



I SAGGI DI **LEXIA**
34

THE WATERFALL AND THE FOUNTAIN

COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC ESSAYS
ON CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN CHINA

edited by

Massimo Leone

Bruno Surace

Jun Zeng



I SAGGI DI LEXIA

34

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Aprire una collana di libri specializzata in una disciplina che si vuole scientifica, soprattutto se essa appartiene a quella zona intermedia della nostra enciclopedia dei saperi — non radicata in teoremi o esperimenti, ma neppure costruita per opinioni soggettive — che sono le scienze umane, è un gesto ambizioso. Vi potrebbe corrispondere il debito di una definizione della disciplina, del suo oggetto, dei suoi metodi. Ciò in particolar modo per una disciplina come la nostra: essa infatti, fin dal suo nome (semiotica o semiologia) è stata intesa in modi assai diversi se non contrapposti nel secolo della sua esistenza moderna: più vicina alla linguistica o alla filosofia, alla critica culturale o alle diverse scienze sociali (sociologia, antropologia, psicologia). C'è chi, come Greimas sulla traccia di Hjelmslev, ha preteso di definirne in maniera rigorosa e perfino assiomatica (interdefinita) principi e concetti, seguendo requisiti riservati normalmente solo alle discipline logico-matematiche; chi, come in fondo lo stesso Saussure, ne ha intuito la vocazione alla ricerca empirica sulle leggi di funzionamento dei diversi fenomeni di comunicazione e significazione nella vita sociale; chi, come l'ultimo Eco sulla traccia di Peirce, l'ha pensata piuttosto come una ricerca filosofica sul senso e le sue condizioni di possibilità; altri, da Barthes in poi, ne hanno valutato la possibilità di smascheramento dell'ideologia e delle strutture di potere... Noi rifiutiamo un passo così ambizioso. Ci riferiremo piuttosto a un concetto espresso da Umberto Eco all'inizio del suo lavoro di ricerca: il "campo semiotico", cioè quel vastissimo ambito culturale, insieme di testi e discorsi, di attività interpretative e di pratiche codificate, di linguaggi e di generi, di fenomeni comunicativi e di effetti di senso, di tecniche espressive e inventari di contenuti, di messaggi, riscritture e deformazioni che insieme costituiscono il mondo sensato (e dunque sempre sociale anche quando è naturale) in cui viviamo, o per dirla nei termini di Lotman, la nostra semiosfera. La semiotica costituisce il tentativo paradossale (perché autoriferito) e sempre parziale, di ritrovare l'ordine (o gli ordini) che rendono leggibile, sensato, facile, quasi "naturale" per chi ci vive dentro, questo coacervo di azioni e oggetti. Di fatto, quando conversiamo, leggiamo un libro, agiamo politicamente, ci

divertiamo a uno spettacolo, noi siamo perfettamente in grado non solo di decodificare quel che accade, ma anche di connetterlo a valori, significati, gusti, altre forme espressive. Insomma siamo competenti e siamo anche capaci di confrontare la nostra competenza con quella altrui, interagendo in modo opportuno. È questa competenza condivisa o confrontabile l'oggetto della semiotica.

I suoi metodi sono di fatto diversi, certamente non riducibili oggi a una sterile assiomatica, ma in parte anche sviluppati grazie ai tentativi di formalizzazione dell'École de Paris. Essi funzionano un po' secondo la metafora wittgensteiniana della cassetta degli attrezzi: è bene che ci siano cacciavite, martello, forbici ecc.: sta alla competenza pragmatica del ricercatore selezionare caso per caso lo strumento opportuno per l'operazione da compiere.

Questa collana presenterà soprattutto ricerche empiriche, analisi di casi, lascerà volentieri spazio al nuovo, sia nelle persone degli autori che degli argomenti di studio. Questo è sempre una condizione dello sviluppo scientifico, che ha come prerequisito il cambiamento e il rinnovamento. Lo è a maggior ragione per una collana legata al mondo universitario, irrigidito da troppo tempo nel nostro Paese da un blocco sostanziale che non dà luogo ai giovani di emergere e di prendere il posto che meritano.

Ugo Volli



Multimedial contents

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The Waterfall and the Fountain

Comparative Semiotic Essays on Contemporary Arts in China

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The Musical Marco Polo

Sketches of “Otherness” from China to the West (and backwards)

GABRIELE MARINO¹

ABSTRACT: The paper aims at addressing the perception of Chinese musical aesthetics and its influence in the West and, therefore, the socio-cultural construction of what we may call “musical chineseness”, conceived as “musical otherness”, according to a wider understanding of Chinese culture as opposed to the European one (as, for instance, in the studies by François Jullien). Thanks to a series of cultural references and musical case studies (ranging from classical music to Modernist avant-garde and contemporary popular music), such notion of “otherness” is articulated into different discursive tropes; otherness may have been portrayed as indecipherability (Giacomo Puccini’s *Turandot*), whimsicality (Renato Carosone’s *This Chinese mushroom*), extraordinariness (so-called “child music prodigies”), blurriness (*shídàiqǔ* or C-pop meant as fusion music), extremeness (John Cage, John Zorn, Giacinto Scelsi, Harry Partch), but also affinity (Frank Zappa). The paper proposes to overcome both the traditional dichotomic view

1. University of Turin. The present paper is an abridged transcript of the talk I was honoured to deliver at the University of Shanghai on 26 September 2018, as both my very first attempt to approach Chinese musical aesthetics — and its relations with the West — and as a homage to the musical culture of the kind hosts of the Italian semi-otic delegation. The talk was illustrated with plenty of pictures, musical examples, and even personal memories. This text has to be seen as nothing more than a map; a point of departure to rely on in order to build up further, more in-depth studies and proper analyses. All the Internet sources were last accessed on 29 October 2018; most URLs are shortened via Bit.ly. I would like to thank Prof. Massimo Leone, Prof. Serena Zuccheri, and Prof. Peng Jia for their suggestions. Any mistakes are mine alone.

