

CHAPTER SIX

MUSICAL MODERNISM IN ASIA



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This chapter takes as its assumption that uniform expressions and articulations of modernism do not exist in Asian music. Anyone familiar with scholarly work on modernism and modernity knows that there is no consensus on its meaning and manifestation. Furthermore, the question of what modernism means in Asia is difficult to answer since we are dealing with a vast region that is further subdivided into East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia, each with its own unique history, culture, politics, and social sentiments. Given this challenge, this overview is not meant to be comprehensive, chronological, or definitive. Instead, I will identify salient features of musical modernism drawn from countries across Asia without treating Asia as a monolithic geo-cultural entity.

At the outset, a working definition of modernism is in order. I take it to mean a set of ideas, values, and qualities closely tied to, inspired by, and as a reaction to eighteenth-century European Enlightenment ideals. Largely associated with an emphasis on human values, individualism, scientific method, progress, and logical reasoning, in the Asian context the notion of modernism is mostly founded on Western knowledge, value, and practices as guiding principles. In this chapter, I am interested in charting what Asian musicians *do* on the ground based on their understanding and interpretation of modernism.

Musical modernism in Asia exists in multiple modalities, formats, styles, and characteristics because it is informed by the country's socio-political-cultural context. Essentially, each culture indigenizes what it means to be modern to some extent and expresses it in its own terms over a long period of time. It is invariably intertwined with ideas of westernization, innovation, and progress. What we can safely say is that the arrival of modernism through Asians' contact with the West has spawned new ideas, challenged conventional ways of thinking about tradition, and inspired musicians to seek new expressions. This encounter inevitably led to a growth of grass-root or indigenous modernisms. Despite different degrees of intensity and engagement, the making of modernism in Asia has resulted in the creation of new musical trends, institutions, practices, concepts, and aesthetics in the region.

The emergence of musical modernism in Asia began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of increasing European military and missionary

presence. Against the backdrop of European military dominance, European music, concepts, and behaviour were seen specifically by Japanese, Chinese, and Korean musicians as scientific, organized, and thus superior to indigenous traditional music and practice (see for example Wade 2013; Everett & Lau 2004; Nettle 1985). The juxtaposition between traditional and European music set in motion the impetus for change as indigenous musicians began to evaluate their music, theory, and practice according to European standards.

From this perspective, modernity has long been equated with development – a catchword of capitalism and globalization – and has been as the very essence of modernization. Perceived as the most formidable achievement of the West, it is considered “a central concern for the so-called ‘Third World’” (Zhao 1997: 44). Some musical examples are the adoption of the 12-tone equal-tempered scale over the conventional pentatonic scale and just intonation, the adoption of Western instruments, and the creation of new music institutions. The battle for advocating modern music is thus fought on grounds of precision, technology, science, and progress. In the following, I focus on three signposts of musical modernism found throughout Asia: the development of music institutions and pedagogy, urban and national music, and new compositions.

MUSIC INSTITUTIONS AND MUSIC EDUCATION

Perhaps the most important mode of musical transmission in Asia was from master to disciple orally and through rote playing. This method was drastically different from the Western notion of musical training through standardized pedagogy and formalized methods offered at schools and conservatories. During the twentieth century, many Asian countries felt the need to remodel their music education system following Western institutions.

The most remarkable development in this area is found in East Asia. In the case of Japan, the Meiji government (1867–1912) considered European culture as superior and icons of modernism as part of its full-scale modernization project. In 1871, the Japanese government established a department of music at the imperial court to provide European-style music for foreign visitors. In an attempt to modernize its musical system, the ministry of education began to disseminate Western music through the help of the ‘Music Study Committee’ (*Onagaku torisirabe gakari*). Under its recommendation, the government established an institute of music for training performers in Western music theory, history, and instruments. This planted a firm foundation for developing Japanese modern music (see, for example, Wade 2013).

The situation is somewhat similar in China. Learning from their Japanese counterparts, Chinese musicians also embarked on a journey to develop new music education after many of them returned from studying in Japan and the West (Liu 2010). They concluded that if China was to be successful in modernizing itself, it needs a formalized music education. The first such institution was the National Music Academy of Music established in 1927 in Shanghai. Headed by the German-trained music scholar Xiao Youmei (1884–1940), this was the first modern conservatory established for Western and Chinese music. This music academy, originally named *Guoli Yinyue Xueyuan* (National Music Conservatory), was later renamed the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

In Korea, traditional Korean national music *kugak* and the earlier form of Korean indigenous music *hyangak* were tied to the royal court, shamanistic rituals, and agricultural festivals. Although some elite genres were created and documented during the *Choson* period (1392–1910), training of musicians was done by oral tradition and handed down from masters to students. In 1932, during the Japanese colonial period, several Japanese music scholars established the *Choson Minsokhahoe* (Korean Folklore Society). This was the first time texts of the narrative genre *pansori* were notated.

