

Cultural ecology, Sound, and ChinaVine: An Approach to Arts Education

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Abstract

In this essay, I articulate an approach to arts education focused on multimodal experience and creative process as important factors in interpretation and representation of arts in general, but more specifically sound and music. I argue that attention to multimodality of experience and creative process helps to situate art and artists in cultural ecologies, thereby encouraging holistic analysis of the interaction and interdependence between aesthetic, social, economic, political, and technological elements surrounding creative practice. Toward formulating a connection between multimodality and cultural ecologies, I will discuss a method for presentation and interpretation of field work materials that I call “mimetic inquiry.” I offer mimetic inquiry as a tool for educators and students alike that encourages engagement with processes and creative practices toward the pedagogical goal of integrating learning and making. The field research underlying my discussion occurred in 2009 and consisted of ethnographic interviews and observation with contemporary musicians in Beijing. This particular field trip was associated with ChinaVine, a transnational web-based project with the mission of educating English-speaking and reading children, youth, and adults about the cultural heritage of China.

Key words: cultural ecology, interpretation, music, multimodal

In this essay, I articulate an approach to arts education focused on multimodal experience and creative process as important factors in interpretation and representation of arts in general, but more specifically sound and music in this case. I argue that attention to multi modality of experience and creative process helps to situate art and artists in cultural ecologies, thereby encouraging holistic analysis of the interaction and interdependence between aesthetic, social, economic, political, and technological elements surrounding creative practice. The work I draw on is embedded within a transnational research project that I have been involved with since 2009. Called ChinaVine, this project manifests largely through an interactive website designed to encourage participation by teachers, students, researchers, and general visitors interested in China's arts and cultural heritage (Congdon & Blandy, 2010a; Congdon & Blandy, 2010b). Toward formulating a connection between multimodality and cultural ecologies, I will discuss a method for presentation and interpretation of field work materials that I call "mimetic inquiry," and offer it as a tool for educators and students alike that encourages engagement with processes and creative practices toward the pedagogical goal of integrating learning and making.

In the early fall of 2009, I traveled to Beijing with a small ChinaVine research team consisting of students and faculty affiliated with the University of Oregon and the University of Central Florida. I had been invited on this trip in order to help expand the ChinaVine project's exploration of arts and culture through fieldwork with musicians and sound artists who were interrogating the intersections of traditional and contemporary practices. One of the artists I hoped to interview was a duo by the name of FM3, and we were lucky enough to secure an interview with Zhang Jian. Born in Sichuan but based in Beijing since the late 1980s, Zhang is the Chinese-half of FM3 and a respected keyboardist in the Chinese rock scene (Christian Viraant is the other half of FM3, and he is from Nebraska but has lived in China for two decades). FM3 is known for electronic improvisation and ambient music, with their most popular "release" being the Buddha Machine - a small plastic box with a digital music chip inside that contains nine short loops which the user can cycle through at will. At the time of the interview, there were two iterations of the Buddha Machine and an iPhone app. By 2012, the group

had produced two more widely available iterations, an iPad app, and a limited-edition Buddha Machine commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (released in 2009). FM3 use Buddha Machines almost exclusively in performance now, enacting what they call "Buddha boxing" on stage by sitting across from each other at a small table with a stack of the devices between them. In turn, they each choose a box, select a loop, and stack it in the middle of the table, ultimately creating a dissonant-yet-integrated sound sculpture through an improvisational game-like process reminiscent of chess or poker visually, yet conceptually subverting such rule-based play.

