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Mainstreaming Buddhist Music in Twenty-First Century Malaysia

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Mainstreaming Buddhist Music in Twenty-First Century Malaysia

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1. Minority Positioning: The Chinese and Buddhists in Malaysia

While Malaysia has established Islam as the religion of the federation since its independence in 1957, the secular state's society reflects heterogeneity in many facets. Given that 'multiculturalism' or 'the existence of some people with different behaviour, manners, language, [and] religion' (Šmihula 2009: 100) has become prevalent, defining 'minority' in Malaysian society is an important matter. In general, complications often arise as to whether a particular social group should be regarded as a 'minority' based on 'a numerical criterion' or 'the non-dominant position of the group' (Matscher 1997: 8), whether the 'old' or 'traditional' minorities who have been present for a long time should be distinguishable from the 'new' 'non-traditional' ones, and how protection for the 'old' 'traditional' minorities is justifiable in terms of qualification and eligibility (Šmihula 2009: 97). More arguments derive from the consideration of 'national minorities', such as whether the term 'national' means 'objective characteristics of language, culture, race, religion' or the 'subjective element of minority consciousness' (Matscher 1997: 8); arguments also derive from the effective employment of the term 'minority', if 'majority' has not been clearly defined in the society (Krugmann 2004: 57).

These considerations correlate to the idea of regarding Buddhist music as the music of the minority in Malaysia. However, the constitution of the Buddhist population in contemporary Malaysia can be uncomplicatedly deduced with respect to the corresponding criteria proposed by Krugmann (2004: 57–60): Buddhists in Malaysia, excluding working non-citizens, are a numerically smaller group, as reflected in the ethnicity and religion census data; they do not gain dominant collective position in politics, the 'objective characteristics of language, culture, race, [and] religion' in this population are collectively different and distinct from those of the majority group who have been defined in the constitution of Malaysia, and the members demonstrate a will to preserve their specificity.

'Mainstreaming', a term that carries an underlying meaning of 'including people who have particular difficulties or needs as everyone else' or 'becoming accepted as normal by most people' (Cambridge English Dictionary 2017), is not new in social studies. Salient notions of 'normalising' particular groups have been addressed in the following literature: in gender mainstreaming, a political strategy is implemented in all

policy areas in order to bring gender inequalities from the margins to the centre of politics, thus ensuring that policy impacts are even on men as well as women (Stiegler 2000: 5; Eveline et al. 2010: 241–242; Cruşmac and Köhler 2016: 50); meanwhile, diversity mainstreaming is a parallel policy that aims to create the comparative ability to ‘consistently and systematically reflect a deeper understanding of intersectionalities’ (Eveline et al. 2010: 245; see also Hankivsky 2005: 978); this term was also coined in a discussion to promote scarce methodologies in regionalism as mainstream scientific foundations (Closa 2015: 1).

Despite the notions of policymaking, as in social engineering, the context of mainstreaming in this chapter revolves around the transmission of a religious sound onto the world platform from an origin point with a minority status in twenty-first century Malaysia, and it is becoming normally accepted among most people who are receptive to music from other popular genres. This chapter mainly discusses the mainstreaming of Buddhist music as the music of the minority; the paper narrates the minority status of the Chinese and the Buddhists in Malaysia, the idea of a mainstreaming minority, the streaming of ‘modern’ Buddhist music from the viewpoint of Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, and the perspectives of a Chinese Malaysian composer–producer–vocalist on a personal approach to making Buddhist music, based on a personal interview. Since the discussion focuses on the problematisation of both the minority position in contemporary Malaysia and the negotiation between Buddhism ideology and the modernisation of Buddhist music in the digital era, the music practitioner’s worldview is explored in correspondence with the many ideas of mainstreaming the religious sound of the minority in twenty-first century Malaysia.

Malaysia, which is predominantly populated by Muslim–Malays, sets an exemplary model in terms of the conception of minority positioning. In terms of ethnicity and religion, the Chinese and the Buddhists in Malaysia are numerically defined as minority groups, as shown in the following statistical facts: in a population of 32,652,083¹ which consists of 62.0% Malays and indigenous people, the Chinese (20.6%) comprise the largest ethnic minority in Malaysia, outnumbering Indians (6.2%), other ethnic groups (0.9%), and non-citizens (10.3%).² In terms of religion, where Islam is considered the official religion, Muslims comprise 61.3%, while Buddhists (19.8%) represent the largest minority, outnumbering Christians (9.2%) and Hindus (6.3%); meanwhile, there are other groups representing Confucianism, Daoism, and other traditional Chinese religions (1.3%), other religions (0.4%), no religion (0.8%), and unspecified religions (1%).³ The nature of traditional Chinese beliefs in Malaysia is a mixture of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist religious views that culturally interconnect in terms of ideology, hence there exists a commonly inaccurate impression, as if this belief system is often understood ethnically rather than ideologically. In written representation, most Confucianists and Daoists identify themselves as ‘Buddhists’ rather than ‘others’,⁴ imagining that they are no different from those who belong to the more dominant Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, mainly comprising the ethnic Chinese.⁵ This ‘culturally justifiable’ (mis)understanding presents a statistical discrepancy, as some entries for ‘Buddhist’ in Figure 1 and Figure 2 do not represent the actual Buddhists in reality; this leads to a consideration of

