

**Adam Kielman**

***Sonic Mobilities: Producing Worlds in Southern China***

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 200 pages. Hardcover, \$95.00; paperback, \$27.50; ebook \$26.99. ISBN 9780226817743 (hardcover), 9780226817804 (paperback), 9780226817798 (ebook).

*Sonic Mobilities* joins and contributes to a growing body of works that explore transnational musical flows, both contemporary and historical, in coastal China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, such as Andrew Jones's *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (2001) and *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s* (2020). Through an engaging examination of the lives, performances, and recordings of two bands based in Guangzhou, the book "theorizes musics on the move by examining the actual and vicarious mobilities inherent in cosmopolitan musical worlds" (14). In doing so, it highlights how such mobilities provide a balance between "local place-based identities," which "continue to be salient anchors in contemporary subjectivities" (12), and the "unmooring of music from place, nation, identity, and emplaced subjectivities" (13). The examples that emerge show how cosmopolitan musicians from different places in southern China fuse together genres and dialects from different places and groups of people to create new meanings and provide musical expressions for evolving identities. By looking at the different contexts through which the various meanings of the musics are produced, including the dialects in which songs are sung and the sonic infrastructures through which the songs are circulated, the book illustrates how these musicians perform poetic evocations of their hometowns while grappling with broader social issues related to China's rapid urban migration and other factors.

The book's author, Adam Kielman, brings a wealth of experience to this subject. As an ethnomusicologist, jazz saxophonist, recording engineer, and co-founder of the Guangzhou-based band San Duojiao that "blended musical traditions of the Bulang, Wa, Hani, Dai, and Lahu minorities with reggae, dub, jazz, and electronic music," Kielman has unique access to the people he writes about "as a fellow musician, recording engineer, and business partner" (20). Throughout the book, Kielman offers vivid evocations of places where "musicking" (cf. Small 1998) occurs, ranging from recording studios to small and large venues. Clearly positioning himself as a participant in the community of musicians, sound engineers, audiences, and businesses he describes, Kielman provides the reader with a unique vantage point into this world, allowing us access to many of the issues affecting its key players in the book's ethnographic present (c. 2014).

The book's introduction looks at broader issues of musical cosmopolitanism and ways that real and imagined mobilities allow people to rethink perceived connections between music and place. Set mainly in Guangzhou, a city with a rich history of witnessing mobilities in China's global interactions as it evolved "from a worldly metropolis in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) to the exclusive international port in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE) to a relatively liberal and open city at the heart of China's reforms beginning in the 1980s" (19), the book examines two bands that, according to Kielman, form part of "a broader cohort of musicians who have coalesced in China's third largest city over the past decade and who participate in a flourishing scene of independent music in southern China that has galvanized in recent years as an important counterpart to both the mainstream Chinese popular music industry and to well-received independent rock and folk scenes centered in Beijing" (3).

The first band, Wanju Chuanzhang (“Toy Captain”), “performs a self-described ‘island mix’ of poppy, Latin-infused music sung in Min subdialect spoken on Nan’ao Dao, a small island off the southeast coast of China” (3). Its members came to Guangzhou from rural Guangdong Province, Guizhou Province, and Nan’ao Dao. The second band, Mabang (frequently translated as “caravan”), is comprised of members from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan Provinces, who play “a blend of folk, rock, and reggae peppered with elements from folk musics of southern China and *caidiao* opera from Guangxi Province” (ibid.). Their songs, performed in a subdialect of Mandarin from the outskirts of Liuzhou, Guangxi Province, are “about local life in Guangxi, depicting country fairs, rural life, and song and dance” (ibid.). According to Kielman, Mabang’s music “evokes China’s southwest, borderlands, cosmopolitanisms, movement, masculinity, and depictions of ancient China” (28). The band’s official bio suggests that it combines elements of southern Chinese folksongs, regional opera from Guangxi province in China’s southwest, and “rock, reggae, ska, and other elements” to produce “a unique Southern branch world music” (33).

