

# **The Class of 1978: New Waves in Music and the Chinese Diaspora**

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In Memory of Philipp Otto Naegele (1928-2011),  
for all of the wonderful music and expanding my confidence as a solo musician

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# Introduction

## The Start of My Journey

In late October 2009, I decided at the spur of the moment to attend a concert that was part of the “Ancient Paths, Modern Voices” series, jointly held at several of the major music venues in New York City. Prior to the performance, I thought I knew about Chinese music, but the contemporary pieces on this program destroyed all of my preconceived notions. I grew up in Brooklyn’s Chinatown, eating chow fun for every birthday and mastering the art of chopsticks before I could properly write my own name. Living there for the first thirteen years of my life, I spent many days exposed to the Chinese language, trying unfamiliar Chinese flavors and observing Chinese customs on holidays.

Ironically, I left this colorful Brooklyn neighborhood just before I began learning Mandarin. As a second semester freshman at a public high school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a native Chinese teacher, Wynne Wu, who was also a piano performance major at Oberlin College, exposed me to the complexity and beauty of the Chinese language. Listening to music from China became an important exercise in her classroom, helping her students understand the cultural roots of such a rich language.

During those years, I coordinated a group of students, now known as the Student Producers of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Our third season featured a concert with members of the Silk Road Ensemble, highlighting the variety of sounds, instruments, and timbres that connected several cultures across Asia. I distinctly remember being fascinated by the pipa player as I watched the fluidity of her fingers plucking the strings; I was discovering a whole new musical world.



As a student at the Associated Colleges in China program in Beijing during the summer of 2008, I held a pipa and strummed a zither for the first time. As soon as the first note sounded my musical curiosity was sparked. During two summers surrounded by sounds and musics reflecting China's past and present cultures, I realized that I wanted to deepen my understanding of Chinese musical instruments, composers, and customs. The precise means of executing this plan remained unclear for quite some time, but I continued to search for performances and other opportunities for exposure while at Amherst.

That Monday night in October, my mother and I purchased last minute tickets to the concert called "Class of 1978," performed by the Ensemble ACJW, a partnership group between Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School, the Weill Music Institute, and the New York City Department of Education. The program consisted of works by Chen Qigang, Chen Yi, Bright Sheng, Guo Wenjing and Zhou Long; these composers number among the major contributors to the world of Chinese-American music, but to whom I had never really been exposed. Each composition challenged my expectations by introducing scintillating sound paintings that would at one moment imitate the timbres of Chinese instruments and then immediately switch to a character that I recognized as "Western." Although I did not realize it at the time, many of the featured composers challenged Western conservatory-taught conventions through abstract musical notation, while also referencing Chinese musical instruments and traditions through the imitation of timbre or of the vocal inflections typical of Peking Opera. One of the most captivating works on the program, Guo Wenjing's *Parade for Six Peking Opera Gongs, Op. 40* (2004) exemplified the innovative compositional ideas that are typical of the

distinguished Class of 1978.<sup>1</sup> The instrumentation educates the listener about Chinese musical and cultural history, as the opera gong has served as a central element of the opera literature for centuries. Guo Wenjing, however, adds a modern twist by requiring the three percussionists to apply different pressures to the gong surfaces, resulting in a unique bending of pitch. The program notes made a key observation about Guo's approach in comparison to his peers in the Class of 1978:

Compared to the music of his colleagues who emigrated abroad, Guo's music has a subtle difference: While other pieces on this program aim to broaden the world of modern composition with Chinese sonorities and musical structure, Guo's music brings the possibilities of Western modernism to bear on a distinctly Chinese tradition. Though rooted in a history of percussion writing from Cage and Varese to Xenakis and Reich (with a particularly Reichian range of sound from the narrowest of sonic possibilities), *Parade* begins and ends with the Chinese operatic stage, drawing on an essential theatricality in its performance. (Smith 2009: 37)

For this piece in particular, the visual transformed into an equally important element of the performance, as the carefully calculated movements of the musicians' feet, arms and bodies ultimately determined if the desired sounds resonated. I jumped to my feet when the musicians finally lowered their mallets—I wanted to hear it again.

I left Weill Recital Hall that evening absolutely speechless and not knowing how to respond. A fervid musician my entire life, I immediately noticed and appreciated the technical and musical achievements of the performers; I found myself, however, more curious about the composers themselves. These composers traversed the difficulties of life as a musician not only in America, but also in China during the tumultuous and restrictive period of the Cultural Revolution. Their works combined characteristics from a variety of cultures, reflecting the diversity of their personal life experiences. An essay in

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<sup>1</sup> The Class of 1978, discussed in more detail below, refers to the year that universities officially reopened and admitted the first classes after the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>2</sup> While one would logically assume culture to be a focal point of Cultural Revolution studies, the

the front of the program contextualizing the composers featured in the concert briefly describes the composers' pasts (discussed shortly, the brochure's problematic language perpetuates cultural stereotypes). The remarks do, however, make clear the formidable presence these composers now have in the Western classical music world and their ability to nurture broader dialogues about multicultural musics that I engage in this thesis.

Music has often thrived in adversity, but China's "Class of 1978"—so named for the year that conservatories reopened after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)—has left a particularly significant legacy. Relocation to the countryside introduced an entire generation of Chinese artists to their own people, and beneath their diverse musical styles, these composers share a single unifying principle: Wherever they settled, they wholly rejected the concept of an "international" style. Theirs is a modernism inconceivable without a distinct point of origin. Each was awakened by musical possibilities at a time when China itself was coming to terms with its recent past; several relocated abroad, where they discovered a Western compositional world newly awakening to a frame of reference outside itself. (Smith 2009: 28)

Even when I first read Smith's commentary, it struck me as containing exaggerated descriptions and highly commercial language that catered to selling the composers rather than telling a real story. Phrases such as "music has often thrived in adversity" and "their own people" misrepresent these composers by making it seem as though they all experienced identical tragedies during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, I believe that the language solicits false sympathy from the audience, asking us to experience their compositions in a particular way because they were "so" disadvantaged previously. Smith's rhetoric also disturbingly echoes that of the Chinese Communist Party in his use of the phrase "their own people," a description that directly mirrors the official message promoted by the party. Finally, characterizing their styles with such uniformity, Smith leaves no room for the composers to articulate their actual musical intentions. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, each composer aims for his or her music to critically engage

both their Chinese and Western sides in hopes of promoting an international forum for musical discussion, rather than the abrupt and unsubstantiated rejection of this so-called “international style” that Smith mentions.

Sparked by the Weill Recital Hall Concert, my interest in engaging with the musics of these composers grew. Their compositions were not only well-written and highly innovative, but also resonated with me on a deeper, emotional level by presenting engaging music upon which I could superimpose my own meaning. Curious to hear their individual stories about life during the Cultural Revolution and in the United States, I investigated additional scholarship about this first entering class, searching for books, articles, interviews or any other critical academic work on the topic. Much to my disappointment, I discovered that minimal research had been published; I mainly unearthed concert reviews rather than analytical articles. I can only hypothesize that the limited amount of scholarship is due to political sensitivities surrounding the Cultural Revolution controversy making it difficult to access pertinent primary sources, coupled with the fact that many of these composers have only recently begun to rise to prominence in the global music world. Su Zheng’s research on diasporic movement, one of my main sources, would not be published for another year. I could only find Barbara Mittler’s writings on the political implications of Chinese music from 1949 to the present in German. Although prominent American classical musicians and ensembles record the works of the Class of 1978 and Carnegie Hall acknowledged their importance in a two-week celebratory festival, little has been uncovered about the effects of the Cultural Revolution, Western musical traditions, and hyphenated identity on these composers’ works.

The three members of the Class of 1978 that I decided to focus on during the fall of 2010 reflect the variety of styles, experiences and histories shared by diasporic composers after the Cultural Revolution. Chen Yi and Bright Sheng, while sent away from home during the reeducation programs of the 1960's and 70's, maintained their connection to music by performing revolutionary songs or participating in Madame Mao's organized musical troupes. Ge Ganru, on the other hand, suffered through excruciating physical labor that both physically and mentally scarred him. I believe that these early, tragic experiences during the Cultural Revolution, while unique to each composer, shaped their relations to China while both in the country and, perhaps more importantly, after they joined the diaspora.

### Methodology

I used several methods in writing this ethnomusicology thesis. My work is the culmination of many months of reviewing secondary sources, attending concerts, listening to a plethora of recordings, and most importantly, communications with and, in some cases, direct observation of the composers. Last summer I began contacting composers to set up interviews. I contacted Ge Ganru, Chen Yi, Bright Sheng and Zhou Long, as I did not yet know who would be interested in contributing to my research. Throughout the fall semester, I sought to develop a relationship with each composer so that the material in the interviews would not simply reproduce biographical information found on a website.

By November, I settled on Ge Ganru, Chen Yi, and Bright Sheng as my three main cases. These three composers have not only experienced different career

trajectories, but also offer distinct approaches to questions of composition, identity and diaspora. Given my ability to speak Mandarin, our conversations would sometimes occur in Chinese, while all interviews used for the purpose of my thesis were conducted in English.

While I attempted to gain equal access to each of the three composers, this proved impossible in practice. The schedules of Chen Yi and Bright Sheng were extremely busy with various performance projects and travel commitments. Despite many scheduled attempts to interview them in person, I was ultimately forced to rely on phone and email interviews. Ge Ganru, in contrast, invited me to his residency week on the Pomona College campus to conduct multiple interviews and observational sessions. Of my three case studies, I have developed the strongest relationship with Ge Ganru, particularly because of the time shadowing him at Pomona College.

In addition to my interview work, I conducted fieldwork in the form of several research trips. The first was to Yale University on February 11, 2011 to view the Yale Concert Band performing one of Chen Yi's most recent works. Second, during the last weekend in February, I traveled to Washington, D.C. to hear a program at the Freer Gallery that featured the Shanghai String Quartet, Wu Man (another member of the Class of 1978), and a quintet by Lei Liang, a slightly younger Chinese composer. The Freer Gallery was a particularly important location to visit as it has a long-standing concert series that features musics from the Asian continent—most often those of China and Japan—and frequently parallels the works programmed with exhibits in the floors above the concert hall. My final trip took place during the first week of March, which I spent with Ge Ganru during his visit to Pomona College. The week consisted of two concerts,

several lectures, rehearsals, and many casual side conversations. During my stay at Pomona College, I also visited an exhibition of contemporary Chinese photographers at the J. Paul Getty Museum. Created by prominent artists in China today, many works responded to the Cultural Revolution and modern Chinese history through a visual medium, commenting and questioning many elements of Chinese culture both sincerely and satirically. Used as a framework for my conclusion, I have included three images, one before each chapter, to provide an additional perspective on similar issues that Ge, Chen, and Sheng confront.

In addition to these three planned trips, the Carnegie Hall concert I attended in October 2009 would be my first moment of fieldwork, though I didn't know it at the time. When at Amherst, I continued my fieldwork through conversations with two key scholars whose works I reference throughout my thesis—Su Zheng and Barbara Mittler. I also interviewed other performers, such as Airi Yoshioka, who was the first violinist to premiere and record *Fall of Baghdad*, the work by Ge Ganru discussed in Chapter 1. Although conducting literature surveys provided me with a theoretical and conceptual foundation upon which to build my thesis, attending these concerts, lectures, and classes underscored that these composers are active and at the forefront of their fields both writing music and engaging with broader issues that influence their daily lives: diaspora, hyphenated identities, and hybridity.

### Setting the Stage: The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

In order to critically examine these three members of the Class of 1978, I must first establish a historical and social context. A period of great upheaval and social unrest,

the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) brought unparalleled turmoil upon Chinese citizens, as well as Chinese people living overseas. The era continues to effect the lives of Chinese around the globe, as it tore families apart, dislocated individuals from their hometowns, and disturbed the educations of millions.

The Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s is a good example of the consequences of a power totality and of life under an ideological state. It occurred when state power was totalized in the hands of a few leaders; where people were left unprotected and had no legal means to challenge the abuse of power. It was a revival of the feudalistic characteristics of a Chinese society that had not changed in terms of its power structure. Although in theory it was called a revolution, in reality it was more like an historical regression, in terms of people being unprotected and losing their basic rights. Historians estimate that of the more than 700,000 people who were persecuted during the revolution, about 35,000 were killed. Thousands more committed suicide after being harassed by Red Guard. (Zhuang 2010: 17)

Chairman Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution to rid the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of its own internal impurities, which he saw as a threat to the entire Chinese state. With this goal established, the question became *how* the CCP would resolve the alleged threat (ibid.: 18). Documented in a speech given right before the launch of the massive re-education campaign, Mao outlined preliminary intentions:

The concept of dictatorship was further elaborated by Mao through a Direction of the Party Central Committee (16 May 1966) on the eve of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The news article, named '5.16 Announcement' (*Tong zhi*, in Chinese), was to be read by all in the nation, stated that the struggle between the proletariat and bourgeois classes, and the dictatorship of the proletariat placed upon the bourgeoisie, including those within the Party, had no room for so-called equality or any other relationships between the classes. (ibid.: 67)

The first two years of the Cultural Revolution brought about significant civil unrest, subsequently resulting in brutal military repression and political persecution. This state of affairs would continue through the early 1970s, ease slightly with Mao's death in September 1976, but continue to haunt the lives of Chinese people into the early 1980s



(Esherick 2006:1). Left with no opportunity to protest or resist the policies, many individuals, specifically intellectuals and members of what the CCP deemed the educated elite, were taken out of their home cities and forced to engage in manual labor in the countryside.

Official media sources in China at the time branded the Cultural Revolution a grassroots movement emerging from the people; this characterization, however, ignores much of the political “brainwashing” that the CCP inflicted on the general population. While Mao envisioned the movement as a means to move China toward greater modernization and progress, the actions taken illustrate a regression from the social and cultural freedoms that were anticipated with the rise of Mao and the CCP:

The [CCP] was able to dictate an individual’s thoughts to such a degree that one accepted total self-denial or even took one’s own life as a result of the mental abuse and torment. Yet the extent of the abuse is such that no one questioned the very nature of this power practice. With no accountability the state had unlimited power to suppress any of its citizens in the most inhumane fashion, while ordinary people had no rights and no choice other than to conform with state ideology if they wished to avoid persecution. Free thinking was prohibited. (Zhuang 2010: 20-1)

Zhuang’s analysis of the Cultural Revolution highlights the fact that Chinese domestic politics turned to “feudal” principles, which are strikingly similar to twentieth-century totalitarian repression by limiting its citizens to an extremely narrow form of living and thinking. The consequence of resistance was persecution. Mao thus established the presence of complete terror among the entire population, which in turn allowed him to rule with total impunity. While Western media distorts the extent to which Mao was idealized during the Cultural Revolution—one perpetuated myth includes that people could only read and discuss the ideas presented in Mao’s Little Red Book (Gao

2008:28)—Mao and the elites in the CCP were nevertheless able to manipulate actions and ideologies:

The deepest tragedy of the Cultural Revolution is rooted in the betrayal of faith, the faith that people had in the Party – a party that turned against the people and in so doing sacrificed the essence of humanity and dignity of life itself. In this sense, the masses became blind believers and also god makers. (Zhuang 2010: 25)

As Communist propaganda emerged in the form of posters, advertisements, and slogans, citizens' lives became oversaturated with information promoting the highly destructive ideology. Despite grandiose statements regarding the Cultural Revolution originating from the ground up, the Cultural Revolution primarily consisted of the CCP constructing and disseminating a set of self-aggrandizing narratives to serve their own political goals.

In addition to Mao's political agenda, the CCP attacked Chinese culture, instituting a policy that limited the continuation of Chinese traditions that they called "*po si jiu*" ("break the four olds"). This campaign included destroying "old customs, old ideas, and old habits," which consequently strained intellectuals and those whose professions stemmed from upholding these traditions (Gao 2008: 20). Enforced during the "Red Terror" phase (1966-69), the elimination of the four olds resulted in the most obvious acts of violence:

The violence, cruelty, suffering and deaths that occurred during the initial years of the Cultural Revolution were caused by different groups of people, for different reasons. Some conflicts were of a class nature, others were social in character; some of the violence involved personal grudges, in other cases the violence was due to blindness, ignorance and stupidity. [...] The Red Terror phase (1966-69) had the most obvious acts of violence – "when in Beijing homes were raided, people judged to be class enemies were beaten up, and detention centres were set up" despite official party line drafted by Beijing Municipality CCP in Nov 1966 saying "*yao wendou bu yao wudou*" ("engage in the struggle with words but not with physical attack"). (ibid.: 17)

The Red Guard, a group of young students inspired by Mao's revolutionary ideas, was responsible for the majority of urban violence, committing irrational acts in hopes of fulfilling Mao's vision.

While it is true that intellectuals and those of "bad class" became ostracized and persecuted, the description of the Cultural Revolution as a total "cultural wasteland" with no artistic creativity is a gross oversimplification of the complicated social, cultural and political dynamics of the time (ibid.: 28). Particularly focused on changes in the structure of the educational system and the process of attaining education, Joseph Esherick points out that a primary focus of Cultural Revolution studies has been the creation of social/class labels and an examination of their consequences for the true education—as compared to the forced mass re-education—and career development of that generation of Chinese people. Encapsulated in a quote by Hong Yung Lee, a primary argument in this discourse becomes clear:

The Cultural Revolution created an opportunity for social groups to pursue their interests and the conflicts expressed social differences that had emerged under Communist Party rule. (Esherick 2006: 4)

Several of the essays in the edited volume suggest that the interactions between Mao and his "social interest groups," like the Red Guards, were the real determinants for the course of the Cultural Revolution, not just the CCP's ability to manipulate their followers and impose their will on society (ibid.: 19).

The confrontation between the Chinese state and its citizens throughout the ten-year period suggests a complex, tension-ridden dynamic defined by political and social turmoil rather than totalizing repression and unquestioning obedience. This scholarship, in tracing many scenarios in which the rural proves to be a key backdrop for radical

change and action, also challenges the conventional notion that the Cultural Revolution was a fundamentally urban phenomenon. Moreover, and as seen in many accounts of the period, the precise effect on following generations still remains unclear:

China has not yet broken the hold of the Cultural Revolution on the imaginations and identities of those who lived through those turbulent years. Memory of the Cultural Revolution, like its history, remains a highly contested field. (ibid.: 25-6)

Paul Clark's account of the Cultural Revolution addresses a side of the tumultuous ten-year period that frequently escapes the attention of other Sinologists.<sup>2</sup> Through examining artistic productions that were sponsored by Madame Mao to underwrite CCP ideology, Clark unveils how the period of extreme political rigidity may have facilitated greater interconnectedness among the artists themselves. He asserts:

Instead of simply a period of madness, the Cultural Revolution was also a time of considerable creative energy, official and unofficial, that built on earlier developments and made possible a reorientation in Chinese cultural discourse since the 1980s. (Clark 2008: 4)

Clark challenges much of the previous scholarship, arguing that “the Cultural Revolution can be seen also as an era of modern innovation and efforts at real change in China's cultural inheritance” (ibid.: 9). Through examining several case studies to illuminate how cultural forms, like the Peking opera, actually garnered popularity and success due to the political climate in the 60s and 70s, Clark establishes a critical framework with which to reexamine whether the Cultural Revolution truly denied artists all opportunities, or rather forced them to find new ways of engaging with art. Part of a CCP sponsored musical group, Bright Sheng maintained his musical passions by participating in ideologically saturated performances. Chen Yi played revolutionary songs as entertainment and improvised sections from Paganini to keep her fingers agile.

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<sup>2</sup> While one would logically assume culture to be a focal point of Cultural Revolution studies, the Communist Party's political agenda was a more common area of focus.

In the middle years of the Cultural Revolution, millions of young people's educations were stopped during a forced internal migration for the purpose of a mass "reeducation" centered on communal values. Although Clark never denies that the period had limitations, the conditions in the rural sites to which the students were relocated unexpectedly fostered an environment that allowed for a "sub-culture" of unofficial cultural production to flourish even though it was not officially sanctioned (ibid.: 250). In such a delicate and constricted environment for creative expression, heavily government-structured artistic performances did create the opportunity for artists to generate works with a layered appreciation and understanding. Furthermore, the disruption in education provided unanticipated inspiration for artists, providing an opportunity to reflect on "their own predicament and the state of their society and culture" (ibid.: 260). Clark concludes,

Artists, performers, writers, politicians, and audiences were all deeply influenced by their direct or indirect experience of the 1966-1976 era. Even those most determined to reject the Cultural Revolution's themes and aesthetics found it difficult to deny its hold on their cultural, social, or political practice. (ibid.: 250)

As Clark illustrates, the Cultural Revolution impacted an entire generation in a multitude of ways. While some individuals may openly acknowledge the detrimental effects of such a significant event, others find solace and relief through other mediums: music serves as one such example.

In my thesis, the selected cases from the Class of 1978 illuminate the variety of tragedies experienced by those living in China at the time. Part of a small, fortunate group afforded the chance to establish a new life away from a country in shambles, these individuals now share the Cultural Revolution as a social and political backdrop that paradoxically spurred their own creativity while helping to unveil their unique musical language. Their relationships with that difficult time are by no means uniform. While

some emphasize their participation in the re-education campaign as a positive learning experience, for others it forever tainted their perception of China. While each composer looks to the period for varying degrees of inspiration, this time of psychological and physical trauma contributes to each individual's particular musical language and, more importantly, to their own identity formations while still in China and after moving overseas.

### The Class of 1978

Throughout the course of my thesis, I use the term Class of 1978 to refer to the generation of Chinese musicians who entered conservatory in China in the years immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution. While I focus most specifically on composers, the Class of 1978 encompasses all individuals who attended conservatory around the same time and applies to individuals who went to school at the Beijing Central Conservatory and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. With this in mind, the Class of 1978 serves as a grouping that signifies a shared educational experience, in particular, the interruption resulting from Mao's sociopolitical campaigns in the late 1960s and 1970s. Ge Ganru, Chen Yi, and Bright Sheng exemplify the variety of experiences possible during the Cultural Revolution, ranging from harsh physical labor to composing for musical troupes promoted by Mao's wife. The variance in experience resulted in some members of the Class of 1978 being fairly supportive of Communist ideology and Chinese nationalism and others seeking escape from the oppressive regime. While a subset of the Class of 1978 now resides in the United States, many have remained in China and occupy top positions at the same conservatories, for example Guo

Wenjing and Ye Xiagong. Chen Qigang, most famously known for scoring the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games opening ceremony, spent extensive time studying with Olivier Messiaen before returning for the games. The array of career paths and residential locations overseas and in China underscore that the term Class of 1978 references a common past, not necessarily unity in musical language, shared notions of identity today or communal understanding of how music acts as a cultural broker.

Seen in Smith's commentary in the Carnegie Hall program I attended in 2009, the Class of 1978 can be manipulated by virtually anyone involved in the music production process as a way to group and brand these Chinese composers for easy marketing. While concert and record producers are the most easily identified example, the composers themselves even advocate the cultural branding as it provides a more tangible way for listeners to legitimize purchasing a CD or concert tickets. In order to create a successful commercial product, categorizing this music as "world music" or "from the East" suggests to the listener that they have some new approach to becoming cultured and, as a result, generates misleading ideas that all of the composers in this particular generation write similar music. The Class of 1978 frequently garners critical reception that focuses on compositions all in relation to one another. The program notes from the "Class of 1978" concert I attended serve as a classic example as Smith possesses no evidence for claiming that every featured composer wanted to abandon their roots in search of refreshing Western modernism. Evidenced through many conversations, Chen Yi articulated to me several times that she directly uses "folk" music to inspire her melodies. Ge Ganru, however, avoids Chinese instruments completely. The process behind the formation of each composition is thus an amalgamation of each composer's personal and

compositional experiences, attesting that critical reception as a group unfairly eliminates a chance for the members of the Class of 1978 to form individual compositional identities.

Another line must be drawn between the Class of 1978 and the hyper-commercialized<sup>3</sup> Chinese artists who have established readily recognizable names for themselves, such as Tan Dun, Lang Lang and Yo-Yo Ma. One could argue that Tan Dun, a member of the Class of 1978, has become closely associated with Hollywood fame after winning an Academy Award, a Grammy Award, and a BAFTA Award for the score of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Lang Lang and Yo-Yo Ma are fully immersed in the Western commercial classical music world. While this kind of involvement in the music world is not necessarily bad—Bright Sheng, too, has an easily recognized name—I argue that the potential problem is advocating false notions of “Chineseness.” On a meta level, these individuals relate to my thesis because they possess Chinese heritage, maintain connections to their homeland, and have since created a raised awareness of Chinese classical musicians. The story that I tell in my thesis, however, shows that Chinese composers can critically engage with Western music practices while also contemplating and negotiating their dual identities that emerge as a result of the diaspora through the means of experimentation in music.<sup>4</sup> While prior scholarship has focused on single components like diaspora or identity politics, my thesis serves as the first amalgamated version of these concepts and voices, juxtaposing three specific experiences to illuminate the different meanings of “Chinese composer.”

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<sup>3</sup> To clarify, commercialism per se is not a negative entity—in fact, the audiences generated by commercialism construct a forum for these composers’ messages to be heard. It becomes problematic, however, when it produces preconceived, and potentially false, notions of authenticity and artistic value.

<sup>4</sup> I also use the term “Chinese music” for pragmatic reasons. It does not denote a conceptual commitment to the notion of a monolithic China.



