Shanshui-thought in Experimental Music Practices: China and beyond

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The experimental music of Chinese musicians including Yan Jun, Li Jianhong, Jun-Y Chao, Shen Piji and the Tea Rockers Quintet embodies a particular mode of thinking rooted in Chinese *qi*-philosophy known as *shanshui* (山水)-thought, which considers nature and the environment as secret and nurturing. *Shanshui*-thought cultivates an existential gesture of following rather than obeying or conquering; it requires tacit resonance rather than object knowing. *Shanshui*-thought enables us to recognise the cosmic, aesthetic and moral values of music qualities of *dan* (淡) (quiet and bland) and *you* (幽) (inward expandedness), once described as 'poverty' and 'darkness' by the composer Christian Wolff of what he calls ascetic minimalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

> *Shanshui* is born in me, I am born in *shanshui*.
> —*Huayu Lu*, Shi Tao (*c*.1624–1704) (2007)[1]
>
> This plate of humanity has long disturbed the albedo, the circulation of water, the median temperature, and the formation of clouds or wind—in short, the elements—as well as the number and evolution of living species in, on, and under its territory. This is the relation of man and the world today.
> —*The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres (1995)

Notions of nature, landscape and its descendent term 'soundscape' became the centre of creative attention of sound art and experimental music practices in the West from the middle of the twentieth century. Through *4′33″*, first performed in 1952, John Cage brought sounds of the environment into the concert hall in both conceptual and practical senses, extending the concert hall to the outside streets. In the early 1960s, La Monte Young created a series of performance-based compositions, incorporating nature in his conceptual art, such as 'Piano Piece for David Tudor #3' which reads 'most of them, were very old grasshoppers' (1960). In 1964, Young conceived his best-known piano improvisation piece 'The Well-Tuned Piano', which extensively makes use of natural resonance of piano strings and the surroundings. Young's friend, the American artist Walter De Marina, created two music works 'Cricket Music' (1964) and 'Ocean Music' (1968), which marked an important transition in the artist's career from sculpture to land art, an art movement in the 1960s and 1970s advocating making art directly in the landscape using natural materials from the site. These sound works were created under the spirit prevalent among avant-garde and experimental artists around the 1960s, given force by a variety of intellectual influences that include cybernetics and Eastern philosophies, or revolting against the visual dominated art world and the history of classical composition tradition.

In recent decades, the global ecological crisis has become a unanimous curatorial concern in the art world. For example, Taipei Biennial themed its 2018 exhibition 'The Post-Nature –A Museum as an Ecosystem.' In the same year, the nomadic art biennial Manifesta 12 took place at the botanical garden of Palermo titled 'The Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence.' The sound community share similar concerns. Ecoacoustic music as practised by the composer and ecoacoustician Matthew Burtner, as well as the video-audio installation project 'The Great Animal Orchestra' led by the soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause, provides knowledge about the ongoing ecological crisis in the world we live in today. Both projects continue and expand the acoustic ecological concerns raised by the Canadian composer Murray Schafer in his 'World Soundscape Project' from the late 1960s.

When making music with or in the environment, artists can embody a different intellectual sensibility. Li Jianhong developed environment improvisation out of his habit of playing guitar in natural environments. 'It is not a dialogue between me and the environment' as he would often emphasise. It is something in between that is generated in the improvising process that allows only him to dwell in. Listening to insects has been a popular culture practice in China since Tang dynasty; observing singing insects has taught the artist Jun-Y Chao to play wind instruments. Shen Piji, a *guqin* (古琴) player, held a series of concerts called 'Frog Jam' in his courtyard with his musician friends, as well as a few singing frogs. These frogs are not home-raised or trained. They

[1]'Shanchuan Tuotai yu yu ye, yu tuotai yu shanchuan ye' (山川脱胎于予也，予脱胎于山川也), from *Huayu Lu* (画语录, *Comments on Painting*).

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are self-invited 'guests' and would play along when they felt like it. In live performances of The Tea Rockers Quintet, four musicians with different instruments improvise with a tea master. The kind of tea served in the performance affects the sound and dynamics of the collective improvisation.

Unfortunately, abstract notions of different thinking modes are among those that are most difficult to translate. For instance, the notion of *shanshui* (山水), which is often seen translated as 'landscape' in English, suggests a rather different thinking mode from the notion of landscape. Landscape suggests a bird's-eye view perspective; it is something to be perceived. *Shanshui*, instead, literally translated as 'mountains-waters', is organic and correlational; *shanshui* perceives. Landscape, as the Chinese scholar Zhao Tingyang argues, is a modern invention; *shanshui* is mistakenly understood as landscape while nature is disenchanted by science and commerce (Zhao 2019: 71). In his book on the Chinese notion of *shanshui*, *Living Off Landscape: Or, the Unthought-of in Reason*, the French philosopher Francois Jullien summarises three biases in the landscape-thought developed in European landscape painting. First, it was conceived in the shadow of the part–whole relation; second, it was ascribed to the primacy of visual perception; finally, it ended up folding into subject-object coupling (Jullien 2018a: 5). Chinese *shanshui*-thought, according to Jullien, presents a whole other approach distinct from the cutoff gesture that divides between subject and object, part and whole, entailed in European landscape-thought, 'In China we are thinking no longer of a portion of the land offered up to an observer's eye but of a correlation of opposites: "mountains" and "waters"' (Jullien 2018a: 13).

