Authenticity is an absolute, a goal that can never be fully attained, a quest. Sincerity and autobiography are techniques one can employ in the service of personal authenticity, just as having traditional instruments and singing old songs are techniques one can use in the service of cultural authenticity. But it's important to distinguish means from the end.¹

What do we really mean when we say something is authentic? In culinary art for instance one might make the claim that a dish is authentically prepared. In this sense, authenticity refers to the technical procedures as well as the ingredients involved in the production of the dish in question. The claim to authenticity in this case may be verified by way of comparison with its culinary origin. The problem here lies with the difficulty in locating an “origin” - a frozen moment in time, a single codified and authoritative tradition. In the manner of Jacques Derrida’s infinite deferral of meanings, there will always

be an older, more “authentic” origin that underpins the one already identified. In the pursuit of the absolute authentic moment, where (and when) is this elusive tradition in which one is supposed to terminate?

The example above refers specifically to correctness of pragmatic details, but claims of authenticity are rarely so precise. In the same context, one could instead be referring to representational authenticity - a vague impression of truthfulness, a mysterious sentiment that it “tastes like home.” Who is making this claim, and what is the nature of this sentiment? When and where is home, and who has the final word? These questions are often masked over in claims of authenticity. More often than not, claims of authenticity are confused and muddled, straddling multiple semiotic boundaries. According to Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, if there were a common thread among all claims to authenticity, it could only be the fact that these claims are primarily defined in opposition to “faking it.” But the question is: who isn’t faking it? Who and what could truly be called authentic in the purist’s definition of the term?

Authenticity is messy, and there are some reasons to do away with the concept altogether. Many scholars who deal with culture and identity have attempted to demonstrate the difficulty of authenticity as a strategic goal in cultural production. Writers such as David Murphy went as far as rejecting outright all notions of authenticity as vitally flawed. Regina Bendix calls authenticity the dirty “A-word.” Scholars and artists alike tread gently on this highly charged territory. In the context of contemporary Chinese music, there are even more reasons to be critical of authenticity both as a creative goal and an analytical focus. Global migration and centuries of foreign occupation meant that it is not easy to say where the Chinese ends and the non-Chinese begins. The pursuit of an authentic Chineseness in contemporary Chinese music runs the danger of essentialism. Authenticity as a demand places an enormous symbolic weight upon Chinese composers, as well as reviewers of their work to “perform Chineseness” in music and in analysis, reducing Chinese composers into local informant, shaman, and conjurer.

But despite its many problems and pitfalls, authenticity continues to feature prominently in the public arena. Chinese composers and artists alike continue to create works that claim to reflect an authentic Chinese essence, and analysts continue to read their works as indisputable texts of cultural China. The world music industry is generating substantial revenue despite dwindling global music sales, and marketing executives rely on the impression of authentic representation as a draw. The yearning for cultural authenticity and the heritage industry that feeds on this yearning seem to be as strong as ever. Vincent J. Cheng calls this yearning “the anxiety over culture and identity.” What is the nature of this anxiety? In the words of Cheng, it is an anxiety over the loss of specificity and subjectivity in a globalized world, “the anxiety of a bleaching out of specific cultural, racial, ethnic, and national identities that threatens to render individuals nondistinctive.” In the face of increasing cross-border migration and globalization, there is a paradoxical renewal of interest in the authentic self and other. While absolute authenticity is improbable, a total rejection of authenticity, which leaves no room for claims of truthful representation, seems to also harbor the purist fantasy of a nondistinctive global village. Is there a middle ground when it comes to authenticity?

The notion of identity as performance is a key point in this discussion. Performances by definition are to some degree always “faked.” In the words of Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor: “nobody goes out on stage and sings about exactly what they did and felt that day.” In works of art, the constructions of identities could also be understood as performative gestures. Are acts of identity performance in musical composition, or any form of cultural production, always inauthentic then? The point here being that an

