As a Hong Kong-Chinese Australian who has lived the majority of his life outside of China, I have many tales of the lived interiority of ethnicity to tell. The vast majority of these tales recount the dynamics between my ethnic body on the margin and the institutions of whiteness at the center, but one such tale that involved my grandmother reveals the possibility of an opposite structure. Multiculturalism and the policy of assimilation were firmly on the social agenda in Australia of the 1990s. At the high school I went to, Asians who only made friends with other Asians were frowned upon as self-segregating and unwilling to blend into local culture, so I made quite a conscious effort to befriend a roughly equal number of white Australian and Asian-Australian friends. My grandmother on the other hand lived happily in Australia for over a decade not speaking or knowing a word of English. She did all her grocery shopping in Chinatown, socialized with Chinese-speaking friends, watched Chinese language drama on TV, and got around town on the train by memorizing the color of each station’s platform. One afternoon, my grandmother flipped through my yearbook and tried to name all of my friends by their faces. She had a recollection of all Asian faces, but failed to recognize any of my white Australian friends. I reminded her that many of these white Australian friends actually came around to the house frequently, to which she replied, “but I cannot tell them apart, their faces are the same, and their voices sound the same to me!” The face is among the most commonly referred to features of the stereotypical Chinese body on the school playground and elsewhere—the slanted eyes, the wide cheekbones, and the flatter facial features. While the face carries physiological features that mark one’s ethnicity, the voice suggests ethnicity through invisible mechanics such as subtleties of accent, word choice consistent with dialects, and tonal inflection. The derogatory term of “Ching Chong Chinaman” for instance refers explicitly to the sound of the Chinese language. There is evidence suggesting that the voice as a marker of identity operates outside of language and speech. A number of studies
propose that the formant structures in the voices of English speakers of different racial backgrounds may be distinguishably different, although one study from the University of Florida suggested the contrary. In any case, the face and the voice remain highly charged territories in racial politics, so much so that the mere mentioning of them might offend many. In 2011, Australia cable network anchor John Mangos made international headline with explicit descriptions of a Chinese man’s facial features. Mangos reported on a Chinese lottery winner who wore a Spiderman mask to conceal his identity while collecting his reward. Mangos remarked that he did not understand why the man bothered to wear a mask, as his “straight black hair […], squinty eyes and yellow skin” clearly betrayed his Chinese identity. In the news footage the lottery’s winner’s eyes were not visible, so there was no way of telling whether his eyes were in fact slanted. In any case, for a news story that took place in Mainland China, Mangos’ comments were redundant to say the least. Mangos’ remarks triggered an immediate public outcry, which led to an official apology from the network on the next day, and Mangos’ eventual dismissal from the station soon after. Another tale involves American conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh, who imitated a speech in Chinese given by the Chinese President Hu Jintao at the White House in a childish manner that resembled the “Ching Chong Chinaman” stereotype. Limbaugh’s actions were swiftly denounced by a number of politicians of Chinese ancestry, including House Representative David Wu, and California State Senator Leland Yee.

The two tales above demonstrate the significance of the face and the voice as sites where collectivity, individuality, and anonymity are constantly negotiated.


In the first tale, the Chinese lottery winner might have succeeded in masking his individuality, but as a result of the act of masking, his ethnicity became the primary instrument of identification; his face was both physically and metaphorically “lost.” In the Chinese language, the face also carries a socio-psychological dimension. *Gei mianzi* (literally “giving face”) is to show respect, and to willingly subsume oneself under another in the social hierarchy. *Shi mianzi* (literally “losing face”) on the other hand refers to lost honor, damaged reputation, or public humiliation. The Chinese socio-psychological face\(^{118}\) is a commodity that can be gained, lost, or operated upon like a tangible object. In the words of famed Chinese intellectual and scholar Lin Yutang:

> [The Chinese face] can be ‘granted’ and ‘lost’ and ‘fought for’ and ‘presented as a gift’ […] it is the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated.\(^ {119}\)

If identity may also be operated upon like commodities, what is at stake and what is gained when it is masked, downplayed, or conveniently forgotten? The face and the voice are important instruments for personal identification, but also political minefields. That much acknowledged, by concealing distinct faces do ethnic bodies on the margin then become integrated, easily tolerated or domesticated by the institutions of whiteness at the center? What hidden power structure does the act of masking reveal? These are some of the issues surrounding my analysis of Hong Kong multimedia troupe Zuni Icosahedron’s multimedia opera *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (2010). The purpose of this article is to deconstruct the various ways by which the identities of the characters in this opera are obscured. By doing so, I hope to confront a problem in the recent studies of contemporary Chinese music, namely, an overtly optimistic celebration of transnational impulses that run the risk of neglecting hidden power structures and oversimplifying the music.