An exploration of *shanshui*-thought in experimental music may at first appear counterintuitive, since historically *shanshui* painting is considered the de facto artistic manifestation of *shanshui*-thought. The goal in this article hence is twofold: first, to discover the acoustic nature of *shanshui*-thought, and second, to examine how contemporary experimental music in China embodies and accentuates the classical wisdom of *shanshui*-thought. While my initial motivation is to find an adequate way to describe and understand certain experimental music practices in China, as the writing develops, it seems possible that *Shanshui*-thought may provide a new set of vocabularies for current experimental music practices at large to test, experiment and evolve with.

Once being filtered out as an undesirably ideology (for its association with Confucianism and Daoism) in China's modernisation project during the Cultural Revolution era, *shanshui*-thought which redraws scholarly attention in contemporary time suggests a human–world relation particularly pertinent in today's global ecological and spiritual crisis.

2. *SHANSHUI*-THOUGHT: AN OVERVIEW

The term *shanshui* (consisting of two characters, *shan* (山) as mountain and *shui* (水) as water), as one joint expression, had its earliest appearance in *Mozi* (墨子) (*c*.478–392 BC) as *shanshui guishen* (山水鬼神), meaning the ghost and spirit of mountains and waters (Berque 2013: 29–30). In his search of landscape thinking, Augustin Berque discovered that the birth of *shanshui*-thought in China was in the painter and musician Zong Bing's text, titled *Hua Shanshui Xu* (*Preface to Landscape Painting*) around 440 in the South Song Dynasty (ibid.: 31). Influenced by Daoism and *Xuanxue* (玄学) (metaphysics), Zong Bing believed that *shanshui* presents *dao* (道) (understood here as cosmological principles of myriad things, including mountains and waters) through its form. As an object of aesthetic appreciation, *shanshui* painting needs to be concrete in form and texture and at the same time spiritually alive and interesting. The function of *shanshui* painting is to 'free the spirit' (*chang shen*) (畅神), very similar to the Daoist Zhuangzi's idea of free and easy wandering (*xiaoyaoyou*) (逍遥游).

The notion of *shanshui* as a manifestation of dao is shared by Shi Tao (*c*.1642–1707), an artist of late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, who later converted to be a Buddhist monk known as Daoji. In his famously profound and difficult essay *Huayu lu* (画语录) (*Comments on Painting*), Shi Tao developed notions of *yinyun* (氤氲) (diffusive with thick clouds of *qi*) and *huwei tuotai* (互为脱胎) (mutual birth). Shi Tao uses the term *yinyun* to describe all possible conditions of the ink when saturated in the brush at the moment before one paints. Once the brush dips into the ink, water in the brush and the ink immediate mix together. An essential technique for a *shanshui* painter to master is how to act swiftly to different conditions of the saturation. The state of *yinyun*, before the tip of the brush touches the rice paper, is *hundun* (chaos) (混沌); it requires wisdom to release the ink from the brush to the paper, to break the chaos. During the process of painting, the painter needs to always bear the state of *yinyun* in mind and body.

For Shi Tao, the process of painting is a process of *huwei tuotai* (mutual birth): '*Shanshui* is born in me, I am born in *shanshui*.' The form, intensity, depth, vastness, rhythm in mountains and waters, are seen as the embodiment of the changing intensities and forms of the cosmos. Mountains and waters have their own agency; *shanshui* selects its own painter. Shi Tao wrote, 'Mountains and waters enable me to announce their secret.' This notion of mutual birth inspired François Jullien, who translates the term as *coenfantement*. 'After all, what gives rise to landscape is precisely the following: it is not that I, the autonomous subject, the subject with initiative (the known subject),

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that has the landscape at my disposal but, rather, that the landscape has me at its disposal in equal measure. Each of the two, "self" and "landscape," brings the other into the world' (Jullien 2018a: 116).

Although most contemporary discussions of *shanshui*-thought develop through the visual and the literary, there is an inherent acoustic nature in both *shanshui* painting and *shanshui*-thought. As the art historian Susan Nelson argues (1998/1999), Chinese *shanshui* paintings in the eleventh century presents an increasing interest in depicting its pictorial themes including listening looks, pine trees and waterfalls as evidence of sound or listening. Commenting on Shi Tao's painting *Pure Tones of Mountain and Water*, as one of the best examples of what she calls listening painting, Nelson nicely renders the painting audible: 'The whole landscape reverberates throughout with throbbing contours and vibrating dots, the "pure tone" of the piping of the earth' (ibid.: 50). Picturing sonic vibrations of *shanshui*, as Nelson convincingly argues, is to evoke sonic sensations or ideas in the viewers' own mind and body. More importantly, as Nelson points out and I very much concur, what ultimately matters in *shanshui* painting is *qi* (气).

