

NO MORE "THE OTHER SHORE" :

IN CONVERSATION WITH YAN JUN

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Visitors to mainland China often marvel at how entire cities seem to have sprung up overnight, as if the clusters of tower blocks and highway overpasses had been constructed wholly from inflatable materials. Almost as impressive is the rate at which China's sonic avant-garde has expanded, starting from almost nothing to become, at present, a scene that has produced some internationally recognized innovators. Its history stretches back to 1996, with the release of the first CD by an 'extra-institutional' artist ("The Grand Rules" by Wang Fan.) Li Chin Sung, a.k.a. Dickson Dee, had the honor of releasing the first internationally distributed CD in that same year, with some help from an organization that had already been deeply involved in the margins of East Asian culture (John Zorn and his then-new Tzadik imprint.) The researcher Jeroen de Kloet also identifies this year as the first in which bona fide underground music performances took place, beginning with a live evening drawing on the talents of NO, Zi Yue and The Fly.¹

Soon after, the independent rock magazine *Sub Jam*, helmed by the intensely prolific Yan Jun, exploded into an ambitious multi-media enterprise comprising music, film and an eclectic variety of text-based output. Yan Jun would gradually steer into less widely explored waters by co-founding the label Kwanyin in the new millenium: this accompanied his own voyage into the realm of electronic-based composition in general, and in particular an investigation into the not irreconcilable of realms of expansive noise and isolated, persistent tones. It was a confidently radical enterprise that paralleled the curatorial and musical efforts of Dajuin Yao (whose assembly of the 2003 Sounding Beijing Festival was another defining moment for, as he called it, "post concrete" electronic music in China), and which showed a happy indifference to courting the "largest audience possible" - to the point of initiating a "living room tour" in 2011 that would, yes, take place completely in private residences. All the while, both Yan and Sub Jam maintained an aesthetic sensibility that did not sacrifice elegance for authenticity.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting Yan during an all-too-brief studio residency at Stockholm's [EMS](#) [Elektronmusikstudion]. While having several meetings over strong coffee in the public lounge area, I was not only relieved to find out that his work was not being disrupted by the apocalyptic volume levels I was achieving in the studio room next to his, but I became gradually more interested in his well-considered approach to sound as a

distillation of all creative experience. A product of the so-called "*dakou* generation" that discovered Western music styles through the staggering number of *dakou* or 'cut-out' albums imported into China, he has a thorough knowledge of music and sound that should not be surprising - yet this knowledge feeds into a deeper philosophical inquiry that makes him something more than an unreflective collector or archive hobbyist. Like many of his multi-disciplinary colleagues operating in the sound arts world, his dual immersion into sound and language causes each to stealthily feed into the other, giving his writing the fluid feel of musical improvisations and his live audio performances a 'conversational' tone even in the absence of verbal information. With little more than keening electronic feedback modulated by the movements of himself and members of his intimate audience (an event I personally witnessed at his September 2014 performance in Stockholm's [Fylkingen](#) venue), he aims at expanding the perceptual experience of reality. As my talks with him made clear, he considers this something very different from providing a temporary refuge from that reality.

All told, his output is too far-ranging to be categorized, but its intentions can maybe be summarized with one of the composer's own wishes, as taken from one of his publications:

Please don't listen to music on your laptop speakers.

Please don't click "I'm interested in" on Douban.

Please turn off your cel phone at the concert.

Please buy a CD to support yourself instead of the artist.

This is an important theme running through Yan Jun's short essays, and animating his sound work: that of denying the "passivity" of the listener, and challenging listeners to not settle for "just enough" either in their interactions with artists or in their interpretation of sound quality itself. Though he is certainly cognizant of the Chinese state's ability to cut off experimental activities with no explanation or advance warning (something recently seen at the complete [shutdown of the Beijing Independent Film Festival](#)), he has for now put aside political agitation in favor of a more fundamental struggle against the limited role that music audiences resign themselves to. I began my Q + A of Yan on this note.

I suppose my first question is, how did the "Only Authentic Work..." text [a 2013 book released as a collaboration with sound artist Lionel Marchetti] first come about? Do you remember the initial inspiration for it?