After the Second World War, a new music institution *Kungnip kugakwon* (National Traditional Music Center) was established in South Korea in 1950. This was the first government-sponsored modern music institution for the maintaining, performing, and researching of national music. Later its name was changed to National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts. The notion that traditional music needs to be protected—a modernist attitude towards traditional music—was formally instituted. A new system called the Intangible Cultural Properties system was put in place to honor certain traditional genres and master performers.

The situation in Southeast Asia developed differently because not too many government agencies were directly involved in the process of change. In Vietnam a new music conservatory system was set up based on the French model. Its main goal was to teach Western music, but it also included the teaching of traditional music with a new pedagogy that relied on music in Western stave notation. Uniformity and systematic performing style were emphasized to the extent that improvisation was rarely taught and was in fact discouraged (Miller & Williams 1998: 119).

In Thailand, the musical modernization project took a different path because the country was never under any colonial power. Even with the establishment of new universities and schools, the traditional master–student model was folded into the new system. A new Fine Arts Department (Krom Silaporn) was established in the 1930s for teaching and researching traditional music. Since the 1970s, the nation’s most prestigious university, Chulalongkorn, began to offer degrees in both Thai and Western music. In Indonesia, the post-colonial government established the Konservatori Karawitan Indonesia in Surakarta in the 1950s. Over the years, several high-school level institutions were founded in different locales such as Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Sulawesi. Over the same period, university-level institutions were also formed, devoted primarily to traditional performing arts and music. Now there are at least four *Institut Seni Indonesia* (Indonesian Arts Institutes) in Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Den Pasar (Bali), and Bandung (West Java).

MAKING OF URBAN AND NATIONAL MUSIC

The boundaries of folk music and elite music have been clearly demarcated in many traditional Asian contexts. Music performed in villages, festivals, temple fairs, and rituals generally falls under the rubric of folk music while music played for the upper class and at courts is known as elite or classical music. Music performed in the folk arena generally has lower social status than that performed for upper-class patrons. However, the changing spatial landscape, the creation of modern cities, and the formation of nation-states substantially altered this conventional folk–elite division and created conditions that called for new musics. The patronage of music has shifted

from courts and aristocracy to commercial outfits, record companies, dance halls, and concert venues.

As bedrocks of urban cultures, megacities and urban music further undermined the folk versus elite divide. Cities such as Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul, Bangkok, Manila, and Jakarta became centers of politics and modern lifestyles with a vibrant mix of cultures. New music created by blending local and Western musical styles became the norm. In Shanghai, the emergence of *shidaiqu* (contemporary popular songs), a combination of local sensibilities and Western vernacular musical style, emerged in the 1930s. In Japan, the incorporation of violin by *enka-shi* (street singers) into their vocal genre formed the foundation of a post-war pop song style known as *enka*. The fusing of American pop song rhythm, Japanese *enka*, and Korean lyrics created the Korean pop genre *trot*. *Kroncong*, a local Indonesian pop genre that combined Western instruments, tonality and sonic elements from gamelan music, was developed throughout Indonesia since the nineteenth century. In most cases, the emergence of new urban environments generated a kind of new or modern music that altered the conventional folk–elite musical divide.

In the process of creating a modern nation-state, music was often used by government as a tool to promote modern culture and to secure the foundation of new society. In Japan, the Minister of Education was actively involved in promoting a genre of newly instituted songs in schools called *shoka* (school songs), a simple syllabic verse and chorus song form with simple harmonic progression and short and memorable melodies. The lyrics are meant to invoke modern nationalist emotions. Inspired by their Japanese counterparts, Chinese music educators such as Shen Xinggong and Li Shutong also adopted this practice. Many adopted the Japanese *shoka* style and wrote Chinese school songs [*xuetong yuege*] for the newly modernized school education. School songs or *xuetong yuege* were treated as an important part of modern education. The trend of linking modern personhood to modern music has been widely popularized throughout Asia (Qian 2004).

COMPOSERS IN ASIA

The Western idea of ‘composer’, an individual artist who exerts total control on his work, is foreign to many Asian cultures. A key sign of modernism in Asian music, then, is the advent of the composer as an indispensable facet of any musical activity. The twentieth century witnessed a marked increase in the number of composers emerging from the region. Almost all of them had received training in Western music and were keenly aware of the importance of traditional music in composing modern music. Here, I will single out a few representative composers who are often cited as pioneers of modern Asian contemporary music.