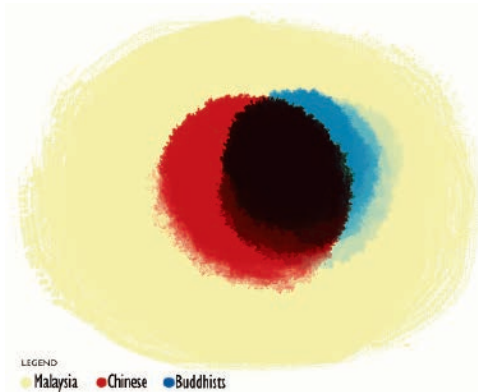


Figure 1 A graphical representation showing the minority positionings of Buddhists and Chinese in Malaysia (Chow 2015: 21).

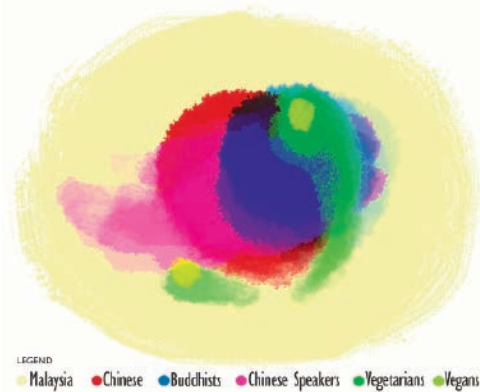


Figure 2 A graphical representation showing the minority positionings of Buddhists, Chinese, Chinese speakers, vegetarians, and vegans in Malaysia (Chow 2015: 21).

statistically incorporating self-claimed Buddhists, Confucianists, Daoists, and devotees of other traditional Chinese religions into a ‘syncretic Buddhist group’, therefore bringing the total Buddhist population in Malaysia to 21.1%.

Given the aforementioned statistical data, Figure 1 is a graphical representation of an imagined population of Buddhist and Chinese in Malaysia. The visual concept of incorporating each component’s indefinite density and boundary into an analogous chart illustrates the impossibility of absolutely representing a nation’s religion and ethnicity and that in many cases, we are not even able to discretely describe a person’s religion or ethnicity. To further exemplify this concept, in Figure 2, we explore a multi-layered interpretation of minority positioning in Malaysia—numerically considering Chinese, Buddhists, Chinese speakers, vegetarians, and vegans⁶⁾ as interlocking components—since more intersecting subgroups derive from these in even more complicated ways.

The subgroups can be infinitely expanded if we are to thoroughly investigate the entire scope of cultural differences that are observable in Malaysia, thus reflecting a reality in which social and cultural diversity are seemingly opulent, considering that this diversity is visible in people’s collective and individual characteristics.

2. Minority Mainstreaming

The mainstream is perceived as the currently trending tastes, values, attributes, or practices of a society that serves the majority. While the construction of a mainstream culture in a society can overwhelmingly emphasise ‘development’ and ‘modernisation’ (Livingstone 1999: 71) and thus marginalise or even lose what is not in the mainstream, today a more immediate problem for music consumers is that music in the mainstream is bound to ‘the synergistic mass marketing of processed, image-driven, and formulaic

music styles' (Halnon 2005: 441), in which created spectacles and simulations that 'induce a vertiginous overpopulation of self and cynicism against reality itself' (Gergen 1991) can be seen.

