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## The Phenomenality of Things: Music Research in the Internet Era

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## The Phenomenality of Things: Music Research in the Internet Era

Chow Ow Wei

**Abstract:** A modern civilization characterized at the dawn of the Internet of Things has extensively transformed human lifestyle that gives drastic magnitude to virtual connections we make with the surrounding through computer-mediated devices. This new living experience potentially changes the patterns of seeing and thinking. Henceforth, ways of understanding music in the Internet era is no longer linear and singular, while the conventional ethnographic habits of thought and work are to be re-examined. As the rising of both the Internet and the virtuality thinking re-configures the conception of time and spatial dimensions, the existing knowledge of music deemed as 'real' and 'authentic' may become inadequate today, since all other attributes that shift across time and spaces may have been disregarded from being a part of the reality. A recent doctoral research in Buddhist music, which employs a methodology in virtual ethnography, embarks on a perspective of parallel ideas in phenomenality and virtuality that is tailored to the rising of the Internet. It is often predicted that both the ethnographic methodology positioned in this study and the problematic appearances of music would become issues to ethnographers. However, one of the findings of this study demonstrates that these typical issues could be resolved by the consideration of the following: the virtual property of music is deemed integral to the reality; and the causation of phenomenality in the making of the ethnographic object is significantly regarded. Though the nature of the music acquires an extensive understanding in the Buddhist philosophy, this study proposes a possible approach in the sense-making of contemporary researches in music as a way of knowing.

**Keywords:** Internet Era. Internet of Things. Phenomenality. Virtuality. Virtual ethnography.

### A Fenomenalidade das Coisas: Pesquisa Musical na Era da Internet

**Resumo:** Uma civilização moderna caracterizada na aurora da Internet das Coisas transformou consideravelmente o estilo de vida humano que dá magnitude drástica às conexões virtuais que fazemos com o ambiente através de dispositivos mediados por computador. Essa nova experiência de vida potencialmente altera os padrões de ver e pensar. Daí em diante, as formas de entender a música na era da Internet não são mais lineares e singulares, enquanto os hábitos convencionais de pensamento e trabalho etnográficos devem ser reexaminados. À medida que o surgimento da Internet e da virtualidade reconfigura a concepção das dimensões temporais e espaciais, o conhecimento existente da música considerado "real" e "autêntico" pode se tornar inadequado hoje, já que todos os outros atributos que mudam ao longo do tempo e espaços podem ter sido desconsiderados de serem parte da realidade. Uma recente pesquisa de doutorado em música budista, que emprega uma metodologia em etnografia virtual, embarca em uma perspectiva de ideias paralelas em fenomenalidade e virtualidade que é feito sob medida para o surgimento da Internet. Costuma-se prever que tanto a metodologia etnográfica posicionada neste estudo quanto as aparências problemáticas da música se tornariam problemáticas para os etnógrafos. No entanto, uma das descobertas deste estudo demonstra que essas questões típicas poderiam ser resolvidas pela consideração do seguinte: a propriedade virtual da música é considerada integral à realidade; e a causa da fenomenalidade na construção do objeto etnográfico é significativamente considerada. Embora a natureza da música adquira uma extensa compreensão da filosofia budista, este estudo propõe uma possível abordagem no sentido de fazer pesquisas contemporâneas na música como uma forma de conhecimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Internet Era. Internet of Things. Phenomenality. Virtuality. Virtual ethnography.

## La fenomenalidad de las cosas: la investigación musical en la era de Internet

**Resumen:** Una civilización moderna caracterizada en los albores de la Internet de las cosas ha transformado ampliamente el estilo de vida humano que le da una magnitud drástica a las conexiones virtuales que hacemos con el entorno a través de dispositivos mediados por computadora. Esta nueva experiencia de vida potencialmente cambia los patrones de ver y pensar. De aquí en adelante, las formas de entender la música en la era de Internet ya no son lineales y singulares, mientras que los hábitos etnográficos convencionales de pensamiento y trabajo deben ser reexaminados. A medida que el surgimiento de Internet y el pensamiento de la virtualidad reconfiguran la concepción del tiempo y las dimensiones espaciales, el conocimiento existente de la música que se considera "real" y "auténtico" puede volverse inadecuado hoy, ya que todos los demás atributos que cambian a través del tiempo y Los espacios pueden haber sido ignorados de ser parte de la realidad. Una reciente investigación doctoral en música budista, que emplea una metodología en la etnografía virtual, se embarca en una perspectiva de ideas paralelas en fenomenalidad y virtualidad que se adapta al surgimiento de Internet. A menudo se predice que tanto la metodología etnográfica posicionada en este estudio como las apariencias problemáticas de la música se convertirán en un problema para los etnógrafos. Sin embargo, uno de los hallazgos de este estudio demuestra que estos problemas típicos podrían resolverse considerando lo siguiente: la propiedad virtual de la música se considera integral a la realidad; y la causa de la fenomenalidad en la realización del objeto etnográfico se considera significativamente. Si bien la naturaleza de la música adquiere un amplio conocimiento en la filosofía budista, este estudio propone un posible enfoque en el sentido de las investigaciones contemporáneas en la música como una forma de saber.

