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DIASPORIC SOUNDSCAPES
OF BELONGING

Mediating Chineseness with Shanghai Restoration Project

Grace Wang

I was returning to my seat during the intermission break of David Henry Hwang’s play *Chinglish* at East West Players—the venerable Asian American theater group located in Los Angeles—when “The Bund,” an instrumental track from Shanghai Restoration Project, began filling the theater. A reference to Shanghai’s famed riverfront and the legendary nightclubs and dance halls that flourished there during the city’s swinging jazz era in the 1930s, the song channels the spirit of that time and place through a heady mix of musical referents. Chinese traditional instruments layer onto hip-hop beats that weave into synthesizers and jazz piano riffs. Listening to the song in the context of *Chinglish*—a play that explores the manifold mistranslations that impede cultural understanding between China and the United States—it struck me how well it serves as a musical counterpart to the play. While Hwang plays with the chasm between meanings and words, using the sometimes humorous gaffes found in mistranslated “Chinglish” signs as a springboard to meditate on the limits of cross-cultural understanding, Dave Liang, the artist and producer who records as Shanghai Restoration Project, remixes bits and samples of Chinese traditional instruments onto beat-driven, electronic soundscapes that create new contexts for hearing those sounds. In so doing, both artists invite reflection on the place of China in the U.S. public imaginary, negotiating the fears, projections, and fantasies that structure U.S. narratives of China’s ascent as a global superpower as well as their own attachments and identifications to China and Chineseness within these changing global relationships.

How do we hear and imagine China in the United States, where longstanding Orientalist and Yellow Peril paradigms of structuring Asian difference collide with and become ambivalently incorporated into newer narratives of “China on the rise”? The accelerated pace of change in China specifically and the Asia/Pacific region generally have unsettled the coordinates of power and privilege that historically marked the relationship between the United States and China and the frameworks of distance and otherness typically used to represent Asia. As global interest in understanding China intensifies, Chinese American artists have begun situating themselves as cultural brokers uniquely positioned to mediate this critical relationship. Reflecting, for instance, on the shift away from themes of multiculturalism to what Hwang terms
internationalism in his work, the playwright marvels at the “sheer coincidence” of being Chi-
inese and interested in U.S.–China relations at a moment when that topic has, somewhat unex-
pectedly, emerged as “one of the big subjects of the rest of the century” (Polkow 2011). In
related fashion, Liang ties his interest in experimenting with music that combines “traditional
Chinese instruments with hip-hop and electronica” to the lag in cultural productions that truly
reflect the dynamism of modern China and his desire to update the soundtrack of China for
U.S./Western listeners (“Shanghai Restoration Project: Hybrid Backbeats” 2008). For both art-
ists, their subject position as Chinese Americans is not incidental to their investment in explor-
ning changing perceptions of China and Chineseness, given both their diasporic connections and
their awareness of how closely tied the fates of Chinese Americans in the United States are to
such understandings.

While this increased attention to China has created some openings for Chinese Americans
to engage anew with questions of diaspora and to participate in ongoing conversations about
shifting meanings of China, narratives in the United States about China’s rise are inevi-
tably intertwined with a complex mix of feelings, from admiration to angst, and, sometimes,
outright racism. For Chinese American artists, toeing this line between personal interest,
fascination, and racialized projection can thus be fraught. There are, on the one hand, market
opportunities for tapping into growing interest in China through remixed sounds and images
of Chineseness that complicate essentialized understandings while still appealing to U.S./
Western sensibilities. On the other hand, the context in which cultural work such as music
circulates digitally and globally, particularly when repackaged as fun and upbeat “world music,”
sample embodiments of “Chinese culture,” and/or hip, stylized blends of sonic Orientalism,
are often linked to economic imperatives outside an artist’s control and the material realities of
making a living as a musician. Moreover, in mining questions of diasporic identification, Chi-
nese Americans can be equally complicit in reproducing class-inflected, romanticized visions
of Chineseness, rendering global cities like Shanghai as cosmopolitan wonderlands of East/
West hybridity set to an ambient soundtrack of techno–cool.