Chapter 2 builds on Kielman’s unique access as a recording engineer and musician, along with a growing tradition of ethnographies of the recording studio, to look at the creative processes behind the recording, mixing, and production of Mabang’s debut album and the evolving ways in which the band was promoted over time by its record company. Kielman’s goal here is “to listen through the recording studio’s control room to the interplay between structure and agency that permeates discussions around and enactments of musical genre in the popular music field in contemporary southern China and attend to the ways that such negotiations mediate broader constellations of cosmopolitanism, mobilities, space, and place” (25–26). In tracing the evolution of the band’s identity, we see a fascinating shift from the band’s earlier self-description as “folk” (*minyao*) (27) to the record label’s later genre-framing as “Southern branch world music” (*Nanpai shijie yinyue*) (31). Kielman’s technical knowledge as a recording engineer shines through in his ethnographically and technically detailed description of how Mabang’s music was produced in the studio, with attention paid to the setup of the physical space, the hardware used, the positioning of microphones for the drums, the decisions involved in how the bass and vocals were recorded, and so on. Looking at the processes through which these myriad decisions were negotiated, the chapter shows how, rather than seeing record executives dominate the production and marketing of “world music” through a top-down approach, we instead see ways in which the conversations and disagreements between band members and record executives regarding marketing and musical/vocal aesthetics sometimes generated “new configurations of musical cosmopolitanism” (48).

Chapter 3 turns to the other band, Wanju Chuanzhang, looking at how their brand of “ocean folk” music (*haiyang minyao*) acts as “a form of cosmopolitan engagement with global island cultures wherein musical elements, timbres, rhythms, and stylistic conventions from reggae, salsa, flamenco, and other musics are resignified in creative ways that consciously attend to issues of mobility, space, and place” (52). Kielman argues that “Wanju Chuanzhang situates their music as expressive of both Nan’ao Island in particular and of a deterritorialized ‘island and beach culture’ in general” (55). He then does a careful musical and lyrical analysis of three of their songs—“Beach Party,” “Mister Curlyhair,” and “A Secret in the Bottom of the Incense Burner”—looking at how they negotiate themes ranging from romanticized portraits of beach life to darker critiques of “the personal and familial repercussion(s) of a neoliberalizing economy where migrant workers move far from home in search of economic opportunity” (60). Kielman concludes

the chapter by examining how the group's "ocean folk" music draws on and resignifies what they refer to as "Latin music" (*lading yinyue*), which, in their usage, connotes "a broad and porous assemblage that encompasses various Afro-Caribbean-derived popular musics traditionally associated with the English term *latin music* as well as Jamaican reggae and flamenco-pop fusions such as the Gypsy Kings" (66).