(according to which, in order to understand each other, China and the West can meaningfully relate only in terms of oppositions) and the consideration of West's cultural (mis)appropriation of Chinese musical aesthetics (as epitomized by Fatima Al Qadiri's political album *Asiatisch*). The idea would be to give the start to a comparative cultural semiotics based not on the differences but on the affinities; namely, on the features that the two cultural macro-contexts have in common and on the languages, the tools, the strategies they do use to connect each other (as in the case of "musical otherness" itself, employed as the *koiné* — common language — of the so-called alternative, experimental, or underground international artistic community, embodied by figures such as Yan Jun).

KEYWORDS: China; cultural mediation; musical genres; popular music; semiotics.

1. Chinese music in a nutshell (as seen in the West)

As the anthropologists have taught us for decades, the perspective of "the other" may be misleading sometimes. But it may be enlightening too.

1.1. *The traditional conception of music*

According to Confucius (Kǒng Fūzǐ) and Mencius (Mengzi), one could recognize the value of a Prince and his reign by the quality of the music played at his court. Music in China has always been not only a matter of aesthetics, nor something merely functional (ceremonial music, dance music etc.), but also a means to convey education and morality, being consistent with the ancient literary, philosophical, and cosmological traditions of the country.

Traditional Chinese music is based upon a five-note scale (pentatonic scale), strictly linked to Nature in all its different aspects (cardinal points, planets, elements, colours, seasons, animals etc.). The same logic applies to its timbral system (the system of sounds); Na-

ture is supposed to have created eight different original sounds, embodied by as many substances: wood, metal, leather, clay, silk, bamboo, and pumpkin. Thus, Chinese music displays itself as a *mystique of Nature*, as the elegant, organic shapes of most of its musical instruments testify; the traditional mouth organ (*sheng*), for instance, is designed to allude to the shape of a pheasant or a phoenix.

Traditional Chinese music notation developed as a neumatic one, a type of musical notation meant as an auxiliary system within a mainly oral culture, employed as a backup for memory or in didactical contexts, more than as a text to be read during the execution of a tune. Neumatic systems of this kind do not actually indicate the precise note (as a specific pitch position), but rather show the ascending or descending development of the tune, carrying information concerning rhythm and agogicity (accents). If we analyse a typical tablature for the traditional *ch'in* cithara, we can mainly infer information about how the sound has to be materially produced, with a great focus assigned to the timbral dimension. The symbols, called *chien-tzû*, combine different Chinese ideograms; each one of them carries at the same time information about which string has to be pinched, with which finger, and whether from the inside towards the outside, or vice versa, of the musician's body. Aspects — *instructions* — such as these were and are generally ignored by traditional Western forms of notation, which are dominated by parameters such as pitch and harmony. In traditional Chinese music, melody is something that has to be stored mainly in the musician's memory, since it cannot be reconstructed exclusively from notation.

Chinese music sounds *different* to Western listeners, being built upon different basic aesthetic principles; on the one hand, we have a mystic, timbre-driven, and relative conception, on the other, a metaphysical, melodic, and absolute one.

1.2. *The opinion of the Italian reporters (back in the Fifties)*

I have scrutinized the online archive of “Corriere della Sera”, perhaps the main Italian daily newspaper, and I have found some interesting old comments about Chinese music. They seem to confirm the idea that its melodic style has historically been considered difficult to be perceived or understood by Western audiences. At the same time, quite surprisingly, such a discomfort in the listening experience has generally been evaluated positively: Chinese music is strange, but good.

Chinese Music [...] is simpler, purer, and *sketchy*. [Without the semitone intervals] We find just an archaic and luminous framework, a dilated and clear bridge onto which the fantasy draws melodic inventions of surprising amplitude. It is like looking at the horizon of the vast plains. [This is] An ancient and perennial music.²

[These are] long singsongs of a mysterious suavity. [...] Chinese music is a strange kind of music that *has no melodic line*, but that is capable of conveying an enjoyable sensation of sweetness and uneasiness to its listener.³

1.3. *A cross-cultural expert opinion*

Sean White alias Zhang Changxiao (b. 1987) is a musical entrepreneur and the author of *Creuza de Mao* (2015), a book meant to spread the Italian singer-songwriter culture in China; the title is a word-game between Italian singer-songwriter Fabrizio De André’s masterpiece album *Crêuza de mä* (1984) and Mao Zedong, the symbol of China par excellence outside China. White is currently both lecturing across China about Italian musical culture and organizing events in Italy to spread Chinese musical culture.

2. V. BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, “Corriere della Sera”, 12 October 1942.

3. C. VERRATTI, “Corriere della Sera”, 28 September 1956.

According to White — I have had a little chat with him — the main difference between Italian and Chinese musical cultures lies in the way of translating musical inspiration into words.

Chinese musicians [are] more *subtle* in their expression, [while] Italian musicians are somewhat more *direct*. [...] Italian musicians, [...] like de André, often describe [what they talk about] through *stories* and express them in a metaphorical way, without imposing personal emotions. On the contrary, Chinese artists [usually focus on] *personal emotions* [when] they write these songs, so [that] there will be a lot of emotions in the expression of lyrics and melody.⁴

In other words, whereas Italian musicians seem to be more *narrative*, Chinese musicians seem to be more *abstract* and *emotional* as regards the lyrical content.

1.4. *Chineseness as otherness*

Oppositions of this kind are consistent with the understanding of Chinese culture, as opposed to the European one, proposed by French philosopher, Hellenist, and Sinologist François Jullien (b. 1951). Jullien summarized his pluri-decennial work with the 20 semantic oppositions between the Western and the Chinese lexicons and systems of thought in his book *De l'être au vivre* (2015; “From Being to Living”). According to Jullien, in the words of prominent Italian semiotician Gianfranco Marrone (2016):

Chinese people appreciate propensity rather than causality, reliability rather than sincerity, tenacity instead of will, [they prefer] regulation to revelation, allusion to allegory, ambiguity to equivocation, obliquity to frontality. [...] Whereas the Western conflict is generally resolved in the Great Battle, with the armies deployed one *in front of the other*, in Chinese conflicts it is *moving sideways* that matters the most: namely, the transver-

4. Personal Message, via email, 10 August 2018.

sal, indirect incursions. We can find this logic in the field of rhetorical techniques as well: we [Westerners] deal with the arguments *directly*, while in China we find *the art of the indirect*, the art of saying one thing through another. ‘Making noise in the East to attack the West’, as Mao Zedong used to say.