How do the economic and cultural transformations of China over the past quarter century
prompt a reassessment of existing narratives about the place of China in the U.S. imagi-
nary? And how can music lead listeners to challenge longstanding, inherited categories used
to organize understanding about U.S.–China relations? This chapter explores these related
questions through the case study of Shanghai Restoration Project, asking how Liang navigates
transpacific affiliations to create, as he describes on the band’s website, “high-energy electronic
music rooted in modern day Chinese culture.” Music, as the musician argues, represents a
particularly powerful medium to tap into listeners’ subconscious—to reach them at a more
intuitive level of feeling and knowing that challenges them to “think beyond the categoriza-
tions that [they] are comfortable with.”

In what follows, I provide background about Liang and his musical development, connect-
ing his impulse to create Shanghai Restoration Project to questions of diasporic attachment
and Asian American musical belonging. I analyze the particular inspiration he finds in 1930s
Shanghai jazz, a musical form rooted in colonial entanglement and interracial admixture,
arguing that it captures Liang’s desire to find rootedness in places of flux, discrepant fluen-
cies, and creativity. And finally, I examine how an understanding of Shanghai Restoration
Project as “Asian American music” allows us to consider this category less as fixed—bounded
by questions of racial descent or musical elements—and more as a mode of inquiry that
allows us to pose certain questions about the idea of China in the U.S. imaginary, the after-
life of Orientalism, and the imprint of details from elsewhere onto racialized experiences in
the United States.
Creating Shanghai Restoration Project

While musicians like Liang tend to speak of their musical projects in terms of personal and musical goals, it is useful to contextualize Shanghai Restoration Project within broader questions about conflicts that Asian Americans encounter with musical belonging. Music, in this sense, helps amplify the broader tensions that Asian Americans face in finding belonging in national and transnational spaces. For, while Asian Americans make music of every kind, to further scrutiny about their place within particular music traditions. Kevin Fellezs (2007) observes, for instance, how in both scholarly and popular jazz discourse, Asian American musicians are “seen as ‘coming into’ a jazz tradition from an external place,” viewed as lacking a rich jazz tradition of their own from which to draw (77). We hear strains of that sentiment echoed by acclaimed jazz pianist Vijay Iyer, who muses how, as an Asian American entering an African American expressive culture and “striving for some place within it,” his status has “been called into question.” He observes how critics used to place him “outside the history of jazz,” filtering their listening through racialized beliefs about Asian Americans that led to assessments of his music as rigorous, cerebral, mathematical, and intellectual (Wilkinson 2016). We see how this racialized imagination extends to other music genres as well. Writing on hip-hop, scholars such as Nitasha Sharma, Antonio Tiongson, Oliver Wang, and Deborah Wong analyze the complex range of positions that Asian American musicians mobilize to authenticate their place within musical cultures not typically viewed as their own, from framing hip-hop as rooted in global, multicultural sensibilities to depicting the music as a vehicle to explore the particularities of the racialized experiences of Asian Americans in national and diasporic contexts (Sharma 2010; Tiongson 2013; Wang 2007; Wong 2004). Positioned at the boundary of music traditions—an othering that mirrors more broadly the racialization of this pan-ethnic group in the United States—Asian American musicians have adopted a variety of musical and narrative strategies for navigating their place and presence in different musical cultures.