Influential Japanese composer Tōru Takemitsu brought Asian avant-garde music to new heights. Born in Tokyo, Tōru Takemitsu came into contact with Western classical music through radio broadcasts by the American occupying forces from 1945–52 and with outstanding Japanese modernist composers such as Toshi Ichianagi (b. 1933) and Fumio Hayasaka. From these colleagues, Takemitsu came into contact with the works of European avant-garde composers Olivier Messiaen, Luigi Nono, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. In 1951, Takemitsu co-founded the mixed

media group ‘Experimental Workshop’ with other composers to promote his own understanding of the avant-garde and musical modernism.

Takemitsu’s earliest works display influences of Second Viennese composers Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, and French impressionism. His 1957 *Requiem* for strings incorporates serial techniques. In the early 1960s, he began to infuse traditional elements in his works. *Eclipse* for *biwa* and *shakuhachi* (1966) represents his initial attempt to engage traditional instruments and sound in a modernist language. His 1967 work *November Steps* for *biwa*, *shakuhachi* and orchestra written for the New York Philharmonic and premiered by Seiji Ozawa brought him most attention. This work was a defining moment in Takemitsu’s work in utilizing Japanese elements in a large-scale modern orchestral composition. Even though Takemitsu is remembered as a unique avant-garde Japanese composer, his efforts in creating a ‘modern’ music by incorporating traditional elements set the stage for other Asian composers.

Another towering voice in creating long-lasting effects on musical modernism in Asia came from the Korean composer Isang Yun. He studied music at the Osaka Conservatory in the 1930s and was exposed to the thinking of many modern Japanese composers. He taught for a short time at the Seoul National University in the 1950s but ended up holding a professorship at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. Like Tōru Takemitsu, his work is deeply influenced by European avant-garde composers. Yun’s modernist musical language and aesthetics marked a great departure from works of other composers in Asia.

Yun was concerned with bridging the gap between Korean and Western music. Although his focus was on Western avant-garde music, his primary emphasis was on how to develop Korean music, a concern no doubt inspired by the modernist notions of development and progress. In many of his works, Yun’s music employs iconic sounds and techniques associated with traditional Korean music. The Korean instruments he references include the plucked zither *kayageum*, bowed fiddle *haegeum*, plectrum plucked zither *komungo*, bowed zither *ajaeng*, and side-blown flute *taegeum*. Their playing techniques utilized a considerable amount of glissandi, pizzicati, portamenti, vibrati, tonal flutters, and micro-tonal ornaments. Melodies of traditional Korean music are characterized by small melodic ornaments articulations, or grace notes played before or after the main pitch. Those unique melodic features and instrumental techniques became Yun’s main aesthetic core and the foundation of his modernist musical theory, ‘Haupttöne’, or main tone. His concept of a main tone is that it ‘needs a preparation and then a settling down with numerous ornamentations, vibratos, and glissando’ (Kim 2004: 185). The presence of many maintones in his compositions result in multiple melodic lines, constituting polyphony and polyrhythmic texture.

The incorporation of Korean music in Yun’s music is most obvious in the chamber orchestral composition *Loyang* (1962) in which the Korean hour-glass drum *changgo* was used. His 1961 *Colloides Sonores* for string orchestra references Korean instruments and sounds in unique ways. The three movements were named after three string instruments in Korean music, *hogung* (also known as the bowed fiddle *haegum*); *komungo* (plucked zither), and *yanggum* (hammered dulcimer). Yun attempts to reproduce the sounds of these instruments by imitating their articulations and melodic characteristics. Many of his compositions were inspired by Korean

instruments or music as indicated in the titles and musical organization. Among them are *Piri* for oboe solo (1971). *Piri* is the Korean name for the double-reed shawm used in ritual music, farmer's music, and court music. Yun's piece echoes the playing and timbre of the *piri*. Another noteworthy piece, *Reak* for larger orchestra (1966) again makes a strong connection to Korean music. The term *Reak* refers to Confucian ritual music, an important genre of music that continues to be performed in present-day Korea. Although the sound of his music is modernist in nature and outlook, it is clear that Yun has succeeded in finding a way to amalgamate Korean music with his own understanding of what it means to be modern. His method of infusing traditional instrument and musical elements in avant-garde compositions has inspired many contemporary Korean composers.

