

# 'Mixed Blood' and Aesthetic Evolution in China's Electroacoustic Music Today

ANTHONY PAUL DE RITIS

Northeastern University, Boston, USA Email: [a.deritis@northeastern.edu](mailto:a.deritis@northeastern.edu)

**Current trends in the works of Chinese composers and their electroacoustic music today embrace increased abstraction and individual self-expression, while others celebrate the importance of clear communication and a unified 'Chinese model'. How is one to derive the current state of a Western art form imported by China, in the context of unparalleled sharing and convergence of ideas made possible by the internet and extensive intercultural exchange in today's globalised world? And how important is it to identify and measure the level of Chineseness in the artistic output of today's electroacoustic music composers that embrace Chinese elements – whether born inside or outside of China? This article seeks to unpack some of the current thinking shared by institutional leaders, such as Yu Feng, president of the Central Conservatory of Music; scholars of Chinese electroacoustic music, such as Marc Battier, Ken Fields, Leigh Landy, Yang YINUO and Annie Yen-Ling Liu; and several composers and thought leaders in the most recent generations of Chinese electroacoustic music.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Mandarin, the word *hūnxuè* (混血) is a person of mixed race. Literally translated as 'mixed blood', it is common for people in China to say that mixed-race children are especially beautiful and intelligent (Gallup 2018). As a composer of electroacoustic music works employing Chinese traditional instruments, works for Chinese orchestra and mixed works for Chinese and Western instruments together, I often refer to my compositions as being of 'mixed blood'. There are, of course, other phrases that capture music born from multicultural inspiration. For example, the phrase 'cross-cultural collision' appears in the welcoming remarks of Yu Feng, president of the Central Conservatory of Music (CCOM) in Beijing, who recently presided over the 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Studies of Chinese Music in a Global Perspective, 'Contrasts and Convergence in Chinese Music':

Thoughts flashed by collision, and culture flourished by convergence. In China's long and profound history, every cross-cultural collision and convergence has brought about innovation and leap in music development. Standing at the intersection of the era of globalization, we must look back at history and look ahead to the future

as well as take root in the local and take the eye on the world. At the present time of unprecedented integration of Chinese and Western music culture, it's both our mission and glory in promoting the development and prosperity of Chinese music culture around the world. (Yu 2021: 4)

I see 'mixed blood' and 'cross-cultural collision' to be analogous when reflecting upon the cross-fertilisation of Western and Chinese origins driving the development of Chinese electroacoustic music today. It is a sort of 'cultural version of DNA mixing', its own 'musical ecosystem' (Oteri 2018). Other terms that share the biological sensibility of 'mixed blood' is 'hybridity' and 'hybridization', as used by Liu and Yang: 'electroacoustic music produced in East Asia offers a platform for connecting contemporary practices to traditional art forms and aesthetics within a context defined by hybridity as well as interactions between the "East" and "West"' (Liu and Yang 2022: 194). One might also consider the term 'mash-up', borrowed from popular music, referencing something new created by combining the elements of two or more sources; or how practitioners of interdisciplinary methodology describe new and innovative thinking derived from placing disciplines 'side-by-side' to see what one can teach the other.<sup>1</sup> One more phrase used to reflect on Chinese electroacoustic music is 'mixed language': 'Chinese composers not only directly inherited Western electroacoustic music technology, but also re-empowered it with poetic performance. In other words, they assigned Western technology to Eastern interpretation ... [through] this mixed language method' (Yang 2019).

In an effort to create a distinctively Chinese practice of electroacoustic music, in a musical genre imported from the West, Chinese musicologists Liu and Yang

<sup>1</sup>In fact, President Yu notes how cross-cultural collision can lead to innovation in music development. A sentiment echoed by several Chinese expatriates living in the United States and Europe, such as Guo Gan (果敢), master erhu virtuoso, resident of Paris for over 20 years and recipient of the Chevalier award from the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Guo cites how cross-cultural collaboration leads to finding something different in the 'universe of mysterious sounds' offered by electroacoustic music. That said, Guo also cites the need for composers to aspire towards more thoughtful collaboration, to avoid 'simple imitation' and 'the lack of sufficient understanding of Eastern instruments and performers'.

expand on what composer Zhang Xiaofu (张小夫) has called a ‘Chinese model’ of electroacoustic music in their paper ‘Technological Mediation and Traditional Culture in Chinese Electroacoustic Music’ (Liu and Yang 2022). The criteria for evaluating excellence regarding the Chinese model aesthetic appears to be the level to which composers can ‘insightfully and skillfully’ communicate ‘elements of traditional culture with audiences’. Liu and Yang call this ‘representation’, or what I refer to herein as ‘Chineseness’. And the level of Chineseness, that is, the amount of Chinese-inspired elements in works that blend Chinese and Western sources, should aspire to be obvious and recognisable by its audience, if it is going to be judged favourably against the ‘aesthetic norm’ of the Chinese model (Liu and Yang 2022).

