Considering the Politics of Sound Art in China in the 21st Century

JING WANG

In 21st-century China, “being political” can mean many things, particularly as discourses on the global economy, environmental pollution, consumerism, sensual perceptions and gender politics become increasingly concrete at local levels. Contemporary Chinese sound artists go beyond the mere use of the language of propaganda and instead make works that play different sociopolitical roles—heroic, observant or participatory—to address sociocultural, sensual and spiritual issues. The author shows that the political statement made by a sound work in China depends to a great degree on the sociopolitical contexts in which the work is exhibited and performed, as well as the sociopolitical identity of its creator.

Politics has been a dirty word in neoliberal China. Many Chinese artists see “being political” in their work as either an easy way to get (Western) attention or as a form of old-fashioned revolutionary heroism—a display of courage and self-sacrifice for greater ideals, e.g. justice, freedom or the success of proletarian revolution. Most sound practitioners, however (especially those from the Mainland), consciously or unconsciously distance themselves from political discourse and avoid using sensitive terms such as Party, censorship, Tiananmen, Ai Weiwei, etc. However, in contemporary China in the 21st century, being political can mean many things, especially as discourses on the global economy, environmental pollution, consumerism, sensual perceptions and gender politics become increasingly concrete at the various local levels within China [1].

Contemporary Chinese sound artists go beyond simply using propaganda terms in their works and instead make works utilizing different sociopolitical roles to address sociocultural, sensual and philosophical issues. To some extent, the politics of China’s sound art practice is congruent with Jacques Rancière’s description of politics:

Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them [2].

Here, I approach the politics of China’s sound art in terms of different sociopolitical roles—heroic, observant and participatory. I use this categorization for the convenience of textual discussion; in reality, sound artworks often play and generate multiple roles.

HEROIC

Mainstream Western media discourse often focuses on the state’s censorship of music and the arts in mainland China, with direct or implied reference to the Tiananmen Square students’ protest of 1989. However, the relation between the state’s ideology and new music ideology should not be oversimplified into rigid dichotomies.

During a symposium in connection with the China Sound Art Exhibition in Shanghai in October 2013, curator Yao Dajuin recalled an unpleasant encounter with the media at a press conference in New York for the 2013 exhibition RPM: Ten Years of Sound Art in China. Some journalists seemed determined to force statements from Chinese artists on sensitive political issues. Even after Yao clearly denied any political dimensions in the works exhibited, the “story” that the media desired to report still appeared in the news. For example, the New York Times reported:

Some of the other pieces touch on sensitive political and social issues, though none have been banned in China, Mr. Shi said. For instance, Edwin Lo’s “Mourn” from 2011 is a spooky audio-visual work about candlelight vigils to commemorate the killings at Tiananmen Square in 1989 [3].

It should be noted that Edwin Lo is a Hong Kong–based artist; his work Mourn has never been exhibited in Mainland China, and its exhibition in the United States does not necessarily mean it would be allowed (or not) on the Mainland.

Due to the “one country, two systems” constitutional principle set out by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, Hong Kong...
and Macau can retain their own economic and political systems, while the Mainland uses the socialist system. In addition, censorship systems vary significantly among the regions of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and the Mainland. Thus, the economic and political conditions of each region affect the perception of the political nature of the sound works discussed here.

An actual censored sound work in Mainland China, which may well fit into the rebellious-artist-versus-state-censorship dichotomy, is Ai Weiwei’s Nian (2010). Nian (reading) is a 3:40:53 audio recording consisting of thousands of readings by volunteers. Each volunteer reads out the name of a student killed in the 5•12 Wenchuan Earthquake on 12 May 2008. Five thousand two hundred five students’ names were read 12,140 times in the piece. Nian commemorates the students’ deaths and expresses the artist’s anger over the jerrybuilt government construction projects implicated in the disaster. Nian has never been exhibited or circulated through public channels in Mainland China.