2. Approaching “Chinese otherness”

Let’s start with three images — none of them being specifically musical — which may help us visualize the Western conception of China as the “land of otherness”.

2.1. *The secluded intellectual as the Other*

Elias Canetti (1905–1994) was a German-language Bulgarian-born author and thinker who won the Nobel Prize in 1981; a *persona non grata* to the Nazi regime, he escaped as a political refugee and settled in England. His most famous work of fiction is the novel *Die Blendung* (best known as *Auto-da-Fé*; literally, “public burning of a heretic”), published in 1935. The protagonist, Doktor Peter Kien, refuses to be part of his Time and to interact with the outside world; he lives as a self-secluded scholar, completely uninterested in human interaction, sentiments, and love, surrounded by his books in his lonely apartment in Vienna.

It is no coincidence that Kien (literally, “resinous old piece of wood”), such an extreme figure of opposition and yet a powerless intellectual, a self-destructive and relic-like figure that embodies the harshest refusal of what the West would become (the Nazi catastrophe was just about to happen), is a philologist and a Sinologist in particular. Kien finds relief only in the study of a far and diverse world such as China. In other words, the radical otherness of the protagonist of *Auto-da-Fé* does nothing but mirror itself in the radical otherness of China.

2.2. *The guardian of the forbidden as the Other*

In the blockbuster Hollywood comedy horror movie *Gremlins*, directed by Joe Dante in 1984, the story begins in a sinister antique shop in Chinatown, where a failed inventor, Randall Peltzer, is seeking a unique Christmas gift for his son Billy. In the shop, Peltzer finds a small, furry creature called Mogwai (“Monster” in Cantonese), whistling a mysterious, lunar tune, and wants to buy it. But the owner of the shop, “the Grandfather” (an old man called Mr. Wing, portrayed by Chinese–American actor Keye Luke), gentle but resolute, refuses to sell the creature (Fig. 1).

Mr. Wing stands as the embodiment of the non–understandable for the Western consumer, who is used to thinking of everything in terms of goods and purchases: if it is in the shop, I can buy it. On the contrary, the Mogwai is dangerous, to the extent that it is not meant to be sold, especially to a Westerner. Breaking this simple basic rule will be the start of the story of a sadistic tribe of little monsters invading the pleasant suburbia of the United States.



Figure 1. The mysterious Mr. Wing’s shop in Chinatown as the opening location in *Gremlins* (1984).

SOURCE: bit.ly/mrwingshop.

2.3. *The heavenly singer in danger as the Other*

In the Amazon-produced series *Preacher* (2015–currently running), from the eponymous comic book (1995–2000) by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, at a certain point we are introduced to a new key character: the Saint of Killers, a ruthless gunman who gets recruited by the Heavenly forces to kill the protagonist, Jesse Custer, the Preacher, so as to escape his own personal hell. The Saint is a damned and doomed outcast, featured with the unique contradictory condition of being dead, immortal, and without a soul. The Saint makes his first appearance in a grandguignolesque scene in season 1, episode 9 (entitled “Finish the Song”): a scene of violent and merciless shooting.

In order to convey a feeling of suspension and estrangement, since the shooting establishes a bridge from Hell to our reality, the authors of the series decided to use the song of a Chinese cowboy (portrayed by Adam Wang), singing in Chinese *Non Nobis Domine* (a musical arrangement of the psalm used as a motto by the Templar Knights), as a diegetic soundtrack (the singer is a character in the scene; Fig. 2). The song is heavenly, so that, in juxtaposition with the slaughter occurring during its performance, the final effect is solemn, melodramatic, and surreal, and perfectly conveys the intended disorienting connotation.



Figure 2. The Chinese cowboy singing *Non Nobis Domine* in the series *Preacher*, episode 9, “Finish the Song” (2016).

SOURCE: still from Amazon Prime video.

3. Articulating “Chinese otherness”

“The other”, as “the unknown” or “the new”, can either be “the enemy” and “the monster” or a precious resource for artistic creation: something or someone to draw inspiration from in order to find a personal voice or a whole new identity.

3.1. *Otherness as Indecipherability: Turandot*

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) is generally considered «the greatest composer of Italian opera after Giuseppe Verdi». *Turandot* is his last and unfinished work, premiered in 1926 at the theatre La Scala, in Milan, with an ending written by composer Franco Alfano.

The main character, princess Turandot, is complex and undecodable, as Chinese composer Hao Wei Ya, who has written an alternative ending for the opera, will efficaciously summarize: «She (the princess) pledges to thwart any attempts of suitors because of an ancestor’s abduction by a prince and subsequent death. She is not born cruel and is finally conquered by love»⁵.

Puccini was inspired by a tale included in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, via the eponymous fable for the theatre (1762) by Carlo Gozzi, and became fascinated by Chinese music thanks to a music box, coming from a former Italian diplomat who had served in China, which he received as a gift. Puccini eventually used at least eight themes that seem to be based on traditional Chinese music (and he commissioned a set of 13 Chinese gongs in order to better reproduce Chinese musical sounds); the most memorable among these tunes is definitely the folk melody *Mo Li Hua* (“The Jasmine Flower”), which is employed as a sort of leitmotif for the princess throughout the opera.