My interest in FM3 and the work that Zhang produced stemmed from their use of loop-based recordings of traditional instruments in performance and in the Buddha Machine. The questions I brought to our interview (which was conducted largely in Mandarin through a translator) were intended to highlight biographical details of his career as well as the processes and intentions behind his work with FM3. Early on in the interview, however, Zhang revealed himself partly as an inscrutable trickster who playfully turned the interview into an improvisational experience of cultural and artistic interaction. Continuously brewing tea for the ChinaVine team, he oscillated between contemplating questions before answering and quickly returning short yet succinct replies. In response to a question about the goal of FM3's music, for example, he instantly closed his eyes and dropped his head to a shoulder in mock sleep. Was the question boring, or was his answer "sleep?" It turned out to be the latter, and his humorous/devious performative answer led into a fascinating group discussion about artist intentionality and audience response. At the end of the interview, my main question was: how do I represent the two hours we have just spent in Zhang's apartment in a way that captures the multimodal experience while articulating his own (and the group's) aesthetic strategies?

Words alone would not have provided the rich context and interpretation useful in arts education settings, as they would have limited me largely to the realm of description. One goal of arts education is to integrate learning with making, and a pedagogical approach that is successful in this goal should emphasize process and product while attending to the many perceptual and

cognitive elements surrounding art. In contemplating how to best represent both the ethnographic experience of the interview and the artistic practice of Zhang and FM3, I sought a poetic and multimedia approach that would reflexively explore the goals of interpretation, analysis, education, and art.

Given ChinaVine's arts education emphasis, I intended this representation approach to attend aesthetically, technologically, and conceptually to the materials at hand in way that contributed to learning about and making art . In constructing a post for the ChinaVine site about FM3—and alongside development of a temporary installation about ChinaVine's work with contemporary artists - I began to distill an interpretive strategy I call "mimetic inquiry." Following from theorizing about arts-based research (Greenwood, 2012) as well as an ethnographic impulse to incorporate poetics into interpretive methods (Brown, 1977 ; Marcus, 1986) I formulate mimetic inquiry as a multimodal approach to presentation that can also serve as a pedagogical approach to arts education. In attempting to merge creative representation with the critical or interpretive reflection sought by the ChinaVine project, I endeavored to bridge the work of researcher and artist, of fieldworker and "informant" or collaborator. I am using the term "mimetic inquiry" to emphasize the ways in which I intended this approach to generate interpretive understanding through redeployment of artistic strategies found in the work under consideration. As such, mimesis here serves to recontextualize rather than solely represent artists and their creative practices, and forms the basis for dialectical insight rather than straight ahead explanation.

A few details about FM3 and Zhang Jian's approach to music creation will help illuminate the choices I have made in posting material about the group to ChinaVine.org. As I noted above, FM3 relies on loops and improvisational play in performance, building sound sculptures that are tactile, sonic, and visual. Zhang also uses a piece of music software called Live (produced by the German company, Ableton) in some of his collaborative work with other musicians, often creating live samples of those musicians and manipulating them in real time. Finally, FM3 offer the loops on their Buddha Machine as freely downloadable, Creative Commons-licensed files for anyone to remix or otherwise use in creative endeavors. Their

particular practice of using loops and embracing mash-ups or remix culture connects them to a larger scene in Beijing (more on this below) in which traditions of borrowing, copying, and reconfiguring intertwine with digital tools and technologies that enable rapid and widespread distribution of art. My goal, then, was to create a representation of FM3 on ChinaVine's site that would also engage this level of arts and culture, thereby traversing the micro-level of specific artistic practice and the macro-level of networked access and interpretation.

ChinaVine as tool, site, and context

The ChinaVine website launched initially in 2007, with a major redesign occurring in 2012 [endnote about who designed each iteration; site kristin/Doug chapter on “developing”, 2010]. Across both versions of the site, the primary content has consisted of artist-centered multimedia posts containing textual interpretation, still image galleries, and videos that depict artists and their work. These posts draw on the immediate context of the artists' working space or studio; the region, city, or village in which they live; and the tradition or historical trajectory within which their work sits. The posts also reference the context of the World Wide Web in that they draw on standard as well as emerging delivery tools in an attempt to leverage the multimodal potential of web-based arts education [Congdon & Blandy, 2010b].