In close connection to the music industry, a stream cannot become the mainstream arbitrarily, and thus a formulation called 'mainstreaming' is required. Metaphorically, 'mainstreaming' resembles the implementation of long-standing ethics by emphasising the 'majority wins' principle in order to construct a more homogenous-looking environment through a policy that has been created for 'everybody' who can grasp a sense of belonging to the relative masses and be identified as part of a majority group. A common example of mainstreaming is music classification in the mainstream market. Marketing decisions, image projection, and radio station playlists are 'all built around how artists and their music are perceived' (Sernoe 2005: 640). The genre a particular album represents is determined according to marketing factors rather than musical characteristics (Sernoe 2005: 646). In such classification, the term 'world music' is constantly linked with negative characteristics such as 'non-Western', 'non-mainstream', or 'non-commercial', and can be seen as having 'attributes of distinction such as indigenous, local, or ethnic'. These prevailing associations are made not just to 'include or exclude audiences', but also 'to evaluate social functions and place the addressees into a space of technocratic Northern industrialism' (Jähnichen 2012: 72). Mainstreaming can be somehow viewed as a desirable outcome of a decision overseen by a group of policymakers who are actually a numerical minority in the industry. This intentional industrial practice in the construction of a mainstream culture—mainstreaming, audiencing, staging, trending, and culturing—is set up to include or exclude music, composers, and audiences, and therefore the outcome of such construction does not often reflect genuine musical attributes.

The twenty-first century mainstream culture indeed includes minority elements in celebration of multiculturalism⁷⁾ as a new paradigm, especially in education, but in many cases, 'The entertainment media simply caricatures minority stereotypes' (Rosado 1996: 4), and whether this incorporation has the potential to necessarily solve any of the minorities' problems is a notable issue that should be left for another discussion. When launching a music career, some may consider commoditising the music with a hearty dose of individual uniqueness and 'cast[ing] their net[s] into mainstream society in order to be successful' because 'music in capitalist cultures is conceived of primarily as entertainment' (Livingstone 1999: 80). Nevertheless, in most music productions where the output is often less risky and more culturally familiar to the intended audiences, music stereotyping and uniformity ultimately determine the desirable values (Jähnichen 2014: 92). To become accessible to 'everybody' through marketing, minority music, despite sounding more unique, exotic, or complex, has to undergo a process of 'alienating the values associated with these music practices from its cultural existence and thus becoming nobody's music' (Jähnichen 2014: 94). Terms like 'mainstream', 'audience', 'stage', 'trend', and 'culture' in an industrialised music world result from a marketing construction that does not specifically represent anybody, that is, no particular people or culture.

3. Streaming ‘Modern’ Buddhist Music

Scholarly discussions about the nomenclature of Buddhist music as well as its quality of ‘being Buddhist’ or ‘being music’ have been widely presented. Chen categorises different types of Buddhist music in the Chinese-speaking areas as ‘Buddhist chants’ (*fanbai* 梵唄), ‘Buddhist devotional songs’ (*fojiao gequ* 佛教歌曲), and ‘commercial Buddhist songs’ (*shangpin fojiao gequ* 商品佛教歌曲), according to their specific history, style, and social meaning (Chen 2005: 267). As suggested by the term itself, ‘*fan*’ refers to India and ‘*bai*’ means ‘scriptural recitation’. Combined, they form a word that is associated with monastic chanting involving vocals and the accompaniment of instruments such as drums, bells, temple blocks, chimes, and cymbals (Chen 2005: 268). However, the Chinese Buddhist monastic tradition has long regarded it as ‘distinct from music’ due to the prohibition on *saṅgha*⁸⁾ with respect to performing or hearing music, whereas chanting is favourable (Chen 2005: 268). Theravāda Buddhism settings regularly see the transmission of liturgical speech or chants in florid, music-like forms that are not considered ‘music’ (Greene and Li 2004: 1).

There have been many speculations on the use of music as a tool in *dharma*⁹⁾ spreading that seem as old as history. Seet Kim Beng’s (1993) essay mentions well-known Japanese musicologist Tanabe Hisao’s (田辺尚雄, 1883–1984) assertion in *The History of Chinese Music* that the Buddha used a *pipa*¹⁰⁾, which should more appropriately be called a *barbat*, when he preached on Ulakia beach in Gaya, northern India. The Buddha played the pear-shaped lute, with its wooden surface, and expounded the Sūtra of Enlightenment (圓覺經) to the barbarians, who could not understand him; however, the *pipa* attracted people from afar to approach and listen to the *dharma* (Seet 1993: 83). Furthermore, when King Ashoka of the Maurya Empire (317–108 B.C.E.) in India incorporated copper gongs, drums, flutes, conch horns, and harps in Buddhist ceremonial music (Hsing Yun 2010: 4–13), the *pipa* was not excepted (Seet 1993: 84). It may seem logical that the spreading of Buddhism from India to East Asia, where Mahāyāna Buddhism is mainly practised, would have long developed Buddhist music along its trail, but there is indeed a less retrievable legacy noted from the beginning until contemporary times, especially in Mainland China. This is suggested for the following reasons: the ‘lack of creativity’ and the hindrance caused by ‘elements of conservatism’ (Hsing Yun 2010: 10) in the Mahāyāna tradition, in addition to the turmoil in China’s politics since the early twentieth century. Music would only truly regain its importance as a *dharma*-spreading tool when the idea of Humanistic Buddhism¹¹⁾ was developed. In 1930, the venerable Chinese monks Tai Xu (太虛) and Hong Yi (弘一) composed ‘San Bao Ge’ (三寶歌, translated as ‘The Triple Gem Song’), which has set a standard for Chinese Buddhist compositions in traditional Buddhist schools. Hsing Yun (星雲), the founder of Fo Guang Shan (佛光山 or Buddhist Light Mountain) in Taiwan, brought a notable degree of modernisation to Buddhist music, ‘based on a need to respond to changes in society in order to provide the most appropriate and suitable methods to help purify the hearts and minds of the public’ (2010: 22). This led to his many efforts in the promotion of modernised Buddhist music, including the Sounds of the Human World

