Audiencing in China: Foreign Rock Musicians' Perceptions of Difference and Sameness

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This article reports on perceptions of audiencing *– the active roles of witnessing and validating involving physical expressivity – raised by a selection of foreign musicians in relation to their experiences of performing rock and related genres in China. It highlights the connections between embodied dimensions of face-to-face musical experiences and the lenses of national* difference *and* sameness *bound up in debates over the colonial implications of "intercultural" musical encounters.*

Keywords

audiencing, interculturality, rock, difference, sameness, China, Wuhan

Statements and Declarations

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Introduction

In October 2014, I attended a performance by British jazz clarinetist Arun Ghosh in Wuhan in central China. Ghosh was in the middle of a residency in the city in association with the British Council and other UK cultural organizations, self-consciously framing the occasion as one of international collaboration and exchange. One number he performed, with a band of Wuhan-based Chinese musicians, was inspired by the persistent heavy rain he had encountered during his stay. It combined references to his Indian background (calling on the Hindustani monsoon *raga* Megh) with allusions to the industrial heritage Wuhan shares with its UK twin and Ghosh's hometown, Manchester (Jonze). But there were other dimensions to

the evening's culture-crossing themes; they were on my mind especially as I began to get a feel for the makeup and behavior of the audience that I was part of. Most of the few dozen people there had probably encountered this free outdoor gig serendipitously as they moved around middle-class shopping and leisure facilities in the area. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the outward response to the music felt polite but largely muted, consisting mainly of modest applause at the end of numbers. After a while, though, my attention was drawn to a couple of small groups of white twenty-somethings in the crowd. I guessed they were students or teachers who had come relatively recently to Wuhan from North America, Europe, or Australasia. They stood out to me against the majority, who were likely Wuhan natives or long-term residents originally from elsewhere in China. The demographic minority group were also outliers in certain outward elements of how they participated. One cluster was dressed up for a night out and apparently getting into a party mood; they moved to the very front, dancing, cheering, and whooping, and they responded much more ostentatiously than anyone else to Ghosh's playing and his spoken interactions with the audience, which were translated into Chinese by a bandmate. I felt comforted by their active fulfilment of what I loosely sensed to be the audience's shared obligation of feeding back energy to these highly committed musicians, but the contrast with the mainly still and quiet majority was striking.

I found it uncanny how outward differences within this small gathering of people seemed to correlate with the personal backgrounds of those present (at least as I extrapolated things from appearances) – members of the foreign minority apparently quite distinct in how they made their participation visible and audible. What's more, it was along lines consistent with stereotypes concerning the relative degrees of individual "expressiveness" in public behavior apparently typical of people from Chinese versus Western societies (Sun). Could I really be participating in an encapsulation of such shibboleths this evening? Inspired by thoughts of this kind occurring to me in the moment of Ghosh's performance – but taking the

opportunity to critically examine their lineages and implications – behind this article is my interest in how audience behavior in certain musical situations may be perceived through a lens of national context. I follow up on my observations at the gig by presenting thoughts about audience activity in China expressed by a selection of foreign musicians who play in venues geared towards youth-orientated genres – like Ghosh, internationally mobile acts with performances in Wuhan (and elsewhere in China) forming part of experience in various territories. To what extent do these musicians share my instinctual lens of *difference* in how they reflect on audience behavior they encounter in the country?

I raise, in particular, the notion of "audiencing," which places emphasis on the active roles of witnessing and validating crucial to the performance of musical encounters, highlighting factors such as physicality, expressiveness, and different modes of participating in the shaping of face-to-face situations (Walmsley). And this is set against layered discourses concerning expressive behavior (especially in larger group contexts) as a factor in the negotiation of national (or other) characteristics. My aim is to bring reflection on these embodied interactive dimensions into current debates about the colonial legacies shaping "intercultural" encounters, discussions that are more commonly geared towards cultural policies and institutions, mediatized forms, and artists and their texts. I explore how the very processes by which people interact in musical experiences with a self-consciously intercultural element – and specifically how this is rationalized by some of the participants – constitute an overlooked territory on which various implications of the ideas of *difference* and *sameness* play out. If meaning in communicative phenomena like music is not simply something that flows out to audiences in the form of texts and discourses but is constructed holistically through various forms of agency, then it would seem essential to bring these other dimensions of musical experience into the debates.

