Reflecting and Reimagining Transnational Chinese Identity through Composition

DMUS IN COMPOSITION (2019-2024)

ALEX HO, ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

I investigate the relationship between my compositions and my cultural identity as a transnational Chinese composer. An autoethnographic method is key to my research. I evaluate my lived experiences and consider their cultural, social, political, and historical contexts, before using these as stimuli to compose music. In doing so, I show how my cultural identity shapes my compositions and collaborations, whilst the process and creation of music affords a better appreciation of my cultural identity. Referring to a range of cultural, ethnomusicological, and creative work, I examine how transnational Chinese communities struggle to belong in the West, the sense of cultural rootlessness attached to transnational experience, the need to reclaim Chinese identities in the face of racism, and lastly the importance of community in my navigation of cultural identity.

My practice-based research is driven by a fascination with transcultural spaces alongside the recognition of the continuing legacy of colonialism and its impact on the perception and presentation of Chinese cultures in the West. The ten compositions of my portfolio address these strands in different ways, taking various forms including opera, orchestral work, song cycles, audience participation pieces, and solo instrumental music. This written commentary elucidates the compositional logic of each piece and their relation to my cultural identity, as well as their creative processes that often involve deep collaboration. As such, I highlight how composition allows me to negotiate the complex layers of identity whilst also nurturing connections with those around me.

A GUIDE TO THIS SUBMISSION

Number of Compositions: 10

Total Duration of Composition Portfolio: 159'

Word Count of Written Commentary: 30,081

Scores and recordings for each composition are available separately to this commentary.

The contents of this submission are based on the indicative durations and word range as set out in the RCM Doctoral Handbook.

A full list of works/projects undertaken during this DMus can be found in appendices 1 and 2.

This version of the written commentary has been created specifically for open access.

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List of Submitted Compositions (in order of appearance in commentary)

1. ***Untold*, An Opera (45') for Dancer, Countertenor, Flute, Yangqin, Percussion, and Piano**
   Co-directed by: Alex Ho and Julia Cheng
   Premiered by: Julia Cheng, Keith Pun, and Tangram at Hackney Round Chapel in November 2019

2. ***Letters from Home* for Baritone and Piano (17')**
   Text by: Theophilus Kwek
   Premiered by: Jia Huang and Satoshi Kubo at the Royal Opera House in February 2022

3. ***Above the White Island* for Tenor and Piano (9')**
   Text by: Theophilus Kwek
   Recorded by: Shengzhi Ren and Derek Clarke, Scottish Opera, in October 2020

4. ***Knuckleduster* for Solo Piano (6')**
   Recorded and premiered by: Aidan Chan at Royal College of Music in June 2021

5. ***Hush* for Choir (6')**
   Text by: Alex Ho
   Recorded by: National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, cond. Ben Parry, in October 2021

6. ***Splinter* for Double Bass and Orchestra (10')**
   Premiered by: Sebastian Pennar and the LPO, cond. Brett Dean at the Southbank Centre in July 2022

7. ***A Place called Paradise* for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano (20')**
   Text by: Theophilus Kwek
   Premiered by: Fleur Barron and Kunal Lahiry at Oxford Lieder Festival in October 2022

8. ***Say Hi* for Four Instruments (Open Score) and Audience Participation (10')**
   Premiered by: Tangram at LSO St Luke's in January 2020, cond. Alex Ho

9. ***Breathe and Draw*** **for Two Conductors, Sinfonietta, and Audience Participation (24')**
   Recorded by: Nevis Ensemble, cond. Holly Mathieson and Jon Hargreaves in December 2020

10. ***On Silk and Paper*** **for Erhu, Pipa, Yangqin, and Guzheng (12')**
    Commissioned by: Silk String Quartet
    Premiered by: Silk String Quartet at Rich Mix London in October 2021

Reflecting and Reimagining Transnational Chinese Identity through Composition

Chapter 1.1 INTRODUCTION

My artistic research centres transnational Chinese identity. As a London-born composer with parents from Hong Kong, I am fascinated by the vitality of transcultural spaces whilst keenly aware of a social landscape where anti-Asian hate speech in the UK increased by over 1,000% in 2020 compared to the previous year.[1] My research pulls at this tension, grappling with the network of assumptions, perceptions, and possibilities alive in my cultural identity. An autoethnographic approach is key, whereby I examine my lived experiences to interrogate cultural, social, and political contexts such as patterns of rootlessness in diasporic existence, the need to reclaim our identities in the face of racism, and the hope of nurturing cross-cultural communities to imagine a better-connected society. I then use these excavations as inspirations to compose music, exploring how my creative ideas realise new dimensions and meanings of transnational Chinese identity, before reflecting on their processes and outcomes. As such, my submission comprises a substantial composition portfolio alongside this written commentary that contextualises each piece and enriches their interpretation as a collective whole. By investigating the relationship between my cultural identity and my music, I find that they actively shape and stimulate each other. The explorations of my lived experiences inspire my music and creative processes, which in turn afford a better appreciation of my identity, its formation, and its articulation.

[1] Ditch the Label, 'Uncovered: Online Hate Speech in the Covid Era', Accessed 15 December 2023, https://www.ditchthelabel.org/research-report/UNCOVERED:%20ONLINE%20HATE%20SPEECH%20IN%20THE%20COVID%20ERA.

1.1.1 Positioning Cultural Identity and Transnational Chinese Identity

I view cultural identity as the means by which I locate belonging to a community, and further, to a system of values and beliefs that is based on a shared history and a shared future. Extending from the basis that race and ethnicity are constructed, cultural identity is at once constructed from social, political, and historical forces, whilst also productive of new connections and practices. My understanding is informed by cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, who in studying Black diaspora of the Caribbean, sees cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'."[2] He rejects the notion of a cultural identity fixed to a 'true self', recognising that cultural identities are subject to change and transformation. In foregrounding its ruptures and alterations, Hall models cultural identity not as "an *essence* but a *positioning*", suggesting we conceive our cultural identities by orienting ourselves in reference to the continuing histories of our communities. In Hall's words, this is to speak of "what we really are" as well as "what we have become".[3]

Hall's emphasis on positioning leads me to pinpoint my research on 'transnational Chinese' identity, a category for those of Chinese heritage living outside of China – the Chinese diaspora – with a self-identifiable connection to China. Crucially, this term recognises the connections between Chinese diasporic communities across countries and continents such as British Chinese and Chinese American communities. My research traces our aligned experiences, not least the marginalisation of our cultures in the West, and I find connections with transnational Chinese composers, performers, and scholars within and outside the UK who contribute to my research as collaborators, mentors, and friends. I demonstrate how

[2] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.
[3] Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', 225-226.

transnational Chinese identity transcends the assumption that Chinese and Western cultures are mutually exclusive. I am frequently referred to as Chinese in the UK by friends and diversity surveys, yet I am almost always British in China and Hong Kong as soon as I speak in broken Cantonese or complete immigration forms. My cultural identity is neither British nor Chinese, but instead occupies a liminal space between these categories.

My broad definition of 'transnational Chinese' is intentional given the plurality of our identities. It is used not to homogenise the experiences of millions of individuals, but instead to celebrate the multiplicity and richness of what being Chinese may mean today. In this way, I embrace collaboration in my practice as a necessary means of reflecting this idea and have found the communal spirit fostered as a result hugely impactful on my creative practice as this submission goes on to demonstrate.

1.1.2 Postcolonial Context

My conception of transnational Chinese identity evokes Hall once more in his assertion that diasporic experience is defined "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity."[4] There has been significant scholarship on this heterogeneity and diversity by critical theorist, Homi Bhabha, who pins this discourse to a postcolonial context. He states that "the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora…", and that the "Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of post-war migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national

[4] Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', 235.

identity".[5] This postcolonial context is pertinent to the relationships between the identities, peoples, and cultures of China and the West, which as cultural critic Rey Chow argues, is necessary to "[keep] alive questions of disciplined knowledge, on the one hand, and those of the continued condition of inequality…that accompany such knowledge as it seeks to deal with racial, ethnic and cultural difference, on the other."[6] Chow examines the study of the historical and present socio-political relationship between China and the West. She names it a "colonial situation", where China's relative lack of territorial concession to the West obscures its exploitation by Western Imperialism across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[7] Indeed, the 'forgetting' of colonial violence on Chinese cultures is part of the West's ongoing marginalisation of our identities in the 21st century. For transnational Chinese communities across the globe today, racism is rife alongside the continued gross misrepresentation of our identities through tropes of orientalism and characterisations of the model minority myth, issues in which this submission intervenes.

1.1.3 An Anti-Colonial Practice

My practice is anti-colonial in its resistance against structures inherited through colonialism. I push back against 'white normativity', a systemic issue across Western classical music that centres white identities, experiences, and cultures over their Global Majority counterparts. There have been multiple examinations illuminating how this persists across the sector, notably Christina Scharff's study that finds the 'ideal' musician is presumed white,[8] Mina

[5] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.
[6] Rey Chow and Paul Bowman, *The Rey Chow Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 29.
[7] Chow, *The Rey Chow Reader*, 36.
[8] Christina Scharff, 'Explaining Inequalities in the Classical Music Profession', *On Curating* no. 47 (September 2020), https://www.on-curating.org/issue-47-reader/explaining-inequalities-in-the-classical-music-profession.html.

Yang's interrogation on Asian musicians being racialised as robotic performers lacking soul and emotion,[9] and Philip Ewell's critique of music theory which found the representation of non-white composers taught in US undergraduate curricula to be under two percent in 2019.[10] In this light, my practice of centring transnational Chinese identity confronts Western classical music's entrenched whiteness; I similarly place importance in locating allyship with composers, musicians, artists, and scholars from Global Majority backgrounds across my research.

Anti-colonial practices are processes that lead to 'decolonisation', an imagination of a future free of the bounds of colonialism. As Education professor George Sefa Dei puts it, colonialism "…has not ended. Lands are still being stolen and/or continue to be occupied. Human dignities are being trampled upon... All this [sic] are forms of colonial relations and oppressive practice that demonstrate we are still colonized in our own existence."[11] Composer, improviser, performer, and scholar, George Lewis has outlined eight steps to decolonisation in new music and his thinking informs my own stance. He states the need for the sector "to move beyond its Eurocentric conception of musical identity".[12] Lewis builds on his 1996 article on improvised music that proposes the terms 'Afrological' and 'Eurological' to "refer metaphorically to musical systems and behavior which…exemplify particular kinds of musical 'logic'."[13] Importantly, these terms situate systems of music

[9] Mina Yang, 'East Meets West in the Concert Hall: Asians and Classical Music in the Century of Imperialism, Post-Colonialism, and Multiculturalism', *Asian Music* 38, no. 1 (2007): 1-30, http://doi.org/10.1353/amu.2007.0025.
[10] Philip Ewell, 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame'. *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020), https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html.
[11] George Sefa Dei, 'Foreword', in *Decolonization and Anti-colonial Praxis*, ed. Anila Zainub (Leiden: Brill, 2019), https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004404588/front-6.xml.
[12] George Lewis, 'New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps', VAN Outernational no.14 (May 2018) https://www.van-outernational.com/lewis-en/.
[13] George Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 217, https://doi.org/10.2307/1519950.

according to where they emerged from historically rather than considering them "ethnically essential".[14] One does not have to be ethnically European to practice contemporary classical music. Akin to Lewis, my anti-colonial outlook envisions a contemporary classical music space that includes Eurological processes but is not Eurocentric. This means rebalancing the space to better include non-Western identities, cultures, and practices alongside their Eurological counterparts.

1.2 WIDER CONTEXT

Western classical music has a 200-year history of finding inspiration in Chinese cultures. Since Weber wrote his 'Chinese Overture' in 1804 based on an unnamed Chinese folk song, composers including Mahler, Puccini, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and Cage have written pieces inspired by the music, poetry, philosophy, religious practices, and people of China. There exists, however, a tension in that few of the creators had meaningful contact with Chinese cultures, resulting in the misrepresentation of our cultures and communities. As Cornelia Szabó-Knotik has observed, "Chinese music was almost entirely unknown in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century", and yet this did not stop composers titling works *Chineser Galoppe* and *Chingkong-Walzer*.[15] Szabó-Knotik goes on to note how for European opera makers in particular, China represented "an exciting site of orientalized exoticism".[16] The pattern of misrepresentation harkens to Edward Said's classic text, *Orientalism*, which dismantles the West's exotic rendering of Middle Eastern cultures and peoples.[17] Through

[14] Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950', 217.
[15] Cornelia Szabó-Knotik, 'Calafati, Sou-Chong, Lang Lang, and Li Wei: Two Hundred Years of "the Chinese" in Austrian Music, Drama, and Film' in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, eds. Hon-Lun Yang and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 67-68.
[16] Szabó-Knotik, 'Calafati, Sou-Chong, Lang Lang, and Li Wei', 70.
[17] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

Said's lens, we understand how the Western appropriation and stereotyping of Chinese identities is a larger issue concerning the Asian continent, within which we comprehend the *Chinoiserie* and *Japonisme* that influenced composers like Debussy and Ravel and often led to the conflation of different cultures. Michael Saffle observes this in the music of operettas and music comedy shows from the late nineteenth century that were titled with Chinese-signifiers. He finds numbers like *Chin Chin Chinaman* (1896) to be Japanese-themed, and *I am Chu Chin Chow of China* (1916) to be Arabic-themed amongst many others, commenting that every "pre-1930s Chinese themed show [in London and New York] drew on unpleasant stereotypes and…racist epithets".[18] Indeed, operas have a fraught history of racialising our identities and yet the same operas are presented on stage to this day. Beyond their musical essentialising of Chinese cultures, it is grating to see works with racist stories and characters called Ping, Pang, and Pong celebrated and performed each year, only compounded by the continued use of yellowface practices that were presented in 2022 at the Sydney Opera House[19] and 2023 at the Royal Opera House.[20]

1.2.1 Transnational Chinese Representation: UK versus US

Raymond Yiu is one of few composers of Chinese heritage to have gained consistent recognition over the last decades in Britain's contemporary classical music scene. In response, I launched Tangram with yangqin-player Mantawoman in 2019 to establish a

[18] Michael Saffle,'Eastern Fantasies on Western Stages: Chinese-Themed Operettas and Musical Comedies in Turn-of-the-Last-Century London and New York' in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, eds. Hon-Lun Yang and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 88-91.
[19] Matthew Knott, '"I Felt Sick": Opera Australia under Fire for Using "Yellowface"', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 2022, https://www.smh.com.au/culture/opera/i-felt-sick-opera-australia-under-fire-for-using-yellowface-20220221-p59yet.html.
[20] Beats, 'BEATS Statement on Royal Opera House - Turandot', Accessed 20 December 2022, https://wearebeatsorg.org.uk/blog/beats-statement-on-royal-opera-house-turandot.

larger space in which to celebrate transnational Chinese identities. As an artist collective of composers and performers of Chinese and Western instruments, we have commissioned the growing number of UK-based composers of Chinese heritage including Raymond Yiu, Tonia Ko, Sun Keting, and Jasmin Kent Rodgman. Our journey is marked by joy in the reception and support Tangram has received, giving us hope that the industry can improve, whilst also coloured by many misconceptions of transnational Chinese cultures, our work, our instruments, and our identities that frustrate and motivate us.

The UK's classical music scene's transformation has been slow, though it is important to highlight that the national cultural scene more broadly is in an exciting moment. Since I began this doctorate in 2019, British Chinese, East Asian, and Southeast Asian communities have been receiving greater recognition. Perhaps most impactful has been the crystallisation of the term, British East and Southeast Asian (BESEA) as a pan-Asian identity. Sociologist Diana Yeh considers BESEA as "emphatically political", and has documented the ways artists, especially those from the British theatre industry, have mobilised anti-racism movements and raised awareness of the challenges facing BESEA communities through their creations and collective organisation.[21] The emergence of BESEA provides a platform and discourse on which to share and support the needs of our communities and has fed into an expanding network of artists, productions, initiatives, and organisations (see Appendix 3). It has been uplifting to witness high-profile events celebrating BESEA communities and creativities, not least the British Library's exhibition, 'Chinese and British', that brought to life the history of British Chinese communities, and the production of *My Neighbour Totoro* by the Royal Shakespeare Company that featured a full East and Southeast Asian (ESEA)

[21] Diana Yeh, 'Becoming British East Asian and Southeast Asian', *British Journal of Chinese Studies* no.11 (August 2021), https://doi.org/10.51661/bjocs.v11i0.131.

cast. Amongst this optimism, however, is the recognition that the place of our communities and experiences in the UK's public consciousness is overdue since the first arrival of Chinese communities over 300 years ago.[22]

The US has a comparatively impressive record. Within Western classical music, composers including Chou Wen-Chung, Tan Dun, Chen Yi, Du Yun, and Huang Ruo have catalysed and established appreciation for transnational Chinese composers since the 1950s. The contrasting abundance of compositional richness in the US is also reflected in the ethnomusicological studies about Chinese American music-making by Nancy Rao, Deborah Wong, Samson Young, and Su Zheng. I see particular alignment with ethnomusicologist Zheng, whose book *Claiming Diaspora: Music, transnationalism, and cultural politics in Asian/Chinese America* models ethnography as resistance against the West's forgetting of Asian American histories by examining how music plays an integral role in the formation of Asian American identities.[23] These identities represent a "site of contradiction" in their fluid negotiation between host country, home country, and transnational communities, thereby rejecting cultural identification based on nation-state boundaries.[24] My research hence intervenes in the absence of the recognition of transnational Chinese identities and extends Zheng's investigation of 'diaspora' as an effective means of "illustrating…[the] past and present social and cultural experiences and [the] structures of feelings, memories and imaginations" of multi-cultural individuals and communities.[25]

More broadly, Asian American Studies was introduced in the 1960s and has flourished into an established field of scholarship, public debate, and artistic presence, albeit with familiar

[22] British Library Exhibition, *Chinese and British*, 18 November 2022 - 23 April 2023.
[23] Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: transnationalism, and cultural politics in Asian/Chinese America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[24] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 27-61.
[25] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 11.

challenges of racism and erasure. Whilst important to acknowledge the differences between US and UK histories, it is clear we have a long way to go to better include BESEA identities in Britain. I personally hope to see British Chinese histories taught in national curricula, particularly the Chinese Labour Corps' contributions in WWI and the forced deportation of Chinese sailors after WWII; more research on BESEA communities and the associated anti-racist work as Yeh has noted;[26] and a larger presence in popular culture including TV and radio and positions of national influence. Focusing in on the representation of transnational Chinese creators in Western classical music, the UK is behind other countries like the US and Canada, whilst Western classical music itself is behind other artforms like theatre and literature. The BBC Proms, who self-proclaim to be the world's greatest classical music festival and who commission composers each year, have only ever commissioned two British Chinese composers, Raymond Yiu and Fung Lam, across their 128-year history. I believe the lack of representation of British Chinese and ESEA composers in Western classical music directly correlates to the lack of BESEA audiences who made up just 1% of audiences of our country's National Portfolio Organisation in 2020/21, the lowest across all the disciplines represented.[27] Poignantly, I recently had a piece commissioned by and premiered at Het Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, after which I was approached by a Chinese audience member who told me: "I didn't know people who look like us could have music performed in a place like this."

[26] Diana Yeh, 'Becoming British East Asian and Southeast Asian', https://doi.org/10.51661/bjocs.v11i0.131.
[27] Arts Council England, 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: A Data Report, 2020-2021', Accessed 20 December 2022, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-data-report-2020-2021.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My submission is underpinned by three research questions:

1. How is transnational Chinese identity reflected in my compositions?
2. How do my compositions enable new understandings of transnational Chinese identity?
3. How does the exploration of transnational Chinese identity critique Western classical music practices?

These questions examine the relationships between my cultural identity and music from different angles, and my portfolio demonstrates the creative possibilities of my topic. The first asks how I draw influences from multiple strands of my identity and develop them creatively in different ways. I have composed pieces directly inspired by memories of Lunar New Year meals, set texts navigating cultural distance between China and the UK, and created works that respond to racism. Furthermore, these explorations have manifested in compositions from opera to pieces for audience participation, from large-scale works including a double-bass concerto to solo instrumental compositions, and from creations for Chinese and Western instruments to song cycles in English and Mandarin. The breadth of my portfolio has allowed me to reflect deeply on my understanding of transnational Chinese identity and to work with various artists who have influenced my thinking.

The window of reflection enabled by my compositions is the focus of my second research question. I show how my music allows me to process experiences of racism and cultural rootlessness by finding solidarity with collaborators with aligned lived experiences. The creative processes of these works involved sensitive conversations and the sharing of memories and feelings between myself and my collaborators which would go on to inform the compositions. Through these creative processes, I comprehend better how I navigate

cultural identity and how music-making can nurture communal connections between collaborators. This approach develops threads from Tangram's work. As artists from the UK, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Canada, and the United States, each with different relationships to their cultural roots, our projects stem from our experiences as transnational Chinese artists to imagine worlds beyond the reductive 'East meets West' paradigm. We aim not to arrive at a single consensus of transnational Chinese identity, but to create a space in which we can collectively explore how our differing experiences engage alternative modes of conceiving and producing our identities distinct from Western media's often monolithic presentations.[28] In this way, my portfolio similarly demonstrates that it is not just my personal processes that afford points of reflection on cultural identity but also those built collaboratively with the artists who perform my music.

These ideas disrupt Eurocentric practices in Western classical music as posed by my third research question. Lewis challenges us to move beyond "institutional whiteness" by investing in populations previously excluded from Western classical music.[29] Beyond featuring transnational Chinese performers, my research gives voice to our identities: I create a space to share our (hi)stories of migration and not belonging, I present our languages, and I showcase Chinese instruments. Additionally, for the largest piece, my opera *Untold*, I was honoured to bring in as co-director Julia Cheng, who had previously never worked in opera. I thus place importance on how I build projects not only as a composer, but also as a co-director, curator, conductor, producer, and commissioner – all roles that I fulfil with Tangram. I view this as part of a wider process of broadening my own artistic

[28] This is to speak of the ways East Asian communities are essentialised, exemplified by the depiction East and Southeast Asians in Coronavirus-related media which resulted in the Change.org petition, https://www.change.org/p/stop-depicting-east-south-east-asians-in-coronavirus-related-media.
[29] Lewis, 'New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps', https://www.van-outernational.com/lewis-en/.

practice to holistically examine transnational Chinese identity. Lewis and Du Yun both balance composing, performing, curating, and research, providing inspiration to my practice and I see significant resonances between my work and Lewis' provocation that the new music space needs a "change in consciousness".[30] By facilitating, foregrounding, and celebrating transnational Chinese identity in my projects, practice, and research, I undermine the Eurocentric boundaries of Western classical music and open new creative pathways for myself and my collaborators.

1.4 PROCESSES OF ENQUIRY

I have a four-stage process for each composition of my portfolio:

1. The IDENTIFICATION of personal experiences / patterns of experiences I associate with transnational Chinese identity
2. The EXAMINATION of the contexts of these experiences through:
    a. composers' and writers' work
    b. (ethno)musicological studies
    c. cultural theory and studies
3. The INTERPRETATION of this preliminary work through composition
4. The REFLECTION on the composition on my understanding of transnational Chinese identity and its implications on future work

This interdisciplinary approach affords a network of references in which to locate and through which to interpret my understanding of transnational Chinese identity. My process

[30] Lewis, 'New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps', https://www.van-outernational.com/lewis-en/.

aims to achieve a balance between creative freedom, so that my research can adapt to the fluid dynamics that influence identity, and consistency to enable the comparison between compositions and their collective presentation.

1.4.1 (Auto)ethnographic influences

My methodology draws on autoethnography in connecting my lived experiences to the cultural, historical, social, and political forces of which they are a part. My compositions extend these interrogations and demonstrate the vibrancy of transnational Chinese identity. This approach intervenes on the orientalist and colonial tendencies to problematically tell our stories. It also gives voice to our experiences that undermine the 'model minority' characterisation that imagines us silent, passive, and apolitical. Indeed, these motivations reflect the environment from which autoethnography has grown since the 1970s. As Carolyn Ellis and Tony Adams note, there has been an increasing focus on identity politics and ethics within the social sciences that has impacted academia more broadly. For Ellis and Adams, concerns "about research being an invasive and oppressive colonialist enterprise are directly connected with the ethics of researching and representing others."[31]

I am also influenced by the ethnographies of music-making of Asian Americans by Zheng and Wong. They provide models of engaging with social and political factors that they experience personally to elucidate deeper understandings of the relationship between music and cultural identity. As Zheng says, the proliferation of diaspora has "destabilized categories, paradigms, and partitions between academic disciplines that had been in place

[31] Carolyn Ellis and Tony Adams, 'The Purposes, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research' in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 258-260.

under quite different historical circumstances".[32] Reflecting this, my own research necessitates an interdisciplinary questioning that brings together cultural, musical, psychoanalytical, and postcolonial studies.

Equally crucial is the extent to which I have allowed myself to be emotionally vulnerable. My research covers experiences painful to write about and difficult to assess. Nevertheless, I have found this research to be overwhelmingly healing and a significant reason to feel cautious optimism. I have come to place much value on collaboration as a vehicle for refining my own sense of identity as well as creating meaningful connections with others. Projects including *Untold* and two of my vocal works, *Above the White Island* and *Letters from Home*, involved personal explorations with my collaborators around a lack of cultural belonging, and in each work there are elements where the performers have their own identities foregrounded through storytelling, improvisation, and/or choice of language. My research commits to collaboration as a means of creating a mutual support network as much as it is about establishing a richer framework for creative intentions.

1.4.2 Limitations

With my research come limitations. Firstly, as Du Yun has noted, there is an issue of cultural ownership in such discourses, prompting the question: what right do I have to represent transnational Chinese culture?[33] No individual can claim to represent an entire culture and it is inappropriate to label my research 'transnational Chinese music'. I refer to it instead as music by a transnational Chinese composer, in a similar manner to Zheng, who frames her

[32] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 48.
[33] Du Yun, 'Who Owns Asian Culture? Not Me', *On Curating* no.44 (January 2020), Accessed: 24 April 2020, https://www.on-curating.org/issue-44-reader/dreams-of-equal-division-of-toxicity-793.html.

book as about “music in Chinese/Asian America” not “Chinese music in America”,[34] and to Wong, who addresses “not ‘Asian American music’ but…Asian Americans making music”.[35] Second, in understanding cultural identities as subject to change, I must recognise that my explorations of transnational Chinese identity are bound to the contexts and personal circumstances of this moment. My music ultimately represents me during the period of this DMus with all the bias and privilege I bring as a British-born Chinese from a middle-class background interested in contemporary classical music. I similarly acknowledge that my research may not include other legitimate experiences of transnational Chinese individuals. On the other hand, by finding ways to reflect my collaborators’ perspectives and experiences in my compositions, I hope to show a multidimensional understanding of transnational Chinese identity. Finally, I draw on anti-colonial alliances with other Global Majority communities to contextualise transnational Chinese identity. In wanting to ensure focus on my cultural identity, discussion of my compositions prioritise the surrounding social, political, and cultural factors, rather than detailed examination of musical and technical influences. Instead, I situate my compositions within contemporary classical music and consider my compositional influences more broadly as a single chapter in Chapter 2.

