Commentary

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[1] Qian Rong's translation offers a new perspective to Western scholars on singing in tone languages because her article was not originally composed for an English-language audience, but addresses Mandarin text-setting for a Mandarin-speaking audience. Most English-language scholarship on text-setting in tone languages must introduce and explain the language and the music within the same text. As English is not a tone language, the concerns seem peculiar, even exotic, and the authors' perspectives often have a colonial slant—people of European descent addressing cultures of colonized lands, including central and northern America and southern and western Africa. Meanwhile, most English-language literature on text-setting in a Sinitic (Chinese) language has been on Cantonese music. This is unsurprising because Hong Kong was a British Colony from 1841 to 1997. The literature on Cantonese vocal music has covered both traditional (pre-colonial) and popular (post-colonial) styles.

[2] Yuen-ren Chao was the first to write about Mandarin text-setting in English (to my knowledge) and has, therefore, had a profound influence on global scholarly thought on the subject. Chao noted that speech-like genres, such as vendors' cries and children's rhymes, show stricter tone-melody alignment than musical genres (Chao 1956). Chao's observations were later confirmed using statistical approaches: mismatches between tone and melody are common in both traditional opera (Stock 1999) and popular music (Wong 2002). However, in Cantonese, high degrees of correspondence were found in both popular music (Chan 1987; Wong 2002) as well as traditional opera (Yung 1983; Yung 1991). These findings have been supported repeatedly since then (including in this journal, Li 2021).

[3] James Kirby (2022, 226) explains the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin text settings this way:

> To the extent that texts involving contour tones will more frequently result in non-similar settings, Cantonese lyricists are at a distinct advantage, given that syllables bearing contour tones make up a rather smaller proportion of the lexicon. In Mandarin, on the other hand, it is much more difficult to compose a text of any sort without making extensive use of contour tones.

[4] Kirby's observations about contour tones are consistent with a recent article comparing two unrelated ethnolinguistic cultures, Cantonese and Yoruba (West Africa), co-authored by myself, Edwin Li, and David Aina. We found many commonalities in text setting between the popular music of the two cultures. Moreover, we argue that a prevalence of level tones and their compatibility with global trends in music production may explain the similarity between the two disparate cultures (Li, Carter-Ényì and Aina 2024). They also share a point of sociocultural similarity: in both cases, ethnic language is used to distinguish the

artists and their listeners from a larger, national identity (i.e., distinguishing Hong Kong from China and Yorubaland from Nigeria).

[5] If current Cantonese and Yoruba musicians continue to embrace their languages as central to their ethnic identities while rapidly adapting to music technology and global trends, what is the status of Mandarin? Qian does not address the direction of Mandopop (as Mandarin-language popular music is often called) but Chinese traditional music. Her work on "'yùeshūo 樂說' in Chinese Vocal Music 中国"乐说"研究," a special research project of "Unpopular and Esoteric Projects" 冷门"绝学"和国别史等研究专项, was supported by the National Social Science fund 国家社会科学基金 in 2019. Although it may not be popular, traditional music is a priority of both the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where Qian works, and the Chinese government. The Chinese government has enthusiastically embraced UNESCO's World Heritage programs and since 2008, successfully nominated forty-three instances of Intangible Cultural Heritage to the representative list (the United States has not contributed). Positioned as a scholar of traditional music, Qian advocated for "语言音乐学" (literally "linguistic musicology" but connotatively "linguistics of music") and in 2020 helped to establish a center for post-doctoral studies in linguistics of music at the Institute of Musicology in the Central Conservatory of Music.

[6] According to Qian, "Mainstream research has furthermore ignored the sheer regional diversity of these entangled vocal musics and languages" and advocates for "Tracing the source of "Xiang Yun 鄉韻 (regional musical charm)" (¶1.21) as a top priority for further research. There is little doubt that there is a rich variety of sounds found in a country so geographically vast and culturally diverse. Cantonese and Mandarin represent just two of nine dialect clusters of Sinitic languages, while English-language research has only recently expanded to the Min dialects through work on Chaozhou songs by Xi Zhang and Ian Cross (2021). Thinking about the variety of sounds one hears in different villages within even a shared ethnic identity, I am reminded of research on the Ekiti people. The Ekiti are known among the Yoruba for having specific melodic and harmonic practices and for harmonizing melodies with seconds as opposed to thirds or fourths. This work points to a history in which the Ekiti might not have seen themselves as Yoruba before cultural consolidation (for the sake of missionization) during the colonial era (Waterman 1990).

