

An art installation in a minimalist white room with a grey floor. Several large, dark, weathered metal pipes are scattered on the floor. Small, dark, stylized animal figures (possibly bears or dogs) are placed on and around the pipes. In the background, a wall of many small, circular speakers is visible. A tall, thin metal stand with a large, dome-shaped light fixture hangs from the ceiling. To the right, a small table holds a decorative object resembling a candelabra or a musical instrument.

sound
studies

HALF SOUND, HALF PHILOSOPHY

Aesthetics, Politics, and History
of China's Sound Art

Jing Wang

B L O O M S B U R Y

Half Sound, Half Philosophy

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of China's Sound Art

Jing Wang
王婧

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To my grandma (1935.5–2020.7)

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What can a scholar of (post)humanities do in this global crisis of coronavirus? Probably nothing directly and immediately. This pandemic should have been faced with globally joint effort among countries, but the situation now exactly reveals the stubborn and selfish mode of thinking and operation all based on separations. The global pandemic is worsened by our own crisis, that of racial, national, economic, religious, ecological. Therefore, to change modes of perception and thinking is the responsibility of a scholar of (post)humanities. It takes time to make correlation and mutual care the fundamental base of living, sensing, and thinking. It is nonetheless worth working for.

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Introduction

The British biochemist, embryologist, and sinologist Joseph Needham in *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 4: Physics and Physical Technology* (1965), collaborating with Kenneth Robinson, makes a significant yet brief claim about Chinese notions of sound (acoustics), offering that Chinese acoustics is an acoustics of *qi*. This brief claim has been forgotten in histories of modern acoustic technology. Listening back to ancient Greek philosophy, one finds some concepts similar to *qi*—particularly around the notion of the *pneumatic* (air, breath of life, spirit)—which informed medicine in the first century AD. As the historian of medicine Shigehisa Kuriyama discusses, the notion of *pneuma* takes central position in the Hippocratic treatise, including *On Breaths*, *On the Sacred Disease*, *Air, Water, Places* suggesting that *pneuma* flows both outside of the body and inside through the mouth, nose, brains, veins, limbs, and nerves (1999). A fascination with “the pneumatic character of life” is also prevalent in Greek tragedy (Kuriyama, 240). Needham, in fact, applies the figure of the pneumatic in his discussion of *qi* and of ancient Chinese acoustics. In the Western tradition, air eventually becomes an object of scientific study—as in aerobiology, aerodynamics, aeronautics, aerostatics. As modern China developed its science and technology, however, the notion of *qi* continued to be kept apart from acoustics, and was treated instead as a more general philosophy of life in cultural, medicine, ritual, health, and art practices.

My first fieldwork encounter with sound art in China happened in Beijing a few weeks before the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Experimental musicians were hosting concerts at home or in semi-private studios, while clubs and venues were ordered to stay closed. I was fascinated with how grassroots practices of experimental music, noise, improvisation music, and sound art had given rise to a subculture working toward communal and alternative ways of living in post-Mao China, forming a contrast with the dominant form of life shaped by accelerated commercialization, commodification, and individualization. With training in anthropological methods and with a simultaneous interest and participation in Chinese art and music, I became aware of an urgent and anxiety-ridden need among artists to figure out their relation to “sound art”—to identify with or disidentify with this form of aesthetic practice. With them, I wanted, using Chinese materials, to expand the notion of *sound* itself.

These two concerns—retrieving an understanding of ancient Chinese acoustics as the acoustics of *qi* and asking how sound as a creative medium registers in China's contemporary art and music practices—motivated me to conceive this book project.