Shanshui-thought takes the perspective of *qi*-philosophy. Depicting dynamic gestures of pine trees is a way to depict wind, which is, according to *qi*-cosmology and later *qi*-philosophy, a metaphor and manifestation of *qi*. According to the Chinese philosopher Zhang Zai (known as the philosopher of *qi*), *qi* is not just a concrete entity but also has the translucent and empty capacity for resonance (Kim 2015: 63–4). As Jung-Yeup Kim interpreted in his study of Zhang Zai's *qi*-philosophy, 'to say that "x is *qi* and y is *qi*" is to say that "x" and "y" are correlative polarities mutually resonating, interpenetrating, and forming an organic unity with one another' (ibid.: 34). Sound is produced when *qi* changes and consequently, sound conveys and also affects conditions of *qi*. The notion *yinyun* used by Shi Tao in *shanshui* painting, originally described a particular condition of *qi:* the state of intermingling and fusing. In Zhuangzi, as Kim points out, *yinyun* describes the state of organism mutually breathing life into one another, a wildly shimmering heat (ibid.: 64).

Through *qi*-philosophy, we can say that both *shanshui* painting and guqin music are practices of directing and cultivating *qi*. In fact, 'Waiting for *qi*' (气候) (*qi hou*) is one of the most important qualities in guqin music, also known as scholar music. For guqin players, music has its own living state, its own *qi*, reflected in its intensity, volume, rhythm, and speed. One has to detect it, connect to it, and internalise it into one's own living *qi*. Only when *qi* is alive and in motion can one know where and how to wait for it. Similar to *shanshui* painting, to play guqin music, one has to first of all detect the dynamic principle of the cosmos. Developed out of the philosophy of *qi*, *Shanshui*-thought as practised through painting and music can be understood as ways to access the transcendental *dao*. It is often the case when looking at paintings of Zhuang Feng's 'Listening to a Waterfall by a Rocky Cliff', one cannot help but 'hear' guqin song 'High Mountain and Flowing Waters'. Listening to Li Jianhong's environment improvisation in *Empty Mountain* (2010) reminds one of the Ming dynasty painter Shen Zhou's (1427–1509) water-ink painting *Night Vigil* (1492) created when Shen sat in his study situated in a sound saturated dark night.

As a concept, *shanshui* functions as the connective plane between the transcendental and the practical (Zhao 2019), between the invisible upper-stream and its sensible manifestation in the down-stream (Jullien 2018a: 116). *Shanshui* is the perceptible transcendental, as Zhao Tingyang succinctly puts it (2019: 61). Compared to the ocean, which is also often used as a transcendental reference, Zhao argues that *Shanshui* is more habitable for humans, and hence has developed a more direct reference to civilisation and social life (ibid.: 61–9).

In 'Against Soundscape', the anthropologist Tim Ingold expresses an insight similar to *shanshui*-thought but still with some essential differences. Ingold argues that landscape, light, sound and wind are not objects of perception, but that which we live in and experience. 'We do not touch the wind, but touch in it; we do not see sunshine, but see in it; we do not hear rain, but hear in it. Thus wind, sunshine and rain, experienced as feelings, light and sound, underwrite our capacities, respectively, to touch, to see and to hear' (Ingold 2007). *Shanshui*-thought and *qi*-philosophy which informs *shanshui*-thought, does not distinguish the thing and the medium in which the thing transforms. *Qi* is both the material and the medium through which the material functions. *Shanshui* is both the object of perception and the medium through which one perceives *shanshui*. It is also a result of creative practice.

3. *SHANSHUI*: THE EXISTENTIAL AND THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL

Shanshui-thought rewires our sensibility through which we perceive and live in the world. According to Michel Serres, landscape now as an object of protection was once a world that threatened in ancient times and has been a target of human subjugation since the industrial revolution (1995). Through *shanshui*-thought, however, landscape is always conceived as secret and nurturing. It cultivates an existential gesture of following, rather than obeying, mastering or conquering. It suggests a sense of being and dwelling, and a moral way of knowing.

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3.1. *Jian*: Li Jianhong and environment improvisation

Born in the southern Chinese city of Fenghua, the experimental musician Li Jianhong developed an innate intimacy with the natural environment of the South, trees that are hundreds of years old, ferns and wild grass, and damp weather. His topophilia with the South manifests in his music and photography works. While still living in Hangzhou, a southern city known for its mountains, the West Lake and Buddhist temples, Li Jianhong liked to hike and enjoyed the five-yuan vegetarian lunch at the Faxi temple. During one of his trips to the Faxi temple in 2004, he encountered a sudden rainfall. Not being able to go anywhere, he waited at the Mahavira Palace and fell asleep. Later he wrote down this experience in his journal, which was later printed in the liner notes of the album *Twelve Moods*:

> I did not expect to listen to the rain under the roof of the cloister. After a long time till now, I still remembered the rain—watching it marching towards my direction from the other side of the mountain, then hearing the rain washing over the trees, sensing the smell from the summer earth. The smoke from the burning incense in front of Mahavira Palace was not psychedelic, but when it met and mixed with the rain vapor, it started some visual and aural chemical actions. I heard the chanting sounds from inside of the palace covering the entire temple and mountains. I could not feel the contour of my ears. It became everywhere—suspended above the mountains and the temple wrapped by the rain and chanting sounds. The ear listened with joy and ease. Facing the scene, I thought the best thing to do is to sleep. In fact, I did not consider there was a choice. I fell asleep. I know it was in fact very normal to encounter such a rain in the mountain. The rain, originally that of the universe, became my rain, because I existed that day. After that, I had a thought to make music with rain. (Li 2011)

Compared with the experience four years ago, the rain this winter sounded quite realistic. The sound of each raindrop falling onto the ground, the leaves and the roof was clear and powerful. It seemed that each raindrop, each sound had its individual identity. At night, I could not see the raindrops. But I could vividly feel them right beside my hand. The realistic feeling assured me that this was the best moment to make music with them.[2]

The creation myth of Li Jianhong begs a question, where is he when he listens to the rain? And further, where are we when we listen to Li Jianhong's environment improvisation?

[2]A blog entry by Li Jianhong on 22 November 2010, titled 'Written before Shi'er Jing' (*Twelve Moods*). The tracks of *Twelve Moods* are available for listening at https://cfimusic.bandcamp.com/album/twelve-moods.

This strange existential question was posed by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk and was rehearsed in the ethnomusicologist Veit Erlmann's discussion in *Reason and Resonance* (Erlmann 2010). For Heidegger and also Sloterdijk, according to Erlmann, music is the 'acoustic uterus' where the primal sympathetic resonance is regained (ibid.: 337). Thus Heidegger's answer to the question 'Where we are when we listen?', as Erlmann postulates, is, in resonance (ibid.: 338). For the philosopher Gunther Anders, as Erlmann quotes 'the situation of being in music is an extraterritorial', similar to situations of sleep, shock, play or dreams. In music, 'one falls out of the world' (ibid.: 325–6). Like being shocked, or in sleep, one falls out of the historical self, the sense that one is continuous with the I of the previous day. Music plays the role of midwifery that cuts the umbilical cord connecting the Dasein to the world. For Anders, according to Erlmann, therefore, when we listen to music we are in music (ibid.: 25).

As Erlmann understood, Heidegger and Anders seek answers beginning with the personal or the psychological, operating through a cut from the world. Sloterdijk is no exception. While developing the notion of sonosphere or phonotope, Sloterdijk suggests a return to the genesis of the human ear. However, neither the existential reference of the uterus, nor music of the extraterritorial seems to apply to Li Jianhong's case. Li Jianhong listens in and to the cosmos of the myriad of things: the monks' chanting, the rain, the smoke from the burning incense and the rain vapour. It is essentially a *shanshui* mode of being, cosmic before psychological, diffusive and impregnating: 'The rain, originally that of the universe, became my rain, because I existed that day' (Li 2010).

Where did he exist when he listened to the rain?

To answer to this question, *shanshui*-thought points us to a unique and contingent space known as *jian*. The classical Chinese character of *jian* is written as 閒, a door with a moon inside. It can be interpreted as moonlight coming through a door. The later simplified Chinese character 间 replaces the moon with the sun. As Japanese architect and artist Masayuki Kurokawa notes, *jian* is a kind of space created by *qi*. Once a thing becomes separated, there arises *qi* (life energy/aura) around the parts. The attraction between *qi* of separate parts creates *jian*. Masayuki Kurokawa describes *jian* as one of the eight most essential Japanese aesthetic concepts. Artists, designers, and architects design an object not for the sake of the object, but for the sake of the space of *jian* created by the object (Kurokawa 2014: 68–82). One creates light for the shadow; one creates separation for obtaining connective life power. To create *jian*, is to enter a game of *qi*. As Jullien also confirms, 'European

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thinking prioritize seeing which is set out to identify and represent. Shanshui-thought instead, drawing largely from the philosophy of *qi*, prioritize breathing, which is to connect' (Jullien 2018b: 188). Breathing keeps the tension of regeneration in *jian*, or in Jullien's French translation *entre*.

Jian is a space to let pass and to let connect. Think of opening the door to reveal a crack, creating the crack is *jian.* Jullien describes *jian (entre*) as *non-lieu*; it does not have *en-soi*, no definition, no belongings, no intrinsic nature, no properties (Jullien 2018b: 184–9). *Jian* cannot be understood as 'in the middle of', because it is itself a kind of terminal. *Jian* is a space only when it is understood as that where every arrival unfolds. Breathing is a kind of *jian*. It lets air in; the arrival of one's physicality regenerates and unfolds. It is through breathing that one keeps a vitality that never dries up. Musicking is another example, when the vibration of one string causes the vibration of medium around, vibrations feed back and regenerate rounds of reverberations. *Jian* invites indwelling to emerge. It implies sources of energy, just like Deleuze and Guattari's notion of annex milieu, 'defined by the capture of energy sources (respiration in the most general sense), by the discernment of materials, the sensing of their presence or absence (perception), and by the fabrication of non-fabrication of the corresponding compounds (response, reaction)' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 51). *Jian* does not pre-exist. It is generated when one enters a certain relation with *shanshui*.