## 2. THE CHINESE MODEL, SEMIOTICS AND THE THREE PATHS

Towards ascertaining the level – and the importance – of Chineseness in today’s Chinese electroacoustic music, I consulted with several scholars, composers and performers via Zoom-based interviews, and considered several music compositions.

Yang YINUO (杨依诺) is a professor at the Nanjing University of the Arts. In her publication *Symbols and Listening: Mixed Language in the First Generation of Chinese Electronic Music Works*, she states that Chinese composers of electroacoustic music tended to ‘adopt Chinese elements to establish its distinctive identity’ and references the semiotic theory of Kofi Agawu; in particular, ‘extroversive’ and ‘introversive’ semiotics. Extroversive semiotics as it relates to music are signs and symbols that reference various sounds composers use to imitate extra-musical objects to achieve immediate communication with their audiences. Introversive semiotics refer to formal or narrative structures that generate poetic meaning (Yang 2019), or a system of inward-pointing signs and symbols made up of sounds or musical events within the work itself, such as how keys and themes relate to each other in purely musical terms (Taruskin 2009). Introversive semiotics also signal moments within the piece such as beginning, middle and end, as opposed to extroversive semiotics, which deal with signals external to the piece (Newton 2013).

Leigh Landy, director of the Music, Technology and Innovation Research Centre at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK, introduced ‘three types of influences or “paths”’ that serve as sources of Chinese inspiration to today’s composers of electroacoustic music in his paper, ‘The Three Paths: Cultural Retention in Contemporary Chinese Electroacoustic Music’ (Landy 2020). These three paths are: 1) sampling; 2) the use of Chinese

instruments and/or musical approaches; and 3) inspiration from Chinese culture (e.g., Buddhism, Taoism, poetry, philosophy).

Yang and Landy both offer methods of assessing Chineseness in Chinese electroacoustic music ranging from easy and obvious, to higher levels of abstraction. Landy’s three paths mostly embrace extroversive signs and symbols; whereas Yang’s interpretation also embraces aspects of Agawu’s ‘built-in’ elements related to the use of music technologies and form. Furthermore, Yang assigns the use of technology in electroacoustic music to be structural symbols of a ‘poetic’ nature; for example, the use of looping to express the cycle of life in Tibetan Buddhism, or the use of reverb to represent water, which also plays an important role in Buddhist philosophy as well as Chinese shanshui painting. Both Yang and Landy recognise the importance of Chinese electroacoustic music composers’ intent to illustrate some level of Chineseness in their works if they are to merit some level of aesthetic integrity. Furthermore, Liu and Yang suggest this *must* be the case if a work is to invoke national characteristics and meet the criteria of the Chinese model; in this case, Chineseness is signified by ‘referentiality’:

Referentiality is a central aspect . . . of Chinese electroacoustic music as a whole . . . most of the sampled sounds retain some degree of recognizable links to their origins . . . For the ‘Chinese model’ . . . electroacoustic music must maintain a social and cultural function linked to the listening attitudes and abilities of audiences. Zhang [Xiaofu] has stressed the importance of passing down the ‘legacy’ of tradition through electroacoustic music. (Liu and Yang 2022)

In some manner, these authors (and myself) seek to identify and measure the collisions, mash-ups, settings of texts placed side by side, hybridity and the general ‘mixing’ of Chinese and Western elements in Chinese electroacoustic music whether it be through language, arts and cultural practice, or musical DNA; and to measure the obviousness of Chineseness in these works in both simple terms (i.e., ‘What can the audience hear?’) and more academic terms, such as those borrowed from linguistics (extroversive vs introversive semiotics). In the section that follows, I reflect on several recent composers’ works by way of the criteria listed earlier in order to better understand the state of Chinese electroacoustic music today; and in particular, in the context of the proposed ‘Chinese model’.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Five of the six composers I reference in this article I encountered over the last ten-year period; this includes during my residency as a Fulbright senior research scholar at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing (2011), at several Musicacoustica-Beijing festivals, at the International Computer Music Conference (ICMC) in Shanghai (2017), and during my most recent sabbatical at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hamburg (2019). One composer, Chin Ting ‘Patrick’ Chan, I came across only recently, having heard (and been thoroughly impressed by) his music that was being presented in the listening room of the Jacksonville (Florida) Electroacoustic Music Festival (jemFest), November 2021.

