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New Directions in Chinese Music Research
*Multi-disciplinarity, In-betweenness, and Engagement**

Jonathan P. J. Stock**

Abstract: This talk identifies prospects for Chinese music studies in the contemporary era as we collectively develop a multi-disciplinary future that is academically valuable, incisive, and inclusive of researchers from contrasting linguistic, societal, and intellectual backgrounds. I present a view of Chinese music studies as a meeting point for scholars who represent positions and perspectives that are inherently "in-between" (between disciplines; between research consultants and readerships; mediating historical, cultural, or linguistic gulfs; etc.), sometimes multiply so. This suggests an explicitly "messy" reality, in which we actively build bridges through cooperation, cross-reading, translation, and consultation. In such a situation, we need to shift continuously from phases of more individual enquiry toward moments of shared focus and back again, sustaining common points-of-reference and the benefits of flexible and diverse responses to newly arising or newly rediscovered concerns. I outline selected concrete steps that we might take in strengthening our "in-betweenness," which significantly includes greater translation from Chinese to English (and other languages), and I offer a rationale for providing enhanced attention to co-research and co-authoring as ways of producing engaged music research alongside members of musical communities for global readerships.

Keywords: Chinese music, "in-between," translation, cooperation, multidisciplinary

Introduction: "Chinese Music Studies"

My paper concerns some ideas on new directions in Chinese music research, which I share below. My topic is Chinese music studies today, and how we can

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improve it by recognizing where we are and by planning ways forward out of some of our current challenges. Ideas in this paper stem from the experience of co-editing *The Oxford Handbook of the Music of China and the Chinese Diaspora* (Yu and Stock 2023). Essentially, that book tries to capture the energetic, multidisciplinary actualities of where we are right now. It aims to become a dynamic springboard for new ideas, new research, new collaborations, new alliances, new stimulations, and new disagreements. Some of these are explicitly explored in my final chapter in that publication (Stock 2023). Other stimulations came from my recent work on ethics in ethnomusicology (Stock and Diamond 2022) and from my experiences researching the everyday musical lives of members of the Bunun Indigenous population in Taiwan (Stock 2021), as well as from reading across and around musicology, ethnomusicology, and Asian studies more widely. In fact, several of my ideas below are far from definitive answers; I hope this stimulates readers to seek their own solutions to the challenges of realizing a productive and vibrant future for our area of study, or indeed to raise their own questions in response as part of a longer, more interactive discussion.

In this paper I'm using the term Chinese music studies, in deliberate distinction from more established terms like Chinese musicology (*Zhongguo yinyuexue*). I'm using a less familiar term for two main reasons. First, I want to talk about this broad topic in general, rather than focus on one particular set of established disciplinary approaches to the study of certain genres of music in or from China. Essentially, I'm embracing everything concerned with how we might collectively study music in or from China, whatever that kind of music might be (indigenous, hybridized, or imported; traditional or newly created; classical or popular; etc.). Second, and since music can be found at the heart of so many expressions of society and culture and value, China's prominence in the world means that interest in Chinese music is already and will inevitably remain multidisciplinary (and multilingual). There are thus many different ways of writing about music as part of Chinese society, and many different audiences to address on this topic.

Chinese music studies is in this sense a messy reality. This is not a criticism. It's an acknowledgment of the fact that many different things are happening all at once, in interesting, diverse, and multifarious ways. In a moment, I'll put forward an idea about "in-betweenness" which I believe may help us in being able to talk to one another, read one another's work, and respond effectively to each other's ideas. First, let me draw out the challenge of all this in more depth.

In anglophone settings, I think it's fair to say that despite there being a lot of work on Chinese musical culture, there's nevertheless little shared disciplinary core. The theatre people write for theatre readers, the music people write for music researchers, the composers write for composers and performers, and so on. That means that sometimes it's difficult for us to talk to one another, too, because we occupy these different subject positions and we address different

disciplinary audiences and points of focus. In sinophone settings, on the other hand, there are multiple disciplines, each with its own norms, its own standard frames of reference, its own inclusions or exclusions, and so on. It's the same problem, but on a magnified scale.

