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"Music and Interculturality"

Antenor Ferreira Corrêa and Maria Westvall (Guest editors)

## Drumming Through *Princess of China*: Intercultural Encounters in a Hollywood Music Video

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### Abstract

The powerful performance rhetoric of North American *taiko* drumming tells a story of Japanese American and Asian American survival, defiance, and joy, but I ask whether the politicized Asian American body created by *taiko* can be reconciled with the performance venues actually available to its musicians. I explore how several members of the Los Angeles-based *taiko* group to which I belonged performed in *Princess of China* (2012), a music video by Chris Martin from Coldplay featuring Rihanna. This video is an unapologetic orientalist mash-up, drawing freely from Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Indian elements. Its loose narrative is based on two Chinese martial arts films, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers*, with the insertion of a White/Anglo hero and a dark heroine, Rihanna as a Chinese princess. I ask how and why my teacher and fellow performers would choose to perform in it as *ninja*-like *taiko* players. I offer two *taiko* performers' thoughts on the shoot and the struggle for self-representation in a popular music environment with little or no cultural accountability. I conclude by reflecting on how there are no pure spaces for Asian American or Japanese American self-determination.

**Keywords:** Intercultural music, orientalism, music video, Asian America, *taiko*, ethnography

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### *Drumming Through Princess of China*: encuentros interculturales en un video musical de Hollywood

#### Resumen

La poderosa retórica de la ejecución del *taiko* de América del Norte relata una historia de supervivencia, resistencia y alegría japonesa y asiática-americana. Me pregunto si el politizado



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cuerpo asiático-americano creado por el *taiko*, puede ser reconciliado con los lugares de la *performance* que están disponibles para sus músicos. Exploro cómo varios miembros de un grupo de *taiko* de Los Ángeles, al cual yo pertenezco, ejecutan *Princess of China* (2012), un video musical de Chris Martin, integrante de Coldplay, que incluye a Rihanna. El video es una mezcla orientalista de estilos que no tiene reparos y que libremente toma prestados elementos chinos, japoneses, tailandeses e hindúes. Su vaga narrativa está basada en dos films chinos de arte marcial, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* y *House of Flying Daggers*, con la inserción de un héroe anglo-blanco y una heroína negra, Rihanna como princesa china. Me pregunto cómo y por qué mi maestro y mis compañeros de ejecución decidieron presentarse como músicos de *taiko ninjas*. Presento la opinión de dos ejecutantes de *taiko* sobre la filmación y la lucha por la auto-representación en un medio de la música popular que tiene poca o ninguna responsabilidad cultural. Concluyo reflexionando sobre la falta de espacios puros para la auto-representación de los asiáticos y japoneses-americanos.

**Palabras clave:** música intercultural, orientalismo, video musical, América asiática, *taiko*, etnografía

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## Drumming Through *Princess of China*: Encontros Interculturais em um Vídeo Musical de Hollywood

### Resumo

A poderosa retórica de performance dos tambores *taiko* da america do norte, conta uma história de sobrevivência, desafio e alegria dos asiáticos e nipo-americanos. Entretanto, indago se o corpo politizado asiático-americano criado pelo *taiko* pode ser reconciliado com os locais de espetáculos atualmente disponíveis para seus músicos. Eu exploro como vários membros do grupo de *taiko* sediado em Los Angeles, ao qual pertencia, se apresentaram em *Princess of China* (2012), um videoclipe de Chris Martin, do Coldplay, com a participação de Rihanna. Este vídeo é uma miscelânea orientalista sem remorso, que se baseia livremente em elementos chineses, japoneses, tailandeses e indianos. Sua narrativa frouxa é baseada em dois filmes chineses de artes marciais, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* e *House of Flying Daggers*, com a inserção de um herói branco/anglo e uma heroína morena, Rihanna, como uma princesa chinesa. Eu pergunto como e por que meu professor e colegas intérpretes escolheram se apresentar como músicos de *taiko ninjas*. Eu ofereço dois pensamentos de performers de *taiko* sobre a filmagem e a luta pela auto-representação em um ambiente musical popular com pouca ou nenhuma responsabilidade cultural. Concluo refletindo sobre a falta de espaços puros para a autonomia de Asiáticos e Japoneses da América do Norte.

**Palavras-chave:** música intercultural, orientalismo, vídeo musical, Asiático-americano, *taiko*, etnografía

Fecha de recepción / Data de recepção / Received: septiembre 2018

Fecha de aceptación / Data de aceitação / Acceptance date: diciembre 2018

Fecha de publicación / Data de publicação / Release date: febrero 2019



## Citational Asia

I offer a close ethnographic reading of the making of a music video to consider how and why musicians are thinking subjects even when working in tight intercultural corners<sup>1</sup>.

This essay is a spin-off from my long-term research on *taiko*, which is a post-WW2 form of Japanese drumming that has morphed into a First World phenomenon while maintaining deep roots in Asian American communities<sup>2</sup>. *Taiko* is a contemporary form of ensemble drumming that is built on the bones of Japanese festival drumming. This “new tradition” is called *kumi-daiko*, “group *taiko*”, because *taiko* ensembles usually feature numerous drums of at least three different sizes often played in a fast, loud, virtuosic, athletic style that is quite unlike the dignified, minimalist solo drumming that continues to accompany Shinto and Buddhist ritual. In some ways *taiko* is very old but in most of the ways that matter, it is a transnational, globalized, dynamic tradition that changes by the day. In Japan, it is part of nationalist folklore movements. In North America and Latin America, it is a means through which communities of Japanese descent explore heritage and assert new diasporic sensibilities. More broadly, *taiko* has attracted intercultural interest but is strongly and self-consciously Asian American... for now, those I suspect that moment is passing even as I write. It exemplifies the performative: it is a loud, physical platform for the emergence of newly racialized and gendered identities in an environment of post-1960s US and Canadian multicultural politics. The powerful performance rhetoric of North American *taiko* tells a story of Japanese American and Asian American survival, defiance, and joy but I also ask whether the emphatically politicized Asian American body created by *taiko* can be reconciled with the venues actually available to us.

In this essay, I explore transpacific culture flows that have created new intercultural forms entirely reliant on the late capitalist movement of culture. Rather than treat mediated artifacts as simple evidence of globalized intertextual play, I suggest that slap-dash late capitalist appropriations of Asian cultural materials are orientalist business as usual but also create spaces based on a post-racial and post-national logic. As Edward Said famously argued, the Orient is a western construct, and orientalism is a social, political, aesthetic, and discursive doctrine whose shape shifts over time. He wrote, “The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representation framed by a while set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire” (Said 1978: 202-3).

This special issue of the journal asks how interculturalism impacts cultural identity. I offer two views and two methodologies for exploring that question: I do a close reading of a music video and I interviewed two of the musicians hired to perform in it. I put my reading of the intertextual, mediated artifact up against the musicians’ efforts to make their own peace with its outrageous inaccuracies and blatant exoticism. Put together, I argue that the labor of these two

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the “tight spaces” so beautifully theorized by Danielle Goldman (via Stuart Hall) as sites of both constraint and agency (Goldman 2010).

<sup>2</sup> My forthcoming monograph offers a sustained look at *taiko* as a now-global form of intercultural music (Wong 2019).

musicians and the critical tools on which they relied to explain their work in the music video offers a useful view of a troubled interculturalism. This intercultural encounter is built on the foundation of an orientalist pastiche that is as much about aesthetic economies of availability as it is the work of critically aware musicians. I offer no celebratory emergent new space but rather the dark side of cultural contact, in which cultural artifacts quickly become commodified stereotypes and culture bearers know that their heritage work is illegible.

In this article, I consider how several members of the Los Angeles-based *taiko* group to which I belonged performed in *Princess of China* (2012), a music video by Chris Martin from Coldplay featuring Rihanna. This article is thus a deep and specific case study of the perils of orientalism as one kind of interculturalism. At another level, I offer a methodological reflection. How best can we see, hear, and understand cultural encounter and representation? How can ethnography and close reading converge, and what, then, should we do with the inevitable contradictions that emerge from that methodological combination?

In California, *taiko* is framed by the tensions between corporate multiculturalism under late capitalism, the dynamism of living in a state that is constantly reinvigorated by immigration, and the commanding gaze of the entertainment industry. *Taiko* in Southern California moves restlessly between these powerful poles. None of our work is done in a protected sphere of cultural authenticity and purity. Southern California is profoundly shaped and driven by the entertainment industry and by neoliberal multiculturalism (now in its late capitalist form, inextricably embedded in other modes of cultural production). The entertainment industry shapes the social geography and the imagination of the Southern California region, from the desert playground of Palm Springs, to the production studios in Burbank, to the young immigrant men selling Homes of the Stars maps to tourists on Sunset Drive. Higher education in the region has seductive programs meant to channel filmmakers and technicians into the industry. The arts and entertainment section of *The Los Angeles Times* reads like an industry rag. In Southern California, Hollywood is on our minds whether we know it or not, and Hollywood beckons to *taiko* players in strange, wonderful, and fraught ways.