As a project and web site anchored in arts education, ChinaVine seeks to educate audiences about Chinese arts and culture heritage from multiple perspectives in order to generate rich understandings of social, historical, political, economic, and technological contexts. The fieldwork that I helped develop with contemporary musicians during the 2009 field trip supports the goals of ChinaVine while also pushing into the territory of artists working with digital technologies. In deploying the mimetic inquiry strategy that I had been developing while working with the FM3 field materials, I sought to directly employ digital tools and strategies such that a web-based representation of the group would poetically engage their work while interpreting it for a larger audience. Toward this end, the post contained common components of ChinaVine content (text, field video, and still images), but also sound

compositions and embedded video generated by or posted by the group themselves. My discussion below will focus on these last two aspects in order to illuminate key elements of the mimetic inquiry approach and point toward the ways in which multimodal experience and creative process might situate art in cultural ecologies.

The sound compositions represent the initial and most immediate manifestation of the mimetic inquiry approach. As noted above, the impulse to find a way for communicating the rich and dynamic experience of interviewing Zhang Jian is what led me to reach beyond text toward aesthetic play with field materials and creative process. As I listened to the audio recording of the interview and reflected on the conversation that unfolded among the ChinaVine team immediately afterwards, I began to imagine a mash-up of interview clips and ambient sounds that would amplify, complicate, or otherwise intertwine with the experience of the interview. Since FM3 freely offers their original Buddha Machine loops for download and reuse, I acquired the files from their site in order to use them as source material. I also combed through the interview recordings, making small clips of the questions we asked as well as key moments in Zhang's answers and the audible group dynamics that emerged as humorous and performative instances during the afternoon session. Knowing that Zhang Jian often used Ableton Live music software in performance and composition, I familiarized myself with the program and loaded the audio clips I had gathered into it. This program is in part designed for real-time improvisation with digital audio, so I began to play with the clips by arranging them in layers, time-stretching loops, adding audio effects, and generating a rhythmic trajectory through repetition that echoed the flow of the interview experience.

Ultimately, I ended up with two compositions of approximately thirteen minutes each. One featured audio clips of questions that myself and other members of the ChinaVine team asked during the interview, while the other focused on responses to the questions - both Zhang's verbal responses and non-verbal sounds such as laughter or exclamations that signaled group dynamics. Across both compositions I had woven loops from the Buddha Machine(s), and these served as ground and figure for the interview clips. Dividing each piece into three "movements" that mapped to shifts in tone or

rhythm in the longer composition, I uploaded the six resulting sound files to Soundcloud. This platform is a social music sharing service used by artists and record labels (independent or commercial) to trade, demo, preview, or otherwise share high-quality digital files. The files can be streamed or marked as available for download, and users can append comments to specific moments of the files. These comments are publicly available, and serve as a discussion tool aligned with the temporal flow of a particular file; in addition to this social media feature, Soundcloud also allows for simplified embedding of tracks across other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogs. FM3 utilizes Soundcloud to distribute performance recordings and improvisations, and in putting my audio segments up on a ChinaVine account with Soundcloud I intended a dialog of sorts with the group's embrace of the platform. Additionally, ChinaVine media management policy with the recent site redesign calls for media files to be distributed and stored with services that are external to the site's direct server. As such, ChinaVine uses services such as Vimeo and YouTube to deliver video content, Flickr for still images, and Soundcloud for audio.

The audio experiments described above formed a central feature of the final post on FM3 that I made to the ChinaVine site¹. They also represent my initial foray into mimetic inquiry in that I specifically engaged tools, resources, and aesthetic strategies employed by the group in creating an interpretive component of a larger multimodal post. Another component of mimetic inquiry - and cultural ecology thinking more broadly-consisted of drawing on FM3's web presence and use of various channels to distribute media themselves or aggregate fan-produced media. The group has a Vimeo channel through which they post FM3 performance video as well as video of solo performances by either group member. They also link to any video documentation of FM3 that has been uploaded by fans and friends, thereby providing a significant pool of video material that a project such as ChinaVine can reference. In addition to video that ChinaVine team members shot while we visited Zhang in his apartment, I embedded video in my post that the group had posted themselves on Vimeo, drawing on their web presence in a

¹ The post on the ChinaVine site can be accessed here: <http://chinavine.org/artist/zhang-jian-fm3/>

dialogic manner that referenced their representation strategy as well as the broader domain of digital culture within which the work of contemporary Chinese experimental musicians manifests.

