

Introduction to the Special Issue on Musics of Coeval East Asia

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A number of scholars in critical Asian Studies have pointed out the persistent construction of East Asia as the Other across Anglophone humanities.¹ They have cited ideologies that have continued to motivate the essentialist construction of East Asia as static, archaic, and separate from the West – from orientalism, a hallmark of European and US imperialisms, to post-war Boasian culturalism, which emerged as a kind of critique of cultural standardization brought on by Western imperialisms.² It would be an exaggeration to say that current Anglophone scholarship on the music of East Asia overtly partakes in the othering practices of the past. However, the legacies nevertheless continue to shape the epistemic ground of this scholarship in subtle ways. This is seen, for example, in the ways in which knowledge is organized and presented in reference books, textbooks, and syllabi. ‘Chinese’, ‘Japanese’, and ‘Korean’ music is depicted first and foremost as a range of traditional musics; Western, popular, or other hybrid forms of music do make an appearance but are given secondary or supplementary status.³ This structure of knowledge reinforces a ‘United Nations’ model where nations are represented by traditional music and exist within nationally bounded space and time. It is difficult to paint in broad strokes the rapidly changing terrain of recent research; however, it is possible to locate a constructivist strain, which, despite its critical work, still maps music onto notions of national or ethnic identity. In this constructivist frame, there is a productive recognition that the traditional in twentieth-century music is reconstructed through the identity discourses of nationalism and globalization.⁴ However, what lies outside this reconstructed soundscape remains underexplored, and thus music remains tethered to a ‘nation-bound, identity-driven hermeneutics’.⁵

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- 1 Naoki Sakai, ‘Theory and Asian Humanity: On the Question of Humanitas and Anthropos’, *Postcolonial Studies* 13/4 (2010); Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Shu-mei Shih, ‘Racializing Area Studies, Defetishizing China’, *positions asia critique* 27/1 (2019).
- 2 See also Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York and London: Verso, 1991).
- 3 Broadly speaking, this model can be found in the *Garland Encyclopedia* volume on East Asia. However, it should be noted that there is a degree of conceptual and analytical diversity among the chapters as they are written by different writers. *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Vol. 7, East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea*, ed. Robert C. Provine, Yoshiko Tokumaru, and J. Lawrence Witzleben (New York: Garland, 2002).
- 4 For examples, see Keith Howard, *Preserving Korean Music: Intangible Cultural Properties as Icons of Identity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006); Andrew Killick, *In Search of Traditional Opera: Discourses of Changguk* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010).
- 5 Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 14. For a critique of the conception of ‘identity’ in ethnomusicology, see

One consequence of such disciplinary legacy is that it reinforces the perception that East Asian music was and is isolated from other parts of the world. To appreciate just how resolutely isolated East Asia has appeared in Anglophone academic and popular imagination despite long histories of interconnections and translocality, it may be instructive to juxtapose it against the taken-for-granted images of hybridity that pervade the understanding of areas influenced by transatlantic connections, such as Africa, Latin America, North America, and Europe.⁶ This is not to propose a comparison of regions that have been affected by different scales and topographies of power relations, but to ask why separation, distinctness, and uniqueness have been such persistent assumptions for East Asia in Anglophone music studies.

This special issue seeks to counter the legacies of this isolationist hermeneutics by centring a framework of cotemporality and connectedness that I call ‘coeval’ after Johannes Fabian. ‘Coeval’ and ‘coevalness’ invoke Fabian’s ‘denial of coevalness’, a phrase he coined to critique how Western anthropology makes its object by relegating the ethnographic object to another time.⁷ Since this phrase appeared in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983), it has been used as ‘the gloss for a situation where the Other’s hierarchically distancing localization suppresses the simultaneity and contemporaneity of the ethnographic encounter’.⁸ According to Fabian, anthropology has a ‘politically precarious dimension’ not only because of the reification and taxonomic orientation entailed in the discursive construction of the object, but also because of the discipline’s history of being unaware of such conditions of knowledge production.⁹ Fabian himself was much less concerned about theorizing coevalness per se as a new systematic framework for analysis, as his priority was to generate a radical critique;¹⁰ and in the hands of the subsequent scholars, the concept of coeval has been contentious, open to interpretation, and dependent on context.¹¹ This special issue uses ‘coeval’ and ‘coevalness’ to mean a historiographical framework that realigns East Asia *with* the world, temporally and spatially, so that what happened and happens in East Asia is not assumed to be discontinuous from the rest of the world.

