

a grey city with its beast

Anqi Liu

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This is a work in two parts, scan the code to access the sound



The possibility of releasing this album is inseparable from the peculiar life I have been fortunate enough, and perhaps complicated enough, to live.

I was born and raised in a remote ethnic autonomous region in northern China, where access to knowledge, art, education, books, information, and even the imagination of another life arrived through layers of distance, limitation, and delay. To give you a tiny example, when I was young, if I wanted certain books, I had to save money and time to take the train to Beijing, because they were simply not available in Inner Mongolia.

Even today, after technology has transformed many cities in China, and even though a high-speed train can bring someone from Inner Mongolia to Beijing in only two hours, the gap has not disappeared. It has only changed form. Distance is no longer only geographic. It is institutional, cultural, economic, linguistic, psychological, and, more recently, reinforced

through law. It lives in the body before one even knows how to name it. It shapes what a child can imagine, what a student can reach, what a musician is allowed to become, and who must spend years simply arriving at a threshold where others seem to have been born standing.

Later, through the chance to study and live abroad, I entered other artistic ecologies, other systems of value, other rooms where sound could be named, framed, discussed, recorded, published, and heard. I learned that a sound does not travel by itself. It travels with language, institutions, access, translation, and the body that carries it.

But this possibility is not innocent. It carries a distance I still do not know how to resolve. Recently, when I was writing the poems for the Peeling Cycle, a collaborative live audiovisual performance with my AHM (A Happy Mennn) trio, I have found myself dreaming about my childhood. Disappeared memories resurfaced. I remember a man from Changsha, a city in southern China, who came to my city in the

1990s to discuss a work project with my father. Years later, we met again. He told me he had never forgotten the little girl living in that dark apartment in that grey city. He had a daughter my age. Looking at where I lived, he said, was the first time he understood that deprivation was not simply economic. It was not only about money. It was a whole condition of lack, a city, a state, an atmosphere where things were missing before one even knew how to desire them. It shaped what a child believed the world could be. Even the villages he knew elsewhere in China had not carried that same degree of absence.

I did not fully understand this lack until much later, after I was able to travel, study, and live in other parts of the world. This is the hidden violence that, once I began to think about it, made me fearful. It is an unseen violence: as long as one remains inside that city, one may never realize that other possibilities of living, surviving, desiring, and becoming even exist.

The city where I grew up seemed covered by a grey that did not belong to the ordinary world. When I later read *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante, I was startled by how familiar it felt. Across the world, deprived and decaying urban districts, though governed by different powers, seem to share the same underlying hue, as if under a curse. When night falls, black smoke slowly wells up from the ground, inch by inch eroding the women and children of the city, corroding human nerves, destinies, and imaginations.

I have since crossed countries, languages, institutions, cultures, and artistic worlds. I have witnessed fierce struggles between people, between people and institutions, and between people and fate itself. Sometimes, when I try to explain where I come from to friends in the United States or to people who grew up in China's other cities, I find myself saying that the place where I was born follows a different logic of survival. Leaving that city changed the scale by which I measure difficulty. After I left, many

things that once seemed overwhelming began to feel strangely simple.

But I do not think I ever truly left. There is still something inside me that belongs to that grey city. Sleepless. Dissociated. Volatile. Furious. As a child, I often suffered from insomnia and neurasthenia, repeatedly torn apart by brutal exams and dreams of escaping my hometown. I learned too early that leaving was not a choice, but a matter of survival.

I sometimes suspect that artistic creation is as frail as a cicada's wing. It often grows in a carefully tended greenhouse, gently cradled by privilege, or at least that is increasingly how it appears to me now. Perhaps this is where my sense of dislocation begins. I have not truly been able to resonate with the present moment, with its surroundings, or with the magnetic field of contemporary artistic life. This ultimately pushed me toward writing the words you are reading now.

There has always been a beast living inside me. Grey as that city. Sleepless. Half-feral. Furious. She didn't learn how to live in sunlight. Perhaps my life was not meant only for becoming a composer or an artist, nor for leaving behind a body of work. Perhaps it has simply been an attempt to find a language capable of speaking for her.

To arrive here also means leaving behind the people who first taught me how to play, how to listen, and how to feel the weight of a sound before it becomes an artwork. Many of them have lived their entire lives within a world I was somehow able to leave. That world was shaped by geography, scarcity, delayed and limited access, and uneven forms of recognition, but also by something more difficult to locate: the way the world decides whose knowledge can be named as art.

We often speak of experimental music as a field of freedom, rupture, and possibility. But we rarely speak about the accessibility of becoming experimental.

Experimental music is one of the ways authority is organized around sound, and sound is the perfect material for authority: intangible, unarguable, unable to speak for itself. The same instability is heard as novelty on one body and as undertraining, backwardness, or lack on another. The difference is never in the sound. It is in who is trusted to say what the sound is.

To be recognized as experimental, a sound needs things that have nothing to do with sound: a microphone and a room quiet enough to deserve it, a program note written in the language of curators, a grant, a visa, a stage where fragility is a genre rather than a verdict. Who is allowed to be fragile, strange, rough, excessive, unstable, or difficult, and still be heard as radical? And who makes equally profound sounds in places where those same qualities are dismissed as local, primitive, untrained, folkloric, or technically insufficient?

For a long time, the sound of the choor khuur was considered too fragile, too unstable, too difficult to fit inside the modern concert hall or conservatory environment. Its instability was heard as weakness. Its vulnerability was treated as a technical problem. Its intimacy was treated as limitation.

Yet, as one can hear in this album, this same sound can be immediately received within experimental, avant-garde, and sound art contexts. What was once dismissed as unstable may suddenly become radical. What was once treated as marginal may suddenly be heard as complex, embodied, materially rich, and conceptually sophisticated.

This contradiction hurts.

I often wonder what would happen if the people who carried these sounds appeared in New York, Shanghai, Berlin, Los Angeles, or Paris. What if they played the same instruments, with the same trembling sonority, the same closeness to

weather, body, animal skin, horsehair, wood, and lived memory? Would they still be heard as folk musicians, rural inheritors, or practitioners of a disappearing tradition? Or would they suddenly become avant-garde composers, experimental sound artists, inventors of another sonic future? But even this question is not enough.

The wound cannot be understood through a single line between margin and center, East and West, tradition and modernity. The relation between Inner Mongolia, China, and the global art world is more tangled than that. No single power decides whether a sound becomes art.

It is not only Beijing. It is not only the West. It is not only the conservatory. It is not only the market. It is not only the critic, the label, the passport, the university, the archive, or the city. It is the accumulation of all these hands, some visible, many not.





These hands decide which sounds remain folklore, which sounds become heritage, which sounds become research and archive, which sounds become experimental music, which sounds become contemporary art, and which sounds never enter language at all. They decide who is heard as a bearer of tradition and who is heard as an artist, who is preserving the past and who is inventing the future, even when the sound itself moves through the same trembling body, the same breath, the same fragile threshold between survival and expression.

This is why I cannot simply say that one center extracts from one margin, or that one powerful world finally recognizes what another world has always known. That is part of the violence, but not all of it.

The situation I come from is shaped by forces that are convoluted and even intertwined with one another: a region administered from far away; a conservatory that measures the grassland's instruments against the piano; a heritage system

that protects a sound by deciding what it must remain; archives that keep voices alive by holding them still; art markets on the other side of the world; a craft of instrument-making that must reshape itself for the conservatory, the stage, and the concert hall, until the traditional loose-hair bow, with all its instability, becomes a privilege: I can afford to inherit it, while my teachers back home hold a Western violin bow for stability and a Westernized virtuosity; and my own painful passage through translation, even as I write this essay. The people who taught me to listen may be made less visible not only by the West, but also by the city, by the school, by the archive, by the very language through which art becomes visible, and sometimes even by the tradition they themselves come from.

What I am trying to understand is how authority gathers around sound.

Before a sound can be called experimental, many conditions must already be in place, and I can count them in my own life. Someone must have

time to experiment: mine arrived only when I no longer needed every hour to secure the next. Someone must have space to fail: my failures happened in well-equipped rooms, among kind witnesses, and were called process. Someone must be close enough to institutions that strangeness can be read as thought rather than deficiency: I learned the words that perform this conversion, in languages my first teachers never needed. Someone must be protected enough for instability to become style rather than danger: my sleeplessness became an aesthetic only after it stopped being a symptom.

The hands that assemble these conditions are rarely visible. They work the way the smoke worked in my city, rising slowly out of the ground, settling on everything equally, quietly deciding who would be called innovative and who would remain local, ethnic, rural, traditional, disappearing.

Experimental music, then, is not merely an aesthetic category. It is a historical mechanism through which familiar forms of class, privilege, and connection recognize one another in sound while believing themselves revolutionary — and sound, being intangible, cannot testify against them. It is difficult to argue with a claim made about a sound. The claim costs nothing for those who speak the right language. The sound cannot contradict the sentence spoken over it.

Perhaps this is also why my relationship to experimental music has become increasingly complicated.

I owe this album to the experimental music communities, institutions, teachers, collaborators, and friendships that allowed me to leave one ecology and enter another. Without those improbable crossings, this record would not exist. Yet arriving here has also made visible the conditions that made my arrival possible. The closer I move toward the center of experimental music, the more I find myself asking what kinds

of distance, privilege, and authority are quietly carried inside its idea of freedom.

The field speaks passionately about rupture, freedom, and radical imagination, yet too rarely asks how those freedoms became possible in the first place. It celebrates the aesthetics of precarity while remaining insulated from precarity itself. It performs openness while quietly reproducing familiar economies of class, geography, language, institutional prestige, and cultural capital.

What troubles me is the quiet transformation of those who have themselves struggled for recognition. The language of institutions has a way of entering the body. Artists who once survived by making every possible opening into a path can gradually begin to speak through the logic of exclusivity, scarcity, and prestige. What once emerged as a strategy of survival is reinterpreted as a lack of discipline, a lack of refinement, or a failure to understand the rules of the field.

This is how authority sustains itself. It rarely appears only as prohibition. More often, it speaks through those who have already been recognized. Recognition teaches artists how recognition should be protected, distributed, and withheld. The radical eventually learns to speak in the voice of the gate, even when it still imagines itself outside the wall.

Too often, the experimental music community mistakes the conditions that make experimentation possible for experimentation itself. Its roughness becomes sophistication; its instability is taught as a style, because it arrives with the right passport, the right education, the right language, the right cities, the right friendships, and, often, enough material security that failure never becomes catastrophe.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, instability and roughness are a condition of life. It is not performed. It is survived. People's sounds emerge from material struggle, political constraint, geographic isolation, disappearing languages, economic necessity,

and fragile ecologies of survival. Yet these same conditions are rarely recognized as experimental, not because the sounds they produce are less profound, but because they remain hidden, muted, and difficult for those scenes to hear. When they do enter the discussion, they are too often reduced to lack.

This contradiction is one of the deepest violences I know. It is not that experimental music excludes these sounds entirely. More often, it waits until they have been translated, mediated, institutionalized, archived, theorized, exhibited, and carried by bodies already granted and protected by the contemporary art world before recognizing them as innovation.

Recognition comes only after the conditions that make recognition possible have already been assembled.

Perhaps this is what this album has been trying to understand all along: how experimentality itself is historically produced.

The sound changes very little.

The conditions of hearing change everything.
Perhaps this album is also one more attempt to
return to the child who heard sound long before
she understood how the world had already
decided what could be heard as art.



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Sound and Writing by Anqi Liu

<https://discreetarchive.cargo.site/>

<https://www.anqiliu.com>

Published by *Discreet Archive*

2026

First edition of 50

I would like to thank my choor khuur teacher, Khas-Suld, for your generosity and wisdom, and for allowing me to approach this tradition as myself. My gratitude also goes to Degjirkhuu, for your heart, endurance, and continued devotion to learning and preserving the art and craft of making choor khuur, and for creating this lovely, volatile, and deeply responsive instrument for me. I am grateful to Xingwu Li (Horchin-huu), whose research, field recordings, and writings continue to inspire me. To Han Zhang, my dear āññā duo partner, thank you for engineering the recording sessions and for your generous support throughout this entire process. To Matt Baltrucki, thank you for experimenting with the mixing possibilities and for mastering the album. To Kyle Motl, thank you for reading the first draft and listening to the first raw mix. And to Jacob Calland, thank you for everything, and for making this publication possible.

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