### Vignette 1: In the Freer Gallery Dressing Room

As a member of the Class of 1978 and a world-renowned pipa player, Wu Man changed one of her strings between the rehearsal and concert, and we casually spoke about Chinese music found overseas today. She finds the works of younger composers like Lei Liang and her peers from the Class of 1978 to be “very interesting,” yet she added, “I mean I don’t know if I would call what they’re doing Chinese music.” Wu Man’s comment brings up the point that their identity does not dictate the kind of music they either should or do write. Their names thus do not and should not predetermine the expectations formulated by audiences. Wu Man suggested that her classmates’ musical languages in particular have shifted since their time spent at Chinese conservatories. She remarked: “I mean, I think that they do two things. Some of them borrow directly from Chinese material. Others use the *ideas* of Chinese music in their compositions. You know, that’s what Lei Liang’s piece is all about—the ideas of Chinese music, the space, the images. Someone like Chen Yi probably used more of the literal material in her works. You know, she’s written several pieces for me on pipa. I don’t know, I would say that they’re definitely Chinese composers, but maybe not Chinese music” (25 Feb 2011 Interview Transcript).

Wu Man’s remarks call into question the typical assumptions one makes upon hearing the works composed by her colleagues from the Class of 1978. While their heritage offers an easy venue for marketing by distinguishing them as “Other” or deviating from the Western tradition, these composers may in fact be Chinese only in name, but not at all through their music. The diaspora offers them an opportunity to transcend strict, binary identity boundaries and instead allows them to write non-Chinese

music. The cultural constructs that still remain can no longer be applied as a default to multicultural composers.

### Vignette 2: Reflection on the State of Composers Today

Eating brunch in an exquisite room of the Pomona College guest professor house, Ge Ganru meditates on the composer's job: "You have to remember that now, only the good composers survived, so you can't find terrible music. But if you went back to the time of some of the great composers, there were definitely composers who wrote bad music. After many years, only the best survive and all the rest go to the garbage. That's why today performers and programmers need to do research about contemporary composers' works. I don't worry about whether my compositions will last or not [laughter]. I think composers today, and even before, have one basic issue: do you write music for yourself or for an audience. To me, I *am* the first audience and I have to be very critical of myself. I need to be convinced. I mean, if I'm not moved by my own writing then who else can be moved? It's kind of like wearing make-up when you're on the stage. If you just put a little bit on so that it looks fine when you're just at a mirror, then when you're under the lights it's going to look awful to the audience. So that's why you need to do much more than what's suitable to you." Ge's conscientiousness of how his musical ideas translate to the audience underscores the critical process behind his compositions. While he may be responding to a particular image or idea, he constantly faces the challenge of making his ideas convincing not just to himself, but also more importantly to his listeners. This type of heightened awareness exemplifies my conviction that these composers possess critical voices that can question and ideally dispose of

expectations of “Chineseness.” These composers, as seen through Ge’s words, concern themselves with translating an extremely powerful message, but not necessarily one that conforms to Western notions of Chinese.

### A Call for Critical Thinking

Throughout my thesis, I return to several overarching concepts: diaspora, hyphenated identities, residual Cultural Revolution ideologies, and hybridity. The work of key scholars generates useful lenses for understanding and interpreting the music and lives of these composers, and the Cultural Revolution provides an even more specific backdrop than just shared cultural contexts. Ge Ganru, Chen Yi, and Bright Sheng, the three case studies in my thesis, illuminate that while the Cultural Revolution and its accompanying ideologies may have deepened some individuals’ connection to their homeland, it also repulsed others and compelled them to never return. Given their associations with both China and America, I contend that they strongly root themselves in one identity, while acknowledging the presence and benefits of the other. Chen Yi and Bright Sheng enthusiastically embrace their Chinese roots and actively seek to benefit both musically and commercially from the association, although Sheng embraces the commercial to a greater extent. Ge Ganru consciously avoids easily identifiable Chinese elements in his music to escape automatically imposed labels and stereotypes based on his name. I examine each composer’s music as a means of understanding how he or she negotiates the complex triangle that includes his or her Chinese, American and Chinese-American identities. The three individuals analyzed in detail in my thesis reframe conventional thinking about the Chinese diaspora and the global effects of the Cultural

Revolution by exemplifying how to translate and ideally combine multiple cultures into a larger musical idiom that reflects the diaspora, their hyphenated identities<sup>5</sup>, and hybridized styles.

In her seminal work on “new wave” music in the global Chinese diaspora, Su Zheng explains that these composers pave the way for an “intersection” of both Chinese and American cultures, as their roles as cultural ambassadors help mediate social, cultural and political differences that divide both their senses of self and the contexts in which they live. While musical interactions with China existed prior to their arrival on U.S. soil, I believe that these composers unexpectedly prove that the two countries could and should foster mutually beneficial cultural exchanges. By situating themselves in the United States, these composers, Zheng argues, find themselves in a triangular relationship among China, America, and Chinese Americans that constantly requires reevaluation of the multiple spheres of conflicting ideologies.

In his expansive examination of the historical concept of world music, Philip Bohlman explores this notion of a triple consciousness by stating that music of diaspora exists as a trace of the homeland and allows individuals to better reconcile their sense of loss and belonging. Through their music, Ge, Chen, and Sheng reflect and grapple with this double consciousness as they retain some connection to China yet no longer feel part of the community. While Chen draws inspiration from Chinese “folk” songs and Sheng returns to research for the Silk Road project, Ge sees no reason to return to a country that possesses a flawed political system and proclaims his musical style insane. Their careers construct a shared space among Chinese diasporic composers in which each cultivates a

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that I use “hyphenated identity” throughout my thesis as a critical framework to bolster my analysis and not as a politically charged term. I envision this negotiation as more of a “slash” rather than a strictly divided hyphen – i.e. Chinese/American versus Chinese-American.

sense of place where they negotiate not belonging to either China or America, but balancing both at the same time. While in my thesis I illustrate such mediation in the context of Chinese composers, their experiences speak to diasporic individuals of any nationality.

Listening to these musics provides a window into elite Chinese music circles that exemplify the clash between past ideologies and globalization. As references to indigenous Chinese cultures bolster commercial appeal and construct more “authentic” musics, I illuminate how Chen and Sheng reinforce the stereotype that Chinese ethnicity correlates to “Chinese” elements in their scores, whereas Ge actively opposes such deliberate labels. Using these two perspectives as a springboard, I suggest that these diasporic movements have ironically led Chen and Sheng to directly quote musics heard in their past experiences and memories as the main source of inspiration. While life in the U.S. promised a fresh start free of oppressive Communist policies, Chen’s and Sheng’s use of “folk” music and indigenous instruments reinforce the Cultural Revolution’s focus on the peasant-centric countryside. One might go so far as to say that they possess traces of Mao’s ideologies. Ge Ganru, however, celebrates his separation from China by resisting old ideologies and commenting upon definitively Western issues—I later analyze his response to the Iraq War through his *String Quartet No. 5, “Fall of Baghdad.”* The curiosity to (re)discover musical sounds and traditions, however, also arises as a result of the stringently enforced Communist ideologies that meld together with individual senses of identity. While scholars like Barbara Mittler conjecture that the Cultural Revolution imposed a return to fundamental elements of Chinese culture and subsequently refreshed artistic traditions and the creative process, I claim this argument

does not capture the whole picture: the rhetoric of individuals like Chen Yi and Bright Sheng exemplifies the continued presence of Communist ideologies in their construction of self and their musics, proving that their innovative Western style works complicate past stigmas differentiating music of the “Other” from high art music.

As the Cultural Revolution sparked a diasporic shift to the United States, these composers face the challenge of a hyphenated identity. In his collection of narratives of diasporic Chinese in multiple countries, Wei Djao (2003) broadly observes that the crucial point of deviation among diasporic populations is how each person defines his or her relations to China. He asserts that they typically exhibit either sympathy or hostility towards the harsh policies and restricted social and cultural conditions. Frederick Lau (2006) takes the position that these composers have situated themselves in the middle of the hyphen, in some circumstances infusing their music with Chinese sounds to enrich their musical languages. For Lau, these references serve as interpretations of the sounds rather than superficial quotations and a stigmatizing of the culture. The risk in this cultural “translation” process reproduces what the industry wants to sell, and consequently, diminishes the chance for nonbiased cultural exchange. While he presents a compelling argument, I find that its two parts do not coherently combine: he notes the refreshing use of Chinese sounds, yet later states that these individuals capitalize on their “Orientalism” to carve a space in a globalized music market. Rather than being refreshed, these sounds reformulate the same stereotypes that have pervaded the dialogues about Chinese culture. I argue that while diasporic movements to America create an opportunity for Western audiences to deepen their understanding of Chinese musics, one

cannot presume that these composers' ethnicity equates with the agency to accurately translate what it means to be Chinese.

In understanding how these individuals negotiate their hyphenated identities, I engage with the notion of hybridity. Addressed in the context of transnational popular music, Georgina Born (2000) conjectures that hybridity exists as the newest form of authenticity as any musician must interact with other musical cultures. In my thesis, Ge, Chen, and Sheng demonstrate that hybridity can espouse multiple forms: Chen and Sheng exemplify the commercial appeal of combining Chinese sounds and Western techniques through incorporating "fieldwork" from the Chinese countryside, while Ge looks beyond easily definable musical characteristics to generate a previously unheard sound world through heavy layering of extended techniques and iconic sound.

Globalization consequently underscores the syncretism pervasive in many formations of identity today. Timothy Taylor (2007) suggests that in adopting hybridity as "authentic," listeners, scholars, and critics alike all immediately interpret culturally mixed musics as genuine creations. This positive conception of global musics, however, may simply be previously formed stereotypes reformulated in a new musical language. I push Taylor's claim by suggesting that the melding of Chinese "folk" songs with Western conservatory-taught techniques only results in a superficial combination that can easily be marketed as global music. Due to the dominating institutions of the music industry proclaiming this music as "authentic," I argue that audiences should not passively accept the cultural branding affixed to these musics. Taylor concludes that hybridity includes ideologies and shared cultural histories, and should not merely be the newest method of separating Western music and those of other cultures. Yayoi Uno Everett (2004) asserts

that rather than underlining the stark East-West division, hybridity transforms these labels into “permeable, fluid cultural entities” allowing these musicians to be the vehicles themselves for cultural interaction and commentary.





*I Love McDonald's (1998)*  
Liu Jian and Zhao Qin

## Chapter 1: Ge Ganru

Remember the Fundamental Element of “Feeling”

*“I was against the war because it brings suffering to people and I hate to see people who are for the war in the United States [...] A political point is one thing, but music is a different thing. When I was writing the music, I tried to not really focus on the political thing because the music itself is really important. Because of the feelings I had towards the war, for example screaming, I used the established feeling to break the boundary of music and do whatever I thought possible. Then I expressed the **feeling**.”*

- Ge Ganru, 7 Dec. 2010 interview transcript

## A Commentary on War

Of course I was against war, and I somehow loved the piece by George Crumb—that piece was interesting. The first time I tried to listen to that piece many years ago, it was very hard to really understand it, but through the years I gradually loved it. I find that kind of language particularly interesting and unique. Of course, that’s a landmark piece, but to me it’s still a more philosophical piece, more abstract. For this piece, I thought I should write something more straightforward. Very straightforward. When I had that piece [*Black Angels*] in mind, I thought about war because a few years ago the Iraq War was going on. I was against the war because it brings suffering to people. I hate to see people in the United States who are for the war because I came from China and, in its contemporary history, China also was invaded. I hate the war. So then I thought, maybe musically I can do something. A political point is one thing, but the music is a different thing. [...] I thought about images, like if something happened to me, if my home was bombed, my family members were killed, what would I do and how I would I feel. Imagine those kinds of feelings and use music to achieve those imaginations. (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript)

In a phone interview on Monday, December 7, 2010, Ge explained to me the inspiration and motivations behind his *String Quartet No. 5, “Fall of Baghdad.”* Knowing that he wanted to comment on and question the motivations and need for war, Ge explicated that he examined the successful approaches taken by other composers for guidance. The connection to George Crumb’s *Black Angels*, his electric string quartet, appears most fitting in this case because it both pushed the notion of experimental music of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as offered a response to the Vietnam War. In describing his personal relationship with this piece, Ge specifies that the deep philosophical and abstract elements, while thought-provoking and requiring years to fully digest, exist as the precise reactions he sought to avoid. Rather than prescribing the position and each movement of every musician on the stage as Crumb instructs, Ge applies a different philosophy in *Fall of Baghdad*, striving for simplicity and “straightforwardness” to

directly communicate his opposition to war today in the United States and also in China's history.

Primarily focused on the expression of “feelings,” Ge Ganru views music as the optimal artistic medium for his vision because of its immediacy. While music itself does not have the fundamentally reductive qualities of language, music achieves captivating “imaginings.” This privileging of feeling over language or labeling dovetails with Ge's relationship both to his Chinese and American experience. A variety of sources inspire the feelings Ge seeks to express through his compositions—sometimes imagining himself in the war, or at times more or less conscious elements of his experiences both as a young man in China and as a slightly older man in the United States. What is unique about Ge, as compared to Chen Yi and Bright Sheng, is his resistance to a reduction of these experiences, or of his identity, to labels. Moreover, that feeling and experience is his primary and true inspiration—labels limit, mislead and undermine his musical language. For Ge, the conveyance of his beliefs through centering his music on his inner feelings opens up a space for his diasporic identity and a style of composition one may truly call hybrid. Ge's life, attitude, and art allow for the free formation of a hybrid, or what some have deemed “avant-garde,” musical language that can only fully emerge when all of the conservative, reductive labeling is avoided.

I selected Ge's *String Quartet No. 5, Fall of Baghdad* because the subject of inspiration, the War in Iraq, speaks directly to both Americans and the larger international community. Rather than making pointed assertions against war, Ge uses his visceral reactions generated by media images to transform the composition into something highly individual and reaction-based rather than outward antagonism towards

a government's political agenda. In this chapter, I use conversations with him from my fieldwork, consider his background and the critical status of his compositional style, and engage in a close reading of his *String Quartet No. 5* to expand current understandings regarding the effects of diasporic movement, the flexibility of a hyphenated identity, and the need for hybrid styles that obviate ethnically constructed musical labels.

### How It All Began: Life in China

Born in Shanghai in 1954 and raised in a non-musical family, Ge Ganru played the Chinese mouth organ (*xun*) and the bamboo flute (*dizi*) for his own enjoyment, and later began violin studies. With the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Ge could practice only with a mute since all Western music was strictly forbidden. With all schools closed, finding a teacher proved to be a particular challenge:

All attempts to find a teacher were first thwarted, since the violin was labeled as a Western product and, what is worse, a bourgeois instrument. When he finally found a teacher from the Shanghai film studio, his lessons were based mostly on etudes and folk-melodies. (Mittler 1997: 173)

At the age of 17, he was subsequently sent to a labor camp to participate in Chairman Mao's mass re-education campaign during which he met one of China's most respected violinists, Nian Kaili, the former concertmaster of the Shanghai Philharmonic. Despite the risk of enraging authorities, Ge began his tutelage under Nian and worked even harder to avoid attracting attention or being labeled bourgeois. Sleeping only a few hours each night, Ge recalls: "I got up at 3 a.m. to practice before we had to do work on the field from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. After work, I would practice again until midnight" (ibid.: 174). Despite the long hours, he remarks, "I would walk 45 minutes in complete dark to this place where I could turn on a light and practice since no one else was around. I was

so happy. I mean, happiness is relative” (Ge 2 Mar 2011 interview transcript). Ge additionally organized an ensemble within the camp that allowed fellow workers to provide entertainment through performing revolutionary folk songs, as well as provide solace from the difficult labor. Although solely a violinist, Ge demonstrated a strong fervor and aptitude with arranging the songs even without any music theory background.

While casually speaking in the Pomona College guesthouse, Ge elaborated on his experiences during the years he spent on Chongming Island off the coast of Shanghai. Comically remarking that travel to the island now only takes an hour from the city by one of the longest bridges in the world, he recalled that during the Cultural Revolution it took a day. Ge woke up early in the morning and was sent in overcrowded busloads to the port. Packed into the boat for an entire day, he described that it was particularly awful since everyone had seasickness and no one could sleep. Once on the island, the work itself was extremely grueling. Describing the bitter period in winter, he points to his shoes and told me, “[laughing] Our shoes, well they didn’t make a difference in the field because it was all marsh land. All of us would have to trek through deep mud all day without shoes on” (ibid.). Since it was freezing outside, Ge’s feet were constantly numb throughout the day’s work and as he dug with a shovel, he would hit and cut his feet. He never felt anything, and he had no choice but to keep working. He commented, “We would go back to the dorms and gradually, gradually my feet became less numb. Then blood would gush everything and I felt so much extreme pain. That was just awful” (ibid.). In response to my comment about how the Cultural Revolution tore apart an entire country, Ge remarked,

Two generations were wiped out really by the Cultural Revolution. The younger generation was effected because the schools closed and their education was

stopped. I am maybe one in 10,000 who survived and found a career with a job and left. Then my father's generation, you know people who were 37-38 at the time and working, they lost their jobs. When the Cultural Revolution ended and they had to go back to work, no one knew what to do or even had the energy to do it. (ibid.)

Ge also expressed to me, "When we left [China], I never wanted to go back there because the political system was so bad and I just had so many bad memories" (ibid.). His time spent on Chongming Island generated deeply rooted resentment towards his homeland that would soon after define his style as a composer and shape his identity.

After the Cultural Revolution ended, Ge entered the Shanghai Conservatory as a violin major, switching later to composition and, consequently, extending his undergraduate study to seven years. In a music history class at Pomona College, he told the students, "That first day I stepped into the Shanghai Conservatory, I knew my life was totally different. I had a chance to finally be a musician" (ibid.). The Shanghai Conservatory unanimously decided in 1980 to give Ge the opportunity to study with British composer Alexander Goehr for two months; while in the capital, Ge evolved into an increasingly controversial figure given his exposure to cutting-edge composers like Cage, Crumb, and Takemitsu (Mittler 1997: 175).

The next year, Ge met American conductor David Gilbert, then assistant conductor for Pierre Boulez at the New York Philharmonic. Gilbert took several of Ge's scores back to America and showed them to Chou Wenchung, a Chinese-American composition professor at Columbia University. In 1983, Ge was invited to New York to study with Chou Wenchung; he arrived with \$40 in his pocket (the maximum amount allowed out of China), a violin, several scores and a suitcase (Schweitzer 2009: 3). He knew only a little English and was quite naïve about the reality of life in a major, modern

city. Ge remarks, “We were not exposed to any commercial things, so I thought it was a great opportunity to study and I never thought about money” (ibid.: 3). He quickly found his first job and source of income: delivering Chinese food. Upon finishing his doctoral degree, Ge and his wife started a business that supplied information about the metals market; only after the company became successful around 2000 did Ge transition to life as a full-time composer in the New York metropolitan area.

Ge made a striking entrance into the composition world with his work for solo cello *Yi Feng (Lost Style)*. Taped first in Shanghai in 1983, *Yi Feng* served as a vehicle for Ge to reclaim artistic freedom from Communist party control and provoked significant controversy in both Chinese and Western music communities.<sup>6</sup> In the piece, Ge first detuned the cello down an octave to destroy the physics of the instrument. He also combined percussive elements, like hitting the cello, pitch bending, and squealing noises to challenge traditional ideas about what constitutes music either in the East or West. In the commentary accompanying the CD, Kathryn Woodard, a pianist who recorded Ge’s *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!* (2006) with the Shanghai Quartet, comments,

On an acoustic level, he uses one instrument to represent the sound of others as a way to intersect Chinese and Western sound worlds and in the process create a new soundscape that goes beyond either identity. On a social level *Yi Feng* represents a remarkable statement of individualism both for the performer [Frank Su Huang] and for the composer at a time when artists in China were just beginning to embrace past traditions but not yet willing to venture into the experimental realm. (Woodard 2009: 3)

In recalling his first composition, Ge seemed almost amused: “When this was premiered, I had a huge problem because people said this wasn’t Chinese. I said I don’t care what you think, because this is my music” (Ge 2 Mar 2011 interview transcript). When first

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<sup>6</sup> Ge was literally deemed insane by Chinese authorities and many of his professors disagreed with his compositional choices. He has since “recovered” and established a flourishing career in the United States and even become highly iconoclastic.



listening to his compositions, Ge commented to me in an interview: “Once you hear [*Yi Feng*], it will give you a historical sense of what we were doing at that time and also it will broaden your musical feeling about the difference between Western and Chinese music” (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript).<sup>7</sup>

The musical climate immediately following the Cultural Revolution created a highly pressured environment in which students had to learn. Ge then describes his experiences:

In China at that time, because the Cultural Revolution just ended, we were so eager that we tried to learn a lot; we just grabbed everything. But when we’re here, more and more for me, I am more conscious of the personal style or individual edit. This is what I always tried to emphasize. For instance in China, the way Chinese people appreciate music is different from the way Western people do. In Chinese history in the past, you almost don’t see any Chinese composers because the music played in Chinese culture basically was not made by a particular person—it was inherited from a long time ago. That is totally different from the Chinese poem or calligraphy that is so highly individualized. So when I gave a lecture at Shanghai Conservatory, they were all shocked because they said they never thought about it. Chinese people don’t care. Here some people like Beethoven or Mozart’s style. Chinese people can appreciate one poem or another and those writers all have their own style, but this is not in music so that’s one reason I was somehow not involved in China a lot. I found it would take them a while to try to understand the creative side of music because you know here the music and composer *creates* the music so people must appreciate your individual style and language. In China, that kind of thing would take many, many years to accomplish. (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript)

Upon his arrival in the United States, however, Ge experienced a crucial shift in the dynamic of his compositional lifestyle: a great emphasis was placed on carving individuality and immersing oneself in writing and editing. Since his first two string

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<sup>7</sup> Entering the musical world with such a provocative piece, Ge was quickly assigned the title of China’s first “avant-garde” composer. While his musical language in this solo cello piece signifies a crucial break with the compositional norms instituted in Chinese conservatories, one must remember that the term “avant-garde” is directly related to a specific context. Given the risks of openly resisting the ideologies of the Communist Party in the years following the Cultural Revolution, Ge composed music that pushed the boundaries of the conservatory curriculum.

quartets reflected black and white interpretation of his identity, Chinese or Western, Ge looked to Crumb's eclectic choice of electric string quartet to reach beyond the boundaries of the East-West binary.

The Cultural Revolution and its constricting ideologies motivated Ge to flee to America and shaped how he formulated his musical language, one which deliberately underscores that he is not a Chinese composer and his music should not be associated with false conceptions of exoticism, Orientalism, or "the Other." Among the members of the Class of 1978 who studied with Chou Wen-Chung at Columbia University, Ge took the most circuitous path to becoming a composer, as he both navigated many difficult forms of musical expression and even experimented with other careers. Upon becoming both a businessman and a composer after moving to the United States, Ge exercises the greatest amount of freedom when composing, allowing him to escape restrictive Communist ideologies that arguably still impinge on the musical styles' of certain peers, like Chen Yi and Bright Sheng. Composing neither strictly Chinese nor Western music, he possesses a hybrid style as an individual who has established his life in the United States, but still retains a Chinese passport. His participation in the Chinese composer diaspora consequently freed him from the oppressive clutches of the Communist party and now empowers him to challenge the unfairly imposed stereotypes assigned to all Chinese composers. Continually searching for new paths of experimentation and innovation, Ge exemplifies that no Chinese composer must limit himself to a certain style because of ethnicity; rather, his active disinterest in the East-West dichotomy transcends these fluid cultural boundaries. In doing so, Ge awakens academics to the fact that hybrid musical languages encourage highly flexible dialogues about diasporic dynamics,

illuminating the intersection between Chinese and Western music traditions that expand our understanding of what transnational music means today.

*Fall of Baghdad: Producing Hybridity*

The specific ensemble and recording project that underwrote Ge's string quartets illustrates that significant voices in the music world perceive Ge as a crucial addition to the dialogue happening in the global music industry. The ModernWorks ensemble, comprised of Airi Yoshioka, Mayuki Fukuhara, Veronica Salas, and Madeleine Shapiro, recorded the quartet on the Naxos label. Founded in 1997, this ensemble dedicates its time to new music only, and has acquired a niche in the present-day music world by performing works for the core string quartet or an expanded group when needed. ModernWorks collaborated with Ge to record all three string quartets on "Chinese Classics," a series under the umbrella of the Naxos label. This set in particular aims to record scintillating music written by prominent Chinese composers:

Several decades of musical interaction between Eastern and Western traditions has resulted in many highly acclaimed compositions which combine and juxtapose instrumental sounds and musical techniques from both hemispheres within the ever-broadening ambit of Western classical music. (Naxos 2011: 1)

While the effort initially appears valiant, Naxos engenders problematic language that affixes the term "classic" to Ge's music—a term that I perceive as undermining Ge's compositional integrity.

By producing a series dedicated to such works, Naxos creates a double-edged sword for diasporic Chinese composers like Ge. On the one hand, such a project demonstrates that these composers have garnered enough critical acclaim to showcase their innovative accomplishments and pieces. Yet at the same time, the separation of

these “Chinese classics” from the larger Naxos label isolates these composers and markets their music with the illusion of “the East” or “Other.” Rather than embracing and passively accepting marketing strategies like Sheng, Ge differs through the inclusion of detailed notes that clarify his artistic intentions. While such a specific focus on Chinese composers is certainly commendable and needed, Naxos upholds the binary that it apparently aims to challenge or at least complicate. The choice of the word “classics” refers to the Western sense of “classical,” which Ge illustrates as an inadequate descriptor of his musical style in these quartets.