I begin with genealogy and prehistory: two video clips. The first is a mini-documentary about the making of Coldplay's *Princess of China* music video<sup>3</sup>. We see the video being shot, with lots of blue screen scenes, and many shots of performers being made up and costumed. Mostly the camera follows its two stars, Chris Martin and Rihanna. After all, the point is to whet our voyeuristic appetite about their stardom, not to disrupt it. Throughout we see the shoot but don't hear it—the song is the soundtrack, and at times we see the two stars singing along with it. We get glimpses of the *taiko* players in between many shots of the two stars getting strapped into their harnesses for wire work and moving into position for a shot. They're in a huddle, preparing their part by playing air *taiko* with their drumsticks (*bachi*). Another glimpse: they're waiting by their *odaiko* as Rihanna sweeps by, and the expressions on their faces, seen only if you hit pause

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<sup>3</sup> *Princess of China: Behind the Scenes*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfJH9XT3BeY>. Published online on May 14, 2012 [accessed: August 18, 2018]. This 6:39 video was evidently made by DJ Ill Will, one of the forces behind HotNewHipHop.com and a well-known mixtape artist and promoter. I refer here to a 3:03 version of the same video, posted to Coldplay's YouTube site [accessed: August 18, 2014].

on the streaming video, is priceless –they’re excited to get a glimpse of her. Japanese American *taiko* teacher Rev. Tom Kurai and Japanese *taiko* virtuoso Hiro Hayashida stare at her, and *taiko* player John Kanai –one of Rev. Tom’s adult students –who is standing at his *odaiko*, looks over his shoulder at her with boyish eagerness. In another scene, we see the costumers preparing the *taiko* players: there is a nice close-up of a costumer tying a thin black *hachimaki* across *taiko* player Shih-wei Willie Wu’s forehead and carefully fluffing his hair around it. Only at one point is the flow of affable professionalism disrupted, when Rihanna is interviewed. She’s in hip street clothes: a black tank top, black ski cap, huge black sunglasses, a fringe of blonde hair framing her face, big gold hoop earrings, and perfectly made up lips. The song stops. She says:

We’re doing Princess of China. This is a video with Coldplay. [jump cut] The final concept now is, like, a movie trailer to an old kung fu film. [jump cut] How awesome is that, right? [jump cut] I get to play a bad samurai bitch. [jump cut] I get to play a cute little geisha bitch. [jump cut] POC –Princess of China!

[Jump cut] to two related scenes from the film *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). Mei (Zhang Ziyi) is a blind dancer at court and a covert guerrilla freedom fighter. She sings the Beauty Song for Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro), a drunken police captain, accompanied by eight women playing *pipa*, one playing *erhu*, and another a rattle made of small bells. Mei dances as she sings, the elongated blue sleeves of her dress a beautiful extension of her movements. Later in the film, this dance is restaged as “the echo game”: Mei is placed in the center of a circle of about thirty tall standing drums. Her delicate frame is emphasized by her long white dress and over-tunic. Now her long sleeves are pink, and each is stunningly long –at least fifteen or twenty feet in length. She readies herself by standing in the center of the drum circle and (startlingly) raises one foot high above her head and straightens her leg, a spectacular ballet move, so she is balanced on one foot, waiting, head cocked, listening, her unseeing eyes wide open yet focused. Liu (Andy Lau), another police captain, picks up a dried bean from a waiting platter and disdainfully flicks it across the circle so it bounces off a drum head. She pirouettes and tosses out one sleeve so it unfurls and strikes exactly the same drumhead. Fifteen male drummers instantly play a riff and then freeze when she goes back into her waiting pose. The court ladies watching from a balcony above laugh with admiration. Liu picks up another dried bean and this time flicks it so it strikes one drum head and then ricochets across the circle to another. Mei instantly follows it, right sleeve then left –*fup, fup*– then twirls and her sleeves outline a huge pink circle around her. She waits, and now he tosses a bean so it strikes four drumheads before falling to the floor; she flawlessly follows and then leaps into the air, pure confidence and grace. The watching courtiers burst into applause; Liu drops his mask of arrogance and laughs, nodding; he can’t help but be impressed by her. Then of course he raises the bowl of beans and flings them all at the drums: a shower of beans –at least a hundred of them– strike the drums like a rain shower, defying the laws of gravity and striking many drumheads before pattering to the floor. The male drummers now begin to play furiously, and we see that two are on large standing drums, three are striking large overturned bowls in tureens of water, and the rest are playing hand drums –it’s a rush of *dokodokodokodoko* with some punctuating *DONs* on the standing drums. Mei

springs into gorgeous, furious movement. Actually, it's a series of separate shots and lots of editing plus constant slow motion, speeding up, slow motion, etc., but she leaps, twists, does splits, *grand jeté*, and more. Her sleeves swirl, smack the drumheads, and twist away. It's dazzling, virtuosic, and breathtaking. Eventually one of her sleeves uncoils and like a prehensile tail, wraps around the handle of a sword sitting on the table in front of Liu, pulls it out of its sheath, and once, twice, three times swings around in the air (in slow motion, of course, so we can fully take in the gorgeous choreography), only missing his neck because he ducks. He flings a celadon saucer at her like a Frisbee. She may be blind but she pulls the sword to her and *SMACK!* strikes the saucer in mid-air so it shatters all over the floor.

Now, that's a good drum scene.

*Princess of China* takes that scene and runs with it. But where do all these ideas come from—the costumes, the choreography, the musical instruments, and the melodies? Why does a music video by Coldplay and Rihanna pay homage to Chinese martial arts films, and why were Los Angeles-based *taiko* players featured in it?

This music video is a composite of every orientalist visual trope imaginable, drawing freely from Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Indian elements. Its loose narrative is based on two Chinese martial arts films, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers*, with the insertion of a White/Anglo hero and a dusky heroine—Rihanna as a Chinese princess who evokes the long 19<sup>th</sup>-c. operatic tradition of “ethnic” heroines who die at the end of the story and a succession of heroines played by Zhang Ziyi. It's an unapologetic orientalist mash-up. I ask how and why my teacher and fellow performers would choose to perform in it as ninja-like *taiko* players. *Taiko*'s imagery intersects with neo-orientalist, J-cool tropes, and it is thus never a dependable source of empowerment. I offer two *taiko* performers' thoughts on why self-representation is difficult to pull off but by no means impossible. I end by reflecting on how there are no pure spaces for Asian American or Japanese American self-determination.

### Homage, intertexts, and references

The composer for *House of Flying Daggers* was former new wave rock musician Shigeru Umebayashi (b. 1951): his film scores are well known, including several of Wong Kar-wai's films. He is part of the intra-Asian art house film scene. Ethnomusicologist Robert Garfias described the Beauty Dance scene as “Fake Tang music. No bowed instruments then. [...] Fake dance, based on paintings on the Dun Huang Caves<sup>4</sup>. It would be great if they could reconstruct Ming music, let alone Tang”<sup>5</sup>. The score for *House of Flying Daggers* is thus part of a well-established film tradition of (sometimes outrageous) historical inaccuracy and anachronism; Mei's *extension en l'air* and the big modulation in the middle of the Beauty Song hint that the

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<sup>4</sup> The Dunhuang Caves in northwestern Kansu Province, China, lay at the crossroads of two branches of the Silk Route. Hundreds of caves containing Buddhist frescoes from the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c. AD feature 240 dance and music grottoes with thousands of depictions of music and dance. These are now important iconographic sources of information for performance traditions during those centuries. “Dunhuang classical dance” is sometimes performed as a historical reconstruction, based on the poses and costumes seen in the frescoes. Robert Garfias suggests that the two dances in *House of Flying Daggers* are related to such efforts.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, Facebook, August 19, 2014.

scene was/n't supposed to sound or look like whatever Tang Dynasty music and dance might have been<sup>6</sup>. The score for *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* was famously composed by Tan Dun and originally performed by the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, the Shanghai National Orchestra, the Shanghai Percussion Ensemble, and featured many solo cello passages played by Yo-Yo Ma. The score wasn't meant to sound anything like the historical time period of the narrative (1779, during the Qing Dynasty) any more than the scores to the films *Elizabeth*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *The Patriot*, or *Rob Roy* are historically accurate. Nonetheless, certain ideas about Asian music, dance, dress, and more are so continuously recirculated that they have complex overlapping phantasmatic lives in different places and in different hands, making accountability impossible to assign or expect. Reorientations, simulacra, and permanent inauthenticity are all we know.

### Everyday dangers: Orientalism as extreme culture

Orientalism and exoticism are inextricably part of *taiko* despite practitioners' efforts to explore cultural heritage and to clear a space for cultural self-determination. What is the zone of ideological contact between the lived experience of *taiko* and representational play? What is it like to participate in politically appalling musical practices? What effects does this have on our subjectivity, on our understanding of *taiko* as a tradition, and on the very terms for our pleasure in it? The ethnography of the repugnant and the ghastly has a considered place in our critical practice, of course. Studying the grotesque has an established history in literary studies<sup>7</sup>. Addressing extreme culture reveals its intimate relationships to quotidian experience, which is imagined as not extreme –indeed, as bland, banal, and inoffensive<sup>8</sup>.

