

Dialectics of Debate: Reflections on Three Pedagogical Scenes in Chinese Music History

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Scene 1: High School Politics

The first impression I had of high school education in China was one of pleasant surprise. Chinese students apparently learn about “dialectics”; but I quickly discovered that there is a slippery slope connecting dialectics, Marxist theory, and “Politics”—a high school subject, and communist party dogma. It is within this context that what we might call the Western liberal notion of pedagogy, as embodied in Abraham Maslow’s concept of self-actualization (more below), is revealed to be impossible. There is a cap placed on Chinese students’ ability to reach their full potential, including the development of an individual point of view, as indoctrination forms a core part of their education; this is the case especially in the specific moments when educators are required to transmit the unshakable dogma that the Communist Party of China is always right. In the Chinese classroom, emphasis is placed on students adopting the “correct” line of thought as established by the Party, closing off space for legitimate critique of the government.

A different, didactic definition of pedagogy applies in this context. For postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, “pedagogy” is the means by which majoritarian ideological forces seek to perpetuate a homogenous definition of the nation. Minoritarian forces, on the other hand, disrupt such pedagogy with performative acts: “the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and the locations of cultural difference” (Bhabha 1994, 212). Pedagogy represents a hegemonic force which ensures discursive discipline by fixing the referent of “nation” as a homogeneous entity, while the performative acts of diverse peoples diffuse the singular nation into its constituent differences. Although China officially promotes (its own definition of) “democracy” as one of the twelve core socialist values crafted in 2012, the government censors political and social discourse to enforce the party line, exerting a homogenizing effect. Against this totalized backdrop, how do performative acts of the people give rise to diversity and heterogeneity?

Although Bhabha is writing from outside of educational philosophy

and his deployment of “pedagogy” is primarily metaphoric and rhetorical, the Bhabha-ian conception of pedagogy (as instrumentalized by the state) is precisely what is applied in classroom indoctrination, which is widely known among Chinese students as *xinao*, or “brainwashing.” Much current thinking in education opposes Bhabha’s rhetorical conception of “pedagogy,” but this notion of the ideological entrainment of the mind and body encapsulates everyday educational practice in China. Bhabha-ian pedagogy thus serves the function of providing a target for critics who wish to explore alternative routes than homogenization. Put differently, in relation to the narrow sense of the party’s supremacy, the only way in which the word “pedagogy” has any meaning is in Bhabha’s sense: pedagogy as propagation of the notion of a homogenous nation loyal to and helmed by the single party that legitimizes its rule precisely by purporting to maintain that homogeneity at all expenses—Uyghur, Tibetan, or otherwise.

In the ensuing two scenes, I will take us through the manifestations of Bhabha-ian pedagogy in a video excerpt from a period Chinese drama serial set in the mythologized Zhou dynasty (1046–221 BC), as well as in an extract from the ancient Confucian text on music, *Yueji*. Both the video excerpt and textual extract are materials I have used in my own classroom in a music conservatory in China. I will demonstrate how the homogenizing “pedagogy” inherent in these materials can be countered in performative acts of defiance that produce “discursive ambivalence that emerges in the contest of narrative authority” (Bhabha 1994, 212). Performativity allows students to self-actualize, enacting a different kind of pedagogy which embraces Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943). With the lower physical and emotional tiers of Maslow’s hierarchy fulfilled (food, shelter, and safety; love and esteem), the educational aim is to create an environment for students to reach the highest plane of psychological development—self-actualization, wherein they embody the desire to pursue the development of skills, goals, and worldviews.

