http://www.yueqiziliao.com/guzheng/202046025.html> and <http://www.yueqiziliao.com/guzheng/202046558.html>. There are some small differences between the two notations, including the bending effects and vibratos.

written by Lin Shicheng in 1956, *Erhu Zuopin Ji* (二胡作品集, Erhu Music Collection) by Liu Beimao in 1957, and *Minzu Yueqi Chuantong Duzou Quxuan* (民族乐器传统独奏曲选, Traditional Solo Compositions for National Instruments) compiled by the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing after the Cultural Revolution in 1981.

In tandem with this development, Chinese instrumental education became systematic and professionalized in the late twentieth century. In the newly established conservatories, there were two types of instrumental courses: one-on-one teaching and ensemble lessons (Shi 2010, 208). Since folk musicians learned to play instruments through oral teaching, some of them kept focusing on oral explanations when instructing students at universities. For instance, Yang Yuanheng, a famous *guanzi* (管子, double-reed wind instrument) master of Jizhong, central area in Hebei province style, required university students to sing with him to get the “the yun of Hebei flavor” before touching the instrument (ibid.). Sometimes, Yang criticized students for playing wrongly, not because they played the notes incorrectly, but because they did not get the flavor right. As more folk musicians employed by the conservatories and universities passed away, this oral teaching tradition with a focus on flavor and subtlety has gradually been downplayed, and Western classical music education, which prioritizes accuracy in score reading, has become dominant in Chinese musical pedagogy.

Compared to Chinese music before 1840, new instrumental compositions in the late twentieth century had more complicated musical content and required more technical playing skills. Chinese composers adopted Western playing methods to develop technically sophisticated Chinese instrumental music. For example, pianistic techniques such as left-hand harmonies and fast-paced melodies were widely used in compositions for the zheng. As a result, students put more effort into developing their fingering techniques and commonly overlooked the yun, the



core aesthetic in traditional Chinese music. Chinese instrumentalists used to play mainly in ensembles, but solo performance, in which musicians can show their superb playing skills has become more popular in contemporary China. Before 1840, Chinese solo instrumental traditions functioned mostly as entertainment or for self-cultivation, while in the late twentieth century, professional instrumentalists began to play formal recitals in concert halls, a typical setting for classical Western concerts.

### **2.3 Debates After the Reforms**

The music reforms boosted the development of traditional Chinese instruments with the emergence of numerous new compositions and instrumental innovations; however, some Chinese musicians and scholars critique the consequences of Westernized music in China (Du 1999). Some are concerned about the abandonment of traditional characteristics in modern Chinese instrumental music (Han 2013), and others deplore the dominance of Western culture within globalization (Liu 2010). It is common for Chinese musicians to believe that they present authentic Chinese music in the West, but “authenticity” is a famously tricky concept in music (Taylor 2007). These musicians are indeed experts in Chinese traditional music; however, as products of modern Chinese music education they are steeped in a hybrid music system resulting from over a hundred years of adapting Western musical elements to Chinese music culture. The following section discusses two of the most controversial debates concerning contemporary music systems in China: tradition vs. innovation, and modernization vs. Westernization.

### 2.3.1 Tradition vs. Innovation

In this dissertation, I use the terms “traditional music” and “traditions” mainly to indicate compositions, features, styles, and formats that existed in China before 1840. However, traditions are always entangled with innovations, as I discuss below, and there are continuing debates about tradition and innovation in contemporary Chinese music. From the perspective of music education, Chinese musicologist Hou Taiyong (2019) comments on music reforms,

我国早期的民乐专业教育制度，只是片面性地移植西方的专业教育体系的一些结构片段发展出来的，并且是以演奏技术、创作技巧等“技术发展”为主体的发展模式。这种方式虽然能够使中国民乐迅速走上专业化发展的道路，并取得了丰硕的成绩，但也付出了“音乐主体的缺失”的代价，致使人们对民乐发展缺乏一种明确的、统一的、持续的历史感。

The early educational system for Chinese instruments was built on partially adopting professional Western educational systems, a mode mainly focusing on “techniques,” including playing and composing skills. Although this method made Chinese instrumental music professional, it caused “the deficiency of musical subject” and led to people’s lack of a clear, united, and historically consistent understanding of Chinese music’s development. (72)

Hou examines the history of Han Chinese music as a whole, and his concern is that Chinese people will take it for granted that Chinese music was always Westernized. In his book *Silk and Bamboo Music in Shanghai*, ethnomusicologist J. Lawrence Witzleben (1995) finds similarities and connections between the contemporary Westernized Chinese music system and music elements that existed in ancient China, such as the equal-tempered scale and sophisticated notational systems; however, he admits that contemporary Chinese musical developments are not descended from indigenous musical practices or conventions (137).<sup>18</sup> Zheng virtuoso and

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<sup>18</sup>Zhu Zaiyu (朱载堉), a Chinese mathematician and musician, invented equal temperament via mathematical calculation in the sixteenth century, but this system was not widely accepted and used in traditional Chinese music

ethnomusicologist Mei Han (2013) states that “the result of the implementation of common Western music practice in Chinese music led to the gradual abandonment of many idiosyncratic performance characteristics that defined traditional Chinese music” (108). Musicians that Han interviewed in her research on the development of the zheng indicated that modern and Westernized hand techniques have challenged traditional playing aesthetics. The yun, the core aesthetics of traditional music, has been widely neglected in technically demanding compositions and contemporary practices that feature more virtuosic and forceful playing. Like Hou, Han is concerned that contemporary musical aesthetics might mislead the public in terms of appreciating traditional Chinese music.

Responding to those critical voices and what they regard as authentic, other musicians, composers, and scholars insist that contemporary innovations on Chinese traditional instruments are signs of historical advancement. In his interview with the *Global Times*, world-renowned composer Tan Dun (2018) stated,<sup>19</sup>

我当初留学时，父亲对我说，不要老讲英文，英文讲多了什么都忘了。我说，如果把中国老祖宗的东西传到全世界，我英文不讲好怎么传？其实，艺术门类里有很多东西，东西方可以互相借鉴。比如，无论跳民族舞还是爵士舞，上来都是先学芭蕾的训练方法，这是一种科学的身体展示。西方的现代美术也经常用中国“大象无形”的理念。科学跟艺术是一对孪生姐妹。刘天华之所以成为刘天华，就是因为他把很多小提琴技术改成二胡技术，使二胡有了崭新的生命。民族音乐也可以有不同的训练方式，我觉得这不是问题。最重要的还是看个人理解和个人目标。越多元化的学习，越能成就个性化发展... 越古老的东西越要用新东西去带动。

When I was studying abroad, my father said to me that I should not always speak English, [because] I would forget everything [Chinese] if I spoke it too often. I said, how can I

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(Luo 1987, 87). As Witzleben (1995) indicates, “the promotion of the equal-tempered scale in China today is related to a widespread admiration for the Western music associated with equal temperament” (137). Although Witzleben focuses on amateur ensemble musicians outside the conservatories, his research provides helpful perspectives for understanding musicians studying in conservatories.

<sup>19</sup> The *Global Times* (环球时报) is a daily tabloid newspaper under *People’s Daily* (人民日报), the largest newspaper group in China. The interview transcript is available at <https://kknews.cc/entertainment/k2jo26p.html>.

transmit Chinese ancestral ideas to all over the world if I cannot speak English well? There are many things in art that the East and the West can learn from each other. For example, whether learning ethnic or jazz dances, [students] all study ballet's training methods first, [because] it is a systematic body presentation. Western modern art often uses the Chinese "Daxiang Wuxing" (invisible elephant) philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Science and art are twins. The reason Liu Tianhua became Liu Tianhua was that he transferred many violin techniques to the erhu, which *gave the erhu a new life*. Ethnic [Chinese] music can have different training methods, which I do not think is a problem. The most important thing is personal understanding and goals. The more diverse the learning is, the more personalized the development will be... The more ancient the things are, the more innovative their leading forces should be. (Tan, the *Global Times*, July 20<sup>th</sup>; emphasis added)

Tan sees the music reforms that happened in modern China as a diversified development, and he believes that contemporary innovations have given Chinese traditional instruments "new lives."

Tradition has long been a controversial term in Western folklore and ethnomusicology. At first, traditional expressions of culture were understood as "survivals" that must be preserved before they died out, and there was great interest in collecting legends, folk songs, riddles, etc., particularly in the nineteenth century (Mieder [1987] 2016, ix-x). Contemporary scholars, however, have begun to emphasize the opposite point that all kinds of traditions experience constant change and creativity/innovation (Bronner 1998; Emielu 2018; Noyes 2009).

There are diverse ways of understanding the concept of tradition. In his influential article "The Seven Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies," Ben-Amos (1984) emphasizes the different ways of understanding traditions in the study of folklore. Tracing tradition as "a key word of Western modernity," Dorothy Noyes (2009) also claims that "tradition is inescapably ambiguous" (234). No matter what kind of meanings it has served, tradition never presents as rigid, fixed, and unchangeable. Following Ben-Amos and Noyes, I

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<sup>20</sup> Daxiang wuxing 大象无形 (invisible elephant) is an aphorism in the renowned *Daode Jing* (道德经, Tao Te Ching) by the Daoist philosopher Laozi. This phrase indicates that the world's greatest and magnificent styles and realms are often not confined to certain things and patterns; instead, they represent through appearance and scenes of infinite variety.

argue that tradition and innovation always co-exist. Change, no matter how subtle or dramatic, results from negotiations developing in everlasting cycles between roots of musical traditions and new branches of innovation. Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, China enacted a series of isolationist policies that banned business with foreign countries (Xu 1995). When China was forced to re-open to the world in 1840, Chinese music had developed independently within imperial, self-sufficient, and secluded dynasties for hundreds of years.<sup>21</sup> For each new dynasty, old cultures and traditions of previous dynasties were innovated upon or replaced by new ones, to represent a brand-new state. Foreign music has continuously come to China over its long history, and Chinese people have always embraced and adopted elements of outside culture, such as several instruments discussed in section 2.1 like the pipa and the yangqin. As Joseph Lam (2008) indicates, “Chinese people and their culture are so strong that they can absorb and Sinicize anything that comes from outside: whatever enters China will eventually become Chinese and the Chinese self becomes enriched and not diluted” (52). If China has always adopted foreign cultures and absorbed them into its social systems, why are the reforms of traditional music in the twentieth century so controversial? If we consider these music reforms to be part of China’s history of Sinification, the current hybrid situation may seem more acceptable.

One reason why some people are concerned about the abandonment of Chinese musical traditions is that the pace of this endless tradition and innovation cycle was pushed to accelerate in the twentieth century when China faced huge social and political turmoil. China always had musical exchanges with foreign countries, but the occasional foreign communications before 1840 were based on reciprocal relationships. Until the First Opium War, China was called by its people a “celestial empire” (天朝), which was related to Sinocentrism that treated China as the

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<sup>21</sup> There are periods of time in China’s history that the country was outward-looking, such as the time of the Silk Road (202BCE-208CE) and the Ming project of treasure voyages to South Asia (1405-1433) (Finlay 2008).

cultural, political, or economic center of the world (Zhang 2008, 109). The Opium Wars broke the Chinese people's dream of being a celestial empire in the world, and Chinese people felt humiliated by the government's defeats in the wars with Western countries and the unequal treaties the government signed. For example, in the Treaty of Nanking which ended the First Opium War in 1842, the Qing government granted an indemnity, opened treaty ports, and ceded Hong Kong Island to the British Empire. Chinese people hoped to rescue the nation through extensive reforms in various fields, including music. However, even though Western music has deeply influenced modern Chinese culture, it has not destroyed Chinese musical traditions. Traditional features may not be emphasized in new compositions and performances, but they commonly co-exist with new musical elements and are never forgotten. For example, Western composing techniques are obvious in many new compositions for the zheng but bending notes and pentatonic melodies have been employed in most of those compositions. Understood in historical context, the music reforms in modern China were only one part of perpetual cycles between tradition and innovation in the development of Chinese music over thousands of years.

One of the reasons for the debate is people's distinct understandings of "traditional" Chinese music. To accommodate modifications to traditional instruments, Chinese musicians in the late twentieth century arranged traditional music based on Western composition. Indeed, many musical compositions that are commonly considered traditional in China were composed by Chinese composers in the twentieth century. Consider for a moment the well-known zheng music *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight* (渔舟唱晚) composed by Lou Shuhua in 1938.

Because it draws on melodies from the ancient tune *Go Back To Come* (归去来兮), many Chinese musicians call it a traditional composition even though it contains two distinct sections in contrast to the single-section form common in traditional zheng music. According to Han

(2013), most traditional zheng compositions only had a single compositional frame, meaning only one mother tune throughout the whole music. Arguably, *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight* may be considered *both* traditional and modern.

According to the large-scale Chinese encyclopedia *Cihai* (辞海, 1989), the word *chuantong* (传统, tradition) in modern Chinese language means “historically inherited social powers that currently exist in systems, ideologies, culture, moralities and various fields” (242).<sup>22</sup> Drawing on this definition, ethnomusicologist Du Yaxiong (1996) states,

中国传统音乐应是指中国人运用本民族固有方法、采取本民族固有形式创造的、具有本民族固有形态特征的音乐，其中不仅包括在历史上产生、世代相传至今的古代作品，也包括当代中国人用本民族固有形式创作的、具有民族固有形体的音乐作品。

Traditional Chinese music should refer to the music that is created by Chinese people through applying their inherent ethnic methods and formats and that has their ethnic characteristics. It includes not only ancient music that was composed in history and handed down by generations but also contemporary compositions that are written by Chinese people using their inherent ethnic methods and forms. (15)

In my experience, Du’s clarification speaks for many Chinese people’s perceptions of traditional music. Here, tradition is not defined by chronology but by its ethnically specific features, styles, and characteristics. Du further gives examples about traditional and non-traditional music: the school songs discussed in 2.2 were not traditional because they used Western melodies and musical structures, but the erhu composition *The Moon Over a Fountain* (二泉印月), which was composed by Abing after the emergence of school songs, is a composition of traditional music because it uses Chinese-style melodies and bending sounds to mimic the Chinese language (15).

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<sup>22</sup> 目前存在于制度、思想、文化、道德等各个领域中的、从历史上传承下来的社会力量。

Some people, however, have a more restricted definition of traditional music, especially those who had the experience of learning from elder folk musicians in the twentieth century. Generally, they claim that only the compositions that existed before Western influence can be called traditional music. Zheng instructor Yang Yi (2012) at Tianjin Conservatory of Music criticizes the phenomenon of people mixing up traditional and modern compositions for the zheng. She points out that the 2012 First International Youth Guzheng Competition in Hong Kong mistakenly labeled some compulsory modern compositions for the competition as traditional compositions, including *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight*. She argues that only three types of zheng music are traditional: ancient music passed on through generations, newly compiled music from local musical genres (i.e., operas, *shuochang* [说唱, talking and singing], and folk tunes), and adopted traditional music of other Chinese instruments. For Yang, tradition should be defined chronologically rather than based on content and style. She claims that mixing up these two definitions not only obscures people's understanding of traditional characteristics but also obliterates new composers' contributions of combining tradition and innovation. During my fieldwork at the Center for Chinese Music and Culture in Murfreesboro, the director Mei Han who learned from folk zheng musicians in China, was also disappointed when young musicians called *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight* and other modern zheng compositions traditional. Those young musicians share Du's widely defined concept of tradition, while Han locates tradition in the long history of oral transmission of folk music (personal conversation, Jan. 2019).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In her PhD dissertation, Han (2013) divides the zheng's history into two stages: "ancient tradition (*gudai*, the second to fourteenth century), and living tradition, which can be further divided into traditional (*chuantong*, the eighteenth to mid-twentieth century) and contemporary (*xiandai*, mid-twentieth century to current day)" (2).



It seems that there are at least three ways of defining Chinese musical traditions. First, through chronological analysis, some people, like Yang Yi and Mei Han, insist that only music made before the arrival of Western influences can strictly be called traditional. Second, from a global perspective, traditional Chinese music commonly refers to music that has Chinese traditional elements and features. Du Yaxiong and the young musicians at the CCMC belong to this group. Third, from a historical point of view, every alternation of dynasties in Chinese history marked an emergence of new social, political, economic, and cultural patterns. One tradition faded away, and new traditions replaced it. Thus, depending on one's point of view, every culture in a certain Chinese historical period can be considered traditional or new.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm (1992) argues that traditions “which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (1). Henry Glassie (2003) also states that “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (176). Coupled with change, tradition connects the past and the future. Creation is a keyword in both Hobsbawm's and Glassie's interpretations of tradition. Rather than being something that is passively observed, absorbed, and understood, they argue that tradition is created by consumers, bearers, and other claimants who have agency in shaping and forming the meaning of the tradition itself. I share Hobsbawm's and Glassie's concepts of invented tradition when analyzing music systems in contemporary China, especially the traditional music in standard texts compiled and “re-invented” by conservatory teachers in the late twentieth century.

Jocelyn S. Linnekin (1983) interprets tradition as “a conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity” (241). By continuously changing, adapting, and

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<sup>24</sup> Such a cyclical relationship between tradition and innovation occurs in many musical histories around the world. For example, the division of “ars antiqua” and “ars nova” – old and new arts – in the early Renaissance in Western music history.

evolving, traditions in the contemporary world are not only invented, but also selected. As Linnekin states, “the selection of what constitutes tradition is always made in the present; the content of the past is modified and redefined according to a modern significance” (241). Because of oral teaching and improvisation, Chinese folk musicians created diverse interpretations of skeletal musical scores. In the late twentieth century, conservatory music educators collected only a small portion of the vast pool of these interpretations in standardized texts. Because of the widespread use of standardized texts, the selected variants and versions came to be understood as “traditional” and “authentic.” These extant compositions were selections of those in power, which directly influenced the public’s understanding of tradition; numerous forms of instruments and playing techniques existed historically, but Chinese intellectuals only kept the versions they found useful. Furthermore, individual musicians play a critical part in cultural transmission, especially when oral teaching is the major education method, and personal preferences directly determine which musical traditions are handed down. Therefore, what Du claims as “inherent” Chinese musical characteristics in his concept of tradition were personal selections at some point in the past. The bending notes and sliding tones have been selected by Chinese instrumentalists because of the tonal feature in the Chinese language, and the pentatonic scale has been preferred because it fits with Chinese culture that emphasizes linear melodies (Tian 1986).

The concept of selected tradition also applies to other aspects of culture. For example, there were many philosophical ideologies in Chinese history, but only a small number of them have survived. As an ancient Chinese belief system focusing on personal ethics and morality, Confucianism has been selected mainly by those in power for propagating the importance of the family and social harmony in a strict social order. With a belief in cosmic balance, Taoism has been favored by Chinese people for achieving a peaceful life and internal freedom. Different cultures, and therefore traditions, have been selected by certain groups of people who have

agency in shaping traditions over time. It should be noted that during the artificial and arbitrary selection process controlled by those in authority, ordinary people may either follow those rules and thus unintentionally reinforce those choices or not follow the rules and influence what gets practiced in everyday life. This factor further complicates the mutual influence of tradition and innovation.

The entanglement of tradition and innovation in the modernization movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may downplay some aspects of traditional musical heritage in China, but there were achievements worthy of celebration, such as the establishment of conservatories, the production of a fertile body of musical works, the nationwide attention on Chinese music, and the elevated social status of musicians. Witzleben (1995) indicated that the modern musical developments in China were still in the “infancy” stage, which caused the disturbing “foreignness” felt by people who valued what had commonly been considered Chinese traditions (138). Twenty-five years after Witzleben’s publication, China has now successfully Sinicized imported foreign musical knowledge and developed better music systems with Chinese characteristics. For instance, many Chinese conservatories and university music departments have designed a mutual learning system that lists both Western and Chinese music as mandatory courses. It is this intercultural music scene in contemporary China that makes some scholars and musicians anxious about the current situation of Chinese music, which further intensifies the debate about the relationship between tradition and innovation.

In my view, one reason for some of my consultants’ impulse of tracing back Chinese musical traditions is because of intense intercultural communications that happened in their diasporic lives; they hope to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese musical heritage to secure their musical roles in a multicultural society. However, their intercultural journeys had already begun when they first touched modernized Chinese instruments. Instead of thinking of

intercultural experiences in North America as “new” encounters for these Chinese musicians, they are better considered as “extensions” of these musicians’ intercultural (mainly Sino-West) music education and, in some cases, more profound understandings of Chinese musical traditions. During this extensional intercultural journey, the interactions between tradition and innovation come into play once again. When Chinese musicians select and present the traditions that they consider the most authentic or appropriate in the West, they are also inventing new traditions by adding their own interpretations and understandings.

### **2.3.2 Modernization vs. Westernization**

Rooted in Confucian ideology, Chinese people believe that music has the power to influence and change society. This principle was essential in an emperor’s governance throughout Chinese imperial history. When China was continuously defeated in the wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Chinese patriots appealed for new national music to save the country and present the nation, which led to the music reforms in modern China. The final triumph of modernists who were in favor of using Western music and instruments as models for forming new national music resulted in a significant Westernized route for the development of Chinese music. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the term *guoyue* (国乐, national music) was replaced with *minzu yinyue* (民族音乐, people’s/national music), or its abbreviation *minyue* (民乐), in order to reflect the proletarian ideology (Lau 2008, 33). The PRC government enhanced the pace, depth, and scope of reforms, which simultaneously expedited the modernization process.

For some Chinese intellectuals, modernization was equivalent to Westernization. As Yu (2010) indicates, the Qing government so comprehensively imitated the strengths of the West

during the early modernization process that its modernization was called the “Westernization Movement” (154). Although China gradually shifted the focus from total Westernization to “Chinese essence, Western means,” the trend of discarding and altering traditional ideologies to conform to the Western paradigm became unstoppable in the twentieth century. Equating almost everything from the West with advanced Western science and technology, many Chinese people compared their music with the Western counterpart based on Western principles and looked down on their local music and aesthetics. Western music was considered scientific and advanced, while Chinese music was vulgar and backward (Lau 2008, 31). This cultural hierarchy gradually took root deep inside many Chinese people’s minds. When talking about his conservatory learning experience in the late 1970s, dizi master Chen Tao described how people treat Western and Chinese music differently,

当时我很自豪的是我们那个时候有校徽- 中央音乐学院附中。比方说，我们男孩子就别在上面，别在上面人家就问你是中央音乐学院的，你是干什么的？那时候我们拉二胡的很多漂亮的女孩子就说，我是拉小提琴的。那时候不敢说出你是搞民乐的。弹古筝的就说是弹钢琴的，比如说是这样。觉得搞民乐很掉价嘛，搞音乐的自卑感嘛，那时候。

I was very proud that we had a school badge – [with the logo saying] Central Conservatory of Music Middle School. We boys often wore it. Some people saw it and asked us what’s your major at the Central Conservatory of Music? By then, many beautiful girls who played the erhu said they played the violin. You did not dare to say you played Chinese instruments at that time. [People who] played the guzheng said [they] played the piano, and so on. [Because we] thought playing Chinese instruments was menial and felt ashamed about it. (Chen, personal interview, March 22, 2019)

Such prejudice against traditional Chinese instruments was common among musicians in the late twentieth century, and the cultural hierarchy still impacts the development of Chinese music today. In 2017, the Chinese musical film *Our Shining Days* received favorable reviews for exposing the unequal social status of Chinese and Western instruments in modern China and

encouraging people to fight the ignorance of, and prejudice against, Chinese instruments. In the movie, a yangqin player starts a Chinese instrumental band with Otaku-loving friends to fight against the public's rejection of Chinese instruments and Otaku.<sup>25</sup> After many twists and turns of the plot (including a dramatic showdown between students playing Chinese instruments and students playing Western instruments), a performance of modernized and hybridized Chinese instrumental music is finally broadcast live and meets with high praise. Although there are exaggerations in the movie, it exposes the fact that the cultural hierarchy stemming from the music reforms is still influencing Chinese people's musical judgments.

With the prevalence of such a cultural hierarchy in China, some scholars criticize the value of prioritizing Western music and the problematic notion of treating it as the only advanced music culture in the world. For example, Du Yaxiong (1999) comments,

属于不同民族的不同的音乐文化，有不同的价值体系，因此只能放在不同的文化、社会背景中去认识和理解，方能研究出其发展的规律和特征，显示出不同的价值。欧洲各民族在其历史上创造的音乐是优秀的，但它并非人类唯一优秀的音乐文化。如果把它当成人类各种音乐文化发展的唯一楷模，必将导致人类音乐文化的单一化。人类音乐文化的单一化，并不是音乐“进步”的表现，而是人类和音乐的悲哀……在世纪之交，回顾中国音乐近百年来的发展，我觉得有两方面的工作没有做好：一是对中国传统音乐学习不够，二是对外国音乐学习不够。

Music cultures belonging to different ethnicities have distinct value systems, which can only be understood in their cultural and societal environment. Only with this in mind, can scholars study their rules, characteristics, and values. Music created by ethnic groups in Europe is excellent, but it is not the only brilliant music culture in human history. If it is treated as the only model, music cultures created by human beings would become homogenized. Homogeneity is not a musical 'improvement' but misery for human beings and music... looking back at the one-hundred-year development at the turn of century, I

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<sup>25</sup> Otaku is a Japanese term, referring to a person who is obsessed with anime and manga. The yangqin player convinces her fellow students, Otaku fans who are also considered outcasts, to join her band. The inclusion of Japanese popular culture in the film underlines the complexity of the cultural influences that constitute contemporary China. A trailer of *Our Shining Days* with English subtitles is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB50H64DEPA>.

believe there are two kinds of work that we haven't done well: one is not learning Chinese traditional music well, and the other is not learning foreign music well. (30-31)

Du hopes to remind Chinese intellectuals that there is more than one advanced music culture outside of China and that blindly following the West displays ignorance of both Chinese and foreign musics. Even though musicians and scholars have various opinions about the effects of music reforms on Chinese modern music, the common concern about the unhealthy value placed on cultural hierarchy has always been on the table. As with the debate about tradition and innovation, some scholars are concerned that Chinese traditional music might be swept away by Westernization and worry about its future development.

As I have already stated, modernization and Westernization are not coterminous. The influences of Western music on non-Western traditions have been widely studied in the field of ethnomusicology. In his book *The Western Impact on World Music: Change, Adaptation, and Survival*, Bruno Nettl (1985) describes modernization as “the incidental movement of a system or its components in the direction of Western music and musical life, without, however, requiring major changes in those aspects of the non-Western tradition that are central and essential” (20). Although Nettl is reproducing the problematic equation of “West=modern,” his idea of the extent of borrowing, with some music cultures seeking to combine local and Western elements, helps to explain Chinese music’s modernization. On the one hand, Western musical knowledge has influenced every aspect of the Chinese musical field, including playing techniques, pedagogy, and aesthetics. On the other hand, traditional musical features, such as pentatonic melodies and tonal inflections, have been retained in the contemporary music system. In addition, a significant number of returned Chinese students who studied in Japan brought Japanese music to China. For example, many school songs (discussed in 2.2) were arranged based on Japanese tunes.

In his book *Musical Creativity in Twentieth-century China: Abing, His Music, and Its Changing Meanings*, Jonathan Stock (1996) examines the “role for traditional music in a self-consciously modernizing society” by tracing the well-known blind folk musician Abing’s life and musical innovations. In Stock’s view, Abing’s musical creations consist of both traditional and Western-influenced music elements of that time, and Chinese conservatory musicians have continued to adapt Abing’s music according to the changing political and cultural contexts. When studying contemporary Chinese dizi repertoire, Frederic Lau (1996) also puts musicians in the foreground and advocates viewing contemporary dizi music and its practice as “a result of the way players themselves interpret and adjust to their immediate world” (127). Through melodic and structural analyses of the scores, Lau illustrates how modern dizi music was composed by Chinese musicians with political considerations and inspirations from the West. Launching dialogues with Western culture is necessary, as Guo Shuyong (2012) states, but “highlight[ing] the characters of Chinese culture and develop[ing] Chinese-style universality and openness” is vital for fulfilling China’s national interests within the context of globalization. Such a balance of modernization and Westernization has also been employed in Chinese music education. In their 2016 article about Chinese folk music teaching in higher education, Yang Yang and Graham Welch indicate that the combination of the Western conservatory model and Chinese traditional folk learning ensures more effective learning outcomes of traditional folk music in modern China. In the twenty-first century, musicians still play traditional music that was collected in the late twentieth century, and many new compositions include Chinese melodies and non-Western musical features. For example, at the 2017 Beijing Modern Music Festival, Chinese yangqin player Liu Yuening and Indian santur player Tarun Bhattacharya performed their new



composition *Raga-Jasmine*, which combines Indian musical elements with the Chinese folk tune *Jasmine*.<sup>26</sup>

Many other Asian countries borrowed Western ideas to varying extents during their modernization processes and—although the context of colonialism does not pertain to China’s experience—India can stand here as a representative example. Through a critical reading of the contributions of two important figures in the twentieth century —V.N. Bhatkhand and V.D. Paluskar, Janaki Bakhle (2005) examines Indian music’s transition from court patronage to public consumption and commercialization under colonialism. He argues that even though colonialism is undoubtedly a central part of modernization in India, other factors, such as political and economic realities, are constitutive as well. In the article *That Ban(e) of Indian Music: Hearing Politics in the Harmonium*, Matt Rahaim (2011) investigates how the public attempted to form a national sound for India that was distinct from the West in the twentieth century, which resulted in the fact that the harmonium was simultaneously embraced and opposed by Indian people for two kinds of centrifugal nationalism: national singularity and national unity. Like China, other Asian countries developed various ways of incorporating and battling against Western influence to achieve an independent national modernization. This phenomenon is well-described in the idea of “alternative modernities” in recent studies.<sup>27</sup>

Alternative modernities challenge the Euro-American-centered conceptualization of modernity that treats modernization as synonymous with Westernization (Dirlik 2013; Gaonkar 2001). As Kumar et al. (2019) indicates, “[the conventional narrative of modernity and Westernization] creates a polarity between tradition and modernity in which tradition has come to

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<sup>26</sup>Full video of Liu and Bhattacharya’s performance is available at: <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ut411p7HW/>.

<sup>27</sup> The term “multiple modernities” has also been used to address the same idea, see Eisentadt (2000; 2002), Kaviraj (2005), and Schmidt (2006).

be associated with all that is primitive, unchanging and static, and modernity with change, dynamism and progress” (xix-xx). Such a narrative also denies the interdependent nature of tradition and innovation discussed above. When illustrating his standpoint of alternative modernities, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (1999) states that “modernity is more often perceived as lure than as a threat, and people (not just elite) everywhere, at every national or cultural site, rise to meet it, negotiate it, and appropriate it in their own fashion” (17). Gaonkar’s point speaks to the case of Chinese music’s modernization. Chinese intellectuals did not copy Western music but strategically Sinicized it. There were certainly non-Western influences in China’s modernization movements and more non-Western musical elements have been employed in Chinese compositions in the twenty-first century (Guan 2014).

In sum, even though there are significant Western influences, the modernization of Chinese music should not be equated with Westernization. What the music reforms in modern China led to be was a Chinese-style modernization with Western influence. Four musical examples will help to illustrate this. During the 1920s to 1940s, Chinese composers began to apply Western classical composition techniques to new instrumental music. Their goal was to create Chinese-style (compared to Western) compositions for both Chinese and Western instruments. Two representative figures were Liu Tianhua and He Luting. Liu mostly used Western composition techniques to write music for Chinese instruments, but He employed Chinese folk tunes to compose for the piano and Western orchestra. Both composers’ works were well-received and are still popular in China.

*Towards Brightness* (光明行) was composed by Liu in 1931, and it has become one of the most famous erhu solos in China. In this music, Western arch form (ABCB) and duple meter marching rhythm are obvious influences. In addition, some violin playing techniques, such as

tremolo playing, were also adapted. Liu explained in a concert, “Because many people think our national music is in the doldrums, I wrote this music to prove it wrong” (cited in Ma and Song 2006, 73).<sup>28</sup>



Figure 2.15 Excerpt from the erhu composition *Towards Brightness* (Liu Tianhua 1931) in staff notation<sup>29</sup>

*Buffalo Boy's Flute* (牧童短笛), composed by He in 1934, was one of the first widely recognized Chinese piano compositions (Melvin and Cai 2004, 125). The compositional techniques, such as ternary form and use of harmony, are still Western, but its melody is typically Chinese. To describe the lovely scene of a boy playing the flute while riding on a cow, He employed rhythms and melodies from Chinese folk-dance music. Overall, this composition conveys a special musical flavor by combining pentatonic melodies with harmonies. *Towards Brightness* and *Buffalo Boy's Flute* showcase the reciprocal nature of Chinese-style modernization whereby Chinese composers both adopted Western musical techniques and highlighted Chinese musical features.

<sup>28</sup> 因外人多谓我国音乐萎靡不振，故写此曲以证其误。

<sup>29</sup> Score downloaded from <http://www.yueqiziliao.com/dianzhiqin/20196859.html>.



Figure 2.16 Excerpt from the piano composition *Buffalo Boy's Flute* (He Luting 1934) in staff notation<sup>30</sup>

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, Chinese music developed under the government's slogan that art should serve politics and people. Therefore, many compositions were composed with titles or themes celebrating communists, peasants, and workers. A masterpiece, *Battling the Typhoon* (战台风) which was composed by Wang Changyuan in 1965, has become one of the most popular compositions of zheng music around the world. It depicts a scene of dock men rushing to unload cargo when a typhoon is coming. Although Wang adapted many playing methods from the piano and the harp, such as left-hand arpeggios and chords, she also developed new playing techniques based on traditional Zhejiang style, such as *sweeping tremolo* (扫摇), tremolo with thumb and brushing with the middle finger, and *buckling tremolo* (扣摇), tremolo with right-hand thumb and pinching the string with left-hand fingers. *Battling the Typhoon* presents a good example of Chinese-style modernization that served China's particular political situation.

<sup>30</sup> Score downloaded from <https://www.yueqiquan.com/a19765.html>.

**战 台 风**

王 昌 元曲  
(作于1965年)

1 = D

快速 热情洋溢地

Adagio section markings: 渐慢 (Ritardando), 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100.

Figure 2.17 Excerpts from the zheng composition *Battling the Typhoon* (Wang Changyuan 1965) in numbered notation (left- the beginning, right- adagio)<sup>31</sup>

Since the 1980s, Chinese musicians and composers have shifted their attention to Western modern music. Avant-garde music resurfaced in China and many innovative playing techniques have been applied to Chinese instruments.<sup>32</sup> For example, Wang Jianmin composed *Fantasia* (幻想曲) in 1991, in which he did many new experiments on the zheng. By sharpening the second note and flattening the sixth in the original pentatonic scale, Wang creates an unusual musical flavor. In addition, many percussion techniques, such as knocking the soundboard and fist taps, are used in the work. With all these innovations, however, the main melody was composed based on *HXak Yeet* (苗族飞歌), a singing style popular in the Miao Minority in Yunnan province. Compared to previous modern compositions, *Fantasia* indicates a new trend of Chinese-style modernization that became more open and inclusive in the late twentieth century.

<sup>31</sup> There is no staff notation for *Battling the Typhoon* available, so I show the numbered notation here. Score downloaded from <https://qupu.yueqiquan.com/a207393.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Some Western avant-garde music appeared in China in the early twentieth century, and this musical genre was reintroduced to China in the 1980s.



Figure 2.18 Excerpt from the zheng composition *Fantasia* (Wang Jianmin 1991) in staff notation<sup>33</sup>

With explorations and experiments such as those described above, China has developed a new music system of its own and this new music culture, in turn, helps to define its national and generational identity in the contemporary era. Even though Westernization and colonialism have influenced many countries' modernization, on the positive side, I believe that some countries have actively adopted Western culture and transformed it into something that can be absorbed by their own societies. The resulting cultures, whether syncretized or Westernized, have shown those countries' distinct features. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese instrumental music embraced more diverse influences from around the world, including popular music and televised shows, and it continues to evolve in its own ways.

It should be noted that the West has also been impacted by other cultural traditions as a result of intercultural exchange. For example, American composer John Cage's famous, though controversial, work *Music of Changes* (1951) was inspired by the *Yijing/I Ching* (易经), an ancient Chinese oracle book describing a symbol system used to identify the order in chance events. Cage wrote this instrumental aleatoric composition based on rules in the *I Ching* and

<sup>33</sup> Score downloaded from <https://www.guzheng.cn/qupu/69.html>.

named it *Music of Changes* based on the *I Ching*'s other name *Book of Changes* (Jensen 2009). Although there are issues of Orientalism and cultural appropriation in Cage's music, my point is that cultural influence has never been unidirectional. While Chinese people were crazy about learning Western music in the twentieth century, more Western composers, musicians, and scholars have been learning and studying Chinese music culture in the twenty-first century. In 2013, *Musical America*, the oldest American magazine on classical music, honored Wu Man, an immigrant Chinese pipa player in the United States, as the instrumentalist of the year,

[Wu Man is] the very model of a modern soloist, but more importantly, her work is part of a big step in *the evolution of Western classical music*. Yes, east is east and west is west, but not only have the twain met and embraced, Kipling's famous refrain notwithstanding, but they have produced a vigorous musical hybrid that is enriching both cultures... Thanks to her, the pipa is no longer an exotic curiosity, let alone a complete mystery.<sup>34</sup> (Allan Kozinn, *Music America*, emphasis added)

Although Kozinn uses journalistic rhetoric to capture attention, his exaggerated idea of Chinese musicians speeding up "the evolution of Western classical music" shows a greater scale of meeting and merging between Chinese and Western music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recent decades, traditional Chinese music has gained wide attention in China and many overseas countries. Traditional or traditional-style repertoires on Chinese instruments have become compulsory in the entrance examinations of the performance major in Chinese conservatories; traditional instruments, such as the zheng and the pipa, have been extensively used in pop, rock, and other musical genres with a broader audience; many musicians have brought Chinese instruments to Western society, and more non-Chinese people have begun to learn and do research on these instruments.

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<sup>34</sup> The full report can be viewed on Musical America's website:  
<https://www.musicalamerica.com/features/?fid=186&fyear=2013>

While significant reforms were happening nationwide in the twentieth century, many Chinese musicians and scholars strove to collect folk music and compiled books of traditional music, playing techniques, and performance aesthetics. In the contemporary era, many of those traditional features have been widely employed in new compositions by both Chinese and non-Chinese composers. In addition, diasporic Chinese musicians, including those in this study, have contributed significantly to more intense musical exchanges between Chinese and other music cultures around the world.

## **2.4 The Music Education of Participating Chinese Musicians**

Of the forty-two musicians, composers, fans, and event organizers in this project, twenty-six are Chinese instrumentalists who were working and living in North America during my fieldwork between January to August in 2019. For the autoethnographic component (see chapter 5), I have included myself as one of the participating Chinese musicians and discuss my musical experiences in Canada and the United States. Although my consultants are of various ages (ranging from the 20s to 60s) and come from different class backgrounds, there are similarities in their music educations.

Some Chinese instrumentalists, especially the elder ones, had the opportunity to learn from pioneering folk musicians. The dizi master Chen Tao was enrolled in the Central Conservatory of Music in 1977 when he was 11 years old. At that time, the essential dizi techniques were classified into two distinct schools: *nanpai* (南派, the southern) and *beipai* (北派, the northern). Before entering the Central Conservatory, he had learned from Lu Chunling, a pioneer of the southern dizi style. Then in Beijing, he had another chance to study from Feng Zicun, a master of the northern school. From these two folk musicians, Chen received traditional



oral teaching and learned traditional playing skills that he could not have gained from music books. Multi-instrumentalist Zhusong Du learned the dizi from Zhao Songting, another pioneer of the southern style. After studying in Zhejiang Art School in 1980, he studied the suona with Ren Tongxiang, a well-known suona virtuoso in the twentieth century. Du told me that learning from these master folk musicians was one of the greatest honors of his musical life. In 1971, zheng virtuoso Mei Han started to learn from her first teacher Gao Zicheng, who was one of the most accomplished zheng musicians of the Shandong style. Although Gao had already been recruited as a professor at Xi'an Conservatory of Music where Western music pedagogy had been adopted, Han recalled that Gao's teaching method was still traditional. For each lesson, Han learned to sing the melody first to get the flavor of the music, and only then could she mimic the vocalized sound on the zheng, a method designed to center the concept of yun.

Although they later received Westernized music education, some musicians initially learned from folk musicians who were famous in their local regions. When she was little, Geling Jiang learned the pipa with Wang Wanfu, a blind folk musician who was well-known in her province. Wang lived far away, and Jiang traveled more than four hours by bus to attend the pipa class every week. Zheng player Jing Xia (US) also began her initial musical training with a local folk musician at the age of 4. In some cases, my consultants' relatives are folk musicians, and it was common for them to start their instrument lessons at home. Zhusong Du's first teacher was his grandfather, a folk musician playing the dizi in his hometown. Both the erhu player Xiaodong Wei and suona player Zhongxi Wu learned from their fathers when they were young. They all received oral training and learned to play their instruments in a traditional way by listening and following their fathers' demonstrations.

Since the late twentieth century, conservatory/university-affiliated schools have become popular and some of my consultants majored in instrumental performance in these schools.

Before attending Tainan National University in Taiwan, Dailin Hsieh majored in zheng performance in its affiliated high school. The erhu player Nicole Ge Li was in the affiliated high school of Wuhan Conservatory of Music, then enrolled in a Bachelor of Music program at Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Another erhu player Rong Jun also completed her Bachelor of Music degree at the China Conservatory of Music after studying at its affiliated high school.

In contemporary China, many musicians and music schools offer private lessons. The yangqin player Xie Jun studied with Li Hongzhong, a teacher at Hunan Vocational College of Art, when he was a child. In my own case, my first zheng teacher was my aunt, who owns a private music school and is a zheng player herself. Because her parents wanted to give her more choices in choosing a major in university, the pipa player Yuxin Mei gave up the affiliated schools and learned music at an after-school program when she was a child. Unlike those who study at affiliated conservatory/university schools, such musicians generally decide to major in music only when entering university.

To nurture well-rounded young generations, in addition to traditional “academic” subjects (i.e., math, science, literature, etc.), the Chinese government has put music, physical education, ideology, and morality lessons in the curriculum of the nine-year compulsory education system. As a result, the earliest music education some of my consultants received was from the music course at elementary school. Both the pipa player Qiuxia He and ruan player Zhimin Yu started to learn instruments and perform in various musical activities in elementary school. Taiwan has a similar education system, in which every school is required by the government to form a musical group. The first time Lan Tung learned the erhu was at such an elementary school ensemble. The early music education of the erhu player Zhongcai Yang was also influenced by politics. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), because Yang’s family background was very “clean”—

meaning all his family members were workers, peasants, and other non-capitalist people—the local government propaganda team picked him to learn the erhu to “serve the people”.

Some Chinese instrumentalists in this study were born in Canada, and they did not have access to professional musical training in the late twentieth century because there were not many professional Chinese musicians in Toronto and Vancouver. Patty Chan learned the erhu from Ming Chan who was studying engineering at the University of Toronto in the 1970s, and Michelle Kwan learned the zheng from the amateur musician Ms. Ying in Vancouver in the 1990s. It can still be a challenge to find Chinese teachers of less common instruments. For example, when Nathania Ko decided to learn the konghou in 2014, she found no konghou player in North America. As a result, she moved to Beijing to learn the konghou at the Central Conservatory of Music. There is also an opposite case: Dizi player Charlie Liu immigrated to Canada with his family in 1996. Because his father is a professional cello player, Liu spent most of his time in Hong Kong learning the cello and played the dizi as a hobby. It was not until going to Vancouver that Liu started to get professional dizi training from an immigrant Chinese musician.

Although some elder instrumentalists had the opportunity to learn from folk musicians, all the Chinese instrumentalists in this study received contemporary musical training, meaning that they have learned modernized compositions, playing techniques, aesthetics, etc. Twenty Chinese instrumentalists (including myself) attended post-secondary training at a conservatory or university for music. This contemporary musical training laid the foundation for developing intercultural musicianship, a concept I will discuss in the next chapter. Their intercultural musical journeys are the results of Chinese music’s modernization, and in turn, they have joined the process of Chinese music’s modernization by creating a new intercultural phenomenon that highlights the influence of Chinese music in the diaspora.

