

Ewell in the East (or Not): A Chinese Perspective on Racism in Music Studies

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1. Introduction

Music theory is white.
—Philip Ewell

Thus begins Philip Ewell's article 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame'.¹ His rigorous analysis of the systemic racism and white supremacy in music theory, and his subsequent lectures on assimilationism in music, have certainly created a tidal wave in Western academic circles, with some institutions responding by acknowledging 'racism and bias in their program' and subsequently revising their curricula.²

The response to this impactful debate was rather different in China—one might describe it as nearly nonexistent. A month after an article on Ewell was published in *The New Yorker*, a schedule appeared on the Chinese social media platform WeChat.³ Released by one of the few elite conservatories in China, the schedule detailed all upcoming lectures in the conservatoire's '2020 Season of Academic Music Studies'.⁴ ⁵ There were 26 lectures in total on the schedule: 22 on Beethoven, with the 4 remaining lectures on

music and neuroscience, European philosophy and aesthetics, musical semiotics, and ancient Chinese music. A pattern similar to the one Ewell described in his article had emerged: a large emphasis on European theories and disciplines dominated by white men, a brief segment about Chinese music, next to nothing about the music traditions and theories elsewhere in the world—and certainly nothing about music and race. The brief segment about Chinese music which was included was, incidentally, about the ancient music of the Han people—the largest ethnic group in China—and thereby excluded Chinese ethnic minorities. Therefore, one naturally doubts whether Ewell's ideas and the significant debate around them have entered the horizons of academic music studies in China at all.

A quick search on *Baidu*, the largest search engine legally accessible in China, shows that no discussions in Chinese were made about Ewell and his work except for one post on the zhihu.com, the Chinese equivalent of the question and answer website Quora, by a PhD student based in Canada whom I know personally.⁶ It was at this point that I began to question whether the issue of race and music is discussed at all in mainland Chinese academia. I entered several different combinations of the keywords 'music' (*yinyue*, 音乐), 'race' (*zhongzu*, 种族), 'ethnicity' (*minzu*, 民族) and 'racism' (*zhongzuzhuyi*, 种族主义) on the website of CNKI, a major research and information publishing institution in China. However, the search results contained mainly journal articles on blues and hip-hop music written by researchers in cultural studies, and some on the preservation of traditional music of ethnic minority groups in China. This debate had been virtually overlooked by the Chinese community of music scholars.

1 Philip A Ewell, 'Music Theory and The White Racial Frame' (2020) 26 Music Theory Online <<https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4>>.

2 'Cornish College of The Arts - Music Department' <<https://www.facebook.com/CornishMusic/posts/3297682836937718>> accessed 2021.

3 Alex Ross, 'Black Scholars Confront White Supremacy In Classical Music' *The New Yorker* <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/21/black-scholars-confront-white-supremacy-in-classical-music>> accessed 2020.

4 'Upcoming Events | 2020 Music Academic Season: Autumn Fusion, 活动预告 2020 音乐学术季秋融' WeChat <<https://archive.vn/H4x38>>, saved from <<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/CjuU82Wd2d90qUdF7KgdlQ>> accessed 2020.

5 All Chinese names and titles are rendered in the Romanised pinyin. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Chinese into English are mine.

6 Patrick Huang, 'Philip Ewell's Musicology Lecture (Oct 27), Philip Ewell 的音乐学讲座 [10.27 的音乐学讲座]' <<https://web.archive.org/web/20201104140239/https://zhuatlan.zhihu.com/p/267960072>> accessed 2020.