Reflecting on *Difference* and *Sameness*

As I later looked back on Ghosh's gig, critical thoughts disrupted my in-the-moment intuitions. Most acutely, I noted (hastily engaging my training in ethnomusicology, a field built on in-depth ethnographic engagement with people in musical situations) that I knew far too little about the particularities of the occasion, and of the small "sample" of individuals involved, to be generalizing about the audiencing characteristics of different groups. Perhaps nationality was a red herring and the differences I observed in behaviors were better explained by contingencies of tonight's show – the possibility that, for instance, the foreigners were among the only dedicated fans of Ghosh or excited jazz aficionados here tonight, that they were especially outgoing people, happened to be celebrating that evening, or countless other details. On another level, maybe my initial thoughts were as much artifacts of the inclinations and skills I brought to observing the situation as anything else – what I recognized as pertinent, how I interpreted behavioral cues, and how I used them to categorize what I saw and heard. At the time, I was especially attuned to displays of crowd inattention and reluctance, my attendance at tonight's gig coming in my leisure time while in Wuhan to research a particular kind of street music whose audiences I characterized as treading delicate lines of involvement in a dynamic of material reciprocity with singers (see Horlor, *Chinese Street*). But was I misapplying similar cues in tonight's less familiar scenario? How differently might someone with dissimilar life experiences and inclinations have seen things?

Still more fundamentally, what made me reach for racial phenotypes (as proxy for national background) as pertinent lines on which to establish my primary categorization of the audiencing I observed – above any other possible reference point? Perhaps I was simply rehearsing historically pervasive orientalist discourses insistent upon noting Chinese/Western difference, or even implying cultural hierarchy. Indeed, difference has been a cornerstone for many fields commenting on activity in Chinese societies – from various perspectives on an

"insider/outsider" continuum. To take just one example positioning itself closer to the latter pole, a leading scholar from the field of cross-cultural social psychology notes that China is "perceived by Westerners as different, very different" and that the task has conventionally been taken as discovering how "these differences play themselves out in the psychology of its cultural legatees" (Bond 1-2). But the uncomfortable implications of this default position of difference when reflecting on Ghosh's performance were heightened in my mind most by my own history in China. Seven years earlier, some of my first experiences in the People's Republic had come as I travelled from the UK to work as an English teacher in Wuhan; it is not a great leap to connect the teaching by native English speakers abroad with colonialist dynamics, to interpret them as perpetuations of patterns of encounter between people of European imperial nations and those of their (formally or informally) subjugated outposts over centuries (Martin and Griffiths).

Another argument, though, runs that "self-flagellation" over the lens of difference itself evinces a minimization of the agency of those being "othered," or those *being taught* (Stanley 43-47). Assuming the privilege to essentialize as reserved for the Western or the white, with everyone else destined to be victims of marginalization, is perhaps to frame the whole topic on certain Euro-American terms. In fact, in the English teaching context, the various kinds of stereotyping and denigrating of Westerners perceived among foreign teachers points to a picture in which *occidentalism* may exist alongside *orientalism* (ibid.). By this logic, for debates in Anglophone scholarship to concentrate on Western-centrism problematically dismisses other manifestations of ethnocentrism, including the Sinocentrism said to have dominated Chinese thinking for two thousand years up until the mid-nineteenth century (Yang). The idea of China as culturally central and superior apparently still forms "part of a strong national tradition, exercising a profound and sustained influence on general social attitudes and intellectual thought in modern China" (Yang 5). Indeed, ideas of

"Chinese exceptionalism" writ large in the contemporary People's Republic's guiding principle of pursuing "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Chan 1) appear in (sometimes ironic) paraphrases concerning contemporary cultural matters, not least reflections on "fan culture with Chinese characteristics" (B. Wang), the construction of "world class musical institutions with Chinese characteristics" (Borel), or even "ethnomusicology with Chinese characteristics" (Yang).

But the European-heritage and Chinese versions of ethnocentrism lying behind the lens of difference are very much intertwined. Contemporary Chinese attitudes are said to arise from a complex mix of the pre-nineteenth-century ideas of centrality and a later sense of political subordinacy to European imperialism and to related cultural hegemonies. As ethnomusicologist Yang Mu puts it,

> Chinese intellectuals have been influenced by the Eurocentric and Western colonialist view of China as a colony, and as an "other" to be studied rather than as one that might study others. In combination, the seemingly conflicting attitudes of Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism form a complex paradox; yet they are just two sides of the same coin of ethnocentrism. (Yang 5)

