

The Houston Chinese Traditional Music Group: Negotiating Decades of Change in America

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Introduction

The study of immigrant culture is one of the main focuses of social scientists and a focus on immigrant musical activities is naturally a significant issue explored by ethnomusicologists. As a country of extraordinary cultural diversity, the United States condenses and combines various distinct cultures – European, Asian, African and Latin American – together. With considerably increasing numbers of Asian immigrants, research that relates to Asian cultures has drawn attention from scholars. As the largest Asian immigrant population, the study of issues concerning Chinese immigrants - their culture, politics, economy, and race – has become more and more significant and valuable.

As an ethnomusicological researcher, studying local performances and activities is an essential and crucial issue, and is considered as the crux connecting the culture that is inherited with that which underwent transformation by immigrants. Deborah Wang suggests that “Taking local lives and local practices seriously is an effective means to reflexively address problematic histories” (2004: 140), and she also specifically emphasizes the point that “history,” she believes is “emigration and the movement across time and space carries its own logic of history-making” (2004: 19). Therefore, I begin with the study of the local practice – The Houston Chinese Traditional Music Group – as the start of the research and to form an understanding of a distinct generation, born in the 1950s and 1960s in China. Focusing on the musical activities and cultural implications of the Houston Chinese Traditional Music Group, this project will display the distinct cultural features which are embodied in musical performances. Su Zheng considers “Chinese American music groups are the primary musical organization of Chinese American society,” because the activities of Chinese American music groups attracted “thousands of immigrant music lovers, as well as their American-born children, to share with each other the sound of music and the sentiment of nostalgia” (2010:171). Chinese music, for Chinese immigrants, is their memory and tradition; for those who were born during the time of the turbulent political movements, it is their collective memory; for the American-born generations, it is a special connection with “their diasporic cultural heritage” (2010:171).

As a performer of Chinese traditional music, I have the advantage of an insider’s view as well as a deep aesthetic understanding of the sensibilities of Chinese music. As an observer, I am also able to take a step back from the music itself by interviewing the group members in order to obtain information as an outsider. In addition, in seeking the cultural angle, I would step even farther, in an attempt to be an outsider of the Chinese culture, to acquire a macro-observation.

Fieldwork

As the state with the third largest immigrant population in the U.S., Texas has become a significant Chinese cultural center in the southern United States, rivaling other major states, such as California, and cities, such as New York. The Houston Chinese Traditional Music Group (HCTMG) is a non-profit music organization and includes more than 40 professional and amateur musicians. Since 2008, HCTMG has regularly performed concerts in Houston for the Chinese American community for whom this has gradually become a cultural tradition. For this project, the fieldwork experience consisted of visiting a regularly scheduled rehearsal on Sunday, Nov. 2nd, and an Erhu rehearsal on Saturday, Nov, 16, 2013.

November 1st was the first time I met Zhang Xin. Zhang Xin is the art director and conductor of the group. Zhang briefly introduced the history of HCTMG and his life in China before he came to the U.S. and also how he personally struggled in American society.

Zhang was born in Shengyang, the capital of the Liaoning Province in Northern China, in 1953. He started learning and practicing Erhu, a Chinese traditional chordophone, when he was in middle school, and he actively participated in the school music group for three years. In his adolescent and young adult years, he encountered the Cultural Revolution, which as Peter Manuel describes it “is now recognized as one of the darker periods in Chinese history, and it serves to illustrate the dangers of totalitarian bureaucratic control over art and culture in general” (1988:230). It is the most significant and crucial political movement after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It changed not only an entire young generation's fate, but also reshaped the political and cultural paths in the country.

During the Cultural Revolution, the main cause for the persecution of Chinese intellectuals was that these individuals – “*Zou Zi Pai*” as they came to be known – “the creeping ‘capitalist’ and antisocialist tendencies in the country.” (Sujian Guo 2013:78) In 1969, Zhang’s parents were considered of “*Zou Zi Pai*,” therefore, Zhang and his family had been exiled to the Kuandian Man Minority Autonomous District, the area on the border between China and North Korea. For more than ten years after their exile, Zhang’s family became farmers in this remote and isolated mountain area. In 1970, because of his music specialty, Zhang was selected to be a music accompanist to work in a traditional opera group in the Kuandian area. After one year, he was chosen to become a soldier to serve in the military performing troupes based in Shenyang.