Scene 2: From the Chinese Drama Serial, *Ze Tian Ji*

Bhabha-ian pedagogy is manifest in multiple period Chinese drama serials, or *guzhuang xi*, in which the primacy of the state is articulated in either its survival in the face of external enemies, or the incremental process of unifying a multitude of independent Chinese kingdoms into a nation (accomplished by 221 BC). These period dramas often feature music as a vehicle of “magic,” which is congruent with the ancient Chinese philosophy of music, in which music is a means of both communicating with ancestors and bringing about cosmic harmony between outer and “inner” nature—man as himself a part of nature. (“Magic” is broadly defined here

as referring to music's purported spirit-realm or cosmological function.) Music is often deployed in fantastical ways in the period dramas, and this notion of music as transcending material limits to reach the spirit and cosmic realms has ancient philosophical roots. In the drama serial *Ze Tian Ji* ("Fighter of the Destiny" or "Revolting Against Heaven")—set in the context of the Chinese Zhou dynasty (1046–221 BC) but translated to the mythical setting of a celestial court—the viewpoint of one of the central characters, in my first-person summary below, elucidates how music can reveal what is hidden from sight by magic:

My name is Longevity, but I was born with a health condition which means that I will die young. Having decided to revolt against my fate, I left the secluded spot where I grew up with my master-teacher and another disciple older than me, my disciple-brother. My search for a way to extend my life led me to seek out a key or *yaoshi* together with my beloved, Xu Yourong, the Phoenix spirit. The key is supposed to open the gate to the National Institute which trains warriors of heaven. I find the spot where the key is supposed to be hidden but it is nowhere to be seen. In order to reveal the position of the key, I play my *guqin* zither. When it appears, the key turns out to be a flower, which is when I realize that the so-called *yaoshi* is actually *yao* (which means "medicine") in the form of the flower. *Yaoshi* turns out to be a play on words.

The above is but one of the multiple scenarios in which music plays a critical role in *Ze Tian Ji*; at other points in the plot, music served as a code (the tones of the melody corresponded to the correct height which books in a sequence must be arranged in, in order to unlock a hidden compartment), and to illuminate a mystical, philosophical principle. The story unfolds with Longevity as a young adult with a hidden past. In a flashback, it is revealed to us that Longevity's parents are the Emperor and Empress of the celestial Zhou court. Told that their child would bring about the downfall of the current Emperor, the royal couple had sent their son away to a remote village. By the time Longevity went searching for a way to change his fate, the Emperor had passed away and the Empress was the ruler, who eventually became intoxicated by the cosmological constellation of stars which powers the defense system protecting the celestial court. Though she progressively came under the control of the star constellation and was increasingly ruthless, the Empress, having learnt of Longevity's identity, gave up all of her power to prolong the life of the person who she thought was her son. But in a further twist, we find out that the Empress's long-lost son is actually Longevity's disciple-brother. Upon the Empress's death, the disciple-brother became the ruler of the celestial court.

Although one of the main threads of the storyline is the romantic

relationship between Longevity and Phoenix, the underlying plot can be understood as the continuity of the hereditary rulers of the mythologized Zhou dynasty, from the Empress to her real son, who is absent from almost all of the fifty-six episodes, appearing only at the beginning and end of the long arch of the story. The real son is thus clearly a placeholder for the authority of the throne and an embodiment of the primacy of the state, whereas Longevity is the central protagonist who undergoes the trials and tribulations involved in revolting against the fate conferred upon him by heaven. While the continuation of the mythical Zhou dynasty reflects Bhabha-ian pedagogy, the character of Longevity, who escapes the celestial order which he was supposed to helm as the (wrongly) presumed son of the Empress, introduces some ambivalence. Longevity self-actualizes his namesake by successfully defeating a destiny and finding his own path with Phoenix, circumventing *both* of his fates as the short-lived invalid and as eventual emperor. Music was a critical vehicle of magic in one of the many obstacles in the path leading to this self-actualization, when Longevity used his zither to discover the hidden key.