Turandot stands as the embodiment of the complexity, ambiguity, and contradictoriness of human inner life. Puccini’s correspondences of the time are filled with statements of powerlessness con-

5. *A Princess Re-Born*, “China Daily”, 19 February 2008.

cerning his inability to musically translate such indecipherability. In a letter to Andrea Adami, the author of the *libretto* of the opera along with Renato Simoni, he confessed:

Nothing good about Turandot. If only I had that little subject I have been — and still am — looking for, I would already be on stage at this time! But *that Chinese world!* In Milan I will decide something; maybe I will give the money back to Ricordi [the publisher] and free myself. (Jamieson, 1997)

3.2. *Otherness as Whimsicality: The mysterious Chinese mushroom*

In Italy, in the mid-Fifties, a strange fad started spreading like wildfire: that of the *fungo cinese* (“Chinese mushroom”). As recorded by a caption from «La Domenica del Corriere», a weekly spin-off of the “Corriere della Sera” (19 December 1954):

The trend of a new cure that is believed to be good for every disease is also spreading in Italy. It consists of an infusion of black tea in which a vegetable belonging to the mushroom family has been kept immersed for at least twenty-four hours.

The author of the artwork, a stereotypical Western representation of the Chinese merchant (incredibly anticipating the look of *Gremlins*’ Mr. Wing), was supplied by master Italian illustrator Walter Molino, who shaped Italian visual imagery from the Forties to the Sixties (Fig. 3).

Renato Carosone (1920–2001) was a master of Italian music, rooted in the tradition of the *canzone napoletana* (Neapolitan song), who created a unique blend of pop music, jazz, and cabaret. In 1955 he published a comedy song addressing the “Chinese mushroom” fad, entitled ‘*Stu fungo cinese* (“This Chinese mushroom”). Musically speaking, the song is a classic Carosone signature tune, with allusive double-meaning inflections and lyrics (the mushroom having notable sexual connotations), capable of playfully putting the sounds and

modes of China and Naples together, especially in the instrumental introduction and hooks. I propose here an abridged and adapted translation of the lyrics:

VERSE: From Beijing has just come, kept inside a jar, a very mysterious thing. “You won’t need medicines any more!”, said the Mandarin who brought it here.

CHORUS: This mushroom grows and grows in the jar, and slowly generates one child a month! When a bride drinks the brew, she feels a thrill and says: “Hey!” [originally, the Neapolitan exclamation *Uè!*]. What is this Chinese mushroom, that grows and grows inside the jar, and slowly gets into the heart, and in the heart grows my love for you? And your love for me in turn: with the Chinese mushroom!

VERSE: Do not take Penicillin, nor Streptomycin, just take the mushroom every morning! But this mushroom is a traitor, just like any woman in love: if you do not know how to handle her, she suddenly goes away!



Figure 3. Cover of «La Domenica del Corriere», 19 December 1954, artwork by W. Molino.

SOURCE: bit.ly/ebayfungo.

3.3. *Otherness as Affinity: The overtone sounds of Tuvan throat singers*

Frank Zappa (1940–1993) was an American composer and musician of Italian origins who earned the reputation of “King of the Freaks”; from the Sixties up to the Nineties, he experimented with genres and musical languages, creating a unique blend of rock, jazz, and avant-garde, more than often with playful or satirical nuances. Always fascinated by “strange music” and by music belonging to non-American traditions, in his late years Zappa became an enthusiast of overtone, harmonic, and throat singing.

A never officially published video dated 8 January 1993 shows a “salad party” at Zappa’s home in Hollywood, featuring many musicians talking and jamming together. Among them: American drummer Terry Bozzio, American blues guitarist Johnny “Guitar” Watson (a true hero for young Zappa), Indian violinist Lakshminarayana Shankar, Irish folk group the Chieftains, and three Tuvan singers (Kaigal-ool Khovalyg, Kongar-ol Ondar, Anatoli Kuular).

During the sessions, one can hear the sonic translation of a typical semiotic gesture: that of revealing the *deep affinities* between apparently *different phenomena*. The musicians’ interplay harmonizes all the differences together, leading to a moment of pure musical joy (Fig. 4). The incredible voice-as-an-instrument of the Tuvan singers can also be heard in two posthumous Zappa records: *Civilization Phaze III* (1994) and *Dance Me This* (2015).

3.4. *Otherness as Extraordinariness*

A few years ago, I happened to watch a video that had “gone viral” across the walls of the social media accounts of some friends of mine. It was a stunning video featuring some “Chinese children” playing a guitar concert; they were perfectly synchronized and technically impeccable. The title of the video read: “Very little chinese [sic] children play the guitars like pros! China got the talent” (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. The “Salad Party” at Frank Zappa’s house, Hollywood (US), 8 January 1993.
SOURCE: stills from the videos at vimeo.com/5619494 and vimeo.com/5690482.



Figure 5. Still from the video entitled *Very little chinese [sic] children play the guitars like pros! China got the talent*, uploaded on YouTube in 2012 (youtu.be/X3SV-OcBGnE); in fact, a video portraying a Kindergarten concert in North Corea.

In fact, this is a common narrative through which the West has decided to give room to Chinese musicians and performers: an uncommon, incredible *technical capability*, mastered from a very *early age*, the result of *intense training*, of *rigid discipline* applied to the cultivation of musical talent etc. A similar video entitled *4 Year Old Boy Plays Piano Better Than Any Master* has some 31 millions views, being the third most popular video for the query “child piano” on YouTube. 1982–born Chinese pianist Lang Lang began playing at the age of two, entered Beijing Conservatory at the age of eight, and

has won international competitions since the age of 13; Lang Lang is always presented by Western media as a “child prodigy”, more than as an “exceptionally talented musician”. The same applies to another Chinese classical pianist, Yuja Wang (b. 1987). It seems that music coming from such musicians should be appreciated for their *chronological coordinates*, rather than for its *aesthetic qualities*; it is as if “Child music prodigies” were a musical genre of its own (as implicitly suggested by a dedicated Wikipedia entry)⁶.

I recently went back to the “Chinese children” guitar concert video, to enjoy it again. Only to discover that many users claimed that the children were actually Korean. I found out it was true; it was a Kindergarten concert in North Korea. These kinds of mistakes, misattributions, and misunderstandings are pretty common with so-called viral videos. And with the West handling non-Western pieces of media. Not without reason. Which also leads us to the next point.