**Palabras-clave:** Internet era. Internet de las cosas. Fenomenalidad. Virtualidad. Etnografía virtual.

## Introduction

This paper is a discussion extended from a doctoral research in Buddhist music tailored to a time when the internet is rising (Chow 2015), in which I employed virtual ethnography to establish an inquiry which is framed on parallel ideas in phenomenality and virtuality. Contradictions can be predicted in this discussion as the ethnographic methodology employed in this study is abstruse: the setting of the internet as the ethnographic field is deemed arguable, and the making of music in cyberspace as ethnographic objects is problematic. However, I attempt to propose a possible approach in a modern-day research as a way of knowing in the Internet Era by introducing a comprehensive understanding in the Buddhist philosophy on all matters.

There are three aspects in this paper: the rising of the internet and the *Internet of Things*; the Buddhist philosophy which exclusively emphasizes on phenomenality; and a practical ethnographical approach that integrates the ideas of phenomenality and virtuality into the sense-making of music in cyberspace.

## Rising of the Internet

The internet is one of the most intriguing revolutions in human technology. Emerged in the 1990s, it took only about two decades to lead nearly all trends of life aspects that expansively define what a modern life is for humankind. It has changed drastically the way things are done in the past. Modern people, especially urbanites, would lavish their dependency on the internet in order to

obtain the convenience of a variety of accessible services, ranging from the mundane routine of heating up water in a kettle to a banking transaction. As the way things are understood in the current time has also practically evolved with Internet applications, globalization in the 21st century is brought into a new, radical, decentralized phase that transforms human interaction dramatically with media technology.

The conception of the internet began in the United States after World War II. Scientists came up with a vision to create a human-computer knowledge management systems that helps researchers to access a useful corpus of all knowledge. J. C. R. Licklider, whose interest was to develop a collaborative modeling among human and computer, theorized a framework for an 'intergalactic network'. He tested whether intellectual and scholarly resources can be established by the society and shared by digitalized information holders without restriction (Hauben, J. 2007: 51-52), and whether "to be online" is a privilege or a right for a citizen (Licklider and Taylor 1990: 40). He also envisioned that members of an online interactive community in the network are not linked to a common location or accidental proximity, but are selected more by common interests and goals instead (Licklider & Taylor 1990: 38, 40).

The internet was born in 1973 when researchers of several national and diverse networks from the United Kingdom, France and the United States initiated an establishment of "a network of networks" that serves as "a means for networks from diverse countries to intercommunicate" by linking the computer systems across political

borders (Hauben, R. 2007: 50). In the 1980s, networking researches and conferences were made common and the internet finally became a reality in the 1990s. It was described as “an important prototype to understand the creation of a multinational, collaborative, and scientific research project” that “depends on and fostered collaboration across the boundaries of diverse administrative structures, political authorities, and technical designs” (Hauben, R. 2007: 50). In 2002, Web 2.0, an interactive social software signifying “a cultural shift in how web pages were developed, designed, and used” (Morrow 2014), was realized and has empowered a crowd-sourced innovation in communication technology, which enables data to be inserted, used, and modified with user-friendly authorizing means. The much-discussed Web 3.0 or the Semantic Web (Shadbolt, Berners-Lee and Hall 2006), the next level of the internet which is “semantic, artificially intelligent, virtual and ever-present” (Morrow 2014), is still under development, the trend moves towards the direction of the Internet of Things (Mattern & Floerkemeier 2010; Mitew 2012; Fell 2014) at the same time.

### Life with Internet of Things

The term *Internet of Things* [IoT hereafter] was first coined in 1999 within a research by the Auto-ID Center and the MIT Media Lab. Kevin Ashton and Neil Gershenfeld attempted the incorporation of things into the internet in an active role (Mattern and Floerkemeier 2010: 2), aiming in “making world comprehensible for things, or allowing things to use the internet” (Mitew 2012: 1). There are various definitions for IoT, but the following encompass most aspects of it:

1. “Networked connection of physical objects” that becomes the “internet of everything”, which is a network of networks where “billions or even trillions of connections” comprising things with added capabilities, more people, and new types of information data (Mitchell et al. 2013).
2. The specific time when more “things or objects” were connected to the internet than people (Evans 2011: 2). The birth of IoT is therefore traced back to a time between 2008 and 2009 (Evans 2011: 3), when the ratio of device connectivity to world human population has just exceeded 1:1<sup>1</sup>.