The topic of music's magical powers (in relation to, for example, communication with ancestors and cosmic harmony) in ancient Chinese music philosophy is rather dry for the undergraduate conservatory students I teach, all of whom major in performance on Western instruments. While there is the difficulty inherent in teaching Chinese music to students who prefer Western music, the problem is exacerbated by the highly conceptual, abstract nature of Chinese philosophy of music, comprising several schools of thought. For example, in relation to state ritual or sacrificial music (paying respect to ancestors who protect the living), students encounter the notion of "music" as a form of contact between physically remote objects which share similar characteristics, manifest as, for example, sympathetic resonance (strings which are physically non-contiguous nevertheless exert force on one another). This abstraction is further compounded by the lack of actual music preserved from the later part of the Zhou dynasty, when the various philosophies were formulated. Video clips demonstrating the magical power of music—even if these clips embody contemporary film scriptwriters's and composers's *imagination* of ancient music (as in *Ze Tian Ji*)—thus have an important function of illuminating philosophical concepts in audiovisual form, which is far more appealing to the students in my class than abstract discussion; Longevity's use of music to unveil the key in *Ze Tian Ji* demonstrates music's magical power in an immediately comprehensible way.

What I particularly like about the video excerpt discussed above is that music in that scene is a magical vehicle for Longevity's meandering path

towards individual self-actualization, whereas magic as a whole within the celestial court is what guarantees the symbolic continuation of the mythologized Zhou dynasty and the imagined Chinese nation. In other words, music accommodates the unfolding of a life story which counters the overarching narrative: Longevity's self-actualization leads to a path away from the throne as a guarantor of the celestial order, even though that order ultimately prevails. Recapitulating Bhabha, "the agency of a people . . . is split in the discursive ambivalence that emerges in the contest of narrative authority between the pedagogical [propagation of the mythologized Zhou dynasty] and the performative [Longevity's self-actualization]" (Bhabha 1994, 212).

Scene 3: *Yueji*, Ancient Treatise on Chinese Music Philosophy

The most important ancient treatise on music philosophy, *Yueji* (c. 33 BC), was written by Liu De in the Han dynasty and serves as a record of Confucian thinking on music, or *yue*, in the centuries following the philosopher's lifetime (c. 500 BC). *Yueji* expresses the Confucian notion that social order is to be maintained via a humane ruler who is responsible to his subjects (as opposed to a dictator drunk on power). This social order is maintained in part through *li*, or "ritual," broadly defined as the judicious cultivation and exercise of forms of propriety (e.g., ways of bowing) in accordance with one's social position, such that social intercourse may be conducted without causing offence and conflict; *Yueji* is the nineteenth chapter of a longer text on *li*, titled *Liji*. The Confucian conception of music accords with this vision in that music is deemed to have the power to bring about the harmonious sounding of the difference between social classes that is articulated in *li*. In other words, whereas ritual divides, music unites. "If the department of Ritual is established, then the noble and the plebeian are separated into classes. When the patterns of Music are uniform, then those in high position and those in low position get along in harmony" (Cook 1995, 42).

The ancient conception of music and *li* in *Yueji* was intended to ensure the continuation of the sociopolitical status quo. At the time of the writing of *Yueji*, China had existed as a unified nation for a period of slightly less than two centuries. In this context, music in *Yueji* was meant to maintain stability in a society of strictly divided classes, at a time when there was next to no social mobility, and the emperor exercised absolute power (which Confucius attempted to constrain through the notion, mentioned above, that an honorable ruler must be responsible to his subjects). *Yueji*, then, is a small part of a sprawling cultural apparatus—a social pedagogy in the Bhabha-ian sense—designed to maintain both the homogeneity of

the reach of power throughout the social classes, as well as the homogeneity of the relatively newly founded Chinese nation. Homogeneity, in this particular context, refers both to the homogenizing exercise of power, as well as to the homogeneous outcome of the exercise of power. As a form of Bhabha-ian pedagogy, music “homogenizes” the heterogeneity of social classes into the harmony of the nation.¹

Pondering the dialectics of homogeneity and heterogeneity—music and *li*, division and unification—I realized that I had to find an accessible way for students to engage with this material. Unlike the topic of music’s magical powers (which I elucidated with video excerpts from period Chinese drama serials), the conceptual apparatus of music-*li* could not be easily represented in moving images. Thus, I came up with the idea for students to debate the motion, “Ancient music philosophy remains relevant today.” From my experience, debates are a great way for students to engage with conceptual material because the separation into the pro and against teams ensures that there are at a very minimum two points of view on the subject of the day. Students sometimes get heated in their debates because of the opportunity to rebut each other, which means that they continue to think about music philosophy outside the classroom.