3.5. *Otherness as Blurriness (and Derivation; and the loops thereof)*

The history of music over different geographical areas and periods is a true jungle of genre and subgenre names, of crossing and revolving flows, of influences, contaminations, and syntheses. It is well known how Chinese culture has deeply influenced the whole of East Asian culture, to the extent that it is possible to talk of a proper Sinosphere, a Chinese cultural sphere of influence. Japanese musical instruments and music, for instance, derived from China; and the Japanese influence emerged, in turn, via so-called J-Pop, in contemporary Chinese popular music or C-Pop. In more recent years, the same goes for Korea and Korean pop or K-Pop; it was influenced by China in the first place, and it ended up influencing it in turn.

What we now call C-pop originated in the 1920s as *shídàiqǔ* (literally, “song of the era, of the epoch, of the present times”), a form of *fusion* between American jazz and Chinese folk. Afro-American

6. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_child_music_prodigies.

jazzman Buck Clayton (1911–1991) settled in Shanghai between the late Twenties and the late Thirties, mainly serving as the resident musical director of the Canidrome (Shanghai’s Cultural Plaza); during this period, he became a close collaborator of composer and songwriter Li Jinhui (1891–1967), who is considered the father of Chinese popular music. Around 1927, Li Jinhui composed *The Drizzle* (毛毛雨), a song sung by his daughter Li Minghui, which is generally regarded as the first modern Chinese pop song; it fuses American jazz and Chinese folk music together, by adapting the traditional pentatonic folk melody in the fashion of American jazz instrumentation and arrangements.

Since that time, C–Pop has faced a rich and complex evolution and diffusion, which includes Western popular music incorporating it among its many “ethnic” contaminations. This is well testified by *The Edge of Heaven* by Gary Lucas (b. 1952), published in 2001, a success in terms of both critical appraisal and sells; the album features 11 covers of classic “mid century Chinese pop”, as the subtitle reads, presented with luxurious arrangements (Fig. 6). Lucas has cyclically returned to his Chinese passion, with concerts, collaborations, and other discographical projects.



Figure 6. Cover artwork of Gary Lucas’ album *The Edge of Heaven* (2001), realized by Jerome Witz.

4. Otherness as Extremeness

Silence or noise, minimalism or maximalism, control or chance, stasis or perennial movement; all these dichotomies being united under the very same umbrella: a radically diverse approach to life and art, to space and time. Eastern — Chinese, Indian, Japanese — music has been a huge source of heuristic–aesthetic inspiration for Western artists, especially for those who ended up shaping the imagery of avant–garde and experimentalism.

4.1. John Cage: *The I Ching and the discovery of Chance*

John Cage is way more than a “musician” or an “avant–garde composer”: he is both the archetype and the epitome of the contemporary experimental artist⁷. Born in Los Angeles in 1912, he is probably best remembered by the wider audience for his peculiar use of so–called prepared piano, a piano modified thanks to the insertion of objects in–between the strings, or for provocative and philosophical pieces such as 4’33” (1952), which consists of four minutes and 33 seconds of musicians *not* playing their instruments. Cage incorporated many aspects of randomness into his work over the years — a form of composition called aleatoric music — and one of these methodologies included the use of *I Ching* (*The Book of Changes*). In 1951, he was given a copy of the book by his pupil Christian Wolff at the New York School; Cage’s interest was immediately caught and the text became the basis of his compositional method for the rest of his life.

The *I Ching* is an ancient Chinese text dating back to around 1,000 BC, used for divination, but which has been a source of inspiration for philosophers, artists, religious figures, and writers both in the East and in the West. Its current sequence is said to have been

7. In order to provide a simple and clear summary of John Cage’s work, as regards his Chinese sources of inspiration, I based this paragraph on the explanation provided by the very well done YouTube video entitled *Inspirational Working Methods: John Cage and the I Ching*, uploaded on the channel “Inspirational Working Methods” on 11 December 2017 (youtu.be/uyjOnqzjqpc).

created by King Wen, king of Zhou, in the late Shang Dynasty. To question the *I Ching*, the user obtains a random number originally from sorting yarrow stalks, and now more commonly from throwing coins or dice. This number corresponds to a line which is either strong or weak, Yang or Yin. When six has been obtained, the user can draw a hexagram. There are 64 different possible hexagrams, which one then looks up in the *I Ching* and reads the interpretation of. If one obtains, for instance, the hexagram “Lin”, the meaning is “approach”; if one has the hexagram “Fēng”, this would mean “abundance”. Further interpretation from these meanings can be drawn to produce a divination. The process is actually more complex than this, but this is the general idea behind the methodology.

Cage would ask the *I Ching* a question and use the hexagram obtained to make a compositional decision. Firstly, he would consult the sound chart to see which note, if any, should be played. Then the duration chart and dynamic chart, to attain the note required. Cage would also use a tempo chart to set the tempo changes for the piece. Works created in this way include *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape N. 4* (both dated 1951 and considered among his masterpieces). Cage wanted to free himself from his own preferences and allow indeterminacy into the process: using randomness meant imitating Nature in his manner of operation. Nothing “Chinese” arises from the actual listening to such works, but Chinese is the philosophy according to which they have been conceived and created.

Cage’s work has influenced many artists and musicians through the years. In 1974, for instance, British musician Brian Eno (b. 1948) and artist Peter Schmidt produced the “oblique strategies” series of cards, a more user-friendly form of Cage’s process with which to help the creative process. Each of the cards, which is drawn at random, has a worthwhile dilemma printed on it to inspire or challenge the artists involved in their creative process. Surprisingly, Eno later employed these cards in the production of some of the best selling popular albums of all time, such as U2’s *Joshua Tree* (1987) and Coldplay’s *Viva la Vida* (2008).

4.2. *John Zorn: Leng Tch'e and the identity of opposites*

John Zorn has also employed different techniques for both improvising compositions and composing improvisations, by means of what he has called “game pieces” (one of them is named after Xu Feng, a Taiwanese actress featured in many martial arts films) and “file cards” (very similar to Eno’s “oblique strategies”). Born in 1953 in New York to a Jewish family, Zorn is a composer and saxophone player who, starting from free jazz and so-called radical or non-idiomatic improvisation, has produced a huge quantity of music, written and performed in the most diverse types and combinations, strongly contributing to the definition of musical Postmodernism. As perfectly exemplified by the work with his supergroup Naked City (1988–1993), Zorn’s music is made of different sources, just like a collage, and lives of radical contrasts, just like flipping through television channels: silence and noise, freedom and rules, pop culture and avant-garde.