Yun's kind of musical modernism also found parallels in China, especially in the work of two composers from two different periods of the twentieth century: He Luting and Tan Dun. Their works are modernist in orientation, set against two very different temporal and cultural backdrops. He Luting is often considered as one of the pioneer composers who set the modern Chinese composition movement in motion. The second composer, Tan Dun, is among a handful of Chinese composers who endured the hardships of the Cultural Revolution and isolationism of Maoist China of the 1960s. Each sought to incorporate traditional musical elements that signaled China's coming of age in historical moments of the modern era.

He Luting lived and worked in the port city of Shanghai. Shanghai of the early twentieth century was a cosmopolitan city enlivened by a mixture of Chinese and European cultures with a vibrant urban twist. One could easily hear European classical music, piano music, jazz, film music, dance music, traditional Chinese music, local opera, and regional music. He Luting grew up in this musically rousing metropolis where modernism was the main driving force for its thriving urban culture (Lee 1999). But the bustling musical life belied a crisis concerning directions for China's modern music. He eventually went to study at the Shanghai Conservatory under the Russian composer Alexander Tcherepnin. Under Tcherepnin's encouragement He Luting began to turn to incorporating Chinese traditional elements in his music. His *Shepherd Boy's Flute* was awarded the first prize in a composition competition sponsored by Tcherepnin in 1934. Since then, all of his work has creatively fused Chinese music with tonal harmony and classical compositional procedure. Among his more popular compositions are the film songs *Si ji ge* (The Four Seasons Song) and *Tianya genu* (The Wandering Songstress) both composed for the 1937 film *Street Angel*, and made popular by the famous pop singer Zhou Xuan. He also wrote the music for the patriotic 'Guerrillas' Song.' His most remarkable contribution was his role as the head of the Shanghai Conservatory from 1949 to 1984, where the next generation of modern Chinese composers was trained.

Tan Dun is part of the new generation of composers after He Luting. During the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, many young people were deprived of the chance of a formal education. Born in the late 1950s during the anti-rightist political movement, Tan did not receive any formal musical training but was sent to play in a village ensemble where he learned to play the bowed fiddle *erhu*. Not until after the end of the Cultural Revolution did Tan receive formal musical training. In the early 1980s, he trained in the Central Conservatory where he came into contact with modernist composers such as Tōru Takemitsu, Isang Yun, Chou Wen-Chung, George

Crumb, and Alexander Goehr. In 1986, he moved to New York and studied composition with Chou at Columbia University.

Tan has written work in many genres, such as opera, film music, symphonies, multi-media work, and instrumental works, all of which have a strong affiliation with Chinese music and culture. His cello concerto 'The Map' entitled 'Sounds of Traditional China Amid a Multicultural Present' is one such example in which he relies on traditional music of several Chinese regions and ethnic groups and taped sounds of ancient Chinese percussion, vocal lines, and reed instruments, as accompaniment to solo cello. Another opera featuring his form of musical modernism is his 1996 *Marco Polo* that depicts encounters between two characters, Marco and Polo (famous figures of music and literature). The opera's two sections are made up of an imaginary story and accounts from Marco Polo's travelogue. The music follows this structure and is divided into two parts. The imaginary encounters between the two characters are presented in music inspired by Peking Opera while Marco Polo's travel is presented in Western operatic style. Non-Western instruments such as the south Asian *tabla* and *sitar*, Middle Eastern *rebec*, and Chinese *pipa*, *sheng* and Tibetan singing bowl and long horn are employed in the score. It is clear that Tan is seeking to establish his own form of modernism by incorporating instruments and sounds from a variety of cultures, thereby injecting a sense of cosmopolitanism in his music. His music concerns not only what it means to be a modern Chinese, but more importantly, how to be a global modernist.

CONCLUSION

Musical modernism is alive and well in Asia. As Asia has developed in multiple directions as a geo-political center in recent years, the meaning of modernism has also shifted. With intense processes of globalization or glocalization, Asian countries are creating modernisms that are inextricably linked to the trajectories of their social development. Since the 1980s, the idea of modernism is no longer tied to European or Western culture exclusively, as seen in the Asian crazes of Japanese pop music (J-Pop) in the 1980s and Korean pop music (K-Pop) in the new millennium. What began as experiments in fusing Chinese and Western music in compositions is now a major trend in the classical music world produced by a new generation of Chinese modernist composers. The idea of modernism is more process than essence. The legacy of musical modernism will continue to be refined and redefined according to the shifting cultural and political terrains in the region. Where it is heading will only be determined by how each country values and gauges its musical specificities and sensibilities against perceived global standards.

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