### 3 Intercultural Music-Making in the Multicultural Society

Deng Xiaoping's Chinese Economic Reform (改革开放, known in the West as the Opening of China) implemented by the Chinese government in 1978 greatly opened Chinese markets to foreign business and brought a new wave of Chinese immigrants to other countries. Unlike those who were hired as indentured laborers by Western countries at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1840-1912), Chinese immigrants of the past four decades have mainly been well-educated elites and professionals, including musicians (Jia 2019).<sup>1</sup> Following a shameful history of excluding Chinese immigrants in both countries in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Canadian and American governments adopted more open immigration policies, including Canada's *Immigration Act* (with priorities of family reunion, diversity, and non-discrimination) in 1976 and the US *Immigration Act* (with extended categories to highly-skilled and educated workers) in 1990. Many Chinese musicians in this study immigrated to Canada and the United States in this context of the increasing population flows between China and North America.

Primarily through case studies of musicians in Vancouver, this chapter addresses such immigrant Chinese instrumentalists' intercultural music-making in North America from musical, social, and individual perspectives. I develop the concept of intercultural musicianship to address the education and professional experiences of Chinese instrumentalists in the diaspora. I examine

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<sup>1</sup> Indentured Chinese Labour emerged in the 17th century as a result of Western colonialism and reached its climax at the end of the Opium Wars. According to Wu (1986), there were three kinds of indentured Chinese laborer: enslaved, indebted, and employed. Although using different methods, these three types of laborers were all exploited and held low social status. Most indentured Chinese laborers were hired to build the cross-country railway systems in Canada and the United States beginning in the 19th century. After these railways were complete at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Canada and the United States implemented a series of unjust policies to block Chinese immigration, which included the head tax for Chinese immigrants (1885-1923) in Canada and the Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States (1882-1943).

how Chinese musicians flexibly adapt the idiomatic features of their instruments in a multicultural society, including instrumental sounds, playing methods, musical styles and features, and aesthetics and philosophies. Drawing on Benjamin Brinner's (2009) three ways of combining or fusing culturally distinct styles—contrast, dominance, and blend—in extended ways, I explore how intercultural collaborations are achieved in music written for Chinese and non-Chinese instruments. I then discuss the social aspects of intercultural music-making based on Georgina Born's (2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2017) four planes of the social mediation of music—performance sociality, musically imagined community, social formation, and institutional forms. Finally, I analyze how improvisation, a new musical practice for many immigrant Chinese instrumentalists, is favored by many Chinese musicians as a means of self-expression that functions to facilitate intercultural communication, appreciation, and coalition. Intercultural music-making implies not only musical exchanges among musicians from different cultural backgrounds but also internalized intercultural musical competencies that musicians develop and maintain. Through intercultural music-making, diasporic Chinese instrumentalists navigate diverse musical and cultural encounters, create economic opportunities for themselves, and contribute to multicultural music scenes in North America.

### **3.1 Intercultural Musicianship**

As discussed in chapter 2, the contemporary Chinese music system is an amalgamation of Chinese and Western musical traditions. Most of my Chinese consultants started to learn their instruments during the second half of the twentieth century when the results of music reforms were gradually applied to the (new) music education system in China. While some of my consultants had opportunities to learn from traditional folk musicians at the end of the twentieth

century, they also received a Westernized and modernized music education in China. After coming to North America, they have expanded their intercultural musical experience beyond the China-West nexus to include various musical traditions from around the world that they encountered in multicultural North American cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, and New York, thus participating in what Mark Slobin (1993) terms a “diasporic interculture.” Slobin outlines a theory of three levels of musical flows within a globalized world: subculture (local affinity groups), superculture (national and transnational institutional frameworks), and interculture (cross-society links). It is these cross-society links that concern me here. Slobin further delineates three types of interculture that are features of music in a globalized world: industrial, affinity, and diasporic interculturalities. The last term is most relevant to this study because diasporic interculturalities emphasizes the mobile individual and describes how musicians create distinct fusions from their experiences living and working in different places.

The term intercultural is different from cognate terms such as multicultural, bicultural/bimusical, and transcultural/transmusical. “Multicultural” refers to co-existence among, as well as distinctions between, diverse cultures, and as a national policy, it is often criticized as an attempt to disguise systemic political and economic disparities between unmarked “White” and racialized citizens through the celebration of colorful cultural products such as music, food, and clothing (Kamboureli 2000; Coulthard 2014). Multiculturalism has become a cultural label in both the United States and Canada, but the two countries’ histories of ethnic contact and conflict differ in significant ways (Guibernau i Berdún and Rex 2011).<sup>2</sup> The emergence of multiculturalism in Canada was primarily based on the “assumption that national

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<sup>2</sup> In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared multiculturalism as an official government policy in Canada. The Multicultural Act implemented in 1988 affirmed Canada’s status as a multicultural nation. Although it has no overt multiculturalism policy, ethnic diversity has been a feature of the United States since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Vecoli 2014).

unity and social cohesion can be molded by integrating differences into a societal framework – not denying them” (Fléras and Elliott 1992, 2).<sup>3</sup> In the United States, multiculturalism is used to promote unity, “a clear-cut sense of national identity” that “Canada seems to lack” (Sielke 2014, 50). Although it has become something of a cliché, it is still illustrative that Canadian multiculturalism is often described as a “mosaic” while American multiculturalism is conceived as a “melting pot.”

In his famous article “The Challenge of ‘Bi-musicality,’” Mantle Hood (1960) conceives the term “bimusicality” to suggest a performance-based approach by which a researcher gains a “real comprehension of theoretical studies” (55) through embodied participation and training in the culture (often non-native) that one studies. Drawing on Hood’s theory and Mark Slobin’s (1979) views on code switching (musicians’ competence in switching between musical styles) and code superimposition (a process of layering different musical styles), Stephen Cottrell (2007) interprets bimusicality as a musician’s “cognitive flexibility” (101) of navigating through different musical styles in particular contexts. In a recent study on bimusicality, Mehmet Ali Sanlıkol (2020) also indicates that “musicians becoming fluent in two or more musical traditions is highly necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (14). The broader term “bicultural,” suggests one’s long-term immersion and embodied understanding of two (or more as in recent studies) distinct cultures. Like speaking two languages, biculturalism presents a lifestyle incorporating two cultural systems with an emphasis on their differences and distinctions. Some of my consultants’ might be considered as bimusical since they gained embodied understanding of non-Chinese musical genres through receiving training directly from local musicians in other countries. The

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<sup>3</sup> This concept is controversial in some areas in Canada. For example, the Quebec 2019 law (Bill 21) banned religious symbols and prevented a person whose face is covered from delivering or receiving a public service. A Canadian court struck down part of this disputed law on April 20, 2021. <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/crime-pmn/canada-court-strikes-down-part-of-controversial-quebec-law-on-religious-symbols>.

concept of “bimusicality,” however, is not sufficient to account for the diverse, complex, and reciprocal musical and cultural interactions that my consultants have experienced in the diaspora.

Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz ([1947]1995) proposed the term “transculturation,” and it has been brought to the fore by anthropologists in line with “transculturality” since the 1980s (Deschênes 2018, 277). Scholars have used “transcultural” mainly to indicate a process of interlaced relationships between and fusions of cultural practices (Benessaïeh 2010; Imbert 2010; Welsch 1999). Drawing on theories of bimusicality and transculturality, Bruno Deschênes (2018) defines “transmusicality” as an embodied and intentional process of switching frames of identity in cross-cultural musical practices. Deschênes’s usage of transmusicality can be related to “intercultural” music making since both concepts emphasize coherence, embodiment, and openness in learning different musical practices. However, transmusicality includes a process of de-identification from one’s own musical background (in certain circumstances, one’s belief in “musical and cultural truth”) to re-identification with the received musical codes, which generally does not exist in intercultural musical practices as I am defining them here (285). Distinct from the terms multicultural, bicultural/bimusical, and transcultural/transmusical, I understand “intercultural” to emphasize a fusion music culture with strong individual features created out of mutual influence and intertwined relationships among diverse musical traditions.<sup>4</sup> There is no strictly defined de-identification process in my Chinese consultants because their musical background is already a hybrid base that is open to new musical influences. They might need to

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<sup>4</sup> My use of the term “intercultural” is thus more positive than that adopted by Dylan Robinson (2020) for whom so-called intercultural collaboration is too often an excuse for appropriating Indigenous music. He proposes the term “inclusionary” as more apt when describing so-called intercultural contemporary art music projects by composers in North America that include elements of Indigenous music (such as recorded samples or even live performers). He coins the term “Indigenous+art music” for resurgent projects that foreground Indigenous sovereignty and remind listeners of the distinctive and contrasting ontologies of music from Indigenous and Western perspectives. Robinson’s suspicion of the term “intercultural” is a useful reminder of the power dynamics present in such collaborations.



switch musical languages and codes (such as reading scores in different musical notations and adjusting playing methods) in different circumstances, but there is not necessarily a re-identification experience while these musicians incorporate new musical resources. Intercultural musicianship is relational and reciprocal, and as I will explain below, it is not always a celebration of diversity but is influenced by wider circumstances, especially those born out of political and economic necessity.

Since the Chinese musicians in this study have taken different musical paths in Canada and the United States, depending on region, city, and size of the local Chinese community among other factors, Slobin's view of individual musicians creating distinct fusions within the diasporic interculture is particularly apt. In fact, long before immigrating to Canada and the United States, my consultants had already formed diverse musical identities and demonstrated considerable competence in what I call *intercultural musicianship*, formed from the amalgamation of Chinese and Western values that characterized Chinese music education in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century and further developed through subsequent collaborations with musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds in North America. Musicianship is a set of competencies that a musician develops through various musical experiences; it includes technical skills, historical knowledge, specialized vocabulary, and artistic sensitivities. Every musician practices musicianship, but well-developed musicianship is not equal to simply achieving a certain level of musical skill. Musicianship is also a mental process that transfers technical display into a powerful expression of one's ideas and emotions, a condition of being "free within the notations" (Bassin 1994, 31). Their Westernized-yet-Chinese music education offered my Chinese consultants a foundation for intercultural musicianship, which those musicians continue to develop through relationship building and reciprocity in collaborations with non-Chinese musicians in North America.

As I discuss below, intercultural musicianship can be developed, experienced, and presented in various formats and patterns, both those received through early intercultural music education and those actively developed through intercultural music projects. I argue that intercultural music education and culturally diverse social networks are decisive factors in forming and developing intercultural musicianship. In this section, I first analyze intercultural music education and social networks. I then give a summary of intercultural musicianship and how it functions in my consultants' intercultural musical lives in the West.

### **3.1.1 Intercultural Music Education**

Most of the immigrant Chinese instrumentalists in this study received their formative music education in China. The oldest of my consultants were educated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the youngest received their training in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the 1960s, when music education was limited to repertoire deemed “politically correct” by the ruling communist party, to the early 2000s, when music became a globalized field, each generation of those Chinese instrumentalists received a slightly different style of musical training in China. During the Cultural Revolution, schools were closed, and music education took place primarily in local troupes working in the service of political propaganda. At that time, music was tied to politics and only repertoire approved by the government could be performed in public (Liang 1996). Zhongcai Yang, my oldest consultant, started to learn the erhu in 1965 when he was eight years old. His father chose music as a career path for him and hoped that he could find peace in those turbulent times. Yang said, “there were many fights during the Cultural Revolution, and my father didn’t want to see me fighting [on the street with other boys]”

(Zhongcai Yang, personal interview, Jul. 3, 2019).<sup>5</sup> The first erhu composition that Yang learned was *Making Up One's Mind* (下定决心), a political song with lyrics derived from Chairman Mao's talks.

The Chinese college system was restored in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution ended, and students could finally receive a school education and attend universities. More than 17,000 people registered for the entrance exam of the Central Conservatory of Music in that year (Zhang 2009). Many music students, however, were studying music mainly to avoid the Down to the Countryside Movement (下乡运动), a government policy that arbitrarily sent privileged urban youth to rural areas to learn from the workers and farmers. Both Geling Jiang and Yangqin Zhao, who started to learn Chinese instruments after the Cultural Revolution, stated that learning music and performing in the local propaganda troupes allowed them to avoid being sent to a farm or doing heavy labor. In the following decades, especially after 1990, the trend of sending children to learn music has been growing among Chinese middle-class families (Yoshihara 2007). The music education system in China has gradually modernized and music has developed in the direction of being a professional field rather than a political tool. My younger consultants, such as Feifei Yang, Nicole Ge Li, and Yuxin Mei, learned Chinese instruments at a young age in the 1990s with the goal of becoming professional musicians.

Through all these different political and social circumstances, there was one common feature of the education received by these Chinese musicians of different generations: the ideal of Westernized and modernized music. As young music students, most of them took it for granted that they were learning Chinese instrumental music of great historical depth. But, as discussed in chapter 2, the instruments they learned to play are intercultural/hybrid inventions that resulted

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<sup>5</sup> 文化大革命打架的就挺多的，我爸爸不愿意看我打架。

from the national modernization movements. Although some of the traditional characteristics have been preserved, such as basic instrument construction and some playing methods, Western musical elements are dominant in contemporary Chinese instrumental music in terms of compositional structure, virtuosic playing techniques, and aesthetics. For students learning Chinese instruments in conservatories, in addition to receiving Westernized instrumental training, they must learn Western music theory, piano, composition, or other forms of Western musical knowledge. For example, I took piano lessons when I studied the zheng as a child (see chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the impact this had on my developing musicianship). Piano playing, Western harmony, and composition were required courses at Hunan Normal University where I did my undergraduate studies (2009-2013). On the one hand, I always had a consciousness about the traditional features of the zheng that I was learning, including the timbre, pentatonic scale, and tonal inflections. On the other hand, I was also unconsciously influenced by Western classical music aesthetics and diligently practiced the zheng to achieve piano-like technical skills (e.g., fast fingering techniques). Indeed, Chinese and Western music are distinctly divided as two fields in conservatories and university music departments, even though the former has been significantly influenced by the latter.

Their long-term immersion in Western-dominated music education has influenced Chinese students' musical appreciation and ways of approaching Chinese instruments. For instance, Western composition methods, such as harmony and counterpoint, on Chinese instruments sound natural to Chinese ears while many Chinese traditional elements, such as tonal inflections and micro nuances in pitches and timbres, are generally downplayed or ignored. Chinese music students must navigate between at least two different cultures throughout their music educations, which, I argue, provides a starting point for developing foundational intercultural musicianship. Such a foundation of course varies from one person to another

depending on the specific circumstances of their training (e.g., during, or after the Cultural Revolution) and this context contributes to their distinct personal experiences.

It should be noted that although their formative music education launched an intercultural musical journey, this is not how it was perceived by most Chinese musicians in my study for whom it was the only available path. Because of the standardized music system, Chinese music students don't have much choice in terms of instrument-type (traditional or modernized), repertoire (folk skeletal pieces or systematic score books), and musical expression (self or community-oriented entertainment or virtuosic concert performance). Even though their training is indeed an intercultural learning experience, they do not necessarily realize or choose it. Only when they become confident in playing their Chinese instruments and have more interactions with non-Chinese cultures, can they start to actively incorporate other non-Chinese musical elements in their playing based on their own choices. Mei Han, Qiuxia He, and Zhimin Yu did not pursue intercultural music projects—i.e., projects with musicians or musics that they acknowledged as being outside the purview of their experience—until coming to North America, which is typical of the musicians in my study. A few of my consultants, however, already engaged in active intercultural experiments before emigrating. For instance, the erhu player Xiaodong Wei was a member of an all-female rock band playing Western music in Beijing before she came to the U.S in 2005. Consciously or not, the intercultural musical experiences those Chinese instrumentalists had in China provided the background for their evolving intercultural musicianship in the diaspora.

In Canada, while multiculturalism celebrates cultural differences, it also *expects* people of color as well as White ethnics to remain attached to their ethnocultural heritage (Attariwala 2013, 12). Under the influence of official multicultural policy, ethnicized musicians become more aware of their musical heritage in the context of a pluralistic society. Some of my consultants

realized their hybrid musical background after coming to Canada and started to trace the history of their Chinese instrumental traditions to better present Chinese music in the West. For example, having lived in Canada (and later in the United States) since 1996, Mei Han describes her musical experience as “the more I move forward, the more I look back” (Han, personal interview, Feb. 2019).<sup>6</sup> Her current encounters with Western composers and musicians have made Han more appreciative of Chinese musical traditions. She has discovered connections between Chinese and Western musical principles and formed her own ways of interpreting and developing Chinese music through her intercultural projects. For instance, in the collaboration between her Chinese ensemble Red Chamber and the Jaybirds, a bluegrass band led by Vancouver-based mandolinist John Reischman, Han found similar improvisational principles in bluegrass and traditional Chinese music: the immediacy and structured improvisation of bluegrass resemble the spontaneity and *jiahua* (加花, adding flowers [to the bone tune]) of traditional Chinese music (Han 2013, 243).

For most of the Chinese musicians in this study, a more self-conscious intercultural musical learning that seeks out difference happened after they came to North America. As mentioned above, successful intercultural music is often assessed based on mutual understanding and appreciation of each other’s musical backgrounds and traditions. When Chinese instrumentalists try to make other people understand Chinese musical practice, they are learning from their musical collaborators as well. Such negotiations boost Chinese musicians’ intercultural experience by expanding their learning spectrum from the China-West fusion to wider, richer, and more active intercultural reciprocity. For instance, Vancouver-based John Oliver (composer) and Mark McGregor (flute player) both stated that they have gained knowledge of different

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<sup>6</sup> 我越往前走，实际上我也是越往后走。所谓往后走，是我认为往离传统近的地方走。

approaches to tonal inflection through collaborating with Chinese instrumentalists. Some Chinese instrumentalists, such as Mei Han (zheng) and Jun Xie (yangqin), also indicated that in collaborating with musicians from other cultures they have learned various rhythmic patterns (e.g., 9/8 and 7/16) that are rarely used in Chinese music.

Founded in 2001, the Vancouver Inter-cultural Orchestra (VICO) has been an important arena for musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds to communicate with and learn from one another. The only ensemble of its kind in Canada, VICO brings together musicians and composers from many cultural and artistic communities in the Greater Vancouver area, including Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Iranian, Latin and South American, Vietnamese, African, North American and European. According to its website, VICO “make[s] connections, between performers and audiences of all ages and backgrounds, across the Lower Mainland, throughout Canada and the world...create[s] and perform[s] orchestral music that transcend[s] boundaries: cultural, social, political, geographical.”<sup>7</sup> In our interview, Moshe Denburg, the founder of VICO, indicated that “intercultural implies the cooperation of people of different cultures in learning about each other and learning how to communicate with each other. Intercultural music-making implies the bringing together of instruments and/or ideas of distinct cultures to create something new” (Moshe Denburg, personal interview, Jul. 22, 2019). A number of my consultants, such as Geling Jiang and Dailin Hsieh, indicated that they have expanded their musical knowledge through working with non-Chinese musicians in the VICO. The “something new” that Denburg describes not only results in new intercultural music and performances but also includes new playing skills and understanding that musicians continue to add to their distinct musicianship through such reciprocal exchanges.

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<sup>7</sup> More information about VICO is available at <https://vi-co.org/>

Some Chinese instrumentalists expand their knowledge by taking private lessons from non-Chinese musicians or by going to other countries or regions to study different musical traditions. For instance, the zheng player Haiqiong Deng has continued to learn the *sitar* (an Indian plucked long-necked lute) and other Indian musics from her *guru* Nalini Vinayak in Florida, with whom she released a CD combining Chinese zheng, Indian sitar, and *tabla* (a pair of small Indian drums) in 2011. Another example is Lan Tung, who has a list of different musical traditions, styles, and instruments that she has planned to learn, including Indian music, Spanish flamenco, and the *morin khuur*, a horsehead fiddle originally from Mongolia. Every few years, she picks one from the list and goes to its original country or region to study from local masters. Gaining a diverse range of musical skills has enhanced Chinese instrumentalists' musical competence in tailoring their music according to specific circumstances, which is a central attribute of intercultural musicianship.

It is important to note that Chinese instrumentalists' purposive intercultural musicking is driven by various forces, which include not only personal passion and professional development but also the complex political, economic, social, geographical, and cultural factors in the society. The VICO was founded at the height of the "world music" craze, when many Canadian composers were fascinated by non-Western music cultures and were also encouraged by the Canadian government's active support for multicultural activities.<sup>8</sup> Canada's multicultural policy is a double-edged sword, because it both celebrates difference and works to contain it (Waterman 2016). As Parmela Attariwala (2013) states, Canada's "emphasis on multiculturalism had

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<sup>8</sup> In Prime Minister Trudeau's 1971 declaration on multiculturalism, he states that "the government will promote *creative* encounters and interchange among all Canadian cultural groups in the interest of national unity." In Canada's 1971 Multiculturalism Policy, the Minister continues to "encourage and assist individuals, organizations and institutions to project the multicultural reality of Canada in their activities in Canada and abroad." <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-18.7/page-1.html>. (Italics in original)



changed the nature of music-making in Canada” (xvii), because arts councils’ priorities had altered from supporting (usually classical) musicians graduating from the country’s music faculties and conservatories to celebrating and representing difference. For Chinese musicians, participating in intercultural projects opened the door to support from Canada’s publicly funded arts councils. Lan Tung’s intercultural music education in different countries was funded by the Canada Council for the Arts. As Qiuxia He said, learning different musical traditions in Canada is “necessary [to] just survive as a musician” (He, personal interview, Jul. 5, 2019). To access more opportunities, Chinese musicians have continuously adjusted their projects and directions according to immediate social and political circumstances. Through both their involuntary intercultural music education in China and their active intercultural studies thereafter, diasporic Chinese instrumentalists’ intercultural musicianship is built on and developed through intertwined internal and external factors which vary over time and across circumstances.

### **3.1.2 Intercultural Social Networks**

As systems theorist Fritjof Capra (1996) maintains, “whenever we look at life, we look at networks” (82). Social networks have played an important role in enriching Chinese musicians’ diasporic lives and facilitating their music careers in North America, including improving their English, getting musical gigs, and forming friendships. On the one hand, Chinese musicians’ diasporic encounters result in creative collaborations in which musical ideas generate and proliferate. On the other hand, increasing musical collaborations help these musicians reach a wider audience. In the cyclical interactions between music and social networks, Chinese instrumentalists continue to build up musical competencies and develop their intercultural musicianship, as the following example illustrates.

Qiuxia He was a professional pipa teacher at Xi'an Academy of Music in 1989 when she came to Canada to perform at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival with a troupe representing Chinese folk music from Shanxi province. During the festival, He met Celso Machado, a Brazilian guitarist who was also a guest artist in Vancouver (and who later immigrated to Canada). Walking backstage, Machado saw He with the pipa and suddenly started to play to her. He was surprised and a music with Chinese melodies spontaneously flowed out of her fingertips. Hearing the melodies, Machado quickly and skillfully played some chords and harmonies in response. At that time, neither He nor Machado spoke fluent English, but their impromptu musical jam went well without any verbal communication. Even though He was trained on the modern pipa and, like all schooled Chinese musicians, understands the principles of Western music, she had not pursued intercultural projects in China. According to He, her fortuitous meeting with Machado opened the door to intercultural music-making. He was amazed by Machado's technical skills and ability to play with any kind of music that he encountered, and she realized that different languages and cultural backgrounds should not be obstacles for musical communication.

Because of the social chaos in China in 1989, culminating in the Tiananmen Square protests, He decided to stay in Canada after the festival. He's early musical activities in Canada were mainly with an amateur Chinese orchestra in Chinatown. Her early social networks allowed her to quickly adapt to the new environment and re-build a music career in Vancouver. Over the years, He has continued to improve her English communication skills and actively participate in more intercultural music. Now she is best known for her intercultural musical innovations and has formed several bands with other non-Chinese musicians, including Silk Road Music (pipa plus changeable instruments) and ASZA (a fusion music group with changeable musicians from

different musical backgrounds).<sup>9</sup> Touring with ASZA, He met André Thibault, a Quebecois guitarist, whom she eventually married. He's relationship with Thibault has further accelerated her intercultural music career in Canada, and she currently plays with Thibault as a duo. For He, meeting the right musical partner was a vital step into the intercultural music field, and building intercultural social networks significantly changed the direction of her musical development.

He's case shows the interconnections between social encounters and their musical routes in Chinese musicians' diasporic lives. A more comprehensive analysis of music's social mediations will be discussed in 3.3; what I want to emphasize here are the significant contributions of Chinese musicians' intercultural social encounters for expanding their musical competencies and developing intercultural musicianship in the West.

### **3.1.3 Defining Intercultural Musicianship**

In Slobin's concept of diasporic interculture, music-making is a complex component in musicians' intercultural experiences. Even with similar musical backgrounds, musicians may develop distinct types of intercultural musicianship because of their different musical encounters and personal circumstances. Intercultural musicianship is not all-encompassing; it does not mean mastering every musical genre that a musician has dealt with. It may be a negotiation between just two music cultures (e.g., Chinese and Western). As mentioned above, unlike "bi-" or "multi-" cultural encounters, intercultural musicianship engenders new musical competencies that emerge through reciprocal exchanges in which each of the cultural elements is influenced by the others with which it comes into contact.

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<sup>9</sup> Qiuxia He left ASZA in 2001, and ASZA kept active with other musician members until 2003.

There are several qualities shared by both the Chinese and several non-Chinese musicians in this study who have been actively developing their intercultural musicianship. Firstly, they come from intercultural music backgrounds and work to develop them further. Early intercultural music education, whether involuntary or sought out, lays the foundation for musicians to gradually find their own voices. As musicians become more experienced, they are often more proactive about their intercultural musicianship and develop ways of managing and employing it. To further develop their individual styles, many musicians also feel the need to continuously learn from different music cultures and skillfully incorporate them into their musical repertoires. For example, Lan Tung had Chinese-Western musical training in Taiwan, and after actively developing her intercultural musicianship in Canada for more than two decades, her current fusion style shows a strong influence of Indian raga and Spanish flamenco. Most Chinese instrumentalists start to build their intercultural musicianship at a young age because of the hybrid music system in China, but I also interviewed people who initiated their own intercultural music training without formal academic education. For instance, Randy Raine-Reusch, a Canadian multi-instrumentalist and Mei Han's partner, started to learn Chinese, Japanese, and other non-Western musics at a young age because of his poor eyesight which prevented him from reading staff notation that is central to Western classical music. In the late twentieth century, he traveled widely to work with master musicians in different countries, such as Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand.

Secondly, as discussed above, they are dedicated to building and maintaining intercultural social networks. The intercultural musicians in my study speak at least two different languages and have their own understandings of some tacit rules (e.g., social and stage behaviors) in different communities. But intercultural collaboration is not simply social. What should be emphasized here is that musicians create such networks primarily to build viable professional

careers. They tend to cultivate connections with musicians, composers, and musical organizations from other ethnic backgrounds in order to generate new musical ideas and projects. For example, Yangqin Zhao, chair and executive/artistic director of the San Francisco-based Chinese ensemble Melody of China, said that one big challenge her ensemble continues to face is seeking funding and sponsorship. To deal with the more competitive musical market in the last two decades, she has gradually shifted the ensemble's focus from playing traditional Chinese music to intercultural music projects (Yangqin Zhao, personal interview, May 30, 2019). These projects include the 2010 premiere of saxophone and erhu player Francis Wong's *Shanghai Story* for Chinese instruments and jazz quartet, a show with Indian tabla master Swapan Chaudhuri at the 2017 San Francisco International Arts Festival, and a concert with Persian music group Mohammed Nejad Music in 2021.

Thirdly, they possess openness, curiosity, and appreciation for different music cultures. Although musicians are more likely to encounter peer musicians or composers from diverse ethnic backgrounds in large cosmopolitan cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, and New York, those who live in small cities like Murfreesboro and St. John's can also enhance their intercultural musicianship through a comparatively small scale of intercultural encounters. The willingness to learn from and understand others is a key to developing active intercultural musicianship, and embracing cultural differences and continuously expanding their musical palette is significant for its long-term development. This quality shows in Lan Tung's intercultural music projects and her regular studies from music cultures around the world. In my own case, proactive learning is even more important for developing intercultural musicianship in St. John's where only a small group of non-Western musicians are active. As I discuss further in chapter 5, I have quickly adapted to take advantage of opportunities to play with folk rock and avant-garde musicians. Openness to new opportunities has also meant fostering curiosity and

appreciation in my collaborators, such as introducing a Newfoundland percussionist to Chinese percussion in my Light Wind Ensemble.

Fourthly, such musicians have developed an intercultural musical mindset. Their instruments and music are not simply bonded with just one nation/region or tradition/style. Rather, they have a more cosmopolitan outlook. Even though their instruments may be labeled as “Chinese” or another ethnic or national group, their music is commonly a hybrid of various cultural elements ranging from macro-musical arrangements to micro-note adjustments, as I discuss further below. An intercultural mindset means being comfortable with this hybrid musical identity. As Haiqiong Deng said, “I am what I am... I am no longer a so-called ‘Chinese musician,’ my music language is much more” (Deng, personal interview, Mar. 8, 2019).

To be sure, some Chinese instrumentalists (mostly elder musicians) have chosen not to pursue intercultural encounters after immigrating to the West. For example, since there is a large Chinese community in Vancouver and his English is limited, the erhu player Zhongcai Yang has mainly focused on Chinese music performances and teaching since moving there in 2001. Some musicians did not choose an intercultural music career because they do not want to risk being excluded by the ex-pat Chinese community or have their “authenticity” questioned. For instance, when I was in Vancouver in 2019, I witnessed an intense debate between elder musicians in the BC Chinese Orchestra (BCCO) and Chih-Sheng Chen, a young Chinese conductor, about some contemporary arrangements of traditional music. For these elder musicians, contemporary arrangements of traditional music are “anti-authentic,” that is, they are against the original features and expressions in the music. Many young musicians, however, consider it a natural and organic way of keeping traditions alive in the contemporary world. This argument goes back to the discussion about tradition and innovation in chapter 2. Despite their attempts to preserve the idea of cultural authenticity, their involuntary intercultural musicianship (gained through the

Chinese music education system) can suspend these musicians in a liminal state of being neither “purely” Chinese nor entirely Western. Their music may be critiqued by both the Chinese audience (for its contemporary features) and the Western audience (for not being “Chinese” enough). In contrast, based on the experience of the musicians I interviewed for this study, it appears that actively developed intercultural musicianship significantly boosts Chinese instrumentalists’ music careers and makes it easier for them to integrate into Western society.

My research demonstrates that Chinese instrumentalists have benefitted from their active intercultural musicianship in North America, in part because such musicians constantly incorporate new musical elements into their repertoires. Compared to those who stick to a single musical genre or style, they are more likely to develop innovative, hybrid musical ideas. Moreover, in a multicultural society, intercultural musicianship makes it easier for those musicians to find favorable musical partners and opportunities to collaborate, which directly influences their musical routes and careers. For instance, Mei Han (zheng) has developed diverse career pathways in North America as a performer, improviser, educator, bandleader, and music director in various Chinese and fusion musical groups and organizations. Even though some conservative concertgoers may reject music presented in intercultural forms, it is beneficial for musicians to reach diverse audiences from different communities in order to create viable careers. Compared to China and its more unitary ethnicity, there is a greater chance for those musicians to gain support in North America where people are generally more open to different cultural expressions.<sup>10</sup> As globalization accelerates, intercultural collaborations have been widely embraced and celebrated, offering more opportunities for musicians to expand their musical

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<sup>10</sup> Although there are fifty-six different ethnicities in China, the concept of a united *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族, the Chinese nation) has long been promoted by the Chinese government for building modern Chinese nationalism (Zhao 2000).

influence. In this study, Chinese musicians, such as Lan Tung and Mei Han, who perform around the world are those most actively developing their intercultural musicianship. On the contrary, those like Zhongcai Yang who maintain their Chinese musical practices are more likely to stay most active in their local Chinese community. In addition, actively developed intercultural musicianship often leads to a personal hybrid style. In other words, rather than following conventional musical pathways, these musicians often develop an individual style of playing their instrument that connects to their unique musical and life experiences. This evolving intercultural musicianship shapes their ever-changing musical identities, which they are able to express and present through their individualized musical styles.

### **3.2 Intercultural Music**

Since there is no codified set of rules for intercultural musical communication, it is a persistent task for Chinese musicians to negotiate with other musicians and composers to interpret repertoire and navigate performance contexts. It can be tough, because of people's distinct musical habits, aesthetics, and philosophies. But it can also be beneficial and pleasant when successful collaborations are achieved. This section discusses how Chinese musicians negotiate with non-Chinese collaborators in terms of the distinct characteristics of contemporary Chinese instrumental culture. Through analyzing a number of intercultural compositions, I will also explore how efficient and successful musical communications are achieved in music that is specifically composed or arranged for intercultural musical groups.



### 3.2.1 Idiomatic Features

In his widely cited paper, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music,” Will Straw (1991) advances the concept of music scene as a cultural space of circulation. In 2001 and 2004, Straw returned to the concept of scene, expanding and theorizing it as a “particular cluster of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them” (2004, 412). Straw contends that “the neophyte advances ‘horizontally’, moving from the margins of a scene towards its center” (413). Drawing on Straw’s theory, Benjamin Woo, Jamie Rennie, and Stuart R. Poyntz (2014) advocate “scene thinking” and argue that it “can map (always incompletely, to be sure) how social and cultural life are lived in space, in time and in relation with others whose participation as consociates in the scenes (Schutz 1967) makes them always already significant” (288-289). Thinking in terms of scenes is helpful for studying both Chinese and intercultural musical activities in North America.

For most Chinese instrumentalists in this study, their musical journey from close affiliation with the expatriate Chinese community on arrival in Canada or the United States to active, professional participation in intercultural music scenes can be described, paraphrasing Straw, as “from the margin towards the center.” Here, the margin is occupied by ethnic communities, and the center is dominated by multiculturalism. I am arguing that they are not simply moving from one scene to another; instead, they appear to be constantly negotiating between margin and center. On the one hand, they balance their training and the notions of musical authenticity in the Chinese community. On the other hand, they manage the expectations of non-Chinese collaborators and audiences. These expectations appear to be multiple: audiences want to hear exotic Chinese sounds, non-Chinese collaborators seek cohesive musical connections that match their expectations, and Chinese musicians want to explore an array of new

techniques and styles in their bid to become successful intercultural musicians. There are ongoing negotiations in Chinese musicians' intercultural music-making, in which one of the challenges is finding their own ways of managing the idiomatic features of their native music culture which manifests in terms of timbre, techniques, and styles.

- Timbre

In our interview, Yuan-Chen Li, a Taiwanese composer living in the United States, indicated that most Chinese instruments produce a kind of “grained sound,” which is different from the “clean and fine tone” of Western instruments. In Li’s opinion, such an “unfocused” sound is a unique feature of many Chinese instruments (Yuan-Chen Li, personal interview, May 30, 2019). Although many non-Chinese composers and audiences I talked to do not treat Chinese instruments as exotic in North America, most of them still admit that the different timbres of Chinese instruments play an important role in their interest and charm. The flutist Mark McGregor, who has been working with various Chinese musicians in Vancouver, said “I love the fact that they [Chinese instruments] are not Western instruments and that they have their own sound world... so if I hear a zheng or erhu, it still sounds to me like a different world and I think that's really exciting” (Mark McGregor, personal interview, May 30, 2019).

In Chinese conservatories, playing techniques (e.g., fast fingerings) are generally prioritized in instrumental training while timbral manipulation on the instrument is comparatively downplayed in the pursuit of high-level musical professionalism. From their audiences’ feedback in North America, many of my consultants have come to realize the significant attraction of Chinese instruments’ “non-Western” sounds and have responded accordingly. For example, although the erhu player Lan Tung’s musical repertoire goes far beyond classical playing, she observed the erhu is most appealing for its timbre among her listeners in the West. In response,

she has included timbral variations, such as wailing tone and creaking sound, as an important part of her erhu improvisations. As a zheng player who recently immigrated to Canada, Dailin Hsieh was surprised to find how Canadians appreciate her music from a different angle. “I was not that satisfied with my playing; why were they so excited?” Hsieh said, “Foreigners, they would say the sound is so beautiful, they have a different way of appreciating my music” (Dailin Hsieh, personal interview, Jun. 12, 2019).<sup>11</sup> Hsieh has learned to choose traditional and melodious music that highlights the distinctive timbres of the zheng when playing solos for non-Chinese audiences.

Some Chinese musicians have also explored the sonic variation found in the diverse musical traditions of multicultural Canada and the United States. For example, the zheng player Mei Han was inspired by cello playing and started to use a cello bow to improvise on the zheng. The bow creates a muddy and buzzing, sustained sound in contrast to the classic, gentle sound produced through plucking the zheng strings with finger picks. Vi-An Diep also experiments on the zheng by using koto picks.<sup>12</sup> In her opinion, koto picks give the zheng a more forceful and precise sound because of their bigger and wider shape, compared to zheng picks. Using koto picks to play the zheng makes her think differently and pours out more possibilities in the music (Vi-An Diep, personal interview, Jun. 14, 2019). Adding sonic changes through learning from non-Chinese musical resources, Chinese musicians not only innovatively expand their musical vocabularies but also become strategically mobile within scenes (playing to the exotic desires of Western listeners and participating in extended techniques across music cultures).

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<sup>11</sup> 我没觉得我弹的怎么样啊，为什么他们就是好像很开心... 外国人，他们就会说声音好美啊什么的，他们有不同的欣赏的方式。

<sup>12</sup> Koto is a Japanese zither derived from the Chinese zheng. Although the koto shares a similar shape, it has fewer strings and wider string gaps. Both koto and zheng players wear finger picks to pluck the strings; however, koto picks have a square design while zheng picks are smaller with a tear-drop shape.

- Techniques

Nuanced ornamentations and sliding pitch effects are two of the most distinctive features of Chinese music. Some of my consultants have found that traditional playing techniques are more suitable for incarnating the unique features of Chinese instruments that non-Chinese audiences enjoy and expect to hear. In many zheng performances, for example, pentatonic melodies and tonal inflections are more favored by local audiences in North America than piano-like virtuosic playing. When talking about her experience with Western composers and musicians, Mei Han stated,

西方的作曲家给我写作品，我都问他们是什么... 真的什么东西吸引你想要给箏写作品呢，基本没有例外，一个回答：是因为它的揉音颤滑的东西。Sliding and tonal inflection, 这个对他们来讲是最吸引的，那这个不就是我小时候启蒙的时候学的吗？右手弹琴，左手按滑。那么这些东西现在在中国的所谓现代箏乐里头是很缺乏的一个东西，是通过了我跟西方的作曲家和演奏家接触后，我意识到了这一点。

When western composers wrote music for me, I always asked them “what attracts you and makes you want to write a zheng composition?” The answer was always the same: because of its sliding and tonal inflection. For them, this is the most attractive part. Isn’t it the thing that I learned when I was young and a beginner? Right hand plays and left hand bends. However, it is a scarce thing in so-called “contemporary zheng music” in China. I only realized it when I worked with Western composers and musicians. (Mei Han, personal interview, Feb. 18, 2019)

Western composers' and musicians' attitudes towards the zheng have significantly influenced Han's musical pathways and choices in North America. In contrast to the career she had in China between 1975 and 1990 as a zheng player in the Beijing Comrades Song and Dance Troupe (北京战友歌舞团), which is affiliated with the People's Liberation Army, for the past twenty years Han has dedicated herself to highlighting the traditional zheng features in a multitude of musical genres including symphonic, chamber music, improvisation, and electronic music. In Han's

musical performances, especially her improvisations, one can hear the emphasis on Chinese musical features.<sup>13</sup> For example, instead of extensively using her left hand to play harmonies as is normal in contemporary zheng music in China, Han uses her left hand to bend the strings and make subtle tonal inflections, a typical method in traditional zheng playing.

Some Chinese instrumentalists in this study have also employed their Chinese traditional playing techniques on non-Chinese instruments. For example, Zhusong Du was a visiting Chinese multi-instrumentalist at the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) in Murfreesboro from 2017 to 2019. When I was doing my fieldwork there, we were preparing a concert together and I was amazed by his performance of the famous qin composition *Jiukuang* (酒狂, Drunken Ecstasy) on the guitar.<sup>14</sup> In addition to transferring the melodies from the qin to the guitar, he also adopted some playing techniques of the qin to make a special flavor on the guitar. For example, he slid his left hand on the guitar fingerboard to mimic the glissando of the qin. Slide guitar is not new, of course, and it is a technique that has been widely used in blues-style guitar playing in particular. However, Du's sliding technique was different from the normal slide guitar which requires an object to be held against the strings to create glissando effects. He slid his bare fingers along the strings to mimic the deep and elastic tonal inflections that the qin produces, which also darkened the timbre of the guitar. Du's fusion experiments made his music appreciated by a wider audience, and he was often invited to play at local friends' house parties. When Du's English was not good enough to express himself in the United States, his music did

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss Mei Han's career in more detail in chapter 4. Her music can be found at <https://www.mei-han.com/mei-han.html>.

<sup>14</sup> According to the legend, *Jiukuang* was composed by Ruan Ji (阮籍, 210-263) during the Wei-Jin Period (魏晋时期, 220-420). Because of oral transmission and skeletal score without detailed rhythmic patterns, there are many versions of musical notations for *Jiukuang*. The one reconstituted by Yao Bingyan (姚丙炎, 1920-1983) has been one of the most popular notations used by Chinese qin players (Chen 1985, 75).

the job. In my view, Du's innovative playing was not only a response to his multicultural experience in Western society but also a negotiation between margin and mainstream, which shows Du's mobility within scenes.

Learning from other musicians is another way for Chinese instrumentalists to expand their techniques. As a pipa player who has lived in Canada for more than 30 years, Qiuxia He believes that learning from non-Chinese instrumentalists is both a natural part of her diasporic life and an integral form of development. She is hired for her artistry on the pipa, a traditional Chinese instrument, but her constant experiences of encountering and interacting with diverse cultures through music festivals, concerts, and other performance occasions has led her along an intercultural pathway. Meeting musicians from different countries and witnessing their ways of playing non-Chinese instruments, He has gradually adopted non-Chinese playing techniques and styles, such as Brazilian and Irish musical features, to enrich her own music. But personal preference is not the only driver of interculturalism. He notes that she must ceaselessly expand her musical repertoire in order to get musical employment. For He, adding non-Chinese musical materials is an efficient way to satisfy the imperative of difference within unity implied by Canada's official policy of multiculturalism. She also expressed this as an ever-growing demand. She said, "by having only my Chinese repertoire, it's no longer relevant in this land because I need to keep growing. I need to keep adding my new experience[s] in it" (Qiuxia He, personal interview, Jul. 5, 2019).

Many Chinese instrumentalists I interviewed for this project had similar experiences to He's. In the diaspora, they have not only exploited Chinese traditional techniques but also become proficient in a wide range of intercultural styles. Both strategies are ways of negotiating competing demands within/across music scenes in North America, and they also correspond with

the multicultural circumstances in North America where both ethnic differences and national unity are highlighted.

- Styles

Musical style is another concern that Chinese instrumentalists must deal with when playing in a multicultural setting. Should a Chinese flavor be maintained? Is it better to tune the pentatonic instrument diatonically? How can one manage the unstable pitches on Chinese instruments that go out of tune easily in relation to the deliberate aesthetic of pitch bending? These questions are real and constant for Chinese instrumentalists whenever they take part in intercultural collaborations.

In North America, where cultural differences are generally admired and celebrated, emphasizing Chinese musical and cultural styles can potentially help Chinese instrumentalists stand out in the musical market. Inspired by the traditional Chinese “plucked string” repertoire, four Vancouver-based virtuosic Chinese instrumentalists with international careers—Mei Han (zheng), Guilian Liu (pipa), Zhimin Yu (ruan), and Geling Jiang (sanxian)—formed Red Chamber, a Chinese plucked string ensemble, in 2005.<sup>15</sup> As one of the leading Chinese ensembles in North America, Red Chamber has experimented extensively with combining the Chinese pentatonic repertoire and non-Chinese musical genres, including bluegrass, Balkan music, and jazz.<sup>16</sup> Within the scope of intercultural innovation, Red Chamber also often highlights traditional features in their performances, such as ancient melodies and Chinese-style outfits. This dynamic

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<sup>15</sup> As discussed in chapter 4, Han subsequently moved to the United States but maintains her leadership of Red Chamber. The Red Chamber Cultural Society was also registered and incorporated in 2015. <https://www.mei-han.com/RCCS.shtml>.

<sup>16</sup> Videos of Red Chamber’s intercultural performances can be viewed at its YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL931C4825D8E3DAEC>

combination of tradition and innovation has made Red Chamber well received in both Europe's concert halls and Asia's international festivals.

