



REVIEW: BOOK

## Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770–1839

Thomas Irvine

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Serving as the backdrop to Thomas Irvine's *Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770–1839* is the Canton system, known in Chinese as *Shisan hang* 十三行 (Thirteen Hong or Cohong), a monopolized foreign-trade operation granted by the Qing government (1636–1912) to a limited number of Chinese merchants in Canton. Its landscape is well captured in the volume's dust jacket – a Western painting of Western junks and European-style trading houses, referred to as 'factories' in the early nineteenth century. The Canton system is traceable to as early as the mid-seventeenth century, the nomenclature 'Thirteen Hong' first being mentioned in two short poems by the Chinese intellectual Qu Dajun 屈大均 (1630–1696) in 1662. Sino-Western contacts, well documented in missionaries' and travellers' writings, though less so in Chinese sources, also inspired the leading Hong merchant Pan Youdu's 潘有度 (1755–1820) twenty poems on Western matters composed in about 1812. Following the decline of the fashion for *chinoiserie* in Europe, the Canton system collapsed as China was forced to open its doors to Western settlement and trade in other port cities beyond Canton after the First Opium War (1839–1842). One of the volume's objectives, as Irvine explains, is to illustrate the changing relations between Europe and China from 1770 to 1839, up to the beginning of this Opium War. According to Irvine, this change was impelled by 'an eighteenth-century revolution, in the West, about how the senses make humans what they are' (27), which, I think, downplays the political and ideological foundations that underpin our senses (see, for instance, Xuelei Huang's 'Deodorizing China: Odour, Ordure, and Colonial (Dis)order in Shanghai, 1840s–1940s', *Modern Asian Studies* 50/3 (2016), 1,092–1,122) and the close ties between knowledge and colonialism (Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)).

Two sets of sources shape Irvine's argument into 'two strands' (4). The first, as Irvine sees it, are documents describing Westerners listening to sounds and music in China: 'published travel writings, diaries, journalism, correspondences, manuscript accounts' (4). The second set of sources are texts by European writers on China or Chinese music, through which Irvine interprets their ways of perceiving Chinese music and culture to be a form of listening. The first set of sources inform the two central chapters, chapter 2 being about Westerners' sonic experience in the Canton area, and chapter 4 the sonic journey of the British diplomat Lord George Macartney's embassy to China from 1792 to 1794. The second group of sources form the pillars of the volume, chapter 1 dealing with Enlightenment writers, namely Christian Wolff, Jean-Philippe Rameau, Joseph de Guignes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder, chapters 3 and 5 with

the English music historian Charles Burney and chapter 6 with the German writers Johann Nikolaus Forkel and A. B. Marx.

Europeans' changing perceptions of China and Chinese music in the nineteenth century are readily evident in the documents examined in the volume. For instance, Christian Wolff's veneration for Chinese culture, commending old Chinese teachings from the *Four Books* and *Six Classics* (should be *Four Books* and *Five Classics* 四書五經) as a shining example of how to live wisely and harmoniously in his 1721 talk at the University of Halle ('Rede über die praktische Philosophie der Chinesen'), provides a stark contrast to the writings of Herder from 1784 to 1791. Though Herder praised China's long-lasting civilization, he criticized the nation's lack of 'progress' and attributed it to the sensitivities of Chinese ears and their fine sense of hearing as manifested in the Chinese language (44–45). Likewise, even though Rousseau regarded Chinese music's lack of notation as a sign of the superiority of this supposedly less developed civilization, and quoted a Chinese tune in his *Dictionnaire de musique* – a tune later used by Carl Maria von Weber in his *Incidental Music for Turandot*, Op. 37 (which Irvine misidentifies as the opera *Turandot* (42)) – his view, as Irvine points out, 'shaped the formation of the first world histories of music written by Europeans such as Charles Burney and Johann Nikolaus Forkel – that more "primitive" or less "civilized" people made music that was simpler' (43).

While the above shows one strand of 'listening' that Irvine meticulously reconstructs to show a European network of knowledge about China (examined in chapters 1, 3 and 5), chapters 2 and 4 take a different approach. Methodologically following Ana María Ochoa Gautier's study of historically informed sonic accounts (*Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)), and drawing on the notion of 'soundscape', Irvine reconstructs China's early nineteenth-century soundscape through what he calls 'earwitness' accounts. Some of these witnesses listened with 'open ears', but most with 'imperial ones', rejecting Chinese sounds and music as ugly, often comparing them to sounds from home and discarding them as noises.

Chapters 2 and 4 are structured as sonic journeys, the readers following the footsteps of the historical protagonists from one spot to another. For instance, the former takes the readers first to Whampoa, where the Western junks docked (57). When on an upriver journey, readers are confronted with the sounds of insects, firecrackers, time-telling gongs and cymbals (59–60); when landing at the 'factories', the multitude of noises from traders of different origins, strains of chamber music, and even hymn-singing from Christian converts (66); when on the street, locals' chattering while preparing meals, monks' sermons from faraway monasteries, beggars' musicking on wretched instruments (68–69); and finally, when in the theatres, the screeching sound from the male singers performing female roles in Cantonese opera (71).

The two types of sources and the two strands of sonic explorations, as Irvine sees them, tell 'the story of a feedback loop' (16), the travellers' responses to Chinese sound affected by what they read in writings on Chinese music, while their negative experiences in turn affected those who wrote about China. These sonic experiences and the downward spiral in Sino-Western relations, in my view, were symptomatic of Western powers' colonial and imperialistic ambitions after the Industrial Revolution, leading to wars waged on China and different forms of violence inflicted on it, a phase seen by Chinese people as 'a century of humiliation' that Irvine acknowledges (11) but evades and does not adequately unpack in terms of how ideology and listening were intertwined.