The post I created for ChinaVine about FM3 was the first piece of new content for the redesigned site, and, in effect, launched a new orientation for the project with regards to working on interpretation and representation of Chinese artists who themselves use digital tools and the Web to distribute their work. As such, it is still too early to determine if the experiments in mimetic inquiry described above are successful in terms of generating audience participation or robust understanding, but nonetheless these experiments are offered here as early steps in developing a multimodal approach for arts education that provides interpretive materials intended to explore creative process through learning and making. The FM3 Buddha Machine loops and the ChinaVine interview clips are available for creative reuse via Creative Commons licensing, so visitors to the ChinaVine site can download the files and make their own interview remixes using tools they have readily available or by exploring the software used by the artists. Arts educators might employ similar strategies based on this model for exploring FM3 more fully, or for focusing on entirely different genres, practices, and realms of creativity.

Cultural ecology: a metaphor for arts education

In moving toward a conclusion, I will steer my discussion through the concept of cultural ecology as it relates to the experimental music scene in Beijing. In doing so, I intend to set the multimodal model discussed above (mimetic inquiry) within a larger project of understanding artistic practice in a dynamic web of cultural production, dissemination, and place. Attending to the interrelationships between setting and creative practice allows arts educators to foster critical thinking about the place of arts and culture amidst economic, political, social, and technological forces. Such critical thinking will lead students and educators to ask questions about the how, why, where, and when of particular arts practices so that they generate insights that situate creative products in relation to creative processes.

The study of ecology in a scientific sense has to do with the

relationships of organisms to their environment, with a focus on the interactions between parts and a whole. These interactions may be partial, symbiotic, antagonistic, intentional, mechanical, or even creative-but no matter what kind of interaction occurs, it transpires within an elastic and ever-changing system. When thinking through the application of an “ecology” metaphor to the culturally-grounded study of creativity and art we should foreground the ways in which interactions take place in, and constitute, webs of connectivity. This is not a new idea when it comes to cultural analysis (cf. Geertz and ‘webs of significance’ or Bateson’s ‘ecology of the mind’), but one worth highlighting when specifically discussing sound ecologies for three reasons. First, it is important to avoid uncritical application of the metaphor so that we do not naturalize relationships between sounds and places. Second, it is useful to distinguish an ethnographic and interpretive strategy toward sonic culture from a compositional one². And, third, emphasizing the concept of connective webs of activity and interactions will drive thinking toward the ways in which sounds, music, and art in general emerge out of various interactions as much as they simultaneously stand to represent interactions. As such we can understand art as not just representational, but also as constitutive of places, identities, and ideas.

Contemporary Chinese “underground” or “experimental” musics emerge from a mix of cultural materials: indigenous and imported, old and new, familiar and far-out. Technological, social, and political forces mediate this mix, forming dynamic environments, or cultural ecologies, that exist amidst the buzz and drone of large-scale structural growth at the state level. Much of the creative energy in China gravitates to urban centers, with Shanghai and Beijing sitting front and center as competing economic and cultural capitals. Beijing, with its major expansion of population, infrastructure, and artistic influence in recent decades, is a primary place for contemporary Chinese cultural production generally, and musical experimentation more specifically. Smaller regional scenes have certainly emerged in the past two decades, but it is often the case that musicians,

² A common understanding of the compositional strategy associated with “sonic ecology” is articulated here: <http://turbulence.org/blog/2010/06/29/sound-listening-and-place-sonic-ecology/>

styles, and movements relocate to Beijing in order to pursue opportunities for performance, production, distribution, and/or artistic development that emerge more readily in a bustling urban environment.