\(^{118}\) The notion of a socio-psychological face is not unique to the Chinese. Dorinne Kondo described the face as a stereotypical Oriental trope that signifies “a presumed Asian preoccupation with social reputation.” See Dorinne Kondo, *About face: Performing race in fashion and theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.

Zuni Icosahedron (Zuni) has been at the forefront of Asian experimental theatre for nearly three decades. Founded in 1982 in Hong Kong, Zuni has since staged more than 150 productions internationally. It is now one of the eight flagship performing arts organizations that receive annual institutional funding from the Home Affairs Bureau of Hong Kong. A signature of Zuni’s productions is the troupe’s seamless integration of moving image, dance, theatre, and experimental music into rich multimedia experiences. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* was commissioned by the 2010 New Vision Arts Festival and produced by Zuni, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of Matteo Ricci. Based on Jonathan D. Spence’s book of the same title, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* was labeled a “digital opera” in the publicity materials, with a libretto by Diana Liao and a score by emerging Hong Kong composer Steve Hui Ngo-shan. Liao is an established writer, translator and librettist who has worked with a number of important Chinese composers and stage artists of the “New Wave” generation. Liao is experienced in topics that deal with cultural border crossing. In 2004 she assisted Dutch filmmaker Frank Scheffer in translating his documentary on Tan Dun’s opera *Tea* (2002). In a biographical sketch she mentions a “life long fascination with words in various languages and their relationship with perceived realities.” Hui on the other hand is a younger and emerging figure. Born in Hong Kong in 1974, Hui graduated from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts with a degree in composition and electronic music in 2010. Before his entrance into the academy, however, Hui was already maintaining an active and high profile career, producing music for various commercial and artistic projects. Hui has worked closely with Zuni since 1999, and has previously collaborated with the local popular music label People Mountain People Sea (PMPS). In addition to his work as a composer, he is also a member of the Hong Kong electronic music group VSOP, and a resident DJ at the underground

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120 The New Vision Arts Festival is a publicly funded, bi-annual festival of performing arts that is directed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong (LCSD). The festival features experimental and adventurous performing art productions staged by both local and international performing art groups.

121 Diana Liao, *Poet Li Bai*, liner notes, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong, December 6, 2009.
electronic dance event Headroom. Before completing *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Hui had produced three orchestral pieces, one of which was *Re-Autumn* scored for laptop and orchestra, which received its premiere by the Hong Kong Sinfonietta in 2004.

Hui’s unusual background, particularly his interest in and engagement with popular and electronic dance music, led naturally to experiments in the implementation of music technology in the classical concert hall. One of the most striking features of *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* has been the technologically mediated virtual presence of the various characters that Matteo Ricci encounters. The protagonist of the story, Matteo Ricci, was portrayed by Beijing native “basso cantante” Tian Hao Jiang. Tian’s voice was in fact the lone human singing voice in the entire opera. All the other vocal parts were “sung” by digitally synthesized voices, which were rendered using Yamaha’s *Vocaloid* voice synthesis technology. On stage, these synthesized singer-characters were represented by large-scale computer-generated “talking heads” created by German video artist Tobias Gremmler, which were projected onto the back of the performance space. A number of non-singing characters also appeared in the opera, including members of the Taiwanese puppetry troupe *The Puppet & Its Double Theater*, and Japanese dancer-choreographer Takao Kawaguchi. The non-singing characters wore masks throughout, so that Ricci’s was the only visible human face in the entire production. It is precisely through the use of technology that the production team was creating a space of fantasy in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, establishing a situation in which the borders of cultures and the definition of opera as understood in the classical tradition are brought into question.