This sentence came exactly from my Weibo [Chinese micro-blogging] account. I mentioned this in the book. Once I talked about the relationship between artist and audience on Weibo. I said the audience should know that it's not he/she supporting artist (buying tickets and cds, etc.) but the artist is supporting him/her. My friend H got angry as he thought I was insulting the audience. After this, I tried to extend the idea in a lecture (also mentioned in the book). And then this writing. The inspiration or the background was this: I was tired about the situation of music as a 'service' and audiences as consumer. I was conceiving of a situation in which audiences actively use, play, improve the music event and make it alive. This itself is not only about money and drinking together, but about creating (ritual, authentic work, etc.) together. I was [originally] planning to write an article to introduce Lionel's music. But when I started, I decided to go freely with all I was thinking at that time. Of course, H hates this book as well, after all...

With this in mind - do you feel like you are a 'minority' in China's music and art scene, when it comes to this type of thinking that you mention? From what you write in the book, it seems like there are at least a few allies to your way of thinking, despite this disagreement you just touched upon. For example, I'm interested in the activity of Lao Yang, who you mention early in the book - what's your personal connection to him?

I was too well known as a rock critic some years ago. At that time, I organized a lot of events and was/am working with almost everybody here. I have to say, I have many friends. Most of the musicians don't like thinking or exchanging minds here. I guess they don't care what I'm thinking.

But thinking, itself, is 'minority'. I never see/hear any comment about this book in China except my friend H, who is offended by it. That happened after Waterland Kwanyin, the event I organized with friends, a warm community or a family. You can see a.pdf about that in the archives section of subjam.org. It was a utopian [experience]. And if any Utopia

should fail, then we are able to face the truth, which is cold. And I think my lovely friends don't enjoy hell as I do. This makes us go different ways. Lao Yang is my good friend...we know each other for 10 years, and he always supports me. But he was a follower of [Ai Weiwei](#) who I really dislike, haha. I don't agree with Lao Yang's sense of social responsibility. I don't enjoy free jazz and psychedelic rock which most of my colleagues in Beijing enjoy, haha. I made myself 'no group' to stay.

I want to talk a bit more about minority [status] and thinking... intuition and thinking are not separated in tradition. No such separation of body and soul etc...but there is, strangely, a trend that takes intuition / body / honesty as a weapon against professional / thinking / rationality [in China]. It's rather nostalgic: to resist the rapidly unfolding modernity. When I talked about truth and reality, I was actually criticized as not honest, not real. This is similar to someone being criticized as 'not professional' in Western culture, maybe...very interesting.

Just out of curiosity, what is your criticism of Ai Weiwei? As you probably know, he's very much respected by Western art critics as the vanguard of 'free speech' and so on, but I'm curious what the local attitude is to his work. It's also interesting what you say about your differences of music taste with Lao Yang. Do you think this change in taste represents a new skepticism about the social and spiritual promises of psychedelic music, or is it simply a matter of younger people being "bored" with that culture?

There's too much to say about Ai...in short, he is a very smart businessman. And maybe a businessman with consciousness. But free speech? No way. He will kick your ass if you say anything not good about him. He is another version of Mao: similar sexy and strong personality, poetic, realistically using resources, huge, empire-like...the notion of justice [that he deals with] makes people high. The answer of black and white makes people feel safe. He's selling this as drug. How does bad art lead to bad politics? Just look at him.

About psychedelic music, I have to say it's also a drug from yesterday for today's people. I like 'dry' sound. I like to discover the reality (of course in some senses there is no reality). No more "the other shore". The hippies have died. But there are fake hippies still selling service to consumers, to stop people from going ahead into reality.

I drink a lot - I have enough fun with alcohol. So I don't need to be drunk with music. I prefer waking up with it. Everywhere in today's world, there are many family-like music communities serving people tons of beer and friendship with drunken music. Sometimes I want to cry as these lovely people are just despairingly running to an illusion of yesterday or the other shore. The hippies died twice: now they are dying again as opium, the gift from the system. The heroes and legendary figures are the biggest enemies of people. Same thing with the sounds. Dry sounds are equally potentially to be triggered into listening. The psychedelic sounds are priorly taken over our initiative.

