

Improvisation and *Orientalism* in the PRC

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I spent July and August of 2014 in Shanghai and Beijing on a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to “conduct research on the burgeoning improvised music community of 21st Century China.” On the one hand it is an interesting research topic; improvised music in these cities presents unique performance opportunities and interpretational challenges. It is, moreover, an area in which to my knowledge virtually no work has yet been done. On the other hand there is a sense in which scholarly interest in these communities rests upon some very old, deeply ingrained, and ideologically suspect habits of thought. From the moment I arrived in China and began in earnest the project of theorizing improvisation in China, I found myself torn between two contradictory impulses: my instinctive feeling that something interesting was happening with improvisation in China and my growing suspicion that those instincts were actually structured by the reductive assumptions Edward Said had exposed decades ago in *Orientalism*.

The concrete task of writing about improvisation in China thus forced me to wrestle with *Orientalism* in a more serious way than I had before. As I reread this complex work, I began to see the ways in which it is part of a broader trend away from categorical thinking and positivism; it is not merely a text about the intellectual history of writing about the East, and its lessons are applicable far beyond the “Arab Orient” that is its geographical focus. Taking in the full scope of Said's work helped me to see the ways in which my own project, traveling under the aegis of institutionalized cultural exchange, inherited from the traditions of Orientalist scholarship.

In this paper, I sketch two important features of my work on this project: first, the evolution of my thinking about how to conduct a research project about improvisation in China in light of a close reading of *Orientalism*. Secondly, I outline the practical directions my research took after an initial shift in approach.

In my proposal to the ACC, what I was setting out to do was simply “research.” This umbrella term is vague enough that, from the vantage point of an American before his departure, it was nearly impossible to see where it might not be completely innocent. It was only after I arrived that I began to ponder the issues behind this apparently neutral language. According to my proposal, there must be something inherently interesting about improvisation in China; its mere existence there is assumed to be both unlikely and necessarily instructive. I was certainly not out to make a sloppy claim about some “Chinese” essence, but the whole idea that improvisation in China would be interesting on its own basically departs from an assumption of radical difference—and it is one of Said's most important achievements to demonstrate the ways in which that departure point nearly always articulates the superiority of the author's position with respect to the region being written about. In a certain grim light, my proposal can be read as a testament to the continued prevalence of categorical thinking about the East in American academia. For what I had proposed was a paper that marveled at the fact that “our music” by some strange miracle had

managed to thrive in such foreign soil. My job as researcher was to tease out and interpret what bizarre shapes it must have taken on there and to discern what fascinating intelligence it could deliver about our relationship to that “foreign” nation.

This made me confront an unpleasant prospect: the idea that I ran the risk of re-iterating the primacy of the Western subject rather than producing real work about improvisation in China. This jarring realization was, for a long time, paralyzing for me. This paralysis, though, had a silver lining. It meant that I performed much more than I had originally planned.

I performed alongside musicians from nearly every walk of improvised music life in China—hard core noise musicians, straight-ahead jazz musicians, traditional instrumentalists, popular musicians. Getting to know the musicians of Shanghai and Beijing, I was often struck by how at home I felt. The musicians in these cities wrestle with many of the same aesthetic squabbles and economic concerns that I had seen all over the music scenes of the USA. In both places, a musician has to balance a sense of artistic fulfillment with market demands, and in both places those market demands have produced an aesthetic schism between those who play “free” and those who play “jazz.” Like so many cultural rifts in China, this divide is more extreme than what I knew from home, but the difference is one of degree rather than kind. The conversations I had in China about the two modes of improvisation always felt familiar. In many ways the improvisers I met this summer were part of the same family I knew from New York and California. No translation was required.