However, Chinese musical styles can also challenge both Chinese and non-Chinese musicians and composers in terms of musical design and communication. For example, it often causes problems when a composer writes music for the zheng with a Western diatonic mindset. Although the zheng can be used for diatonic music, it can be hard for musicians to combine certain notes in chords or play them in sequence. Typically, the zheng has four octaves of pentatonic scales, in which tones 4 (fa, or F) and 7 (si, or B) are not included but can be created by pressing strings 3 (mi, or E) and 6 (la, or A) respectively.

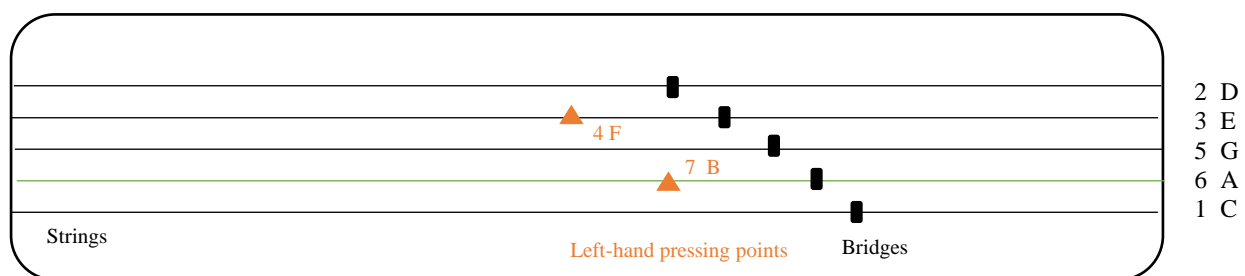


Figure 3.1 One pentatonic octave in C major on the zheng

As shown in Figure 3.1, the approximate left-hand pressing points (normally around 15cm left of the bridge) for making 4 and 7 are not close to each other, and they require different pressing pressures and depths for precise pitches. Therefore, when these two notes combine in one single chord or follow each other (which is common in some new compositions), it can be very challenging, if not impossible, for players to press two strings precisely together or successively. To solve the pressing twists, sometimes composers or zheng players will tune the original pentatonic scale into a diatonic one that includes 4 and/or 7. But this brings new challenges. Even a seasoned player might need to practice for months to overcome engrained playing habits and get physically used to the new scale.



For the multi-instrumentalist Geling Jiang, one of her most unforgettable musical experiences was the first time she played an intercultural zheng composition with the Orchid Ensemble, an instrumental trio made up of two Chinese instruments (the erhu and the zheng) and culturally diverse percussion. In 2006, they played a musical composition called *Parting at Yang Kuan* (2004) by Taiwanese Canadian composer Hope Lee, which set an irregular musical scale for the zheng. To get used to the new scale, Jiang had to stick pieces of tape next to the strings showing the altered notes. In addition, since she had only read numbered notation in her previous zheng training, she transcribed the composition, which was in staff notation, to numbered notation. In the end, she memorized the whole 13-page score to avoid checking notes during the performance (Geling Jiang, personal interview, Jul. 17, 2019). Even though the final concert was successful, Jiang felt exhausted by having to adjust her musical habits and playing style to meet the requirements of that composition.

Jiang is definitely not the only Chinese musician who has had challenges working with non-Chinese composers and musicians, and my research shows that some Chinese musicians, especially elder immigrants at an early stage of immigration, tend to sacrifice their musical preferences and comfort when playing music written by non-Chinese composers. Such Chinese musicians are conscious of their immigrant status and are anxious to carefully explore the sociocultural rules in the West. They will therefore go to great lengths to meet the requirements in the score. In chapter 5, I describe my own experience of negotiating with young Western composers about writing new music for the zheng during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021.

After living in North America for a while, some experienced Chinese instrumentalists have learned to be selective about accepting musical opportunities. For example, Mei Han indicated that when she was a new immigrant in Canada, she accepted any compositions written for her, which sometimes resulted in significant pressure and self-doubt. In our interview, she

painfully recalled some of her early musical experiences, “every piece requires re-tuning the strings, then you can’t recognize [your instrument] at all, and finger positions are also not the same. The A string is changed to G, and the next one should be F sharp, but now it is E; all the relationships are not right anymore.”<sup>17</sup> For those compositions that were not suitable for playing on the zheng, Han had to spend several months practicing to be smooth enough to perform in front of audiences. Looking back at those struggles, Han realized her responsibility to say “no, this is not playable” to those composers and musicians who are not familiar with her instrument and its musical features. According to Han, the main reason she did not do that as a new immigrant was “a lack of cultural confidence and faith in my instrument.” Paradoxically, Han has come to better understand herself and her music more through those misunderstandings received from non-Chinese collaborators. “Why do [some composers] make me sound like a third-rate pianist or harpist, not a first-rate zheng player?” Han wonders. In her opinion, it is good to push boundaries, but the essence and the “DNA”—the yun in zheng music as discussed in chapter 2—should not be ignored or twisted in contemporary compositions. Now, Han only selectively accepts premiere invitations and intercultural collaborations that she considers suitable for her instrument (Han, personal interview, Jan. 16, 2019).

In recent years, more composers in the West have realized the importance of learning details about music culture and style before writing a note for any non-Western instrument. As a seasoned composer who has collaborated with Chinese musicians for decades, John Oliver emphasized the initiative of performers in his new compositions:

You don't want to get too detailed because the master of the instrument is not the composer unless they happen to be a virtuoso of that instrument, in which case, yes. But

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<sup>17</sup> 每个作品都得重新对弦，然后根本一对完之后全部不认识了。手把位也不对了。本来这个弦应该是 A，现在成了 G。下一根弦本来应该是 F sharp，现在成了 E，这个关系整个也不对了。

most of the time, most composers, they are not masters of all those instruments. So, they have to be a little bit humble and write the score so that they *let the musician discover and play in a very expressive way*. If they try to write it in too much detail, then the musician feels like, “Oh, I can't express myself. I have to express exactly what the composer wants. And he wants me to not ornament here and to ornament here.” And then they become very stiff and the music stops. It doesn't breathe anymore. It doesn't feel like it's full of life. (John Oliver, personal interview, Jun. 12, 2019)

Similarly, Mark Armanini, another composer active in the Chinese music community in Vancouver, indicates that there are always back and forth communications between him and musicians to make compositions more playable and enjoyable to perform. Many of my consultants indicated their gratitude and appreciation for those non-Chinese composers' willingness to learn and communicate. In our interview, Geling Jiang mentioned how she was impressed by the effort that Moshe Denburg, the composer and founder of the VICO, put into learning the zheng when he wrote a music for her. “He found all these special overtones and he told you which distance on which string [to press],” she said, “I really admire the effort he made” (Jiang, personal interview, Jul. 17, 2019).<sup>18</sup>

Generally, Chinese musicians start to take control of their musical style when they become more seasoned and experienced in working with non-Chinese musicians and composers. Only when collaborations are made with mutual respect and communication, can successful intercultural music-making be achieved, and Chinese musicians' voices be expressed and heard. Such benign and reciprocal musical relationships play an important role in helping Chinese musicians navigate within and across music scenes in North America.

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<sup>18</sup> 特别的泛音...他都给你找出来，他会跟你说第几个弦的那个距离。我这点很佩服他。

- Aesthetics and Philosophies

Musical differences, such as sonic textures, playing techniques, and musical scales, are comparably easy to manage in most situations, but it is often hard for musicians to negotiate intangible aesthetics and philosophies during intercultural communications where misunderstandings easily arise. For many Chinese musicians, such cultural differences are one of the biggest challenges of their musical collaborations in the West.

In chapter 2, I discussed the importance of the *yun* (charm) in Chinese traditional music appreciation. Being rooted in Taoism, the *yun* is generally tied to *qi* (气, breath) in traditional Chinese instrumental music. Daoist philosopher Laozi (Lao-Tzu) in his renowned *Daode Jing* (道德经) states about the *qi*, “Dao begets One, One begets Two, Two begets Three, Three begets all things. All things carry the yin and embrace the yang. By breathing together, they live in harmony.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the One is nothingness, the Two is yin and yang (or female and male), the Three is Heaven, Earth, and Human (or yin, yang, and *qi*).<sup>20</sup> The *qi* is related to life and therefore musicians’ subjective vitality in playing, and the *yun* is implicated in the harmonious sounds produced by music. When appreciating art, the criteria of *qi* and *yun* are often combined. For instance, *Qiyun Shengdong* (气韵生动, vitality of *qi* and *yun*) is an idiom commonly used to describe good art in Chinese culture, including painting, music, and poetry. There are different approaches to pitch and metered rhythm in Western (especially classical) music compared to Chinese traditional music. If strictly judged by Western standards, many Chinese folk music performances might be perceived as out of tune and lacking a metrical rhythmic structure.

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<sup>19</sup> 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。万物负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和。

<sup>20</sup> Online resource in Chinese: <https://www.daodejing.org/> English resource: <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Daoists/daodejing.html>

However, such unstable pitch variations and rhythmic flexibility are valued in traditional Chinese music. Like different dialects in China, delicate fluctuations in pitch and rhythmic variations characterize regional music. In addition, the personalities of the musicians are also distinct in different performances. Western music notation is by no means adequate for inscribing tonal inflections, and it can be hard for a Western classical musician to understand or accept those Chinese musical aesthetics and philosophies.

In our interview, the zheng player Dailin Hsieh talked about the aesthetic conflicts she experienced when playing a contemporary concerto with a Western pianist.

还是觉得 "语法" 不太一样... 西乐跟中乐的人他长期的, 就是浸泡在两种完全不同的思想里面。所以你在合作的时候会感觉很冲击, 就是小到那种细节, 你会觉得说, 这个乐句上面的处理还有合作的那种方式都不一样唉, 就是西乐跟中乐的人... 弹临安遗憾和云裳诉的时候, 然后我觉得那个云裳诉怎么会这样。就是他告诉我说, 就是他基本都是数着那个拍子。他会没有办法理解我的弹琴速度... 你会觉得他弹起来就是理解不了我的音乐... 他给我的那个氛围就是我觉得是一个管弦乐团就演那个间奏, 一点都不像是那种中乐的气氛。

The "grammars" are different... Because Western and Chinese players are immersed in different aesthetics and ideologies, you can feel conflicts in detail during the collaboration. You might find that Western and Chinese players treat one phrase in the music so differently... When I played the *Tune of Rainbow Cloud* [with a Western pianist], I was confused about how it could be played like that.<sup>21</sup> He [the pianist] basically counted and followed the beats, and he couldn't understand my playing speed... You might say he just couldn't understand my music... I think the atmosphere he gave to me was like a musical interlude in a Western orchestra performance, lacking the feeling in Chinese music. (Dailin Hsieh, personal interview, June. 12, 2019)

For Hsieh, her sense of affect and expressivity while playing were prioritized over the precise tempos written in the score. On the contrary, the Western pianist rigidly followed the score. As a

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<sup>21</sup> *Tune of Rainbow Cloud* is a zheng concerto written by Chinese composer Zhou Yuguo (周煜国) in 2002. Inspired by the literary masterpiece *Chang Hen Ge* (长恨歌, Song of Everlasting Regret) by Bai Juyi (白居易, 772-864), this composition describes the well-known love story between Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (685-762) and his favorite concubine Yang Guifei (719-756) (Zhang 2011).

result, Hsieh felt “he couldn’t understand my music.” Many of my consultants mentioned similar challenges. For example, they use words like “different languages” (语言不同) and “contrasting vocabularies” (语汇不通) to describe the divergent musical thinking they encountered from non-Chinese musicians and composers.

Interestingly, to deal with these conflicts, the pipa master Qiuxia He compared music cultures to different types of fruit by adopting the familiar Western “apples and oranges” metaphor. She advocated mutual learning in intercultural music-making:

Many times, as new players who came to a new culture, we had the same problem. When we came to North America, we didn’t play jazz...Because [we thought] they were not good. Because we had a preconceived idea of musical value. But what is the good? The point is when you are judging an orange to be good, it is different from judging an apple. Apple has a different quality of goodness. So, which one do you use? If you use sweetness to judge an orange, then if the orange is sour, it will be very distasteful. But if an orange loses its sour taste, it is not orange anymore. So, we need to clarify our minds for learning anything foreign or outside of our experience. We need to sit down to learn their way, look at their view, look at their value, and then you can compare. (He, personal interview, Jul. 5, 2019)

As He mentioned, some new immigrant Chinese musicians reject jazz and other unfamiliar genres because of their preconceptions of what music should sound like. Not only Westerners may have stereotypes of Chinese music, but Chinese musicians can also have such preconceptions about unfamiliar musical practices. To embrace other music cultures means to be open to musical aesthetics and philosophies that are different from or even conflict with one’s own. From this perspective, intercultural music-making is complex, continuous, and requires multifaceted negotiations among people with different cultural backgrounds, musical values, and personal tastes. Therefore, mutual respect and understanding, willingness to learn, and appropriate communication according to each other’s musical languages are vital to achieving

successful intercultural collaboration. Through breaking stereotypes and facilitating cross-cultural understanding, Chinese instrumentalists weave intricate nets across scenes in North America.

### **3.2.2 Styles of Intercultural Music-Making**

Musicians and composers have various approaches to making intercultural music, and there is no overarching set of principles that govern these collaborations. We can, however, identify some methods and styles that are commonly used in intercultural music-making. In his 2009 book *Playing Across a Divide: Israeli-Palestinian Musical Encounters*, Benjamin Brinner discusses two related concepts: fusion of styles and styles of fusion. The idea of a fusion of styles is often applied to musicians and their music for public consumption and commercial purposes, which Brinner points out is problematic because of its discursive binaries, such as simplistic definitions of unitary Eastern and Western styles. Brinner proposes three dimensions of comparison—contrast, dominance, and blend—to describe important aspects of styles of fusion (217). Although Brinner’s division focuses mainly on fusions of stylistically varied musical resources, his formulation is helpful for examining intercultural instrumental combinations. Drawing on Brinner’s terms contrast, dominance, and blend in extended ways, in this section, I examine several compositions that were written for and performed by Chinese and non-Chinese instrumentalists in Vancouver from 2007 to 2019.

- **Contrast**

Instead of adjusting to each other’s musical styles to achieve a harmonious combination, sometimes composers and musicians choose to highlight the differences among styles to feature contrasting materials. In 2019, I participated in the Vancouver Inter-Cultural Orchestra (VICO)

Summer Academy where I gave a workshop and played a number of intercultural compositions with musicians from different countries. One of my favorite pieces was *Camel Hop at the Caravanserai – remix 2* by Moshe Denburg. The remix versions (1 and 2) are the composer's arrangements of his original composition (2007) with a more appropriate orchestral configuration for VICO concerts. The term caravanserai refers to inns or rest areas along the Silk Road where caravans of merchants and their camels could stop for refreshment, and Denburg uses this word as a metaphor for a meeting place where music cultures from the world over celebrate together.

Instrumentation includes flute, dizi, accordion, clarinet, sheng, santur, zheng, harp, violin, erhu, zhonghu, and cello, covering instruments from Europe, Iran, and China. In addition to arranging improvisational parts where musicians can make musical variations according to their own instrumental styles, Denburg has special techniques for highlighting the contrasts between instruments.



Moshe Denburg

Figure 3.2 Opening of *Camel Hop at the Caravanserai* – remix 2 (Moshe Denburg 2007)

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Denburg groups instruments according to their sonic similarities rather than their origins—plucked strings, winds, and bowed strings—and contrasts those groups, which indicates the “world cultures together” aspect in his conception of the composition. In addition to the pre-composed elements, Denburg also includes improvisations in the middle of this music, which add more dramatic stylistic contrasts through the musicians’ individual expressions. The combination of instrumental contrasts and orchestral cohesion makes *Camel Hop at the Caravanserai* an innovative intercultural composition that depicts the multiculturalism ideology that VICO has promoted.

- Dominance

When speaking of dominance in musical collaborations, people often think about concertos in which one or more soloists are accompanied by other instruments. In fact, dominance can occur in any kind of musical collaboration, and in many situations, alternations between dominant (solo) and supportive (accompanying) positions among musicians make playing and listening more enjoyable for both musicians and listeners. My fieldwork revealed that one common method musicians use for intercultural musical communication is to “jam” on a famous piece from each musical tradition represented by the collaborators. It not only enhances musicians’ confidence in playing with the group but is also a great way for musicians to become familiar with each other’s styles. In many cases, group repertoires are chosen from the music generated by those musical exchanges.

When Red Chamber collaborated with the Indian musical group Akasha at the Rainforest World Music Festival in Malaysian Borneo in 2009, they created a new arrangement of the famous Chinese folk tune *Yaozu Wuqu* (瑶族舞曲, Dance of the Yao People). Except for the

improvisational parts, the dominance of Chinese instruments, especially the zheng and the pipa, is noticeable during the performance.<sup>22</sup> There are many versions of this composition in China, including symphonic, rock, instrumental ensemble, folk, and popular songs. When watching the collaboration between Red Chamber and Akasha, I heard many elements of the solo zheng version. The leading role of the zheng is apparent, especially in the allegretto parts, compared with other plucked Chinese instruments. During the performance, audience members cheer several times when the leading instrumentalist skillfully takes over the music and shows their virtuosic playing techniques, a technique by which dominance is asserted. The appropriate arrangements of musical dominance and subordination in the collaboration between Red Chamber and Akasha effectively propel the musicians' interactions and enliven the performance atmosphere.

During the 2019 VICO Summer Academy, faculty and students played together in a final concert. The last composition in the program was *Han Ya Xi Shui* (寒鸦戏水, Winter Ducks Frolicking in the Water), a traditional Chinese music arranged by Mark Armanini and Qiuxia He in 2008. The arrangement calls for a wide range of instruments, including European flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, and double bass, Iranian santur, Arabic oud, Japanese sho (or sheng or oboe), Chinese zheng (or pipa), Chinese erhu, triangle, and cymbals. Since it was an arrangement of the original Chinese music, the zheng played a leading role in the musical progression of the composition, which is in the form of a concerto where the zheng musician (me in this case) played the solo and the intercultural orchestra accompanied.

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<sup>22</sup> The performance can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKK5irgTfYI>

Figure 3.4 Opening of *Han Ya Xi Shui*, arranged by Mark Armanini and Qiuxia He

Armanini and He arranged this music based on the pipa version that He used to play, which is different from the zheng version that I learned. Due to limited time, we did not rehearse enough before the concert and both Armanini and the conductor asked me to play my own version. I hate to say this, but as can almost be predicted, I lost the orchestra (or the reverse) for a while during the performance. In that chunk of “split time,” I heard the orchestra accompaniment trail away and sensed the nervousness of the conductor who stood on my left. As the soloist, I had no choice but to keep playing. At the end of the adagio where there was an important cue for the whole orchestra to stop and prepare for the allegretto, we finally reunited and began the fast and passionate rhythm together. I believe it was a “sweating moment” for all of the players on stage, but to my surprise, many audience members (mostly Westerners) did not notice the error and thought it was just arranged for my solo playing. Apparently, the mistake that happened in

that performance was covered up by my solo since the zheng was the dominant instrument. I offer this example here (and elaborate on it in chapter 5) because it shows that the dominance effect in some circumstances can ease the tension when mistakes happen during performance.

- Blend

Blending is an ideal effect that many musicians pursue in intercultural musicking. In contrast to highlighting differences, different instrumental timbres are blended to create a new, aggregate sonic effect. To achieve this, instruments sharing similar sonic and musical features are often combined. For instance, the Chinese zheng, Iranian santur, and Western harp are commonly grouped because they are string instruments and share a similar mellow timbre.

Established in Vancouver in 2015, the Sound of Dragon Ensemble has become an influential intercultural ensemble in Canada. As their website announces, “the Sound of Dragon Ensemble’s repertoire represents original Canadian intercultural art music and breaks down genre boundaries, crossing over Chinese traditions, contemporary music, world fusion, and improvisation.”<sup>23</sup> The instrumental setup of the Sound of Dragon Ensemble is delicately arranged as sets of paired Chinese and Western instruments: the dizi is with the flute (blown), the ruan with the guitar (plucked), the cello with the erhu (bowed), and a mix of Chinese and Western percussion (struck) instruments. Such combinations intelligently blend different ethnic instruments and cohesively balance the metal and wooden instrumental sounds.

In 2019, the Sound of Dragon Ensemble premiered *Reminiscence II* by Yuan-Chen Li, a Portland-based composer originally from Taiwan.

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<sup>23</sup> More information about the Sound of Dragon is available at <https://soundofdragon.com/sound-of-dragon-ensemble/>

Score in C

guitar and alto flute sound as written  
crotaless sound two octaves higher

Duration: ca. 6'45"

in memory of Quang Guang Fu  
dedicated to Sound of Dragon Ensemble

Reminiscence II  
離歌之二  
for octet of mixed instruments

Yuan-Chen Li 李元貞  
(April, 2019)

I. "Who am I": forward going  
♩ = 60  
meets w/ Fl. at the same time

Alto Flute

Dizi

Guitar

Ruan

High Sus. Cymb.  
♩ = 60 arco L.V.

Pitched Perc. & Percussion

Voice / Erhu I

Erhu II

Cello

(Note: "我"一字拆成兩個語音 - 喝 - 囉 - 唱之) "我" 喝 (喝) → 囉

1 2 3 4 5

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Figure 3.5 Opening of *Reminiscence II* (Yuan-Chen Li 2019)

As shown in figure 3.5, similar instruments share analogous melodies and playing methods. For example, the music begins with the flute and the dizi playing sparse long notes in the background. In contrast, the guitar and the ruan occasionally cut in with several bouncy and snappy phrases. The erhu II corresponds with both the erhu I/vocal and cello, on sustained notes. All these instruments harmoniously blend, producing timbral consonance.

The image shows a musical score for two staves, labeled 'Eh. I' and 'Eh. II'. The score includes various performance instructions and dynamics. A red box highlights a section of the score for Eh. I, containing the following text:

- synchronize with Erhu II
- vibrato ord.
- mp cantabile e rubato
- synchronize with Erhu I

Other performance instructions and dynamics visible in the score include:

- vibrato gliss.
- slow vibrato
- ppp
- slow vibrato
- vibrato ord.
- mp
- p cantabile e rubato

Figure 3.6 Section of erhu I and erhu II from *Reminiscence II* (Yuan-Chen Li 2019)

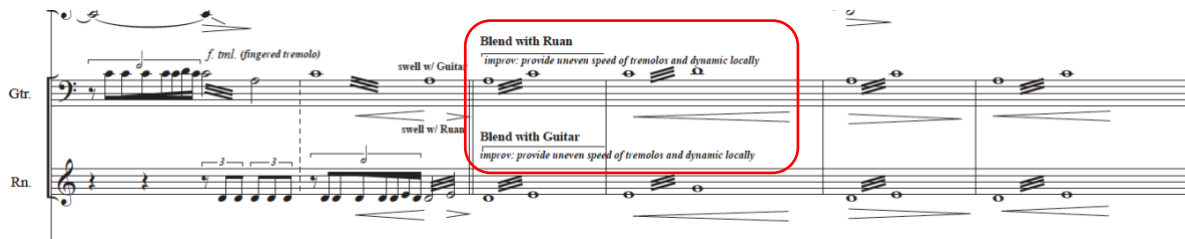


Figure 3.7 Section of guitar and ruan from *Reminiscence II* (Yuan-Chen Li 2019)

Li also provides written instructions in the score emphasizing the desired blending effect. Figure 3.6 indicates that erhu I and erhu II should synchronize vibrato, and guitar and ruan in figure 3.7 are also required to blend through improvisation at the beginning of the second part of the composition. The flute player Mark McGregor told me that he actually “changed the instruments around so that it blends better with the dizi” (McGregor, personal interview, May. 20, 2019). For example, he switched to piccolo when the dizi played in a high register. In their intercultural music-making, timbral differences are covered by musicians with dexterity, and the sonic distinctions of different instruments “elided in a synthesis” (Brinner 2009, 218).

Through such sonic synthesis, the Sound of Dragon Ensemble has explored an intercultural voice of its own. It includes Chinese, Western, and other musical elements, but represents none of these musical traditions specifically. In our interview, McGregor states,

Learning to blend and creating a group sound is actually one of the most exciting parts of what we do in Sound of Dragon, because [in other contexts] we never get a chance to do this ... the most challenging thing for us as a group is to create that performance practice, to create a plain tradition together. Because we don't have anything that we can look to as an example. (McGregor, personal interview, May. 20, 2019)

As a Western classically trained musician, McGregor sensed a new musical tradition that was being created by the Sound of Dragon Ensemble. For Chinese instrumentalists in this ensemble, this intercultural hybridity is even more complicated. As discussed in chapter 2, China has a long



history of absorbing and blending different musical elements and styles from all over the world. The contemporary Chinese music system is a hybrid product of traditional Chinese and Western art music, among other influences. When Chinese instrumentalists interact with non-Chinese musicians in North America, an extra layer of blending is added on top of their already hybrid musical foundation. If the legacy of Western influence in their Chinese music education put their musical practices in a liminal state of being neither “purely” Chinese nor entirely Western, intercultural music-making provides an arena for them to better present their hybrid musical experiences and express their intercultural subjectivities. From this perspective, what McGregor considers a new tradition is not “new” for Chinese musicians. Of course, some musicians may not be conscious about their hybrid music background because music education was so normalized in China. These musicians may perceive the overt hybridity in diasporic intercultural music as a novel experience that causes an important shift in subjectivity. Such musical and cultural hybridity shapes who they are as diasporic Chinese musicians in North America.

Through intercultural music-making, some musicians and composers hope to build a new and idealized sonic world, in which music is separated from race, ethnicity, nationality, and all other generally related identities in daily life. Having collaborated with Chinese musicians since 2004, John Oliver has a definite opinion about composing intercultural music,

Even though I’ve been listening to Chinese music and even performing Chinese music for over a decade, I still can’t quite get it. I don’t quite get it. And I’m very convinced that this has to do with language and that language and music are born out of culture together... So, you want to find the things that fascinate people regardless of what their culture is. And this is why I’m interested in what I call *omni-cultural music*. That is to say, music that doesn’t try to beat any specific culture. It really tries to find that common sound that will fascinate many people regardless of their culture... it’s a kind of global life, the language that brings the cultures together. And this is why I like the term *omni-culture* because it means all of them together. (John Oliver, personal interview with emphasis added, Jun. 12, 2019)

Much like Jon Hassell's "Fourth World" concept, Oliver has worked on blending cultural differences in his fusion compositions that blur the specifics of conventional traditions.<sup>24</sup> He prefers the term "omni-culture" rather than "interculture," because the latter brings a sense of, in his word, "fight" when cultures intersect and interact with each other. When Oliver wrote music for instruments from different cultural contexts, he sought to create a space that bridges different cultures rather than emulating any specific culture. In other words, he tried to "create a new music that sounds something like all of them at the same time" (ibid.).

However, not all musicians believe in an "omni-cultural world." For example, when Haiqiong Deng composed a duet for Chinese zheng and Indonesian gamelan in 2014, she named it *Layered Fantasy* because of the distinct tonal qualities and cultural symbols that the zheng and the gamelan produce. In Deng's opinion, these two instruments work together well, not through blending into a new sonic world but as sonic layers that maintain their individual characters. In Deng's case, a successful intercultural collaboration does not necessarily blend cultural differences, and on the contrary, it can help listeners better understand the distinctive features of each musical source. Significantly, some Western composers and musicians (like Oliver and McGregor) believe music can somehow transcend culture, while Chinese musicians (like Deng) often sense that music is always culturally, politically, and socially rooted in place. One reason for such distinct ideals and expectations is their different social status in Western society: White-presenting composers and musicians do not have to negotiate the constraints of official multiculturalism since they are "unmarked" as part of the dominant culture, while Chinese musicians have to continuously manage their minoritized position that is "marked" by the White

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<sup>24</sup> In 1980, Jon Hassell and Brian Eno released their collaborative album "Fourth World Music Vol.1: Possible Musics". Hassell developed the concept "Fourth World" as "an ideal blend of traditional music from around the world with Western forms and modern electronics, forming a kind of contemporary folk music from 'unknown and imaginary regions.'" See <https://www.wired.com/1997/11/building-a-musical-fourth-world/>.

majority. Deng's assertion of cultural difference when putting different musical traditions into dialogue corresponds with her experience as a "marked" Chinese musician in the Western society.

Intercultural musical fusions using contrast, dominance, and blend may be discussed at various levels, from moments within a music, to an entire work, to rehearsals, concerts, or recordings. It is not unusual to see these three methods used in a single musical composition. Many more details can be examined as well, such as texture, tuning, and stage setting, and I focus more on composition and orchestration in this section. The examples discussed here demonstrate that even in amicable and successful musical fusions, there are in fact power dynamics at work, which may be concealed but should not be ignored.

### **3.3 Social Mediations**

The microsocialities of performance are traversed by wider social formations, and entangled social interactions are implicitly embedded in the process of musicking (Keil 1970; Monson 1996; Wong 2019). As Tia DeNora (2000) states, "music is active within social life: just as music's meanings may be constructed in relation to things outside it, so, too, things outside music may be constructed in relation to music" (40). Georgina Born (2012b) offers a methodology for analyzing the social mediation of music. She argues that music is mediated through four intersecting planes (266-267): 1) "performance socialities" that music produces "in the guise of the intimate microsocialities of musical performance and practice, the social relations enacted in musical ensembles, and the musical division of labor"; 2) "imagined communities" that music animates with the effect of "aggregating its listeners into virtual collectivities or publics based on musical and other identifications, collectivities that may be more or less unified

or heterogeneous”; 3) “social identity formations” that music refracts of “class, race, or ethnicity, gender or sexuality, nationality or locality”; 4) “institutional forms” that music is entangled in to “enable its production, reproduction, and transformation, including nonmarket or market exchange, elite or religious patronage, public or subsidized cultural organizations, or late capitalism’s multipolar cultural economy.” Born sees an irreducible relationship among these four planes in that they are “articulated in contingent and nonlinear ways through relations of affordance, conditioning, or causality” (267). Born’s argument is helpful for examining the social layers of Chinese instrumentalists’ complicated intercultural encounters. In this section, through the perspectives of Born’s four intersecting planes, I explore the social mediations of Chinese musicians’ intercultural music-making in North America.

### **3.3.1 Performance Socialities**

In Born’s analytical methodology, the first plane primarily concerns the microsocial interactions among musical collaborators in performance, rehearsal, and other musical activities. As Born (2012b) states, “in the first plane, music produces its own diverse socialities in the guise of the intimate microsocialities of musical performance and practice, the social relations enacted in musical ensembles, and the musical division of labor” (266).

In most of the Sound of Dragon ensemble’s performances, one can easily identify the dynamic microsocial interactions through the seating arrangements, the musicians’ improvisational dialogues, and expressive eye contact on stage.<sup>25</sup> For example, when the ensemble played the composition “Crossover” by Ali Razmi (arr. Lan Tung) at their 2019 concert in Vancouver, Chinese and Western instruments with similar features were grouped: guitar, cello,

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<sup>25</sup> See <https://soundofdragon.com/2019-season-videos/>.

and ruan on the left, flute and dizi in the middle, and two erhu on the right with a set of percussion instruments behind them.<sup>26</sup> Such arrangements facilitated more intimate microsocial interactions among musicians in the same group. For instance, the dizi player Charlie Liu and the flutist Mark McGregor shared similar body movements and gestures while blowing their wind instruments together, and erhu players Lan Tung and Nicole Ge Li had united mastery of the stroke, including up-bow and down-bow combinations and string-crossings. At the beginning of the performance, every musician on stage looked at the percussionist Jonathan Bernard for his “cue” to start—Bernard had intense eye contact with others before he took a deep breath in and nodded his head (the “cue”). When the music proceeded to the improvisational part where the guitarist Itamar Erez played as a leading improviser with other musicians playing the accompaniment, another moment of intense eye contact happened among the group before Erez started to take the lead. When the improvisation ended, Erez looked back to the group to indicate a return to the composed part. Such embodied gestures of cooperation during musical performance serve both to ensure a united musical performance and to mediate the cultural divides within the group.

As the flutist Mark McGregor recalled, because the ensemble operates in two different languages, English and Chinese, musicians speaking the same language tended to socialize together. Such social choices were reflected in the quality of how they play as a group on stage. After going on tour where they got to know each other across linguistic and cultural divides by socializing more generally together, their music started to become more cohesive and united. Even though some Chinese musicians continue to maintain culturally specific social networks, such intercultural social interactions have significantly deepened their understanding of non-

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<sup>26</sup> The video of the live performance is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYUGJIOxQSY&t=314s>.

Chinese musicians' playing and improved the quality of their intercultural music-making. From McGregor's experience of playing in the ensemble, most Western musicians are trained to watch the conductor for visual cues and follow strict rhythmic patterns, but Chinese instrumentalists focus more on listening to each other and are less used to working with a conductor. He characterized the process as "growing pains" in the first few years after the ensemble was established in 2015. During a performance, the ensemble musicians must balance "following" and "listening" to achieve a unified flow of music, which creates a dynamic performance sociality among musicians. The process of negotiating different playing habits highlights musicians' different musical backgrounds, but the unified music-making generates a socially cohesive intercultural communication. As a Western player, McGregor realized the benefits of listening to the ensemble when playing Western and intercultural music, and his Chinese collaborators also learned to follow the conductor to be more precise in playing. I provide more examples of such micro-level performance sociality in Chapter 5.

My research demonstrates that microsocial musical interactions are significantly connected with and influenced by wider social relations that Chinese instrumentalists have built in finding their way to collaborative music-making in North America. This insight forecasts Born's third plane of "social identity formations" which I will discuss below. In fact, Born (2012a, 2017) recognizes a degree of overlap between the first and third planes in her analytical method. In her book chapter "Digital Music, Relational Ontologies and Social Forms," Born (2012a) calls social identity formations "wider social relations, from the most abstract to the most intimate" (172). Similarly, in analyzing the social aesthetics of improvisation, she notes that "alternatively, many improvising musicians may link the microsocialities of performance to wider social arenas" (2017, 49). For Chinese instrumentalists, their intimate social networks with Chinese and non-Chinese composers and musicians lay the foundation for their musical

interactions which are not only mediated by the multicultural social context but also serve to mediate intercultural musical exchange. Such a tight connection between on-site music-making and daily social contacts applies to most of my consultants whose first musical opportunities in North America were mediated by nurturing “intimate social relations” within musical networks. Although this might also be discussed through Born’s third plane, I want to argue that forming and navigating such musical networks is inextricably connected to the microsocial musical interactions they produce and support.

Many of my consultants had a list of contacts to whom they could reach out for help and information when they first arrived in Canada or the United States, some of whom were other Chinese immigrant musicians. For new immigrant Chinese instrumentalists in this study, learning from and playing with experienced Chinese musicians was often the first step in mingling with Western society as the help and guidance of these Chinese musicians smoothed their entrance to various music scenes. For instance, the ruan player Zhimin Yu immediately started her music career after arriving in Vancouver in 1990 with the help of Jirong Huang, an erhu player who had immigrated to Canada two years earlier. The first performance Yu did was at a festival where she shared the stage with three other seasoned Chinese musicians who played the dizi, pipa, and piano respectively. Although Yu’s English was not good enough to confidently communicate with non-Chinese musicians, she was exposed to many musical opportunities (both Chinese and intercultural) by following experienced Chinese musicians. She said, “I met so many Chinese friends when I first arrived here... Although performances are often not in the Chinese community, I don't need to do contacting or anything like that. I just follow [Chinese friends], so there is no problem” (Zhimin Yu, personal interview, Jun. 9, 2019).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> 一来就碰到这么多朋友... 演出都不是中国圈子, 可是我也不需要做任何什么联系或怎么样, 我跟着就行了, 所以说没有什么问题的。

Chinese instrumentalists may also support each other by starting an ensemble together. Compared to playing in pick-up bands for specific projects, initiating a formal and long-term ensemble is beneficial for getting more performance opportunities and applying for public arts funding. As discussed in the previous section, Mei Han, initiated Red Chamber in 2005 when she wanted to establish a unique musical ensemble with only Chinese plucked string instruments. According to Han, Red Chamber has received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council. Han has been stretching the boundaries of traditional Chinese instruments and exploring diverse musical innovations with the ensemble. For example, in 2018, Red Chamber collaborated with the bluegrass band Jaybirds, which, according to Han, drove her music career to a different level, including introducing her to new musical ideas, and the broader popular bluegrass audience, that she wouldn't otherwise have had the chance to access on her own (Han, personal interview, Feb. 18, 2019).

Belonging to a small ethnic community, however, also means more competition among musicians in that community. There are limited teaching and performing resources and opportunities for musicians to share. Unlike in China where well-established musicians have access to large musical markets, immigrant Chinese musicians often have to look hard for musical performances and students in North America. Chen Tao was a dizi instructor at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing before coming to the United States in 1985. According to Tao, he had a very high social status in China as a teacher in the top conservatory. After moving to the US, he had to teach students of any level, including those beginners whom he would have delegated to his students in China (Chen, personal interview, Mar. 22, 2019). Although in my experience Chinese musicians always avoid talking about competition in their music community, the tacit tensions are evident and sensible in their conversation and behavior.



Alan Thrasher, a professor emeritus of the University of British Columbia who began his study of East Asian musics during the 1970s, commented on the Chinese music community in Vancouver,

One of the problems here is that high-level musicians, Cantonese musicians, and musicians from different places maybe don't like each other very much. Some of them are very friendly, but some of them are not very friendly... If you are from Guangdong, you may not like someone from Beijing or Shanghai. (Thrasher, personal interview, Jul. 22, 2019)

The suona player Zhongxi Wu also said,

人与人之间合作还算比较 OK，基本上都认识，都是好朋友。那也有打架的啊，尤其是二胡，二胡跟二胡之间闹不和的。古筝也是... 幸好我没有第二唢呐，没有人跟我挤。

The collaborations among Chinese musicians are ok. We basically know each other and are good friends. But sometimes there are also conflicts, especially for the erhu. Some erhu players are not getting along very well. The same thing for the guzheng... I am glad there is no second suona player, so nobody shares the musical resource with me. (Wu, personal interview, Jul. 1, 2019)

Of course, the situation varies from one city to another. Before coming to Vancouver, Wu also worked in New York for a while, and he thinks the competition in these two cities is different. He said, “[In New York,] the competition was also intense, but musicians had their own places. Instead of sharing one piece of meat here [in Vancouver], everybody had their own meat in New York” (ibid.).<sup>28</sup> In bigger cities with a larger Chinese community, the musical competition appears to be comparatively less intense for Chinese musicians.

To alleviate the competitive pressure, some Chinese musicians have put great effort into creating more collaborative opportunities. The above-mentioned method of starting a group

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<sup>28</sup> 竞争也是比较激烈，但是他们都有自己的地方。不是说一块肉大家都抢这里，在纽约是大家都有自己的肉。

together is not only a good way to support fellow Chinese musicians, but also an important strategy to create trust and enhance the internal cohesion of the Chinese music community. In our interview, the erhu player Lan Tung mentioned her plan of starting a new erhu group. She said, “the last thing Vancouver lacks is the erhu, too many erhu players. But there is no erhu group. Every band has an erhu and they compete with each other, but no group is made of only the erhu” (Tung, personal interview, Jul. 21, 2019).<sup>29</sup> For Tung, starting an erhu ensemble could ease the competitiveness or tension between erhu players in Vancouver.

When Chinese musicians negotiate with each other for access to limited musical resources, they also cultivate new networks with non-Chinese musical partners in the host country. However, most Chinese instrumentalists in this study have experienced challenges in communicating with non-Chinese musical collaborators in terms of language and social conventions. Language is the first obstacle they need to conquer for any intercultural collaboration. The zheng player Dailin Hsieh moved from Taiwan to Vancouver in early 2019. Although she frequently traveled to other countries to perform, the biggest challenge for her as a new immigrant in Canada was the language. She said, “I am now actually in a passive status...but I can’t be like this all the time... I hope when my English gets better, I can actively do something in this environment” (Hsieh, personal interview, Jun.12, 2019).<sup>30</sup> Hsieh used to host a solo concert every two or three years when she was in Taiwan, and she was keen to bring her musical routine back and invite Taiwanese musician friends to play with her in Vancouver. In her opinion, however, it was impossible to carry out all her plans given her English level at that time.

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<sup>29</sup> 温哥华最不缺的就是二胡，二胡人最多了... 所以我就想说，没有人做一个二胡的团，一个团一个二胡，大家相互竞争，没有做一个全部都是二胡的。

<sup>30</sup> 我现在其实都是被动的状态... 我希望说，就我语言能力好一点，我自这个环境当中，我也能够主动地去做一点什么事情。

There are also different social conventions between Chinese and non-Chinese musicians. For instance, many Western or intercultural concerts conclude with a reception at the performance site where musicians, composers, and audience members can socialize. After a typical Chinese concert, however, musicians often take photos on stage, go home directly, or have a celebratory gathering somewhere else. Another example is the different sense of rehearsal time. It is common for Western musicians to wrap up and leave when it comes to the planned finishing time, while Chinese musicians may not be that time-sensitive during rehearsals. These small cultural differences may significantly influence the social interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese musicians. A Chinese musician may be considered unsocial or arrogant by Western partners if she misses the reception after a performance, and a Western player's behavior of packing up their instrument when others are still discussing the music may be taken as rude by Chinese musicians.

Musicians' social networks and relationships discussed above directly or implicitly influence what happens during rehearsals and on stage. In many performances and rehearsals that I attended, it was common for Chinese musicians to ask other Chinese players about certain musical terms or playing techniques in Chinese, even though the whole group used English to communicate. With a common focus on doing a professional job, Chinese musicians who otherwise had a competitive relationship formed a benign team when performing together. In Chinese instrumentalists' diasporic music-making, there is always a dynamic interplay between the micro-level performance sociality and wider social networks.

### **3.3.2 Musically Imagined Communities**

According to Born (2012b), “music has powers to animate imagined communities, aggregating its listeners into virtual collectivities or publics based on musical and other identifications, collectivities that may be more or less unified or heterogeneous” (266). There are imagined communities that exist within and across music scenes that Chinese musicians have navigated in North America: the diasporic community that people of Chinese descent embrace and celebrate; an idealized multicultural community that fans of world music conjure up through listening to diverse music cultures; and an intercultural music community that VICO has striven to build.

This section examines the interactions between Born’s plane 1 (microsocial relations) and plane 2 (imagined communities) in the dynamic negotiations between players and listeners during a musical performance. Born’s formulation suggests that imagined communities are “virtual collectivities” that might or might not be in agreement. Similarly, my research demonstrates that while imagined communities are conjured up at the site of intercultural musical performance, they are more often in conflict than unifying. Audience participation and response are part of the performance, and there is a delicate transformation from what a player sends out through the music to how audience members receive the information and integrate it into their own experiences. During a performance, both sensorial and affective communication happens between musicians and audiences. On the one hand, the audience may identify with musicians by hearing the sound waves, following the musical flow, and appreciating the expressions in the playing. An imagined community is conjured up by audiences when personal voices and emotions in the music are understood with empathy. On the other hand, musicians’ playing is affected by the external environment, including the audience’s reactions, stage setup, and their collaborators’ performances.

The specific listening context varies from one listener to another, and audiences often need a certain knowledge or musical background to better understand the music. Even in China where there is a significant number of Chinese instrumental music lovers, formal concerts are less well attended than popular music shows. The situation becomes worse in North America where Chinese instrumental music is one of many ethnic musical genres with a limited number of informed listeners. In addition to the fact that not many Westerners appreciate Chinese music, many Chinese people do not have the habit of attending professional instrumental concerts either. Lan Tung, artistic director and erhu player in Sound of Dragon Society, stated that one of the difficulties of organizing concerts in Vancouver is selling tickets:<sup>31</sup>

这边的华人我觉得购票欣赏音乐的习惯还没有，越业余的节目呢，观众就越踊跃。任何越业余的合唱团、业余的乐队、业余的活动、晚会都坐的满满的。越是精致创业的东西就越难卖票，因为这边的华人去看活动，真的只是来欣赏的比较少，多半是来捧场……然后这边很多学生……不会自己来参加音乐会的活动，他们可以自己逛街，自己去看电影，但是他们不会自己来看音乐会。

I think Chinese people here still haven't had the habit of buying tickets for music, and they are more active in participating in amateur activities, such as amateur choir, bands, and concerts. While the more professional and delicate the concert is the worse usually the box office will be. Chinese people come to concerts mostly to support friends rather than to enjoy the music... And music students often don't attend concerts. They can go shopping and go to a movie by themselves, but they won't go to a concert on their own. (Tung, personal interview, Jul. 21, 2019)

Ideally, intercultural music concerts congregate listeners who appreciate different music cultures, and intercultural music-making can be a great opportunity for Chinese musicians to play for members of various non-Chinese communities. In North America, however, many public

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<sup>31</sup> Sound of Dragon Society is a non-profit intercultural musical society that was established in 2013 under the leadership of artistic director Lan Tung. It hosts a biennial festival, workshops, and concerts with a mission of preserving “ancient traditions of Chinese music and celebrates diversity and creativity in the contemporary applications of this music, resulting from the interaction between musicians of various ethnic and musical backgrounds.” <https://soundofdragon.com/about/>

Chinese musical activities are presented in non-professional forms, such as pop songs played in Chinese restaurants and small groups of amateur musicians celebrating Chinese festivals. As Tung indicated, many Chinese come to concerts mainly for supporting their musician friends and they rarely go to performances held by musicians with whom they are not personally acquainted.