Dajuin Yao, curator, artist and professor of sound art at China Academy of Art, argues that one of the most distinctive characteristics of sound art practice in China is its engagement with Chinese social media platforms, formats that have subtly taught the society how to listen (2019, 651–2). Without negating the category of “sound art,” Yao nonetheless downplays it, and suggests that we hear China's contemporary sound art as part of “Chinese auditory culture” and as “an extension of one of the oldest and most important heritages in world auditory culture” (2019, 652). Yan Jun, the poet, musician, and independent curator of experimental music, expresses a more casual but radical attitude, calling China's experimental music “loser-music” (Yan 2017). In recent two experimental music and sound art compilations Yan Jun curated—*There Is No Music From China* (2017) (cocurated with the musician and event organizer Zhu Wenbo) and *Music Will Ruin Everything* (2020)—a humorous negation of categorical identities of the national and the musical can be clearly felt from both their titles and from the strange, bold, and hard-to-categorize music tracks.

I have found both Yao and Yan's insights and attitudes about the value and development of China's sound art and experimental music inspiring. However, in this book project, I want to listen beyond such existing evaluations and beyond already-charted territories. In what follows, I return to contemporary Chinese visual art from the 1980s (Chapter 2), to electronic music, which was introduced as a target of critique in the 1950s, to electronic instrument building fever in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and to the origins of both academic and nonacademic electronic and experimental music activities (Chapter 3). This expansive tracing of sound in the arts meets with another goal of this book, to understand sound and its artistic practice through notions of resonance (Chapter 1), *shanshui* (mountains-waters) (Chapter 4), *huanghu* (elusiveness and evasiveness) (Chapter 5), and diffusive politics and immanent control (Chapter 6), all of which I take to be informed by a classical philosophy of *qi* (Chapter 1). I turn back to deep history to learn about the meaning and function of sound and listening in ancient China, particularly to understand how a scholar such as Needham would arrive at the statement that “Chinese acoustics is acoustics of *qi*.” Curiously, *qi*-philosophy, while underlying current sound practices in China, may be heard as in dialogue with contemporary cybernetic theory, providing insights into today's life world that is increasingly shaped by ambient technology, ambient marketing, and ambient governance, in which sound proves to be a long-used tool of manipulation and control.

The title of this book, *Half Sound, Half Philosophy*, came to me when I was trying to find a way to synthesize the two seemingly

incompatible goals of the book: taking account of the recent history of sound practiced in the arts in China, and understanding sound practices through the philosophy and cosmology of *qi*. The book might easily have opened up into two book projects. But to let either one stand on its own seemed incomplete to me. Without a database of *practices* (sound art), it would be empty to talk about *concepts* (*qi*). Without identifying hidden philosophical lineages, practices by Chinese artists would have to be filtered through theoretical frameworks derived more from sociocultural-intellectual milieus of the global North. I have no intention of denying any theoretical frameworks, but I feel the need to give voice to a philosophy and cosmology that has too often remained unheard in the analysis of sound art in China.

So, as I wrote this book, I thought: why not let the two coexist? The idea was to let each exist in the other even as they operate as two independent polarities, as in *qi*-philosophy. The relation between practice and thinking should be the relation of what the Chinese painter Shi Tao (1642–1707) calls *huwei tuotai*, that is, mutual birth, mutual resourcing, or *coenfantement*.

The split suggested by my title also hopes to capture the nature of sound art and experimental music practices at large. Sound art and experimental music practices as known today originate from expanding the conceptualization of music and visual art. The English terms “sound art” and “experimental music” are not simply names for art practices; they carry baggages of philosophy, history, ethics, and politics, and names of notable artists. These baggages would not easily contextualize practices in non-English speaking cultures. The development of acoustic technology, I urge, is often tightly related to its cultural cosmology, epistemology, ontology, and ethics.