**Voice, Technology, and Decentered Subjectivity**

In an interview by local press, Steve Hui spoke of his vision for the opera and a creative space that exists beyond the boundaries of classical and non-classical, Western and non-Western:

> Opera as an art form is seductive, but I could never write a traditional opera, the kind of opera Mozart has composed. It is impossible for me and I am not
interested in it. The structure and format of traditional Western music is very rigid, and that’s where the fun is, since my work is about the exploration of the boundaries of Western music, and I think about the world that exists outside of these boundaries.\textsuperscript{122}

In the printed concert program to \textit{The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci}, Hui puts his intention to challenge the tradition and institution of Western opera in even more unambiguous terms,

\begin{quote}
\begin{quote}
Opera as a genre has a long history in the world of Western classical music […] [it] has been strictly defined by tradition as to what does and what does not constitute an opera. Electronic music, however, with its decades-long only history, is a relatively new form of expression made possible by science and technology. Its aesthetics, techniques and skills as well as parameters are still evolving. Interactive dialogues between electronic music and traditional opera offer ample room for dialectical exchanges, both as a challenge and reaction to established forms of musical expressions and as an inspiration for us to test the limits of crossing over and enriching two totally different disciplines.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

Many Chinese composers of the “New Wave” generation, who came to international prominence in the 1980s, had also spoken publicly of their vision of a music that transcends cultural boundaries, in which there is no East or West.\textsuperscript{124} Commentators of contemporary Chinese music have also advocated looking beyond the “East Meets West” binary in the reading of music by Chinese composers.\textsuperscript{125} While this point is well taken, and composers’ individual impulses must certainly be respected, what is sometimes unclear is how exactly does the music itself transcend culture when the composer employs musical elements with explicit cultural meanings (folk songs or elements of regionally Chinese opera, for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[122] Gary Chan, “\textit{The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci}: Interview with composer Steve Hui.” \textit{Milk Magazine}, October 21, 2010. [In Chinese]
\end{footnotes}
example) or musical genres with a perceived historical lineage (operatic and orchestral music of the classical concert hall tradition, for instance). Despite composers’ best intentions, musical elements and genres may still exert a persuasive cultural force that frames the responses of listeners. Here I refer to what Jeffrey Kallberg calls music genre’s “horizon of expectation.” 126 According to Kallberg, musical genre is not simply a category for classification. Genre is a communicative concept and “a social phenomenon shared by composers and listeners.” 127 This communicative concept actively frames responses to a piece of work, for it evokes a set of expectations and cultural meanings that are in turn based on some social, historical, and contextual constructs that is associated with the genre. When a composer chooses to evoke a particular genre, he or she is willingly entering into a “generic contract” 128 with the audience, under which the composer agrees to adhere to certain conventions, while the audience agrees to interpret the composition under certain specific conditions necessitated by the genre in question. 129 How do composers deal with the persuasive force of musical genre, or the cultural meaning of musical elements in the age of transnationalism?

Composers and commentators have advocated frameworks that emphasize transnational impulses: fusion, syncretism, and hybridity have been suggested at various times—and sometimes interchangeably—as ripostes to the essentialization of China. But could we also confront the many assumptions about the West with equal rigor? Where is a truly transnational music to be found? Debunking the “East Meets West” binary involves not only a destabilization of the essentialized concept of China, but also an equally rigorous interrogation of the essentialized concept of the West. How do we take seriously the question of “how these two large geo-cultural regions of the world end up coinciding?” 130

127 Ibid., 243.
128 Ibid.
It seems to me that whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged, at the center of many discussions regarding the nature of border crossing in music is the question of inclusion into and exclusion from musical traditions. To create and then label a musical production an “opera” is an invitation to be considered as belonging to and/or in tension with a specific history of music making. In the context of The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, what is the nature of opera's seductive aura that Hui spoke of in the interview quoted above? Given the subject matter and the libretto's strong focus on border crossing, Hui’s approach to the whole issue of culture is quite unusual. Instead of identifying with a specific cultural origin, he sidesteps the question by identifying with the “decade-long only history” of electronic music and technological advancement in the concert hall. “Digital opera” could then be seen as a strategy intended at destabilizing the definition of opera as taught in textbooks of Western music history, and as exemplified by the operatic canon\(^\text{131}\) that continues to circulate in the concert halls and opera houses. This also allows Hui’s music to maintain an abstracted distance from the common understanding of opera, and to approach the established musical form with an attitude of playfulness. As we shall see, this abstracted distance between the music and genre or style that the music is referencing is maintained by the act of identity masking in Hui’s score.