Intercultural concerts may be less well attended than those presenting traditional music. Each musical genre has its specific audience and intercultural concerts do not necessarily attract fans from all the traditions represented. Most of my consultants' intercultural concerts fall into the category of "art music" which typically has a much smaller audience than popular music. In a city like Vancouver, their intercultural collaborations are competing with more familiar kinds of art music—chamber music, orchestral music, solo recitals, etc.—which often puts them at a disadvantage. People who commonly go to concerts of traditional Chinese music do not necessarily enjoy fusion performances including Chinese instruments. From this perspective, intercultural music brings challenges and risks for Chinese musicians to build intimate connections with both Chinese and non-Chinese audiences. The virtual collectivities animated between players and listeners in an intercultural musical setting require not only an empathetic experience through music but also an appreciation and openness to a broader range of cultural diversity.

In addition, audience members can be highly critical of intercultural performance due to concerns about authenticity and cultural appropriation. For a long time, the composer Mark Armanini avoided using Chinese poetry in his work after he was accused of cultural appropriation by a Western audience member. In 1990, when many Chinese people left China and came to Vancouver after the Tiananmen Square protests, Armanini organized a show with

the Community Arts Council in Vancouver to welcome those new Chinese immigrants.<sup>32</sup> One of the performances designed by Armanini used Chinese instruments to accompany a performance of a Chinese poem by a non-Chinese musician and poet. After the show, one audience member, a student at Simon Fraser University, was upset about the performance and critiqued Armanini's use of Chinese instruments and the poem as cultural appropriation. The performer reacted violently and punched the student in the nose. The fight was reported by the *Georgia Straight*, a local newspaper in Vancouver, and Armanini was caught in the middle since he had organized the event. For a long time, Armanini was careful about the music he wrote for Chinese ensembles; he avoided using Chinese poetry even though he is a big fan of it. After years of working with Chinese musicians, however, Armanini has recently begun to re-introduce Chinese poetry in his intercultural music. Because he has done research on Chinese instruments and poems and uses them respectfully, he believes that it is more beneficial than harmful to revive old traditions in a contemporary form through intercultural collaboration (Mark Armanini, personal interview, May 22, 2019).

Sometimes, Chinese musicians also receive criticism about the Chinese musical elements they employ in intercultural contexts. On July 11, 2019, the Sound of Dragon Ensemble premiered the concert *Crossing Mountains & Seas*, a collaboration between contemporary aerial dance and intercultural instrumental music. Against dramatic media projection with the latest video technology, the performance described a story crossing between modern-day Canada and a magical world of pre-historic China as described in the ancient book *Shan Hai Jing*, or *The*

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<sup>32</sup> See chapter 4 for an explanation of the Tiananmen Square Protests.

*Classic of Mountains and Seas*.<sup>33</sup> The concert appeared to be well received, with a full house in the audience cheering and applauding. However, one member of the audience came to Lan Tung afterward and questioned her knowledge and usage of the Chinese ancient legends for this contemporary music project. Tung had to explain to that audience member that she had researched the cultural background of *Shan Hai Jing* before adding any related references to the music (Tung, personal interview, Jul. 21, 2019). Both Armanini and Tung consider it appropriate to employ traditional cultural elements in intercultural music if one seriously studies it and does not take it for granted.

We need, however, to take these audience members' critiques seriously because they reveal the different listening positionalities at work in the performance and reception of intercultural music. In his 2020 book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Dylan Robinson examines the ways that Indigenous music interacts with Western art music and advocates for a critical awareness of "listening positionality" through which we are called to examine our "listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability that are never wholly positive or negative" (10). He emphasizes the intersections and influences of "race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background" (ibid.) at work during the listening process. Although Robinson's focus is decolonization, the idea of listening positionality is a useful way to understand conflicting interpretations of intercultural music. The musicians and audience members in these examples demonstrated different interpretations of Chinese musicians' intercultural music-making based on their listening positionalities.

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<sup>33</sup> *Shan Hai Jing* (山海经) is the oldest singular book full of myths and legends in China. This enormous collection mainly introduces geographical knowledge in folklore, including mountains, animals, geography, nationalities, properties, medicines, sacrifices, and witch doctors (Zhao 1997, 96). The project of Sound of Dragon Ensemble and aerial dance focused on the magical world this book describes where countless mythical creatures and hybrids of humans and animals populate over 100 kingdoms. (<https://soundofdragon.com/>)



The discourse of cultural appropriation is further complicated in the context of globalization. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's (2008) notion of the contact zone wherein "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (7), Robinson understands listening as a "haptic and proprioceptive encounter with affectively experienced asymmetries of power" (11). Such power asymmetries have drawn the attention of scholars who study intercultural music in the globalized world. For example, when examining Irish rock music that combines mainstream global rock sound and Irish musical elements, Noel McLaughlin and Martin McLoone (2000) contend that "global capitalism today works, not by 'homogenising' world culture but rather through 'niche marketing' and the marketing of 'difference'" (183). It is harmful that the asymmetrical power relationships have continued in the globalized world in the guise of marketed difference. It should be noted, however, that unequal cultural exchanges can also bring positive affects to those in subordinate positions. Admitting Western interference in the development of Balinese musical traditions in the early twentieth century, Manolete Mora (2011) studies Sanggar Bona Alit, a studio founded by the experimental Balinese artist Ali Putra in the context of contemporary Bali where traditional and modern elements intersect. Examining Putra's innovative musical projects, Mora argues that the process of cultural negotiation that occurs at the conceptual boundaries between insider and outsider facilitates the emergence of local musicians' creative productions (45). In the context of globalization, people's listening positionalities have been complicated by factors like power asymmetries in "contact zones," by exploited cultural difference through marketing of niche cultures, and by local examples of people overcoming power asymmetries. Such sophisticated positionalities have manifested in audience members' responses to the intercultural music concerts in which my consultants have been involved.

To better understand the listening positionalities at work in response to my immigrant Chinese musicians' intercultural collaborations, it is helpful to consider the oft-cited concept of Orientalism. Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism denotes "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). The Orient, Said argues, is the West's dark images of the Other: exotic, effeminate, primitive, and inferior. *Orientalism* is one of the most significant, impactful, and widely cited studies of difference. The term "Orient" in Said's original work refers to the Middle East and North Africa, but his seminal postcolonial critique has also been employed in a wide range of studies on the patronizing Western attitude towards "the East" (Bellman 2011; Szabó-Knotik 2017; Yang 2001). The concept of Orientalism is helpful for understanding the conflicts and issues my consultants have encountered in North America. As Hon-Lun Yang (2017) states, "the portrayal and representation of Chinese themes on the Western stage have long evinced orientalism and stereotyping, but they can also be understood as celebrating multiculturalism" (4).

Scholars have various opinions about the role Orientalism plays in the imagined communities conjured up by contemporary musical exchanges between the West and the East. For example, although they both point to a spectrum of musical practices that, although "Oriental" are also almost more or less "American," John Corbett (2000) and Nancy Yunwha Rao (2009) have distinct interpretations of how Orientalism has been adopted, refined, and challenged in contemporary instrumental music. In Corbett's view, exoticisms and Orientalisms continue to proliferate in the contemporary art music of the West and East, especially in the global Cageian experimental movement, but he finds differences between contemporary Orientalism and its previous manifestations. Corbett suggests that there are two basic forms of musical Orientalism in postmodern music: conceptual Orientalism and contemporary chinoiserie. The former, which Corbett associates with composer John Cage, develops something

conceptually and/or sonically original under the stimulation of non-Western music, while the latter, which he terms as “decorative Orientalism,” (173) borders on pastiche. In addition, some Asian experimentalist composers, including Toru Takemitsu and Tan Dun, follow the Cageian route and employ the Western modern musical idiom. Corbett calls them “Asian neo-Orientalists” (178) (also known as self-Orientalizing Asians) and argues that their approach to transculturalism is an American one, rather than one that is inspired by their own heritage or experience. In contrast, Rao states that the “model of appropriation or borrowing [in the American ultramodern music scene] is deeply flawed” (110). In her view, Chinese music came to the United States with Chinese immigration in the mid-nineteenth century and has already become one part of the rich multi-ethnic American musical landscape. Instead of considering those intercultural new musics to be examples of Orientalism, Rao argues that they represent the deep American musical landscape and the interiority of its diverse racial terrains.

Corbett’s and Rao’s arguments contrast significantly because of their distinct listening positionalities. Corbett focuses mostly on the music per se, that is, detailed analysis of the musical structure, material, timbre, etc., while Rao pays more attention to the subjects (e.g., composers and musicians) rather than the music. Therefore, Corbett sees Orientalism as embedded in the search for novel sounds that characterize experimental music, while Rao understands such cultural fusions to be a result of composers’ life experiences in American multicultural society. The audience members who questioned Armanini and Tung appear to share Corbett’s view, while many musical supporters would agree with Rao as they embrace intercultural musical collaborations in North America.

Both Corbett’s and Rao’s arguments are helpful for examining Chinese instrumentalists’ intercultural music-making in Western society. On the one hand, it should be acknowledged that there are global power asymmetries between supercultural expansion and subcultural flow

(Slobin 1992), and we should avoid a sense of “happy hybridity” when looking at intercultural music. China accepted Western music as being scientific, professional, and highly developed, while Chinese music was historically exported to the West as exotic and strange. Western modern music (from pop to classical) is sold in almost every music store in China, while Chinese and intercultural music are at best niche genres in North America. For Chinese instrumentalists in Vancouver, even though their music is widely respected, they can never escape being marked as racialized and minoritized. It is hard to ignore such power relationships when looking at almost every intercultural musical activity. On the other hand, China-West musical interactions are hopeful and promising since each music culture has been enriched by the other’s musical ideas and resources. The West has adopted Chinese musical traditions, and China has also used Western music systems to develop its own modern music. It is arguable that in the globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century, intercultural musical communications are inevitable and significant for every culture’s development.

Imagined communities conjured up by music have multifarious aspects and meanings. As discussed above, there are many different “kinds” of imagined communities in Chinese music-making: one coheres around ideas of Chinese culture, one around cultural flows in the globalized world, and another around ideals of intercultural harmony *and/or* dissension. While aggregating its listeners into shared virtual communities as niche music fans, intercultural music can also intensify the conflicts and issues engendered through cultural exchange.

### **3.3.3 Social Identity Formations**

“Music refracts wider social identity formation – formations of class, race or ethnicity, gender or sexuality, nationality or locality” (Born 2012b, 266). In a multicultural society, music

and identity formations, such as ethnicity and nationality, are tightly connected. In North America, Chinese musicians often find their music bonded with the concept of “Chineseness,” which can be both beneficial and problematic. A percussionist who has been working with Chinese instrumentalists for more than twenty years, Jonathon Bernard states that many performances he participated in with the Vancouver-based Orchid Ensemble in the United States resulted from the popularization of Chinese culture in that country ten to fifteen years ago.

People in the United States were realizing that China was the next economic superpower. So Chinese language programs were springing up and all the universities and people were learning the Chinese language and Chinese culture. Because they knew that's where the business was. You know, a lot of our engagements on tour were at universities and colleges. So of course, if there are more Chinese language programs, then they wanted to expose their students and communities to Chinese culture. (Jonathon Bernard, personal interview, May. 29, 2019)

The Orchid Ensemble is intercultural, but many of their opportunities in the United States were due to the two Chinese traditional instruments featured in the group—the erhu and the zheng. Although most of their music is in the genre of contemporary classical music, the group is “Chinese” enough to present Chinese culture to those American students.

Similarly, in Canada where multiculturalism has been an official government policy since the 1980s, it is more possible for Chinese instrumentalists to get public arts funding if they participate in intercultural collaborations and highlight multicultural features in their music. When discussing the development of Chinese musical groups in Vancouver, Mei Han said that “in Canada, you must do multicultural things to make money... from the perspectives of survival and artistic development” (Han, personal interview, Apr. 11, 2019).<sup>34</sup> Whether or not individual

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<sup>34</sup> 因为在加拿大，你要搞 multicultural 的东西才可以挣钱嘛...一个是从生存上考虑，一个是从艺术的发展角度。

Chinese musicians directly apply for grants, if they are programmed by festivals or major arts organizations, those entities very often depend on public arts funding.

In addition to engaging in intercultural music-making, some Chinese musicians have carved out a distinctly Chinese ethnic presence in Canada. Zhongcai Yang came to Vancouver in 2001 and has mainly focused on playing and teaching erhu since then. Together with his wife Chen Wenying (zheng) they established the private training institute, the Canada Y.C. Music Academy, in Vancouver in 2001. Since Yang feels that his English is not good enough for him to write grants or initiate intercultural collaborations, he has concentrated on developing a music career in the Chinese community. According to Yang, at one time there was a big erhu market in Vancouver because Taiwan and Hong Kong immigrants were interested in traditional Chinese culture, and he had more than one hundred erhu students at its peak in 2006 (Yang, personal interview, Jul. 3, 2019). In addition, he has also maintained connections with the Central Conservatory in Beijing and has recruited several graduate students from there to do remote teaching for students at his school. Despite Yang's decision to focus only on Chinese music, he has cleverly tapped into the values of official multiculturalism. In the Colors of Summer concert hosted by the Canada YC Music Academy on Jun. 2, 2019, the first several pages in the program featured letters from Justin Trudeau (the prime minister of Canada), John Horgan (premier of British Columbia), and Malcolm D. Brodie (the mayor of Richmond). The term "multicultural" appears frequently in these letters, and Trudeau states that "this event provides Chinese Canadians with a wonderful opportunity to connect with their roots and to share their heritage with the community." Benefiting from his distinct public ethnic presentation, Yang has worked with municipal, provincial, and federal arts funding organizations to maintain his music school.

However, the problems associated with the ethnicity—music tie should not be ignored. In her book, *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music*,

Mari Yoshihara (2007) examines how Asian classical musicians navigate issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class while developing their music careers in the United States. Through extensive interviews with Asian musicians, Yoshihara glosses the relationship between ethnicity and music and states that most audiences in the West think about Asian American musicians' race before their music. She argues, "to think of musical understanding as geographically and culturally bound is not only provincial but also racist" (200). From this perspective, racism in the musical field has shifted from performing superficial behaviors (such as language, body gestures, and attitudes) to benign interactions with highlighted differences (culture, language, nationality, etc.).

Some of my consultants want to present themselves purely as musicians, but the public tends to tie their music to their "Chinese" identity. Since immigrating to Canada in 1989, the pipa player Qiuxia He has launched a series of intercultural music projects. Although she tries to avoid identifying herself primarily as a Chinese musician, some projects require her to do so. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) presented her Silk Road Music ensemble but told her that they only wanted Chinese players. He said, "I don't understand 'Chinese players', what do you mean? So that means only Chinese-looking players, but in my ensemble, I have old White guys playing Chinese instruments." He was very disappointed that non-Chinese-looking band members couldn't join her because of their physical appearance and ethnic background. In her opinion, making music should transcend conventional notions of nationality, race, and culture. She advocates looking at musical instruments without any preconceptions and states: "pipa is pipa; it does the job. Its job is a pipa and [it] doesn't have a country" (He, personal interview, Jul. 5, 2019). However, no matter how He thinks about her music and herself, stereotypical and racist interpretations of Chinese music and musicians are almost unavoidable

because they are imbricated with both Chinese and Western attitudes towards gendered and raced bodies.

In her chapter “Listening to Local Practices: Performance and Identity Politics in Riverside, California,” Deborah Wong (2004) examines how gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are articulated through a controversial performance that Miya Masaoka, Japanese American koto master, presented in the recital hall at the University of California, Riverside. In her composition *Ritual*, Masaoka lay down nude on a table, while a number of Madagascar hissing cockroaches crawled over her body, to a mixed soundtrack of koto and hissing roaches. Masaoka hoped to address “the relationships between and the social construction of the body, race, and performance” (150). Contrary to Masaoka’s and Wong’s original intention to situate the event as a celebration of Asian American music, in students’ and other audience members’ responses, “race and ethnicity evidently disappeared into the display of the female body” (153). In that context, Masaoka was profoundly Othered through exposing her racialized and gendered body. Wong also discusses such gender issues in her article “Taiko and the Asian/American Body: Drums, Rising Sun, and the Question of Gender.” By addressing the misrepresentation of taiko as masculine and sinister in the film *Rising Sun* (1993), Wong (2000) illustrates how taiko is in fact played mostly by Asian/Asian American women as a way of subverting the stereotype of Asian women as being delicate and submissive. Wong’s examples resonate with the experience of Chinese women in my study. In addition to their ethnic difference, female Chinese musicians often bear another layer of pressure in terms of presenting their gendered bodies in Western society.

Although the current status quo does not necessarily reflect historical practice, there is tacit consensus in Chinese culture that many Chinese instruments are “gendered.” For instance, the zheng and the pipa are considered feminine, while the suona and the drum are considered



masculine. Before the establishment of music conservatories in the twentieth century, Chinese traditional instruments were mainly used by (amateur) musicians performing at public events. The zheng and the pipa were primarily played by women as indoor entertainment, while men primarily played the suona and the drum in outdoor folk ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals. Although the gender division by instrument is not significant in contemporary Chinese conservatories, sexuality, and body (especially female body) presentation are indiscerptible elements of musical performance.

Susan Cheng, the executive director of the New York ensemble Music from China, indicated in our interview that although beauty is not the primary criterion for Chinese female musicians' success, "being beautiful and a woman" is one of "the right combinations for [their] success [in the West]" (Cheng, personal interview, Mar. 17, 2019). Vi-An Diep is a transgender zheng player of Vietnamese descent, and femininity is clearly emphasized in most of her performances and public image. As she told me in our interview, "it matters for the public. I think they enjoy zheng music more if it was a girl with the public. That's the consensus" (Diep, personal interview, Jun. 14, 2019). Chinese players in Red Chamber often wear cheongsam and other traditional Chinese costume for performances, which highlights both their Chineseness and their feminine beauty. However, presenting their ethnicized and gendered bodies does not mean they agree with Asian stereotypes. In fact, one can easily sense power and authority through the mature Red Chamber musicians' determined looks and confident playing, which challenges the stereotypes of submissive and girlish Asian femininity. In certain contexts, just being a woman is an obstacle for Chinese musicians. For example, Lan Tung stated that approximately eighty percent of the musicians that she encounters in the improvisation field are White males; few female players of any cultural background are actively involved in that community. In her opinion, gender was the most significant barrier for her to becoming an insider in the

improvisation scene in North America (Tung, personal interview, Jul. 21, 2019).<sup>35</sup> Gendered stereotypes are tied not only to specific racialized contexts but to genre as well.

For Chinese musicians in this study, social identity formations refracted by music are often tied to Asian stereotypes. On the one hand, they strategically employ ethnic distinction as a way to achieve successful music careers in a multicultural society. On the other hand, they fiercely fight against stereotypes that misrepresent them as Chinese musicians. They are visible minorities with their “Asian” bodies and “foreign” music, but they are also invisible in terms of being individual members of a heterogeneous Chinese community. Such a paradoxical situation seems to be an inevitable part of Chinese musicians’ diasporic lives.

### **3.3.4 Institutional Mediations**

Born (2012b) argues that “music is entangled in the institutional forms that enable its production, reproduction, and transformation, including nonmarket or market exchange, elite or religious patronage, public or subsidized cultural organizations, or late capitalism’s multipolar cultural economy” (266-267). Institutions, such as non-profit organizations and government departments, have significantly influenced the intercultural music projects that Chinese musicians in this study have been able to do in North America.

Since moving to Canada in 1994, Lan Tung has initiated many intercultural groups in Vancouver, such as Birds of Paradox, Proliferasian, Orchid Ensemble, Sounds Global Ensemble, and Sound of Dragon Ensemble. Tung has gained significant support from public arts funders, and all of her music projects (including those in other countries, such as touring) have been funded by various Canadian resources. While some of my consultants found the new application

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<sup>35</sup> For other studies that corroborate Tung’s experience, see *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* edited by Nicole Rustin-Paschal and Sherrie Tucker (2008).

system at the Canada Council for the Arts (commonly called the Canada Council) implemented in 2017 to be quite complex, Tung has benefited a lot from a recent commitment to diversity in the system.<sup>36</sup> She has applied to every single Canada Council grant related to her music during the past two decades, and her music projects have grown bigger with continual supports from this federally funded organization.

In my view, two important factors are contributing to Tung's success in applying for grants. First, she has a good sense of the Canada Council's priorities and continuously adjusts her music projects according to new policies. Tung saw the opportunity to apply for bigger projects through the more open requirements attached to each program in the new system. According to Tung, funding programs in the previous Canada Council system were directed towards particular criteria, while the new system offers artists more space for creativity. Second, Tung is also good at seizing special funding opportunities. Her project *Crossing Mountains & Seas*, discussed earlier, was funded by the Canada Council's New Chapter grant program, a special one-time program created on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada in 2017. According to Tung, the New Chapter program encouraged artists to do something that they could not do with normal grant support, which resulted in the biggest project that she had done to that date. With those grants, Tung also established the non-profit Sound of Dragon Society and has provided financial supports to musicians and composers across the world by hiring them for her concerts and festivals.

While institutional support can be beneficial, Chinese musicians' artistic decisions and directions are also influenced by institutional priorities. Tung has indeed won many grants, but

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<sup>36</sup> For more information about these reforms in 2017, see the State of the Arts in Canada by Simon Brault, the director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts. <https://canadacouncil.ca/spotlight/2017/01/state-of-the-art-in-canada-2017>

her success is based on her proactive work in consulting the Canada Council, doing the necessary background research, and modifying her grant applications according to the changing requirements. Institutional patronage is a double-edged sword. For instance, Mei Han is well-known for her intercultural music-making. Since being hired as the director of the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) in Murfreesboro, however, Han has had less time to pursue such projects. When I interviewed Han in Murfreesboro in 2019, she was still sorting out ways to balance the music projects that her job demanded and the music that she is personally passionate about. For Han, the position at the CCMC brought her both opportunities and challenges in terms of personal musical development.

In this section, I have traced the social mediation of intercultural musicking by Chinese instrumentalists by analyzing Born's four planes separately. In reality, these four planes intersect and influence each other in almost every musical activity that Chinese musicians conduct in North America. As Born (2012b) states, "the four planes of music's social mediation are irreducible to one another and are articulated in contingent and nonlinear ways through relations of affordance, conditioning, or causality" (267). Mei Han's musical routes in North America provide a good example. Before coming to Canada in 1996, she worked as a young musician in a government-sponsored musical troupe (fourth plane) and went to rural areas to perform for soldiers and peasants (the first and second planes); emigrating to Canada, she started to trace ancient zheng traditions as a way of exploring her distinct Chinese ethnicity in the multicultural society (second and third plane). She established Red Chamber, a virtuosic Chinese plucked instrument ensemble whose performance personae emphasize Chinese music tradition and intercultural musical collaboration (first and third planes), and she has received significant public arts council support in addition to building a supportive audience (second and fourth planes). Encountering intercultural performance, she has also dedicated herself to transforming the zheng

into a powerful tool for the contemporary international concert stage (first and third planes). Her wide range of musical activities and her second ethnomusicology M.A. and then Ph.D. in Canada made her eligible for the CCMC job and a tenure-stream faculty position at Tennessee Middle State University (the first and fourth plane). Finally, as a direct result of her affiliation with the CCMC, she has re-established a performance and teaching relationship with China (first and fourth planes). Han's musical experiences show how Born's four planes of social mediation are permeable and mutually constitutive in Chinese musicians' diasporic lives in North America.

### **3.4 Intercultural Improvisation Practices**

Almost all my consultants indicated that they often encounter improvised musical situations in North America, and so it is worth discussing the role of improvisation in facilitating intercultural encounters. Compared to "the evolving concert performance tradition associated with Western art music of the past two centuries," Born (2017) suggests that "the lineages of [freely] improvised music of the late twentieth century often manifested a heightened reflexivity about the socialities engendered by performance, just as some practitioners set out to engage with the social in inventive ways" (40).

Although not all immigrant Chinese instrumentalists incorporate improvisation into their musical practices, they have likely encountered it at concerts, festivals, and musical jams. Few of my consultants had the experience of improvising in China since improvisation is not included in conservatory training for Chinese instruments. Most of them first encountered improvisation in intercultural music projects in Canada and the United States. For many Chinese instrumentalists in this study, improvisation has become an important musical practice to not only enhance their musicianship but also help them better fit into a multicultural musical society. In addition,

because of its spontaneity, improvisation has been favored by those Chinese musicians as a way of expressing their distinct subjectivities and countering ethnic stereotypes in North America. In this section, I discuss the different forms of intercultural improvisation that Chinese instrumentalists in my study have encountered, and how these musicians perform subjectivities, form social coalitions, and negotiate with external social relationships through improvisation.

### 3.4.1 Forms and Approaches

Improvisation played a vital role in Chinese traditional music before 1840, but it has been widely omitted in contemporary Chinese music education.<sup>37</sup> Of course, such improvisation is different from jazz, free improvisation, and other musical genres that are structured through improvisation. When Chinese musicians improvised on skeletal scores, they added extemporized ornamentations to enrich the melodies, which could be interpreted as mere embellishment. Taking my cue from critical studies in improvisation (Fischlin and Heble 2004), however, I want to argue that even this subtle form of improvisation is fundamental to the music's affective power because it introduces a strong subjective element.<sup>38</sup> As musicians who received their musical training after 1950, when the music system in China had been thoroughly modernized and Westernized, most Chinese instrumentalists in this project did not touch on improvisation until coming to North America, including Mei Han, Lan Tung, and others who are now well-known

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<sup>37</sup> Before 1840, Chinese instrumental music was mainly transmitted through oral teaching (this might still be the case for some amateur players who take different approaches to tradition taught and performed in conservatories). As subsidiary teaching and playing materials, musical scores were often skeletal and did not contain playing details. While playing, traditional Chinese musicians often improvised based on the score through adding tonal variations and ornaments. This method was called *jiahua* which literally means adding flowers. For a discussion of improvisation in contemporary Chinese music, see Wang (2016). Interestingly, improvisation was also more widely found in Western art music before the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and is slowly being reintroduced in contemporary music education (Hill 2017).

<sup>38</sup> There are different degrees of improvisation in traditional Chinese musical genres: such as folk singing traditions with improvised lyrics (e.g., hua'er and shan'ge), contemporary solo instrumental music with added ornaments, and variations in operas with regional features.

for their intercultural improvisations. Although some of them started to improvise soon after immigrating, most of these musicians were hesitant to try it. For example, lacking knowledge and experience of improvisation, the ruan player Zhimin Yu was prejudiced against improvisation when she was an occupational musician in the China Broadcasting Chinese Orchestra between 1976-1986. She said “I misunderstood it as something for those who cannot read music. I really thought so” (Yu, personal interview, Jun. 9, 2019).<sup>39</sup> However, most Chinese instrumentalists in this study accepted improvisation and incorporated it into their musical practices after trying it with non-Chinese musicians. Yu indicated that she later realized that there is great skill involved in improvising, and she has been developing her improvisational abilities since moving to Canada in 1990. There are three major forms of intercultural improvisation that my consultants practice in North America: jazz, in-score improvisation, and free improvisation.

When speaking of improvisation, many people think of jazz. In part because of its well-known history and popularity, jazz is more acceptable to many Chinese musicians in comparison to other improvisational genres, such as experimental and free improvisation. Many Chinese I interviewed, including Jun Xie, Mei Han, and Lan Tung, have worked with jazz musicians. Some of my consultants consider jazz an introductory musical practice used to learn various improvisational techniques. For instance, the yangqin player Jun Xie said that studying jazz was a bridge for him to learn the culture of improvisation in general. Further, he believes knowing improvisation was also necessary for communicating with American musicians (Xie, personal interview; Feb. 16, 2019). Xie learned jazz mainly by analyzing online videos of jazz masters and collaborating with local jazz musicians while he was visiting Murfreesboro in 2018. He invited the jazz band New Silk Road Explorers to perform at a music festival hosted by Wuhan

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<sup>39</sup> 我以前对这个有误解，我以为根本就不识谱的人才会即兴的，我真的以前就是这么想的。

Conservatory of Music in 2019, during which he learned a lot about jazz from band member Jonathon Wires, a bass player, composer, and educator. Compared to other improvisational genres, jazz is based on more codified rules and principles such as idiomatic formal structures, chord progressions, and modes. Indeed, its technical nature is another reason why some of my consultants find jazz to be a respectable and intelligible genre of improvisation.

My fieldwork demonstrates that many newly composed pieces of music for Chinese instruments, especially those written for intercultural orchestration, include improvisational sections. As Western composers who have been working with Chinese instrumentalists for several decades, both Mark Armanini and John Oliver advocate musicians' initiatives in their music, which is often achieved through improvisation. By adding improvisational sections, Armanini and Oliver hope to leave space for Chinese musicians both to communicate with the music and to express themselves. In addition, in-score improvisation has also been widely used in my consultants' arrangements of traditional music.

Because of its wild openness and spontaneity, free improvisation has been a controversial form in the Chinese music community. Some musicians love it, while others reject it. Unlike jazz, in which improvisation is based on composed melodic themes and harmonic structures, unstructured free improvisation is initially harder for some Chinese musicians to accept. For instance, Mei Han was hesitant the first time Randy Raine-Reusch asked her to do free improvisation on the zheng in 1998. She said, "No, [I don't know how to improvise], I only read music. Everything has to be on a piece of paper, has to be scored for me" (Han 2013, 235). Later, she played a memorized piece by using the same fingering on the zheng but in a different key; she felt free and sensed the expressive power of improvisation. Since then, free improvisation has become an important musical practice for Han. In this study, many experienced Chinese instrumentalists indicated that free improvisation requires even more musical competence than



scored music to support a good musical flow. For example, the multi-instrumentalist Zhusong Du enjoys free improvisation over other musical practices because he believes it “fully presents one’s musical techniques and brings out imaginations” (Du, personal interview, Jan. 31, 2019).<sup>40</sup> I agree that, compared to jazz and in-score improvisations, free improvisation certainly offers Chinese musicians more freedom to express themselves.

### 3.4.2 Forming and Expressing Subjectivities

As a young person and new immigrant, the zheng player Dailin Hsieh hopes her Canadian audience can feel her personal expressions in the music rather than taking the performance purely as a sonic presentation. She said, “people are easily attracted by the nice atmosphere created by the zheng. However, what I really want the audience to feel is not the instrument per se, but the expressions I send out with the zheng during the playing” (Hsieh, personal interview, Jun. 12, 2019).<sup>41</sup> She believes improvisation has helped her achieve this goal, stating that “if a good player makes the best of improvisation, it can present her personal characteristics” (ibid.).<sup>42</sup> By adding noise and other non-traditional sonic elements, Hsieh challenges the stereotypical impressions of Chinese musical performance.

What makes improvisation an ideal musical practice for those Chinese instrumentalists to express themselves? Perhaps it is precisely because, at least in some contexts, it is perceived as transgressive. Critiquing structuralist semiotics, the philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1980) states that meaning is identified within transgressions between order and its subversion. Kristeva (1984) makes a distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic: the semiotic as the

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<sup>40</sup> 可以把个人的技术和想象发挥地淋漓尽致。

<sup>41</sup> 大家是会被古筝的那种好像美好氛围吸引...可是我自己最希望别人感受到的, 其实对于我来说并不是古筝这个乐器本身, 就是因为我在弹这个古筝, 然后我跟古筝的结合传递出去的信息。

<sup>42</sup> 如果一个号的演奏家能够好好发挥即兴, 它是可以表现出她个人的特色。

maternal, showing the speaker's inner drives and impulses, and the symbolic as the paternal, associated with the masculine, the law, and structure. She argues that "the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he [sic] produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (24). Drawing on Kristeva, Matthew Sansom (2007) contends that the interactions between different elements in improvisation, such as musical objects, emotional content, and the playing ambience, constitute a series of continua (e.g., intuitive and intellectual responses), which signify the interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic. In improvisation, the musician simultaneously seeks and denies stable symbolic ordering, and real-time exploration of the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic is experienced. Such interactions contribute to ongoing self-construction and representation while playing. New musical ideas or hidden musical pulses are brought out by converting the external social forces into sonic variations, and in turn, those unveiled inner expressions continuously receive the pressure of being judged by players based on conventional musical rules. This process contributes to the formation and expression of musicians' subjectivities. Many of my consultants characterize such negotiations as "feeling freedom," because they subvert preset musical logic and rules.

However, it can be a challenge for Chinese instrumentalists to counter rooted musical logics and rules they gained from years of conventional musical training. One example for most Chinese improvisers is to unconsciously default to pentatonic melodies. Geling Jiang said "when Chinese musicians improvise, we easily play into a Chinese musical style. We are afraid of making mistakes, and it should not be like that" (Jiang, personal interview, Jul. 17, 2019).<sup>43</sup> The erhu player Nicole Ge Li had the same thought,

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<sup>43</sup>我们中国人弹即兴，经常弹着弹着就进到中国音乐里面去了。好像觉得我们生怕弹错一个音或者怎么样，其实不是这样的。

这方面我觉得中国人稍微比较缺一点。如果我做这个improvisation，很多出来就会变成五声的...这点实际上我觉得比较烦，因为其实我本身可以拉很多很多音的，然后我所有的新作品是各种调的。但是你要让我自己随便拉几句我就会知道，中国学出来的有多局限。

I think Chinese musicians generally lack experience in improvisation... When I do improvisation, the notes naturally come out pentatonic... It annoys me. Because I can play many [non-pentatonic] notes and many new compositions that I premiered are in different keys. But if you ask me to randomly play something, I would immediately notice how limited the education I received in China was. (Li, personal interview, May. 16, 2019)

Encountering a conventional musical mindset, Chinese improvisers also try to break out of it and follow inner pulses, which requires not only a full commitment to the playing but also no judgments about what to play and what has just been played. This breaks the rules of classical performance practice, which many Chinese instrumentalists find hard to achieve. Starting to improvise, Mei Han (2013) found the most demanding part was “letting go and feeling free” and she felt that she “was learning to become a musician all over again.” Despite all the challenges, Han indicated that “free improvisation gradually helped me to break the cultural and psychological barriers that prevented me from expressing my own voice” (237). Similarly, Haiqiong Deng, another zheng player, states,

刚开始弹的时候我就发现，你可能觉得是不是这个不好那个不好。然后你一听的时候。哇，这些是我弹的。哇，我可以弹成这样，古筝可以发出这样的声响。我觉得improvisation，当然它肯定是spontaneous，但是它也是一个让你在这个moment这个时候让你发现who you are，一个self-discovery的过程。

I found that when you started to improvise, you may think this or that was not good at the beginning. Then you listened to it [the recording and thought], wow, these were played by me; wow, I could play like this; the zheng could make such sounds. In my opinion, improvisation is certainly spontaneous, but it also makes you find who you are at that moment. It is a process of self-discovery. (Deng, personal interview, Mar. 8, 2019)

Ingrid Monson (1998) contends that improvisation is “a process simultaneously musical, personal, and cultural” (163). If conventional musical performances represent the previous musical training Chinese musicians had in the centralized political and educational system in China, improvisation serves as a new musical and social adventure that they embark on in the Western world. Improvising is not only a self-discovery process but also a self-opening challenge. When Chinese musicians embrace improvisation, they are often prepared to get into the swing of local music communities. Through spontaneous playing, Chinese instrumentalists explore their own ways of expressing their complex subjectivities, just like the various routes they take to adapt to their new environments.

### **3.4.3 Empathic Communications Across Difference**

In North America, intercultural improvisation is not only a musical practice but also a way of socializing. As Ingrid Monson (1996) shows in her study of African American jazz, in many cases, metaphorical images (e.g., “improvisation as conversation”) are more communicative and understandable than ordinary analytical language (e.g., “musical exchanges”). In a multicultural society where people’s first languages vary, improvisation provides a great opportunity for Chinese musicians to communicate with others more efficiently through music. Haiqiong Deng said “it is impossible to not improvise in America... It’s their tradition. Everyone wants to grab the instrument and play with you” (Deng, personal interview, Mar. 8, 2019).<sup>44</sup> As discussed above, improvisation makes subjectivities more distinct and sensible in the music, and musicians get to know each other through collaboration. Recalling

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<sup>44</sup>到美国你不可能不improvise。It’s their tradition. Everyone wants to grab the instrument and play with you.

Born, microsocial improvisational interactions such as call and response, solo and accompaniment, or contrapuntal exchanges, establish and develop relationships between players.

Some of my consultants indicated that good musical partners were vital in securing a positive experience of improvisation. After moving to Murfreesboro, Mei Han has improvised less often, not only because of the time constraints of her job as director of the CCMC but also because there are fewer compatible improvisers in the area (I discuss Han and the CCMC in more depth in chapter 4). She states, “you must feel and have a connection to do improv, otherwise you cannot play well. Your collaborative partner is very important, and the width of his/her knowledge and sensibility is very crucial.”<sup>45</sup> To give an example, she highlighted her improvising experience with Howard Levy, an American multi-instrumentalist who played the harmonica with her. While showing me their video, Han said “I like it very much. You can do anything with Howard because his range is very big. Like you were a fish swimming in the ocean, not a pond or river” (Han, personal interview, Feb. 18, 2019).<sup>46</sup> In the video, Levy keeps his eyes closed almost the whole time, listening to Han’s musical variations and feeling her musical pulses. Han takes a quick look at Levy now and then, swinging in rhythm with a pleasant smile on her face. The whole performance feels like a race: Howard begins with high-speed harmonica playing and Han accompanies him with a series of brushing sounds on the zheng; maintaining the rapid tempo, Han then takes over and plays pentatonic melodies with bending notes, and Howard shifts to non-pitched sounds. Finally, Howard dominates again and plays chromatic music, and Han goes back to brushing sounds with added percussive playing. When Han plays some high-pitched melodies,

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<sup>45</sup> Improv 这个东西非得有这种 feel 和 connection 才行，要不然真的玩不起来。你合作的对象很重要，他的 knowledge 和他的 sensibility 有多宽是非常重要的。

<sup>46</sup> 这个我非常喜欢。跟 Howard 这个就是你怎么样都行。他的那个范围已经很大的就是等于你是一个鱼在海洋里游，而不是一个池塘或者河里游。

they end the music fervidly together.<sup>47</sup> With clear exchanges of leadership, the whole musical process is so smooth that it sounds almost pre-composed. While watching it, I feel a sense of oneness through their music and physical bodies that are moving together. It is obvious that they are communicating not only musically, but also through embodied affect, and I was touched by a strong musical and social connection in their collaborative music performance. Through improvisation, Han and Howard could communicate emphatically and freely across their cultural and musical difference.

Because of the spontaneous aspect of improvisation, the interactions between musicians and the audience are also reinforced during the process of improvisational musicking. When I first met Dailin Hsieh in Vancouver in 2019, I had a short conversation with her and thought that she was such a gentle person. During her performance, however, I witnessed a strong and powerful personality through her improvisation. As a zheng player myself, I often compulsively focus on players' finger techniques, precision, and other professional elements when watching a zheng performance. While watching Hsieh's improvisation, I let go of all the conventional judgments and fully put myself into her process of musicking. I remember that I was attracted to the strength and sincerity that I felt in Hsieh's music. Her eyes were focused and determined, her fingers were smoothly controlled, and her whole body was slight, but powerfully moved with the music. At that moment, I had a strong sense of empathy as the music continued. In that space, an intense social interaction happened between Hsieh and me, which significantly enriched my musical experience as an audience member. Compared to listening to a classic zheng performance, her improvisation offered me a different angle to know her and get into her music.

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<sup>47</sup> A short video clip of Mei Han and Howard Levy's improvisation can be viewed on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-bW5dgqgk>

For some musicians, the value of improvisation extends beyond the empathetic communications that it affords. Several of my consultants have built improvisation collectives with musicians from various ethnic backgrounds in part to fight against marginalization of their music cultures, including the aforementioned Qiuxia He's Silk Road Music ensemble and Lan Tung's Sound of Dragon ensemble, who aiming to combine Chinese and Western instruments and aim to break down genre boundaries and challenge stereotypes of Chinese performances. Both He and Tung often include improvisation and traditional Chinese musical elements in their compositions or arrangements, though He's improv focuses mainly on melodies while Lan's on noise.<sup>48</sup> Deborah Wong (2004) similarly illustrates the politics of ethnic minority coalition-building among Asian American and African American musicians through free improvisation. Wong advocates considering "music *as* politics" rather than "the politics of music" (296) and states that "the process of free improvisation... joins the political and the personal" (285). Drawing on Henry Louis Gates (1992), Jr.'s notion of "the cunning trap that practically guarantees that the marginalized culture [glorified by the left] will remain marginalized" (1992, 184 qtd in Wong 2004, 296), Wong states that "the free improvisations by these musicians are one response to that cunning trap" (296). Adding traditional Chinese musical elements in their intercultural improvisations, He and Tung have contributed to the multicultural scenes and challenged their marginalized and "marked" minority status in North America.

Fighting against stereotypes, however, is a long-term and tough task for diasporic Chinese musicians. As discussed in chapter 2, improvisation is an important part of traditional Chinese music, but it has been widely ignored in contemporary Chinese music education. When I asked flute player Mark McGregor about his collaboration with Chinese musicians in the Sound of

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<sup>48</sup> Watch music videos of Silk Road Music at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvH1cTjBHe9SF8YOk4UAXaw>, and Sound of Dragon Ensemble's music at <https://www.youtube.com/user/SoundofDragonSociety>.

Dragon Ensemble, he emphasized the importance of improvisation in their intercultural playing and said, “I think improvisation is an important part of traditional Chinese music... it’s not something where I’ve been trained. People who are trained like me who play in orchestras, they never have to improvise.” McGregor was assuming a folk-style Chinese music that is freer and implicitly less sophisticated than Western scored music. Although he did use the word “traditional” when talking about Chinese music, what he was referring to is the music of his conservatory-trained Chinese colleagues. Chinese musicians in the Sound of Dragon Ensemble, however, had never practiced improvisation until they came to North America. Lan Tung, the artistic director of that ensemble and the one who invited McGregor to improvise with the group, only started to learn improvisation in 2000 when she established Proliferasian, a Canadian fusion band that performs both compositions and improvisations. The erhu player Nicole Ge Li and ruan player Zhimin Yu also did not improvise until they came to Canada. When I informed McGregor that Chinese instrumentalists do not learn improvisation in China, he was surprised and said with an incredulous look, “isn’t it interesting?” (McGregor, personal interview, May. 30, 2019). I was surprised by his stereotypical impression of his Chinese collaborators after several years of working with Sound of Dragon. And it is ironic that Sound of Dragon, a fusion ensemble established to challenge Asian stereotypes, has such cultural misunderstandings among its members. McGregor’s case shows us that it is still a severe task for Chinese instrumentalists to make others understand their music and themselves in the West, and intercultural collaborations do not necessarily overturn these stereotypes.

As a spontaneous musical practice, improvisation has been a friendly arena for many Chinese instrumentalists to voice out their individual subjectivities and communicate with other musical cultures. Through learning and practicing different forms of improvisation in North America, Chinese musicians in this study have opened themselves to new sociocultural



environments and expanded their musical palettes in North America. George Lewis (2004) defines improvised music as a “social location” and states that “working as an improviser in the field of improvised music emphasizes not only form and technique but individual life choices as well as cultural, ethnic, and personal location” (149). For Chinese musicians, improvisation serves as such a location where they can navigate internal and external conflicts that have emerged along their diasporic musical journeys.

