

# “WHY CAN’T WE SING TOGETHER?”

## REVIEWING THE ACTIVITIES OF SOUNDATE

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The title says what I want to talk about: why can’t we sing together, that’s a very abstract way of talk, I don’t really mean that we shall sing a real song together, Just give you a short explanation, so, who are we?

Here, I take the opportunity to introduce a new creative company in Shanghai. This conference about recording and archiving states clearly that both activities are an important work of any musicologist, ethnomusicologist, and librarian. However, I think that many people from different occupations or identities, including the ethnomusicologist, also the artists, film directors, musicians, and specific manufacturers, these all share the same interest in music and sound recording.

That is part of the meaning with ‘sing together’. Looking back into the history of ethnomusicology, scholars often took a one-way research method as I was taught: we go to do a field work, we observe our research subject, then we come back to write a paper or book, we produce the knowledge of what we think. Here, I will review several collaborations involving the young creative company SounDate, mainly research collaboration or research based on and generating filming and recording from different perspectives. The term ‘young creators’ refers to people in my age born between the 1980s to 1990s now doing field recordings and archiving not only in academic institutions or national departments, but also in the creative industry. They try to transform their recordings into something usefully applied on a sustainable level. These young creators play a very important role in sharing music and sound, in passing over different kinds of knowledge, to let “us” sing together.

For instance, Wei Xiaoshi<sup>1</sup>. His recent ‘publication’ is a sound archive documenting a very famous Uyghur musician. Also the Ban’du music studio in Shanghai, based in a creative space of Shanghai, regularly organizes music performances of specific Chinese music 民乐.<sup>2</sup> The studio’s founder Liu Sing used to be a Chinese zither player. His team also published traditional music recordings such as the Dongzu Dage.<sup>3</sup> Now, I use this chance to introduce some projects that I and my company have been done as an example of the young creator’s work.

I’m currently running my own Cultural Communication company Soundate, in Chinese is 行走的耳朵 it means walking ears, with my business partner. One thing that is very positive for us: from this year we start to make a profit in order to support our upcoming projects and also ourselves.

We founded SounDate in 2012, and on our website, we defined our goal as: ‘to discover the possibilities and build a bridge between academic and public knowledge, also to communicate among traditional, popular, and sub culture, to find our own way to push forward a sustainable cultural and ecological development. Furthermore, to deliver our thoughts about the society, the globe, and the universe through music and sound’.

The projects we’ve been doing included ethnographic films, oral history interviews, field recordings, music

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<sup>1</sup> Who is right now running his own record label Tashi.

<sup>2</sup> Min Yue, derived from Min Zu Yin Yue, is a specific term for a kind of academic or classical Chinese music played on reputed instruments. Its informal character is often seen as an official naming (Lau 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For more information: Ingram (2012).

recordings, organizing live performances and music festivals, workshops and exhibitions. In some of these activities we cooperated with academic institutions, and regarding some of them we worked with purely commercial companies.

From 2013 until now, our fieldwork and ethnographic filming projects have been covering some areas in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang for multi part music and soundscape of Mongol, Kyrgyz, Khazak and Tuvan, and many other places all over the country (Figure 1).

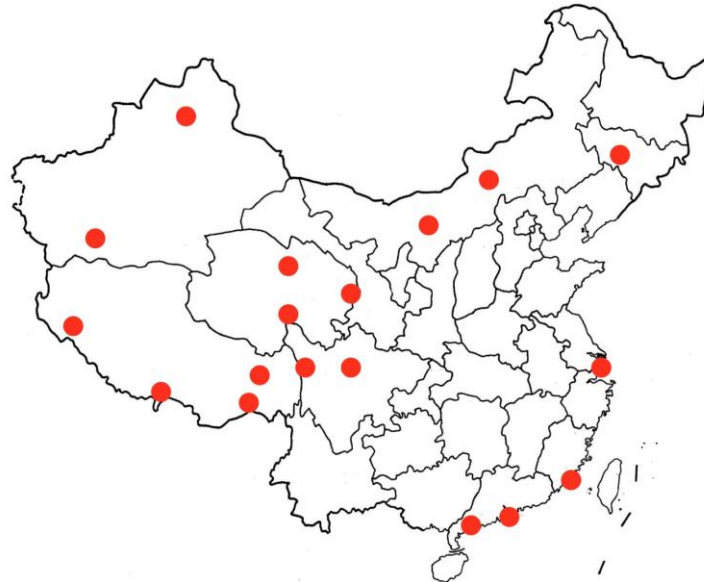


FIGURE 1: Map scheme of recording spots.

