

WHEN SOUNDSCAPE STUDIES ENCOUNTER BUDDHISM: METHODOLOGY DEVELOPMENT OF SOUNDSCAPE STUDIES CONDUCTED AT CHINESE BUDDHIST TEMPLES

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Abstract

The ethnographic ideals of 'reflectiveness' and 'openness' inspire the researcher to think deeply about how to develop ethnographic soundscape methodology during the research process. This Paper focuses on developing adaptive research methods for soundscape studies on Chinese Buddhist temples.

Chinese Buddhist temples are monasteries and dwelling places of monks. They are also the miniature of "pure land". Temples have been considered as the landmarks of quiet and peace in China for thousands of years. What and how are the soundscapes of Buddhist temples? Have any changes happened in the soundscapes? How does the Buddhist way of thinking about hearing impact the Buddhists' way of hearing? Within these questions in the researcher's mind, field work is carried on in three Chinese Buddhist temples in 2011.

In the course of the field work, I detected that Buddhist thinking impresses enormously Buddhists' way of listening and forms special understanding about hearing. This way of thinking about hearing in Buddhism seems to be opposite to our encouragement on increasing awareness of soundscape and cultivating soundscape competence in soundscape studies. The paradox between soundscape studies and Buddhist thinking inspired problems in the field work in temples.

I don't give any explanations yet, just descriptions of the differences. I will analyze further two notions I paid attention to in sound preference test answers and interviews. These answers questioned the need to express soundscapes liked or disliked and the need to change in the sound environment outside.

Keywords: soundscape, Buddhism

1. Introduction

To investigate Sonic Identity and Changes in the Soundscape in Chinese Buddhist Temples, In January 2011, I carried out Pre-fieldwork at three Chinese Buddhist temples: Huating temple in Kunming, Lingyin temple in Hangzhou, Jingshan temple in Yuhang. While the western-originated soundscape methodology encounters oriental Buddhist thinking, the problems caused by generally describing listeners as concerned mainly with opposites and extremes stand out

amongst the various problems that I needed to consider.

Andra McCartney points out listeners are usually described by researchers as concerned mainly with opposites, and with extremes such as hi-fi and lo-fi, quiet and noisy. McCartney questions whether this is really what contemporary listeners think about when listening. (McCartney, 2010) McCartney's question is also a significant question need to be considered in the soundscape studies conducted in Chinese Buddhist Temples.

2. Methodology and two problems

This problem is reflected most noticeably in the sonic preference test of the soundscape of Chinese Buddhist temples. The method of Sound Preference tests have been originally applied by a group of researchers leading by Murray Schafer in the World Soundscape Project which studies on five European villages in 1975. The FVS group has run sound preference tests in the village schools by asking the pupils to list their favorite and most disliked sounds in the community. (Schafer, 2009) This method has been inherited in the project Acoustic Environments in Change which is conducted by Helmi Järviluoma in 2000. The new group of researchers implemented similar sound preference tests in the village schools after twenty five years. Students were asked to list five pleasant and unpleasant sounds they heard in daily life. Although the forms of Sound Preference tests in two projects are presented similarly in a quantitative way, the interpreting ways were different. The result of former Sound Preference test was analyzed statistically in a quantitative research way. However, the latter one in the AEC project was not intended for statistical analysis but meant to be interpreted qualitatively.

Follow the way and idea of AEC project, the method of sound preference test is adopted in my research as a qualitative method. In order to investigate the basic attitude of listeners towards sounds that can be heard in temples, listeners from different groups, include monks, staffs, visitors and residents near the temples, were invited to fill out questionnaires. They were asked to list five pleasant and unpleasant sounds heard in the temples, and to describe the acoustic environment of the temple using three adjectives. There is no doubt the sound preference test is a handy and speedy method for grasping a basic attitude of listener in the field work. However, one aspect that may be ignored here is that, in addition to the matter of hi-fi and lo-fi, quiet and noisy, asking listeners to describe sounds in terms of likes and dislikes is still based on the underlying attitude that considers all listeners to be concerned mainly with opposites and extremes.