As Li Jianhong reflects, the environment he improvises with is not the environment others would see in reality. One can only improvise with an environment that one has established a certain affective relation with.[3] Between the musician and *shanshui*, what most matters is not equality or individual happiness so much as the emergence of a felt-new life. Environment improvisation does not require the presence of audience. It is private and even secret. A good piece of environment improvisation happens when a kind of connection develops in the process of improvising, a co-existence of mutual birth. In environment improvisation, there is no subject or object. There is no dialogue between the improvisor and the environment. This means that sounds of the wind and rain are not going to respond to the musician. One's attention is in the environment, rather than in music.

While the uterus functions as a physical reference for the existential function of music for Sloterdijk and Heidegger, the existential notion *jian* also has its physical reference, Chinese traditional architecture – *ting* (pavilion). As I wrote in another article on acoustic milieus (Wang 2018), a Chinese pavilion is usually built in private literati gardens or temples or public areas, with names such as 'wind listening pavilion' or 'pavilion of wind in the pines' or 'pavilion of the drunken old man'. A pavilion suggests a pause for travellers or walkers, rendering a moment of rest and play. In private literati gardens, the site where the pavilion was built was selected according to directions of wind, surroundings of trees, plants, architectures and paths to reach the most perfect kind of harmony. For the Chinese literati, living space and spiritual space are not separate; they interchange and convert into each other all the time. Curiously, the Chinese pavilion appears in several experimental music works, such as Li Jianhong's 'stringless pavilion' on his album *Bird* (Li 2007), Feng Hao's self-released album titled *Pavilion without Words* (Feng 2016), and Lao Dan's 'pavilion' in *Going after Clouds and Dreams* (Lao 2018). Titles of these works do not signify; like *shanshui*-thought, they are allusive in nature.

This leads us to the particular way of knowing in *shanshui*-thought, also inherent in everyday practices of breathing, walking and musicking, known as *moqi*.

3.2. *Moqi*, the cosmic mind and improvising

'We agreed before the performance that the piece will be 30 minutes long and that everyone performs on his or her own. One should not listen to other people's sounds, neither should one intentionally collaborate with each other. But, there is a deeper sense of collaboration, that is *moqi* (默契) [tacit resonance].'[4] Yan Jun wrote this in his blog reflecting on the concert series 'This is not a Music Concert (Musiklos)' he co-curated with Goethe Institute Beijing beginning from April 2018.

Improvising, as a 'method', describes the moment when everyone began playing instinctually without prescribed notations or instructions. It is widely used in classical music, jazz, blues, rock, electronic music, etc. Since the 1960s, improvisation itself is considered a music genre when paired with another equally important yet abstract concept – free. The significance of free improvisation often goes beyond its technique and aesthetics and extends to social and ethical realms. Improvisors often make particular rules as a performance collective, either banning any musical familiarities including harmony or tonal system (e.g., the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza in Rome), or restraining from communication about performances (e.g., AMM) (Gottschalk 2016: 192–3). The social significance of free improvising music derives from its non-structural thus non-hierarchical nature and hence often considered a musical model for democracy.

[3]Artist talk at 'Savaka: Asia Experimental Music Currents' at Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai, curated by Yin Yi and Wang Jing (the author), 19 January 2014.

[4]http://subjam.org/blog/462#more-462.

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Of course, not every contemporary musician or composer advocates improvisation. John Cage, for example, expresses his intention to avoid improvisation, because he feels people who improvise often fall back to their habits and memories (Darter 1982). To circumvent this, Cage uses indeterminacy as his major composition method. It seems that creating the unknown becomes the de facto goal of improvising experimental music; anything traditional or habitual is intentionally avoided.

Improvising is also an important part of Chinese art, including *shanshui*-painting, calligraphy and guqin music. The function of improvising is not so much knowledge production as *qi*-cultivation, which requires a cosmic mind to conceive and perceive the *qi* of the cosmic. Objective knowing will not work in the process of waiting for, following and cultivating *qi*; it requires what Michael Polanyi (2009: 18) suggests as the tacit dimension of knowing, 'It is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning.' Or as Tim Ingold (2000) suggests in his notion of sentient ecology that listening to our sound environment belongs to a sensual, experiential way of knowing (e.g., how to sail; how to fly a kite). In *shanshui*-thought, this tacit dimension of knowing or sensual way of knowing is called *moqi*, achieving understanding through non-linguistic ways.