Between 1986 and 1990, he recorded the music for an album entitled *New Traditions in East Asian Bar Bands* (published in 1997); the track entitled “Hu Die” includes a spoken part narrated in Chinese (by Zhang Jinglin). But Zorn’s connection with the East is deeper. Between the Eighties and the Nineties, he used to live partly in New York and partly in Tokyo, where he regularly performed and also ran a record label, called Avant, and got obsessed with Eastern and Japanese culture in particular, because of its contradictoriness. Zorn was fascinated by such a hypermodern society still permeated by a deep down dark imagery and influences, such as sadomasochism and pornography. Zorn’s obsession with Japan led post-colonial and feminist musicologist Ellie Hisama (1993; 2004) to talk about “asiophilia”; according to Hisama, his way of portraying the East could be seen as a violent and exploiting appropriation, aestheticizing the pain of the other. In fact, rather than perceiving the Japanese as “the other”, Zorn — as he has declared multiple times — always felt himself as “the other”, “the foreigner”, “the minority”, the one who could not be fully accepted. According to him, such a frustration was eventually exorcised thanks

to the discovery of the cathartic power of violence translated into music. This led him to the writings of Bataille.

Georges Bataille (1867–1962) was an influential and controversial French author who systematically explored the darkest side of human artistic expression. His book *Les larmes d'Eros* (1961; “The Tears of Eros”) is a very personal and twisted history of eroticism and sexuality. Bataille concluded the book by displaying and commenting on five images taken circa 1905 in Beijing by a group of French soldiers to document the last public execution utilizing *lingchi* (“death by a thousand cuts”), a form of torture which dates from the Manchu dynasty. The look of ecstasy on the face of the victim, who had been given opium in order to prolong his agony, haunted Bataille, who said:

This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic and intolerable. I wonder what the Marquis de Sade would have thought of this image. [...] What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish — but which at the same time delivered me from it — was the *identity of these perfect contraries*, divine *ecstasy* and its opposite, extreme *horror*.

The quote is included in the liner notes of Zorn’s *Naked City* album *Leng Tch’e*. The cover image of the original 1992 compact disc featured the infamous 1905 Bataille photograph (Fig. 7), which had



Figure 7. A censored version of the most (in)famous among the *lingchi* pictures included by Georges Bataille in his book *Les larmes d'Eros* (1961); the picture is also featured as the artwork of John Zorn’s *Naked City* album *Leng Tch’e* (1992).

inspired the composition and could not but lead to major conflict between Zorn and his record label (Japanese imprint Toys Factory), which objected to its extreme graphic nature. The music in *Leng Tch'e* consists of one single 32-minute piece, a «slow-motion clash of heavy droning guitar, squealing saxophone, and screaming vocals» (Berry, 2006, p. 46), the latter element being provided by Japanese singer Yamatsuka Eye, from the avant-punk band The Boredoms.

In the image of *lingchi*, Zorn probably found the most extreme rendition of his search for the cathartic power of violence. Standing in radical contrast to Zorn's noise explosion is Taiwanese director Chen Chieh-jen's reconstruction of the *lingchi* in his eponymous short movie (2002), which is completely submersed in silence.

4.3. Giacinto Scelsi: Music is the other

Giacinto Scelsi (1905–1988) is the composer who was most influenced by the East, not only as regards his music, or his aesthetics in general, but also his private life. A proper philosopher of music, whose body of works is still little studied (and controversial too, due to philological issues), Scelsi embraced a syncretism made of philosophical traits drawn from China, Japan, and India.

According to Italian orientalist and philosopher Leonardo Vittorio Arena (b. 1953), Scelsi shaped his aesthetics onto the ancient Chinese concept of wisdom of *Wei-Wu-Wei* (为无为, “action without action”), as learned from the philosopher Zhuāngzǐ. He did not look for something: he looked for *not looking at all*. This anti-Aristotelic absence of any cognitive yearning is the cornerstone of the rejection of the West by Scelsi. I quote again Gianfranco Marrone (2016) summarizing François Jullien:

The West has never had such a thing as Wisdom: in the West we have dealt with things like Knowledge, Science, Intelligence, questioning about Truth or Freedom. But not Wisdom. [...] According to ancient Chinese

thought, the wise man is neither the philosopher nor the scientist or the artist and, definitely, he is not the economist or the politician. He is the one capable of being all these things *without being none of them*. With his gaze scrupulously devoted to common experience and everyday life: which is something that seems repetitive only to those who cannot appreciate its transformative nuances, its hidden details of novelty, the *small evolution of signs*. The wise man, the sage, *lives* and lets live, rather than *being*; he does not take initiatives: he lets things happen, encouraging their flow, without either personal demands or ontological obsessions”.

Scelsi chose *living*, instead of *being* and, as a consequence, he composed with “lucid passivity”: he did not write the score of his compositions, but rather directly recorded the music, so that he ended up believing *pure improvisation* was the best way to compose. Like Cage, he was an avid reader of the *I Ching*.

The music and choruses of the Hottentots or of African Pygmies, the songs from China or the Japanese Nō, are certainly neither songs nor music to the ear of an opera composer or performer, or to that of most European musicians, not to mention their audiences. (Scelsi, 2010, p. 5)⁸

Scelsi does not distinguish between sound and music: everything is sound and, more importantly, *sound is everything*. He embraces a mystique of sound, of the *single* sound, just like in Chinese tradition, a single sound full of infinite nuances, and expanding. Just like an atomic structure.

His most extreme outcome in this respect, as well as his best-known work, is *Quattro pezzi per orchestra* or *Quattro pezzi su una nota sola* (1959; “Four Pieces For Orchestra” or “Four Pieces on a Single

8. The contents of the book, which was posthumously published in 2010, were originally recorded on magnetic tape in 1973 (first part) and 1980 (second part). This excerpt of the English translation is taken from: *The Sound of Scelsi*, «Nero Magazine», n. 28, Winter 2012, pp. 78–89.