This interrelationship is particularly well documented with reference to the twentieth century May Fourth Movement's goals of "developing" Chinese music according to Western classical models – stylistic features, "scientific" principles of organization, systems of training, and so on (Lau). But there are also suggestions that looking to China played important roles in the construction of Western European classical music's self-image too (Irvine). Indeed, any sense that this is a binary and unidirectional matter is complicated further by considering internal Chinese cultural-group relations – the suggestion, for example, that the self-conscious "modernity" of Han Chinese elite musical culture is *founded* on its complex relationship with the nation's minority ethnic peoples (Bovingdon 7–8). It

may be tempting to wonder, as ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox does, "Are we all not ultimately 'other' to each other?" (37), the instinct to seek difference perhaps a cornerstone of how social life works more broadly, rather than simply a Euro-American monopoly. This viewpoint certainly serves as a reminder that instincts to distinguish "us" from "them" are not exclusively associated with colonial vestiges and similar problematic phenomena but equally part of oft-lauded ideals such as commitment to community or family (Horlor, *Chinese Street*).

Alongside this broader perspective on *difference* at the level of historical and social narratives, there is also highly relevant work that has looked in detail at perceptions of Chinese-speaking musical contexts held by people from various "outsider" positions – although so far with reference to only relatively few aspects of musical culture. Marc Moskowitz, for example, sets up his monograph about Mandopop partly in response to Americans writing off the music as "vapid, uninspired, and somewhat painful to listen to" (1). Likewise, in the context of Beijing rock in the early 2000s, Jeroen de Kloet notes among Western musicians, journalists, and academics a "hegemonic gaze" that finds fascination in this music only when "Sinified" elements (classical allusions, local dialects, traditional instruments, and so on) are emphasized; acts that do not play up these features, and thus sound more familiar, retreat from interest as "just another group of punk bands" (26-28). For Helen Rees, similar sentiments also prevail in the context of traditional music concerts attended by foreign backpackers in southwest China. She finds these visitors impressed by the "authenticity" of a certain kind of performance, those eschewing markers of Western influence – even though these self-consciously "traditionalist" concerts ironically represent a "new cultural phenomenon" emerging in direct response to the particular kind of gaze that these visitors proffer (142). In various realms of musical culture in Chinese-speaking contexts, then, Western commentators are invariably cast as attracted to – and part of the

construction of – *difference*, at the same time showing apathy or even repulsion to the perceived encroaching of sameness.

It is also easy to connect the examples above with the view that a field like ethnomusicology, having developed over the last century or so in Europe and the United States to study “other” musics, is heavily invested in the “fetishization” of difference (Bayley and Nooshin 3) – a manifestation of “Euro-American orientalism which arguably emerged in the vestiges of colonialism, and as part of the modernist obsession with binaries” (9). If so, then what alternatives may be available? A famous appeal for music scholars to reflexively counter this default position of difference comes from Kofi Agawu in the context of studying “African music”:

> I remind the reader that difference is not real, that it is, like anything else, a construct rather than something given in nature, and that notions of difference have been employed by scholars seeking to exercise a certain form of power over African subjects. I propose that we rethink difference, that we put the accent on the material conditions that produce surface differences; I propose, therefore, that we reach for the more primal motivations – such as the need for music-making – that constrain all community-dwelling human beings. A strategic embrace of sameness may thus prove liberating. (xx)

For ethnomusicologist Laudan Nooshin, an example of this fruitful recognition of sameness is found in connection with musicians working in the contemporary “world music” scene. She suggests, in a paper built on dialogue with another scholar, Amanda Bayley, that performers from various places “arguably all participate in a particular metropolitan cosmopolitan cultural formation” – they share commonalities of lifestyle and experience that largely cut across differences of location and heritage (Bayley and Nooshin 8). For Nooshin, this is particularly pertinent in the context of initiatives framed as “intercultural” – those

bringing artists together expressly to create using materials and characteristics from different musical genres and traditions. Sameness here helps counter the underlying assumption that the world is divided into fixed and discrete cultural units, with "fusion" activities "predicated on a view of culture as relatively stable and bounded, rather than as a fluid and ongoing process" (1). The comparable Chinese-language framing of *kua wenhua* ("cross-cultural") practices provides particularly good examples of what Nooshin criticizes. In fields such as music education, scholars are often preoccupied with notions of the "development" of Chinese musical culture, for instance by harnessing the potential of external influences, such as instruments like the piano (Zheng). And the substantial history of Chinese musicians and scholars looking to fuse "Eastern" and "Western" influences, or seeking to popularize Chinese ethnic minority stylistic features through assimilating them into mainstream structures (Du), show few signs of abating.