Here are some illustrations of the size and sort of range of Chinese music research. A search on October 5, 2021 of the ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis A&I database discovered 153,702 contributions to this field spread across sixteen languages, the ten most widely used being English, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, German, Serbian, Dutch, and Afrikaans. Some important languages are missing from that list (suggesting major gaps in the database's coverage). A similar search on the WorldCat database turned up 128,772 items, 50,613 of which are in Chinese and 41,335 in English. Among the remainder were significant numbers in Japanese, Korean, Italian, Russian, and Vietnamese alongside most of the other languages already listed. Both databases are managed in the English-speaking world and likely feature disproportionately more results in English than in other languages. The quality and richness of data in these catalogues is inevitably determined by who contributes information for inclusion. They're hardly neutral representations of the whole world of scholarship, although they do give some sense of this being a huge subject area with already more work produced than any one researcher could ever hope to read. This is just one sense in which the term messy reality applies.

A further aspect of the messiness relates to the issue of English as a global language. In some disciplines, certainly in the sciences, I hear people say that a scholar who is not publishing in English is not contributing to international research. That's a harsh judgment, even in the sciences, but certainly in social and cultural fields it's obvious that it's a problematic one. English creates challenges even as it translates Chinese: it filters materials, content, subjectivities, stories, narratives, perspectives. Chinese has terms, concepts, and values that can't be fully matched in English, and use of English transforms meanings even as it translates them.

Translation isn't the only problem with English. The language is, of course, also a great force for intellectual colonization on several levels. A clear example occurs when a Chinese scholar writes up their research in English hoping to publish in an English-language journal. But then the journal's peer reviewers reject the approach or the pattern of references. Their objection isn't to the language, but to the school of thought. Nancy Yunhwa Rao identifies exactly this problem in North American music theory, observing that Western-focused theorists assume for themselves far greater authority than they are willing to recognize among those who research music from other settings:

> First, such a division of intellectual labor allows the [Western-focused] "theorists" to be more or less ensconced in their discipline, collecting raw data from different area studies and cultures to test or expand their universalizing models and theories, without burdening themselves to acquire the requisite knowledge about these non-Western traditions. Second, such division of intellectual labor relegates those theorists who work on non-Western music with adequate language and cultural knowledge to the roles of area-specialists, their work marginal to the discipline of music theory, and their conceptual model or analysis not "theoretical" enough to be considered a valuable contribution to the "world of music theory." They are cultural insiders, but not theorists. (Rao 2019: 78)

Meanwhile, let's recall that Chinese is itself very far from being a single language. Shu-mei Shih notes that many languages are spoken in China but that we use the term "Chinese" when we often mean Mandarin Chinese. This apparently innocent shorthand draws attention away from the diversity inherent in Chinese nationality, ethnicity, and language (2011: 715). Yet Chinese music researchers actively explore linguistic heterogeneity, from the classical written language of ancient treatises to the special linguistic formations and registers of singing, from regional dialects to the languages and expressions of minority peoples and of others who have migrated into the Chinese world, and from the shifting nuances of spoken languages (and Internet slang) to the special aesthetic and technical vocabularies used, by vocal teachers, *qin* performers, or fans of traditional opera, among many others.

All this means that Chinese music studies is an inherently multilingual, multidisciplinary space, one where researchers need to be able to navigate between and across different languages and disciplinary approaches. The challenge is that none of us can speak all these languages or translate seamlessly between them. (Surely AI will help us more and more with this as time goes on, but that too will introduce its own distortions, problems, or misassumptions, some of which we can't easily identify because the output looks authoritative.) Neither can we keep up with every possible disciplinary approach or relevant literature.

The Core and "In-Between"

If our present reality is a messy one—one that's inherently, multivalent, multilingual, and multidisciplinary—then working together will require ongoing attention to two essential elements, namely the core and the in-between. Building the former will enable us to collaborate effectively on matters of genuinely shared interest; attending to the latter will strengthen our aptitude in

reaching meaningfully across languages and disciplinary divides. This latter is not only about the potential audiences, local, national, international, global for our research; it also includes working with the communities whom we research, I point I return to in a subsequent section. First, I'll introduce each of these ideas in more depth.

The Core

The idea of the core is that explicitly identifying shared strengths and pressing concerns allows us to support and build upon the best work in our field, address topics that are too big for the solo researcher while avoiding duplications or oversights, and recognize how our individual enquiries fit into a larger whole. Let me illustrate this with some simple examples.