1.5 COMPOSITION PORTFOLIO

My portfolio is organised into four sections which correspond to chapters 3-6. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the longest piece, my 45-minute opera, *Untold*, which was the first project of my DMus. *Untold* interrogates a theme of ‘not fitting in’ and proved to be hugely influential in my journey navigating transnational identity. In its exploration of collective storytelling, it

[34] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 14.
[35] Deborah Wong, *Speak it Louder* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) 4.

secured the importance of collaboration in my practice and led me to articulate three themes fundamental to my cultural identity in rootlessness, reclamation, and community, which are covered in chapters 4-6.

Chapters 4-6 are structured in the same way. Each begins by locating specific lived experiences followed by the examination of their social, cultural, and/or political contexts. After these introductions, I write about the individual compositions of that chapter and signpost when to watch/listen to their performances. For the sake of weighting and clarity, I have proportioned the length and scale of each piece with a comparatively longer/shorter section of writing.

Having composed over 250' of music since starting this degree, I have been selective about the 150' of music included in this submission to showcase my research most effectively. I have listed the full output of my compositional work (see Appendix 1) as well as the Tangram projects I have completed (see Appendix 2) during my time at RCM at the end of this commentary. This is to comprehensively document my artistic journey throughout this doctorate and to record how my research operates beyond academia in the professional industry of contemporary classical music. The projects I have undertaken have all been publicly presented by various commissioners and platforms. Indeed, as I took on projects, I was not focused on how I curated my overall output so that I could group compositions into a neatly categorised and balanced portfolio for submission. I have presented my materials across four chapters not under the false pretence of this organisation, but as part of a process of reflection from which I identified connections and themes that have emerged organically within an ongoing examination of transnational Chinese identity.

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CHAPTER 2. Contexts of Contemporary Classical Music

I compose within the space of contemporary classical music, and it is necessary to situate my practice further in regard to this context.[36] In particular, there are three non-mutually exclusive strands that inform my work: the music of other transnational Chinese composers, examples of political music from the latter half of the 20th century, and the music of composers whose approach to timbre and texture have influenced my compositional technique. On the one hand, these threads highlight the continuities of my music in relation to that which has come before, and on the other, they provide a framework against which to compare my portfolio and identify the points of divergence from these histories. I thus trace three generations of transnational Chinese composers who have explored their identities in their music, albeit with an emphasis on representing Chinese musical traditions. I begin with an examination of Chou Wen-Chung, arguably the first composer of Chinese heritage to authentically blend Chinese and Western classical musics. I then examine composers of the so-called 'New Wave' including Tan Dun and Chen Yi who formed a Chinese avant-garde tradition in the 1980s. Lastly, I consider the next generation of composers in Chinese American Huang Ruo and British Chinese Raymond Yiu who have shown a greater preoccupation with storytelling as a means of identity politics. Following this discussion, I examine how composers from the 1950s to present day have made politically active work that has influenced how I incorporate anti-colonial and anti-racist narratives in my music. I consider composers of the 'Darmstadt School' Luigi Nono, Hans Werner Henze, and Mauricio Kagel, before assessing the music of Cornelius Cardew and

[36] I use contemporary classical music to mean the period of music which follows the common practice period (1600-1910).

Frederic Rzewski, and lastly that of Du Yun and Hannah Kendall. Finally, I look to composers whose sensibility towards timbre and texture have shaped my music. I evaluate how Kaija Saariaho, Henry Cowell, Witold Lutosławski, and György Ligeti have informed my technique and enabled me to draw out soundworlds that feel as much personal to my interests as they are rooted to the larger tradition of contemporary classical music.

2.1 Transnational Chinese Composers

Despite centuries of European composers gazing at China to find inspiration, the contact point between Chinese composers and Western classical music only developed during the 20th century. Chou Wen-Chung (1923-2019) would prove to be the pioneer in the synthesis between Chinese and Western classical musics. He was born in China and moved to the US in 1946 where his key teachers were Edgard Varèse and Nicolas Slonimsky. It was the latter who Chou credited as the catalyst for his 50-year investigation of how elements of Chinese cultures could be embedded in his compositions, moving beyond the "superficial exoticism" exhibited by several European composers.[37] Slonimsky would describe Chou as "…possibly the first Chinese composer who has attempted to translate authentic oriental melo-rhythms into the terms of modern Western music."[38] For Chou, the challenge of synthesizing his heritage within Western classical music was part of a wider goal to re-establish the importance of Asian cultures on a global scale. This was against the backdrop of the cultural void he perceived in the 1950s where "creativity in most Asian countries had sunk to an all-

[37] Chou Wen-Chung, 'Asian Concepts and Twentieth-Century Western Composers', *The Musical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1971): 213, https://www.jstor.org/stable/741215.
[38] Eric Lai, 'The Evolution of Chou-Wen-chung's Variable Modes', in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, eds. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 147.

time low".[39] He coined the term 're-merger' to conceptualise his belief that "the traditions of Eastern and Western music once shared the same sources and that, after a thousand years of divergence, they are now merging to form the mainstream of a new musical tradition."[40] Chou investigated different manifestations of Chinese cultures in Western classical music. His early work, *Landscapes* (1949), draws from the principles of Chinese landscape painting and poetry in conjunction with three traditional melodies, 'Under the Cliff in the Bay', 'The Sorrow of Parting', and 'One Streak of Dying Light', to configure the Western orchestra to evoke his heritage. *The Willows Are New* (1957), meanwhile, is a piece for solo piano that explores the combination of pentatonic harmony derived from traditional qin music and Western chromaticism. The piece hinges on pedal points made up of minor 9th intervals in the left hand whilst the right hand plays a melody coloured by appoggiaturas representative of pitch-bending in qin music. In this way, Chou's harmony is ridden with chromatic inflections on a local level but follows a pentatonic contour on a larger scale. Eric Lai has shown how Chou's explorations would crystallise into a technique of 'variable modes'.[41] This describes Chou's mature works beginning in the 1960s, where he formulated a harmonic and rhythmic system from the Chinese divination text, *Yiching*. Lai has analysed a variety of compositions including *Metaphors* (1960) and *Cello Concerto* (1992) which demonstrate not only Chou's adherence to this scheme, but also its development throughout his later years as a constant evolution of compositional technique grounded in Chinese philosophy.[42] A key element of variable modes is the transformation of pitch and rhythmic sets by inversion, reflection, and both combined, akin to serial

[39] Chou Wen-Chung, '*Wenren* and Culture', in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, eds. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 208.
[40] Lai, 'Variable Modes', 147.
[41] Lai, 'Variable Modes', 146-167.
[42] Lai, 'Variable Modes', 154-165.

techniques that Chou had studied in the 1950s. Peter Chang thus highlights the importance of Chou's output being "the union of the two [Chinese and Western musical cultures] at the conceptual level", noting also that Chou's career-long development towards this union was a result of his cultural experiences between China and the US.[43] Chou's significance within Western classical music extends beyond his compositions. Chou had huge influence on the next generation of Chinese-born composers. His visit in 1977 to the Central Conservatory of Music has been hailed as a "landmark in the history of contemporary Chinese music", where he introduced the latest music by Western composers to a generation of composers including Tan Dun and Chen Yi who would follow Chou to the US less than a decade later.

Tan Dun (1957-) and Chen Yi (1953-) were part of the first post-Cultural Revolution class of composition students at the Central Conservatory of Music. This generation of composers, which includes Bright Sheng (1955-), Zhou Long (1953-), and Qigang Chen (1951-), would be called the 'New Wave', marking the establishment of a Chinese musical avant-garde. As Zheng says, these composers, who demonstrated "a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture, both elite and folk, became the driving force for experiments with new textures, timbres, gestures, and techniques in musical compositions."[44] With the exception of Chen Qigang who moved to Paris to study with Olivier Messiaen, the others at the impetus of Chou, relocated to New York. Here, they developed highly individual compositional voices from their new environment. Tan Dun found inspiration from John Cage and the experimental scene in downtown New York, whilst Chen Yi cultivated influence from her teachers, Chou and Mario Davidovsky, at

[43] Peter Chang, 'Chou Wen-Chung's Cross-Cultural Experience and His Musical Synthesis: The Concept of Syncretism Revisited', *Asian Music* 32, no. 2 (2001), 113-114.
[44] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 149.

Columbia University. With decades of success behind them, which has seen Tan Dun win Grammy and Grawemeyer awards and Chen Yi a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rome Prize, multiple studies of their music exist. Nancy Rao has studied the extensive use of Chinese Opera percussion rhythms in their compositions;[45] Frederick Lau has investigated the sociocultural and racialised circumstances of their careers and reception;[46] and Zheng surveys their work within the broader context of Asian-Americans making music and the ties to the negotiation of cultural identity.[47] Indeed, Tan Dun and Chen Yi's work has been influential on my musical approach in their exploration of cultural memories – a model for my own creative investigation of lived experience. *On Taoism* (1985) is one Tan Dun's earliest pieces on arriving in the US. Inspired by the sounds of Taoist rituals he participated in at his grandmother's funeral, the composition explores, in the composer's words, "sound in many dimensions: microtonal, swimming among frequencies, and expanding timbres as the ink of calligraphy spreads in rice paper."[48] A particularly striking element is Tan Dun's vocal writing as exemplified at the opening. He notates the voice without determined pitches and instead creates contours by using different vowels, registers and glissandi. This expansion of the Western style of classical singing would influence my pre-doctoral composition for vocal trio, *…chinese whispers…* (2018), which translates Cantonese oral traditions badly, mimicking my own limited knowledge of my mother's tongue. My submitted opera *Untold*, which I write about in detail in the next chapter extends these

[45] Nancy Rao, 'Chinese Opera percussion from Model Opera to Tan Dun', in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, eds. Hon-Lun Yang and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 163-185.
[46] Frederick Lau, 'Fusion or Fission: The Paradox and Politics of Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Music', in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, eds. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 22-39.
[47] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 149-155.
[48] Wise Music Classical, 'On Taoism', Accessed 3 January 2024, https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/33569/On-Taoism--Tan-Dun/.

ideas. Chen Yi's *Symphony no. 2* was written as a commemoration to the passing of her father. Rao has extensively examined the symphony in terms of gesture translated from Cantonese Opera.[49] The connection between Chen's gestures and the emotional arc of the piece are keenly felt, not least at the close, where the final phrases foreground Chinese percussion, especially the gong, to depict the deep sense of anguish and mourning. The emotional weight that Chen Yi extracts from her percussion writing inspired another pre-doctoral work: *Rituals and Resonances* (2018), a solo work for yangqin which was written as a farewell to my grandparents. I treat the yangqin predominantly as a percussion instrument, using several parts of the wooden frame as a percussive body and a metaphorical doorway into an imagined conversation with my relatives whose names gradually emerge across the piece. I similarly use this percussive technique in my piano solo *Knuckleduster* featured in Chapter 4 to meditate further on language and cultural loss.

Since the success of Chou Wen-Chung and the New Wave composers, the next generation of transnational Chinese composers have also made an impact in the classical music industry. New York-based Huang Ruo and London-based Raymond Yiu are both vocal advocates for transnational Chinese cultures within Western classical music. Whilst they have sought to integrate Chinese musical traditions with their Western counterparts in various compositions such as Huang Ruo's *Paradise Interrupted* (2016) and Yiu's *Northwest Wind* (2010), examining Chinese Opera and extended pentatonicism respectively, it is striking how they use storytelling to raise awareness of the challenges faced by our communities. Huang Ruo's opera, *An American Soldier* (2014/2018), was a collaboration with playwright David

[49] Nancy Rao, 'Chen Yi: Symphony no. 2 (1993), in *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music from 1960-2000*, eds. Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127-152, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190236861.003.0006.

Henry Hwang about Chinese American soldier Danny Chen who committed suicide in 2011 as a result of daily racial abuse for six weeks from his colleagues. Huang Ruo and Hwang later collaborated on another opera, *M. Butterfly* (2022), which upends the problematic racialised and gendered power dynamics of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (discussed in detail in Chapter 5). *M. Butterfly* tells the true story of a male French diplomat who falls in love with a Beijing Opera singer thinking that they are female. The eventual discovery of the truth leads to the Westerner's ruin, and he stabs himself just as Cio-Cio San does in Puccini's opera. Huang Ruo also composed *Angel Island* (2020), which brings to life the stories of Chinese immigrants in the US in the early twentieth century. The text includes writing that was inscribed on the barrack walls by those detained at Angel Island. Huang says he aimed to "give people history that they didn't learn in school" and that "[t]his is not just a Chinese American story, this is an American story."[50] Yiu similarly addresses a forgotten part of transnational Chinese history in his quartet commissioned by Tangram, *Corner of a Foreign Field*. The twelve-minute piece is a commemoration to the Chinese Labour Corps who provided vital manual labour for the British and French governments during WWI. Their contribution to the Allies' victory remained unacknowledged by the British government until 2014. Yiu composed for flute, yangqin, piano, percussion, using Chinese and Western instruments to redress into various characters and emotions the folksong *Swinging*, which comes from the Shandong province where most of the labourers were recruited. The title itself is a metaphor for the need to re-insert Chinese identities into Western histories. Yiu explains it is "a re-interpretation of Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* from the point of view of the 2,000 members of the workforce who lost their lives in Europe: "That there's some

[50] Javier C. Hernández, 'Channeling the Pain of Chinese Immigrants, in Music and Verse', The New York Times, 7 January 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/07/arts/music/angel-island-oratorio-huang-ruo.html.

corner of foreign field that is for ever China"."[51] These examples of Huang Ruo and Yiu's compositions that intervene in the under-told (hi)stories of our communities have impacted my research. Storytelling as an intervention tool against our erasure is hence a key element of my music, exemplified in my song cycle which I discuss in Chapter 5, *A Place called Paradise*, about the eighteenth-century Prince Lee Boo of the Pacific Islands and the context of colonialism by which he was surrounded.

2.2 Political music since the 1950s

Western classical music underwent a significant shift in the wake of WWII's end. In the 1950s, composers of the so-called 'Darmstadt School' sought to create a new musical vocabulary based on 'total serialism'. This was to relocate themselves far from the Romanticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that they associated with global collapse. Amongst the composers affiliated with this group, several composed highly political pieces. Luigi Nono (1924-1990), for whom Paul Griffiths observes that "political and musical revolutions went hand in hand", aligned the need to counter right-wing ideology with the rejection of capitalist culture that Nono perceived permeated classical music and the avant-garde.[52] *La fabbrica illuminata* (1964) responds to this by combining a soprano with a tape part made up of factory sounds and recordings of factory workers, thereby giving voice to the working class. His cantata *Il canto sospeso* (1955-6) goes further, setting the farewell letters of the Nazi's political prisoners before their execution. Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012) and Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008) turned to music theatre to express

[51] Tangram, 'Corner of a Foreign Field', Accessed 5 January 2024, https://www.tangramsound.com/corner-of-a-foreign-field---raymond-yiu.html.
[52] Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (New York: Oxford University Press), 208.

similarly socialist political opinions. Henze's *Das Floss der 'Medusa'* (1968) is a requiem dedicated to Che Guevara and provokes questions on the value of human life according to their social class. Inspired by Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting, *Le Radeau de la Meduse*, the text is about a group of shipwrecked men who are left by their responsible officers to starve and drown. Kagel's provocative stage work *Staatstheater* (1967) reaches into an absurdist aesthetic to metaphorically turn the institution of opera inside out. This 'anti-opera', that Kagel described as "not just the negation of opera, but of the whole tradition of music-theatre", calls for staging, set design and costumes for singers, dancers, an orchestra and chorus, only to instruct each performer to perform a role outside their expertise.[53] Indeed, if these composers demonstrated the political potential of the avant-garde tradition, their explorations would be extended by composers Cornelius Cardew (1936-81) and Frederic Rzewski (1938-2021).

Confronting the state of new music in the 1970s, Cardew declared: "Progressive ideas must shine like a bright light into the dusty cobwebs of bourgeois ideology in the avant-garde, so that any genuinely progressive spirits working in the avant-garde find their way out, take a stand on the side of the people and set about making a positive contribution to the revolutionary movement."[54]

Cardew was disillusioned with the institutionalisation of new music, including the Darmstadt School who "had compromised its opposition to the dominant culture", and turned away from their serial compositions.[55] Cardew turned to improvisation and the liberation of the

[53] Oxford Reference, 'Staatstheater (State Theatre)', Accessed 10 January 2024, https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-8122.
[54] Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 203.
[55] Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 203.

performer and amateur to create music devolved from its high art status. This led to his co-founding of the Scratch Orchestra in 1969. In his words, the group "came about in response to the demand of a lot of young people who weren't trained musicians to get together to make what we called experimental music on a large scale."[56] Cardew's earlier work *Treatise* (1963-67) is a graphic score made up solely of three basic types of notation: numbers, elements of musical notation, and abstract shapes. Performers are tasked with interpreting the mammoth 193-page piece as they can, not least because as Brian Dennis has pointed out, "Cardew makes rules but at some point usually breaks them."[57] In a clear rejection of the classical music institution, Michael Nyman stated that Cardew himself wanted *Treatise* to be performed by "people who by some fluke have (a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musician".[58] The freedom of expression on behalf of the performer is similarly prioritised in *The Great Learning* (1968-72). Based on seven paragraphs of writing by Confucius, the piece has a flexibility to allow amateur musicians to perform alongside professionals. The score contains various instructions for each paragraph, asking performers at different points to choose pitch, rhythm, and duration albeit within a set of materials that Timothy Taylor has shown to be highly organised according to intervallic relation.[59] Rzewski similarly explored 'performer freedom' in his politically motivated compositions. *Coming Together* (1972) is a setting of letters by Sam Melville who was an inmate at Attica State Prison and shot during the 1971 Attica prison riots. 43 men died during the riots, and Rzewski stated that it was an "atrocity that demanded of every responsible person that had any power to cry out, that he cry

[56] Cornelius Cardew quoted in Timothy Taylor, 'Moving in Decency: The Music ad Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew', *Music & Letters* 79, no. 4 (1998), 556.
[57] Brian Dennis, 'Cardew's 'Treatise' (Mainly the Visual Aspects)', *Tempo* 177 (1991), 13.
[58] Michael Nyman quoted in Dennis, 'Cardew's 'Treatise', 15-16.
[59] Taylor, 'Moving in Decency', 557-562.

out."[60] Rzewki's composition is notated as a single bass line with each bar allocated text to be recited. He asks that the bass line be played in its entirety by an instrument such as piano, on top of which any number of pitched instruments can play. These instruments should begin the piece without playing, before joining in and sustaining any pitch of the bass line at the players' discretion. Eventually these instruments should play in (octave) unison with the bass line. In the composer's words, "[in] addition, however, the musicians should try to interpolate freely improvised passages that depart from this rule, with the condition that they do not get lost. It is very hard not to get lost, so that to be free in this situation really requires a struggle."[61] As such, Rzewski ingeniously models the performance experience of *Coming Together* on its political message. Both Cardew and Rzewski opened a space to consider not just composed sound but also composed performance as political. Indeed, their explorations of performer agency are developed in my compositions *Say Hi*, *Breathe and Draw*, and *On Silk and Paper* in Chapter 6 that examine how the act of making music creates communities in performance through audience participation and improvisation.

My music's political charge is predominantly in its re-presentation of Chinese identities through anti-colonial and anti-racist narratives. The political output of Du Yun (1977-) that includes composing and curating inspires my work. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning opera, *Angel's Bone* (2015), demonstrates the power of opera to engage audiences with social catastrophe in meaningful ways, in this case with human trafficking, whilst her Pan Asia Sounding Festival (2019) responded to the Western perception that Asian cultures are ancient and

[60] Frederic Rzewski quoted in Christian Asplund, 'Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music', *Perspectives of New Music* 33, no. 1 (1995), 419.
[61] Frederic Rzewski quoted in Christian Asplund, 'Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music', 421.

homogenous by programming new work from across the continent. Du Yun was also one of the composers for the site-specific opera, *Sweet Land* (2020), which depicts the story of the first European settlers to arrive in and subsequently colonise North America.[62] This production breathes new life into the opera form in a multitude of ways. It contains two artistic teams of composers (Raven Chacon and Du Yun), librettists (Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney), and directors (Cannupa Hanska Luger and Yuval Sharon), who created two separate strands of narrative to occur simultaneously. Audiences therefore choose one strand to experience before coming back together at the end. The performance setting is the LA State Historic Park, which appropriately was where the colonisers of this land first arrived. Across the opera, audiences move around the park, engaging with the story of colonial conquest physically as the narrative unfolds theatrically. The remoulding of opera to interrogate social issues through anti-colonial narratives, shared storytelling, and audience interaction is similarly a preoccupation of my opera *Untold*. Beyond opera, Hannah Kendall (1984) has composed instrumental music which advocates for anti-colonial intervention. Her piece for ensemble, walkie-talkies, and music boxes, *shouting forever into the receiver* (2022), re-examines the historicization of plantation machines and the slave trade. Kendall portrays "Afro-diasporic sorrow" by weaving together spoken extracts of the Book of Revelation, a composed chorale, and music boxes playing classic works from the slave-era: Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* and *Für Elise*, Mozart's *Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman*, and Strauss' *The Blue Danube*.[63] The additional use of walkie-talkies that feed back to each other as a never-ending loop symbolises the longevity of colonial violence, with added weight as their sonic quality conjures associations of police brutality towards Black communities. This

[62] The Industry, 'Sweet Land', Accessed 6 January 2024, https://theindustryla.org/projects/sweet-land/.
[63] grinblat, *Hannah Kendall: shouting forever into the receiver (2022)*, Accessed 20 December 2023, https://youtu.be/cHytnlUgBac?si=Tb3luUZmdGlyK995.

social, historical, and musical critique lays a foundation for my compositions, not least in my humming chorus *Hush* and double bass concerto *Splinter* that reassess Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and the concerto genre in Chapters 5.

2.3 Technical influences

My compositions are shaped by a desire to convey emotion and narrative connected to my cultural identity and lived experiences. This takes the form of literal stories as in the multiple works that set text, and more abstract storytelling as in the instrumental pieces and my wordless humming chorus for choir. The vocabulary with which I express these ideas is derived from a framework of tonal harmony that I extend not necessarily through pitch, but by the manipulation of timbre and texture. My approach resonates with Kaija Saariaho's (1952-2023) assertion that "...the tonal system is, in my own experience, the most effective means of using harmony to construct and control dynamic musical forms...I think, however, that using tonal functions in such a way is definitely a thing of the past."[64] Saariaho utilises other ways to create dynamics of tension and resolution through 'oppositions', namely in timbre, harmony and rhythm, in order "[t]o enrich the network of dimensions" in her music.[65] My music thus elaborates on this idea of expanding the expressive capabilities of the tonal system through timbre and texture, finding influence from Saariaho alongside other composers including Henry Cowell, Witold Lutosławski, and György Ligeti.

[64] Kaija Saariaho, 'Timbre and Harmony: Interpolations of timbral structures', *Contemporary Music Review* 2, no. 1 (1987), 94.
[65] Saariaho, 'Timbre and Harmony', 94-97.

In her own assessment of the timbral qualities of her music, Saariaho refers to a 'sound/noise' axis – a continuum where the poles of 'consonant sound' and 'dissonant noise' are represented by "smooth, clear textures" and "rough, noisy textures" respectively.[66] This provides the syntax for her use of extended instrumental techniques as in her solo cello suite, *Sept Papillons* (2000), which evokes the vivid fragility of butterflies using various levels of bow pressure and placement techniques. A further example is in the orchestral diptych, *Du Cristal* (1990) and *...à la fumée* (1990), based on the opposing structures of crystal and smoke. For Saariaho, "crystal is a classic example of repeated order, symmetrical, tense, stable mass. Smoke, on the other hand, changes its form constantly, an unpredictable, developing state. Crystal and smoke, like order and entropy, chaos."[67] This binary characterisation is heard clearly when comparing the opening of each piece. *Du Cristal* starts with a tutti all-interval chord from the full orchestra, which Jon Hargreaves hears as imbibed with 'crystal-like' qualities such as purity and clarity.[68] *...à la fumée*, in stark contrast, begins solely with the cello soloist playing a low *sul ponticello* trill from silence whose over-tone laden timbre is subtly extrapolated into the tutti string section. Saariaho's dramatic conception of timbre informs my own musical language, particularly in my vocal settings. I have used techniques of *sprechstimme*, whispering, grunting, and speaking in opposition to sung voices in *Letters from Home*, *Above the White Island*, *Hush*, and *A Place called Paradise*. This expanded palette of sound enables me to draw out a more dramatic soundworld to portray my storylines.

[66] Saariaho, 'Timbre and Harmony', 94.
[67] Pour ceux que le langage a désertés, *Kaija Saariaho - ...à la fumée (1990) for alto flute, cello and large orchestra*, Accessed 10 January 2024, https://youtu.be/MdM2s1bFvI8?si=jHd_6ON8X-2H1EMx.
[68] Jon Hargreaves, 'Networks of Communication: (De)Crystallization and Perceptual Zoom in *Du Cristal*', in *Kaija Saariaho: Visions, Narratives, Dialogues*, eds. Tim Howell, Jon Hargreaves and Michael Rofe, (London: Routledge, 2011), 182.

Henry Cowell (1897-1965) has also influenced my timbral sensitivity. Interestingly, Cowell grew up on the outskirts of San Francisco's Chinatown where he learnt Chinese folksongs and experienced Chinese opera from a young age. Rao has highlighted this influence in Cowell's music, noting his frequent use of Peking Opera's 'sliding tones' and describing him as "one of the first significant American composers to seriously investigate and integrate non-European music".[69] Cowell would go on to theorise the value of these sliding tones, pointing out their intrinsic existence in human speech and non-Western musics, as well as their various possibilities in colour according to five parameters: direction, distance, duration, change, and symmetry.[70] Rao shows Cowell's continued use of sliding tones in his late orchestral works, analysing in his *Symphony no.11* (1953) the structural use of register and its timbral implications.[71] As well as Cowell's timbral exploration of sliding tones, his deployment of tonal clusters is also fascinating. His solo piano work, *Three Irish Legends* (1922), is a brilliantly colourful work whose core sound is clusters being played with different register, articulation, dynamic, and pitches. As such, Cowell's timbral manipulation with sliding tones and clusters is a significant influence, namely as techniques I am drawn to in order to depict climaxes. Extended slides form the driving impetus to *Hush*, whilst I use registrally-displaced clusters at the apex of *Knuckleduster* and the two song cycles *A Place called Paradise* and *Letters from Home*.