In experimental music that requires improvisation, informed by *shanshui*-thought, the effort is spent in mastering how to resonate, to enter a relation of *moqi.* Jullien translates *moqi* as connivance, 'The Latin *connivere* means to come to an understanding 'with a wink' (2018a: 106). For Jullien, 'Connivance stakes a rightful claim opposite knowledge. It recovers what knowledge has ended up repressing, though not quite abolishing, and from this opposite position demonstrates the coherence of what has been repressed' (ibid.: 105–6). When one winks at another person or walks in the woods, one finds one is anchored to a connection in an elementary and expansive way.

To achieve connivance with a person, a living or non-living being, one does not control and grasp (knowledge would require these gestures). Instead, one waits, detects and carefully initiates the link. In fact, one of the major characteristics of guqin is following (Van Gulik 1969: 48). *Shanshui* unravels and overflows. One waits for the *qi* of *shanshui*, follows it, links to it and becomes an element in it. *Moqi* fails to happen when one of the parties withdraws. In Shen Piji's case, the singing frogs very often stay quiet in their improvising concerts.

The guqin player and experimental musician Shen Piji has lived the urban village of Shenzhen since 2015, China's leading city for technology and industry, linking Hong Kong to mainland China. Here, Shen rents his studio. In his front yard, Shen placed five ceramic jars of different sizes in a self-made pond. The jars attracted a group of music frogs (*Hylarana daunchina*, endemic to China) and they stayed afterwards. From 2015, Shen initiated a series called *Frog Jam* inviting musicians and artists nearby to participate. The first event occurred on 11 July 2015. He invited musician friends from his hometown Chaozhou (a city in Guangdong province) to perform Chaozhou opera together with these frogs. To use a hometown music meant something special for Shen as a new immigrant to the city of Shenzhen. On 18 July 2015, for the second concert, Shen Piji invited his neighbour, a Japanese new media artist Macoto Cuhara, as well as Hong Kong-based sound artist Pal Pal aka (Paul Yip). Macoto programmed an infrared sensor installation to interact with the frogs. Once the frogs croak, the sensor would make beeping sounds and emit cross infrared rays at the same time. There are altogether five sensors set to correspond to each pottery jar.[5]

Moqi connects one to the interiority of the life power of the other. In the case of collective music improvising, participants need to know each other as a full person – their temper, character, spirit and values. The music group FEN (Far East Network) consists of Otomo Yoshihide from Japan, Yan Jun from China, Yuen Cheewai from Singapore, and Ryu Hankil from Korea, and formed in 2008. They are significant individuals in their respective cultural scenes, organising events and festivals, performing as artist, musician and curators. They seldom discuss music when they are together. Staying together, eating, drinking and travelling, helps them to establish *moqi*. Listening and improvising give this growing tacit resonance an ever-changing acoustic form. The affective bond formed in life feeds back to musical communication that further nurtures the well-being of the collective and the individuals.

Waiting and following characterise the kind of improvising experimental music which develops *moqi and jian*. Live performances of such often sound quiet and restraint but still with dynamic, tension and a degree of chaos.

4. MAKING *SHANSHUI*-THOUGHT AUDIBLE: TWO AESTHETIC QUALITIES

In the concluding remarks to his lecture contribution to Alvin Lucier's edited volume, Christian Wolff made a passing comment on two ideas in experimental music, described as operations of renunciation or restriction, as a kind of 'ascetic minimalism':

[5]For a video recording of the second concert, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGP_DnV_q08.

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> one is the notion of musical poverty, of an avoidance of rhetoric, of the presence of silence or spaciousness, of sparseness of the irreducibility of material, one might think of music of Satie, Webern, Feldman, Lucier, Cage, for example. The other notion is of what Adorno refers to as 'the ideal of darkness', which does not simply match what he feels to be the darkness of the times, of social reality, but 'does no more and no less than postulate that art properly understood finds happiness in nothing except its ability to stand its ground. This happiness illuminates the sensuous phenomenon from the inside … blackness [darkness]—the antithesis of the fraudulent sensuality of culture's facade—has a sensual appeal.' This notion, of poverty and darkness, would function, so to speak, to keep us honest; and Adorno adds the point that in that very function their music achieves its particular beauty. (Wolff 2017: 30)

These two notions of poverty and darkness as Wolff identifies and advocates in music making resonate well with two aesthetics (also moral) qualities in classical Chinese guqin music and in today's experimental music practice in China. That is, the quality of *dan* and *you*.

4.1. *Dan* (quiet, bland): the taste of wisdom

Informed by the organic and relational *qi*-philosophy, ancient Chinese aesthetic qualities are often at the same time cosmic and moral qualities; the aesthetic, cosmic and moral are mutually dependent and penetrable. *Dan*(淡) is related to the virtue of centrality (*zhong*) (中), which applies to both Heaven and the Sage:

> There is no other basis in reality apart from this value of the neutral: not leaning in one direction more than in another, not characterized more by one quality than by another, but preserving, perfectly whole within itself, its capacity for action. From this neutrality derives, in the eyes of Confucians, all true efficacy. And to the neutral we owe, of course, the ineluctable blandness that is the mark of the Sage. (Jullien 2004: 49)

