The Calming Effect of Imee Ooi's Buddhist Music: from Mantra to Music and Meditation

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ABSTRACT

Past researchers explain how Buddhist music has gone through three stages developing from chant, to devotional song, to commercial music. Among the many composers of Buddhist music, Imee Ooi is a well-known Malaysian composer who has composed and produced thirty albums to date, highlights being Siddhartha, Above Full Moon, The Chant of Idona, Heart Sutra and Jewel of Tibet. The composer has a reputation for producing her own Buddhist mantra music that is believed to have a calming effect on listeners. This study looks into the context of Buddhist music and examines its effect on listeners. Methods that are both qualitative and quantitative in nature include analysis, interview and virtual ethnography. The songs composed on the mantra On Lom Padme Hum was selected for musical analysis to shed light on how Ooi ingeniously combines text into a musical structure that contributes to a calming and meditative effect. 

KEY WORDS: Buddhist, Mantra, Meditation, Music, Effect, Imee Ooi

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism originated from the belief and teaching of enlightened Siddhartha Gautama – Buddha from India has a history that dated back to the 6th and 5th centuries BCE [1]. The teaching of Buddha is that there is no escape from suffering in all human life. Therefore, the main goal of meditation is to become free from suffering such as greed, hatred and delusion [2].

In Buddhist meditation is known as samadhi or Way of Mindfulness [2]. The Western term ‘meditation’ was not originally used in this religion but is now commonly accepted in contemporary practice. Meditation forms a common practice in many Eastern religions. In Buddhism, practitioners meditate to attain skills and physical stamina where accomplishment comes from constant practice [3]. Moreover, Shaw [4] explains that meditation helps to attain the eightfold path of Buddhism: right view, right speech, right action, right resolve, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration and right mindfulness. Following the ten precepts, the teaching of Buddha prohibits one from killing, stealing, having sexual contact, lying, consuming alcohol and other intoxicants; eating at the wrong time; entertaining such as dancing, singing, instrumental music and unvarnished performance; wearing gold, silver, and body ornaments; indulging in luxurious beds and seats; and collecting gold and silver [5]. However, in contemporary Buddhism, certain practices have changed. As Cook [6] observes, meditation as contemporary Thai Buddhism is very much customized and secularized. The use of music in meditation also signifies a form of cultural change in Buddhist practice.

Among the various changes in contemporary practice of Buddhism, music forms the form of this article. As Dhammayake [7] discussed, the term ‘music’ was originally Western and may not denote any other cultural activity that involves organized sound. Liturgical chant or sānākā was strictly distinct from music in early Buddhist monastic tradition [8]. Reviewing post-literate scholars such as Tan and Tan [5], Chen [8], Chen [10] clearly delineate the development of how music once prohibited in Buddhism, continued to develop from the 1300s, surpassing the Cultural Revolution in China to the modern era of recording, commercial recording and live performance. Besides, Loo, Loo, Lee and Lee [11] also observe that Buddhist music took on a new context in comparison of Malaysia which has become a musical activity held by a Buddhist association. Generally, according to Chen [10], Buddhist music is now categorized as:

1. Buddhist Chant (sānākā)
2. Buddhist Devotional songs (Foég aoé)
3. Commercial Buddhist Music (Yangseng Foég aoé)

In Malaysia, among the many Buddhist music composers or song writers, such as Chen Zee Bing, Li Ying Jian, Huang Zong Qi and Zeng Jing Han, Imee Ooi has a reputation as a composer of Buddhist chant music whose music gives a calming and relaxing effect. Ooi had thirty albums produced to date and her music includes composed chant, devotional song and also meditations of which the latter may be classified as commercial Buddhist music. Her albums include The Chant of Maitreya, Heart Sutra and The Great Compassion Mantra.