

Listening to Yan'an: A Revelation on Listening Experience

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Abstract

The emergence of Yan'an's listening environment and sound culture was naturally very closely linked with the tumultuous years of the Anti-Japanese War, however its broader and much more explanatory background was actually the culture of passion which first formed and developed in Yan'an, where it would later be widely advocated as well.

Keywords

Yan'an; Revelation; Listening Experience; Auditory Imagination

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The research and discussion surrounding listening experience as well as sound culture has, in recent years, garnered the attention of many scholars and has also given rise to many interesting topics. Throughout the past ten years, in the process of my own research on visual images and visual culture, I have come to feel deeply that seeing and hearing, or one's visual and auditory senses, cannot altogether be discussed as separate issues, as there exists significant interaction among the two. In fact, the reason [we find] many visual works of art highly appealing, or that they continue to bear upon us a unique kind of impactful force long beyond [the period of their initial creation], is often times related to the listening experiences or auditory imaginings which

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they create for us. Many powerful paintings actually make tremendous efforts to convey a kind of auditory experience, such as Picasso's *Guernica* – an extremely famous work in the history of modern Western art. This large oil painting, finished by Picasso in 1937, depicts the bombing of the [Spanish] city Gernika by German and Italian planes during the Spanish Civil War. It uses a unique modernist visual language to convey the auditory violence brought on by war, as well as the miserable screams and the sensory realm, torn and fragmented, of those who suffered in that environment. In Chinese art history, Li Hua's *Roar, China*, created in 1935, is another classic work of art with respect to sound and voice. This woodblock print, while quite small in dimensions, possesses an enormous historical capacity in that it touches upon aspects such as expressing voice, hearing [others] calling out, the subjective experience that exists somewhere between observing and listening and the alternation of their relative positions, as well as attainment and expression of national identity and a whole host of other problems. In the past, I have written my own interpretation of this piece, holding that it was a piece both produced by and extremely representative of The Modern Woodcut Movement during the 1930's.

When discussing sound and auditory sense, we should naturally be aware that these are in fact two different issues, even though they share a close relationship. On the one hand, there is listening, or auditory sense, which [is just that] – a sense, or mode of perception. As with all other senses, listening has its own historicity and history of development, as what we are able and unable to hear is the result of a process of training. As such, listening is a kind of cultural competence. When I previously discussed a selection of modern poetry in relation to voice/sound, I proposed that we [scholars] should go through and sort out the “modern history of listening” (*tingjue de xiandai shi* 聽覺的現代史).¹ On the other hand there is voicing, or making, sound (such as shouting and crying, or singing and performing), and creating sound (from ancient music all the way to modern audio technology, including architectural design). These behaviors, or effects rather, may be said to belong to the category of self-expression and artistic creation, and come to form [what is known as] sound or audio culture. Naturally, each of these has their own process of historical evolution, as well.

1 See: Tang Xiaobing, “Buxi de Zhenchan: Lun Ershi Shiji Shige de Yige Zhuti,” *Wenxue Pinglun*, no. 5 (2007), 25-32.

Sound culture implies that the various sounds we are able to perceive are also given meaning, therefore sound culture and auditory experience share an interactive relationship, while interactively defining and influencing one another. At the level of our daily experience, [the acts of] listening to sound and making sound are commonly part of a continuous organic process, i.e. a transition from accepting to expressing, or from passivity to activity, which grants us the pleasure, or perhaps satisfaction, of directly expressing ourselves and our emotions. For example, when we hear songs that we love, or are familiar with, we often cannot help but sing along. The elevation of this experience at the individual [level] to a type of collective and participatory form of emotional expression, wherein this candid and forthright sound culture then became organized into a richly passionate [way of] life forming a positive and active subject, may be said to have been a very prominent aspect of both the listening experience and listening environment of Yan'an during the late 1930's and early 1940's.

Auditory and Visual Sense

There were several conditions specific to Yan'an – which at the time was termed a sacred site of revolution – in the development of [its] listening experience and sound culture. The first condition was that the surrounding environment in Yan'an was relatively deficient in visual culture. Yan'an has wide-open spaces filled with infertile and barren land. It was a far cry from Shanghai and other cities at the time, which were alive with the excitement of sights and sounds. With regard to the sensual excitement which accompanied these modern cities, the most famous description in the history of modern Chinese literature is most likely the introduction to Mao Dun's *Midnight* (*Zi Ye* 《子夜》), written in 1931. The dazzling neon lights, the thundering trolleybuses racing forth and the streets filled with nearly half-nude, enchanting young women had, upon his first encounter, completely astounded old Mr. Wu from the countryside, “[until the point where his over-excited nerves were throbbing with pain as if they were to burst, and his rapidly racing heart could no longer beat anymore],” and then – alas! – a bizarre [tragedy] suddenly ended in death, just as soon as it had begun. Several years later, the musical comedy *Scenes of City Life* (*Dushi Fengguang* 《都市风光》), directed by Yuan Muzhi, would also feature a series of inter-woven shots of the

bustling, modern landscape of Shanghai in a documentary-style fashion during film's first several minutes. It was nearly a complete re-enactment of old Mr. Wu's dizzying experience written in the language of film.

