

BOOK REVIEW

Half Sound, Half Philosophy

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Jing Wang. *Half Sound, Half Philosophy: Aesthetics, Politics, and History of China's Sound Art*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 286 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5013-3348-4

Abstract: Jing Wang's book *Half Sound, Half Philosophy* discusses how musical and artistic trends have shifted from connecting with nature and cultivating moral values to prioritizing advertisements, technology and individualism. In the past, people actively engaged with music as participants, but today they are mostly passive listeners or entertainers, which has diminished the philosophy of music's transformative power. The book highlights that music should not just be seen as a simple practice but as an experimental art that connects with cosmic, moral and aesthetic values, shaping life itself. Sound art is not just an abstract concept but a way of life intertwined with both thought and practice. The author explores this idea by linking qi-philosophy with qi-sound, offering insights into the role of sound art in fostering creativity, especially in practical fields like architecture and daily life.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Chinese Acoustics, Creativity, Half Philosophy, Politics, Sound Art.

Sound art, as a philosophical approach, goes beyond abstract thinking or intricate ideas – it embodies a way of life. Music, seen as a form of philosophical art, plays a vital role in shaping and transforming both individuals and societies, blending thought and practice into an indivisible whole. This raises the question of

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how sound art philosophy relates to aesthetic, moral, and cosmic values. It also prompts inquiry into whether there are existing frameworks—such as literary, electronic, or instrumental traditions—that can inspire creative sound art for the well-being of the planet. Jing Wang's book *Half Sound, Half Philosophy* tackles these issues by examining the connection between qi-philosophy and qi-sound. Wang's six chapters offer insights into how this ancient Chinese philosophy applies to sound art in the contemporary cybernetic world. Qi-philosophy, which emphasizes creativity in practical fields like architecture and daily life, is presented as a key framework for understanding and building innovations in sound art and experimental music.

The introduction sets the stage for the fusion of the *qi* concept with ancient Chinese music. Wang explains the philosophy of *qi* in Chinese acoustics, presenting it as both the breath of life and the driving force within the cosmic order (17). In essence, *qi* philosophy posits that the cosmos and humanity are interconnected, constantly resonating to create unity. *Qi*-philosophy, therefore, is a living philosophy that actively fuels creative sound practices (20). Each chapter of the book ties back to *qi*-philosophy, revealing its relevance in the modern world. Wang refers to this as "*qi*-thinking" rather than theory, emphasizing that while theory is an abstraction, *qi*-thinking "relates things through resonance, an innate capacity of the cosmos and all things—the secret of creativity" (19). This approach links nature and culture to the cosmos' inherent creativity, fostering an earthly politics rooted in this creative power.

The book explores the philosophy of *qi* in relation to sound studies, focusing on concepts like transformation, resonance, process, and correlationality (26). It emphasizes how Chinese music's connection to the heavens and earth supports its social, political, and moral roles. Artists and musicians working with sound prioritize the invisible, aligning with *qi*-thinking. Wang contextualizes *qi* across various languages, historical periods, and intellectual frameworks, developing it into a philosophy aimed at enhancing creativity through the power of resonance and embracing change. Rather than offering a comprehensive theory

of sound art or music, qi-philosophy addresses bodily senses, moral and intellectual values, and the practices of caring, feeling, listening, thinking, and creating, with its richness lying in fostering an innovative way of life (53).

Creativity plays a vital role in fostering innovation, self-expression, and cultural enrichment, especially in sound art, where it allows for diverse and transformative experiences. In our pluralistic world, the importance of creativity lies in its ability to bridge differences, encouraging new ways of thinking and connecting across boundaries. Sound art exemplifies this through its ability to resonate with aesthetic, moral, and cultural values, creating shared experiences despite diversity. Modern technological advancements further enhance this creativity, contributing to a more harmonious world. Innovations in sound technology, such as electronic music and multimedia platforms, amplify the impact of sound art by making it more accessible and multifaceted. Just as loudspeakers once spread cultural messages in ancient China, today's electronic sound art – broadcast through radios, TVs, sound machines, concerts, and festivals – promotes social harmony and artistic diversity in contemporary society.