The articles of this special issue are premised on a China, Japan, or Korea where meaningful music practices are assembled via the circulation of music, ideas, and people at inter-regional

Nicholas Tochka, ‘To “Enlighten and Beautify”: Western Music and the Modern Project of Personhood in Albania, c. 1906–1924’, *Ethnomusicology* 59/3 (2015).

6 For a related critique, see Philip V. Bohlman, ‘Introduction: World Music’s Histories’, in *The Cambridge History of World Music*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16.

7 More specifically, his critique was directed at Anglo-American and French anthropology. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects*, reprint edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 38.

8 Fabian, *Time*, ix.

9 Fabian, *Time*, ix.

10 See Fabian, *Time*, 143–65. When writing on ‘coevalness’ proper, he conceptualized it in abstract and open-ended terms. For example, he wrote, ‘coevalness aims at recognizing cotemporality as the condition for truly dialectical confrontation between persons as well as societies’. *Time*, 154.

11 See, for example, Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000).

and intra-regional scales. In particular, they take for granted the accumulated relations between East Asia and Europe/North America, which materialized with the expansion of the modern-colonial structures in the nineteenth century (and it should be noted that even before modern empires made a 'global village' out of the world, there were transregional encounters and exchanges).¹² The contributors explore how different types of Western music have been utilized, re-assembled, re-signified, and imagined in different East Asian contexts. The focus on Western music (and, by extension, Europe and North America) is not intended to validate the supposed universality of this music, or to subscribe to fantasies of music's colour-blindness and transcendence, or to buy into the binary logic of 'traditional' and 'Western'. Rather, this focus is meant as a way to recover the complex historical reality within which many people across East Asia have refashioned and practised music in the twentieth century. To put it another way, it acknowledges that life was transformed in the colonial-modern world through new matrices of power, agency, and desire.

To frame this historical reality as a starting point for writing coeval music histories, we may sketch out a number of inter- and intra-regional power relations that have connected East Asia internally and with the rest of the world in the modern and contemporary era. We may then conceptualize the network of these power relations as constituting a shared yet fragmentary frame of reference that in turn shapes the temporality and historicity of modern and contemporary East Asia. Of course, this exercise is bound to be hopelessly broad in the face of countless internal heterogeneity in the region, but its value lies in what it tells us about comparability, translocality, and connections at the expense of localized 'culture gardens'. I start this exercise by invoking the comparable histories of unequal globalization that trace back to the 'opening' of China, Japan, and Korea by Western powers, symbolized by events such as the Opium Wars (1839–42; 1856–60), Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy in Japan (1853), and the US expedition to Korea (1871), among others. I also emphasize the parallel and often intertwined projects of nation-building and modern personhood across East Asia in the wake of the West's gunboat diplomacy. These projects heralded and drove the circulation, uptake, and appropriation of Western music. In this historical narrative, the role of Japan in the region is worth underscoring. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the Japanese state built itself into an empire, replacing the Sinocentric order that had previously moulded the ecology of power and prestige across East Asia.¹³ Japan's colonial institutions circulated a body of musical texts intra-regionally; often, these texts were hybrid forms building on Western music.¹⁴ In these processes of circulation and uptake, 'new' music rewrote the

12 See Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016); Christian A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). For research on early modern connections, see, for example, Makoto Harris Takao, "'In Their Own Way": Contrafactual Practices in Japanese Christian Communities during the 16th Century', *Early Music* 47/2 (2019).

13 Japan colonized Okinawa in 1879, Taiwan in 1895, and Korea in 1910. It also had colonial ambitions in China as evidenced by the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5 and 1937–45). Beginning in the 1930s, the Japanese empire competed with European empires and the United States for colonies in Southeast Asia.

14 See Hyun Kyong Hannah Chang, 'Colonial Circulations: Japan's Classroom Songbooks in Korea, 1910–1945', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 27/2 (2018).

terms of cultural authority and social aspiration while also acting as new vernaculars that animated interpersonal connections and social mobilization.

It is important to note that Western and hybrid music continued into the post-1945 period in many parts of East Asia, even as the post-war imperative of ‘national culture’ motivated a kind of amnesia of pre-1945 entanglements in Japan, Korea, China, and more broadly, the Sinophone world. Even in settings where the amalgamation of post-war nationalism and the Cold War called for a policy of self-isolation – the PRC during the Cultural Revolution and North Korea for most of its history – it was impossible to disown mixed musical influences from before 1945 (see contributions by Bess Xintong Liu and Stephen Johnson). In Japan and South Korea, countries closely allied with the United States after 1945, active exchanges with Western Europe and North America at individual and state levels deepened already existing transborder musical practices, even as traditional music came to be seen as an emblem of national identity (see contributions by Serena Yang and Hyun Kyong Hannah Chang).