At present or in the very near future, it has become a reality that the internet is extended to daily objects that operate as interfaces to internet functions. AI-driven devices communicate with the system server and each other. Massive storage of information are digitally archived in the “cloud”<sup>2</sup>. A human user no longer needs to physically get out of his armchair to learn almost everything. With a smart device in hand, he can monitor the device processes remotely, despite handling online business

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- 1 The corporate’s statistical data reveals that in 2003, there were about 500 million devices connected to the internet serving a world population of 6.3 billion people, but it is estimated to increase drastically in 2020 with 50 billion connected devices serving 7.6 billion people worldwide, that in average each human is to possess 6.83 devices connected to the internet (Evans 2011: 3).
  - 2 “Cloud computing” is a metaphoric term which depicts a computer system operated by “a model for enabling ubiquitous, convenient, on-demand network access to a shared pool of configurable computing resources” that can be immediately retrieved and released with the least effort or interaction within the management of the service provider (Mell and Grance 2011: 2).

activities, indulging himself with streams of audiovisual data and interact with other people. Bruce Sterling (2005), a novelist of the cyberpunk genre, has actually visualised life with IoT:

*I no longer inventory my possessions inside my own head. They're inventoried through an automagical inventory voodoo, work done far beneath my notice by a host of machines. I no longer bother to remember where I put my things. Or where I found them. Or how much they cost. And so forth. I*

*just ask. Then I am told with instant real-time accuracy. I have an Internet of Things with a search engine. So I no longer hunt anxiously for my missing shoes in the morning. I just Google them. As long as machines can crunch the complexities, their interfaces make my relationship to objects feel much simpler and more immediate (Sterling 2005: 93–94).*

Today, China's internet development can be considered as one of the most fitting corresponding depictions to Sterling's description above.

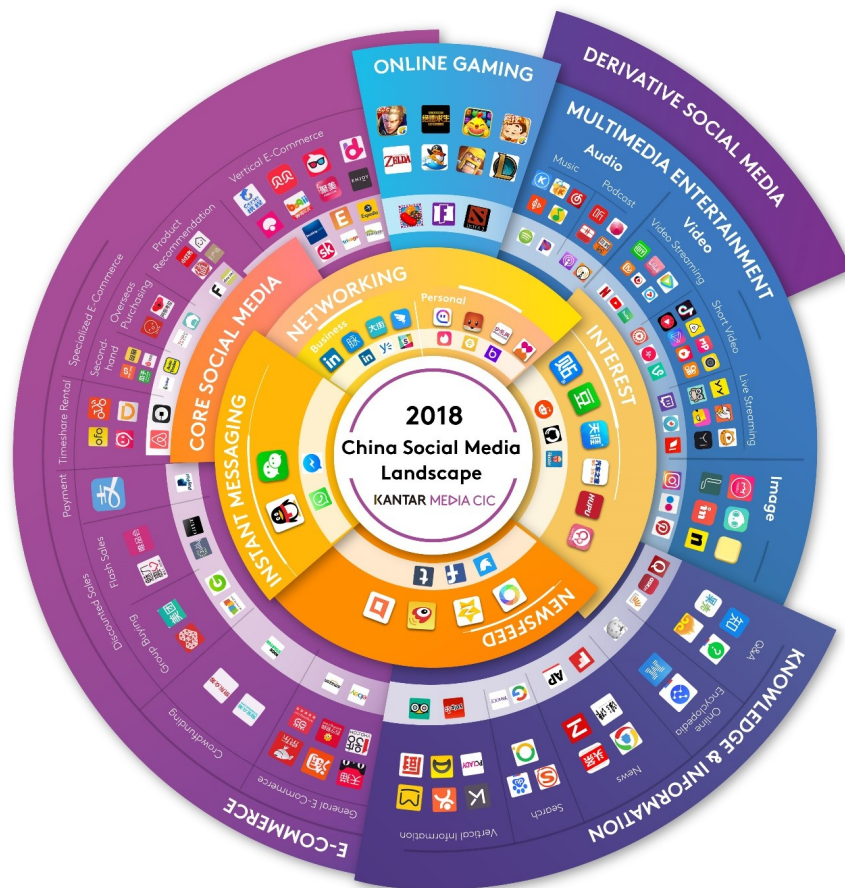


Figure 1: The social media landscape in modern-day China. Source: Kantar Media CIC (Jin 2018)