*When you mention 'dry' sounds, I feel like you mean both sounds that are not modified with additional studio effects, as well as something like Pierre Schaeffer's acousmatic sounds - is this correct? And reality is also a tricky term, as you suggest above...since you use terms like 'authentic' in your work, I feel like you are definitely concerned with ***reflecting*** reality and using sound as an investigative tool for separating truth from falsehood. Yet I feel that the sound work you do may have one point in common with psychedelic music; since both these styles have the potential to expand people's idea of what "reality" is, therefore allowing them to change that reality.*

Regarding dry sound, yes, the acousmatic [influence] is important. But of course Schaeffer has his radical ideal which is purely acoustic phenomena, which he's able to pursue within a modern cultural frame. And, actually, the acousmatic music is never just as dry as noise. We do make too many aesthetic requests of it. I wonder how it developed from art of sound to music?

When I say 'dry sound,' I have a context of underground music rather than electroacoustic music. After the development of effect pedals and subwoofers, we are more powerful than before. Not to mention laptops. And the cultural politics. With the distortion pedal noise became easier. With the delay pedal, psychedelic music became easier. But the early psychedelic music was clearer than today's. It was more about playing by hand, one stroke after the other. [And] it was not just about sound, but the relationship between the musician and the sound. I am concerned with this space between sounds, including the very tiny

spaces between the tiny granules of sound. There are possibilities in these spaces. Some other sound, other event - environmental sound for example.

It's ironic for me. I have some works which are very psychedelic in a way: continual, repeated, overwhelming... yes, to bring listeners go in to another reality. There is no permanent authentic work, nor [permanent] reality. If a sound tells us nothing is true, it must be a lovely sound (Alvin Lucier covered the Beatles' song Nothing is Real [Yan means here "Strawberry Fields Forever" - ed.] with a tape recorder. That was lovely! And I don't say that a piano sound is fake and noise is real. Same thing with the psychedelic sound - I talk of it in a conditional way.

Even though artists here are disdained by people who believe professional success is the key to reality, it seems that the arts communities in this country also make the quest for authenticity into a kind of perpetual competition. Too often, it is just the inversion of the "authenticity" of the career-oriented society: the goal becomes to suffer as much as possible in order to attain authenticity, rather than to have as many professional successes as possible. What do you notice in China now - are there any other individuals or groups who view authenticity as something different than extreme success or extreme suffering?

Yes, there is nothing more real than the here and now. Artists always believe that the material-reality is fake...this leads to dualism. I believe in materialism, but for me, for instance, Buddhism is very materialism. If this one reality is illusion, then we should just change a way of observing it, instead of going to the other shore. My understanding of Buddhism is that the other shore is just another understanding of "here".

My old friends are always talking about honesty and realness. More about "heart": to face yourself deeply, to be honest to yourself. Don't be professional. Don't work. Don't be consumed. Don't betray your instinct... this voice is rare in today's Chinese society, but still strong in experimental / improvised music scene. Do you think this is a kind of common sense of underground culture? I think I'm a betrayer of this voice, as I'm asking for concerts to start sharp and challenging the moral limit of honesty. Yes, I try to be honest to myself. But it's difficult if I want to build a relationship with the system. Someone said the best way to fight with capitalism is to be useless. So I'm much too useful, and not pure.

This country is going into its twisted modernity. Some people are trying to fit into the new world. Some are against it. Many are trying to forget their confusion. I'm one of these who are lost, so if you ask me the situation I have to say I'm curious too.

I do think there is a kind of "anti-utilitarian" movement in underground culture. But I think this "anti-stance is, really, just another kind of usefulness. Similar to what you say about Buddhism, it is not a rejection of doing anything useful whatsoever, but simply a side effect of perceiving material reality differently. So usefulness is no longer defined as contributing to, say, techno-scientific progress or the efficiency of markets...but one can still be useful to a different set of forces. Do you agree?