[7] Although text-setting in tone languages has been written about in international journals for over a century, it is a topic that cannot be exhausted because of what Qian calls "regional charm." Thus the conclusion that Cantopop follows lexical tones while Mandopop does not (e.g., Kirby 2022), while likely correct at a coarse level, does not reflect the granularity with which Qian is thinking. Even within the same language, there is dialectical variation and seemingly infinite possibilities for how lyrics may be interpreted musically. Individual or regional/collective approaches to text setting are an important aspect of musical style and evolve over time. The influence of sung words on vocal melodies is persistent but malleable, much like the beat or chord figurations, or guitar effects. Such change is reflected in Edwin Li's (2021) research on Cantopop, which offers the apt heuristic for understanding tone-language singing as if viewing the contours of language through an anamorphic lens. Li's analogy that different cultures and different times call for different aspect ratios holds true in Qian's account of the need to understand "regional charm" in setting chàngcí (lyrics/libretto).[1]

[8] The correspondence between linguistic tones and melodic intervals (especially the directional component), which has been the main focus of much research on vocal music in tone languages, is only a part of Qian's thorough research agenda for linguistics of music. While the influence of tonal trajectories in regional chàngcí 唱詞 (lyrics) on chàngqiāng 唱腔 (vocal music) is the first of her Six Key Points of Implicit Musical Signs, there are also five more such key points, in addition to her Six Key Points of Explicit Musical Signs. Many of the Dual Six Key Points are familiar from the thinking of composers in West Africa (e.g., Ekwueme, Euba, Nketia, Euba, Oluranti). For example, there is a key point that addresses "padding words," which I assume are vocables, alliterative, or "nonsense" syllables. Another key point, "The influence of changes in syllabic count or syntactic structure in chàngcí 唱詞 on chàngqiāng 唱腔" (¶1.19) is a reminder of how fraught the linguistic analysis of lyrics and vocal music can be, because lyrics are not natural speech.

[9] Qian's attention to Sinitic traditional music and its regional varieties diverges from scholarship on Mandarin opera and popular music, which has been the focus of English-language scholarship on Mandarin vocal music. But the challenge is how to analyze this music. She advocates for the use of IPA. For example, her Shuang Yin Vocal Notation includes an IPA text with tone notation under (Western) staff notation. The author acknowledges that IPA was first developed in the UK in the 19th century but rhetorically asks, "When a foreign cultural product is conducive to the preservation of our local multi-cultural characteristics,

why not put the foreign concept into practice?" (¶1.25) Qian pushes for the use of IPA because *pinyin* was designed specifically for Mandarin and cannot capture the full range of sounds of other Sinitic tongues. But what of staff notation's ability to represent traditional music? Staff notation has not presented an issue with studies of Mandopop or Cantopop because of their conformity to diatonic keys, but for locally-made instruments, surely this would no longer be the case. Notation remains a debated topic within American music research, as addressed in Kofi Agawu's 2015 keynote to the Society for Music Theory.

[10] It seems there may be widespread acceptance of standard music notation for music analysis in China because Qian leaves the problem unmentioned. Instead, the analytical problem Qian points to is that "Being influenced by the existing institutional education, musicians have been taking the methods of analyzing musical notes as the mainstream of music analysis and ignoring the relationship between vocal musics and language." (¶1.20) Qian's musical example is accompanied by a plot in which the y-axis is semitones and there are no diagonal lines. Clearly, this plot is an interpretation of a score and not of a performance and assumes that the transcription (which is from another of the author's works, according to note 9) has all the pertinent data recorded. My inclination, partially based on recent findings by Schellenberg and Gick (2020) and Li (2021) on Cantonese, is that aspects of the text (chàngcí) are found in microtonal variations within the singing voice. Yet, these microtonal variations are not included in what might be accepted as an accurate transcription of the melody. My opinion is that the chàngqiāng (vocal music) is to be found in the recorded voice rather than in the transcription because it is the former that includes the vocal inflections.

[11] While the IPA vs. *pinyin* debate may not be familiar to most Western scholars, another debate within Chinese music research revealed in Qian's article may feel closer to home:

> At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, ethnomusicology from abroad introduced into musicological circles in mainland China a trend towards writing "thick description" of music as culture. (¶2.5)

Apparently, there was a reaction by some against this Geertzian turn, perhaps along the lines of what Agawu writes in his 2004 article, "How We Got out of Analysis and How to Get Back in Again." China may not have the same institutionalized branches of music research as the US has (indeed much of Europe does not divide music research to the same extent either), but the quandary between and within ethnomusicology and music theory is familiar. Qian argues that the disconnect between music analysis and thick description (ethnography) may be bridged by the linguistics of music. Indeed, analyzing language requires digging into ethnicity and culture in a way that analysis of non-linguistic sounds does not.

[12] Qian's article does not demonstrate so much as prescribe, so I hope that rich data and analysis will be forthcoming for English-language audiences. Still, what she prescribes is promising, especially as the discipline of music theory engages this topic more deeply. Qian's article advances the argument that singing in tone languages is not a peculiarity for Chinese music research but should be at the heart of music analysis. I'm glad for Qian's perspective, as recent English-language scholarship on this topic has remained largely in the domain of linguists. Many ethnomusicologists have eschewed formal analysis of this type, and within music theory, interest in lyrics (chàngcí) and vocal music (chàngqiāng) in tone language cultures has largely been advanced by two people (Edwin Li and myself). As we, or if we, as a field, decide to delve deeper into this area, Qian's expansive list of key points and thematizations of this research would serve us well.

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Footnotes

1. Qian's explanation of chàngcí: "Among all genres of vocal music, the element involving spoken sounds is known as chàngcí 唱詞 (literally, "sung words"). That is, what is in opera known as 'libretto' and in songs known as 'lyrics' are in a more general sense for all vocal genres collectively known as chàngcí" (note 5). Return to text

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