Qi-Philosophy

Is there philosophy in China? The Chinese philosopher Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) opens his book *Characteristics of Chinese Philosophy* (牟宗三 2007) with this question. The book is comprised of a collection of twelve lectures Mou gave at Hong Kong University with a focus on Confucianism. From the beginning, Mou makes it clear that there is no philosophy in China that answers to the precise definition developed out of ancient Greek sources, but that it would be ignorant and narrow-minded to therefore say that there is no philosophy in China. For Mou, philosophy is an intellectual and conceptual reflection on activities related to human nature. Every cultural system has its own philosophy, without which a culture will not take form. For Mou, Western philosophy can be seen as knowledge-centered and as a game of rationality. Chinese philosophy or Eastern philosophy at large is life-centered. Despite varied versions of

academic accounts of the history of Chinese philosophy, this observation is shared.

Works by contemporary Chinese scholars including Mou Zongsan, Feng Youlan (1895–1990), Zhang Dainian (1909–2004), Li Zehou (1930–), Ying-shih Yu (1930–), and most recently the young philosopher of technology Yuk Hui, as well as sinologists Francios Jullien (1951–) and Benjamin I. Schwartz (1916–1999), have been my major guides in beginning to understand the rich and complex history of Chinese philosophical thinking. Yuk Hui’s most recent project in developing a Chinese “cosmotechnics” that develops from both Western and Eastern thinkers is inspiring. Drawing from Heidegger, Simondon, and Steigeler’s works, Hui points out that current technological convergence and synchronization has resulted in a homogeneity in technology. Only through what he calls cosmotechnical thinking—unifying the cosmic order and moral order through technical activities—can anthropocentrism be overcome and can we save ourselves from the risk that modernization has delivered to the world (Hui 2016). Although my project is far from a purely philosophical one, I share a similar concern and aspiration with Hui by turning back to ancient Chinese acoustic thinking to find solutions—and new questions—for the status quo of the contemporary.

Qi plays a pivotal role in the classical holistic and organic Chinese worldview (Ames and Hall 2001; Cheng 1987; Kim 2015). As Joseph Needham points out, just as form and matter dominated European thought from the age of Aristotle onwards, the notion of *qi* has molded Chinese thinking from the earliest times (Needham 1965, 133). In ancient China, *qi* was considered both the vital source breath for life and the driving force in the cosmic world. *Qi* was used to describe the human body as used in *qi*-blood, explaining how the human is a part of the resonant cosmic cycle, forming into a union with the heaven and earth. The notion of *qi* refers to the ceaseless fluctuation, interpenetration, and transformation of *yin-qi* and *yang-qi*. Through different historical periods, *qi*, from a vague idea, was developed into a cosmological, aesthetic, social, medical, moral concept, and eventually a philosophical system, reaching its maturity in the Song Dynasty.

It is very easy to think of *qi* materialistically today. The visuals of steam, gas, or fog easily reduce *qi* to simply a material force, blocking the possibility of thinking of it as a movement, a process, or an experience. However, as heavily influenced by *Yijing* (*The Book of Change*, allegedly created by Fu Xi, a legendary hero in Chinese mythology), the Song Dynasty scholar Zhang Zai (1020–1077), known as the philosopher of *qi*, defines *qi* as change, mutation, propensity, and transformation. As Zhang Zai writes, *gui-shen* (literally translated as ghosts-spirits, also means movements of contraction and expansion) is the intuitive and intrinsic nature of *qi* (鬼神, 二气之良能). The contraction of *qi* is *yin* and hence *gui* (return); the expansion of *qi* is *yang* and hence *shen* (outstretch). For ancient Chinese from Han Dynasty, as Ying-shih Yu explains (1987), the soul consists of two kinds, the *hun*-soul

(魂) and the *po*-soul (魄). *Hun* is seen as the arising *qi*, light and ethereal; *po* is the descending *qi*, connected to the flesh and heavy. Life is not being but condensation of *qi*. Death is not nonbeing but dispersion of *qi*. When one dies, the *hun-qi* ascends quickly and hence there were ancient rituals of *hun*-soul summoning in which the summoner calls aloud, “O! Thou so-and-so, come back!” (Yu 1987, 365).