Audiencing and Bodily Expressivity

Each of the examples of Western attraction to difference I offered above – and related denunciations of sameness – are concerned with stylistic features, themes, instruments, the self-presentation of musicians, and similar aspects of musical production. Far less thoroughly examined is how consideration of wider musical behaviors, those involving performers *in collaboration* with other actors, may extend understandings of these international dynamics. The gerund "audiencing" points on the one hand to the active witnessing that brings performance into being, and at the same time, it is about the performing of actions that are themselves witnessed by others (including performers) and thus influence the dynamic unfolding of interactions (Barber). This is, of course, typically studied through presence at musical performance, whether observed over the long term ethnographically (Polak) or in various kinds of analysis of audio-visual material providing access to the details of particular

occasions (Bradby; Clayton). Indeed, there is no shortage of potential in these approaches when considering the self-consciously intercultural dimensions of audiencing specifically (Horlor, "British Rock"). But my focus in the rest of this article is slightly different: paying attention to *perceptions* held about audiencing in a more general sense (rather than as pertains to any particular encounter). I am interested in how musicians visiting China see behavior at their shows in relation to the lenses of difference and sameness I have established. This means considering their perceptions on phenomena that interested me at Ghosh's gig: how people externalize participation, communicate through positioning themselves in the performance space, dance, verbalize, and engage in spoken communication collectively and individually.

Indeed, the study of bodily expressivity in musical practices overlaps significantly with approaches to "interculturality." Ways in which the body is present can become emblematic for internal belonging and pride, and it can also inspire insidious external stereotyping – the long history, for instance, of the African individual being characterized as "the incorrigible dancer and instinctive rhythmist" (qtd. in Agawu 5). The latter shows a certain correspondence with Chinese contexts – the immediate sensual (rather than the intellectual) level on which people from minority ethnic groups are portrayed as "carefree merrymakers who are good at entertaining 'guests' with festive music" (Wong 35), or the female popular musicians of the 1990s, confined to a level of "optical spectacle" in which only certain kinds of bodily expressivity are made available to them by a patriarchal environment (Qu).

But from an international perspective less sensitive to these internal complexities, most pertinent are stereotypes identified in North American psychological research associating Chinese people with traits such as being "reserved," "quiet," "conservative," and "neat" (Grant and Holmes 109–10). And the foundations of notions like this are tested by

scholarship looking at “display rules,” the “cultural norms that dictate the management and modification of emotional displays depending on social circumstances” (Matsumoto et al. 58). This work highlights how research participants from the People’s Republic of China and Hong Kong endorse expression of emotion much less than, for instance, those from the United States. But there are also suggestions from scholars looking at recent history in broader Chinese music culture that “Westernizing” reforms of the twentieth century have seen the “evenhanded, nonpoignant” manifestations of emotion in “pre-modernity” replaced by a more virtuosic version of emotional expression (Y. Wang 153).

Again, the emphasis stubbornly falls on the musical performer, with only occasional mention of the listener (Leman et al. 263). But the idea of *audiencing* I elucidate here encompasses far more than just experiences of *listening*. Rather, it situates sensory engagements within a wider social picture, where people do not just receive and respond to sound but perform their parts in a multilateral communicative process. And this is where research that mixes empirical observation with real-life ethnographic detail can be fruitful. One focus, for instance, has been understanding how the psychological processes of interpersonal movement synchronicity connected to music intertwine with social expectations; in some situations, for instance, there is social capital at stake in controlling when and with whom people entrain their bodily movements (Lucas et al.). In complement is work from social and cultural geography hinting at how differences in uses of the body during musical occasions might take national-ethnic forms; Indian and white foreign tourists’ contrasting enculturated responses to the influence of the sun on the body in the rave scene of Goa, for instance, feed into the particular racial dynamic playing out in this scene (Saldanha). The body, as bound up with audiencing behavior and how it is perceived, certainly demands factoring into the discussions of difference and sameness I have outlined.

The Perspectives of Foreign Musicians in China

Reflecting soon after on my perceptions at that evening's gig in Wuhan, I recruited eleven musicians who had ostensibly similar experiences to Arun Ghosh, in the sense of having played in the city as part of international performing careers.[1] In writing, I asked them a series of open-ended questions about how they perceived audiencing behavior they had encountered in China (also secondarily raising Wuhan in particular). I was interested in how their thoughts would connect with the complexities of difference and sameness I have laid out – specifically concerning the active performance of audiencing manifest in certain qualities of engagement, interaction, and body expressivity. I asked them how this fed back into their experiences of performing and about any adaptations their perceptions inspired in this context. In what follows I pick out and compare pertinent comments from the different musicians as and when they speak to my themes of interest, without any pretentions at any more systematic methodology for structuring the discussion.