One remarkable strength in Chinese music studies surely lies in its potential contribution to global histories of music. Much music research worldwide has focused on the history of Western music. We now have a rich body of knowledge on that music, but it's questionable how far its history stands as a model for understanding the history of other musics worldwide. Western music history is shaped by specific patterns of religious and court practice and patronage and by centuries of imperialism and colonization, both within and far beyond Europe. It's inseparable from the rise of particular technologies—staff notation, the keyboard, equal temperament, the orchestra, music printing, recording and broadcasting, the Internet, to name just a few, and the systems and ideologies that inflect use of these technologies one way or another, such as literacy, professionalism, the notion of the individual artist-composer, copyright, and capitalism. Many of these factors have histories in other parts of the world too, but not always in the same ways or at the same times. Chinese music history is relatively well documented, and its areas of distinction and similarity with Western music history provide an alternate set of guideposts that, together with those offered by Western music history, could stimulate research questions that could be applied in many parts of the world.

A second and highly contrasting possibility lies in current interest in decolonizing the academy. While decolonization potentially concerns almost all of us, the models we have currently available largely stem from writers based in former British, French, or Iberian colonies. Their models are certainly stimulating, but they nevertheless do not apply fully well to many East Asian situations, where movements of people and patterns of historical dominance have often worked somewhat differently.

It's not my aim to propose what the core content of Chinese music studies should be. Rather, I encourage us all to read widely across our shared

field of interest. Find the best work and engage with it. Be sure to cite it, even when reaching out to audiences in other areas, such that a core gradually takes organic form. Remember, our peers are not our rivals so much as key partners in a shared research infrastructure and future! It remains absolutely fine to work on non-core topics too, of course: not only will the core itself be always in a state of change but also an awareness of a strong set of shared themes can itself act as a powerful springboard for original enquiries and new emphases.

In-Between

As researchers in Chinese music studies, we're in-between disciplines, languages, communities, and audiences. In trying to understand this idea of being in-between, I am drawing on inspirations like those of Stuart Hall, particularly his work on postcolonial identity. Here, Hall talks of identity as ruptured, discontinuous, hybridized, and always under construction (1990). According to this viewpoint, identity isn't something we inherit. It's something we make and remake continuously in everyday experience, and we may experience friction between the demands of competing layers. The result can be as uncomfortable as it is unstable and describes a situation that many of us in the contemporary world occupy. In my own case, I come from a British background and work in Ireland. Generally, those two identities overlap quite comfortably, but sometimes they push in entirely opposite directions. Meanwhile, I have a Chinese spouse, which means that half my family are Chinese. That doesn't mean I can claim to be half-Chinese, of course. Nor am I in the position of researchers whom Lila Abu-Lughod labelled "halfies": researchers "whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage" (1991: 466). But I am every day close to a particular set of Chinese experiences and ways of being in the world. As a family, we inevitably live in-between Chinese, British, and Irish realities.

It's a reminder that many of are not quite fully at home, even when we look and sound like we come from the country where we work. Isn't it the same in disciplinary terms? I would describe myself as an ethnomusicologist, but I regularly read, and occasionally publish, in Asian studies, musicology, music theory, and music education too. It's similar in relation to musical traditions: I'm closer to some than others, whether through training, experience, relevant contacts or musical interests, and researching them becomes an act of double-mediation: I attempt to form new understandings on the basis of my own experience and the perspectives shared by musicians and others, and I then set out to share those insights through writing (or recording or even performance)

for others in turn. We all do this, acting as bridges between disciplines, readerships (and audiences, for practice-based researchers), and music communities. Noting that research is an act of in-betweenness is helpful because it explicitly cues us toward practices of engagement and cooperation.

Our work involves reading other scholarship, consulting, translating—all tasks for someone who is in-between. Standing in-between often means recognizing that we do not hold a position of personal authority. Instead, we work with people who know more than we do, and our role is to attend to what they say and then frame it in presentations that can reach diverse audiences potentially far away from the musicians themselves.

I want to illustrate a couple of ways of being in-between that I believe are potentially productive and that I feel we should utilize even more in Chinese music studies. The first is co-authoring. Co-authoring remains rare in in our field (Farrer and Field 2015 is an encouraging example), and when it does occur it's often a case of a tutor and a graduate student or members of a grant team working directly together. Such collaborations remain very welcome, but I believe even broader collaborations have potential to address wider topics and develop new and authoritative interdisciplinary perspectives. I'm suggesting that we go out and hunt for interdisciplinary collaborators whose input can take us deeper into the study of a world where music is both very widely distributed and simultaneously not intended to be apprehended as an isolated listening experience. Instead, music is often part of something broader—a rite, an economic exchange, a display of power, etc. Working in cross-disciplinary collaborations not only brings new expertise into music research, but also takes our special insights out to new readerships as well. Team-research is new to many of us, but we are familiar with the idea of combining voices into a collaborative whole: we should be good at this.

