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ASIAN AMERICAN SOUNDTRACK

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## ABSTRACT

Music is often associated with our identity. For some people, it is a means for self-expression, others may view it as a channel of communication. From the sound and lyric of a song to the emotion it evokes, music often represents a powerful symbol for many communities, one established by coming together and celebrating traditions. In this ethnographic research project, I explore the role that music plays in expressing identity among East Asian immigrants who came to the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. I interviewed 20 Asian Americans about their life experiences and musical tastes with the goal of highlighting contrasting views of the U.S. through their stories, and how their individual political behaviors and attitudes are projected onto and through their music. I also assess how generational differences impact musical choices. I argue that these Asian American individuals and their communities utilize music to consolidate their sense of self, whether through music they heard long ago or the music they listen to now in the United States. They seek themselves within the music, and their choices reflect an identity that they have forged within the immigrant context.

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## Introduction

On a Friday night in April, I found myself listening to “Lonely Christmas” by Eason Chen on my way back from work. It was 7 PM, the traffic ahead of me did not seem to be moving, and it was my 10th time listening to the song in the past hour. I was, by no means, celebrating Christmas in the middle of spring, nor was I chasing some form of unrequited love. I also am not fluent in Cantonese; without simultaneously reading the translation, the meaning of the song escapes me. I wondered why this song was so important to me. This song reminded me of my family, even more so when I started living alone. When I was younger, I would leaf through the binders of piano music my mom collected over the years. Playing “Lonely Christmas” would invite my parents to sing along. For a moment, I would feel like my life was put on pause and I didn’t have to worry about anything else. To me, this song was never tied to a specific holiday, but rather a memory that reminded me of my family, my home.

This brought me back to the theme I learned that music acts as a communicative tool for individuals. Our unique experiences shape the way we use music and from that, a means to shape ourselves. People's interpretation and application of music demonstrate this phenomenon. I don’t know anyone who reminisces about moments in their childhood with the song “Lonely Christmas”. Because of my unique experience with this song, I have musically composed an association with it — inadvertently fostering the aesthetic agency in myself. The value we place in the music we listen to alludes to the relationship it holds with our identity. I believe that people, who actively engage in music, have developed their own unique understanding and found a reflection of themselves within it.

## *Literature Review*

Music is an integral part of people's lives. Tia DeNora explores the reception of music and its meaning to listeners in her book, *Music in Everyday Life*. Certain songs and sounds recapture a capacity people found themselves in or will be in. It is a device that drives the process of remembrance/ creation. DeNora highlights "the shape of human agency" (20) in her interviews. The people she interviewed all have varying backgrounds, yet they all consider music integral to their lives. Anyone can say that music is important to them, but it is people's choices and self-identity that make their connections to music more unique, more subjective. Her approach shows that music changes with the recipient, how they receive the music, how they derive meaning from it. Through their own personal aesthetic, individuals find reflections of themselves or their past selves, in music.

A model we can use to assess individuals is music evoked autobiographical memories (MEAMs). In a journal article "Music evokes vivid autobiographical memories" by Amy Belfi, Brett Karlan, and Daniel Tranel, it explores the vividness of music regarding memory recall. The MEAMs are usually associated with "strong emotions such as happiness, excitement, and nostalgia" (Belfi et. al 2). There are moments in someone's life that could be elicited from listening to music important to an individual's personal associations and aesthetics. The interactions between music and people trigger "feeling, thinking, and [actions]" (DeNora 62). Music becomes a resource for people. It constitutes the medium of exploration and remembrance. Interpretation of music is personal to the listeners — the demands they require in music are an intrinsic need they regulate to maintain their sense of self.

The article “Reflection on Music and Identity in Ethnomusicology” (2007) by Timothy Rice critiques the way ethnomusicologist’s liberal use of the term identity in their papers. Its multifaceted nature suggests a complexity that is not properly addressed. Rice analyzes different approaches to identity in music and I will be using this to derive the parameters set in my paper. From reading his article, I could tell there was a tension between two forms of identity: group and individual. You can view them on a spectrum. At the very end of one spectrum, is the usage of a group identity. This usage would explain why a community would listen to a certain genre.