## 4 Diasporic Subjectivities and Transnational Musical Collaborations

In the age of increasing globalization that began in the mid-1960s, the world has witnessed a new migration phenomenon based on the opportunities afforded by the global flow of trade and people across (more) open borders (Ma 2003). In this optimistic conception of migration, people migrate for a variety of reasons (e.g., work, marriage, education), and shuttling between different countries becomes routine, especially those who work for transnational business. Against this “new migration,” as has become increasingly evident in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is massive, forced migration due to war and environmental catastrophe, along with an inhospitable hardening of national borders. The ideals of globalization must be tempered in the face of renewed protectionism and nationalism (Agwu 2021; Bloch and Donà 2018; Mansbach 2021). Nevertheless, the Chinese instrumentalists in this study are products of the globalization spirit that animated the turn of the millennium. In this chapter, I focus on the formation of Chinese diasporic subjectivities through immigration and transnational musical collaboration in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In 2017, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimated there were 10 million international migrants from China with main destination countries including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Chinese have a long history of migration to North America. As Tingting Elle Li and Bob McKercher (2016) state, there were three major migration waves between China and North America corresponding with the following periods: Gold Rush (1840-1900), Post World War II/Post

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.asp>.

China Civil War (1945-1978), and Post Open-Door Policy (1979-present). The first migration wave was related to the California Gold Rush and railway construction; the second occurred because of war, and people left China temporarily, hoping to return once the political situation stabilized; the most recent migration wave has been shaped by well-educated Chinese immigrants searching for a better quality of life, advanced education, and more employment opportunities. The Chinese instrumentalists in this study all came to North America after 1979 and were thus affected by the Open-Door Policy. Under this policy, China reformed its native economic systems and opened its economic market to the world (Wu 2005). With frequent transnational exchanges, more people who were not satisfied with the social and political situation in China found opportunities to move to other countries. Some of my consultants, such as Chen Tao and Qiuxia He, had a difficult time living in turbulent China and came to North America through music exchange projects.

This chapter examines the migration routes of the Chinese musicians I interviewed and seeks to understand their various identity formations and subjectivities in the diaspora. The first section discusses three early motivations for emigration from China: political and social turmoil, family immigration, and music education and projects. Regardless of what specifically brought them to the West, each of my consultants encountered the challenges of building a new music career in North America. The second section considers musicians' adaptations to their new local cultural environment in terms of adjusting their musical directions and managing their own music business. I address how those musicians have shifted their roles from classical musicians to folk musicians as a way of fitting into multicultural society in North America and establishing themselves professionally.

With the convenience of modern transportation and telecommunication, going back and forth across the Pacific Ocean is almost routine for some of my consultants, including Mei Han

and Nicole Ge Li.<sup>2</sup> As Su Zheng (1994) indicates, “Chinese musicians’ migration from homeland to host country [is] not a once-and-for-all unilateral journey, but the beginning of an ongoing process in building diasporic networks” (276). Following Zheng, the third section examines my consultants’ transnational activities that have been produced, supported, and managed by individual networks, music organizations, and government funding, and discusses the political and economic forces behind them. I argue that no matter what kind of musical form or style Chinese musicians playing traditional Chinese instruments present to the public in Western society, with their Asian physical appearance they are inevitably connected to an ethnic folk musician stereotype. As a result, some Chinese musicians strategically promote their Chineseness and use it to market their performances, while others try to break the stereotypes and present their distinct musical identities and subjectivities to their audience. With increasing participation in intercultural and transnational musical activities, some of my consultants have formed cosmopolitan mindsets within which they no longer feel bound to one country, place, or role. Although a deep theorization of cosmopolitanism is beyond the scope of this thesis, the last section briefly explores issues associated with diasporic identities and subjectivities that these musicians have formed in the West, as well as the nature of their cosmopolitan mindsets in the globalized society.

#### **4.1 The Routes to North America**

With different experiences and backgrounds, the Chinese instrumentalists in this study immigrated to North America under various circumstances. Their migration was motivated by personal reasons as well as broader social and political forces in both the place of origin and the

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<sup>2</sup> Note that my fieldwork took place before the global pandemic that began in 2020 and was still disrupting international travel in late 2021.

country of destination. For those who came to North America before 2000, especially after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the main reason was the political and social turmoil in China at that time, which impacted their personal lives in a multitude of ways. Although they loved their homeland, they felt that North America offered greater freedom and a more peaceful quality of life at that time. In the twenty-first century, many Chinese musicians have come to North America for educational or performance opportunities and have chosen to stay after completing their degrees or contracts. Several musicians have brought their children along, hoping to provide them with a healthier environment. By focusing on a number of case studies, this section explores the various immigration routes of Chinese instrumentalists in my study between the 1980s and 2010s.

#### **4.1.1 Political and Social Turmoil in China**

Qiuxia He came to Canada with a Chinese musical troupe to perform at the Vancouver Folk Festival in 1989. She chose not to return to China and has been living in Canada ever since. According to He, a significant event occurred in China just before she left that compelled her not to return. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1989, Hu Yaobang, former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, passed away. Thousands of students marched to Tiananmen Square to participate in Hu's memorial service, and the mourning eventually escalated into the Tiananmen Square Protests, protesting government corruption and calling for democracy. The Chinese government sent soldiers to forcibly put an end to the demonstrations, resulting in the death or wounding of several thousand people (Pye 1990). In Chinese official textbooks, this event is called "Political Disturbances in 1989" (1989 政治风波), and is described as anti-party and anti-socialist activities that were dominated by bourgeois liberalists. Given the chance to stay out of

the turmoil, He finally decided to stay in Canada as “a way of avoiding facing what’s going on in China.” At that time, He was 25 years old and had a husband in Xi’an and a job as a teacher at the Xi’an Academy of Music. Despite these ties, she still decided not to return. She had only 60 dollars in her pocket and did not speak English. The trauma she had experienced in China made the decision necessary for her. As she explained, “If you were in that period, you would understand the sentiment... June 4<sup>th</sup> was like a cut to everybody’s throat for that generation. Everything was dead after that. There was no food, and nothing left for China” (Qiuxia He, personal interview, Jul. 5, 2019). Because the Canadian government issued a special immigration permit to Chinese students and teachers who wanted to stay in Canada, He was granted status as a permanent resident right away; Canada’s openness to immigration from China at that time was a significant factor in her decision.

In 1993, Chen Tao also immigrated to the United States seeking a better life and personal development. As a young teacher at the Central Conservatory of Music in China, Chen first came to the United States in 1985 when the Asian Society in New York invited him to tour 13 American cities. The last stop on that tour was the East-West Center in Hawaii where the Center’s president, Haoran Zheng, invited Chen to stay as a Ph.D. student, as well as a teaching faculty member. Chen rejected the offer, however, because, at that time, he did not want to leave China. He said to the president, “I play Chinese music and my root is in China... If I leave the root, I don’t think I can get further improvement” (Chen Tao, personal interview, Mar. 22, 2019).<sup>3</sup> Several years later, however, when Chen received another offer to come to New York City as a conductor for the Chinese Music Ensemble of New York, he decided to accept it. Even though he was developing a good music career in China, he gradually found that there were some

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<sup>3</sup>我讲我是搞中国音乐的，我的根是在中国... 我离开这个根的话，我没有办法再来更大的提高。

kinds of “ceiling” which prevented him from continuing professional careers and maintaining peaceful personal life. He had a difficult time dealing with the corrupt bureaucracy and intense social atmosphere, and he was not hesitant when he had another chance to come to the US. Because of his excellent reputation as a performer and complimentary testimonials and reviews he received from the New York Times and Herbert von Karajan’s report of his collaboration with the Berlin Philharmonic, Chen was granted a Green Card and permanent residency within half a year after arriving in the United States.

The immigration stories of He and Chen illustrate how political and social forces in the home and host countries led Chinese musicians to move to the West during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Both He and Chen had decent jobs as university teachers and had families in China; leaving their homeland was not an easy decision but they considered it necessary. Faced with a choice between a high-profile music career and a peaceful life, they chose the latter. Chen successfully immigrated to the US because of his previous musical experiences in the West. However, He was forced to flee from the performing troupe and seek political asylum in Canada. Both sought a peaceful life that they could only dream of at a turbulent time in China.

#### **4.1.2 Family Immigration**

Some of the Chinese instrumentalists in this study immigrated to North America because of their families; older musicians immigrated to offer their children a healthier environment to grow up in, and younger musicians either followed their parents or married someone living in North America. In 1980 the Chinese government implemented the one-child policy to control the size of its population (Cameron et al. 2013; Cao et al. 2015). Until the end of 2015 when this

policy was finally eliminated, each Chinese couple could have only one child and this only child became extremely important to the family unit.<sup>4</sup> In Confucian culture, “a good education is the path to upward social mobility as well as the road to realizing an individual’s fullest potential in life” (Zhou and Wang 2019, 1). Therefore, their only child’s education is often the central concern in the family. Some of my consultants immigrated to North America primarily to raise their children in an environment that they considered to be healthier. Chinese musicians have various understandings of what constitutes a “healthy environment,” but generally it indicates a peaceful, equal, and friendly society with safe neighborhoods, good infrastructure, and a well-structured education system. Equating almost everything from the West with advanced Western science and technology, many Chinese people idealized Western society when China was turbulent in the twentieth century.

Geling Jiang immigrated to Canada via the Federal Skilled Worker Program in 2004. She had been working as a researcher specializing in ancient music in a museum in Wuhan. According to Jiang, she did not have friends or relatives in Vancouver before boarding the transpacific flight, but she wanted to raise her son in the West because of its better education and career opportunities. Jiang’s husband stayed in China so he could provide stable financial support for the family, and he visited them once a year. Initially, Jiang did not expect a large market for Chinese music in the West and was prepared to work jobs unrelated to music. But she did not give up on music and finally discovered the British Columbia Chinese Orchestra. Jiang reached out to Bill Lai, the president of the B.C. Chinese Music Association (BCCMA) and volunteered

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<sup>4</sup> There were exceptions to the one-child policy: rural parents were allowed to have a second child if the first one was a daughter, and ethnic minorities were also excluded. Information from BBC News (2000-09-25) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/941511.stm> and Law of the People’s Republic of China on Population and Family Planning (in Chinese) <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c10134/201512/60dcfd3d1a394af6b38e20a4cf165b82.shtml>



to play in the orchestra without a salary. Joining the BCCMA was an important step, and she gradually established herself in the Vancouver music scene. When I met Jiang in 2019, her son was doing undergraduate study in the United States and her husband was still working in China. She indicated that she had thought about going back to China now that her son was grown and she was living in Vancouver by herself. However, she finally chose to stay because she wanted to maintain her music career in Canada.

Like Jiang, Jun Rong came to Canada for her son. In her opinion, the Western education system was more advanced than that of China and the cultural environment in the West would be better for her son's future development. Through the Canadian Immigration Self-employed Program, Rong successfully moved to Vancouver with her family in 2003. Since she has friends and relatives in Vancouver, she already had a support system, and her transition was easier than Jiang's. However, she still had to give up her stable job as an erhu player at the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater and rebuild her music career. In our interview, Rong indicated that it was difficult to adjust to the different cultural environments, including language, eating habits, religious, and social systems. She did not initially enjoy her new life in Vancouver and felt disappointed with her first experience in Western society. Therefore, she kept her job in China for the first two years and returned twice a year to participate in major performances. In 2006, when she realized that her child loved living in Vancouver, she quit her job in China and settled in Canada. Now, she enjoys her life and focuses mainly on erhu teaching in Vancouver.

Some of my consultants immigrated to North America with their parents when they were young and adapted to the new environment more quickly and easily. For instance, Lan Tung came to Canada with her family in 1994 when she was a sophomore at the Chinese Culture University in Taiwan. Her parents had been applying for immigration to Canada through the Self-Employed Program for several years; when they were finally approved, Tung had to give up her

study of the erhu in Taiwan and move with her family. In Vancouver, Tung spent one year learning English in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at Capilano Community College and then re-enrolled as a freshman majoring in music therapy in 1995.<sup>5</sup> With financial support from her family, she quickly established a new life in Vancouver and founded a music ensemble, the Orchid Ensemble, in 1997 as a sophomore at Capilano Community College.

Some Chinese musicians came to North America to form a new family. Dailin Hsieh, for example, married Bruce Qinglin Bai, a Chinese composer who lives in Vancouver, and moved there from Taiwan in 2019. Hsieh indicated that she has never been afraid of moving. Before her marriage, she often traveled to other countries to perform with various music groups, and Vancouver was among the cities she visited most often. Therefore, moving to Canada was not a hard decision for her, and she has continued to maintain connections with musicians and music organizations in Taiwan, in part through teaching students virtually.

During my fieldwork, I was surprised to find that while a substantial number of female Chinese musicians came to North America for reasons related to their children's education and opportunities, that was not often the case for male musicians. It was typically the wife, rather than the husband, who left China to take care of their children in the destination country. One reason, perhaps, is that it was easier for men to secure higher-income work in China. A survey on the status of Chinese women conducted by the All-China Women's Federation in 2011 shows a dramatic difference between the annual income of Chinese men and women (Figure 4.1).

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<sup>5</sup> Capilano Community College became a university in 2008. <https://www.capilanou.ca/about-capu/get-to-know-us/our-history/>

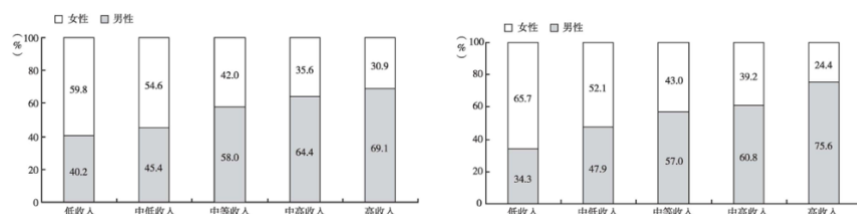


Figure 4.1 The income of Chinese men and women in urban and rural areas in 2011<sup>6</sup>

The left side of the graph shows the differences in income between Chinese men and women working in urban areas, and the right side shows those in rural areas. The dark portion of the columns represents men and the lighter portion women. In each portion, the vertical ordinate denotes different income groups (low, low-middle, middle, middle-high, and high), and the horizontal is for percentage. As shown in the chart, the income of Chinese women is generally lower than men, and the percentage of men in the high-income section is much higher than that of women. Behind female Chinese musicians' sacrifices for the family is also the underlying issue of gender inequality in China. Jiang indicated in our interview that her immigration status and musical achievements in Canada uplifted her position in the family. Three female musicians in this study (Geling Jiang, Zhimin Yu, and Rong Jun) tied their immigrations to childrearing, and they believed that their children did get a better education and more job opportunities in the West. Whether for the sake of their children's development or union with other family members, immigrant Chinese musicians have continuously had to balance family life with their music careers in the West.

<sup>6</sup> This figure comes from the article "Executive Report of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Survey on the Status of Chinese Women" by the All-China Women's Federation in the journal *Women's Studies* in 2011. The 4<sup>th</sup> Survey was conducted on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, and the result is not yet published at the time of writing.

### 4.1.3 Music Education and Projects

Some of my consultants arrived in North America as international students and became permanent residents either during or after completing their studies. Mei Han, for instance, did not plan to immigrate to Canada when she first came to Vancouver in 1996 as a master's student at the University of British Columbia. One year later, she decided to stay. As she explained, "I immediately felt the beauty of Canada after arriving in this land. The first reason was the landscape and culture, and the second was the academic atmosphere, including my supervisor's knowledge level, the library in the university, and courses that challenged me. Every aspect demonstrated Canada as an ideal place, so I decided to immigrate there" (Mei Han, personal interview, Jan. 16, 2019).<sup>7</sup> The Canadian government uses the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) to determine applicants' immigration eligibility. It is a points-based system and people get different points based on the information in their profile, including skills, education, age, and work experience. Only people with the highest points are invited to immigrate. In CRS, Han received a high score for her youth and her educational background, and she successfully became a permanent Canadian resident one year after her arrival.

Between 1975 and 1990, Han worked with the Shenyang Song and Dance Troupe (沈阳军区歌剧团) as well as the Beijing Comrades Song and Dance Troupe (北京战友歌舞团). According to Han, "the [Beijing] troupe began in the 1940s. It had several hundred artists when I was there (dancers, singers, and musicians). It is very much like the army troupes in the Soviet Union ... Many nationally famous artists were at Zhanyou (the Army had the privilege and advantage to recruit top artists)" (Heffley 2021, 158). beginning in the 1980s, however, the use of

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<sup>7</sup> 来了以后当然来了以后当然就立刻感受到加拿大的美好，首先是风景，还有人文，第二从学术来讲，学术的氛围，包括导师的水平，另外就是学校的图书馆，还有课程对自己的挑战。各个方面都觉得加拿大真的是一个非常理想的地方。那时候才决定移民的。

traditional instruments began to recede in these musical troupes because of the growing popularity of pop music and electronic instruments. Han started to re-think her career and proceeded to earn a master's degree in ethnomusicology at the Musical Research Institute of the Chinese Arts Academy (中国艺术研究院音乐研究所), which then led her to pursue further graduate study in ethnomusicology in Canada. The changing cultural climate in China compelled her to shift her focus to academics and find a new direction for her music career. At that time, she was not confident with her English writing ability and chose to repeat a master's degree rather than go directly into the Ph.D. She completed her doctorate at the University of British Columbia in 2013 and developed a flourishing music career in Vancouver while she was studying.

Some Chinese musicians come to North America as invited artists for musical events, and some of these choose to stay long-term. The first time Zhongxi Wu came to the United States was in 1999 when he was invited by Chinese Theatre Works, an organization in New York City, to perform the Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭) in several theatres there.<sup>8</sup> It was a one-year project funded by the American government, but Wu chose not to return to China when the contract ended. He had not enjoyed his musical life in China and had already planned to stay in the United States when he received the offer. As he explained,

人际关系很复杂的.....那个时候移民热，都想逃脱，不想在国内待了。我已经很晚了，之前89年的时候，国内人都想往外跑.....我那个时候在国内就想出来，因为国内参赛我本来拿第一，那别人吹的比你差的也拿了第一，人家这个比赛是人家单位拿的钱人家必须得是第一。那不公平嘛，不公平我就不高兴了。那就找机会出来。

The interpersonal relationships were complicated [in China] ... There was an immigration wave back then, and everybody wanted to flee the country. I was already late, and many people ran away in 1989... I was planning to leave when I was still in China. In a musical

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<sup>8</sup> *The Peony Pavilion* is a romantic kunqu opera written by Tang Xianzu (汤显祖) in 1598. According to Wu, this play was banned in China around the time when he arrived in the US because of the flirtatious lines and skimpy costumes.

competition there, I was supposed to get the first prize, but someone worse than me got it. Because his organization sponsored the competition, and he must be the first. That's not fair, and I was disappointed. So, I was already looking for a chance to get out. (Wu, personal interview, Jul. 1, 2019)

Although Wu came to the United States for a musical contract, like Han, his immigration decision could not be divorced from wider social circumstances. After the Cultural Revolution, and especially following the June Fourth Incident in 1989, China's culture and morale were devastated, and the social climate was unhealthy because of long-standing class struggles. With the rise of popular music, many classical Chinese musicians, including many of my consultants, began to seek opportunities in the West where composers and musicians were fascinated by non-Western musical traditions. The 1990s saw the rise in popularity of "world music" and Western people's interests in "authentic" non-Western musical genres. Many scholars have criticized the emergence of the world music genre as it is often related to issues like neo-colonialization, imperialism, and racism (Frith 2000; Bohlman 2002; Kheshti 2015; Guilbault 1993). Nevertheless, the increasing vogue for non-Western musical traditions offered Chinese musicians more musical opportunities and they felt welcome in Western society, which created a further incentive to emigrate.

Although Chinese musicians' routes to North America have varied, their immigration journeys were similarly triggered by a confluence of social, political, economic, familial, and emotional influences. Leaving their achievements, fame, friends, and even family in China, these musicians faced the uncertain promise of a new country. Many of them visioned a wonderful life and prosperous music career in North America. Only when they settled down, could they experience the real pros and cons of living in the West.

## **4.2 New Life in the West**

Like other ethnic immigrants, Chinese instrumentalists arriving in North America must adapt to a new living environment and look for opportunities to develop their artistry. To make a living, musicians must adapt to local market expectations, such as presenting “authentic” Chinese music, lowering their musical standards, or combining local culture with their musical practices (Chong 2003; Tan 2000; Yung 2009). It may take a long time for professional musicians to mentally accept the reality of their situations, but the Chinese musicians in my study have explored imaginative ways of settling down in North America. Through case studies, this section considers the adaptive processes of Chinese musicians who have continued their music careers and lived their distinct diasporic lives in North America.

### **4.2.1 From Deterritorialization to Reterritorialization**

Although people in the contemporary world are “no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous” (Appadurai 1991, 191), most immigrants still experience a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) when they arrive in a new society and start a new life. As Vytis Čiubrinskas (2015) states, “migration is associated with processes of ethnification, where territorial in-rootedness is maintained transnationally, and reterritorialization of descent, social memory, and heritage is enacted locally” (127). In this study, deterritorialization indicates the radical changes Chinese musicians faced in the West after leaving China, a territory with their native cultural and social systems. On the contrary, reterritorialization represents the various ways that these musicians have developed to adapt to the new environment in North America. Deterritorialization and

reterritorialization occur simultaneously once these musicians start to build a new life in the West.

One of the challenges Chinese musicians, especially new immigrants, face is the significant change in their economic status, which impacts their lifestyles in the West (Chin 2006). Before Chen Tao came to New York in 1993, for instance, he was a young lecturer working at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Due to his excellent performance as both an educator and a musician, the conservatory gave him the salary of an associate professor. At that time, wealthy people in China were called “ten-thousanders” (万元户); Chen was essentially among them, as he could easily make ten thousand yuan in two months from recordings, performances, and other musical activities outside of school.

Since he had toured in Europe and the United States with high-profile performances, Chen believed that with his musical talent and experiences he could build a similarly prosperous music career in the United States. However, his superior lifestyle receded when he arrived in New York, and he had to take jobs outside the field of music to support himself. He described his experience as follows,

来美国之前在北京音乐学院任职，那是个有着崇高地位的、让人尊敬的生活。可是等你真正到了美国这个地方来生活，普通的社会来讲，人家根本不知道你的艺术。就是你的东西一钱不值，没有人来学，那时候中国人更少，那么你靠什么来为生？这是一个很大的落差……当初来美国的时候，我带了一些钱来，但告诉自己，我要重新开始，哪怕再苦再累，我要重新来做……除了做那个，因为你要生存，我在美国做过外卖的工作，做过制衣厂的工作。然后我还做过出租车的工作，我是limo driver. 一直等到十几年前，后来我quit掉了这个limo driver以后我就去学了电脑，然后找了一个电脑工程师，我写软件的工作，一直工作了十几年。

Before coming to the US, I had a respected job and social position as a teacher at the conservatory in Beijing. But when you finally came to the US to live here, [you realized that] nobody knew your art. Your knowledge was worth nothing, and nobody wanted to learn it. There were even fewer Chinese back then, so how could you survive? There was



a psychological gap in my mind... I brought some money with me, but I told myself that I must restart my life no matter how hard it would be... In addition to that [doing music], I used to work as a deliveryman and as a laborer at a garment factory. I was also a limo driver until more than a decade ago, and then I started to learn computers. After quitting the limo driver job, I found a full-time job as a computer engineer, which I did for more than ten years. (Chen, personal interview, Mar. 22, 2019)

Although it was harder than he expected, Chen never regretted his decision to immigrate.

In his opinion, he could not have done many music projects, such as his collaborations with composer Tan Dun, if he were still in China, and he has been enjoying the freedom of making art in the United States. Besides, he believes that experiencing the ups and downs enhanced his comprehension of music, society, and life. Five years ago, he quit all his non-music jobs. “I have made enough money and it is unnecessary for me to make more,” Chen said, “my wife and I have no children, so it’s no difference between making ten thousand dollars and five thousand. We do not need that much.”<sup>9</sup> Since 2012, Chen has been making a series of free online videos teaching dizi, applying the knowledge he gained from his study with folk masters and in Chinese conservatories, as well as subsequent experiences in North America. He plans to film 100 episodes, each an hour-long, to make it a complete teaching project.

Chen also had to adjust his musical plans to maintain a music career in the United States. The first day after being hired as the conductor of the Chinese Music Ensemble of New York, however, Chen found that his goal of developing professional Chinese music in the US is different and conflict with the director of the Ensemble. In this context, “professional” suggests having a repertoire of sophisticated compositions that require highly skilled, rapid hand technique. Initially, Chen was upset since he had trained to become a professional. Years later, Chen came to understand that those Chinese music lovers usually don’t want the music that the

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<sup>9</sup> 我觉得钱赚够了... 再多钱对于我来将没有意义了... 我跟我太太没有孩子, 所以呢, 我觉得我们赚再多的钱没有区别, 赚十万跟赚五万没有区别, 因为花不了那么多。

Chinese consider to be “professional.” Instead, what they prefer is interesting and playable music that is “charmingly Chinese.” As a result, he adjusted his musical goals to meet the requirements of local music markets.

However, Chen did not give up his dream of pursuing a professional music career in the US. In 1998, Chen established the Melody of Dragon, a New York-based Chinese music ensemble and non-profit organization with the goal of “build[ing] a bridge of musical and cultural exchange between China and the United States.”<sup>10</sup> He has actively maintained musical connections with China, and regularly plays on radio and performs in mainland China and Taiwan. In addition to playing the dizi, he is also a composer, conductor, and music educator. He posted his first internet dizi lesson at “Two Measures at a Time” in 2002 and has given workshops, lectures, and music lessons in both China and the United States.<sup>11</sup> Although “hustle culture” is part of being an independent musician in a gig economy regardless of positionality or genre, it works on Chinese (and other ethnicized) musicians in a specific way. In addition to seeking multiple ways of making a living, my consultants have to manage their minoritized subjectivities: complying with cultural expectations related to ethnicity and multiculturalism is essential to their survival in North America. In the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, Chen has strategically explored his ways of learning the local culture and positioning himself as an ethnic musician between China and the United States.

#### **4.2.2 Re-developing Music Careers and Performing as a “Folk” Musician**

According to many Chinese instrumentalists that I have spoken with, there are different “rules” for being a good musician in China and the West. Although musicians have various

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about Melody of Dragon, see <https://www.melodyofdragon.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> Chen Tao’s online pedagogical products are available at <http://www.2measures.com/>.

opinions on what these “rules” are, most of them indicated a difference in the direction of their musical development after moving to the West. This feeling often emerges when Chinese musicians perform in unfamiliar contexts, encounter different appreciations of music, and manage their own music business in the West.

Ethnomusicologist and zheng virtuoso Mei Han argues that, in China, “the Western perspective of virtuosity combined with the Chinese notion of xuanji [炫技, showing off skills] has become the foundation of a new performance aesthetic for professional Chinese musicians” (Han 2013, 220). Han’s husband and musical partner Raine-Reusch also commented in our interview that many Chinese instrumentalists are experts in “the art of performance” but not nuanced in “the art of music.” He criticized the exaggerated body movements and over-emphasized attention on technique in contemporary concerts in China. Chinese composer and scholar Gao Weijie (1988) has a different opinion about the relationship between technical virtuosity and musicality. Referring to nineteenth-century pianist Franz Liszt’s famous virtuosity, Gao discusses how musical presentation and appreciation are tied to technique. He argues that virtuosity, which requires perseverance, effort, and empathy, represents not only the beauty of humanity but also the beauty of form and style in music. However, Gao indicates that players should not over-emphasize technique in performance even though it is an important part of the music. As pursuing high professionalism and virtuosity has become a trend in the Chinese musical field, it is crucial for Chinese musicians to balance technical showmanship with expressiveness.

Many Chinese musicians in this study have found a different performing context in North America. For instance, Dailin Hsieh used to be concerned with outfits, makeup, and other extra-musical elements of stage presence in her concerts because the audiences in Taiwan expect

performers to be beautiful and elaborately dressed. After immigrating to Canada, however, she started to “loosen up” and set aside such constraints. She said,

在这里演出跟在台湾演出的最大的一个感受就是在台湾大家都穿的很漂亮，生怕比别人丑一样。一定要化妆，弄的很那个……来这以后原来觉得那都不是重点啊，那确实本来就不是重点。我觉得文化习惯不同，就是你要在台湾，你穿的很素，随便扎个马尾上去了，底下人还觉得你好像很敷衍，其实我是很认真来的。

I feel the biggest difference between performing here and in Taiwan is that everybody is usually showily dressed in Taiwan, almost like a beauty competition. You must wear stage make-up and elegant costumes... After coming here, I realize that it is not the key point for a performance, it should indeed not be the focus. I think there are different cultural habits. If you wear casual clothes with a loose ponytail on stage in Taiwan, audiences will judge you as being perfunctory even though you are a serious performer. (Hsieh, personal interview, Jun. 12, 2019)

Professional musicians in China are trained in a “classical” style of concert performance. Here, I use the word “classical” to refer to a formal concert tradition originating from Western art music, and “folk” to describe the kind of community-based, traditional performance not usually found in concert halls. Before the music reforms in the twentieth century, most Chinese musicians were community-based folk musicians. Contemporary conservatory-trained musicians most often perform in formal concert halls. Chinese traditional instruments are indeed “classical” from the perspective of both Chinese performers and audiences. In North America, however, Chinese music is one of many ethnic forms of music that are marginalized, and Chinese musicians must adjust their performance practice to be “folk” enough to fit into a Western multicultural music scene. Compared to musical performances in China, Chinese instrumentalists find themselves more often in casual folk performance settings rather than sophisticated classical ones in the Western world. For example, although Geling Jiang enjoys her musical life in Canada, she felt

upset at the early stage of immigration by the treatment she received during a performance. She said,

我在国内演出从来不自己拿琴。我的琴都是放到那以后有人给打包，你直接出场往那里一坐，有人都给你弄好了。后来到这边，你得自己背着琴，拎个琴架，丝袜都不敢穿，因为怕刮坏了。

When I was in China, I never set up the instrument myself. My instrument would be unpacked by a work crew, and you just came out and sat down, everything was ready for you. After coming to Canada, I have to carry the instrument and the stands [to the stage], and I don't wear silk stockings because I am afraid to snag them [while moving my instrument].

Like most musicians in North America, Chinese instrumentalists not only need to carry their instruments but also, in many cases, do their own recording and administrative tasks. However, these musicians often do not receive training in the business aspects of music (such as grant writing, booking gigs, and promotion) as many Western musicians do in their university studies. One significant reason is the different cultural policies within each country. Various levels of public and private funding (such as arts councils and foundations) are important resources that Chinese musicians have access to in North America which requires musicians to write grants, promote themselves, and organize musical activities. On the contrary, most musical events in China are organized and regulated directly or indirectly by the government and institutes, and there are few personal or private musical activities, especially large concerts and festivals. Although professional musicians in Canada and the United States do have access to some public funding projects, most of them could not make a living from grants. As Damhnait Doyle indicated in the panel about Canadian musicians' living conditions at *Playback* on October

17, 2017, “musicians, technically and for a very long time, have been undervalued.”<sup>12</sup> Many of my consultants had to develop entrepreneurial strategies to promote their music, and doing non-music jobs was almost inevitable for most musicians to make a living in North America. Lan Tung was the only person in this project earning a living just from doing musical performances, though she had to write grants and perform administrative tasks for her non-profit organization Sound of Dragon Society and the Orchid Ensemble. About 80% percent of my consultants indicated that they had to, or used to, spend a lot of time on teaching to make a living. Most of them did non-music jobs at the early stage of immigration, and although they could be more focused on music-making after gaining fame in the West, diversified development is still necessary for a sustainable economic existence.

If the unbalanced power relationship between China and the West in the twentieth century caused sweeping reforms in the Chinese musical arena, the “ethnification” of immigrant Chinese musicians from “classical” musicians in China to “folk” musicians in North America is an outcome of this power asymmetry. Immigrant Chinese musicians not only learn to adapt to the local music culture of their new homes but must also try to meet the expectations of local people, including non-Chinese musicians, composers, organizers, and audiences. While fulfilling their artistic pursuits, they must also meet the requirements of private and public funders. In a foreign society with limited funding resources, Chinese musicians must explore multiple (musical and non-musical) ways to make a living. Regardless of their musical backgrounds, these instrumentalists learn to “perform” their new roles as folk musicians and diversify after arriving in North America.

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<sup>12</sup> More information about the panel and its live discussions is available at <https://musiccanada.com/news/playback-2017-panel-canadian-musicians-discuss-how-the-value-gap-affects-their-ability-to-earn-a-living-from-music/>.

### 4.3 Transnational Musical Pathways in the Globalized World

Some of my consultants have participated in ongoing transnational routes between China and North America, even after living in the West for several decades. Ruth Finnegan (2013) uses the term “pathways” to refer to the routes musicians creatively tread across overlapping and intersecting music worlds in a city. Drawing on Howard Becker’s (1982) *Art Worlds*, Finnegan states that the idea of multiple music ‘worlds’ “points us to the sustained and systematic notion of what otherwise might look haphazard and individual. Equally important, it gets us away from the idea that there is just one way in which music can be enacted” (180). Finnegan’s demonstrations of musicians’ pathways across various music worlds and the “plurality of equally authentic local musics” are helpful in this study of Chinese instrumentalists’ music-making in the diaspora, especially their transnational musical activities. In the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, Chinese musicians build musical and non-musical “pathways” across various social and political circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, transnationalism gained attention among social scientists, and more studies have been done in recent decades (Chaloyan 2017). Nina Glick Schiller et al. (1992) conceptualize transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (1). They suggest distinguishing transmigrants from migrants, with the former simultaneously occupying social, political, economic, and cultural spaces across borders. Based on this definition, Astghik Chaloyan (2017) states that although cross-border connections are important components of transnationalism, they do not necessarily need to be sustained and frequent. Few of my consultants have regular or

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<sup>13</sup> Immigrant Chinese musicians may have transnational musical connections with various countries. This research has focused mainly on their transpacific musical activities between China and North America.

frequent transpacific connections, but many of them maintain certain (e.g., professional and family) ties to China.

The rapid development of telecommunications and advanced information technologies over the past few decades has also made transnational collaborative music-making easier to pursue for musicians in different countries (Kane 2011; Orozco 2005; Vertovec 2004). As Vertovec (2009) explains, modern transnationalism is specific because it has become a type of consciousness, which points out an individual's awareness of simultaneous attachments to different countries. Through transnational musical pathways, some of my consultants, especially the first-generation immigrant Chinese musicians, have formed what Chaloyan (2017) calls "the feeling and awareness of dual belonging" (38). It is a simultaneous and boundaryless combination of experience, memory, and sentiments in China and the host country. For instance, the zheng player Haiqiong Deng has lived with her husband and two children in the United States for almost two decades. When I asked her the question about belonging, she said that both China and America are home. It is not only a sense of cultural "in-betweenness" but also a simultaneous attachment to both countries.

Governmental powers (of both home and host countries) play an important role in facilitating Chinese musicians' transnational musical collaborations, especially large-scale projects. In North America, immigrant Chinese musicians participate in musical activities that are available and suitable in the local music scene, and a significant number of these events are funded by the Canadian and American governments. In her article "Imagining Kin: Cold War Sentimentalism and the Korean Children's Choir," Susie Woo (2015) examines how the choir formed by adopted Korean children is employed by the American government for political and social effects: politically showing American democracy and establishing international fame for the United States, and socially "recast[ing] wartime violence and postwar dominance as



American altruism” (48). The use of the political strategy known as “soft power” has also been deployed by the Chinese government in its relations with the US and Canada. In his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, political scientist Joseph Nye (1990) coined the term “soft power” to contrast the concept of hard power. While hard power often involves the coercive usage of military and economic means (Campbell and O’Hanlon 2006; Wilson 2008), soft power influences other nations’ behaviors through persuasion and attraction (Cooper 2004; Nye 2004). To improve the country’s cultural soft power, the Chinese government has established Confucius Institutes, which among other projects, promoted the work of Chinese musicians in North America since 2004. The cultural exchanges through Confucius Institutes have improved knowledge of each culture, reduced trade costs, and increased information exchange between China and collaborating countries (Li et al. 2020). The increase in the number of government-sponsored musicians and ensembles coming to North America has helped some immigrant Chinese musicians build transnational connections through collaborations with these visiting musicians.

Transnational and intercultural music-making are often connected. Just as Western music was introduced to China rapidly during the nineteenth century, Chinese musical elements, such as the pentatonic scale and bending notes, are now permeating world music systems because of growing transnational and intercultural musical exchanges (Yoshihara 2007; Zheng 2010). It is common to see a transnational concert include an intercultural program that relates to the local music culture. For instance, when Vancouver-based fusion band Proliferasian collaborated with the Little Giant Chinese Chamber Orchestra from Taiwan in 2014, their performances strategically combined jazz and Chinese traditional musical elements to generate a unique sound

suitable for the audiences in both Vancouver and Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> In turn, intercultural musical activity is usually associated with current or historical transnational travels. Nevertheless, I argue that there are significant differences between these two kinds of activity. As discussed in chapter 3, I understand “intercultural” music making to emphasize a fusion of music cultures that nevertheless retains strong individual features and is created out of mutual influence and intertwined relationships among representatives of diverse musical traditions. I use the term “transnational” here to focus on musical exchanges across national boundaries that are facilitated mainly through institutional powers, such as universities, the Confucius Institutes, and Canada Council for the Arts. Intercultural musicking emphasizes musicians’ negotiations of subjectivity with other musicians within a particular place. Transnational musicking puts the emphasis on institutional structures that mediate border crossing and musicians’ mobility. Such institutional forms play an essential role in promoting Chinese musicians’ transnational musical activities in the globalized world.

In the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, diasporic Chinese musicians actively participate in Chinese music’s globalization process through transnational musical exchanges and intercultural music-making in the diaspora (Lau 2017). Since the 1990s, globalization has emerged as a controversial topic in cultural studies (Hillhouse 2013). According to Stokes (2004), early theories of globalization and music can be divided into two major viewpoints: those of Veit Erlmann (1994; 1996; 1999) and those of Mark Slobin (1992; 1993) are representative examples. On the one hand, Erlmann’s vision of globalization is rooted in postcolonialism and imperialism, in which Western culture dominates throughout the world through mystified explorative relationships with non-Western cultures. Slobin (1992), on the

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<sup>14</sup> More information about *The Giant Project*, the collaboration between Proliferasian and the Little Giant Chinese Chamber Orchestra is available at <https://www.lantungmusic.com/project/giant-project/>.

other hand, is resistant to interpreting globalization as systematic. He pays attention to local “micromusical” (49) scenes, and following Arjun Appadurai (1990), argues that there is no single power that can control global cultural flows. More recent studies have mediated between these two perspectives and grappled with the concept of interconnected global networks and people’s diverse ways of experiencing “global complexity” (Urry 2003). As Hillhouse (2013) claims, “globalization theory now mobilizes a range of interrelated concepts such as transnationalism, translocalism, glocalization, cosmopolitanism, and individualization” (72). The various dimensions, including the individual, social, cultural, and political aspects of Chinese musicians’ diasporic lives discussed throughout this dissertation exemplify the complexity of globalization.

In examining the diasporic music-cultural flows of Chinese immigrants in America, Su Zheng (1994; 2010) points out three influential forces: individual networks, music organizations, and governmental powers. Zheng views immigration as a historical process of “displacement and deterritorialization of culture” and argues that “a complex Chinese ethnic music subculture has emerged as a unique American phenomenon inscribed in an interconnected global system” (284). Through case studies, this section examines various transnational musical pathways that my consultants have developed between China and North America. Tracing their social networks and funding resources, it explores some of the entangled forces that facilitate transnational musical exchanges.

#### **4.3.1 Personal Pre- and Post-migration Networks**

Among the various transnational ties, personal pre- and post-migratory social networks—including families, friends, colleagues, conservatory alumni, and teachers—are significant factors contributing to immigrant musicians’ return to China.

After living in North America for more than two decades, Mei Han, for instance, has built several transnational pathways across the Pacific. As noted above, in 1996, Han came to Canada to pursue her second master's degree (2000) and later a Ph.D. (2013) in ethnomusicology at the University of British Columbia while establishing a career as a zheng performer in Vancouver. After graduation, she served as visiting assistant professor at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio from 2013 to 2015, and subsequently took up a position as a faculty member at Middle Tennessee State University in 2015 where she is Director of the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC). In addition to promoting musical exchange with expert Chinese musicians, she has brought many transnational activities to China through her social networks. Randy Raine-Reusch, a Canadian multi-instrumentalist and Han's husband, plays an important role in Han's post-migratory musical life. In 1998, Han met Raine-Reusch and learned improvisation from him, which altered her musical trajectory in Canada. Since then, Han has dedicated herself to various innovative and intercultural music projects, such as her duo Distant Wind with Raine-Reusch that combines Chinese musical traditions with music from other global cultures and jazz. In 2003, Raine-Reusch initiated a concert for Han in China premiering a zheng concerto with the China Philharmonic Orchestra, one of China's most prestigious orchestras; this was the first time Han had returned to China as a musician since moving to Canada.<sup>15</sup>

That musical collaboration in 2003 was indeed "transnational": the zheng concerto *When Cranes Fly Home* (2001) was composed by John Sharpley, an American composer living in Singapore; the zheng soloist, Mei Han, was a Chinese immigrant living in Canada; and the premiere was arranged with the China Philharmonic Orchestra in China. One week before the performance, Han traveled to Singapore to practice with Sharpley to better understand the

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<sup>15</sup> A video clip of the performance can be viewed on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=u3TjNcAeWXU&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=u3TjNcAeWXU&feature=emb_logo)

composition and his ideas about the music. She then went to Beijing to rehearse with the China Philharmonic Orchestra and perform at the Baoli Theatre, one of the most prestigious venues in China. That concert enmeshed her previous memories and experiences of China with her new life as a zheng player in the West. For Han, coming back as an “overseas Chinese zheng player in Canada” (旅加箏演奏家) was meaningful and emotional. She said, “because this [zheng] is a Chinese instrument, it is the most significant thing for me to bring it home” (Mei Han, personal interview, Apr.11, 2019).<sup>16</sup>

According to Han, *When Cranes Fly Home* was the first original multi-movement concerto written for the zheng since previous concertos were arrangements based on existing compositions. At that time, Western classical music was prioritized and called “serious music” (严肃音乐) in China, and there were still people who considered Chinese traditional instruments underdeveloped compared to Western instruments. Han playing a Chinese traditional instrument in the context of a symphony orchestra caused a big stir in China. After the concert, the Chinese music journal *Universal Music* (环球音乐) interviewed Han, Sharpley, and Raine-Reusch. The first question the reporter asked Han was about the concerto she had played with the China Philharmonic Orchestra. China had been promoting Western classical music as serious music, but Han had brought a Chinese traditional instrument to play music with the orchestra in a non-Chinese style. Did the composition belong to the category of serious music or not? The answer remained unclear to the Chinese journalists. According to Han, Yang Yang, the conductor of that performance, said to her after the concert that no Chinese zheng performer in China would be able to play the zheng part because the composition contained a degree of rhythmic complexity not generally taught in Chinese conservatories.

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<sup>16</sup> 因为这是个中国乐器。如果能够把这个东西带回家去，实际上是一件对我来讲最有意义的事情。

Han's position at CCMC has offered her more opportunities to participate in transnational musical events, which also requires her a nuanced understanding both of North American culture and Chinese culture (I will give a more detailed analysis in the following sections). Since, in second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Han's daughter D'arcy Han (stage name Han Zi, 涵子, and ZiZi, 子子) had developed a high-profile music career in China as a pop singer, some of Han's transnational musical activities were with ZiZi and Raine-Reusch.<sup>17</sup> For example, in May 2019, they participated in a Chinese TV show called *Everlasting Classics* (经典咏流传), a cultural music program first aired in 2018 and, at the time of writing, is still being produced by CCTV (China Central Television). The show's purpose is to promote classic Chinese poetry by inviting celebrities and ordinary people to sing ancient poems in a modern style. Han's family performance was part of the second season in 2019. They collaborated on the poem "You Came from Home" (君自故乡来) written by Wang Wei in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> During the discussion session after the performance, Raine-Reusch demonstrated several Chinese instruments from his personal collection. In the same year, they participated in the *Grand Display of Chinese Music*, a popular TV show featuring traditional Chinese musical instruments, and performed the Jasmine Medley with Koulun Huang, a famous Taiwanese composer, producer, and pop star. It was a showy performance, and Han had an interesting improvisational interplay with Raine-Reusch on the zheng. They tastefully arranged the popular Chinese folk song *Jasmine* with pop singing, zheng, guitar, and piano playing.<sup>19</sup> There has been a dynamic combination of intercultural and transnational music-making in Han's diasporic life, and her family's innovative intercultural

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<sup>17</sup> Some of Han's family performances can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/user/ZaDiscs>

<sup>18</sup> The show is available on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63UOiIn\\_nH4&list=PL1p-6MFZX-eYNrj1q1QkC3HcKZgXbkC0n](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63UOiIn_nH4&list=PL1p-6MFZX-eYNrj1q1QkC3HcKZgXbkC0n)

<sup>19</sup> The performance video is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3ozbDq8h-U&list=RDh3ozbDq8h-U&start\\_radio=1&t=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3ozbDq8h-U&list=RDh3ozbDq8h-U&start_radio=1&t=1).

musical projects have enriched the contemporary music scenes of traditional Chinese instruments in both North America and China.