Chapter 4 looks at the cultural politics involved in several Guangzhou-based bands singing in dialects and languages that their audiences may or may not understand. Beginning with a description of a night's performances at a particular music venue, we see various examples of "the intersecting aesthetic and political dimensions of the use of *fangyan*—alternatively translated as dialects, local languages, or topolects" (69). Mabang performs songs in the southwestern subdialect of Mandarin (Guiliuhua) spoken in the singer's hometown Liuzhou, in Guangxi Province; Wanju Chuanzhang performs songs in the southern Min subdialect that is spoken on Nan'ao Island; a third band, San Duojiang, in which Kielman performs, sings songs in the Yunnan dialect of Mandarin as well as several minority languages from the region. Examining the use of such diverse languages, dialects, and topolects within China's contemporary politics of language, Kielman notes how such performances are often viewed as challenges to national linguistic hegemony, before ultimately concluding that "the use of dialects by these bands serves to express the local not as a particular place but as a nostalgic feeling of home connecting multiple locations and experiences in southern China through the cosmopolitan hub of Guangzhou" (79). The bands offer various opportunities for audiences to engage with the lyrics, whether through translated liner notes accompanying their recordings and booklets handed out during performances, or the use of "simple, repetitive language in a calculated linguistic tactic to make the dialect, and the local, comprehensible to a wider audience" (85). Audiences, in turn, choose how they want to engage with the lyrics, either attempting to decode them or just enjoying the texture of their musicality.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at the musical lives of the members of the two bands at the heart of the book—Mabang and Wanju Chuanzhang. Kielman's choice to include these two collections of band member biographies is an interesting approach that highlights the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that come together in these contemporary musical entities, while at the same time joining earlier Chinese popular music biographies that have tended to focus on individual artists, such as those detailed in Helen Rees's *Lives in Chinese Music* (2009) and Andrew F. Jones's *Like a Knife* (1992) and *Circuit Listening* (2020). As Kielman notes, "Examining musical lives in contemporary China means unraveling intersections of personal histories, national histories, cosmopolitan formations, and musical creativity," and those intersections highlight "the role of individual agency and expressive culture in broader cultural shifts and . . . the lived and subjective dimensions of cosmopolitanisms and mobilities that are self-reflexively grappled with in part through listening to and producing music" (92–93). Of particular note in the life stories that Kielman uncovers is the ways in which band members' listening to a variety of musics acted as "a form of vicarious mobility, where the auditory experience was intertwined with imagined travel" and led to actual movements, newly permitted following Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up," so that "vicarious mobility and actual mobility are woven together through their musical lives" (135). At the same time, Kielman is cognizant of the "stark contrasts in class backgrounds . . . that influenced the paths members traveled to becoming musicians in Guangzhou," showing how the

diverse experiences and backgrounds of these musicians “bring attention to the ways that geographic mobility intersects with class mobility” (132).

Chapter 7 looks at how different forms of media—socialist-era wired radio, cutout discs (*dakou die*, i.e., surplus CDs and other types of media) in the 1980s and 1990s, and so on—have affected ways in which music is consumed and heard. Kielman uses the term “sonic infrastructures” to capture the way in which “music changes alongside the mediums through which it travels” (140), referring to

the technical infrastructures that transmit mediated sounds, from copper wires to compact discs to online platforms; the political systems that contextualize and promote certain sounds; the informal social relationships that bring musicians and listeners together in new places; the corporate relationships that seek to influence what is heard, where, when, and by whom; and even the high-speed railroads that transport musicians on tour (141).

Furthermore, he notes that these elements are nested within the economic, political, and cultural developments that China has experienced over the past fifty years. Having traced how these earlier forms of media influenced spatial forms of listening, Kielman then turns to an extended discussion of the sonic infrastructures involved in the distribution and promotion of these two bands’ music by Xingwaixing Records. Detailing the record company’s sublabel for independent bands Liuzhen Yinyue and the company’s social networking site YYQ.com, Kielman argues that these infrastructures “build on and further enable actual and vicarious mobilities that connect smaller cities and rural areas to major urban centers” (157). In addition, he posits that there is a parallel between the translocal qualities of the musics themselves and the sonic infrastructures that transmit and support them. He writes, “In the case of each of the bands, the music itself articulates new modes of spatial belonging that are mirrored by the sonic infrastructures through which the music reaches listeners, modes that may broadly be termed *translocal*, implying a capacity to belong to multiple places and a mode of existence between places” (155).

As the author points out in the book’s epilogue, this study, with its focus on southern, cosmopolitan, and transnational musics, adds to and extends previous literature on popular music in contemporary China, which has largely focused on rock music from Beijing and northern China, albeit with some exceptions, and “hegemony/resistance models and approaches from cultural studies in understanding music’s relationship to state power” (164). Given the book’s combination of ethnographic depth and theoretical breadth, it would make a welcome addition to undergraduate courses on Chinese popular music, world music, and those that examine the transnational flow of culture productions more broadly.

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