The articles take up different dimensions of the historical framework laid out previously, exploring musical cultures in China, Korea, and Japan in different historical moments. Serena Yang’s contribution is on the contemporaneity of avant-garde musical practices in the United States and Japan in the 1960s. From the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War, Japan was a regional centre of Western art music, and a number of Japanese artists studied or performed in France, Germany, and the United States during this time, creating particular networks of artistic influence. Yang focuses on post-war Japan and documents the emergence of an avant-garde music scene in this milieu. In retelling the story of this scene, she deconstructs the so-called ‘Cage Shock’, a media term that has reinforced the myth of Cage’s singular impact on the Japanese avant-garde scene. She shows how Japanese artists – many of whom were associated with Jikken Kōbō and Group Ongaku – interpreted Cage’s work through their existing practices and ideas, rather than being the products of Cagean experimentalism. Yang, through this alternative history, warns against the tendency to assume non-Western artistic movements as ‘belated’ or ‘derivative’ in the historiography of Western art music.

Hon-Lun Helan Yang’s contribution examines Western art music in interwar Shanghai. Shanghai was one of a number of port cities in East Asia forced open by European and US gunboat diplomacy in the nineteenth century. As Yang details, by the 1920s, a colonial social order that had been enforced by American and European settlers in Shanghai co-existed with rising Chinese nationalism and the arrival of Russians fleeing the Revolution. Yang, in this meticulous study of the concert programmes of the Municipal Orchestra in Shanghai, considers how the performance of Western art music in this milieu reverberated with the ideologies of colonialism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Using the conceptual apparatus of performativity, she argues that Chinese musicians’ performances of Western art music negotiated these seemingly contradictory ideologies.

Bess Xintong Liu takes us to a historic moment in Cold War Sino-US relations: the Philadelphia Orchestra’s China tour in 1973. Little known today, this tour departs from usual images of musical life during the Cultural Revolution, such as the model operas

(*yangbanxi*) and the purging of Western music. Much more than a study of an underexplored event, Liu's article shows how this orchestral tour relied on on-the-ground negotiations among individual politicians and musicians on both sides as well as on transnational musical connections made prior to the Cultural Revolution. Based on this, Liu re-theorizes twentieth-century musical diplomacy as an assemblage that animates connections at 'various social scales'. She also makes a fascinating analytical intervention by using *li* (etiquette/ritual) to conceptualize the ritualization of Western art music as diplomatic etiquette.

Stephen Johnson's article builds on a critical and contextualized analysis of form to reconceptualize North Korean revolutionary opera, a genre championed by Kim Jong Il beginning in the 1970s as the embodiment of the *juche* ('self-reliance') ideology. It focuses on *chölga*, a simple strophic binary form that acts as the building block of revolutionary operas. Johnson points out that despite *chölga*'s centrality to this repertory, it is judged to have little value when seen through Western artistic criteria such as originality and complexity. He reframes *chölga* as a 'positive and proactive choice' from the North Korean perspective by situating it in the 'polyphonic assemblage' of colonial musical genres and Kim Jong Il's nationalist thought on opera. He concludes by reflecting on the disciplinary implications of prioritizing Korean historical perspectives over Western analytical methods.

My article explores a vocal genre emblematic of South Korea-US Cold War alliance: Protestant choral music. At the centre of this article is an ethnography of a choir of a South Korean diasporic church in southern California. I document singers' preference for unmarked European-style choral music over neotraditional pieces that incorporate the aesthetics of suffering from certain Korean traditional genres. I argue that their musical judgement must be understood in the context of their lived and remembered experience of power inequalities between the United States and South Korea. Based on my interviews with the singers, I show that they understand hymns and related Euro-American genres as healing practices that helped them overcome a difficult past and hear traditional vocal music as sonic icons of Korea's sad past. The article outlines a pervasive South Korean/Korean diasporic historical consciousness that challenges easy conceptions of identity and agency in music studies.