For Liang, creating Shanghai Restoration Project grew out of a desire to explore questions of musical belonging and to make music that reflected the full range of his musical and familial inheritances. Growing up in upstate New York, he participated in a wide range of music-making activities: classical music, jazz and improvisation, musical theater, and choral and *a cappella* music. Other types of music filled his home as well. His mother, trained in Chinese opera in Taiwan, sang and played the *guzheng* (a traditional Chinese stringed instrument), while his grandfather played the *dizi* (a Chinese flute). As the child of immigrants from Taiwan who came to the United States to pursue graduate degrees in math and science, the experience of living in a new language and culture led his mother to enroll Liang in music and other artistic activities. As he put it, his mother saw the arts as a means to nurture the expressive elements of self, a priority she placed on her children given the cultural exclusions that she encountered as a racialized immigrant in the United States:

She was like, ‘the more you’re in tune with different emotional components within yourself, the easier it is going to be to navigate America,’ was her theory. My mom felt that one of the big ways to succeed in America was to express yourself … As an Asian American and a woman, my mom definitely heard her share of racist comments from her co-workers and when you encounter that, your instinct is probably that you want to fight back. But as an immigrant you don’t necessarily have the words or the expression to do it necessarily at the time.
Liang understood how inclusion in the professional middle class did not necessarily signal full societal acceptance.

While Liang connected his parents’ musical nurturance to broader dynamics of race and immigration in the United States, such issues did not feel particularly relevant to him when it came to his own music making while growing up. As he commented, “I would just find friends who were musicians and musicians don’t care about the other person’s race, they just care about if you’re good or not, or if you like to jam.” It was his immersion into the commercial music industry that heightened his understanding of the business aspects of making music, and the role that race played in selling music, from creating boundaries around music genres to the commodification of ethnicity and the segmentation of markets.

In Liang’s retelling, his path toward making music professionally seems both a deliberate and a fortuitous path. He was working in consulting while still performing music on the side, when he heard from a former classmate who was then working as a producer at Bad Boy Records. He began apprenticing for his friend in 2003, eventually leaving behind his consulting work to delve full time into hip-hop music and production. It was his work as a music producer that led him to begin considering creating his own group, one that would challenge the music industry impulses toward categorization and explore a musical vocabulary that spoke to the full complexity of his experience as a Chinese American. In this sense, Shanghai Restoration Project can be interpreted as a journey back to the goals that his mother had in mind when she enrolled Liang in music training: to express yourself.

There is a certain irony in that the genre of electronic music and the use of a pseudonym, in some ways, run counter to ideas about self-expression. Liang mused: “I think compared to other genres, electronic music tends to be more detached from the biographical background of the artist and as a result, race does not play as much of a role on the listening front.” His decision not to make music under his own name further redirected focus away from the particularities of his own background. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor (2010) observes how electronic bands that involve only one person (like Liang’s) tend “to draw attention to themselves not as individuals, but as hidden, mysterious creators” (140). While Liang explains his choice to use the name Shanghai Restoration Project in more pragmatic terms (as he notes, many electronic groups use pseudonyms to feature different vocalists and instrumentalists without confusing the audience too much), it also shifts attention away from the personal background of the artist.

At the same time, “electronic music” is an inadequate descriptor for Liang’s music. As he readily admits, despite using that term, “there’s a lot of other stuff going on. Shanghai Restoration Project was a way I could combine everything I like into one thing.” For what Liang aspired to achieve was a sound that captured the full range of his musical inheritances. As he explains, performing and listening to jazz, classical, choral music, and hip-hop, he began to sense an inchoate longing:

I never felt completely myself in terms of musical identity … It was not until one day, somebody gave me a suggestion, well, if you want to be true to yourself, why don’t you use some of these instruments that you grew up with and grew up listening to. So that’s when I started to fuse the Chinese instrumentation with all the musical experiences I had leading up until that point. (“Shanghai Restoration Project: Hybrid Backbeats” 2008)
More than just a fusion of different sounds, Liang aimed to capture the sense of hybridity—the assemblage of past and present, foreign and local—that recombined in the 1930s Shanghai jazz that he fell in love after visiting the Peace Hotel in Shanghai and encountering some old Chinese jazz bands during college. “In my mind,” he recalls, “it was the perfect blend of Chinese and Western musical styles from that era.” This “perfect blend” resonated with his own sense of self, someone who was at once “a combination of Chinese culture and American culture.”