In a niched environment, the genres usually listened to are determined by many factors: ethnicity, religion, families, etc. Using a random example of a Taiwanese community living in the 1970s, we could glean a perspective from the environment they grew up in and the musical choices they’ve made. During the 1970s there was a wide array of musical genres to listen to all around the world; however, the likelihood a Taiwanese person would hear Brazilian reggae is very slim. As members of a particular nationality, they would listen to music that represents “a collective self-understanding” (Rice 2007) — musical traditions and customs that reaffirm their group identity. The Taiwanese community would not know to include reggae as an option during the construction of their identity.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is individual identity. Say a Taiwanese woman, born in the 1970s, immigrated to the United States in the 2000s. Living here, there is a higher chance of exposure to other forms of music. She now has a choice of whether or not she would hold on to the music that she grew up listening to. Songs from her past could remind her of her identity with ties to her home. She could also listen to new music that is popular in the Taiwanese immigrant community in the U.S. The narrative could help her integrate her identity into the migrant narrative. The micro choices people make are unique to themselves. Even if they are

from the same generational group, or immigration background, there is still individual variation. People have authored their own sense of identity through their musical choices.

To understand a more detailed and nuanced account of identity and music, we turn to several significant works regarding the Asian American and Asian immigrant population. Both of these works help us understand how this process of music and identity formation takes place in the Asian American community. Su Zheng and Deborah Wong construct their own parameters when conducting their research. What defines diaspora? What does it mean to be an Asian American mean?

Author of *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America*, Zheng argues that music serves as a powerful tool for claiming and negotiating identities. Asian American and Asian immigrants find methods to connect to their cultural heritage and express themselves in ways that may not be possible through language alone. The creation and performance of music can help create a sense of belonging to a community and challenge any stereotypes. Zheng explores the overarching category of Chinese music and their presence in the United States through the diaspora. The movement of individuals, willing or forced, creates a number of unifying musical experiences. Traditions that were brought by Chinese immigrants reclaimed their cultural identity. Innovations demonstrated assimilation to the U.S. musical context and migrant narrative. She argues that connections, between our real and imagined homes, music plays an important role in the formation of individual identities.

Deborah Wong's book, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, explores the vast and diverse traditions and musical practices of Asian American musicians in the United

States. Wong covers a wide variety of music genres from different cultures. Her main focus is not the music itself, but the Asian Americans who create and perform the music. Each individual's experience with music is unique to them. They made different choices; they have authored their identities in different ways. Wong's argument describes music as a crucial site for the intersection of the representations of self. Our identities are so multifaceted that she recognizes the depth and narrates everyone with the same level of complexity.

### **Case Studies**

Building on the insights of these literatures, I explore the relationship Asian American and Asian immigrants have with music, and their choices in music with regard to the formation and consolidation of their identity. It was interesting to me, to see how the smallest deviation in someone's life affected their outcome and the music that they use. The subjects of my case study are several members of the diasporic East Asian immigrant population currently living in California. I have interviewed more than twenty people ranging in age, sex, nationality, and language. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on four representative stories that utilized music to reinforce their sense of self. For their privacy, I will not be revealing their names or any other identifiable factors. They will be referred to by their nationality, gender, and a pseudonym of their choice.

1. 71 year old female who immigrated from Taiwan
2. 22 year old female who immigrated from China
3. 56 year old female who immigrated from China
4. 25 year old male who immigrated from Japan

*Interview: Participant #1*

In 1988, Tammy traveled to America, placing her around 36 when she took the life-changing journey across the Pacific Ocean. Her husband had received a position in California. They took up this chance and immigrated together to seek a better opportunity. They also hoped that their children could receive a well-rounded education. Her goal, when she reached the United States, was to open up a small restaurant for Taiwanese cuisine. This dream stemmed from her love and passion for cooking; Tammy had learned how to cook from her parents, in the small restaurant that they owned in 宜蘭 (Yilan), Taiwan.

In her childhood, she grew up learning different languages. Her education was interrupted and marked by government changes that were fueled by World War II. Post WWII brought with it a series of political unrest as Taiwan experienced linguistic divisions. The Chinese civil war brought an influx of soldiers and civilians from China to Taiwan. They subsequently began prohibiting the usage of Taiwanese as a form of political repression.

The slow erasure of Taiwanese culture was prominent when schools and offices were banned from speaking or writing the language. The only time she heard Taiwanese was when her parents spoke to her. Her memory is dotted with her parents and neighbors singing together in closed walls.

When she arrived in California, they found rent in a small town. Before she could pursue opening her own restaurant, they needed to settle down and consolidate themselves into the community.

A: We were the only Taiwanese family in the neighborhood. When my husband was at work, and I was alone, I felt lonely. There were no other families that I could talk to. At that time, my English was no good.

Q: What did you do to pass the time then?

A: I could cook, but not too much, I didn't think the neighbors would want to eat... I sang... Here, in [the United States], you can really sing whatever you want.