In November 2008, *String Quartet No. 5* was premiered at the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. on a program that included Ge’s first two quartets and the work, *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!* (2006). An avid supporter of Asian arts in many different media, the Freer Gallery supports many contemporary East Asian musicians by providing a wonderful performance venue; recent performances feature works by Zhou Long, the Shanghai Quartet with Wu Man playing pipa, and a concert led by Hu Jianbing allowing audience members to enjoy the galleries of Chinese landscape and season paintings prior to the concert. Ge also taps into unconventional venues, as exemplified with the New York premiere of *Fall of Baghdad* located at Roulette, a venue for contemporary music and art that supports emerging, young and also established modern artists. In order to uphold their mission, applications demonstrating fervor for experimentation and imagination are required in order to guarantee that the space services the needs of the international composer community and continues to seek unusual programs and pieces.

Through looking at the various commissioning bodies and performance spaces, one can readily recognize that Ge’s hybridized style attracts a wide variety of sponsors

and musicians. Concerned primarily with preserving his own musical feelings as they correspond to his own identity, not to the interests of a producer, Ge composes before sharing his work with performers or sponsors, thus achieving a measure of independence in his creative vision. While this approach does not fully guarantee that his compositional vision remains intact, it carries Ge one step farther towards achieving a hybrid style that transgresses the restrictions frequently placed on composers. Furthermore, Ge not only deconstructs antiquated notions that music by a Chinese composer has “Chinese” sounding components, but also lays a foundation for a more substantial appreciation of multicultural musics.

#### Humanity and Subjects of Our Time

It would be impossible to discuss the relevance of Ge’s *Fall of Baghdad* to questions of hybridity without also briefly engaging with the piece’s treatment of the Iraq War. Ge accepts a tremendous challenge in directly commenting on the Iraq War, as indicated by the quartet’s title, and consequently uses Crumb’s quartet as a model framework. Articulating strong opinions on a longstanding conflict opens the door to large amounts of criticism. This is due in part to the notes, but it is also due to the event’s intimate connection with Americans personally and nationally. Ge does not intend to focus on one particular audience. While this piece explicitly exemplifies a form of anti-war protest and responds to the political and social turmoil of the time, it also acts as a tribute to George Crumb’s string quartet, *Black Angels* (1971) (Bruskint 2008: 1). This decision speaks to Ge’s engagement with established American musical emblems as a means of strengthening his own cultivation of a hyphenated diasporic identity.

Although the two string quartets differ in a multitude of ways, Ge draws upon Crumb's division of the work into subsections: *Black Angels* is subtitled "Thirteen Images from the Dark Land" and Ge breaks down his three movements into the same number of smaller image-based vignettes. Each overarching section of Crumb's quartet possesses the title "Threnody," which can both be found in Ge's piece as well as in other significant contemporary works, like Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1959). By specifically composing a tribute piece, Ge appears to indicate that his specific kind of hybrid and diasporic self is unlike those of Chen Yi or Bright Sheng that reinforce superficial notions of "Chineseness." Ge actively investigates each side of his identity "hyphen" to further his conception of self. Although already a well-established composer, Ge's enduring search for hybridity reiterates the omnipresent influence of the diaspora on these composers' lives.

Having persevered through the Cultural Revolution and various trials upon moving to the United States, Ge uses his feeling as the primary vehicle for translating the hardships of diaspora and its effects on identity formation. Due to his personal connection to a highly traumatic historical event, Ge illustrates the many different sides of war, both the brutality and destruction—seen in portions like "Living Hell," "Barbaric March," and "War of Horror"—as well as the aftermath, as exemplified by "Threnody" and "Prayer." Although he did not participate in the Iraq War, one might argue that his close association with a period of mass destruction enables him to make commentary about a horrifying current event. At the same time, one could also easily criticize Ge for exercising such hubris in equating one trauma with the other—that he "understands" the horrors of the Iraq War. I contend that Ge possesses the agency to engage in such commentary because

he seeks to capture his personal reactions to the war, not generate any type of universal truth or timeline. Through revealing an emotional response to the Iraq War, Ge's music serves as a vehicle for more thought-provoking commentary on greater political and social values. Given his position as a hybrid and diasporic composer, Ge's work exemplifies how identification with multiple nations and musical traditions can help demystify one country's political motivations.

### Bringing His Musical Voice to Life: Conversations with the Composer

Throughout the fall and spring semesters, I communicated with Ge Ganru multiple times to better understand his intentions for *Fall of Baghdad*, as well as his general approach to composition. Of the three composers I examine in my thesis, Ge was by far the most responsive and eager to participate in my research. In January 2011, Ge invited me to join him at Pomona College for a week while he served as a visiting composer. All of these conversations, classes, concerts, and observations of rehearsals provided an unbelievable window into the life of one of the most inventive living composers today. Most importantly, I was able to fully realize that the Class of 1978 is a highly active group of composers whose lives are continually changing. As this happens, so too do their musical languages, hyphenated identities and relationships with Communist ideologies continue to shift.

The notion of "feeling" that Ge continually returns to in his attempts to describe *Fall of Baghdad*, consistent with his style as a whole, is the crux of Ge's struggles with hybridity and hyphenated identity. This struggle springs from the challenge of fully transcribing one's thoughts to paper in musical form. He responds,

For me to write this piece, that's one thing. Through writing this piece I tried to also do some exercises: how to express my feeling. As a composer, how to transfer feeling to notes is not easy. Very often, for instance when I started composing, if I had a strong feeling, I wrote down the note, and then played it back, about 75% was gone, I could only express 25% of my feeling. Every composer's relationship to music is different, but for me, the most important is to express 100% of that feeling to the audience and secondly to help break music boundaries. Once you have that kind of feeling, certain traditional techniques might not be enough, so you need to look for new techniques and sounds. If you have a feeling, then you try to use a particular tool—I went through that kind of music writing when I was studying at that time. First of all, I tried to learn to have all these kinds of techniques, but with no feeling these tools are useless. (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript)

Composing *Fall of Baghdad* was not simply about writing just this piece; the process provided an opportunity in which Ge could test and experiment with musical expression through what he calls “exercises.” In constantly grappling with how to attain complete fulfillment of “feeling” through his music, Ge reveals that this “feeling” acts as a critical framework for understanding how he composes *Fall of Baghdad* and also formulates his compositional approach as a whole. By focusing on the “feeling,” Ge emphasizes the subject over the notes themselves, which immediately differentiates his way of conceptualizing composing from other Class of 1978 members.

Rather than adhering to cultural stereotypes, Ge employs “feeling” as a direct means of translation for his own hyphenated identity that emerges as a diasporic composer. Ge clarifies the distinction from other “Chinese” composers with whom he can easily be compared:

On the surface maybe it seems like imitation, but not really. For me, my music is about how to truly get the deepest expression not ever trying to imitate people. I may use something specific for inspiration but the music is my perception of the sounds. I try to stay as far as I can from labels. (Ge 3 Mar 2011 interview transcript)



Ge not only veers away from imitating people, but also avoids the categorization of “Chinese” or “Western” because he perceives himself as embodying neither one fully. Since he prioritizes feeling in his works, Ge dismisses widely taught conservatory techniques, like minimalism and twelve-tone. In Ge’s eyes, these techniques emphasize a preoccupation with the arrangement of pitches rather than a concern with the music as a whole entity. Twelve-tone eliminates emotion and logic from a work, thus removing the feeling that is absolutely fundamental to Ge’s own hybrid style (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript). In freeing himself from any binding to a particular type of composition, Ge sets up a blank canvas upon which he can portray his pure feeling, distancing himself far from any imitations that could corner him into prescriptive stereotypes by critics and listeners.

Before even mentioning the need for new “tools” that satisfy his compositional vision, Ge postulates that without any conception of feeling, all of the techniques learned in conservatory prove futile and meaningless. The feeling itself drives the formation of deeply meaningful and powerful music and also reflects larger cultural and diasporic influences in his life. In her examination of Chinese in diaspora around the world, Helen Rees posits,

The use of musical traditions to maintain spaces of cultural belonging and nostalgia in the Chinese diaspora is noted again and again...In all cases, a strong sense of the personal tie to place, to national, local or ethnic community, and to cultural traditions comes through, whether consciously expressed or implicit. (Rees 2009: 13)

Having started his musical training and career in China and subsequently traveled to the United States for a doctoral degree, Ge possesses a type of dual identity, connected to many things both Chinese and American. With Ge as a forerunner, Zheng remarks, “The

new wave movement dramatically changed the direction of Chinese musical development; it animated both excitement and frustration, provoking ideologically changed criticism” (2010: 149). As a result, Ge’s musical idioms exist as not purely of either culture or nation, but as a conglomeration of learning and living in Shanghai and New York. While the *Fall of Baghdad* addresses a difficult subject itself, Ge complicates the message by composing from a multinational perspective. Wei Djao’s examination of shifting identity perceptions among Chinese populations in several countries helps understand Ge’s experiences. Djao asserts,

Feeling sympathetic or hostile toward the People’s Republic of China, finding its policies and actions repulsive or sensible, or being ashamed or proud of it, all enter into the identity of the Chinese overseas, because these opinions, attitudes, and sentiments are the position by which they have chosen to define themselves. (2003: 194)

Rather than focusing on the notion that the *Fall of Baghdad* acts as a direct criticism about the Cultural Revolution and China’s previous socio-political conditions, Ge demonstrates that merely growing up in such an environment both actively and subconsciously guides how each member of the Class of 1978 formulates a sense of identity. Ge recognizes that the struggles and close-minded policies of China at the time contributed to his current aversion and disagreement with war and suffering. Located in the United States during the Iraq War, Ge enters a parallel time in which he must determine his relationship to policies, actions, and national sentiments. As he negotiates new social and cultural realms through the diaspora, Ge relies on a hybrid compositional style to inform his hyphenated identity as whole.

## Iconic Sound: Connecting the Past to the Present

Through deconstructing conventional notions about a string quartet and employing a broad range of extended techniques, Ge produces a dynamic sound painting. He creates this soundscape through cultivating iconic sounds that embody his feeling with regards to the Iraq War, and in doing so, he directly confront labels of Chineseness and Westernness to his music. Each movement breaks down into titled subsections to guide the listeners' interpretation: "Screaming – Living Hell – Barbaric March – War of Horror – Threnody"; "Prayer – Bazaar – Pharaoh's Drum – Music from Heaven"; and "Desolation – Weeping – Moaning." His use of specific language prescribes the exact way he wants the quartet to be heard. Markers of the precise feelings that Ge uses to guide his writing, these subtitles facilitate the communication of a thoroughly hybrid musical language through making his music accessible to Chinese, Western, or any other ear. Furthermore, Ge tackles the continual sensation of hyphenated identity sparked by diasporic movement.

Ge leaves little room for the performers to misinterpret the evocation of iconicity through heavy use of English descriptive phrases. To create vivid moments of both utter chaos and deep serenity, Ge scores sounds like "behind the bridge" and "distorted," as well as techniques such as *sul ponticello* (on the bridge) and *sul tasto* (bowing over the fingerboard). By playing on the bridge, chords attain a more mysterious sound with almost a metallic effect, whereas playing near the fingerboard creates an airy sound.

**Example 1.1:** Movement I, mm. 1-4

1. Screaming

**Largo**  $\text{♩} = 40$

In Example 1.1, the specified timbres directly simulate a range of screams from high-pitched shrieks to prolonged howls. The dynamic markings and layered entrances prove to be so effective that it becomes difficult to know that it is a string quartet playing. In his examination of several key elements of sound for the performer and listener, Thomas Turino clarifies the notion of iconicity. He writes,

Iconic processes are fundamental to musical meaning in terms of style recognition and are basic to our cultural classifications of most things, including people’s identities. This kind of iconic process is usually so automatic and constant that it happens low in focal awareness until we encounter something that is not easily connected to a general type that is familiar to us – for example, a radically different kind of musical sound or “scary noise.” (Turino 2008: 6)

Applied to the beginning as well as throughout the entire quartet, the use of unfamiliar and unidentifiable sounds results in Ge directly imbuing the audience and performer with specific experiences. As Turino suggests, iconicity not only impacts the sounds but also reflects on the composer’s identity. In the case of Ge, the unintelligible, “scary” sounds draw one’s attention back to his cultural and political experiences while both in the West and China to demonstrate through music how diasporic movement resulting from tragedy can espouse huge identity conflicts. Ge takes advantage of the malleability of icons to

construct an effective strategy that links his experiences from the Cultural Revolution to the War in Iraq—one that he does not know directly. Ge translates his diasporic experience into an effective hybridized style that speaks to a multitude of international communities.

The descriptors chosen for each section set the stage for a literal evocation of each heading. “Screaming” at the opening of the first movement serves as a primary example of how Ge uses whatever means necessary to characterize the adjective. Combining exaggerated dynamic textures and specifying instructions “distorted,” Ge generates a sensation of immediacy in the quartet, as the performers frequently become so enraptured in their performance that it sounds like improvisation. Rather than leaving room for ambiguity, Ge thus turns to iconicity as a clear indicator of his “feeling,” leaving little room for misinterpreting his personal opinions. By starting with “Screaming”—as opposed to a somber chorale or a bitter, lyrical lament—Ge immediately unveils his deeply rooted perturbation with the Iraq War. Elaborating on the notion of iconicity as a form of communication, Turino emphasizes,

The main issue is that icons can spur imaginative connections of resemblance between the signs perceived and the objects stood for in light of the internal context of the perceiver. (2008: 7)

Through highly evocative subtitles like “Screaming,” Ge once again provides an avenue for the listener to conjure up personal images or associations to his quartet despite his own explicit references to the Iraq War. As Turino suggests, the performers use the score as a means to invoke powerful images that are both so specific, yet also representative on a larger scale of Ge’s negotiation of hybrid styles in a musical world ridden with cultural binaries. As a composer who views himself as neither fully Western nor fully Chinese,

Ge illustrates the transferable nature of diasporic compositions by specifying iconic connections as a means to welcome in the performer's or audience's own associations to the listening experiences.

In searching for a means to evoke his response to the Iraq War, Ge incorporates dramatic dynamic changes and heavy, prolonged glissandos. Bolstering the intensity in both volume and emotion, the performers face significant physical challenges in dragging their fingers up and down the strings using heavy pressure and adhering to the intense bowing demarcated in the score. Ge strengthens the connection to war by incorporating the intensive expenditure of energy required of those fighting into each part.

**Example 1.2:** Movement I, mm. 116-123

The image displays a musical score for the piece "4. War of Horror" (Movement I, mm. 116-123). The score is written for four string instruments: Violin I (VI. 1), Violin II (VI. 2), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The tempo is marked "Largo" with a metronome marking of 52. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 116 to 120, and the second system covers measures 121 to 123. The score features a variety of dynamic markings, including *sfz*, *f*, *p*, and *sf*. It also includes specific performance instructions such as *sul D*, *sul G*, *sul C*, *sul A*, *sul G distorted*, and *s.t.* (sul tasto). The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth-note runs and triplets, as well as glissandos and sustained notes. A box containing the number "120" is located in the upper right corner of the first system.

As indicated by the parentheses around certain sixteenth note figurations in Example 1.2, the notes themselves become secondary to effective execution of the technique. Ge makes readily apparent the centrality of the dynamics, randomized chromaticism, and glissandos to communicating the proper imagery—in this case, “War of Horror.” Ge achieves distinctive timbres in all four parts by specifying “*sul D*,” meaning play that note or phrase on the designated string. When played on the D-string rather than a higher string, one can produce a richer tone.

**Example 1.3:** Movement I, mm. 137-141

The musical score for Example 1.3 consists of four staves: VI. 1, VI. 2, Vla., and Vc. The measures are numbered 137, 138, 139, 140, and 141. In measure 137, VI. 1 has a single note, VI. 2 has a sixteenth-note figure, Vla. has a sixteenth-note figure, and Vc. has a sixteenth-note figure. In measure 138, VI. 1 has a single note, VI. 2 has a sixteenth-note figure, Vla. has a sixteenth-note figure, and Vc. has a sixteenth-note figure. In measures 139, 140, and 141, all parts are marked with a double slash (//) and a horizontal line, indicating a glissando or sustained tone. Dynamics like *ff*, *poco a poco*, and *dim.* are also present in measures 139 and 140.

At the end of the section, Ge further strengthens the texture by writing artificial harmonics in several voices. This addition heightens the sense of eeriness, creating unexplainable squeals and grinding noises as though the mass of sound that was approaching finally arrived and engulfed the listener within the disarray. Given that artificial harmonics typically intensify a notion of discomfort, Ge selects a highly effective technique that actualizes the suffering of war for both participating individuals and those observing from the outside. A difficult subject to discuss without provoking an assortment of strong opinions, the Iraq War unquestionably ignites impassioned

convictions with regards to American wielding of global power and the country's responsibility within the larger global community despite individual political leanings. By responding to a subject that pertains specifically to America, not China, Ge demonstrates that his music acts as a vehicle for social, political and cultural commentary.

### Taking It Apart: Deconstructing the Fundamentals of Western Music for Hybridity

Rather than China and the West acting as two distinct sources of inspiration and techniques for his music, Ge distills the “tools” that prove most useful and weaves them together to produce a quartet that both tackles a difficult subject and exemplifies the genesis of a highly distinct multinational style. By deviating from both Western and Chinese conventions of notating keys, rhythm, meter, and voicing—all components of the score assumed as necessary in order to play a piece—Ge reveals that his diasporic movement enables his ability to compose music that does not conform to the language of China or the West. He explains:

At that time, when China just opened its door, we tried to learn all new techniques like 12 tone. So I wrote pieces in that style, but gradually I found that was something I didn't really feel, so then I tried to find my own language. But it was so hard because there was no example from which I could model! So then I sat down and spent a long time and tried to think and I somehow thought about the so-called form and most basic elements in music. There are four elements: 1) Pitch: without pitch you have nothing to really listen to; 2) Rhythm: even if very slow, that's rhythm, otherwise the notes will be indefinitely long; 3) Timbre: you will never hear a music that you cannot describe its timbre; 4) Dynamics: without dynamics there's no music. Then I tried to compare these four elements in Chinese and Western music. For instance, I tried to study pitch. In Western music, we spend time trying to achieve perfect pitch, but in Chinese music precise pitch is not that important. More important is how to do something around the pitch. Because in Western music you have precise pitch, then you have harmony. In Chinese music, it's not polyphonic – there's almost no sense of Western harmony. For Chinese people, they are not emphasizing that precise pitch. Then if you



compare rhythm in both musics, you will find that in Western music you have a pulse and that's why you have waltzes, marches, and rock n' roll, but you won't find this in Chinese music. In Chinese music, there's no pulse; once you have no pulse it's hard to have a waltz or a march. But Chinese music has its own kind of rhythm, like the *accelerando* in Chinese opera. In Western music if you look at instrument making, the timbre is the most representative form; if you have the perfect vibration, you can get a good timbre. But for Chinese instrument making like the pipa, which is also a plucked instrument, the body is solid wood. So for a pipa, the frequencies are totally different, almost no vibrations. You will find that Chinese people aren't interested in narrow sound, but more interested in sound that's distorted. That's beautiful. If you compare all of these, everything is almost upside-down in both musics. If you study further, you will find there is something a lot to do with the language. You study the language, you know that there are four tones. In music, that's why we have all of this sliding—microtones. But in Chinese language there is no accent. When you have accent, then it forms the rhythm. Most Chinese music (like folk songs, Peking opera) is very hard to beat—that's because of the influence of the language, because we don't have accent. So then I thought, ok, let me just do an extreme composition. I just wanted to totally destroy the principles of these things for Western music. So I wrote a cello piece in which I re-tuned the strings one octave lower. Once you did this, the mellow sound all disappeared. So I said to myself, I should write something with no steady pulse of Western rhythm. Then I tried to not let people hear a clear precise pulse and pitch. All of these things I did are totally against the elements of Western music. (Ge 7 Dec 2010 Interview transcript)

Although the twelve-tone technique pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg in the mid-twentieth century challenged conventional notions of harmony, Ge hankered for something more personal to define his style. The four identified components of music that Ge mentions thus serve as a springboard from which he constructs a wholly different approach to crafting a work. With regards to pitch, Ge reveals a crucial point in noting that Chinese music focuses less on particular pitches and rather aims to create a sound world around a pitch. In his string quartet, Ge exemplifies this characteristic through using many innovative techniques to manifest a highly varied set of sounds.

Evidenced while both listening to the work and looking at the notation, the score rarely possesses moments in which all four voices sustain chords, but rather frequently contains a single instrument or two playing elongated notes, embellished by the

remaining instruments layering combinations of glissandos, dramatic dynamics, ponticello, hitting the tailpiece etc.

**Example 1.4:** Movement I, mm. 21-23

The musical score for Example 1.4, Movement I, mm. 21-23, is presented in four staves. The first staff (Violin I) begins with a trill marked 'tr.' and 'as fast as possible', followed by a glissando marked 'sul A' and 'rit.'. The second staff (Violin II) also starts with a trill and 'as fast as possible', then moves to a glissando marked 'sul D' and 'dim.'. The third staff (Viola) features a trill and 'as fast as possible', followed by a glissando marked 'sul D' and 'dim.'. The fourth staff (Cello/Double Bass) begins with a trill and 'tr.', then a glissando marked 'sul A' and 'dim.'. The score concludes with a final glissando marked 'sul D' and 'p'.

While not distinct to Ge's writing, this type of voicing seen in Example 1.4 creates highly specific and varied tonal qualities that mirror Ge's disillusionment with war and tragic events on a larger scale. Since Ge's music exists as not purely Chinese or American, but instead a negotiation of the two, the quartet uniquely blends traditional harmony with more complex tonal movement that appears to veer far away from any particular key.

This approach places Ge in a broader trend among diasporic Chinese composers:

While composers in China were composing music with strong political messages, those who were living outside China were continuing their efforts to find a new voice for their music. (Lau 2008: 99)

In identifying the centrality of pitch in Western music and then actively deconstructing its presence in his works, Ge tries to break free from all restrictions by forming his own musical language, albeit in an overstated manner. Fully divorcing himself from Western techniques would require reinventing the wheel, so to speak. Despite all of the easily assigned labels because of his Chinese name, the United States affords Ge an opportunity

in which he can distance himself from the designation as a radical, controversial composer according to Communist ideology, and instead, experiment with various new modes of “feeling” in a more open, thinking environment.

In describing the principles of rhythm, Ge identifies several qualities that serve as a useful guide when listening to music composed by individuals of Chinese descent. Rather than possessing a strong sense of internal rhythm, Chinese music offers a dynamic ebb and flow—Ge illustrates this point in mentioning the accelerandos frequently found in Chinese opera. While abandoning a strict pulse makes the music difficult to follow at times, it simultaneously permits a heightened sense of fluidity that seems more natural. Turning again to the *Fall of Baghdad*, Ge specifies many time signatures in each movement, yet the notes themselves do not always fall cleanly on the beat (see Example 1.5) and he typically keeps the same time signature for extended periods, manually adjusting the rhythms and embellishments as needed.

**Example 1.5:** Movement II, mm. 130-136

The musical score for Example 1.5 consists of four staves. The top two staves are in treble clef, and the bottom two are in bass clef. The music is characterized by a complex, non-pulsed rhythmic feel, achieved through the use of hemiolas and syncopations. Each staff has a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings, illustrating the fluid and non-linear rhythmic structure described in the text.

Throughout the entire piece, Ge masks a clear pulse by generating hemiolas, complex syncopations, and randomized accents played at the instrumentalists’ discretion. Pairing

such intricate, staggered rhythms with constantly shifting pitches consequently formulates demanding music that challenges both the performer and listener.

Through adorning the rhythmic structure with layers of extended techniques, Ge further clarifies his hybrid musical language through pairing the “ebb and flow” in Chinese music with embellishments taught in the Western conservatory world.

**Example 1.6:** Movement II, 124-129

As this section in Example 1.6, “Pharaoh’s Drum,” builds and each part becomes increasingly complicated, Ge introduces many shorter, abbreviated textures, combining pizzicato, *col legno* (hit the string with the wood), arco, and hitting the tailpiece and chin rest. Observing the notes on the page does not accurately convey the technical challenges that Ge presents as he formulates a style unlike many others. The first violinist, Airi Yoshioka, recalls,

For the Fall of Baghdad, there are a lot of extended techniques and in order to play sounds that he wanted, we had to try out various things. For example in Pharaoh's Drum, we had to figure out the appropriate drumming stick to get the balance of sound he wanted. The 2nd violinist, violist, and cellist tried different length/weight pencils, chopsticks, to get the ring, color and bounce that he envisioned. As for myself, we arrived at a guitar pick (but again, we tried a few

different ones) to get the right resonance in my pizzicatos in that section.  
(Yoshioka 20 Jan. 2011 interview transcript)

While other composers have certainly used these extended techniques, Ge invents an anomalous category of sound that calls attention to the medium of the instrument and the performer. Seen similarly in his treatment of iconicity in sound, Ge draws upon the endless pairings of rhythm and extended techniques to show that his experiences during the Cultural Revolution and within the diaspora link to other trying experiences in present times. In comparison to Chen and Sheng, Ge generates a musical language that is simultaneously complex, high art music and easily accessible to any audience. This characteristic not only makes the listening process enjoyable, but also, and more importantly, proves that music is a crucial medium for cultural and political commentary on issues that go beyond the East-West binary.