5 Barker and Taylor, Faking It, xi.
acknowledgement of the unattainability of absolute authenticity should not necessarily negate and discredit all efforts to represent a culture with a certain degree of authenticity. We habitually abstract features of a culture from works of fiction, from “faked” identity performances. Could we not speak of an “authentic enough” representation of contemporary China in music, with some sensitivity to the multiplicity of realities that exist across geographical regions and over time? In this article, I advocate that we employ authenticity as a productive strategy, as a form of strategic essentialism, with an insight of its failures as well as potentials. Instead of rejecting authenticity in haste, I suggest that we focus on the various elements that constitute a claim of authenticity - the where, when and who. In other words, what does authentic mean in this very specific context? These questions are rarely answered in the discussion of contemporary Chinese music. In the following, I will outline and analyze several ways by which features of a contemporary Chinese condition can be said to manifest in FM3’s Buddha Machine. My goal is to address the over-stigmatization of authenticity by demonstrating that it is still possible to talk about a nuanced and multi-faceted representation when authenticity is seen as an aspiration within a carefully defined and specific context.

The Buddha in the Machine

The Buddha Machine (Figure 11.1) is the creation of musical duo FM3. FM3 is Zhang Jian from Beijing, and Nebraska native Christiaan Virant who has lived in China for many years. Christiaan Virant moved to Beijing at the age of 18, and is among the 150,000 foreign nationals who now call China home. When asked if he still feels like an outsider after all these years, he replied, “my adult reality is actually a Chinese one.”6 Virant is at ease with his identity, and regards his worldviews to be “similar to [that of] a Chinese person.”7

In the spring of 2005, experimental music label Staalplaat began to distribute the Buddha Machine worldwide. Just a couple of months after its initial release, independent online vendor forcedexposure sold over three hundred units in a fortnight. Then the word got out that music legend Brian Eno purchased six units in Beijing, and the blogosphere went crazy. The Buddha Machine finally went from underground to mainstream when New York Times gave it a plug in its Christmas buying guide.8 To date, with over fifty thousand units sold worldwide, the Buddha Machine is a trademarked franchise complete with its own t-shirt, handbag, and a long list of celebrity patrons.

No larger than a pack of cigarettes in size, the Buddha Machine is a plastic box with a built-in speaker. It houses several original tracks composed by the duo, each lasting only several seconds. These tracks loop indefinitely until the user switches to another track, or turns the device off. Virant stated in an interview that the duo was originally inspired by the chanting machines found in temples across China. Cheaply produced and virtually unbreakable, the Buddha Machine makes modest claims and accomplishes what it advertises brilliantly. It is dedicated to one task only: music-making. In the age of technological convergence when music is transmitted as ones and zeros
through devices that are at once camera, phone, web browser and music player, the Buddha Machine is stubbornly lo-fi and refreshingly limited. New York Times described the Buddha Machine as “beautifully useless.” Grooves magazine called it “anti-iPod.”

Much of the commentaries on the Buddha Machine have focused on the device’s novelty as a nostalgic relic of pre-digital age. But the Buddha Machine is also unmistakably rich in cultural meaning: as a product of the market economy, it encapsulates a certain contemporary Chinese condition that is linked to patterns of production and consumption. As an artistic creation, the Buddha Machine represents a novel strategy in domesticating the cultural self and other beyond Orientalist gestures. These two narratives are inevitably intertwined. In the following, I will present a reading of the Buddha Machine as an authentic representation of a temporally and geographically defined China. I attempt to achieve this by making finer distinctions between the different Chinas, detailing some of the social and cultural conditions of the specific China that I intend to investigate. I will then look at ways by which these conditions could be said to manifest in the Buddha Machine.

Contexts for Intellectual Properties Infringement in Mainland China

The first edition of the Buddha Machine contains nine short original audio clips of no longer than a couple of seconds each. These clips can be listened to through the built-in speaker or through personal headphones. A clip loops infinitely until batteries are exhausted or when user switches track by pressing a button. The playback possesses a distorted quality that is reminiscent of an old radio.

The Buddha Machine is an astounding success in Europe and North America. Back in Mainland China however, sales are slower. One could attribute the discrepancy to the popularity of chanting machines in the Mainland, which takes away from the novel appeal of the Buddha Machine. But a more likely cause is the habit of intellectual property (IP) acquisition in the Mainland. Not only is the duo economically affected by patterns of IP circulation; I would argue that the Buddha Machine actually embodies the very social and cultural contexts that gave rise to IP infringement in the Mainland.