Addressing these matters draws me away from the real work at hand; giving too much voice to living colonial histories is risky. But serious anticolonial work isn't separate or distant from exoticist, imperialist, racist, and appropriative narratives: the dialogical potency of imperialism ensures that the response is always tied to the condition. I must do more than simply show how and why a piece of music is orientalist<sup>9</sup>. Simply identifying the imperial gesture

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to Robert Garfias, Shih-wei Willie Wu, and Jonathan Stock for helping me think through the historical inaccuracies in these scenes.

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin's formulation of the grotesque and the carnivalesque is well established in literary studies and performance studies (Bakhtin 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Tomie Hahn has addressed the extreme through her work on monster trucks. She writes that the ethnographic method routinely excises the extreme from our work and our sensibilities despite its centrality in our experiences and motivations: "Researchers in academic settings are often cautioned not to "go native" and to keep extreme, extra-ordinary "illusions" out of their work because such encounters occur beyond the realm of statistical analysis. "Scientific method" is classically based upon what is directly observable, quantifiable, and repeatable. As a result, extreme data is aberrant and deviates from the mappable norm. Extraordinary experiences, as statistics, stand only as unique entities; they are not repeatable or quantifiable. While extreme experiences might be the most meaningful personal encounters for the researcher, they are statistically insignificant. Herein lies a paradox: encountering the extreme, the extraordinary, or even the spiritually moving can be a danger zone for the researcher, yet finding such experiences can be the very passion that pulls one to the field" (Hahn 2006: 89).

<sup>9</sup> As musicologist Matthew Head points out, musicology was transformed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Susan McClary's, Ralph Locke's, and Carl Dahlhaus' work on orientalism (Head 2003: 211). Positioning imperialism and orientalism as culturally and ideologically foundational to western art music, they and other scholars offered new hearings of repertoire, from the canon to works regarded merely as quaint curiosities, but Head



makes it seem as if troubling ideologies are extractable; worse, it creates the illusion that they have been disabled. The reality of transnational capital in a neoliberal Pacific Rim necessitates attention to how and why Asians consume and transform the signs of orientalism, whether through parody, agitprop, or auto-exoticization. Asian-themed popular culture (whether in Asia or the US) often offers textbook examples of orientalist nonsense.

Three decades have passed since music scholars' earliest use of postcolonial theory, and even more years since the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Many music scholars now deploy postcolonial theoretical strategies, and music journals are full of articles that painstakingly chart the movements of musical materials along orientalist byways. Most are marked by careful staff notation "showing" how musical materials from elsewhere are picked up and incorporated by composers; the effort to follow the musical *topos* on its journey is often an end in itself<sup>10</sup>.

The second generation of post-Said scholars generally assumes the importance of intersectional analysis and has upped the ante (and the critical challenge) by routinely addressing the interconstitutive nature of the multiple systems of difference always at work. Christopher Connery argues that Pacific Rim Discourse is distinctively different from earlier forms of orientalism because it is "a non-othering discourse" dedicated to rendering centers of power invisible. In shifting the discourse from nation-states to an ocean space, "the Pacific would be at its essence a noncolonial space where a pure capital would be free to operate" (Connery 1994: 32-40). Postcolonial theory has stretched and deepened accordingly. Scholars in Asian American Studies necessarily address orientalism (it comes with the territory) and often deploy postcolonial theory in fresh ways informed by Ethnic Studies and American Studies. Importantly, Asian American Studies explodes the self/other binary of orientalism in American contexts. Sheng-mei Ma's powerful work, for example, addresses the "paradoxical" "stormy marriage" of orientalism and Asian American identity (Ma 2000: xxiii). Focused squarely on the

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argues that stepping outside the imperial frame to radically new acts of reception will require new critical approaches, beyond the powerful imprimatur of Said. Indeed, he argues that even McClary was subject to the limitations of the theory at hand. He writes, "McClary, in fine orientalist fashion, still 'used' Carmen as a figure of desire –her account of Carmen as a fantasy of bourgeois male heterosexual patriarchy is flipped over into a feminist desire for an ancestral female figure, for an icon of the liberated and self-determining woman" (Head 2003: 217). Further, he argues that many musicologists were too ready to reduce orientalism to culture and to split it off from the critique of imperialism at the heart of Said's work (218). In sum, he argues that a deep engagement with the fullest implications of postcolonial theory should "ensure an epistemic break" with "Orientalist practices and pleasures," but that musicology has instead "come to replicate and reinforce music's orientalist discourses" (Head 2003: 221). He calls out the musicological practice of identifying "clearly defined topos" that enable a contained treatment of orientalist aesthetics (224), and he points to intersectional critical analysis and historically contingent interpretation as essential (with a nice acknowledgment of Linda Austern's work). Finally, he accuses musicologists (by and large) of choosing to work within "musical tourism" (227), writing that "musicological discussions of orientalism typically exaggerate the affiliation of orientalism with imperialism while at the same time suppressing any attempt at analysis of that affiliation" (226).

<sup>10</sup> Ethnomusicologist Henry Spiller summarizes how the 'application' of postcolonial theory by music scholars now routinely pushes back against the East/West binary and attends carefully to the contingencies of empire in particular moments and places (Spiller 2009, 129–30). Spiller quickly moves to a focus on "musical source materials" and "musical gestures" (Spiller 2009, 130) in exactly the way Matthew Head argues limits such scholarship, but Spiller's exegesis of his chosen materials (Americans engaged with Javanese melodies) is richly informed. His book on 20th-c. US orientalist engagement with Javanese music and dance takes these issues further (Spiller 2015).

Asian American movement of the 1960s-70s and the post-movement period of the 1990s, he addresses the political paradox of the struggle against racist representation, writing that “in order to retire racist stereotypes, one is first obliged to evoke them” (Ma 2000: xi). This “unwitting reiteration” (Ma 2000: xi) is the mimetic contradiction at the heart of the postcolonial condition (Bhabha 1994). Ma argues that the “dreamworld of postethnicity” (154) now dominating a US defined by liberal humanist multiculturalism is based on a willful forgetting, and he thus chooses to remember by focusing on the “discursive straitjacket” of orientalism (161). The music video of *Princess of China* offered just such a straitjacket to the *taiko* players featured in it. They knew they were enacting and repeating orientalist stereotypes but they opted to participate and to make themselves visible in other ways and for other reasons.

Several commanding scholars have addressed orientalist play in the very constitution of new Asian and Asian American positionalities through music<sup>11</sup>, and several focus on self-exoticization as a key critical move for an expanded understanding of the long and ever-changing life of orientalism<sup>12</sup>. Popular music scholar Tony Mitchell’s close reading of Dick Lee, a pop star most active in Singapore during the 1980s-90s, offers a particularly rich look at how specific conditions –in this case, “two-way strategies” positioning Singapore as simultaneously a global city and as quintessentially “Asian” (Mitchell 2001: 23)– allowed Lee to create a spectacularly rich and knowing subject location. As Mitchell puts it, Lee’s unique style of campy, ironic musical performance always activated, simultaneously, both self-orientalism and reverse-orientalism as a critical modality (Mitchell 2001: 23). Further, Mitchell shows how Lee’s reflexive form of pan-Asian commentary was made possible through specific intra-Asian flows of capital and musical products, and that this enabled a certain re-absorption of Lee into Singaporean nationalism. Similarly, Shuhei Hosokawa examines Japanese exotica through the work of Haruomi Hosono, founder of the Yellow Magic Orchestra, in order “to explore how orientalism can be inversely adapted by its object; and to explore the manner in which the self-occidentalisation and self-orientalisation of Japanese culture is fundamental to the construction of its identity” (Hosokawa 1999: 114). Hosokawa’s attention to the double colonization of Okinawan rock musicians (by both Japan and the US) and their resulting double consciousness becomes the lens through which he posits a kind of amnesia –an active forgetting of American colonization– which, as he puts it, “produces the discursive space for western and Japanese rock in Japan –in which one listens to and performs any sound one wants without reflecting on the distance (in terms of ethnicity and locality) between the sound and the listener/performer” (141).

Orientalism as an Asian/American structure of feeling thus runs deep. The question, then,

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<sup>11</sup> Others have offered essential scholarship on musical orientalism writ large. Ellie M. Hisama’s classic essay on “Asiophilia” in popular music is a case in point (Hisama 1993). Mina Yang has shown how the presence of traditional Chinese and Japanese musics in Californian immigrant communities during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> c. was habitually resituated as deep signs of foreignness. Yang writes, “The misrepresentation or neglect of actual Chinese and Japanese music served the agenda of the dominant group, and until Asian Americans could wrest their own voice back from the control of others, Orientalist conventions claimed to speak for them” (Yang 2001: 409).