movement in the form of a Taiwan-based worldwide music competition.¹²⁾

Since historical accuracy is not central to this discussion, it is more worthwhile to ponder the role music plays in *dharma* spreading, how these speculations emerged, and the need to develop these speculations into a contemporary narration on the importance of music as a tool in *dharma* spreading.

The music industry that distributes Buddhist music in Malaysia has not been institutionalised, and thus it does not constitute a stream by itself, more or less leading the Malaysian audience to readily consume Buddhism-related music beyond the established channels in the music market. Thanks to the development of digital platforms and social media—which have been liberal and inclusive with regard to particular features of modern Buddhist music works that creatively fuse ancient *mantras* in different languages with traditional sound or modern beats¹³⁾—Malaysian audiences are now widely receptive to Buddhism-related music in spite of the many barriers in terms of religious denomination, language, culture, and nationality. However, because Mahāyāna is the mainstream Buddhist tradition among all the others in Malaysia, music connected to Mahāyāna Buddhism has gained the most popularity. Hence, it seems to be regarded more as Buddhist music among the Chinese in Malaysia, given the additional fact that there are a number of Malaysian composers¹⁴⁾ who are working in such a direction.

One may observe that the modernisation of Buddhist music means drastic adaptation to a scheme of familiarity for lay Buddhists or even a globalised community who are often accustomed to the Westernised music system as well as the maintenance of openness towards religious secularism. A parallelism of both the ‘sacred and secular contexts’ is seen in the presentation of Buddhist music in contemporary Malaysia; despite having lyrics to function as an identifier of Buddhist features, the music adopts a simple Western musical style that bears similarity to the characteristics of a hymn (Loo et al. 2011: 102–107). Hence, it is also not surprising to find a new Buddhist music development in Singapore, where ‘Buddhist worship songs’ have been performed at ‘Buddhist praise and worship services’¹⁵⁾ in place of traditional Buddhist chants (Chia and Chee 2008: 6). Composers reach out to the Buddhist audience, which constitutes a distinctive minority in Malaysia, but given the use of digital media as a greater revolutionary form of modernisation—especially the crowd-sourced file-sharing technology that was once called ‘a celestial jukebox’ and is now known as ‘the wisdom of the cloud’ (Condry 2011: 10)—they may find a new audiencing platform which seeks to serve ‘everybody’ in the global sense. Inevitably, composers are confronted with the issues of whether and how to mainstream their music or negotiate their idealism. Interestingly, Imee Ooi (黃慧音) has developed an insightful worldview that responds to both the Buddhist ideology and the dynamics of the changing world.

4. A Composer’s Journey to the World Platform

Imee Ooi, a Malaysian music composer, producer, arranger, and vocalist, founded IMM Musicworks in 1997 and has released more than 45 Buddhism-related albums, with some having been successfully marketed to Taiwan (Loo and Loo 2012: 1342), where her

Chinese version of ‘Heart Sūtra’ was re-recorded by the popular artiste Chyi Yu (Chyi 2004, 2009). She has composed *sūtra*, *mantra*, and *dhāraṇī*, written new compositions in seven languages,¹⁶⁾ worked on a few musicals,¹⁷⁾ and produced music for numerous events hosted by Buddhist organisations around the world. She is Chinese and was raised in a simple family in Taiping. She trained as a classical pianist, listened extensively to Disney songs and gospel music in her youth, and is also a devoted Buddhist who sees spreading the *dharma* as her destiny (IMM Music and Arts 2014: 3). She practises vegetarianism and insists on working only during the daytime. With regard to Imee Ooi, what is worth discussing in this paper does not pertain to her achievements in music production, but rather to her worldview, which is rooted in her long-term Buddhism practice. The following is a discourse on how she negotiates several related issues during the music-making process.