### 3. QI 'MAGGIE' MENGJIE (齐梦婕)

Qi 'Maggie' Mengjie (b. 1989) is a composer and multimedia sound artist, currently working as a lecturer at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing (commensurate with a tenure track assistant professor in the US system). Previously Qi completed her Masters and PhD, at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, as well as a post-doc with a focus on artificial intelligence and music. Qi's education exhibits wide breadth, having been mentored by Zhang Xiaofu, one of the most prominent figures in the history of China's electroacoustic music, and in live electronics and multimedia from Jin Ping (金平), now professor of Composition at the China Conservatory of Music. Qi also studied for two years at the City University of New York, including under Morton Subotnick, a pioneer in the development of electronic music and multimedia performance.

In Qi's composition *Breathing*, for cello, electronics and video (2018), it is not clear to the listener that any Chinese elements were employed, as was the case in two of Qi's earlier works: *Echoes for Woodblock from Peking Opera* (2010) and *Lin Chong Fled at Night* (for Peking Opera performer and electroacoustic recording 2015), which featured samples of Chinese percussion and traditional singing (pre-recorded and performed live). These earlier works aligned well with Landy's paths 1 and 2 (Landy 2020), and with the Chinese model (Liu and Yang 2022). *Breathing* uses notated and pre-recorded cello phrases as pre-composition from which she selected audio fragments as source material, and then processed using GRM tools. The visuals in *Breathing* consist of a minimalist sequence of horizontal and vertical white lines against a black background that are increasingly angular, generating textures, patterns and rectangular blocks.

Qi's Chineseness in *Breathing* is represented by her reference to meditation and its connection to Chinese philosophy (path 3). However, Qi's reference to meditation is also inspired by the Western composer Pauline Oliveros and her method of composing sonic meditations for the purpose of achieving deep listening and expanded consciousness (O'Brien 2016). Meditation is a primary tenet of Buddhism, employed to 'see oneself more clearly' in an effort to achieve enlightenment (Lan and Qiu 2008); but here Chinese philosophy is intermingled with Qi's experience studying in New York, where Qi embraced aspects of minimalism from New York's downtown music scene and other inspirations from Western new music such as Pauline Oliveros's eccentric sound exercises. In addition, despite the sparseness at the onset, the work has a teleology reminiscent of end-accented formal structures typical of Western classical music, that is, it rises to a climax.

Qi's *Breathing* is an East–West cross-cultural collision, though at the onset one would not know that this was the work of a Chinese artist at all. After a discussion with the composer, and from reviewing her programme notes, the intent of Qi's Chineseness is revealed. This piece embraces the exploitation of space, where Qi uses digital delay to give single notes of the sampled cello 'more extension, more space, more imagination'.

When gauging the Chineseness in Qi Mengjie's *Breathing*, the signs and symbols employed are less representational and more abstract than in her previous works. (Though, once the listener is guided on what to listen for, the connection is less abstract.) In this sense, Yang's use of introversive semiotics to reference the poetics of technology applies, linking *Breathing* to Qi's cultural heritage using poetic (abstract) symbolism: 'The use of technology as a poetic symbol to express the spirit of traditional Chinese religions is a part that has been seldom noticed in the current Chinese electronic music research' (Yang 2019). That is, if the digital processing (the digital delay that enhances the sensibility of space and meditation) is linked to Chinese religion and philosophy, and if the composer's intent is to make this link clear, then the connection to the Chinese model is established.

As a student of Maestro Zhang, the need to identify with her Chinese identity and to adhere to the proposed Chinese model through typical timbres and rhythmic patterns was strong. However, now the influence of Western elements, such as the minimalist aesthetic and formal structure, has significant impact in defining Qi as a composer. As does Qi's gender identification with the pioneering American electronic music composer Pauline Oliveros, which Qi shared during a conversation via Zoom: 'I do feel more inspired with [Oliveros] being a feminist, and by the lyrics and vocals in her pieces that strongly highlight feminism – it really speaks to me. The deep listening method and phrasing fit well with my current musical preferences.'