While Liang’s description might, at first glance, appear to depict Chinese American subjectivity as the melding of two distinct cultures, it is worth emphasizing that the musical inspiration he finds in 1930s Shanghai jazz is more than an “East–West” mixture, but, rather, a hybrid popular form rooted in colonial entanglement and interracial exchange between Chinese and African American musicians. Colonized by multiple Western powers as well as Japan, the port city of Shanghai—famously dubbed the “Paris of the East”—was the thriving jazz capital of Asia. 1930s Shanghai jazz reflected this history of colonial encounters, merging together American big band, Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood film music, and Chinese folk melodies and instruments. The music, later deemed “yellow” or “pornographic” for its colonial influences when the Chinese communist government came to power in 1949, forced musicians to go underground, many of them not emerging again until the end of the Cultural Revolution. In his interpretation of Shanghai as a mediating point of cultures colliding and coming together, Liang thus taps into what Chinese scholar Leo Lee (1999) calls “Shanghai modern”: “If cosmopolitanism means an abiding curiosity in ‘looking out’—locating oneself as cultural mediator at the intersection between China and other parts of the world—then Shanghai in the 1930s was the cosmopolitan city par excellence” (19). Lee’s evocation of 1930s Shanghai as an embodiment of cosmopolitanism that allows an engagement with questions of Chinese modernity finds parallels in the inspiration that Liang finds in Shanghai jazz as a touchstone for interpreting the hybridity of Chinese diasporic subjectivities. Rather than find diasporic attachment to what we might view as “authentic” vestiges of Chinese culture—classical poetry and art or the musical forms of Beijing opera and kunqu—Liang chooses “impure” sites of contestation, collision, and colonial incursion.

**Unfixing Categories**

How can the remnants of the sounds of Shanghai jazz, remixed for the present, represent the sonic pulse of China in the U.S. imaginary? This question, specific in its details and references, invites us to consider how Liang’s music provides a model for understanding China that moves us away from totalizing visions—what Ien Ang aptly describes as the “larger-than-life phantom China in the global imagination, a China that is at once mighty and scary, far too large and powerful for its own good” (Ang 2013: 19). Liang himself expresses wariness about the fear-mongering tactics of mainstream U.S. media and its monolithic depictions of China:

> It’s almost like everything is bad about China and the government is always bad. There are no humanizing individual stories. The individual stories are always about suffering, usually at the hands of the government or Chinese behaving badly … If you’re reading the news constantly and all you see about China is this, your entire perception of anybody who’s Chinese that you meet is informed by these mainstream publications.

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As he observes that such blanket coverage can be dangerous, creating distortions lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and violence. Having grown up in the United States, Liang concedes that he will “never have full understanding” regardless of his travel, research, interpersonal relationships (his wife is a Chinese visual artist), and professional collaborations. At the same time, he cautions against the desire to gain or claim “full understanding.” In this sense, rather than see discrepant fluencies as a shortcoming, these provide a template for approaching cultural interpretation. Such a view is in keeping with Liang’s aim to challenge the desire for categorization, whether about genres, groups, ethnicity, or culture: “I don’t want people to think in terms of the broad categories, I think it’s ultimately unhealthy for society in the long run … Music is one of the ways you can actually get through to people’s subconscious … to challenge them to think a little bit differently.”

We can interpret Liang’s desire to contest received categories and totalizing views of China—a place for which he feels both intimacy and distance—as part of his inheritance as the child of immigrants. Here, I draw from Alexandra Vazquez’s evocation of the assemblage of fragmented, puzzling, cherished, and often elusive details that the children of Cuban immigrants cull from to forge diasporic attachments. Writing about the idea of Cuba and Cuban music for the generation raised in the United States, she observes:

for children of immigrants, details from their parents’ other lived locations are precarious things. They are openings that can be sought out, avoided, honored, rejected, and loved. The details are often all that is left behind from a near past. They remind us that that place is always partial, that we will never have a fullness of a past picture or sound. Details are things that we learn to live on, imagine off, and use to find other kinds of relationships to our parents’ natal locations.