Yan'an, however, lacked even electric lamps. During the early part of August, 1938, scholar Chen Xuezhao made her journey to Yan'an as a reporter. When writing down her initial impressions, she said: "[Yan'an is already in sight now. Its city walls wind down from the surrounding hilltops and overlook a winding, elongated river. Upon arriving at the main entrance, the characters inscribed onto either side of its main gate come sharply into view and appear both vivid and powerful]." ² The view there is both refreshing and pleasant, while also open and spacious; it could be said to be panoramic in essence and markedly different from the likes of the city, which is most always heavily congested or even blocked out by sky scrapers and signboards of all varieties. After living there for nearly one year, Chen Xuezhao came to a certain understanding: "[Everything here is relatively simple and pure, and transportation is fairly inconvenient. There is no darkness here to plague you, nor are there the garish and decadent venues by which to be stimulated. It is not a poetic environment, but rather one which urges you to 'live'." ³ Here, what she terms "poetic" (*shi* 詩) refers to the Baudelairean discovery and embrace of the city's "Flowers of Evil," as well as more broadly speaking, the supersession of totality (*xianshi zhengti* 現實整體) as well as the modernist aesthetic interest with [one's] direct experience.

To say that the visual culture of Yan'an was relatively lacking is, of course, to compare it with that of the modern city space. In his famous work *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, German sociologist Georg Simmel had emphasized the importance of visual experience in city life. In the city, interpersonal communication, the ordering of daily activities and the construction of social relations are commonly all built upon a foundation of visual experience and visual knowledge. Some examples are all of the various types of street signs and signboards, or the attention to and reliance upon the semiotic system of dress and fashion, et cetera. Simmel once pointed out a very interesting detail, which was the importance of

2 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 99. *A Visit to Yan'an* began to be published consecutively in November of 1938 by *Guo Xun* (《国讯》), a tri-monthly publication put out by Chongqing Shenghuo Shudian (重慶生活書店). In 1940, the entire collection was published by Beiji Shuju (北極書局), and would later be re-printed in 1990.

3 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp 356.

clock time in the urban experience. During the early 20th century in Berlin, the general flow of the city as well as human communication, for example the arrival and departure of trains, operated in accordance with the time as dictated by the clock hanging on the wall, or by the watches worn on people's wrists or kept in their pockets. Thus, what had dictated the time for everybody was in fact not the blowing of the train whistle, and even less so was it the more traditional bell tower situated in the church.

It may be said that in the modern city, the dominance of vision, or the visual sense, far exceeds that of hearing, or the auditory sense. Yet, one of the ways by which to interrupt the order of the daily urban routine is in fact to create a novel and powerful sound as it gives people an inescapable shock that arouses excitement and fear. At the end of his novel *Rainbow*, Mao Dun describes the "May Thirtieth" protests held along the Nanjing Road in Shanghai in 1925. What really propelled the whole scene and made the protagonist Mei Xingsu's blood boil were the indignant shouts of those congregating there: "[The stirring, heartrending cries, interlaced with bursts of fervent applause, were like raging billows rolling forth, [each one] poised to rock the lofty skyscrapers that lay ahead]." (A similar protest scene was also featured at the end of part two of Ding Ling's two-part novella *Shanghai, Spring* 1930, which read: "[At exactly 9 o'clock, an enormous roar of firecrackers suddenly erupted from the other side of the street and through it, one could only make out all the various slogans being thundered in unison].")

Yet what people felt in 1930's Yan'an was specifically not that type of urban space as dictated by visual sense, nor was daily life in Yan'an organized and conditioned by clock time. When documenting her "first glimpse" upon arriving in Yan'an, she made the following observation: "[There are no leather high-heels on the streets of Yan'an, nor are there brightly-colored silk garments. Men and women are all alike, wearing [light] blue military uniforms with small puttees wrapped around their calves. The sight of women wearing military garb is, in other places, an extremely rare one. However, here in Yan'an, even the female comrades who are pregnant still sport their military attire]." ⁴ Clearly, in this type of militarized environment, differences in gender, interpersonal communication

4 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 104-105.

as well as relationships among people are not established [merely] through one's exterior appearance, but more so through other methods and channels. Not long after these initial impressions, it occurred to Chen Xuezhao that "[Yan'an lacks standard clocks]" and thus much time was spent simply waiting for meetings to convene.⁵ At the end of August, 1938, which is to say not long after she had arrived at Yan'an, Chen Xuezhao was among the thousands of attendees to join the welcoming ceremony for the return of Red Army Commander in Chief Zhu De (朱德) from the front lines. "[As they day progressed towards noon]," she came to learn of this meeting and saw that many others didn't even bother to eat their lunch, but ran straight down the hills to await the meeting's commencement. After people from all different walks of life convened together, various organizations such as the Lu Xun Academy of Art, the Chinese People's Anti-Japanese Military and Political University, the Northern Shaanxi School, et cetera, all began to take turns singing songs. By 3 o'clock, however, there was still no sign [of Zhu De]. By the time the sun set below the hills, "[their entire repertoire of songs had been exhausted, and the people were becoming weary]." "[All of a sudden, the sound of a motor hummed from afar... This was music to one's ears in the empty valley, and suddenly everyone was roused to stand firmly at attention]." ⁶

In Zhu Hongzhao's (朱鴻召) *History of Daily Life in Yan'an, 1937-1947*, he specifically discusses the experience of time in Yan'an and also mentioned Chen Xuezhao. Since Yan'an lacked clocks, most of the time people used hour-glasses and sundials to keep the time. In winter of 1939, the Central Hospital was constructed, and because it relied upon Western medicine, people came to realize that they would need a precise method of keeping time. "[During the early stages of preparation in building the hospital, they managed to purchase an old alarm clock from a new marketplace outside the south gate of Yan'an, and it was as if they'd struck gold. From the roof of their cave laboratory, they suspended a large

