

A musical journey towards trans-border humanity

Music travels as people migrate from one place to another. As a shared human activity, music often appeals to peoples of different ethnicities living in different places, and transcends various boundaries that are often defined by ethnicity, nation and religion. In this sense, music demonstrates ‘trans-border humanity’ or bonds amongst human beings in the midst of differences, conflicts, and transformation. This essay searches trans-border humanity by tracing music that has travelled with migrating peoples around Northeast Asia, and beyond.

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CASE STUDIES OF TRAVELLING MUSIC exemplify shared sentiments, memories, and human sensibilities that illustrate chains of humanity beyond historical, cultural, and geo-political distances. Trans-border humanity may also contribute to solutions to international conflicts and antagonism caused by exclusivist ideologies based on nation, ethnicity or religion. It identifies human beings in diversity and multiplicity rather than in a single attribute, such as nationality or ethnicity, and proposes alternative views of people as mobile and in expanding networks across ‘imagined’ barriers.¹

In search of trans-border humanity, I begin the musical journey in a small island group, called the Ogasawara Islands, where peoples from different places have intersected and created a unique musical culture, and then extend the scope to Japan, the Russian territory Primorsky Krai, and Central Asia.

Ogasawara musical culture

The Ogasawara Islands (or Bonin Islands in English) are a cluster of small islands located in the Pacific Ocean south of Japan. A boat trip of 25.5 hours from the Tokyo metropolitan area is the only public access to this small place, where fewer than 2500 people reside today. These islands were uninhabited until 1830, when five Caucasians and some twenty people from Hawai'i first migrated to one of the islands, called Chichi Jima. Since then, the people in this small place have suffered various hardships, including Japanese colonisation (1860s-), discrimination at home, alienation amongst the islanders, colonial migration to Micronesia (1920s-), forced evacuation during the Pacific War (1944), segregated life under the US Navy (1946-1968), and reversion to Japanese administration (1968). Although island life has greatly improved since the reversion, the entangled history still casts a shadow on Ogasawara and its people.²

Reflecting the complexity of history and society, Ogasawara musical culture reveals diversity in its practices and performances. Migrants from different countries and islanders travelling around the Pacific Ocean have provided a variety of musical genres in this small remote community. For instance, colonial immigrants from Japan provided such performing arts as *taiko* drumming and *bon* dance in Ogasawara. When Japan established its mandate in the South Pacific (1922-1945), many islanders travelled around Micronesia and transmitted the dance called *Nanyō odori* (literally ‘South Pacific dance’) to Ogasawara. After the war, under the control of the US Navy, some islanders worked in Micronesia temporarily and encountered local songs with Japanese lyrics; they were possibly written by Micronesians, who had received Japanese education during the colonial period. The *Nanyō odori* and Micronesian songs are today recognised as Ogasawara cultural heritage. After the reversion to Japanese administration, many newcomers arrived on the islands and provided new musical genres, including choir singing, brass band music, steel orchestra, and Hawaiian hula. Although the island community remains small and relatively isolated, the people still live in the flow of globalisation and experience music of the world. For instance, the islanders utilise the African *djembe* drum and the steel pan, as well as the ukulele, electric guitar and bass guitar,

to accompany hula. Nowadays, the Ogasawara Islands are filled with various musical events and activities all year around.

On the surface level, the variety of songs and dances appears to represent a fracturing of memories and identity. However, I argue that island musical culture in fact embodies multiple ‘bonds’ to other places and peoples. The Ogasawara Islanders embrace their gratitude and affection to the peoples who have provided various musical activities in this small and remote place. Without multiple historical and cultural communications, Ogasawara musical culture would not exist as it is today. Immigrants from foreign countries, islanders travelling around the Pacific Ocean, anonymous Micronesian songwriters, newcomers after the reversion, and even temporary migrants or visitors:³ all of them have contributed to Ogasawara musical culture. By performing songs and dances received from other places and peoples, the Ogasawara Islanders embrace multiple identities rather than a single nationality or ethnicity. In a sense, they inhabit trans-border humanity, that is, extensive webs of human beings that emancipate the Ogasawara Islanders from a minor/subordinate position defined by smallness, relative isolation, and the politics of nation-states.⁴

Towards trans-border humanity

The musical journey continues from Ogasawara to many places in Northeast Asia, and beyond. There are numerous examples of music that have travelled around and appealed to various peoples living in different places. I recognise that music can be utilised to promote idiosyncratic nationalism and ethnocentrism that sometimes prevent trans-cultural communications and international conversations. Nevertheless, there are still cases of travelling music that have been transmitted against political and ideological manipulations.