Such an intricate piecing together allows, as Vazquez suggests, for the emergence of something “that is both foreign and somehow familiar into something new” (Vazquez 2013: 7–8). That is, more than what is sometimes referred to glibly as a second generation’s “search for roots,” these fragments and details offer new ways of listening and understanding. Such a view resonates with Liang’s musical goals of unsettling the categories we use to fix and assign meaning. Reframing 1930s Shanghai jazz, traditional Chinese instruments, and children’s songs onto hip-hop beats and electronic vistas, his projects evoke and confound fixed definitions of China or Chinese culture that invite closer listening.

This attention to slips of memory and local, everyday contexts extends to Liang’s many collaborative projects, helping listeners make links between the displacements wrought by immigration with processes of colonialism, migration, urbanization, and social/natural disasters. For instance, in the 2009 album Afterquake, a project that Liang undertakes with American folk singer Abigail Washburn and the humanitarian nonprofit Sichuan Quake Relief, he gathers field recordings of the continuing impact of the 2008 earthquake that killed more than 88,000 people and displaced more than five million people. Afterquake, as described on its website, “remixes voices and sounds from the Chinese earthquake zone to raise awareness for victims still in need.” Songs sung in straightforward and moving simplicity by children attending relocation schools (for children displaced outside of the disaster zone and separated from their families) are placed onto electronic beats along with fragments of ambient sounds found in the local environment, from cement mixers to ping pong balls. In the multimedia website that accompanies the album, listeners gain a glimpse into the process of gathering research and materials for the album. Interview transcripts with the children featured on the album, raw video footage of field recordings, and photos of places and people visited allow listeners
to gain a sense of how these tracks were compiled, descriptions of contexts for choosing and recording songs, and the individual stories and emotions behind the songs, allowing listeners a glimpse into their process of interpreting the soundscape of post-earthquake Sichuan—the rebuilding, the feelings of longing and loss, the resilience of children, the redemptive power of music.

**Repackaging Chineseness**

Still, while Liang aims to destabilize categories through his music, the ways in which listeners engage with his music speak to their own interests and desires. He concedes as much, noting: “people gravitate towards a certain type of music because it speaks to them. It’s a product. It’s doing something for them.” This should not suggest that musicians do not have certain goals in mind or pathways toward which they want to lead listeners. But it does mean that the contexts in which their music is consumed and understood can sometimes lie in contradiction to the artists’ intentions. Deborah Wong (2004) aptly cautions artists who draw on traditional Asian instruments and sounds, as they run a heightened risk of having their music consumed through frameworks of Orientalism and exoticism (215). While Liang acknowledges that a certain amount of “otherizing” might be inevitable, particularly for listeners who are hearing particular instruments for the first time, he also accepts responsibility as an artist for guiding listeners. Reflecting on his earlier albums, which often included more overt and decontextualized Chinese sounds, he notes: “I was a little bit more irresponsible in not sort of leading folks to the right places, but now I’m hoping to do that less.” We can, in part, interpret Liang’s remarks as stemming from his desire to work against reductive views of Chineseness—views that he may have even partially held himself earlier in his career. His comments reflect an understanding of the ease with which Chinese music/sounds can be slotted into an Orientalist framework, particularly when presented without a great deal of contextual knowledge or research into the musical traditions being cited.