5 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp 133. After breaking a watch that she had carried around for over 40 years in Yan'an, Chen Xuezhao could henceforth only request the time from her friends. "[As the days passed, I lost my habit of always wanting to know the time and slowly began to care very little about observing time and being punctual]." (pp. 356)

6 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 279-280.

iron hoop, for which there was an office worker solely responsible for watching the alarm clock and striking the hoop upon each hour].”⁷ This, however, was only a unique instance. At the time, the more common method was to sound bugles to indicate the periods of break as well as mealtimes. “[However, in several schools, breaktime was simply determined by the leader, or duty officer, who measured the time via the relative height of the sun, or by looking at the sundial. [Thus], there was a high degree of arbitrariness... For the common soldier or worker within the revolutionary army, this was not perceived to be some type of hindrance, for, on the contrary, during the period in which they awaited the leader’s arrival, they could enjoy themselves by singing ‘Jody calls’ (*lage* 拉歌) together and having a bit of fun].”⁸ In regard to these habits, Chen Xuezhao would finally raise her criticisms in an article published in the *Jiefang Daily* in November of 1943: “[In our experience, if one were to go listen to a two-hour talk, one would [also] have to wait an hour and a half to two hours. It was such that one would already feel tired and be unable to fully concentrate during the speech].”⁹

This impunctuality, in Chen Xuezhao’s mind, was wasteful, and was indicative of their negligence towards efficiency. In her *A Visit to Yan’an*, Chen spoke directly on the greatest shortcoming of the work being carried out in the border region (*bianqu* 邊區) at the time, stating that “[all of the administrative bodies are far too unscientific],” or that they are “too artisan (*shougongyehua* 手工業化) in nature].”¹⁰ With regard to people’s casual and lackadaisical style of work in Yan’an, where they “[treat work as a joke, and treat jokes as work],” Chen Xuezhao’s observations and criticisms were representative of the group of “outsider” intellectuals who, after arriving in Yan’an, were altogether unaccustomed to this cultural environment which was clearly non-urban, pre-industrial and evocative of a “[guerilla-war atmosphere].” This was especially the case for Chen Xuezhao, who came from a privileged upbringing in Haining, Zhejiang and

7 Zhu Hongzhao, *Yan’an Richang Shenghuo Zhong de Lishi, 1937-1947*, (Jilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 9.

8 Zhu Hongzhao, *Yan’an Richang Shenghuo Zhong de Lishi, 1937-1947*, (Jilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 7.

9 Chen Xuezhao, “Time,” *Jiefang Ribao*, November 16th, 1943. Quote selected from: Zhu Hongzhao, *Yan’an Richang Shenghuo Zhong de Lishi, 1937-1947*, (Jilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 8.

10 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan’an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 215.

who had previously spent seven to eight years studying abroad in France. After returning to China in 1935 – to borrow her own words – she essentially locked herself up in her house and lived a European life inside her Chinese home. After the Anti-Japanese War broke out, she followed her husband to Chongqing, and later would pass through Chengdu and Xi'an until she arrived at Yan'an. Although she admitted to being “[an extremely undisciplined individual with no conception of political parties and no organizational competence],”¹¹ she would go on to observe and ruminate deeply on all aspects of life in Yan'an in a way that was both very sagacious and compassionate.¹²

It was Chen Xuezhao's experiences and background which determined the rich dimensionality of her perspective when observing things. First of all, she had a conscious, female point of view. Apart from championing gender equality and admitting to feeling ashamed for her lack of understanding of those “modern women” who had joined the revolution, she also raised criticisms of several things she saw in Yan'an, for example the fact that the male comrades had displayed no chivalry and were unwilling to help their female comrades, et cetera. Next was her regional perspective. She had observed the regional customs of the Northwest through the eyes of a southerner, so her surrounding world was both new and interesting, including all of the various dialects of those who had congregated in Yan'an. In fact, many of the woodblock artists who came to Yan'an at the time would, through their wooden artworks, reveal similar sentiments of having discovered an exotic landscape, and there was a certain perspective of portraying local folk customs inherent within them. Another aspect of Chen Xuezhao's perspective was related with her experiences in Europe. For example, each time she attended the evening parties (“[this is the only form of entertainment in Yan'an]”), she knew that they would all begin late, and so she could not

11 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 159.

12 There was a book review which introduced the publication process of *A Visit to Yan'an* which was printed in *Shanghai Zhoubao* in December of 1942 (Vol. 2, No. 25). The reviewer, “Xiao Ke” (小珂) pointed out that Chen Xuezhao's [book] wasn't like French author Andre Gide's *Return from the U.S.S.R.* which was like “[someone who had lost their soul].” “[She observes from her progressive ‘petty bourgeois’ standpoint, or perhaps like an affable ‘older sister,’ who clings onto a not yet fully-mature ideal, pointing out to her growing ‘little brother’ all of the nice things that an ‘older sister’ should say. These relatively ‘severe demands,’ however, are all spoken so ‘intimately’!]” (pp. 647).

help but recalling her time spent abroad attending concerts and watching plays. Also, at times, she could not help but view what lay before her eyes through the eyes of a European. For example, she discovered that the children of Yan'an all enjoyed eating treats and snacks: "[Europeans scoff that the Chinese are a people who idle away their time by eating snacks. Yet, this remark [now] compels me to contemplate deeply]." ¹³