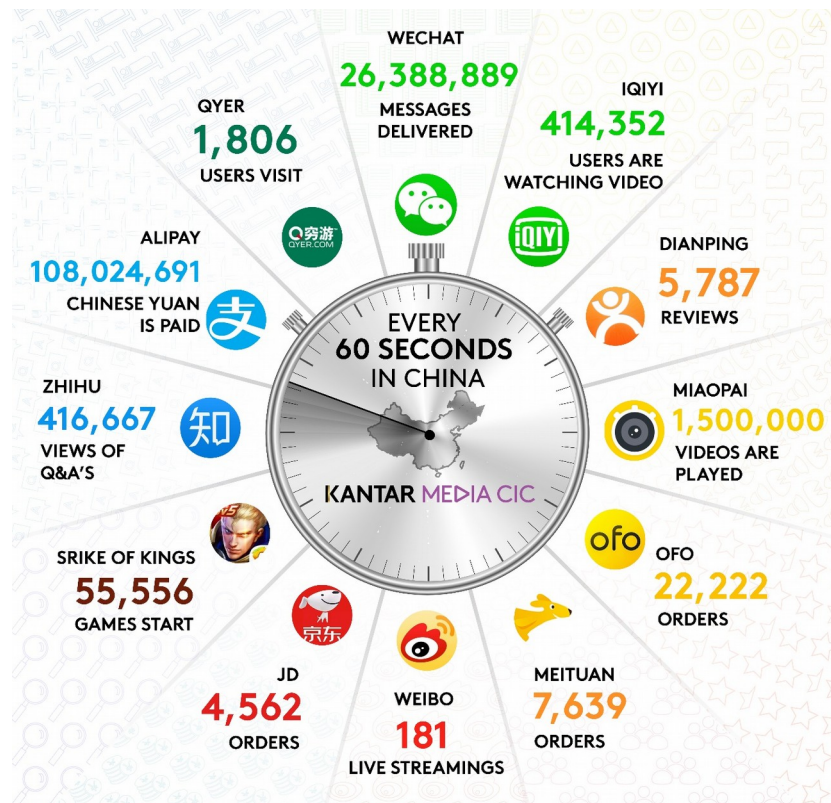


Figure 2: Essential statistics on social media activities of every 60 seconds in modern-day China (Kantar Media CIC 2017)

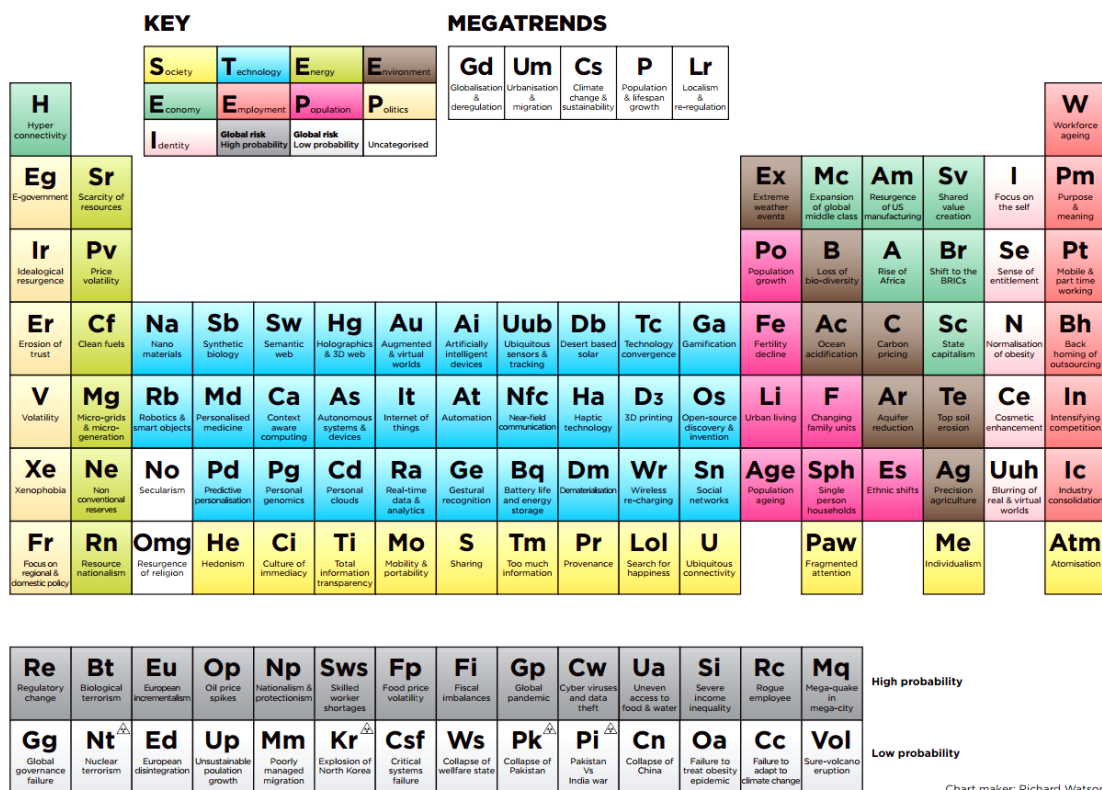


Figure 3: Richard Watson's "Table of Trend and Technologies for the World in 2020"



Figure 4: Yanko Tsvetkov's "The World According to a Facebook User"

The emergence of IoT as the future of human life are much anticipated. To some, this huge change may also be intimidating. The materiality of everything can be understood in the selected parody works shown in fig. 3 and 4 (Watson 2013, Tsvetkov 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