Liang’s intentions and sense of responsibility notwithstanding, it is worth questioning how Shanghai Restoration Project taps into longstanding desires for Asian difference, whether packaged as sonic Orientalism or rebranded through cosmopolitan visions of “Asian cool” aimed in the United States at global-minded National Public Radio (NPR)/film festival/museum crowds (among the market segments that the group circulates within in the United States). This is particularly true with regard to the secondary circulation of Shanghai Restoration Project in commercials and albums such as Starbucks’ *World Is China* and Putamayo’s children’s album *Asian Playgrounds*, which traffic more explicitly in romanticized visions of China/Asia. Putamayo’s *Asian Playgrounds*, for instance, invites listeners on “magical and educational journeys to the rich diverse lands of Asia,” while Starbucks’ *World Is China* (which follows the albums *World Is Africa* and *World Is India*) aims to “display the diversity of China. Encompassing classic Chinese pop, Beijing opera, hip-hop and electronica, these East-meets-West selections reveal the span of China’s sound and how it colors and is colored by music from around the globe.” Listening to these albums, one has the sense of being on a fun, curated adventure, engaging in what Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh describe as a type of “psychic tourism through music” (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000: 35). Such compilations provide a window onto the cultural strategies by which China is packaged and commodified in the U.S. cultural imagination—resembling less a threatening global hegemon than a source of cultural richness that enhances our global diversity.
Diasporic Soundscapes of Belonging

Rethinking Asian American Music

If the analytics of “world music” can foreclose understanding, it is worth asking whether the category “Asian American” in relation to Shanghai Restoration Project can open up inquiry, even though the group is not typically placed within an Asian American framework. Here, it may be productive to shift attention to the ways that Asian American cinema studies scholars have analyzed how the label “Asian American” film and video depends not only on unsettled criteria regarding race, politics, and aesthetics, but also on questions of commerce, distribution, and resources. Jun Okada, for example, traces the inextricable role that state and public institutions—in particular PBS (Public Broadcasting Service)—played in the development of Asian American film and video. Arguing against the idea of an “authentic, organic, or autonomous ‘Asian American film and video,’” Okada emphasizes how the category itself arose out of marketplace politics: “It is a concept invented by the network of grassroots, local, and national institutions that emerged following the civil rights and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (Okada 2013: 5). Broader debates around the shifting boundaries of the label “Asian American” thus inform, as well as arise out of, the often material contexts for making and distributing films.

Okada’s capacious understanding of Asian American film and video as dynamic and shifting echoes Glen Mimura’s proposition to view the lack of definitive answers to the question “What is Asian American film?” not as a shortcoming but rather, as an open-ended and ever-unfolding “gift”: “Its meaning is no longer something we must anxiously seek to define, free in its tracks, conquer; it is no longer an answer at the end of a well-traveled question, but the beginning of our journey into other stories, problems, question” (Mimura 2009: xxii). For Mimura, analyzing Asian American cinema within the anticolonial, international movement called Third Cinema that emerged in the 1960s productively opens up lines of inquiry about Asian American racialization, queer sexuality, and globalization. In this sense, both Okada and Mimura allow for an open-ended understanding of Asian American film and video as engaged in a mode of social, political, and historical critique.

We can understand the category “Asian American music” as similarly enabling particular forms of critique—encompassing what Joseph Lam describes as a “flexible heuristic device” rather than a codified set of race-based expectations and criteria (Lam 1999: 44). To think of Shanghai Restoration Project as making “Asian American music” can thus prompt us to ask how the music engages with a set of questions about, for instance, U.S.–China relations, the critical afterlives of Orientalism, and/or the racializing distortions that render certain groups as “other” within the U.S. imaginary. Such a conception allows us to apprehend how race continues to matter in music such as Shanghai Restoration Project, even if it might not, at first glance, seem centrally engaged with questions of Asian American identity or representation.