Training Auditory Sense and Auditory Imagination

Perhaps even more significant was Chen Xuezhao's acute awareness of Yan'an's listening environment and sound culture. Not long after arriving in Yan'an, she quickly discovered that although the streets of Yan'an were both dirty and congested with almost no place to land one's foot amid all the mud-died loess soil, and that walking about were "[an innumerable amount of people infinitely varied in appearance and in accent]," she was still enchanted with it there. "[I believe that what I like about the streets of Yan'an is the air of democracy and freedom [here]. On the streets of Yan'an, you can discuss and you can laugh to your heart's content about significant matters of state, or even personal matters of emotion. You can say what you'd like and as loud as you want]." ¹⁴ Clearly, here, Chen Xuezhao connects "the air of democracy and freedom" together with the ability to speak freely in public places and with a loud voice, which is to say, she connects political atmosphere together with manners of speaking. Here, she feels strongly that it is the concepts of "democracy and freedom" which openly spread freedom of speech and freedom of thought, and not the values espoused by traditional liberalism such as privacy, honor, dignity, tolerance, order, et cetera. The former [two] are generally more related to the voicing and the hearing of sound (for example the concepts and/or metaphors of inner-voice, shouting, vox populi, et cetera, are ubiquitous to this tradition of discourse) and highlight the positive value(s) of direct and real experience, whereas the latter actually holds distance and space in high regard, and may thereby be

13 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 151.

14 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 116.

said to represent a political culture which is formed upon the logic of visual sense and the urban life. It is precisely the candor and sincerity embodied by Yan'an's auditory experience and sound culture which led Chen Xuezhao to sense novelty and excitement. (However, when the others from the neighboring cave-homes would speak loudly and conversate deep into the night, Chen felt somewhat helpless, sighing to herself: “[We certainly have no street police like those in the capitols of Brussels, France and England who, after 10 o'clock at night, would put an end to this clamor preventing our good night's rest!]”¹⁵)

Thus, after becoming accustomed to jostling her way through the cramped throngs of people, she “[began to open her eyes],” greedily watching everything and discovering that “[the mouth of nearly every single person was moving; if it was not eating, then it was talking, and more commonly, it was eating and talking at the same time].”¹⁶ She went to go attend the founding of the Women's Brigade at the Chinese People's Anti-Japanese Military and Political University and marveled at the speeches made by Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, He Long and some ten other speakers. “[Each of them all seem as if they are experts on the women's movement, and they each speak with such eloquence. [To have this] in Yan'an is truly a wonder, as it seems all of China's speakers have all convened here in the border region].”¹⁷ Not only were these leaders adept at speechmaking, but Chen also encountered several female comrades who were quite glib and were able to deliver silver-tongued speeches, too. Around the same time, she also noticed that much of the work being carried out in the border region was managed by people with an ability to talk, and that there was a lack of people committed to fully carrying out the task(s) at hand.

Here, I am reminded of a very interesting character documented in Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*. Snow first arrived in Bao'an (保安) in 1936 and then went onto Yan'an where he carried out many interviews, including one with Mao Zedong, thereby making him the first person to have made a written account of Mao Zedong's life. In the town of Wuqi (吴起镇), Snow interviewed an

15 Chen Xuezhao, Yan'an Fangwen Ji, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 186.

16 Chen Xuezhao, Yan'an Fangwen Ji, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 115.

17 Chen Xuezhao, Yan'an Fangwen Ji, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 180.

electrical engineer from Ningbo, whose surname was Zhu (朱). Zhu was fluent in both English and German, having once worked for an electrical company and another foreign company in Shanghai where he lived a luxurious life earning a yearly salary of \$ 10,000 USD. However, Zhu resolutely left all of this behind to come to the border region of Yan'an. Snow was quite moved by this and asked serious-mannered engineer what his thoughts and feelings on Yan'an were. Zhu replied that his greatest complaint was that people in Yan'an spent far too much time singing. "[Now is not the time to be singing!]"

At the time, Yan'an was indeed a place full of song with a unique and vibrant sound culture. Many people who visited or lived in Yan'an at the time left behind reams of notes as well as memoirs and, together with the valuable photos taken by Snow and collected in *Red Star Over China*, mutually affirmed the existence of this environment which was alive with song and melody. In *A Visit to Yan'an*, Chen Xuezhao wrote multiple times of the excitement and thrill that this singing had given her, and that within these singing voices, what she heard was plainness and sincerity, as well as righteousness and determination. On one occasion, Chen went to attend a joint performance held by four organizations, only to discover that the audience was unprecedented in number and as a result, a dispute emerged. "[At crowded events in the past, I was mostly worried that a fight or an argument would break out, as those are always the hardest cases to settle. On that day, the atmosphere seemed a little more serious than most, and yet all of a sudden, all tensions soon melted into the melody of song]." ¹⁸ Here, the sound of song did not suppress the argument by sheer volume, rather it uplifted people to a higher [emotional] state by means of a different language, or form of expression, which caused the altercation at hand to suddenly become insignificant.

Chen Xuezhao wrote an extremely imaginative and philosophically profound description of this revelation brought by this new culture of sound. Within the first 10 days of arriving in Yan'an, Chen had moved into the cave-homes located outside of the city. For Chen, who had grown up in the region south of the Yangtze, this was both a novel and enchanting experience. At the time, it was still the blistering month of August, and when the temperature dropped in the evenings, she enjoyed gazing at the city from the surrounding hills, watching

18 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan'an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 285.