While Ge clearly tries to delineate the elements of Chinese and Western music with regards to pitch and rhythm, the two sound worlds may actually be inextricably linked. In looking at the reception of traditional instruments, Zheng observes,

Chinese instruments such as the *pipa* and *dizi* have been introduced into American highbrow music culture, not as isolated oriental exotic objects to be gazed upon, but as *different* musical sounds capable of dialoguing and interweaving with Western instruments. (2010: 151)

Zheng's point appears quite provocative as it challenges the preconceived Chinese versus Western binary. From her perspective, the use of Chinese instruments occurs in "highbrow" music culture to create appealing modern sounds, rather than specifically perpetuating a concrete version of "Chineseness." Brought immediately to the foreground when discussing an individual associated with both lineages and their associated instruments, compositions, pedagogy, and methodologies, each music cannot and does

not exist completely separated from the other, which directly taps into the essence of hybridity. In actively contemplating what constitutes Chinese and Western music, Ge himself merges the two “spheres” and shows that embodying both heritages can result in cultural masterpieces that act as an evolving exhibition of his political and cultural experiences.

Occurring in tandem with the deconstruction of Western music’s four fundamental elements, Ge’s translation of Chinese language into music emerges as the primary means of differentiating his works from others found in the West. Due to its dependence on tonality, spoken Chinese relies solely on precise inflections of the voice to distinguish one word from another and results in a common connection to the Chinese sense of pitch. As a brief example, the character “ma” can mean mother, hemp, horse, or act as a question particle, depending on the accompanying tone; the language appears highly lyrical even when simply spoken. Ge concludes that the lack of accent or syllabic emphasis in Chinese language translates into music through deemphasizing the presence of accent-driven pulse. In both Ge’s music and other Chinese compositions, language directly inspires and correlates to the sounds produced by the musicians. In this regard, these composers seem extremely aware of their cultural roots and distinctive elements—turning to language for inspiration serves as a highly specific reference to one’s native culture.

**Example 1.7:** Movement II, mm. 1-20

The image displays a musical score for a quartet, specifically focusing on the string parts. It is divided into two systems. The first system includes Violin 1 (VI. 1), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The second system includes Violin 1 (VI. 1), Violin 2 (VI. 2), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The music is in 4/4 time. The Viola part is particularly prominent, featuring melodic lines with triplets and dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*. A 'sul C' marking is present in both systems, indicating a specific playing technique. The overall texture is characterized by a lyrical and articulated style, with the Viola line mirroring the vocal line's contour.

In Example 1.7, the shape of the viola line mirrors the even level of the first tone (m.15), the rise of the second tone (m. 5), and finally the lift and lilt of the third tone and the fall of the fourth (mm. 11-12). By translating the tonal quality of Chinese into his quartet, Ge intensifies his original feeling by associating it not only with broad adjectival descriptors, such as “Living Hell” or “Threnody,” but also with specific articulations found in everyday Chinese spoken words. In one of the few calm moments in the quartet, the viola accepts the role similar to a storyteller, as the melodic contour imitates the pacing and dynamic arc of a captivating story line. Given Mandarin’s central role in Ge’s quartet, the performers must sharpen their ear to the vocal quality of the lines, resulting in an even more lyrical and articulated performance style.

Despite this close connection to his mother tongue, Ge now turns to English for daily communication. While characteristics of Mandarin seep into his phrases, both

languages structure his thinking and experiences. Ge's personal identity and relationship to his Chinese heritage and his American residency arise as closely linked to his composition process. In replying to a question about the influence of Chinese music on his style and referencing such traditions in his works, Ge discusses the balance between the two sides of his identity as a composer:

For me of course, most of my compositions are more Chinese style than Western, but actually I have always been trying to stay away from those kinds of perceptions. To me, whether you work as Chinese or not, really doesn't mean anything, that's a superficial thing. The main thing is how to write your own feeling, but of course I'm Chinese and I studied music. It's like Chinese music is in my blood. But I also studied Western music when I was young and it's like a second language. If I want to truly express my music feeling naturally, there is Chinese flavor but I try not to emphasize that. The main thing is how to express my own feelings. I pay attention to my own style. That's why I usually don't write for Chinese instruments. It is just like if you take a photo or want to draw. You need more things from yourself and your perspective; you can't just rely on photography to capture an image. (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript)

A transnational composer, Ge began his studying in China, both as a composer and instrumentalist, but his career truly flourished after his arrival in the United States. As he acknowledges, it becomes nearly impossible to fully eliminate one set of influences from a work because he lives with them daily. As Zheng observes,

Music in Asian/Chinese America is an important signifier that produces complex and sometimes paradoxical cultural meanings. It reiterates diversified Asian cultural heritages deeply rooted in various enduring indigenous traditions and histories; it bears both the emblem of modernity and its shadow of colonialism and Westernization; it registers racialized Asian American history while resonating with diasporic cultural politics; it is powerful and meaningful enough to link the two sides of the Pacific, yet insignificant and irrelevant enough to escape the local (mainstream American) media's attention; and it embraces hybridity and heterogeneity while yearning for a sense of cultural belonging. (2010: 7)

Zheng argues that a multinational musical tradition relies on the multifaceted influences of each culture. While the United States offers the space for different types of cultural



expression, Chinese-American musicians face the political and social conflicts as well, leaving them with a “hyphenated” identity and a simultaneous desire for belonging. Ge wholeheartedly recognizes that Chinese music “is in [his] blood,” yet his experiences adjusting to Western life in New York City and attaining a compositional niche concurrently shape his thinking.

The process that he describes above closely echoes that of someone growing up with two languages: in Ge’s case, he mediates the compositional languages of China and the West. Applying her own theory of diaspora, Zheng comments on the formulation of transnational musical language:

On the one hand, these composers searched their personal memories of contemporary life in China, were inspired by concepts or ideas from Chinese folk traditions and literary histories, and synthesized Chinese instrumental and vocal music idioms. On the other, they channeled their musical expressions through the “sophisticated” or experimental vocabularies of late-twentieth-century Western art music. (2010: 150)

Rather than in one moment turning the Chinese style switch on and then alternating with Western styles, Ge abandons the sense of two discrete compositional languages and instead formulates a hybridized style that results from diasporic movement.

Despite all of his concerns regarding the stagnated development trajectory of Chinese music, Ge simultaneously acknowledges that music, especially classical music, in the United States faces a different set of issues. He elaborates,

Here in the U.S., the problem is commercialism. Because of that and pop culture, gradually nobody really cares about anything individualized, but anything individualized has no popular market. Since this kind of thing has been going on for a while, they’re all numbed; no one cares about real creative music. People always want to have more and bigger markets, but everything uses the market to measure success. So eventually, if you want everyone to understand it and be sophisticated, you lose that individuality. It’s like if you want everyone to like and appreciate French food, but to make it widespread you need to turn it into McDonald’s! [...] I can see today all these programmers are chasing for popular

taste, but that will never serve them any good and they are losing the audience. I think they should do something completely different so that they really make the music creative. Otherwise there's no way for classical music to survive. (Ge 7 Dec 2010 interview transcript)

While commercialism and mainstream cultural flows in the U.S. have faults, the conditions that he describes directly impact how he situates himself as a diasporic composer. Despite the relative nature of the term “avant-garde,” Ge seems unable to escape this form of commercial branding, yet also does not resist or denounce its presence. One might contend that while he rejects the label of “Chinese” or “Western,” the descriptor “Chinese avant-garde” provides a very specific niche in the music world. Although he observes the pitfalls of fast-paced media and consumption, this perspective transpires as shortsighted. Zheng outlines a more nuanced view:

In studying the role of media technology in people's everyday life experiences, it has been widely recognized that one of the media's powers is that it produces images and sounds that evoke the imagination, which can transcend reality or create a sense of reality that can be metaphorically lived in many different places by different persons simultaneously. (2010: 207)

As Zheng poignantly elucidates, technology in fact supports a deeper level of cultural exchange by allowing the creator to maintain an identification with several places—China and America in Ge's case—and also affords the consumer varied degrees of connection to the artistic material. Looking to the Naxos project as an example, Ge records his series both as a form of documentation, but more importantly, as an effort to share a highly emotional work that immediately effects the performer and listener. While *Fall of Baghdad* is inspired by a specific event, the way in which the music captures trauma makes it transferable to many other experiences. Given that Ge does not seek to forsake either half of his identity, he benefits from this technology in accessing multiple

markets that support his music and also preserve his connection to China through the multinational, diasporic characteristic of the Class of 1978.

### What is Nationality?: Battling Identities

Implicit throughout much of this analysis, I will now turn explicitly to nationality and individuality as key constructs in understanding how Ge relates to the diaspora and formulates his hyphenated identity. *Minzuxing*, literally translated as “nationality,” arises as an important concept for all Chinese given the volatile and complicated history of the country since its establishment as a republic. Given the political events on the Mainland since 1949 and the formation of Taiwan, many Chinese possess complex notions of identity:

A real or (as in the case of the Cultural Revolution) imaginary threat from outside is one reason for intuitive or prescribed root-seeking. In China, however, a particular type of historical awareness appears to be imprinted in every Chinese from early childhood and this is another important reason for the Chinese advocacy of *minzuxing*. (Mittler 1997: 280)

Chinese nationalism, which is nurtured in all Chinese citizens from a young age, does not mean the absence of individuality in the present. During the time of Mao’s rigid Communism, however, such free-thinking was perceived as selfishness.<sup>8</sup> As Ge comments, “If I sound Chinese that might well be, I just write being sincere to myself and my self is Chinese” (ibid.: 280). While some may actively foster sentiments of nationalism in their works, Ge appears to let his work take a natural course, which, as Ge describes, cannot be disentangled from his experiences in China. Mittler keenly observes

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<sup>8</sup> Combining these elements in composition proves to be quite difficult, with Tan Dun typically acknowledged as a master of the two.

that the embodiment of “Chineseness” differs for each composer, but converges in the fact that it comes from above rather than within:

The manner in which a nation is created is not the result of a natural process of accumulating cultural commonalities. Rather, it is the imposition of a historical narrative or a myth of descent/dissent upon both heterogeneous and related cultural practices: a template by which the cultural cloth will be cut and given shape and meaning. (Duara 1993: 19)

Especially following the Cultural Revolution, Chinese nationality existed as something highly prescriptive—it was something that every individual was forced to engage in; people were not able to interpret and make it their own. Immediately following the end of the tumultuous era, the Class of 1978 stormed the doors of the conservatories, soaking up every bit of musical knowledge and not questioning why certain techniques were used or rules imposed. Mittler thus uncovers the process in which composers like Ge Ganru or Tan Dun awaken and realize that a relationship to one’s homeland can be both inspirational and highly complicated. From musicians to politicians to regular citizens, “to be Chinese” generates different images. Applied to music in particular, “Chineseness” extends further than the bounds of rhythm and harmony, but also relates to technique, timbre, and the thought behind the music (Mittler 1997: 283). Yet “Chineseness” in its purest form should not be confused with the Western default of denoting anything that sounds remotely Asian as exotic. A key dichotomy emerges, however, as composers and artists struggle between distancing themselves from their Chinese roots and utilizing Western artistic methods, while simultaneously using their “Chineseness” to exploit the marketing potential (ibid.: 283).

## The Performers' Perspective: A Testament

“There’s one thing I want to tell you. When the quartet sat down a few months ago to listen to the quintet for the first time, we were so excited from the first listen to play it. I’m not just talking about like moderately excited. We thought this piece was unreal. There was so much material to learn from and experience. And let me tell you, that doesn’t happen a lot. Many times we come to appreciate a piece as we live with it for a longer time, but rarely do we all have the same, ecstatic reaction. We knew that this was going to be something special and different to play.”

- Maggie Parkins, Eclipse Quartet

“When I was in the process of choosing a topic for my doctoral dissertation in 1998-1999, I strongly considered researching works by Chinese composers such as Zhou Long, Chen Yi, Tan Dun, etc. Somehow, their aesthetic spoke to my Japanese background. I realize that China and Japan have their own cultural histories and each country developed their own unique cultural paths. But, there were some aspects of Ge's music that immediately spoke to me, and perhaps because we share a certain heritage. Let's say the ending of Fu, with sparsely spread out voices, I could hear some of the instruments from gagaku, Japanese imperial music, playing the passage. I would say, that Chinese composers have entered the center stage of the U.S. contemporary music scenes. I hope that their works remain as unique and original as Ge Ganru's music.”

- Airi Yoshioka, ModernWorks Ensemble

Maggie Parkins and Airi Yoshioka, both performers of two different compositions by Ge Ganru, underscore that Ge’s compositional language has a way of immediately connecting with performers and listeners. Due to his travails as a diasporic composer and his resulting hyphenated identity, their reactions illuminate that Ge has tapped into a musical style that uses and then deconstructs elements of Chinese and Western music, resulting in scores that draw inspiration from real events yet resonate far beyond. Immediately following the “East Meets West” concert at Pomona College in which the Angeles Quartet performed Ge’s *Four Studies of Peking Opera* (2003), Ms. Parkins dashed up to me and exclaimed that her above comment was extremely important. Despite the fact that I was still agitated by the “original” title of the concert that promoted

the exact labels that Ge fundamentally rejects, her enthusiasm grabbed my attention as she recounted her first reactions to the piece.

While offering a more academic perspective, Ms. Yoshioka emphasizes the transnational nature of Ge's music. Most obviously interpreted in terms of Ge's own Chinese and Western identity, Ms. Yoshioka suggests that his music connects identities that he may not have even considered. Even if Ge denied this association to Japanese instruments from the gagaku, the notion that a hybrid work conjures up additional cultural associations for the performer and listener exemplifies his ability to draw upon the diaspora to formulate an all-embracing musical idiom. In considering the music of dozens of so-called Chinese American composers using the understanding of hybridity developed in this chapter, it becomes clear that Ge has opened the doors both for China and the West to challenge traditional, preconceived notions of each other's musical cultures. When considering the range of composers in the Class of 1978 in particular, Ge offers the most interesting case for reframing notions of the Chinese diaspora and the translation of multiple identities into a unified musical style. While he exposes himself to criticism both from uninformed critics and close-minded listeners on both sides of the Pacific, Ge is more than just a cultural ambassador: he goes beyond merely transporting musical quotations into each country, but rather negotiates, experiments and amalgamates key fragments to spawn a style free from all labels.



*They No. 6 (1999)*  
Hai Bo

## **Chapter 2: Chen Yi**

Writing a Transnational *Qi*

*“My music is not American native music...The things I write now of course don't belong to American majority [culture], or white culture, or black culture, or jazz culture, or rock culture. I am not all these, I am not. But I belong to the fraction of traditional classical [music] training, although I have combined Chinese culture in [my music] ....Because Chinese culture has been already blended in our blood.”*

- Chen Yi (Zheng 2010: 262)



## The Experimentalist and Traditionalist: Unlike Any of Her Classmates

*As I considered composing in my own unique language, in my most natural voice and style, I began to be inspired by what I had learned from various cultural traditions, and even from scientific principles. (Chen 2002: 64)*

Chen Yi's diversity of experience, including both her youth and initial training in China and her subsequent move to the United States,<sup>9</sup> connects her to Ge and Sheng. In contrast, however, Chen retains a fascination with Chinese "folk" music tradition that is less evident among her colleagues. Both aesthetically and ideologically different from others in the Class of 1978, Chen's diasporic experience deepened, rather than strained, her connection to her homeland. Commenting on whether her career would have taken a different course if she had not traveled to the United States, she confirms that each of her homes has shaped how she approaches her work:

I deeply believe that art creation and artists are closely related to the society they inhabit. I must say that I got a great education from New York City, from the atmosphere and conditions to be found in the richest cultural scene I have ever known... It's a kind of face-to-face interaction between life's activities and working, and as a result one becomes deeply rooted in the society where one works and lives. I don't think that I could have had the benefit of all of these influences and experiences if I had not come to the States. (de Clef Pineiro 2001: 6)

While Chen found this essential "interaction" during her multifaceted education in the U.S., her childhood and early life in China forced her to confront Communist party ideologies deep in her construction of her own identity. Compelled by Communist officials to engage in hard physical labor during the Cultural Revolution, Chen presents herself and her music as multinational. Her perception of urban versus rural in China—

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<sup>9</sup> Through both reviewing secondary sources and conducting interviews, I had hoped to construct a more detailed narrative of Chen's immigration process. The only disclosed information, however, is that Chou Wen-chung sponsored her student status. One must acknowledge that this process was unquestionably difficult given the tense political environment in China immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution.

with the rural representing the pure, untainted version of her country's tradition—embodies the Maoist ideal of reeducating the elite through forced contact with the “folk” located in the countryside. Born in 1953, only four years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chen lived through political and social instability, as well as cultural confusion: China's indigenous culture was rife with ethnic divides within its borders, and the nation also felt continually threatened by the U.S.-Japanese alliance and the instability in the Koreas. She notes, however, that the fundamental change in China's government in 1949 paved the path for Chinese women to pursue interests that, a few years prior, would have been unthinkable:

Without a doubt, the political change has created more opportunities for women. For one thing, the number of composition students has increased. Also, in the work place, as in other areas of life in China, both women and men are equal. These changes have made it more possible for women to become composers. (ibid.: 1)

Despite the increased receptiveness in China to female artists, relocating to New York City afforded even greater avenues for creative exploration, and venues in which she could market her “Chineseness” by foregrounding East versus West stereotypes in her music. Many members of the Class of 1978 relocated to New York City as graduate students and the city stood as the polar opposite of the closed Chinese society immediately following the Cultural Revolution. In New York, they were afforded creative freedom and the exposure to sights and sounds unseen or heard while in China.

[...] Since the 1980s, New York City has gradually assumed the most important place in Chinese American musical life. This change was brought about by both the shifting patterns of Chinese immigration and the ascendance of New York to the status of a global city, drawing an immense transnational influx of capital, artists, cultural productions, agencies, and political power. (Zheng 2010: 110)

While other composers of the same generation, like Ge Ganru, write solely for Western instruments and ensembles and strive to minimize the influence of the political, social and cultural environment of China's post-Cultural Revolution period on their music, Chen embraces culturally loaded and easily stereotyped techniques. Yet somewhat paradoxically, in so doing she attempts to formulate a hybridized musical language. She melds together Chinese melodies with Western classical technique, the essence of spoken words and opera transcribed into heavily articulated phrases, and the blending of music with what Chen calls "scientific principles"—the Fibonacci series and the Golden Section theory. At the present time in her development as an artist, Chen inhabits a moment when she can transcend the divisions between Chinese and Western music by breaking free from the culturally stereotyped labels affixed by the global music industry, yet she seems to dismiss this opportunity. Through a study of a composition from 1997 and a brief glance at another from 2010, I propose that Chen foregrounds the East-West dichotomy through the use of "folk" tunes and superficial hybridity. I then explore how Chen's dedication to a romanticized Maoist notion of "folk combines with the reductive cultural constructs of the commercial music industry to prevent her from developing a musical idiom that surpasses identification with merely one nation.

#### "Arise! Arise! Arise!": Chen's Life in China

Chen Yi is the most influential female composer of the *xin chao* ("new wave") who graduated from Chinese conservatories in the 1980s, after the Communist government initiated an open-door policy. In 1953 in the southern, sub-provincial city of Guangzhou, Chen Yi was born into a musically talented family. Her parents, both well-

respected doctors, enjoyed playing music—her mother played piano and her father played violin—and were also ardent supporters of Western classical music. Both of her siblings have achieved successful musical careers: her brother is a former violinist with the Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra, now concertmaster in a top Chinese orchestra, and her sister is a concert pianist in China (Zheng 2010: 254). Joining her family’s musical tradition, Chen began piano at the age of three and the violin at the age of four. With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, she continued to pursue high-level music studies even though daily activities like practicing and listening to recordings became exponentially harder due to the danger of being caught by the Red Guards. Within a few years, she was sent to the countryside for a program of mass re-education. Chen recalls her time there:

As a teenager, in 1968, I was sent to the countryside for two years of forced labor (with a hundred pounds loaded on my back, climbing to the top of mountains, and working sometimes twelve hours a day). I took my violin along, however, and, sometimes after hard labor, played simple songs interspersed with excerpts taken from my standard repertoire to local farmers. (Chen 2002: 59)

Since only revolutionary songs were permitted in the labor camps, Chen invented ways to challenge herself technically and also remember her previously acquired classical music repertoire. She recollects,

Only revolutionary songs were allowed to be sung and played, so I made up double stops and fast passages that I learned from Paganini, when I played the popular tunes from revolutionary songs. It may have been a small triumph, but I felt a big release in being able to exercise some of my creativity in making something out of these circumstances. (de Clef Pineiro 2001: 4)

At the age of seventeen, Chen returned to her home city and became a central figure in the Peking Opera Troupe of Guangzhou, nurturing her musical passions by both composing and serving as the concertmaster. While holding these positions, Chen

“initiated”<sup>10</sup> her research and studies in Chinese traditional music. She occupied her free moments with independent study of both Western and Chinese music theory (Chen 2002: 60). By the end of the 1970s, conditions for educated Chinese improved. With the reopening of conservatories and universities in 1978, Chen emerged as a highly competitive applicant due to her substantial self-taught knowledge and performance experience.

When Chen later moved to China’s capital to enter the Beijing Central Conservatory, she became a member of the highly selective Class of 1978. She participated in an eight-year course of study that incorporated both elements of a Western musical education and of Chinese traditional music. She describes the types of classes included in her course as follows:

...[a] systemic study of Chinese traditional music, as well as strict training Western classical music techniques (advanced ear-training, a heavy load of piano lessons, harmony, counterpoint, music analysis and orchestration) and music history (both Chinese and Western). The required courses of Chinese traditional music included Chinese folks songs, traditional instrumental music, local operas, and narrative music. (ibid.: 60)

After five years working towards an undergraduate degree, Chen immediately proceeded to a Master’s program for three years. She is the first Chinese woman to receive a master’s degree in composition in China. Despite the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Beijing Conservatory continued to sponsor yearly trips to the countryside to facilitate student research of folk music. Chen remarks,

I could see what is natural—it’s so close to my native language and the customs of my daily life! I felt that if I were to create my music in a language with which I am most familiar, using logical principles that are related to nature, then my compositions would be very natural in emotion and powerful in spirit. (ibid.: 60)

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<sup>10</sup> Chen never articulates what motivated her to begin her “fieldwork” about Chinese traditional music during the Cultural Revolution. Given the social, political, and cultural restrictions at the time, I suggest that it organically arose because of the pressures of the environment in which she lived.

Chen's continual underscoring of the term "natural" arises as problematic because it so closely echoes the tenets of Communist propaganda. Her "field trips" while in conservatory reproduced official forms of Chinese culture prescribed during the Cultural Revolution. Although schools reopened, the Communist Party maintained pressure on administrators to adhere to the propaganda of urban and rural stereotypes set forth during the years of labor. As a member of the educated elite who immediately re-entered school, Chen seemingly echoes the re-education campaign's mantra that the true China resides among the peasants in the countryside. The walls of the conservatory were not impervious to the Communist-endorsed, essentialized, pre-formed identities, and Chen seems to have internalized the party line. In 1986, the year she graduated, Chen's significance among emerging Chinese composers was cemented when an entire concert at the Beijing Concert Hall featured her orchestral works. One must remember, however, that Chen was officially sanctioned not only because of the quality of her compositions, but also because they reproduced what was then considered to be ideologically correct.

Chen Yi was among the lucky few who were given the chance for a fresh start after the Cultural Revolution. She was invited to the United States to pursue a D.M.A. from Columbia University and to study with Chou Wen-Chung. Moreover, the move promised much more than just an advanced musical education. Chen sought "to see the world: [I] can't be limited just in one place and in one culture" (Zheng 2010: 255). New York City provided exactly what Chen yearned for—a place with new sounds, cultures, languages, and customs. Her experience there would help her garner an understanding of how her music, as both Chinese and American, fits into a larger global context. Chen's exposure to, and thus influence of, American styles helped create this global relevance

along with an awareness to it. Just as Ge Ganru first encountered New York City through delivering food, Chen Yi taught piano lessons while in school to support herself. Chen recalls, “I learned to teach in English at that time, that’s my first *experience*, it started from *Chinatown*” (ibid.: 255). When not studying or teaching, Chen took advantage of the vast resources of the city to expose herself to a diversity of musical idioms:

Going to New York to study was an extremely interesting experience. I went to the music library at Lincoln Center to study new scores (written in many different styles), and attended numerous concerts, in small and large concert halls, clubs, churches, parks, subway stations, and on the streets. (Chen 2002: 63)

Chen actively expanded her notion of what constituted music both within and beyond the classroom. Her professor, Chou Wen-Chung— a mentor to several Chinese composers at the time— dedicated significant time to explaining his own compositions. He showed her how he imbued certain techniques with cultural meaning by creating evocations of Chinese instruments using Western instruments or experiences of Chinese culture from her early life. In describing her experience, she acknowledges that courses focused on twentieth-century music theory, early music, and the specific course, Contemporary Music Practice, greatly shaped her growing musical knowledge:

These courses gave me the ability to consider music not as new versus historical, nor as Eastern versus Western, but rather to consider the fact that human thought goes into all of these musics. I began to see similarities in musical styles, aesthetics, customs, feelings, and principles. (ibid.: 64)

While Chen may have recognized the possibility to mediate East and West through music, her subsequent development as a composer suggests that she settled on a musical style that emphasized her Chinese origin.

