

REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE ‘CHINA SOUNDS ABROAD: MIGRATION, MOBILITY AND MODERNITY’

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ABSTRACT

This short report is about the virtual conference “China Sounds Abroad: Migration, Mobility and Modernity” held in May 6–8, 2021. Many scholars involved could attend in this online event. This report comments on the program and how it was conceptually organized.

KEYWORDS

Online conferencing, China sounds, Migration, Global presence

REPORT

The international and interdisciplinary conference, China Sounds Abroad: Migration, Mobility and Modernity, was held on May 6–8, 2021. The conference was organized by Andreas Steen (Aarhus University) in cooperation with Frederick Lau (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Andrew F. Jones (UC Berkeley). Originally envisioned as an event in Copenhagen, Denmark, the conference had to be switched online due to the ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19. However, the pandemic did not affect the outcome of the conference. Notably, 18 scholars from all over the world gave high-quality presentations, with a sizable audience joining from a diverse array of geographical locations.

The conference ‘aims at a systematic investigation of the sonic dimension of China’s modern history and rising global presence’—to quote the organizers’ words—with particular concerns on questions including how Chinese sounds (interpreted in its broadest sense) have traveled around the globe from the 19th century to the present, how they might have adapted or changed in different geographical locations and historical contexts, and how they affect the perceptions and imaginations of China in a changing world. These questions were addressed in various ways in 18 presentations that were made up of 7 panels. The details of the panels could be found at the website <https://conferences.au.dk/chinasounds2021/>, an innovative and effective platform thoughtfully designed by Andreas Steen and his colleagues at Aarhus University to facilitate the online conference. Through browsing the website, one would find a striking diversity of participants and their presentations. In terms of disciplines and methodologies, scholars brought forth insights from musicology, ethnomusicology, history (intellectual, cultural, social, and economic), cultural studies, anthropology, etc. In terms of the variety of sounds, the presentations not only focused on a wide spectrum of musical genres, such as classical, traditional opera, pop, reggae, rock & roll, and jazz

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(broadly defined, including the localized jazz forms in, for example, China and Korea), but also extended to include sounds that needed to be discovered with particular critical ears, such as Buddhist chanting and reciting, pigeon whistles, gongs and drums accompanying lion dancing, ‘euphonies and cacophonies’, heteroglossic discourses, and even silence. Scholars traced these sounds everywhere in the world, including East and Southeast Asia, Oceania, Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean. In terms of the agents that made possible the global dissemination of these sounds, these presentations covered migrations of Chinese indentured workers to the Americas in the 19th century, sojourns of elitist musicians and intellectuals in search of transcultural communications, commercial tours of artists and their bands, global profit-seeking by cultural entrepreneurs, and even cassette ‘smugglers’, as well as overseas proselytizing missions. As a whole, this diversity has most convincingly epitomized the aforementioned ‘aim’ of the conference, i.e., a ‘systematic’ investigation of Chinese sonic representations from a ‘global’ perspective.

Yet, the conference does much more than creating an exhibition of various sorts of ‘China sounds’, and the celebration of diversity does not prevent the participants from finding shared insights, getting multiple-way inspirations, as well as collectively pushing forward the ‘aural turn’ in the humanities in general and China studies in particular. I observe that the conference has brought up several theoretical and methodological issues that go beyond any particular disciplines or areas and thus shed new light on the greater academia. Here, I briefly address three among many observations.

First is a ‘networked’ mode of thinking. Many presentations contextualize the subject in question in transnational networks—not only the human networks of migrants and sojourners which are commonly examined in transnational studies but also networks of objects, media, and information. Andreas Steen’s paper, for example, traces the global travels of ‘Rose, Rose, I love You’ (1940), China’s first international hit song, and in the process that reveals an unexpected global network of singers, producers, gramophone records, live shows, and their consumers, all centered around a piece of song but spanned from China to the UK, the USA, Japan, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Nancy Rao, similarly, delineates a ‘transpacific network of opera in early 20th century’ through which sounds, printed materials, and human agents traveled between Shanghai and San Francisco. Using the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, both Marc L. Moskowitz and Andrew Field map out the intertwined sonic, visual, and discursive networks connecting China, Singapore, and Hollywood. The second observation is that these presentations simultaneously question an essentialized ‘Chineseness’, problematize the so-called ‘China sound’ in dialogue with other sounds, and explore how the two shape each other. For example, Barbara Mittler, Christina Till, Di Wang, and Frank Kouwenhoven all offer new insights to complicate the dichotomy between China and the West. Edgar W. Pope, Frederick Lau, Fumitaka Yamauchi, and Yuan-yu Kuan each in their own ways decentralizes China in the traditional Sinosphere and carefully avoids a Sinocentric trap. Andrew F. Jones, Edwin E. Porras, Hwee-San Tan, and Xiangjun Feng shift to the ‘Global South’ and observe how the China sounds reverberated in each of the comparatively unfamiliar lands. Third is the special attention that most participants give to media. That is, they not only study ‘sounds’ per se but also investigate the particularities of the material means through which the sounds travel. In addition to gramophone records and films that are commonly observed in sound studies, Odila Schröder discusses how pigeon whistles spread the Beijing sound to the West, Chang Liu traces how the *dakou* cassettes delivered the ‘authentic’ rock & roll to China, and Andrew F. Jones reveals how the cold war was played out in the Jamaican sound system.

The conference was a great success, not only because of the diversity of the topics but also how well they cohere with each other. Moreover, each paper is a showcase of solid research, rich materials, and innovative thoughts. A short review as such could not do justice to their quality. However, the good news is that these papers will be published in an edited volume in the near future, and readers of AEMR will no doubt find the breadth and scope of these papers enlightening.