I found suitable musicians predominantly via the previous two years' listings for Vox Livehouse, taking as the primary commonality their connection with this, Wuhan's major non-mainstream music venue and one of China's epicenters for youth music culture (Amar). I exclusively sought the contributions of non-Chinese musicians, being fundamentally interested in this particular perspective, but also aware of the favorable interpersonal dynamic I felt could develop (albeit in written communication) with those sharing my professional but not ancestral relationship with China.

The musicians comprised a mixture of solo artists and members of bands, collectively involved in a range of genres, self-identified as punk, indie, and rock; metal and psychobilly; electronic; folk, jazz, and new age. Most had performed in the People's Republic as part of tours to a range of bars, clubs, and cafes, dedicated rock venues and DIY spaces, and outdoor festivals across the country – a few also had experience playing in larger mainstream theaters.

I was, of course, most interested in how each musician perceived audiencing here against a background of their own milieu as manifest in other territories, rather than comparing across (sub)genres – although the discussion below does touch on matters to do with performance venue. Each musician had given between four and around 300 performances in the country. The three individuals at the highest end of this range had been based in China or Taiwan for some time and had thus developed language skills affording lasting links and potentially a different level of insight. The range certainly meant the musicians had diverse degrees of investment in the topic – something that proves fruitful in my analysis. Most were originally from countries in Europe (Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom) and two were from the United States.[2]

No.	**Genre**	**Act(s)**	**Nation**	**Experience in China**
M1	Psychobilly	Band	Russia	One tour; six shows
M2	Acoustic folk; rock	Solo; band	Ireland	Seven tours; approx. 180 shows. China based
M3	1960s rock	Band	France	One tour; four shows
M4	Rock	Band	UK	Approx. 40 shows in 30 cities; long association with Taiwan
M5	Indie electro-rock	Band	France	Three tours; 14 shows
M6	Punk	Band	Sweden	One tour; 15 shows
M7	Jazz, new age piano	Solo	Belgium	More than 100 shows
M8	Electronic	Solo	US	Approx. 300 shows; China based
M9	Hard rock	Band	Denmark	28 shows

M10	Indie rock	Band	Netherlands	One tour; 12 shows
M11	Post rock/metal	Band	US	One tour; 14 shows

Table 1: *Details of the musicians.*

It is worth first noting a little about the wider context of these performances, and the subtle differences in how the musicians perceived themselves to be involved in occasions shaped by negotiation of mutual otherness. Striking to a musician with experience of only one short tour in China was that audiences he encountered "seem to like Europeans a lot, which is one of the reasons we think they responded so well to us. They also seemed to enjoy our costumes and commented a lot about our looks" (M3). For the musicians with longer-term connections to the Chinese-speaking world, on the other hand, the sense of novelty surrounding their work (the delight shown by some audiences when these musicians spoke Chinese on the microphone, for instance) was joined by more mixed blessings emanating from outsider status: "I find it difficult to get what I would consider honest feedback or a decent critical opinion, which I would easily find in Ireland," remarked one (M2). Another with similar longevity of experience added a qualification: "Of course as a foreigner you're going to stand out and get some attention because of that, but if it isn't a good performance then you're going to be under the same critique as anyone else" (M8). More generally, though, the musicians' responses show them to be highly conscious of the validatory functions of audiencing, and the feedback loop in which they became entwined: "We had the feeling that hard work resulted in more engagement and response; so we gave our max every time" (M10). I move now to outlining some of the details of this relationship in the musicians' perceptions.

"Not shy to move, to dance, to scream" (M1): Energy, Bodily Expressivity, and Emotion

Considering the livehouse and similar performance contexts I asked these musicians to comment on – and their musical genres and associated clienteles – it should be no surprise that the general picture they painted is of audiencing quite unlike the mainly reserved activity I found at Ghosh's gig. It is worth emphasizing that I set out not to make obvious points about these two audiences behaving differently, as might be readily explained by a glance at demographic and contextual factors. Rather I take the element of intercultural awareness as platform to explore musicians' rationalizations of this audiencing in reference to their wider international experience. In other words, I am interested in *what* audiences do and how it is perceived and less, on this occasion, in what might give rise to these patterns of behavior.