Texture is an important parameter in my music, particularly in its manipulation to create forms of tension. Witold Lutosławski (1913-94) and György Ligeti (1923-2006) are key

[69] Nancy Rao, 'Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage: Theory of Sliding Tone and His Orchestral Work of 1953-1965), in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, eds. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 119.
[70] Rao, 'Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage', 130-131.
[71] Rao, 'Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage', 136-138.

influences. In their own personal yet interconnected ways, they explored the extent to which the superimposition of multiple lines could manifest ideas of vertical opposition and unity, in other words, how simultaneously occurring lines of music could push and pull against one another. Jadwiga Paja discusses Lutosławski's use of polyphony "to create a gradation of tensions".[72] She examines works such as *Preludes and Fugues for 13 solo strings* (1972) and *Chain I* (1983) for orchestra to show how techniques of canon, imitation, and voice-leading at once form ideas of unity in melodic content as well as opposition in their rhythmic and durational dislocation. This idea would become the bedrock of Lutosławski's exploration of 'limited aleatory', where groups of instruments are given sets of pitches but with freedom to choose their entry point, pitch order, and rhythm in what Paja terms "diffusional aggregation".[73] Michael Klein elaborates, exploring the formal significance of register in tandem with Lutosławski's contrapuntal textures. He extends Wallace Berry's idea of 'texture-space' that conceptualises texture and register as a single parameter.[74] Klein analyses Lutosławski's large-scale works *Jeux vénitiens* (1961) and *Trois poèmes d'Henri Michaux* (1962-63) through this lens, showing how registral choices are made both to delineate different groups of vertically aligned sounds and to create single 'harmonic aggregations' of these groups combined.[75] Indeed, this connection between texture and harmony was also significant for Ligeti in his focus on micropolyphony. In reference to the canonic structure of *Lontano* (1967), he commented that "polyphony is written, but harmony is heard".[76] Amy Bauer discusses the "shimmering, iridescent effect" of *Lontano*'s

[72] Jadwiga Paja, 'The Polyphonic Aspect of Lutosławski's Music', *Acta Musicologica* 62 (1990), 184.
[73] Paja, 'Lutosławski's Music', 186.
[74] Michael Klein, 'Texture, Register, and Their Formal Roles in the Music of Witold Lutosławski', *Indiana Theory Review* 20, no. 1 (1999), 37-70.
[75] Klein, 'Formal Roles in the Music of Witold Lutosławski', 49-62.
[76] György Ligeti quoted in Miguel A. Roig-Francolí, 'Harmonic and Formal Processes in Ligeti's Net-Structure Compositions', *Music Theory Spectrum* 17, no. 2 (1995), 243.

harmony as a result of sensitive instrumental layering combined with micro adjustments to dynamic and articulation.[77] Like Lutosławski, Ligeti uses texture as a structural parameter from which other dimensions unfold. These principles of texture in terms of formal consequence and signifiers of tension can be heard in my music. Although I do not use techniques of micropolyphony or limited aleatory, I often build sections of music according to opposing layers of sound and characterise instruments according to contrasting musical material. This comes to the fore in the struggle between soloist and orchestra in my double bass concerto *Splinter* and in the push and pull between voice and piano throughout *Letters from Home*, *Above the White Island*, and *A Place called Paradise*.

2.4 My Compositional Influences

The eclectic and global array of composers outlined speaks to the way I have constructed my compositional voice. I recognise influence from older generations of transnational Chinese composers. These composers have shaped my musical approach to storytelling and motivated me to consider wider soundworlds in my vocal and percussion writing. Perhaps more importantly however, they have expanded the idiom of contemporary classical music to better include Chinese identities on a historical, cultural, and musical level. Since Chou Wen-Chung integrated Chinese and Western musical traditions in the 1950s, new music has transformed through a process of transculturation, which Yayoi Uno Everett calls "a process of cultural transformation marked by the influx of new culture elements and the loss or alteration of existing ones."[78] As a consequence, I am less preoccupied with the challenge of

[77] Amy Bauer, '"Composing the Sound Itself": Secondary Parameters and Structure in the Music of Ligeti', *Indiana Theory Review* 22, no. 1 (2001), 41.
[78] Yayoi Uno Everett, 'Intercultural Synthesis in Postwar Western Art Music: Historical Contexts, Perspectives, and Taxonomy', in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, eds. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 1.

synthesising Eastern and Western musics, not least because my conception of my cultural identity transcends a binary between China and the West. My focus instead on the political dimensions of my music lead me to locate inspiration from earlier histories of political music. I consider the politicisation of performance by Cardew and Rzewski as well as the anti-colonial and anti-racist work of Du Yun and Kendall. Finally, I refer to influences on my compositional technique chosen for their sonic qualities rather than their cultural or political associations. I emphasize the significance of timbral and textural explorations made by Saariaho, Cowell, Lutosławski, and Ligeti, who have each shaped my thinking and approach to portraying tension and resolution beyond harmony. As such, my compositional vocabulary both acknowledges and transcends cultural boundaries. In the next chapters, I evaluate my compositions with these contexts in mind, grounding their discussions in my lived experiences and the recognition that they are a part of an increasingly connected network of cultures and identities melded together by political, social, cultural, historical, and musical forces.

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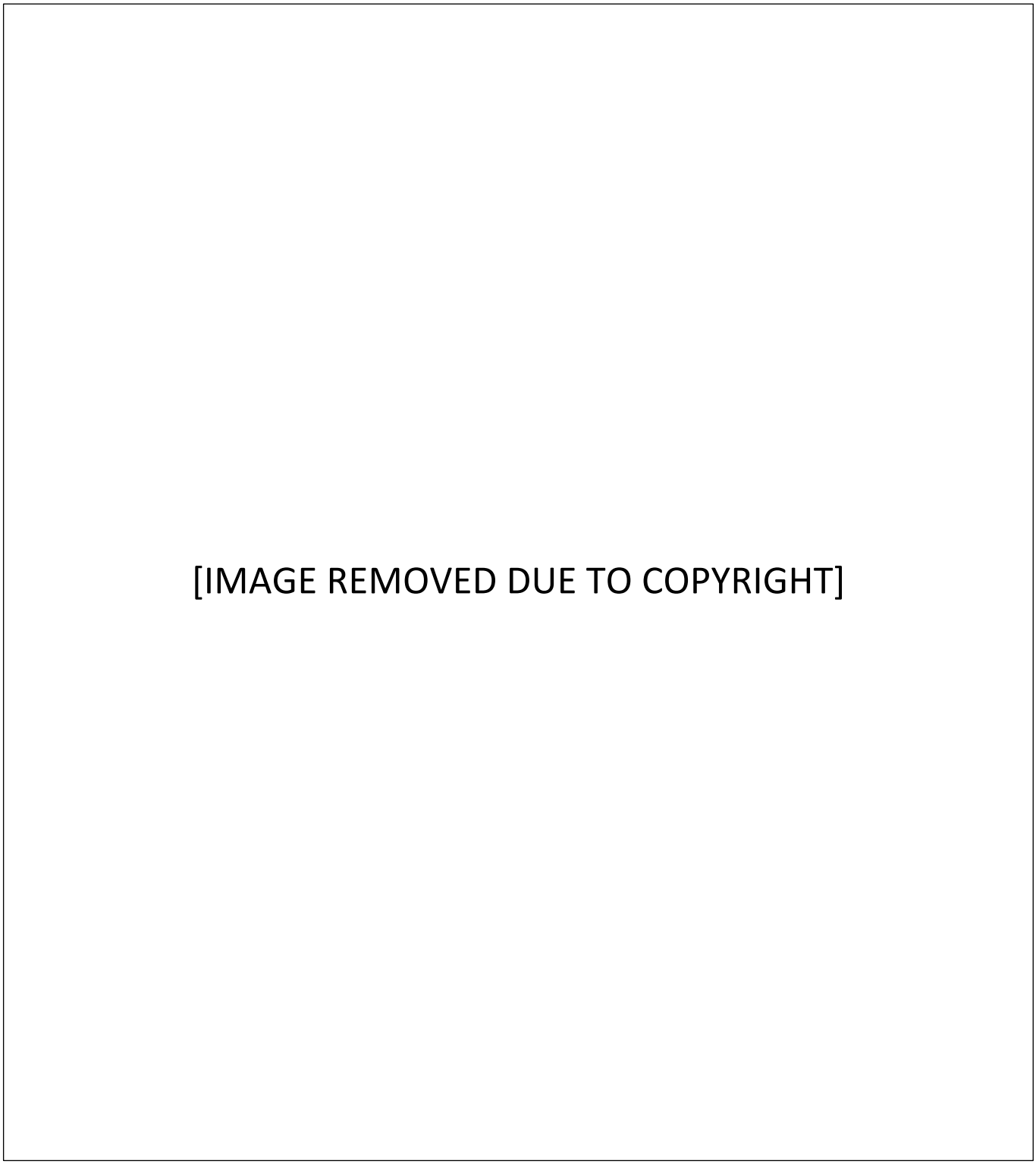
CHAPTER 3. An opera for us and our stories: *Untold*



Untold

Instrumentation: Dancer, countertenor, flute, yangqin, percussion, and piano
Duration: 45'
Supported by: Sound and Music, Help Musicians UK, Arts Council England, Snape Maltings, RVW Trust, PRS Foundation, The London Community Foundation, and The Cockayne Foundation
Co-directed by: Alex Ho and Julia Cheng
Premiered by: Julia Cheng, Keith Pun, and Tangram at Hackney Round Chapel in November 2019
Other: Winner of the George Butterworth Prize 2020 from Sound and Music

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3.1 Introduction

"Where are you from?"

My experiences of growing up and living in London include many joys and privileges facilitated by the city's culturally diverse demographic. I have come to appreciate the value of cultural exchange and have witnessed the richness it has to offer. Within my experiences, however, is also a pattern of racial othering. Whether from the lack of role models who look like me, having few friends who were not white, being repeatedly mistaken for a half-Japanese classmate, being called Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee in five different countries, being told I was good at chess because I am Asian, having a teacher say my music was "doing that Chinese thing" so it was not worth discussing any further, or simply being called a 'Chink' numerous times, the various and multi-layered manifestations of racial prejudice have shaped my perception of transnational Chinese identity. Discrimination against Chinese people is nothing new nor are there signs of it waning. In 2017, research showed that Chinese people faced the highest levels of racial harassment in the UK out of any ethnic

group,[79] whilst in 2020, The Independent reported the number of hate crimes against Chinese people in the UK had tripled compared to the previous two years.[80] It is clear that the sense of not fitting in is alarmingly prevalent amongst Britain's Chinese community. *Untold* takes 'not fitting in' as its core theme and explores it through music and movement. With a full cast of artists of Chinese heritage, its creation was not only empowering, but also collaborative in creating space to tell our own diverse stories as transnational Chinese individuals. The choice of engaging with opera was made to exploit its capacity to integrate music with other artforms and to portray explicit narratives. I was especially interested in extending the genre whilst simultaneously disrupting elements as a critique of its Eurocentric history of storytelling and high social status. I found inspiration in the principles of Chinese Opera, most notably the importance of movement, to draw out broader interdisciplinary possibilities. Additionally, by centring our experiences, I re-present our lived experiences in a space that has previously marginalised our identities. This commentary will therefore focus on three interdependent strands: the use of narratives, the ways in which opera is recast, and the musical dramatisation. The hope is to elucidate how the processes and decisions in the creation of *Untold* serve to explore the theme of 'not fitting in' and shed further light on the complexities of Chinese diasporic existence.

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[79] Jamie Doward and Mika Hyman, 'Chinese Report Highest Levels of Racial Harassment in UK', *The Observer*, 19 November 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/19/chinese-community-reports-highest-proportion-of-racial-harassment-in-britain.
[80] Samuel Lovett, 'Coronavirus: Hate crimes against Chinese people almost triple in UK during pandemic', *The Independent*, 5 May 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-uk-hate-crimes-chinese-people-china-a9499991.html.

3.2 Untold Narratives

"London."

"But where are you really from?"

Untold adapts the story of '葉限', a Chinese folk story from the Tang Dynasty first documented in an anthology by Duan Chengshi in the ninth century (see Appendix 4 for translation). 葉限 is extremely similar to the well-known European fairy tale, 'Cinderella', whose first transcription is understood to have been written in the seventeenth century by Giambattista Basile 800 years later and is considered one of Cinderella's predecessors.[81] This is not, however, a squabble about which story is more 'authentic' and there are different versions across many cultures and time-periods. Rather, this point illustrates how this narrative has an embedded notion of a transnational journey between China and the West and parallels my journey as a transnational Chinese individual which was a significant reason for choosing 葉限 for *Untold*. The resonances extend to how I first came across the folk story. I was introduced to 葉限 in Adeline Yen Mah's autobiography, *Chinese Cinderella*, which recounts episodes of the author's troubled childhood that follow a similar arc to the Cinderella narrative and includes the story of 葉限 at the very end.[82] Perhaps most fascinating is how Yen Mah writes her biography in the style of a novel that fuses fiction and non-fiction, an idea planted from the outset by naming her autobiography after a fairy tale.[83] By acting as both narrator and protagonist, Yen Mah undermines the traditional 'impartial narrator' and creates a hybrid identity. Although not a conscious decision, it is

[81] Amelia Carruthers, *Cinderella And Other Girls Who Lost Their Slippers* (Bristol: Pook Press, 2015) 5.
[82] Adeline Yen Mah, *Chinese Cinderella*: *The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter* (London: Penguin Books, 1999).
[83] I take 'novel' to mean "a long-printed story about imaginary characters and events" as defined by Cambridge Dictionary Online, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/novel.

striking that I was drawn to 葉限 having already been exposed to its potential to blur biographical and creative spaces and more broadly play with genre expectations, both areas that I examine in *Untold*.

In many ways, 葉限 was an ironically perfect fit for a piece about 'not fitting in'. The narrative concerns a protagonist, 葉限, who is subjected to a life of misery at the hands of her stepfamily who never accept 葉限 as one of their own. Even when 葉限 manages to attend the local festival after being magically transformed, she is forced to flee home, fearing she would be recognised by her stepfamily and reminding us of 葉限's inescapably peripheral existence. This arc is subsequently disrupted when 葉限's lost shoe does not fit anyone else's foot, much to the dismay of the King. It is only after 葉限 fits into the shoe, which has come to symbolise marriage and social acceptance, that our familiar ending is reached and the story resolves happily ever after – 葉限 leaves her home for a better life and a better future.

For all the ways in which the story of 葉限 contains layers of 'not fitting in', it also contains problematic issues that are exacerbated when interpreted in line with a piece about transnational Chinese identity. It is tempting to map 葉限's journey onto those of the Chinese diaspora whose families left for the West in search for a better life for their children, and to equate 葉限's marriage to the King with the West's acceptance of immigrants who relocate and live happily ever after in a modern, democratic, and fair society. But is this representative of our families' routes? Is the transcontinental journey to the West just a path to a better future? Does the West truly symbolise the best qualities of society? And are people who look like me really accepted in British society today? Or is it that the transcontinental journey is part of a long history of colonisation and an uprooting of

othered cultures, that the image of the West hinges on their perpetual ignorance of this problematic past, and that people who look like me continue to face challenges because of the supposed colour of our skin, the narrowness of our eyes, and the shape of our noses? 'Untelling' colonial narratives is a critical lens through which the folk tale of 葉限 is adapted (see Appendix 5 for synopsis). Now the King's search for 葉限 is depicted as disturbingly as it would be if a stranger approached asking you to try on a shoe. Now the story ends not with 葉限 blindly accepting the King's proposal. Now 葉限 has realised she will never fit in and chooses to find her own path, wherever that will lead.

Untold is an intervention in Britain's colonial past and offers a new narrative about transnational Chinese identity by those and for those who live it. A crucial way in which *Untold*'s narrative does this is by framing each scene with a personal story told by one of the artists. These stories document individual moments of 'not fitting in' and are paired with an episode from 葉限's narrative. Whilst I had the idea to include personal stories in this way during the compositional phase, the stories were first exchanged during rehearsal after which we had an open conversation agreeing to share these stories publicly. Our accounts show how transnational identities transcend the singular categorisations of Chinese and Western cultures, and how our feelings of belonging do not neatly align with geographical boundaries. Instead, our sharing of lived experiences align with Zheng's conception of diaspora as "[not an] old term denoting a state of geocultural being for groups of dispersed people, but a new analytical category with which we take part in current discourses on cultural politics, and a new empowering consciousness for many people who are struggling in their everyday lives to live with, claim, and belong to multiple cultural identities."[84] For us,

[84] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 28.

the weaving in of these personal stories with that of 葉限 opens a space to come together as transnational Chinese individuals who have unique and diverse experiences around a common theme. This space between fiction and reality – one that is so elegantly navigated in *Chinese Cinderella* – symbolises what Bhabha calls the 'Third Space': the interstices between cultures where diasporic identity is situated that opens "a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation".[85] It is this liminal space in which I, as the un-costumed pianist in the performance, am located. The 'breaking of the fourth wall' serves not only to tie together the narrative pieces of 葉限 and the artists, but also to collapse the imagined border within the artists as performers and people of Chinese heritage.

3.3 Reimagining Opera

"Are you here to study?"
"I was born here."

The transformation of 'Western opera' to scrutinise historical metanarratives is not new. Huang Ruo's *M Butterfly* (2020) and British Chinese director Jonathan Man's *Turandot Reimagined* (2015) are two examples of the active reclaiming of the postcolonial space as a matter of personal and social importance. In these cases, both do so by examining and adapting Puccini's operas that have played an extant role in the musical exoticisation of East Asian cultures. Huang Ruo comments: "as an Asian American I have a duty to write about stories that are more relevant to my background, to my culture, and to the issues Asian

[85] Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha', interview by Jonathan Rutherford, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 211.

Americans are facing..."[86] Moreover, there exists a substantial body of operatic work by transnational Chinese composers that extend the genre by integrating elements derived from Chinese cultures. Tan Dun (*Ghost Opera*, 1994), Liza Lim (*Spirit Moon Feasting*, 1997-99), Huang Ruo (*Paradise Interrupted*, 2016), and Du Yun (*Thirst*, 2018) have all done so in novel ways, exploring between them the intersections that Western opera holds with shamanistic rituals, Cantonese street opera, Kun Opera, and Diaoqiang Opera respectively. As I have discussed elsewhere, this points towards a "seemingly endless desire to reimagine opera…that brings together composers from across the globe of Chinese heritage".[87] By considering the diverse operatic traditions of Chinese cultures in tandem with their Western counterpart, this predilection is perhaps for these composers "not just about questioning the meaning of opera, but also about questioning the meaning and manifestation of diasporic existence through opera and music."

Untold extends this work of reimagining Western opera, a genre with which I have a tense relationship because of its continued telling of misogynistic[88] and racist stories[89] in luxurious settings. I felt the need to destabilise these norms and explore how opera can tell relevant stories in meaningful ways. I looked towards Chinese Opera, a form with humble beginnings as 'lowly' entertainment for the general public, for inspiration.[90] In the case of *Untold*, I was aware of my limited knowledge of the numerous regional practices that make up Chinese Opera and considered it inappropriate to replicate specific elements of which I had little

[86] Huang Ruo, 'Our Music Cannot Escape Our Lives: An Art Talk with Composer Huang Ruo', interview by Ann Meier Baker, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 19 May 2020, https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2020/our-music-cannot-escape-our-lives-art-talk-composer-huang-ruo.
[87] Alex Ho, 'Mind the Gap: Navigating Transnational Identity in Opera', *British Music Collection*, 28 October 2019, https://britishmusiccollection.org.uk/article/mind-gap-navigating-transnational-identity-opera.
[88] Charlotte Higgins, 'Is Opera the Most Misogynistic Art Form?', *The Guardian*, 26 February 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/26/is-opera-the-most-misogynistic-art-form.
[89] Joshua Barone, 'Opera Can No Longer Ignore Its Race Problem', *The New York Times*, 16 July 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/arts/music/opera-race-representation.html.
[90] Colin Mackerras, 'Opera' in 'People's Republic of China', *Grove Music Online*, Accessed 22 June 2020.

expertise. Instead, I focused on one of the main principles of Chinese Opera in an approach distinct from Huang Ruo's and Du Yun's work, that being the equal importance of music and movement. Performers of Chinese Opera are trained in movement (acting and martial arts) as much as they are in singing, a practice that differentiates this form from Western opera to the extent that what may be considered as dance training in the West may be considered simply as operatic training in China. Taking this interdisciplinary approach as a starting point, I decided to use a dancer alongside a Western-trained opera singer to convey *Untold*'s narrative. In addition, I expanded the instrumentalists' roles so that they were not just an accompanying ensemble but were as integral to the theatrical and visual unfolding of the story as the dancer and singer in a manner far removed from the traditional orchestral pit-setting of Western opera.

The performers in *Untold* were given characters to play both musically and theatrically; co-directing the piece with movement artist/director Julia Cheng was crucial to achieving the optimal balance between music and movement for each musician. There are several key sections where the narrative is driven by movement and these sections are the moments where the instrumentalists portray their characters most explicitly. Compositionally, this meant employing two strategies to afford space for the choreography to assume the main impetus: rhythmic flexibility and improvisation. Indeed, rhythmic flexibility governs the opening as the choreography, which serves to establish 葉限's marginalisation by her stepfamily and sets the tone for the entire piece, was set to vocal gestures that were cued by movement (b.1-30). A similar idea is used in the fight section of the second scene. The killing of 葉限's beloved fish is dramatised by Wu Shu performed by yangqin-player, Mantawoman, who has been practising martial arts since a young age. Here, the music is reminiscent of the accompaniment to Chinese lion dancing on Lunar New Year, one of my

fondest childhood experiences, and was made up of rhythmic cells that could easily be repeated and cut as necessary to fit the choreography (b.148-174). Designing the music to the movement was taken a step further in the use of improvisation. The latter half of the first scene features an improvisation 'duel' in music and movement between percussionist Beibei Wang and Julia as 葉限 is physically mistreated by her stepmother, played by Beibei, and her two stepsiblings, played by flautist Daniel Shao and Mantawoman. Lastly, the close of *Untold* foregrounds Julia's movement when 葉限 rejects the King's advances by including a semi-improvised piano part that employs a melody repeated and varied in accordance with Julia's improvised movement. In these ways, movement played a critical role in the portrayal of *Untold*'s narrative as the functions of music and musicians are redressed and reinvigorated, and represents the crystallisation of the initial influence of Chinese opera's interdisciplinary approach.

3.4 Musical Dramatisation

"What instruments do you play?"
"Piano and Violin."
"That's so Asian!"

Beyond its integration with movement, the musical dramatisation of *Untold* has its own significance. Indeed, writing for an ensemble of Chinese and Western instruments was another strand of exploring a transcultural space by combining a countertenor with flute, yangqin, Chinese percussion, and piano. The music functions to heighten the narrative and its conception is based on exploring the spectrum between tension and resolution in

tandem with 葉限's story. I privileged pitch structure, harmony, and voice-setting in the music's conception and will now address each of these parameters.

Throughout *Untold*, there is a semitonal conflict that governs the pitch structure and reflects the various points of tension in the narrative. The mapping of pitch centres in relation to the five scenes is formulated as:

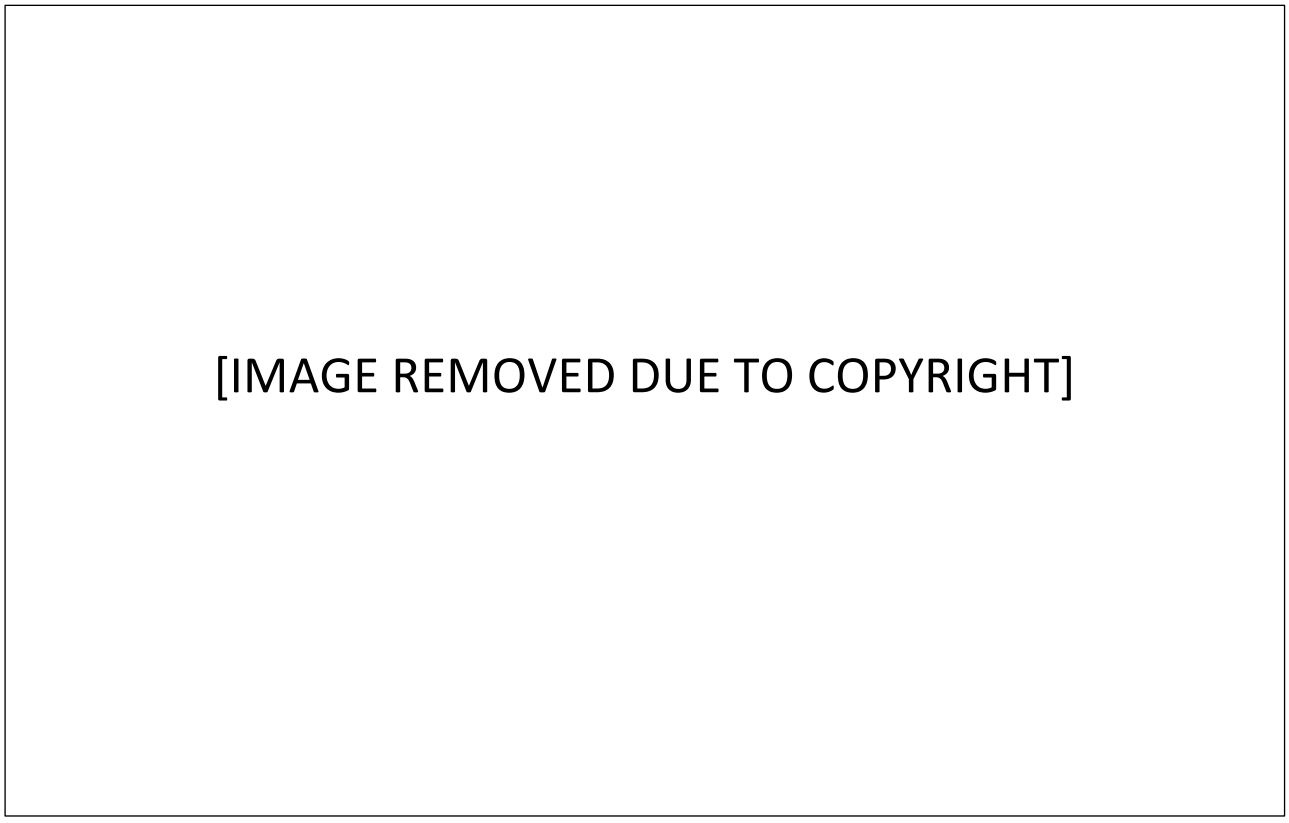
Scene:	1	2	3	4	5
Pitch centre(s):	F	E -> F	E -> C#	C	F -> Eb

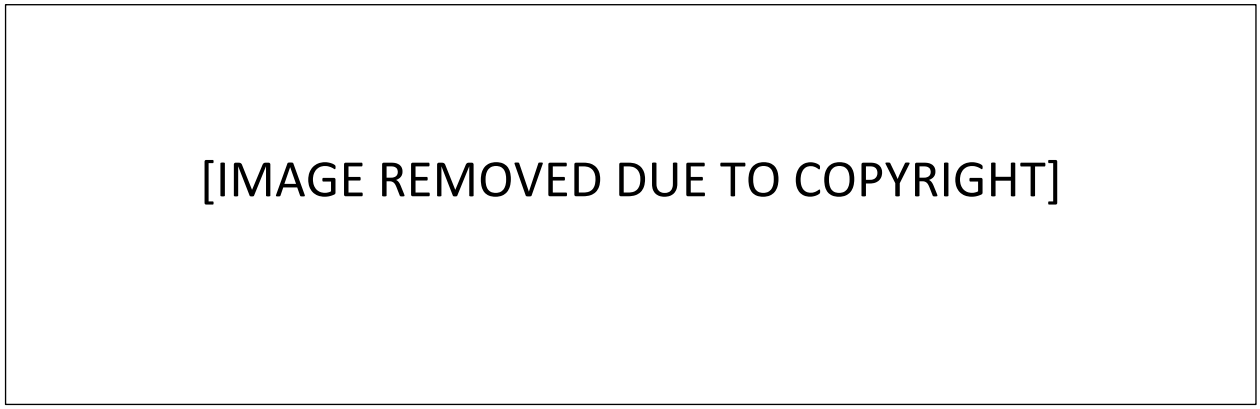
As shown, semitonal pitch relations proliferate the structure through conflicts between F and E, and C# and C. In each case, the shift in pitch centre by a semitone marks a shift in the mood of the narrative. 葉限's miserable existence is thus established in Scene 1 around pitch centre F. In contrast, scenes 2 and 3 begin on pitch centre E, representing 葉限's moments of hope and happiness in her interactions with the fish. These episodes then become destabilised over the course of the respective scenes and the pitch centre E gets dissolved in each case. Scene 4, marking the entrance of the king, modulates the pitch centre that closes Scene 3, C#, to C. Finally, the last scene returns to pitch centre F before the ending, where 葉限 leaves her stepfamily and the king in a departure from the traditional storyline, is reflected in a new pitch centre of Eb, hinting at a resolution of the semitonal conflict by a shift of a whole tone.

