

Introduction

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Let's begin with a parable about how music moves—in both senses of the word. Many years ago, one of the editors of this volume (Andrew) visited the city of Victoria on Vancouver Island in Canada. Arriving at the hotel, he found a message awaiting him: A curator of the historical archives at the Royal British Columbia Museum had come upon a cache of old Chinese 78-rpm records. Would he be so kind as to help identify them? The next morning he found himself moving through a cavernous, brightly lit, and antiseptic facility where the museum studied and catalogued its recent acquisitions. The curator led him toward a large wood and leather steamer trunk, its lid propped up to open its contents to view. A dilapidated old boarding house in Victoria's Chinatown had been renovated as part of the gentrification of the city's downtown, and the trunk, contents intact, had subsequently found its way to the museum.

Andrew knelt down to take a closer look. Dozens and dozens of shellac records, dating back to the first decades of the twentieth century and in immaculate condition, were filed away in the trunk, separated into sections by slim and neatly labeled wooden dividers. Alongside these meticulously curated records were a few boxes of Chinese medicine. Mounted above the records were four official photographs of Chinese faces staring mutely from out of the trunk. These were the mug shots taken by the Canadian immigration authorities certifying that each of these young men had paid the exorbitant “head tax” required of all Chinese workers entering the country in the years before 1923.

What kind of story was the trunk telling? How did these fragile shellac records make their way from Victoria Harbor in Hong Kong to the crown colony of Victoria in the far reaches of the Pacific Northwest? The curator filled him in on the rough lineaments of the history. Victoria, as it turns out, was the second oldest Chinese settlement on the West Coast, after San Francisco. When the gold rush in California began to wane, an ancillary speculative fever took hold in the wilderness of British Columbia. And when that second gold rush went bust, Chinese laborers began to “mine” the stupendous wealth of Vancouver Island’s vast old-growth forests of Douglas fir. Conditions were hard, and pay was poor. The “head tax” that these Chinese loggers had hoped would be a down payment on a better life—and eventually a return ticket to Hong Kong—often bankrupted them instead. Victoria’s Chinatown was a city full of bachelors with no direction home.

The four men who looked out at Andrew from behind the lid had shared not only a cramped room but also this trunk. The records, so carefully curated and consisting entirely of Cantonese opera, were their most prized possession. The records brought them together, and we can imagine sonic moments of emotional listening to sounds and melodies coming from a gramophone, still powerful enough to evoke memories and feelings of nostalgia for a perhaps idealized home. The records were their last remaining connection to a place to which they could never return. And now, transported to a museum archive, they would linger on as their sole legacy, a sonic trace of hard lives, muted and unremarked, that found solace in the sound of home.

This volume is, in some measure, a collective effort to listen to the historical legacy, and gauge the contemporary resonances of Chinese sounds that have and continue to reverberate across spatial, geopolitical, linguistic, and ideological borders. These sounds have traveled via modern media such as the phonograph (as in this particularly plangent example), radio, cinema, and the internet. But they have moved primarily as an epiphenomenon of waves of migration, beginning in the nineteenth century and increasing exponentially in the twentieth century, as the Chinese diaspora fanned out across the globe. The mobility of Chinese sounds, as this volume shows, provides us with a map (or many maps) of immigration throughout Southeast Asia, across the Pacific, including Australia and New Zealand, to the Americas, and into Europe. In charting the travels of Chinese sounds, we also necessarily trace the contours of a cartography of the upheavals that have

characterized the experience of modernity. These contours follow imperial vectors across the British Empire, the Qing Imperium, the Empire of Japan, including Korea and Taiwan, and the Pax Americana. They follow the flows of financial capital and travel to wherever work is available. They traverse trade routes, ride on the back of diplomatic endeavors, enter modern media circuits, and even find their place in the sophisticated domains of composed music and high art. Moving beyond borders, these sounds may elicit annoyance, incomprehension, or even disgust among some listeners. Often, they are assimilated, in complex and conflictual ways, into the territories and cultures to which they have moved. Sometimes, these sounds even go against the colonial grain, finding common cause with other diasporas or bypassing Chineseness altogether. Indeed, as the story of the trunk reveals (and as will be instantiated by many of the essays in this volume), these sounds tend to question any notion of a unitary or singular Chinese sound. Partly sung and recorded in *guanhua* 官話, the operatic Mandarin Chinese performed in Cantonese opera before the 1920s, the Cantonese records collected by the four laborers in Victoria, after all, predated the primacy of Mandarin as a newly constructed national language and harked back not to “China” as a whole, but to the sounds of “home,” wherever home might be.