4.1 Idealism and Religiosity in Music

Ooi is both a composer and a Buddhist; she embodies idealism in music and understands her direction as a Buddhist. Her involvement in Buddhist music has become a means to function in this double role, but she has to overcome the demands of reality and compromise on certain aspects.

Over her eighteen-year music career, she has worked in the recording studio, producing music as well as marketing and distributing it; she has also done charity work through volunteerism and the provision of assistance to *saṅgha* and Buddhist organisations. Though she has thought of market expansion in order to contribute more to Buddhist-related matters, she has never made a stage appearance due to her reluctance with regard to the idea of stardom and commercial success, for which she would have to ‘trade in’ her quiet lifestyle. Nevertheless, the increasing popularity of her music may invite a new plan in terms of her career path. She is currently working on a concert proposal, which may entail performing on stage or delivering a talk, since she feels she has now reached a mature stage for facing the audience in a state of ‘mutual inspiration’ (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2596: 00:26:42–00:29:02).

Ooi has no intention of becoming an idol, since she does not view idolisation as an achievement; she is content to focus on *dharma* spreading. There is only one mission on her mind when she sings: to deliver the *dharma* to the audience, and send her blessings to people, especially those suffering misfortune, for example, the victims of the lost Flight MH370¹⁸⁾ (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2597: 00:28:57–00:29:26). This commitment reflects an intense religiosity that structures her double role with regard to her engagement with music.

However, in the context of the Buddhist performing arts, one may often question the meaning of artwork based on the ‘seventh of the Ten Precepts of Buddhism: a vow to abstain from seeing dancing; from music, vocal, and instrumental[s]; from dramatic shows; and from wearing perfume or finery’ (Greene and Li 2004: 1). This precept generally applies only to the ‘clergy or [to] laypeople [who are desirous of] demonstrating exceptional piety’ (Greene and Li 2004: 1), but Ooi does not restrict her religiosity and other Buddhist composers’ commitments accordingly. Monastic practitioners gradually

eliminate the dependency on the six *indriya*¹⁹⁾ (六根), but one should also encourage ‘*dharma* spreading through music and sounds’ (音聲弘法) as a beneficial means (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2597: 00:10:33–00:11:05) to reach people on all levels, from laypeople to the clergy. Music is only a sonic transmission of *dharma* that reaches people at a certain level who have a certain need, even if they may not yet be looking for it (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2595: 00:07:43–00:07:55). At the same time, Ooi does not agree that questioning Buddhist musicians’ degree of religiosity through their engagement with music is relevant. Since Buddhism is never a ‘religion about restrictions and oppression’, but rather a belief system that is about ‘self-realisation’, one should neither demand that all musicians who produce Buddhist music ‘become Buddha’, nor critically moralise them, many of whom have at least done good deeds (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2598: 00:04:30–00:06:21). Even when an artiste with a personal agenda pretends to perform Buddhist music as though he/she were a Buddhist, he/she is at least still pretending to do the ‘right’ thing and is, to some extent, attaining ‘enlightenment’ in that moment at least (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2596: 00:30:23–00:31:04). However, in order to achieve sustainability, Ooi agrees that Buddhist musicians should not just become ‘Buddhists in music’; they should actually become real-life Buddhist practitioners. What makes the music durable is not their talent or their fleeting enthusiasm, but rather their sincere devotion that is sustained with *caryā*²⁰⁾ (修行), which should be applied to every aspect of their lives outside of recording sessions (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2598: 00:00:38–00:01:59).

4.2 Music Stereotyping

Despite Ooi’s contrary view on music categorisation, her musical style can be conveniently regarded as new age in the commercial music mainstream. Her music, especially ‘The Chant of Mettā’ (Ooi 1999a), ‘Prajñā Pāramitā Hṛdaya’ (Ooi 1999b), and ‘Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī’ (Ooi 2000), offers a meditative dimension that is probably best described as ethereal, ambient, celestial, universal, relaxing, peaceful, serene, and evocative of love. As observed in the musicals she has produced, her music conjures a scene’s atmospheric mood rather than projecting melodic ideas, and thus, given the exclusion of a fixed melodic line or phrase, a more spontaneous musical character is presented (Loo and Loo 2012: 1354).