Instead of distancing herself from her heritage when she emigrated to the United States, Chen fostered nostalgia and strengthened her bond to traditional Chinese culture

by blending Chinese and Western musical sounds and marketing her works as hybrid. Through her musical prowess and mathematical precision, Chen actually revived the culture of *wenren* that was vehemently suppressed during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Pervasive throughout Chinese society for centuries, *wenren*, which means "scholar" or "literati," resonates with the Chinese both in China and in the diaspora. Chou Wen-Chung writes,

The *wenren* spirit is at once Chinese and universal—Chinese in that it is a unique institution responsible for more than two millennia of China's cultural and social life, and universal in that it stands for commitment to true quality and deep sincerity, to independence, honesty, and courage. (Chou 2004: 218)

Chou's words underscore the integrity of the artist as a whole as she searches for new ways to enhance China's cultural sophistication. To Chou, his students from the Class of 1978 have the ability to perpetuate the dual nature of the *wenren*: they are Chinese yet their move to America at a young age affords them a global lens through which to broaden their compositional vocabulary. As their mentor, Chou shows them one approach to building works that are both deeply personal, and also accessible to anyone who may not immediately understand the context of their experiences or traditions. Although Chen and her classmates studied with several people, Chou's Chinese ethnicity established some degree of familiarity and he was thus able to ease their exposure to the completely new culture, as both a cultural broker and mentor.

Examining Chen's composition *Qi* (1997) as a response to Chou's call for a *wenren* revival, one can readily identify the inspiration of the quartet through the embodiment of *qi*, a concept highly prevalent during the more than two millennia of cultural and social life in China. Literally translated as breath, air, energy, or spirit, *qi* exists as a central philosophical concept first discussed by Mencius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century



B.C., and now commonly known even to those not of Chinese origin, potentially deconstructing readily identifiable stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> The fluid lines, exaggerated textures, and powerful rhythmic undercurrents create energy within the piece itself, the *qi* within *Qi*: it is abstract and impervious, yet strong and absolutely vital.

Before discussing the specific techniques that Chen uses to achieve this *qi* within *Qi*, I will briefly describe my first encounter with this piece. I had the great fortune of hearing this composition performed live during the Weill Recital Hall concert, “Class of 1978.” The open sound quality created through the ostinato lines and held chords contrasted with the Chinese-inspired melodies, making me question what type of voice Chen sought to evoke. At certain moments of high intensity, I felt drawn completely onto the stage, as if sitting in the middle of the quartet. Bars later, the atmosphere would shift to a more passive aural experience. The performers’ movements further enhanced the varying intensities of the *qi* at any given point. Regardless of whether they embodied extreme passion or placid contentment, the performers generated a communal energy that augmented the effectiveness of Chen’s scoring. I sensed the continual presence of energy, as even in quiet sections or rests, there was a feeling of muffled activity that would soon bubble to the surface.

My experience with *Qi* suggests that a lack of prior knowledge of the principle does not diminish the experience of hearing the quartet; the profound silence after the articulation of the last note and the roar of applause, as experienced at Weill Recital Hall, underscore the powerful writing. Chen gives her audience a clear depiction that the

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<sup>11</sup> One way in particular that *qi* has entered the Western world is through the introduction of *feng shui*, the traditional Chinese art of geomancy. Working together with concepts like *yin* and *yang* as well as the five elements (fire, earth, metal, water and wood), *qi*, when properly balanced, can positively affect health, energy levels, luck, wealth and many other good fortunes. Interior design and building construction has used the principles of *qi* to help determine fortuitous placement and arrangements.

motives and the notes mediate *qi*. In replicating her perception of *qi*, Chen transfers to listeners her own *qi* through the dynamic and multi-layered score, as the work becomes *qi* itself.

Throughout the course of this chapter, I balance ethnographic research with scholarly critique to create a well-rounded picture of the multiple dynamics at play when examining Chinese diasporic composers. I draw upon earlier academic work to help theorize and explicate many of the experiences from my own fieldwork. In doing so, I provide a deeper level of analysis and cultural understanding for Chen and the Class of 1978. This chapter in particular employs an embedded structure, the “*qi* within *Qi*,” to act as a critical device for comprehending Chen’s hybrid musical language, deciphering her form of hyphenated identity, and framing her position within the Chinese composer diaspora.

### Understanding *Qi*

In 1997, Chen composed a mixed quartet titled *Qi* scored for flute, cello, percussion and piano that from the piece’s earliest notes convey the intangible nature of *qi*. The piece’s title refers to the governing principle of life for anything involved in Chinese culture. The philosophical concept of *qi* is intended to explain how everything in life links together and thus that any interaction is possible because everything possesses *qi*. Chen elaborates on her personal curiosity about *qi*:

I tried to use a combination of Western instruments to create the sound from the East, as well as to express my feelings of the Qi: It is untouchable and mysterious, but very powerful; it melts into air and lights; it’s like the space in Chinese paintings; it fills in the space between the dancing lines of Chinese calligraphy; and it’s the spirit in the human mind. (Chen 2002: 68)

Her observations articulate an interesting point: *qi* connects all of the Chinese art forms and also all of the creations of East and West. Working against the historical notion of the West appropriating the East, *qi* has the potential to reverse conventional modes of cultural imperialism, as China's *qi* travels to America through Chen's writing. Inherent in any living object, *qi* provides a vital life flow to all things, unrestrained by geographical or cultural boundaries.

Chen's composition itself acts as *qi*; it contains universalizing characteristics that describe the nature of the Chinese composer diaspora through the music itself. Connected to two countries and deeply immersed in the transnational dialogues of composers from many other nations, Chen animates the increasing pressures on Chinese composers to construct works that superficially represent each of their identities. While Chen could use this notion of *qi* to propel her music beyond the default labels of "Oriental" and "exotic," she illuminates the struggle to escape the boundaries of the hyphen by proliferating imagined ideas about what it means to be diasporic and "Chinese" in America.

#### Chen's First Compositional Seed: The "Folk"

Chen's officially controlled "field trips" and the accompanying "research" conducted during her conservatory years had a significant influence on the melodies and harmonies within *Qi*. Due to its intangible and continually changing quality, *qi* adopts multiple forms, sometimes embodying extreme calm while, in other instances, evoking commotion and irrepressible motion. In the quartet, Chen evokes this variability by specifying a free and slow tempo (quarter note=56). The performers quickly alternate between sudden bursts of energy and placid, suspended harmonics. Chen frequently

draws upon ostinato to create rhythmic propulsion over which the other instruments play elongated or diminished versions of the original melodies. While not directly articulated by Chen, the steady pulse established by the ostinato seen in Example 2.1 additionally expresses the notion of *qi* as the primary life force.

**Example 2.1:** Mm. 27-38

The musical score for Example 2.1 (Measures 27-38) is presented in four systems. Each system contains four staves: Flute (fl.), Violoncello (vc.), Percussion (perc.), and Piano (p). The piano part features a consistent ostinato in the right hand, while the left hand provides harmonic support. The flute and cello parts play melodic lines that are often elongated or diminished. Dynamics range from *f* (forte) to *pp* (pianissimo). Performance markings include *8va* (octave up) and *muffled sound*. The percussion part provides a steady rhythmic pulse.

The image displays a musical score for measures 33 through 37. The score is arranged in systems, each containing staves for flute (fl.), violin (vc.), percussion (prc.), and piano. Measure 33 shows the flute and violin playing a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, while the percussion and piano parts play a rhythmic ostinato. Dynamics include *mp* and *mf*. Measure 34 continues the melodic line, with the piano part marked *f* and *pp*, and a *cresc.* marking. Measure 35 features a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, with the piano part marked *f* and *mp*. Measure 36 shows the flute and violin playing a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, with the piano part marked *mf*. Measure 37 continues the melodic line, with the piano part marked *mf*. The score includes various articulations such as slurs, fermatas, and accents, as well as dynamic markings like *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *pp*, and *cresc.*. The piano part includes fingering numbers (5, 6, 7) and a *8va* marking. The percussion part includes a *open sound* marking and a *f* marking. The score ends with a *-5-* marking.

When in the piano line, or other parts, the aggressive character of the ostinato— frequently occurring with rearticulated sixteenth notes—proves to be physically demanding. As such, the performer must expend her own *qi* to play the part effectively.

Featured in Example 2.2, the opening cello solo establishes all of the major pitches developed throughout the quartet and, within a sweeping four bars, references three different “folk” melodic sources.

**Example 2.2:** Mm. 1-5

The musical score for Example 2.2 (Measures 1-5) is presented in four staves: Flute, Cello, Percussion, and Piano. The Cello staff is the primary focus, showing a solo line with three distinct melodic characters labeled 'a', 'b', and 'c'. Character 'a' is a tritone interval, 'b' consists of major and minor second intervals, and 'c' is a fast sequence of notes. Dynamics range from *sf* to *pp*. The Percussion staff features maracas with a 7/7/7 rhythmic pattern. The Flute and Piano parts are mostly silent in this section.

A flowing, lyrical line, the cello solo contains three distinct characters, each delineated by a subtle change in the rhythmic or accentuated intervals. Chen elaborates,

Material “a,” the opening tritone, is taken from the oldest folk song that I heard during my field trip to Guangxi province. (This song was sung by the head of a Yao ethnic-group tribe, and tells of how, in Chinese myth, the giant Pangu created heaven and earth. The major and minor second of “b” are taken from the intervals used in the cadences of most choral folks songs of the Zhuang ethnic group. The “c” material, a set of fast notes at the end of a phrase, is my imitation of the shape of mountain song-singing, which is close to the sound of speech. (2002: 69)

The chromatic lines in both examples emerge from the major and minor seconds that Chen heard among Zhuang ethnic groups. Furthermore, the tritone that opens the piece and appears in mm. 32, 33, 36, and 38 come not only from material in China, but from what Chen describes as “the oldest folk song that [she] heard.” Connecting the composition to the dynamic nature of *qi* itself, Chen explains that, “There are exaggerated textures that are full of tension; through them I tried to sound the inner voices and spirit of human beings, to experience aurally this eternal power” (ibid.: 68). With these aims in mind, she not only responded to a Chinese phenomenon, but also embraced *qi*'s manifestation within and beyond the human body using Western scoring conventions and techniques. To fully elicit a physical experience from the audience, the performers audibly and visibly expend energy to create the desired sound effect and transfer the *qi* to the listener.

Chen thereby bases the entire structure of the quartet on the emblematic sonorities of specific Chinese populations. In doing so, *qi* acts as a vehicle connecting the global musics of the present with Chen's “folk” music from China's past. Explicating the dynamic between folk and global musics, Philip Bohlman explains,

Folk music and world music clearly replenish each other; in some parts of the world they may even depend on each other. Both the survival and revival of folk music have benefited from the spread of world music, and world music in turn has proved to be far more hospitable to folk music than anyone could have predicted. (2002: 87)

By fragmenting and reassembling pieces of several “folk” songs, Chen disassociates the familiar melodies from their respective songs and mixes various sonic cultural artifacts. The success of this rearrangement within the larger framework of a multicultural piece shows that world music dialogues can be enriched through addressing and incorporating

local music cultures. The opening cello solo, for example, evolves into an intriguing amalgamation of the music of minority ethnic groups in southern China. Although Chen's handling of the term "folk" is problematic given the Maoist ideology underwriting her romanticized construction of the concept, she uses *qi* to bring life to a global-local dynamic that assists the continuation of both Chinese and Western musical spheres.

In selecting the musical traditions of these groups rather than of the predominant Han population (who compose approximately 90% of the people living in the People's Republic of China today), Chen underscores, albeit superficially, the importance of capturing the sounds of all of China's cultures. At the same time she may be reproducing an official Communist ideology of tolerance and plurality that is not representative of the actual situation. In this sense, one might ask whether she reveals her indoctrination by incorporating the force-fed, biased ethnic ideologies provided by the Communist Party. Describing the "c" material, Chen translates mountain song-singing into the ending beats of the opening cello solo, providing a powerful and insistent ending to the first phrase of the piece. She strengthens the presence of *qi* as the intensity builds with the accelerating minor seconds, propelling the music forward as the other three instruments enter. The quartet's *qi* extends beyond the notes and tries to incorporate the "folk" from Chinese culture using the instruments of the West. Chen thus looks to *qi* as a critical device for connecting "folk," various ethnicities, and global music all in one composition.

Chen's awareness of the urban-rural split emerged during her forced labor duties after the Cultural Revolution, as her life in the city was condemned and peasant life was



advocated by the prevailing ideology of the time. Having worked among educated elites and peasants alike, she recollects,

I learned to overcome hardship, to bear anger, fear and humiliation under the political pressure, to get close to uneducated farmers on a personal and spiritual level, and to share my feelings and thinking with them, to learn to hope, to forgive, to survive and to live optimistically, strongly and independently, and to work hard in order to benefit more human beings in society. (de Clef Pineiro 2001: 4)

The time Chen spent among those of a different ethnicity and class deeply affected her conception of Chinese identity, opening her eyes to the harsh conditions of physical labor. At the same time, however, the notion that only in these circumstances could she fully appreciate the value of independence, forgiveness and other ideals, echoes the goals of Communist propaganda. At times, Chen resembles a Cultural Revolution poster child who has successfully embraced the benefits of re-education. Rather than revealing an understanding of the severe conditions of rural life, she celebrates a hubristic national fantasy. The application of the term “folk” to peasant music originates in government propaganda, which idealizes the less sophisticated, native sounds. “Folk” thus attains its label not from the musicians who perform these musics, but rather from individuals representing music as high art. Communist mantras emphasized that folk culture offered a counterpoint to industrialization, education and urbanization. Somewhat ironically, “folk” was established as an acceptable, safe, even ideal trope precisely at the time Chinese society was being forced to transcend it.

Barbara Mittler advocates a contrasting stance that offers a more benign assessment of the function of Chinese folk music in compositions such as Chen’s:

The traditional heritage is used as if it were a museum stacked with raw-material. Characteristic for this type of adaptation, then, is the (re-)discovery of techniques

prevalent in traditional music in compositions of the Western avant-garde and their application in new compositions. (1997: 324)

Considering this more sympathetic perspective, the nature of “folk” as a culturally loaded term makes it nearly impossible for Chen, or any composer, to look to these musics for inspiration. Chen confronts the challenge of transcending the negative or antiquated meanings of “folk” in the hopes of using the material because it is interesting. With Mittler’s idea in mind, one might contend that Chen draws upon *qi* to free the “folk” from its former ideologies in the hopes of crafting new music for China. In thinking about *Qi* in these terms, one might theorize that Chen utilizes concepts like *qi* to proactively influence Western conceptions of Chinese culture instead of composing for the American commercial industry.

Regardless of whether one chooses to espouse a more critical or sympathetic lens in viewing Chen’s work, the dynamic and universal portrayal of *qi* in *Qi* indicates that Chinese and Western music, as mediated through Chen, possess the potential to surpass constricting ideologies in an attempt to manifest a true multinational, non-stereotyped identity. Paired with Bohlman’s underscoring of geographic place, the “folk” in Chen’s music resonates on a larger scale with the importance of earlier, “traditional” musical practices in any location. Just as the energy of *qi* permeates the performers and listeners by engaging the sound waves with their bodies, the “folk” too, on a more analytical level, flows among the participants regardless of each individual’s definition of the term.

#### A Work of Precise Calculation: Melding Science and Music

While Chinese folk traditions and the theoretical underpinnings of hybridity explain the majority of the material in the quartet, Chen also blends together musical

composition with mathematical precision. *Baban*, also known as *lao baban* (old eight large-beats) or *lao liuban* (old six large-beats) is a melody model that is derived from a Chinese folk tune known as a *qupai* (labeled tune). Proliferated for generations through both oral traditions and written music, the *baban* tune permeates a significant portion of traditional music, incorporated in ensemble, theater, and dance music (Wang 2005: 189). According to Chinese mythology, the *baban* structure was considered to be evocative of a “seamless heavenly robe,” an idiom meaning “flawless.” Furthermore, the word “ba,” translated as “eight,” represents good luck in China because it sounds similar to the word for prosperousness and wealth: this is why the number eight dictates components of Chinese culture, from the number of agricultural seasons in one year to the Eight Diagrams in Taoism (Chen 2002: 67).

Studied extensively by Chinese scholars and musicians after the formation of the People’s Republic of China, *baban* became a fundamental component of Chinese music theory taught in conservatories and has been used extensively by Chinese composers and students as a building block for their compositions (Wang 2005: 163). In his research, Alan Thrasher identified variations on the *Baban* form in central-eastern and Northern China. It is most prevalent in the Chaozhou, Hakkam and Jiangnan regions (Thrasher 1989: 74-5). He also notes the reason maintaining *baban* over time:

[...] the *Baban* structure exists as both a melodic ideal and a form in the ears of traditional musicians. In a manner not unlike the 12-bar blues form, some elements such as cadence tones and phrase lengths are more or less fixed, while specific aspects of melody are flexible. (ibid.: 74)

As Chen discovered, “The folk tune *Baban* has become the maternal melody and model of many Chinese traditional pieces throughout China” (2002: 67). In adopting this “old” tune, Chen actually links her music to a more contemporary idea of blending music and

rigorous form. Her curiosity about old or traditional Chinese musics no longer appears rooted in antiquated traditions but extends beyond that which can simply bear the title of “folk.”

Chen also uses timbre, tempo, dynamics, and rhythm, all distinguishing characteristics of the original *baban* tune, throughout the work. For the entire piece, Chen deconstructs, embellishes and experiments with the main melodic framework of the quartet. Upholding an element found in *baban* model-derived tunes, Chen enhances the melody through adding grace notes, stretching the rhythm, or inserting different pitches.

**Example 2.3:** Mm. 57-60, cello only



In Example 2.3, the melody develops from the cello’s first six beats, maintaining the line’s contour while introducing new timbres. This approach draws the listener’s attention back to a familiar tune, while simultaneously offering an unanticipated change. Typically containing sixty-eight beats in eight phrases, the *baban* tune occurs in several different patterns shown below in Figure 2.1.

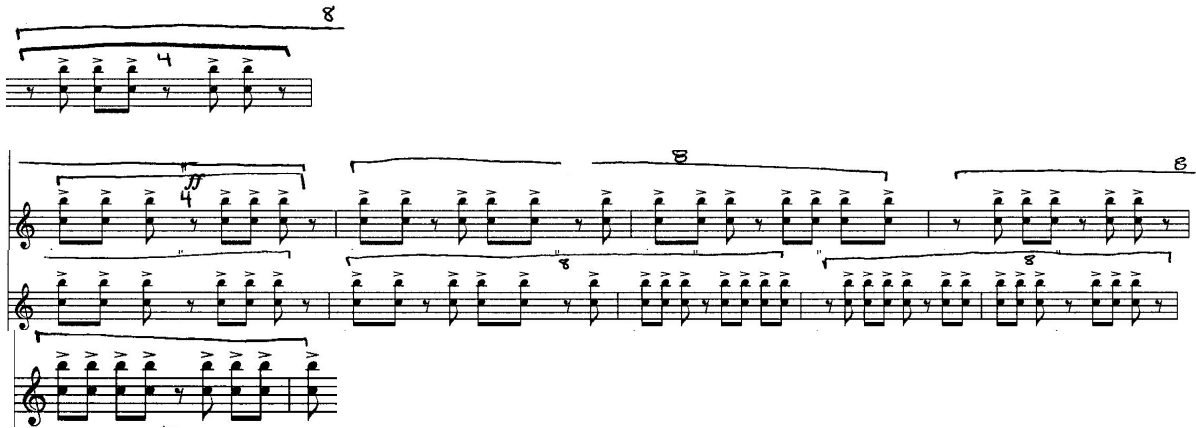
**Figure 2.1:** Structure of Chinese folk tune *Baban* (Chen 2002: 66)





Chen directly quotes these beat patterns during the piece to create a strong, yet syncopated underlying rhythm.

**Example 2.4a:** mm. 117-28 percussion only



**Example 2.4b:** mm. 157-68 piano right hand only

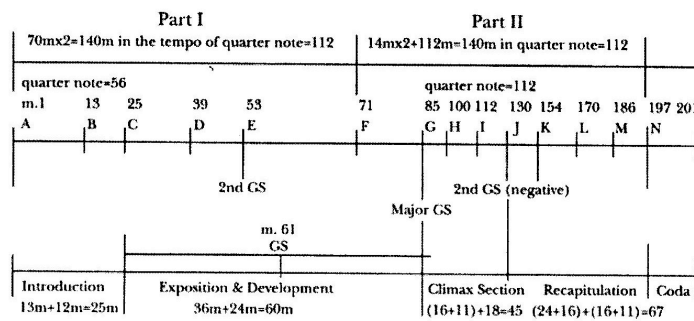


Indicated by the groupings, the *baban* form in these percussion and piano excerpts appears almost identical to the original. While Chen claims that she sees music as neither Eastern nor Western, neither new nor traditional, one might interpret her heavy

incorporation of the *baban* tune as a deliberate gravitation to a form that possesses longstanding ties to her native culture, but blended within a very Western musical context. By presenting a Chinese-dominated version of hybridity, one could argue that Chen uses the Western context to create a surface difference even though the underlying prejudices about Chinese culture remain intact beneath.

The rhythmic subdivisions of the *baban* form correspond with the Golden Section theory and the Fibonacci sequence. Taking the total sixty-eight beats of the *baban* form and multiplying it by the Golden Section ratio, 0.618, results in the number 42.024, which falls immediately in the middle of the eight *baban* subdivisions. As noted by Wang, “prior to the four-*ban* conjunction there are five *daban* and after it there are only three. The resultant ratio of 5:3 is a part of the Fibonacci sequence” (2005: 191). Thinking about the intersection of *baban*, the Golden Section theory and the Fibonacci sequence, Chen combines all three to form not only the overall structure of *Qi*, but also to propagate the melody and rhythmic movements that generate the piece’s *qi*.

**Figure 2.2:** Structure of *Qi* (Chen 2002: 70)



As seen above in Figure 2.2, the quartet contains two parts of equal length: part I is from A to the end of E, part II is from F to the end of M with a short coda. The binary form

contains a recapitulation and maintains the same time signature for the entire work—  
 Chen provides variation through different tempo markings (Chen 2002: 69). The climax  
 of the piece aligns with the Golden Section at measure 85 in Example 2.5, with all of the  
 previous music propelling the energy, or *qi*, of the work forward to this point.

**Example 2.5:** Mm. 85-99

Example 2.5 is a musical score for measures 85-99. It is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 56. The score is divided into five systems, each containing staves for Flute (fl.), Violin (vc.), Percussion (perc.), and Piano (p).  
 - **System 1 (Measures 85-87):** Flute has a melodic line with a fermata over measure 87. Violin has a similar melodic line. Percussion features a 'high tom-tom' with a 'muffled sound', playing a steady eighth-note pattern with dynamics *mf* and *f*. Piano has a complex rhythmic accompaniment in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.  
 - **System 2 (Measures 88-90):** Flute and Violin continue their melodic lines. Percussion maintains the eighth-note pattern. Piano accompaniment continues.  
 - **System 3 (Measures 91-93):** Flute and Violin have more melodic development. Percussion continues. Piano accompaniment continues.  
 - **System 4 (Measures 94-96):** Flute and Violin have melodic lines. Percussion continues. Piano accompaniment continues.  
 - **System 5 (Measures 97-99):** Flute and Violin have melodic lines. Percussion continues. Piano accompaniment continues.

In the most intense section of the entire piece, the tempo has increased and the tom-tom, which played sixteenth notes in the previous sections, drives the music forward by playing the equivalent of thirty-second notes in the old tempo. The flute and cello melodies once again derive from the opening cello line, but Chen fragments it, elongates the note value and adds grace notes and new semitones. At the emotional, dynamic, and rhythmic peak of the entire piece, the *qi* in *Qi* operates at its most intensified level, showing how Chen crafts a piece that draws upon the “folk,” yet calls for East-West hybridity. Moreover, she demonstrates the unique power of diasporic composers to propagate such cultural exchange.

Chen builds a link between notated structures and audible musical gestures by looking to a sequence that pervades the proportions of the human body and elements of



nature. While *baban* itself is of Chinese origin, the Fibonacci series and Golden Section theory is found in Western scientific thinking. The *qi* within *Qi* once again emerges as Chen connects folk music—the Chinese component—with science—the American component. She reveals her reasoning for such an atypical technique:

The Golden Section and the Fibonacci Series are found in both nature and human society...Because it reflects natural beauty and proportion, it is applied extensively in every field. In the course of several generations of performances of Baban, folk musicians must have transferred this natural feeling of balance from the visual arts and natural sciences to the form and rhythm of the music. (Chen 2002: 67)

Chen's interpretation places value on the "folk" precisely because it manages to adopt a level of sophistication through these embedded mathematical proportions. Chen uses this crucial intersection as a vehicle for expressing both the Chinese and universal characteristics of *qi*. Focusing solely on the artistic components of *qi* proves to be too shortsighted because this energy or life force influences the flow of music and art, as well as the smooth functioning of the human body and mind. By fusing the presence of art and mathematical precision in her quartet, Chen allows the two to act hand-in-hand: the application of Fibonacci proportions helps generate the forward rhythmic and melodic propulsion that underlies her depiction of *qi*.<sup>12</sup> In looking to both "the visual arts and natural sciences," Chen captures the vast array of possibilities available in depicting this continual source of energy. As she observes the prevalence of these scientific principles in nature and human society, art and musical sounds similarly pervade daily life. As Chen upholds science as universal, which is the counterpoint to her invocation of folk, *Qi* aspires towards such universality through depicting its intersections with valid principles

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<sup>12</sup> Chen provided no clarification on whether this inspiration came from Western models or her undergraduate training in China. I would conjecture that she experienced some degree of exposure while in China when first learning about *baban* with a deepening of the Golden Section theory later in her education.

like the Golden Section theory and the Fibonacci series. In just two hundred and one measures, Chen portrays the Chinese origin of *qi*, yet also illuminates how the concept reaches beyond China's borders, universally determining the rhythms of a global community. As the *qi* within *Qi* brings together Western and Chinese listeners by acknowledging the insignificance of dividing cultural binaries, Chen fights for the formation of a hybrid musical language that could at once celebrate the "folk" and the modern, the Chinese and the American, the easily marketable product and the high art music.