The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci depicts the life and works of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the Jesuit priest who went on a mission to China in the sixteenth century. It is scored for the Chinese mouth organ sheng, viola, piano, percussion and electronics. In the opera, Ricci recalls pivotal events in his life by journeying through an imaginary memory palace, in which people and events are represented by biblical images and Chinese ideograms. Ricci made every effort to blend into Chinese culture: he dressed in Chinese robes as a display of humility, observed Chinese social customs, and mastered the Chinese language in both its spoken

\(^{131}\) I am referring to the operatic warhorses that are most frequently performed by the major institutions of opera, ranging from works by Mozart, Verdi and Puccini, to Zemlinsky and Wagner. According to a statistical study of the operatic canon by Siobhan McAndrew for the UK Treasury, the United States currently has world leadership in the production of new opera. Despite the continuous creation of new works, the top 148 most frequently performed operas comprise 81.3% of all operatic productions around the world. See Siobhan McAndrew, “Opera composition and the operatic canon,” accessed April 14, 2012, http://www.fokus.or.at/fileadmin/fokus/user/downloads/acei_paper/McAndrew.pdf.
and written forms (Scene 3). In order to earn the trust of Wanli (1563–1620), the Emperor of China, Ricci taught his scientific expertise to the Chinese. While Wanli eventually did grant Ricci patronage in recognition of his scientific knowledge, Ricci was kept out of the Forbidden City’s innermost chambers, and he never met the Emperor in person (Scene 5). The rich European culture that Ricci represented might have gained currency among the Chinese, but the price of admission was the exclusion of his foreign body.

The opera’s narrative is structured around four Chinese ideograms and three biblical images (table 4.1). As explained above, Ricci’s voice, sung by Tian Hao Jiang, is the only human voice in the entire production and the other vocal parts are “sung” by Yamaha’s Vocaloid voice synthesis technology. The use of Vocaloid is central to the claim of the production being a “digital opera.” Vocaloid was jointly developed by Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona, Spain) and the Yamaha Corporation in 2005. To synthesize singing, the user enters the lyrics and the corresponding pitches into a piano-roll style editor that is typical of software music sequencers.

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Table 4.1. Structure in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci.

Score information is passed into a synthesis engine, which will then select the appropriate singer library for voice generation. The resulting sound is reminiscent of the human voice, and at times the realism is uncanny. The

synthesized voice certainly takes on an eerily cyborg quality, but in Hui’s “digital opera” its pure tone and lack of vibrato also provided an intriguing contrast to Tian Hao Jiang’s more typical operatic singing. The Vocaloid makes its first appearance in the opera in the first scene. Here, the synthesized voice of a character named “the mother” is doubled by the solo viola and answered by the sheng, against a drone-like ostinato provided by the piano (ex. 4.1).

**EXAMPLE 4.1. The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, Scene 1, mm. 30–34.**

The personal identity of the mother is uncertain at this point. The character could be at once referring to the Virgin Mary, Ricci’s mother, or simply a pacifying and nurturing spiritual presence. We are also unsure of her ethnic background. She is devoid of a body, and the computer-generated singing voice possesses a generic English accent. On stage she is represented by a large computer-generated talking head, which has facial features that could be Asian or Western. The use of the synthesized voice also renders the character somewhat sexually ambiguous. The Vocaloid software provides a number of parameters for vocal quality adjustment including “breathiness,” which controls the amount of artificial breathing heard in the voice, and timbral parameters such as “brightness” and “opening.” One of the more interesting parameters, however, is the “gender factor.” The higher the gender factor, the more masculine the synthesized voice would supposedly become. That said, it is sometimes unclear to
the ear at which point does the voice cross over from the female range into the male range, particularly at the extreme ends of the pitch spectrum. This configuration presents gender not as a binary, but as a continuum. As a character, the mother is deprived of personal characteristics and her identity is deliberately masked. The act of *masking* provides the basis of the re-imagination and reconfiguration of identity later in the scene. In the next section, the mother’s lullaby breaks into a primal, rhythmic and highly syncopated dance that is reminiscent of Stravinsky’s orchestral music (Scene 1, mm. 69–128). The synthesized voice soon enters again, this time to represent a fellow priest who brings the news of King Sebastian’s demise (ex. 4.2).

**EXAMPLE 4.2.** The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, Scene 1, mm. 129–131.

Ricci’s brief encounter with the virtual priest is soon answered by the voice of a slave from Africa. Synthesized in the male vocal range, the slave sings about his longing for Africa and his mother. The construction of the slave’s vocal line is the least “human-like” of all vocal timbres thus far, with leaps of up to a major seventh (Scene 1, m. 168) and a large range of three octaves and an augmented fourth. Here, the slave refers to his “teary mother in Mozambique” (Scene 1, m. 167), which further obscures and confuses the true identity of the mother who appeared earlier in the scene. Towards the end of the passage, the slave laments

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133 Sebastian was the king of Portugal and the Algarves from 1557 to 1578. He was killed in battle during a crusade to the Kingdom of Morocco in 1578.
that he will soon “die in peace [...] nameless, faceless, penniless” (ex. 4.3, Scene 1, mm. 168–174).