In the Mainland cheap bootlegs are readily available, and the purchase of illegitimate intellectual properties is much less of a stigma than in other industrialized nations. Even if one wanted to do the right thing by the law, to locate legitimate copies of DVDs and CDs is no easy task. In a typical shopping arcade or book mall, pirated recordings of foreign musicians are habitually displayed alongside legitimate Chinese versions of the latest Hollywood blockbusters. Pirated materials are so finely produced that there is no way of distinguishing them from legitimate ones. Long gone are the days when bootlegs were sold in bags of plastic. Pirated copies now come in color-printed card boxes complete with inserts, “anti-piracy” laser stickers, even exchange policies. Currently, only five state enterprises own legitimate distribution right of Hollywood films in the Mainland. Pirate brands often adopt names that are similar to their official counterparts, making it even more difficult to distinguish between genuine and pirated materials. A number of “reputable” pirate brand names are actually known for their “superior quality.”

9 Ibid.
According to one report, up to 95 percent of the transactions in audiovisual materials in Mainland China are carried out in the black markets.\(^{13}\)

The issue of IP protection is a constant source of diplomatic conflict between the White House and Beijing, with the US accusing China of uncivilized disrespect for IP. Despite complaints from the international community, some have pointed out that at least on the legislative level Mainland China is actually one of the most committed to IP protection, with an impressive body of laws against copyright infringement.\(^{14}\) What then are the reasons for Mainland China’s failure to impose IP protection laws? One must not simply attribute the lack of IP respect in Mainland China to a certain Chinese cultural conditioning. Rather, it is the result of a unique set of social and economic conditions that are specific to the Mainland. To understand the current predicament, one must examine the contexts for the circulation of copyrighted materials in “other Chinas.”

Across the straits in Hong Kong and Taiwan where anti-piracy law enforcement is strict, illegitimate copies of audio-visual material can only be found in back alleys, or in shopping malls tucked away in the suburbs where adult entertainment DVDs are also sold. Decades of anti-piracy clampdown and education have paid off in these regions, and there is tremendous social pressure to purchase copyrighted materials in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. There are other political incentives for stopping piracy trade: IP theft is a major source of revenue for organized gangs in these regions, second only to drug trafficking. The dwindling movie industry in Hong Kong in particular suffers major loss of profit from these illegal activities, and it constantly lobbies the administration to take tougher measures. The social and economic reasons for imposing IP protection are therefore paramount. The contexts for IP protection in the Mainland are quite different. First of all, factories that produce pirated material are in many cases staffed by workers who lost their jobs to economic rationalization and state enterprise downsizing.\(^{15}\) Remote rural communities are often the most affected by such reforms. Some villages depend entirely on the manufacturing of pirated materials for their livelihood,\(^{16}\) so on a pragmatic level pirated material trade serves as a cushion to the social problems brought about by rapid economic reform. There is some social benefit therefore in allowing the market to slowly ease into a piracy-free environment.

Another major difference between Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland is the degree to which music and moving images are able to freely circulate in the public sphere. Censorship in Mainland China is a complex machine that functions on many levels in service of a multitude of state interests. It is no secret that films containing controversial subject matter are habitually banned from public screening. Even in materials that are officially sanctioned one may still detect evidence of heavy editing. The progressive *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported that subtle yet significant changes were made to the dialogues in the Mainland release of *The Warlords*, a film by Hong Kong director Peter Chan that is set against the Taiping Rebellion.\(^{17}\) Pirated DVDs of the film were duplicated mostly from the uncensored Hong Kong version of the film. Since the majority of transactions were carried out in the black market, many were able to enjoy the film uncensored. Films that are prohibited from public screening altogether find their way into the hands of the culturally-aware citizens also through acts of piracy, both online and offline. Many directors of films that contain sensitive subject matters see the black market as a functional alternative distribution network.\(^{18}\) Film scholar Laikwan Pang in *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia* pointed out that the black market of audiovisual materials explicitly aided in undermining state censorship, and

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\(^{16}\) *Ibid.*


\(^{18}\) Laikwan Pang, *Cultural Control*, p.103.
therefore warrants a re-examination of its transgressive values:

Movie piracy in China is particularly pertinent to an examination of the relationship between copyright and reception rights, as the country’s film distribution does not operate in the ideal ‘free market’ from which the notion of intellectual property supposedly derives its meaning.\(^\text{19}\)

Pang argued that acts of piracy could be politically productive, particularly within a rigid and hegemonic system. In Mainland China, arts organizations are still by-and-large self-financed. Art spaces struggle to balance the book through box office or rental incomes. Arms length arts funding is scarce, and in cases where some city level funds are available they often come with the hefty price of content compliance. Piracy trade serves to overcome the limitation of a profit-oriented distribution network and lack of state subsidies for the arts.