2. Racism in Chinese culture: Nonexistent or overlooked?

One might argue that Ewell's analysis of the white racial frame and of racism in music is 'utterly irrelevant in the Chinese context' because racism 'is a modern phenomenon which originated in Europe'.⁷ This is the argument used by Xu Wei, who, writing for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), had defended a song-and-dance number in China's state-run Spring Festival Gala against claims of racism. It featured a Chinese actress 'wearing blackface and fake buttocks' to portray an African mother who gushes, 'I love Chinese people. I love China.'⁸ Xu, referencing Pierre-André Taguieff and Clifford Geertz, argues that the show was not, in fact, racist in a Chinese context, for the following reasons. 1) Racist symbols depend heavily on cultural contexts. 2) Several popular characters in Chinese traditional operas were often portrayed with black faces (citing PRC premiers Zhou Enlai and Wen Jiabao). 3) Blackface portrayals of African characters by Chinese people show that 'African people and Chinese people are one family'.⁹

2.1. Chinese racial frames: Old and new, Eastern and Western

What Xu fails to acknowledge, however, is the supremacist undertone of the show. China and Chinese people are portrayed as the cultured forces which offer civilisation and generous help, while African people remain subservient, singing their praises. This undertone calls to mind the complex history of racism in Chinese culture. The ancient Chinese concept of 'Sinocentrism', and the 'Sino-barbarian' dichotomy, would let one 'regard all foreigners as objectively inferior' and view China as 'the most advanced civilisation in the world'. They were overwhelmed by the influx of European culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ This drastic change meant that the Chinese 'idea of "race" (zhong [種], "seed", "species", "race") transitioned from cultural exclusiveness to racial exclusiveness', but it also brought white supremacy—and even anti-black racism—to China.¹¹ The resulting modern Chinese mindset regarding race and culture can therefore be interpreted as a subversion of the ancient 'Sinocentric' model by the European idea of white supremacy. It was further complicated by xenophobic, anti-Western propaganda, as well as the regime's ever-changing relations with other communist states, which influenced the history of communist China.

Another way to interpret this mindset would be to use Dr Ibram X Kendi's concept of non-white assimilationism, which Ewell drew on profusely in his lectures, whereby people of colour express 'the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviourally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioural enrichment programmes to develop that racial group'.¹²

The overlaps and clashes between the two racial frames resulted in a unique phenomenon. Chinese culture was often deemed 'backwards', but it was also revered as a symbol of national pride, because of the complex origins of China's nationalism—a mixture of Westernisation, iconoclasm, and Sinocentrism. Because of China's major defeats at the hands of European nations and Japan in the nineteenth century, European and Japanese ideals gradually came to be perceived as superior yet at the same time foreign and untrustworthy. Soviet/Russian culture was at first revered because of the rise of the Communist Party of China and the subsequent establishment of the PRC. However, its influence later waned because of the Sino-Soviet split and the post-Mao, reform-era influx of Western culture. African and other Asian cultures, including those of ethnic minority groups in China, stay at the bottom of the hierarchy, as they do in the white racial frame. While some suggested that authorities in the PRC tended to 'portray racism as a Western phenomenon', outbursts of racist and Han-chauvinist sentiments still occur in modern China. Exemplars are the 1988 Nanjing anti-African protests and the racist actions against Africans in Guangzhou amid the COVID-19 crisis.¹³ One can therefore conclude this is solid proof that racism and a unique duality of racial frames do indeed exist in modern China, which overlap and clash with the European white racial framework.

2.2. Eurocentrism in Chinese music and the Chinese racial frame

In the domain of music, especially of music academia, this Chinese racial frame takes the form of a reluctant but futile acceptance of assimilationism and, as a result, European supremacy. Shen Yang Yandi, the deputy director of the China Association of Music Theory, admitted in an interview that there is 'no Chinese mother tongue in a musical sense, or, to put it differently, we have lost our [musical] language'.¹⁴

He illustrated this by pointing out that '80% of what we teach in conservatories is Western music (西方音乐, "music from the West"), same with our concert life', and that even 'the concert itself' and the modern Chinese orchestra was developed in China by 'copying Western art'. This means that Western music is in a dominant position in China, and is an unavoidable reality.¹⁵ Yang believed that the reason for this reality was that Western music, a tradition of art music, had no equivalent in classical Chinese culture, and that China did not have a powerful tradition of art music in a Western sense, causing profound confusions and clashes when Western music was introduced in China. He furthered his argument by stating that 'we still understand it—"Western music"—insufficiently and superficially', which 'made the destructive effect [of the introduction of Western music] all the more violent'.¹⁶ While lamenting the absence of 'a reliable, comprehensive biography of Beethoven' in Chinese and 'a serious Chinese scholarship on Beethoven's 9 symphonies', Yang also fleetingly mentioned the 'preservation of Guqin, Kunqu, long song and Muqam as world heritages'.¹⁷