EXAMPLE 4.3. The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, Scene 1, mm. 167–174.

The slave's aria is swiftly interrupted by another episode of syncopated dance. This time the ensemble is heard in rhythmic unison, combining into clusters of tones that “mask” the timbre of the individual instruments (Scene 1, mm. 178–188). The next section features a carefully engineered transition from the sheng’s cluster chords (Scene 1, m. 188) to an improvisational sheng solo that repeatedly ascends to D5 (Scene 1, mm. 194–206), which acts as a bridge to the
electric organ’s drone on a low D3. The effect is one of a smooth timbral modulation, from the rich and complex overtones of mouth organ clusters to the purity of a single note on the organ. Ricci’s voice enters against this sustained drone with a prayer to Virgin Mary before the synthesized voice of the mother returns in the female vocal range (Scene 1, m. 225), joining Ricci in a duet—the first time that human and synthesized voice are heard together in the opera.

Throughout this scene, cultures and identities are presented on a network of overlapping continuums: the movement of the synthesized voice from the feminine to the masculine vocal range; the modulation of the Chinese mouth organ into the electric organ; the human voice set in tension with the synthesized voice. Musical elements move back and forth on these continuums with a high level of mobility. Sounds and musical gestures are continuously reconfigured, and the movement between one “node of identity” to another is seamless. This mobility is activated, to a large extent, by the process of identity masking in Hui’s score. The ambiguity of the synthesized voice and of the race-less, genderless computer-generated talking heads turns the operatic stage into a space of fantasy, where groups of very unequal power relationship and background may coincide. The perceived origins of these groups are individually acknowledged, each is given a musical-theatrical nod as it were: Africa, Europe, China; male, female; humans, puppets, cyborgs; classical opera and electronic music. Each of these “nodes of identity” is deliberately and consciously masked, obscured, and downplayed. This act of identity masking is achieved through technological means. To gain further understanding of these gestures, I refer to Allucquére Rosanne Stone’s The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age in which she discusses the new forms of identity that emerge from complex human-machine interactions. Cyberspaces, according to Stone, can be thought of as social spaces inhabited by “refigured humans.”

134 Allucquére Rosanne Stone, The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

135 Ibid., 34.
traditional attempts at categorization and identification. Specifically, identities that emerge from these interactions are decentered and pluralistic:

The identities that emerge from these interactions—fragmented, complex, diffracted through the lenses of technology, culture, and new technocultural formations—seem to me to be, for better or worse, more visible as the critters we ourselves are in the process of becoming, here at the close of the mechanical age.  

While face-to-face meetings (in which the body is in plain sight) and telephone conversations involuntarily reveal aspects of identities such as gender, age, and ethnicity, virtual identities allow for simultaneous presences in multiple contexts. The reproduction of the self in the techno-social space is devoid of a body, and affords the new possibility of continuous reinvention. The reconfigured body maintains an abstracted distance from the physical body. Subjectivity is decentered, and fluidity is foregrounded. The Vocaloid-synthesized voices and the computer-generated talking heads in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci also afford this possibility of identity reinvention and re-imagination. Here, identity markers are acknowledged only as nodes of contradictions, and authenticity is no longer held to the highest esteem. To again quote Allucquère Rosanne Stone:

Complex virtual identities are real and productive interventions into our cultural belief that the unmarked social unit, besides being white and male, is a single self in a single body.

In this sense, the metaphysical and musical “losing” of faces and voices in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci are necessary steps in redefining the operatic stage as a space where fantasies in ethnicity, gender, centrality, and marginality are played out. In this space of sanctioned fantasy, unequal powers collide on

\[136\] Ibid., 36.
\[137\] Stone is referring to the generic body in cyberspace, which is often assumed to be white and male, possessing a singular biological body. In my opinion, Stone’s story of multiple virtual selves may also help to undermine “the story of the straight, white, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual man of property as the ethnical universal.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a word: Interview with Ellen Rooney,” Differences 1 (1989): 124 – 156.
\[138\] Stone, The war of desire, 75.
equal footings. Virtual characters embody multiple personalities, to challenge the
notion that there is an unproblematic and singular “I” within each of us.