The community Tammy originally moved in did not have any other Chinese or Taiwanese families. For the most part, her family kept to themselves. Even though the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, it didn't stop other people from exhibiting displays of xenophobia. This community was vastly different from the one she experienced as a child. According to Tammy, everyone would support each other: this one uncle down the street introduced her to the 古筝 (gu qin), a traditional Chinese instrument played by plucking seven strings; the family next door taught her English; her fifth-grade teacher gave her reading materials every week.

The style of music that resonates most with Tammy is Hokkien pop. A popular singer in this genre is Jody Chiang. She reminisces on fond memories of listening to her music. Despite the ban on the Taiwanese language, Jody Chiang released songs that were sung in Taiwanese. The controversy revolved around Jody because of her views on the political and social issues happening at the time. Using her platform, she would advocate for the rights of Taiwan's aboriginal people. Her music would often speak out against discrimination and injustice in society.

A: When I hear this music, I remember being at my parent's restaurant. I would come home from school and go down to the restaurant to help out... not too busy at this time. There would be a [moment of stillness].

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: It was quiet, but not quiet. There would be noise from the kitchen, the music playing, people talking... and I would just be. Here it's not quiet. When it gets too loud for me, I listen to her music.

Was it the simple act of listening to a genre of music that elicited this type of response from Tammy? She described, to me, the discriminatory behavior she witnessed and experienced as an Asian immigrant. Through the music of Jody Chiang, she could continue to find her sense of self, in the comforts of her own home. Jody's music exhibits a wide range of emotions: from slow mournful tunes reminiscent of a time when things were peaceful, to an excited and upbeat song celebrating little wins.

Tammy has the ability to choose what type of music she wants to listen to. Yet she chose to remember her past through her past: in the neighborhood she grew up in, where they would come together to sing traditional Taiwanese folk songs; in her primary and secondary schools, where she learned nationalistic songs in Mandarin; in the new migrant narrative, where she could learn new music. Her individualistic choice brought her to remember memories "from a lifetime ago" (Tammy) and to celebrate the language she grew up using with her parents.

*Interview: Participant #2*

Allison immigrated to the United States from China when she was only six years old. At the beginning of this interview, she recalled her first years in kindergarten.

Q: Are you comfortable elaborating on some of your experiences?

A: Well, for one, I don't think I was prepared for how rude they were. The school I was in? We were all Chinese, all Asian. The only difference, I think, was that they were born here. My English was not the best, but we all could speak Chinese. Their parents spoke to them in Chinese, and my parents spoke to me in Chinese. Still, they found it necessary to point out my accent and make fun of other aspects of my life.

She would most likely attribute this to her eventual dismissal of her own culture. It took two years for her to lose her fluency in Chinese and an even faster time to come to scorn the music her parents listened to. It reminded her of the taunts she faced in kindergarten.

When asked about the song that resonates with her the most, she said it was “Empire State of Mind” by Jay Z.

A: It was a typical day, my dad, he was driving me to school. Before, he showed me some CDs he burned the previous night. He said they were new! They were popular! Now, I don't remember all the songs on the CD, but one that stuck with me was “Empire State of Mind”, the song by Jay Z. It was exciting and it captured my attention right away.

This song is considered to be New York City's anthem. Oftentimes, it is performed and broadcasted at parades, events, rallies, etc. The chorus of the song, sung by Alicia Keys, is particularly anthemic, with this repeated refrain:

Concrete jungle where dreams are made of

There's nothing you can't do

Now you're in New York

These streets will make you feel brand new

Big lights will inspire you

Let's hear it for New York

The chorus is designed to be catchy, with a sense of pride and triumph that is meant to inspire listeners and evoke a sense of unity and belonging. The participatory aspect of it allows the audience to all sing together. Without looking at the lyrics, there is a strong instrumental backing and driving rhythm that makes this song memorable. It's distinctive and uplifting.

A: Obviously, I'm not from New York... but I'd like to go there.

Q: It would be pretty exciting to take a trip to New York.

A: No... well, yes... I'd want to work there in the future. It's been a dream I've had ever since I was a kid, actually.

Q: Is there something in particular that drew you to New York?

A: The hustle and bustle... it's the city that never sleeps and I don't sleep! [laughs]. Seriously though, when I came to America, I thought I'd be able to work hard and reinvent myself. It seemed possible, probably even, when I heard this song. I don't know if you felt it when you first heard this song, but I felt soulful. It was telling me that I could pursue and achieve my dreams. I know it sounds silly, but...

Q: But it's true!