7 Wei Xu, 'Do Not Use The Racism Label Randomly 不要把种族主义的帽子随便乱戴' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic Of China, 2018) <<https://archive.vn/H4x38>>, saved from <<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zft/chn/jlydh/mtsy/t1536004.htm>>.

8 'With Blackface And Monkey Suit, Chinese Gala On Africa Causes Uproar' *The New York Times* (New York, 2018) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/asia/china-africa-blackface-lunar-new-year.html>>.

9 *ibid.*

10 Guy G Ankerl, *Global Communication Without Universal Civilization* (INU Press 2000).

11 Barry Sautman, 'Anti-Black Racism In Post-Mao China' (1994) 138 *The China Quarterly* 413 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000035827>>.

12 Ibram X Kendi, *How to Be An Antiracist* (Penguin Random House 2019).

13 Hsiao-Hung Pai, 'The Coronavirus Crisis Has Exposed China's Long History Of Racism' *Guardian* (London, 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/25/coronavirus-exposed-china-history-racism-africans-guangzhou>>.

14 Yang Yandi, 'Yang Yandi: Western Music And Its Research In China, 杨燕迪: 西方音乐及其研究在中国' (*Nanjing University Marxist Social Theory Research Center*, 南京大学马克思主义社会理论研究中心, 2008) <<https://archive.vn/Sf0sI>>, saved from <https://ptext.nju.edu.cn/bf/33/c12245a245555/page.htm>.

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

17 *ibid.*

However, Yang did not discuss any other musical traditions, such as jazz, blues, rock, gamelan, or Indian classical music, except for a fleeting acknowledgement of the ‘impingement we face from [Western] popular music’, despite many of these traditions also being ‘powerful and rich traditions of art music’ and some also coming from the West.¹⁸ Here, Yang reveals not only the dominance of ‘Western music’ in China, but also the underlying assumption that the default ‘Western music’ (or, ‘music from the West’) for him and his audience should be European classical music. This is precisely the assumption attacked by Ewell in his articles, blog posts, and lectures. Yang’s subtle dismissal of popular music, and the conspicuous absence of other classical music traditions from his remarks, indicate his own conforming to the aforementioned Chinese racial frame, and possibly, to some extent, to assimilationism and the white racial frame. Above all, Yang’s interview is a brutally honest depiction of the systemic Eurocentrism which permeates the contemporary Chinese music scene. Shen Qia’s comment should serve as an appropriate conclusion to this section: ‘In China, Eurocentrism has made a more profound impact on music than any other artistic fields.’¹⁹

3. Case study: Racial-Ethnic frames in Li Chongguang’s *Basic Music Theory*

Ewell investigated the white racial frame of music theory by examining widely used American music theory textbooks and looking for patterns in their musical examples. I believe the same analysis could be performed on *Basic Music Theory* by Li Chongguang, a ‘foundational music theory textbook’ which influenced ‘generations of Chinese people who wished to enter the world of music’ and is still widely used to this day.²⁰ First published in 1962, the book was based on *Elementarnaya Teoriya Muzyki* by Igor Vladimirovich Sposobin’ with ‘additional sections on Chinese music’. It remains one of the best-selling music textbooks on Chinese e-commerce platforms.²¹ It is therefore plausible to use *Basic Music Theory* as the Chinese counterpart to Ewell’s selection of American music theory textbooks. I analysed musical examples in *Basic Music Theory* using the same method as Ewell (fig 1).