“[the evening clouds nestle up to the mountains in the distance and the cluster of brown horses gallop through the yellow soil and evening mist. ‘He is now in the midst of the mountains. And his whip can be seen in the dying rays of the sun.’ Indeed, this line perfectly captures the setting].”¹⁹ It was a picturesque landscape which she was appreciating from afar, lost in her own memories of childhood. Afterwards, “[after the rain had passed, the river water then swelled up, and in the deep of the quiet night, it was if there was a large boat crashing through the waves which billowed as high as the heavens].” The rushing sound of the river during the quiet evening was like a stream of whispers which was pleasing to the ear, causing Chen to recall the boats which passed over the Indian Ocean, and bringing to mind her past experiences of living abroad in Europe.

“[I told a good friend: Listen – does it not resemble the sound of boats passing along the calm waters of the Indian Ocean? This comment, however, was met with punishment: I dreamt that I was sitting in an ocean-going ship, sailing to a foreign land, and the sounds of the waves were sending me far away from my beloved mother country! The reality, however, was that flames of war were raging across the lands of our nation, which were being invaded by our powerful neighbors. We were all suffering unbearable hardships, only so that we could live freely!]”²⁰

When faced with the stark reality of “flames of war raging across the lands,” one’s personal recollections and imaginings seem strikingly unsuitable for the occasion, just as the heart’s inner-voice similarly cannot become the [form of] language or expression necessary in times of foreign aggression and the invasion of one’s homeland. If it is said that “in the midst of the mountains,” Chen experienced an aesthetic of distance, or aesthetic perception, which was heavily centered on visual sense, then “the waves which billowed as high as the heavens” that she heard in the deep of the night demonstrates the alternative experience which sound came to offer [her]. In this case, as an external physical force, sound projects forth in an unstoppable manner and closes the gap between the listening subject and its object, while also striking the self-awareness of the sub-

19 Translator’s note: Here, Chen Xuezhao references a line from *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (Xi Xiang Ji 《西廂記》), for which I have borrowed S. I. Hsiung’s translation. See: S. I. Hsiung, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 203.

20 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan’an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 129.

ject. Chen had felt a sense of resonance when listening intently to the sound of water, yet she discovered she was unable to communicate and unable to share the dreams and recollections initially set off by this flowing sound of water, as these sensations took place deep within her heart, and as such were unrelated to her surrounding environment. Therefore, the imagined sound of waves in the still of the night was, for the listening subject, both familiar and strange, as it sent thoughts and memories swirling through her head, and yet left her at a complete loss. She was moved by these thoughts, yet she was also aware that she had been moved: “[The sounds of the waves were sending me far away from my beloved mother country!]”

However, in the following scenario that Chen Xuezhao describes, sound becomes the medium of self-expression and not an external force. On a fair evening under the luminous moon, horses gave out their long neighs of delight as the sultriness of the day faded:

“[Strolling in front of the cave-homes, I really longed to play Schumann’s “Spring Symphony”! The red sorghum now towers over our heads, swaying with each passing of the wind as its leaves rustle, and is almost as if someone was whispering softly. Occasionally, a laughter or two drifts by, resonating as clear as the strings of harp. The sounds of voices, yelling, marching and bugles… rock the surrounding hills! The youth, for their nation, for their ethnicity and for themselves, now shout from the tops of their lungs, and shed all of their blood… this is an “Unfinished Symphony”! When listening to this music, one’s passion and vigor cannot help but be aroused!]”²¹

This is a very infectious passage which alternates between and gives expression to several levels of experience, such as different [forms of] the self and different imaginary spaces. From her desire to play Schumann to hearing the swaying of the red sorghum plants, and from the soft whisperings of the red sorghum to the resonant sound of laughter, she hears the sound of a harp, of music, of shouting, marching and bugles as well as the thundering roar of the youth which shakes the surrounding hills. It is a process of auditory imagining which extends forth continuously, as well as being a process which starts from a particularly defined “me” and transforms into a more broadly [defined] and universal “you.” It

21 Chen Xuezhao, Yan’an Fangwen Ji, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 130.

is within this process that the collective voice binds closely together with national and ethnic identity, and the emitting of sound and the shedding of blood therein become a meaningful form of expression and participation.

An Unfinished Symphony

The metaphor of the “Unfinished Symphony” used by Chen Xuezhao embodies her sharp insight into the sound culture of Yan'an. In this new listening environment, the concepts of symphony and chorus are both very important. They also exist as effective methods of creating sound and shaping hearing in that they organize various sounds together in an organic way, forming an orderly, resonant and very exciting listening experience which produces a very powerful inner-force, allowing the listeners and the participants alike to be elevated and, to quote the poet Ai Qing (艾青), “[arise from the deep ravines of time],” (*Shidai* 《時代》, 1941). Moreover, this symphony was an unfinished one which was being carried out in real-time, and whose significance and effect was open-ended, as it was collectively composed and created by each individual who participated in it.

The third scene which Chen Xuezhao describes, namely the one on the “roaring youth,” may also be described in terms of Kant’s “feeling of the Sublime,” which is to say the active awareness of and participation in, on the basis of moral judgement or what he called the “concept of teleology,” the grand and sometimes terrifying situation. However, the first scene described by Chen, namely the experience of being “in the midst of the mountains,” was closer to what Kant described as “the Beautiful,” or that aesthetic of being rich in form. In between these two was the “sound of waves in the still of the night,” which evoked neither the Sublime nor the Beautiful, but rather a sense of anxiety. On the one hand, it was an anxiety produced through a highly internalized aesthetic experience, and on the other, through a conflict or contradiction between her subjective notions. These three scenes described by Chen Xuezhao may be viewed as a process of coming in close from afar, or of shifting from observation to participation, and were experienced by many who had visited Yan'an. Therefore, they were [also] a process of learning to listen, and learning to make sound.