The Chinese government treats people of Chinese ethnicity and birth who reside outside of China as *huaqiao* (华侨), meaning “overseas Chinese,” and are proud of the successes they have achieved in Western society. There is a common belief that *huaqiao* have an inseparable cultural bond with China (Wang [1991] 1994; Zheng 2010). With the gradual enhancement of China’s international strength and its openness to overseas *huaqiao*, an increasing number of immigrant Chinese musicians and composers, such as world-renowned composer Tan Dun and pipa player Wu Man, have periodically returned to China in recent decades and developed their music careers there. Some of my consultants have been invited back to China to perform by their former teachers or by conservatories as special guests, including Nicole Ge Li, Xiaodong Wei, and Jun Rong. It is commonly acknowledged among Chinese people that China’s action of learning from the West was part of China’s defeat in the 19<sup>th</sup> century battles with the West, and diasporic Chinese musicians’ success is tacitly understood as the rise of Chinese culture on the world stage—a way of fighting back. The appearance of successful *huaqiao* on stages in China not only shows the connections between Chinese-descended people worldwide but also helps Chinese people gain cultural confidence. Therefore, even though some diasporic Chinese musicians find it hard to re-develop a music career in China once immigrating to another country, those musicians who have already achieved success in the West are often idolized by Chinese people and welcomed by the Chinese music industry. With growing musical exchanges between China and North America, Chinese musicians in this study have been exploring their various pathways in convoluted transnational networks.

### 4.3.2 Music Associations and Organizations

Music associations and organizations have played an important role in facilitating transnational musical activities between China and North America. Due to relatively high costs, transnational travel for immigrant musicians is often associated with a series of musical events arranged by cooperating music groups.

Established in 1995, the B.C. Chinese Music Association (BCCMA) has become a musical home for many Chinese musicians in Vancouver. As a non-profit society and charitable organization, it has three main subsidiaries: the B.C. Chinese Orchestra (BCCO), the B.C. Chinese Music Ensemble (BCCME), and the B.C. Youth Chinese Orchestra (BCYCO). BCCO has more than 50 professional and amateur Chinese musician members, many of whom have been orchestra members since it was founded. BCCME is an ensemble of professional Chinese musicians, composers, and teachers that holds concerts and performances of works that require highly skilled musicians. BCYCO offers Chinese instrument lessons to people under the age of 25 and often participates in community-building events, such as performing in nursing homes, schools, and shopping centers.<sup>20</sup> According to Gloria Wong, the artistic director of BCYCO, the association organizes about seven concerts each year with invited professional Chinese musicians from various countries.

In May 2019, BCCMA held a concert entitled *Cloud and Red Plum Fantasies* with three guests – conductor Chi-Sheng Chen from Taiwan, erhu player Tingwei Li and pipa player Lina Zhang from Jilin in mainland China – collaborating with BCCO. As the artistic director and conductor of the Little Giant Chinese Chamber Orchestra (LGCCO) in Taiwan, Chen had already collaborated many times with music organizations in Canada, including BCCMA, Vancouver

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<sup>20</sup> More information about BCCMA is available at <https://www.bccma.net/>



Intercultural Orchestra (VICO), the Sound of Dragon Society, and the Toronto Chinese Orchestra. There are complex personal and organizational networks in the map of transnational Chinese musical activities. Because of the relatively small number of Chinese musicians in Canada, it is common to see the same performers in Chinese musical events. To make performances affordable, BCCMA and Sound of Dragon Society co-invited Chen to participate in their 2019 summer concerts and shared Chen's travel expenses and professional fees. After finishing their concerts in Vancouver, Chen also flew to Toronto with Lan Tung to perform with the Toronto Chinese Orchestra, which again reduced travel costs for both the performers and the host organizations. In addition to bridging musical connections across the Pacific, these transnational musical exchanges have also facilitated collaborative relationships between different Chinese groups in the diaspora.

Another annual transnational event BCCMA has organized is the Chinese Instrumental Technique Grade Examination in collaboration with the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM) in China. Since 2006, CCOM has sent examiners to Canada every year to assesses applicants' technical levels based on designated criteria determined by CCOM professors.<sup>21</sup> According to its program description, from 2007/8 onward, the British Columbia Ministry of Education has recognized this exam result as the only qualified Chinese musical instrument credit within the External Credential Program for secondary school graduates, which has boosted Chinese musical learning among young students in the province.<sup>22</sup> The exam not only provides official certifications for students learning Chinese instruments but also supports the teaching careers of

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to BCCMA, CCOM also collaborates with five other music organizations in different Canadian cities: Toronto Chinese Orchestra (Toronto), Canadian Association of Oriental Fine Arts (Montreal), Zichan International Arts School (Ottawa), Calgary Chinese Music Association (Calgary), and Edmonton Chinese Philharmonica Association (Edmonton). These organizations work together to hold the Chinese Instrumental Technique Grade Examination each year.

<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.bccma.net/2019/04/17/2019-ccom-technique-exam/>.

immigrant Chinese musicians. As discussed in chapter 3, some Chinese instrumentalists focus mainly on music education after coming to North America, and this grade exam has become one of their tools for recruiting students in the West. As far as I know, there is currently no post-secondary level university or college in British Columbia offering degrees in Chinese instrument performance. However, many institutions, including the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, have included courses on Chinese music ensemble and Chinese music culture.

Another important Chinese organization in the United States is Music from China, a New York-based chamber ensemble that plays both traditional and new compositions written for Chinese instruments. The organization started as an amateur music group established by six music lovers in 1984 and has grown to become one of the most influential Chinese music organizations in North America. Music from China was the first US musical arena for many musicians and composers, including Wu Man, Zhou Long, Chen Yi, Wang Guowei, and Chen Tao, who are now well known in the West.<sup>23</sup> In addition to organizing concerts, since 1992, Music from China has held an annual international composition competition, which draws submissions from Asia, North America, and Europe. According to its executive director, Susan Cheng, they have received many applications from China because international prizes are highly valued there (Cheng, personal interview, Mar. 17, 2019). Since each winner receives a New York premiere, this competition has facilitated many transnational musical exchanges and collaborations over the past two decades. It has also offered a point of entry for composers and musicians in China to become involved in the music scenes of North America.

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<sup>23</sup> More information about Music from China can be found at <http://musicfromchina.org/about/>.

These diasporic groups and organizations have striven to facilitate more transnational musical exchanges in various ways, but many organizers have indicated that their ensembles have not been particularly welcomed in China in recent decades. One of the reasons was a trend in China that performances should be elegant, sophisticated, and highly produced events, for which many diasporic Chinese music groups were not prepared. For instance, after visiting China as part of the project China/Canada Composer Exchange in 2003, Mark Armanini has been looking for more collaborative opportunities but with little success. Armanini stated that if he brought VICO to China, he would have to create a show just for Chinese audiences because their expectations and venue sizes are significantly different from those in Canada. The use of dry ice, fancy costumes, large screens, and other extramusical elements would have to be considered since they are expected by Chinese audiences. Following the standards of classical European music, Chinese musicians have developed sophisticated playing techniques and continue to update their repertoires at a dramatic rate. Some of my consultants, including Zhongcai Yang and Dailin Hsieh, indicated that they constantly seek new repertoire from the Central Conservatory of Music and other top conservatories in China for their professional development.

In the twenty-first century, music has become one of the most important vehicles for cultural exchange between China and other countries. In transnational communication, music associations and organizations often function as mediators for musicians and composers in different countries. For Chinese musicians in the diaspora, these coalitions have become a sort of “home,” helping them acclimate and reterritorialize in the West.

### 4.3.3 Music and Public Policy

Music is not immune from political influence. As John Street (2011) states, music “is deeply implicated in the ideas and institutions that organize politics” (175). Although it may present in an indirect way, music “does not just provide a vehicle of political expression, it *is* that expression” (1). Both Chinese and Western governments directly or indirectly provide funding for Chinese musical organizations in the diaspora. For example, in Canada, public arts councils at the municipal, provincial and federal levels are ‘arms-length’ bodies that receive their funding through a budgetary allocation from government. Because arts councils are accountable to their government funders, they are inevitably sensitive to public policies (e.g., multiculturalism, indigenization, and currently, pandemic recovery), which in turn become built into their funding priorities. In turn, arts organizations, including Chinese and intercultural music groups, may respond to those priorities when shaping their grant applications (Attariwala 2013). In a similar vein, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Chinese government helped to raise the profile of Chinese music in North America through visiting artist programs that brought Chinese musicians to North America and through sponsoring musical events in the West. Although musicians are of course responsible for their own artistic programming and may well believe in separating art and politics, I and many other scholars argue that music is necessarily mediated by the wider public policies that influence the social contexts in which musicians live and work (Born 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2017; Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Tian 1986; Waterman 2016; Yang 2006; Zhao 2001).

In 2019, I spent four months, January to April, at the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, studying the musical activities of Chinese instrumentalists there. My original intention was to compare Murfreesboro and Vancouver as two distinctive sites with concentrated musical

activities involving Chinese musicians. After completing my fieldwork, I realized different support systems in these two cities in two different countries greatly affect the musicians' experiences. As a small city in the American south, Murfreesboro's Chinese musical activities are mainly organized around CCMC. By contrast, in Vancouver, at the time of my field research, there were schools associated with Confucius Institutes, but most of those exchange programs focused on language training.<sup>24</sup> From my observations and interviews, a combination of private teaching, performances, and publicly funded arts council grants, was important to my consultants' ability to make a living through music.

In March 2016, CCMC officially opened with ethnomusicologist and zheng master Mei Han as the director. The only center of its kind in North America, CCMC was initially a collaboration between MTSU and Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters) in China. The Confucius Institutes are non-profit educational institutions established through collaborations among universities in China and around the world, and Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters) was affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. Although many Confucius Institutes focus more on language and cultural training, they have played an important role in bringing Chinese music culture to the world, especially to small Western cities like Murfreesboro.

In February 2019, the CCMC invited the Fengyuan singing group (歌班), a Dong minority group from Xiaohuang village in Guizhou province in China to perform at MTSU. This group's polyphonic singing style, known as *Dage* (大歌) or Grand Song, is designated by UNESCO as part of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage.<sup>25</sup> During the visit, the MTSU

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<sup>24</sup> Many Canadian schools and universities associated with Confucius Institutes began to sever their ties in 2020. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-universities-school-boards-across-canada-defend-ties-with-chinas/>.

<sup>25</sup> See <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/grand-song-of-the-dong-ethnic-group-00202>.

Women's Chorale learned a Dong song and performed alongside the Fengyuan group at the concert. Beyond showcasing this unique Chinese tradition, the collaboration constituted a significant transnational musical exchange between Fengyuan and the MTSU Women's Chorale. Because of Han's commitment to bringing a folk music group from the mountains in Western China, instead, for example, of a "song and dance" troupe from a major center such as Beijing or Shanghai, the local audience was exposed to a precious Chinese musical tradition that has existed in China for more than two thousand years without adopting foreign (especially Western) musical elements. The American students who learned from the Dong singers gained the invaluable experience of learning to sing through traditional oral teaching and to appreciate the Dong singers' rich culture.



Figure 4.2 Dong Women's Choir singing with MTSU's Women's Chorale

CCMC's musical events have enriched the local multicultural scenes in Murfreesboro, and with financial assistance from Hanban, CCMC was able to present Chinese music traditions that audiences are rarely exposed to in North America.

The relationship between Hanban and MTSU shifted in 2020. According to the Chinese newspaper *Xinhuanet*, there were 548 Confucius Institutes with 46,700 full-time and part-time

teachers in 152 countries in 2018.<sup>26</sup> On August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, however, the Trump Administration designated the Confucius Institute US Center as a foreign mission of the Chinese Communist Party because of its ties to the Chinese government, which led to a large-scale closure of Confucius Institutes in the United States (Peterson 2019).<sup>27</sup> According to the local newspaper *Murfreesboro Post*, MTSU was in the process of ending its affiliation with the Confucius Institute in July 2020.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to establishing Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government has also sponsored many musicians to North America through the China Scholarship Council (CSC) (Hartig 2016; Zheng & Wei 2018). These musicians often have jobs in China as university professors. To receive approval for travel, they must pass a series of exams and competitions. The Chinese government's actions of sponsoring musicians and transnational musical activities have dramatically influenced the operations of local Chinese music organizations in North America. For instance, Susan Cheng, the executive director of the New York chamber music ensemble Music from China, indicated that the growing number of Confucius Institutes across the United States was one of the most important reasons for the decreasing performance opportunities Music from China experienced during the 2010s. She explained,

[Running the music organization] is more difficult now... because there are so many Confucius Institutes that are formed in the United States. They often bring musicians and teachers to teach students how to play Chinese music at universities and then they give performances. Whereas in the old days, a lot of colleges and universities would hire groups like us to go and perform. Now there is no need because the students already have

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<sup>26</sup> Read the news in Mandarin at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-12/05/c\\_1210009045.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-12/05/c_1210009045.htm).

<sup>27</sup> The Washington Post has published several articles about the Confucius Institutes in the United States: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-confucius-institute-is-arm-of-beijing/2020/08/13/37418da0-dd8a-11ea-b4f1-25b762cddb4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-confucius-institute-is-arm-of-beijing/2020/08/13/37418da0-dd8a-11ea-b4f1-25b762cddb4_story.html), and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/24/state-department-labeled-chinas-confucius-programs-bad-influence-us-students-whats-story/>.

<sup>28</sup> Read the full news article at [https://www.murfreesboropost.com/news/mtsu-ending-confucius-institute-affiliation/article\\_1ef5654e-bfe6-11ea-9686-0b75a8b23532.html](https://www.murfreesboropost.com/news/mtsu-ending-confucius-institute-affiliation/article_1ef5654e-bfe6-11ea-9686-0b75a8b23532.html).

been exposed to world music, like Chinese music... Almost every month there are so many different performing groups coming over from China. They are often sponsored by either the Chinese government or by the cities. It's not just a set of the central government, but every other [government] on the municipal level in China... They are very polished and all professional groups... You can't compete with that. (Cheng, personal interview, Mar. 17, 2019)

Although the Chinese government has influenced North American music markets, its priorities arguably differ from those of local Chinese music groups. The former supports musical activities primarily to promote Chinese culture to non-Chinese (particularly Euro-American) people, while the latter is more inclusive in terms of doing intercultural musical projects and reaching out to a variety of audiences and communities in the West. In April 2019, I attended a conference themed “Tradition and Discovery: Teaching Chinese Music in the West” in New York State that was held by the US-China Music Institute of the Bard College-Conservatory of Music. In partnership with the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the Institute has offered many transnational music programs and ground-breaking projects, including “the first degree-granting program in Chinese instrument performance in a U.S. conservatory.”<sup>29</sup> Yu Feng, the president of the Central Conservatory of Music addressed the gathering. One important point in Yu's talk was how Chinese musicians should recruit more non-Chinese students in the West. Although it may be incorrect to interpret his statement as a rejection of students of Chinese descent, Yu did emphasize that Chinese music teachers should focus more on recruiting non-Chinese students. Many attendees at the conference were shocked by his talk, especially those who lead Chinese music groups or educational organizations in North America. Patty Chan, the music director of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra (TCO), said she felt sad that Yu appeared to be shutting out second and third-generation Chinese who want to learn Chinese music. Chan also

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<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.bard.edu/conservatory/uschinamusic/>.



stated that she had the same impression when taking TCO to a university in China in 2017. She felt that teachers there were more interested in doing transnational music projects if the musicians were non-Chinese-looking. By contrast, Chan received a warm welcome in Taiwan, where she had an impression that local teachers did not care about the musicians' skin colors and were willing to spend time with them. As a result, for the past three years, Chan has prioritized bringing the TCO to Taiwan.

With strong economic support, China has been expanding its cultural influence and strengthening its global position through soft power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through the Confucius Institutes and the China Scholarship Council, the Chinese government has brought diverse Chinese music activities to the West. For diasporic Chinese musicians, the government's overseas music plans offer opportunities and challenges: on the one hand, they may have a chance to participate in large transnational musical events produced with generous government funding, while on the other hand, those very activities have created a more competitive music market. In the diaspora, Chinese instrumentalists are influenced by public policy from both China and their host countries.

Personal networks, music organizations, and politics are three major and intertwined elements that influence the implementation of most transnational Chinese musical activities. In addition, other elements, such as the economy, geographical situation, and public health conditions (especially since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020) may be considerations when musicians propose a transnational musical plan. In recent years, many musicians and music organizations in North America have sought collaborative opportunities in China because of its fast-growing economy. In turn, more Chinese music groups came to North America looking for diverse musical opportunities. The frequent transnational musical exchanges

that characterized the first two decades of the twenty-first century both enriched and complicated Chinese musicians' diasporic lives in the West.

Nicholas Van Hear (1998) proposes the term “new diasporas” to describe the phenomenon of immigrants with multiple memberships in different societies and multiple allegiances to places in the post-Cold War era. As cultural mediators, many of my consultants have lived in such new diasporas, straddling Chinese and Western societies and building their social and musical pathways both by choice and out of necessity. During my fieldwork, I observed my consultants proposing music projects, applying for government grants, contacting organizations, locating performance venues, communicating with musical partners, etc. Just as in developing intercultural musicianship, they must flexibly shift between different artistic and administrative roles to achieve their musical goals in the West. Far from being autonomous, transnational musical exchange, I argue, is mediated by profound interplay of ever-changing cultural, economic, social, and political circumstances.

#### **4.4 Heterogeneous Subjectivities and Cosmopolitan Mindsets**

Building their criss-crossing pathways in the diaspora, Chinese musicians' identity formations are constantly challenged by dynamic social and cultural circumstances. Through case studies, this section looks at ways that Chinese musicians negotiate with the “Chineseness” that automatically marks their public personas in North American societies. Transnational connections have complicated immigrant Chinese instrumentalists' sense of belonging. Living in a diaspora may reinforce a sense of Chinese identity but it may also produce a sense of cosmopolitanism. Some consider China or Chinese culture as their “root” that they belong to from deep inside, while others have developed cosmopolitan mindsets and do not feel attached to

any specific country in the globalized world. In this section, I discuss identity formations and the heterogeneous subjectivities of Chinese musicians in a multicultural context.

#### **4.4.1 Cultural Ambassadors and/or Anti-Stereotypes**

This study involves three types of instrumentalists who consider Chinese to be their ethnicity, ancestry, and/or heritage: Chinese immigrants, children of Chinese immigrants born in Canada or the United States, and visiting Chinese musicians. Although the musicians in each group have similar lived experiences, they do not necessarily share the same interpretations of Chineseness that many Westerners impose on the identity formations of people of Chinese descent. In his influential article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall (2003) theorizes two ways of thinking about cultural identity. An older idea of identity saw it as a stable and fixed category in terms of one shared culture (e.g., race and ethnicity). Instead, Hall proposes that identity is always in the process of both being and becoming—coming from the past, situated in the present, and moving forward into the future. In the globalized world where there is a mutual penetration of cultural patterns, one declares an essentialized cultural identity often by choice rather than based on perceived reality. In other words, it is almost impossible for an individual to be immune to cultural influences outside her national culture, but she may choose to identify herself purely based on those regional customs. For diasporic Chinese instrumentalists, highlighting Chineseness in their personal and professional lives is often accompanied by a sense of being cultural ambassadors in the West.

Chen Tao has lived in the United States for 27 years but has retained many of the cultural habits he learned in China. He cooks Chinese food at home and says that his “Chinese stomach” could accept the worst Chinese food but not McDonald’s. In Chinese culture, the family name

comes before a person's given name, but many people change their name order to conform to Western custom. Chen has retained his name in the Chinese order and insists on his being called Chen Tao rather than Tao Chen. He indicated that Chinese people put the family name first to emphasize family values and that non-Chinese people could learn about Chinese culture by memorizing his name this way. Chen calls himself a “musical missionary” (音乐传教士) and feels a strong responsibility to spread Chinese culture in the West.

我不但有这个责任，我有这个能力。别人想做做不了……你要语言比较了解。第二你要有对中国文化的深厚的了解。光吹个笛子没有用，你对中国文化的传统要有一个全面的了解。对中国的哲学、中国的书法绘画艺术有个全面的了解。第三你要懂西洋的文化，我们在音乐学院学习又占了便宜了，就是我们在中央音乐学院钢琴是必修课，听的都是这样的东西…至少两方面我都有接触，然后你才可以做这样的事情。我觉得通过我的讲课，能够在美国的小孩子里面种下中国音乐文化种子，等他们长大了以后到了读大学的时候，因为当时我的一个讲课，能够使他们对中國音乐中國文化产生兴趣，去研究。然后由他们再来反馈，去做一些中美文化之间的交流，那我就觉得我做值了。

I have not only the responsibility but also the ability [to be a musical missionary in the West]. Many people want to do it, but they can't... First, you need to be fluent in both languages. Second, you must have a profound understanding of Chinese culture. It is not enough to just be able to play the dizi, you need to have comprehensive knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, including Chinese philosophy and the art of Chinese calligraphy and painting. Third, you must understand Western culture, and we have an advantage with this because of studying in the conservatory. The piano was our compulsory course at the Central Conservatory of Music, and all we listened to was Western music... I have knowledge of both cultures, which allows me to do missionary work. Through my lectures, I hope to plant the seeds of Chinese music culture in American children's minds. When they go to universities, they might be interested in researching it. Their feedback would contribute to cultural communications between China and the United States; then all my efforts would be worth it. (Chen, personal interview, Mar. 22, 2019)

Chen has seen his dream come true. In the comment section of one of his YouTube videos, a former student commented that he was pursuing doctoral research on Chinese music at Harvard University. He said his passion for Chinese music originated from a music workshop

Chen taught that he had attended eighteen years before. The student's message moved Chen to continue to share Chinese culture in the West through performance and education. In Chen's opinion, Chinese individuals began doing cultural missionary work in America about twenty years ago, before the first Confucius Institute was established by the Chinese government in 2004.<sup>30</sup> Because of both multi-cultural policies and Western fascination with Asian cultures, early immigrant Chinese musicians in the late twentieth century had many opportunities to be cultural ambassadors, including doing school shows, lectures, and public performances. The Chinese government, however, did not implement its global cultural exchange policies until the establishment of Confucius Institutes.

Chen considers himself to be an “ascetic monk” (苦行僧) who has lived a hard life in the West. According to Chen, there were levels of hardship in his ever-changing immigrant life. The first challenge he faced was the language. Once Chen became fluent in English, the next challenge was finding an entry point for Americans to appreciate Chinese music culture. Then he had to find more powerful sponsors to implement larger projects, such as concerts with more Chinese instruments and invited musicians. This was made more difficult because the Chinese government and most Chinese people did not understand or support what he and others like him were doing in the 1990s. However, Chen is confident and believes that diasporic Chinese musicians have better opportunities to promote Chinese culture than the Chinese government because they have closer contact with local communities. Since establishing the Chinese ensemble Melody of Dragon in 1998, Chen has also collaborated with Midori & Friends, a foundation for music education established by the internationally famous Japanese American

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<sup>30</sup> In 2004 the University of Maryland became the first US university to host a Confucius Institute, but it was closed in 2020 under pressure from the US government. See <https://www.axios.com/oldest-confucius-institute-us-close-91d77448-ae5c-4da8-a8ec-8c75c46d388d.html>

violinist Midori, to provide lectures on Chinese music in elementary and high schools in New York City.<sup>31</sup>

The sense of responsibility as a cultural ambassador occurs not only with Chinese immigrants but also with Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans. Patty Chan, a second-generation Chinese Canadian, is an erhu musician, educator, author, and music director of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra (TCO). The TCO website introduces Chan as a “cultural connector” with a passion for “sharing the beauty of this music to a new generation and audience and building bridges between cultures.”<sup>32</sup> When Chan was young, she learned the violin and the erhu simultaneously, but she felt that the erhu was more expressive than the violin.

[The erhu] helps me connect with my culture. Because my parents always said you are Chinese, you must learn something about your culture. I would struggle with the language, but I found music helps me connect with my culture... I can't hide, I'm a visible minority. For my growing up, I always felt like I'm different from all the White kids. So, I don't totally fit in because of the way I look. I am always reminded that I'm Chinese. (Chan, personal interview; Mar. 23, 2019)

Chan's family maintained their Chinese heritage and accepted the “Chinese” label that came with being a visible minority. Chan had difficulty growing up in Toronto, because of her in-between situation as neither purely Chinese nor Western. Her parents moved every two years, further and further away from Chinatown for a better neighborhood and schools for her and their other three children. According to Chan, every time she went to a new school, the teacher put her in English as a Second Language (ESL) class before she said a word. She was usually the only Chinese kid in the school, and the teachers assumed that she had just come from China. She normally spent a

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<sup>31</sup> More information about Midori & Friends is available at <https://www.midoriandfriends.org/about/>

<sup>32</sup> The music in that claim is erhu music, if not Chinese music. See Patty Chan's bio on the TCO website at <http://www.torontochineseorchestra.com/wp/teammembers/patty-chan/>

day in ESL and then went back to the regular class. Local Chinese people called Chan a “banana” because she is “Yellow on the outside but White on the inside.” Chan’s embrace of Chinese culture and her role as a cultural connector is tied to her life-long negotiations of her Chinese and Canadian identities. As a result, she chose to work in the field of Chinese music with the goal of sharing Chinese culture with North American audiences.

Another example is Nathania Ko, a second-generation Chinese Canadian konghou player born in Vancouver. Ko attended several Chinese conservatories to learn the konghou after graduating from a Canadian high school in 2014. Like Chan, Ko received her education in Chinese culture at home, while being immersed in Canadian culture at school. She began to learn Chinese at the age of five and her parents cultivated their Chinese heritage at home, including in their eating habits, decor, and philosophies. A Chinese Canadian in her 20s, Ko treats herself as “a bridge between China and Canada” and has an ambitious plan to spread konghou culture worldwide. Compared to other Chinese instruments, the konghou is unpopular because of its large size and limited repertoire. Konghou was almost extinct during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and was reintroduced after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Li 2019). Ko considers herself a konghou missionary. She said, “I feel my obligation is to let the world hear [the konghou’s] voice. And I am the only fluent English speaker right now for the konghou” (Nathania Ko, personal interview, Jun. 6, 2019). Ko has put her dream into practice. She gave up an offer to study engineering at the University of British Columbia and went to Shenyang Conservatory of Music to do a bachelor’s degree in konghou performance instead. After finishing her studies in China, she came back to Vancouver to pursue a master’s degree in harp in 2018. Ko hopes to promote the konghou by combining her knowledge of the Chinese konghou and the Western harp, and she has been active as a konghou performer in Vancouver.

While many diasporic Chinese musicians have embraced an unofficial role as cultural ambassadors, visiting musicians sponsored to Canada or the United States by the Chinese government are considered official cultural ambassadors. As discussed above, a significant number of Chinese musicians came to North America through Confucius Institutes and the China Scholarship Council (CSC). While conducting fieldwork in Murfreesboro, I met two seasoned musicians who were also professors at Chinese conservatories and two graduate music students who volunteered at CCMC. Being part of the CCMC crew, they participated in almost all its musical activities, including private and university instrument lessons, school shows, and various music festivals and events. I also worked closely with the CCMC and was invited to perform with them in some of their musical events.

The first performance I did with CCMC was a multicultural show in Nashville in January 2019. The Confucius Institute sent a student assistant to pick up the performers—the Director Mei Han, visiting professor Du Zhusong, two volunteer music students, and me—at CCMC and drove us from Murfreesboro to Nashville. I thought it was a public musical show in a park or a concert hall, but it turned out to be an educational presentation for school children.



Figure 4.3 Multicultural show in Nashville

Figure 4.4 shows the dance performed by a group of students before us. It was my first month in Murfreesboro, and this performance broke the previous impression I had gained of CCMC



through watching their online news and high-profile concert performances. At first, to be honest, I felt a little awkward sharing the stage with those kids, even though their performance was cute. When I turned to Han and other musicians, however, I found no surprise on their faces. They behaved as if it was a serious concert. After we set up onstage, Han started to talk to the audience, introducing CCMC and its future musical activities. Since most of the audience members were children, Han made lots of jokes to make it easier for them to understand Chinese music and culture. Han was experienced in doing this kind of “introducing-Chinese-music” presentation, and my awkwardness disappeared in her jokes. Before each music, she briefly gave some information about one of the instruments we played. I felt proud of Chinese culture and history when all the kids were wowing about what Han said. At that moment, I too had a sense of being a cultural ambassador even though I was just there doing my field research.

Although some of them participated in cross-cultural musical practices, visiting musicians at CCMC put more effort into sharing Chinese music. For instance, Jun Xie, a yangqin player and teacher from Wuhan Conservatory of Music, came to the United States through a special project offered by CSC for artists to visit foreign countries in 2018. When I met him in February 2019, he had just completed a six-month series of promotional performances in selected US cities, including Chicago, West Lafayette, Ann Arbor, and Murfreesboro, as part of the plan he had proposed in his application to the CSC.

我访学分为两大方向。一个是我本身是中国器乐的演奏者，我来美国希望有一个平台来宣传中国音乐，特别是中国扬琴的传统和现代作品。我觉得扬琴是可以和他们沟通的，因为他们也有相似的乐器……国家如果给我资助的话我希望让美国听到中国扬琴的过去和现在。第二个在这个基础上，我来学习美国音乐，包括country music, pop music, jazz 这些，根据自己能力和条件学习。

There are two major plans for my [American] tour. First, I am a Chinese instrument player and I hope to promote Chinese music in the United States, especially the traditional

and contemporary compositions for the yangqin. I think I can communicate with Americans through the yangqin because they have similar instruments... [I wrote in my proposal that] “if the government sponsors my project, I hope to let Americans listen to the past and present of the yangqin.” Second, based on the first condition, I will learn American music, including country music, pop music, and jazz, according to my ability and opportunities. (Jun Xie, personal interview, Feb. 16, 2019)

Xie came to the United States as an official cultural ambassador not only to share Chinese culture but also to develop yangqin music by learning from American musical genres. In our interview, Xie emphasized the importance of musical abilities, including fingering skills, knowledge of music theory, and rhythmic dexterity, and he believes that these are the foundation for intercultural musical communication. Xie’s attitude was typical, resulting from the trend of pursuing professionalism in Chinese music education, and I could sense his competitiveness when Xie talked about playing with Western musicians. The focus on technique may result in virtuosic collaborations, but it may also make cross-cultural music-making a competitive experience. From this perspective, Xie’s sense of being cultural ambassador is slightly different from those of diasporic Chinese musicians, such as Chen Tao mentioned above. For diasporic musicians, sharing Chinese culture is part of the process of integrating into Western society; while Xie, as a visiting musician, hoped to promote Chinese music and enhance his musical competence through cultural exchanges.

Some diasporic Chinese instrumentalists I interviewed were certain about their roles as cultural ambassadors outside of China, but they have also sought to break down stereotypes and emphasize their individual subjectivities in their performances. In her article “Voices in the Minority: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Asian American in Popular Music,” Christi-Anne Castro (2007) examines how Asian-American performing artists in popular music renegotiate and challenge the mainstream stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and race. Drawing on Yen Le Espiritu’s (1997) summaries of the history of Asian stereotypes, Castro states that “the Asian in

the United States is a perennial foreigner” (222), because of the country’s racial politics stressing Whiteness and Blackness as well as the exclusion of Asian people in history. According to Castro, Asian American masculinity is imagined as “subordinate” and women as “culturally submissive” in traditional stereotypes of Asian descent. Although Asian stereotypes are deeply embedded in Western society, Castro argues that “the identities can be renegotiated in performance and the structures of music production” (223). Many of my consultants have challenged Asian stereotypes, including the gender issues that Castro indicates. Haiqiong Deng, for instance, stated that Chinese musicians seek to be cultural ambassadors in the West because there are numerous misunderstandings, such as preconceptions about Chinese politics and ideology, as well as ignorance among people of different cultures. She hopes to ease cultural tensions and dispel misunderstandings through sharing her musical knowledge with North American audiences. However, she does not consider herself to be simply a “Chinese musician.” After living in the United States for two decades, she has complex feelings and connections to China and the United States. Even though she plays Chinese instruments, Deng considers her music to be much more than Chinese.

As discussed in chapter 3, diasporic Chinese instrumentalists have developed heterogeneous intercultural musicianship in the West, which has led to complex cultural identities through their music. On the one hand, they feel like being Chinese cultural ambassadors because of the Chinese instruments they play, their Asian physical appearance, and the deep-rooted cultural practices they maintain. On the other hand, their music education was Westernized from the beginning, and they have also continued expanding the cultural reception of their music in the West. As Giovanna P. Del Negro and Harris M. Berger (2004) state, “visions of identity can be institutionalized and restrictive or situational and expressive, and the multidimensional character of identity is a basic difficulty in all forms of social interpretation”

(125). These Chinese musicians believe that they became cultural ambassadors by default upon arriving in North America, but their subjectivities have also evolved through their diasporic experiences. They can present their ambassadorial identity by wearing traditional dress and playing traditional Chinese tunes, but they can also smash Chinese identity stereotypes through new musical presentations.

Some immigrant Chinese instrumentalists challenge cultural stereotypes by promoting diversity in the Chinese music community. For instance, improvisation has become an essential component in Lan Tung's music, but she does not think all Chinese musicians must learn improvisation after moving to the West. She said,

因为要多元嘛。有的人做传统做的很好，没有兴趣去做别的。为什么要做别的呢？每个人可以朝不同方向发展嘛。以前亚洲最喜欢在conference谈中国音乐该怎么发展，就非这样发展，别的都不行... 各做各的，各种风格都有不是很好嘛？

Because we need to be diverse. If someone is doing well playing traditional music and is not interested in other musical genres, why would they make a change? Chinese musicians can develop their music in various directions. Many Asian conferences were discussing the future development of Chinese music, and they often tried to find one answer from all kinds of possibilities... Isn't it great to have various styles [in the Chinese community]?" (Lan Tung, personal interview, Jul. 21, 2019)

Whether short-term visitors or long-term residents, professional Chinese instrumentalists are typically aware of their cultural difference and their position as cultural ambassadors in the West. Such difference not only emerges from their Asian appearance, Chinese instruments, and family backgrounds but most importantly is engraved in their minds by the treatment and attitudes they have received from the public in the West. Some of them feel proud of their ability to share Chinese music culture, while others have struggled with Asian stereotypes. Visiting Chinese musicians have put the most effort into promoting Chinese culture and presenting their

Chineseness to non-Chinese people. Their performances can add another layer of difficulty to diasporic musicians who fight against stereotypical Chinese identity formations. In many non-Chinese audience's minds, visiting and diasporic Chinese musicians are the same—they are all Chinese musicians, especially when they play the same Chinese instruments. However, these two groups of musicians can have distinct approaches to their Chineseness. I haven't encountered any visiting Chinese musician claiming a second identity other than being Chinese. On the contrary, many diasporic musicians I interviewed indicated that they don't consider themselves "fully" Chinese. From this perspective, diasporic Chinese musicians' lives in the West have been significantly influenced by the cultural activities facilitated by the Chinese government. Though they have emigrated from China, these musicians must still negotiate between their diasporic subjectivities and their inextricable bonds with China.

#### **4.4.2 Returning to China**

As China's economy continues to grow, some diasporic Chinese instrumentalists return to China in search of career opportunities. Instead of looking for transnational collaborations, these musicians hope to find a stable job or sustainable music career in China. In this study, however, the immigrant Chinese instrumentalists who attempted such a return ultimately decided to stay in North America.

Wu Fei, a zheng player and composer, came to the United States in 2000 when she transferred to the University of North Texas as a junior student from the Central Conservatory of Music. After finishing her master's program at Mills College, she went to Colorado where she gained a teaching position in 2005. One year later, however, Wu realized she was no longer interested in teaching and decided to become a touring musician. In 2007, she moved to New

York City looking for musical opportunities and lived there until 2009 when she felt keen to go back to China.

那会年纪也开始大一些，就到将近30上下就觉得，where am I going? ... 那个时候一个人巡演跟男友分手了，巡演回来之后回到纽约，身边也没有什么朋友.....回到家没有家的感觉，是一个酒店。然后开冰箱，都是好几个礼拜的菜了，也没有人在家里等你。一个人空荡荡的，两礼拜没开窗户，家里很大的味。觉得很lonely, I am doing this, you know, I have no family no friends, 我所有的朋友都是做巡演的..... 在纽约我们谁也见不着谁。

At that time, I was getting older, around 30, and thought “where am I going?”... I broke up with my ex-boyfriend when I was on tour and found few friends around me after coming back to New York... I did not feel I had a home, and the place I lived at was like a hotel. When I opened my refrigerator, the vegetables had been there for weeks. Nobody was waiting for me, and it's just me in the empty room which did not smell good because the window was kept closed for two weeks. I felt lonely and thought “why am I doing this? You know, I have no family, no friends.” All my friends were touring musicians... we rarely saw each other in New York. (Wu Fei, personal interview, Apr. 5, 2019)

After coming to the United States, Wu did not feel settled in any place. She returned to China in 2010, hoping to find a music career there amongst family and friends. However, Wu soon realized that she could not re-enter Chinese music communities after having lived in the West for a decade. In China, Wu states, she felt like “a hero without a battlefield”

(英雄无用武之地): she felt that she had no opportunity to show her talents, because she did not have connections to influential institutes and it was hard for people outside the local music communities to be accepted. Therefore, Wu decided to slow down her career and start a new family with a Jewish South African who lived in Beijing for twenty years. Contrary to her previous plan of developing a performance career, Wu spent five years in China mainly to care for her family and expand her knowledge of other art forms, such as Beijing opera. After giving birth to her second child, Wu felt ready to shift her focus back to music, which she felt better equipped to develop in the United States than in China. In 2015, she and her family moved to

Nashville, where she was hired as a composer-in-residence for the Chatterbird Ensemble.<sup>33</sup>

Although Wu had a strong willingness to return to her homeland, her hopes were dashed by the crucial music market and local protectionism in China.

Another example is Mei Han, who was offered a tenure-track position at a university in China in 2015, two years after she received her Ph.D. degree in ethnomusicology from the University of British Columbia. At that time, Han thought that her cultural experiences of studying in both Chinese and Canadian universities made her a perfect fit for the teaching position in China, and she was eager to share her intercultural knowledge with Chinese students. After visiting its campus, however, Han realized that she could not go back. She explained,

I had many thoughts. One of them was the trauma, the personal trauma all came out because of the smell, color, certain objects, etc. I'm a very sensitive person. Then I realized that my fantasy of coming back to China was not going to work for me...I was a visiting professor at Kenyon College, and they were all shocked by my decision. They offered me one more year in the visiting position versus China offering me a tenured position. Take one year, or take tenure? Of course, take the tenure [track position], plus it's your country. But I said I take this one year. If I'm going to have a short teaching experience, I want to make it a good memory. (Han, personal interview, Apr. 11, 2019)

As a young child, Han suffered because of the Cultural Revolution and the social and political turmoil that followed in China. During our interview, she still felt pain remembering the intense atmosphere she endured in China. Han recalled that, around 1967, her mother would warn her to hide when someone knocked on the door and told her how to behave if her family was taken away by policemen. At that time, they stockpiled noodles, cookies, and other food at home in case she had to stay home alone. These experiences entailed significant psychological injury to

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<sup>33</sup> Founded in 2014, Chatterbird is a Nashville-based chamber music ensemble and non-profit organization “with a mission to explore alternative instrumentation and stylistic diversity in order to create thoughtful and inventive musical experiences.” <https://www.chatterbird.org/>

Han, and the painful memories surfaced when she visited that campus in China. Han rejected the tenure-track position and has not looked for any permanent job in China since then.

For musicians who came to North America because of political and social turmoil in China, their previous sufferings are unforgettable and prevent them from moving back. With no living parents and infrequent contact with her other relatives, Han did not feel a strong family attachment to China. When she received the tenure-track job offer, she had already built a new family and developed a music career in North America. According to Han, her current job at CCMC is ideal because she works full-time in the United States but also has regular musical and cultural activities in China. Compared to Han, Wu had more positive connections with China and was young enough to start a new career. Even with all the advantages and her willingness, however, Wu still could not stay because of the complex social and political situation. According to Wu, she was already an outsider in the local music community. Once one leaves, it is hard to return from the West unless considerable time and effort have been spent maintaining musical connections in China.

Non-Chinese musicians, however, are commonly well-received in China, especially those playing Chinese instruments or singing well-known Chinese songs. For instance, Swedish guitarist Johannes Möller has become famous in China by playing Chinese folk songs on the guitar. Since 2018, he has been the ambassador of Zheng'an Guitar in China, which, according to Möller, is the largest investment of its kind in guitar history.<sup>34</sup> Although some performances Randy Raine-Reusch did with Mei Han and their daughter Zizi in China operated the same way as those of Möller's, Raine-Reusch facilitated more innovative intercultural collaborations on

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<sup>34</sup> Zheng'an is a city in Guizhou which has made guitar manufacturing and guitar culture its main priority. The city has encouraged hundreds of guitar manufacturing companies to set up their production facilities there. About five million guitars are produced there every year. Currently, a concert hall dedicated to the guitar, as well as a guitar museum and a 99-meter guitar tower, is under construction. See <https://johannesmoller.com/biography>.



Chinese instruments. Chinese people felt proud that Westerners like Möller and Raine-Reusch have made the effort to learn Chinese music and culture. However, there are differences between China learning from the West and the other way around. As discussed in chapter 2, China considered Western culture to be more advanced, modern, and professional when the government reformed its music system in the twentieth century. Westerners who learn Chinese culture in the twenty-first century, however, often do so out of personal interest or are motivated by the growing economic power and music opportunities in China.

It is arguable that many Chinese people proudly take Westerners' interests in Chinese culture as a sign of China strengthening its soft power worldwide (Zhang 2021). From this perspective, many Chinese audiences value the fact that a growing number of non-Chinese musicians are singing Chinese songs or playing Chinese instruments. As a result, these talented non-Chinese musicians have gained fame and received many performing opportunities in China. Some of them, including Möller and Raine-Reusch, are well-known in diasporic Chinese communities as well. In 2018, for instance, Mei Han invited Möller to give a concert called "China Impressions" for the Center for Chinese Music and Culture in Murfreesboro, which not only introduced American audience to contemporary compositions inspired by Chinese music but also demonstrated the interactions between Western and Eastern cultures.

Successful cases like Möller's have led other non-Chinese musicians to go to China with their Chinese musical partners for greater exposure and larger markets. For instance, Feifei Yang has been developing an innovative music career in the U.S by combining the erhu/banhu with vocal music in her performances. One of her long-term musical partners is Gary Lucas, an American guitarist, songwriter, and composer. Like Möller, Lucas sings and plays Chinese songs and has collaborated with Yang on arranging many famous Chinese and Western songs, such as

“Nightlife in Shanghai” (夜上海, composed by Chen Gexin (陈歌辛) in 1947) and Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.”<sup>35</sup> In our interview, Lucas told me that his dream was to break into the Chinese music market with Yang because, in his view, most European Americans do not appreciate or open themselves up to Chinese music. However, Yang was not as interested in Chinese music markets; she enjoys the artistic freedom and world-class music stages in the United States. Without strong social connections, Yang would rarely have opportunities to play in national musical events in China, but in New York, she has performed at the United Nations, Times Square Countdown Stage, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Carnegie Hall, and other prestigious venues where top-tier musicians in China dream of playing. Although it requires strategic efforts to achieve success playing Chinese instruments in the West, Yang is confident and believes in a bright future for Chinese musicians in the United States.

The Chinese and Western cultural experiences described here highlight a condition of cultural in-betweenness (Canagarajah 2013; Ickstadt 1999; Wang 2014), a concept that captures the feeling of being culturally attached to China but physically living in the West. Some of my consultants consider such in-between status an advantage. They have enjoyed personal freedom and gained music opportunities as they traverse China and North America. Others experience this cultural in-betweenness as a confusing dilemma. Unless they gain widespread fame in Western society or maintain active social networks in China, it is difficult for Chinese musicians to come back once they emigrate to other countries.

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<sup>35</sup> Feifei Yang and Gary Lucas played both songs at the “Talks with The Artists” event by Sino TV in 2019. A recording can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isHNdA4BQYg>.