### *Qi* as a Signifier of Diaspora

The selection of a mixed quartet, rather than a traditional string quartet,<sup>13</sup> enhances the projection of the free and diverse properties of *qi*.<sup>14</sup> In *Qi*, Chen uses each part to capture different qualities of the Chinese principle of *qi*. The percussion part, for example, provides rhythmic continuity throughout the piece, introducing new timbres with the various types of instruments. The contrast between the woodblock, maracas, bongo, and crotales furnishes moments of extremely open sound—sometimes literally underscored by the inclusion of "open sound" in the score—and at other times contributes to the murkiness and more subdued character of a phrase or section. *Qi* thus flows both naturally and complexly through each part, adopting a diversity of timbres and

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<sup>13</sup> I default to a comparison with a traditional string quartet because that particular instrumentation serves as a main mode of comparison for the masters of Western classical music. Given that it is a format explored extensively by many composers, I perceive Chen's selection of a mixed quartet as her variation on a form heavily studied in Western conservatories.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted, however, that string quartets by no means restrict a composer to writing a piece that must be grounded in strict Western European classical styles. Ge Ganru's *String Quartet No. 5*, discussed in Chapter 1, serves as a primary example in which the instrumentation is conceptualized in a highly innovative manner, incorporating and layering extended techniques to directly communicate Ge's visceral response to the Iraq War.

character throughout the piece. This open sound is facilitated by a freer ringing of the instruments that have more resonant vibrations, which themselves are an evocation of both traditional Chinese instruments and a manifestation of the Western instruments' own *qi*. While the four parts all exchange different roles in the work, the fact that Chen makes her selection from nearly every musical instrument family, excluding brass, strengthens her emphasis on the universality of *qi*. Originating in the instruments themselves, the *qi* flows through the performers, who then project a second permutation of *qi* into the space, which eventually reaches the listener.

In a case study on the presence and multicultural integration of Cantonese opera in British communities, Helen Rees observes that the interaction between two seemingly different cultures illuminates previously unrecognized meaning:

Cultural difference does not presuppose existing structures of cultural practices but foregrounds the enunciation of culture to construct new knowledge, meanings, and values of such practice: more to the point of diasporic communities, it emerges 'from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization.' (Rees 2009: 135)

In this case, cultural difference is articulated through the varying understandings of *qi* between indigenous Chinese people and Westerners. While *qi* in Chinese culture exists as an assumed, abstract element of everyday life, Western adaptations take on a variety of emphases, such as they way in which *qi* can be practiced through the calculated arrangement of space. By attempting to convey the more general, Chinese understanding of *qi*—as a governing principle for life—Chen enunciates a central element of her own culture to communicate what Rees calls new knowledge, meanings and values. In doing so, Chen not only physically and emotionally imbues the listener with the energy of *qi*, but also deepens the Chinese perception of *qi*, constructing different contexts to

experience the life force. As Chen herself is a member of a diasporic community, she facilitates a dialogue between the two cultures she associates with by illuminating the worldly nature of *qi*. She thus demonstrates that *qi*, an idea so essential and “natural” to specifically Chinese cultural forms, is a fluid concept, extending beyond transnational boundaries. Echoing Rees’ point, Chen indeed “resists totalization” by Western cultural dominance by asserting the Chinese origin of *qi*; however, in this process she also demonstrates that a cultural artifact, style, or even way of knowing something inherent to one culture can be intimately experienced by, and moving to, those not immediately familiar with it.

Written in 2002, Chen’s personal analysis of the quartet addresses the specified conditions for the piece and how they directed her composition process. She explains,

As usual, I hear Chinese instrumental sounds when I compose, even when using Western instruments. For *Qi*, I was asked to feature each of the four musicians in the ensemble; I could write anything I wanted, both musically and technically. (Chen 2002: 71)

*Qi* was a project supported by the Meet the Composer’s New Residencies program and written for the New Music Consort, San Francisco Contemporary Players, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group. By finding equivalent sounds on Western instruments, Chen is able to translate Chinese cultural and ideological tropes into her music by mapping her “Chineseness” onto Western performance practice. Composers frequently encounter sponsors who want pieces in particular styles or evocative of specific music traditions: the compositional freedom that Chen describes constitutes ideal conditions that allow her to explore and mediate her various realms of musical expression. Free of typical commission specifications—for example, an assignment to write for this instrumentation or for that kind of character—Chen had an opportunity with

this quartet to initiate social change by rising above the constricting East-West dichotomies.

Unfortunately, despite this potential, Chen ultimately reconstructs old means of representing Chinese cultural practice through the inclusion of sounds based on Beijing Opera percussion ensembles. Although she never explains this choice, one may attribute it to the centrality and prevalence of the operatic tradition in Chinese culture and her continual interest in native Chinese cultures as a way of expressing herself to global audiences.

**Example 2.6:** Mm. 99-113

The musical score for Example 2.6, measures 99-113, is presented in a multi-staff format. The top two staves are for flute (fl.) and violin (vc.), both of which are mostly silent in this section. The percussion (perc.) staff is highly active, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with various instruments: [crotales] (marked *ff*), [high sus. cymbal] (marked *sf*), [bass drum] (marked *mf*), and [4 Beijing opera gongs] (marked *f*). The piano (p) part consists of two staves. The right hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamic markings *ff* and *sf*. The left hand has a section labeled (arms) with dynamic markings *sf* and *f*. A box labeled 'H' is positioned above the flute staff at measure 99. The score concludes at measure 113.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system, labeled '109', includes staves for voice (v.), piano (pc.), and piano (p.). The piano part features a cymbal and [B.D.] markings, with dynamics ranging from *sf* to *p*. The second system, labeled '112', includes staves for voice (v.), piano (pc.), and piano (p.). The piano part features gongs, cymbal, triangle, and crotales, with dynamics ranging from *ff* to *f*. The piano part in measure 112 shows a thickening of the line with chromatic motions.

In this section shown in Example 2.6, the percussionist uses four pitch-specific, Beijing opera gongs to form the predominant melody. Chen highlights the inclusion of the distinctly Chinese sound by thinning out the score and notating held chords in the piano only. As the piano line thickens with chromatic motions in m. 111, she introduces new timbres with the muffled cymbals, crotales, and triangle. Although not specifically Chinese, these sounds blend with the resonance of the Beijing opera-inspired gongs, resulting in a section that exemplifies the melodic, as opposed to strictly rhythmic, capabilities of percussion instruments. Chen uses her deeply internalized understanding of Chinese sounds to shape how she scores and combines Western instruments. Consistent with Rees' observations regarding cultural presentation in diaspora, Chen

enunciates her culture using Chinese idioms translated onto a canvas of Western instrumentation. One might wonder, for example, why she never experiments with the reverse process. Unlike her contemporary Ge, who responds directly to an image with a sound, Chen first envisions the Chinese version of a melody or piece and then thinks about the intersection with Western instrumentation or techniques. In comparison to Ge, for example, Chen demonstrates a potentially hybrid music, albeit with a more explicit commitment to some notion of “Chineseness.” This mode of composing clearly underscores Chen’s nostalgia for China in the midst of her diasporic situation in America.

To further her goal of seamlessly integrating Chinese sounds into the quartet, Chen constructs parallels between the other instruments in addition to the percussion. She explains,

The pizzicato cello imitates the Chinese plucked-string instruments as well as the sound of the *erhu* in the high range; the flute is played with the tone quality of a *dizi* (transverse bamboo flute), and also imitates the weeping sounds of a *xun* (a wind instrument made from clay) in the low register; the piano has the gestures of a *zheng* (zither) and other plucked instruments. I use all four instruments carefully to hit certain points, to form the lines and textures horizontally and vertically, and I wrote the parts in various registers and for various tone qualities. (2002: 72)

Chen’s careful planning and formulation of a piece is apparent in her descriptions of writing *Qi*. The composition process exceeds simply hearing a melody and transcribing it onto the page, but also harkens back to the sounds and images of her childhood in China. While Chen attributes this aspect of her style to her Chinese heritage, one might tangentially perceive faint trails of Communist socialization inflicted on youth during the Cultural Revolution. Her descriptions clearly indicate that Chinese instrumental sounds dictate how she then constructs the notion of China for Western instruments. Through associating Eastern and Western instruments, Chen essentializes the two cultures,

generating music that satisfies easy consumption of “world” music. As she states, “I think that my musical language is a unique combination and a natural hybrid of all influences from my background” (de Clef Pineiro 2). In contrast to her characterization, one might argue that the diaspora resulted in Chen’s nostalgia for China and that her inclusion of Chinese sounds warrants the label of “authentic.” In a follow up interview, Chen elaborates,

I used Western and Chinese traditional instruments to sound like Chinese speech, in reciting, talking, and speaking tones and styles, with sound shapes and articulations. When it’s written for vocal, I notated all pitches with imitation of ancient poem reciting tones. (Chen 6 Dec 2010 email correspondence)

For both to Chen and Ge Ganru, language emerges as a primary point of reference—the extreme variety in sound among the different Chinese dialects leads to the versatility of this compositional approach. The tonality of Mandarin in particular can be heard through both fluid and jarring melodic contours.<sup>15</sup> In the previous chapter, I show how Ge deepens this effect by noting how the lack of accents in Mandarin deemphasizes regular pauses or ebbs in the musical lines. With the inflections of spoken Chinese as a tool, Chen has the potential to accomplish more than merely translate her Chinese identity onto a Western medium. The *qi* experienced within *Qi* demonstrates that diaspora can facilitate deeper levels of cultural interaction and understanding with Chen as the primary agent for dissemination. This process abruptly ceases, however, because she embraces her rootedness in Chinese tradition implanted decades earlier.

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<sup>15</sup> One particular approach that proves highly effective in connecting the music to the tonality of Mandarin is pairing a composition with a text. Performed live on March 3, 2011 at the Pomona College Museum of Art, Ge’s piece for toy instruments, *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!* (2006) features a Song dynasty poem. The roles of each toy instrument (harp, piano, accordion) complement the inflection in the performer’s voice.



## Chinese? Western? A Hybrid?

In describing her own compositional process and her intentions for *Qi* in particular, Chen consistently returns to one central claim about her “distinct” musical language: hybridity. Appearing more frequently with the increasingly international dynamic of global musical cultures, hybridity and the claims of musicians from many cultures saying that their music is from neither X nor Y country make the concept a critical area of investigation for scholars of world music (Born 2000: 25). Hybridity, however, has multiple definitions and applications when it comes to contemporary music.

Timothy Taylor posits that

Hybridity has become a marketing term, a way of identifying, commodifying, and selling what on the surface is a new form of difference, but one that reproduces old prejudices and hegemonies. (2007: 143)

If we apply this reasoning to Chen’s choices for *Qi*, we see that her “hybrid language” fusing Chinese and Western would be understood in functional terms: as a tool for tapping into a broader audience and fostering multinational identity dynamics. Taylor’s understanding of hybridity is far from sympathetic, for him this superficial “new” style in fact merely takes old ideologies and governing principles and masks them within this fancy rhetoric. One might then wonder if Chen’s “unique” compositional style restructures the previous Communist, peasant-centric ideology prevalent during the Cultural Revolution and later on in conservatory teaching methodologies.

Recognizing that the hybrid label opens the door for easy marketing of music, Taylor asks several key questions about musics that perhaps too quickly assume the designation of hybrid. He posits,

History and culture must be put into dialogue with one another. Past and present must be put into dialogue with one another[...]it is ever more important to go beyond the text and reclaim the social, the cultural, and the historical. Why were things the way they were? Why are things the way they are? (ibid.: 212)

Taylor provides a critical reminder that hybridity arises out of a previously constructed history and that it happens within a set of rules that outline a power dynamic between two or more cultures. His critical framework structures the Cultural Revolution's impact on the compositions of Chen and her colleagues in the Class of 1978—"the way things were"—and also the flexibility and contrasting environment offered by the more creatively open society in America—"the way things are." While in an ideal scenario, artists engaged in hybrid musical contexts would equally divide their attention between each sphere of influence, this even split rarely occurs and a power play eventually ensues. In more concrete terms, two plants that are grafted together may seem like a unified whole, yet one plant still possesses the roots. For Chen, the *qi* within *Qi* acts as the thread connecting her Chinese and American identities, weaving together past melodies with present scoring techniques and requiring the audience and performers alike to contribute their own energy to complete the listening experience. The *qi* itself embodies hybridity as it engenders elements of each culture. Although her use of Western instrumentation could be perceived as an assertion of her American identity, Chen negates this interpretation and confirms that the Chinese side of the "East-West" binary is her defining artistic concern, guiding her ear as she notates each part to resemble Chinese instruments and develops a Chinese aesthetic that permeates the underlying formal structure of the entire piece.

For Chen, questions of hybridity in musical expression and in identity are tightly interwoven. Just as she struggled to find her individual voice among the pedagogical

techniques of both Chinese and Western origin, Chen concurrently tackled the issue of whether she perceived herself as a Chinese or American composer, or perhaps even both. Amidst his own conjectures about what constitutes hybridity, Taylor invokes an argument made by Ashwani Sharma:

The powerful redefinition of ethnicity evoked through the concept of hybridity enters the dynamic of popular cultural politics to be incorporated, reterritorialized and reworked by hegemonic structures to produce new marginalized and essentialized identities. (ibid.: 142)

Sharma's statement aligns with Taylor's lens for understanding hybridity in acknowledging that one side, or hegemonic structure, ultimately prevails and in the end shuffles around previous conceptions of ethnicity and culture to produce an equally "marginalized" or socially isolated identity. Similarly, studying and establishing a career in the United States forced Chen to negotiate the two sides of her musical identity—I resist saying two halves—as one clearly exceeds the other. Chen may be both Chinese and American, yet one may notice how she gravitates more towards being an American Chinese than a Chinese American. Looking into her past, Chen's time during the Cultural Revolution and shared experiences with the Class of 1978 while in conservatory produced a level of social and cultural understanding between her and her peers. Upon their move to the United States, they all confronted the challenge that Sharma identifies: how to redefine one's ethnicity or identity in a new and diverse cultural sphere.

After pursuing a graduate degree at Columbia University and then moving onto a professional career, Chen without a doubt writes great music, yet she limits her full abilities as a cultural ambassador between China and America by remaining bound to the constructed notion that Chinese is immediately associated with "Other." If Chen distanced herself from the former Communist ideologies of the past and the commercial

lures of the present, she could become the culturally fluid *qi* that she beautifully illustrates in her music. In doing so, Chen would free herself, as well as fellow composers in the Chinese diaspora, from the naïve and superficial labels that plague her freedom of expression and force her into falsely constructed binaries of identity.

### New Music, Old Traditions

Through the lens of *Qi*, Chen shows that conventional thinking about the Chinese diaspora and residual effects of the Cultural Revolution contribute to misunderstanding, or falsely assuming, what Chinese *is* when applied to music, identity, and ideologies. Different from the Class of 1978 in that he deliberately identifies as a Chinese-American composer, Chou postulates that the increased exchange of many cultures' musical traditions has both benefits and potential detrimental effects on music by Chinese composers in the future. He contends,

[Asians] can join the globalization process and become assimilated. Or, they may become partners who have a cultural capital of their own to contribute, so that they do not lose their own identity and will be able to influence the outcome of the change. To achieve that status requires revitalizing the heritage that is so different from that of the West. To breathe life into the abandoned heritage, a commitment of the whole society is necessary... Then, and only then, will a new era arrive in Asia, as well as in the West. A new era, not of globalization but of global partnership founded on global cultural interaction. (2004: 220)

While provocative, Chou's argument here is somewhat shortsighted. The initial dichotomy that Chou puts forth casts the place of Chinese composers in a black-and-white framework that is too simplistic when applied to musicians like Chen. Seen throughout the course of this chapter, I show that Chen unquestionably engages in the globalization process, even though she does not fully assimilate into American culture. Rather than "losing" her identity, Chen draws upon her music and the idea of *qi* to

explore different formations of identity, as she navigates the challenges of accurately portraying herself in the global commercial market. While at times she may slip into essentialisms or previously constructed historical ideas about what “Chinese” music is, she also proves that the stereotypes can and should be challenged by herself, the Class of 1978 and by future generations.

From as far back as the origins of the Silk Road, people of Asian origin, especially Chinese, have been active participants in the globalization process. This participation has detracted from their ability to maintain individual cultural capital. While Chou stands as the anti-Communist, creative-freedom advocate for his students, his emphasis on revitalizing the past continues the echo of Cultural Revolution rhetoric and policy. His somewhat antiquated ideas about cultural essence and authenticity have provided him with many successes, but he fails to notice that the same principles may not apply to younger generations. With the shared socio-political and cultural backdrops of the Cultural Revolution among the Class of 1978, Chen and her colleagues are equipped with the tools to look to the past and also to acknowledge that they are very much intertwined in a larger international musical exchange. While by no means the only example of an individual who reflects these values, Chen defies Chou’s logic and actively investigates new means of expression through extended techniques and atypical instrumentation, yet also celebrates sounds of the past. The problem that Chen quickly encounters, however, is that all of this Chinese material is inextricably linked to the fraught politics and experiences of the Cultural Revolution. As such, any engagement with this material by Chen opens the door to critiques of her diasporic identity, requiring her to carefully incorporate the “folk” by engaging vigilant self-awareness.

Mittler offers a contrasting perspective to Chou's negative, or at least wary, outlook for Chinese composers, or in Chen's case, those of Chinese origin. Mittler's understanding of the challenges facing Chinese national and diasporic composers proves more realistic and representative of the accumulated experiences of Chen and her classmates since arriving in the United States. She claims,

The emulation of this Western type of music in China is everything but anti-traditionalist: for the Chinese, the reflection of those reflections of their culture in New Music is based on strong traditionalist feelings. Having experienced their roots in living tradition, they re-discovered them in New Music from the West. And in turn, by using the Western medium of New Music, they were able to find a most authentic traditional voice. (Mittler 1997: 324)

The recognition of strong traditionalist feelings is Mittler's first key point because it takes into account the profound effect of the Cultural Revolution on Chen, Ge, and Sheng.

Those feelings, however, do not necessarily limit compositional freedom; they can also spark new languages that engage both Chinese and Western identities. As opposed to Chou, who views globalization as a dangerous force to be combatted, Mittler asserts that the previous experience of living with "tradition" during the Cultural Revolution spawned unprecedented musical voices when coupled with Western techniques. The flow of influence in the diasporic community can be fluid, bi-directional, and ongoing. Chen, for example, still returns to her home country for performance and teaching opportunities, thus encouraging cross-cultural communication. Chen has already encountered and surpassed Chou's notion of a "global partnership" because she juggles commissions from both American and Chinese sponsors. The creation of a burgeoning musical culture for any particular country rests in the ability to borrow from, respond to, and ultimately collaborate with the musics of an increasingly diverse musical community. As this mode of musical communication between China and America flourishes, the Class of 1978 and

subsequent generations will increasingly have the opportunity to transcend the East-West dichotomy, as the global cultural market neutralizes and realizes the superficial nature of these falsely constructed binaries. Surpassing such binaries will realize a moment when “hybridity” can be truly hybrid, the “folk” can be appreciated for its inherent musical forms and not as an antiquated stereotype, and the diasporic composer can be perceived as an agent of cultural transmission and celebration.

### How Many More Times Will We Have to Hear This Story?

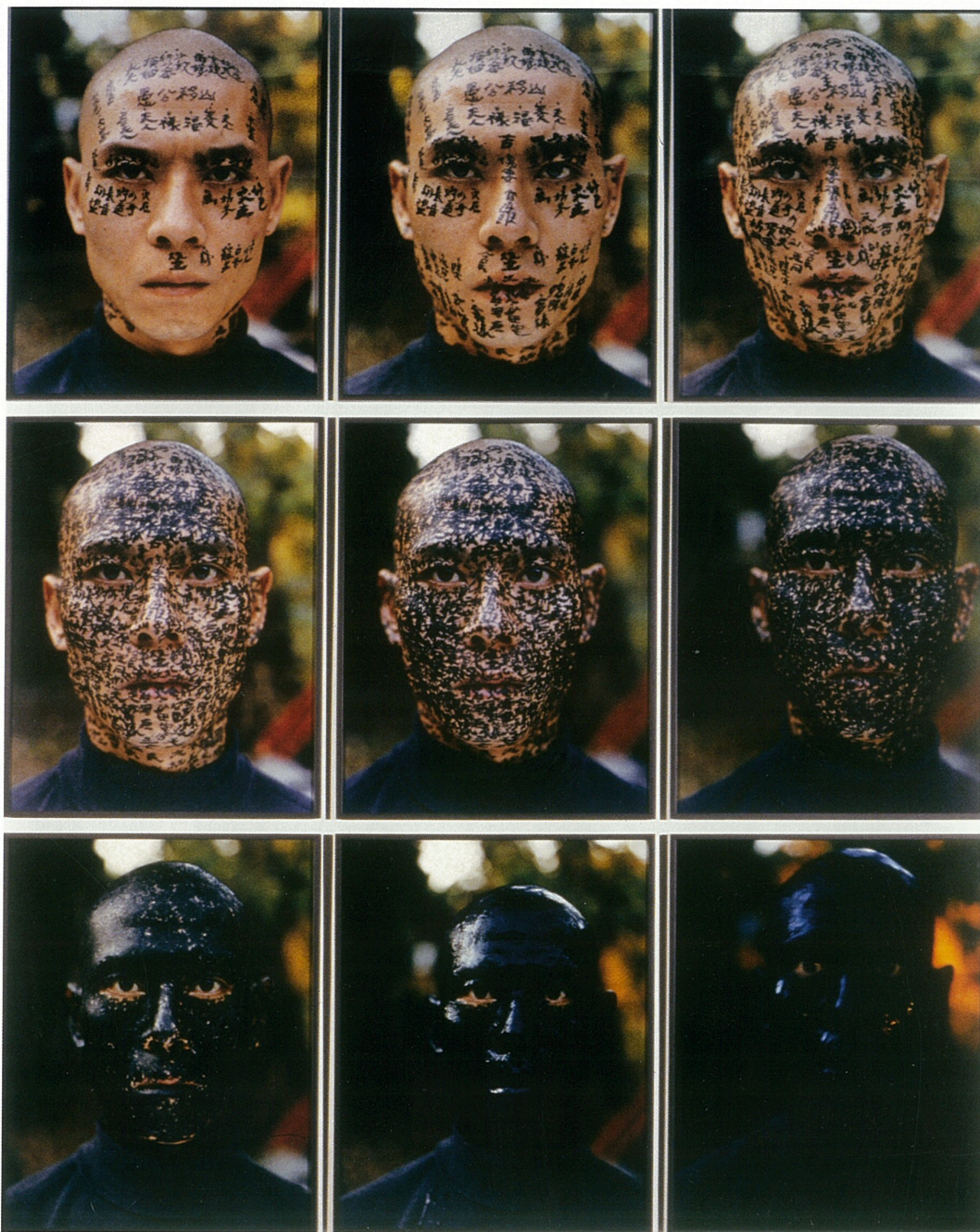
Unfortunately, while many encouraging steps towards such a future have already been made, the goal remains far from realized. On February 11, 2011, I attended a performance by the Yale Concert Band conducted by Thomas C. Duffy that featured one of Chen’s newest compositions, *Dragon Rhyme* (2010). The program notes that Chen’s inspiration for this piece is derived from the image of the dragon, one of the most frequently occurring symbols in Chinese history and culture. Chen describes the dragon as “auspicious, fresh, and vivid and is layered and multidimensional.” In her eyes, this work emblemizes the East. The two movements, respectively titled “Mysteriously-Harmoniously” and “Energetically,” aim to be lyrical and powerful, and utilize intervals common in Beijing opera music to directly reference indigenous culture. Chen further mentions that the textures offer a variety of rich colors, ranging from delicate to angular. Although not explicitly referencing the “folk,” Chen looks to Chinese sources and imagery for one of her newest works rather than simply writing a piece for concert band.

In a follow-up interview the week after the concert, the conductor remarked that the piece was perfect for the concert because it directly referenced Chinese culture.

Despite his perspective, I found myself quite disappointed that Friday evening because the piece directly catered to superficial representations of Chinese culture. I could not help but wonder how the non-Chinese audience members interpreted the work. Would this be their only exposure to Chinese music? If so, Chen's piece would leave the impression that Chinese music in America reproduced stereotyped, "Oriental" imagery and soundscapes. As for the Chinese in the audience, were they enraged by this superficial portrayal of the dragon as the ultimate "Chinese"?

Perhaps I was the most puzzled person in the audience that evening, but that concert confirmed that Chen has yet to fully shed the same stale musical idioms that the Western media promoted back in 1997 when she wrote *Qi*. The music is aurally pleasing and contains tremendous potential as a cultural broker for China and America. Until this barrier between East and West can be overstepped, however, I fear that I will sit through many more concerts emblemizing dragons, pandas, and maybe even, bamboo.





*Family Tree* (2001)  
Zhang Huan

## Chapter 3: Bright Sheng

More American than Chinese?