As the political capital of the People's Republic of China, Beijing is a center of power and economic importance. The kinds of civic, technological, and creative infrastructure associated with this centrality are key elements in the city's cultural ecology and therefore contribute to its prominence as well. To specify, a major component of Beijing's prominence (within and outside of China) is its digital integration into the global flow of culture and communication, accelerated in the past decade or so and an integral factor in the efflorescence of musical creativity and experimentation since the mid 1990s. From the emergence of "da kou" ("recycled" compact discs and cassettes from abroad) to the rise and fluctuating availability of web-based external cultural portals such as MySpace or YouTube, Beijing artists are increasingly connecting with transnational sonic and artistic cultures while participating in an augmentation of common notions of place. As such, the local ecology of Beijing forms a node in a larger web of sonic-cultural ecologies around the globe, such that practices, sounds, and people flow through networks of connectivity as influences, products, interruptions, and responses.

In terms of the historical backdrop for the material under discussion, it is crucial to recognize that there is a long trajectory for the mix of sonic materials and influences informing Chinese musics of all sorts. For popular musics specifically, Andrew Jones' work on rock (1992) and "yellow music" or jazz (2001) provides important critical insight into the dynamic tension between 'imported' and 'local' that serves as a central pivot for debates in and around contemporary Chinese musics. Similarly, work done by Nimrod Baranovitch on popular music, ethnicity, gender, and politics in China between 1978 and 1997 contextualizes the flow of social-musical practice through Beijing that I have discussed (2003). That is, while the material - the sounds, approaches, artists - that appears on the ChinaVine site is contemporary, the processes feeding interactions across boundaries surrounding nation-states, identities, or other categories are not necessarily new. Applying the metaphor of ecology can help to illuminate the many

vectors of movement - temporal, cultural, geographic, technological - that serve to ground artistic practice and to which arts educators might usefully pay attention.

Cultural ecology,
Sound, and
ChinaVine: An
Approach to Arts
Education

Sonic ecology & musical practices for Beijing-based artists

As I noted above, ecology is concerned with relationships of parts to wholes, with these relationships further specified as interactions occurring within webs of connectivity. In the communications environment we currently inhabit, this notion of 'webs of connectivity' obviously resonates with digital technologies, and toward delineating the cultural ecology of Beijing I will highlight a few of the technological phenomena mediating underground or experimental music in the city. What I hope to illustrate is that these 'organisms' - alongside political, social, and economic forces as well - contribute to the formation of dynamic environments (ecologies) within which artists live, work, and create. Simultaneously, these digital phenomena correlate in important ways to the aspects of mimetic inquiry and multimodal interpretation I discussed in the first portion of this essay.

A unique and important feature of Beijing's cultural ecology is *dakou*, a creative catalyst referenced by many of the musician's ChinaVine team members have worked with since 2009. *Dakou* (to make a hole or to cut) consists of commercial music discs and cassettes [endnote that I'm just focusing on the digital CD] that major music labels in the west ship to China for recycling, often due to poor sales in their original market countries. Manufacturers cut or drilled holes toward the center of compact discs in order to mark them as unsaleable and supposedly unusable. Once in China, though, the discs drifted into the informal market, sold inexpensively on the streets to youth eager to hear musics not readily available to them through official channels. As such, these unheard musics interacted with other aspects of culture and art in China - most significantly in Beijing, where a large trade in *dakou* influenced scores of emerging musicians born between 1970 and 1985 (often referred to as the 'dakou generation')³. *Dakou* might

³ See either of these two posts for more information on understandings of *dakou*:
http://www.norient.com/html/show_article.php?ID=97 or
<http://www.rockinchina.com/w/Dakou>

be thought of as a 'microecology of influence' in that the distribution of these saw-gash discs became a flow of sonic source material for a range of underground musical and creative practices: listening, learning, inspiring, copying, and appropriating sounds and styles. Those musicians and aesthetic approaches that emerged out of the dakou boom of the 1990s represent the dynamic environment within which FM3 operates today (as well as a host of other contemporary music creators). As such, dakou very much serves as one digital element of Beijing's cultural ecology that interacts with, influences, responds to, or undermines other elements of the constantly shifting system.