These structural ideas are further embedded in the choices of harmony. The prominent intervallic relation of an enharmonic third between dyads C/C# and E/F play an important role. The opening motif (b.1-9) is hence constructed on a minor third sung by the countertenor and reappears at key structural moments including in the transition between scenes 2 and 3 (b.191) and at the start of Scene 5 (b.369). Furthermore, the notion of the semitonal conflict and its complementary whole tone resolution is developed. The

countertenor in Scene 1 continuously outlines semitonal relations as 葉限's sad livelihood is conveyed, whereas the hopeful openings of scenes 2 and 3 use harmony based on the pentatonic scale, the distinctive sound of which is based on whole tones (see Example 1 below). Minor seconds return in Scene 4, centring on C/C# as the King is depicted as self-absorbed and obsessive (Fl. in b.274-277, Fl. in b.284-286, C-T. and Ygn. in b.295-304). The tension between minor seconds and its whole tone complement then comes to a head in the second half of Scene 5 (b.391ff.) as the piano right-hand melody is built predominantly on major and minor seconds in parallel with 葉限's decision to depart. Indeed, the very end of *Untold* spells out both these harmonic devices, namely the minor third and the semitone/whole tone dichotomy, once more as the piano right hand closes by alternating a whole tone dyad Db/Eb with a semitone dyad C/C#.

Example 1 (Untold) – Comparison in the openings of Sc. 1, 2, and 3





These structural and harmonic ideas are derived from my Western classical music education, and the use of a semitone as a structural and harmonic conflict is how I was taught at university to analyse music by nineteenth century composers. By integrating these devices with elements distinctly not taught at university, not least composing for Chinese instruments, exploring pentatonicism, and engaging with non-Western musical cultures, I wanted to realise and navigate a space within myself that reflected my musical journey between Western and Chinese influences.

Indeed, this journey between cultures impacted how I composed for voice in a critical way. Of all the artists, countertenor Keith Pun represented the clearest musical link to Western opera in training and experience, and I was interested in how I could undermine operatic norms in my vocal writing without compromising Keith's sound. Perhaps most obvious is the lack of text across the majority of *Untold*. Unusually for an opera, I did not collaborate with a librettist and wrote the sung text myself. This departure from standard practice served to resolve an issue I had struggled with at the start: if there was to be a text, what language should it be in? Having the text in Chinese would mean that most of our British audiences would not understand the words, and there would have been a further issue in deciding if it should be in Cantonese or Mandarin as our cast was split between both languages. On the other hand, setting a text in English would have been jarring for a piece about transnational Chinese identity and would reaffirm the peripheral position of Chinese culture and

communities in the UK. The removal of the text thus sidesteps the problem and allows the narrative weight of *Untold* to fall onto the music and movement.

The exception is in Scene 4. The mad king is given words in English to sing, albeit only a few phrases that are repeated obsessively. Moreover, he is given a recitative section (b.313-343), marked "delirious", that plants the seed of the audience interaction that comes in Scene 5. It is in this scene also that the vocal line is most melismatic in another nod towards tropes of Western operatic virtuosity (see Example 2 below). In this way, I aligned the image of Western opera with the unattractive characteristics of the King that represent the West's dark colonial history as well as my personal misgivings about Western opera. The King is obsessed with his own status and image; that he is the only character to have words symbolises the erasure of culture, independence, and identity that colonisation brings. His pathetic pleading in the last scene where he asks members of the audience to try on the shoe is designed to be as uncomfortable as Britain's lack of acknowledgement of its insidious past and present, and it is this that 葉限 rejects in the moment when she rejects the King.

Example 2 (Untold): b.344-368 – virtuosic and melismatic countertenor line in Sc. 4

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

3.5 New Chapters

There have been periods when I wished I was white and felt shame and embarrassment from looking and being Chinese. *Untold* afforded me an opportunity to confront this. In bringing together artists with aligned lived experiences, I felt empowered to grapple with the complexities of my cultural identity in a vulnerable and meaningful way. From individual feelings of not fitting in and positions of isolation, we reoriented ourselves to imagine a space of community around these experiences of transnational Chinese identity. We found a process of healing in the creation of *Untold* and a power in making a work for and by us. Indeed, this project motivated me to continue exploring my cultural identity. It inspired me to delve deeper into my lived experiences and their contexts, examining how I negotiate their nuances in my compositions. The next three chapters show my findings by interrogating themes of rootlessness, reclamation, and community. In examining these non-mutually exclusive themes, I extend my research to elaborate on wider patterns of transnational Chinese identity.

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CHAPTER 4. Rootlessness: Mediation as Language

Compositions:
Above the White Island for Tenor and Piano – 9'
Letters from Home for Baritone and Piano – 17'
Knuckleduster for Solo Piano – 6'
Total = 32'

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I explore cultural rootlessness – the feeling of disconnection to both Chinese and Western cultures – and how my music can mediate this rootlessness. The three works are collaborations with other transnational Chinese artists whose lived experiences and perspectives actively shape the final compositions. By way of introduction, I examine my own journey through assimilation, denial, rootlessness, and mediation. I contextualise this by referring to Cathy Park Hong's autobiography that critiques Asian experience in the West and to David Eng and Shinhee Han's studies on 'racial melancholia'.

4.1.1 A Language Lost to Assimilation

識聽唔識講.

Sik teng, mh sik gong is the feeble introduction I give to describe my level of Cantonese to communicate: "I understand Cantonese, but I can't speak it". In my childhood, I was eager to assimilate into the white environment I was surrounded by in London. I formed a bad habit – one that I would come to heavily regret – of replying in English to my parents when they would speak to me in their native Cantonese. The loss of speaking a mother tongue across immigrant generations is well documented, with notable studies finding a pattern of

immigrant families losing their heritage language by the third generation.[91] In my case as the second generation, it meant the lack of a shared language with my grandparents and a language barrier with my mother which my attempt to rectify through Cantonese classes in my twenties feels too little, too late. Instead, I learnt English as my first language and camouflage, blending in as well I could and minimising my 'foreignness'. It would take over twenty years for me to unravel this tale of white longing. By this point, I had completed my primary and secondary education as well as an undergraduate degree barely questioning my lack of engagement in Chinese cultures beyond Lunar New Year meals and short phone calls to my grandparents to speak in toddler-level Cantonese confirming that I was studying hard.

4.1.2 Not White Enough: Denial about Denial

I recognise now that the goal to assimilate into white British culture was entangled in the pressures of my social surroundings, the pattern of microaggressions and racism I experienced, and to an extent the shortcomings of my personality. It was part of a broader societal system which duped me into believing that whiteness was not so much the norm, but the only mode of existence available in the constant feeding of white identities I was surrounded by, saw on TV, studied in English literature, examined in history classes, and into whose music I was indoctrinated in my music education. By ignoring my Chinese heritage to fit into the mainstream culture of white normativity around me, I was measuring and legitimising myself based on how close I could get to passing as white. I was pitting Chinese against British cultures in a false East versus West struggle and overlooking the hybrid

[91] Jonathan Pullin, 'Mind the Generation Gap: Heritage Language Often Lost by Third Generation', *University of Alberta*, Accessed 20 December 2022, https://www.ualberta.ca/rehabilitation/news-and-events/news/2019/may/mind-the-generation-gap-heritage-language-often-lost-by-third-generation.html.

nature of diasporic identities. The issue of denial was twofold. I was denying my full self by eschewing my Chinese heritage, whilst simultaneously denying the fact that I was in denial about it.

These experiences speak to an othering that applies more broadly to presenting as East Asian in a white-dominated culture. Amongst the powerful writing by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Mary Jean Chan, and Xiaolu Guo, I find particularly compelling the autobiography of Korean American writer, Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition*.[92] Hong scrutinises her experiences living in the US, identifying a pattern of racialisation that causes 'minor feelings': "the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from sediments of everyday racial experience".[93] These feelings are typically suppressed under guises of 'not being so bad', thus being allowed to accumulate into a cycle of self-repression. Even for Hong, she notes "even now as I write, I'm shadowed by doubt that I didn't have it bad compared to others. But racial trauma is not a competitive sport… The problem is not that my childhood was exceptionally traumatic but that it was in fact rather typical."[94] Although minor feelings like shame and melancholy are "non-cathartic states of emotion", I ironically felt catharsis – the releasing of repressed emotions – in reading Hong's work and its legitimisation and articulation of my own minor feelings.[95] If, as she says, the "ethnic literary project has always been a humanist project in which nonwhite writers must prove they are human beings who feel pain", I feel empowered to share and examine my own experiences.[96]

[92] Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition* (London: Profile Books, 2020).
[93] Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 56.
[94] Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 78.
[95] Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 56.
[96] Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 49.

4.1.3 Not Asian Enough: Assimilation into Rootlessness

After my undergraduate studies, I began shedding the pressures to assimilate into white cultures and engaged more with Chinese cultures. The shift was gradual and awkward. I was grappling with a language and culture with which I was familiar yet foreign. The more I delved in, the more I realised there was to learn. The sense of endless inadequacy would grow each time I used the wrong tone or point at pictures to order *dim sum*.

Compositionally, I began writing music for Chinese instruments. This included composing *Vanishing Point* (2016) for erhu and orchestra for the Shanghai Philharmonic, and a yangqin solo, *Rituals and Resonances* (2017/8), for Mantawoman. Both pieces were meditations on feelings of guilt about my lack of knowledge about Chinese traditions, and their processes continued my questioning of why I had previously pushed aside interest in Chinese cultures. My *Pau-Pau* (maternal grandmother) passed away in March 2018 just as I finished *Rituals and Resonances*. I brought a bound score to leave in *Pau-Pau*'s coffin but as I went to do so, I was stopped by my relatives who told me it is against Chinese custom to leave anything with your name in a coffin as it brought associations of being close to death yourself. The irony of trying to connect with my *Pau-Pau* only to do so in a way that was culturally inappropriate was as laughable as it was indicative of my cultural estrangement. Having spent most of my life feeling not being white enough, I was now not Asian enough. As a consequence, I felt increasingly untethered, as if I was losing a part of myself and it was too late to get it back. I felt rootless.

This acute feeling of cultural rootlessness is examined in the work on 'racial melancholia' by literature professor David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han who extend Hong's formulations to identify a pattern of melancholia amongst diasporic Asian communities in the US. Their work provides a framework to process my feelings as they pinpoint the ways

immigration, assimilation, and racialisation manifest in feelings of loss.[97] Using Freud's theory on unresolved grief and Bhabha's idea of mimicry, they view melancholia as "mourning without end", and explore how it results from the inevitable failure of Asian Americans to reproduce whiteness.[98] The extent of their findings cause them to propose a "national melancholia, a national haunting, with negative social effects".[99] Eng and Han further their analysis by noting the mourning by diasporic communities is both for their failed identifications with whiteness as well as their 'original' Asian cultures.[100] In this multifaceted understanding, they focus on the losses between immigrant Asian generations and the next generation born outside Asia, studying the pressure on this 'first' generation to repay their parents' sacrifice and posing the uncomfortable notion that the sacrifice is only paid by the children sacrificing themselves to succeed in the same hegemonically white system, even if that comes at the cost of an estrangement in language between parents and children.[101]

These observations uncannily map onto my own journey and just as I did in reading Hong's work, I felt catharsis in reading Eng and Han's paper. They gave validation to my own lived experiences I did not know I needed. Furthermore, their articulation of the structures of loss provided guidance in understanding the rootlessness attached to my cultural identity. Indeed, Eng and Han see optimism in their work in identifying how the "communal appropriation of melancholia" can offer useful tools of intervention, and advocate for the creation of spaces where these issues can be addressed collectively and publicly.[102]

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[97] David Eng and Shinhee Han, 'A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (15 August 2000): 667–700, https://doi.org/10.1080/10481881009348576.
[98] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 670-1.
[99] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 673.
[100] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 679.
[101] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 682.
[102] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 697.

4.1.4 Confronting Rootlessness

Inspired by the catharsis I derived from Hong, Eng, and Han, I began collaborating with artists who shared experiences of rootlessness in the hope of mediating these feelings in the years preceding this doctorate. Key amongst these was launching Tangram in January 2019 with Mantawoman, Daniel Shao, and Beibei Wang. Each went beyond solely playing music by contributing to the curation, production, and fundraising of this concert made up of music exclusively composed by transnational Chinese composers. Perhaps most valuably, we spent time together discussing our relationships to our heritages. It allowed me to begin processing my thoughts around cultural identity, resulting in *Tell them we were here*, which was premiered at the concert, and embedding the importance of collaboration that would shape my artistic thinking going forward. Alongside this, I explored rootlessness in my pre-doctoral compositions. *Spiralling Scrolls* (2018/19) is scored for clarinet, viola, and yangqin, and takes a theme of cultural, temporal, and physical distance to imagine growing up in Hong Kong. *Can I Play, too?* (2019), for clarinet trio and table-tennis players, interrogated notions of cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity and transformed the concert setting into a table-tennis match.

4.1.5 Mediating Rootlessness

These musical projects helped me reflect on my feelings, and consequently, I have come to understand that making music allows me to negotiate the rootlessness common to diasporic experience. Key to this is the sharing of the issue of rootlessness with collaborators. The three works included in this section thus extend how my compositions mediate rootlessness by exploring rootlessness with performers whose own lived experiences and our joint reflections shape the compositions. Indeed, the two song commissions, *Letters from Home*

and *Above the White Island*, are settings of new texts inspired by our conversations about rootlessness resulting from disconnections with family and homeland. Additionally, my piano solo, *Knuckleduster*, is a response to the rootlessness in disconnecting from transnational Chinese identity as a classically-trained musician, an experience I share with pianist Aidan Chan who commissioned and premiered the piece. It is notable that several of my collaborators spoke English as their second language, and so it was perhaps unsurprising that these projects converged onto rootlessness given the significant language barriers between us. In this way, our collaborations folded in a desire to mediate rootlessness alongside a search for a communal language necessary to collaborate. As our conversations progressed and as each artist shed light on our themes, our collective search for connection through music became our communal language and balm. My own rootlessness is heavily linked to my inability to speak, read, or write fluently in Cantonese. As such, these projects not only helped me mediate rootlessness, but they also led me to understand how the process of mediation formed a language in itself for me and my collaborators.

4.2 COMPOSITIONS

4.2.1 *Letters from Home*

Instrumentation: Baritone and Piano
Duration: 17'
Commissioned by: Royal Opera House
Text by: Theophilus Kwek
Premiered by: Jia Huang and Satoshi Kubo at the Royal Opera House in February 2022

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Letters from Home is a song cycle in four movements created with Chinese baritone Jia Huang and Singaporean poet Theophilus Kwek. It was clear that we had been grouped together by the commissioners at the Royal Opera House for our shared Chinese heritage, and yet what we perceived immediately were our cultural differences. At the time, Jia had just moved to the UK from China to study at Guildhall, whilst Theophilus had moved back to Singapore having finished his studies at Oxford. It was fascinating to share our respective relationships with Chinese cultures and it was striking that we were also immediately challenged to navigate language differences between our contrasting proficiencies of English and Mandarin. My levels of Mandarin are non-existent whilst Jia had only started learning English for a few months and Theophilus most helpfully had fluent English alongside a functional level of Mandarin. We found ourselves adjusting our way of speaking to communicate and thanks to Jia's patience and Theophilus' translating, we were able to find a process and rhythm of conversation. We spoke about our different lived experiences

growing up in the UK, Singapore, and China, the cultural and familial expectations around vocations in the arts, and the journeys we and our families had taken between East Asia and the UK. Listening to Jia and Theophilus describe the negotiation of leaving their home cultures made me aware of my own privilege still living in London, whilst it was eye-opening for them to hear about my racialised experiences growing up as an ethnic minority. Our conversations led us to think about the manifestations of cultural rootlessness from migration and how the sharing of our experiences itself felt healing.

Theophilus' text beautifully encapsulates the spirit of our conversation. It intertwines the tensions embedded in the act of uprooting oneself for opportunity and the consequent loss of home, family, language, and identity, unconsciously tracing Eng and Han's assertion that the "experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning."[103] Theophilus affords a multi-perspective view by framing this as four letters between a father and his son who has moved from China to England, casting their intergenerational disconnect to drive the emotional narrative as they attempt to mediate their distance, and specifically their losses of each other and family. The autobiographical link between the son and Jia's own journey is apparent, and the use of Mandarin compounds this further. The first two letters from the father are innocuous on the surface. We open with the familiar Chinese greeting, 'Have you been eating?', and hear the father's rambles about winter back home. The second letter describes the father locating his son's living address in London and the "sense of distance and alienation" manifesting as humour in the street names around Bermondsey.[104] It is both telling and appropriate to the Chinese cultural context that there are few moments of strong emotions despite their separation. Only at the end of these first two letters, like a

[103] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 679.
[104] Theophilus Kwek, 'Collaborating in a Crisis' (October 2020), https://www.theophiluskwek.com/home/collaborating-in-a-crisis.

postscript, do we glimpse moments of indirect longing and signs of grief as the father mentions that the son's sister cried in his absence and that his mother sends her love respectively. It is in the father's third letter that things come to a head:

喂? [Hello?]

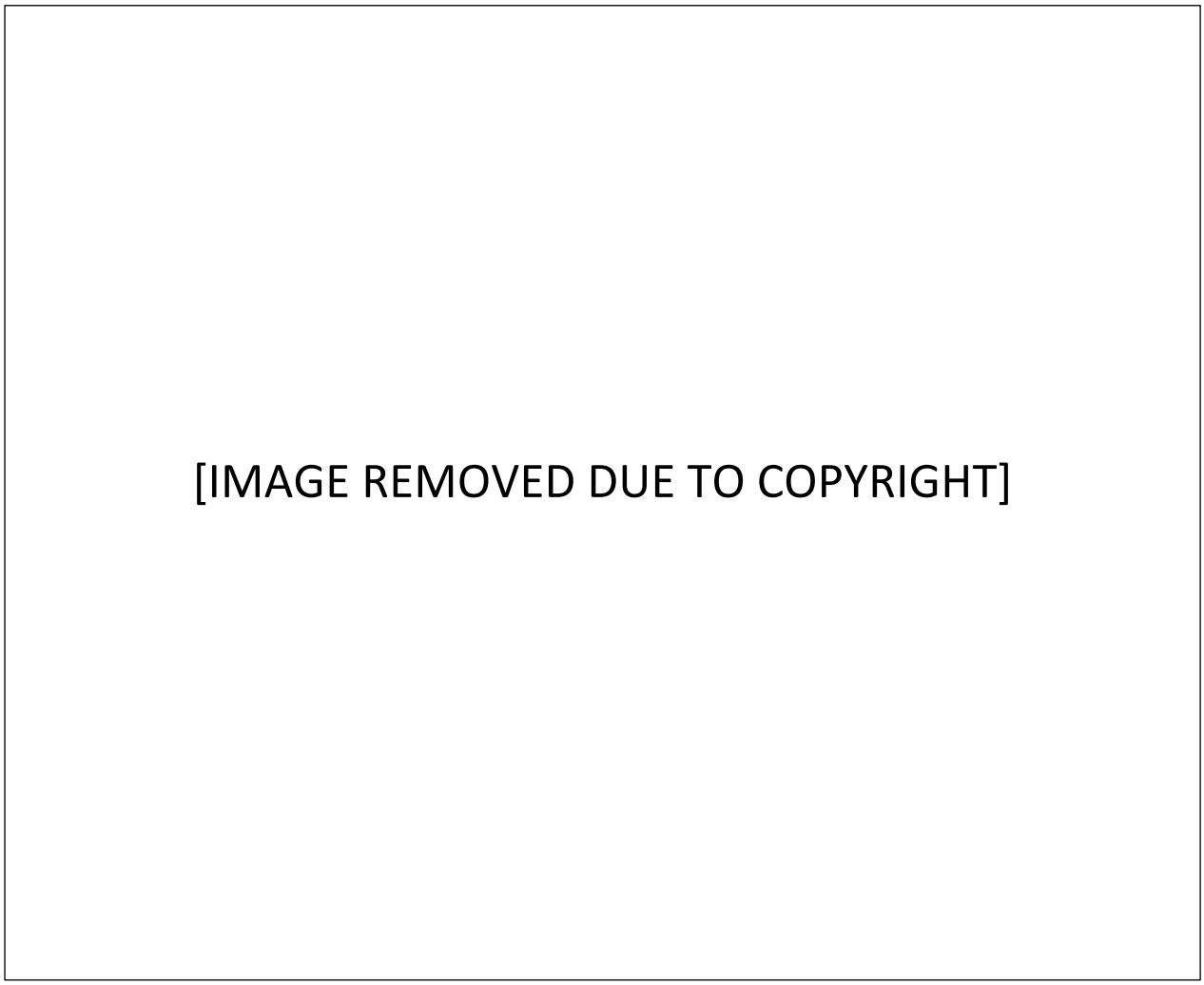
你听得到吗? [Can you hear me?]

In this literal transcription of the first Zoom conversation between Jia, Theophilus, and me, the father's emotions begin to come to the surface. We have reached halfway through the cycle and we are yet to hear anything from the son. Perhaps he cannot hear his father and their connection has been lost. This significantly longer letter begins once more as a description of the family's situation, albeit with a darker tone as we hear that the son's mother is unwell. The father's feelings are still suppressed, however, as he continues to eschew any overt emotional language until the end of the letter, when we hear the father lament the *bittersweet distance* separating them after the admission that he is proud of his son. It is only now that we hear the son's voice in a fragmented and brief fourth letter. We learn that the son has been trying to write to his father and struggling to form the words, the vocabulary, and the language to write back.

The emotional thread of this text resonates with me powerfully. Growing up, I rarely heard any expression of love from my father, at least not in words. I often wondered what happens when the lack of emotional affection becomes normalised between family members. In 2019, on my first day beginning my doctorate at RCM, it was crushing to discover that my father was having an affair which ultimately led to my parents' divorce and the complete cessation of contact between my father and the rest of my family. It is this devastating moment that I seek to convey in the climax of the song cycle (example 3 below):

You ask me if I am proud – of course I am…. It represents the dissolution and crushing of an imaginary world where my father had communicated more, in which our relationship was better, and the distance between us was navigable.

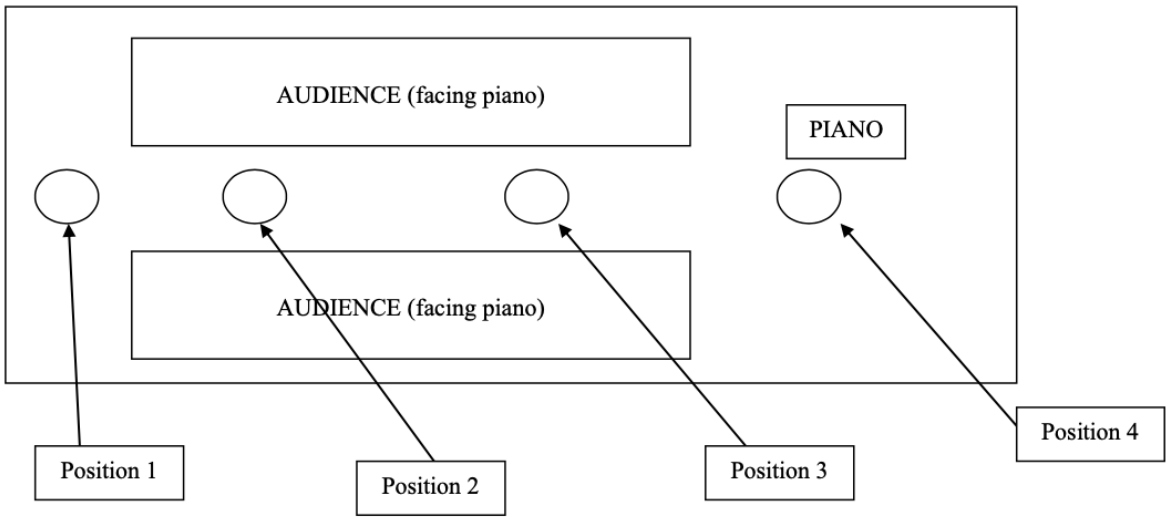
Example 3 (Letters from Home): b.263-266: Climax of cycle



The rest of the music hangs off this climax and explores estrangement through various mechanisms. Most immediately, the song cycle contains instructions for Jia to take up four positions in the auditorium for live performance, each at different distances from the piano. Based on the layout of the ROH Crush Room where the premiere took place, Jia began the cycle at the opposite end of the room to the stage and piano (see example 4 below). He

then gradually moved to the piano through a centre line so that not only was there an in-built tension between Jia and pianist Satoshi Kubo, but also for each audience member. Wherever audiences sat, they felt a moment of physical proximity followed by distance to Jia as he moved on. It is then a sad irony that once the distance between Jia and Satoshi is traversed and Jia has reached the piano at the onset of the fourth and final song, the vocal line is fragmented in tandem with the son's letter and the piano is reduced to a disappearing echo of the voice until it vanishes leaving our protagonist alone.

Example 4 (Letters from Home) – positioning of singer and piano



The use of an 'echo' to portray distance was also integral to the composed relationship between the voice and piano. The piano's echoing of the voice is established in the opening bars of the cycle (b.5-10) and proliferates across rest of the first letter (e.g. b.21-23 and b.33-35), until the end of the movement (b.45ff) where the same rising motif is transformed into a melancholic bell-like figure and the distance is translated into a registral one. Registral distance is elaborated further in the second song as the *moto perpetuo* in the piano's bass register is offset by the voice and the piano right-hand which both explore their respective

ranges. This tension culminates in b.118ff where the relaying of the mother's love transforms the *moto perpetuo*'s register as if to unlock the full piano range, only to end with the three lines of the voice, the piano left-hand, and the piano right-hand in starkly different registers to signal that the narrative distance remains. In the third song, gestural and registral echoes are combined as the piano develops the vocal line in duration and register (e.g. b.162-163). The single D#-D#-F# motif that opens the song represents a phone ringing in the distance; it is eventually extended to include a responding D#-D#-C# fragment (b.210ff), marking its transformation into a lilting lullaby. The music thereafter drives to the climax as the piano unravels in register and pitch, and the father's suppressed feelings spill out before the son's registrally displaced and rootless voice finally enters in the last letter. In this last letter, the vocal line loosely echoes the melodies of the very first letter, as if the son is trying to find a common language with his father, but for now it remains out of reach.