<sup>12</sup> Gumpert’s examination of Turkish modernity and “auto-orientalizing” through the Eurovision competition offers a compelling look at how several Turkish popular musicians are caught up in a peculiarly Turkish (and Saidian) dynamic of “watching the East watching the West watching the East” (Gumpert 2007: 154).

is not why anyone would choose to participate in orientalist representation but rather, what are the discursive practices that continually reinsert us into its play? Opting out isn't an option; living with the chronic condition is the real challenge.

### **The view from the shoot: Two *taiko* players reflect**

I have written about many different kinds of *taiko* players, but I especially enjoy writing about the ones I know the best, as my friends and musical companions. My familiarity with them is an ethnographic gift but it is also the most challenging research I do because of the need to honor their trust. Their willingness to “let” me write about them is an extraordinary act of generosity and faith. Unspoken hopes and obligations are also part of the transaction. Nonetheless, I don't want to write celebratory narratives about them that simply reproduce the uncritical assumptions already dominating the *taiko* landscape, even if this is sometimes what they might actually prefer. My commitment to *taiko* and to critical ethnography precludes that. I spoke at length with two of the musicians who appear in the video. This is my intervention; this is my point of entry into the praxis of orientalist representation. I choose not just to do a textual interpretation of the video, but I also consider the lived experience of negotiating orientalist play. I turn ethnographically to the subjects of orientalism, and their agentive experience of orientalism, through portions of open-ended interviews I had with Rev. Tom Kurai and Shih-wei Willie Wu.

Shuichi Thomas Kurai (1947-2018) was born in Japan and emigrated to Southern California at age five with his parents. A seventh-generation Soto Zen Buddhist priest and the abbot of Sozenji Buddhist Temple in Montebello, California, Rev. Tom (as he is known) was a *taiko* player and teacher since the mid-1970s and was well-known in the North American *taiko* community. Shih-wei Wu –known to his American friends as Willie– was in the MFA program in Integrated Composition, Improvisation, and Technology at UC Irvine when the shoot took place. I know him very well because I co-directed his senior honors thesis at the University of California, Riverside (Wu 2011); during that year we spent many hours meeting, reading, talking, and going through his work. We both play *taiko* and we both focus on critical approaches to intercultural music encounters. In 2011, Willie wrote a two-part senior thesis in which he explored these issues in depth. He read much of the best work on music, orientalism, and intercultural experiments (Yoshihara 2007; Everett and Lau 2004). He was fascinated by Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project and pored over many of its albums, paying close attention to how traditional Asian musicians' musical knowledge was deployed in western art music contexts. For his thesis, he wrote a long multi-movement original composition in which he activated his questions and ideas by writing music for four musicians from diverse ethnic, cultural, and musical backgrounds<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Titled *Luan Shi* (Turbulent World), it featured four musicians, all close friends and/or teachers, including a White American professional classical cellist, a Japanese American *taiko* player, and an African American blues singer. Willie was the fourth musician, playing *xiao*, a Chinese vertical flute. The piece was partly through-composed and partly improvised. Willie worked closely with, and through, each musician's training and idiomatic musical knowledge. Before beginning his compositional work, he talked extensively with each musician about his aims in

Willie is an ideal interlocutor. Born in Taiwan in 1989, he was twenty-three years old at the time of the shoot and is a gay bilingual/bicultural immigrant who uses postcolonial theory to create original music because he doesn't want to reproduce the imperial gestures of much western art music. On his Google+ page at that time, he stated, "If you speak 'subaltern', you might be able to understand what I mean"<sup>14</sup>. As a non-Japanese American *taiko* player, he engages with the tradition as an Asian American and as a Taiwanese immigrant, learning it as an outsider but finding points of cultural contact. He has participated in four different *taiko* groups, so he has both a broad and deep awareness of the tradition<sup>15</sup>.

I interviewed him on February 17, 2013, eleven months after the video shoot, and asked him questions about what he experienced on the set. He remembered that the directors' original idea had been for the *taiko* players to perform bare-chested... but he noted with amusement that the directors changed their minds once they met the musicians (and presumably noticed that they were not all built like athletes). Although the members of the Taiko Center of Los Angeles usually wear either coordinated tee-shirts or traditional Japanese festival (*matsuri*) style long-sleeved cotton shirts with a traditional apron over it, the wardrobe staff put them into costumes on the spot: black shirts and black trousers, and black *hachimaki* to make them look like *ninja*. Willie remembered that the Japanese *taiko* master Hiro Hayashida was a bit concerned about appearing without his trademark head scarf, which is part of his signature look as a famous professional *taiko* soloist; he willingly took it off but Willie later heard –especially from Japanese *taiko* players– how astonished they were to see him without it. Many didn't even know he shaved his head since they had literally never seen him without his head scarf. The *taiko* players' costumes were thus not their own in any number of ways. Although they were willing to wear whatever they were told, their onscreen look was significantly different from what they normally wore in performance.

The *taiko* players didn't know that they wouldn't be heard on the soundtrack, nor had they been told whether they should prepare any music for the shoot. They were surprised but didn't argue the point since most were simply glad to be featured in the video. A month later, when word broke in the North American *taiko* community that the music video featured TCLA *taiko* players, the Facebook discussion group called "Taiko Community Group", with over two thousand members, had a long discussion about whether the video was respectful of the tradition, and the strangeness of seeing the *taiko* players but not hearing them. I asked Rev. Tom about this:

Deborah Wong: How do you feel about not being on the soundtrack?

Rev. Tom Kurai: Well, we were just all excited to be part of that, you know. It didn't hurt

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the piece. He sought their input and he eventually interviewed each and featured digitally processed excerpts from these conversations in his final composition. I offer this much detail to show that Willie is critically informed and deeply engaged with the actual work of creating principled music using politically and ethically informed strategies.

<sup>14</sup> This personal webpage was at <https://plus.google.com/108962545533410487166> [accessed: August 18, 2018].

<sup>15</sup> These groups include the University of California, Riverside *taiko* class, taught by Rev. Tom Kurai; the Taiko Center of Los Angeles, led by Rev. Tom; a Riverside community-based group called TaikoMix, led by UCR alumna Terry Nguyen; and Jodaiko (2012-14), one of the oldest collegiate *taiko* groups, based at the University of California, Irvine.

any of our egos. I saw some of the posts on the Taiko Community Facebook [page], and I read one that said oh, they should have had live *taiko* music, and there was some criticism of the mixing of Chinese and Japanese culture...

At the time, the six members of TCLA just rolled with whatever they were told to do. When they learned that they needed to fit their movement with the song somehow, they came up on the spot with something that worked. The recorded song was played on set constantly through the shoot, so the *taiko* players had ample chance to listen to it and plan what to play. Willie remembered it like this:

Willie Wu: When we first got there, we wondered –were we supposed to prepare something, to play with this? And... we didn't. We just got the call and they told us to go in and play, so we didn't prepare anything. So on the fly they had us listen to it and it was like a group decision between like Hayashida-*san* and Rev. Tom, to decide what is the most minimum thing we could do to do and still look good. The only thing we were told to do was to bring *obachi* –that's it. I assume it's for a theatrical look. [laughs] because we were mainly doing the o-drums. Yeah, so they told us, like, just, if you can figure out something you can play together. And Rev. Tom and Hayashida-*san* was, like, discussing, like, we need to come up with something together for this, so we look good in the video. Yeah, so... they came up with *don KA, do-don-don KA/ don KA, do-don-don KA* kinda thing, yeah! It was just really simple, so that we looked somewhat together. So when you see that huddling part [in the *Behind the Scenes* mini-documentary], we were literally going over the sticking. [laughs uproariously] Right! *Don KA...!* And how much to do behind them. It was definitely a time when we all came to realize we all play differently...! Hayashida-*san* was breaking *bachiiii*–he cracked like two *bachi* right there, just so intense the way he always plays, this extremely powerful style, and there's always a lot of energy to watch. The whole set was really impressed by his playing –yeah, so they really enjoyed [makes a *tch* sound] that whole kind of theatrical thing going on. It was really intense.

Rev. Tom remembered that Hayashida-*san* first came up with a complicated, dramatic rhythmic pattern that was totally in keeping with his extraordinary level of skill, but the directors decided they wanted something simpler. So the six players huddled and came up with the simple rhythm described by Willie, which is a pattern that would be familiar to most *taiko* players. As Rev. Tom put it:

Rev. Tom: It was up to us –we were in a huddle and then I asked, OK, Hayashida-*san*, I want you to do something here, and he was just-*doko don don* –[laughs]– and the directors were like, oh no no no, it was just too much, make it simple, you know [laughs]. Yeah, 'cause they had no clue, they had no idea what we should do. They just left it up to us. Which is a good thing, I guess. We were able to something that was *taiko*-ish.

They were told to play the same pattern in both of their scenes, and they were only required to “fit” with the song's structure at one point, when the directors wanted them to stop together where there was an instrumental pause in the song. I asked Willie about it in this way:

Deborah Wong: So they played the song for you. Did they want you to fit in with the song in some way?