As one of the essential concepts in Zhang Zai’s *qi*-philosophy, *gui-shen* not only suggests the ceaselessly mutating and transformative nature of *qi* but also emphasizes the virtue and the sensation of reverence in *qi*-philosophy. That is, one should always have reverence for transformation, mutation, and resonance of nature and the myriad things (including humans). Following Zhang Zai’s *qi*-philosophy, the neo-Confucian scholar Tang Junyi (or Tang Chün-I) (1909–1978) argues that *qi* is not a matter or spirit, but is rather a becoming. “An existential process, within which there is the mutation of forms, or as an existence within which there is the process of the mutation of forms” (121). Zhang Zai uses the perspective of *qi* to interpret the cosmos and human experience. Instead of using words like being and nonbeing, existence or nonexistence, Zhang Zai’s *qi*-philosophy favors another set of vocabularies, condensation and dissolution, coming to be and passing away, moving and resting, contraction and expansion, ascending and descending.

Mostly uniquely, *qi*-philosophy, as well as *qi*-cosmology, highlights a sixth sense—resonance (感)—beyond but also underlying the five senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch, a notion essential to *Yijing* (*The Book of Change*). Yuk Hui calls resonance a “moral sentiment” and “a moral obligation” that “emerges from the resonance between the Heaven and the human” (27). Based on the Confucian scholar Jung-Yeup Kim’s interpretation of Zhang Zai, it is one primary goal of Zhang Zai to realize in the cosmos and the myriad things the capacity for resonance, which is often veiled or hidden. This capacity for resonance is creativity. As Zhang Zai writes, that which interpenetrates through resonance (感) is creativity (诚) (感而通诚也). Resonance as a transformative interaction among polarities of *qi* leads to the great harmony, which further produces and sustains life vitality.

Qi-philosophy suggests an organic, holistic, and enchanted worldview that the cosmos and the myriad things (including humans) are a correlated organism that are constantly resonating, condensing, disintegrating, and forming unity with one another. It is an enchanted worldview that holds a reverence for transformations, mutations, and resonance.

Sound as *Qi*

Zhang Zai (1020–1077) describes sound as a result of *qi* riding each other. Song Yingxing (1587–1666), a Chinese scientist and encyclopedist during the late Ming Dynasty, extends Zhang Zai’s statement and adds that sound

is *qi* disturbed in a certain way. Song stresses that to make sounds, *qi* has to possess *shi* (the advantage of position of force). Considering Zhang Zai and Song Yingxing's interpretations of sound through *qi*, together with Needham's discussion of ancient Chinese acoustic technology, the relation between sound and *qi* in ancient China can be summarized as: (1) sound is produced by *qi*; (2) sound is a manifestation of *qi*; and (3) acoustic technology is a facilitator of *qi*.

To understand sound through *qi*-philosophy is hence to take the organic and holistic worldview of *qi*. *Qi*-thinking shares similarities with contemporary cybernetics. Norbert Wiener in his book *Cybernetics* in 1948 originally coined the word "cybernetics" drawing from the ancient Greek work *kubernete*, meaning governor and steersman. Both suggest a holistic method, and both can be seen as an art of control. Cybernetic theory inspired the French economist and scholar Jacques Attali to conceive his model of socioeconomic change through a history of noise by placing music/noise relation within the frame of information/energy, suggesting that noise as unformed energy gives rise to new forms of social organization (Attali 1985). Cybernetics also inspired the British musician and artist Brian Eno to invent the genre of ambient music, a music system that generates atmospheric music loops to create a sense of place. *Qi*-philosophy, essentially a life philosophy, intuitively informs Chinese sound art creativities. Experimental music that operates through principles of tacit resonance and strives for the aesthetics of *dan* (quiet and bland) and *you* (inward expandedness) can be understood through *shanshui*-thought, which is informed by *qi*-philosophy and *qi*-cosmology. Praise for strange sounds and shamanism in experimental music and sound art resonates with the mythical dimension of *qi*-philosophy, a mystified spiritual state known as *huanghu* in Daoism, advocating a dissolution of divisions among senses, a withdrawing to the background, into the realm of non-distinction, seeking life forces in the dark and dim, the impure and afterlife.