While applause, dancing, cheering and screaming, clapping to the beat, singing along, and waving phones in the air were all entirely common responses noted by these musicians, some also remarked on internationally less common forms of audience bodily expressivity seen at their shows: conga lines, head-banging and moshing, stage-diving, and audience members mounting the stage to dance or to shout into the microphone. Indeed, all of the musicians observed that the liveliness and responsiveness of their audiences in China (as indexed by these behaviors) were either indistinguishable from or greater than those in other places, often making for particularly welcome and memorable performing experiences. The specifics of the international comparison were made explicit by some: "We found it very rewarding, as a Chinese crowd seems easy to impress, compared to for example a Danish crowd, which can be quite reserved. We had a feeling of getting the response we have always dreamed of and [that] is one of the main reasons we play music in the first place" (M9). Several musicians talked about band members and audiences crowdsurfing, one describing previous instances of these practices as "never as intense as in China" (M5). And this, combined with having people jumping on stage to shout into the microphone or dance, inspired another to comment that it "felt like we were part of some amazing musical

movement!" (M2). Another explained this by linking the specifics of bodily engagement with broader social modes they perceived to be at play:

> We found audiences to be less self-conscious about moving around than elsewhere in the world. For our style of music, most of the Western world seems to approach it with reserve, looking to get into a catatonic or trance-like state. Chinese audiences headbanged, moshed, and generally responded with a great deal more enthusiasm than we are used to. We play fairly serious and abrasive music, but it appeared most of the audience just wanted to let loose and have fun. (M11)

Several of the musicians emulated wider discourses (including the academic ones mentioned above) by linking physical expressivity and coordinated engagement with emotionality. While in general, "the Chinese crowd are not afraid to show their emotions, that's for sure" (M9), it was particularly remarkable for some musicians that this emotional fluency had a wide-ranging vocabulary: "They seemed to really enjoy all parts of [our performance], whether it was high energy, or more emotional ballad style" (M4). Another musician commented: "We were surprised that no one seemed to find our exclusively screamed vocals off-putting, nor did they read it as inherently 'angry' but seemed to perceive it as simply more intensely emotional" (M11).

If, however, the musicians were unanimous in their general positive inclination towards audiencing activity they had encountered in China, several also remarked on expressive behaviors that struck them as puzzling or awkward. One theme calls to mind stereotypes linked to distinctions between individualism and collectivity. A band member explained: "We have experienced big applause – though they have a tendency to ring out fast and in perfect synchronicity, which we find quite funny" (M9). Another made similar observations on what struck him as an unusual togetherness in the feedback: "[They are]

100% as a group; little individual response. If you don't ask them to clap, they won't. If you do ask, they all do. … We do breaks between all songs (which we normally don't do so much) so [they] know when to applaud" (M10). But, for a couple of the other musicians, breaks between songs proved to be more difficult moments, remarking that "overall people seem to have a lot of respect for the artist. They are very quiet between songs which sometimes feels a bit awkward" (M6). Another agreed: "An unusual thing is that there is usually a pause of one or two seconds at the end of the song before they respond, as if to make sure the song is really finished" (M3). But regarding this apparent delay in the real-time responses, another musician countered: "The Chinese audience … began cheering and applauding as soon as we stepped on stage. They are very receptive to any interaction we might have with them during the concert during or between songs (cheering and clapping)" (M3). This disagreement is a reminder that as personal *perceptions*, my reporting of these comments here is offered in full acknowledgment that they are not disinterested, but in fact formed in tandem with the discourses and other factors that I discussed in the opening to this article – the ideas that shaped my own instinctive reaction to Arun Ghosh's performance in Wuhan and the internal debates they inspired in me. These are connections I begin to develop now with specific reference to ideas of difference and sameness.