Willie Wu: The only really evident one was that we had to do a pause –there's an

instrumental pause in the song. During the shoot, we had to shoot the whole song over and over again, regardless of which position we were in, whether we were on beta or *o[daiko]*. So we had to do the whole thing –the *beta* and the *o*'s use the same *kata*, so it's always [moves his arms, playing air *taiko*] [laughs]. Yeah, we were doing the same thing on both, and... So the only main thing that we had to do was we had to wait on the instrumental pause. You can hear it –it's when they do the [sings it, de-de-de de-de de-de etc.], just the electric part. Right before the guy has an 8-bar pause before [sings] ahhhhhhhhhh, yeah, that part, that's the pause. And then we come in. And we are technically imitating the kick drum a little bit, because it's like [claps, sings] *don KA, do-don don KA*, that's kind of what the kick drum is doing. *Dum dum DUM*. Yeah. Mm-hm. So we actually did that take a couple of times just to do that pause. So that's the only thing that's specific.

In short, the *taiko* players were given free rein in certain ways and were able to play *taiko* in the ways they already knew, on Rev. Tom's drums. They aren't heard on the video soundtrack, but one could say they presented themselves according to the norms of *taiko* performance practice, albeit in costumes they wouldn't normally wear.

The *taiko* players had sustained interaction with Chris Martin because they shot a scene with him standing in front of the *taiko* players while he sings. Both Rev. Tom and Willie described Martin as warm, friendly, and curious about *taiko*; they said he was down to earth and connected easily with them as a fellow musician. They spent a lot of time waiting to go on and had very limited contact with the female dancers or with Rihanna; in fact, they all had to sign contracts stating they wouldn't take photos of Rihanna or ask to have photos taken with her. Rev. Tom, clearly a bit star-struck, described her as beautiful but unapproachable, always surrounded by her entourage; Willie remembered her as aloof. Their main scene with her –or rather, her character– was shot almost entirely with her stand in, an African American actress whose specialty was double work. The Chinese princess' main scene with the *taiko* players was the dramatic long sleeve dance, taken straight from *House of Flying Daggers*. The dancer's long sleeves extend beyond the hands by more than ten feet and create sinuous lines of choreographed movement that are generally regarded by Chinese audiences as aristocratic, refined, and extremely beautiful; long sleeves were traditionally associated with Confucian moral conduct.

I knew Willie had studied these scenes in the film during his senior thesis work a year earlier, not least because he was fascinated by the very old Chinese song, called the Beauty Song, sung by Zhang Ziyi in the film as she danced, so I asked him what he thought of the long sleeve dance in the *Princess of China* video. He was tactful but clearly disappointed by it:

Willie Wu: It was definitely... well, fun to watch, for sure. And from the videography side, when the sleeves are supposed to hit the drum, they did a –take with the sleeve hitting drum and pulling back, and they backed the video up so it looks like it's supposed to be hitting the drum. So videography-wise, it was really fun to understand and see how that works. [Pause] Ummmm, for me, it was a little unfortunate that they didn't, like –I don't think they had any plans for either Rihanna or her substitute to learn any sort of the [Chinese] choreography. I think that's unfortunate because that style of drumming –I mean, that's not a style of drumming, that's a style of dance, the water sleeve dance is a very culturally significant thing, to the Chinese culture. I mean, of course... [long pause, thinking] I mean, from my

point of view, it's very unfortunate that they didn't invest in that. So they were definitely going for a certain look, and... it was really a reenactment without much teaching in it, I think. Which is OK, I guess, I mean, I don't know how it's done because I'm not part of the process, but the actress Zhang Ziyi in *House of Flying Daggers* is a trained dancer in multiple cultural styles. That's the reason why she could pull it off. In a lot of films, she got hired for that particular reason, 'cause she has the training. So it was unfortunate for me to see that they didn't invest the time to sort of introduce that. I think it was a great opportunity. [Softly] It was an opportunity lost to see that.

In short, Willie had the cultural knowledge to see exactly how little the full power and beauty of the long sleeve dance was used in *Princess of China*. Indeed, the princess' costume is a wild combination of elements, featuring a purple gown slashed open to expose cleavage, long bright red sleeves, thigh-high red high-heeled rubber boots, a *geisha*-like heavy black wig, and a shiny red latex thong, seen when the gown's long train was swept aside. During the shoot, Rihanna tweeted three photographs of herself, describing her costume as “gangsta goth geisha” and brandishing her middle finger. Rev. Tom, usually extremely discreet, said he felt these photos showed she was “insensitive to the culture” while trying to be “quote-unquote hip”. The difference between Rihanna's crass enjoyment of her orientalist dress-up and Willie's deep cultural understanding of the sleeve dance and the references to its depiction in *House of Flying Daggers* couldn't be more distant from one another. I will return in a moment to Willie's disappointment in these inaccuracies.

I asked Willie how he felt about the music video in the end, and he answered with great care:

Willie Wu: I want to get [this] right. Not right, but just precise. [long pause] One initial reaction –I was really elated to be part of the project. Second, I really do have kind of mixed feelings– it's a Japanese *taiko* kind of thing with a Chinese, like, backdrop. But I felt they got the [director Zhang] Yimou's visual [style] kind of correctly. Yimou was the director for many wushu movies, martial art movies. I think they got it quite correct, 'cause Yimou was really into that, having a visual impact –not so much having a CGI thing going on. I think they kind of– I think they kind of got it! In terms of like having the entertainment aspect of that. The dancing part... The drum dancing part was, to me, felt a little flat compared to the original idea with the Beauty Dance. Yeah. That to me has more of an impact because [it had a real] relationship to the sound, the music. This one didn't. So that was less impactful, in my opinion. Um [under his breath], I'm trying to think... There were a lot of shots of Hayashida-san, which was kind of nice. Not a lot of the faces of the drummers, though. Yeah, yeah. They did capture the essence of power with the drumming, which I guess they were kind of pulling that as needed, to put in the video, borrowing that kind of tradition. One way I see it is that it was good exposure, I guess, for seeing Asian culture as existing in America, that kind of thing. At the same time, it was really a generalization –it wasn't quite correct [dropping his voice]. To say the least. So I have a lot of mixed feelings about it, in short. Entertainment-wise, it's fun to look at, but it's anything but correct... no, no. It's not that an in-depth project, I felt. They didn't really have that in their mind, as such. Yeah.

I asked Rev. Tom the same question: what did he think of the video in the end? He

answered as follows:

Rev. Tom: Rather than being a mishmash of cultures, I look at it as being a tribute to Asian culture in general, and even though popular culture in general tends to mix both of them up, and perpetuate that stereotype that all Asians are the same or, you know, that you can't tell Chinese from Japanese... [...] if a White person speaks Chinese to me, I tend to feel offended –more offended than if an Asian person makes that mistake! People are just too ready to criticize these kinds of things, you know. I tend to see as not quite homage, but it's a positive thing. If people respect Chinese culture, if people respect Japanese culture, if people respect Asian culture, that's kind of the way I look at it. But I'm glad I didn't see all the posts –I just saw a few. I don't know if anyone was criticizing us for being in it– I didn't see that, or I hope no one thought the worse of us for being in it, you know. I would think more people were envious –I would think so. I would like to think. I talk about it a lot and you know, I'm glad I did it. It's something to tell my grandkids, you know. [Laughs] I mean, it wasn't the most– it doesn't compare with me being friends with [the late Senator] Daniel Inouye or something like that, but you know, it was fun. It was fun.  
[...]

I thought I would have more uneasy feelings but I really didn't feel uneasy. I knew that –wow, they're mixing [Asian influences] again but I don't think it was bad enough to say that it perpetuates stereotypes, but like I said before, a lot of these Asian cultural things are hip –martial arts, and... Zen! Zen is so hip! It is!

Sheng-mei Ma argues that any “proprietary relationship” with the martial arts that Asians may elicit or resist is thoroughly troubled by the late capitalist transnational economies that support the corporate networks connecting martial arts films, video games, and more (Ma 2000: 53-75). Rev. Tom's and Willie's reflections on *Princess of China* are similar but not equivalent. Not surprisingly, with a forty-year age difference and roots in, respectively, Japanese and Taiwanese cultures, their perspectives are different. Their proprietary relationships to the music video contrast in important ways: Willie's investment in informed intercultural encounters and his familiarity with classical Chinese music and dance left him “uneasy” with some aspects of the music video. Shaped by the Asian American movement and Japanese American political history, Rev. Tom is very aware of cultural politics but was ready to seize the chance to participate in popular culture and not sweat the details. Always pragmatic, he welcomed the visibility offered by the video; always ready to take the middle path, he viewed visibility as useful in itself. He sized up the profound ignorance of the music video's artistic directors and embraced the curatorial opportunity to present *taiko* on his own terms. Willie was thrilled to be in the video and to experience, from the inside, the making of a music video, but he was troubled by the ephemeral moments when more informed choices could have been made. These two musicians –teacher and student, elder and junior, both directed toward Asian American identity work– offer a window on the ground level labor of intercultural production.