Here, we may also note two other unique aspects of the listening experience in Yan'an. The first one, which takes place at the technical level, was the power

of real song, or real voice. Among the many descriptions of Yan'an's sound culture, for example singing, reciting, performing, assembling and so on, the issue of sound amplification systems was rarely mentioned, which is to suggest that there were no technical methods being employed to project or broadcast sound. The effect of actual voices, then, together with the feeling of being at the event, came to form a very vivid and distinct experience. Thus, in this regard, it may be explained why many of the people who witnessed the sound culture of Yan'an had all raved about the sincerity and the enthusiasm which they experienced there.

Another aspect is the culture of youth expressed by this listening experience – for example Jack Chen (陳依範), an overseas Chinese in Malaysia. In 1938, he joined in with the young folk “making their pilgrimage” to visit the “holy site” of Yan'an. During his 200 miles travel, Jack saw many groups of children, each person equipped only with a single toothbrush and the clothes on their back, all singing together along the whole route. They had forsaken everything in the world and resigned joyfully to the arduous path ahead. After arriving in Yan'an, he discovered that it had the splendor of “Sparta,” in that it was materially impoverished, but very rich in spirit. It was the “real utopia” that he had been seeking (at least, it was “the happiest city” he'd ever seen). Inside of this utopia, he wrote: “[People here seem more ‘human,’ and are not individuals shaped by ‘face,’ ‘power’ and ‘reputation].”²² If we take the “May Fourth” period to be the origin of youth culture in modern China, then in Yan'an, this youth culture was advanced and further developed, having a both direct as well as profound influence on the youth of the 1950's and 1960's.

Within this environment, a very classic text on listening and making sound was also produced. That text was the *Yellow River Cantata* (1939), written and composed by Guang Weiran (光未然) and Xian Xinghai (冼星海), respectively. By introducing the full selection of poetry recitation [throughout] the cantata, we will hear the poet directly call upon the people to listen with a new pair of ears, and during their listening, to discover new and once-neglected realities and meanings – to discover the new community of common destiny (*xinde mingyun gongtongti* 新的命運共同體).

“Friends! Have you seen the Yellow River? Have you crossed the Yellow

22 Chen Yifan (translated by Du Xing), “Weishenme Tamen Wang Yan'an,” *Xue yu Sheng*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April, 1938), 62-67; 74. This quote was pulled from page 65.

River? Do you remember scenes of the boatmen risking their lives to battle the perilous waves? If you have forgotten, then listen!”²³

The whole of the *Yellow River Cantata* takes this new listening experience and new listening imagination as both its starting point and its driving force. Because we can hear the frightful billows and terrible waves the Yellow River, as well as the steadfast [singing] of the boatmen as they cross it, we can also hear “the vigor of our nation,” and therefore we must “face the Yellow River [and] sing our song of praise” (*Ode to the Yellow River*), hoping that, before the Yellow River, “We [may] offer a poem, confiding in you the catastrophe’s suffered by our people” (*Yellow River’s Water Descends from Heaven*).²⁴ In the well-known seventh movement, *Defending the Yellow River*, the lines “the wind howls, [the] horses neigh, the Yellow River roars, the Yellow River roars,” are at the same time a description and lyrical expression, or a description of scenery (*xiejing* 寫景) and a vivid expression of meaning (*xieyi* 寫意). Here, the natural scenery is given its own voice and acquires subjectivity, while at the same time also becoming symbolic and expressive of the new national will and [national] subjectivity. In the eighth movement, *Roar, Yellow River!*, which is also the climax of the entire cantata, both the listening and the making of the uproar blend into a process of awakening, where both that which is heard and that which is uttered are brand new sounds which arouse “the battle cry” of this new historical protagonist.

“Listen: The Pearl River roars angrily! The Yangtze River is raging on! Ah! Yellow River! Raise up your angry waves, let loose your wild bellows...”²⁵

The *Yellow River Cantata* is without a doubt the product of a new listening environment. At the same time, it also demonstrates the intrinsic logic and driving force of a new sound culture in a highly refined fashion. It may also be said that *Yellow River Cantata* had made an effort towards completing the “Unfinished Symphony” which Chen Xuezhao appealed to.

23 Translator’s note: Here, I have borrowed Hong Xiangtang’s English translation, see: Xiangtang Hong, “Performing the Yellow River Cantata,” (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2009), pp. 272-73, ProQuest (3406753).

24 Ibid., pp. 325-330.

25 Xiangtang Hong, “Performing the Yellow River Cantata,” (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2009), pp. 315, ProQuest (3406753).

“The Flames of War” and “The Vast, Broken Night”

With regard to the unique aspects of and meaning(s) produced by Yan'an's sound culture, it may be useful to approach the issue from a different angle, namely by looking at Zhang Ailing's (張愛玲) aversion to, if not outright fear of, symphonic music. In her essay, *On Music* (*Tan Yinyue*《談音樂》), Zhang Ailing begins the paper by stating bluntly that she doesn't like music, as she feels that “all music is sorrowful,” yet it is the impassioned and performative nature of symphonic music which she particularly dislikes. “[Naturally, large-scale symphonies are different. They are forceful and formidable, crashing forth like the May Fourth Movement and absorbing each person's voice as their own. Raucous clamor emanating from all directions becomes subsumed, and the individual who opens their mouth to speak is startled by the depth and the amplitude of their own voice; yet, [symphonies] are also like hearing a voice speaking to you as you arouse from your sleep, unable to discern if it is you or the other person who is speaking, leaving you with a faint sense of horror].” For Zhang Ailing, symphonies are not only forceful, formidable and inexorable, but are also intricately planned out, with all the various instruments playing their parts in an orderly fashion. “[They all lay in ambush, each one taking cue from the other – I fear this kind of planned conspiracy].”