In the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the only art activities were the Eight Contemporary Beijing Opera, called *Yang Ban Xi*¹. *Yang Ban Xi* firmly occupied the cultural stages – music, plays, movies, and other art forms – in the whole country; therefore, the only music allowed to be performed was music from the Eight Contemporary Beijing Opera and its related musical works.

Zhang regards this period of his musical development as the most technical phase. He said “I cherish that time, even though we could only play *Yang Ban Xi*, but it gave me a many great of opportunities to practice my musical techniques, and I must thank the tight scheduled performances; it is because of that I can pick up my music after more than fifteen years of interruption in musical practice upon arriving here. I studied Western harmonic theory and orchestration, the theory of music analysis and composition by myself and practiced it with my

¹ Yang Ban Xi: It is also called Revolutionary Model Operas. It is designed and promoted by Jiang Qing (1914-1991), Mao Zedong’s wife, who was the major role of the “Gang of Four.” Instead of performing historical stories, myths and sagas, Yang Ban Xi propagandizes the “heroic stories” of Communist Party of China during The War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945), The Civil War (1945-1949) and the Korean War (1950-1953).

performances. It was a great time for me.” In fact, his words reflect the special connection with the musical activity during the Cultural Revolution and also mirror the characteristics of musical education of traditional music in the period from the 1950s to 1980s.

In 1976, Zhang retired from the military and became a government employee until starting work as an art critic at the Art Theory Academic Office in the Liaoning Province. In 1989, with the sparking of the Tiananmen Square protests, Zhang, as an art critic, has publicly expressed support for the students in the protest. While the political turmoil had finally been recognized as subversion of the government, Zhang and other participants realized that they had not only barely kept their jobs, but also lost their entire careers.

“After the Tiananmen Square protests, I realized that I must leave. In 1995, it was my first time putting my foot on the soil of the U.S.; I worked like a slave since then. But I am so proud of myself because I brought my family here only one year later. In the twenty years, I have done everything but music. But I met Yang Wan-Qing and Peng Zhuo-xi four years ago, and they invited me to help them to create a Chinese music group, so eventually I am making music again; I thought I would never play Chinese music anymore.” (Interview of Zhang Xin)

His passion for Chinese music affected me and ignited my curiosity and desire to see what they are making of Chinese music and how. Furthermore, I did not realize how different the concept of traditional music was between Zhang Xin and myself.

He told me that he wishes more and more of the younger generation would understand and appreciate Chinese music, and the best way to attract them is letting them join the music group. Therefore he called off the practice of having auditions and encouraged group members to bring their children to the concerts and rehearsals. The auditions used to be applied to recruit musicians, but made many amateur and young beginners hesitate to participate in the group’s performance. Now, due to the flexible arrangement, there are at least six teenagers playing in the group. However it is interesting that all of them play Western instruments, including clarinet, flute, viola, French horn, cello and double bass. Zhang rearranges the music, adapting it to Western musical instruments for every piece.

As I mentioned before, there is a different concept of “traditional music” between Zhang and myself. I have been thinking and trying to find out why they choose this musical style, and what the cultural meaning is behind their music activities. In order to understand the purpose of organizing this music group, we need to keep in mind the significant role of music and the specific music influences of the collective memory of the 1960s.

“Music was our only hope when we were living in remote mountain areas and countryside, and is our only hobby in America now. I can tell you but you may not truly understand when we lived in a strange village, the area of suffering for famine, loneliness, homesickness, exhausted labor work and prison-like living environment, the most beautiful thing was the music, especially, *Yang Ban Xi*. Everyone can sing, can perform *Yang Ban Xi*, it was our only way for making us to laugh and sing, and the only moment we might not suffer from the horrible feeling of homesickness. All of us have been living in the United States almost twenty years or more; Chinese music is our antidote of nostalgia. This is the main reason the conductor, Zhang Xin, and the old guys, like us, want to create a music group which is a space we can share our memories, speak Chinese, eat Chinese food, and talk about our youth” (Interview of Peng Zhuo-xi) .

I cannot stop thinking about his words, their “memories,” the intangible and powerful force attracting them to come together, even though from other’s views, those memories seem so

ghastly and excruciating. But music, as they said, was the only antidote, which was the relief from the pain and suffering.