4.2.2 *Above the White Island*

Instrumentation: Tenor and Piano
Duration: 9'
Commissioned by: National Opera Studio
Text by: Theophilus Kwek
Recorded by: Shengzhi Ren and Derek Clarke, Scottish Opera
Released by: Opera Vision in November 2020

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Above the White Island examines rootlessness in the loss of homeland and its mediation through memory. The project continued my collaboration with poet Theophilus Kwek, on this occasion creating a song for Chinese tenor, Shengzhi Ren, then based in London. The commission came about in early 2020 and I met Shengzhi in person at the London office of National Opera Studio just before the first lockdown was announced in England. As we got to know each other, our discussion anchored on how Shengzhi first started singing back home in China. He spoke with fondness about learning to sing through Chinese folk music long before being introduced to the world of Western opera where he makes his living now thousands of miles away from his wife and family, and how he sometimes missed singing this music both for its sonic qualities and for the feeling of singing in Mandarin, his mother tongue. A magical moment then occurred when Shengzhi suddenly sang a Chinese folksong. He transported us both into his memory of home: a place of family, familiarity, and sanctuary. The office we were in was transformed into a sacred space, one that seemed to

shelter Shengzhi's inner emotions and would remain in my mind throughout the rest of the collaboration.

We went on to have several conversations online as lockdown took hold and, with Theophilus joining the process, continued the conversation about feeling rootless and distant from our heritage which only took greater significance within the context of mandatory isolation. The resulting text that Theophilus devised is written as a homage to our collective experiences of the sense of loss of homeland. We encounter a Chinese student far from home, who, in summary by Theophilus:

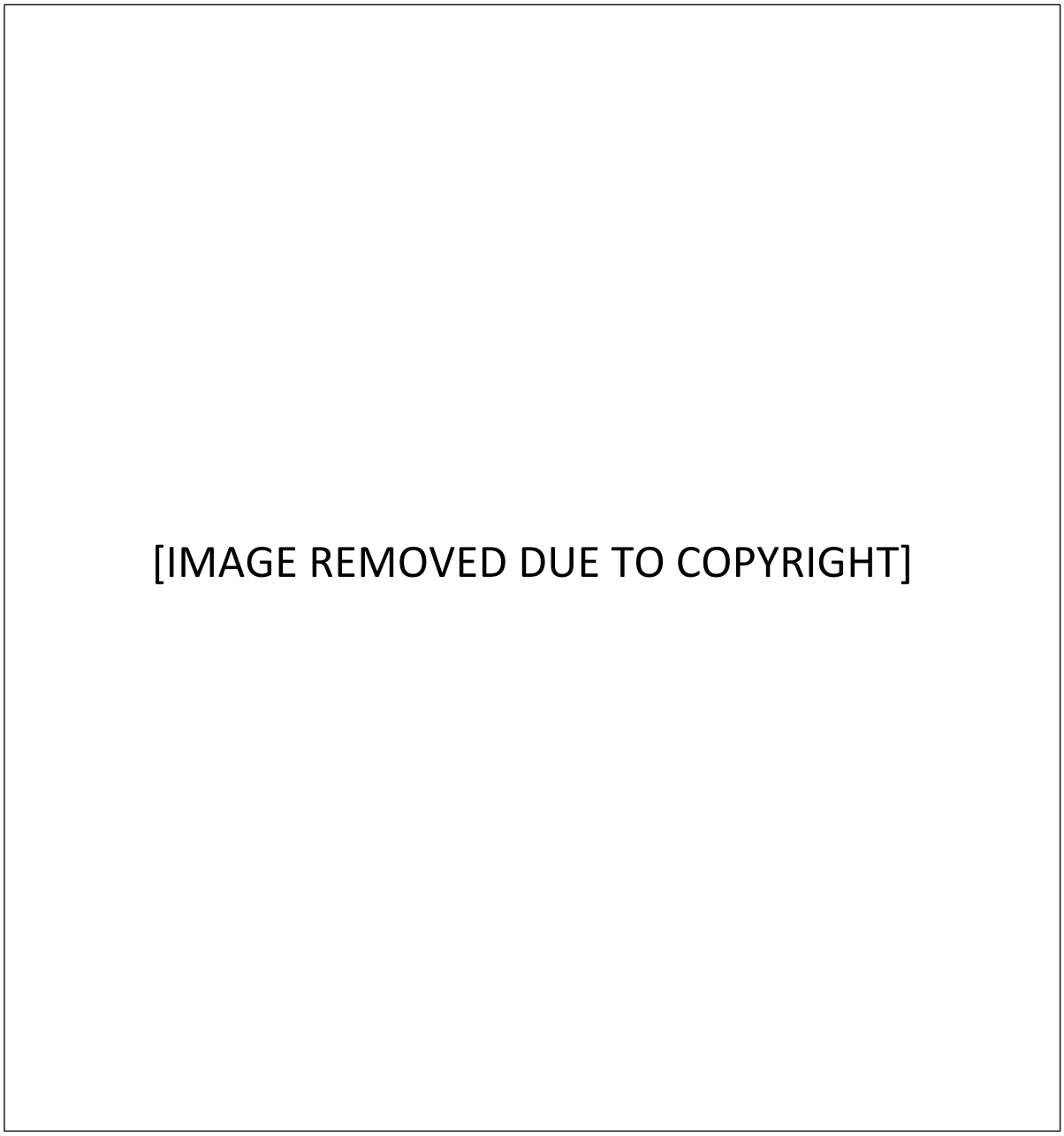
> *…finds himself doubly estranged: distant from the familiar comforts of home and forced to grapple with the suspended reality of a locked down city on his own. Pacing the narrow space of his room, he retreats into his memories, and finds himself reminiscing on the classical Chinese poetry he was taught as a child. One poem in particular, by the Tang Dynasty poet and politician Du Fu, captures his imagination, and as he begins to translate it, he realises that the centuries-old poem of exile seems to closely foreshadow his current situation.*[105]

In this way, Theophilus crafted a narrative that poignantly reflected how we may find solace in our memories to mediate rootlessness. Du Fu's poem, *The Climb*, evokes a strong melancholy in its protagonist's grief, the trigger for which is left open. The final line reveals how their *heart still yearns*, recalling Eng and Han's depiction of racial melancholia as "interminable grief".[106] For us, the *mournful cry* of Du Fu's text afforded a sense of catharsis in its pained emotions and allowed us to reflect on our journeys through cultural identity. Indeed, as part of the writing of the text, Theophilus translated the poem by Du Fu himself,

[105] Theophilus Kwek, 'Above the White Island', *National Opera Studio*, Accessed 10 January 2021, https://www.nationaloperastudio.org.uk/1242-above-the-white-island.
[106] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 670.

mirroring the protagonist undertaking the translation and placing himself on a meta-level of the narrative. This meta-relationship would also be assimilated by Shengzhi who would embody the character based on Shengzhi's own experiences. I wanted therefore to extend this meta-level thread. As such, I composed the music based on my own memory of Shengzhi singing the Chinese folksong several months prior, similar to the protagonist delving in his own memory to translate Du Fu's poem. It was less about remembering the folksong that Shengzhi sang than recreating the journey Shengzhi had taken us on in that magical moment when he transported us to his place of home and sanctuary, the journey of negotiating his cultural estrangement. Musically, this meant crafting a trajectory across the piece whereby the voice starts alone with small melodic fragments to depict its isolation. This builds slowly until the piano joins (b.31), at first playing its fragmented material sounding at odds with the voice, before gradually aligning as they both grow bit by bit like slowly recalling a folksong from childhood. The melody that comes to represent this folksong appears (b.55ff – see example 5 below) and with the switch in language to Mandarin, the protagonist, finally able to express themselves freely, takes us on a climb to the piece's cathartic apex (b.73-74). The end of the piece mirrors the opening, completing a palindromic structure. We return to reality though with the added memory of what has just been. The temporary nature of our protagonist's mediation of their loss of homeland reflects our own continued feelings of rootlessness, albeit reshaped by our shared exploration.

Example 5 (Above the White Island): b.56-66 – the switch to Mandarin signals the representation of Shengzhi's folk melody which is echoed in the pno. LH



4.2.3 *Knuckleduster*

Instrumentation: Solo Piano
Duration: 6'
Commissioned by: Aidan Chan
Recorded and premiered by: Aidan Chan at Royal College of Music in June 2021

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

"…one almost has to be apologetic of their non-Western identity as an artist in a Western-dominated industry…"

Thus wrote RCM piano student, Aidan Chan in a Facebook message (see Appendix 6 for full transcription). He was reaching out to commission a piece for his final undergraduate recital, but the message delved deeper:

> *I've found that over the past few years, the more that I've come to understand the culture of classical music and the Western world, the more clueless I am as to where I stand…sometimes I feel like I have to compromise my diasporic identity when presenting myself as a classical musician…Honestly I'm a bit lost as to where I want to move next artistically because I don't know how to define myself adequately yet. It's like living a double life…*

In this echo of Eng and Han's ideas around racial melancholia and the 'splitting' of one's identity due to unattainable assimilation into white cultures, Aidan appeared to be

experiencing a similar process of cultural rootlessness that I had previously encountered.[107] We both felt a loss of our transnational Chinese identities. It was not just that institutional and societal pressures meant it was difficult for Aidan to explore his Hong Kong heritage, but also that he felt the processes were not in place to be listened to, recalling Hong's observation that "[artists] of color had to behave better…they had to always act gracious and grateful so that white people would be comfortable enough to sympathize with their racialized experiences."[108] This resonates with my own experiences which include an instance when I was due to present *Untold* for a European opera fund and on presenting a draft to an industry professional, was advised to include less discussion about racism so that the white panel would not feel uncomfortable. The experiences Aidan and I shared was to describe an emotional and cultural undermining. It was a gaslighting that we only became fully aware of through our own conversations – a contact point which, for many artists of colour, does not exist because of the conditioning to accept the failure of our industry to include our full selves. Hong similarly writes, "Of course writers of color must tell their stories of racial trauma, but for too long our stories have been shaped by the white imagination…[so the] forces that cause their pain…are remote enough to allow everyone, including the reader, off the hook."[109]

As Aidan and I discussed these issues, we constantly ran into the problem that we had been musically raised as pianists within the Western classical music space and felt trapped in a singular musical language. This was to ask: what do you do when you no longer trust the only language you know? Our disillusion was to observe in ourselves Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Mimicry describes how colonised subjects imitate the culture of their colonisers

[107] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 671.
[108] Hong, *Minor* Feelings, 46.
[109] Hong, *Minor* Feelings, 49.

but will never reproduce it adequately, which as Eng and Han write, is the "doubling of difference that is almost the same but not quite, almost the same but not white".[110] *Knuckleduster* is an unpolite study for unlearning. It is the result of our shared alienation with Western classical music, its institutions, gatekeepers, canons, and language. We imagine unlearning the system of Western classical music to unlearn the structures of white hegemony and to make space for our transnational Chinese identities and experiences. Indeed, embedded within Bhabha's conception of mimicry is a disruptive potential, an "insurgent counter-appeal", against the coloniser's 'pure' culture, exemplified by the fact that much postcolonial theory is written by people of colour in the English language of their colonisers.[111] In this way, the material for *Knuckleduster* is derived from the piano studies I used to practice as a student. I mimicked the scales, arpeggios, and finger patterns pianists are taught to reel off, interrupted by Aidan being asked to hit the frame of the instrument with his knuckles. This material of piano studies is consequently pulled apart and put back together in different combinations until the ultimate 'inartistic' gesture of piano clusters takes over and destroys the six-minute study. Now the image of the piano, an icon of 'high art' Western classical music, is distorted and reduced to an object of violence and beating by our knuckledusters.

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[110] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 676.
[111] Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* no. 28 (1984): 125-133, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.

4.3 Conclusion

In my investigation of rootlessness and its mediation, I have found collective creativity to be as compositionally stimulating as it has been emotionally cathartic. Drawing on Hong's, and Eng and Han's ideas to understand the wider patterns of rootlessness, the three pieces began with conversations with my collaborators around our shared feelings which inspired the final compositions and their themes of loss of family, homeland, and self-identity. The creation of outlets for my collaborators turned out to have a dual function of unearthing an outlet for my own experiences, memories, and misgivings. It was the process of making music that encouraged us to create ways to explore feelings that were difficult to articulate purely in words, prompting us to build a shared language from our creative process. This building of a shared language through conversation and creation teased out new modes of communicating that transcended language barriers, geographical distance, and differing relationships with family, heritage, and Chinese cultures. It is hence through these compositions and their processes that we found mediation of our rootlessness and the qualities Zheng perceives in diasporic musical culture, one that:

> *provides emotional shelter for feelings of nostalgia, …channels individual creativity, supports social interaction, showcases pluralism, sustains diasporic sentiments, and expresses cultural difference and resistance on cultural identity.*[112]

Just as this is prompted by Zheng's observation of how music-making performs important social functions for transnational Chinese communities, these compositions strengthen the conception of creation as collective care for myself and my collaborators. Akin to *Untold*, my pieces demonstrate how I reorient my lived experiences to negotiate my cultural identity. It

[112] Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora*, 286.

fortifies my belief in the potential music holds to generate articulations of experiences, feelings, and hopes that can draw valuable attention to and recognition of wider social issues, an idea that is especially relevant when addressing the need to confront the racism affecting transnational Chinese communities today.

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CHAPTER 5. Reclamation: Our Experiences, Our Identities, Our Stories

Compositions:
Hush for Choir – 7'
Splinter for Double Bass and Orchestra – 10'
A Place called Paradise for Mezzo-soprano and Piano – 20'
Total = 37'

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I grapple with experiences of racism and draw out ways of processing them through my music. I trace the history of discrimination towards Chinese people and the 'model minority myth', and situate it amongst a broader context of colonialism. Key amongst this work is recognising that the history of colonial violence intimately connects non-white identities as argued by Lisa Lowe. I therefore locate anti-colonial solidarities beyond transnational Chinese communities and find further influence from Xine Yao, Vijay Iyer, and Paul Gilroy, to address wider racial prejudice within which my racialised experiences sit and to provide starting points for my compositions.

5.1.1 "Ching, chang, chong!"

It was 2021 and I had been racially abused outside my home. I stopped, unable to compute what I had heard, but by the time I had digested what had happened, the two kids had run down the street. Amongst the feelings of anger and humiliation was also one of resignation. I had expected this moment to come, and now that it had, there was a sense of hollow vindication. It came after friends and family had suffered abuse so it made sense that the virus of racism also struck me. After all, I was somewhat prepared given the accounts of

racism appearing on the news and social media. Each week, I would hear how it was spreading on a global scale: Donald Trump saying 'China virus' and 'kung flu',[113] news that teenagers had pushed a Chinese woman into a canal in Ireland,[114] footage of Italian TV hosts slanting their eyes to mimic Chinese people,[115] campaigns highlighting how Chinese restaurants in Australia were losing business due to racial stigma,[116] the image of French newspaper *Le Courrier Picard*'s publication of an editorial headlined "A New Yellow Peril",[117] the attack on Jonathan Mok on Oxford Street that fractured his face,[118] and all this amidst the reports of statistical increases in racism towards our communities across the world including the finding by ITV News in 2021 that hate crimes towards the UK's ESEA communities had risen by 50% in the previous two years.[119] This virus was exhausting. On the one hand, absorbing these atrocities was taking a toll on my creativity and mental health; yet on the other, I could not help but follow each case out of self-directed solidarity. I found myself struggling to process it all just as I had in that moment being racially abused outside my home.

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

[113] Los Angeles Times. *Trump Calls Coronavirus 'the Chinese Virus'*, Accessed 18 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pjsx94m8qA.
[114] Carl Samson, 'Asian Woman Assaulted, Pushed Into Canal By Racist Teens in Ireland', *NextShark*, 17 August 2020, https://data.nextshark.com/ireland-dublin-asian-woman-pushed-into-canal/.
[115] Chelsea Ritschel, 'Italian TV host apologises after racist segment mocking Asian people', *The Independent*, 15 April 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/italian-tv-asians-michelle-hunziker-b1831564.html.
[116] Jessie Yeung, 'Chinese restaurants are losing business over coronavirus fears', *CNN*, 18 February 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/18/australia/australia-chinese-restaurants-coronavirus-intl-hnk-scli/index.html.
[117] Alexandra Fouché, 'Coronavirus: French Asians hit back at racism with 'I'm not a virus'', *BBC News*, 29 January 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-51294305.
[118] Jack Guy, 'East Asian student assaulted in 'racist' coronavirus attack in London', *CNN*, 3 March 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/03/uk/coronavirus-assault-student-london-scli-intl-gbr/index.html.
[119] Ann Yip, 'Covid racism: Hate crime attacks against east and south east Asians in UK rise by 50% in two years', ITV News, 7 October 2021, https://www.itv.com/news/2021-10-06/true-scale-of-covid-hate-crime-against-asians-in-uk-revealed-as-victims-speak-up.

5.1.2 Feeling Seen and Heard

I was lifted by a video published by the Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice. *Eyes Open* is a call to "our allies to confront the historical and present injustices" faced by Chinese communities.[120] Through visuals, music, and spoken word by Christopher Tse, the video drew on and drew out a plethora of feelings, experiences, histories, and stereotypes I had strong emotive responses to: the abuse of Chinese labourers who built the nineteenth century North American railroads, the burning of multiple Chinatowns, and the numerous historical cartoons that shaped the portrayal of the fear in the West that Asians were coming to destroy society, the 'Yellow Peril'.[121] *Eyes Open* reckons with the racist perception of the shapes of our eyes, the sizes of our noses, the colours of our skins, the pronunciations of our names, and demands respect that our cultures deserve. It is a dismantling of the figure who is not seen or heard by wider society; the one who is socially compliant, politically passive, emotionally narrow, and productively efficient within the Western system; the one who is peripheral; and the one who neatly ticks every box as the 'model minority'. In watching it, I had never felt so seen and heard and it triggered a huge feeling of catharsis and empowerment at seeing our communities presented in a historically aware, culturally sensitive, and politically active way.

5.1.3 The Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth is a tool for the oppression of Global Majority identities. For Asians, it homogenises our identities and erases our plural experiences whilst pressuring us

[120] Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice, *Eyes Open: An Anti-Asian Racism PSA*, Accessed 12 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGQtaCyp8f8.
[121] More on the Yellow Peril can be found at https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/jack-london-and-the-yellow-peril/.

to aspire to the stereotype outlined above. If we do not reach it, we are failed Asians, or 'B-sians'. And even if we subjectively do, it is not that we are truly accepted. Instead, we comply to a set of characteristics that are based on economic success which as Eng and Han note, "mask our lack of political and cultural representation" and therefore "our inability to gain 'full' subjectivities" in a white society.[122] I therefore did not get a first for my undergraduate degree because of my own personal attributes. As an acquaintance put it, I got it because I am Asian.

For other Global Majority identities, it creates a false benchmark against which to compare, pitting our communities against one another to be the 'best' minority. The origins of the model minority term suggest as much. Its first appearance came in 1966 in a New York Times Magazine article by sociologist William Peterson to describe Japanese Americans' perceived social rise and would quickly proliferate to apply to Asians more widely. As historian Ellen Wu says, this rhetoric was "a way to discredit the claims of African Americans who were seeking racial and economic justice".[123] Asians were used by white oppressors as a 'racial wedge' between white and Black communities, effectively saying to Black communities: if Asians can fit into our system, why can't you?

This connection between the oppression of non-white groups and the coercion of Asian identities by white hegemonies has a long and violent history. In her seminal book, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Cultural Studies professor Lisa Lowe interrogates these ties, or 'intimacies'. She examines how Chinese people were used by the British colonial mission in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1833, a decision not made from moral

[122] Eng and Han, 'Racial Melancholia', 678.

[123] Ellen Wu quoted in Jennifer Liu, 'How the Model Minority Myth Holds Asian Americans Back at Work—and What Companies Should Do', *CNBC*, 3 May 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/03/how-the-model-minority-myth-holds-asian-americans-back-at-work.html.

judgement but out of fear of slave uprising.[124] Lowe lasers in on colonial archives to show that beyond forming a new labour force, the introduction of Chinese men and women in the Caribbean had a more sinister function. She reveals how Chinese people, described by British colonizers as "an industrious, sober, orderly"[125] if "semibarbarous people in comparison with the present nations of Europe",[126] would in Lowe's words, "deter a possible insurrection of African slaves, and moreover, would form a racial 'barrier' between the British and the 'Negroes'".[127] The parallels between this gross manipulation and the genesis of the model minority myth a hundred years later are uncanny. This treatment would also set the tone specifically for British-Chinese relations for the next decades which would include the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-1860) where the British effectively drugged the Chinese population and declared war when the Chinese government declared opium illegal. There is a sickening irony in the prevalence of the model minority myth, which characterises Asians as docile and apolitical, when the British distributed a drug that induces docility and subsequently crippled China's political autonomy.

Xine Yao elaborates on Lowe's excavations in her book *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*.[128] Drawing on Raymond Williams' idea of 'structures of feeling', Yao investigates how the perception of legitimate feelings are shaped by colonial dynamics and argues that notions of affectability are racialised categories to validate white over Black, Indigenous, and Asian experiences. Put simply, we are conditioned to prioritise how white people feel over how non-white people feel. In the

[124] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
[125] Lowe, *Intimacies*, 44.
[126] Lowe, *Intimacies*, 102.
[127] Lowe, *Intimacies*, 44.
[128] Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021).

same way that I was told to edit my presentation for *Untold*'s funding bid so the white panel would not feel uncomfortable about its confrontation with racism, I was made to repress my own feelings for the sake of the panel's. Yao reads texts by American-based authors from 1855-1912 which feature characters who "defy the expectations of right feeling that structure the politics of recognition" and connects them to broader social inequalities.[129] These characters are symptomatic of how experiences and histories of non-white identities are delegitimised to a 'disaffected' state of 'unfeeling', where "people who are disaffected break from affectability and present themselves as unaffected".[130] Through this lens, the model minority stereotype that renders its subjects unaffected, passive, and compliant reinscribes the marginalisation of our identities in contrast to white sentimentality, a system of violence I grapple with in my humming chorus below.

5.1.4 The Politics of Our Lack of Knowledge

Lowe and Yao intervene on the erasure of non-white histories across Europe, Asia, Africa, and America and their interwoven connections. In doing so, they make space for anti-colonial alliances that cross continents and communities to instigate "collective attention for a common cause."[131] By uncovering this colonial violence, they throw into relief what Lowe calls the "politics of our lack of knowledge".[132] They provoke us to question what we do not know and why we do not know, just as I was previously confronted with why I did not know more about my Chinese heritage. In that case, it was the result of my subconscious decision to assimilate into my white environment at the expense of engaging

[129] Yao, *Disaffected*, 7.
[130] Yao, *Disaffected*, 11.
[131] Lowe, *Intimacies*, 164.
[132] Lowe, *Intimacies*, 39.

with Chinese cultures. Tellingly, in my primary, secondary, and higher education, not once were transnational Chinese identities mentioned. It feels absurd that I have relied on a mix of individual research, serendipitous contact, and social media to come across important stories about our communities. I thus found out about the Chinese Labour Corps' contributions in WWI, which were only acknowledged by the British government in 2017, through Raymond Yiu's Tangram commission, *Corner of a Foreign Field*; and about the racially-motivated murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin in 1982 through Vijay Iyer's Violin Concerto, *Trouble*. This erasure extends to the lack of any meaningful study of colonialism and its legacy in British schooling, an issue that was recently rejected in Parliament.[133] Paul Gilroy writes on Britain's denial of its colonial past.[134] He calls this a state of 'postcolonial melancholia', which rears its head most clearly in the systemic ignorance of issues of racial hierarchy in British governance and politics. This melancholy is fuelled by a crisis in British national identity, whereby to acknowledge the legacy of empire is to suggest the waning of Britain's global power. In this regard, the politics of our lack of knowledge about colonialism is part of a cycle of erasure that paradoxically continues its legacy.

5.1.5 Reclamation and Allyship

The three compositions of this chapter draw together these contexts. They bring to the fore narratives of colonial violence endured by our communities to reckon with our erasure and gather alliances between marginalised identities. I lean into this anti-colonial activation to reclaim our experiences, identities, and histories. Diana Yeh views the emergence of BESEA

[133] Rob Merrick, 'Schools Minister Rejects Lessons about Colonialism and Slave Trade in Case They "Lower Standards"', *The Independent*, 25 February 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/school-compulsory-lessons-colony-slave-trade-b1807571.html.
[134] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

identities as the "formation of political (as opposed to cultural and linguistic) communities" in negation of the politically inactive model minority, declaring further this mobilisation "can be an expansive force that opens up possibilities of solidarity across racial and other differences".[135] My music similarly draws on the work of others beyond my immediate transnational Chinese community. I directly grapple with the model minority myth in solidarity with broader ESEA identities through the appropriation of Puccini's humming chorus from *Madame Butterfly* and further reading of Yao's theories of unfeeling; find inspiration in Iyer's violin concerto, *Trouble*, for my double bass concerto; and consider Gilroy's formulations of postcolonial melancholia in my song cycle based on Prince Lee Boo of the Pacific Islands. As such, in the urgent need to respond to the racism affecting transnational Chinese identities, I form cross-community solidarities that foreground our experiences as well as their larger cultural and political contexts and, in this, locate a process of catharsis, healing, and empowerment.

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[135] Yeh, *Becoming British East Asian and Southeast Asian*, https://doi.org/10.51661/bjocs.v11i0.131.

5.2 COMPOSITIONS

5.2.1 *Hush*

Instrumentation: Choir
Duration: 6'
Commissioned by: National Youth Choirs of Great Britain
Recorded by: National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, cond. Ben Parry
Released by: NMC Recordings in January 2022

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Hush is a response to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904), the opera which arguably presents the clearest portrayal of the model minority in Western classical music. Each year across the world's opera houses, audiences are treated to this story of a fifteen-year-old Japanese girl, Cio-Cio-San, being married off to an American man and then cast away as he marries a 'proper' American woman. Across the three acts based on John Luther Long's 1898 short story, Cio-Cio San's lack of agency is clear. Her entire character development is made in relation to her white American husband, from the opening act when she is married off, to the second act as she waits for her husband's return after a three-year absence, to the finale where she kills herself in response to her husband's actions. Cio-Cio San is thus portrayed as an object of white male desire whose suicide is not an escape from this patriarchal and racist system, but a glorification of her eternal love for her husband and the hegemonic structure he represents.