Anyone might be as surprised as I was when I heard more than one monk responding with: "But why do you feel like or dislike for these sounds from outside? What does it matter?" This kind of response has given me a shock to some extent in the pre-fieldwork, as some of the monks and nuns just refuse to join the test directly owing to this reason.

It is at this point that I came across the first clash between Buddhist thinking and soundscape methodology. When the field work is starting from a sound preference test, the Buddhists are probably to think that the researcher's way of thinking about the world is totally different from theirs. As Confucius says in *The Analects*, "If your Way is not the same you cannot lay plans for one another." (Watson trans, 2007) In this case, it is hard for me to stimulate the Buddhists to plunge into their spiels in the interviews.

In addition to this, there is still another conflict happened to the sound preference test of my research. When audiences were invited to join the tests, part of them, especially the staffs working in the temples, tend to be unwillingness to mention the unpleasant sounds. Although I have explained to the testees beforehand that the questionnaires are anonymity and value-free. That is not a question of lying-the answer is Guanxi of Chinese society. Guanxi describes the basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence, and is a central idea in Chinese society. Nowadays, the pinyin romanization of this Chinese word is becoming more widely used instead of the two common translations—"connections and "relationships" — as neither of those terms sufficiently reflects the wide cultural implications that guanxi describes. (Thomas, Guthrie and Wank, 2002) Guanxi as a kind of social connection, which usually extends from extended family, school friends, workmates and members of common clubs or organizations. The case in my study is related to Guanxi between workmates and member of a common organization. Staffs working in the temples are easily to consider that to write down the unpleasant sounds heard in the temple is a kind of negative appraising to their work place. As a kind of protecting to Guanxi, they tend to say nothing about unpleasant sound of the temples.

Hence, I had to step back to have second thoughts about how could pave the way to communicate with the audiences in Chinese Buddhist temples.

3. Methodology development

As Francis Seeburger illustrates in his article Heidegger and the Phenomenological Reduction, the type of phenomenological reduction which makes an attempt to interpret the relationship of man to his world within that relationship itself, should be adopted in the research at hand. (Seeburger, 1975) Buddhist ways of thinking about hearing needs to be taken into account not only in the designs of the questionnaires and interviews, but also in the analysis to the materials by the researcher.

In Buddhism, developing into Buddhahood can also be described as a search for eternal silence which means neither a lack of sound nor existing quite in the present world. The eternal silence is described in Buddhism as a state that, whether you see or not, whether you hear or not, you would not feel concerned about liking or disliking sounds. This is to say that there should be no separate heart within, but that seeing is synonymous with not seeing, and hearing is synonymous with not hearing. (Paramith, AD705) Hence, in the process of practicing Buddhism, one should overstep the feeling of liking or disliking to the world outside. This is one reason for some monks or nuns excuse themselves from the sound preference tests. Obviously, in the case of my study, at least parts of the listeners are not concerned listening in an opposites and extremes way.

Thus, to develop a soundscape research method suitable for the research conducted in Chinese Buddhist temples, firstly, it is necessary for the researcher to discard the ideological baggage that describes listeners as concerned mainly with opposites and extremes. As McCartney has indicated, setting extreme criteria for assessing listening in terms of hi-fi and lo-fi, quiet and noisy, places a constraint on both the researcher's and the audience's thinking about listening. An open area will be added to the question-

naires of sound preference tests in order to break down the barrier set up by the ostensible clash between Buddhism and soundscape methodology, so that listeners such as some Buddhists, can feel that the researcher is open to every point of view and willing to know more about others' experience of listening. Sound preference test aims at grasping the basic attitudes of audiences about soundscape of Buddhist temples, but not to classify the sounds into pleasant and unpleasant sounds.

To deal with the second clash caused by Guanxi, the important work will be down not on the questionnaire, but on how the tester presents the project to the testees before carrying on it. To relieve the testees' worry in terms of Guanxi, the tester needs to explain clearly enough that the sounds preference test just care about personal feeling about sounds heard in temples. It is not a question about merit rating on all the sounds. Thus, to talk about unpleasant sound or disliked means nothing bad to the temples. Of course, since Guanxi impacts on the Chinese thinking model inveterately, this problem is hard to be solved thoroughly. However, to consider it in another way, locating this situation back to the macroscopical context of Chinese cultural, it can also disclose the interpersonal relationship in the Chinese temples. Then I decide to apply the observing method and make a record of testees' reactions during the process of Sound Preference test.

