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Musical Ethnography

Research Paper

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Introduction



The world music culture is vast. It requires one to have not only knowledge to a great extent, but also the sensibility and fidelity to understand and perceive the core values and aesthetic of a music culture. One from these fascinating music cultures can be quite the norm to people who worship. That is **church music**.

While most people have heard of (or even played) Western-style church music through, more or less, TV shows and they themselves. But the **Asian branch** of this church music is different. Even though **the message** they convey is generally the **same**, their **way of conveying** the message **varies** ever so often.

Similar to any church music culture, this two specific Asian church music branches namely, Vietnamese and Chinese, are performed by a **church choir** with everyday musical instruments like the **piano, guitar, drums and vocals**. The message that they convey is their **full belief in God** and **embrace God's grace**. Basically, from what they learn in a Bible study, they *paraphrase* it into a song of holy worship.

In a sense, Asian church music in the Western community (Canada) both inherits its Eastern roots and embraces the geopolitical traits of the Western culture.

Research

BRIEFLY

1. Topography

None

2. Languages

The languages of these church music cultures are Vietnamese and Chinese.

3. Ethnic groups

The ethnic group is Asian.

4. Gender roles

Both male and female play equal gender roles in the performance of music.

5. Family organization

The band members are highly likely to be filial piety to their predecessors.

6. Community life

Every Sunday morning, the church attendees gather in the main hall where they worship God through songs that are written in dedication to God.

7. Religion/Spirituality

Christianity

8. Economy

The initial purchase and the maintenance of the church relies on the church members' donations and benefactors

9. Regionalism

The Asian church music in the Western context, more specifically, Montréal, QC, CA. And how Chinese and Vietnamese differ from one another

10. History/Politics

The original church members are the first-generation refugees, from either Vietnam or China, fleeing deadly communist persecutions.

IN DETAIL

The author set out to explore the Asian church music in a Western society. More precisely, I wanted to know more about the Vietnamese and Chinese church music, how they change, evolve or differentiate themselves, in a Western society, particularly in Québec (Canada, North America). I also would like to know more how Vietnamese and Chinese church music differ from one another. Surprisingly enough, the languages of these music cultures are, in an alphabetical order, Chinese and Vietnamese. But, the reader needs to be reminded that, since these music cultures are set in a Western context, the recurring use of English and French is nevertheless inevitable.

The ethnicity of focus in this paper is Asian. Despite the fact that most people associate Asians with the rigidity of their traditions and culture and how Asians have these sets of rules, i.e. Confucianism, Taoism retained from the old feudal ages that in many ways belittle the roles of women in society, both men and women in the churches mentioned in this research paper share the same roles in church services and preparations according to each person's strengths and weaknesses. This serves to ascertain that the Western way of life, more or less, has penetrated and assimilated into their lifestyle. However, the notion of filial piety is highly apparent in this Asian culture. Every so often when a child of the church member is born, he or she is brought into this world of religion and taught how to play one or more instruments that are used in the church band. To rest my case, the children of the church members follow their family's religious belief and get into contact with the traditions at a very young age. The community life of the Asian churches is highly inclusive. The reason behind the author's claim is that the church members warmly welcome new members and

they are extremely hospitable, as in the author's case, I am even welcomed into the Bible study group and invited to join them for the Sunday church service.

Of course, without the need of further presentation or elaboration, their main goal is to honor and pray to God and Jesus which is akin to their Christian religion. While talking with the pastors, as well as the church-goers, I was able to find out that in order to have the church they have today, ordeals have to be overcome. These ordeals include the initial purchase of the church as a whole when they first settled (in Québec, Canada), the early-day maintenance of the church, and the number of church memberships and fellowships. For this project/ethnomusicology paper, I have visited a total of three churches: Chinese church, Vietnamese church and English-speaking Chinese church. The pastor of the Chinese church told me that the purchase took them 10 years to pay off with interest loans. The one at the Vietnamese church remembered that they went through 20 years after arriving in Canada to establish, purchase and renovate the church as it is today. And finally, at the English-speaking Chinese church, the pastor said that it took them 20 years to pay off a loan of CA\$600,000 with interest. As we can all see, their roads to the church they have today may be different from one another but the roads all share the similarities of hardship and difficulties. The church members claim that God has guided them to where they are now. I am not disputing their claim, but adding their claims help to elaborate the fact that the church-goers pour their hearts and souls into the songs and hymns worshipping God – their guide and savior.

During one of the many Sunday services that I had the chance to attend, I bore witness to the scene in one of the churches where people would stand up, move to the church choir's singing and wave religious flags to signal their love for Jesus and God, embracing God's grace,

so they say. When one gets the chance to simply have a glimpse of the eyes of the church-goers during their rituals, one can certainly see how important Christianity is to the church members.

FROM A SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVE

According to the www.mfiles.co.uk: *The Nature of Church Music Today*¹, church music has a wide variation depending on the country of origin. In this paper's case, we are able to differentiate the Asian church music from that of the Western world by looking at the unique, non-Western instruments used during the Asian churches' Sunday services. For example, during the Sunday service of the Chinese church, there was the use of the traditional Chinese lute (pipa, a four-string plucked instrument) which creates a transcending and longing effect towards the listeners. And in the case of the Vietnamese church, incorporating the traditional music style (ca trù or hò) into the church choir performance not only creates a sense of orienting towards the place they were born initially, but also amplifies their embrace of God². Despite the music cultures studied in this paper are localized in Montreal (CA), the same characteristics can be applied for other Asian church music in other Western civilizations. In the case of the United States of America, according to Ben Dumbauld (The Chinese Christian Church in the U.S., 2012)³, the Chinese branch of church music surfaced in the 50s with the

¹ Jim Paterson. *Nature of modern Church music*. <http://www.mfiles.co.uk/church-music-and-hymns.htm> (Date of Access: March 22nd, 2017)

² For a clearer reference to the Vietnamese Church music, we can visit this YouTube video to see how it is played out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZvnCa11b84> in real life.

³ Ben Dumbauld, 2012. Ethnomusicology Review, Volume 12: *Worship Music and Cultural Politics in the Chinese-American Church*. <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/17/piece/590>. (Date of Access: April 28th, 2017)

influxes of Taiwanese immigrants. And the same author called this Chinese music culture by the name “Chinese hymnody.”

The reader may find that this research paper is orientating more on the Chinese side, but in fact, since the mix between the Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants, as well as, the fewer Koreans and Philippians, the same can be said for all Asian origins. Collectively speaking, the Asian songs of worship is called “Asian hymnody” (C. Michael Hawn, 1999). And the article also states that “to date, most of the Asian music that appears in hymnals published in the United States comes from northeastern Asia.”

In the end, music itself is a grand topic to talk about, Asian church music is no exception. As aside from Chinese and Vietnamese, there are plenty of Asian ethnicities that are not covered in this paper. One truly has to do researches and study his/her whole life in order to somewhat grasp the gist of Asian church music. My research paper intends to widen the knowledge about the Asian community in the Western society to alleviate the discrimination and/or the long established stereotypes that are apparent in said society.

REFERENCES

The sources and articles that the author will use to extend his knowledge of subject matter, compiled in a list of URLs:

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