#### 4.4.3 Sense of Belonging and Cosmopolitan Mindset

Wu Fei indicated that although she enjoys her life in the United States, her sense of belonging is rooted in the *hutong* (胡同), a type of narrow residential street most prominently associated with Beijing. She uses chopsticks to eat and has decorated her home with Chinese cultural elements, such as calligraphy and Chinese-style baubles. Wu's Chineseness is embedded in her personality and her musicianship, which led to her return to China in 2010. She also mentioned, however, that the longer she lives in Nashville, the more at home she feels. It took some of my interlocutors, including Nicole Ge Li and Jun Rong, several years to feel they belonged in their new homes in Canada and the United States. In the diaspora, Chinese musicians' sense of belonging changes and evolves as they go through different stages of their post-migration lives.

Many of the Chinese instrumentalists in this study treated the concepts of a country and its culture separately when talking about belonging. Those who indicated a strong connection to Chinese culture did not necessarily feel a sense of belonging to China as a nation, and those who felt a strong tie to a North American country did not always live a Western lifestyle. Mei Han stated that she dislikes the political concept of "nation" because it cuts off homologous cultures in different countries. Han feels a connection with calligraphy, ink painting, and other genres of traditional Chinese culture, but she does not have a sense of belonging to China. Many of my interlocutors firmly believe in preserving their Chinese customs while developing a sense of belonging in North America. Chen Tao calls himself a Chinese "musical missionary" and took on the responsibility of a cultural ambassador in the West. When I asked him about his sense of belonging, he decisively said, "very much, I like [the United States] very much. I am an

American citizen; of course, I feel I belong here” (Chen, personal interview, Mar. 33, 2019).<sup>36</sup>

Being immersed in Chinese and Western cultures, Chen enjoys his in-between situation not only in terms of personal enrichment but also as an opportunity to develop the music career that is most suitable for him.

Some Chinese musicians owe their success in the West to the enhancement of China’s international presence. An interesting case is Zhongcai Yang, who has lived in Vancouver for two decades and feels strongly connected to Canada. While Chen’s sense of belonging mostly comes from the musical freedom and opportunities he enjoys in the United States, Yang finds his sense of belonging to be tied to the esteem he has received from the Canadian government. In China, government officials normally attend large musical events arranged by the government, but they rarely appear at concerts organized by individual musicians. By contrast, in Canada, many government officials, including the Prime Minister and the mayor of Richmond B.C., have sent unsolicited letters of greeting to the musical events held by Yang’s private institution, the Canada Y.C. Music Academy. The acknowledgment he has received from the Canadian government generates in Yang a sense of pride in his work and further enjoyment of his post-immigration life. Yang also emphasized his patriotism to China, however, believing that his career in Canada is influenced by China’s international power.

我很爱国。中国如果不好没什么人来尊重我的。所以我非常希望中国是非常强大的，像现在这个状态一直保持这。祖国就是我的妈妈嘛，我妈妈多不好，我自己知道就行，对吧，对外嘛，妈妈应该还是好的吗……所以我是始终觉得我最大一个靠山还是中国这一块。因为我将来要想发展一定要有中国的支持，没有中国这帮人的支持的话，我怎么玩，玩不起来呀。

I am very patriotic. Nobody [in the West] would respect me if China does not develop well. So, I hope China gets stronger, keeping the current developing pace. The homeland

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<sup>36</sup> 非常有, 我非常喜欢。因为我是美国公民, 当然有归属感。

is like my mother, and only *I* need to know the weakness of my mother. She should be strong to outsiders... I always believe that China is my most powerful backer, and I must gain support from China if I want to develop my music in the future. Without support from China, how can I navigate [in the West]? It would be impossible to do it. (Zhongcai Yang, personal interview, Aug. 27, 2019)

When talking about China, Yang considered himself an insider even though he has lived in Canada for twenty years. Like Yang, Chen also mentioned in our interview that China's extraordinary economic growth has increased Westerners' interest in Chinese culture, which in turn has provided more musical opportunities for diasporic Chinese musicians.

Despite maintaining their Chinese customs in the West, some musicians, especially older immigrants, feel they have become strangers to the current society in China. Zhimin Yu, a ruan player and composer, moved to Vancouver in 1990. She said she felt lost every time she returned to Beijing. The urban design was significantly different from the city she grew up in, and she refreshed her memories of Beijing by visiting Tiananmen Square, the Palace Museum, and other famous tourist spots local people rarely visit. Like Yu, Zhongxi Wu (suona), and Geling Jiang (multi-instrumentalist) have experienced the same dilemma as they continue to negotiate their Chinese and Canadian identities. Wu said, "[my life] in China belongs to the past. If going to China, I have no place to stay" (Wu, personal interview, Jul. 1, 2019).<sup>37</sup> Jiang did not think a Chinese audience would accept her current fusion style and said, "They won't understand my music... If I want to use the pipa to play music with Persian style, how can I find a Persian musician in China?" (Jiang, personal interview, Jul. 7, 2019).<sup>38</sup> They emigrated more than a decade ago, and their current lifestyles mix Chinese customs from their pasts with new practices

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<sup>37</sup> 中国那已经是过去式了。我要是回去，基本上我没有地方待了。

<sup>38</sup> 别人听不懂的... 比方说我想用琵琶奏一曲波斯的味道。你在中国去哪里找这个波斯的音乐家？

formed in Canada. The Chinese life that they were familiar with only exists in their memory and imagination.

Chinese culture evolves in the ways it is transmitted, interpreted, and expressed. For those of my consultants who indicated a rooted Chinese culture in their diasporic lives, they understood and expressed different conceptions of Chinese culture. The current socio-cultural, economic, and political situations in China may bring a sense of unfamiliarity to those who remember a previous version of China and its cultural practices. In his widely cited book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson ([1983]2006) analyzes nationalism by depicting a nation as an imagined politically— and socially—constructed community. A nation is imagined because it is too vast for any single person to know every aspect of its history, economy, geography, and so forth. This theory applies to culture as well. The Chinese culture that my consultants relate to can be considered behaviors and beliefs that they grew up with and that are memorialized through continued practice. These practices are a small but tangible part of the bigger picture of what is considered “Chinese culture.” It is worth noting, however, that just because a nation is imagined does not mean that it is false or a fictionalized existence; in a similar vein, imagined culture is also exercised and presented by an individual’s lived experiences, such as their eating habits and daily behaviors. The interplay between nostalgic imagination and new cultural experience in North America has complicated Chinese musicians’ lives in the diaspora.

With hybrid cultural experiences, some of my consultants have developed cosmopolitan mindsets. Deriving from the Greek word *kosmopolitês* (‘citizen of the world’), the terms cosmopolitan and cosmopolitanism contend that all citizens of the world share membership in one single community, the cosmopolis, which is governed by a universal and egalitarian law (Pierik and Werner 2010). Cultural Geographer Daniel Hiebert (2002) defines cosmopolitanism

more generally as a way of living based on the openness to, interaction with, and appreciation of people from diverse cultural backgrounds.<sup>39</sup> In this study, musicians with cosmopolitan mindsets not only believe in egalitarian values but also express a sense of “loss” of a solid attachment to a particular culture or home place. This cosmopolitan mindset may be interpreted as a “freedom” of expressing subjectivities across cultural boundaries, but it can also bring a sense of loneliness to those living in the diaspora. It is a complex sentiment that evolves with those musicians’ diasporic experiences and varies according to the circumstances.

Some of my consultants who frequently participate in transnational music projects indicated that they felt there was no place they could permanently settle down. Having lived in North America (first Canada and latterly the United States) for more than twenty years, Mei Han considers herself a “global citizen.” In our interview, she talked about the changing process of her psychological status,

从1998年开始在加拿大做音乐，然后就开始有机会到处去演出。接触各种不同的人、不同的社团、社会的不同方面。另外travel越来越多，除了北美以外，欧洲、亚洲的其他国家、非洲等等。重要的不是说人到了哪里，落了地就会变，不是这样的。它是一个你的mental process，越来越多，包括你对人性的看法、对宗教的看法、psychological的status，对人生怎么看，世界的这个大和小，不同的人群，不同的文化。

From 1998 onward, I started to develop a music career in Canada and looked for performance opportunities everywhere; I engaged with people and organizations from various cultural backgrounds and witnessed different aspects of society; I frequently traveled around the world; in addition to North America, I went to Europe, Asia, Africa, etc. It should be noted that I did not suddenly change my outlook on life when arriving at a certain place. Rather, it is a mental process, a gradual change of psychological status,

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<sup>39</sup> There is a rich body of literature on cosmopolitanism, ranging from sociocultural and ethnic studies (Cleveland et.al 2010; Falzon 2009; Luczak, Pochmara and Dayal 2019; Tekgül 2012) to analysis of global capital flows and political analysis (Baban and Rygiel 2017; Brock and Brighthouse 2005; Hannerz 2005; Mohan 2006). The term “cosmopolitan(ism)” is often combined with other subjects to serve different research purposes, such as “cosmopolitan governance” (Held 1995), “cosmopolitan attitudes” (Nyíri 2014), “Chinese cosmopolitanism” (Yao 2019), and “strategic cosmopolitanism” (Mitchell 2003). In this dissertation, cosmopolitanism is a minor theoretical sidenote and only selected works have been covered.

including views of humanity, religions, lives, world, ethnicity, culture. (Han, personal interview, Jan. 16, 2019)

Her diasporic experiences have effectively made Han a cosmopolitan person. Although she still feels close to Chinese culture, Han has embraced and incorporated different cultural forms into both her music and daily life. Several elder musicians I interviewed share a similar cosmopolitan perspective: Pipa player Qiuxia He considers herself a musician of the world and rejects labeling her music based on one country or idea; dizi player Chen Tao developed a distinctive way of appreciating worldwide music from a “mountaintop angle,” i.e., seeing the bigger picture, and believes that at the heart of his musicianship is hybridity; and multi-instrumentalist Geling Jiang indicated that she does not have a specific cultural root.

Living in the diaspora with multicultural musical encounters does not necessarily lead to a cosmopolitan mindset. In this study, many Chinese musicians have been committed to cross-cultural musical collaborations in North America. Some actively engage with other music cultures and develop their intercultural musicianship, while others may treat intercultural musical collaborations as simply necessary to survive in the West. The former group of musicians is perhaps more likely to develop a cosmopolitan mindset, and the latter may be more conservative in terms of incorporating new cultural influences.

Some of my consultants also pointed out problems connected to their cosmopolitan lives. For instance, Mei Han indicated that sometimes her status as a “global citizen” makes her feel sad and isolated because no one place suits her in every way and she does not have a large family situation with several generations living together, which is a typical household constitution in Chinese culture. Diasporic life and frequent world travel gradually alienated Han from her relatives in China, and they are not in frequent contact with each other, even during the Spring



Festival when it is a Chinese tradition for families to reunite. In Han's case, freedom and experience were gained at the cost of sometimes being lonely in her cosmopolitan journey.

Although I use the homogeneous term "diasporic Chinese instrumentalists," each of my consultants has a distinct lived experience. These Chinese musicians came to the West for various reasons and have developed diverse music careers as ways of expressing themselves in the West. They faced the challenges of the immigrant's journey, and successfully positioned themselves in the North American multicultural scene. They must respond to social changes, be innovative and flexible, and design individual strategies to encourage Western audiences to accept and appreciate their music. Simon Frith (1996) argues that "Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives" (124). Whether presenting as cultural ambassadors or anti-stereotypes, Chinese musicians in this study started with their intercultural musicianship and chose diverse musical pathways in the West. Music allows these musicians to reterritorialize in the host country, smooth out cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, negotiate professional relationships in both China and North America, and most importantly, experience and present their distinctive subjectivities in the diaspora.

## 5 Autoethnography and Practice-based Research

I waited about a month until I finally started writing this chapter in March 2021.

Autoethnography should be an easy thing; you just recall what you have experienced and write your own story, right? It can also be the most challenging writing for scholars, because you are not making a laundry list of your daily life. You pick out the most significant experiences with deeper thoughts of their underlying cultural, social, and political implications, recording not only what you have experienced, but most importantly, uncovering why and how things happened (De Bruin 2018; Spry 2016). I knew I intended to incorporate an autoethnographic section from early stages of planning my dissertation, because I study the music culture that I belong to and I hoped to enrich the research with my personal perspective as an international student. Throughout my research, I kept a journal to record important events and activities with a fresh memory and immediate emotional response. To better understand my situation as a member of the Chinese diaspora, I also incorporated practice-based research (Candy, 2006; Nelson, 2013) with autoethnography (Chang 2008; Coffey 1999; Duncan 2004). Linda Candy (2006) defines practice-based research as an “original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice” (1). My practice-based research (or research-creation in Canadian parlance) was conducted through a series of musical projects, including recording a CD with both Chinese and non-Chinese musicians, holding an intercultural recital during the pandemic, and establishing a brand-new Chinese music ensemble in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The journals of my diasporic encounters and strategically designed musical practices were key supports in the development of this chapter.

As a qualitative research method, autoethnography has gained importance in recent social science research (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013; Poulos 2021; Reed-Danahay 1997; 2017). Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner (2011) define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)”. They argue that autoethnography is “both process and product” because of its close ties to autobiography and ethnography (273). There are various forms and approaches to autoethnography, such as indigenous ethnographies (Denzin, Lincoln and Smith 2008), reflexive & dyadic interviews (Ellis 2004), community autoethnographies (Toyosaki et al. 2009), and personal narratives (Tillmann 2009). Autoethnographic works also appear in a variety of creative formats, such as poetry (Pelias 2021), musical composition (Bartleet and Ellis 2009), performance (Jones 2007), visual art (Liamputtong and Rumbold 2008), and reflective journaling (Jones 1998). For this PhD project, I approached autoethnography mainly through a reflexive journal with personal narratives, performance recordings, and field photos.

Self-reflexivity has been an important pathway for me to explore the subjective feelings and sensitivities that would not have been available through observing other people’s music-making. Although music “more frequently serv[es] as a subject of social inquiry rather than [a] tool through which to conduct social research” (Leavy 2009, 106), “a wave of self-reflexivity is sweeping across the music profession and is gaining momentum in a number of areas, such as music practice, research and pedagogy” (Bartleet and Ellis 2009, 6). There are increasing numbers of musicians and music scholars who have included autoethnographic methods in their musical creations and cultural studies (Bresler 2009; Davidson 2015; Jenoure 2002), and my autoethnographic writing has been inspired by several excellent scholars in this field, including Tomie Hahn (2007) and Nina Sun Eidsheim (2018). In her book *Sensational Knowledge*, Tomie

Hahn (2007) examines how *nihon buyo*, a form of Japanese classical dance, is transmitted and translated between bodies with the aesthetic principles of its cultural and personal expressions. Hahn's ethnographic data are based on her lifelong experience as a dancer in the Tachibana school, which presents a neat music study that combines autoethnographic narratives and ethnographic research. Such a dynamic combination also presents in Nina Sun Eidsheim's (2018) pioneering book *The Race of Sound*, which thoroughly criticizes naturalized assumptions of an essential relationship between human voices and racial identities. Informed by her own practice as a singer as well as her ethnographic and musicological work, Eidsheim unfurls the ways voice and the aesthetics of voice are socially produced.

In my PhD project, participant-observation has been an important method of data gathering and a research tool for autoethnographic and practice-based studies. I have combined these three methodologies, though I sometimes found it hard to balance my role as a participant/performer and observer/scholar in the field. I tried not to be so immersed in the musical process that I missed any significant details, or other participants' real-time reactions and emotions. On the other hand, I allowed myself to be present in the situation as much as possible, so I could better understand my standpoints, feelings, and thoughts throughout the activity. At first glance, these two aspects seem to conflict, but I have effectively combined them throughout my research. One strategy I found very useful in balancing these two facets was to record a fresh memory on the same day as the event. Here the key is "the same day," because I found writing things the next day made a big difference. A later memoir often sees things from a bigger picture, which we also need when conducting analysis, but timely writing is more useful for recording details. In the same-day journal, I gave a comprehensive description of the event context, including setup, people's clothing, behaviors, and interactions. I also highlighted my personal experiences and emotional shifts and wrote down interesting/strange/thought-inspiring

conversations I had with other people— often either with musicians or audience members at the venue. The autoethnographic journal kept me engaged in my project, as well as tracking the research process—sometimes I came up with new ideas about my next performance project through finding my personal interest and passion indicated in the journal.

Reflection is an important process in practice-based research, which embodies the process of gaining new knowledge by doing. This is not a new idea. Michael Polanyi (1958) emphasizes scientists' personal participation in knowledge-making and claims that "complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false ideal" (18). John Dewey ([1934]1980) also states that knowledge gained by the artist is by definition experiential, and it is only through reflection that experience becomes intellectualized. In the twenty-first century, Annette Iggulden (2002) continues to insist that subjective dispositions and personal motivations are driving sources in academic research. Estelle Barrett (2007) opposes both "post enlightenment separation of the arts from science" and "scholastic construction of incorporeal knowledge" (116). She argues that "creative arts practice as research is an intensification of everyday experiences from which new knowledge or knowing emerges." (115).

Many scholars understand knowledge as a journey with no end. In Alfred Jules Ayer's (1956) classic text *The Problem of Knowledge*, he contends that we need to find a "right to be sure" to support a belief and call it knowledge. Influenced by Ayer, Karl Popper ([1959]2002) claims in his description of scientific inquiry that we cannot know any general truth about the world for certain. Drawing on their arguments, Linda Candy (2006) claims that the pursuit of knowledge is a constructing rather than uncovering process, and that "being sure" is about being certain of its possibility rather than truth. Similarly, when discussing practice as research in Ph.D. projects, Robin Nelson (2013) argues that knowledge is not fixed and there is no absolute truth. From this perspective, new knowledge emerging from performance/practice-based research can

be understood as a continuous exploration of the ongoing relationships between scholars' personal experience, previous knowledge, and wider social circumstances.

Although both theory and practice are important and integral to the study process, many practice-based projects prioritize practice over theory. Nelson (2013) argues that “something has gone wrong in the PaR [practice as research] inquiry if a practitioner-researcher feels that she needs to grab at a theory to justify the practice” (32). He developed a model showing the imbrication of theory within practice through different modes of knowledge: “know-how, know-what, and know-that” (38). “Know-how,” an embodied experience, refers to discovery-by-doing. “Know-what” presents “what can be gleaned through an informed reflexivity about the processes of making and its modes of knowing,” which reflects not only what works, but also the place where the researcher stands (44). “Know-that” is equivalent to “traditional academic knowledge” and is the base of the model (45). In PaR, there are constant dialogic engagements among the three key modes and Nelson insists that practice is at its heart. In his view, practice is a realization but not an application of theory. Practice can adjust theory, but theory should not adjust practice. Sophie Stévance and Serge Lacasse (2018) have a slightly different take on the relationship between practice and theory in their book *Research-Creation in Music and the Arts*. They define research-creation as

*An approach applied to an individual or multiple agent project combining research methods and creative practices within a dynamic frame of causal interaction (that is, each having a direct influence on the other), and leading to both scholarly and artifactual productions (be they artistic or otherwise) (152, emphasis in original).*

I share Nelson's view that theory should not be mechanically applied to practice, but I also agree with Stévance and Lacasse on the dynamic interactive relationship between theory and practice. I have gained a significant amount of instruction and inspiration from the literature on autoethnography (Boon 2019; Chávez 2017; Knight [2009]2010) and practice-based research

(Kershaw 2008; Leavy 2009). I tried, as Nelson insists, to realize rather than apply theory through my practice and to maintain a clear and critical mind while rehearsing and performing. In addition to musical practices in St. John's where I pursued my Ph.D. degree, I had the privilege of playing with many of my consultants during my fieldwork, in both informal and formal performance contexts. Performing with my consultants has not only deepened my understanding of their musical and societal situations but also influenced my own musical practice as a zheng player.

In this chapter, I describe my foundational music education in China, and then unfold my diasporic experiences through a series of short vignettes I recorded in my autoethnographic journal.<sup>1</sup> Through these episodes, I hope to show how, as a Chinese musician and scholar, I have navigated the intricate web of social, cultural, and political circumstances in my diasporic life in North America.

## **5.1 My Music education in China**

Although in this chapter, I want to focus more on my life after coming to Canada, I think it is necessary to share some of my musical experiences in China, especially my education. There have been big shifts in my musical direction, passion, and appreciation since I redirected my musical paths in North America, and the musical training I received in China served as the jumping-off point for my future musical development in the diaspora.

Like many music students in China, I started to learn the zheng at around six years of age. My first teacher was my aunt, who is still a zheng educator in my hometown of Yongzhou. I was

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<sup>1</sup> Most of my journals were written in English, albeit some content is in Mandarin. To make it more readable, I have translated the Mandarin parts to English. In order to retain the flavour of a journal, however, I have not edited my journal writing or tried to make it more idiomatic.

fascinated by this elegantly designed and euphonious instrument, so when my mom asked me if I wanted to learn the zheng, I said yes. I never thought about growing up and living with it for the rest of my life, let alone the connection between this ancient instrument and my Chinese heritage. Soon after I started learning the zheng, my other, elder aunt started to work for the government-owned cultural center in Yongzhou, from which she offered me many chances to perform. My childhood and adolescence were full of music and my zheng education was never interrupted thanks to my two aunts.

I belong to the Han majority, but I didn't pay much attention to my ethnicity until the university entrance exam where I knew there was a policy for ethnic minorities to get additional points. Then I found out that the zheng shares the same ethnic origin as me. Due to the Han cultural dominance in China, I always considered the zheng to be a Chinese instrument, rather than a Han instrument. From my experience, Chinese people like to distinguish between Han, minority, and foreign instruments. For example, someone may introduce the zheng as a traditional Chinese instrument, the hulusi as a Dai minority instrument, and the violin as a Western instrument. When I was an undergraduate student, I had the chance to visit some minority areas in China, including Yunnan province and Xiangxi Tujia & Miao Autonomous prefecture, and I witnessed how various minority people's lives were significantly influenced by Han culture. As a Han person, I was expecting to see distinct minority cultures, but all I saw were people speaking Mandarin and wearing T-shirts and jeans on the urban streets. I remember dressing in Dai costumes and performing Dai-style dance when playing the hulusi in my hometown. I learned the hulusi when I was a teenager, and I naively thought I was presenting Dai culture by doing this, even though I had only studied the instrument for several months and had never lived in a Dai community. (I can imagine a Western audience would jump up and point saying, "this is cultural appropriation." Or maybe not; we are all Chinese anyway, aren't we?)



My mother had high expectations of me. I learned ballet, Chinese calligraphy, and various musical instruments as after-school activities, with my daily schedule packed tight with classes, practices, rehearsals, and performances. In the 1990s, although the trend of sending children to learn music was growing among middle-class families, only a small number of families chose to do so; some could not afford after-school lessons. My mother felt proud of my extra-curricular achievements and believed these learning experiences would cultivate my artistic temperament, an important feature for a well-educated girl. As mentioned in chapter 2, in Confucian philosophy, there are four main arts utilized to define a well-educated scholar-gentleman: *qin* (琴, music), *qi* (棋, Chinese chess), *shu* (书, calligraphy), and *hua* (画, painting). I clearly see the influence of Confucianism in my mother's plan because I learned music for the longest time, but also touched on the other three fields. I was born under the One-Child Policy, a policy that, as I discuss in chapter 4, influenced my generation and our families. Although my mother did give birth to another child after I went to university, I grew up being the only child in my family and received all the attention and pressure.

Not surprisingly, I learned the piano while I was learning the zheng. How could my mom neglect my Western music education when the whole of China was learning from the West? She said there was no suitable piano teacher in my hometown, and she just wanted me to know the basic knowledge to keep pace with the times. So, I learned the piano for several years, but never took it as seriously as the zheng. It turns out my piano education was very helpful for my musical journey in China and later in North America. First, it helped me to understand the chords and fast fingerings in contemporary zheng music. People don't call the zheng "Chinese piano" for nothing, and many modern zheng compositions adopt piano playing techniques. As a child, I was amazed by these connections and enjoyed exploring easier ways to learn different instruments.

Second, it saved me a lot of practice time when I was doing compulsory piano and other Western music courses in university. Compared to students who didn't have piano training, I had the advantage of finishing course assignments with a better grade. Third, it made collaborations with non-Chinese instruments in China and North America easier for me to navigate, especially when premiering new compositions written by non-Chinese composers.

The route of my zheng education was quite standard. I learned zheng compositions mainly from the grade book designed for the exams held annually by the China Conservatory of Music (CCM). I never clearly memorized the information about composers and styles of the compositions I played, but I knew precisely (and still remember) which grade each music was in. Although I didn't pay attention to it, there was a hierarchy of zheng repertoire gradually forming in my mind, which influenced my musical appreciation and approach to the zheng. Gradually losing my original passion for exploring the beauty of the zheng and its music, I practiced hard with the goal of passing my exams. Music exams are common in many countries. For example, many music students in Canada follow the grading system of the Toronto Royal Conservatory of Music. It can be efficient in tracking music students' learning progress and stimulating them to practice hard, but the exam repertoire also made me think that compositions with difficult contemporary techniques were superior to those more traditional pieces that did not require tremendous practice time. Later I realized that what I and my music peers considered "high-level" skills were contemporary inventions adopted from the West, and ironically the aspects that I looked down on are essential features in traditional zheng music. I have written about this issue throughout my dissertation, and it was indeed a shock for me when I realized the truth.

After deciding to pursue a major in music for my undergraduate study, I went to different cities to learn from various zheng teachers in preparation for my audition. It sounds like I was learning different styles from their regions, but this was not the case. Most teachers I reached out

to were conservatory teachers and all I learned from them were contemporary compositions that were difficult to play but good for music exams and competitions. I remember that my lessons with Ms. Wang at the Wuhan Conservatory of Music always began with fingering exercises. Only when I became fluent with the rapid fingering sequences could I touch on the real musical composition. My lessons focused on score interpretation and technical precision rather than traditional oral transmission. Unlike Mei Han's experience of learning from folk musicians (discussed in chapter 2), I was never required to sing anything before playing a new music. It was always my job to get familiar with the composition before Ms. Wang gave detailed instructions on how to play it. In my experience, most zheng teachers have their own "authentic" versions of interpreting a composition, and students have to follow their interpretation, which in turn is based on a lineage of teachers.

My relationship with the zheng was not always good. I certainly chose it out of pure musical passion, but I remember that I hated playing it for a while because of my mother's high-pressure approach to education. She later realized the problem of her tiger parenting and asked me if I blamed her for giving me such a busy and stressful childhood. I certainly did not tell her I almost gave up the zheng as a teenager, and I do appreciate her efforts to raise me with music. In the end, I did not give it up because I felt I lost my identity when I didn't play it. I grew up with the zheng and it became part of me; it is my pride, fear, joy, passion, aspiration, and simply the thing I do. However, I didn't enjoy the pressure to conform to certain professional standards, though it seemed unavoidable in my professional music education in China. When I finished my undergraduate degree, I decided to pursue a master's degree in arts administration because I wanted to learn the business of music and bridge the gaps between artists (especially those who play Chinese instruments) and audiences. During my graduate studies, I came across Mei Han's jazz performance at the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, Quebec

(FIMAV) online. I was amazed by Han's performance and excited to see the various musical possibilities of the zheng. At that moment, I conceived my plan of studying in Canada and playing with fantastic musicians there. In 2016, I successfully made my way to Canada and my subsequent experience has proven that it was the right choice. After living in North America for five years, I am gradually rediscovering my original musical passion for the zheng through a diverse intercultural journey.

## **5.2 Musical Encounters in North America**

In this section, I narrate my musical journey in North America through experiences that I recorded in my autoethnographic journal. There are two sections in each vignette: the content cited from my journal, and my current reflection and comments on that event. Some of these musical encounters happened years ago, and I can't recall all the details. I found it interesting to read my journals with a fresh perspective and from different angles. The combination of the autoethnographic journal and my current thoughts shows my evolving feelings and analysis as I continue to develop my intercultural musicianship in the West.

### **5.2.1 Discovering Improvisation**



Figure 5.1 Improv rehearsal with Sara Pun (left)

**Event:** *The International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation at Memorial University (IICSI-MUN) 2016 Colloquium: Improvisation as Intercultural Contact and Dialogue*

**Time:** July 6-8, 2016

**Location:** St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

Seven months after I moved to Canada, I participated in the IICSI-MUN colloquium with my colleague Sara Pun who is a music therapist and plays Balinese gamelan and was then a fellow student in the ethnomusicology Ph.D. program.<sup>2</sup> It was my first time attempting improvisation on the zheng. I wrote a paper about my process of gradually opening myself to improvisation and how I listened to my identity through spontaneous playing.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, honestly, I did not know how to improvise at all. I got stuck many times with an empty mind and did not know how to continue, because I did not think I was playing good melodies or making a beautiful fusion sound with the gamelan. After several tries, I paid attention to Sara's ways of improvising for inspiration... I gradually got the feeling of cooperating with Sara's gamelan music by observing her body movements with the music. I adjusted my hand position and plucked the strings and meantime felt my body swing. Suddenly I found that my hands were "excited" to touch the strings and my whole body swung with Sara's body movements. When we reached the same embodied rhythm, our improvisation became dynamic. Like a stimulator, my body interaction with Sara gave me a sense of diving into the music and it pushed me to continue and make changes.

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In the afternoon, I was not satisfied with a long improvisation we had just played.

"It was terrible" I said.

"It was ok for me" Sara's reply was unexpected to me.

"Really? Why? We did not match the rhythm in many parts and some chords I chose were horribly dissonant with the gamelan..." I was confused.

"Maybe because I have an open mind for different kinds of music and sound" Sara smiled.

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<sup>2</sup> IICSI is the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, a partnered institute which has branches at several universities in Canada, including Memorial University. See [www.improvisationinstitute.ca](http://www.improvisationinstitute.ca).

<sup>3</sup> The paper was presented at the 2017 Society for Ethnomusicology's Annual Conference in Denver.

I never treated myself as a conservative person and I always felt open to new things. I kept asking myself why we had such different opinions, and finally, I got the answer: Although I always feel free to try new things, I still have a strong Chinese formal training background that deeply influences my musical appreciation. The reason I was not satisfied was that the music broke the rule of playing guzheng music that I took for granted: music should be harmonious and melodious. Sara also responded to that practice and said “I was taught that improvisation was a tool for expression and communication with [music therapy] clients ... we valued the process of improvising and the insights gained from the process... When we improvised, there was never a ‘wrong note’, but it was always about the sound represented.”

I feel excited every time I read about my first improvisation experience, even after several years of learning and practicing improvisation in North America. Moving from my native China to St. John’s, Newfoundland in December 2015, I also moved into a strange new musical territory. The experience of living in the diaspora was unsettling – it required improvisational skills of listening, observing, and adaptation. Stuart Hall (2003) argues that “we should think [of] identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (234). As a new resident in Canada, my cultural identity was constantly being reshaped by the diasporic experience, and this reshaped identity became unusually perceptible during improvisation. The improv experience I had with Sara was at the beginning of my residency in Canada, and the ways I engaged with improvisation echoed the paths by which I adapted to the new environment in St. John’s. For example, I learned to read stop signs, which is not a thing on the streets in China, and cook food that I rarely eat in China. In the multicultural Canadian context, I became conscious of my Chinese culture in everyday social encounters. Similarly, embarking on improvisational musical practice paradoxically made me hear my Chineseness through my spontaneous Chinese style of playing.

When the Swiss trio Deer toured in China in 2014, it took the organizer Jing Wang (2016) several months to find two Chinese musicians who were able and willing to improvise with Deer. This is not surprising. I spent twenty years learning and performing the zheng in China but never

had access to improvisation. However, improvisation has become an important musical practice for me in North America. After more than five years, I have become familiar with Western culture, and on some occasions, I am even a local culture representative. For example, when I was in the United States, my friends introduced me as “a Chinese coming from Canada.” In Vancouver, the executive director Bill Lai of the BC Chinese Music Association was excited to meet me, and I remember the first thing he said to me was “now I know a Chinese musician in Newfoundland!” This label made me feel that my identity is no longer just tied to being “Chinese”; it is a complex and dynamic synthesis of different identity formations that varies across circumstances.

Over the years, my sense of cultural identification as a zheng player has also evolved as I become more experienced as an improviser. I no longer have a strong connection with my Chineseness in my spontaneous playing. I feel more comfortable playing with noise and atonal expressions, and I have even absorbed influences from other improvisers, such as Mei Han and Lan Tung, with whom I have worked. Watching recordings of my improv performances from different times, I clearly see my playing developing into a more diverse and intricate net of musical connections that have been influenced by various musical resources. This is why improvisation is so important to me: it is not only a musical practice, but also a sense of self-awareness and diasporic consciousness (Walcott 2005).

### 5.2.2 Tradition & Authenticity



Figure 5.2 Zheng rehearsal with Mei Han (left), photo by Ellen Waterman

**Event:** *Mei Han — Improviser in Residence*

**Time:** November 21-25, 2017

**Location:** St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

In 2017, the zheng virtuoso Mei Han came to Memorial University to be an improviser-in-residence for one week, during which she gave a public talk, an improvisation workshop, and a concert. I am grateful for the many opportunities we had to talk and play music together. I joined her and several other musicians for the final concert, and we not only improvised together but also performed *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight*, a famous work based on an ancient tune, composed for the zheng by Lou Shuhua in 1938.<sup>4</sup> In my journal I recorded the rehearsal experience with Han:

In the rehearsal of *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight*, I was shocked by the different ways we approached the music. Han laoshi criticized many versions of this composition in score

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<sup>4</sup> For more detailed information about the score, see Figure 2.14 in chapter 2.



books published in China as “messy” and “not authentic.”<sup>5</sup> When we played the allegretto, Han laoshi heard my ascending portamentos and said,

“This part is not right, and it should be one sliding and one vibrato.”

“But I remember the book I learned marked them all ascending portamentos.”

“NO, no, one sliding and one vibrato, I learned from Cao Zheng!”

Cao Zheng was a well-respected and famous folk musician and a student of Lou Shuhua, the composer of *Fisherman Singing in the Twilight*. For someone like me who didn’t have experience of learning from folk musicians, Han laoshi’s speaking of “learned from Cao Zheng” certainly showed her authenticity. Therefore, I changed the portamentos to be a dialogue between sliding tones and vibratos.

Another conflicting part was towards the ending where Han laoshi had an off-the-beat playing while I was used to following the rhythm notated in the score. She said, “you should play the 6 (1a, A) with a feeling of reluctance, vibrate 2 (re, D) until the sound fade away, and let the final double stop goes itself.” Because of my previous playing habit, I couldn’t help plucking the strings when it came to the beat. For the last three notes, I felt I wanted to run but Han laoshi was “pulling” me back. Our different interpretations of the same music represented the distinct music education we received. Han laoshi emphasized the abstract feeling and the broadness of the music, while I was trying to be precise and follow the score.

In my previous experience, I was always the one who emphasized affect and a flexible approach to tempo when playing with non-Chinese instruments. While rehearsing with Han, I became the one with “Western thinking” even though I had never considered myself to be following the score rigidly. After Han’s visit, I had a different way of approaching my instrument and re-thought my ideas about authentic playing. It’s never black and white: for my Canadian audiences, I indeed represented authentic Chinese music since I received formal conservatory musical training in China. When playing with Han, however, my music became less authentic and even “Western,” and I had to adjust my playing to make it more “Chinese.” So, what constitutes “authenticity”?

Sarah Weiss (2014) uses ethnographic data from around one thousand university students in her world music classes to examine issues of authenticity and hybridity in the context of

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<sup>5</sup> In Chinese, laoshi means teacher. Calling teachers by their names can be considered impolite in Chinese culture, so I called Mei Han “Han laoshi” when we were together and in my journal.

globalization. She concludes that “authenticity is a relative, flexible and malleable concept... an object, production, or individual that seems authentic in one context may in another context or at a different time seem comparatively inauthentic to that same person” (519). Weiss’s study speaks to my experience, I never felt as close to the zheng tradition as when I played with Han. I enjoyed and appreciated learning more “authentic” playing from her. However, I was also aware of the different interpretations being present at any given time. As Simon Frith (2000) states, “it can be doubted whether there is such a thing as an “authentic”—autonomous—musical form in the first place” (308).

The nostalgia for a pure musical tradition plays an important role in shaping our aesthetic preferences when presenting traditional instruments and music. As Weiss (2014) indicates, “listeners imagine they are listening to another musical world, but they are hearing themselves, as their own musical world is used as a filter” (520). Living in multicultural Canada, I have become more aware of my cultural heritage and feel a strong responsibility to maintain and share Chinese traditions in Western society. Depending on the context, I might not be as authentic as I want to be or be more authentic than I think I am. No matter how my music is received, however, I am presenting my own version of “lived” tradition and it is indeed authentic for me. From this perspective, authenticity is a perception rather than a fixed concept.

### 5.2.3 Folk-based Rock and Roll



Figure 5.3 Solo performance (left) and playing with Shanneyganock (right), photo by Haochen Zhang

**Event:** *George Street Festival*<sup>6</sup>

**Time:** August 2, 2017

**Location:** St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

In July 2017, Chris Andrews interviewed me for the program *All Over the Map* on CBC Radio

One in St. John's. Afterwards, I realized that Chris leads Shanneyganock, a famous

Newfoundland-based folk-rock band that plays traditional Newfoundland (Irish-influenced)

music, and we were both interested in each other's music culture. One month later, we did a show

together at the George Street Festival, and in my autoethnographic journal, I recorded the process

of our micro-social musical negotiations and my feelings on stage. George Street, a two-block-

long street located in downtown St. John's, is unusual in being packed with over two dozen pubs,

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<sup>6</sup> While video of this performance is not available, I have included a link and description in appendix B for another show I played with Shanneyganock in 2017. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6CWvjLqyp4>

clubs, and bars.<sup>7</sup> Held annually in August, the George Street Festival attracts both locals and tourists by providing a variety of entertainment for all kinds of adult audiences.

At first, Chris asked me if I could play the zheng in G. I said yes for G major. Then he sent me a music recording to see if I could join them for this piece. I tried to accompany their singing using harmonies and glissandos—a special zheng playing technique using index finger and thumb to make a water-flowing sound. Chris liked my playing, and we decided to give it a try.

The Shanneyganock was on tour, and I didn't meet the whole band until the performance day. I was a little worried because we didn't have enough time to rehearse, but Chris was confident and kept telling me "we will figure it out." When I brought my instrument to the venue for a soundcheck, Chris asked me if I could perform the solo piece that I played in our interview to open the show. I could play but there were small issues: although both pieces were in G major, the tuning of my solo piece changed pitches of several notes in the bass scale. When I played them in a sequence, I had to swiftly tune the zheng after finishing the first piece. Later, I went home practicing my solo piece and made some marks on the instrument to ensure a quick and precise tuning onstage.

When the sound engineer asked me if I wanted to wear earplugs during the performance, I had no idea what he was talking about. As a conservatory-trained zheng player, most of my performances happened in concert halls where I never needed earplugs. They told me I won't be able to hear myself if I didn't wear them, and it turned out that I indeed couldn't hear myself clearly in the band even with the earplugs. I also didn't like the sound effect in the earplugs—the zheng sounded unreal and fake. For the opening piece, they put me on the center of the stage in the spotlight. The whole atmosphere was dark and mysterious, and I could sense the curiosity among the audience. However, the zheng has 21 strings with four of them colored green to mark the different octaves, and the spotlights made my green strings hard to identify. I asked them to turn the lights brighter, but they didn't make a big change since they still wanted a mysterious stage effect. Playing a solo in that context was like a fight for me, not only because of the unrecognized strings but also for the unfamiliar performing atmosphere. I could feel and hear the audience's talking, light changing, moving cameras, and working stuff shuttling back and forth... every part of the show was new to me, and I had no choice but immediately adapt to it. When the band joined me on stage, the whole scene was livened up. The crowd was cheering and dancing down there, and I totally forgot that I was playing a traditional Chinese instrument.

Playing with Shanneyganock was a special learning experience. It was my first time collaborating with a folk-rock band, and there were many challenges since we had different

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.georgestreetlive.ca/>.

musical backgrounds. When I asked Chris for a musical score, he told me that none of the band members read music. I was shocked and could not believe it. How can a band become famous and keep evolving their repertoires without reading any sheet music? Shanneyganock was established in 1994; the band is still active in St. John's and produces well-attended musical tours. As a musician coming from a classical background, it was hard for me to imagine starting a band without written compositions, let alone thinking that one day it would become successful. With all the confusion, I had to accept the truth that there would be no score for me to arrange my musical part. I listened to their recording and roughly wrote down the melodies. Then, I added the chords and playing techniques and tried them with the music over and over again. At that point, I felt strongly grateful for my previous Western music education, such as my composition course in university and my early piano training, otherwise I would not have been able to arrange my part in a short time.

In many situations, my musical collaborations were like the one with Shanneyganock. Not only was I unfamiliar with my musical collaborators' habits and cultures, but most of them also had little or no knowledge about my instrument and musical background. There were always issues of cultural misunderstandings and I needed to develop my own strategies to conquer them one after another. Sometimes, cultural and aesthetic negotiations needed to come before musical communications, especially in the early stage of conceiving an intercultural music plan and communicating with potential collaborators. It is interesting that I have also increasingly realized the cultural connections between my non-Chinese musical partners and myself in the globalized world. We might have different native languages, but we can use English to communicate; we come from various musical backgrounds, but most of us have the same basic (usually Western) musical knowledge to start with; our instruments can be distinctively different, but we often have previous experience of listening to, or playing with, similar instruments. Through dealing with

musical challenges and uncovering these connections, I find myself gradually developing my intercultural musicianship, a musical route that feels natural and inevitable in the globalized twenty-first century because of the cross-cultural influences and penetrations.

#### 5.2.4 CD Recording



Figure 5.4 Recording with Spencer Crewe (middle) and Chang Chang (right) in the studio

**Event:** *CD Recording*

**Time:** April 2018

**Location:** St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

**Link:** [https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/tune-of-rainbow-cloud/slqaMlbl1uT?si=0a4527357eb143499f26136e909d18ff&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/tune-of-rainbow-cloud/slqaMlbl1uT?si=0a4527357eb143499f26136e909d18ff&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=social_sharing).

With Spencer Crewe as the sound engineer, I recorded my first CD with Jacob (Jake) Danson Faraday, Teresa Marie Connors, and Chang Chang in St. John's in 2018. In addition to my solo zheng music, I included one improv with Jacob on electronics and Teresa on voice & laptop instrument, and one contemporary concerto *Tune of Rainbow Cloud* written by Zhou Yuguo (周煜国, 2002) with Chang on piano. I met these collaborators at MUN: Spencer is an audio engineer at the Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media, and Place, Jake was a fellow

student in the ethnomusicology Ph.D. program (2015-2021), Teresa was doing her postdoctoral research (2017-2019), and Chang was a master student majoring in piano performance (2016-2018).

I had some interesting conversations with Chang while rehearsing and recording:

After finishing one playing, I ask her,

“Do you think what we just played was good?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“One of the pitches was unstable and I adjusted it during the playing...”

“Really? I didn’t hear it. I always heard small pitch problems with the zheng, I mean not because of you but for this instrument in general. But I didn’t hear any for what we just played.”

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“Can you wait longer here in this transition part? I feel I need more time and to pause longer to process emotions...” I stopped playing and said to Chang, because I felt she was pushing me when coming to the adagio part.

“Not following the score? Ok, I’ll watch you then, give me a sign.” Chang quickly responded.

“Not rigidly follow it, yes. I mean let our emotions lead the music and the first note in adagio would come out naturally...and slowly...” I waved my hands making a slow-down gesture.

“I know, I played this piece with other zheng players in China before. You zheng players all have different interpretations and emotional flows... it’s always a bit different from the score” Chang said with a sign of “I have experience” on her face.