The popularized trend of getting online in the contemporary time has preordained the changes in human behaviors in the

appreciation of music. David Beer (2008) observes that people nowadays significantly shift from physical and analogue towards virtual cultural artifacts. They intensely rely on the internet media to access music. They no longer buy CDs but subscribe to, or download digitally compressed music files from the internet or 'rip' audio music from the CD, audio tapes and vinyl records. They discuss shared interests, tastes on social network sites with "like-minded" people whom they have never actually met. They "make friends" with performers and celebrities, and get involved in their promotional campaigns within the collaborative functions of the internet. They watch and share live performances from gigs they have never actually attended (Beer 2008: 223–230).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Watson's "Table of Trend and Technologies for the World in 2020" deliberately substitutes chemical elements in the periodical table with internet jargons and technology-related ideas to reflect a predicted human life in 2020, or what is described as "one futurist's recommended set of ideas to watch" (Fell 2013: 50). Yanko Tsvetkov's "The World according to a Facebook User" (2014) features an imagined topography consisting of contours and meridians in satirized labels. The idea of the parody is to illustrate the materialization of a user's ego-centric interaction network in Facebook or, at large, a social networking service application of any place.



Additionally, Internet users no longer solely learn to play musical instruments from tutors but YouTube. They can publish music compositions on the internet with no involvement of music labels. This new culture could have prepared a great leap in popular music consumption that has re-invented an ecology for music industry today<sup>4</sup>.

## The Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhism is one of the oldest living religion in the world since more than two and a half millennia ago. It may appear as a complex religion to study in the modern time, but the core idea of Buddhist teaching focuses on a story how an ordinary man named Siddhārtha Gautama attained enlightenment. Buddhist practitioners neither discuss religiously characterized incidents nor focus in a specific sacred text. Rather, they are more to discuss an abstract, perplexing experience called *nirvāṇa*<sup>5</sup>. In order to achieve the state of *nirvāṇa*, there are diverse approaches for the religious practice. In modern-day Malaysia, there are five Buddhists denominations which are commonly available: *Mahāyāna* [literally big vehicle], *Theravāda* [literally school of the

elders], *Vajrayāna* [literally diamond vehicle], Zen Buddhism or Chan Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism.

Despite its general image as one of the world's popular religions, Buddhism rather appear more as a way of life, as well as a universal philosophy on all matters of life – not just at present but also the previous and future lives through reincarnation. Above all essential teachings, the following are the highlights of significant concepts in the Buddhist philosophy:

1. *Dukkha*: A Pāli word generally means 'suffering', 'pain', 'sorrow' or 'misery', but additionally includes deeper ideas such as 'imperfection', 'impermanence', 'emptiness' and 'insustainability' (Rahula 1974: 17)<sup>6</sup>.
2. *Samsāra*: It is the 'cycle of continuity' (Rahula 1974: 8) or the 'turning of the wheel of transmigration' (Soothill and Hodous 2003).
3. *Śūnyatā*: Translated from Sanskrit, it means 'emptiness' or 'voidness' that denotes though materials in the world we can perceive are real and existent in the outside, the true property inside is insubstantial and void, while unreal matters appear as real. 'Emptiness' symbolizes an absence of self-property (Chang 1971: 60).

4 In 2017 alone, physical formats accounted for 30% of global music sales, but digital revenues accounted significantly for 54% of total recorded music industry revenues worldwide. The digital formats include streaming, paid subscription audio streams and digital downloads (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry 2018: 13)

5 The ultimate aim of Buddhist practice is to achieve *nirvāṇa*, a state of being that is indescribable with language or any known human experience but can be verbally simplified as 'liberation from *dukkha*'. To achieve *nirvāṇa*, one needs to understand *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*, or further explore into four fundamental discussions known as the Four Noble Truths (Abe 2003: 49–51).

6 Walpola Rahula does not provide an equivalent English term for this in order to avoid a misleading and superficial interpretation that life according to Buddhism is nothing but suffering and pain, and thus Buddhism is subsequently regarded as pessimistic (Rahula 1974: 16).

## Emptiness and Phenomenality

‘Emptiness’ does not mean “zero” or “a state of nothing”. It rather means that the self-property of everything is “absent” in nature. Based on the fundamental principle in “Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra” and Nāgārjuna’s “Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā”, the world is a state of existence that is continuously experienced as a phenomenon. Hence, all phenomenal beings are basically “empty” as they have no self-property (Abe 2003: 111). In other words, the existence of being is not dependent on a singular, self-contained and unchanged condition.

The following *kōan* [Zen riddle 公案] illustrates a metaphor that strengthens the importance of “emptiness” for Buddhist practitioners:

*Encountering a Buddha, killing the Buddha;  
Encountering a Patriarch, killing the Patriarch;  
Encountering an Arhat, killing the Arhat;  
Encountering mother or father, killing mother or father;  
Encountering a relative, killing the relative;  
Only thus does one attain liberation and disentanglement from all things, thereby becoming completely unfettered and free<sup>7</sup>*  
(Abe 2004: 56-57).