If Puccini's rendering of Cio-Cio San supposedly embodies East Asian identities, *Hush* is what we really think and how we really are. It decries the West's orientalist essentialisation of our cultures that typifies us as passive objects incapable of strong emotions. Indeed, Yao tears apart this racist perception in her critique of white sentimentality by highlighting how it delegitimizes non-white identities – the 'disaffected'.[136] She critiques 'Oriental inscrutability', a trope she observes in nineteenth century American public consciousness as part of an anti-Asian and specifically anti-Chinese agenda which would ultimately lead to the Chinese Exclusion Act.[137] An 1877 report by the 'Joint Special Committee To Investigate Chinese Immigration' hence reads that to have Chinese people is to have a race "alien in feeling and ideas…a great disadvantage to the community". [138] As a precursor to the model minority myth, Yao defines Oriental inscrutability as the racialised perception of non-reactiveness and insensibility amongst East Asians, both in their physical demeanour, especially their facial appearances, and their behaviours. She goes further, noting how this mode of unfeeling was regarded as a threat to the image of the white child, calling Oriental inscrutability "the primary expression (or lack of it) of the treacherous inhumanity of the Yellow Peril that threatens the good white American family…and its way of life."[139]

The connections between Yao's observations and the power dynamics presented in *Madame Butterfly* are noteworthy. The trope of Oriental inscrutability is embedded in its most iconic musical setting, Puccini's humming chorus, where Cio-Cio San waits for her husband. To depict this episode, Puccini composes a beautiful number. A soft melody slowly rises into the ether and the orchestra delicately tiptoe around so as not to disturb but to

[136] Yao, *Disaffected*.
[137] Yao, *Disaffected*, 171-207.
[138] Yao, *Disaffected*, 175.
[139] Yao, *Disaffected*, 175.

enhance the status quo. It is not Cio-Cio San who sings but an off-stage chorus humming. Instead, she is left on-stage with Suzuki and her child simply waiting immobile, passive, and inscrutable. The audiences are therefore invited to literally gaze onto Cio-Cio San's diligence and compliance whilst her voice and agency are erased. Puccini manages to create a spectacular site of orientalist fantasy which unnervingly parallels Yao's summary of Oriental inscrutability as a mode that essentialises and reduces entire races and their cultures, languages, feelings, and bodies, into a single face.[140]

Against this understanding, I imagine *Hush* to be performed in segue to Puccini's chorus with its opening top Bb matching the same pitch with which Puccini ends his number (see example 6 below). My humming chorus appropriates the framework of a wordless chorus away from its connotations of a sensual, exotic place to one enlivened with tension and presence to portray the violence our communities have endured. With the opening expression, 'excruciating', I wanted to communicate the anti-colonial reckoning that opera and Western classical music need to go through, and the excruciatingly slow pace at which this transformation is taking place. The final breaths (see Example 7 below) that close the piece represent where we are as an industry now: a place between relief that our experiences are being recognised more, pain at the understanding of how much further there is to go, and anger at what we have had to go through as a community to progress this short distance towards racial justice.

[140] Yao, *Disaffected*, 179-180.

Example 6 (Hush): b.1-5 – the singers are challenged to sing extremely high and quietly

Example 7 (Hush): b.88-92 – breaths marked as "between relief, pain, and anger"

5.2.2 *Splinter*

Instrumentation: Double Bass and Orchestra
Duration: 10'
Commissioned by: London Philharmonic Orchestra
Premiered by: Sebastian Pennar and the LPO cond. Brett Dean at the Southbank Centre in July 2022

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Splinter portrays the exhausting struggle towards racial equality and confronts the need to evaluate the systems that reaffirm racial minoritisation that include my Oxford undergraduate degree in Music. It was a course saturated with modules, lectures, and tutorials exploring the richness of nineteenth century classical music. We studied the intricacies of Schubert's late period, the complex orchestrations of Mendelssohn, the dramatic manifestations of Wagner's operas, and, of course, learnt to relate almost everything back to Beethoven's legacy in musical structure, harmony, and trope. I consequently left university with an unbalanced amount of knowledge and skills skewed towards a very specific period of a very specific type of music. Whilst I see value in the studying this music, I also question the implications of presenting a niche of the diverse traditions and makers of music as the total spectrum of this artform. By prioritising white male composers of nineteenth century music, what other musics and creators are erased? What does this teach students about the plurality of music? And what values does this circulate about our musical institutions? My higher education plays into Lewis' observations

of “the continuous recirculation of the stereotype of exclusive whiteness around classical music’s self-image”.[141] It sustains and promotes a structure of Eurocentricity, one that systemically privileges white European identities and histories.

These ideas formed the starting point on receiving a brief to write a concerto for a Western classical instrument of my choice. The concerto form is a genre weighed down heavily by the baggage of tradition and expectation. Tropes including soloistic virtuosity, narrative allusions of ‘man versus mass’, and a resolution of individual victory underscore numerous concertos from the last 200 years.[142] Yet to my personal outlook, the musical narrative of an all-conquering hero who triumphs against a faceless mass is riddled with associations of colonialism and patriarchy. I was keen therefore to eschew these tropes to undermine these genre expectations. In my pre-compositional explorations, I found Iyer’s violin concerto for Jennifer Koh most influential. The concerto, *Trouble*, takes on multiple layers of recrafting the concerto genre. From the opening prelude, aptly subtitled *Erasure*, the traditional role of the soloist is subverted as the violinist accompanies a haunting flute solo with scratchy *sul ponticello* sounds as if erasing itself and the history of the soaring violin trope we hear in the celebrated violin concertos of Brahms and Beethoven. Even more striking is the following section, *Normale*, where the soloist repeatedly plays an engine-like double-stop, foregoing melodic virtuosity for physical grit. The third section is a homage to Vincent Chin, a Chinese American engineer who was killed by two white men who repeatedly beat him in the midst of anti-Japanese sentiment in the US in the 1980s. The concerto ends with *Assembly* as ostinatos return across the full orchestra, and, in place of the expected feeling of full teleology and closure, we hear an accumulation of excitable rhythmic gestures assembled

[141] Lewis, *New Music Decolonisation*, https://www.van-outernational.com/lewis-en/.
[142] Examples include the violin concertos by Bruch and Tchaikovsky; the piano concertos by Grieg and Schumann; and the cello concertos by Dvořák and Elgar.

by the violin that ultimately explodes into a sense of awakening. It is as if Iyer has thrown down the gauntlet to ask, where does the concerto go from here?

Splinter elaborates on Iyer's provocation by meditating on the experiences of living and working in a white environment and the struggle to be heard. I chose to compose for double bass, an instrument infrequently regarded as a solo instrument and often literally placed on the periphery. With this centring, I imagined the double bass as a splinter against the orchestra which represents an apparently unmoveable pillar. In this way, I cast the 'narrative' of *Splinter* to reflect the arduous work that is often ignored when trying to voice discontent at the Eurocentric Western classical music system. The first section of the concerto (b.1-82) is driven by the tension created by the extent to which the soloist is ignored by the orchestra's 'pillar' character. Its material is a sonic representation of a continuous scratching gesture with incessant quintuplets making little headway on the contrastingly static orchestral texture (see example 8 below). It is only at the end of this three-minute section when the double bass drives to an initial climax (b.57) that we fully hear our protagonist. In the next section (b.82-132), the spotlight is on the double bass where it retains its isolated and lonely character as the orchestra softly play their material from the opening in the distance. The soloist and the orchestra are thus still divided, not so much through conflict but by the idea that the orchestra is ignoring our soloist. This begins to slowly change across the rest of the work as the double bass stubbornly latches onto a simple figure presented first in full in b.104. The figure, after huge physical effort through repetition, eventually persuades other instruments to join the motif (b.141ff.) and it is this idea of collective coming together that ultimately takes us to the climax of the concerto to uproot (b.199-215) and topple (b.216-228) the orchestral pillar. Thereafter, our protagonist is not feeling victorious or heroic. Instead, they are exhausted from the amount of grind and

effort they were forced to put in to achieve this goal. The concerto ends with the image of the dust settling around the fallen pillar and the soloist surveying their work, knowing full well this is not the end.

Example 8 (Splinter): b.1-6 – the solo double bass' 'scratching' gesture

Through this narrative arc and the relationship between the double bass and orchestra where we witness a splinter grow through collective effort to topple a pillar, I hope to reflect the longevity and emotional toil of the struggle towards racial equality and, further, that much of the invested time and effort often goes unnoticed by those unaffected. However, akin to the ways that our double bass splinter persuades more to join its cause through persistence of playing in almost every single bar in this concerto, change on a structural level both within and beyond classical music is possible. It is up to the policymakers and gatekeepers, ultimately, to decide at what point they will listen.

5.2.3 *A Place called Paradise*

Instrumentation: Mezzo-Soprano and Piano
Duration: 20'
Commissioned by: Oxford Lieder Festival
Premiered by: Fleur Barron and Kunal Lahiry at Holywell Music Room in October 2022

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

A Place called Paradise was created with writer Theophilus Kwek, Singaporean American mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron, and Indian American pianist Kunal Lahiry. It is based on the life of Prince Lee Boo who was one of the first Pacific Islanders to visit England in the eighteenth century. He died of smallpox just six months after he arrived at the age of 20. There are few reliable accounts of Prince Lee Boo's journey to and time in London and we sought not to painstakingly piece his life together, but instead, as Theophilus says, to explore the "arcs of travel, discovery, and loss to be compelling to a contemporary audience".[143] Within these arcs, we were interested in bringing to life the colonial context in which Prince Lee Boo would have found himself, drawing out a history that would mark a stark contrast to Britain's lack of colonial acknowledgement. In this, we were presenting our own system of values as an empowering means of reclaiming our identities.

We began the collaboration by discussing our respective upbringings in the UK, US, and Singapore, sharing experiences elucidating what it means to be Asian on both sides of the

[143] Theophilus Kwek, 'Lee Boo', *Mekong Review* no.28 (August 2022), https://mekongreview.com/lee-boo/.

Atlantic. Most notably, our conversations grew a feeling of solidarity between US and UK experiences as well as South and East Asian cultures. We found connection in our racialised experiences of living in the West and the challenges our families faced in migrating from Hong Kong, India, and Singapore, all former British colonies. This resonates with what Gilroy calls 'conviviality', the postcolonial conditions "in which cultures, histories, and structures of feeling previously separated by enormous distances can be found in the same place".[144] Gilroy positions this multiculturalism to address the UK's lack of acknowledgement of its colonial past – a 'postcolonial melancholia' – and its continuing impact on Black and Global Majority communities. Gilroy calls on us to embrace conviviality as integral to Britain's national identity in order to engage meaningfully with Britain's colonial past. Conviviality provided a framework for the four of us to explore our aligned experiences and perspectives as children of Hong Kong, Indian, and Singaporean parents. It opened a window where "the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant".[145] Gilroy views immigrants from former colonies as occupying a place of ambivalence, whereby these identities simultaneously represent the desire for conquest in Britain as well as a threat to the alleged purity of British identity. We challenged ourselves to reflect on this ambivalence creatively by negotiating our ties to the colonial legacy. The notion of 'postcolonial melancholia' affecting the identity of the nation state can hence be seen as the flip side to the aforementioned 'racial melancholia'. Whilst the latter has the potential to debilitate its subjects, the recognition of the former helped us intervene on the forgetting of colonialism. In this transcultural alliance, we awakened a

[144] Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 2005), 70.
[145] Gilroy, *After Empire*, 3-4.

shared curiosity to examine a theme of (im)migration and to represent the violence of the colonial conquest that shapes the meeting of cultures and identities we find in Britain today. The cycle is underpinned by the idea of searching for 'paradise', hinted at in the title, as a play both on the East-to-West journey many Asian families undertake and a nod to the fact that Prince Lee Boo lived on Paradise Street just south of the river Thames. Theophilus' text is split into four songs that chronologically follow Prince Lee Boo's journey: travelling by ship from Palau to Portsmouth, arriving and docking into the UK, settling into London on Paradise Street, and finally the days before his death. Significantly, the first, second, and third songs are preceded by a refrain that is a poetic casting of the colonial context. The same refrain then appears within the text of the third song:

Where men go casting for a fortune

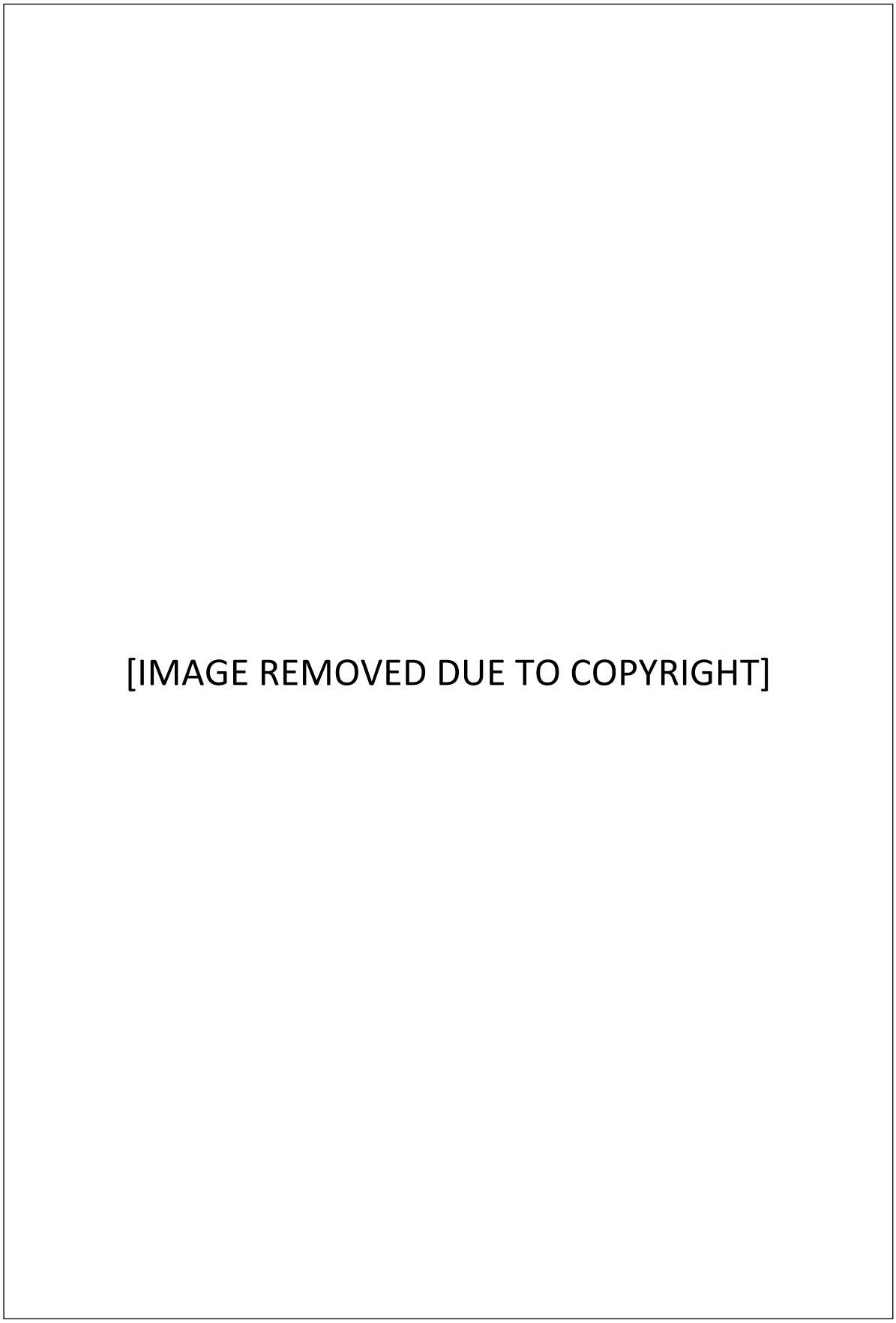
or lift themselves into the air

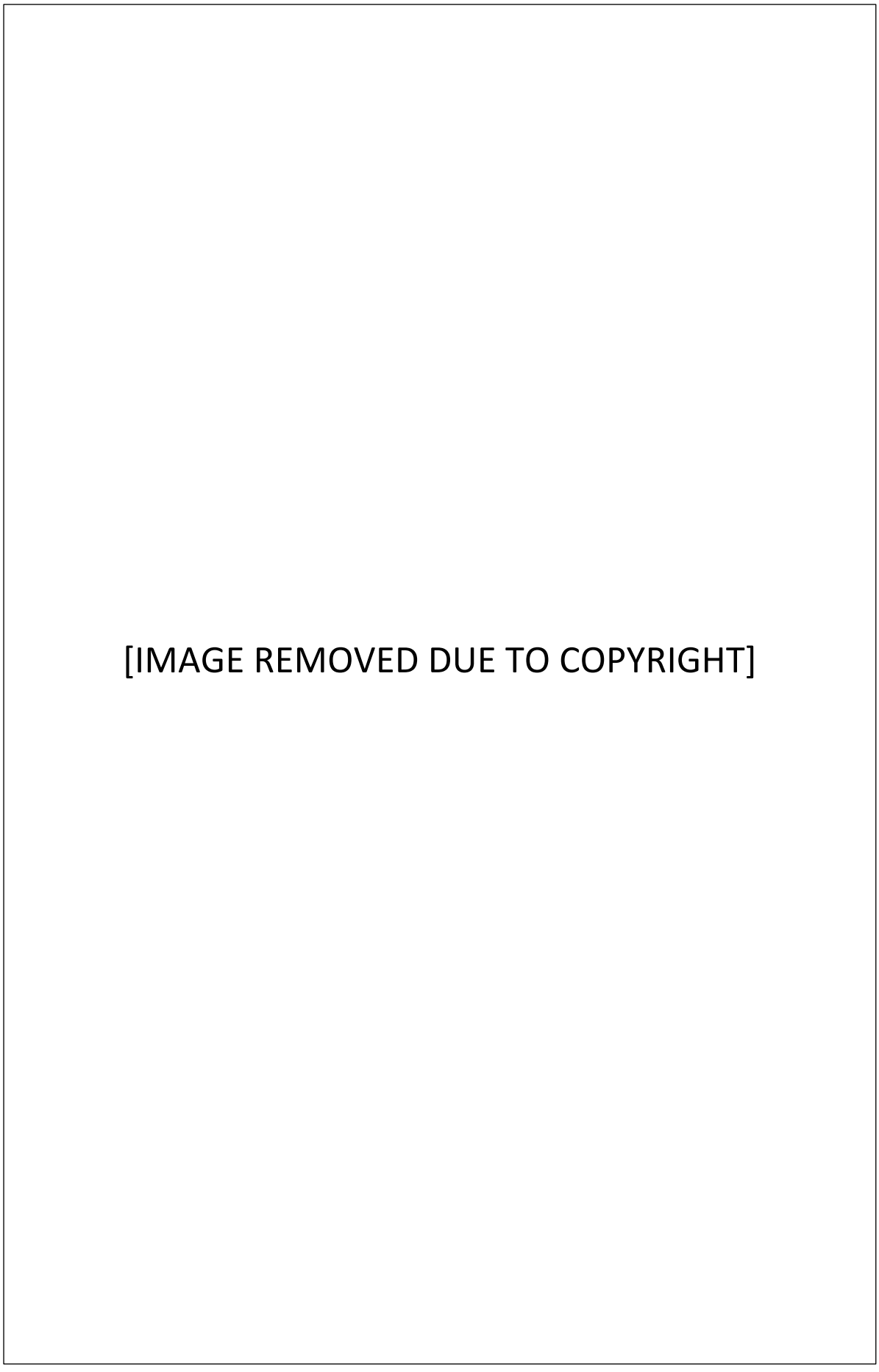
there's a darkness on the water

a kind of cloud that settles there

It is the repetition of these lines across the cycle that functions as the throughline. Whilst the remaining text tells Prince Lee Boo's story in his own voice in the first person, this refrain takes on a different register as a narrator-like figure. I envision this voice to be one that sees the grip of empire and colonisation. It attempts to warn Prince Lee Boo but fails to get his attention until its climactic culmination in the third song (see example 9 below), by which point it is too late as Prince Lee Boo's life ebbs away in the last song. In this, the narrator is representative of our own voices as four Asian artists telling Prince Lee Boo's story. It imagines a dialogue with our own families and ancestors who journeyed to the West, warning them, with the blessing of the knowledge of the present, of the horrors and violence of the colonial system.

Example 9 (A Place called Paradise) – the transformation of the refrain




[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Compositionally, I was interested in the idea of repurposing tropes of Western music and manipulated elements of plainchant, sea shanties, chorales, and lullabies across the song cycle. On one level, it suggests an inversion of the cultural appropriation and orientalising of Asian cultures. On another, the use of Western musical tropes for a song cycle written and performed by Asian artists about a person from the Pacific Islands harks to Gilroy's conviviality as "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life".[146] The first song, *Oroolong/Ulong*, takes plainchant as its reference. The setting of the refrain at the opening spells this out with the piano accompanying like a cantus firmus. This cantus firmus later reappears in the piano right-hand (b.31ff) and begins to take hold of the music until it grows into a two-part counterpoint (b.64ff.) to end the first song. Indeed, the play on these ideas of plainchant, cantus firmus, and counterpoint recall my undergraduate studies where I sang choral evensong every week, often singing Renaissance polyphony. As a non-Christian, this tension of singing for a faith in which I did not believe is subverted in the use of these musical tropes in my composition. The subversive dynamic also comments on how Christianity inserted itself into colonies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a topic whose examination is beyond the scope of this submission.[147] The second appearance of the refrain (b.83ff) is based on the rhythms of a sea shanty. I played off the nautical ties between the genre and our narrative as the ship docks onto land. The grotesque casting of the sea shanty through (lack of) pitch and a menacing piano bass line serves to create Prince Lee Boo's sense of self-perceived foreignness as he notices *though they call me prince*

[146] Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, xi.
[147] A summary of the links between colonialism and Christianity can be found in Kevin Ward. 'Christianity, colonialism and missions', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Hugh McLeod, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71-88.

something clouds their eyes – something less than fear and more than surprise, so they look at the buildings behind me like I'm not here. In the third song, Prince Lee Boo's alienation deepens. Set as a chorale (b.258ff) to allude to the text's Christian undertones, we get stuck in a repetitive cycle of verses in language, meter, and music, as Prince Lee Boo becomes increasingly aware of the engines of colonisation *a hundred yards from our door*. Things gradually spin out of control with the piano being displaced from the voice through rhythm (b.290ff), register (b.303ff), and pitch (b.315), all the while slowly accelerating like a churning cog in the colonial machine. Eventually, we reach Prince Lee Boo's crisis moment (b.367ff) as he comprehends the dark underbelly of the British empire which drives to the song cycle's apex (b.352). Prince Lee Boo cries for his father thousands of miles away but it is too late. The fourth song, drawing on a lullaby that fragments and fractures, conveys his last days suffering from illness and reflecting on his life's journey *between two islands* of Palau and Britain. It is time for him *to find the island of my mind*, however, *a place to stand, an outstretched hand…and for now, still, a mystery*, as if to acknowledge the trials of those who would make the same journey from East to West long after his death.

5.3 Conclusion

The three compositions of this chapter seek to reclaim our identities and to present our experiences authentically and poetically. Through the strength of solidarity I nurtured with my collaborators and readings of Lisa Lowe, Xine Yao, Vijay Iyer, and Paul Gilroy, I examine the history of colonialism and its racial legacy. As manifested in *Hush*'s reckoning of the model minority presented in *Madame Butterfly*, *Splinter*'s subversion of the expectations of

the classical concerto, and *A Place called Paradise*'s retelling of the historical journeys made from East to West, there exists a role that music can play to dismantle the power structures and problematic perceptions of marginalised communities, even if small. A commonality between these pieces is the musical violence in their climaxes. This is a response to the urgent need for classical music to transform and for the sector's gatekeepers to find ways to better include our identities. I am nevertheless encouraged by the artists who engineer their spheres of influence to pursue decolonisation on a ground level and it is within this hope that I gratefully acknowledge my collaborators for investing huge physical commitment and emotional investment into these three works. Beyond the catharsis and empowerment in the act of reclaiming our identities, it is the spirit of community that I keenly felt within each project that lifted and motivated me. In Theophilus' words,

> *Perhaps there's something here, after all, that is common to all diaspora stories: the fact that they're so often, too often, told through the eyes of others. And yet, equally, how they must continue to be told – not because we can be assured of getting them 'right', but because with each attempt to imagine ourselves in another's shoes, we eke a little closer to another kind of truth. Of how important it is to remain open to stories that unsettle the worlds we live in, however comfortable they may be. And that there are also worlds into which we ourselves are always arriving.*[148]

[148] Kwek, *Lee Boo*, https://mekongreview.com/lee-boo/.

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CHAPTER 6. Community: Rendering the Imagined as Real

Compositions:
Say Hi for four instruments and audience participation = 10'
Breathe and Draw for two conductors, sinfonietta, and audience participation = 24'
On Silk and Paper for erhu, pipa, yangqin, and guzheng = 12'
Total = 47'

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Notions of community through collaboration pervade my practice. I have highlighted in the preceding chapters: the social bonds with *Untold*'s artists and our sharing of aligned racialised experiences; the building of a creative process through conversation to mediate 'rootlessness'; and the empowering formation of anti-racist alliances to reclaim our identities. This convergence on the importance of community highlights the ways it fuels my negotiation of transnational Chinese identity, namely in the social support network it provides, the creative collaborations it facilitates, and the personal growth and joy in which it results. As such, I can reflect better on my ideas around cultural identity, extend curiosity into meaningful exchange with my collaborators, and communicate more effectively to audiences the vitality of transcultural spaces.

In this final chapter, I consider the connection between my cultural identity and a wider community. I pay homage to the communal belonging I have felt in my exploration of transnational Chinese identity and examine how my music can create space for community in their act of performance. In particular, I investigate the ways I can create works that catalyse communal interaction between performers and audiences through improvisation and various audience participation techniques inspired by Lunar New Year celebrations and

living through the COVID pandemic. In this way, I demonstrate how my music and its performances encourage communal bonding as a metaphor for imagining a better-connected society.

6.1.1 Locating Community

For all the instances of feeling marginalised in the Eurocentric Western classical music industry in the UK and abroad, the projects of this submission have afforded a strong sense of communal belonging, not only to the projects and with my collaborators, but optimistically also to a wider community that I imagine shares common outlooks and values. I envision this community as one that includes transnational Chinese identities, those with similar racialised experiences and/or creative influences, and the allies who support our voices. It is the sense of belonging to this community that motivates my creative practice which includes composing, writing, curating, producing, and co-directing Tangram. Subsequently, I appreciate that the projects that I undertake render this imagined community real in my collaborators, producers, funders, and audiences. And further, this community becomes a network of support and self-learning on a personal and artistic level. Such an understanding was made apparent when curating a series of articles for the British Music Collection, *Together in Difference: Transnational Identity in Music*. I brought together six composer colleagues, each with non-European heritage, to write about the ways their respective cultural identities impact their compositions. Our reflections on different cultural backgrounds spanned a range of styles and ideas. On the one hand, the dialogues I had with each composer demonstrated their unique set of experiences, whilst on the other, they represented an opportunity to share these experiences in a spirit of mutual reflection on transnational identities and collective growth.