Of the 333 musical examples in *Basic Music Theory*, 253 (roughly 76%) were written by composers who identified as Chinese, or had been transcribed by formally trained Chinese composers from ‘folk tunes’ which originated in mainland China. 79 examples (roughly 24%) were by composers who were mainly active in Western and Eastern European countries (including Tsarist Russia and the USSR). 1 (less than 1%) was supposedly transcribed from a (North) Korean ‘folk tune’. None of these examples came from outside China, Korea, or Europe. None of them was composed by a person of African or American heritage, or indeed from any other musical cultures. The book succeeded in introducing students to key concepts in Western functional harmony, and to the Chinese pentatonic scales, as well as the Chinese *Gongche* notation and the numbered musical notation system which was popular in China

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Shen Qia, ‘The U-Shaped Journey Of The Idea Of Chinese Music Through The 20th-Century, 二十世纪国乐思想的, U‘字之路’ (1994) *Music Studies*, 字之路 67.

²⁰ Li Yuhong, ‘Two Textbooks in The Development Of Basic Music Theory As A Discipline, 基本乐理’ 学科发展中的两本教材’ (2005) *Music Education In China*, 中国音乐教育 33 <<http://www.cqvip.com/QK/82024X/20057/16031120.html>>.

²¹ Li Chongguang, *Basic Music Theory*, 音乐理论基础 (twenty-sixth edn, People’s Music Publishing House 2001).

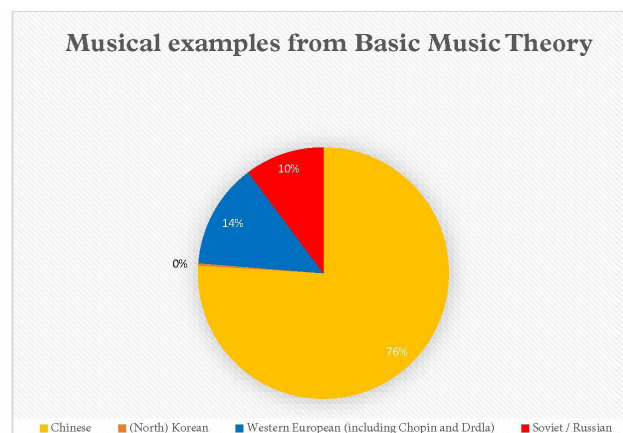


Fig.1. Racial/regional demographic data for musical examples from *Basic Music Theory*.

at the time.²² However, it made no effort to introduce or even mention any other musical traditions, let alone other theoretical systems. Therefore, I share Ewell’s conclusion that these music theory examples are ‘literally, from a critical-race perspective’, Chinese or white, and ‘virtually nothing else’.²³

The stark racial and cultural imbalance illustrates how the duality of Sinocentric and Eurocentric racial frames in China intertwined and morphed into a complex cultural phenomenon, which influenced the writing of *Basic Music Theory*, and by extension, the entire discipline of academic studies of music in China. The book alone was not enough to construct such a far-reaching racial frame; instead, it was a product of precisely that racial frame, born out of China’s unstable relationship with Western culture over the last 200 years—‘sometimes like the devil, but sometimes like a beauty’.²⁴ This unique and complex fixation led Li Chongguang and other Chinese music theorists at the time to focus solely on music from China and Europe, ignoring vast traditions of music and music theory from other parts of the world. Such a narrow, Eurocentric, and Sinocentric perspective has already been acknowledged and scrutinised by Chinese musicologists. Few have made a clearer observation than Shen Qia, who commented in 1993 that the so-called ‘openness’ of the Chinese music circle has often been a fixation on ‘the West’ as the only frame of reference. This fixation is in fact narrow-minded and conservative.²⁵ His assessment of the lamentably narrow perspective of musicology in China testifies to the accuracy of my analysis above. Indeed, music scholars in China have not taken up music theories from outside China and the West as valid reference points.

Furthermore, Li Chongguang’s *Basic Music Theory* shows a tendency to diminish the cultural identity of ethnic minority groups within China. Of the 139 traditional Chinese musical examples in the book (categorised as folk tunes rather than works of specific, identified composers), only four are identified by ethnicity. The rest are identified by province, despite many being important songs by ethnic minority peoples. Perhaps to promote official narratives, the book credits key Mongolian and Uyghur songs by their respective

²² *ibid.*

²³ Ewell (n 1).