When I asked Liang about his impressions of the category “Asian American” in relation to his music, he expressed hesitation, noting that while he understood race to be important and expressed support for Asian American activism, what is most significant to him is the work—the music itself: “I’m an artist first and foremost, and I’m an individual artist. … ‘If you hear my music on Pandora, it shouldn’t matter to you what my race is, what my ethnicity is. What should matter to you is, do you like the music?’” On the one hand, Liang’s measured response speaks to the suffocating ways that ethnicity can be tethered to cultural productions, limiting and calcifying how listeners consume them and what their work might encompass. On the other hand, the belief that music can ever speak for itself is debatable.
Everything from the packaging and marketing of the music/musician to the construction of music genres and the history of intertextual references and beliefs that the listener brings to the music impacts the “pure” experience of listening. Still, when I hear musicians like Liang emphasize individual artistry and the “work, first and foremost,” I place their comments within an understanding of the vexed place that Asian Americans occupy in the musical cultures in which they participate. Elsewhere, I have written about young Asian American singer-songwriters on YouTube who often eschew race as central to their project of music making while mobilizing visibility around its category. In such instances, gestures toward the universalism of their art and an emergent sense of ethnic pride are not mutually exclusive positions (Wang 2015). While the contexts and audiences for whom they make music differ greatly, what emerges for both Liang and these young YouTube musicians is a desire for race and ethnicity not to lead listeners down a singular path that confirms existing conceptions, but to open up new ways of listening, dislodge existing categories, and perhaps, in the process, create more capacious imaginations of what the category “Asian American” might entail.

Conclusion

There is an album by Shanghai Restoration Project that is on constant replay in my household, a compilation of Chinese children’s songs called Little Dragon Tales. I blame my preschooler for this compulsive listening and the delight she finds in familiarity and repetition. It could be worse. Liang notes that that he had in mind “children’s songs that parents could stand listening to again and again” while working on the album and, in fact, made the album to fill a perceived gap in the U.S. market for Chinese children’s songs. “A few years back,” he recalled, “I had a lot of [parent] friends ask me for recommendations for Chinese children’s music and I couldn’t find any that I felt were produced well. But during my search, I rediscovered some songs I had learned as a child and found others that I hadn’t been exposed to but enjoyed. So I decided to make a children’s record of my own.” Liang’s album notwithstanding, my own search for compilations of Chinese children’s songs continues to yield few albums that are not overladen with traditional sounds and cadences, a somewhat surprising fact given the growing interest in China and Chinese language learning among youth in the United States, the latter increasingly seen as imperative in order to compete globally.

In my repeated listening to Little Dragon Tales, I have struggled to puzzle out what makes this album feel distinct from the collections by Starbucks and Putamayo—what makes it feel, in short, like a Chinese American interpretation of these children’s songs. It may be the context I bring to my listening, my understanding of the research Liang conducted into these songs, and his intentions and goals for the project. It may be from watching the video of Yip’s Children’s Choir of Canada (the choral group featured on this album), which provides a glimpse into the process of making the album and the giddiness and exuberant sense of play these children bring to their singing. And it may be in the rawness of the kids’ voices, the imperfections that Liang retains, the vocal improvisations he adds, and the mix of electronica and hip-hop that gives the music an extra layer of familiarity. I have come to the conclusion that the difference lies in the fact that the accretion of these details does not tally up to a whole—the sense that one is entering into another world, that of China or Asia more broadly—but rather, an invitation to listen with the openness and imagination of a child. As my preschooler sings along to the tracks and claps along to the syncopated rhythms, I wonder...
what soundtracks she will inherit about Chineseness, about being Asian American, about the stories she inherits about the United States and China, and whether projects like this can help her listen differently.

Notes
1 For an exploration of cultural strategies adopted by Chinese diasporic groups in the past two decades, see, for instance, Kuehn et al. (eds.), Diasporic Chineseness after the Rise of China (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

2 Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Liang are from interviews conducted with the author, including a phone interview conducted on September 1, 2015 and various email correspondences.

3 For more on Shanghai jazz see Andrew Jones, Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

4 Putamayo is a world music label that had its origins as a clothing company.

5 Here, too, it is useful to turn our attention to how Asian American literary critics engage the problematics of the label “Asian American literature.” For instance, Stephen Sohn reveals the tension between a literary marketplace that “continues to aggressively promote a form of racial authenticity” and Asian American writers who do not feel bound in their fictional worlds to necessarily write about recognizable Asian American characters and experiences. See Stephen Sohn, Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 14.


References