Neutrality means harmony, which means music needs to balance with social, moral and natural conditions. The sound of neutrality corresponds to *gong*, the first tone of the Chinese musical scale. *Gong* corresponds to the organ of the spleen. It also refers to the emperor and the humming thunder of the autumn. Spatially, gong means the middle. As an aesthetic category, *dan*, meaning mild, vast or bland, challenges most European or American individuals who would consider *dan* boring and the opposite of aesthetic stimulation. However, *dan* is a highly valued sound quality in classical Chinese aesthetics, particularly in *guqin* music. According to the Chinese scholar Cai Zhongde (2003), one can trace the idea of *dan* in music to Ruan Ji's (AD 210–63) writing 'On Music (*Yue Lun*)', and find a more developed aesthetic theory of *dan* by Xu Shangying (1582–1662) in his text *Xishan Qinkuang* (Xu 1673). Informed by Taoism, Ruan Ji suggested that music embodies the nature and spirit of the earth, the heaven and every organic and inorganic things. Taoism suggests that one has to be desire-less to achieve peacefulness. Music accordingly has to be quiet and bland to accommodate this moral need.

In *Xishan Qinkuang*, the motif of *dan* corresponds to two Chinese characters that are pronounced the same as *dan*, one is 澹 and the other is 淡. *Dan* is first of all a state to be acquired by guqin players. As Xu Shangying describes, 'clear spring, white stone, bright moon and slight breeze, freely exist. The listener sets free their mind to reach the state of *xuanmiao* (metaphysical subtly), the desire for entertainment will disappear as well.'[6] The character used by Xu is 澹, somehow neglected by Jullien in his book *In Praise of Blandness* (2004). The two characters, 澹 and 淡, are often used interchangeably, but there are still some differences. The character 澹 tends to mean quiet, peaceful and slow, while 淡 refers to blandness in taste. Quiet and bland sound leads to the flow of the spiritual *qi*, referred to the state of *tian* (恬). Xu explains the relation between *dan* and *tian*, 'one achieves *dan* when one reaches subtlety, when *dan* reaches *miao* one creates *tian*, when *tian* reaches *miao*, one's music will be each more *dan* but never makes one feel tired of it.'[7]

Dan is a sensual category but it is too simple and unappealing to the senses so it requires the intellect to engage with it. Francois Jullien speaks highly of *dan* as a concept to grasp the depth of Chinese thinking. Blandness is the most basic and authentic of all flavours: that of the 'root' of things (Jullien 2004: 52–3). *Dan* is a quality shared on ethical, aesthetic, relational, psychological and metaphysical levels practised through classical paintings, music, social codes, individual characters, literature, ideology and taste. Jullien identifies several variations of *dan*: the stone sculpture of Buddha in Datong grottos showing very little curves on the face, the painter Ni Zan's water-ink painting, the aesthetic value of lingering tone in music. *Dan* is the colour of the whole, as it appears to the eyes of those who look farthest into the distance; it makes us experience the world and existence itself beyond the narrow confines of the individual's point of view. What is missing in the sensual will be reacquired in the intellect. Therefore, *dan* is the taste of wisdom.

4.2. *You* (inward expandedness)

Bland sound, as Jullien describes, is 'an attenuated sound that retreats from the ear and is allowed to

[6]'qinquan baishi, haoyue shufeng, xiaoxiao zide, shi tingzhizhe yousi piaomiao, yule zhixin buzhi hequ—si zhi wei dan' (清泉白石，皓月疏风，翛翛自得，使听之者游思飘渺，娱乐之心不知何去—斯之谓澹).

[7]'wei cao zhi miao lai, ze ke dan; dan zhi miao lai, ze sheng tian; tian zhi miao lai, ze yu dan er bu mie' (唯操至妙来，则可澹；澹至妙来，则生恬；恬至妙来，则愈澹而不厌).

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simply die out over the longest possible time. We hear it still, but just barely; and as it diminishes, it makes all the more audible that soundless beyond into which it is about to extinguish itself' (2004: 79). Here Jullien is actually talking about the dimension of *you* (inward expandedness) (幽), related to *dan* but itself a separate quality in guqin music appearing in both *Xishan Qinkuang* and Leng Qian's *Sixteen Rules for the Tones of the Lute* (Leng n.d.). Originated from *Laozi*, the notion of *you* means deep, hidden and secret. In *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*, Robert Van Gulik (1969) translates *you* from the text of *Sixteen Rules for the Tones of the Lute*, as the profound touch:

> The quality of music depends upon the personality of the player; thus profundity comes from within. Therefore, when a high-minded and cultivated scholar executes a tune, then the resonance is profound ... the music will be broad and generous like the wind, and unstained by earthly dust ... when one hears his music one shall know the personality of the player. Such as the wonderful qualities of the profound touch. (Van Gulik 1969: 112)

You is often seen paired up with another character *xuan*(玄), which means empty, dark and unclear. *Youxuan* (幽玄) means deep and mysterious. *Youxuan* refers to those unspoken beauty, secrets, a kind of state beyond logic and language. It is an idea influenced by Chan Buddhism. The quality of inward expandedness brought a sense of subtly and lightness. It exists not in the body of music, but in the fading sound when music ends, as well as in the music player's personality. When used to describe a person as *youxuan*, it means that the person is elegant and refined.