²⁴ Shen (n 19).

²⁵ *ibid.*

provinces, not by their ethnicity. The epic folk song ‘Gada Meiren’, for instance, is labelled an ‘Inner Mongolian folk song’, which diminishes the ethnic tensions that the song reflects.²⁶ Borjigin Burensain, for instance, cast the events described by the lyrics of the song as ‘an ethnic conflict between the Mongols and the Chinese over Mongol land’ and a ‘campaign against Chinese colonisation’.²⁷ This subtle suppression of ethnic minority identities, intertwining with the Sinocentric and Eurocentric racial frames, forms a spectre of racial-ethnic frames that haunts the book yet has often been overlooked. One can therefore draw parallels between my analysis of *Basic Music Theory* and Ewell’s analysis of American music theory textbooks. While the American music theory classroom has been shaped by the white racial frame, its counterpart in China has been influenced by a different yet similarly oppressive racial-ethnic frame born out of the clashes and the eventual fusion between Sinocentrism, Eurocentrism, and Han chauvinism.

4. Conclusion and suggested revisions

In my analysis, I have attempted to reveal the far-reaching impact of the white racial frame and Eurocentrism. The white racial frame is not only a Euro-American problem but also, one can argue, a significant component of the racial-ethnic frame behind modern Chinese music. My analysis therefore calls on musicologists in the West to re-evaluate the impact of the white racial frame and Eurocentrism on music and theory, from a global perspective. The discussions on race and music theory can therefore be conducted on a global scale, expanding from Ewell’s America-centric perspective to a true multicultural dialogue between music scholars from around the world, in order to acknowledge, comprehend, and eventually tackle this problem.

In the same interview where he admitted that China had ‘no (musical) mother tongue’, Yang Yandi remarked that the trend of globalisation has begun in China, and that ignorance of ‘other worlds’, especially the West, is no longer defensible.²⁸ His call for a better musical understanding of ‘other worlds’ seems to suggest his advocacy for diversity in China’s music theory classroom, but what follows shows a more nuanced picture. Yang was advocating for diversity, yet he insisted on selecting the ‘Western World’ as the world out of all ‘other worlds’ for the Chinese music community to understand.²⁹ His call for diversity was thus still insinuating the validity of China’s Eurocentric approach to music from ‘other worlds’. Following Ewell’s recommendations for the American music theory community, however, I believe that Yang’s call for a more globalised approach could be expanded to address the racial-ethnic frame in Chinese music theory. The racial-ethnic frame itself, along with its history and impact, needs to be acknowledged and analysed by the community of music scholars in China and, subsequently, taught as the historical component to theory for music students in China. The music theory curriculum itself can be expanded to cover more traditions—for instance, by including music traditions and theoretical frameworks of Indian, African, American, and South-East Asian peoples—rather than focussing solely on China and the Western classical tradition. Such a broadened scope, combined with a more comprehensive

understanding of the Western classical traditions, could arguably act as a more inclusive approach to Yang’s problem.

Finally, it is vital that music scholars in China establish effective means of communication with colleagues from across the world. A good start would be introducing more accurate Chinese translations of non-Chinese scholarly texts to music scholars in China, as well as more accurate English translations of Chinese texts to non-Chinese music scholars. Via this potential avenue of collaboration, along with others, problems posed by racial frames in music and music theory can be dissected to reimagine more diverse and inclusive theoretical frameworks of global musical traditions, which in turn could become a new source of musical innovation.

²⁶ Li (21).

²⁷ Borjigin Burensain, ‘The Complex Structure of Ethnic Conflict In The Frontier: Through The Debates Around The “Jindandao Incident” In 1891’ (2004) 6 *Inner Asia* 41 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/146481704793647171>>.

²⁸ Yang (n 14).

²⁹ *ibid.*