One of my original intentions in recording a CD was to commemorate the musical compositions that I used to play in China as well as touching on my new musical explorations in Canada. *Tune of Rainbow Cloud* was one of my favorite concertos, and I chose Chang Chang to collaborate with because we both came to Canada as international students and had music education in China. I thought it would be easier for us to communicate since we came from a shared cultural background and Chang had the experience of playing with the zheng before. It turned out that I did express myself better when we spoke in Mandarin, but it was not as easy as I

thought in terms of musical communication. When I asked Chang her feeling about playing with Chinese instruments, she said,

Due to different cultural backgrounds, one of the challenges was to combine these two instruments and let Westerners appreciate the performance... I feel the rhythm and melody are not very clear in traditional Chinese instrumental music, and there are no playing rules for all the players. I had to learn the zheng music as well as the playing habits of the player in order to better collaborate with the zheng. (Interview, March 2021)

Chang indeed understood my suggestions about letting the emotions flow in the music, but rather than considering it a Chinese concept that we both share, she interpreted it as a feature of zheng playing. As for the tuning issues, even though the zheng can be tuned based on the standard frequency of A 440 Hz, there are always harmonics wobbling around pitches and it is also true that Chinese instruments are easily put out of tune (based on Western musical criteria) due to the technique of frequent sliding movements.<sup>8</sup>

Compared to playing with Chang, my improvisation with Jake and Teresa went more smoothly, which was the opposite of what I had expected. Our cultural differences were easier to navigate because of the flexibility and inclusiveness of improvisation. We did not have trouble with pitch, emotional flow, personal style, musical standards, etc. What we considered while playing were only our spontaneous musical expressions of the moment. Through making this recording, I realized that different cultural backgrounds are not always be an essential element causing musical conflicts or influencing musical communication. People from the same cultural background can have trouble communicating musical ideas, and it is not necessarily a disadvantage for people with different cultural backgrounds to collaborate musically. Mutual

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<sup>8</sup> A440, or Stuttgart pitch, represents the audio frequency of musical note A (above middle C) as 440 Hz. It is the standard pitch set by the International Standards Association for calibrating acoustic equipment and musical instruments in 1955 (Randel and Credo Reference 2012).



understanding and appreciation, as I discuss in Chapter 3, plays a more important role in securing a successful intercultural collaboration.

### 5.2.5 Chinese Cultural Ambassador



Figure 5.5 Various musical activities with CCMC in Murfreesboro

**Events:** *Concerts, performances, school shows, and lecture-recitals*

**Time:** January-April 2019

**Location:** Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the United States

In January 2019, I arrived at my first field site in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and started a four-month musical journey at the Center for Chinese Music and Culture (CCMC) at Middle

Tennessee State University. With the aim of understanding the interrelated musical lives of visiting and diasporic Chinese musicians and the operations of the CCMC, I worked closely with my consultants, especially Director Mei Han, and I participated in most Chinese musical activities there.

I have finally arrived in Murfreesboro, and everything is now settled down. It is a beautiful city, neater and more peaceful than I expected. I saw old buildings with iconic red bricks, old-schooled mailboxes, and all kinds of big trees that I cannot name. It is a historic city with stories, I always have this thought when walking on the streets. Such an impression also makes me wonder how Chinese music takes its root here.

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On my first day at CCMC, Han laoshi picked me up at 8 am, and we were the first people who arrived at CCMC. After looking over the center, Han laoshi noticed that three zheng were laid down on the floor. "I have told them so many times!" Han laoshi was unhappy that new volunteer students sent by Hanban from China did not follow the rules of correctly storing the instruments. She explained that all working staff (except her) at CCMC are temporary. When one person just got the skills of managing the Center, he or she had to leave soon, and another fresh hand took over the position.

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I just finished an outdoor performance with CCMC, and I am freezing now. The performance was part of the Chinese New Year Celebration and, in addition to music playing, there were also dragon dance and martial art demonstrations. It was my first time playing in cold weather (-2 degrees) with Chinese costumes, and I could hardly feel my fingers while playing. Even though it was a challenge for the performers, the whole festival atmosphere was quite good. The event was held in the downtown square, and our music attracted many locals and tourists, which was a great way for CCMC to reach out to more audiences.

When I first arrived at CCMC, I felt so overwhelmed by Chinese culture, not only because of the cultural presentations at the center, but also because of people's behaviors and socialization. Since most of my musical activities in Canada were in Western communities, I was used to socializing with non-Chinese musicians, and it took me a while to adapt to the new musical environment in Murfreesboro. I spoke Mandarin at the Center, wore Chinese-style costumes for performances, and expanded my knowledge of Chinese music culture. Although my

primary role in that context was as an ethnomusicologist, I had a strong feeling of being a Chinese cultural ambassador by participating in the events held by CCMC.

What CCMC offers to the public is meaningful and valuable. It is not only a center to showcase Chinese musical culture and facilitate cross-cultural exchange but also a “home” for local people of Chinese descent. One of the students I taught there was a middle-aged Chinese immigrant who has been living in the United States for decades. She wanted to learn the zheng because she felt at home being surrounded by Chinese culture; she liked watching me demonstrate and said it reminded her imagine an elegant musical scene in ancient China. She told me that learning the zheng was a nostalgic and healing cultural experience that had been lacking in her life in the US. I could sense her nostalgia while listening to her expressions, and I was moved by the fact that CCMC has provided a space for diasporic Chinese people to gather and share their common cultural values.

Because of constant turnover of visitors and students at CCMC, Han’s role as director has many facets. From my observation, she was working as a musician (playing several instruments), programmer, advertiser, teacher, scholar, ensemble leader etc. Being a precise person, Han paid close attention to detail to ensure the quality of each musical event, which caused a heavy workload for her. I was amazed the energy and passion she brought to the cultural activities she has developed at CCMC, and by participating in its events, I was influenced by Han’s ideals and wanted to join her to facilitate cross-cultural exchange and understanding in the globalized world. This feeling finally resulted in my action of forming my own Chinese musical ensemble in St. John’s after I finished my fieldwork in late 2019 (I discuss it later in this chapter).

### 5.2.6 Intercultural Orchestra



Figure 5.6 Full crew in VICO Summer Academy

**Event:** *VICO Summer Academy*

**Time:** July 9-19, 2019

**Location:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

One of the most unforgettable experiences I had during my fieldwork was the concert I played with the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra (VICO) for their third annual Summer Academy in 2019. It was an educational program that provided a ten-day period of intensive training for established and emerging musicians and composers on creating and performing intercultural music. I was invited to give a workshop on improvisation and at the final concert, I performed *Han Ya Xi Shui*, a traditional Chinese music arranged by Mark Armanini and Qiuxia He, with Jackie Hu on dizi, Michel Marang on clarinet, Saina Khaledi on santur, Tim Chan on sheng, and Yun Song on erhu. There are many versions of *Han Ya Xi Shui*, and the zheng version I played was different from the one Armanini and He used. Because of limited time, we performed with two different scores on stage, and I lost the orchestra (or the reverse) for a while during the performance.

I was very excited to be invited to the VICO Summer Academy and playing with the intercultural orchestra was definitely a dream come true. However, the final concert didn't go as well as we planned, at least for the concerto piece I played with the whole band. Mark and Qiuxia arranged *Han Ya Xi Shui* based on the pipa score, but the zheng version is different even though there are similar melodies. Mark didn't want to re-write anything, so, Gloria, the conductor, and I worked together to figure out how to fit the zheng version in the music.

The first change was the key. The zheng version I played was in G, although it shows G in the ensemble score, we realized that D was the major note in the musical progression. Since my zheng score was in numbered notation, it was easier for me to change keys. So, I changed my score to D, which simultaneously altered the octave positions on the zheng. Mark said I could play a little differently from the score as long as I kept up with the rhythmic flow. Gloria and I matched the measure numbers in the ensemble score with mine, and we decided to go with two different scores on stage. At the concert, Gloria didn't have my score, and I just played my solo part by myself. It was dangerous by doing this since we could easily lose each other if any of us missed one beat. And that was exactly what happened: I lost the orchestra (or the reverse) somewhere at the second half of the adagio, and we did not unite until the end of that part where there was an important cue for the whole orchestra to stop and prepare for the allegretto.

Later on, I discussed the concert with Gloria. She said we should learn from this that in the future if we are not ready, we should say no. It was a traditional piece, and we should have foreseen this result when we decided to play with different scores for the soloist and the ensemble. Mark kept saying "it's ok," but for musicians, we didn't think it was ok enough to be performed at that time. Because of limited time, musicians and students were rushed to finish the job.

This incident is mentioned in Chapter 3 where I discuss intercultural collaborations, and my autoethnographic journey shows the details of my experience of working with VICO in 2019. There is a big Chinese music scene in Vancouver, and local musicians and composers keep producing new intercultural works, including concerts, compositions, and other collaborative projects. If I had to use one word to describe my fieldwork in Vancouver (May-August 2019), it would be "busy." I had musical events to attend almost every day, and many Chinese musicians I interviewed were involved in several music projects simultaneously. It was summertime when more musical activities are arranged, and the fast pace in these local music communities made me

feel stressed even as a researcher. Musicians were working hard, and it was normal for them to have a schedule packed with rehearsals and performances for the whole summer.

From my observation, most music projects in Vancouver were completed in a short amount of time. From the first rehearsal to the concert, it usually took less than a month for musicians and conductors to learn repertoire, rehearse, and perform a concert. For example, when the Sound of Dragon Ensemble prepared their concert with the Melody of China, a San Francisco-based Chinese ensemble, on May 30, 2019, their first rehearsal was on May 19, which was twenty days before the concert, and they had six rehearsals in total. Musicians from Melody of China arrived on the concert day and only joined the dress rehearsal with Sound of Dragon Ensemble before playing with them in the concert. This transnational and intercultural concert was a success and I enjoyed the new intercultural compositions they performed. There were, however, small musical issues that remained unsolved, such as the transitions between improvisation and composition parts and delicate musical dialogues between different instruments. In my view, those collaborative pieces could have been even more polished if the musicians had had more time to rehearse with each other. According to Tung, the director of Sound of Dragon Ensemble, musicians were paid for their rehearsals by the hour, and it was impossible to arrange more rehearsals because of the limited funding. In our interview, the conductor Chih-Sheng Chen also said rehearsals in Taiwan were often more meticulous because musicians had more time to polish their interpretations of the works. For Chen's previous music projects in Vancouver, it was normal for him to have only two rehearsals before performing a new composition. He thought "this is terrible," but he had no choice but to adapt to the local musical environment (Chen, personal interview, May 30, 2019).

The conductor, Gloria Wong, said that in the future I should avoid the kind of rushed situation we encountered at the VICO Summer Academy, but I wonder if it is possible for us to

say no under such a musical atmosphere. If we could re-run the program, would we say no to performing at the concert? I am not sure. We tried our best to deal with the issues, and I don't think things would get much better if we could do it over again. After all, given the inevitable intensity of a short summer academy, we only had less than five days to form a brand-new intercultural group and play new compositions, let alone resolve the initial score problem. It was a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, musicians including myself wanted to present a high-quality musical performance, but on the other hand, we were given a short amount of time to prepare and finish the project. In my admittedly limited experience, such a situation was common in Chinese musical collaborations in Vancouver.

When I interviewed Qinglin Bruce Bai, a young Chinese composer who immigrated to Vancouver with his parents in 2001, he also pointed out the time issue of many Chinese and intercultural musical concerts in Vancouver. He said it was hard to present a high-quality concert when every musician was in a rush to finish it, which also influenced composers' musical development (Bai, personal interview, Jun. 18, 2019). Most musicians I interviewed were working musicians, they had to make a living and efficiently finish their musical jobs in a limited time. It is an unhealthy musical development if quantity is prioritized over quality, but there are economic pressures on artists, and they need to survive in the difficult conditions of neo-liberal capitalism. To a certain extent, these intensive projects have fostered a prosperous music scene in Vancouver, in which both locals and visitors experience celebratory multiculturalism through being immersed in diverse musical activities. However, musicians and composers may feel unsatisfied in terms of achieving their musical goals in these intense conditions. It is a difficult conundrum for Chinese musicians in Vancouver (and perhaps in many other fast-paced cities as well).

### 5.2.7 Light Wind Ensemble



Figure 5.7 Light Wind Ensemble at the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve

**Event:** *Cape St. Mary's Performance Series*

**Time:** August 31, 2019

**Location:** Cape St. Mary's, Newfoundland, Canada

After finishing my fieldwork, I went back to St. John's and formed the Light Wind Ensemble, which, to my knowledge, is the first Chinese music ensemble in Newfoundland. We performed a debut concert at the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve as part of the Cape St. Mary's Performance Series in August 2019. Every summer, this performance series, produced by musician and folklorist Delf Maria Hohmann, invites various artists to present music, storytelling, and readings at the Interpretation Center at the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve, the site of an important seabird colony located about two hours from St. John's. As of February 2021, Light Wind Ensemble had given five concerts in Newfoundland, and its repertoire consists primarily of arrangements of traditional and contemporary Chinese compositions.



I am very excited and keen to apply what I learned in the field to this new ensemble. It is hard to find Chinese players in Newfoundland, let alone professional musicians. Although the current band members in my ensemble are amateur musicians who have non-musical jobs/studies, they all learned their instruments for a long time and have no problem playing ensemble music. So far, I find the biggest challenge is to stimulate and motivate them. They have their own jobs to do during the day and can only join me on weekends or in the evening. Sometimes they couldn't make the rehearsal when they suddenly had a work meeting. I understand and don't complain about it. After all, it's already not easy for me to form this band.

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I feel very sad that the erhu player Peiyao Liao will not join us after the Cape St. Mary's performance because she will be preparing for her CPA exam, and the percussionist Bison Du is also temporarily in this ensemble. Du just graduated and has moved to Alberta for a better job market there. He came back to St. John's for this performance and then will be gone again. I have to look for a new erhu player and percussionist afterwards.

I mentioned to the band members that I wanted to add improvisation to one of our pieces. The dizi player Fan Zhang asked me "what is improvisation." I was stuck at that moment because I didn't expect this question. I was prepared for responses like "I never did improvisation," "I don't know how to improvise" etc., but not "what is improvisation." It took me a while to persuade them to accept this idea, and both Peiyao and Fan said "it's so hard" when they tried to improvise on their instruments. I understood them because I experienced this moment before. It was also hard for me to begin improvising, but I fell in love with this musical practice quickly and I believed they would love improvisation someday. However, it turned out that they didn't enjoy improvising and they would prefer memorizing a hard piece to improvising on the spot. Therefore, Peiyao and Fan designed their improvisational parts and wrote down their "improvising" melodies in the score.

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Our performance at the International Cuisine Festival was almost ruined by Tan [pseudonym], the new erhu player that I found in Newfoundland. The last time Peiyao said she was going to prepare for the CPA exam and couldn't join us for the future performance, so I looked for another erhu player and was very excited to find Tan. Everything went smoothly that Tan agreed to join our ensemble and perform at the festival. Since I was in China when I contacted Tan, we couldn't rehearse until I came back to Canada. He confirmed that he played the pieces before and should be no problem playing with the ensemble after several rehearsals. I believed him and thought everything was planned well. However, I could not find him afterwards. I contacted him right after I arrived at the airport in Toronto because I was a little worried that we had less than 10 days to rehearse. He did not reply. Then, two days after I settled down in St. John's, I messaged him again but there was still no response. I looked for him everywhere, and he just disappeared, right before the show. Without any other choice, I went to Peiyao again and asked if she could come to help us once. Thank God, she agreed. Until today, I still haven't received any response from Tan, and I couldn't find another erhu player on this island.

When my research consultants described the intense competition for work in the Chinese music community in Vancouver, I wished I had the same problem in Newfoundland. Compared to a lack of Chinese musicians, I'd prefer to have more musical competitors and more opportunities to collaborate. I always had a dream of forming my own musical group, especially after my fieldwork at the CCMC in Murfreesboro, and the Light Wind Ensemble helped me to make my musical goals concrete. However, maintaining a Chinese ensemble in St. John's is much harder than I imagined. St. John's is located on the island of Newfoundland and is the capital city of Newfoundland and Labrador, the easternmost province in Canada. In part because of the city's isolation from mainland Canada, there is only a small Chinese community in the city.<sup>9</sup>

Unstable membership is the biggest problem in our ensemble, and a transient population is also a significant issue across the province.<sup>10</sup> Many people move to Newfoundland for a temporary job or to pursue a university degree, and because of the limited job market, they often leave this province at the end of their contracts or when they graduate from university. After living here for five years, about 80 percent of the friends that I met in my first year have left. For the same reason, I also do not know if I can stay here after graduation, even though I like this province—the beautiful summer landscapes, friendly environment, inclusive multicultural music scene, etc. The dizi plays an important role in our ensemble, but the player Fan Zhang told me that he got a new job in China and is going to leave in April 2021 as well. I was shocked when

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<sup>9</sup> The 2016 Canada Census showed that there were 2700 residents of Chinese ethnic origins in Newfoundland and Labrador, occupying 0.5% of its total population of 519716. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=POPC&Code1=0792&Geo2=PR&Code2=10&Data=Count&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All>.

<sup>10</sup> According to a Statistics Canada analysis of tax filers, among those admitted to Canada in 2011, only 51 per cent remained in Newfoundland five years later, which was the third-lowest retention rate by province. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/economy/article-in-newfoundland-and-labrador-a-demographic-crisis-puts-the-economy-at/>.

hearing this news because he was hired as a research scientist at the Fisheries and Marine Institute at Memorial University. I thought he would stay here at least longer than others.

Sometimes, we had conflicts in terms of choosing repertoire. Fan preferred music of a popular style, but I wanted more professional compositions and folk tunes. I like experimenting while playing modern compositions with noise, improvisation, and non-traditional playing, but both Fan and Peiyao were hesitant to try and not comfortable or confident with playing them. I had to balance each musician's preferences and make decisions for the ensemble. It was also my job to reach out for performance opportunities and arrange music to make it suitable for the ensemble to play. Since Fan and Peiyao are amateur players, I also contacted my professional musician friends in China to help them to deal with certain playing issues. For example, I asked one of my erhu friends to record a video demonstrating how to play a horse-like neighing sound on the erhu for Peiyao so we could play the composition *Horse Racing*.

It is not easy to form and maintain a Chinese music ensemble in a comparatively isolated place like Newfoundland. Because there are few Chinese musicians, I feel a strong responsibility to share Chinese music culture and present good-quality Chinese instrumental music to the public. It is a different feeling from being a cultural ambassador in a city with a big Chinese community, or even in the context of the CCMC. In the absence of successful cases of previous Chinese ensembles, my musical experiments in Newfoundland are like trying to find my way in the dark but I have been moving steadily forward. One person's effort is limited but I want to see how much I can achieve. I hope to raise local people's awareness of Chinese culture and will continue to contribute to the multicultural scene in Newfoundland. Leading the Light Wind Ensemble has also facilitated my own musical development: I have gained knowledge of musical arrangements, developed leadership skills, and had a better understanding of the zheng and other Chinese instruments in the context of ensemble playing.

## 5.2.8 New Compositions

Guzheng

Variations on Circular Motion  
for percussion and guzheng

Andrew Luther

Variation 1  
Spiraling (♩ = c. 80)

knocking on instrument

Variation 2

Variation 3

Variations on Circular Motion

Figure 5.8 Sections of the zheng part from *Variations on Circular Motion* (Andrew Glenn Luther 2021)

**Event:** *PhoeNX-MUN Workshop 2021*

**Time:** February-March 2021

**Location:** St. John's and Toronto, Canada

**Link:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLg7wZN7yuY>.

Composer and music professor, Andrew Staniland organized a collaborative project between MUN and the Toronto-based PhoeNX ensemble in early 2021. It included a series of workshops and recordings designed for a composition class at MUN with seven composition students and four musicians—Sanya Eng (harp), Ryan Scott (percussion), and Patty Chan (erhu) from Toronto, and me (zheng) in St. John's. There were three parts to this project: first, each musician gave a workshop to introduce their instrument and its playing techniques. Then, composition students had two weeks to write a duo for selected instruments. When they finished

writing, four musicians had one week to practice and record their individual parts in three to four compositions assigned to them.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Staniland and his composition students combined different musical parts and produced the recordings. I received four compositions, of which the most challenging one was *Variations on Circular Motion* written by Andrew Glenn Luther for percussion and zheng. I recorded the negotiations Luther and I had about musical notes, rhythms, and chords:

I felt lost when I quickly went through the music that I just received from Andrew Glenn Luther. If it is not written on the top “for percussion and guzheng,” I won’t assume this is a score for the zheng. Generally, this composition treats the zheng more like “a percussion instrument with bending effects” rather than a melodious instrument. The time signature changes in almost every measure, and the chords are written in an unconventional way. Normally, I would have a rough impression of how the music flows when I go through a score, but honestly, I had no idea what the music was going to sound like.

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In my first email to Andrew, I pointed out two chords that I couldn’t play because of pressing twists. Andrew quickly fixed them and changed two notes to be the ones played on bare strings. After I tried the whole score on the zheng, I then found another big problem: it created additional/unwanted descending portamento in several spots when I had to quickly move my left hand after sliding a string. Without the experience of writing music for the zheng, Andrew did not consider that the pitch of a sliding note will change if I do not hold or cover it with another note. But he soon realized the issue and even took the initiative asking me if I wanted to change several other chords in the score. I didn’t point out these places, but they were indeed challenging for me. Since I had to practice and record four pieces in a week, I accepted his advice and also asked him to change some difficult rhythmic phrases and unusual chords to make it easy for me to play.

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The whole week of practicing the pieces and doing the recording was very intense for me. Even though all the pieces were less than four minutes, they were new to me and I had to practice them at least three hours a day in addition to my other daily work routine. I had a Zoom meeting with Ryan discussing the possibility of playing music together through Sonobus.<sup>12</sup> However, we did not succeed because of technical problems, and our musical parts sound unreal in the virtual world. Finally, we decided that for the improvisational

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<sup>11</sup> The project took place during the COVID-19 pandemic which meant that we had to record our parts separately. Since musicians everywhere were developing creative responses to the social distancing necessitated by the pandemic, it also afforded an unusual opportunity for musicians in St. John’s and Toronto to collaborate.

<sup>12</sup> Sonobus is a network streaming software.

section, I recorded my part first and then let Ryan improvise based on my playing; and for rhythmic parts, we used a click track to play and record our own parts separately.

Negotiating with Luther reminded me of what Mei Han said in our interview that some compositions made her sound like a third-rate pianist or harpist because of their use of non-idiomatic materials. In my case, it would be a third-rate percussionist! However, I greatly appreciated Andrew's openness to making changes. The final version was not that bad to play, even though it was still a challenge for me because of the rhythmic variations and unconventional chords. Han said she accepted any music written for her at the early stage of immigration because of "a lack of cultural confidence and faith in her instrument" (Han, personal interview, Jan. 16, 2019), but that now she would not accept compositions written without considering the *yun* in the *zheng*. Although I am still a student in Canada, I am also at the early stage of developing a music career here. Honestly, I believe I would accept any composer's invitation to premiere a composition since it will become a precious musical experience for me. Does this mean that I lack cultural confidence or faith in my instrument?

As a new resident in Western society, I share the feeling of uncertainty that Han had in her early years in Canada. However, I believe that generously accepting new compositions is different from the situation where I fully accepted any corrections to my writing that a native English-language coach gave to me for my course assignments in my first year. There was definitely "a lack of writing confidence and faith in my English" when I followed the coach's instructions. In the process of negotiating with Luther, however, I found myself gradually gaining cultural confidence with one problem solved after another. I became more open-minded towards the challenges presented by the music and continuously found new possibilities of playing the *zheng*. In turn, Luther also indicated that he learned a lot about the *zheng* and Chinese music in general through our interactions. I agree with Han that we should say "no" to compositions that

are not playable for us, and I also want to think of every challenging situation as an opportunity for me to facilitate intercultural communication and increase our cultural competencies. The benign and egalitarian cultural atmosphere produced by the PhoeNX-MUN project provided a precious space for musicians and composers from different cultural backgrounds to communicate.

Listening to the final mix, I was surprised to find that I had made such progress in playing rhythmic variations, something that had not been part of my musical training in China. As a result of this experience, I sensed the route for developing my intercultural musicianship in the diaspora. In my view, a benign and egalitarian social context is vital for enhancing one's cultural and musical confidence, and in turn, cultural and musical confidence play an important role in facilitating effective cross-cultural collaboration as well as an organic development of intercultural musicianship.

### 5.2.9 Recital During the Pandemic



Figure 5.9 Playing moments in Jing Xia & Friends concert

**Event:** *Jing Xia & Friends concert*

**Time:** February 4, 2021

**Location:** St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

**Link:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t32-naOHk\\_E&t=1658s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t32-naOHk_E&t=1658s).

In the sixth year of my study in Canada, as I was writing this dissertation, I gave my first recital with a group of local musicians in St. John's, Newfoundland. I purposely designed it to be a presentation of the diverse musical pathways I have been exploring in the diaspora, including traditional music, folk tunes, contemporary composition, and free improvisation. This performance was part of the annual Music at Memorial Concert Series produced by the School of Music at Memorial University. Due to the social distancing restrictions during the COVID-19



pandemic, we pre-recorded the concert that was supposed to be live in the D.F. Cook Recital Hall and broadcast it a week later.

I asked musicians with whom I collaborated most often in town to join me for the concert, and they quickly responded and agreed to participate. That's the beauty of this province, I was never disappointed when I invited musicians to jam or perform with me. Maybe because we are on an isolated island with comparatively fewer musicians and musical opportunities, we appreciate each other's effort in building the local music scene. I had a hard time at the beginning of the lockdown, and those musicians' warmth made me feel at home again.

Bert Power is a fantastic percussion student at MUN, and he is now the percussionist in my Light Wind Ensemble. I invited him to join me for three pieces: traditional, popular, and ensemble music. It was tricky for the traditional piece *The Rhyme of Han River*, because I did not have a score for him. Since this music is a traditional composition, it is notated in numbered notation which Bert could not read. In addition, although there was a percussion accompaniment in traditional playing, the score does not include a percussion part and it requires the percussionist to improvise based on the music. Therefore, it was a challenge for Bert and me to rehearse and learn each other's musical language. I gave Bert the *muyu*, a set of woodblocks, for him to play and sent him a link to an online music video so he could listen and practice at home. It took a longer time than a normal musical collaboration for us to get together in the music.

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We are lucky to live in Newfoundland during the pandemic. Compared to other places with a terrible soaring number of COVID-19 cases, the situation in Newfoundland is under control and only a few cases were reported in the province. Although it's not allowed to hold a live show in a hall with the audience, we can record a concert and broadcast it online. I feel grateful that my concert can be held as scheduled, and we can rehearse at School of Music building on campus.

I had my first rehearsal with several musicians at School of Music building this afternoon. There were many COVID protocols we needed to follow for rehearsing on campus. First, we needed to do the COVID self-assessment on the MUNSafe app before accessing campus. Then, Peter Stanbridge, the concert coordinator, gave me a paper to collect information about all the musicians attended. Filling the form and signing the paper was part of the procedure of entering the Music building. There were also limitations to the rehearsals. For a rehearsal without a wind instrument and singer, the maximum time for us to stay in one room was 75 minutes. When we had dizi (which is a wind instrument) with us, the time was shortened to 30 minutes. So, we had to change the room every 30 minutes and let the original room sit empty for one hour until it could be used for another rehearsal... Doing in-person rehearsal during the pandemic was like a fight, because we had to watch the time and shuttle between different rooms.

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I asked Fan if he had a black shirt for the concert, and he said no. The concert is going to be recorded in the D.F. Cook Hall, a concert hall with a Casavant pipe organ as a background on the stage, and my original thought was that we all dressed in black or any other dark colors like Western musicians do for a classical concert. When I asked Chang (the pianist) and Bert (the percussionist), both of them indicated that they wanted to wear black. However, Fan did not have/want to wear black and said we should wear something different to emphasize our Chinese features. The erhu player also indicated that she wanted to wear something more Chinese. Since this concert was not programmed as a “Chinese” musical event, I won’t dress too Chinese myself. In the end, I decided to let musicians wear the clothes that they feel most comfortable with. The variety of stage costumes also corresponds with the diverse musical routes that I hope to present through the concert.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives since early 2020. Even though my main task has been working on my dissertation at home, I miss musical collaboration. Most of my musical activities have been canceled or postponed due to the prohibition of social gatherings at the time of writing. In the past year, like many North Americans of Asian heritage, I experienced anxiety, loneliness, and other mental challenges, especially when anti-Asian racism quickly spread on social media because of Donald Trump’s inflammatory public statements. I am a social and outgoing person, yet I didn’t leave my house for a while not only because of the virus but also for fear of facing people’s stares. Newfoundland is one of the friendliest places I have ever been, and I believe most people would not blame innocent Chinese residents for the pandemic. However, several Chinese reported their encounters of anti-Chinese racism in Newfoundland during the pandemic to the CBC.<sup>13</sup> I had a hard time reading the news and conversations from the Chinese community on Twitter, Wechat, and other social media platforms about the soaring racism.

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<sup>13</sup> More information about anti-Chinese racism during the pandemic in Newfoundland, please see the CBC news on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/racism-mundy-pond-st-johns-1.5714808>

It was music that saved me from pandemic anxiety. In August 2020, Ellen Waterman invited me to join the Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour (MCRH), an online improvisational jamming group gathering every Saturday afternoon and facilitated by her partner Michael Waterman. MCRH has been doing networked performance since the 1990s with origins in experimental call-in-radio collage (Kent 2021).<sup>14</sup> I still remember that the first jam was very relaxing and fun, and in line with their playful custom, they gave me a humorous MCRH stage name “Jing O’Ling.” When other musicians helped me solve technical problems on Zoom, I felt strong support from my non-Chinese friends in that virtual online community. When we played together, I enjoyed the cohesive and friendly musical world where my anxiety about anti-Asian sentiments was eased during the playing.

Then I started to prepare for my recital at the end of 2020. I met my musical collaborators regularly and conducted in-person rehearsals while social distancing, and these musical activities finally healed my mental struggle. At a time when I felt lost and unsafe, I regained a sense of belonging to Western society through music-making. The pandemic added an extra layer of hardship to the already complex procedure of holding a concert, but the in-person musical communications made the whole process enjoyable and revitalizing for me during a difficult time. On the day my concert was broadcast as a live stream on YouTube (including the pre-recorded concert and live commentary), Ian Sutherland, then dean of the School of Music, watched the show with me in a pre-set studio and we shared a short conversation immediately afterward as a part of the broadcast. For me, each music represented a different route on my musical journey, and I was moved to be sitting there with Sutherland and two concert coordinators listening to the music together. On my first day visiting the School of Music in

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<sup>14</sup> MCRH is broadcast weekly on CHMR campus/community radio in St. John’s; more information can be found at <http://mannlichercarcano.blogspot.com/>.

January 2016, I knew nobody and bought a full pass for the Music at Memorial concert series for that year. Five years later, I was part of it and had so many musician friends playing with me. If diasporic life is often uncertain and anchorless, music has been lighting the way forward for me.

I said “yes” without a doubt when, during our post-concert conversation, Sutherland asked me if I wanted to stay in Newfoundland after graduation. Living in the diaspora has offered me opportunities to explore diverse life possibilities, and music, especially my new journey in improvisation, has helped me to better understand and express myself. The Chinese community in Newfoundland is comparatively small, but I see a growing interest in Chinese music among the public. The musical supports I have continuously received from the community make me eager to present better music to give back to that community. My local Chinese friends have said to me that my involvement in the St. John’s music scene makes them proud. Receiving such comments, I feel the power of an individual’s actions to contribute to a more benign multicultural society. Through music-making, I feel that I have been acting as a mediator and bridge between Western and Chinese communities in Newfoundland.

#### **5.2.10 Summary**

Through writing an autoethnographic journal and conducting practice-based research involving my own creative musical projects, I was able to organically combine academic research and musical praxis in a critical and self-reflexive manner. This dynamic combination of research methods provided me with rich data and embodied experience that I would not have gained through ethnographic study alone (even as a participant-observer in my consultants’ musical activities). The reason is that autoethnographic and practice-based research focus on subjective and affective feelings, expressions, and reflections, while ethnographic research emphasizes more

objective and comprehensive analysis. In this project, these two research approaches are equally important, and my subjective experience both supports and extends the findings of my ethnographic study. For instance, after I formed my own ensemble in St. John's, I had a different standpoint, as an ensemble leader, on understanding the social relationships among Chinese musicians that my consultants described in Murfreesboro and Vancouver. In addition, I gained new understanding of "cultural confidence" through premiering new compositions. Taking the initiative to start new musical experiments with a research purpose and reflect on them laid a foundation for me to better, and more deeply, understand my interview data. In turn, my fieldwork experience contributed significantly to my musical projects in Canada.

My musical experience shared in this chapter has also exemplified the dynamic interplay among Georgina Born's (2012b) four planes of music's social mediation that are permeable and mutually constitutive in Chinese instrumentalists' diasporic lives. My encounter with improvisation at Memorial University has altered my musical interest and directions in North America (the third and fourth planes). On stage, my musical negotiations with Mei Han deepened my understanding of Chinese musical traditions, especially in the context of a multicultural society (first and second planes). In addition, playing with Shanneyganock and recording a CD have re-shaped my understanding of intercultural and cross-genre musical collaborations (first and third planes). With a more comprehensive approach to Chinese musical traditions and intercultural music-making, I participated in many musical activities held by CMCC, VICO, BCCMA, and other music organizations in Murfreesboro and Vancouver (first and fourth planes). These musical experiences have generated rich social networks which help me stay connected with diasporic Chinese musical communities (first and second planes). Besides, they also led to the Chinese band that I formed in St. John's with a sense of being a cultural ambassador in the West (first and third planes). Finally, premiering new compositions and

producing my own concerts have enhanced my intercultural musicianship which prepares me for a more diverse musical career in North America (first and fourth planes).

This dissertation offers an example of interdisciplinary possibilities for ethnomusicology. Through autoethnographic and practice-based research, I now understand my own shifting cultural identifications, the conflicting allegiances to Chinese musical traditions, cross- and within-cultural misunderstandings, voluntary and involuntary ambassador roles, questionable cultural confidence, and implicit racial/ethnic conflicts that mark the musical pathways of Chinese instrumentalists in the North American diaspora. Some of these experiences were shared by my consultants, but certain details and tacit information I could only gain while unfolding my own projects. As a result, I have become more certain about my musical direction and my role as a Chinese musician in the diaspora.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I explore the diasporic lives of Chinese instrumentalists who lived and worked in North America while I conducted my research in 2019 and examine how they navigated intricate social, cultural, and political circumstances in the pre-pandemic globalized world. To investigate the dynamic flows of intercultural and transnational musical exchange, I chose Murfreesboro and Vancouver as two major field sites with contrasting Chinese music scenes. In these two sites, I was able to observe Chinese musicians manage their music projects in the mediating context of different aesthetic, institutional, cultural, and political priorities. My argument is that many Chinese instrumentalists in this study have developed dynamic intercultural musicianship as a way of securing and expanding their music careers in the West. Their diasporic music careers are also influenced by increasing mutual cultural influences and political tensions between China and other countries in the context of globalization. Chapter 2 lays out the historical background for readers to understand Chinese musicians' fusion music education and initial intercultural musical experiences. Chapters 3 and 4 unfold Chinese instrumentalists' diasporic lives in North America through case studies of my consultants' intercultural collaborations, immigration routes, social networks, institutional ties, and changing mindsets. In chapter 5, I introduce autoethnographic and practice-based research, a methodology that not only helped me deepen and nuance my interpretation of my interviews and other field data but also provides a subjective point of view for readers to gain insight into one Chinese musician's diasporic life. In that chapter, I also introduce another field site, St. John's, Newfoundland, where there is a small Chinese community, no Chinese music organizations, and few Chinese musical activities.

Chinese musicians' lives in North America are complex. With music education that is heavily influenced by Western classical music, many of my consultants have found themselves working in an art music context, often performing for small audiences. Their minority status adds another layer of challenge for them to find and/or build their musical markets and situate themselves as musicians in the West. Questions of musical tradition and innovation are further complicated in North American multicultural society. On the one hand, their music is "Chinese", in terms of their ethnic heritage and their instruments' origin. The foreign environment highlights their ethnic difference, and many musicians feel the pressure of representing tradition through their Chinese instruments. On the other hand, because of their intercultural music experiences in both China and the host country, strictly speaking, even those who take on the role of cultural ambassador can never play "pure" Chinese music. Many ethnomusicological studies have treated tradition as a dynamic process rather than a fixed state. In a given performance context (e.g., the intercultural concerts discussed in chapter 3), however, the audience may assume a clear divide between tradition and innovation, from which arises many cultural issues, such as authenticity and cultural appropriation. Chinese musicians have their own interpretations of their music, but sometimes they must compromise their aesthetics to meet the criteria of Western markets. As demonstrated in the case of Qiuxia He's BBC performance, even though she criticized the organizer's requirement of having only Chinese-looking players from her fusion band perform, she accepted their invitation and flew to the United Kingdom to perform in the concert. Sometimes, such choices are made by economic necessity rather than personal artistic inclination.

During my research, I continued to discover new ways in which my Chinese consultants' music-making was shaped by the aspirations of the nation state. In China, their music education was influenced by national modernization movements that, I argue, laid the foundation for their intercultural musical routes. The multicultural contexts in North America urge them to



foreground their ethnic traditions and enhance their intercultural musicianship. In the nineteenth century, Chinese people accepted Western music systems as advanced models for achieving modernization. Many Chinese musicians in this study indicated that, as a result, they experienced a cultural hierarchy in China where there was a xenocentric atmosphere. In the twenty-first century, however, China began to promote Chinese culture through Confucius Institutes and other government-sponsored projects in North America, yet, by 2020 with increased tensions between the United States, Canada, and China, many of these ties were severed. Even in a globalized world, the shifting priorities of nation states have real effects on the lives of diasporic musicians.

In response to burgeoning artistic markets in China, some musicians in this study have tried to develop music careers in China, where they must learn to navigate between different political and cultural environments. During my fieldwork, a number of participants were cautious about what they would say for a public document like my Ph.D. dissertation. One of my consultants mentioned at the beginning of our interview that I should not include any “(politically) inappropriate” words in my writing even if they carelessly said them. Another challenge was accessing scholarly sources in Chinese. I gained rich information from the Chinese scholarship on music, particularly for chapter 2, but I could not find online Chinese articles concerning politically sensitive topics, such as the June Fourth Incident that influenced Qiuxia He’s immigration. In addition, there are conflicting statements around some historical events in Chinese and Western literature. For example, Chinese official textbooks mark 1840 as the beginning of the First Opium War, while it is commonly held by Western historians that the War started in 1839.

There are also other elements, such as economic, familial, educational, and musical considerations, that have significantly influenced my consultants’ music-making across different

circumstances. They emigrated for many reasons: their children's education, marriage, a family reunion, or for personal musical development, and there are vivid life stories behind their music. Their new lives in the West may not have met their idealized expectations, but most of my consultants appreciate that they can still play Chinese instruments and continue their music careers in North America, even though they may encounter stereotypes and misunderstandings among the public. This is also why improvisation has been embraced by many of my consultants after moving to North America. Through spontaneous playing, they can freely express their dynamic life experiences and complex subjectivities that would otherwise be limited in conventional musical performances.

Playing with my consultants during fieldwork and conducting my own practice-based research projects, I have gradually gained a clearer mind about the musical direction that I want to pursue. As a musician, I share many similar experiences with my consultants and feel a strong empathy with them. Two of my consultants cried during the interviews when they recalled the journeys they had in China and North America. There is no easy pathway that they can choose and remain on, and Chinese musicians have no choice but to adapt to ever-changing circumstances in the diaspora. Their diversified musical practices manifest Chinese musicians' continual negotiations of minority status, racism, cultural conflicts, musical distinctions, public anticipations, and personal aspirations.

The widespread closures of Confucius Institutes in North America in 2020 call for further research on Chinese musicians and musical organizations who were tied to China's overseas projects. It remains to be seen what effects this will have on Chinese music organizations and visiting musicians in North America. For musicians who blamed Confucius Institutes for decreasing musical opportunities due to increased competition from visiting Chinese musicians, have their musical lives been improved? Or have they suffered from anti-Chinese sentiments in

North America as a result of the pandemic and international politics? An updated study on these diasporic Chinese musicians would require more fieldwork. In late June 2020, the Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) changed its name to the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (中外语言交流合作中心), hoping to continue its cultural exchange with other countries. Thus, diasporic Chinese musicians will continue to deal with new projects of public diplomacy. In addition, most of the visiting musicians that I interviewed have returned to China. Their subsequent musical activities are also worth investigating.

While I had many rich interactions during my research, much work remains to be done. David Badagnani, the director of the Cleveland Chinese Music Ensemble, has been collecting information on Chinese ensembles and musicians in North America. He created an online google document and invited Chinese musicians and scholars to contribute to the updated statistics. According to this document, as of April 24, 2021, there are approximately 222 active Chinese ensembles in North America (174 in the United States and 48 in Canada). There are, however, few studies of these Chinese music groups and their operations in North America. Finally, in this dissertation, I mention religions and philosophies when discussing particular cases; however, a comprehensive introduction and analysis of their influences on Chinese musicians' diasporic lives is beyond the scope of this study. Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and later Christianity are important elements that influence Chinese musicians' social behaviors, musical preferences, and career planning. Thus, religion and philosophy are important topics for future research. Chinese music study is still a niche field in ethnomusicology, and more research needs to be conducted on diasporic Chinese music communities. I hope this dissertation will inspire further in-depth studies. Chinese musicians have made a significant contribution to the prosperous

multicultural music scenes in North America, and they deserve to be heard and understood by a broader audience.

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## Appendix A: Links to Recordings

Selected tracks from my CD, *The Numinous Journey* (2022):

- **Memory**  
An improvisation recorded by Teresa Connors (voice), Jacob Faraday (electronics), and me (zheng).  
[https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/memory/s-VwKIST1Rz2H?si=05a343c1a3fb4ff2850683af20eb8b75&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/memory/s-VwKIST1Rz2H?si=05a343c1a3fb4ff2850683af20eb8b75&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)
- **Tune of Rainbow Cloud**  
A zheng concerto (Zhou Yuguo 2002) recorded by Chang Chang (piano) and me (zheng).  
[https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/tune-of-rainbow-cloud/s-slqAMlbl1uT?si=2f15f06ae268490b8beadb2d67aa84f0&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/tune-of-rainbow-cloud/s-slqAMlbl1uT?si=2f15f06ae268490b8beadb2d67aa84f0&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)
- **Language of Pipa**  
I arranged this piece that was originally a pipa composition by Lin Hai (2003) to be a combination of zheng and sounds of nature.  
[https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/language-of-pipa/s-EFioAL6ir38?si=32aaec3eff7346ccbf2c1f15931f08ea&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/language-of-pipa/s-EFioAL6ir38?si=32aaec3eff7346ccbf2c1f15931f08ea&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)
- **Fantasia**  
This contemporary zheng composition was written by Wang Jianmin (1991) in Miao music style.  
[https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/fantasia/s-m3ocrjiQudt?si=34f332667c6a4f6f9b68668ed180fb89&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/fantasia/s-m3ocrjiQudt?si=34f332667c6a4f6f9b68668ed180fb89&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)
- **Ling Chong Fled at Night**  
This music, written by Wang Xunzhi and Lu Xiutang (1962), has a strong flavour of Kun Opera, and it is arguably one of the representative zheng music of Zhejiang style.  
[https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/ling-chong-fled-at-night/s-ZlCUlryQgIk?si=47cec8d94470483f9883d48c57b7bdc4&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/jing-xia-644455707/ling-chong-fled-at-night/s-ZlCUlryQgIk?si=47cec8d94470483f9883d48c57b7bdc4&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)

## Appendix B: Links to Performances

### **Understory-Season One** (Jan. 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

Nicole Rampersaud (trumpet, piccolo trumpet), Leslie Ting (violin, voice), and me (zheng, voice) created three improvisation pieces with videos for the Understory, a web-based, inter-provincial series dedicated to showcasing improvising artists working across Canada.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuFOdvCUgTk>

### **Jing Xia & Friends** (Feb. 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

As part of the annual Music at Memorial Concert Series, this concert presented my intercultural journey through musical combinations ranging from Chinese traditional folk tunes, contemporary fusion compositions to experimental improv.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t32-naOHk\\_E&t=1657s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t32-naOHk_E&t=1657s)

### **Variations on Circular Motion** (Mar. 2021)

This composition was written by Andrew Glenn Luther for percussion and zheng for the PhoeNX-MUN Workshop project. In this video, I play the zheng with Ryan Scott on a variety of percussion instruments.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLg7wZN7yuY>

### **Jing Xia on the Broadside** (April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

I played a number of contemporary zheng music on the Broadside, a weekly web stream featuring folk music and arts by Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Arts Society.

<https://ne-np.facebook.com/Nlfolk/videos/jing-xia-on-the-broadside/274021037549486/>

### **Aspects of Trees** (Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018)

A live improvisation performance by Ellen Waterman (flute/voice), Teresa Connors (laptop instrument/iPad), and me (zheng) at Newfound Festival, a wide-ranging music event held annually by the School of Music at Memorial University.

<https://vimeo.com/262273964>

### **Shanney Christmas Show** (Dec. 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

I played with Shanneyganock, a famous Newfoundland-based folk-rock band that plays traditional Newfoundland (Irish-influenced) music, at their annual Christmas show.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6CWvjLqyp4>