Other digital elements or organisms in the system include web-based platforms and software that help artists based in Beijing to connect with collaborators, fans, and potential audiences. Social media sites such as YouTube, Tudou, MySpace, Vimeo, or Sina Weibo offer opportunities for artists and fans to distribute media or have conversations about art and music, while wikis such as RockInChina serve as a collaborative effort to document an ever growing field of contemporary styles and performers. More obviously a "web of connectivity" than dakou, these digital communication tools facilitate interactions beyond national borders⁴ and enable the movement of sound, art, music, and ideas into and out of Beijing. The ChinaVine website exists in this cultural flow, and as I discussed above, the FM3 post leverages some of the social media outlets to aggregate content at the same time that it pushes interpretive and poetic material into the flow. As such, it is an organism of sorts in the ecology under consideration that represents an approach for arts education in the current mediascape (Appaduarai,1990).

The final set of digital tools or organisms I will discuss is the hardware and software used by artists in this cultural ecology to create their work. From powerful software applications and recording hardware to simple digital chips such as those found in the Buddha Machine, these technologies

⁴ It is important to note that while not all web-based services are officially or easily available within the borders of the People's Republic of China, content related to artists based within the PRC may be posted by users residing outside of the country. Additionally, users within the country may determine ways to access blocked services to post or retrieve such content.

have become more accessible over the past decade to artists working in a range of styles across Beijing. The ubiquity of digital technology for music creation and distribution is a key element in the cultural ecology of Beijing, and also serves as a connective or common element across cultural ecologies. Most of these same tools used by artists in Beijing are available to arts educators and students alike across the world, such that engaging in a remix of Buddha Machine loops is at once participation in the cultural ecology as well as a critical learning activity focused on process and aesthetic practice. The digital, then, serves as a macroecology of sorts, representing yet another level of context for making and learning about art.

In addition to the above digital components of a cultural ecology for experimental music in Beijing, there are people and places that dynamically construct the physical environment. Space limitations prevent me from exploring this aspect further, but it would be remiss to neglect mentioning such elements and risk implying that the digital is the most prominent component of Beijing's cultural ecology. Rather, I foreground digital tools and technologies in order to illuminate the many ways in which they figure into the creation, dissemination, documentation, and interpretation of musical art and culture.

To summarize, I believe that the metaphor of ecology offers at least three important tools for an approach to arts education:

1. a way to "place" music, by attending to interactions between setting (in this case Beijing), sound (represented by a range of genres, styles, and approaches), and creative practices.
2. a way to track the "flows" of musical practices within and between particular social geographies.
3. a flexible interpretation or analysis of artistic cultures that foregrounds the dynamic relationship of change and continuity by attending to the movement of elements ('organisms') into and out of systems over time—such that 'change' becomes a constant in a continuously shifting environment that, nonetheless, can be understood as "stable".

I see the metaphor of ecology and the method of mimetic inquiry to be intricately intertwined, as both are attuned to process and interaction with

creative practice. Mimetic inquiry, as I have described it, offers an arts-based approach to interpretation and learning through the exploration of tools, materials, and aesthetic paradigms used by artists. As such, it offers an entry point into a cultural ecology, and this entry is both educational and experiential. My work with this method or approach is young, and I intend to employ it on future posts for the ChinaVine site. Following from Doug Blandy's argument that arts education is a "network" within which people make and learn material culture (2011), I propose that the FM3 post I have discussed is a node of entry into this network, with future posts providing yet more nodes. Visitors to the site can engage in learning and making by using the tools, platforms, and resources employed by the artists documented by the ChinaVine project and distributed widely through digital networks of communication and culture that can connect people and ideas across geographic and social spaces. And arts educators can draw on the approach, as well as the specific materials, to craft dynamic learning experiences that foreground the art making process as an educational experience of cultural ecology.

References

Cultural ecology,
Sound, and
ChinaVine: An
Approach to Arts
Education

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