The articles raise new questions on agency, power, authenticity, and scale for music studies scholarship on East Asia and beyond. First, they tell us about the pervasive presence of hybridity in East Asia. The assemblage of styles, texts, and sounds disrupts received ideas of where to locate authentic musicking subjects in East Asia. Second, they push us beyond a West-centric conception of power relations where the notion of resistance is romantically mapped onto the Other's musical difference. Third, they point to the negotiation between the mundane and the structural as a key historiographical question. How do we narrate everyday experiences with music without losing sight of their profound embedding in large-scale events and their co-constitutive relations with social categories such as nation, class, gender, etc.? Last, the new departures made in the articles – topical, methodological, historiographical, and so on – raise the question of the contingency of knowledge production. On this note, I think it is worthwhile to ask the following: to what degree has knowledge of East Asian music been

narrated as if it is produced from a ‘view from nowhere’, when it has been contingent on Anglophone or Euro-American criteria?¹⁵ I ask this question not to issue a reductive criticism towards what is clearly a rapidly changing field or to make a case for a simplistic identity-based scholarship. Rather, I seek to amplify the ongoing critiques that emphasize the inter-connection between ‘semiotic relation’ and ‘human interaction’, particularly at a time when membership in music studies is growing heterogeneous in ways that challenge previously accepted boundaries (including the boundary between ethnomusicology and musicology).¹⁶

Many of the articles in this special issue were first presented at the special session of the Global East Asian Music Research Study Group at the American Musicological Society meeting in Boston in 2019. I am grateful to Gavin Lee for convening this session and inviting me as a respondent. A project like this does not develop in a vacuum. It is inspired by the recent surge of interest in global music history,¹⁷ by innovative projects on twentieth-century music in East Asia (including Western music) by scholars based in East Asia,¹⁸ and by critical Asian studies including inter-Asia cultural studies.¹⁹ I also acknowledge an intellectual debt to scholars in music studies who have written about the dangers of orientalism and racialization²⁰ and scholars who have explored music in different parts of East Asia (or Asian America) in transborder or postcolonial perspectives.²¹

Finally, I want to note that 2021 is a sobering time to take up the theme of East Asia’s isolation, which I raised in the beginning of this introduction. The anti-Asian racism that was

15 See Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, ‘Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation’, in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2000), 35. Also see J. Lawrence Witzleben, ‘Whose Ethnomusicology? Western Ethnomusicology and the Study of Asian Music’, *Ethnomusicology* 41/2 (1997).

16 On the necessary connections between ‘semiotic relation’ and ‘human interaction’, see Fabian, *Time*, 151.

17 Consider, for example, the inauguration of global music history study groups in the American Musicological Society, the International Musicological Society, and the International Council for Traditional Music in recent years. Also see Olivia Bloechl, ‘Editorial’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 17/2 (2020).

18 Consider, for example, recent digital database projects at the Ewha Music Research Institute at Ewha Woman’s University, under Hyun Kyung Chae, and at the Graduate Institute of Musicology at the National Taiwan University, under Ying-fen Wang. Also see Hon-Lun Yang and Michael Saffle, eds., *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

19 Refer to footnote 1.

20 Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Ellie M. Hisama, ‘Postcolonialism on the Make: The Music of John Mellencamp, David Bowie and John Zorn’, *Popular Music* 12/2 (1993). Also see Kofi Agawu, ‘Lives in Musicology: My Life in Writings’, *Acta Musicologica* 93/1 (2021), 15.

21 A comprehensive list is outside the scope of this introduction, but see, for example: Nancy Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Joshua D. Pilzer, *Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese ‘Comfort Women’* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Mina Yang, ‘East Meets West in the Concert Hall: Asians and Classical Music in the Century of Imperialism, Post-Colonialism, and Multiculturalism’, *Asian Music* 38/1 (2007); Noriko Manabe, ‘Globalization and Japanese Creativity: Adaptation of Japanese Language to Rap’, *Ethnomusicology* 50/1 (2006); Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau, eds., *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

sparked in the wake of the ongoing global pandemic showed once again just how entrenched the notions of Asia's separation and uniqueness are. We would do well to remember that it is this projection of distance – what Johannes Fabian called the 'denial of coevalness' – that rationalizes the us-versus-them thinking.²² Particularly, the stigmatization and objectification of Asian bodies in the West demonstrated just how easy it is to forget that we have been living in 'common Time'.²³ Writing a coeval East Asia into music history, then, is not just an intellectual exercise. It is also about writing against the illegibility of East Asian lived experiences and asking hard questions about the troubling impact of a separatist, binary paradigm on our understanding of the world.

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22 Fabian, *Time*, 32.

23 Fabian, *Time*, 52. Also see Daniel Chua, 'President's Message: Corona Musicologica', *IMS Newsletter* 7/1 (2020), 3–4.

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