### Reading the Princess

*Taiko* players have appeared in a number of films, advertisements, soundtracks, and (now) music videos, and *taiko* players love to track how our work enters popular culture. Two



important examples set the stage. The first is an infamous *taiko* scene from the 1993 film *Rising Sun*, starring Wesley Snipes and Sean Connery<sup>16</sup>. This film was made during a period of intense anxiety in the US over Japanese corporate takeovers of American industries. The outstanding *taiko* players featured in that scene had no idea how their footage would be edited and intercut with graphic sexual content. The second example is a 2006 television advertisement for the Mitsubishi Eclipse that featured gorgeous Asian/American women playing *taiko*<sup>17</sup>. Created thirteen years apart, these two examples offer a window on the many ways that *taiko* is reimagined by Hollywood, advertising executives, and the consuming public. Ideas about *taiko* are mobilized through these images –ideas about Asia, gender, the other, the US nation-state, etc. The *Rising Sun* scene used *taiko* to make the presumed American viewer anxious about a militant masculinized Japan threatening the US economy; “the Mitsubishi girls” offer an eroticized/exoticized J-cool meant to make the viewer want to be as hip and ownable as they are. Both scenes deploy a host of time-honored orientalist visual tropes, including inscrutable Asian faces, fetishized Asian eyes, a mechanical ability to work (evoking coolie labor), and more. Those two clips set the stage for the *Princess of China* music video, to which I now turn.

*Princess of China* was filmed in March 2012 over two days’ time in Sunland, California, just north of Burbank. The three-and-a-half minute music video stars Chris Martin, the lead musician from the British alternative rock band Coldplay, and Rihanna, a pop/hip-hop singer originally from Barbados. The song was written by members of Coldplay<sup>18</sup> and the video narrative is based on loose unattributed reenactments of scenes from the films *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, directed by Ang Lee) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004, directed by Yimou Zhang). Both films were entirely in Chinese, featured Chinese actors, were based in the fifty-year-old cinematic tradition of *wushu* or martial arts films, and both were breakout hits in the US. The music video thus builds and depends on an American fascination with those films though it features two non-Asian leads and a song in English. The other performers included sixteen Asian/Asian American female dancers, six *taiko* players, and two Asian American actors with tattoos.

The *taiko* players were all from the Taiko Center of Los Angeles, directed by my teacher Rev. Tom Kurai. The directors wanted six ethnic Asian male *taiko* players, so that’s what Rev. Tom provided despite the fact that a majority of his many students are Asian American women. He was joined in the video shoot by four of his Taiko Center of Los Angeles students –John Kanai, Edward Nakashima, Shih-Wei Wu, and Kazunori Mogi– and by an extraordinary Japanese *taiko* player, Hiroyuki Hayashida, who was visiting the US at the time. Hayashida-san (as we all call him, with respect) was a member of the world-famous professional *taiko* group Kodō from 1984-1991; he is in a class by himself and his playing stands out in the video despite

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<sup>16</sup> I have already written about it and won’t revisit my interpretation here; the featured *taiko* group is San Francisco Taiko Dojo and its founder, Seiichi Tanaka (Wong 2000, 2004). Paul Yoon also writes about this scene, in very similar terms (Yoon 2009).

<sup>17</sup> One chapter of my forthcoming book addresses this in detail (Wong 2019).

<sup>18</sup> The song was written by Coldplay band members Guy Berryman, Jonny Buckland, Will Champion, and Chris Martin, along with Brian Eno.

their unison movements<sup>19</sup>. In sum, the music video's artistic directors wanted an all-Asian cast behind the two non-Asian leads; they auditioned and hired certain kinds of Asian "talent", in the lingo of Hollywood (tattooed Asian men, beautiful young Asian female dancers, etc.); their aim was to evoke and recreate certain scenes from the two well-known martial arts films with Coldplay's song on top of the narrative. David Kang Casting was enlisted, a top-drawer casting company that doesn't seem to specialize in Asian material but is led by two casting directors who are both Asian American (David Kang and Becky Wu)<sup>20</sup>. Neither *taiko* nor any *taiko*-like percussion is heard in the video soundtrack. Rather, the *taiko* players, along with the other supporting cast members, provide a visual narrative about certain Chinese film traditions surrounded by orientalist/exoticist iconographic language.

I offer a close reading of *Princess of China*, aware that description and interpretation have dynamic relationships in this method. My attention to the music video's visual and sonic moves is unapologetically interpretive even when (seemingly) empirically descriptive. What may seem like matter-of-fact descriptions reflect my subject position as an Asian American critical spectator<sup>21</sup>. Close reading is generally assumed to be the purview of historical musicology and other text-based scholarly disciplines, and is especially associated with the new musicology (especially Susan McClary, Gary Tomlinson, and Suzanne Cusick). It usually means a close examination of a (musical) work through the lens of critical or cultural theory. Close reading implies focused interpretation, and the work of interpretation is generally done by an unapologetically unitary subject who "reads". Perhaps for this reason, ethnomusicologists rarely claim close reading as a method, despite the textual, humanistic kind of North American anthropology on which our discipline relies. My close reading of *Princess of China* is mine but is ethnographically informed by Rev. Tom's and Willie's uneasiness. Attempting a close reading of this music video is seductive because I want my reading to operate as an intervention, but it constantly runs the risk of reproducing the stereotypes and cultural confusion of the video narrative.

The music video is three minutes and thirty-four seconds long<sup>22</sup>. It opens with a two-second shot of a Motion Picture of America (MPAA) green preview screen that at first glance looks entirely familiar, since something like it precedes all feature films in the US. This music video is pretending to be a movie trailer, or one could say it offers metacommentary on martial

<sup>19</sup> From <http://www.hiroyukihayashida.com/english/biography.html> [accessed March 4, 2013].

<sup>20</sup> See [davidkangcasting.net](http://davidkangcasting.net) and on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/David-Kang-Casting/297421610276159>). A quick web search turned up basic information on this company, which evidently casts for a wide range of industry genres, including film, television, commercials, music videos, live events, print, fashion shows and runway, promotional events, dancers, documentaries & reality TV, background work/extras, infomercials, voiceovers, and industrials. The company did casting for a number of top music videos including Katy Perry's "Roar" and "Wide Awake", Bob Dylan's "Duquesne Whistle", Taylor Swift's "Mean", Jennifer Lopez's "On the Floor", Eminem's "Space Bound", etc.

<sup>21</sup> My use of an oppositional gaze is far from new. My approach to agentic spectatorship is drawn from bell hooks, who writes that "we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see" (Hooks 1992: 116).

<sup>22</sup> "Coldplay - Princess Of China ft. Rihanna" can be viewed on Coldplay's official YouTube site at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Uw6ZkbsAH8&list=TLLeIC1WKAjqZ8NxDxiL\\_4RRD20HaHJnSqJ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Uw6ZkbsAH8&list=TLLeIC1WKAjqZ8NxDxiL_4RRD20HaHJnSqJ) [accessed: August 16, 2014].

arts films. It is exactly the right shade of green and the font is familiar and the centered text is too, but it is actually a parody. It says “The following trailer has been approved for/all audiences/by Emi music, Coldplay and Rihanna”. A box below this seems to contain an MPAA rating but in fact it says “POC – Princess of china”, and in very small type, “All audiences/contains ninjitsu, flying sequences, dance/numbers, drumming, wandering ronin, boudouir/scenes, court intrigue and princesses”. This goes straight to another film reference, or really an evocation: on a lizard-skin back-drop, “A Coldplay \* Rihanna” appear, with “production” underneath and Chinese above –four characters, *jun guo* (China) and *gong zhu* (princess). Two seconds later, another opening credit screen appears with the same Chinese/English title, “Princess of china”, over a dark red backdrop and a silhouette of a woman with eight pairs of arms with long fingernails gently waving up and down like a many-armed Hindu deity.

At 0:07, we see a vast desert landscape with a man walking toward us in slow motion as dust swirls across the screen. The sky is blue, low mountains stretch into the distance, and the sand is parched brown. The camera jumps in to a closer shot of the man, with his head initially cut off by the shot and then a pan up so his face appears as he advances in heroic slow motion; a credit line in Chinese (with no English) appears saying “Chris Mah-teen”<sup>23</sup>. Chris Martin wears drab brown jeans, tee shirt, hoodie (with the hood up) and scarf around his neck; he’s dressed for a desert journey. He stares forward with emotionless determination; he looks like he’s walked a hundred miles and is ready to walk a hundred more. At 0:14, the camera cuts to a different place, a “boudouir” (*sic*) full of heavy dark Chinese furniture and Rihanna reclining on a chaise lounge. She is in front of a window (or perhaps a backdrop) of a Chinese landscape of buildings with traditional red tiled roofs evoking the Forbidden City. She wears skintight shiny red pants and a purple silk top; her black hair is piled up on her head; she wears heavy gold earrings; she slowly twists, caressing her own arms. Over all this, we have heard the opening hook twice: a high electric guitar line that cascades downward; Martin’s voice is mixed into it. This hook sets the distinctive timbral backdrop for the entire song: heavily synthed, it is also homage, featuring a ripped sample from Sigur Rós’ song “Takk...”<sup>24</sup>. Now we see Martin, still striding purposefully in slow motion, but we see him from behind, head exposed and hood down, as he enters a monumental complex of buildings –an endless gray balustrade or causeway with a gigantic Chinese building at the end. Ah, he’s coming to get her. Cut back to Rihanna, still on the chaise lounge, closer up; her eyes are closed; she looks beautiful, resigned, and slightly sad. In Chinese (again with no English) a credit line appears saying “Starring Ri-Han-na,” i.e., offering her name in Chinese phonetics.