The title *China Sounds Across Borders: Migration, Mobility, and Modernity* expresses the scope of this volume, which complements—and is in dialogue with—an increasing scholarly interest in “sonic flows” related to (and between) China, the West, and East Asia. Several recently published edited volumes engage with the topic from different angles: *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, edited by Hon-lun Yang and Michael Saffle (2017), addresses “China’s encounters with Western music and, to a lesser extent, vice versa” (1). Other publications include China in their studies of “traveling musics” around the Asia Pacific (Lau and Yano 2018), on “sound communities” established through music broadcasting in this region (Ó Briain and Ong 2021), on “sound alignments” via popular music during the Cold War in Asia (Bourdagh et al. 2021), on the recording industry during the shellac era in Asia (Yamauchi and Wang 2024), and on *Music in China and the Chinese Diaspora* (Yu and Stock 2023). In another publication, *Asian Sound Cultures: Voice, Noise, Sound, Technology* (Haukamp et al. 2023), the editors explain that their engagement is motivated by the conviction that sound and music are “central to the experiences of

modernity and everyday life in Asia and [...] essential to our understanding of the historical processes of cultural, social, political, and economic transformation throughout the long twentieth century” (4). We fully agree with this evaluation, and in our explorations, we specifically concentrate on China to explore the sonic travelogs, experiences, and the cultural and social significance they hold, all from a global perspective. By taking this approach, we acknowledge the close ties between music, sound, and place, as foregrounded with a focus on Asia by Keith Howard and Catherine Ingram (2020). Place, however, is a starting point as we aim to uncover the intricate connections between sound, culture, and society and how sounds travel, transform, and acquire diverse meanings within different contexts.

We began by asking several interrelated questions: When and how did Chinese sounds travel abroad? Why and where did they travel in the past, and how might those routes anticipate contemporary flows? How were Chinese sounds received in culturally and politically disparate geographical regions, and how was this sonic knowledge contextualized? What impact did sounds have on images and perceptions of China outside of its borders? How might we approach and possibly periodize these sonic travels across borders since the late nineteenth century? Guided by these questions, the authors in this volume provide insight into a panoramic and exciting variety of musical and sonic travels, both historical and contemporary, tracing historical sonic flows and routes, investigating what set these flows into motion and circulation, and how they were perceived and sometimes rejected. In aggregate, these essays will also undergird a deeper understanding of how these Chinese sounds echo and how their significance persists into the present.

In this volume, “China sounds” primarily refer to musical sounds, traditions and genres, melodies, instruments, and noise that are interpreted as being “Chinese,” but also the transformations that are catalyzed by Chinese (sound) travels in far-flung places, as well as those that are produced by ethnically Chinese people or even Chinese-speaking but minoritized populations within or beyond China’s putative national borders, such as the indigenous peoples of Taiwan and the Pacific. Regarding “travels,” we must admit that our volume is selective, in that large swathes of the world—such as Australia, India, Africa, South America, and Russia—could not be included. While we hope that these areas will become the foci for future research, we are convinced that the variety of case studies presented here is

in many ways representative and certainly suggestive of persistent patterns as Chinese sound travels across borders. With that in mind, we begin with a historical outline of China's sound exports and some exemplary instances of sonic travel, pointing out the ways in which they journeyed, overlap with, complement, and adumbrate the case studies in the volume.