When discussing the issue IP infringement in Mainland China, it would be a mistake to rely solely on capitalist logic. Here I have painted a complex picture of the social and economic features that gave rise to IP infringement activities in the Mainland. These features are specific to Mainland China \textit{circa now}. They are also precisely the kind of conditions that defy domestication by Orientalist strategies. I will now look at several ways by which these features can be said to manifest in the Buddha Machine.

\section*{A Proud Knockoff}

With the record industry so fixated on combating piracy, being able to tie a physical object to music must be the dream of many record company executives. The duo however explicitly denied that they created the Buddha Machine to combat IP infringement. FM3 maintained that piracy impacted their career positively, and that \textit{Soulseek} and other similar music sharing services have in fact contributed toward a wider global fan base.\(^\text{20}\)

The Buddha Machine could also be understood as a celebration of the acts of free appropriation and re-appropriation. The Buddha Machine’s audio circuit is a replica of that of the chanting machine down to the smallest resistor, while the chanting machine in turn is a creative re-adaptation of the circuit commonly found in answering machines. In the spirit of the open source movement, the chain of creative appropriation and re-appropriation continues as musicians sample the Buddha Machine to create remixes, many of which eventually become commercially available.\(^\text{21}\) This sort of community-initiated creative appropriation was an important aspect to the Buddha Machine’s original conception. Zhang and Virant often perform live sets using multiple machines in combination. The duo calls these live sets \textit{Buddha Boxing} (Fig. 11.2). They also intended for the musical community to freely experiment with the Buddha Machine as a musical instrument, and encouraged musicians to claim authorship in these acts of appropriation - a musical creative commons of sort. Many bands now regularly use the Buddha Machine in their live sets.

The dynamics between FM3, the Buddha Machine and its community of creative appropriators is one of mutual enrichment. The act of “knocking (each other) off” not only enabled the production process of the Buddha Machine itself, but it also activated a creative defiance of capitalist logic, in much the same way that Pang has argued for the potential political value

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp.104-107.
\item \url{http://www.disquiet.com/2005/12/17/buddha-in-the-machine}. [cited December 10, 2010]
\item The fact that the samples contained within the Buddha Machine are mediated via cheap and easily replicable audio hardware is significant. This distinguishes FM3’s strategy from the sanctioned sampling that is already common in the West. I would argue that the deliberate downgrading of audio quality is in itself a political and anti-establishment gesture. See the next section for details.
\end{itemize}
of IP infringement. Here, the authentic picture of contemporary Mainland China that the Buddha Machine paints is a far cry from nostalgic Orientalist imagination, and it could not be understood as a general representation of all Chinas. The China we speak of is geographically and temporally specific.

Mass-Produced and Made in (Socialist) China

From the distorted quality of playback, to the kitsch recycled paper packaging and skewed logo printed on it (fig.11.3), to the ultra low-cost and virtually indestructible PVC plastic casing - features of the Buddha Machine exemplify a shameless insistence on sub-par mass-produced quality. In fact, much of its appeal comes from an honest and open display of crudeness.