Zhang Ailing wrote these words in Shanghai of 1944. At the time, Shanghai was under the occupation of the Japanese and hence became known as the Lone Islet (*gudao* 孤島). Her aversion to symphonic music formed a stark contrast with Chen Xuezhao's highly praised “Unfinished Symphony.” One of the key differences between the two was likely what Zhang Ailing referred to as “a faint sense of horror” (*mohu de kongbu* 模糊的恐怖), as what is truly terrifying is not just the fragility and hazy nature of one's self-awareness when in the state between sleep and wakefulness, but rather the breakdown and melting away of the boundary that separates you and the other. For Chen Xuezhao, however, the power of the music that arouses “one's passion and one's vigor” comes precisely from encouraging others to extricate themselves from the prudent barriers [erected in] their own everyday lives and experience the fate shared by the greater living community.

At the end of her essay, Zhang Ailing had already written for an entire day and night, and from outside of her old velvet window curtains, she heard the

sound of music wafting in from the dance hall in the distance. It was a woman with a shrill voice singing a very popular song at the time – *Roses, Roses, Everywhere* (*Qiangwei Chuchu Kai* 《薔薇處處開》). “With Shanghai as big as it is, there was hardly a house which had its lamps still lit, and so the night appeared particularly vast and empty].” A car down below let out a long and cold beep as it passed by quickly and then slowly disappeared into the distance. Zhang Ailing wrote: “[To have roses blooming everywhere during this cruel, vast and broken night is simply unimaginable, yet this woman still chants softly and optimistically that they are all blooming].”

Actually, Zhang Ailing’s experience here bears many similarities with that of Chen Xuezhao and her deep-night listening of the swelling ocean waves. They were both similarly moved by sounds from afar, and also became aware of the absurdity and impracticality of their imaginings which were stirred from this. The shrill voice of the woman led Zhang Ailing to feel the severity of this “cruel, vast and broken night,” while the flowing sound of the river caused Chen Xuezhao to realize that “the flames of war raged across the lands of our nation, which were being invaded by our powerful neighbors.”

The difference among them, then, was the reality that they had grasped within the different environments which they occupied. Above, when discussing the different stages of Chen Xuezhao’s descriptions, namely that of observing and listening, it was pointed out that “the sound of waves in the still of the night” gave her a feeling of anxiety, as her recollection and imagining of “self” during this time could not be linked together with the concepts of “mother country” and “national territory,” and so they ultimately were unable to form a coherent and meaningful organic whole. This anxiety stemmed from the “self” realizing that it was “small” and was drifting away from a much larger sense of identity. It was precisely this sense of identity which propelled Chen Xuezhao to listen ardently and clearly make out the shouts and cries being uttered by the youth for their nation, their ethnicity and for themselves, and in doing so, discover the “Unfinished Symphony” which roused one’s passions and indignation. In other words, to discover and embrace the Sublime is, in the end, a conscious decision, and may even be said to be an ideological judgement, rather than the result of an impulsive action.

For Zhang Ailing, the reason that the “vast and broken night” was so cruel and caused one to feel depressed, or even hopeless, was precisely because it was

“vast” (*da* 大) and it was unalterable, even if it was broken and incomplete. Although in her essay *On Music*, Zhang Ailing could state without any hesitation that “[I am Chinese, so I like babel and clamor],” in her eyes what was “vast and broken” was not the nation, nor was it the nation’s people or history, but rather it was the inescapable condition of mankind, which is to say the “unreasonable world” in which everything is reduced merely to cause and effect, as stated in *Love in a Fallen City*, or as she later wrote in *Liuqing [Traces of Love]* (《留情》), “[Living in this world, there exists no romance which is not scarred and battered].” Thus, just like her character Bai Liusu who was living in occupied Hong Kong, where even though tens of thousands of people had already perished, she “[just smiled happily as she stood up and kicked the mosquito coil underneath the table].” Zhang Ailing does not directly face nor does she attempt to change that “vast and broken night.” Rather, she turns around and seeks to find truth in the more tangible and palpable details, appreciating “that immature completeness,” while unwilling to join in with the [larger] crowd and “deepen and amplify” her voice. Although it is impossible for roses to bloom everywhere, she still believes that “[even if they are only silk roses embellished onto canopies, lampshades, the brims of hats, sleeves, the tips of shoes and parasols – that immature completeness is still very lovely and darling].”

Though we could discuss and explain the differences between Zhang Ailing and Chen Xuezhao from many different angles and many different levels, it would be better to say that these two modern writers each possessed different temperaments, experiences and cultural backgrounds. Their disparate response to symphonic music was but only one point of entry into [this topic]. If we say that in *A Visit to Yan’an*, Chen Xuezhao vividly presents an elevatory process through which the Beautiful approaches the Sublime and the joys of vision approach the shock of listening, then what Zhang Ailing writes about at length in her essay *On Music* is precisely the experience of the individual which, through its forsaking of symphonic music, its refusal to be subsumed by the powerful [collective] voice and, in turn, its retreat to colors and smells, seeks only to find happiness. Each of them pursues their own life path as they head in opposite directions, and they share only the broader background of the wartime environment. Although neither of them directly experienced the war, they each had completely different imaginings about the war which was being carried out on the front lines. It may be said in the “Lone Islet” of Shanghai, Zhang Ailing persisted in a lifestyle which was

seemingly “post-war” in nature. Perhaps this is why in today’s age – in an era far removed from war – we feel that Zhang Ailing’s words are more touching and more meaningful, whereas the scenes described by Chen Xuezhao are forever stamped with the impassioned and stirring notes of that era. Because we now subsist in a different listening environment, the sounds which emanate out from the depths of history create completely new echoes and resonances.