Ai Weiwei is an unusual example, however, as his artworks often publicly confront the state. Going back to China’s rock music of the 1980s, we can say that the rock star Cui Jian and his music played a similar heroic sociopolitical role [4]. In the 1980s, Cui Jian’s public performances found enormous resonance among music fans, artists and intellectuals. During the Tiananmen Square students’ protest, Cui Jian went to the square and sang “Nothing to My Name” to students to express his spiritual support. For Cui Jian, rock music is an ideology rather than a musical form. Rock music was strictly censored soon after Tiananmen and, as a result of the censorship, very quickly caught both commercial and Western media attention.

In neoliberal China, being rebellious within conceded degrees is safe and sells. Deng Xiaoping’s neoliberal policy reshaped the social milieu of post-Tiananmen China and gave rise to new political dimensions. Despite their cultural, technical, historical and institutional differences, different genres of music were all mixed together and introduced as new or avant-garde to Chinese listeners through dakou CDs [5], the Internet and online radio programs. In the early 2000s, the underground rock musicians and critics who would later constitute the main forces in China’s sound art culture, including Yan Jun, Li Jianhong, the Raying Temple collective, Feng Hao, Zen Lu and Li Yangyang, shifted attention from the sociopolitical to the technical, materialistic and philosophical dimensions of sound. Most became disillusioned with revolutionary heroism, but what has nonetheless been inherited from the first-generation rockers is the condition of musician-as-public-intellectual. Sound artists (including experimental musicians) are influenced by Western experimental art, critical theory and contemporary philosophy (Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Virilio, etc.). They are savvy about critical discourses, which somewhat facilitates their creation of sound works that are observant and participatory.

OBSERVANT

We should not hastily conclude that Chinese sound artists, especially those of younger generations, are apolitical simply because they have told the public media that they are not interested in politics. The fact is that the game of political resistance is changing and becoming multiscalar as technical and intellectual milieus change.

Despite Yao Dajuin’s denial of a state-activist dichotomy in the above-cited press conference, he does create sound work that is implicitly political. In the Sound Art China exhibition (Shanghai, 2013), Yao’s sound installation Tank Listening Shanghai (20 October–19 December) applies the concept of the Panopticon in transforming a gigantic oil tank into a listening space. The red-lit Panopticon space, according to Yao, returns listening to its purest form, uninterrupted by visuals. At the same time, while sitting in the piece’s semi-enclosed listening booths, created with plastic boards around the interior edges of the tank, and listening to a field recording of Shanghai, one cannot help feeling exposed (although one cannot see people sitting in neighboring booths, one can be seen listening by the people standing in the middle inside the tank). There is an uncomfortable feeling of listening privately but being watched in a public space. The work makes one recognize the immanent visual and audio surveillance and the central control permeating everyday city life in modern society. However, while the work makes Shanghai audible and social surveillance sensible, here the artist remains a distant critical observer maintaining an ambiguous relationship with his/her work. A critical observer often retains a certain distance from the object of observation, unlike an artist-hero who presents a clearly defined position and attitude.

The sound artist Yan Jun tells a story on his “Radio Enemy

Fig. 1. Zen Lu, Borderline, sound installation artwork proposal, 2014. (© Zen Lu. Photo © Zen Lu.)
program of June 2010 [6]. During a visitor’s talk at UC Berkeley in 2011, Yan Jun played a field recording of Tiananmen Square during the national day of mourning for the 2008 5•12 Wenchuan Earthquake. In the field recording, one hears waves of patriotic chanting: “China China China” and “Jiayou [cheer up], Jiayou, Jiayou.” The affective power of human sound and background noise is overwhelming. After his talk, a visiting Chinese scholar, apparently irritated, approached him and asked, “What do you want to do with this? Why do avant-garde artists like you make such ambiguous work? What do you want to say?” Yan Jun did not have an immediate answer. In the radio program, he said he still does not have an answer and that the question stays with him.