To reconstruct China's soundscapes and to untangle various European writers' 'Chinese' networks, Irvine has consulted an enormous number of primary sources – over a hundred in English, German and French, and triple the number in secondary ones. Meticulously researched, *Listening to China* is the fruit of nearly a decade of research and intellectual labour from the volume's inception in 2012 to its publication in 2020. Irvine's knowledge of German intellectual history and Enlightenment ideology is on full display, his discussions generally nuanced and persuasive.

But as a Chinese scholar myself (who is attuned to Sinologists' writings and cultural theorists' postcolonial critiques), I am troubled by the total absence of Chinese-language sources, and, likewise, Chinese voices in *Listening to China*. For example, neither the two Chinese poems pertaining to Sino-Western encounters that I mentioned at the beginning of this review, nor key Chinese-language monographs on Sino-Western musical exchanges (for instance, Tao Yabing 陶亞兵, *Zhongxi yinyue jiaoliu shigao* 中西音乐交流史稿 (The History of Musical Exchange between China and [the] Western World) (Beijing: Zhongguo dabeike quanshu chubanshe, 1994) and Feng Wenci 馮文慈, *Zhongwai yinyue jiaoliu shi* 中外音乐交流史 (A Chinese Foreign Exchange History of Music) (Hunan: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999)) are referred to in this volume – to say nothing of obscure primary sources in ancient script. Irvine explains: 'even if I wanted to somehow "envoice" Chinese protagonists in the soundscape I discuss – and I do not, since to assume the power of bestowing voices would be an act of considerable hubris – it would be very difficult to find the necessary historical evidence. For accessing unmediated Chinese perspectives, my project unfolds within archival, disciplinary, and linguistic realities' (12).

What are these archival, disciplinary and linguistic realities? What would be the interpretative implications of these realities? What is the purpose and meaning of an intellectual history of listening to China for musicology and other academic disciplines, for Irvine himself, as well as for the volume's potential readers (Western and Chinese)? What are the fundamental differences between Irvine's book and the writings he examines? I raise these questions not to diminish the contribution that Irvine has made, but to probe into historiographical issues such as the scope of a study, the sources selected, the methodologies adopted, the narrative formulated and projected as a result, and the relationship between this narrative and the position of the author.

The subjects examined in *Listening to China* would make a good case study for postcolonial critique. Irvine, however, aspires to the field of sound studies, formulating his research through the concept of aurality, partly to avoid postcolonialism's overt self-criticism and the tendency of that scholarly mode to draw straight lines between politics and ideology 'past the lived experience of protagonists in the historical archive' (9). For the author, the field of sound studies provides greater interdisciplinary possibilities, and, writing as a music historian, he argues that 'listening is a particular kind of material experience accessible through historical sources' (8), though he overlooks the fact that material experience is itself ideological, as is the reading of historical sources. Following historian Neil Gregor's plea for a more pluralistic approach – which both he and Irvine see as possible in sound studies – Irvine states that 'my aim is to imagine historically how China's real or imagined sounds shaped the myriad ways Westerners constructed themselves as actors in a global historical panorama of politics, diplomacy, race, economy – and music' (9).

Irvine's use of the word 'imagine' in the above sentence is worth pondering, and the importance he assigns to China's sounds as he 'imagines' them, and the plurality he claims sound studies may bring to his book, are, to me, exaggerated. The lack of Chinese sources from the past and Chinese-language studies from the present, as well as the absence of a dialogue between China and the West (both then and now), hardly do justice to a twenty-first-century study on Sino-Western encounters. Despite Irvine's condemnations of nineteenth-century colonialism and European arrogance here and there, what I 'hear' is a narrative tinted by colonial undertones. China's sounds, then and now, were and are powerless, having no agency of their own to 'talk back', and Irvine has rarely taken the opportunity to do so on their behalf. They were then and are here still objectified, being written, described, discussed and listened to in order to serve different Western actors' agendas, including Irvine's. The fact that Irvine has often contextualized Western musical practices at great length but merely described Chinese music as it was reported in earwitness accounts, without further explanation, is what I think has caused the colonial undertones. For instance, he contextualizes the social function of instrumental music in the West at quite some length (74), but merely mentions *Naamyam*, the narrative music that James Lind came across through Chinese courtesans (76). In the same vein, Irvine reports Matthew Raper's correspondence with Burney in great detail

(99–103), but provides hardly any information about the Chinese music ensemble of the region of Canton in which Raper claimed to have taken part, and which was used by Irvine as one of the chapter's subheadings. Likewise, cultural context is absent for John Christian Hüttner's encounter with Chinese instrumental music emanating from pleasure boats (182); Irvine does not even refer to the well-known 'Song of Pipa' by the Tang-dynasty poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) about encountering a dejected pipa (Chinese lute) player's virtuosic performance on a pleasure boat in the city of Xunyang. The volume's lack of a stronger critique on how China's sounds and music were being heard, objectified, misunderstood and deprecated, and, most of all, its inadequate contextualization of the Chinese culture in which sounds were made and music consumed, to me, run the danger of perpetuating misunderstandings and stereotypes that have been in the West for over two centuries, as Michael Keevak has traced in his monograph *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). *Listening to China* has extended the scope and geography of Western music and also added to the very limited literature on Sino-Western musical encounters, and it is a fine example of global music history. But as Irvine is learning Chinese (mentioned on his website), it is to be hoped that his next volume, if again on a 'global' subject (whatever that means), will be more polyphonic and inclusive, as there will be one less 'reality' for him to grapple with.

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