The song *Imjin River* is a good example; it demonstrates music travelling despite arbitrary politics. In 1957, the North Korean government released the propaganda song *Imjin River* – the river that divides the homeland into two countries. The song became popular in North Korea and was also disseminated amongst *Zainichi* people (Koreans in Japan) through school education at *Chōsen Gakkō* (Korean Schools in Japan). Later, a Japanese songwriter Matsuyama Takeshi (b.1946) learnt the song from a *Zainichi* friend and translated the lyrics into Japanese for a commercial recording (1968). First, *Chongryon* (The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) tried to utilise the opportunity for North Korean propaganda, and then the South Korean government expressed its concern about a North Korean song being widely disseminated in Japan. Under such political pressure, the recording was eventually withdrawn voluntarily from publication.⁵ However, the song *Imjin River* strongly appealed to the sentiments of Japanese audiences, and thereafter various Japanese and also *Zainichi* artists frequently performed *Imjin River* as part of the Japanese music scene. In 2005, the movie *Pacchigi!* (*Break Through!*) was released featuring stories about the song *Imjin River*. Although the lyrics lament a homeland divided into two countries, the song itself has transcended political boundaries and manipulations, and achieved transnational popularity.

There are also cases of songs that have travelled from Japan to other places, including Primorsky Krai and Central Asia. The song *Urajio Bushi* (*Song of Vladivostok*) is one such example; it travelled from a rural area of Japan into continental Asia. The song is considered to be a variation of a local song from the Amakusa Islands, Japan. It tells about nostalgia for home: “Someday, I would like to return and disembark at the port of Nagasaki (located near Amakusa).” In 1881, a regular boat service opened between Nagasaki and Vladivostok, and many Japanese began to move to the Russian Far East. *Karayukisan* (Japanese overseas prostitutes, often hailing from the Amakusa area) were such migrants and disseminated the song about their home in Vladivostok. At that time, Vladivostok was a rapidly growing city, in which Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Russians, and other peoples from different regions intersected. Later, the song *Urajio Bushi* became popular throughout the Russian Far East and even in Manchuria, as *Karayukisan* had moved around these areas under the Japanese colonial scheme.⁶

Some *Koryo-saram* (ethnic Koreans in the post-Soviet States) also remember *Karayukisan* and their Japanese tunes – as part of their nostalgia for home in the Russian Far East. The study of *Koryo-saram* and their musical experiences could also be an interesting study for trans-border humanity. These people first migrated to Primorsky Krai after experiencing difficulties when the Joseon Dynasty of Korea (1392-1910) began to decline. Then, under the politics of the Soviet Union, they were forced to move to Central Asia during the late 1930s; they were suspected of being spies for Japan. After having experienced the pressures of various international politics, some *Koryo-saram* sing Japanese tunes with Korean lyrics.

In her books, *Zainichi* journalist Kyo Nobuko introduces *Koryo-saram* located in a village in Chirchiq (Uzbekistan), who sing a song of nostalgia, *Go Guk San Cheon* (*The Mountain and River of Home*), which is adapted from a Japanese popular tune *Ten'nen no Bi* (*The Beauty of Nature*) (2002, 2003).⁷ They even perform the music with musical instruments such as the violin, accordion and mandolin, learnt from a similarly displaced Jewish musician. Kyo continues her story: in the village of nowhere, ethnic Koreans, who were displaced in different places, sang songs together, including Russian folk songs, Korean popular tunes, and *Go Guk San Cheon*. Trails of songs have been dispersed and separated, yet sometimes they turn around and cross over again – as if to confirm bonds of humanity.

Epilogue

The study of trans-border humanity continues as musical journeys extend to many different places and peoples. In this on-going research, I will trace crossroads of songs and peoples, and explore shared sentiments and memories inscribed in trails of travelling music. It is important to seek trans-border humanity, because it illustrates ‘bonds’ amongst human beings within differences, conflicts and transformation, and proposes to us new visions for the future of a changing world. Current issues in international politics often highlight the ‘differences’ or ‘contradictions’ in asserting national legitimacy and benefit. However, through this research, I argue that we share a common humanity amongst apparent differences. By realising and respecting trans-border humanity, we can enable constructive ‘conversations’ for mutuality and global cooperation rather than pursue ‘negotiations’ primarily for one’s own benefit. I believe that the research on trans-border humanity will inform us of a new and innovative knowledge that guides us to the future of a shifting world. Music travels as people migrate from one place to another, and the journey towards trans-border humanity continues to demonstrate the chains of humanity beyond great distances.

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References

- 1 Here, I refer to Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso.
- 2 For instance, three types of residents are conventionally recognised in Ogasawara, including: ‘Caucasian descendants,’ ‘former Japanese settlers’ and ‘newcomers’; the distinctions create a basis for discrimination amongst the islanders.
- 3 There are many local songs written by temporary migrants that remained in Ogasawara even after the composers left the islands.
- 4 See further issues on Ogasawara musical culture in Shishikura, M. 2014. *Wanting memories: Histories, remembrances and sentiments inscribed in music and dance of the Ogasawara Islands*, PhD thesis, available online at <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/11185>.
- 5 Matsuyama, T. 2002. *Shōnen M no Imujin Gawa*, Tokyo: Kirakusha; 2002. ‘Imujin gawa no sūkina unmei’, *Aera*, August 12 issue
- 6 Kurahashi, M. 1989. *Kita no Karayukisan*, Tokyo: Kyōei Shobō; 1990. *The Karayukisan no Uta*, Tokyo: Kyōei Shobō.
- 7 Kyo, N. 2002. *Tsuihō no Koryo-saram*, Fukuoka: Sekifusha; 2003. *Nore Nosutarugiya*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

Above:
A boat leaving
from the Ogasawara
Islands. Photo
by the author.