I agree partly about this usefulness. The underground was also built by people who do a lot. That's a form of punk rock: to fight. But there is also another tradition concerned with really doing nothing. Maybe Lao Tse was a great source contributing to this. But also, when people face modern culture, they might naturally choose to be nothing and nobody and even not exist (if possible). More radically, to die young or to live with alcohol. I'm not sure if this is correct since i haven't really done any research.

But I had this feeling 10 years ago when the underground rock scene ended in China. Almost all of my old friends quit or took a break. Some had totally quit music. I thought this was a great suicide; a refusal to join the new world order. Of course there were many direct reasons - for instance, most of their music was not interesting (and not good quality) for new audiences or for themselves. But deeply, to be a loser is always a nice means of reacting to the successful new world. Some people are [just] being a loser with their art, some with their life.

I'm also curious about your attitudes towards online social networking. It seems that the desire to be publicly recognized for one's work is greater than ever before...or at least the anxiety about public recognition is greater than ever. I'm fascinated by those individuals who refuse to accept this new dual role as "public relations agent" and "artist" - many of the most famous innovators in Techno culture still have no 'Facebook' profile or public website. And the great irony is that many of those same people have, or had, very extensive networks

of collaborators and loyal friends. So I wonder what the attitude of you, and maybe your local 'scene' is, towards this? Are those people who resist 'social networking' and self-promotion truly "anti-social"?

This question is really sharp. I use Facebook a bit. I run a small magazine on Wechat. I do blog sometimes ([but] each time i delete the previous blog once I write a new one). More musicians use Douban here...it's like Facebook pages for artists, but also for everyone - especially young people - who likes films, book and music. I have my own site, so I don't use it. But then i have to use other means to promote events, such as Wechat and email.

The internet is very important here. It was very difficult to find information 10 years ago, and it brought a kind of free information and wider communication. One of the results is that many young people, including musicians, don't have a CD player or speakers. As an organizer i have to use Wechat (or any others) and email. As an artist I don't. I'm not lucky enough (or strong enough) to be only an artist. Wittgenstein said, after been refused by many publishing houses, that his duty is writing a book instead of publishing by himself. But the situation here is that you have to be your own history and background of that writing: not just publishing, but everything else. I'm trying. The most important thing about social media is community, both internationally and locally...and physically...sound is physical vibration. Wechat is stupid, as many things I have to deal with. Like the air. But maybe I can get cancer from the polluted air. It's possible.

In your "The Only Authentic Work," one of the most striking parts to me is your discussion about the anarchic nature of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, particularly Ji Kang (who was of course a musician as well as a Daoist philosopher.) I was especially struck by how you compare Ji Kang's attitude (as you have quoted it "the Dao is like the blue sky...the reality is a piece of shit") to the work of modern artists who separate meaning from their creative process. This continuity between 3rd century and 21st century attitudes makes me think that artists working in your fields ("noise," psycho-acoustic music, etc.) are not really so concerned about being the "cutting edge" or the vanguard of the future; that they care more about preserving certain timeless qualities. What do you think about this?

Me, for instance, my talent is very normal. But I think it's fine. Noise means any sound can be listened to, or "all sounds equal". To make noise means to believe (and makes people believe) this. Before I heard noise and sound art, I had no idea about that possibility.

Several avant-garde movements were all backward in a way of making their time timeless (while they deal with reality and [moving] forward to a new reality/society). Cyberpunk is another instance: drugs and technology, experimenting on the body as wizards did. But there is always a danger that one will go on the 'new age' way. If we take noise as another kind of religion, I think, why we don't just accept the existing religion? And it's not that easy to say "The Method Is Science, The Aim Is Religion" (an article title of [Zbigniew Karkowski's](#).) There are always fields of different societies/times to stand on. We need go deep into method as well, whether we mean that as a computer or philosophy term.



Originally submitted to *Perfect Sound Forever*, 2014

¹ Jeroen de Kloet, *China With A Cut: Globalization, Urban Youth and Popular Music*, p. 43. University of Amsterdam Press, Amsterdam, 2010.