A general summary of the debate on the above motion (the contemporary relevance of ancient music philosophy) will suffice to give an indication of the impact of the classroom discussion in relation to Bhabha-ian/Maslowian pedagogy. On the one hand, students on the pro team pointed out the centrality of the concept of “harmony” (brought about by music), which has persisted in Confucian philosophy throughout the ages and is part of the vernacular vocabulary of contemporary Chinese society. On the other hand, students on the against team, without any prompting from me, or explanation of the power dynamics inherent in *Yueji*, argued that the philosophy of ancient China was formulated as an instrument of rulers of the day who used philosophy and culture to consolidate their dominance—a take away from high school lessons in Chinese history. From this latter point of view, the ancient, instrumental notion of music as harmonious is remote from the contemporary vernacular understanding of music as a largely non-political avenue for leisure and means for relaxing (a notion to be decidedly problematized in a different lesson). And yet—returning to the pro team—the notion of music as a tool of social cohesion is reflected today in, for example, the Chinese national anthem, which shows that traces of ancient thinking (on music as social symbol) may resonate today in a delimited way.

In the debate, various lines of argument expressed Bhabha-ian pedagogy—music as a means for achieving social harmony and cohesion. In

addition, arguments that highlight the congruence of ancient and contemporary thinking reinforce the oft repeated factoid of “5000 years” of Chinese civilization (there are no records of the mythical first Xia dynasty [c. 22nd to 18th centuries BC] from that time period), which resonates with the propagation of the mythical Zhou dynasty in *Ze Tian Ji*. On the other hand, the debate—through the temporal leap from the Zhou dynasty to the present—creates a space for performative acts through which students can articulate and self-actualize their contemporary musicality without being trapped in historical context and in the homogeneity inherent in ancient philosophy. Students appropriated some of the lessons learnt in high school Chinese history, revealing the tangents which efforts at indoctrination inevitably lead to. While party loyalty is primary in high school Politics and History, the party stance of being the successor to the Chinese dynasties of the past means that party discourse includes language critical of ancient power structures. This critical apparatus enabled students to quickly see through the ideological aspects of ancient music philosophy and sets the stage for the performance and actualization of a heterogeneity that cracks open the ideological uniformity of party discourse. I encourage students to articulate this heterogeneity by drawing on their own understanding and musical experience as students and listeners.

Using points brought up by students in the debate, I conclude the lesson by weaving their arguments into the dialectical relationship of past and present, ancient and contemporary. This relation is characterized not by absolute difference or similarity, but a form of difference in which key similarities may be discerned—or a form of similarity in which key differences may be discerned: Music may serve as a symbol of a united society in two different times, but the social structures (monarchial vs. communist rule) have radically changed. Extending from my belief that there are at least two sides to an argument, my pedagogy is not fixated on either homogeneity or heterogeneity, or similarities or differences, but on the *relation* not just between these two sets of terms, but any set of opposed concepts. I like to think that debating, a crude form of dialectics, might encourage students to dust off their memories of high school lessons, shedding some light onto the philosophical force exemplified in Marx’s own dialectical writings.

Notes

1. I do not mean to imply that heterogeneity cannot become an instrument of power—this can be seen observed in legislation on multicultural representation in media, which does not address socioeconomic inequalities but helps multiculturally-oriented politicians to garner support from progressive voters. The deployment of heterogeneity to counter ho-

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mogeneity should be regarded as a tactic specific to the particular context which my essay addresses. See Melamed 2011.

References

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