Conclusion: Culture of Passion and Auditory Imaginings

The production of Yan’an’s listening environment and sound culture is naturally very closely related with the arduous Anti-Japanese War, however its broader and more explanatory background was actually the culture of passion (*jiqing wenhua* 激情文化) that first formed and developed in Yan’an, where it would later be widely advocated as well. This beautifully sung and rousing culture of passion brought together [elements of] war culture, revolutionary culture as well as the aforementioned youth culture. Although each of these cultures had their own inherent logic and cause, in Yan’an they came together to create a powerful and novel form of emotional [expression] as well as a cultural practice of subjective experience.

During the 1939 “May Fourth” Commemoration Day, Chen Xuezhao witnessed her first nation-wide Chinese Youth Day in Yan’an, where she was once again moved by the songs chanted by the youth. In *A Visit to Yan’an*, Chen wrote of her admiration and respect for these youth: “[The youth of modern China are blessed. They are able to receive liberal and revolutionary collective education... The youth of modern China are mighty, as the nation is currently engaged in a bitter international war].” She praised that “[the boarder area is the cradle of the youth],” because they “[received the education of revolution and war, as well as cultivated the spirit of democracy]” there.²⁶ This cradle, however, was built upon the foundation of extreme poverty. “[In and of itself, life in Yan’an is extremely drab and dull],” wrote Chen Xuezhao, however if asked to describe this life [in detail], “[I think that even a beautiful poem could only begin to describe but one

26 Chen Xuezhao, *Yan’an Fangwen Ji*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 362.

small fraction (of it)],” because “[at the time, everybody was satisfied with the [relative] material deprivation in Yan’an, and so they were quite pleased with the simple and optimistic living atmosphere there].”²⁷

As previously mentioned, the distinctive listening experience and sound culture in Yan’an was closely related with what was the relatively deficient visual culture. The culture of passion in Yan’an may be seen as a supplementation to and means of overcoming this materially deprived lifestyle, however at a [deeper] level, it may be seen as a principal element for Yan’an in becoming a sacred site of revolution and the spiritual “Mekka” to which the youth had flocked. How to arouse passion, or as a young Lu Xun had put it, “kindling the hearts of the people” (*ying renxin* 櫻人心), as well as how to guide and maintain this passion still remains a key question for modern Chinese culture today. To this, Yan’an gives us a very attractive answer, namely that a life of passion should be the real goal of modern society, and that our domestication, our marginalization and our capitulation to modern slogans is an unnecessary anomaly. Even though the times and trends have changed, the Yan’an experience still serves as a mirror, reflecting back the ever-standardized, fragmentized and deficient nature of our contemporary life.

Regarding research on Yan’an’s culture of passion, I believe that it should be framed and developed within the traditional concept of “feeling” or “sentiment” (*qing* 情) in Chinese culture as well as its more modern manifestation(s). What “*qing*” emphasizes is “truth” (*zhen* 真) or “sincerity” (*cheng* 誠), while at the same time also emphasizing “intimacy” (*qin* 親). “*Qing*” is about human relations, yet is also related to the self; it emphasizes interpersonal relationships, while at the same time also requiring a concrete or tangible form of expression. I feel that these aspects of “*qing*” had been given modern significance and modern form through Yan’an’s culture of passion, while the traditional Confucian code of ethics (*lijiao* 禮教) and Song-Ming Metaphysical Confucianism (*lixue* 理學) became the targets of cultural criticism during the May Fourth era, if not having already been “given the boot.” Aside from this, discussions on the so-called “affect theory” taking place in scholarly Humanities circles in the US may also serve as a useful reference, however I believe that the historical experience and

27 Chen Xuezhao, Yan’an Fangwen Ji, (Beijing: Zhongguo Guojia Guangbo Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 292; 300.

theoretical reflections left behind by the [legacy] of the Yan'an era are ultimately richer and more enlightening, namely because these experiences and musings remain unrestricted by the modern Western academic tradition. The interest in “affect theory” by many [Western] humanities scholars, on the other hand, may be largely attributed to their efforts to break free from the limits of the Western academic tradition as well as their attempts to discard with rationalist discourse and rigid gender norms.

Yan'an's listening experience and sound culture provides us with a revelation: We must fully recognize the extremely significant role that sound had played in stirring the imagination of the national community. In his discussion on how ethnicities emerge as imagined communities, Perry Anderson paid closer attention to 19th century print capitalism by looking into news disseminated by newspapers, the narratives touched upon in novels and [ultimately] the simultaneous imaginings brought on by these forms of print media. Yet, it is clear that the sense(s) of identity, as well as the designs and visions for modern society which were created on the basis of [said identity(s)], achieved through the listening experience and sound culture have significant differences with the national or ethnic imaginings arrived at through the reading experience, and as such are very worthy of our attention and consideration. We must make further, multi-layered investigations into the listening experience and its historical forms of imagination. Here, then, China's vocal 20th century provides us with extremely rich sources and materials to research.

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