Defaulting to Difference

Musicians showed signs of recognizing that discourses of difference shaped both their experiences in China and their contributions to this research, acknowledging its presence in several ways. A few subtly highlighted that the premise of my questioning imposed a fundamental China-versus-the-rest framing, especially by making pains to disassociate themselves from any implication that Chinese audiencing (and audiences) are a singular phenomenon knowable through a China-West binary. One musician, with extensive

experience in both the UK and East Asia, made the connection between difference and heterogeneity explicit: “It’s hard to draw too many conclusions just because each place and each group of people seem to be different; but it’s certainly true to say that we didn’t find audiences in China to be as different as we’d been foretold” (M4). The lens of difference starts to fall down when there is no singular and uncomplicated version to hold up one end of the comparison. Indeed, others embraced the sense that the national framing conceals a more complicated equation; one musician emphasized that “from town to town, most audiences in China are *not* the same,” offering the explanation that “the numbers, the environment, the venue, history and culture of the town all play a certain part in shaping the way the audience perceives and reacts to the songs” (M2; emphasis in the original written response). Another remarked similarly on his experiences at multiple gigs: “It could go two ways: during the performance they act like what people do in music videos: scream, dance really intensely and go mental; or they were really quiet and super polite” (M10). Of course, musicians are in a good position to appreciate that, alongside structural factors, less tangible fluctuations and occasion-specific details come into it: “The character of the Chinese audience is going to change depending on the act, the venue, the style and the day of the week” (M8); again, there is reminder of the essential part ethnographic engagement has in the broader research into audiencing, especially in tackling the intangible fluctuations hidden behind this musician’s figurative comment about the “day of the week.”

Several musicians, however, did make efforts to explain the variability they found, focusing especially on differences between venues, but also linking this to their perceptions of a more abstract cultural environment at the city level. This was particularly striking for a couple of musicians with experiences in theater-type performances, whose preponderance of relatively reserved audiencing behavior they contrasted with the loud and enthusiastic participation in contexts such as festivals. In doing so, they pick up on a trend studied in

detail by, among others, the comparative urbanist Xuefei Ren, who has investigated the trend for Chinese cities at various levels to build emblematic concert halls and theaters, with associated shifts in modes of audiencing forming part of the wider narrative of "Westernization" of musical culture already remarked upon. While the economics and policy-based aspects behind these developments fall outside of my focus on the immediacy of embodied activity, in the minds of the musicians I consulted, the topic is highly implicated in the role of audiencing, particularly when seen through the lens of sameness.

Moving Towards Sameness

Ideas of sameness emerged most strongly in responses to my question probing the musicians' place-based perceptions at the smaller scale, when I asked whether they noted anything remarkable about audiences in Wuhan in particular. Several hinted at connections between a perceived sub-cultural vibrancy of the Wuhan venue Vox Livehouse and a particular version of sameness: "There is definitely more of a Western vibe in terms of the audience behavior, and they make bands feel more like at home and inviting to a great night" (M6). This should come as little surprise considering that, along with Beijing, Wuhan is attributed a special role in Chinese punk subculture, one whose history stretches back to the 1990s (Xiao 46). Musicians and scholars sometimes connect this mood to Wuhan's wider conditions, it being "an industrial city with numerous workers, and punks felt the same anger as those people at the bottom of society" (ibid. 63). Encountering what might in some ways be a more familiar atmosphere of dissatisfaction and dissent, however – and the feeling of interacting with audiences in a more "Western" way – was not considered a positive by the majority of the musicians. They read it as an indicator of people finding it "less special that there was a band of Europeans in their venue" (M10). This disappointment over the modes of engagement they encountered unfolded for some as they travelled between places with apparently different

degrees of economic (and therefore cultural) “development”: “Our impression is that people in smaller cities were more active in terms of dancing and moving in general. Beijing audiences for example were more about listening and taking it all in more seriously maybe” (M6). In other words, economic development meant changing modes of audiencing, where exciting difference gave way to underwhelming sameness:

> As we drove more and more south in our tour, the cities’ appearance and mood started to change, but also the people. So that in Shenzhen we got to face a really attentive audience – but all about smartphones in the air taking videos, all about the fashionable dress code, and not so much into the actual energy we want to face when playing. Our drummer even said “it looks like the audience in Europe now; this is how far into China we’ve got. In the end the mood has got so close to European that it has got boring as well.” [It] was that frustrating and questioning feeling we know too well here [in Europe]. (M5)

In the testimony of some of the musicians, similar points gave way to a more paternalistic tone. One linked this less energetic kind of audiencing style to people who were “a bit more experienced” (M7), implying it to be a sign of audiences having elevated themselves to the standards found in Europe. For the people left out of this internationalized apprenticeship in the conventions of these genres, on the other hand, “it seemed like it’s all just music to them, it’s all new, and it’s all exciting on its own terms” (M11). One musician even made efforts to *quantify* how far behind the Chinese audiences were:

> We play music that is very influenced by the Beatles and Pink Floyd and a lot of them had never heard of Pink Floyd and did not always know the Beatles very well. We had the feeling they were discovering rock ‘n’ roll and were experiencing what people in England and USA experienced in the 1960s. (M3)