Ooi sees the dimension associated with her compositions’ ethereal (空靈) sound as a ‘state where the mind stays when one has no distractive thoughts—and it is not necessarily in heaven. However, it is abstract and highly subjective: some may interpret it as an infinite place with a starry sky or as an underwater space. Some may even have a sense of the ‘ethereal’ after finishing a chant with the benefit of full concentration, but one cannot conclude that music in the ‘ethereal’ style should not contain a heavy drumbeat, as both the rhythmic beat in ‘Prajñā Pāramitā Hṛdaya’ and the ‘techno loop’ in ‘Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī’ still sound ‘ethereal’ to Ooi, invoking ‘a light state of mind without carrying a grudge or an explosive emotion’ (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2596: 00:17:30–00:20:27).

Ooi refuses to categorise her music as new age and even dismisses the idea of sound stereotypes by applying the Buddhist philosophy of ‘Forms are empty, and emptiness is a

form’ (色即是空, 空即是色). She says, ‘I refuse to live [with] in [the limits of] stereotypical concepts such as “Bass is heavy”, “Being rhythmic is chaotic”, “A *sitar* sound is sharp”, “*Dizi* is ethereal”, “An *erhu* sound is melancholic” ... Each instrumental sound has “Buddha-nature” (佛性; Soothill and Hodous 2003) that depends on how it is presented and perceived’ (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2596: 00:19:11–00:19:40). Composers should be flexible in music making, since there is no reason Buddhist music cannot sound like rock, as long as it highlights the bright side of life (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2596: 00:20:30–00:21:20).

The philosophy of ‘Forms are empty, and emptiness is a form’, which lies at the core of both ‘Heart Sūtra’ and ‘Prajñā Pāramitā Hṛdaya’, sums up Ooi’s view on music stereotyping. Therefore, seemingly in parallel with the idea of multiculturalism, the question of whether one should categorise Buddhist music or all other types of music has no importance to music making, which should no longer uphold a falsely constructed impression or alienate the values associated with musical content in the interest of universal accessibility.

4.3 Music for Everyone

Tai Xu (1889–1947) recognised an important function of music: to give ‘the people of a society a means to better communicate their moods and feelings to each other ... For society to achieve some degree of integration, it is essential to be able to communicate and understand each other’s moods and feelings and as a result establish a sense of unity’ (Hsing Yun 2010: 3). As a Buddhist composer in the digital era, Ooi attempts to facilitate this function of music.

It is claimed that the scope of Ooi’s audience ranges from unborn fetuses to the dying elderly, making the point that her diverse compositional style is for ‘everyone’, since anyone can always find something suitable in her musical oeuvre. Having reached many parts of the world, her music is believed to have crossed over various barriers, including those erected by age, nationality, and religion. Her composition ‘Mettā Rattana Sūtra’ was chosen to be played at a Catholic church near Ground Zero in New York City, where it touched the priest and many of the devotees at the memorial service on the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks. This suggests that her music is regarded as relevant to the victims of the catastrophe, although many belonged to other religions. According to Ooi, *dharma* is omnipresent, and her music is an audible package—or clothing, a recipe, or an assortment in another sense—of Buddhist chanting accompanied by music, chords, and instrument sounds, the product of which enables people (of various music persuasions) to easily engage with Buddhism. Due to this far-reaching scope, it is difficult to classify Ooi’s music with respect to any one specific audience (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2596: 00:24:08–00:24:33; ARCPA2597: 00:24:31–00:25:06).

To realise the goal of offering music that is for everyone, composers should consider giving people what they want and need to effect positive lifestyle changes. Ooi sees that today’s urbanites are drawn to delicate productions and indoor activities where they can find comfort, elements that reflect their tastes, convenience, physical security, and hygiene; meanwhile, traditional temples are losing crowds due to their shortcomings in

terms of physical conduciveness. Therefore, when it comes to spreading *dharma*, which is considered to be enduring religious content that remains unchanged even with the passage of time, she agrees with the ‘improvisational’ approach of Humanistic Buddhism²¹⁾ (人間佛教), which is an emerging Buddhist practice idea based on the Mahāyāna philosophy that promotes favourable adaptation to the human’s attraction to the senses, without losing the essence of the faith (Ooi 2014b, ARCPA2597: 00:17:11–00:20:01).