Note”), whose title is self-explanatory⁹. Here musicality does not lie in the organization of a melody or even of a sequence of notes, but rather in the infinite microtonal forms that the sound assumes, in its harmonics, in the timbre, and in the acoustic dynamics thereof, freed from any chronological conception. Scelsi focuses on the spherical globality of sound, deepening its thickness, working on its very spectrum. In a diary entry of his, Scelsi remembered his first childhood experiments with sound, sitting on a beach and hitting two stones against each other; repeated many times, the sound produced an array of nuances that already contained in itself his entire idea of music.

Sound [...] takes shape and, therefore, is multidimensional. It creates shapes and we can *see* this also in the phenomenal world, but above all in meditation. Just as happens with colours, this can be *heard*, since, definitely, everything is *unity*. (Arena, 2016, p. 13)

Scelsi did not meditate and compose music, but rather *meditated through music*: making music was his own personal form of mystical prayer; he played as if in a state of trance, thus removing any rational supervision, to let the “cosmic sound” come to him without any filters. He lived under the sign of the number eight, as it is understood in traditional Chinese culture, and used a circle upon a line as his personal signature: the perfect synthesis of Eastern cyclicity and Western progression (Fig. 8).

4.4. Harry Partch: A one-of-a-kind approach to tonality

American musical maverick Harry Partch (1901–1974) invented his own musical instruments and composed with scales dividing the

9. In order to provide a simple and clear summary of Giacinto Scelsi’s work, as regards his Chinese sources of inspiration, I have based this paragraph on the explanation provided in the brief unsigned introduction to the aforementioned «Nero Magazine», feature.

octave into 43 unequal tones, derived from the natural harmonic series; these scales allowed for more tones of smaller intervals than in standard Western tuning, which uses twelve equal intervals to the octave.

Partch was deeply influenced by Chinese music, as much as by Ancient Greek Theatre and Japanese culture. His parents were Presbyterian and served as missionaries in China from 1888 to 1893, and again from 1895 to 1900, when they fled the Boxer Rebellion; his mother used to sing to him in Mandarin Chinese. Among his first musical works we can find *Seventeen Lyrics of Li Po* (1931–1933), based on translations of the Chinese poetry of Li Bai. Partch's *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (1961), a multimedial opera based on the *The Bacchae* (405 BC) by Greek poet Euripides, generally considered a summa of his work, features a prominent Chinese influence which is both timbral and melodic.

Through a series of moments, images, sketches of music and discourse, we have tried to see how Chinese music has been perceived, employed, appropriated, and misappropriated in the West; Chinese music as the spectrum, the sound image of otherness. From the one hand, it has been mediated via superficial clichés. From the other, it has become a solid influence for musicians and artists who were



Figure 8. Stylized elaboration of Giacinto Scelsi's handwritten signature.
SOURCE: bit.ly/fondazionescelsi.

seeking a different inspiration and became fascinated by an aesthetic ideal which the West could not deliver to them.

5. Do Chinese musicians make Chinese music?

And what about non-Chinese musicians who make Chinese(-like) music?

5.1. *Otherness as a koiné*

In recent years, a few articles have proposed a journey through the contemporary Chinese musical underground scene to the Italian audience (see De Seta, 2015; Ricci, 2018; Benini, 2018). Not to mention the decennial critical work by influential and idiosyncratic music critic and historian Piero Scaruffi (2012) or the pioneering, cult book about Chinese punk published by Sinologist Serena Zuccheri (2004).

Artists like Yan Jun (an electronic musician, improviser, and author born in 1973 in Lanzhou), Bun-Ching Lam (a composer, pianist, and conductor born in 1954 in Macao), Wang Fan (an electronic musician from Beijing), Tzusing (a Malaysian-born and currently Shanghai and Taipei-based techno producer), Howie Lee (Beijing-raised and UK-educated club music producer), Genome 6.66 Mbp (a collective of DJs and producers based in Shanghai) have their own cult following in the West and their sound, their musical and visual aesthetics perfectly represent the idea that a first possible way to understand “the other” is recognizing how *the other is not different from us*; namely, how *the category of otherness* may help build cultural bridges and common identities.

At least since the age of classical-contemporary avant-garde, namely Modernism, on the one hand, China has deeply influenced Western music; on the other hand, Western music has regularly and stably penetrated the aesthetic horizon of Chinese music. Avant-

garde and experimentalism have become a meta-genre ranging from New York to Milan, from Beijing to Tokyo, under the sign of what Ilaria Benini (b. 1984), the Asian editor of the independent Turin publishing imprint Add, has recently defined as a «connected underground» (2018). A typical performance by a Chinese artist like Yan Jun would not sound unlike one by any other conceptual, electronic, and noise musician worldwide; it would include hisses, white noises, pauses, direct manipulation of the employed hardware, etc. In other words, *musical otherness* has become a *koiné*, a common language, a «post-geographical sound [...], deterritorializing and border-crossing, [which] could equally be about any city anyway» (Reynolds, 2012, p. 515). Starting from our common *sense of otherness*, suggests Benini, we may better understand each other.

The size of China, in terms of geographical extension, population, background history and economic power contributes to surround it with the allure of an anonymous and kowtowing mass, often considered undecipherable, like its language. This illegibility provokes more than often a polarization in opinions about China. But is China this indistinct? [...] We need to break the stereotype in every direction: China is stimulating and exciting, walking in the streets of Shanghai is an infusion of energy; China is also scary and disturbing, experiencing the limitation of freedom of expression can support the worst nihilistic view of the human society. (Benini, 2018)

Once we have highlighted the *differences* between the West and the East, we may adopt the perspective of *affinity* and *complexity*, rather than that of *otherness* and binary *oppositions*.

5.2. *Chinesisch?*

Fatima Al Qadiri (b. 1981) is a Senegal-born, Kuwait-raised musician and artist, currently based in Berlin. *Asiatisch* (“Asian” in Ger-



Figure 9. Cover artwork of Fatima Al Qadiri's album *Asiatisch* (2014), realized by Shan-zhai Biennial.

man) is her debut full length album, published in 2014 for the London label Hyperdub (Fig. 9).