Wang explores how sound art has evolved beyond its traditional boundaries, becoming a central feature in galleries, video installations, sculptures, and concerts. Since 2000, sound art in China has flourished, supported by commercial galleries, independent art spaces, exhibitions, and academic institutions, with Shanghai emerging as a key hub for contemporary Chinese art. This period marks the blending of tradition with new media, contributing significantly to the global discourse on sound art. Wang argues that while modern sound art is often viewed as entertainment, its deeper purpose is to foster a greater understanding of the world rather than serve as self-promotion for artists and musicians. Again, the diversity within sound art transcends the art form itself, encompassing broader cultural narratives, ideologies, technological developments, and political expressions. Wang's focus on experimental music at the grassroots level, particularly among non-professional artists, offers a more comprehensive view of Chinese sound art. This

inclusive perspective highlights the importance of creativity and meaning beyond academic or professional circles, demonstrating that sound art is nurtured through diverse practices, enriching the artistic experience across all layers of society.

Wang's research deals with sound art in contemporary China by integrating the ancient practice of shanshui-thought within qi-philosophy. According to Wang, shanshui-thought, rooted in qi-philosophy, emphasizes cultivating harmony with the landscape rather than mastering it. Wang argues that contemporary Chinese musicians, drawing from shanshui-thought, approach sound art not as public entertainers but as environmental improvisers. These musicians engage audiences in experimental practices that aim for cosmic harmony and political awareness. This creative process, inspired by shanshui-thought, enhances cosmic well-being and fosters a deeper consciousness about the Earth (171-188). Furthermore, Wang expands on Chinese ancient philosophy by integrating shamanistic perspectives, particularly the concept of *huanghu*. Like shanshui-thought, *huanghu* reveals the aesthetics of poetry, literature, and painting, and Wang connects these elements to sound art practices and electroacoustic activities (196). Shamanism, seen as a cultural gene in local environments, strengthens individuals and communities, aiding them in overcoming challenges and entering a mystical state of *huanghu* (220). In essence, Wang's book examines how the mystical and philosophical practices of the past, particularly Shamanism and qi-philosophy, enrich the contemporary world. Her approach is not limited to local or historical contexts, but rather encompasses a holistic, global perspective that integrates poetry, literature, and art into the modern era of sound art and creativity.

One of the key challenges that Wang addresses is how technological advancements, while innovative, have contributed to environmental degradation through the noise and pollution from factories, machinery, and manufacturing plants. As the world becomes increasingly industrialized, attention is drawn to this distortion, leading to a disconnection from the natural beauty of the planet. Wang emphasizes that "the ancient Chinese qi-cosmology has always been attentive to diffusive forms of

violence" (222) (222), highlighting the need to rethink the use of technology. Wang argues that rather than employing cybernetics for control and manipulation, qi-philosophy advocates for using technology in a way that fosters creativity, particularly in sound art. She cites the work of Zhang Peili, whose sound pieces exaggerate a humming noise associated with the state, creating an "anti-monumental" message that critiques the totalizing control of political and economic systems (226). In this way, Wang suggests that instead of being dominated by technology, we should embrace cybernetics as a tool for creativity and self-expression, grounded in the holistic principles of qi-philosophy.

Wang encourages the use of qi-thinking to reimagine contemporary society, particularly in China, where the balance between technological progress and holistic living is crucial. She argues that a cybernetic mindset, informed by *qi*-philosophy, can foster a sense of care for oneself and others, cultivating a philosophy of life that promotes harmony and well-being. This reimagining calls for a shift in perspective, where technology serves not as a force of control, but as a means to enhance creativity and cultivate goodness in the world.

This book offers a comprehensive exploration of the aesthetics, politics, and history of China's sound art within the framework of qi-philosophy. It examines both contemporary electroacoustic creativity and traditional sound art methods, unveiling Wang's inclusive approach that encompasses both professionals and non-professionals in the grassroots context of Chinese sound art, thereby presenting a holistic view of the nation. However, Wang distinguishes her concept of *qi*-philosophy as "qi-thinking," suggesting that traditional theories are often overly abstract. She considers concepts like *shanshui* and *huanghu* as notions and thoughts rather than mere theoretical frameworks. However, this approach may raise questions about the relational integrity of her arguments, as her construction of *qi*-thinking with *shanshui* and *huanghu* theories could potentially undermine her inclusive views. Additionally, while Wang effectively captures the geographical connections and interdisciplinary perspectives of creative sound art, one might inquire about the treatment of

feminist perspectives within *qi*-philosophy. The philosophy of life has not only a connection with any particular domain but rather with every domain – the whole life (see, further, Shapshay 2023). This raises important questions about inclusivity and representation within the broader context of *qi*-philosophy and sound art.

Despite these drawbacks, the book serves as an essential resource for integrating Chinese and Western musical traditions. It uncovers a wide array of creative sound art practices within both historical and contemporary contexts, exploring aesthetic, moral, and political perspectives. This comprehensive examination fosters a deeper understanding of how sound art evolves in China, bridging cultural divides and enriching the discourse on musicality.

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