Is the presumed spectator a Chinese reader, or not? A North American spectator already knows who these famous performers are, so the Chinese-language credit lines blur genres –the music video is a film trailer, or is the beginning of a film– and they draw the viewer into multiple

<sup>23</sup> My thanks to Shih-wei Willie Wu for these translations and for his observation that the subtitles are all in traditional unsimplified Chinese characters, evoking the past.

<sup>24</sup> One review referred to the song’s “glossy synth sound” (*NME* 2011) and another to “its synth-fuzz groove” (*Eells* 2011).

narrative conventions, ready to present the tale as a music video and as homage to Chinese martial arts films and as a trailer to such a film and as the beginning of a film.

Cut back to Martin from behind and then from the front. The first verse begins precisely as the camera cuts to head on and he is suddenly striding forward in real time, no longer in slow motion, his eyes very blue. He sings *Once upon a time somebody ran*, and he looks us in the eyes as he continues, *Somebody ran away saying fast as I can*. The next phrase, *I've got to go*, begins with a rest on beat one, and we see Hayashida-san from behind, striking an *odaiko* in slow motion, right hand *DON-I've got to go-(rest)*, and then left hand, *DON-I've got to go*. Then Martin sings *Once upon a time we fell apart* while striding past an Asian sentry outside a massive Forbidden City-esque building. This three-second phrase and shot is focused on the sentry and makes the viewer take in a lot all at once: the sentry is shaven-headed, bare-chested, and his upper body is completely covered with tattoos; he is standing at attention with a tall stave in one hand. He wears a leather *menpo*, a half-mask covering his nose and lower face, normally part of a samurai helmet (*kabuto*) but he is bare-headed; the effect is part Hannibal Lector, not least because his inscrutable Asian eyes follow Martin as he strides past. Martin continues down the causeway singing *You're holding in your hands the two halves of my heart, Ohhhhhh, ohhhhhh!*

At 0:45 he has entered the palace. During an instrumental interlude, we see an ornate bronze door flanked by two many-armed Asian women –perhaps ten women in two rows, waving their arms in a vaguely exotic manner, their long gold finger nails sparkling in the gloom. We are suddenly in a large dim blue-lit room where Martin, dressed completely in black, is in the middle of a swordfight with a *ninja*. They are already mid-fight, spinning apart in slow motion. We immediately know we are watching “wire *fu*”, the beautifully choreographed wire-aided *wushu* filmic tradition infused with magical realism in *Crouching Tiger*. Close-up of Martin as he draws his sword back in a two-handed stance; close-up of his opponent, whose face is concealed by a black mask except for his/her Asian eyes. We have already seen *Crouching Tiger* so we suspect his opponent might be a woman –that key scene in which Jen (Zhang Ziyi), concealed behind a black mask, fights Mu Bai (Chow Yun-fat) and of course loses but simultaneously puts up a good fight and discovers what it might mean to have a real teacher (“Learn to defeat movement with stillness”, Mu Bai advises her while holding his sword point to her throat). Back in the video, they charge at each other and Martin appears to strike a blow because s/he staggers back.

At 0:55 we see three *taiko* players for literally one second. They're standing at *odaiko*, dressed all in black (like the *ninja*!) with black headbands (*hachimaki*); we see them from behind, in a classic strong masculine stance, from the waist up. Left to right, it's Rev. Tom, Hayashida-san, and Shih-wei Willie Wu. They execute a beautiful movement, quickly scissoring their hands in front of their drumhead and ending up arms open in a large Y-stance. For two seconds (0:56-58), we're back at the door with the many-armed Asian women: the door swings open, the women turn their heads toward it, and the camera rushes in to reveal Rihanna in a huge audience hall festooned with red lanterns. She faces us, standing on a long carpet runner. She's now in a strapless floor-length tight black sheath dress, split up to the groin so that her right leg is beautifully exposed. She sings *Ohhhhhhhh ohhhhhhhhhh* while waving her arms in the same

way as the many-armed women outside: sweeping them up over her head and then crossing her wrists in an X and drawing them down across her face. The camera comes in for a close up and reveals her long gold nail sheaths. We see one second of Martin and the *ninja* fighting and then we're back in the boudoir where Rihanna is reclining on the chaise lounge as before. She sings, *Once upon a time, we burned bright/Now all we ever seem to do is fight/On and on*. She twists seductively, pensively, sings *And on and on and on*, and we hear Martin's voice and hers together on that line.

Martin and Rihanna appear airborne, in blue-lit night clouds, both wearing vaguely Chinese aristocratic gowns, arms outspread, staring at one another. Martin is in a gray tunic; Rihanna is in a diaphanous white gown with long dangling sleeves and slashes exposing her upper arms, and she flutters and dangles in the night wind. Ah, this is a reference to another scene in *Crouching Tiger*. Together they sing *Once upon a time on the same side* as they float toward each other and lightning flickers across the dark clouds. We see less than a second of Martin and the *ninja* slowly tumbling and twisting, too close to even know exactly what's happening, but we register that they were once on the same side but now aren't. We hear them sing together *Once upon a time on the same side, in the same game* as the camera flips back and forth between the *ninjas* and the night sky lovers: we see Martin and the *ninja* from above, his sword point at her throat, both frozen into stillness. Rihanna alone sings *And why'd you have to go, have to go and throw water on my flame* as the camera shows them float past one another in the sky and then her alone on her chaise lounge. We understand that we're seeing them then and now, past and present, two chronotopes through our eyes and through our ears.

The chorus begins at 1:33 with the black-gowned Rihanna back in the audience hall. This is one of the more sustained visual sequences in the video. The camera begins fairly far back and slowly approaches her as she sings. She sings while looking the viewer in the eyes and slowly waving her arms up and down; behind her, the troupe of Asian women dancers' arms are fanned out so she once again evokes a many-armed Hindu deity. She sings *I could've been a princess, you'd be a king/Could've had a castle, and worn a ring/But noooooo, you let me goooooo*. The camera pulls back to its original position for the next stanza and we see the sixteen dancers separately, arranged eight on one side and eight on the other by height. They are in matching shiny black chemises, tight below-the-knee skirts, platform sandals, and their midriffs are bare; they wear odd gold diadems. They execute quick energetic moves as Rihanna repeats *I could've been a princess, you'd be a king/Could've had a castle, and worn a ring/But noooooo, you let me goooooo*, half of the dancers turning to the camera at a time while half-squatting and flicking their hands and gold fingers toward the viewer. At least five dancers are still behind Rihanna, only their arms visible as they fan their arms in, out, up, and then they dart out and freeze into lunges.

At 1:54, we see a restaging of another scene from *Crouching Tiger*: the lovers are alone in a magnificent desert landscape, kneeling, face to face, with their foreheads touching and their gazes averted. They sing *And stole my star/La, la, la, la, la, la, la* three times as the camera jumps back and they are framed by the sun low in the sky. Near the end of the third repetition, Rihanna raises her eyes to look at Martin and draws back from him while touching his chest; we

see a close-up of her hand grasping her sword. Over an instrumental break, she leaps up into the cloudy sky, sword in hand. She goes into slow motion and then we see Martin similarly in the sky, sword raised; the camera goes back and forth between them as they slowly descend, staring intensely at one another, ready to fight.

The final scene begins at 2:24. We hear Martin and Rihanna singing the opening hook, *Oooooooh-oh oh oooooooh oh oh oh ohhhhhhhhh* and we are abruptly inside in a dim crowded hall. This is a restaging of the famous scene from *House of Flying Daggers*. Rihanna stands in the center of a half circle formed by the dancers, the two tattooed sentries, and the *taiko* players. The dancers kneel, watching Rihanna; the sentries are at alert, staves in hands. Rihanna wears the fantastical costume we first saw when she lay on the lounge: thigh-high skintight shiny red high heel platform boots, red garters, a red-trimmed purple tunic that barely covers her groin, and red sleeves that must each be fifteen feet long. She wears a black *geisha*-like wig with dangling ornaments stuck in it; she is heavily made up. She stands in place while flinging and twirling her sleeves, and the camera pans in real time, then slow motion, then real time, to bring out the movement of the sleeves. All this takes place in two seconds. At 2:26, we see the six *taiko* players in a dim hall, each at a large *chudaiko*, ranged across the screen; they are still dressed like ninja and play *beta* style (i.e., upright) in unison. Hayashida-san and Rev. Tom are in the two center positions and Martin stands in front/between them, now dressed all in black, no *taiko* but staring straight at the camera. Two seconds later we are back in the hall as Rihanna dances, her sleeves tracing red spirals in the air. For a split second we see that two *odaiko* players frame the scene. At 2:31, for one second the scene jumps 180 degrees and we see Rihanna (actually, her body double) from the back, her sleeves tracing a slow-motion X, and the six *taiko* players all at *odaiko* arranged in a semi-circle, their backs to us. We're still hearing the opening hook repeated, *Oooooooh-oh oh oooooooh oh oh oh ohhhhhhhhh* –this scene is all about the visuals. At 2:33, we see a dark hall full of golden glowing lanterns and the dancers falling gracefully in slow motion to the floor. Back to Martin in front of the *taiko* players on *chudaiko*: he is now singing, staring at the camera, *Oooooooh-oh oh oooooooh oh oh oh ohhhhhhhhh*, as the camera pulls up so we are looking slightly down at the scene.

