

THE YANDUN DAGU STORY: A SHORT FIELD REPORT REVIEW

Gisa Jähnichen

Abstract

This brief field report review is based on a short-term observation in 2019 and the discussion with attending field work participants regarding reasonings for changes in the construction of Yandun Daggu and the way performances are organized. The focus of the report includes some observations on the fringe of any fieldwork and thoughts about the social sense in the survival of musical instruments.

Keywords

Chinese Drums, Yandun Daggu, Guangxi Culture, Instrument Production, Performance Practice

INTRODUCTION

On the way into a future of things and no-things, this very short essay will help to clarify the urgent necessity to keep to facts, either historical or social, in order to move the understanding of human relationships from reacting to a pro-active approach to the arts that is not only valuing the outcoming objects, the drums build in Yandun (Chen Hongbo, 2016), but also the people's ideas about it and the history making them what they are.

Lu Song is a young researcher coming from Hunan. He is proud of being from Hunan though he cannot name one single thing that makes him specifically proud of it except some food. Whatsoever, this is a normal story nowadays. Everybody seems to be in need of being proud of something: relatives, parents, children, birth places, nations, food, songs, languages, and many more. People were in long term trained to develop this kind of attachment to elements of human culture they do not directly comprehend. Although this also applies to Lu Song, he is seemingly very curious and tries his best to qualify for an expert in his field: ethnomusicology.

In order to complete his fieldwork notes, I had the great opportunity to accompany him to Yandun, a place not far from Nanning. Taking a two-hour bus ride and a short trip on a motorbike, the famous drum maker's home was reached. Here, one of many small problems started. While being a proud Hunanese, Lu Song had to clearly understand the pride of a Yandun drum maker, of Yandun drummers, and of Yandun villagers. He had to split his own local rootedness with his professional interest in another local rootedness. And, in writing, he is going to promote a local rootedness that is not his own. Once such a young student starts to explore a specific topic in order to find out what makes others being proud of what they name, then this issue rapidly changes its dynamics. Nevertheless, it seems still too early to feel the urge of questioning the purpose of any pride and turn towards some rather non-dividing facts.

THE FACTS

The Yandun Daggu is a phenomenon (Golany 2001:87) of producing an extra-large drum conducted in order to have a tool of communication crossing valleys. Also, it is a competitive tool in celebrating festivals, the start and end of journeys or similar important events.¹ In times of the internet, the communication function is rather obsolete. The size only matters in the eyes of the stranger. Here is one point of observation: Who actually are the strangers and who are the insiders of this kind of drum

¹ I an article about the Sebbang of the Bidayuh in Sarawak, I wrote together with the audiovisual archive curator of the Sarawak Museum, Beddie Frank, on a similar function of drums and the impossibility to attach the taboos of "not-playing" to an object that is promoted (Jähnichen & Frank, 2015). Other problems are reported by Australian researchers on gender and age-based taboos of "listening-to" specific recordings (Musgrave & Thieberger, 2006).

production? The insiders are the drum makers and some of the players who know more or less of the history that these drums can reveal. This is just a handful of people. All others, especially people coming from as far as from Hunan or even from Shanghai, are strangers to the tangible object and mainly to the intangible knowledge the object represents. To them, it is just a big drum that can be hit and makes an unbearable noise.



FIGURE 1 (from left to right and from above to below): Damaged drum skin in the exhibition of the Guangxi University's (GXAU) Museum Hall for Ethnic Music; FIGURE 2: Two persons attaching the skin with the green plastic rope to the body of the instrument; FIGURE 3: Size matters – different Yandun Dagus examples, some for playing them some for selling yet still well-sounding; FIGURE 4: Historical picture exhibited in GXAU to explain the traditional attraction of the Yandun Dagus.²

² Photographs in |Figure 1-3 by the author. Figure 4 courtesy of GXAU Museum of Ethnic Music.

While the size does not matter anymore for communication, the drum is increasingly downsized in order to accommodate the wishes of strangers who want to own one of these drums. This is, from the perspective of history another sign of strangeness, since these drums were most of the time played in groups. It is a bit as selling the single keys of a piano to strangers without them having a piano culture. They can put them in a glass cabinet and enjoy the fragmented object from all sides.