### 4. FU XIAO (付晓)

Fu Xiao (b. 1979) is a multimedia composer born in Zhengzhou, China. She received her Bachelor's degree in electronic music composition (1997–2001) from the Wuhan Conservatory of Music under Professor Liu Jian (刘健) and credits Wu Yuebei (吴粤北) as her primary mentor.<sup>3</sup> She then worked as a music journalist and editor at Henan Radio Station where she wrote,

<sup>3</sup>In 1987 the Wuhan Conservatory was one of the first institutions in China to establish an electronic music studio, founded by Liu Jian (1954–2012) and Wu Yuebei (b. 1957), and soon after opened the first Bachelor's programme in electronic music (Battier and Liao 2018).

edited and produced more than 3,000 radio programmes. In 2022, Fu completed her doctorate (Dr. sc. mus.) at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hamburg.

When I asked Fu whether there were aspects of her work that were obviously Chinese, she stated that sometimes she references a Chinese melody, or uses a Chinese text. This is the case in her work *Longing*, for flute, percussion, electronics and video (2015), which employs Chinese calligraphy, folk song and a Chinese bamboo flute (*dizi*). In *Longing*, the sonic and visual elements portray Fu's Chineseness very directly; though, interestingly, juxtaposed with Western flute and mixed percussion (both Chinese and Western). Like Qi Mengjie, Fu's earlier work exhibits more direct communication of Chineseness to the audience, employing clear Chinese signs and symbols reminiscent of extroversive semiotics and consistent with the Chinese model.

However, in her more recent work, *Amnesia 2.0*, for percussion, dancer and tape (2020), the cross-fertilisation is more pronounced. If it were not for the Chinese percussion, the tape part would not easily be identifiable as particularly Chinese inspired. *Amnesia 2.0* is the third of four movements in Fu's 'dance theater' work, *Enactment::Interchange*, which employs a set of five paigu, a Suzhou white drum, Chinese bass drum and a Tibetan singing bowl. The use of Chinese instruments aligns this work along Landy's path 2. In her programme notes, Fu cites that meaning in the work is connected to topics related to Buddhism and Taoism, and is derived from 'old Eastern aesthetics ... brought into a new media context', which aligns with Landy's path 3, inspiration from Chinese culture. When asked directly if there was something specific and uniquely Chinese about the tape part, Fu corroborated my earlier assessment, 'I don't think it is obvious. I'm not really sure if that is true.' (Although Fu did suggest that the 'character' of *Amnesia 2.0* might borrow its slow pacing from Chinese culture.)

Fu cites how her musical expression continues to evolve as she matures as a composer, and especially during her time living in Hamburg where, Fu suggests, the great increase in the exchange of people and ideas presented at the Hochschule, and the internet, is the principal cause for this evolution. 'In Wuhan, I didn't see anyone from the West or from Europe ... I didn't even know IRCAM.'

Fu Xiao states that Chineseness is inherent in her creative work, and using Chinese elements is as natural to her as eating Chinese food. However, in the context of younger composers such as Dong Zhou (周东), Fu is quick to point out that they are from different generations. Although Fu believes it is 'important to have Chinese elements, it is not a requirement in my music', she still believes 'it is a good

way to share the Chinese culture'. For younger composers, this sentiment is not necessarily the same. As a result, Fu believes that Zhou has 'more open goals' than she does.

## 5. ZHOU DONG (周东)

Zhou Dong (b. 1992), born in Shanghai, is the youngest composer referenced in this article. She is the latest in several generations of musicians (going back to her great grandfather) who play traditional Chinese Sizhu Music, though she was trained in piano and violin from a young age.<sup>4</sup> Zhou gained her BA in electroacoustic music composition from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and an MA in multimedia composition at the Hamburg Hochschule für Musik und Theater. She cites Dr Georg Hajdu as her mentor.

When I asked Zhou about her Chineseness, she had some strong pushback: 'My music is not always obviously Chinese. When I talk about the Chinese influence in my music, it is mainly Chinese ideas and traditions, and especially those that are having the greatest impact in society.' Zhou pointed out that although there is such a long history of Chinese culture and tradition, it too is constantly changing, even in her own lifetime.

Zhou's composition *Jia*, for violin, electronics and performance (2017), features herself as an actor and violinist, as well as composer. The title refers to the verb 'to marry'. Zhou points out that there are two words in Chinese that offer different perspectives based on gender. The word 'qu' (娶), 'to marry', means for a male to 'let a girl into your family'. 'Jia' (嫁), 'to marry', refers to a female to 'let yourself out of your original family'.