Like Allison said, listeners may not even be from New York, but the concept of the song still holds true for a lot of people. Regardless of their geographic location or background, people can understand the themes of resilience and determination. The song's lyrics speak to the universal human desire for success; this concept can be applicable to anyone. Additionally, "Empire State of Mind" has become a cultural icon that represents not only New York but also a certain attitude and way of life that many people around the world can relate to.

Allison deviated from her parents' likes and dislikes and grew to create her own. There was individual agency when she turned away from traditional Chinese music to American hip hop. However, at this point, hip-hop was popular. Jay-Z was a popular celebrity at the time as well. A lot of people around the world listened to Jay-Z's music — this tapers into the group identity. Allison could have been influenced by the number of listeners and the fame surrounding this genre of music.

*Interview: Participant #3*

June was originally from China. She came to the United States in 1995 to further her education via graduate school. By then, she was in her late 20s.

Q: There was an immigration act that was passed before I traveled to America. It made a lot of us fear deportation. But it also caused the border patrol officers to be stricter when interviewing us. I remember, for the verbal exam, we were expected to carry out a casual conversation with the administrator. Well, I wouldn't say I tricked, but I... steered the conversation in my favor.

A: How did you do that?

Q: I was thinking this white male must like music. Why not talk about the famous song titles, artists' names that everybody knows? I figure he must like rock music... I said I like it... and then I passed the exam!

Someone who grew up during the 1980s experienced the callback of songs from the People's Republic of China. Taiwan and Hong Kong have been pushing for their independence and sovereignty for some time; they no longer responded to the nationalistic music the PRC would broadcast to them. The PRC government took to condemning modern Cantonese and Mandarin pop songs "as counter-revolutionary", says Wai- Chung Ho, author of "Social change and Nationalism in China's Popular Songs". June recalls hearing people talk about how "the National Programme of the Central People's Broadcasting Company became the voice of the PRC state" (Ho 11). They were now in charge of all media that entered the state. They deemed rock music as inappropriate and deviated from the norm. Little music from the West was played, so people typically heard different variations of nationalistic music.

Regardless of the PRC's attempts to try and control the music people listened to, after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, students were left with a "bitterness, combined with a perceived need for self-empowerment and the desire for change" (Ho 12). There was a newly founded growth in

the development of rock music. A style of music that cropped up mid-1980's and became even more apparent during the times of political and social turmoil is called 西北風 (xi bei feng). It was a synthesis of traditional folk music and popular music. Xi bei feng had adapted aspects of rock to articulate struggles that the people have felt, in consequence of the Communist Party in China. People would hear a forceful voice and bass line. Dynamic-wise, the songs stay loud to represent the voice of their people (Ho 445).

The song that resonates with June the most is “一无所有 (Nothing To My Name)” by 崔健 (Cui Jian) falls in the Xi bei feng genre. This is a protest song that expresses the frustration and disillusionment of the Chinese youth during a time of social and political change in China. The song's lyrics describe the struggles of a young person who feels trapped in a society that values conformity over individuality — they long for personal freedom and the ability to express themselves.

A: My friends and I would listen to this when we were still in school. We related to it.

Q: Do you know if there was a particular reason why you listened to this song? I know it's a strange question, but did you listen to it for fun? Or was there a circumstance that made you feel associated with the song?

A: We did listen to the song for fun... but there was always something deeper to it.

Q: Deeper?

A: Yes, this song could be heard in rallies and in student dormitories. Not just [I Have Nothing], a lot of [xi bei feng] songs. I like the incorporation of different traditional instruments like the [di zi], the [gu zheng], the [suona].

There is a repeated phrase “I have nothing”, like the title, that emphasizes the marginalization and oppression of the Chinese youth. As the “father of Chinese rock and roll” (Ho), he was established as a voice for social change and reform. This form of music can be seen as presentational because Cui Jian was well known. The information and messages he includes in his music can be widely heard throughout China; he can show his opinions and stance on the government.

Upon her arrival in the United States, June and her friends entered graduate school. Being a student in a historically male-dominated field of study, she felt unfair treatment due to her race and gender. There were teachers who did not believe she had the same skill set as her male counterparts and men who did not want to be in the same group as her. Listening to music helped her become immune — “... somewhat immune... I still have feelings” says June — from her classmate and professor’s behavior. June was proud to be Chinese and did not want to lose any part of herself. Eating cultural food, celebrating holidays, and listening and performing music, allowed her to protest against discrimination and troubles she experienced in the United States.

*Interview: Participant #4*

Nathan is a 25 year old who immigrated from Japan at the age of 14. Both of his parents had found work in the United States, and they traveled here to increase their economic status.