This is one of the contradictory but genuine emphasizes in the advanced Buddhist practice that in order to be liberated from the sufferings, one should reject the attachment to the delusion caused by the worldly phenomenon. In order to achieve true *Buddhahood*, one should not concentrate on the thought of “being Buddha”, because

7 As in “Lin-chi Lu” 《临济录》 written by Linji Yixuan 临济义玄, a Zen master in Tang Dynasty China. Original Chinese text: 逢佛杀佛, 逢祖杀祖, 逢罗汉杀罗汉, 逢父母杀父母, 逢亲眷杀亲眷, 始得解脱, 不与物拘, 透脱自在。

there is no Buddha to worship. One needs to break through the delusion of Buddha as well as all worldly existence which does not exist by itself, in order to reach enlightenment. One learns to understand the causation, the refutation of the existence of “self”, “ego” or *ātman* (Rahula 1974: 51), and practices to let go of the attachment to the impermanent delusion in order to seek “the ultimate happiness”. Hence, the truth about embracing “emptiness” is that “if one takes what is non-Buddha as the ultimate, what is non-Buddha turns into a Buddha” (Abe 2004: 63-64).

Phenomenality, the quality or the state of being phenomenal, refers to the worldly existence of phenomenon and the consciousness towards it. According to “higher-order” theories of consciousness, phenomenality is explained as nothing more than “a species of the mind’s self-representation” (Siewart 2013: 236). He elaborates:

*Phenomenality is that feature exemplified in cases of something’s looking somehow to you, as it would not be in blindsight as just conceived. Any instance of its looking somehow to you is essentially a phenomenally conscious visual state* (Siewart 2013: 242).

In another context, Buddhist practitioners conceive the humanly world as “the phenomenal world” which is an external, impermanent, impure and unreal existence; hence phenomenality is “of a dusty path”, “neither becoming nor passing”, “likened to assembled scum, or bubbles”, and produced by a subjective mind (Soothill and Hodous 2003).

With such an understanding of the living world, Buddhists learn to understand the

causation, the refutation of the existence of “self”, and the “devoid of a self” (Soothill and Hodous 2003) of phenomena, and practice to let go of the attachment to the impermanent delusion in order to seek happiness in the ultimate goal of *nirvāna*.

## Virtual Ethnography

In 2013, I intended to begin my doctorate research in Buddhist music with an ethnography based in Malaysia, though I collected some audiovisual data in two cities of Thailand. Bearing in mind that *Buddhist music* is a problematic term for Buddhist practitioners of the *Theravāda* tradition where Buddhist chants are not considered as music, I searched for a possible methodology that would allow an inclusive interpretation of Buddhism-related music without losing a relatively compatible perspective from the Buddhist philosophy. I was then convinced to discard the conventional ethnographic method and adopt virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) which is relatively new, more feasible in both online and offline environments, and more challenging when integrating the ideas of phenomenality and virtuality in the entity.

Christine Hine (2000) recommends a contemporary approach that renders a form of ethnographic inquiry suited to the internet, which involves ethnography “as a textual practice and as a lived craft”, and “destabilizes the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a found field site” (Hine 2000: 43). This approach has particular concerns on how an ethnographic object is to be constituted, and how that object is to be authentically known. She applies the ethnographic thinking to the interactions facilitated by the internet by looking

particularly into three essential areas in the study of the internet: the role of travel and the face-to-face interaction in ethnography; text, technology and reflexivity; and the making of ethnographic objects (Hine 2000: 43–63).

With this consideration, she details ten principles of virtual ethnography. The following are the highlights (Hine 2000: 63–65):

1. The internet as “problematic” – it does not appear inherently sensible; it is a way of communicating, an object within people’s lives; it is a site for community that is established and maintained in the ways in which it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted;
2. The internet is both culture and cultural artifact and not just a detached space of real life connections. A high-degree interpretive flexibility is therefore acquired, learned, interpreted and incorporated into context;
3. Mobility in mediated interaction is useful in the inquiry of the making and remaking of space. Therefore, ethnography is no longer done for specific places or even being multi-sited;
4. Culture and community are not self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography. An ethnographic object can be essentially reshaped by concentrating on the flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle;
5. *A priori* boundaries of the “virtual” and “real” are challenged and explored

- throughout the course of ethnography. Boundaries and connections are dynamically defined and reformulated as the ethnographic object, depending practically on the embodied ethnographer's constraints in time, space and ingenuity;
6. Due to temporal and spatial dislocation, an ethnographer's engagement with mediated contexts is crossed into his interactivity in other spheres and media;
  7. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial because a holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve. Leaving alone the idea of "pre-existing, isolable and describable informants, locales and cultures", this approach can be based on "ideas of strategic relevance" rather than "faithful representations of objective realities";
  8. The shaping of interaction, either with informants by the technology or of the ethnographer with the technology, is part of the ethnography. Intensive engagement with mediated interaction in virtual ethnography essentially introduces a new reflexive dimension to explore the use of the medium in context. An ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight since he also plays the role as an informant through his interactions with the technology;
  9. All forms of interaction, including the face-to-face and remote messaging, are ethnographically valid. A kind of relationship within the ethnography is allowed for informants and the

ethnographer to be both "absent" and "present" across temporal and spatial divides;

10. "Virtuality" carries a connotation of "not quite". It is sufficient to apply in practical purposes even if not strictly representing the "real" thing. Virtual ethnography is sufficient for the practical purposes in exploring the connectivity of mediated interaction, even if not quite the "real" thing in "methodologically purist terms".