For the activities part, we've been continuously cooperate with

- SMG, Shanghai Media Group from 2015
- Shanghai Danology Institute
- local galleries/天地人神
- with Korean, Zhuang, and Yao musicians and scholars,
- at Power Station of Art (PSA) in cooperation with Shanghai Conservatory of Music (SCM) where the performances are open to the public.

It seems that we are working in many different areas. Most of the time, a cultural based company will focus only on events or only on film production. It is not very easy to do everything together and do it well. Nevertheless our projects are all well connected. There's an example:

From 2013, we started an ethnographic film project named "Sounding Nomad" with Shanghai conservatory of music, University of Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang Normal University. The main purpose was to research the local soundscape and multi part music including different types of vocal and instrumental music being practiced in the golden steppe of China.

Except shooting the ethnographic film, we also invited musicians that we met from our fieldwork, to have workshops and performances along our tour.

In some cases, we were inviting musicians who usually do not perform on stage, however, we tried to make them feel comfortable with it. In a music festival we wish to have experienced musicians, who are used to perform on stage either in their community or in front of others. Then we also invite music makers to do experimentally music on a transformed stage that does not look really like a conventional stage but like a mourning hall or a big room. This difference is necessary in order to get an active feedback within the

communities. This work is important to let the performing people and the audience getting into a dialog of mutual acknowledgement. The exchange reaches even the emotional level between musicians and audience. We asked the performers to perform freely without thinking of the rather unfamiliar context. They were purposely not guided into a stage situation.

We are also involved in the “Concert on The Green”<sup>4</sup> since 2015, which is annually held in May. This large music festival was last year fully directed and executed by us. It is the first open-air classical music festival in China, and since Soundate participates in the team, we successfully established our own stage and bring different yet to be promoted kinds of music to the festival.

In 2017, we collaborated with the automobile company Chevrolet and World Music Shanghai. We went with them on a road trip in the western part of China: Xinjiang\Tibet\Sichuan and Qinghai. Chevrolet usually does road trips when launching a new car type. This time, they wanted to increase the attraction by taking us with them to collect cultural elements along the road they traveled in order to introduce their new product. The Chevrolet was the first car using a music player in their cars and the company wanted to connect to this historical feature. This is the reason why they thought of our company. For the company, the main point was to get financial support for other projects. Also, we could collect music following the randomly chosen road.

We cooperated together for a documentary of which the main theme was music and sound. So, our role in this complex team was to lead the team to find different kinds of music and soundscapes throughout the journey, and for us, it's our chance to get the recordings for research and later communication.

Unavoidably disappointing was the fact that the music producers hired by the company Chevrolet were not within our scope of ethics towards the people of which we collected the sound. The customer imposed a music taste on us we did not like to accommodate. Yet, we needed the financial support.

So, after the trip we finished our documentary, yet we still have to deal with the sound we have recorded so far. Also, as I mentioned in the very beginning, we want to find our way to connect with the society, especially with the people's lives in the cities, those being affected by mass population. We want to attract the people with real stories and a bit of an academic background, but we did not want to deliver just another kind of entertainment. Therefore, we made an exhibition in Xintiandi, one of the top tourist sites in Shanghai, during the national holidays. The exhibition was sponsored by the first World Music Festival: World Music Shanghai.



FIGURE 2: Arranged exhibition in Xintiandi.

The content of the exhibition are the photographs we have been taking during our road trip, and the visitor will find a QR code on every photo description in order to read more about each item. Also, after you scan this QR code with your mobile phone, you are able to listen to the recording from our road trip, and hear

<sup>4</sup> For more information: <http://concertonthegreen.com/> (Last accessed 12 June, 2018).

about the story behind the photography and recording. The company Sonos supported us with their amplifiers to play parts of our selected recordings in high quality.

We are thankful for any feedback, ideas, and directions.

## References

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