Chinese Tom-toms and Jazz: The Cultural Assemblage of the Early Drum Kit

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Introduction

Music research has done much to comprehend exoticism in musical presentation and representation, and often applies a Saidian critique of Orientalism as a closely related notion (Cohen et al 2016). Such critical discussion has been especially linked to analyses of appropriation, representation, positionality, and power relationships. In this context, postcolonial approaches have explored exotica to show that not only music, but also "words, visual images, stage action, and other extra-musical features" can signify cultures as Others (Locke 2008, 334; see also 2009). Taylor (2007), for instance, notes in his book *Beyond Exoticism* that power has everything to do with exoticism: that is, "systems of domination and oppression, and about who has had the power of representation of Others in music" (p. 1).

I refer to the notion of assemblage in two interconnected ways: (1) in connection with the assemblage of instruments from diverse sources as a cultural recontextualization and confluence in the creation of the drum set; and (2) in connection with the importance of the transformative fluidity of the drum set in terms of cultural meaning inherent in its process of creating culture as a result of the meeting of diverse cultural flows at any one time.

Chinese Tom-Tom

The main names for the instrument that is the focus of this paper are Chinese tom-tom and Chee-foo tom-tom. Each name, which also often uses the term drum as a suffix, or tom as a shortened label, depicts the perceived national or cultural origins of the instrument, and are names connected with a type of drum that was commonly included in the early trap set that comprised drums, cymbals, and various other types of sound-producing objects. The term Chinese tom is an exonym (a name given by outsiders), but in China there are a number of specific drum types with their own distinct names. The term Chee-foo tom (or drum) implies an endonym (a local name), but this term is actually an exonym.

While the label Chinese tom signifies the instrument's Chinese roots, the term Chee-foo tom shows a closer cultural association with a specific locality in China. The name Chee-foo was well-known in the western world, which was primarily a result of the location's links with trade since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, "by the 1870s, national economic interest began to focus on China as a vast market for American products and, concurrently, as a source of curiosity for visitors" (Moon 2005, 113). Such was the term's use that it was found in 1906 in the title of a comic opera in the U.S. called "The Lily of Chee Foo".

The form of the Chinese tom is usually a shallow or large individual double-skin barrel-shaped drum with membranes nailed to the drum. The kit shown in the slide is an early 20th-century Vaudeville outfit from Southern California with four Chinese toms of different size (10", 12" 14" and 16"), along with a set of five Chinese temple blocks. Unlike some Chinese toms that are brightly painted in red with head decoration, with this set of circa 1900–1928 "[t]he graduated Chinese tom toms are painted black to blend into the darkness of the orchestra pit" (Olympic Drums & Percussion 2019).

In comparison to the larger Chinese drums that usually had their own adjustable stands, the shallow type of Chinese tom was particularly well known in the early years of the trap set. This type of drum had two skins tacked to each end of the body and usually with highly decorated paintings applied to each. The subject matter of the decoration included a dragon or phoenix with stylized cloud, bird, or flower patterns.

“The year 1930 saw Leedy’s introduction of the first American-made tom-toms” (Cooper 2019). “They were later called “China type” tom-toms” (Cooper 2019). Structurally, what was particular to the Chinese tom was that its two drum skins were attached permanently and could not be tuned. Although early experiments with tunable toms were made by Ludwig & Ludwig in 1922, they didn’t catch on (Cooper 2019), but in 1931, “full-size tom-toms that could be tuned were offered for the first time by Leedy and by Ludwig & Ludwig” (Cooper 2019). “By 1935, most drum companies were offering toms with tunable top heads” (Cooper 2019). By 1937, an example of the utilization of tunable toms was found with Gene Krupa on drums in Benny Goodman’s hit “Sing, Sing, Sing” (an arrangement of the 1936 version by Louis Prima & His New Orleans Gang).