Translation provides a second example. I want to acknowledge world-leading efforts by sinophone scholars in translation of English sources into Chinese. (One of the largest examples is Cao and Luo [2019].) A huge amount of labor has gone on there, and it has provided massive support for those of us who write in English. There's been less the other way around. Those like myself, who write predominantly in English, need to do more to repay the trust that's been shared with us and the opportunities we've received for sharing our ideas. It's true that many of us work in systems where we're rewarded more for our own publications than for translating someone else's research. Nevertheless, I think we have to do our part. In the meantime, I would be interested to learn more on an associated topic from those who have already undertaken more translation work: what's found, what's lost, what's gained, what's transformed or recentered? What's at stake for whom through these acts of redirecting scholarship?

Engaged Research: Toward a Conclusion

If we can put all of these ideas together, then we additionally will find we have new scope for what's often called engaged or applied research. Societal challenges that confront us all today, and music can be part of a solution to some of these. Music aids in social integration, in maintenance of our memory, self-worth, imagination, and creativity. It helps individuals and groups explore and express their values, and apprehend those of others around them. All these situations, and many more like them, require research. In some cases, we may study music making simply in order to understand it, but in other situations we may be able to work alongside the people in question, humbly deploying our expertise (whether as musicians, writers, teachers, linguists, or whatever) to assist them achieve their goals. Doing so is not necessarily straightforward but it can produce concrete benefits for society. And that would be a great step forward not only in Chinese music studies but in music studies globally as well.

Figure 1, which serves as a summary of this presentation, shows how socially engaged research fits into the greater whole that I now envisage. My first point is that we should expect to take on a fuller range of everyday musical engagements. People engage massively with music in their lives, but we currently study quite little of it. We focus on certain kinds of music, particularly on pieces of music, rather than the ways that people use music. Of course, we shouldn't abandon our present interests, but there's scope for us to be more thoughtful about what is music achieving for ordinary people right across present-day society.

Written from positions in-between and fully utilizing an expanded set of approaches (such as co-authoring and translation), new research in Chinese music studies will…

1. …take on the full range of everyday musical engagements

2. …embrace music, sound, noise, and silence, and the sonic regimes that surround us

3. …be vitalized through expanded societal coverage, within and beyond the boundaries of the PRC

4. …consider the experiential specificities that occur by way of music's relationships with surrounding its social emplacements, values, and usages

5. …confront societal challenges and yield concrete benefits, especially for subaltern groups

Figure 1. Prospects for research in Chinese music studies.

Studying this wider set of ways that people employ music, or used to do so, means that we need to go beyond studying just music itself or the sounds of music. This is point 2 on Figure 1. Instead, we need to embrace the fullest spectrum of sonic possibilities. So often music is being compared to sound, noise, or silence. Maybe it's threatened by silence, or replaces silence, or is in interaction with silence, noise, and sound. And of course, there are sonic regimes that control or attempt to control our aural surroundings. Music plays an important role in that, though not always a positive one. It's time for more research on the roles that music plays in sustaining or threatening the wider societal soundscape, and our training as music scholars actually equips us well to make a strong contribution to this task. We're trained to listen well and sensitively to what's going on and what it means to those who are apprehending those sounds, or indeed suffering from those silences.

Listening more widely to the sounds of Chinese society takes us to an expanded societal coverage (point 3). Have we collectively put a bit too much attention on what we might call mainstream society? If so, then it's now time to look for new topics, listening out for people whose musical lives have been hitherto overlooked or disregarded. The topic could be historical as much as contemporary: I think there's a lot of space for new research into an even broader set of people's musical lives.

Point 4 takes us to the study of the experiential specificities that occur by way of music's relationships with its surroundings, its social emplacements, values, and usages. Under this point we need to uncover what music does for people across the broad range of Chinese settings? How does it make them think, care, or feel? How do these experiences spread out into the rest of their lives? What ideas travel in reverse, impacting the ways that music is heard or imagined? These are questions that a music psychologist might habitually ask, but here they're framed within a richness of social enquiry that would be more familiar to a music historian or an ethnomusicologist. In Chinese music studies, we have scope to contribute some very interesting research in this area.

Asking questions about what music does for particular people finally brings us back to the responsibility we might wish to take up, which is to use our research, at times, to bring benefits to the wider publics and subaltern groups from whom we learn so much, not only to academy. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Chinese music studies resonated not only with thoughtful, inspiring research but with an ethic of public service?

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