*“I feel 100% Chinese and 100% American. I say that in the most humble way: I am now at a point of my life about half of which I have lived in China, the other half in the U.S. But all my life I have been striving to better my knowledge and understanding of both the Western and Asian cultures, in the hope that my work would reflect and exhibit this personal obsession.”*

- Bright Sheng, personal essay

## A Proclaimed Genius

Proclaimed one of the most innovative composers of his time in 2001 by the MacArthur Foundation, which wrote that he “will continue to be an important leader in exploring and bridging musical traditions,” Bright Sheng is the most renowned composer of the Class of 1978 in the classical music world, perhaps with the exception of Tan Dun. In comparison to Ge Ganru and Chen Yi, Sheng climbed to the top ranks of contemporary composers within years of arriving on U.S. soil. During that period he capitalized on opportunities to learn under the tutelage of several renowned composers, including Leonard Bernstein and George Perle. His successes, however, situate him in the center of the alluring realm of musical fame and the global recording industry culture. Although this industry presents multiple arenas for showcasing his music, the record labels, agents, and marketers may also motivate Sheng to craft a musical language that caters to audience and industry tastes. While an argument can be made that all musicians must bend somewhat to these opinions or else their music would not sell, Sheng appears to yield to the easily applied label “Oriental,” as well as other marketing devices such as East meets West, “the Other,” or sounds of the Silk Road. By examining *H’Un (Lacerations)* (1988), his only piece specifically addressing the trauma experienced during and after the Cultural Revolution, I argue that Sheng negotiates his thoughts about Chinese and American identities by failing to escape the expectations of mainstream American audiences. In the case of Chen and Ge, the compositions of diasporic Chinese composers can facilitate productive cultural exchange and help new audiences navigate the Western, Chinese and global elements of music. Whereas I articulated that Chen demonstrated the potential to rise above the strict East-West delineation, I contend in this

chapter that Sheng embodies a contrasting interpretation of the hyphen, as he underscores his new American identity yet maintains his “Chineseness” for marketing and commercial appeal. With this in mind, one might argue that Sheng aims to maintain the East-West cultural division, rather than use his status to elevate transnational music beyond these binding binaries.

In her work chronicling the experiences of overseas musicians originally born in Asia, Mari Yoshihara articulates a central dynamic to consider when critically analyzing Sheng’s identification with both China and America. She writes,

The debates over the Chinese-ness of works by Chinese composers illustrate the complexity of the notion of authenticity. Even if a composer’s musical style indeed shifted partly in response to demands of the audience and the market, it is difficult to differentiate between his or her genuine search for a Chinese sound and appropriation of audibly Chinese sounds for commercial appeal. (2007: 220)

This characterization calls attention to a desire in the music industry to assign every type of music a label. Since music is catalogued by genre both in stores and in digital form, hybrid composers fit into neither the overarching “world,” nor “American” categories. In generating commercial appeal, such composers potentially jeopardize their voice, as constraints based on market pressure rather than musical inspiration may undermine authenticity.

The Class of 1978 poses a challenge to Yoshihara’s reasoning, however, because the diasporic identities of the composers in this group constitute a mixture of both Chinese and American cultures. In Sheng’s case, some works, such as *Three Songs for Pipa and Cello* (1999), which are direct arrangements of Chinese folk tunes, fit neatly into a single category. For the most part, however, parsing the “authentic” Chinese from the stereotype fulfilling “Orientalism” in his works proves to be a daunting task. In the

case of *H'Un*, determining which compositional elements characterize his identity dilemma and which satisfy the classical music market for “Chineseness” is both challenging and problematic. Given his successful reputation in the musical world, Sheng, along with Chen, possesses the ability to set an example for how composers of Chinese descent can contribute to the musical cultures of America, China, and the globe at large. Sheng capitalizes on this opportunity and, in selling himself as a Chinese package, sets a tone for what music by a Chinese composer *should* sound like. Although all three cases in my thesis are of Chinese origin, Sheng most transparently embraces his heritage by using it as a primary device for selling his music.

In his commentary on *H'Un*, Sheng specifies that the Cultural Revolution sparked his compositional career and also directly addresses the sensitive subject. This is a delicate endeavor, as doing so might not only create discomfort in the high art music world, but also among scholars as it beckons one to question and disagree with the standard narrative of the Cultural Revolution as singularly destructive with respect to artistic creation. Although he writes an orchestral work that, in comparison to those of Chen and Ge considered previously, most specifically confronts the devastating sociocultural impacts of the Cultural Revolution, Sheng's success makes his construction of hyphenated identity, hybridity, and association with Chinese diasporic movement difficult to analyze. While his commercial success is not inherently problematic, Sheng may potentially accomplish more as an individual composer and for the larger community of Chinese ethnicity composers if he actively challenges the constricting stereotypes affixed by the classical music industry. That being said, the distinction between using Chinese identity for commercial purposes versus reflecting an authentic

relationship remains highly ambiguous and difficult to decipher given Sheng's broad range of compositions.

What does the "and" mean?: A Meditation on Chinese **and** American Composers

Displaced in the diaspora and dissociated from their native country, the Class of 1978's music itself serves as the composers' primary vehicle for attaining cultural belonging in the United States without fully abandoning their Chinese roots. The three cases in my thesis present a dilemma, as they are not solely Chinese or American, but live somewhere within the realm of the hyphen between the two. Through their music and cultural exposure in the United States, they must each determine how to situate themselves: seeking the middle or gravitating to one side. Su Zheng offers a framework for theorizing this split:

Music in Asian/Chinese America is an important signifier that produces complex and sometimes paradoxical cultural meanings. It reiterates diversified Asian cultural heritages deeply rooted in various enduring indigenous traditions and histories; it bears both the emblem of modernity and its shadow of colonialism and Westernization; it registers racialized Asian American history while resonating with diasporic cultural politics; it is powerful and meaningful enough to link the two sides of the Pacific, yet insignificant and irrelevant enough to escape the local (mainstream American) media's attention; and it embraces hybridity and heterogeneity while yearning for a sense of cultural belonging. (2010: 7)

Seen through Zheng's characterization, composers of ethnic Chinese background stimulate a multitude of cultural sensitivities given the complex historical, social and political conditions from which their music emanates. As Sheng and the rest of the Class of 1978 move to the United States in hopes of escaping Communist China, their diasporic movement reverses the assumed West-East direction of cultural influence, indicating to Western countries that they have much to learn from and about Eastern cultures. Sheng

and his classmates contend with the issues faced by all living composers, such as garnering commissions and popular support, attaining a professorship, and developing a distinguished musical language. They must also critically consider how to position themselves either in tandem with or contrast to Western conceptions of “Chineseness.” Exemplifying the paradoxical conditions brought forth by Zheng, the Class of 1978 stands at a crossroads when starting and continuing to develop a flourishing career in the United States: they must choose to either fulfill, or at least adhere to, preconceived stereotypes or actively oppose them as individuals and vehicles for cultural interaction. If they adopt a position somewhere in the middle, they open the door to criticisms of faux-authenticity or present an opportunity for critics and academics to assign labels that might directly undermine their formation of self and of their music.

Proclaimed by the MacArthur Foundation in 2001 a living link between the two sides of the Pacific, Sheng promotes both sides of his identity depending on the circumstances. Contrary to Zheng’s suggestion, the American public has acknowledged Sheng and his music as he has garnered substantial amounts of mainstream American media attention. His American success rests on his ability to convince the listener of “Chineseness” or “Otherness” while in the West, yet his support from China ironically owes to his acceptance in the West. The Chinese identity that he exemplifies upon return to China is not that of an individual questioning his homeland’s history and practices, but rather that of someone who left and became a sensation.

Zheng’s concluding comment on hybridity and heterogeneity juxtaposed with the desire for cultural belonging, however, taps into the crux of the Chinese and American composer dilemma. I include “and” between the two descriptors because all three

composers, regardless of their relative degrees of fame, associate with China on some level, whether it be through musical quotations, thematic inspiration, or merely possessing a Chinese name, birth certificate, and passport. At the same time, they also serve as cultural ambassadors of Western culture to China and of Chinese culture to America.

As residents, distinguished professors, and, in the case of Ge, prominent businessman, Sheng, Chen and Ge also embody the social, artistic and political freedoms available in the United States. These composers' extensive exposure to education and sponsorship by major universities and composition teachers meant that Sheng, Ge, and Chen enjoyed more opportunities for success than most newcomers to the United States. Although potentially ridden with cultural stigmas, the open American mindset towards variations of creativity generates a welcoming arena for new hybrid voices. Exemplified when examining Sheng, the biggest challenge arises when a member of the Class is forced to draw more defined boundaries around identity and cultural assimilation as the music industry increases pressure to easily categorize his or her music.

### The Early Years

Born in Shanghai in December 1955, Sheng started piano studies at the age of four and began cultivating his passion for both indigenous Chinese music and Western classical music. Sheng's first compositional lessons consisted of an antiquated method that dated back to the 1920s and 1930s, in which Chinese melodies were harmonized with Western chords. The approach has clear limitations, as students handled simplified versions of Western harmony and Chinese melodies (Chang 620). With the launch of the



Cultural Revolution in 1966, Sheng's father faced a difficult decision with regards to his son's fate. His family did not approve of engaging in music as a form of business or a career, but Sheng's musical talents offered a means for him to escape the alternative: grueling physical labor. Madame Mao provided tremendous amounts of state funding for the arts and actively sought new, young performers. Given the harsh life situation of farmers, his father permitted him to leave family life for Qinghai on the Tibetan border where he would participate in Madame Mao's efforts to establish the presence of the predominant Han population in the strategic area in Western China. While there, Sheng became the primary pianist, percussionist, and conductor and arranged for the local music and dance troupes because of his affinity for music (Sheng 2003: 205).

His years spent in Qinghai working for state-sponsored musical groups revealed his natural affinity for music and, lacking a mentor, quickly forced him to learn how to be his own teacher. While living in the countryside, Sheng engaged in officially sanctioned exposure to "folk" traditions, collecting and examining all forms of local musics and studying its social and cultural contexts. He recalls,

Qinghai province was in a very remote area with a special and beautiful type of music. I started studying it on the side without knowing why, and without realizing that one day it would be a great resource for inspiration. (2006: 206)

Sheng describes his curiosity as emerging out of nowhere— an enriching way to pass the time and find a benefit in the pseudo-imprisonment implemented by the Communist Party. One must remember, however, that Madame Mao sponsored these large-scale cultural campaigns to the countryside, which created a highly organized and ideologically driven engagement with the arts. Although Sheng calls his research "fieldwork," one must wonder how Madame Mao's artistic vision during the Cultural Revolution

underwrote an appreciation of “folk” music as well. While Sheng’s participation in the re-education did not exist in the form of working alongside farmers, his musical activities unquestionably contained a similar ideological purpose, breeding the notion of rural music as intriguing, authentic and officially germane.

As the Cultural Revolution ended, Sheng was among the first students admitted to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He primarily focused on composition between 1978-82, but recognized the importance of becoming a well-rounded musician. Equally curious about Chinese folk music and the major figures in the Western classical music cannon, Sheng realized that only through studying classical greats such as Brahms and Beethoven, in addition to local musics and twentieth century techniques, could he develop a well-rounded style. Dissatisfied by the Chinese conservatory mode of pedagogy, which emphasized the blatant separation of Western and Chinese musical traditions, Sheng sought a method of learning and composing that could bring the two areas together:

This superficial reconciliation of the two cultures, which falsified them equally, did not satisfy Sheng, and he actively sought a new direction. The naïve idea of simply mixing elements from two cultures had to be criticized—and transcended. He realized that if he were ever to be a means of an authentic cultural fusion coming into existence, he must first embrace a conscious goal of self-enlightenment. Only then could he bring it about: a junction of East and West, fair to them both, and yet productive of a new music that did not simply echo either. (Chang 2007: 621)

As noted in Chen’s descriptions of the coursework at the Beijing Central Conservatory, the division of pedagogical methods based on the music tradition acted as a crucial undercurrent shaping the approach each of the composers in my thesis espouses. After years of exposure to ideologically stringent policies during the Cultural Revolution, this creative suppression continued even as schools reopened due to residual fears of

persecution. While Chang praises Sheng's formation of a mixed, yet different musical language, I argue that his initial educational experiences established a foundation that emphasized an East-West binary both then and now. In asserting Sheng's "authentic cultural fusion coming into existence," Chang fails to challenge how Sheng situates himself in Chinese and American music circles and how he positions his musical language in relation to diasporic movement. His move to the United States and subsequent reformulation of a hyphenated identity did not result in a musical language that transcended either realm of the East-West dichotomy. Instead, Sheng maintained the Western and Chinese musical division but reoriented himself to more closely identify with his American side.

In the summer of 1985, Sheng began a relationship that would greatly shape his perception of composers in the United States. While at the Tanglewood Music Center, Sheng met Leonard Bernstein and was quickly impressed with his knowledge, accomplishments and multifaceted roles as a musician and educator. Up until his death, Bernstein served as a central figure in Sheng's life, supporting and encouraging him to explore in depth how his two spheres of musical influence, China and the U.S., could come together to create a previously unheard musical language. Bernstein, and to some extent the Columbia University professor for the Class of 1978, Chou Wen-chung, believed that Sheng could formulate a "hybrid" style, whereas other teachers both in China and at Columbia University, perceived Chinese and Western music as incompatible entities.

Bernstein contributed to Sheng's compositional strategies; however, his role as a mentor is the key element of their relationship. Throughout my many conversations with

Ge Ganru, he frequently attributed his own struggles as a composer to the fact that he lacked any predecessor whom he might have drawn upon as an example. Ge frequently felt frustrated and even put his compositional career on pause because he needed time and distance to process how he wanted to portray himself as a multinational artist.

In contrast to finding a Chinese-born, American composer as a mentor, Sheng turned to Bernstein, already a highly successful, commercial musician. Sheng's remarks about Bernstein being a well-rounded musician who exemplified the ability to master the roles of conductor, composer and pianist (Sheng 1999: 207) illustrate that Bernstein set a precedent for the benefits of commercial success. Although not explicitly stated, one might assume that Sheng admired Bernstein's position in the center of the musical world. In contrast to Ge who specifies the lack of any Chinese figures for inspiration, Sheng actively turned to an icon of twentieth century American music, naturally strengthening his association with America, rather than China.

#### Homage to His Past: *H'Un (Lacerations)*

While a doctoral student, Sheng fulfilled his desire to write a piece that expressed his personal relationship to and memories of the Cultural Revolution. Written in 1988, the same year Sheng was granted U.S. citizenship,<sup>16</sup> *H'Un (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1976* laments the brutality and tragedies inflicted on the Chinese nation in what has been commonly referred to as the decade of state-sanctioned madness. Despite the plethora of criticism arguing that the Cultural Revolution destroyed all creative channels in China at that time, Sheng's piece constructs a paradox that must be closely examined

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note the "coincidental" timing of these two events. Only after attaining US citizenship and tangible identification with another country does Sheng feel enough freedom and agency to write a piece that vividly portrays his scarring experiences from the Cultural Revolution.

to understand his identity as a diasporic Chinese composer. While he claims that it depicts the indescribable physical and psychological damage caused by Mao's campaigns, he may simultaneously be attempting to unite a generation of Chinese through his music, transforming his personal narrative into one that extends to his fellow classmates and those who lived through the ten years. Although an admirable cause, to speak categorically for a group invites sweeping and counter-productive general claims about "Chineseness" from critics.

For the group of *xinchao*, "new wave", composers whose education was interrupted, the political conditions in China led to an awakening of their appreciation for their longstanding, but frequently forgotten national culture:

One of the unforeseen achievements of the Cultural Revolution: it brought millions of educated and semi-educated urban youth into direct contact with the unchanging realities of the Chinese countryside. (Barne 1989: 40)

A major contributor to the discourse of Chinese intellectual and cultural history, Barne's perspective on this issue appears shortsighted as he appears to echo the ideologies driving the actions of the Communist party. Proliferated by Mao supporters as a universal understanding, this notion of "unchanging realities of the Chinese countryside" reflects the precise message behind Mao's re-education initiatives. Shockingly bold yet unsubstantiated, Barne's argument flounders because Mao's campaign failed despite the persistent efforts by the Red Guards to enforce the ideologies through many forms of violence. Perhaps not even consciously recognized by artists and composers, such as Sheng, the distance from the city and the attempt to educate everyone in hopes of eliminating all elitism ironically reinvigorated artists' lost connection with the most easily accessible material for their compositions. Although *H'Un* unmistakably recounts

Sheng's hardships, it also chronicles his admiration for and belief in the Chinese heritage from which, within a few years, his unique compositional language would emerge. Similar to the case of Chen and her influential "field research" while sentenced to forced labor, Sheng may still possess remnants of formerly internalized, strict Chinese conservatory pedagogy and Maoist ideology rather than engaging in conscious appropriation.

Before hearing any part of a composition, the title provides a window into the composer's thought process and connection to the work. In the case of *H'Un*, one can immediately decipher the controversial underpinnings of his work with the selection of the word "lacerations." Sheng reinforces this expectation in deliberately assigning a title that reflects his hyphenated identity—it is in Mandarin yet also includes the English translation. Two questions immediately arise: why did Sheng choose to place the parenthesis around the English word, and does the Chinese contribute anything to the listener's experience with the piece as a whole? The choice of two languages first confirms that Sheng perceives himself as both Chinese and American. Given that the work was written earlier in his compositional career, one might argue that he still saw himself as a cultural outsider who constantly had to rearticulate his differences from "Americans." By using the Romanization of Chinese, Sheng encourages his composition to be perceived as Chinese, yet he reflects his identity conflict by using letters for the Chinese word rather than the character itself. The use of Chinese language opens the door to stereotypical assumptions about "Oriental" musics, creating an opportunity for the listener to make assumptions about what the piece will or at least should sound like.

While this is not inherently problematic, Sheng immediately confronts the dilemma of affirming, negating, or circumventing the definition of his identity through music.

Looking to the specific word choice, *h'un*, which Sheng translates as “lacerations” in the title, can also mean wounds, scars, traces, marks, and vestiges. The choice reflects Sheng’s changing perception of how this massive event affects his life. For example, translating *h'un* into wounds would create a different set of associations than does lacerations. The choice also implies a sense of temporality, as lacerations heal over time, whereas scars demand significant time to heal and never fully disappear.<sup>17</sup> Having made this distinction, one might posit that the Cultural Revolution affected Sheng less than others who went through the period; if he experienced indescribable trauma, the translation of “scar” would embody his continual suffering. Thinking in broader terms, this title resonates with the two generations who lived through the Cultural Revolution because the multiple forms of translation allow at least the Chinese listener to identify with whichever one is most appropriate to his or her experience.

Although partially an autobiographical piece representing Sheng’s shifting sense of Chinese and American identity, *H'Un* might also signify an element of resilience among the Class of 1978. When I asked if there were any experiences that deeply shaped how he composed after moving to the United States, Sheng replied,

What I think the most important aspect of the Class of 1978 in China is that our generation had seen and lived through many lives that other generation might not have. Furthermore, we manage to catch the last train, so to speak, comparing to the majority of my generation who essentially were robbed of all the important opportunities. Therefore, you might say that we are unbreakable as we are always ready to start over again. (Sheng 22 Feb 2011 interview transcript)

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<sup>17</sup> One could potentially read laceration as a choice to focus on the freshness or the temporal associations of the piece on the period of Cultural Revolution itself, rather than on the implications of the experience. The musical material itself and Sheng’s rhetoric about the piece, however, reflect other intentions for the title.

Although one could contend that other members of the same generation were able to escape China and find other opportunities abroad, Sheng keenly observes that the vast majority of the educated urban people who were sent to the countryside found it extremely difficult to find a new start. Ge Ganru commented during a conversation at Pomona College that nearly two generations were lost during the Cultural Revolution and that many people his age in China today remain disheartened and unmotivated to find work.

While Ge, Chen, and Sheng's compositional careers have all taken different trajectories, this notion of shared resilience has helped them persevere despite the challenges of arriving in a foreign country with little knowledge of English. Although this resilience acts as a unifying thread among this small subset of composers who are now important voices in the music world, huge numbers of Chinese could not find sponsorship to "catch the last train." Engaging in diasporic movement enables Sheng, Chen, and Ge to test their individual and shared resilience within new cultural environments, like New York City, and with educational methodologies, like the integrated system at Columbia University, rather than the divided pedagogy in China. In this light, I argue that the "unbreakable" quality of the Class of 1978 that Sheng underlines emerges partially from their shared experiences during the Cultural Revolution, but actually more from their formation of hyphenated identities that free them of the discouraging and restricting ties still experienced by those unable to leave China.



## The Search Never Ends: Navigating the Hyphen

Sheng's instrumentation in *H'Un* creates an immediate association with more traditional Chinese musics. Scored for a very large orchestra, the piece features the percussion section at several points, frequently requiring Chinese tom-toms, Peking opera gongs, a large Chinese bass drum, and a Japanese woodblock. While one might argue that these sounds represent Sheng searching for novel orchestral sounds within the Western tradition, the piece's subject matter and his use of musical troupes typical to the countryside cultivate an immediate connection with the notion of "folk" discussed in chapter two. The combination of all of these instruments at one time suggests that Sheng is not concerned with novel sounds, but rather with maximizing the "Chineseness" within the piece. Because of his role as percussionist in Qinghai, Sheng writes several solo sections for Chinese tom-toms and Peking opera gongs, harkening back to the state-sanctioned music programs that Madame Mao endorsed. The layering of multiple instruments leads to what Sheng terms "textural counterpoint"—the combination of differing timbres, registers and dynamics. Seen in Example 3.1, the percussion parts join together to form the only non-sustained line.

Example 3.1: mm. 372-394

Cbn. *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Hn. 1 *p* *mp* *fff* *mp*

Hn. 3 *fff* *fff* *fff* *fff*

Tbn. 1 *mp* *f* *fff* *p*

Tbn. 2 *mp* *f* *fff* *p*

Perc. 2 *f* *mf*

Cb. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *fff*

Cbn. *fff* *fff* *fff* *fff*

Hn. 1 *p* *ff* *fff* *fff*

Hn. 2 *p* *ff* *fff* *fff*

Tbn. 1 *mp* *ff* *fff* *fff*

Tbn. 2 *mp* *ff* *fff* *fff*

Perc. 2 *mp* *p* *ff*

*rit.* *ca. 7"* *G.P.* *G.P.*

♩ = 58

Fl. 1 *Fl. solo* *pp* *(non cresc.)* *fff*

Perc. 1 *f*

Perc. 2 *mf* *Large Temple Block solo* *pp*

Hp. *solo* *mf* *pp*

Vn. I *con sord. div.* *free bowing* *pp* *pp* *pp*

Vn. II *fff espr.* *pizz. div.* *3* *gliss. mp* *pp* *fff*

Va. *pizz. div.* *3* *fff* *free bowing* *pp* *pp* *fff*

Vc. *con sord. div.* *free bowing* *fff* *pp* *pp* *fff*

\*Ossia: may be used to help the passage to "speak".

381 *fff* *fff*

To help understand how such musical choices connect to the notion of the “folk,” Philip Bohlman remarks,

Folk song and folk music are everywhere and potentially owned by everyone, as if they were so commonplace as to defy any further discussion. They are anachronistic, connected primarily to a previous era, but they live in the present, shaped by and responsive to contemporary events. (2002: 69)

Sheng never directly states that he consciously uses the “folk,” but the connection between the percussion instruments in *H’Un* and the types of music promoted by Madame Mao—especially Peking Opera—illustrates the remaining presence of state-sanctioned musical “correctness” in Sheng’s mind.

Given that his musical role in the Cultural Revolution triggered his “research,” Sheng captures his Cultural Revolution experiences through the instruments and melodies collected in the countryside. The problem arises, however, when these Communist imposed musical practices are interpreted as the “folk” of the past. Most frequently combined with words like old, antiquated, or traditional, the musics produced by “country folk” falsely generate nostalgia for the past, even if the people employing the term and experiencing the nostalgia do not understand what they are actually missing. As Bohlman suggests, just as one can conclude that industrialization and globalization have led to a loss of cultural roots, one must also realize that this “folk” music is still performed throughout the countryside today, as well as in urban environments. The label “folk,” however, is detached from much of the music actually made in rural areas; it appears when educated, elite music connoisseurs travel to more remote areas and hear sounds that *they* have not heard before.

What is considered folk music is thus largely a matter of perspective. What would happen if someone from the remote area of Qinghai traveled back to more urban areas

with Sheng? He would be exposed to new sounds and, as they are not what he lives with on a daily basis, high art music to him is “folk.” The reason musicians and academics alike apply the adjective “folk” rests on the fact that musical styles change quickly, sometimes in ways that we understand and at other times through incomprehensible turns. Immersed in twentieth-century techniques, especially the twelve-tone technique, Sheng, one could argue, yearned for cleaner lines, easily delineated instrumental roles, and more straightforward chord progressions. In analyzing the music through the context of the Cultural Revolution and the provocative theoretical issues surrounding folk music, I contend that Sheng references his time in Qinghai through the use of percussion to make explicitly clear that the folk he heard offered a temporary escape from the terrorizing reality of the time. Ironically, the retreat to the folk may have been considered ideologically appropriate according to Maoist doctrine.