Hence, data are mainly collected through the following means by embracing face-to-face and virtual approaches that could be possibly managed:

1. Interviews: All 21 interviews are face-to-face except one with the virtual method from 2013 to 2015. All informants are Malaysians except two from Thailand and one with a Tibetan heritage;
2. Remote information gathering: This include a manual questionnaire, a few set of online questionnaire designed with SurveyMonkey<sup>8</sup>, and a set of questions on Quora<sup>9</sup>, an online query-based platform;
3. Audiovisual recordings: They include interview data, video recordings of live music performance, and audio files of music compositions by two composers;
4. Music events: Live music events attended in September and November 2014;
5. Published materials: They include programme booklets, compact disc

8 <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>

9 <https://www.quora.com>

booklets and online Buddhism-related websites are referred for their contextual attributes;

6. "Integrated auxiliaries": Online streaming platforms, social blogs, instant messaging service apps, academic search engine, online encyclopaedia, and online forums/bulletin board system (BBS).

With such methodology in my most recent attempt (Chow 2015) I then rendered data analysis with a combined method in qualitative research that comprises discourse analysis, hermeneutic phenomenology, metaphorical analysis, ethnostatistic, and music analysis or microanalysis.

When all partial components resulted from the above mentioned analytical methods were sorted systematically, the data were eventually interpreted as a whole ethnographic entity.

### **"Phenomenality of Things"**

In such process, ethnographers have to cope with the quality of low-cost maintenance, anonymity, open-endedness and interactivity in cyberspace, as well as the state of contradiction and indeterminacy (Bu 2012: 218). The following is an illustration by Lysloff (2003):

*During my research, I never physically leave my home. I just need to infiltrate a new music*

*community which I think I will never meet and I believe to exist according to the textual information I get about them. I wish I know whether I am actually doing fieldwork, because in spatial terms I have never been to any place and I do not have to create any physical need or to experience any risk ethnographers normally do. In contrast, doing fieldwork means spending the night time surfing from a distance in a virtual dimension. With my instant messaging system and email, I am always online all night: moving from a website to another, logging in a huge online community, reading and sending comments to electronic music workers and their fans, staring at still or moving pictures, and listening to auto-playing music on websites (translated from Bu 2012: 225).*

This also reflects the most significant advantage in virtual ethnography that the internet environment provides an opportunity for ethnographers to completely go lurking inside an online community in order to explore their subject (Bu 2012: 226).

The problematization of virtual ethnography in my research is that the virtual properties of the internet join seamlessly into the nature of a Buddhist subject. The study into the exploration of Buddhist music online and offline can be relevantly constituted as an ethnographic object that can be known authentically. The internet and Buddhist music both appear to the researcher as a phenomenal existence, like all other matters in the worldly existence, that they are interconnecting and interweaving, if not being complementary to each other.