*Jia* opens with Zhou lying next to a violin shrouded in a red cloth, the same red material covering the violin. She is also wearing a red dress. The initial sounds are percussive: Zhou taps her feet on the ground, rubs the violin strings and taps around the various surfaces until she begins to pluck the strings (the violin and table surface were amplified). With the cloth over her face, she is at first blindly and tactilely getting to know the instrument. The first sounds from the 'tape' do not come until about two minutes into the work, including digitally delayed strikes from hitting the violin, and sounds from rubbing the strings, played back slowly. After Zhou removes the red cloth revealing her face, it is the first time she looks upon her arranged 'partner', and caresses the instrument before more aggressive percussive taps on and around the instrument. Pre-recorded and undecipherable vocal fragments appear roughly one-third into the work,

<sup>4</sup>Sizhu refers to the silk and bamboo music tradition indigenous to the region along the south bank of the lower Yangzi River, including the cities of Shanghai and Suzhou.

later transposed and processed along with layers of digitally delayed plucked strings. Halfway through the work, Zhou finally picks up the instrument, cued by a long, pre-recorded bowed open string, and begins to bow the violin herself. She then speaks to the violin in its 'language' – 'Arco!' 'Piano!' 'Diminuendo!' 'Pizzicato!' and so on – she quite literally is getting to know the violin.

Two-thirds into the work, electroacoustic layers are being added, increasingly distorted. Zhou's calls to the violin (in Italian) are becoming louder and louder until she tunes the violin in real-time (to an A440, also part of the pre-recorded track). She then plays a recognisable phrase from the *Butterfly Lovers* Concerto, one of the most famous Chinese works of orchestral music. At the climax of *Jia*, there is distortion and a sonic build-up of all the materials that have been captured in real time and processed. Zhou, and the violin, have consummated their relationship.

Zhou's *Jia* is a social commentary on arranged marriage. Its Chineseness comes from cultural association. Traditionally, on the wedding day in China, the bride wears a red dress and covers her face with a red veil. Historically, most marriages were arranged, and the first time the bride and groom usually meet would be on their wedding day. An additional representation is the quote from the *Butterfly Lovers* Concerto (which, interestingly, originated as a work for violin and Western orchestra, and was only later arranged as an erhu concerto with Chinese orchestra).

*Jia* represents the most recent generation of Chinese composers less concerned with representing Chinese culture, instead clearly embodying intermingled traits of East and West – 'mixed blood'. According to Landy's paths, it does reference Chinese culture, and quite literally 'samples' something recognisably Chinese (in the *Butterfly Lovers* quote). However, Zhou's sentiment seems to be less about following a Chinese model with the intent of 'passing down the legacy of tradition', and instead offers a critical commentary on that tradition, and does so in a manner that is abstract, representational (such that audiences can easily follow the narrative), and (I would argue) unique to Zhou as an individual rather than representative of her national identity.

## 6. CHIN TING 'PATRICK' CHAN (陳展霆)

Electroacoustic music composer Chin Ting (Patrick) Chan (b. 1986) is currently assistant professor of Music Composition at Ball State University, having earned his DMA from the University of Missouri–Kansas City. He was born in Guangzhou and raised in Hong Kong. Chan is motivated by forms of expression most often inspired by abstract patterns he discovers in daily objects, imaginary landscapes

and human interactions, but depicts his subject matter from unexpected perspectives, allowing listeners to reimagine their surroundings. Chan has been a fellow and guest composer at festivals such as IRCAM's ManiFeste, the ISCM World Music Days Festival and UNESCO's International Rostrum of Composers, and has worked with ensembles such as City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong, Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble.

Chan came to the United States from Hong Kong in 2003, when he was 17; therefore, his entire experience of higher education occurred within the United States, and he did not come to grips with his Chinese cultural heritage, let alone Chinese aesthetics in his creative work, until later in life. However, as Chan gets older and he looks deeper into the electroacoustic medium, his cultural heritage is increasingly important.

Chan's work *Rituals* offers hyper-pristine audio quality and mastery of register and space. There is a precision in Chan's music such that no sound appears gratuitous, and reminds one of excellent works of multilayered counterpoint. *Rituals* uses sound sources that include air, wind chimes, metals, water, piano resonance and various drum patterns. Chan sees the exploration of his Chineseness, and how he is inspired by Chinese aesthetics, to be personal instead of obvious in its representation. He shares that his greatest influence might not be from music but, instead, from philosophy (consistent with Landy's path 3). Although Chan studied with two of the most highly regarded Chinese composers who migrated from China to the United States, Chen Yi and Zhou Long,<sup>5</sup> he does not consider them to have had a direct influence on the 'Chinese thinking' in his music.