Furthermore, other kinds of extreme criteria for assessing listening should be reconsidered in the research, too. A Buddhist temple will often have been considered to be the pure space of Buddha for a thousand years or more. It will also be regarded as a landmark of silence in most Chinese eyes. In interviews with visitors, I receive numerous responses to the effect that the silence and peace of the temples are one of the attractions that cause people to come to them. The image of Buddhist temples is always connected with quiet and hi-fi. Nevertheless, the hustle and bustle of large crowds at Chinese Buddhist temples during a traditional event, such as the Spring Festival, should never be ignored. In addition, at some temples that are regarded as famous scenic spots,

the soundscape may be very lo-fi and not quiet at all, especially in the peak tourist seasons. Even at a relatively quiet temple, depending on the time of day and the season of the year, the soundscape may very well switch between hi-fi and lo-fi, crowded and quiet.

Hence, to search for a more open format, may not require complete abandonment of opposites or extremes in descriptions. The problem does not consist of describing this kind of extremes, so much as finding ways to bond these extremes of description together, such as always regarding the soundscape of temples as quiet, hi-fi and being liked, whilst simultaneously considering downtown as noisy, lo-fi and being disliked. When I interviewed an old monk living for decades at a forest temple, he said: "Feeling the quiet soundscape in temples is the same as eating vegetarian dishes. One may feel novelty in eating them occasionally, but if you eat vegetarian dishes every day, then you may start to feel bored with them and miss other food." In light of this, I find that, even for the same person and with regard, to the same soundscape, one's feelings may undergo variations at different times. We may change our feelings from like to dislike even when facing the same soundscape. Another old worker on the temple staff said that he himself preferred the quiet and peace of the soundscape of the temples, but his grandchildren were unable to bear such a "boring" life at all. He brings them to live in the temples with him occasionally, but the children could scarcely wait to return to the hustle and bustle of city life. Thus, even in the same soundscape and the same time, audiences of different ages or with different backgrounds may very well feel differently about the same soundscape.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, it can be concluded that an audience's sonic preference and their feelings about a soundscape are not invariable. An audience may demand different soundscapes in different situations. The key is to have the right to choose the soundscape that is wished for, but not to accept a

soundscape that offends one's wish. If something conflicts with our vision, or when something repellent appears in front of our eyes, we may choose to close our eyes. In the auditory context, however, we cannot simply close our ears. The right to select the sounds that we hear freely is to some extent deficient.

However, when we consider this situation from a Buddhist perspective, this illiberality may be seen to result from the way in which we are chained to the sounds of the external world. This is an ordinary person's way of thinking about sound. In the case of a sage, however, he or she would not feel happy or unhappy in following the changes in the outside world. On the contrary, a sage can adjust to the outside world by following the changes within his/her inner world. This, then, represents another conflict between Buddhist thinking and soundscape methodology. It impacts fatally on questions about the expectation of changes in the soundscapes at Buddhist temples. In consequence, Buddhists do not concern themselves very much with changing the soundscapes but rather with adjusting their mentality involving hearing in order to face even noisy sounds peacefully. When an individual feels peaceful in his/her mind, external sounds will cause no disturbance.

This totally different way of thinking about hearing may be worth adopting in soundscape studies. This is not to say that we do not need to improve the soundscape of the present world. Nevertheless, the soundscape of a place, such as a Chinese Buddhist temple can be, shared by various audiences. Each of the audiences may have their own preferred sounds, which may possibly be in the process of changing. Just as it is likely to be a huge project to improve the soundscape of temples, it may also be argued that we can learn from the mode of hearing in Buddhism to adjust our mental state or mood to sounds that we dislike. Soundscapes are in a constant state of changes. At the same time, audiences' experiences and feelings connected with soundscapes are also in a constant state of changes, and such experiences and feelings are impacted not only by our ears, but also by our cultural context and technology.

Through this research project, I expect that the audiences could be encouraged to interact with each other, as well as with the soundscapes.

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