Cultural Meaning

Cultural influences on the early drum kit included European military drums (bass drum, side drum), Chinese drums, cymbals, and other sound-producing instruments, Turkish cymbals, and US inventions such as trap sets, brushes, pedal instruments, and high-hats. The inclusion of any instrument labelled with the prefix “Chinese” was part of a process of Othering, especially when such objects looked and sounded different to contemporary instruments. Such Othering of Chinese instruments included, to mention entries found in one reference book on percussion, the Chinese block, bongo, crash cymbals, pavilion, rattle drum, temple blocks, thumb piano, tom-tom, tree bells, and woodblocks (Beck 1995, 24–25).

The inclusion of the Chinese tom in the early trap set showed several levels of cultural flows. While revealing cultural appropriation in that the drum was removed from its Chinese cultural home and relocated in the hybrid trap set assemblage in the US and other western cultures, it was an instrument that had become a part of global trade of the time, and an object that was culturally at home amongst the Chinese diaspora who had made the US their home, especially since the 1849 California gold rush. As an object of trade, while the Chinese tom had been transmitted to the US for use in the emerging trap set, it was also then transmitted from the US to other global locations through trade and the growing influence of jazz as a global phenomenon.

As an appropriated musical instrument, the use of the Chinese tom in the trap set also pointed to a process of exoticization in that the instrument was included as an item of visual appeal that added to the trap set’s assemblage of diverse sound-producing objects and played mostly by non-Chinese performers. The exotic presence of the drum is signified not only by its name by those who referred to it, but also through its colourful visual appearance in the trap set. Further, the larger style of Chinese tom stood out as a visual symbol of difference: it was large, barrel-shaped, and unusual in comparison to the other drums. The smaller style of Chinese tom usually had brightly-coloured paintings as decoration on its two skins, at least until the instrument started to be made in the US. Decoration consisted of Chinese traditional designs depicting motives that visually signified Chinese traditional culture (e.g., the dragon or phoenix). Such decoration itself was perhaps included as part of its export to the US in that it would offer visual exotica that was desired in the non-Chinese construction of Chineseness. It must be remembered that during the late 19th century and early 20th century, US and European audiences were mesmerized by the exotic. There were many homegrown acts that gave themselves a Chinese-sounding name; the visual arts were influenced by the Orient; and visiting Chinese entertainers toured the US. Overall, the Chinese tom was used at a time when representations of Chinese were a common form of theatrical entertainment, usually exoticizing Chinese culture and with performers and culture reflecting the images of Chinese that had already been constructed. Yellowface entertainers used a power relationship to control cultural representation with stereotypes reinforced through the addition of make-up, costuming, and props (Moon 2005, 118).

A sense of authenticity emerged with the Chinese tom in that the term “genuine” was sometimes used in advertising of the time. This notion relates to the exoticization of Chinese musical instruments within the paraphernalia of the trap set, and also to the idea that the drum was actually imported from China. Indeed, while drum manufactures did soon begin to make their own Chinese toms, or at least toms that had an appearance very similar to the Chinese tom, there is evidence of manufacturers purchasing the drum from China. For example, Ludwig ordered 2000 Chinese tom-toms in 1920, as well as 1000 Chinese woodblocks, 4000 Chinese cymbals, and 300 Chinese gongs (Milard’s Review of the Far East 1920, 31 January, p. 460). However, by the time western manufactures began to make “Chinese toms”, they were soon to be replaced by tunable toms, especially from the 1930s.

Conclusion

From a contemporary perspective, the social and cultural global flows that helped create material and sonic culture with the assemblage of the drum kit, including its appropriation of the Chinese tom as an exotic contraption of the trap set, have continued, but with changing cultural movement and politico-economic power dynamics. Chinese drums continue to travel from China to other global locations, and while some are so-called traditional drums, predominant within these reconfigured cultural flows are drum kits manufactured in China for a global market. Added to the complexities of global trade, when they are made in China they are usually for Chinese, Japanese, and western drums manufacturers (including: Ludwig, Tama, Gretsch, and Yamaha). Lastly, while I have attempted in this short paper to deconstruct the cultural assemblage of the Chinese tom within a cultural setting of appropriation and musical exotica, it must also be noted that the term “tom-tom” itself is actually a word borrowed from Hindi (OED 2012): टॉम-टॉम.

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