Sound Travels: Migration, Mobility, Modernity

China's sounds traveled long before large-scale migration began in the mid-nineteenth century. There is a long and old history of the diffusion of music in regions neighboring the Chinese empire, especially those in which literary Sinitic was an important medium of elite communication, including modern-day Korea and Vietnam. While vitally important, these histories predate the book's historical scope. An early sound, for example, could be heard in the "Dong Son drum," a bronze drum of the Dong Son culture in southern China and northern Vietnam (300 BC–200 AD), which "ha[s] been found in many parts of Indonesia" (Kartomi 2000, 277). Pilgrims, merchants, traders, refugees, and migrant workers from southern China were among the earliest to explore and migrate to the neighboring kingdoms and islands.

During the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), Chinese cultural goods and values began to travel eastwards to Korea and Japan. After the dynasty's collapse, China experienced tumultuous centuries of division and split into several kingdoms and dynasties, which defined conflict and warfare while increasing interaction and possibilities for cultural exchange in China and with neighboring tribes and ethnicities. This period saw the travels of the Chinese *qin* 琴 and *zheng*-form 箏 instruments and the appropriation of string instruments such as plucked lutes, bowed fiddles, and various forms of drums, cymbals, and other instruments. Most influential was perhaps the arrival of Indian Buddhism and ritual music, instruments, and sounds via the Silk Road. In the Tang dynasty (618–907), China's sophisticated (and cosmopolitan) musical culture, traditions, rituals, and repertoire were widely appreciated, for example, in Korea and Japan (Tokumaru et al. 2017, 42; Picken 1981). Japan's eagerness to learn from China was the catalyst for this sound journey, which caused her embassies "to ship loads of boxes filled with Chinese books back home," including treatises on music. A

particularly illustrative example features the musician Fujiwara no Sadatoshi 藤原貞敏 (807–67), who studied with Liu Erlang 劉二郎, a master of *pipa* 琵琶 (Chinese lute). He was so skilled and talented that the master gave him his own daughter as his wife and two lutes made of precious wood. Back in Japan, Sadatoshi became a court musician and a high official who served three emperors in a row. A scroll with lute compositions he brought from China is still preserved in the Imperial Household Agency in Tokyo (Vogelsang 2020, 49–50).

Centuries later, the Mongolian Empire, “Pax Mongolica,” increased exchanges with Europe via its vast territory, the Silk Road, and southern sea routes, facilitating the transfer of musical and sonic knowledge. Marco Polo’s (1254–1324) travelog *Il Milione* (1300; or, *Book of the Marvels of the World*), which was quickly translated into numerous languages, was perhaps the best-known conduit. His report about travels and experiences under the Great Khan Kublai (r. 1260–94), who in 1271 had established the Yuan dynasty, contained vivid observations about music and ceremonies, musical instruments, sound and noise, arousing great curiosity and interest. Earlier, “Dominicans and Franciscans wasted no time in the mid-thirteenth century in staging missions to the Great Khans,” writes Jason Stoessel (2018, 83), and, concerning music, “early missionaries were sensitive to different sounds of the human voice they heard in Asia, including the singing voice” (88). Based on missionary observations beginning in 1247 with a general of Batu Khan north of the Black Sea, Stoessel documents the shift from initial unfamiliarity of “barbarian” sounds that seem to come from the end of the world to a more profound understanding in the fourteenth century, articulated by missionaries who spent many years at the court of Kublai Khan. The Franciscan missionaries Giovanni da Montecorvino (1247–1328) and Odoric of Pordenone (ca. 1286–1331) reflected on musical experiences such as drinking festivities, Confucian court rituals, performances, and the noise of singers and instrumentalists. The latter reported, “Some performers (*histriones*) and even women performers (*histrionices*) [*sic.*] approach him (the Great Khan); they sing so sweetly before him what is certainly pleasing to hear” (Stoessel 2018, 96).

These accounts, however, reached only a small “audience,” while Chinese music also traveled as a demonstration and representation of power. Here, we may think of ritual and ceremony at the Chinese court

when receiving representatives of tributary states or Admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433/35) and his seven voyages (1405–33) during the Ming dynasty, which led him to various ports in Southeast Asia and along the Indian coast to Africa.