When listening to *Rituals*, one does not hear any obvious representations of Chinese elements. Rather, Chan is interested in less direct communication, such as one might find in Chinese painting, brush ink painting and, in particular, the work of the 'shanshui' (山水) painting style. 'Shanshui painting is not an open window for the viewer's eye, it is an object for the viewer's mind. Shanshui painting is more like a vehicle of philosophy' (Shanshui 2008). Chan's electroacoustic music is not about realism, but about bringing the arts, and the viewer, to another state of mind, where the viewer can find something personal of their own. He seeks to focus on the Chineseness that resonates with his upbringing, 'the whole culture is less direct ... like how the parents treat their kids, they don't tell you "I Love You", they show you.'

<sup>5</sup>Chen Yi and Zhou Long are two Chinese music pioneers, present at the 'beginning of electronic music experiments' at the Central Conservatory of Music in 1984 (Battier and Liao 2018).

When I asked about Chineseness in his music, Chan admits that his aesthetic is not particularly Chinese. Instead, 'my music is ambiguous, it asks questions, but I don't like giving answers'. He hopes that his audience will come out of concert halls asking more questions and that his music will provide a platform for listeners to explore more. Music that does not have a complete form; he would rather the listeners say 'Oh, what did I just hear?' and have them 'feel very unfulfilled'.

Chan believes that composers such as those who participated in CCOM's 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Studies of Chinese Music in a Global Perspective are from a completely different generation, where the dissemination of Chinese cultural aesthetics is paramount. Instead, as Chin Ting states: 'When I think about form and structure, I seek to compose in such a way that doesn't sound like there is a beginning and an end.' In this sense, Chan believes that his music does share a very Chinese aesthetic, very philosophical, like reincarnation: 'When there is no beginning and no end, you are in a completely different state of mind. When you go to a concert, I have the opportunity to teleport the listener to some other place, a place that exists only in their imagination.'

Chan clearly prefers to avoid extroversive semiotics, and is perhaps better associated with introversive semiotics – but even the notion of signs and symbols that are unique to his individual works are not intended to create a specific formal structure. Like shanshui painting, Chan seeks to blur the edges: 'Shanshui paintings have no fixed perspective as Western landscape paintings do' (Shanshui 2008). If anything, Chan's music is synergistic with Yang's notion of the poetics associated with the use of music technology as introversive structural symbols.

## 7. JIN PING (金平)

When asked to comment on Chineseness in Chinese electroacoustic music, Jin Ping, currently professor of Composition at the China Conservatory of Music, stated that, historically, Chinese composers using a 'pure Western concept', that is, electroacoustic music that is not influenced by Chinese elements, 'is quite rare'. There was a feeling that you 'must' include some aspect of Chineseness, or one would just do it automatically. However, in doing this, one might end up with music that represents a 'lack of depth', or would lack a deeper meaning of what it means to represent Chineseness, or Chinese influence. There is a lot of 'superficial' music. A lack of critical, philosophical or 'deep, very serious thinking'.

For example, Jin believes that only a few composers employ Chinese folk song elements in electroacoustic music (because it is difficult to do well); instead, they tend to use Chinese cultural elements such as a

Chinese title, subject, or imagery, in order to enhance the Chineseness of their music. In his works employing real-time electronics, Jin only occasionally deals with purely sonic elements, that is, sounds one would not associate with a particular country or region. Rather, as in his new media theatre work *Ferry Tale*, he is one of the few composers to directly reference Chinese folk song elements, Chinese stories (or legend) and stage elements that were recognisably Chinese (such as costuming and set design) in order to inject something Chinese into the electronic music. And in his work *The Lost Sound*, Jin does not attempt to be Chinese at all. He sees this work to be purely Western, including backgrounds, images, references to Western female composers and even adopted Western feminist perspectives.

When I shared with Jin my concept of 'mixed blood' in current Chinese electroacoustic music, he was not convinced: 'Current electroacoustic music in China is not 50 per cent and 50 per cent, it is still quite Western.' Instead, he believes it is more accurate to describe this music as a Western form or genre that a composer may decide to bring some Chineseness to on purpose, or otherwise might come unconsciously. Jin was similarly questioning my suggestion of 'aesthetic evolution' in Chinese electroacoustic music. He suggested that the influence of Zhang Xiaofu still very much remains. He agrees that Chinese composers since Zhang have gradually added something, but believes that electroacoustic music is still 'really a Western genre, where Chinese composers want to know how to do it, with all of the necessary training techniques, but bring to it their own personal, cultural background'. The concept of Chineseness becomes less and less relevant. Jin referenced Thomas Friedman and the sensibility found within his book *The World is Flat*, that is, because of globalisation and the internet, the playing field between industrial and emerging market countries is levelling (Friedman 2007). Jin states:

For a unique style or school of composition, you need a certain degree of isolation, and you need creative space without the influx of so much daily information and so much influence from outside. Nowadays it is not relevant to Chinese music or any music or art to form a distinct and unique school, instead we are really in a completely new era, which has destroyed the necessary soil to grow this kind of uniqueness, including cultural uniqueness. The current generation, they grew up playing Chopin and Bach, for them that is what is natural, Chopin and Bach is in their blood.

## 8. SHEN YE (沈葉)

Since 2004, Shen Ye has been professor of composition at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Although his musical output consists primarily of acoustic works for Western orchestra, Chinese

orchestra, and mixed ensembles of Asian and Western instruments (and very successfully, as can be seen by his 2019 publishing agreement with Breitkopf and Härtel), his work *Ondulation* for piano solo and electronics (2014) premiered at IRCAM is exceptional in the integration of acoustic and electronic sound sources.

Shen was also not a fan of my phrase 'mixed blood', as he stated in a WeChat-based conversation after reading one of the early drafts of this article: 'cultures and music themselves are constantly influencing each other, as they always have throughout history ... but the use of the word "mixed" brings your expression into a complex and unnecessary context of race and ethnicity. Also, I think the term "West-China" or "West-East" is too old-fashioned for today and tomorrow's musical culture.' For Shen, 'mixed race' connotes 'cultural isolationism'. Instead, he sees the ultimate goal to be 'an active artistic identity' and 'creative artistic attitude'. He points to his curiosity of different musical cultures, engaging with different cultures and traditions when making music:

Looking to the future, the whole world has a common problem to solve: how do people who are free achieve a new identity? The way forward for humanity lies in this question. We, as creative musicians, free-thinking composers, traversing different histories and cultures, are answering, one work at a time, the question: What difficulties and bad habits stand in the way of human freedom? How can music and creativity make a free mind? Do free people fail to understand each other for various reasons? How can music and creativity help people to identify with each other?

Shen's perspective is refreshing and forward looking, and brilliantly encapsulates what I think is the burgeoning of creative individualism in China, which begins to decrease the importance of Chineseness when considering the aesthetic evolution of Chinese electroacoustic music, or at least suggests how quickly the Chinese model can become outdated in today's globalised world.

## 9. CONCLUSION

When observing the history of Chinese electroacoustic music and the state of Chinese electroacoustic music today, it is understood that this art form was imported from the West by China. In order to create its own national identity with this medium, China (largely based upon the creativity and direction of Zhang Xiaofu) derived its own 'Chinese model', where composers began to introduce Chinese elements – their own musical and artistic DNA – into their electroacoustic work.

The three paths introduced by Leigh Landy reveal three increasingly abstract paths of Chineseness, from sampling Chinese instruments to music representative

of Chinese culture, such as philosophy, religion and painting. Yang Yinuo borrows from linguistics to help us identify and understand signs and symbols that represent Chineseness in electroacoustic works. Extroversive semiotics represent aspects of Chinese art and culture from extra-musical sources, similar to those identified by Landy. Introversive semiotics represents signs and symbols introduced and identified from within the electroacoustic music art object itself, not unlike themes or gestures that recur as one might find in a classically Western formal analysis. That said, Yang artfully introduces the concept of poetic significance in her use of introversive semiotics, best suited for the most abstract Chinese electroacoustic music, which draws connections between philosophical concepts and the technological manipulation of sound. This, in turn, provides an approach to link abstract electroacoustic music with the Chinese model that Liu and Yang, together, suggest Chinese composers were required to adopt such that Chinese audiences could more readily identify the Chineseness in the music.