The lone human voice of Ricci’s explicitly sympathizes with this notion of
identity re-imagination in the third scene. In one of the most lyrical passages in
the opera, Ricci sings a duet with a synthesized voice that represents a woman of
the Hui\textsuperscript{139} ethnic minority in China. Ricci introduced her as “a Christian, a Jew
and a Muslim […] all in one” (Scene 3, mm. 29–35). Historically, the people of
the Han majority in China made little distinction between foreigners of different
geo-political origins. The synthesized voice addresses Ricci also as a “fellow
foreigner” (Scene 3, mm. 59–60) against a background of constantly sliding tones
of the viola and a tonally ambiguous ostinato in the piano (ex. 4.4).

\textbf{EXAMPLE 4.4.} \textit{The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci}, Scene 3, mm. 54–62.

\begin{figure}
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\textsuperscript{139} In the opera the Hui woman was called a “Huihui.” The term was originally used only to label
Muslims residing in China, but later the Chinese labeled all foreigners of all religions “Huihui,”
regardless of their ethnic origins and religious beliefs. See Donald Leslie, \textit{Islam in traditional China:
A short history to 1800} (Canberra: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986).
While the synthesized voice is often rendered to perform humanly impossible leaps or angular vocal lines elsewhere in the opera, the passages that are sung by the virtual Hui woman and the mother from the first scene represent some of the most lyrical and melodic writings in the entire production, featuring a smooth contour with stepwise motions and small leaps. The scoring is sparse, and the sound world is bright and consonant, with perfect fourths and octaves in the accompaniment.

The Sinister Resonance of Culture

The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci is the product of a predominantly Hong Kong-based creative team. It was commissioned by a publicly funded festival of art in Hong Kong. In the program notes, Diana Liao, the librettist, spoke of her vision for a Hong Kong production that is “proud and honored to have its world premiere in Hong Kong, […] able and willing to compete on the world stage.”140 In our reading of The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, it is also important to address the contexts out of which the production arose.

Hong Kong, a former British colony and now special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China, is an open and international city. The inhabitants of Hong Kong have for decades consumed a vast amount of imported culture. Some of its oldest institutions of Western classical music date back to the nineteenth century.141 Despite its historical reliance on imported culture, the city manages to yield an impressive repertoire of unique cultural artifacts through the process of systematic hybridization and strategic reconfiguration. According to cultural critic and writer Chan Koon Chung, at the core of Hong Kong’s creative impulses is the desire to replace foreign imports with localized hybrids.142 Historically, this desire to replace foreign imports was in many instances motivated by the need to provide access to acts of cultural consumption and

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141 The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HKPO), one of the oldest institutions of classical music in Hong Kong, was first established in 1895 as an amateur orchestra.
142 Chan Koon Chung, Xia Yige Shinian (the Next Ten Years) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2007). [In Chinese]
production for local people. The tea food hall (Cha Chaan Teng) style of “Western” cuisine is one such example. Tea food hall serves a “Western food” inspired menu. In its heydays in the 1950s, tea food hall provided affordable alternatives to the novel “Western” style cuisine served in up-market establishments, which were patronized mostly by foreigners and explicitly excluded the locals. To this end, local chefs re-interpret—and “mis-interpret”—imported food culture. The tea food hall experience is activated and mediated by the seductive aura of “Western” cuisine executed according to regional habits of cooking. Tea food hall may be conceived of as a cross-cultural contact zone and a designated space of fantasy, where essentialization of the West serves a pragmatic purpose. We could similarly see composition as a designated space of fantasy, and the act of composing as a free cross-cultural play. In The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci border crossing is specifically activated by the use of technology. It is also further enabled by the seductive aura of the operatic tradition, which is to say, the privileged position that opera occupies in Western music tradition.

When a Hong Kong-born composer is commissioned to write an opera, is she or he automatically granted access to this very specific mode of cultural production? And if so, what is the price of admission? These are perhaps important questions, but they are also misleading as they draw attention away from movements, currents, and fluidity in actual compositional practice. Seeing composition as a free cross-cultural play has the distinct advantage of sidestepping these questions altogether, without ignoring the pressure that cultures and histories exert on composers. In such acts of free play, cultural gestures are detached from the origin to which they refer and become acts of reconfiguration and misconfiguration. This is in line with what Harold Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence calls “creative misreading”—the way by which a poet clears imaginative space for oneself through deliberately and creatively misreading a precursor.