Qi-philosophy circumvents the divide of nature-culture, a division around which Christoph Cox develops a philosophy of sound art that defines sound as an immemorial flux (2018). Drawing from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Deleuze's conception of "flux" and extending Manuel Delanda's realist ontology, Cox suggests that sonic flux, as matter-energy-information, always has a resistance to human interpretation that the natural history of sonic flux precedes its cultural history. Through sonic ontology, Cox suggests that we see the sound artist as someone "who samples from the sonic flux" (an expression Cox borrows from Deleuze) (30).

Cox's philosophy of sonic art is insightful. However, the idea of the temporal precedence of nature over culture, as well as the very image of artists sampling from the flux of becoming remains dissatisfying. The artist and scholar of sound and listening Salomé Voegelin expresses her discomfort in the suggested distance between matter and human in Cox's

sonic materialism, which is informed by new materialism and speculative realism. Voegelin rethinks sonic materialism, through Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Luce Irigaray, as a “sonic-feminine new materialism” that “reads objectivity not as a distance but as responsibility, and develops an embodied materiality that performs an ‘agential realism’ of the world through the ‘diffraction’ and ‘intra-activities’ of listening as a creative engagement in the between-of-things” (Voegelin 2019, 152–76).

The nature/culture divide and the temporal precedence is a highly Western way of thinking. Acknowledging the theoretical rigor of Cox’s sonic materialism, Voegelin’s moral stance informed by sonic feminist materialism, I propose Chinese *qi*-thinking as another way to understand sound and sound art practices. Through *qi*-thinking, myriad things (including humans) are constantly changing and resonating to known and unknown forces. It does not therefore make sense to ask “what it is.” Rather, what is important to ask is “what is its propensity?” or, in other words, to ask “what and how it is going to become.” Different from phenomenological “intertwining” that runs through Voegelin’s philosophy of sound art, *qi*-thinking places things in relation to each other through resonance, an innate capacity of the cosmos and of myriad things, the secret of creativity.

I am not proposing *qi*-philosophy as an alternative theory, because the very term *theory* must be questioned. Theories encapsulate, abstract, and generalize phenomena, while *qi*-thinking suggests, hints, and insinuates. Theories are related to truth, while *qi*-thinking is eventually about living a life.

This book consists of six chapters. The first chapter is a preliminary attempt to investigate sound through the philosophy of *qi*. It can be read first or the last. The second and third chapters are historical accounts of the use of sound in contemporary Chinese art practices and in electronic, experimental music. The remaining chapters, four, five and six, can be read as thematic analysis of China’s contemporary sound art practices. In these three chapters, I reinterpret various sound practices through notions informed by *qi*-philosophy, under three themes, *shangshui*, *huanghu*, and immanent control.

Chapter 1, “Sound, Resonance, and the Philosophy of *Qi*,” recontextualizes sound studies in a different worldview, that of *qi*, which emphasizes correlationality, resonance, process, and transformation. As difficult as it is to grasp the complex and diverse definitions of *qi*, I begin with a close reading of Joseph Needham’s discussion in ancient Chinese acoustics, focusing particularly on sound and *qi*. I then trace translations of the term *qi* in different languages and follow its development from a vague idea in prehistorical China to a cosmological, aesthetic, social, medical, and moral concept in ancient and imperial China and to a philosophical system in Song Dynasty. According to Zhang Zai’s philosophy of *qi*, sound is a result of and a manifestation of resonating *qi*. It is one of the primary goals of

qi-philosophy to unveil the capacity of resonance among things to enhance creativity and at the same time to restore reverence for transformation, mutation, and resonance.