The record is about what Qadiri herself called “Imagined China”, an environment of stereotypes about East Asian nations and cultures formed in the media of the West. According to her:

It's like a garbage tapestry: you don't know what the fabric is; it's not something that's easily identifiable or quantifiable; there's a catalogue of films and cartoons and comic books within it, but one that many authors have contributed to. The Asia in *Asiatisch* is a nexus of stereotypes that have been perpetrated, elaborated, embellished and weaved, each time further and further dislocated from the original misrepresentation.¹⁰

As pointed out in the aforementioned interview, *Asiatisch* is meant to be about «nations as mythologies, as fantasies, as erratic aggregations of commerce, junk-media, fabricated fictions». The album indeed presents a contamination between the typical sound of contemporary Western electronic music, and grime in particular (Lon-

10. F. AL QADIRI, *Me and my Sister Played Video Games as Saddam Invaded*, “The Guardian”, 5 May 2014.

don signature dark and minimal hip hop music, epitomized by artists such as Wiley and Dizzee Rascal), and elements designed to “sound Eastern-like”, such as digital renditions of traditional Chinese-styled drum kits (see the track “Shanghai Freeway”), excerpts of ancient Chinese poems (in the tracks “Loading Beijing”, “Wudang”, and “Jade Stairs”), and even nonsensical Chinese phonemes and words.

In this respect, *Asiatisch* should be considered a sonic commentary to cultural *shanzhai*, a Chinese term which refers to counterfeit consumer goods produced in China and which gives to the opening track of the album its name. The song, fully entitled “Shanzhai (For Shanzhai Biennial)”, is actually a twisted cover version of Sinead O’Connor’s classic “Nothing Compares 2 U” (1990), being a “nonsense Mandarin” a capella version sung by Helen Fung, the frontwoman of the band Nova Heart; the song was inspired by and is dedicated to art trio Shanzhai Biennial (Cyril Duval, Avena Gallagher, and Babak Radboy), who also realized the cover artwork of the album. Another interesting track in the collection is “Dragon Tattoo”, which includes a modulated voice saying «speak Chinese, if you please», a polemical response to the line «we are Siamese, if you please» from “The Siamese Cat Song” of the Disney cartoon *Lady and the Tramp* (1955). *Asiatisch* would definitely provide the perfect sound companion to a Chinese-focussed version of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the book which popularized the study of the West’s patronizing representations of The East.

6. Outro

One way or another, in its purest form as well as through its diverse metamorphoses, Chinese music will last: It will go on, and on, and on...

6.1. *From the flowing streams to the stars*

Guan Pinghu (1897–1967) was a leading player of the *guqin* (古琴), a Chinese 7-string bridgeless zither. *Liu Shui* (流水, “The Flowing

Streams”) is a traditional Chinese tune dating back at least to 1425, being the only piece from *Shen Qi Mi Pu* (“The Handbook of Spiritual and Marvelous Mysteries”) to have survived in a recognizable form in the modern repertoire. In 1977, a recording of *Liu Shui* performed by Guan was chosen to be included in the Voyager Golden Record, a gold-plated record containing music from around the world, selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth, intended for any intelligent extraterrestrial life form — or for future humans — who might find it, which was sent into outer space by NASA on the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecrafts. It is the longest excerpt included on the disc, lasting seven minutes and 37 seconds, and the only excerpt of Chinese music. Its elegant simplicity and brightness make it a meta-temporal classic, not only in the realm of music and sound, but of artistic creation and human expression in general.

And while the Voyager spacecraft float through the spaceways, Body Heat, a collective of young Italian disco-funk musicians, led by Rocco Civitelli, is probably organizing some late-night party at the KTV Baolijin, a Chinese karaoke bar in via Paolo Sarpi, the heart of the Chinese block in Milan, Italy (Fig. 10).

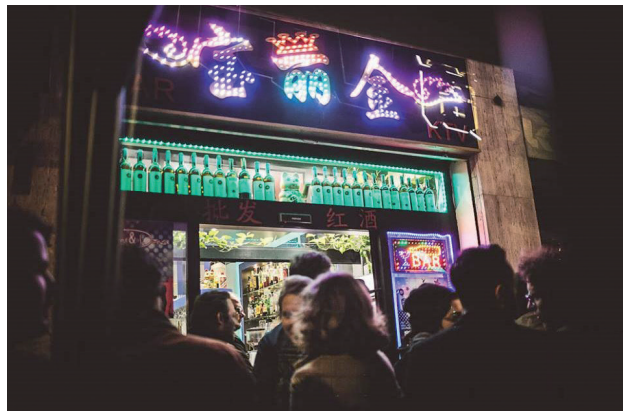


Figure 10. Crowd at a Body Heat concert/party at KTV Baolijin, via Paolo Sarpi, Milan, Italy. SOURCE: bit.ly/zerobodyheat, photo by Meschina, meschina.it.

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The Waterfall and the Fountain

Geographically and anthropologically distant cultures inspire awe and fascination: for centuries, Europe and China, the West and the East have fantasized about each other, longed for journeying toward each other, mutually projected onto each other their own alter egos. Modern innovation in the transport of people, goods, and especially cultural contents in digital form has increasingly narrowed the distance between these two geographic and human poles. Today, China is everywhere in the West, and viceversa. Yet, facility of access is not always tantamount to in-depth comprehension. Century-long differences, prejudices, and asymmetries still persist. Comprising the essays of several specialists in cultural theory and analysis, both from Europe and China, the volume seeks to uncover the semiotic formula underpinning the encounter, the dialogue, but also the clash between Western and Eastern aesthetics, especially in the neglected field of popular culture and arts. The title hints at the Chinese fascination for waterfalls and the natural flowing of the elements, compared with the European attraction to fountains as exploitation of technological mastery over nature: each chapter in the volume focuses on many aesthetic dialectics, spanning from literature to painting, from videogames to food.

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