Theorist Ien Ang described such an instance of cultural free play. In 2001, the Art Gallery of New South Wales mounted a large-scale exhibition of Buddhist art. The presenter vacated a spacious “Wisdom Room” in the middle of the exhibition space where Buddhist communities from various backgrounds were invited to put their living culture on display for one week at a time. Participating groups included Taiwanese monks, Tibetan Gyuto monks, and the Vietnamese Buddhist community. According to Ang, the Wisdom Room turned into a “cross-cultural contact zone” where encounters between groups with unequal power took place, “groups who normally exist out of sight from the dominant culture gained visibility—if only temporarily—in a very privileged site of that dominant culture itself.”

Within such a cross-cultural contact zone, essentialization of culture serves a pragmatic purpose—to enable participation and to allow marginalized groups to temporarily reclaim cultural spaces. Simultaneously, a composer’s precursors might be Western, Chinese, the institutions of classical music, popular or electronic music. When these precursors are summoned as musical gestures, these gestures are likened to acknowledgements or “musical nods.” The composer reconfigures culturally referential musical materials to evoke a horizon of expectation, while at the same time maintaining an abstracted distance from the source itself. These “musical nods” may depart significantly from the source that is being referred to. Departure and reconfiguration are creative gestures, which serve to maintain a buffer between acts of appropriation and their precursors.

There are many such moments of “musical nods” in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci. The opera begins with a prologue performed on the toy piano. The prologue is written in a carefully constructed two-part harmony, and accompanied on stage by the movements of three puppeteers (ex. 4.5). The puppeteers represent a trio of children, to whom Ricci would introduce the art of memorization. Hui’s contrapuntal writing points to the music of the baroque period (possibly alluding to the style Ricci, who introduced the clavichord to China, grew up with), but

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146 Ibid.
when combined with the timbre of a solo toy piano and an unusual phrase structure (5+6, 4+3), the resulting sound is stylistically intentionally vague.

**EXAMPLE 4.5.** *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, prologue, mm. 1–18.

**EXAMPLE 4.6.** *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, scene 4, mm. 19–24.
Another moment of musical tribute happens in the fourth scene, in a passage labeled “baroque.” The passage begins with the Chinese mouth organ outlining the theme of a quasi-fugue (Scene 4, mm. 1–6). Soon the mouth organ is joined by the viola (Scene 4, m. 6) and later by the keyboard-player performing on a synthesized harpsichord (Scene 4, m. 20, ex. 4.6). This unconventional baroque trio continues for another 80 measures.

In the second scene Ricci recounts his missionary expedition to India. Here Hui refers to the sound of Indian music with a strange trio of taped drone, bongos, and sliding viola solo (ex. 4.7).

**EXAMPLE 4.7. The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, Scene 2, mm. 18–27.**

Towards the end of Scene 6 Ricci encounters a beggar, who is performed by a masked dancer. Although the composer labeled the passage “kunqu,” he used only minimal musical means to invoke the impression of regional Chinese opera, while the dancer attempts to vocalize in a style that is vaguely reminiscent of *kunqu* singing (ex. 4.8).
It is of course entirely uncertain which India, which baroque, what kind of kunqu singing, and which period of Western classical opera is being referred to in Hui’s score, but to ask such questions is to miss the point. It is not the precursor or the origin of culture itself that is being called upon in these musical gestures. What is invoked is the haunting of a culture, an aura, a sinister resonance. In this
sense, misreading and essentialization are both sanctioned and necessary as they allow the music to maintain a certain abstracted distance from the perceived source of culture. This abstracted distance resonates with the technologically mediated multiple selves of the virtual characters in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, and the possibility of identity reinvention that this fluidity affords. There is no unproblematic and singular “I,” only multiple avatars. While maintaining this distance, Hui is able to re-interpret and “mis-interpret” cultural artifacts within a very privileged site of cultural production that is known as the opera. To label *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* a “digital opera” is therefore to acknowledge an art form and its contradicting set of histories, conventions and assumptions, to give opera a “nod.” It is also to give oneself permission to misread, mis-interpret and re-interpret, and by doing so, reclaim opera as ones own. Through the act of creative misreading, marginality and centrality may be re-imagined, albeit temporarily.