The first edition of the Buddha Machine contains samples of traditional Chinese instruments, including the plucked, fretless string instrument guqin and the Chinese flute dizi. The sub-par quality of the built-in speaker means that playback quality is normally low and at times distorted beyond recognition, and the identity of the sampled instruments is masked over. Distortion and occasional clipping of volume however does not take away from the authentic appeal of these instrumental samples. On the contrary, imperfections bestow these sounds with a distinctive quality that can be said to authentically reflect the social reality of a contemporary socialist China. While on the surface the socialist nation is aspiring to the peak of technological innovation, a significant portion of its economy is still being driven by the export of cheaply manufactured or counterfeit products. From cellphones to brand name sneakers, from search engines to micro-blogging services, for every popular Western innovation there is a crude socialist Chinese “alternative.” And they are not at all ashamed of it: crudeness could be an attitude by choice, a gesture of resistance against transnational capitalist logic, and an insistence on non-conformity. In any event, what other choices does the socialist nation have at this point in history? The Buddha Machine is a naked display of the nation’s current predicament. It has emerged out of the contradictory social, cultural and economic realities of the socialist nation. It is a knock-off product that took advantage of the abundance of cheap labor, but it is also a creative re-adaptation that is inspired by a local invention, one that implies a kind of spiritual-ideological pragmatism. Instead of resisting sub-par qualities as aspects that are inferior and need improvement, the Buddha Machine fully domesticates the reality of mass manufacturing and pragmatically accepts the process’ consequences. The Buddha Machine represents an acute self-realization. In this sense it is truly anti-iPod, a gesture against the tyranny of endless commodity refinement and technological advancement. In the words of Virant:

Figure 11.2. FM3’s Zhang and Virant performing Buddha Boxing.

Figure 11.3. The Buddha Machine’s recycled paper packaging.
Part of the reason we made the Buddha Machine was because we couldn’t make an iPod... with limited resources and technological knowledge, why bother? So we created what we knew how to: a humble 12-bit plastic box.\textsuperscript{22}

Out of pirated circuit board and cheap PVC plastic enclosures was born a new aesthetic of kitsch. The China that the Buddha Machine represents is messy and fuzzy around the edges. It is both inside looking out and outside looking in, and it defies simple explanation.

There are signs that this way of understanding socialist China is entering into the international conversation. In 2009, the New Museum organized an exhibition entitled \textit{Urban China}.\textsuperscript{23} Counterfeit Nike flip-flops and bright-colored nylon handbags were among its exhibits. The exhibition explored the notion of a “vernacular” (socialist) China - a set of descriptors that is not reflective of an unadulterated Orient, but of the social realities of a modern nation whose development defies normative trajectories. There is something authentic about the way socialist China is portrayed here. Ed Gillespie commented on the exhibition:

Urban China... captures the imagination around what Chinese urban development is, could and perhaps should be. It forces those outside the Chinese economic expansion looking in to think about the Chinese mode of development more objectively whilst simultaneously challenging Chinese Ministries and developers to consider the legacy and longer term impacts of their explosive urban growth.\textsuperscript{24}

In an interview, Virant explained how he navigated through the “hidden

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\textsuperscript{22} Christiaan Virant, in discussion with the author, October 28, 2010.

\textsuperscript{23} This exhibition took place at the Lobby Gallery of the New Museum in New York, between February 2, 2009 and March 29, 2009. Benjamin Godsill, Curatorial Associate of the New Museum, curated the exhibition.

\textsuperscript{24} Available from http://www.newmuseum.org/urbanchina/ [Cited February 16, 2009]
\end{flushleft}
representation complicates rather than affirms normative assumptions of cultures and nations. Authenticity as an aspiration has the potential to be transgressive.

What then constitutes “faithful representation” in acts of creativity? Let us be clear that authentic representations of culture in music will not and cannot be pure archival phonographs. That said authenticity is not an all-or-nothing matter either. Instead of asking “is X authentic or not,” analysts and composers could ask “on what basis are claims of authenticity made in X,” with full awareness of the impossibility of the authentic absolute. As the notion of authenticity comes into crisis in post-modern times, so do forms of representation. Yet without the means to produce new and contemporary meanings, composers and analysts have no choice but to resort to either Orientalist nostalgia or transnational definitions of culture. But as cultural theorist Arif Dirlik has pointed out, transnationalism is not without its problems either. It runs the danger of neglecting the rich contradictions that activate the curiosities for border-crossing in the first place. Discourse and practice are interdependent - we may theorize about transnational cultural spaces or even globalized composers, but where is a truly transnational Chinese music to be found? In light of the increasing interest in the authentic self and other, I argue that authenticity may continue to be a worthwhile pursuit in composition and in analysis as long as we put its purist definition behind us. At the same time, we must bear in mind that any claim to authenticity must be geographically and temporally specific. The strategic essentialism of authenticity must do justice to the plurality and complexities of multiple Chinas.

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