About two hundred years later, European interest was driven by curiosity, missionary work, and academic interest. “Perhaps the first account of Chinese music in Europe,” writes David Clarke (2010, 544), “was that given by the Portuguese Dominican Gaspar da Cruz (ca. 1520–70) in his *Treatise in Which the Things of China Are Related at Great Length*.” Based on his experience and studies in China, da Cruz demonstrates musical expertise and an appreciation of Chinese music. Unfortunately, the volume, which was published in Portuguese (1569–70), had no significant impact on future studies (Clarke 2010, 545). The more influential European encounter began with the arrival of the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in China and his adverse reaction towards Chinese music, which long impacted its perception in Europe. “According to Western evolutionary notions of music,” summarizes Lau (2017), “China’s monophonic and heterophonic styles still had a long way to go before arriving at the higher end of cultural and aesthetic scales” (270). The French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674–1743) relied on those missionary reports and never visited China. Yet, he published “five short Chinese pieces transcribed into European notation,” which traveled widely (Clark 2010, 545). A few decades later, the French missionary Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot (1718–93) published his *Mémoire sur la musique des chinois, tant anciens que modernes* (1779), and Chinese music became a much-discussed topic among intellectuals in France (Jiang 2022).

By and large, “the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cultivated the consumption of China as a visual product,” writes Thorpe (2016, 26) with a focus on England. Chinese objects were widely circulated, arousing interest in Chinese culture, architecture, and the arts, which inspired the age of chinoiserie in Europe and America (Frank 2011; Chu and Milam 2019). The British East India Company (1600) was the most prominent company to engage in global trade, and, as it expanded its colonial empire, it profited from and facilitated the transfer and exchange of goods with China.

Therefore, it may not be surprising that Great Britain, though unexpected, hosted perhaps the first “authentic” performance of Chinese music to be heard and seen in Europe in December 1756, a few months before the

Qianlong Emperor 乾隆帝 (r. 1735–96) closed all ports for foreign trade except Canton. The merchant official Loum Kiqua (Lin Qiguan 林奇官) had arrived from Canton via Lisbon in London, where he was welcomed with respect and even granted audiences with the king and aristocrats. Unable to speak English, he decided to communicate through music and “played several Chinese tunes upon a musical instrument something resembling a guitar” (Liu 2023, 75). A listener transcribed one of the tunes, and the musical notation was later published as “A Chinese Air” in *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* (74–77).

Decades later, on the other side of the Atlantic, and intrigued by chinoiserie objects and gardening, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), the author of the Declaration of Independence (1776), was able to make a specific sonic request for his plantation estate, Monticello, in Albemarle County, Virginia. A few years after *The Empress of China* arrived as the first American trading vessel in Canton (1784), he successfully ordered two Chinese gongs in 1792. “[O]ne of these gongs reportedly hung from a tree and was used to summon the people living and working at Monticello (enslaved people, free tradesmen, and members of Jefferson’s own family), like mandarins of the streets of a Chinese village, as Jefferson had described their use in his original letter requesting the import” (Milam 2019, 67).

Meanwhile, in Great Britain, Lord George Macartney had set sail for a diplomatic mission to China (1792–94) to negotiate trade relations with the Qianlong Emperor, allowing for an unprecedented foreign experience of Chinese musical expertise, which engendered the arrival of more solid sonic evidence and knowledge, if not inspiration, in Europe. Both sides performed music on this occasion for representation and entertainment, and each, convinced of its superiority, listened to “the other” respectfully, marked by curiosity and shaded by mutual unintelligibility. In his rich analysis of the sonic dimension of this encounter, Thomas Irvine (2020) correctly characterizes it as “a grand tour of listeners.” In numerous publications, and to different degrees, participants commented on their musical experience, so music “was one of the main items of exchange, carefully prepared by the embassy, performed and heard throughout their journey in China” (Lee 2021, 90). For our purposes, perhaps the most interesting of these—as we will see below—was Macartney’s comptroller, John Barrow (1764–1848), who published his *Travels in China* (1804), including images