Chapter 2, “A Brief History of Sound in China’s Contemporary Art,” goes back to the initial stage of the development of China’s contemporary art in mid-1980s and discusses how sound already by then played a role in art making. Inspired by Bill Viola’s observation that like sound, video evolves out of the electromagnetic and hence video art bears a closer relation to audio art than to film and photography, I reexamine earlier video art for its acoustic mechanism and make evident the essential role sound has played in earlier video artworks. The year 2000 marked the origin of recognizing sound as a unique art medium in mainland China through two consecutive exhibitions *Sound* (2000) and *Sound 2* (2001). Through an analysis of sound art works by categories—sound installations, sound in performance-oriented conceptual art, sound objects/machines, public sound art, and sound and net art—developed after 2000, this chapter unveils the rich creative field of China’s sound art practices.

Chapter 3, “A Brief History of Electronic and Experimental Music in China,” traces developments of electronic instrument building, academic electronic music, and grassroots experimental music practices. Each of the three has its own distinct resources, agendas, leading figures, and ethical-aesthetic preferences. Instead of seeking a unification, I endorse keeping “a sonorous archipelago” to borrow Francois J. Bonnet’s expression, to allow highly creative and original collectives (both unprofessional and professional) to have a chance to develop following their own desires and standards in music making.

Chapter 4, “Shanshui-thought in Experimental Music Practices,” discusses how 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 *qi*-philosophy known as *shanshui*-thought, which conceives 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 objective knowing. *Shanshui*-thought enables us to recognize 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.

Chapter 5, “*In Praise of Strange Sounds of the Shamanistic*,” is inspired by the increasingly shamanistic reference and mysticism in contemporary new music practice, sound art, and experimental music. Drawing from China’s own shamanic cultural past, I identify two tendencies in mystical sound artists and musicians, taking works by Tan Dun, Xu Cheng, Wang Fan, Lin Chi-Wei, and Sheng Jie as examples. One treats the shamanistic as a cultural gene and plays the role of cultural inheritor; the other continues

a particular aesthetic sensibility shared with the shamanistic known as *huanghu* in ancient Daoism and presents a particular resonance with the old, deserted, and noisy.

The last chapter, “Ubiquitous Control: From Cosmic Bell, Loudspeakers to Immanent Humming,” attends to diffusive forms of control that are prevalent in today’s political, economic, and technological regimes. How do we negotiate with what has already been shaping, changing, and synchronizing us, like the data cloud and our humming acoustic infrastructure? Sound works by Zhang Peili, Zhang Ding, and Liu Chuang seek to detect, repurpose, exaggerate, and speculate on the increasingly cloud-like, atmospheric, and ubiquitous form of power and violence in everyday life. As “weapons of the weak” to borrow James C. Scott’s expression, these artworks embody a holistic worldview of *qi* or a cybernetic brain, suggesting artistic ways of exercising the power of anti-control and of acquiring the quality of anti-monumentality.

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Breathing is the simplest manifestation of the fact that we are composed of *qi*, the original creative potency accessible to myriad things in forms of resonance. *Qi*-thinking is in a way prevalent in other cultures, in science, arts, philosophies, and even politics. However, identifying *qi* as a global component in all thinking and cultural practices is different from claiming its global universality.

I am pushing for a reinterpretation of sound and listening through a philosophy of *qi* and at the same time confirming that no philosophical system is universally applicable, including *qi*-philosophy. Any philosophical system needs to work with a set of concepts and within particular historical and cultural contexts. It is to follow the anthropologist Stefan Helmreich’s insight in his study of sound, life, and water, remembering that we should not fall into the trap as if we are offering “the final, most meaningful account of the biological world” or “the final answer to what sound and life really are” (2015, xix).

I like how François Jullien describes a scholar’s work as a gardener taking care of her own garden, checking how a plant of concept grows, fixing it now and then and observing what kind of function it serves or stops to serve. It is with this kind of caution, care, and responsibility that I begin with *Half Sound, Half Philosophy*.