**At the Boundaries of Transnationalism**

As conceptual fashions come and go, various frameworks have been suggested by both commentators and composers of contemporary Chinese music in place of the “East Meets West” model, sometimes as a way to highlight the individual faces and voices of composers. While the progressive potential and theoretical necessity of these frameworks are acknowledged, an overwhelmingly positive celebration of transnational impulses also runs the risk of ignoring the rich contradictions that fuel the act of border crossing, which are nonetheless evident in the “grounded practices of everyday life.”

In the words of Arif Dirlik:

Transnationalism […] shares with globalization a propensity to an exaggerated emphasis on flows, border crossing and cultural hybridizations against […] the proliferation and reification of boundaries, and the persistent attachment to real or imagined cultural identities. The oversight raises questions about the ideological biases built into the concept, as with globalization, which has ignored

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147 Dirlik, “Transnationalism in theory and practice.”
the marginalization of populations as they were left out in its processes. The consequences are problematic intellectually and politically.\textsuperscript{148}

Border crossings are about movements and mobility of the individual, but they are also about the extremities that activate these processes in the first place. We must respect and acknowledge a composer’s agency and debunk any framework that attempts to lump individuals into one-size-fits-all identity markers, but we must also interrogate, with equal theoretical rigor, the political implication of Chinese composers’ engagement with the Western music tradition. Music that transcends culture need not become an empty and hegemonic concept, or a convenient sleigh of hand for an unchallenged assumption about the tradition of Western classical music. Analysts should be mindful not to perpetrate the presupposition that Western music is the “musical universal.”

In a discussion about Hong Kong rap music, cultural theorists Chan Kwok-bun and Chan Nin commented on the danger of accepting transnationalism and hybridity as new forms of unchallenged solidarity, for it masks hidden power structures and renders the cultural products of ethnic artists culturally indistinct and critically uninteresting. It is sometimes fruitful for theorists and artists to italicize the distinction between East and West in acts of creativity. That said, if we then view these creative acts only through ready-made artistic formulae that are assumed to be culturally neutral, the resulting discussion may warrant little critical interest.\textsuperscript{149} While transnationalism, hybridity, agency and individualism are all very useful and progressive frameworks, it is my opinion that they do not fully explain the forces that continue to fuel the creation of contemporary Chinese compositions in our age of globalization. They also do not help to explain “the persistent attachment to real or imagined cultural identities”\textsuperscript{150} that seem to be evident in works by artists of Chinese backgrounds. This is particularly so if one took into account the lived interiority of race and ethnicity, the “grounded practices of everyday live” as it were, which arose out of local and specific contexts. By way of conclusion, let me quote extensively a

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Dirlik, “Transnationalism in theory and practice.”
remark by Allen Chun in his controversial essay “Fuck Chineseness: On the ambiguities of ethnicity as culture as identity.”

What appears at the global level to be a contest of identities inevitably becomes transformed at the local level into a contest of meaning that pits the desirability of one set of values over another […] more important than the notion of multiple identities, which represents a loose code word for counterhegemonic discourse of various sorts, in my opinion, is the need to articulate the various contexts (of speech or practice) wherein facets of identity (such as ethnicity) are deemed to be relevant. That is to say, what kinds of contexts demand that one speaks from a position of identity, and what contexts do not?\textsuperscript{151}

Chun’s insights from nearly a decade ago still ring true in the new millennium. Today, Chinese composers are certainly more than just Chinese, “Eastern,” or Oriental. Ethnic artists are undeniably respected agents with individual artistic impulses. But now that these points are self-evident, where do we go from here? Chinese composers might have found their voices, but are they speaking in their own transnational language? If not, then what are the operational logics of Chineseness, under the new circumstances brought about by globalization? To take seriously the question of how two large geo-cultural regions of the world end up coinciding\textsuperscript{152} is to reconsider Chun’s question on the politics of identification with renewed critical rigor. I hope that my analysis of *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* has shown that at the boundaries of transnationalism, it might be possible to derive explanations for acts of identification that will open new doors for critical inquiry.

Perhaps the loss of face and voice is not such a negative event after all—it signifies the beginning of a strategic resistance, an unwillingness to be integrated, “tolerated,” or domesticated. At the limits of transnationalism, it affords new and exciting opportunities for centrality and marginality to be reconfigured within the dominant culture itself, and offers new tools for commentators and composers alike to account for the peculiar contradictions of our times.

\textsuperscript{151} Chun, “Fuck Chineseness,” 134.
\textsuperscript{152} Lau, “Context, agency and Chineseness,” 586.