Also utilizing the affective power of field recordings, Shenzhen-based sound artist Zen Lu proposed a multichannel sound installation called *Borderline* (2014). The work makes one aware of the electrified fences put up for border management by the Chinese government to separate Shenzhen and Hong Kong (Fig. 1). Four years after the founding of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zones in 1979, 84.6 miles of 2.8-meter-high electrified fences were built to encircle a 327.5×327.5-km zone. People from the Mainland must obtain a “Border Pass of the People’s Republic of China” to cross this border into Hong Kong. The fences contribute to the increasingly striking gap between the rich and the poor, as well as spatial-identity–related discrimination. *Borderline* is interactive. When the audience makes enough noise, a microphone picks up the signal and activates sounds of gunfire. However, this work has not yet been actualized due to financial difficulties. It is also difficult to find a venue for its exhibition on the Mainland because border issues are too politically sensitive to address in artworks.

**PARTICIPATORY**

The performative and participatory have become major characteristics of China’s current sound artwork. To create the work *Sing for Her* (2013), Zheng Bo spent a significant amount of time interviewing Filipino domestic workers at their weekend gatherings. From Sol Pillas, a Filipino domestic worker who lived in Hong Kong for 28 years, Zheng Bo discovered a love song that most Filipino workers in Hong Kong know. He organized the workers to perform the song and recorded the performance. *Sing for Her* consists of a gigantic iron speaker suspended in the middle of the exhibition room (Fig. 2). On top of the speaker, a small screen plays the video recording of the performance. The audience is invited to stand in front of the speaker to sing along. The video keeps playing until the audience becomes quiet. If no one makes any sound, the video does not play. With *Sing for Her*, Zheng Bo successfully makes the audience affectively experience another culture, profession and class by singing along. He calls the work a “pedagogical encounter,” to differentiate it from the participatory art (a.k.a. people’s art) of Mao’s era, which Zheng Bo has criticized as too violently enforced.
During the 10th Shanghai Biennale 2014, Yan Jun presented the participatory installation *Noise Hypnotizing* (Fig. 3). Yan arranged eight massage beds, each equipped with headphones, on the third floor of the Power Station of Art, the state-run contemporary museum and home of the Shanghai Biennale, by a window facing the Huangpu River. Most of the tracks played on the headphones come from Yan’s previous live performances; two were made expressly for the exhibition. All of the tracks were created by the same method: feedback noise generated manually by portable recorder and earphones. Once the noise is played in a loop, a hypnotic effect that puts listeners to sleep is expected to result. The high-pitched noise does not have this effect on every participant, and many quickly remove their headphones. Noise is still not widely considered an acceptable “music” form, but instead is considered to be a sonic attack.

Conceptually, this work is a variation of Yan’s sound work series *Living Room Tour* (2011–current). The protocol for *Living Room Tour* is simple: Anyone can invite the musician to his/her living room for a private concert. There is no invitation fee charged, but the artist’s transportation has to be paid for. Yan brings his feedback noise set and supplements it with whatever is available in the inviter’s house. The tour is an ongoing project and has been conducted in several cities, including Beijing (2011, 2014), Shanghai (2012), and Montreal (2014) [7]. For Yan Jun, noise is liberation, although not everyone agrees.

China’s sound art movement also encompasses works made by non-Chinese artists and exhibited in China. Berlin-based Peter Ablinger and Graz-based Winfried Ritsch created the sound work *The Truth or: How to Teach the Piano Chinese* for the 10th Shanghai Biennale 2014 (Fig. 4). It is a mechanized piano audiovisual installation that converts phonographic recordings (recorded human voices and field recordings) into music. The work is part of the *Speaking Piano* series, in which Ablinger investigates phonorealism’s relation with phontorealism. As a composer, Ablinger performs as an observer of perceptions of music, noise and speech. In *The Truth or*, Ablinger programs the piano so that it musically pronounces the well-known Chinese propaganda phrase “seek truth from facts,” used by both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. The phrase nicely fits into the biennale’s theme, “Social Factory.”

The 2014 Biennale theme addresses both the production of the social and how “social facts” are constituted in the case of modern China. A recurring point of reference is the year 1978, acknowledged as a turning point in the recent history of China’s modernity. This was the year in which Deng Xiaoping, who was to become China’s most influential leader in the following decades, initiated his landmark socioeconomic Reform and Opening, reinvoking Mao Zedong’s 1938
exhortation to “seek truth from facts”—a practice meant to separate accounts of objective reality from subjective imagination, as the curatorial statement for the Biennale stated.