Although one musician took this opportunity to expand into comments uncannily replicating the observations de Kloet gathered from Western commentators attracted only to Beijing bands playing up "Chinese" elements (M11), others emphasized specifically how audiencing behavior was implicated in these sentiments. One, a French musician, recounted an anecdote in which an audience in China failed to match expressions of bodily energy to the norms of concert experience as he would have expected it in his home country. He described in amusement a collective expression of celebration that seemed out of place in the more rough-edged concert experience:

> One time in Zaozhuang [枣庄] … the audience started a *queue-leu-leu* [conga line] – it's rather popular in weddings … but never in concerts [in France]. One hand over their friend's back, the other making the devil horns like it suddenly was something really badass. We'll never watch a *queue-leu-leu* the same again. (M5)

With this, it appears that comments about audiencing sameness and difference are really manifestations of a coherent attitude, one which places Chinese audiences at various points on a line of progression towards the norms these musicians bring with them into the encounters – gaining experience and adapting to the expectations for use of the body found elsewhere. Sameness is read as a state of convergence with Euro-American models, with people in larger cities having come to inhabit the standards of more familiar Western scenes. Nonetheless, the difference that is passed through on the way to this destination is interpreted as an exciting condition for many of these performers – and use of the body, fluency in gestures of participation, and so on, are clear sites on which this dynamic is manifest and recognized.

Conclusion

Ironically, then, the lens of sameness emerging from the musicians' comments on audiencing does little to fulfil the ambitions of Agawu or Nooshin in negating the fetishization of difference – if anything, it serves to reinforce it by dialectically playing the other side of difference's coin. Sameness is, to some of these musicians, the underwhelming endgame of Chinese audiencing "maturing" into successful emulation of Euro-American earnestness and complacency. This is broadly linked to a narrative of economic development, bringing with it not only infrastructure that can change the nature of active engagement, but also a depth of familiarity with Euro-American genres and modes of participating in them. The musicians' engagements with narratives of difference, those resting partly on an assumption of internal sameness and on the existence of discrete cultural units, reinforces further the sense that difference and sameness in this topic are intertwined. Thus, "a strategic embrace of sameness" does not represent a ready-made route to liberation from questionable power dynamics in this case (Agawu xx).

Of course, it is hardly a surprise that these people's interpretations should elaborate a certain view of how "others" may fit into the world they know, evincing certain epistemological positions along the way. But it is still interesting to note the consistency by which they expressed pleasure in being part of communicative occasions of intensive expressivity, those that negate stereotypes of Chinese reservedness, albeit perhaps replacing them with condescending hints at the latter's indiscriminacy and lack of experience. Naturally, the musicians most committed to these ideas had shorter and less deep relationships with playing in China; it is likely that the musicians' appraisals of "development" and "experience" ironically change as they become more "expert" in reading these intercultural dynamics. Snapshots of musicians with various degrees of engagement with the country hint that assessments regarding the "other" shift with the appraiser's own experiences.

The wider aim behind my focus on audiencing is to stress that this aspect of musical life demands a central place in how scholarship becomes "attentive to the ways in which difference comes to be constructed and understood, how such constructions become naturalized, and how certain kinds of difference become privileged over others" (Bayley and Nooshin 3). While rock in China has naturally attracted both "insider" and "outsider" reflections on the dynamics of intercultural awareness, the predominant focus on musical material and surrounding "subcultural" narratives has largely neglected how these issues are constituted in real-time behavior. Adopting a broadly social-interactive lens gets directly at the "processes of materializing in acts of performance, acts of making, acts of archiving and acts of remembering" (Reason and Lindelof 1) – vital for a fuller understanding of the significances of difference and sameness as lived through musical experiences.

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[1] Although I did contact Ghosh himself for an insight directly relatable to my own experience, unfortunately he was not able to participate in the research.

[2] I took information about genre, performance experience in China, and national background as the key points to contextualize the musicians' positions in relation to playing in China. I did not systematically collect demographic data concerning, for instance, ethnicity, gender, or age – but it is reasonable to conclude from information shared online that all musicians were white, male, and between 25 and 40 years old. The genre identifiers given in Table 1 represent the musicians' self-identifications taken either from their responses to my questions or their online publicity material. The discussions that follow touch only superficially on the musicians' individual identities, so they are kept anonymous. Ethics approval for this research was granted by the Ethics Committee at the Department of Music, Durham University.

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