In looking specifically to the score, Sheng represents suffering during the Cultural Revolution and his search for a hyphenated identity through the use of the semitone and the elimination of a melodically driven composition. Outlining his compositional process for *H'Un* in particular, Sheng explains,

In the earlier stages of composition, I did attempt to construct several melodies into which motives would eventually merge. However, I failed to satisfy myself because the melodies turned out to be too *beautiful* and did not fit the tragic and violent nature of the work. Only then did I realize that melody was inappropriate for a work about the Cultural Revolution. (Sheng 1995)

In his personal essays and in interviews, Sheng more or less clarifies that melody, with its structure, predictability and beauty, was not consistent with the experience of the Cultural Revolution he intended to portray. Knowing that Sheng experimented with the twelve-tone technique as a student, it is possible that mode of composition may have been too

precise and constricting for him, reminding him of Communist controlled teachings methods. While *H'Un* is not a twelve-tone piece, Sheng maintains the melodic restriction component of twelve-tone and exercised compositional freedom through texture, timbre, rhythm and tempo.

**Example 3.2:** mm. 1-12

The musical score for Example 3.2 (measures 1-12) is a complex orchestral arrangement. It features a variety of instruments, including woodwinds, brass, percussion, harp, piano, and strings. The score is written in a 4/4 time signature and includes a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 132$ . The woodwind section (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon) and strings (Violin, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabass) play intricate melodic and rhythmic lines. The percussion section includes Chinese Tom-toms, a Snare Drum, a Small Tambourine, and a Small Peking Opera Gong. The harp and piano provide harmonic support. The score includes numerous dynamic markings (e.g., *sf*, *f*, *p*, *mf*, *pp*) and performance instructions such as "non vib.", "arco, sul pont.", and "gliss.".



Seen in Example 3.2, the opening twelve bars of the piece exemplify his exploration of development through tools other than melody. Sheng covers a dynamic range from *ff* to *ppp*, specifies no vibrato, *sul ponticello*, or *glissando*, and writes Bartók pizzicati and artificial harmonics. While none of these techniques are particularly innovative alone, the emphasis on quickly changing textures shows that “melody” is not an essential part of every composition. Intensified by the varied timbres throughout the piece, the semitone furthers Sheng’s expression of suffering. Denoted as the fundamental building block of the entire piece, the semitone complements Sheng’s response to his past, China, and his present, America.

**Example 3.3:** mm. 237-244

The musical score for Example 3.3, measures 237-244, is a complex orchestral arrangement. It begins with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ . The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes Piccolo (Picc.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bn.), Horn (Hr.), Trumpet (D Tpt.), Trombone (Tbn.), Marimba, Percussion (Perc.), Harp (Hp.), and Piano (Pno.). The second system includes Violin I (Va. I), Violin II (Va. II), Viola (Va. div.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score features a wide dynamic range, with markings such as *ff*, *ppp*, and *cresc.*. Performance instructions include *sul pont.*, *arco, non div.*, and *gliss.*. The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature.

One of the climaxes in *H'Un*, the section displayed in Example 3.3, contains almost all semitones with some displaced by an octave while others clash next to each other. While heavily scoring the semitone in every instrument group generates extreme discomfort, Sheng's rhythmic contrasts in mm. 238-9 between the violas and the other strings and winds, the rapid crescendo from *pp* to *fff*, and the gradual increase of *ponticello* makes the interval that much more effective and haunting. The peak of the crescendo in m. 244 suggests to the listener that the sound will clear and Sheng will switch to a new texture. The clarinet subito *pp* ostinato semitone unexpectedly edges in, providing no release for the listener or the performers.

The hybrid musical style seen in these score examples point to the tremendous identity negotiation Sheng experienced as a graduate student in New York City. Despite the presence of mentors who Sheng claims guided him through the American music world, his music conveys a much different picture, one filled with confusion and turmoil that originated during the Cultural Revolution and continued later on in the United States. The stark differentiation of Western and Chinese musical practice during his undergraduate career becomes readily apparent in Sheng's struggle with the idea of melody. Even if this contrast was lessened somewhat while studying at Columbia University, the initial seeds of his compositional voice are deeply rooted in the East-West binary. Since the piece was written not long after he arrived in the West, one could interpret the inclusion of elements connected to the twelve-tone technique as Sheng's deliberation on how he fits with new trends in the American music sphere. Zheng describes the tensions faced by Chinese composers within a diverse musical environment like that found in America:



Music has been a significant empowering vehicle through which Chinese sojourners and immigrants reinforced their diasporic connections and articulated their cultural identities against an oppressive and prejudiced American sociopolitical environment. At the same time, Chinese music has been perceived by white America as a mystified oriental sound gesture, one through which, over time, the curious majority came to know about and interpret “Chinamen,” Chinese immigrants, and, eventually, the Chinese Americans. (Zheng 2010: 67)

The diasporic movements for Sheng and the rest of the Class of 1978 creates a dynamic that stimulates composition and music as a means of cultural translation, yet also subjects them to historically constructed images of the “Asian.” While Zheng highlights the use of increasingly respectful and inclusive terms for Chinese Americans over time, undertones of not belonging or being a cultural outsider continue to influence his societal interactions. Sheng and the multiple musical spheres acting on his language in *H’Un* exemplify that the diaspora simultaneously frees and confounds creativity. Sheng’s response to his search for identity arises in his assertion that his piece acts as a form of resolution, both for himself and also for his entire class. In an email correspondence, Sheng reflects,

Before the experience of writing *H’Un*, I never quite believed in catharsis. But after the premiere (and maybe the fact many important orchestras also performed it), I did feel that I got rid of a lot of anger inside me, which I think is deeply related to the nightmare I lived through. As you know, I only tried to tell my story of what it was like for a young child growing up during the Cultural Revolution and the ultimate question after you realize it was a nightmare: why does this have to happen? (Sheng 22 Feb 2011 interview transcript)

Perhaps interpreted by some as a valiant effort, I argue that Sheng can only offer his individual experience of suffering—doing anything to represent a whole assigns reactions and emotions to other members of the Class of 1978 that might not be most salient. For example, in the quote above, Sheng seems to imply that his success achieved an effective therapy for his upset; this success was not, of course, enjoyed by all members of the Class

of 1978. The distance from China gave Sheng the agency both to evaluate and be skeptical of his past. While the multiple performances by important orchestras may signify an emerging curiosity about Chinese music in the West, it also suggests that his sense of catharsis was due in part to the fact that he received attention from the Western public. I contend that, while Sheng is a brilliant composer who lived through the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, he writes semitone-laden and “tormented” music in large part because Western audiences want and expect to hear this type of music. In doing so, Sheng perpetuates the stereotypes that plague the Class of 1978 and (re)circulates the images that he superficially denounced.

The structure of the score as a whole mirrors Sheng’s memory of both the Cultural Revolution and his old and new identities, reflecting a sense of personal realization that occurs as a direct product of diasporic movement. Partially due to the lack of any one musical element being developed throughout the whole piece, Sheng never continues a single idea for very long, frequently changes tempo, and constantly introduces new timbres that generate extreme variety in the score. One might suggest that the fragmentary nature of the piece underlines the sense of disjointed identity that occurs within diaspora and Sheng’s inability at that point in his career to clearly articulate his relation to China and the West. In comparison to Chen, whose inclusion of “folk” melodies indicated her connection to China, Sheng’s piece lacks a clear nationalist connection to either country. While studying at Columbia University allowed a formation of a cultural buffer zone to develop, Sheng continued to struggle with his goals and identity as a composer. Zheng takes this idea one step further:

These composers left behind them the ideological and social constraints imposed by the Chinese government and society; at the same time, they have become

highly conscious of their own cultural heritage and individual identities in America's cultural pluralist and multiethnic society and strongly competitive new-music circles. Chinese cultural tradition has therefore become both part of their personal identity and a strategic capital for their professional advancement in America. (2010: 150)

For Sheng, traveling overseas generated a healthy distance from the restrictive nature of Chinese society, yet the American tendency to label individuals as one ethnicity or another simultaneously forced him to ponder the life he left behind. The hyphenated identity that emerges as he becomes increasingly situated in America thus compels him to uphold connections to his cultural roots. This, however, may not be something that Sheng adamantly resists given that he, in comparison to Chen and Ge, most frequently seems to capitalize on his Chinese ethnicity as a way of promoting his own compositions. Chen also does not resist, but has not become as popular. Ge, on the other hand, avoids direct connection to his cultural roots when composing. As Zheng underscores, these composers' heritage and country of origin becomes inextricably linked to how their works are packaged and promoted.

### Hybridity a la Bartók

In digesting his rhetoric and analyzing his representations of identity through his music, one quickly notices that, while Sheng verbalizes his "desire" to avoid the trap of being labeled Western or Chinese, he also uses this same paradigm to market his music and achieve fame. He explains,

I think less and less about whether some element I am using is Chinese or Western. I write whatever excites me while continuing to study both cultures, hoping that Western audiences don't feel they need to understand Chinese music in order to appreciate me, or that Chinese audiences feel that they need to understand Western music. (Sheng 1999: 209)

While this sounds quite liberated, *H'Un* demonstrates that Sheng is conscientious of the Chinese and Western boundaries of his identity. Despite his emphasis on studying both cultures, Sheng never articulates his interactions with Western culture as they affect his music. In an ideal world, a multicultural, hybrid work aims not to solely please one half of the audience, in this case Chinese or Western, but instead seeks to elicit an awareness that two musical traditions can be combined to spawn something greater than its constituent parts or transcend the dialectics of hybridity.

Hybridities are made in a series of open-ended social moments that move as people move and can overlap with each other, moments in which sounds or images or styles (or what have you) are thrown up against each other in ways that leave their different origins discernible. But most of the industry's discourses of hybridity are not about flux; they are rather concerned with fixing something for the purpose of easy categorization and marketing. (Taylor 2007: 150)

With this description of hybridity in mind and given his diasporic movements, one would expect Sheng to be well versed in the musical and cultural languages of both cultures.

The discussion of a hybrid style in the music industry, as contrasted with an academic use of the term, unfortunately dismisses the presence and significance of multicultural interaction and focuses on labeling and marketing a product. Rather than aiming to distill key Chinese and Western musical elements and reformulate them in an innovative way, Sheng markets his identity depending on his audience. One might conclude then that instead of working to abolish preformed cultural assumptions, Sheng actually promotes them by using the paradox as his primary framework.

With continually expanding opportunities for engaging each musical culture, Sheng looks to Bartók for guidance about how to seamlessly weave multiple spheres of inspirations together. While not fully explained by Sheng himself, one might hypothesize that, just as Sheng and Chen pursue a curiosity in the “folk” as a result of the fieldwork

instituted under Communist party rule, referencing Bartók serves as a means of legitimizing Sheng's own use of "folk culture." As he elaborates in the beginning of his essay "Bartók, the Chinese Composer":

Often, his compositions are manifestations of the true beauty of folk music. In his music we hear "unrefined," "raw" peasant songs alongside the "high art" classical music, a coexistent quality obvious even in his most lyrical passages. We thus realize that folk music is as beautiful and exciting as "art" music. One does not borrow from the other. (Sheng 1997: 1)

According to Sheng, Bartók possesses the ability to lift the "folk" up to the level of high art music. One can readily notice the parallels to Sheng's own compositions as he seeks to use his "research" as a means of infusing his compositions with something not Western, yet also not immediately Chinese. Sheng identifies several superficial similarities between Hungarian and Chinese folk melodies, arguing that his turn to the "folk" in China mirrors Bartók's efforts to use similar material as a way of proclaiming his dedication to Hungary. The presence of pentatonic scales exists as one of the more easily decipherable parallels, although the inclusion of semitone-based embellishments obscures the pentatonicism. Although Sheng views these similarities as characteristics uniting Chinese music and that of Bartók, one might counter by pointing out that pentatonicism can be found in a variety of musical traditions and only becomes "Chinese" in conforming to stereotypes about the Orient. More provocatively, however, Sheng argues that, just as folk music appeared to be rapidly disappearing from the Hungarian consciousness, the same trend appears to be occurring in China. In so doing, he calls for a consideration of Bartók's approach to maintaining a nation's cultural roots:

A true musical fusion can only happen at its deepest level when both elements retain their original qualities, and when the composer possesses the most profound understanding and knowledge of both cultures. Thus the music of earth never dies. (Sheng 1997: 2-3)

Looking beyond his expressive language, one realizes that the situation Sheng posits cannot actually occur, as even the most profound understanding of both cultures cannot facilitate a combination that also “retains their original qualities.” Furthermore, Bartók’s desire to uphold Hungarian tradition through the inclusion of the “folk” has triggered much skepticism in academic circles. An essay written by Katie Trumpener exemplifies the common critique by arguing that his interest in folk music occurred at a time in Europe when many people contemplated notions of “race and eugenics.” She acknowledges a disconnect in Bartók’s reasoning for such engagement:

Bartók’s reinvestment in folk music presents a striking asymmetry. For if he is captivated by the strains of the nurse’s song, [...] he decisively fails to develop any sentimental reattachment to the other form of music which delighted him as a small child: the music played by Gypsy musicians. Bartók’s initial nationalist interest in folklore-collecting and his initial criticism of musical cosmopolitanism are fueled partly by racism, specifically by a fear of both Gypsy and Jewish influences on Hungarian cultural life. (Trumpener 2000: 405-6)

Albeit strongly worded, the critical point is that Sheng’s look to Bartók contains implications beyond how a composer engages with the folk. Looking to social and historical contexts, academics cast doubt on Bartók as an emblem of Hungarian nationalism because of the incongruities in his development as a composer. Although at face value Sheng is fairly convincing in his efforts to preserve the supposedly dwindling presence of Chinese traditional music, Lau confidently declares,

To Sheng, the power of his music like that of Bartók and Janáček, is unequivocally universal in quality; it transcends national and cultural boundaries despite a nationalist root and foundation. (2004: 32)

In one sense, Lau makes a legitimate point; despite the inherent contradictions between his discussions of identity and music and his actual musical renderings, Sheng does access and impress a global audience. This does not, however, demonstrate universality. I

find Lau's second claim problematic, as Sheng's music lacks a nationalist foundation. Possessing Chinese ethnicity does not equate with a rootedness in that national culture. On the contrary, Sheng appears to reap the benefits of commercial success in the United States as he falls into the trap containing statements of "Chineseness."

### The Perils of the Global Cultural Market

In a continually growing, multimedia driven world, any composer can easily succumb to the allure of commercial success. Temptation now arises not only from traditional sources—live performances, recordings, publication—but also through new technologies like Internet music distribution, digital file sharing, and live blogging by critics, to name a few. While broader distribution through an expanding set of pipelines is not inherently negative, the ease with which composers adopt biased labels in an effort to access growing markets is quite problematic. The pressures to create ethnically "authentic" music constrain composers, yet at the same time any composer is expected to somehow discover an unused angle into the musical world. While Sheng and the Class of 1978 by default have an "angle" because of their multinational perspective, they must also distinguish what actually structures their compositional identity from what simply sells "Chineseness."

It is a simple equation: composition and performance have been institutionalized within our society, often driven by a recording industry and presenting agencies that are measured in turn by the profit generated by the recording and live performances. Therefore, packing these artists and their work as coming from the cultural fringes has tacitly become an important element in promoting them. (Lau 2004: 36-7)

As one of the more successful members of the Class of 1978, Sheng and his music are easily accessed by audiences both familiar with and completely new to diasporic musics.

His critical and musical acclaim provides the rest of the Class of 1978 and future Chinese diasporic composers much optimism, as Western audiences seem increasingly interested in cross-cultural and transnational musics. The danger in possessing such status, however, becomes evident when Sheng upholds Western stereotypes about Chinese identity and how the music of an ethnically Chinese composer *should* sound. Formulating a clear understanding of hyphenated identity for oneself proves daunting enough, not to mention for a global music industry, yet Sheng must acknowledge and directly address this challenge. Opening such a forum for critical discussion will help Chinese and other foreign diasporic composers grapple with conflicting spheres of musical inspiration and enhance understanding of the complex dynamics of a transnational music industry.



## **Let Us Hear Their Voices: A Conclusion**

Introducing each chapter of my thesis is a photograph taken by a well-known contemporary Chinese photographer who has responded through images to the Cultural Revolution, Communist ideologies, and social and cultural restrictions placed unwillingly upon the Chinese people. While conducting my research with Ge Ganru at Pomona College, I visited the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles to see two photography exhibits: one featuring the earliest known photographs taken in China and the second displaying works by contemporary Chinese photographers today. Though a fundamentally different medium than the compositions in which I had been immersed, the work of these artists resonated deeply; each photograph captured the physical, psychological and even to some extent musical elements of the pieces I lived with throughout the course of this thesis. Just as Ge Ganru, Chen Yi and Bright Sheng used music as a vehicle for commenting on diaspora, identity, and hybridity in an increasingly global world, these photos demonstrate that artists are engaging other mediums to similarly critique and question the social conditions of China today and unveil the realities of the past.

In *I Love McDonald's*, Liu Jian and Zhao Qin satirically comment on the current, confused state of Chinese identity through a juxtaposition of the ideologies of the past—the figures are dressed in uniforms from the Cultural Revolution with fake painted slogans—with the dominating presence of Western culture, represented through the inclusion of McDonald's containers and bleached blonde hair. Hai Bo's *They No. 6* depicts the effects of time on the generation that lived through the Cultural Revolution, as certain individuals' appearances mirror those from decades ago and others are no longer present. Zhang Huan's *Family Tree* powerfully illustrates the transnational, diasporic

movements of Chinese today—after generations, identity becomes black as hundreds of families, stories, histories and traditions coalesce. While the ability of these composers and photographers to directly produce change in China is limited, simply the presence of these issues in art shows that artists are eager to ignite far-reaching dialogues about the issues facing China today. Most importantly, the display of such photography in a prominent American art institution underscores that, like the music explored in this thesis, these Chinese visual artists navigate around the East-West binary by constructing images that draw upon Chinese examples to speak to the overarching effects of global cultural exchange. The combination of easily identifiable Chinese and Western cultural elements in the images proves that interaction between two cultural spheres that have been historically separated is inevitable and also necessary. Such cross-cultural and cross-medium dialogues will only continue to emerge and expand as scholars and artists alike realize that the East infuses the West and vice versa. This new flow of social, cultural and political influence thus oppugns a reliance on East-West duality, and instead calls for an increasingly universal consideration of how culture is both formulated and critiqued.

In the present thesis I crafted a story about three expatriates who fled their homeland in search of freedom and new opportunities. The subjects of my three case studies all began their lives during one of the most traumatic periods of modern Chinese history, the Cultural Revolution. Yet since arriving in the United States their lives have taken different paths. Traced through each of their lives and seen in relation to specific compositions, the continual negotiation of a diasporic identity acts as a common thread, connecting them to each other but also to an entire group of individuals who left their native countries in hopes of restarting.

When in diaspora, all emigrants must negotiate essentialized stereotypes due to their origin in the “other” country. Their social identities can become clustered together as outsiders to mainstream society. In fact, even if these individuals had been born in the United States, they would still run the risk of being essentialized as Asian American. This gives rise to a crucial distinction between diaspora and hyphenated identities, as the former implies arrival in and assimilation to a new country as a mode of movement and separation, while the latter suggests mediation between multiple spheres of heritage amalgamated into one identity. In critically understanding American identity and cultural politics, I contend that one cannot divorce diaspora and hyphenated identity, as human and cultural movement itself generates a window through which individuals can redefine their hyphenated identity. For the Class of 1978, the diaspora does not stop as soon as they arrive on new territory, but rather continues to exist as each composer discovered his and her own places in New York City as students. As I argue throughout my thesis, the discourses on diasporic movements need to be refined, as they essentialize individuals as either belonging or not to a particular community, and fail to acknowledge that diaspora acts as the undercurrent beneath fluctuating notions of identity.

As seen in my thesis, the composers from the Class of 1978 hold Chinese passports, birth certificates and names, yet they have spent half of their lives in the United States. They teach in American universities and their works are widely performed in this country. While some represent their Chinese heritage more explicitly in their music, these composers not only meaningfully participate in already established music cultures, but also insert fresh voices into a world that frequently comes across as stale to

listeners.<sup>18</sup> Having achieved a place in mainstream classical circles, members of the Class of 1978 show that, even while occasionally engendering stereotypical marketing techniques like the dragon, bamboo, and “East Meets West” titles, their music can also be understood as separate from the East-West dialectic. In moving beyond this black-and-white framework, musicians can more freely articulate their own voices without experiencing pressure to conform or the fear of deviating from audience and critical expectations. Both historically and at present, diasporic movement is one of the primary catalysts for the emergence of multicultural exchanges of art, without which cultural dialogues would remain stagnant.

Despite the great promise represented in the work of the Class of 1978, programmers in the classical music world continue to play the same broken record when it comes to Asian music: “East Meets West.” I wonder, why is East meeting West? Why not West finds East? Or West finally notices East? In my opinion, the transnational interdependence of contemporary culture today renders this game of musical “hide and seek” obsolete. The West did not discover the East, nor did the East assert its notability as a place of musical production. Just as fans in the United States have become accustomed to the prevalence of Dominican baseball players or Russian models on the runways at New York Fashion Week, the idea that Chinese composers will become unexceptionally present and free of hyphenated ethnic modifiers in the mainstream world of U.S. classical music is appealing. At present, however, it seems the social and cultural conditions of the music world are still highly problematic. The West exists as the dominant cultural sphere

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<sup>18</sup> The presence and integration of music cultures from around the globe—not just from China, but also those of Africa and South America—warrants a more critical consideration of hybrid musical languages.

and selectively interacts with those outside of its “boundaries,” especially in the culturally and ideologically driven world of classical music.

Given the Western European origins of classical music, the United States, or rather American composers, were once outsiders to the tradition as well. As Europeans increasingly immigrated to America, their musical practice followed and established the foundation for music appreciation in the United States. Several early conductors of major U.S. symphonies serve as prime examples of foreign-born musicians rising to prestige in American music circles—for example, Seiji Ozawa, George Szell, Erich Leinsdorf, and Zubin Mehta. Given this history, it may strike some as hypocritical that these Chinese composers should be made to feel alienated as the “Other” when the U.S. occupied that position not that long ago. Moreover, it is critical to confront such issues because, despite the United States’s cultural sophistication and openness, tremendous limitations still exist.

Examples such as Yo-Yo Ma may inspire us to recognize that Chineseness does not have to be immediately invoked by artist or audience; only when he participates in the Silk Road project does Ma directly maintain Chinese perceptions. In contrast, the Class of 1978 does not always play a constructive role in the evolution of East-West hybridity, as some members of the class continue to capitalize on their overseas identity and Cultural Revolution “baggage” in their attempts to formulate attractive musical languages. Parallels may be drawn to the earliest forms of bebop or gangsta rap in the 1990s, as the Class of 1978 perpetuates certain essentialized assumptions as a means of gaining additional professional traction and audience credibility. The pressures to do so remain intimidating. The confines of the “classical music” genre now extend far beyond

more conservative, antiquated associations to tuxedos, Beethoven, and old crowds crinkling cough-drop wrappers. The multitude of institutions and organizations supporting the cultivation of classical music will continue to patronize the arts and program great Western classical masters on their programs. In so doing, they must be conscious of the impact their expectations may have on the creative processes of patron artists. These groups must integrate voices like those from the Class of 1978, as their growing presence and significance can no longer be ignored in a century defined by ever-increasing transnational cultural exchanges. The elimination of the classical music world's rhetoric concerning the "East" would facilitate institutional recognition of Chinese composers comparable to those from Western Europe and America.

While researching this thesis I had the opportunity to speak with composer Lei Liang, a Professor at the University of California San Diego, who is part of the generation of Chinese composers after the Class of 1978. Commenting on the state of Chinese composers in the United States today, Lei Liang remarked,

I think what's most important is how to maintain an independent mind—not conditioned by political, commercial, institutional or academic powers. That way, art can flourish in free ways. All of these great things can be traps; the material rewards can let you forget your focus. (25 Feb 2011 interview transcript)

As Lei Liang recognizes, Chinese composers must safeguard their creative independence as they become increasingly involved in the musical cultures of multiple countries. By rising above the political, commercial, and institutional constraints, Chinese composers, as well as those from cultures across the globe, have the opportunity to make the East-West binary inconsequential. Free of binding dichotomies, musicians and academics alike will face a sonic and social world where diaspora, hybridity, and in-between hyphenated identities are no longer exceptional or the most productive critical frames.

My thesis reveals that classical music now stands at a threshold where the definition of the term itself must be reevaluated and more appropriately adjusted to the social and cultural production of the twenty-first century. A failure to do so will mean that in the future the music of highly innovative artists will confront the same barriers faced by the Class of 1978. Without these new voices, styles, and sounds, the classical musical world will, as Lei Liang asserts, lose its multiplicity and relevance to broader discourses about multicultural exchanges.

For cultural historians of China and the United States, I contend throughout my thesis that the rapidly growing significance of China in the international community, and centrality of the country's interaction with the United States, necessitates a holistic consideration of how culture flows between the two societies. Although history has led to biased notions of Western cultural imperialism, the multitude of foreign students, conductors, performers and composers in the United States and abroad proves that the musical world today is no longer captured by American hegemony. For those interested in theorizing and comparing the dynamics of diaspora and hybrid identities, I have used Ge Ganru, Chen Yi and Bright Sheng as cases to argue for a consideration of diaspora as a means of generating multicultural musical languages that eliminate the need for stereotypical dichotomies. For music scholars, I have expanded upon previously conducted scholarship regarding these highly successful Chinese composers to further illuminate their predominance in transnational music dialogues and their enduring presence in a different kind of "classical" music world. When preconceived notions about ethnicity in music have been abandoned, composers, instrumentalists, and performers



from China or any nation will be able to exercise creative freedom and further inform global audiences about the necessity for multicultural musical engagement.

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