Conclusion

I continue to think about the meaning of their way of making music. First, the attitude towards tradition is different from the Chinese communities which live on the east and west coasts. As the main and established centers of Chinese immigrants, Los Angeles and New York City, for instance, are the representatives of Chinese immigrant culture which embody the features of a cultural conservative attitude and de-politicization. But meanwhile, after more than three hundred years living in the U.S., their culture also has accepted and adopted Western and contemporary American cultures. For instance, Leehom Wang, is the representative musicians of the young generation of Chinese immigrant. His music includes several Chinese traditional cultural elements but in Western popular music context. On the other hand, with the influx of the immigrant wave, around the time of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), the main reasons for emigration were the refugees fleeing from the Civil War and the dissidents with the new political authority in mainland China. Their culture is characterized as the nostalgia of old cultural traditions and the focus of cultural authenticity. Nowadays, these Chinese communities present the cultural features of historical continuity in which some of the traditions have even died out in mainland China, because the old tradition was considered a cultural evil, and had been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. Zheng explains the phenomenon with the case study of how Taishan *Muyu* song is maintained and preserved in Chinese community in New York City while its tradition is barely founded in its homeland (Zheng 2010).

Additionally, according to the distinct cultural background, Zhang and his immigrant generation embody the cultural features of post-Cultural Revolution. With the third immigrant wave emerging in the late 1980s, the main components began to change from laborers to students and intellectuals who were born in the 1950s and 1960s. They were no longer always the laborers or low-level service workers surviving in the North American societies. Instead, they had high educational backgrounds and struggled in the mainstream societies in the U.S. Their lives reflected the changes of Chinese culture and tradition especially the period of the post-Cultural Revolution. The concept of tradition has been entirely changed by the turbulent political movements which lasted through the late 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s. Meanwhile, the witnesses, the experiencers and in a sense, the victims, the memory of the chaos and anti-authority of the 1960s, are preserved.

However, the new generation of Chinese immigrants also maintains a close connection with their homeland; it is quite different from the old generations, since the political and economic issues used to be the barriers of communication between the United States and China, because the People's Republic of China and the U.S. had severed diplomatic relations until 1975. As the connection between the two countries has increasingly strengthened, the new immigrants are able to access new musical works and other cultural fashions from mainland China. At the same time, since the policy of Reform and Opening Up² has been processed, China has begun to play a significant role on the international stage. In fact, it also can be considered a profound influence

² Reform and Opening up, led by Deng Xiao-ping in 1978. The new policy marks the shift of China's policy which is from political struggle to economic development.

of globalization. The new trend is reflected by the new cultural changes within Chinese immigrants. It can be understood in three points

First, their music has the characteristics of the art aesthetics of the 1960's. The repertoires of HCTMG are the music styles which were composed after the 1960s, and relates to the conservatory style, which was formed by the establishment of Chinese music programs in conservatories in China. Undeniably, such reformation and innovation of musical technology was directed influenced by Mao Zedong's art ideology and embodied his cultural attitude towards tradition and the West, which is "Making the past serve the present; Adapting the foreign things for China needs," (古为今用 , 洋为中用) the art guiding principle which was declared by Mao Zedong, in 1964.

In addition, the new Chinese immigrants are willing to encourage their young generations to learn and practice Chinese music for understanding the culture of their homeland. Meanwhile, the welcome and adoption of Western instruments also echoes the political art thoughts of Mao Zedong. As shown with the repertoires of HCTMG, the Chinese American-born group members often perform Chinese traditional pieces or Chinese composer's works by Western instruments. For instance, in "2014 New Year Chinese Folk Music Concert," an American Chinese young banjo player performed a rearranged Guangdong folk song – *Han Tian Lei*; two four hands piano pieces, *Spring Festival Prelude* (composed by Li Huan-zhi) and *Dui Hua* (a folk song from Yunnan Province), played by two adolescent girls.

Last but not least, the specific significance of music, in particular for the Chinese immigrants born in the 1950s and 1960s, is much more than other cultural activities in Chinese communities. Music connects not only their cultural identity but also their collective memory, since music, their love and practice, was almost their only cultural activity during the "traumatic upheaval," (Manuel 1988:230) of the Cultural Revolution.

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