Ooi regards herself as servicing audiences through her music by providing them with a conduit to *dharma* and ultimately eliminating their suffering,²²⁾ regardless of their diverse backgrounds. Since many schools of Buddhism teach different perspectives on music, she works towards a ‘universal’ reception, adopting versatility in the four undertakings currently demanded by different Buddhist organisations: music accompaniment for Theravāda chanting in the Pāli language, Pure Land Buddhism chanting, Māhayāna chanting on *Amitābha Sūtra*, and Vajrayāna chanting. We may listen to her composition ‘Kanpekina Nihon’ (Ooi 2014a), which is not based on Buddhist scripture, in wonderment and with admiration for her astonishing effort to reach an audience that is beyond her lingual culture. Without confining herself to any presumably ‘right’ form, Ooi believes that her music provides for audiences in need. Her ‘for everyone’ approach is apparent in her recent project ‘White Tārā Mantra’ (Ooi 2014c, 2014d), which was produced with due compassion, in a manner that is reminiscent of a vow inspired by the referenced Bodhisattva,²³⁾ for all those around the world suffering in the aftermath of Malaysia’s missing Flight MH370.

5. Conclusion

Given that new Buddhist movements have emerged since the twentieth century, the concept of Humanistic Buddhism, which stresses the importance of the ‘humanly world’ over the concerns about afterlives, in alignment with the *samsāra*,²⁴⁾ is now prevalent in many urban areas. Unlike traditional-sounding Buddhist chants, modern Buddhist music, which focuses on ‘bringing harmony into people’s everyday lives, purifying people’s minds, and performing the function of educating and transforming listeners in order to bring their emotions in line with the teachings of the *dharma*’ (Hsing Yun 2010: 23), is no longer representative of the sound of a religious minority, with composers tending to appeal to a larger audience that consists of all mankind. Using new media, Buddhist composers have accessed a more influential platform for reaching such an audience. The impact of mainstreaming in the digital era is therefore great and instantaneous, with composers striving to mainstream music for ‘everyone’, which often entails compromises in terms of alienating values in the music.

Hence, the discourse on Ooi’s worldview offers a reconsideration of the notions of minority positioning and music mainstreaming in the digital era. In the future, digital era ethnomusicology or cultural musicology may include further differentiations of minority self-perceptions in light of overcoming ethnically or socially determined limitations.

Furthermore, composers' musical responses to phenomenal catastrophes or 'spectacles of human suffering [splashed] across our television[s] and computer screens that clearly cause an outpouring of emotion, a sense that the world is not as it should be' (Condry 2011: 6) can appear to reflect humanity's epidemic sentiment. In any tragic event, for instance the Princess of Wales's fatal car crash, the September 11th attacks or the 9/11, the Sichuan earthquake, Japan's 3/11 triple disaster, or the recent losses on Malaysian flights MH370 and MH17, music may appear to offer relief for 'everyone', in the sense of the emotionally affected majority, while on the other hand, the event also offers an opportunity for a single musician or group from a minority to gain collective attention for a moment or perhaps for longer, e.g. months or years. This condition prompts us to rethink the definitions of 'majority' and 'minority' in the context of diversity, as well as reconsider majority–minority dynamics.

Without expanding to religious enquiry or media investigation, it is hoped that more aspects of Buddhism-related music as a rising medium that responds to a highly complex philosophy in the digital era will be unrestrainedly explored.

Notes

- 1) Estimated in July 2020 (Central Intelligence Agency 2020).
- 2) Estimated in 2017 (Central Intelligence Agency 2020).
- 3) Estimated in 2010 (Central Intelligence Agency 2020).
- 4) Forms are available at any Malaysian institution. The forms usually contain a section in which one has to indicate one's religion from a selection of options given as: 'Islam', 'Buddhism', 'Christian', 'Hinduism', or 'Others'. Similarly, one usually has to indicate one's race by choosing from the following options: 'Malay', 'Chinese', 'Indian', or 'Others'.
- 5) Wee observes that 'The "Buddhist" systems as practiced in Singapore must therefore be considered in the larger context of Chinese religious behaviour' (1997: 131). A significant number of Singaporean 'Buddhists' believe that 'Buddhism' actually means the Chinese syncretic religions (Wee 1997: 131).
- 6) The components of 'Chinese speakers', 'vegetarians', and 'vegans' are added to illustrate the complexity of the minority positioning, but they are not subjects of this study.
- 7) Rosado sees 'multiculturalism' as 'a political ping-pong term' that is 'greatly misused and highly misunderstood' (1996: 2).
- 8) Refers to the monastic assembly of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns. Together with *buddha* and *dharma*, *saṅgha* is the third member of *triratna* (the Three Precious Ones) for Buddhists to take refuge.
- 9) Law, truth, religion, thing, anything Buddhist (Soothill and Hodous 2003).
- 10) This is a term used in the later historical development of the musical instrument. It should denote an instrument called *barbat* that originated from Persia (Jähnichen 2008: 1–4).
- 11) This concept was first developed by Tai Xu in 1916; Hsing Yun, who introduced modernisation and practice in Buddhist reform and further developed the theoretical aspects of Humanistic Buddhism, significantly promoted the cause (Long 2000: 56, 63). This is noted as 'Reformist