Articulating an ideology-laden phrase at a loud volume, imitating a stereotypical Chinese propaganda broadcast voice, Ablinger’s work invites criticism mostly targeted at the apparent orientalism in the work and the sonic pollution of his piece in relation to the other works in the same exhibition. The use of socialist propaganda symbols was a strategy applied in political pop art of the early 1990s and 2000s, but only rarely has been used by contemporary Chinese artists in recent years. Whether the work constitutes orientalism should be a question open for debate, but this is a good example of the importance of context in attributing a political dimension to a sound work, even if the artist desires to remain apolitical and conceptual.

In general, the degree to which a sound work is considered to be political in China depends largely on the sociopolitical contexts in which it is exhibited and performed, as well as the sociopolitical identity of its creators. Even when the work is a pure experimentation in sound and technology, the process of exhibition or performance, the nature of the exhibition space and the larger cultural-economic space endow additional meanings and significance to the work. The more abstract the sound, the easier it is for it to be discursively and symbolically manipulated in subjective ways.

HARMONIOUS NOISE

In my opinion, sound works that create a dangerous, unbearable and immersive sonic presence are the most political and, at the same time, the most poetic. Recent examples include Yan Jun and Yu Ji’s collaborative project Deep in the Cloud (2013) (Fig. 5), and Collision of Harmonies (2014) by the well-known new media artist Zhang Peili [8] (Fig. 6). While Deep in the Cloud creates an immersive sonic world that makes every audience a breathing body vibrating with feedback and dust, Collision of Harmonies draws the audience into a conceptual and reflexive state in thinking about intricate relations between harmony and noise.

In Collision of Harmonies, when the installation’s two speakers are far apart, one hears women (from the right speaker) and men (from the left speaker) singing harmoniously. As the two speakers slowly move closer together, a piercing feedback noise is generated and becomes increasingly unbearable, until fluorescent tubes suddenly light up. Piercing noise and blinding lights fill the room. Then the two speakers move apart once again; noise becomes harmony. Noise—“cosmic vibration” in Evens’s term—is still an undesirable thing, but nonetheless an ideal state for sonic harmonizing [9]. Noise makes music possible.

Over the last 14 years of development—from China’s first sound art exhibition Sound, curated by Li Zhenhua in 2000 in Beijing, to the most recent Shanghai Biennale 2014—sound art in China has finally stepped out from the shadow of “no sound art in China.” Now is the time for sound artists to push beyond their own boundaries to make more noise, to discover creative possibilities, and to connect sound to more nerve endings in both the actual and virtual worlds [10].

Acknowledgments

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References and Notes

1 I am aware of the complicated identity politics among Taiwanese, Hong Kongers and people from the Mainland. I will not expand on this issue here given space limitations. I use the term Chinese here mostly as an ambiguous cultural identity rather than a national identity. I will not engage in exploring what “Chineseness” means in this article; this point definitely deserves fuller discussion elsewhere, however.

3 See <artsbeatblogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/now-hear-this-works-by-chinese-sound-artists/?r=0>.


5 Dakou, or “saw-gash,” refers to the small punch hole cut into the excess CDs by Western record companies prior to shipping them to China as trash, presumably to make them unsellable.


7 For more on Living Room Tour, see <www.yanjun.org/archives/category/project/living-room>.

8 For more on Deep in the Cloud, see <www.yanjun.org/archives/1132>.


10 For further discussion of socially engaged practices within the discourse of contemporary Chinese art, please see e.g. Thomas Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Timezone 8, 2007); Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005); Peggy Wang, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (MoMA Primary Documents) (Duke Univ. Press, 2010).

JING WANG is currently a teacher in the College of Media and International Culture at Zhejiang University, China. Her research areas include the anthropology of sound, senses, space and technology. She also curates and organizes sound-related art events and exhibitions in the cities of Hangzhou and Shanghai. For more information, see <www.sonorouspresence.org>.