6.1.2 Performance as Community

The pieces of this last chapter take 'community' as their theme. I investigate how my compositions can form a site of communal interaction, one that celebrates processes of co-creation as a means of collective alignment, whilst acknowledging our differences and individual journeys. These processes extend my emphasis on collaboration discussed in the previous chapters. In the first two pieces of this chapter, *Say Hi* and *Breathe and Draw*, I employ audience participation to foster direct creative dialogue between the performers and audiences. *Say Hi* has the audiences sing to create different textures with the ensemble. Inspired by my memories of Lunar New Year meals with friends and family, it includes literal dialogue between audiences across the three movements, thus embedding their singing within an explicitly social environment. *Breathe and Draw* goes further in weaving together the creative potential between performers and the audience. Here, the entire piece is based on the cyclical idea that audiences create graphic notation from what they hear the musicians play, who then improvise off this graphic notation which restarts the process. Lastly, improvisation and performer freedom are at the core of my final composition, *On Silk and Paper*. Scored for four Chinese instruments, the work is inspired by the differences between Chinese and Western classical musical traditions, and in particular, Chinese music's greater emphasis on improvisation and aural over score-based learning. *On Silk and Paper* asks performers to make key structural choices that impact duration and rhythm. The piece also incorporates a theatrical dimension, where the performers symbolically critique score-based learning by using their literal scores to make sounds. As such, *On Silk and Paper* is a metaphor for sensitive cross-cultural collaboration and interrogates the historically unbalanced relationship when Chinese instruments have been invited to the Western classical music space.

The previous excavations on *Untold*, rootlessness, and reclamation have all converged on the significance of an internal community spirit between the artists. Viewing this relationship between the formation of community and the creation of music not as a one-directional process but as a pivot point that may be inversed, I now explore how the act of making music can form an invitation to those outside my immediate connections to become a part of a broader community. This is to ask how my compositions can create ideas of community in their act of performance.

6.2 COMPOSITIONS

6.2.1 *Say Hi*

Instrumentation: Four instruments (open score) and audience participation
Duration: 10'
Commissioned by: Tangram
Premiered by: Tangram at LSO St Luke's in January 2020

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Say Hi is an invitation into my memories of Lunar New Year. Each year growing up, I celebrated the New Year with a meal with family and family friends. As is common amongst Chinese families, I would be asked to '*giu yahn'* on arriving, to go around the room and say hi to everyone to wish them a happy new year. It was a sign of politeness and respect as well as the opportunity for elders to give money in red envelopes to wish us a prosperous year. At the time, I found this tedious and was impatient to sit down for delicious food. In retrospect, I have come to treasure these memories, not least because they were the moments that I would come to appreciate as the few times I celebrated Chinese cultures in my youth. It was this annual ritual that was a small connection to my heritage and would allow me to maintain and develop the bonds with my family friends.

I conceived *Say Hi* for Tangram's Lunar New Year concert in January 2020, knowing that our audiences are made up of different cultural communities beyond our own transnational Chinese community. The principle was to involve the audience so they could glimpse the socio-cultural interaction I experienced saying hi to my family friends year on year as a

gesture of warmth and kinship. In doing so, I would evolve the relationship between performers and audience, collapsing this duality into a singular commune. The piece is split into three movements which ask the audiences to sing within different musical textures with two crucial facets. Firstly, before each movement and before I instructed the audiences on what to sing, I asked them to say hi to their surrounding neighbours. And second, each of the three movements were spread across the concert's programme. By curating the piece as such, the audiences developed a familiarity with their neighbours through repetition and did so throughout the evening, mimicking the annual cycle I had experienced growing up of greeting my family friends each New Year. The three movements are designed to ease the audiences into participating creatively. The first, *Breathing Together*, asks audiences to sing pitches they hear the ensemble play to teach them a melody. The second, *Listening Together*, has the audiences holding a single chord whilst the musicians dovetail in and out of their tonal cloud on the same melody. And the third, *Celebrating Together*, instructs the audience to repeat the melody throughout whilst the ensemble adds layer on layer. As the audiences familiarise themselves with their neighbours, the melody they sing together, and the act of co-creating, I invite them into a shared communal space irrespective of their cultural identities and backgrounds: that they are present in that moment is enough.

6.2.2 *Breathe and Draw*

Instrumentation: Two conductors, sinfonietta, and audience participation
Duration: 25'
Commissioned by: Nevis Ensemble
Recorded by: Holly Mathieson, Jon Hargreaves, and Nevis Ensemble in December 2020
Other: Shortlisted for a Scottish New Music Award 2021

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

Breathe and Draw was commissioned in 2020 during the pandemic when music was primarily made for online/remote audiences. The situation made clear how different and odd an experience it was to perform without audiences in the room. As I reflected on the interdependent relationship between performers and audiences, an idea formed which would become the bedrock of *Breathe and Draw*. I imagined a piece that required audiences just as much as it required musicians to sound it into existence. To this end, I identified a cyclical idea where audiences drew images as graphic scores in response to the music they heard, which were then given to the musicians who could improvise music in response to the drawings they received. As such, the hierarchy between composer, performer, and audience is flattened so that each one is an active agent in the creation of the piece and the performance. *Breathe and Draw* is created collaboratively by the musicians and audiences themselves and each performance is specific to the group of people, or community, present in that particular performance.

Scored for two groupings of instruments, each with their own conductor and each with their own group of audience members, the musicians of *Breathe and Draw* are divided so that

some are performing fully notated music to structure the beginning and end of the piece, whilst the rest are improvising based on the images they are given from audience members.[149] The audiences are also split into two groups. One half would draw images based on what they heard to be given to the musicians as graphic scores. The other half would inhale and exhale throughout as directed by one of the conductors, the sound that starts and ends the piece, whilst also writing or drawing a 'story' across the whole performance as they imagine. The audiences of this latter group represent another layer of improvised creativity whereby they are creating stories based on the sounds they are hearing, which are being created from images drawn by the other half of the audience. Consequently, each performance is a web of communal interaction where every individual, be they an audience member, musician, or conductor, contributes to the piece in a unique yet aligned way. No one is doing exactly the same thing and yet everyone is co-creating this single experience for themselves and everyone else. Moreover, although the entire piece was being created collectively in that moment of performance, it would be difficult to identify what led to another thing, as if the lineage of a single idea on a local level is submerged in favour of a broader singular yet heterogenous amalgamation of thoughts, ideas, and identities. For audiences then, even though they did not know where the direct inspiration of their creativity came from, they knew that it came from someone in that community in that room, and it is a room to which they have already been invited. Creating connections is the focus of *Breathe and Draw*. The last strand of this idea is to curate connections between separate performances of *Breathe and Draw* and between the peoples that were in the room at these different points. The stories and images that are

[149] Full instructions can be found in the score included in this submission

created within a given performance were stored online on Nevis Ensemble's website which functioned as a form of 'community archive'.[150] It reminded us that communities are as much imagined as they are physical, that the community spirit is able to bridge distances, and that it is up to us, both individually and collectively, to foster and nurture these communities.

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[150] This is no longer available as Nevis Ensemble have sadly stopped operating. The webpage was available from February 2021 to January 2023.

6.2.3 *On Silk and Paper*

Instrumentation: Erhu, Pipa, Guzheng, Yangqin
Duration: 12'
Commissioned by: Silk String Quartet
Premiered by: Silk String Quartet at Rich Mix London in October 2021

[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]

On Silk and Paper addresses the cultural nuances embedded in the coming together of a Western-trained composer and Chinese-trained musicians. The education players of Chinese instruments receive is different to those of Western instruments. They emphasise learning music aurally rather than with scores and commonly perform ensemble music without physical scores. Their education also typically encompasses training in improvisation more rigorous than in Western classical music and the use of *Jianpu* notation. It is now, however, usual for musicians of Chinese instruments to learn Western staff notation, which affords cross-cultural collaborations, as sheng and pipa virtuosos Wu Wei and Wu Man have done for the last few decades. On the other hand, it is curious that the assumed expectation is for these players to assimilate into Western standards of notation and practice, suggesting an unbalanced power dynamic between Western and Chinese music cultures without significant conversation about possible alternatives. Speaking to the musicians of the Silk String Quartet about these issues made clear the need to reassess the traditional power dynamic between composers and performers in Western classical music. *On Silk and Paper* thus directly questions this historical balance between our respective cultures and engages

in a process of co-creation as a metaphor for communal interaction across distinct cultures. After discussions and workshops with the players, I conceived the commission to be one that distributed responsibility of key musical parameters to the players during performance, notably structure and duration, thereby foregrounding a communal creativity. I also saw this piece as an opportunity to re-evaluate the perceived importance of the 'Western score' which has significant consequences on the visual and timbral manifestations of this piece. *On Silk and Paper* is split into five sections where each tasks the players to make creative decisions that shape the duration and, by extension, the structure of these sections. The first section (b.1-21) consists of gestures separated by pauses marked with the indications 'short', 'medium', and 'long', asking the players to collectively choose the precise length of these silences and therefore the length of the whole section (with guidance to last approximately one minute). The second section (b.22-40) releases my own control of duration further. The musicians are given 30-second phrases within which they control the pacing through accelerations, decelerations, and moments with more subjective markings such as 'as fast as possible' and 'very, very slow'. The third (b.41-87) and fourth (b.88-108) sections continue in a similar vein to the first, with the musicians dictating the length of certain bars (e.g. b.42, b.46, b.89, b.91). Consequently, the rehearsals of these four sections involved the quartet working to agree on the numerous durations and fostered a communal energy as a result of being given responsibility to make decisions rather than following the composer's preferences. The last section involves each musician improvising on a given set of pitches before ripping up their music and walking off stage to signal the end of the piece. Indeed, this final gesture is the culmination of the theatrical dimension of *On Silk and Paper*. Throughout the performance, the players are directed to physically destroy their scores as a critique of the historical power imbalance between Western and Chinese classical musics.

Beginning at the end of the second section (b.40), the yangqin and guzheng players rub a sheet of their music on the strings of the instruments. Hereafter, the players continually use their scores to make sounds on their instruments and by scrunching up the pieces of paper and dropping them on the floor. These theatrical moments serve to disrupt the expected flow of the 'music proper', alluding to the idea that the score is not the primary means of making music. It is this realisation across the piece that leads to the final section (b.109ff) where every musician, as if acknowledging the uselessness of the score, improvises as they see fit before taking their parts, tearing them to shreds, and dropping them on the floor after which they leave the stage. All that is left by the end is an empty stage with ripped remnants of the Western classical music score discarded on the floor. Now we know the music has ended, as there is no one there to play it. The Chinese classical musicians have left, and the Western classical composer was never there. It is unclear where they have gone, but perhaps they have moved to a new place of transcultural dialogue and community.

6.3 Conclusion

This final chapter has investigated how the music I compose can serve as an invitation to a community. Led by the prominent convergence on communal interaction within my navigation of transnational Chinese identity examined in the previous chapters, I have explored how my compositions facilitate communal exchange and creative dialogue. Underpinning my ideas is the acknowledgement that this community becomes real in the act of their performance. Through audience participation and/or distributing creative

agency to the performers, the spirit of these artistic conceptions is in their live collaborative realisations. The active coming together of audiences, performers, and composer mobilises our alignment and thus a reorientation into a community for a given performance. This mode of thinking and creation is therefore a small means to pay homage to the ways I have been listened to, supported, inspired, and lifted by the cultural and artistic communities that have made and continue to make my research possible. I understand better the intricacies of communal interaction and how it lives and grows depending on the individuals and the co-habitation of similarities and differences between these individuals and their experiences. Through these pieces, I encourage a deeper engagement with finding connections through difference. It is these consequent communities that are 'true' in our real social and creative connections, and that have helped me understand better the nature of my cultural identity, the role music has to play in cultural identity, and the layers of human interaction, collaborative spirit, and love of which music is the product and for which it is the process.

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Chapter 7. CONCLUSION

My submission interrogates the relationships between my cultural identity and music. In drawing on my lived experiences, I have examined the complex network of factors that shape my perception of transnational Chinese identity. The music I composed builds on this examination of transnational Chinese identity; I find that the creative and collaborative processes of my compositions enrichen my understanding of facets personal and collective intertwined with transnational Chinese identity. My research elaborates on Hall's conception of cultural identity as fluid and my chapters elucidate how transnational Chinese identity is negotiated in my compositions in various ways. Chapter 3 reflects on my opera, *Untold*, as I explore 'not fitting in' with my collaborators. We intertwine our personal stories with that of 葉限, showing the plurality of our experiences along a common theme to draw wider attention to the ways transnational Chinese communities continue to be marginalised. Chapter 4 examines my feelings of cultural rootlessness in the lack of belonging to both Western and Chinese cultures. I find resonances with Cathy Park Hong, who explores her racialised experiences to critique white hegemonies, and theorisations of 'racial melancholia' by David Eng and Shinhee Han. I subsequently collaborate with other transnational Chinese artists and demonstrate how our shared exploration of rootlessness mediates these feelings. Chapter 5 interrogates my experiences of racism through cultural studies by three scholars: Lisa Lowe, who uncovers the history of colonial violence on transcontinental histories; Xine Yao, who tackles white sentimentalism as a structure of coloniality; and Paul Gilroy, who analyses Britain's state of national stagnation in the form of 'postcolonial melancholia'. I am also influenced by Vijay Iyer in presenting anti-colonial narratives through the concerto genre. By highlighting the colonial roots of my experiences of racism, I locate alliances with other Global Majority identities and am empowered to

compose music that re-presents our cultures and communities. Indeed, Chapter 6 acknowledges the importance of community in my appreciation of transnational Chinese identity. I recognise the healing afforded by the communal processes embedded in the compositions of the previous chapters and the resultant creation of a support network to process racialised experiences. I therefore explore how I can conceive of pieces that nurture interaction between performers and audiences to engage with ideas of community in the act of performance.

My compositions are points of orientation and reorientation against the fabric of social, cultural, political, historical, and personal threads woven into transnational Chinese identity. Just as Hall views cultural identity as 'positioning', I have oriented transnational Chinese identity in a historically aware, culturally sensitive, and politically active manner. A significant strand of this idea is the presentation *of* transnational Chinese identities, experiences, histories, and languages, on stages and programmes *by* transnational Chinese artists as a subversion of classical music's Eurocentricity and its gaze on our cultures. As such, in reappropriating 'orient' as a word to undermine orientalist discourses, I shed critical light on how cultural identities are produced and the ways in which they impact and are impacted by creative processes.

7.1 Wider significance

My submission contributes to the discourse, comprehension, and visibility of transnational Chinese identity on several fronts. Most immediately, I progress compositional research on transnational Chinese identity in Britain, which is a sorely under-researched area with arguably only one composer to have made a sustained impact in Raymond Yiu.

Furthermore, my practice builds on the growing momentum around the belated recognition

of British Chinese and BESEA communities' historical and continued presence in the UK. To this end, the inclusion of stories based on our lived experiences in *Untold*, *Letters from Home*, *Above the White Island*, and *A Place called Paradise* are meaningful as a means of re-inserting our histories. The presence of transnational Chinese cultures in relation to Western classical music more broadly is an additional intersection with which my practice engages. My compositions that are inspired by my memories of and interactions with Chinese cultures are relevant, not least in *Say Hi*, and *On Silk and Paper*. Perhaps then, it is less to do with pushing for the place of transnational Chinese cultures in Western classical music but more the welcome place of Western classical traditions and audiences within our manifestations and celebrations of transnational Chinese cultures. Lastly, that my research takes the form of composition is significant. Within the existing body of cultural studies examining transnational Chinese identity, there is little non-textual research and much of it focuses on theatre and/or the performance of music rather than its composition. I show in new ways how we can articulate our cultural identities and experiences, and the rich platform composition provides to do so. This portfolio therefore serves to extend perceptions of the vitality and creativity of transnational Chinese identity whilst simultaneously intervening in the problematic racialisations of our communities.

7.2 Towards Care

This submission has forced me to grapple with anxiety and emotional fatigue. I have found my perceptions of cultural identity to be tricky to untie, awkward to describe, and difficult to evaluate, but by doing so, I open myself up to another reality in which I navigate the complexities of transnational Chinese existence and imagine a better-connected musical, creative, and social space. In this spirit, I acknowledge the mental challenges of confronting

my memories and familial fissures; the sprawling search for coherence based on four years of creative ideas; the blurred boundary between the shortcomings of my own personality and the failures of broader society; and the contradiction of choosing to work in the Western classical music industry only to continuously perceive ways I do not belong in it. However, tied to these recognitions is a site of agency. I take responsibility to reconfigure past experiences, received practices, and perceived differences through holistic examination and support from the artists, collaborators, and scholars referred to across my submission. I consequently realise that this work I anxiously do is to give care to the messy negotiation of cultural identity, and that giving care to my practice is to give care to myself and to transnational Chinese communities in a time fraught with cultural polarisation and misunderstanding.

7.3 Future Directions

I am often asked if all the creative work I do relates to transnational Chinese identity and how I expect this relationship to develop in the future. This research has shown that the answer to this question is not a binary yes or no. Instead, it is one that is rooted in the awareness that my practice brings my whole self to each project and recognises that my ideas are a consequence of an ongoing negotiation of my cultural identity and its significance in connecting to others around me. It is with this vulnerability that I continue my practice-based research beyond this submission. Most substantial is the extension of my work in opera. This includes a three-year residency at Glyndebourne Opera and winning the FEDORA Opera Prize 2023 to develop *Untold*. Furthermore, as Artist-in-Residence at Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier, I am co-creating a new mainstage opera that brings cultural perspectives into dialogue and community between the UK, Hungary, and Haiti to

interrogate humans' relationships with the Earth. I am also creating two projects investigating the deportation of Chinese labourers in the UK and US: one a twenty-minute commission for solo piano and creative technologies, and the other a 45-minute production with Tangram that incorporates Chinese and Western instruments with sung, spoken, and silenced voices. Lastly, together with Tangram, I have begun exploring improvisation as method of collaborative music-making to draw out pan-Asian coalitions in a new project with đàn tranh extraordinaire Vân-Ánh Võ. As such, reflecting critically on my practice has enabled me to understand better the ways to articulate, draw from, and reimagine cultural identities through music, and, that the variety of compositions in my submission only represents an initial phase is an indicator of the expanse of the possibilities. Indeed, through these projects and the spaces they open, I edge closer to a truth of cultural identity that depends not on a fixed idea of what it is but on a hope of what it can become.

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Rajasekar, Shruthi. ‘Sheen of Silk – Shruthi Rajasekar’, Tangram, 11 October 2022, https://youtu.be/V9UsW0JIqU0.

Rzewski, Frederic. ‘Rzewski - Coming Together (with score)’, Various Artists, Contemporary Classical, 2 September 2020, https://youtu.be/wczJlxoxITE?si=bMOIOAPvxbHvwMEX.

Saariaho, Kaija. ‘Du cristal’, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, LA Phil, 22 September 2014, https://youtu.be/zz5H6x4yT5E?si=wqeupZotprzarEZZ.

------ ‘Kaija Saariaho - ...à la fumée (1990) for alto flute, cello and large orchestra’, Petri Alanko, Anssi Karttunen, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, Pour ceux que le langage a désertés, Accessed 10 January 2024, https://youtu.be/MdM2s1bFvI8?si=jHd_6ON8X-2H1EMx.

------ ‘Saariaho - Sept Papillons for Solo Cello (2000) [w/ score]’, Dirk Wietheger, Adam Schreiber Music, https://youtu.be/8j0LcmdG1kI?si=jkOVXAD4JYOW6rzQ.

Sheng, Bright. *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, Peter Serkin, Shanghai Quartet, Weigang Li, Bright Sheng, Naxos, 970235, 2015

------ *Orchestral Works*, Juliana Gondek, Zhang Qiang, Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Samuel Wong, Naxos, 8555866, 2003.

Sun, Keting. ‘Erasure for flute, yangqin and piano’, Tangram, Accessed 1 December 2020, https://soundcloud.com/ketingsun/erasure-for-flute-yangqin-and-piano.

Takemitsu, Tōru. *Takemitsu: November Steps*, Katsuya Yokoyama, Kinshi Tsuruta, Nobuko Imai, Saito Kinen Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa, Decca, 20C, 2014.

Tan, Dun. *Concerto for Orchestra*, Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Tan Dun, Naxos, 8570608, 2012

------ ‘Tan Dun (谭盾): On Taoism (1985)’, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Tan Dun, Zewen Sama, 12 February 2022, https://youtu.be/SscG4rJldmg.

------ *Piano Music*, Ralph van Raat, Naxos, 8570621, 2022

------ *Snow in June*, Various Artists, CRI, CD 655, 2007.

------ *Symphony 1997 (Heaven Earth Mankind)*, Imperial Bells Ensemble of China, Yo-Yo Ma, Sony, G010002962053O, 2013

Walshe, Jennifer. *The Wasistas of Thereswhere*, Grúpat, Jennifer Walshe, Tetbind Records, 2020.

Wang, Lu. *An Atlas of Time*, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose, New Focus Recordings, FCR277, 2020.

------ *Urban Inventory*, Various Artists, New Focus Recordings, FCR197, 2018.

Woo, Naomi, and Youngsook Choi. ‘How to Restore a Broken China Vase – Youngsook Choi & Naomi Woo (2020), Tangram, 11 December 2020, https://youtu.be/r5nBluMhMnE.

Yiu, Raymond. ‘Raymond Yiu: Bright Fear (Premiere)’, Fleur Barron, Myra Huang, Aural Compass Projects, 12 February 2021, https://youtu.be/8fYFAWQ5SnE.

------ ‘Corner of a Foreign Field – Raymond Yiu (2019)’, Tangram, 7 March 2020, https://youtu.be/S9decYzHBmM.

------ ‘Northwest Wind (2010) by Raymond Yiu’, Odaline de la Martinez, Lontano, 2012, https://soundcloud.com/raymond-yiu/northwest-wind.

------ ‘Raymond Yiu – Symphony (World Première)’, Andrew Watts, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Edward Gardner, fiveagainstfour, 29 March 2023, https://youtu.be/oViTGQGSpgk.

Appendix 1 – Full List of Works Completed during DMus

works included in this submission are in bold

Opera/Music Theatre:

2021/2022 - *Étape par étape*, a chamber opera in the most literal sense for our dreams, two singers, and four players (30')
Commissioned by Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier for performances in September 2022
Directed by Franciska Éry, Words by Ar Guens Jean Mary, Conducted by Sora Elisabeth Lee

2020 - *AMAZON*, a digital piece for stop motion animation, text, and home sounds (7')
Created with theatre-maker Elayce Ismail, co-commissioned by Music Theatre Wales and London Sinfonietta in partnership with HOME Manchester

2019 - *Untold*, opera (ca 45')
Produced by Tangram for performance in November 2019 by Julia Cheng, Keith Pun, and Tangram at Hackney Round Chapel, supported by Sound and Music, PRS Foundation, Arts Council England, Britten-Pears Arts, and Help Musicians UK

Orchestra/Large Ensemble:

2022 - *Carved in Gorton Stone* for sinfonietta (9')
Commissioned by Royal Philharmonic Society for performance by Manchester Camerata

2022 - *Unveiling* for orchestra (7')
Commissioned by Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier for performance conducted by Chloé Dufresne in September 2022
2 +picc, 2, 2+bass cl, 2+contra, 4, 2, 3, 1, timp, 2 perc (b.drum, tam-tam, 5 temple blocks, 5 wood blocks, sus cym, snare, 3 triangle), strings

2022 - *Splinter* for double bass and orchestra (10')
Commissioned by London Philharmonic Orchestra for performance conducted by Brett Dean with Sebastian Pennar at Southbank Centre in July 2022
2 +picc, 2, 2, 2+contra, 2, 2, 2, 1, perc (bass drum, 3 tom toms, 5 temple blocks, sus cymbal, crotales), hrp, solo DB, strings

2020 - *Breathe and Draw* for sinfonietta, two conductors and audience participation (ca 25')
Commissioned and recorded by Nevis Ensemble

Chamber:

2023 - *For the Headless Horse* for natural trumpet, natural horn, and sackbut (1')
Fanfare commissioned by Glyndebourne Opera for performance by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE)

2021 - *Gambit* for six players: flute, oboe, bass clarinet, violin, viola, and violoncello (ca 7')
Written for Riot Ensemble for performance at Crossroads Festival, Salzburg in November 2021

2021 - *For Silk and Paper* for traditional Chinese string quartet (ca 12')
Commissioned by the Silk String Quartet

2021 - *Our Common Wealth* for string quartet (ca 6')
Commissioned by Villiers Quartet for performance at Oxford University in June 2021

2020 - *In Significance* for seven players: two percussionists, oboe, horn, piano, violin, and violoncello (ca 12')
Written for London Symphony Orchestra's 'Soundhub' scheme for performance by members of the LSO at LSO St. Luke's in February 2020

2020 - *Say Hi* for three or four players and audience participation, open score (ca 8')
Written for Tangram for performance at LSO St. Luke's in January 2020

Vocal:

2023 - *Four miniatures for our littler selves* for mezzo-soprano and piano (ca 6')
Commissioned by Het Concertgebouw for performance by Fleur Barron and Julius Drake at Het Concertgebouw in April 2023
Text by Alex Ho

2022 - *A Place called Paradise* for mezzo-soprano and piano (ca 20')
Commissioned by Oxford Lieder Festival for performance by Fleur Barron and Kunal Lahiry at Holywell Music Room in October 2022
Text by Theopilus Kwek

2020/22 - *Letters from Home* for baritone and piano (ca 17')
Commissioned by the Royal Opera House for performance by Jia Huang and Satoshi Kubo at ROH Crush Room in February 2022
Text by Theopilus Kwek

2021 - *two connected souls* for mezzo-soprano, baritone and piano (ca 5')
Commissioned by Oxford Lieder Festival for performance by Helen Charlston, Michael Craddock, and Alexander Soares in October 2021
Text by Kwan-Ann Tan

2020 - *Above the White Island* for tenor and piano (ca 7')
Commissioned by National Opera Studio for performance by Shengzhi Ren and Derek Clarke for 12:42 Series
Text by Theophilus Kwek

Solo Instrument:

2021 - *furling* for solo sheng (ca 6')
Written for Wu Wei, supported by Asian Cultural Council New York, for recording as part of SEED 2021 in August 2021

2021 - *Knuckleduster* for solo piano (ca 5')
Commissioned by Aidan Chan for performance at Royal College of Music in June 2021

2020 - *little twinkle* for solo double bass (ca 1')
Commissioned by BBC Radio 3 as part of 'Postcards from Composers' Series for broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in November 2021

2020 - *"Play Me"* for solo piano (ca 2')
Written for 'Twenty', a free series of twenty short piano pieces for all abilities

2020 - *Shout!* for solo violoncello (ca 5')
Written for Psappha Ensemble's *Composing for Cello* scheme for recording by Jennifer Langridge in May 2020

2019 - *Plastic Ceremony* for one drum and sixteen plastic bags (ca 12')
Commissioned by Bascule Chamber Series for performance at Totally Thames Festival at Tower Bridge in September 2019

Choral:

2021 - *Scratch Theatre* for choir (ca 3')
Written for VOCES8 in partnership with Choir and Organ Magazine for release in March 2022
Text by Alex Ho