The notion of *youxuan* originates in China, but was developed further in Japan. According to the Chinese scholar Zhou Jianping, the idea of *youxuan* as a philosophical term was introduced to Japan from China and soon became an essential concept and value in Japanese aesthetics. *Youxuan* was developed first in medieval poetics in Japan (Zhou 2015: 190). It was extended from the field of singing to poetry, literature and noh, gradually becoming the top aesthetic concept in Japanese aesthetics. *Youxuan* describes a personality that is aloof, morally lofty, or a performance that insinuates. Among different derivations of *youxuan* developed by Japanese poets and art theorists, the Haiko master Matsuo Basho particularly values *youxuan* as an aesthetic quality generated through sound. It refers to the remaining rhythm after sound has died out, a high art form that is silent, sad, solemn and meditative. To give an example of his famous poem:

> The old pond;
>
> A frog jumps in
>
> The sound of the water.

The sound of *dan* and *you* does not seduce or incite. It, however, leads to the most profound quietness of both the inner world and the cosmos. Music that bears the qualities of *dan* and *you*, resembles guqin music in that it is not to be performed on stage; it should be listened to as having a private dialogue with oneself or a few friends. Examples include the Japanese experimental music genre known as *onkyô*, feedback music by Yan Jun, stone music by Christian Wolff, and certain experimental music works that operate on the border of audibility.

4.3. The Tea Rockers Quintet

The Tea Rockers Quintet includes Yan Jun (feedback system), Wu Na (guqin), Xiaohe (guitar, voice, laptop) and Li Daiguo (voice and multi-instruments). Formed in Berne in October 2010 when they performed at the same music festival, the collective combines traditional instruments such as guqin and pipa with contemporary electronic instruments. Besides these instruments, there is a non-musical presence: a tea ceremony performed by Lao Gu, now replaced by his disciple Xi Jian. The kind of tea they drink during the concert determines the tenor of their performance. The group so far has only released two albums: *Ceremony* (2012) and *Fictions* (2017).

On their album *Ceremony*, we can sometimes hear sounds of tea making and the clicking of cups. The entire performance creates a poetic space in which one begins to feel that it is not so much a simple musical event as a casual gathering of like-minded friends. The small, high frequency and non-human feedback noise constitute the opposing dimension of sounds of guqin, pipa, cello, guita, voice and tea making, opening up a world of ceaseless reinvigoration of intimacy and well-being mixed with a sense of mystery and aloofness. The aroma of the tea does not give structure to the music performance, rather it creates the non-existent sound that interestingly generates an attractive space of *jian*, with individual sounds reaching tacit resonance with the tea making. Sound and tea may or may not have anything to do with each other;[8] they can just be in parallel existence in the same time–space, just as cloud, trees and cats.

5. CODA: *SHANSHUI*-THOUGHT, EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC AND WELL-BEING

Experimental music informed by *shanshui*-thought is paradoxically quotidian and elite. It belongs to amateurs and it should stay so. Just like guqin music being practised by amateur scholars from the literati

[8]Or as the anonymous reviewer brought this point up to me, the smell of the tea sometimes affects the nervous system of the musicians and hence affects the sounds they improvise.

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class in Chinese history, professionality or musical virtuosity is not preferred because neither guqin music nor experimental music is meant to be played to entertain the public. The Chinese experimental musician Yan Jun speaks of minimising techniques in his music practices. He speaks openly about his lack of professional musical training and never intends to master a musical instrument. He makes subtle gestures with his body over his DIY feedback sound system. He even sleeps in his performance set. Yan Jun organises the Beijing Impro Committee, consisting of experimental, improvising music performers of little professional training in music. They are programmers, housewives, vendors, designers, painters, or self-taught musicians. In their performances, they decide not to intentionally collaborate with each other in order to make space for *moqi* (tacit resonance) to develop.

When we hear music that appears quiet, bland, dark, or restrained and when we feel that the music is not actually performed for us but for the musicians themselves, we may, before making any quick judgement, rewire our sensibility through *shanshui*-thought. It might be true that *shanshui*-thought-informed music fails to excite or entertain the public or fails to produce objective knowledge. It does not even seem to be a useful artistic medium to directly address pressing social, cultural, political, ecological issues. However, experimental music driven by *shanshui*-thought embodies a care for the cosmic well-being, a no less political way of being and becoming.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Dan 淡 bland in taste
Dan 澹 quiet, peaceful and slow
Huwei tuotai 互为脱胎 mutual birth
jian 间 a space to let pass and to let connect
moqi 默契 tacit resonance
Shanshui 山水 mountain-water
Xuanxue 玄学metaphysics
Yinyun 氤氲 diffusive with thick clouds of *qi*; the state of organism mutually breathing life into one another; a wildly shimmering heat; chaos
you 幽 inward expandedness

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