A: How was the move?

Q: It was difficult, to say the least. We got here around December... so I joined school in the second trimester. I wasn’t just the new kid, I was the new new kid. I felt like a lot of people there already formed their little niches and friend groups. It was hard to fit in.

A: Were there many major differences in the schools here and back in Japan?

Q: So many. Everything was pretty uniform, including our uniforms. Academically and outside of school, Japan had structure. There was an emphasis on achievement. In the U.S, I feel like I didn't get that much support. People were expected to do their own thing.

A: I believe U.S schools stress the importance of creativity and independent thinking... at least in public schools.

Q: It was a difficult adjustment for me.

If we take out the fact that he joined in the middle of a school year, we see that he joined in the eighth grade. To a lot of people this is a liminal moment — a major stepping stone where we cross from middle school to high school. During this state of development, according to Jennifer Pfeifer, adolescents around this age are trying to “explore their emerging identities in ways that foster autonomy” (Pfeifer 1). At this point in life, people are experiencing either physical or emotional change or experiencing them all at once. A lot of the time, Nathan felt like he wasn't able to fully integrate himself into both school and social life here.

He would say the most impactful genre of music is Taiko. It was his parents who first introduced this to him in the middle of his freshman year. Having participated in Taiko ensembles as a child, he was happy to check it out. Upon his arrival there, he felt like the community welcomed him readily. Here, he told me he felt like he created genuine friendships. There was common ground people could relate to.

In a video filmed at the Library of Congress, Deborah Wong discussed Taiko drumming in the Asian American context. It is as much a visual art form as an aural art form. From the visual perspective in the audience, we see the physical movements of the drummers. They strike the drums with a balance of rhythmic precision, intensity, and graceful movements. In terms of aural art, Taiko drumming is characterized by its thunderous and dynamic sounds. The rhythms

and beats produced by the drums are often complex and syncopated, creating a sense of energy and excitement. The sound of the drums can be both rhythmic and melodic, with different drums producing different tones and pitches.

What Nathan practices here in California is a Japanese American style of Taiko. This style differs from the traditional Taiko from Japan, which dates back to the sixth century. Often found in folk and religious music, with relation to Buddhism and Shintoism, the music heard through Taiko is spiritual to the performers and audience. Taiko drummers are not conducted by anyone, instead, they perform together — they breathe in unison (Powell 104). Japanese American, or Northern American (referring to Canada and the United States), Taiko finds influence from the traditional style and art of Japanese Taiko. However, the Taiko in the United States stray from the religious or folk approach. The Transpacific diaspora brought forms of Taiko from immigrants who wanted to remember their past and celebrate their traditions. During the period of World War II, Japanese people experienced a significant trauma in the form of concentration camps. The discriminatory behavior was meant to deconstruct who they were and significantly shaped the Japanese community here today. Taiko rebirths the Japanese culture and the Japanese people's identity.

## DISCUSSION

These four individuals explore different means music finds their sense of self. Their unique experience in the United States brought forth varying emotions and attachments to their home. Using the concept of realms in *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, the interviews recognize the practices each person turns to express themselves. Individuals have their own metaphorical realms that they grow into, whether it's physical or cultural.

For Tammy, she recalls the peacefulness she's experienced growing up with the comfort of her family and community. Upon moving to America, it was difficult to discover that feeling again, but she regained it through music. In Allison's case, music helped her assimilate to her new environment. It's engaging, it's relatable. It helped her come to terms with her life and that if she works hard enough, she'll be able to achieve what she wants. June remembers a time when music was used in solidarity. During that moment in her life, people rallied together against oppressors for their rights. In the United States, where she felt she was treated unfairly, she turned to music. For Nathan, he discovered shared collectivism within the Taiko community. Feeling alone in the United States, this musical group welcomed him. He found himself through the music the drumming group fostered.

## CONCLUSION

It was interesting to me how people with similar stories can end up listening to music differently. The literature I used helped me create a theoretical framework for which I can construct questions and differentiate between stories. When I first began, I had categorized individual identity and group identity into separate entities. After applying this approach to the interviews I've done, I learned that people do not strictly think and act on each side of the

spectrum. Individuality is easily influenced by outside forces, just as the people in a group are not limited to a single collective thought. The depth and nuances in each person's lives give rise to their unique self, projected in the music they listen to.

Asian immigrants have forged paths for themselves through music. These are ways they've created to support and advocate for the cultural and national identities in themselves, in the homes they have created, whether real or imagined.

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