One of Said's recurring themes is the moment of conversion in Orientalist writing. This can mean both the conversion from personal reflection into officially sanctioned fact and the conversion from imaginative writing into concrete, useful knowledge. Said writes of the conversion from “personal to professional Orientalism” and about writing that “remains 'literature' and not science” (157). Edward Lane's *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* is characterized as a “random set of observations [...] changed into a document of useful knowledge, knowledge arranged for and readily accessible to anyone wishing to know the essentials of a foreign society” (159). To translate from the personal to the historical and to extrapolate from particular observations of a foreign subject to a complete description of a foreign place are two of the hardest Orientalist habits to spot and two of the most dangerous ones to commit.

The more I performed in China, the more I felt that there were ways one could talk about improvisation there that would require no such conversions. In the end this was the strategy I adopted: whatever I said about improvisation would, I decided, depend as little as possible on the notion that improvisation in China was available only in translation, or that its meaning in China was unique and in need of translation to be intelligible in America. To the greatest extent possible, I chose to depart from an assumption of sameness rather than difference.

Indeed, one of the most instructive ways to look at the meaning of improvisation in China ended up taking place in a feature of the contemporary world that is by no means uniquely Chinese: consumerism. The two cities I studied have very different improvised music

communities; speaking about those differences turned out to be an interesting way of talking about the role that consumer culture can play in shaping musical culture.

Both Shanghai and Beijing are intensely consumerist, but Shanghai is clearly a more extreme case. Of the two cities, it is the wealthier one, the newer one, and, historically, the one more exposed to foreign culture. New, ostentatious displays of wealth are everywhere. This kind of consumer culture is, of course, not unique to Shanghai, but like so much of contemporary China, it has developed extremely quickly and on a massive scale. In an article about a recent wave of popular culture magazines in Shanghai, Yaming Bao poses an interesting set of questions about consumerism in contemporary China:

has the consumerism constructed by contemporary China's popular culture already formed a new popular ideology? If the answer is yes, what complicated relationship is this new ideology forming with traditional ideology? How and to what extent has any such relationship influenced city life in contemporary China? (564)

Of these three questions, the third is, for me, the most interesting and the one I address with respect to improvised music. Actually doing so is beyond the scope of this piece, but I will conclude with a brief word on how I am beginning to think about the matter.

The demographic makeup of China's improvised music communities is a crucial part of this project. As noted above, Shanghai has always been the more cosmopolitan city. The jazz scene there is no different; it is mostly white men from the USA and Europe. In Beijing, foreign musicians are the minority. This bare fact has some very important consequences. As one interviewee pointed out, most Chinese-born jazz musicians come from wealth; until very recently, there has been no way to learn to play jazz in China without significant exposure to the West, which has not historically been available to anyone but the elite. The foreign jazz musicians living in China, by contrast, are generally there specifically because they need to earn money. Because Beijing's scene is almost entirely made up of Chinese musicians and Shanghai's is mostly expatriates, the two communities have very different relationships to money. Comparing those relationships, we can see the most common split between the two cities, where Beijing is artsy and Shanghai is materialistic. Although these demographics are interesting for any number of other reasons, they validate that familiar view in a fairly straightforward way. Shanghai is the place where improvised music has gone to make money; Beijing is the place where it can afford not to do so.

One might raise the objection that I have merely substituted the search for difference between East and West with the perhaps no less problematic search for difference between Shanghai and Beijing. Does not any project that rests first of all on the validation of a flat stereotype risk the same categorical thinking that Said puts so much pressure on? Is the putative study of consumer culture in music merely a veneer covering a project that congratulates Beijing on its arts culture and condemns Shanghai as aesthetically vapid?

Although my work on these two cities is more nuanced than that, there is a sense in which

these objections are valid. It is my belief, however, that no project about a foreign place can truly break free from these shackles—much as there is no way out of language or metaphor, there is some reductiveness built into every interpretive act. *Orientalism* does not deny this issue but asks us to be careful, to make our reductions as responsibly as possible, and, above all, to create a critical space where interpretive power is evenly distributed. It is my hope that the project outlined above does at least a better job at that than the one I thought I was setting out to do in June.

Works Cited

Bao, Yaming. “*Shanghai Weekly*: Globalization, Consumerism and Shanghai Popular Culture.” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9.4 (2008): 557-67. Print.

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