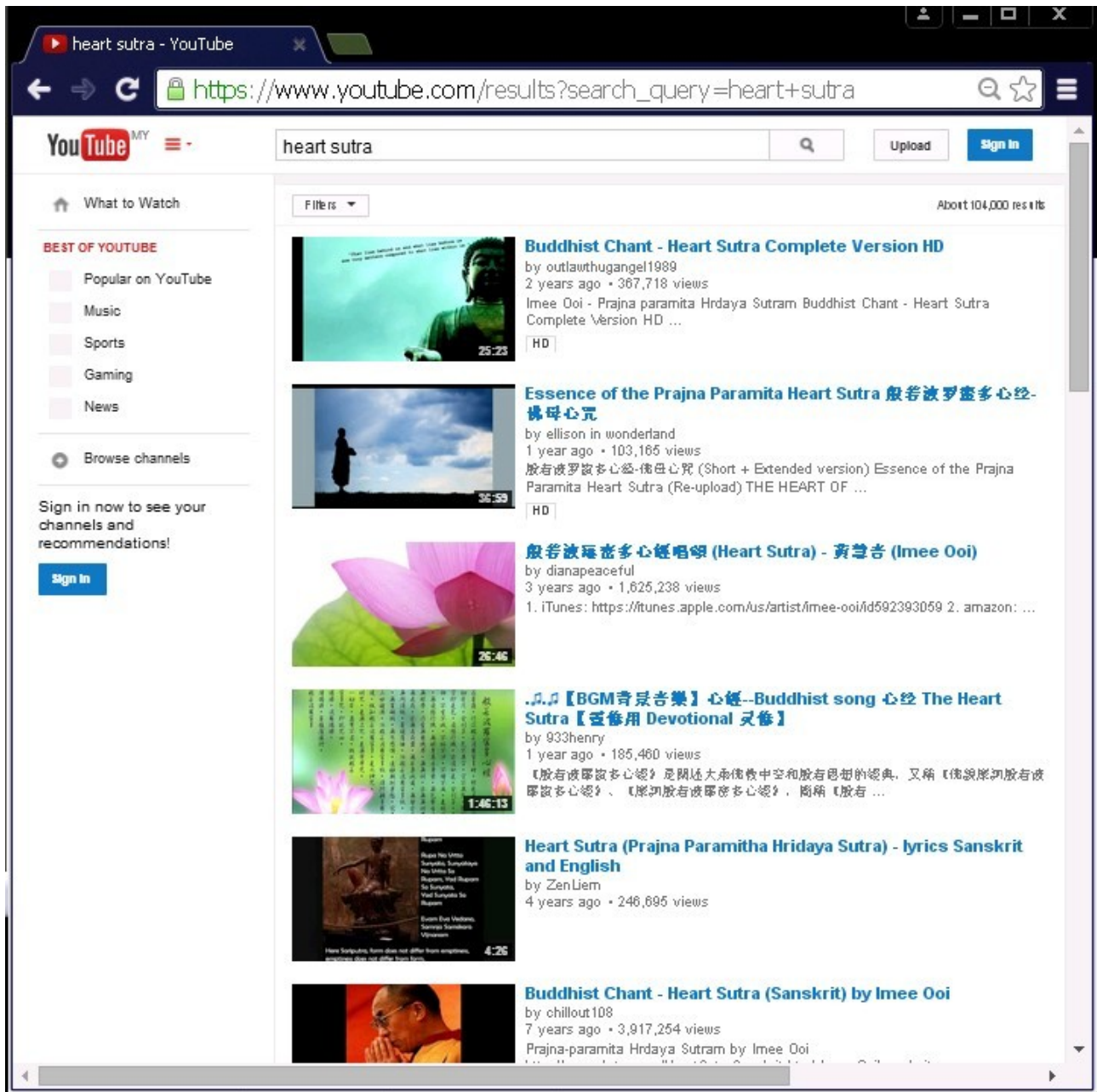


Figure 5: Using YouTube as one of the “integrated auxiliaries”. This screen capture shows the search result of “Heart Sūtra”, a famous Buddhist scripture in audiovisual form, on YouTube, 22 February 2015 (Chow 2015: 42).



Figure 6: Tzu Chi Foundation's unique sign language presentation in a massive ensemble performance, illustrating an example of the "integrated auxiliaries" rendered in virtual ethnography (Tzu Chi KL and Selangor Branch 2013; Chow 2015: 38).

As a solution to the contradiction arising from both the methodology of virtual ethnography and the tricky properties of the digital data, the idea of the "impermanence of being" [无常] can be therefore considered. It is an important concept in the core Buddhist ideology that links to "emptiness". For example, Buddhist chanters can experience impermanence by "reflecting upon and observing the rising and passing away of the sound, ideas, and emotions in a constant flow of interconnected states of being", as well as "the nature of the transformation in how he or she senses, perceives, and feels" (Chen 2001: 46). It is, however, not nihilistic. Instead, one has to be conscious of a process-based experience. He then learns to undertake the middle path, which is to avoid the extremes or to persist a non-existent absolute being.

As IoT marks the rising awareness of virtuality as an integral part of reality, the conscious boundaries of "real" and "virtual", "presence" and "absence", "online" and "offline", and the singularity and multiplicity of "self" have become blur: all things are constituted of phenomenal beings, and all things are phenomenal. As this new idea about things challenges all known authentic concepts in conventional ethnography, an understanding in phenomenality helps to make a new sense in the making of an ethnographic field and object. Consequently, paradoxical attributes of the internet can be balanced in light of the "non-self" nature of things which are deemed more complex and no longer absolute: at each instant, the internet are both real and virtual; people are both absent and present, or both online and offline; a "self" can be both singular and multiple in the conscious existence.

## Conclusion

Virtual ethnography has an “adaptive” nature as an ethnographic object “sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself” (Hine 2000: 65). This corresponds to the idea of phenomenality in which spatial and temporal settings of the field has become more open-ended and towards a construction from the consciousness of the ethnographer.

Moreover, the coherence of virtuality and phenomenality based on the doctrine of emptiness allows a shared understanding of the phenomenal properties of things when researching music in the Internet Era. A methodology adapted to the consideration of phenomenality could be applicable not just in Buddhist subjects but also ethnography of all other disciplines in the humanities. While conventional ethnographic approaches seem not being able to transcend the constraint of making a virtual object known authentically, ethnographers could consider the virtual properties as phenomena integrated to the reality, as well as the causation of phenomenality in the making of the ethnographic object. Adopting “Phenomenality of Things” into ethnography is, however, a challenge in the conventional ethnography, but this would be instrumental to solve cognitive problems that come along the development of the internet. More discussions and debates by ethnographers should be encouraged to explore more possibilities to research music in the 21st century.

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