Based on interviews, readings of pertinent texts, and the analysis of recent electroacoustic works, I surmise that Chinese electroacoustic music today is trending away from explicit (obvious) elements of Chineseness (as seen in the works of the earliest masters of Chinese electroacoustic music) towards increasingly abstract representations in recent works, and especially by China's youngest generation of composers. In addition, there seems to be a shift away from Chinese composers seeking to identify with a pure Chinese electroacoustic music tradition towards composers seeking to find themselves, their unique voices, in their composition activity – this will lead to innovative ideas and new forms of artistic expression.<sup>6</sup>

Here I draw synergies to a previous paper I published in a different context: creativity and innovation in new products and services by China's youngest generation, titled 'Inhibitors to Innovation in Chinese Students: The Case of the Ballet Slipper', which received the best paper award at the 5th Annual International Conference on Innovation & Entrepreneurship in Singapore (De Ritis, Friar and Zhang 2015). In that paper, my colleagues and I argue that

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that all the Chinese electroacoustic music composers included in this article have either taught or studied abroad; and one might wonder, justifiably, if I would have come to the same conclusions herein should I have interviewed and compared several composers who had not studied abroad. This is a valid perspective, and would make for a meaningful discussion. That said, in my experience, one would be hard-pressed to identify several Chinese electroacoustic music composers from the most recent generation who have completed graduate study, achieved some level of prominence, and *did not* study abroad. Several of the most leading Chinese institutions now strongly encourage if not require its graduate students to spend a year abroad, with costs generally covered by the Chinese government, most notably via the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC). I, myself, have hosted three such graduate students in the last ten-year period.

China has traditionally pursued a top-down strategy to innovation, instead of a bottom-up approach that capitalises on individual thinking, and suggests that there have been several cultural impediments to individual creativity. One such example is revealed in the traditional Chinese saying: ‘the shot hits the bird that pokes its head out’ (*qiang dachu tou niao*, 枪打出头鸟). That is, historically, individualism and nonconformity are discouraged – the group supersedes the individual. In this paper, my colleagues and I argue that there is an evolutionary shift in China’s business environment towards balancing ‘individual slices of genius’ with ‘the collective genius’, with emphasis on the former. And that this is a sign of the rapid evolution of Chinese new products and services not from a culture that borrows and copies, but from one that innovates and leads; and the evidence shows that the youngest generation is embracing this approach to creativity. The same can be said for the recent generation of Chinese electroacoustic music composers. That is, younger composers are shifting away from conforming to an explicit Chinese model, in favour of unique and individual self-expression.

In my interview with Frank Kouwenhoven, director of the journal *CHIME*, he shared his thoughts with respect to the penchant for individualism in China’s youngest generation: ‘the majority of Chinese youth don’t feel the same pressures to identify with strong traditional backgrounds like their parents or grandparents. Instead, they seek to find their own voice, and it’s pretty hard for them! How do you find your own voice in that kind of environment? Thousands of composers; they are no longer struggling to identify with being Chinese, but are rather concerned with, “Where am I?”’

Benoit Granier, a lecturer at the Central Conservatory of Music for ten years (from late 2007 to June 2016) before taking his current position at Coventry University in England, concurs with this sentiment. With Zhang Xiaofu’s direction and support, Granier brought several composers to China for Beijing Musicacoustica, including John Chowning, Jean-Claude Risset, Richard Boulanger and Mark Phillips. Granier believes that the electroacoustic music composers at CCOM benefitted greatly from the cultural exchange and that students ‘were exposed to new ideas [and were] able to feed on that knowledge’. The need to represent any direct sense of Chineseness is increasingly less apparent in the most recent generation of Chinese electroacoustic music composers.

In 2018, when asked about the importance of representing Chineseness in her work by Landy, in the context of the three paths, Qi ‘Maggie’ Mengjie replied, ‘I am a Chinese composer and need to keep my specialist [*sic*] and character’ (Landy 2020). However, in 2022, Qi no longer feels the need to explicitly prioritise Chinese elements to express her musical ideas. Rather, her Chineseness is expressed

naturally. I believe that this difference in compositional intent is important, as it reflects the shift of composers’ active to passive (but certainly no less potent) expression of cultural identity.

One senses a creative tension between the increasing individualism of China’s youngest generation of composers and those who seek to toe the line of China’s ‘institutional and political frameworks’ of a pure Chinese model of music composition (Liu and Yang 2022), while simultaneously recognising the ‘unprecedented integration of Chinese and Western music culture’ (Yu 2021). Sensibilities of mixed language, mixed blood, hybridity and cross-cultural collision are acknowledged herein – so what does the future hold for the future of China’s electroacoustic music? Current trends seem to embrace an increase in abstraction and unique self-expression, while others celebrate the importance of clear communication with audiences and a unified model. Liu and Yang recognise the ‘tensions between representation and abstraction’. Similarly, there are tensions between national and individual identity. Of course, identifying as proudly Chinese and aspiring towards one’s creative and musical individualism are not mutually exclusive. The current trend of China’s most recent generation of composers towards embracing uniqueness and self-expression will only enhance the innovation in China’s musical output, and the world of music has much to gain from it.

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