While downsizing the drums, the drum maker still does not give up on the construction of a good sound. He is willing to construct the drums with an acceptable acoustic outcome. So, he is not compromising the skin quality, nor the attachment of the skin to the body. Nevertheless, he created a big problem by following the current tendency of using artificial ropes for tightening the skin over the body. These green colored ropes of plastic are not really elastic and are chosen to reflect the fresh bamboo that was once used in the past. Natural bamboo stripes can be created from the bamboo skin of long knotted types of bamboo growing in the surrounding area, especially along small lakes and waterways in the soft valleys of Yandun. However, while these natural stripes are losing their green color after a few days, the green artificial ropes stay strong and do not adjust easily to the behavior of the skin. They live even longer than the skin that is often attacked by rodents.³ If so, the ropes have to be changed as well since they only fit the single skin on an instrument and cannot be recycled. Therefore, the reason given that the plastic ropes would replace bamboo for durability cannot be taken seriously. They only ease the way of production but not the way of maintenance. That means that not every improvement is contributing to the life of an instrument.

CURRENT PROBLEMS

Here, the first important problem is named, which is that of the instrument production: the life of an instrument and its entire contents is not properly defined. Any instrument can be affected by this approach. This is visible in many undertakings that focus strongly on the material features and their production yet little attention is paid to the entire story, the real use, the changes, the events of a musical instrument in its changing environment.

The second important problem is the prevalent abstraction⁴ from different time periods. While specific time periods in other contexts are often exactly given or even exaggeratedly emphasized, in the case of instrument construction, those time periods are rather undervalued. However, repertoires, purposes, ensemble arrangements, qualification of musicians, the way of instruction, and the construction of the instruments are very much dependent on each other. A better understanding of only one of these historically different issues would help improve the view on instrument construction in present times as well as in the future.

And the third big problem might be the fact of ignoring the personal attachment to the object of a musical instrument. As in the case of the Yandun drum, when in the past⁵ each rich family or a family clan owned at least one Daggu, these people were always considering to play their own drum together with the drums of other family clans. This considering of sound and fitness of the players is an element of the instrument's life. It makes people thinking in a joint way of understanding and code their behavior towards the musical instrument. This coding is missed today in many ways. So, the musical instruments will have been already reduced to their current arbitrary existence as material objects. Anyone can come along and buy a single drum of any size that fits the transport vehicle.

In order to prevent the end of the Daggu's life and the Daggu becoming a pure commercial item which is freed from place and time, drums may have to re-establish their own taboos and restrictions. If only

³ In one case, mice were attacking and eating off the skin at its thinnest parts which is directly between the holes for the tightening pegs inserted in a circle around the edge of the body. The skin got loose and had to be repaired with glue. This happened in a storage building of the Guangxi University of the Arts in Nanning between 2015 and 2017. Nowadays, this is a problem that also often appears in Yandun (Lu Song and Jähnichen, 2019).

⁴ Here, abstraction is related to both encapsulation and data hiding in regard of viewing the item in its changing characteristics. It means mainly that the item is seen as a static object of research and denies flexibility towards any of the named essentials. This phenomenon applies on external observations documented in academic writings (Furniss, 2006; Golany, 2001).

⁵ The past means in this case the time before 1979. Further back, nobody can remember.

Dagu (meaning very big drums) could make the job in the past, they should be kept alive for all the still existing events. For people, who just admire the sound or shape, small souvenir drums that do not sound well or at all, can be a good solution since they will never be seriously played as they would have to when keeping to their social functioning. The middle-sized compromises are actually the one who cut off the life of the big drums and create a mediocre understanding that does not respect the past and does not help the future of these highly interesting drums.

OUTLOOK

Lu Song, the young researcher may have to further focus on what changed the people by interacting with the material presence of the Yandun Dagū, what makes these people being proud of the big drums but not really comprehending their past history, and what has to be done for the survival of them despite changing into items of heritage care. Once he could find some answers to these questions, he might be in another mood of being proud. I cannot but wishing him sticking to the facts and voicing out the uncomfortable truth of changes that could make him successful in overcoming current social short-term preferences. The story of the Yandun Dagū would be without purpose if the story could not have an impact on at least this young researcher's understanding.

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Gisa Jähnichen, Prof. Dr. at Shanghai Conservatory of Music, is working on Southeast Asian music practices, sound ecology, and audiovisual archiving.

Contact: gisajaehnichen[@]web.de