The outro begins at 2:46. Once again we see the lovers kneeling in the desert, singing *Cause you really hurt me/No you really hurt me* to one another. We flip back to Rihanna flinging her sleeves to and fro, intercut with slow motion *taiko* players' arms striking the *odaiko*. In the desert, Rihanna and Martin begin to caress one another, singing *Cause you really hurt me/No you really hurt me/Cause you really hurt me/Oooooooh*. In the hall, Rihanna slowly turns and looks intensely over her shoulder at us, no, at Martin. He is suddenly in the hall, sitting on an elaborately carved dark wooden Chinese chair of intertwined dragons; he is all in black, so his pale face and red hair are highlighted. He is staring intently at us, no, at Rihanna, leaning forward, one hand on his chin, covering his mouth. Back in the desert, they're clasping one another and singing *Cause you really hurt me*, and at 3:23 we see Rihanna from above as she stretches back, arms high over her head, and flicks the sleeves back in preparation to fling them forward. We hear her sing *ooooooh* as we see Martin sitting and watching her, pensive. In the last shot, we see Rihanna from behind, arms outspread, sleeves out flung in both directions,

framed by the *taiko* players at the *odaiko*, as we hear her sing *You really hurt me*.

The camera jumps to the credits<sup>25</sup>, laid over the silhouetted many-armed Rihanna seen at the very beginning of the video. The credits are real with one important exception: although the casting was actually done by David Kang Casting, the credits read “Casting Chia-Liang Liu.” Liu Chiang-Liang, or Lau Kar-leung (1934-2013) was a Hong Kong-based Chinese actor, filmmaker, choreographer and martial artist<sup>26</sup>. This presumably playful reference is both homage and another framing gesture.

## Conclusions

The music video refers to and riffs on the love stories in *Crouching Tiger* and *House of Flying Daggers*. The desert landscapes, the one-on-one sword combat, and the love between warriors is all straight out of *Crouching Tiger*, in which the aristocratic Jen, acted by Zhang Ziyi, is first kidnapped by a desert bandit named Lo (Chang Chen) and then after an epic one-on-one pursuit and hand-to-hand fight that seems to last several days, they fall in love in a dramatic meeting of equals. One could say that the entire film, while certainly about the expected themes of honor and betrayal, is about two warrior women who choose their own men<sup>27</sup>. Both these films rely on that frisson. *House of Flying Daggers* plays out many of the same tensions, and through the same actress, no less –Zhang Ziyi<sup>28</sup>. The sleeve dance scenes in *House of Flying Daggers* are mesmerizing not only for Zhang’s virtuosity but also because she suggests a hidden set of powers without initially revealing them. *Princess of China* refers to the narratives of those films but only includes selected parts, and possibly the least interesting ones. As a stand-alone narrative, it tells a profoundly different story: a racialized heterosexist tale of captivity, heroism, and love. By recasting the story with a White hero and a non-White heroine, the story evokes *Madama Butterfly*, and the struggle between the two “works” because she loses/capitulates –i.e., the key erotic/exotic trope is securely in place. The sleeve dance in the music video outro becomes sheer spectacle: she is simply an object of the hero’s gaze: her dance doesn’t seem to require much skill (she stands stationary and twirls the sleeves without reference to the original

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<sup>25</sup> The credits look exactly like credits normally seen at the end of a film, once again eliding the music video with *wushu* martial arts films. They read: An Emi records production in association with Def Jam and Roc nation an Adria Petty and Alan Bibby film “Princess of china” starring in alphabetical order Coldplay and Rihanna casting by Chia-liang Liu music supervisors Markus Dravs, Daniel Green and Rik Simpson music by Coldplay & Rihanna costume designers Mel Ottenberg, Lauren Braley and Ivy Jarrin executive producers Jay Brown and Dave Holmes co-producers Ciarra Pardo and Phil Harvey.

<sup>26</sup> Lau is best known for the films he made in the 1970s and 1980s, some very famous, e.g., *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978). His career reached across and exemplified the development of Hong Kong kung fu films.

<sup>27</sup> The pairing of Jen/Lo and of Yu Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai, acted by Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yun-fat, are dynamically parallel. Jen and Lo act on their love while Mu Bai and Shu Lien do not (out of honor, of course), and naturally both women end up with nothing. One could say that the deepest affective power of this film (as defined by the genre) lies in their willingness to sacrifice everything in an acknowledgement that they can’t align the incompatible values in their lives –love, honor, and individual agency.

<sup>28</sup> Zhang Ziyi has made a career as an actress of considerable range, always drawing on her extensive training in dance. She is not a trained martial artist but has learned some *kung fu* and *wushu* through years of training for many martial arts films.

conceit of the echo game), so the point is really to gaze at her spectacularly revealed erotic/exotic body. It goes without saying that the costumes, sets, and choreography are a Chinese-Japanese-Indian-Thai orientalist mess. All these renarratized moves are depressingly familiar.

Rev. Tom and Willie both described how they used classic *taiko* rhythms and quickly and flexibly fit their knowledge into the framework they were given. They inserted their rhythms into a kick drum pattern and paused on command. Musicologist Olivia Bloechl argues that Baudrillard's critical construct of hyperreality offers handles for seeing how some post-9/11 popular musics are "dominated by the orders of reproduction, simulation, and the model" rather than built up out of originary cultural authenticities (Bloechl 2005: 136). She writes that the confabulation of orientalism and hyperreality is both the product of and a productive site furthering global capitalism. *Princess of China* relies on just such recirculations of already mediated materials<sup>29</sup>. Pacific flows of popular culture rely on economic, cultural, and aesthetic exchanges but the outcomes are sometimes fearfully repetitive, relying on old orientalist ideologies and tropes rather than creating new intercultural formations.

The ethnography of performance offers essential tools for living in a mediated environment of shifting authority defined by corporate centralization and consumer intervention. Intercultural play takes place within those terms. Thick interpretive work on particular practices and specific places, peoples, and moments remains important, but we must also acknowledge that moving between the local and the global activates deeply gendered and raced understandings of intercultural encounter. *Taiko* is a politically imperfect (and forever incomplete) political project for these reasons. Over and over, it reveals the minute and enormous compromises built into any effort to step forward as an Asian American subject.

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<sup>29</sup> A puzzling additional recirculation/reorientation is Coldplay's music video *Magic*, released on April 7, 2014, starring Chris Martin and Zhang Ziyi in a narrative about magicians in a travelling carnival. It is shot as if it were a silent film, with Zhang Ziyi as a magician and abused wife. Like *Princess of China*, it is framed (with credits, etc.) as if it were a film. Chris Martin plays two roles, both the abusive husband and the young magician's assistant who saves her. The music video reworks/rips off the storyline from the film *Water for Elephants* (2011) and at the same time dramatically inserts the actress Zhang Ziyi into Coldplay's work—without referring to *Princess of China*—in a multilayered intertextual way that is both completely dependent on recirculating existing material, strangely unironic about its own lack of originality, and unreflexive about its intertextuality. Zhang looks hauntingly but (apparently) unintentionally like Anna May Wong.



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Deborah Wong is an ethnomusicologist and Professor of Music at the University of California, Riverside. She specializes in the musics of Asian America and Thailand and has written three books, *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko* (2019, in press), *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (2004), and *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Ritual* (2001). She is a past President of the Society for Ethnomusicology, a series editor for Wesleyan University Press's Music/Culture series, and a research team member for the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI). Very active in public sector work at the national, state, and local levels, she is the Chair of the Advisory Council for the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. She is currently involved in two public sector projects: the Great Leap Online Archive, for the well-known Asian American non-profit arts organization in Los Angeles founded and directed by Nobuko Miyamoto, and a loose North American collective called Women and Taiko, working to create structural change in the *taiko* community.

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### How to cite / Cómo citar / Como citar

Wong, Deborah. 2019. "Drumming Through *Princess of China*: Intercultural Encounters in a Hollywood Music Video". In: Corrêa, Antenor Ferreira and Maria Westvall (eds.). Dossier: "Music and Interculturality". *El oído pensante* 7 (1): 74-99. <http://ppct.caicyt.gov.ar/index.php/oidopensante> [Web: DATE].