- Buddhism' in Singapore, as Buddhist ideology is the key emphasis rather than ritual, which is underscored by 'Traditional Buddhism' (Chia and Chee 2008: 3).
- 12) The first Sounds of the Human World competition (人間音緣—星雲大師佛教歌曲發表會) was organised in 2003, attracting over 3,000 entries submitted by over 1,000 composers within three months, while a total of 80 shortlisted finalists worldwide attended the music presentation in Taiwan (Fo Guang Publication 2005).
 - 13) Notably from contemporary artistes of the Chinese-speaking regions, such as Chyi Yu (齊豫), Faye Wong (王菲), Dadawa (朱哲琴), Sa Dingding (薩頂頂), Sheryl Huang (黃思婷), and Jing Shanyuan (敬善媛).
 - 14) Active Malaysian composers in Buddhist music include Teoh Wei Kian (張蔚乾), Chow Kam Leong (周金亮), Seng Tak Pin (程作彬), and Lee Ying Jian (李英劍). Other composers noted by Loo et al. are I.gemz, Messengers of Dharma, and Victor Wee (Loo et al. 2011: 104).
 - 15) These services have been adopted by an increasing number of Buddhist organisations, such as the Panna Youth Centre (正信佛教青年會) (Chia and Chee 2008: 6).
 - 16) Namely Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, English, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Japanese.
 - 17) Ooi was the composer and music director for musicals produced by Musical On Stage, a production group known for its Buddhism association with musical products such as *Siddhartha: The Musical* (釋迦牟尼佛傳, 1999), *Above the Full Moon: The Legend of Master Hong Yi* (天心月圓—弘一大師傳, 2004), *The Perfect Circle* (圓滿的生命, 2005), and *Jewel of Tibet: Princess Wencheng* (雪域上的光芒: 文成公主, 2008) (Loo and Loo 2012: 1342; IMM Music & Arts 2014: 3). Since 1999, these musicals have been staged in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Singapore, Jakarta, Taipei, Beijing, and Johannesburg.
 - 18) Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, which was carrying 227 passengers and 12 crew members, vanished on 8 March 2014 after departing for Beijing from Kuala Lumpur. Since to date there is still no physical evidence to indicate its whereabouts, it is presumed to have been lost with no survivors. Malaysia Airlines lost another Boeing-777 131 days later, when Flight MH17 was shot down in Ukrainian airspace, killing all 298 passengers and crew members abroad.
 - 19) The six sensory organs, namely the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind (Soothill and Hodous 2003).
 - 20) Buddhist conduct: to observe and do, to end one's ways, to cultivate oneself in the right practice, and to be religious or pious (Soothill and Hodous 2003).
 - 21) The concept of Humanistic Buddhism emphasises societal transformation and human progress through the use of the doctrines of Buddhism (Long 2002: 340). Hsing Yun later advocates a version of Humanistic Buddhism that stresses Buddha's characteristics as comprising humanity, human life, altruism, joyfulness, timeliness, and universality (Hsing Yun 2012: 2–3; Long 2000: 64). Humanistic Buddhism seeks to transform the current world into 'a pure land of peace and bliss' by following the teaching of the 'human vehicle' that leads to the '*Bodhisattva* vehicle' as the ultimate goal (Hsing Yun 2012: 8–10). Hsing Yun has also established the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order that reflects the core beliefs of Humanistic Buddhism: to give others confidence, joy, and hope, and to render service to others (Hsing Yun 2012: 27).
 - 22) 'Suffering' is a central ideology in Buddhism. Being the first of the Four Noble Truths or *catvāri-ārya-satyāni*, it represents the 'lot of the six states of existence' (Soothill and Hodous 2003).

- 23) White Tārā, a representation of Tārā (多羅菩薩) in Mahāyāna Buddhism, is a *Bodhisattva* of immense compassion who vows ‘to counteract [the] illness and suffering of sentient beings’. The mantra also helps ‘to strengthen cultivation and to eventually attain cultivation’ (Ooi 2014d).
- 24) Transmigrations or the round of mortality, in contrast to *nirvāṇa* or metaphorically the ‘other shore’ (Soothill and Hodous 2003).

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