2021 - *tah dah!* for choir (ca 2')
Written for recording by National Youth Choirs of Great Britain Fellowship for release by NMC Recordings in January 2022
Text by Alex Ho

2021 - *Hush* for choir (ca 7')
Written for recording by National Youth Choirs of Great Britain for release by NMC Recordings in January 2022
Text by Alex Ho

2020 - *Six Geese a-laying a-lay a-lay a-lay!* for choir (ca 1')
Digital release by Corvus Consort, commissioned by Corvus Consort
Text by Alex Ho

Appendix 2 – Tangram List of Projects during DMus

Productions

28 January 2023 - Beibei Wang: 五行 Wu Xing – Five Elements, LSO St. Luke's
Premiere of Beibei Wang's new one-hour music theatre piece for Chinese and western instruments

28-29 August 2022 - Our Silence Is Your Silence, LSO St. Luke's
Premieres by Sun Keting and Mantawoman, with additional music by Huang Ruo, Valentyn Sylvestrov, and Qu Xiao-Song

5 November 2019 - Hackney Round Chapel
Premiere of *Untold*

Concerts

27 October 2022 - Tangram at LSE
Music by Debussy, WF Bach, Tyzen Hsiao, and Doppler

9 September 2022 - Untold (work-in-progress showing), Snape Maltings
Work-in-progress version of *Untold* at Festival of the New

26/27 May 2022 - LAOGANMAN, Tangram Voices #6, San Mei Gallery
Premiere by Ben Nobuto, with additional music by Sun Keting, Samantha Fernando, Lucy Treacher, Isang Yan, Chen Yi, and JS Bach, and poetry by Eric Yip

29 January 2022 - Lunar New Year Premieres, LSO St. Luke's
Premieres by Vivian Fung and Tonia Ko, with additional music by Emmy The Great and folk song arrangements

22 October 2021 - Angela Wai Nok Hui, Tangram Voices #5, San Mei Gallery
Music with installation and film by Angela Wai Nok Hui, Jasmin Kent Rodgman, Neil Luck, and James Larter

23 September 2021 - Cheng Yu, Tangram Voices #4 Sound of Silk, Rich Mix London
Premieres by Alex Ho and Johan Famaey, with additional folk song arrangements

29 April 2021 - Chinese Arts Now Festival, Tangram Voices #3 Infusion, Online
Premiere by Lucas Jordan, with additional music by Tyzen Hsiao and Dohnányi

Online

22 April 2021 - Chinese Arts Now Festival, Crossing Paths
Mantawoman hosts composers Alex Ho, Sun Keting, and Raymond Yiu in conversation where they discuss their practices

30 October 2020 - New Stories: A Digital Short Play Festival by New Earth Theatre
Collaboration between Tangram and New Earth Theatre on a new play by Andrea Ling

5 September 2020 - Chen Teng, Tangram Voices #2
Premieres by Shruthi Rajasekar and Robin Haigh, with additional music by Zhu Changyao, Ma Xilin, Jin Wei, Patrick Huang, Hua Yanjun, Lu Rirong, and Huo Yonggang

27 June 2020 5-6pm - Launch concert (online) of Tangram Voices
World premieres by Jasmin Kent Rodgman, Raymond Yiu, Beibei Wang, and Mantawoman

25 January 2020, LSO St. Luke's
Tangram celebrate the Lunar New Year with two new commissions from Raymond Yiu and Jasmin Kent Rodgman and new arrangements of Chinese folk melodies

Other

10-11 December 2020 - New Creativity in the UK's Emerging East Asian Music Scene - Symposium in partnership with SOAS
Tangram host a symposium exploring how East Asian identities create and curate the music scene in the UK with work by Hyelim Kim, Kiku Day, Julia Cheng, and Jasmin Kent Rodgman

Commissions

Beibei Wang – *五行 Wu Xing* (2023)
Sun Keting – *It's Distance that Makes Mountains Mountains* (2022)
Mantawoman – *Everything is Music 萬物皆音樂 – A Response to John Cage* (2022)
Ben Nobuto – *i carry your heart*
Beibei Wang – *酒歌 JiuGe* (2022)
Tonia Ko – *Farewell Dwelling* (2022)
Vivian Fung – *Sparks* (2022)
Naomi Woo and Youngsook Choi – *How to Restore a Broken China Vase* (2020)
Shruthi Rajasekar – *Sheen of Silk* (2020)
Robin Haigh – *Baby Steps* (2020)
Lucas F. Jordan – *Three Scenes at the Edge of…* (2020)
Raymond Yiu – *Corner of a Foreign Field* (2020)
Jasmin Kent Rodgman – *Ancient Stone* (2020)
Sun Keting – *Erasure* (2019)
Alex Ho – *Tell them we were here* (2019)

Appendix 3 – Selected List of British East and Southeast Asian Creativities

Current and Recent Productions

Kakilang, *Augmented Chinatown 2.0*
https://www.kakilang.org.uk/augmented-chinatown-20

Moongate Productions, *WeRNotVirus*
https://www.omnibus-clapham.org/oto-we-r-not-virus/

New Earth Theatre, *WORTH*
https://www.newearththeatre.org.uk/events/worth

Royal Shakespeare Company, *My Neighbour Totoro*
https://www.rsc.org.uk/my-neighbour-totoro

Royal Exchange Theatre, *UNTITLED F*CK M*SS S**GON PLAY*
https://www.royalexchange.co.uk/whats-on-and-tickets/untitled-f*ck-m*ss-s**gon-play

Tangram, *YANG QUEEN*
https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/tangram-x-mantawoman-yang-queen/

TS Crew, *Hong Kong Soul*
https://www.rada.ac.uk/hires-hong-kong-soul/

Initiatives/Advocacy Groups

BEATS
https://wearebeatsorg.org.uk/

Besea.n
https://www.besean.co.uk/

eastbysoutheast
https://eastbysoutheast.co.uk/

End Violence & Racism Against ESEA Communities
https://evresea.com/

ESEA Heritage Month
https://www.eseaheritagemonth.co.uk/

ESEA Hub
https://www.eseahub.co.uk/

ESEA Lit Fest
https://www.esealitfest.com/

On Your Side
https://www.onyoursideuk.org/

Resonate
https://www.weareresonate.com/

Sine Theta Magazine
https://sinetheta.net/

Artist Collectives/Organisations

Asia Art Activism
https://asia-art-activism.net/

Celestial Peach
https://www.celestialpeach.com/

Centre 151
https://www.centre151.com/

China Exchange
https://chinaexchange.uk/corefiles/

Hidden Keileon
https://www.hiddenkeileon.art/

Kakilang
https://www.kakilang.org.uk/

MilkTea
https://www.milkteafilms.com/

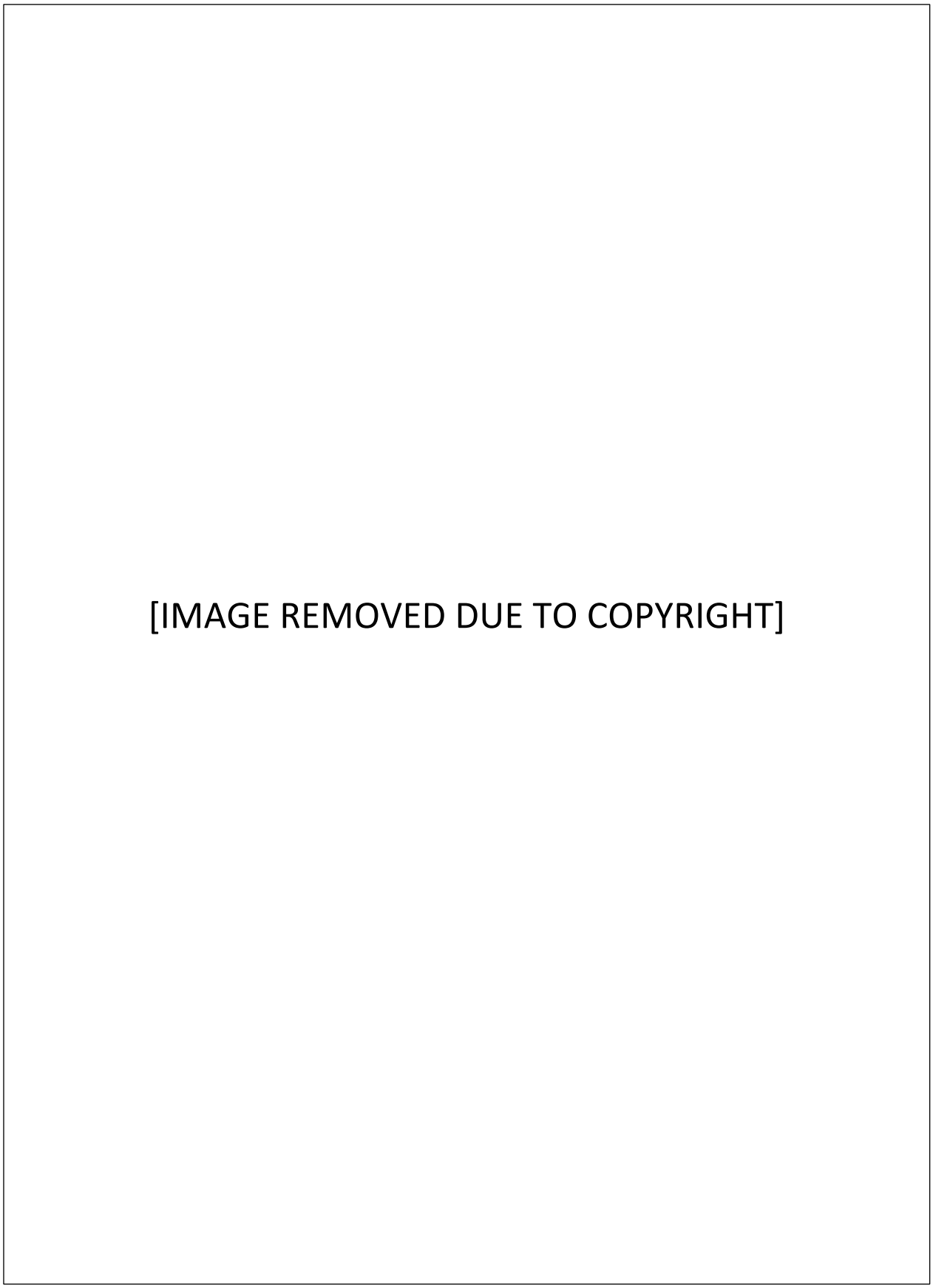
Moongate Productions
https://www.moongateproductions.net/

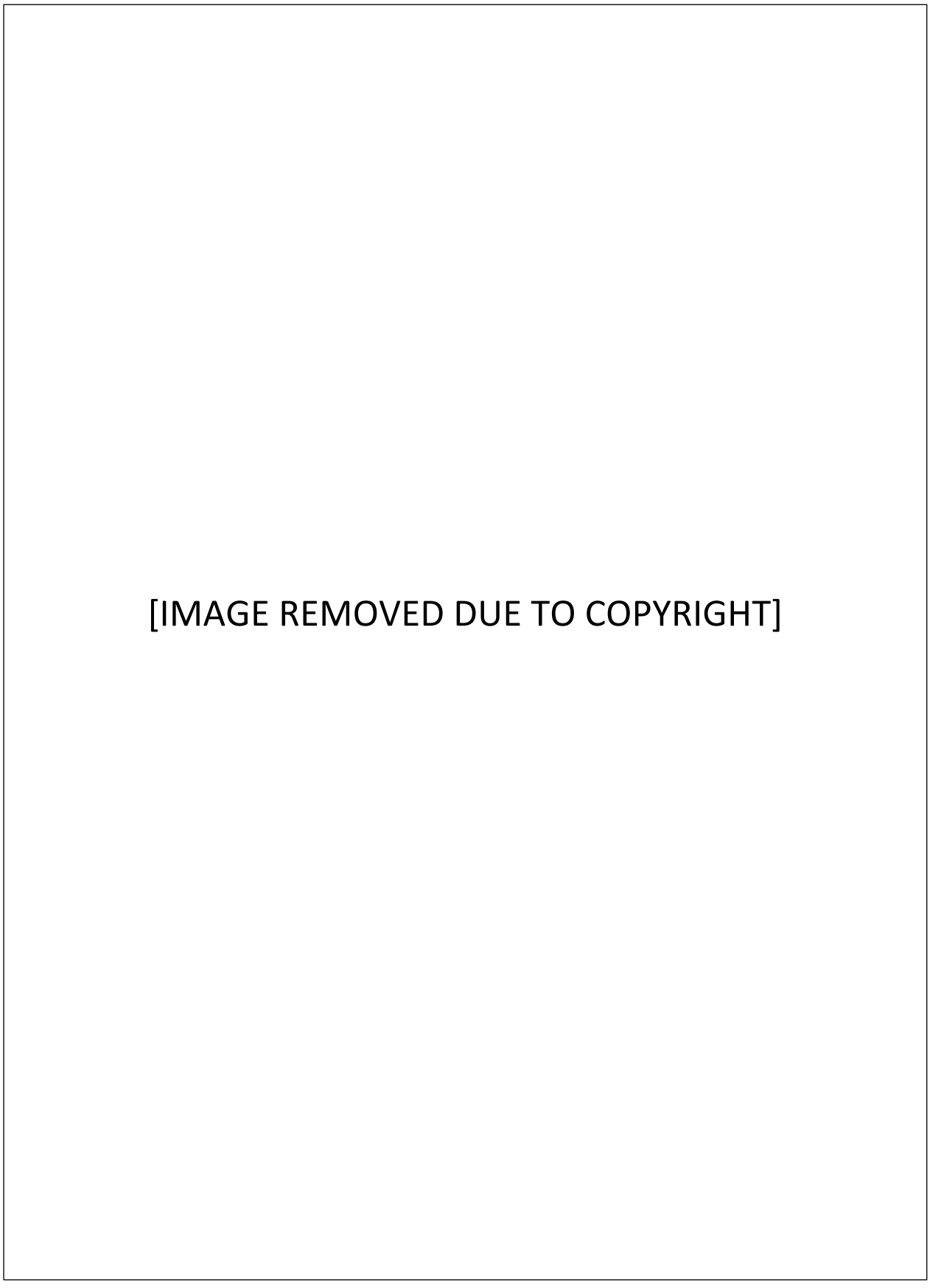
New Earth Theatre
https://www.newearththeatre.org.uk/

Papergang
https://www.papergang.co.uk/

Tangram
https://www.tangramsound.com/

Appendix 4 – 葉限 folk story, translated by Yifang Qian, edited by Alex Ho

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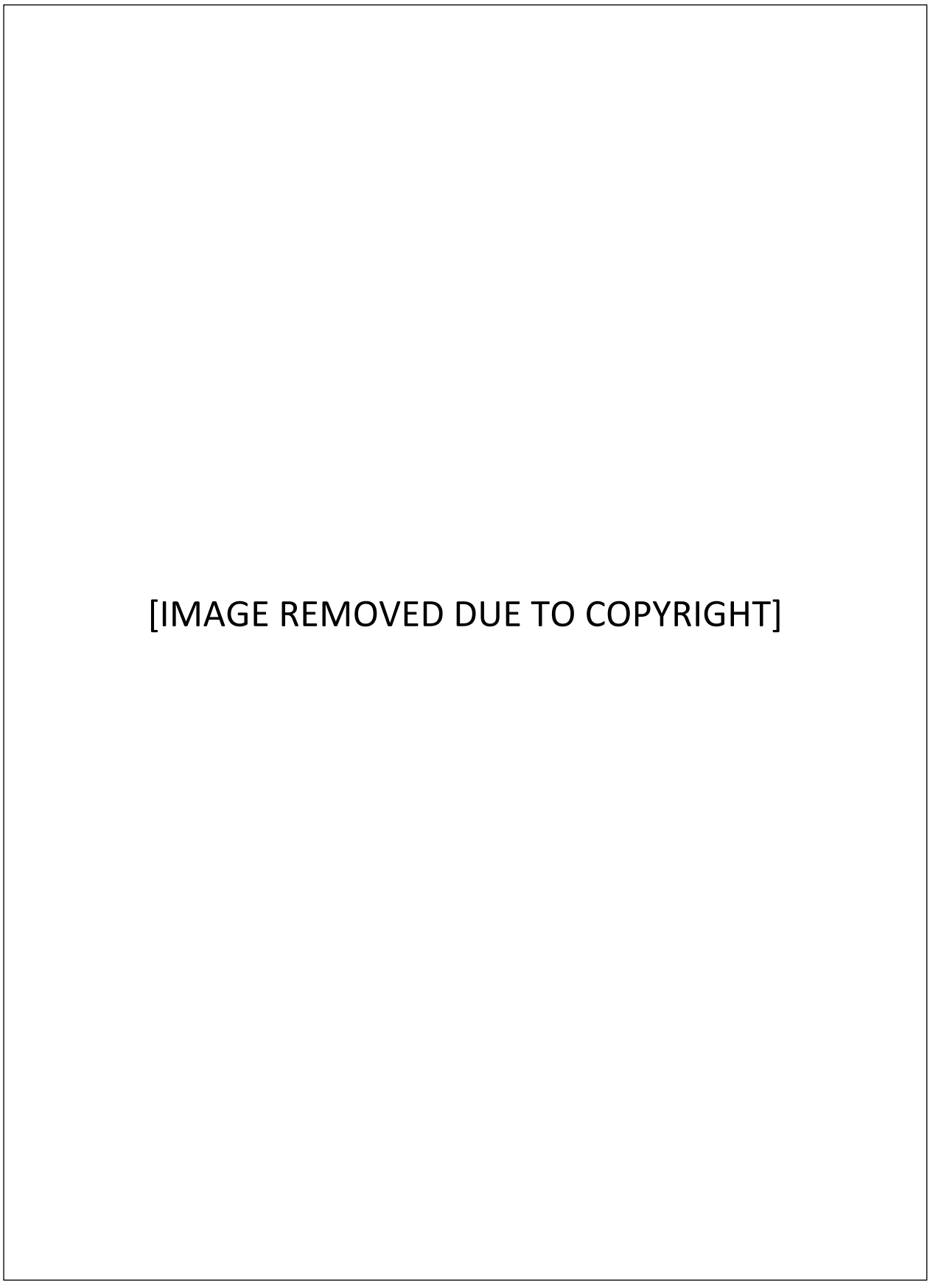
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Appendix 5 – 葉限 Adaptation, the synopsis for *Untold*

Scene 1: 葉限 is in the cave where she lives with her cruel stepmother and stepsiblings. She tries to fit in by binding her feet in the way that her stepmother and stepsiblings have done. She cannot do it however. Her stepsibling comes and beats her up.

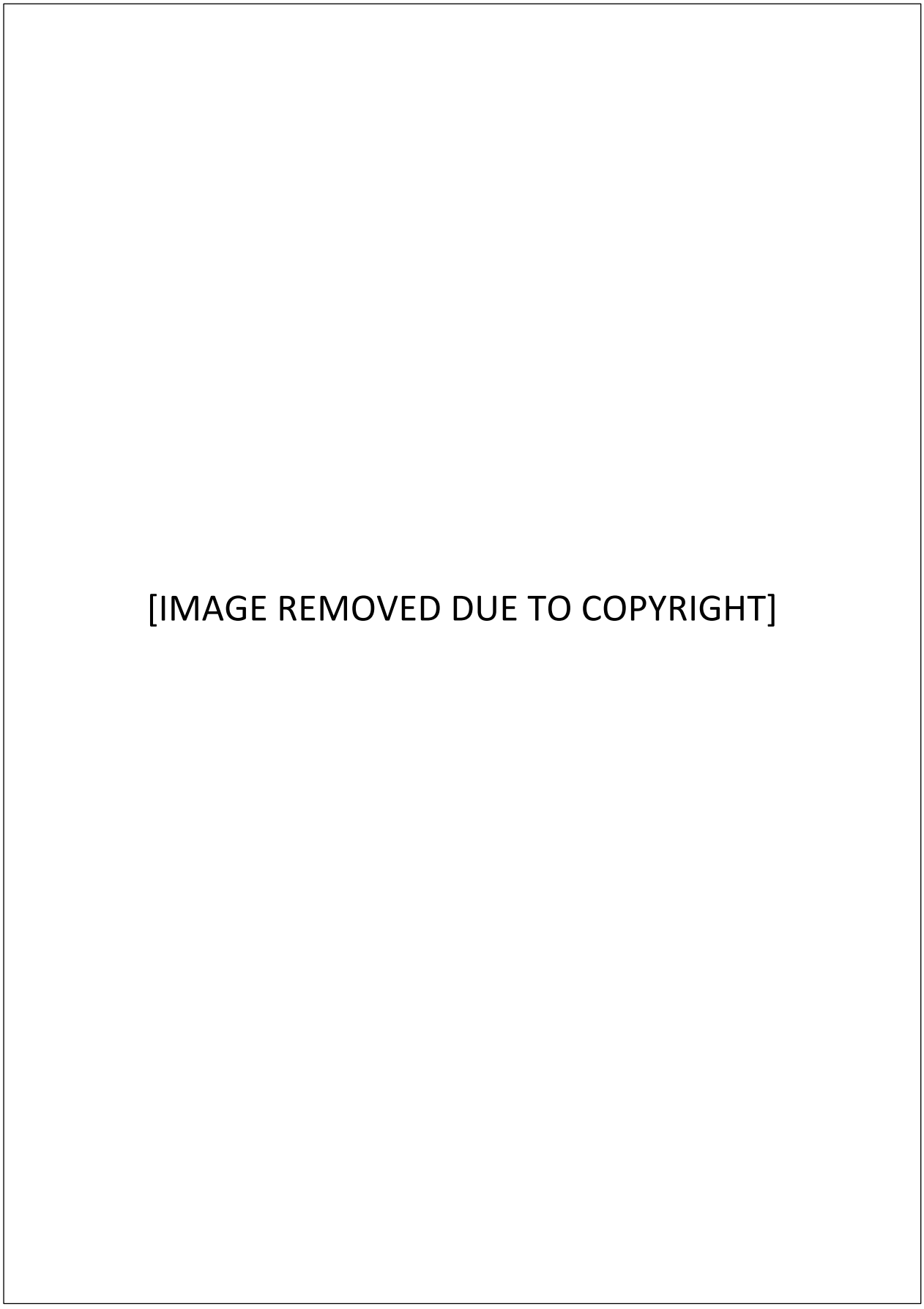
Scene 2: 葉限 befriends a fish in a lake near the cave. For once in her life, she does not feel lonely. But her stepsibling finds out about the fish and decides to capture it.

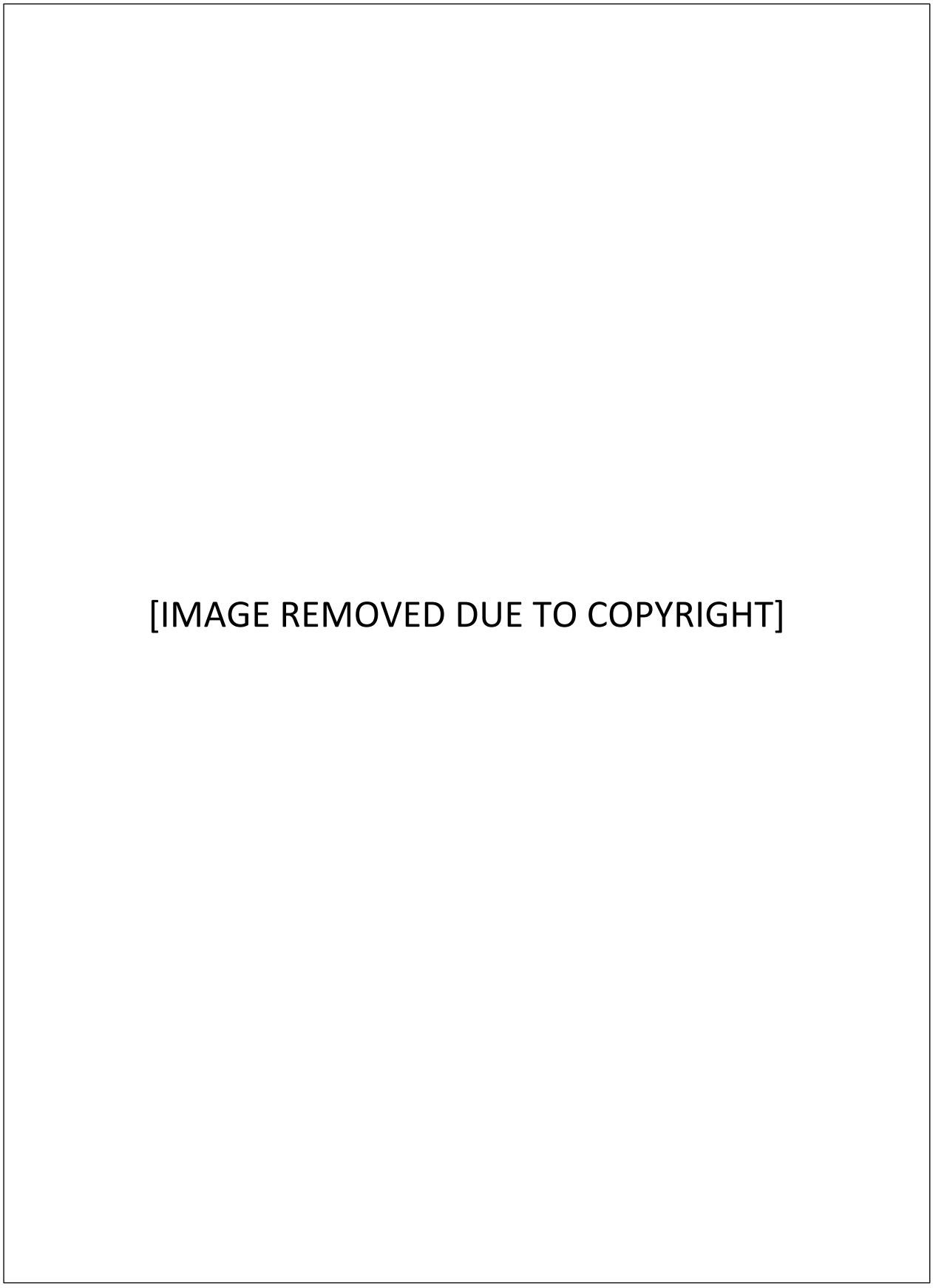
Scene 3: The fish is hurt by the stepsibling and dies of its wounds leaving 葉限 feeling more alone than ever before. The fish then miraculously comes back to life to 葉限's astonishment and is able to grant Ye Xian a wish. Ye Xian wishes to have her footbind transformed and to have a beautiful pair of shoes so she fits in with the others.

Scene 4: It is time for the annual festival held by the King. The King is mad and hysterical. 葉限 attends the festival with her transformed footbind where she meets the King who instantly falls in love with the shoe...and 葉限.

Scene 5: 葉限 is forced to run home because she is scared that her stepmother recognised her. She accidentally leaves a shoe behind. After the festival, the King desperately tries to find 葉限 but to no avail. 葉限 knows the King is looking for her, but does not care. She realises that she will never fit in with her stepfamily, and so leaves the cave and the remaining shoes to live happily ever after.

Appendix 6 – Full message from Aidan Chan on Facebook, 13 September 2020




[IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT]