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A Page at the Orchestra

Abstract: An onomatopoeic sound-word performance of drums, bells, and cymbals from the Qing period pushes us to wonder about the far limits of what writing can do.

It starts with the ringing of bells.

Chang Chang, Tang Tang, Yang Yang - Ung! - Chang Ching.

Next, we add some drums.

Tung Tang. Tuntung Tangtang. Jing Jiyang.

Now, just the drums.

Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Tung Tung.

Let's add some cymbals.

Tung Tung. Dur! Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Kung Chang! Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Kuwang Chang! Tung Tung. Tung Tung. Tung Tung.

Fade to silence. And now we lighten the mood a bit with the flutes.

Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Jingjing Jangjang. Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Jingjing Jangjang. Bing Biyang. Halar! (Those are jade pendants grazing against each other.) Jingjing Jangjang. Bing Biyang. Kalang Kiling! (We add a light percussion with pieces of copper or iron.) Kalang Kiling! Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang. Bing Biyang.

A shaman's drum drumming.

Tong Tong.

A shaman's sword cutting through the air.

Halar Hilir.

And back to the bells, the KalarKilirilation that so musically wells from the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells—*Kalar Kilir. Kalar Kilir. Kalari Kilir. Shak Sik, Kanggir Kinggir.* Small bells. *kiyalang. konggir. holor. konggir kanggir. konggir kanggir. holor. holor halar. holor halar. holor halar. holor halar.*

Slowly, the bells quiet to make space for the single sound of the sonorous striking of a hollow wooden block.

Tok tok. Tok tok. Tok tok. Tok tok.

And finally, as the last reverberations of the last *tok tok* fade, the moan of a conch shell.

Bung. Bung.

Just as observation has its history, so does listening. It is a history in many languages and media—including, as just experienced above, an archive of onomatopoeic sounds printed on the pages of the Imperially Commissioned Manchu Dictionary in Five Scripts (*Han-i araha sunja hacin-i hergen kamciha Manju gisun-i buleku bithe* in Manchu, or [*Yuzhi*] *Wuti Qingwenjian* in Chinese). Often known simply as the *Qing Pentaglot*, this eighteenth-century dictionary of five of the most socially, culturally, and diplomatically crucial languages of the Qing (1644–1911) dynasty. Probably the most ambitious dictionary project in Qing history, the *Pentaglot* was commissioned by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796) toward the end of his reign as a means of rendering his multilingual empire in visual terms.

The language worlds of the dictionary move from the top of each page to its base, from Manchu, to Tibetan, to Mongolian, to Uyghur, to Chinese. Each column represents a set of functionally equivalent terms in the five languages. The position of Manchu terms at the head of each column affirms the position of Manchu language in Qing imperial bureaucracy and ideology. The Chinese terms at the end of each column often provide a semantic description of the word or phrase being translated. Between them, on each page we travel through a set of visual and sonic embodiments of each term: Tibetan script, followed by two different transliterations in Manchu (first a Manchu transcription of how the Tibetan terms sound if spelled out, and then a rendering in Manchu of how they sound if pronounced properly in Tibetan), then Mongolian script, then Uyghur script, followed by transcriptions in Manchu of what the Uyghur terms sounded like.

Time is measured in pages in an encounter with this lexical landscape, an ecology textured not by trees and hills but by sounds, each of which is embedded in a particular linguistic context. And so we have pages of terms for the sound made by blowing into a conch shell, the tinkling of jade pendants hitting together, the sound of bells. The sound of bells (for example) is then rendered as you move your eyes from the bottom of the page back upward through Uyghur and Mongolian and Tibetan and Manchu in turn: *Chung Chang, Chang Chang, Urding, Chang Chang. Chang Chang* is an onomatopoeia, the sound some bells make when rung in Manchu, and is the opening note of our page at the orchestra.

The orchestral movement above was drawn from the Manchu renderings of the list of onomatopoeic voices of musical instruments in the *Qing Pentaglot*. Let's go back to our musical assemblage, and instead play the same piece in Tibetan.

It starts with the ringing of bells.

Urding, Ding Ding, Urur—G'anj'i!—Urding.

Next, we add some drums.

Ursil. Urur Silsil. Jamrol.

Now, just the drums.

A. A. A. A. A.

Let's add some cymbals.

A. Aur! A. A. A. Akar! A. A. A. Akar Chemchem! A. A. A.

Fade to silence. And now we lighten the mood a bit with the flutes.

Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Jingjing. Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Jingjing. Dzing Dzing. Silsil! (Those are jade pendants grazing against each other.) *Jingjing. Dzing Dzing. Jakdang!* (We add a light percussion with pieces of copper or iron.) *Jakdang! Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing. Dzing Dzing.*

A shaman's drum drumming.

Lak Ai.

A shaman's sword cutting.

Alung Ril.

And back to the bells, the Dedededelation that so musically wells from the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells—*De. De. De. Chab, Rilbui*. Small bells. *riljang. ril. rilchen. rildang. rildang. rilchen. jongril. jongril. jongril. jongril.*

Slowly, the bells quiet to make space for the single sound of the sonorous striking of a hollow wooden block.

Niyak'ok. Niyak'ok. Niyak'ok. Niyak'ok.

And finally, as the last reverberations of the last *niyak'ok* fade, the moan of a conch shell.

Dung. Dung.

This is both the same musical piece that we began with—they both feature the same set of instruments making what are nominally the same sounds in the same order—and completely different. Sounds are more than what they sound like. Thinking about this play with identity and difference in the language sensorium opens up some interesting ways of reconsidering the history of listening, the history of sound, and the relation of both to the history of early modern science.

Just as listening has its history, so do sounds. This history extends across words and scripts, forms and formats. In the hands of a Qing dictionary maker crafting a work in five languages, lived sonic experiences may have been transitory and ephemeral, but sounds could solidify into objects made of language, and those objects could be translated. Translated sounds were multiple objects: the same sonic object in different languages (which might sound nothing alike to an individual listener) were made equivalent by being linked (at least in the mind of the translator) to a common material context that produced them. Put another way, materials *sounded* different depending on the languages used to translate their voices. In charting these sonic objects and their translations we're able to create a kind of *klangkammer*, a paper cabinet of sound.

Let's consider how this works in the Manchu language. In these pages of our pentaglot dictionary we have a community of unlikely fellows: sutras being chanted (*or ir*), bodies kowtowing (*keng keng*), hunters scaring animals out of hiding (*ho HOI!*), arrows speeding through the air (*shuwar!*). We have teeth biting down on ice (*katur kitur*), throats being cleared (*hak!*), children sobbing (*miyar*

mir), throats coughing (*korkong korkong!*) and spitting (*pei pai*). Wind is blowing (*sheo sha*), fingers are moving chess pieces (*tak tik*), clods are being crushed under the wheels of wagons (*kiyatur kitur*), pieces of dry wood are breaking (*kayak!*). Wild geese are calling to one another (*gang gang*), other birds are looking for each other (*jang jing*), crickets are crying (*jar jar*) and grasshoppers are flying (*sar sar*).

For all of their variety, these sounds were alike. All of them (and others with which they share their pages) were formed by material bodies: mouths, knees, wheels, beaks, arrows. All of them could be languaged. All of them could be translated. And, importantly, all of them were ultimately included in the same category of this topically organized dictionary.

The terms in the dictionary were divided into categories ranging from The Heavens, Time, Ritual, Music, Military Tools, Gods, Doctors and Shamans, Fireworks, Cloth, Ships, Insects, and more. The *Pentaglot* pages overflowed with Birds, Livestock, Scaly and Shelly Beasts, Grains, Fruits, Plants, and Flowers. The category of People-related terms was among the richest and largest in the dictionary: it encompassed the names of Qing professions, terms for action and movement, descriptions of human relationships, terminology for birth and death, emotions, illnesses, curses, and insults. A category of sonic terms was nestled among these other groups, and onomatopoeias made up a substantial portion of this sonic subsection. This classification made sense if you think about the sonic as fundamentally an element of the human sensorium: together the drumming and sobbing and crunching and cracking described a material soundscape of human life. One of their most important qualities, for the lexicographer and his readers, is that they were heard by people. But equally as important, or perhaps more so, was the fact that these Qing sounds were voiced by people. The *klang-kammer* was a soundscape produced by the human voice.

Look back at the orchestral piece that began these pages, and you'll see what I mean. More likely than not, you experienced it the first time in just that way: by looking, as a reader. Now go back and read it aloud, giving it voice. The *chang chang*, *tang tang*, and *yang yang* become something new, taking on a new kind of materiality made up of human breath, voice, sound. The drum's *tung tung* and bell's *holor* are embodied in the spoken word, translated from the physical reverberations of copper or animal skin, into a soundless inked imaged print, and back again into sonic materiality through the human mouth, lips, and throat. A kind of metamorphosis is happening here: the human body (your body, my body) *becomes* a bell, a sword, a crying baby deer, a flying grasshopper. To communicate the sound of a material object without the benefit of the presence of that object, we become the object and take on its voice. We each do so in the vernacular in which we live: if I am the bell, the voice of the bell becomes an

American English tinkle tinkle. If you are a Qing speaker of Manchu and you have instead become the voice of the bell, or if you are mimicking that voice, it might sound like *kiyalang*. The bell speaks many languages, exists through many voices, and in doing catalyzes relationships among them.

The pages of the *Qing Pentaglot* catalogued these soundings, creating equivalencies across the languages of the empire: the sound of *this* bell in Uyghur is the same as the sound of *that* bell in Tibetan; the kind of laughter described *here* in Chinese is the same kind that sounds like that word *there* in Mongolian. The user of the dictionary would encounter the text as a reader of clusters of terms, even if she had turned to it to consult the *pentaglot* for something specific: though a table of contents acts as a map of the categories and their subcategories, the only way to find an individual entry within one of those categories is to read your way to it. The ordering is not alphabetical—if there was any principle of order, terms with similar semantic meanings were clustered together in cacophonies of stormy sounds, avian sounds, soundings of musical instruments. Paging through the catalog was a form of sonic travel, in the eighteenth century as it is today, and revisiting and revocalizing some of these sonic landmarks brings the modern reader into a different kind of dialogue with early modern nature than might otherwise be possible.

Tok tok. Qing sounds (whether produced by lips, storms, feet, or hollow wooden blocks) were embedded in human language. In using Manchu or Tibetan or Mongolian to voice the sensorium of the material natural world in human language, sound created relationships between objects and the human bodies that experienced them, mediating between the knowing body and the known. If we understand sonic natural history in this way, the history of listening becomes inextricable from a history of the voice.

Niyak'ok. Not only were Qing sounds languaged, but they could be translated. This means that the early modern material soundscape differed across different languages. In a way, this isn't surprising. We know that onomatopoeia exists across languages: the kitty says *meow*, *miao*, *mao* depending on whom and where and when you're asking. Still, putting the sonic front and center in our thinking about the materiality of early modern nature and its translations gives us a space to think about language, objects, knowers, and the sensorium that connects and creates relationships among them.

What does this exploration into the Qing soundscape mean for thinking about early modern nature across Eurasia? It's a trick question, in a way. Qing sounds did not *mean*. They emerged, they transformed, they sounded. *Bung Bung!* became part of a larger, multilingual, multiple material sound-object that was made out of conch shells, *Dung!*, lips and lungs that honked air through the seashells, and other lips that formed the sounds of Manchu and the other tongues

through which the conch was voiced. All of these were part of the materiality of the conch-object. And this is a materiality that we become part of when we voice these Qing objects, compose with them, and become part of their histories just as they are part of ours.

And so the translated orchestra becomes a prelude, the beginning of a history of and with the early modern voice. In voicing early modern sonic objects instead of merely reading or writing them, the historian gives them a new materiality, makes them part of modern storytelling, recombines them into new soundscapes. This is a kind of knowing that comes from singing the early modern, and listening to that song while understanding it to be just the latest of an ongoing history of translations and transmutations that are all connected through the chain of relations that this history of voices creates. Like the shell of the conch if we put our ears to it instead of our lips, a history of translated things becomes a resonating chamber. Shhhhh. Listen.