



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***PHENOMENAL AND VIRTUAL VIEWS ON MUSIC RELATED TO
BUDDHISM IN 21ST-CENTURY MALAYSIA***

CHOW OW WEI

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**PHENOMENAL AND VIRTUAL VIEWS ON MUSIC RELATED TO
BUDDHISM IN 21ST-CENTURY MALAYSIA**

By

CHOW OW WEI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

September 2015

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**PHENOMENAL AND VIRTUAL VIEWS ON MUSIC RELATED TO
BUDDHISM IN 21ST-CENTURY MALAYSIA**

By

CHOW OW WEI

September 2015

Chair: Gisa Jähnichen, PhD

Faculty: Human Ecology

Music related to Buddhism, or Buddhist music in general, gains attention only in the recent decades. Mahāyāna Buddhism substantially registers the importance of music, despite a restriction on the monastic involvement in music performance. While Vajrayāna Buddhism and ‘engaged Buddhism’ have emerged as a global trend that increasingly applies a musical context in many religious movements, Buddhist music is rather deemed problematic to Theravādins. To gaze this music with a philosophical perspective, phenomenality is employed as one of the typical Buddhist emphasises that promotes a detachment from the delusion of worldly existence. In this context, music is merely reflected as a perceived phenomenon. The virtual perspective is another access point to the concept of phenomenality since the internet has created a new dimension that transcends the boundaries across time and space. Subsequently, music enthusiasts, knowledge seekers, and Buddhist practitioners in 21st-century Malaysia, who no longer need to overcome the problems of distance and unscheduled absence at a specific location, are allowed to access relevant data conveniently according to various needs.

Malaysians embrace an innovatory ‘tech’ life that drastically transforms urban lifestyle with a newly developed ‘mobile-only’ culture in the 21st century, a time widely regarded as the digital era. However, the adaptation of a ‘tech’ lifestyle brings about a question of existence in virtuality, which is also connected to the online experience of Buddhist music. Spreading fast through a virtual platform, Buddhist music somehow appears in diverse styles but it also perpetuates a possibility for its musical attributes to remain questionable.

This qualitative research explores possible connections of music related to Buddhism with parallel ideas of phenomenality and virtuality, and investigates the emphasis of the contexts of ‘Buddhism’ and ‘music’ as well as aspects that makes music ‘Buddhist’ by considering music seen from multiple perspectives. Employing a contemporary view of virtual ethnography by Hine, this musicology on Buddhist music in 21st-century Malaysia undertakes a combination of qualitative analytical methods in which discourse analysis, hermeneutic phenomenology, metaphorical analysis, ethnostatistics and music analysis significantly operate on data sources as a way of knowing.

This study consciously regards all music related to Buddhism as an all-inclusive genre called ‘Buddhism-related music’, while the term ‘Buddhist music’, which is adopted to classify or describe this typical music, is employed interchangeably though both terms

are not entirely the same in their specific contexts. As the outcomes, it is found out that Buddhism-related music hardly constitutes significant typological criteria based on its sonic and stylistic attributes. Though variously defined, this music can be identified simply through a conceptualised content that interpretatively represents an idea related to Buddhism. With the understanding of 'emptiness', a more universal view can be projected in the ethics of the making of Buddhist music. Virtuality as an integral part of reality affects the making of the object in parallel with the causation of phenomenality. Buddhist music can be considered as both a phenomenal and virtual being, therefore suggesting an insight to consider separable contexts of 'Buddhism' and 'music', as music is deemed secondary to the goal of Buddhist practice. The notion of 'emptiness' advocates an undertaking of the 'middle path' for composers, musicians and audiences to access Buddhist music. Finally, this leads the study to formulate an idea of the 'Buddhist being' in music.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PANDANGAN FENOMENA DAN MAYA TERHADAP MUZIK BERKAITAN
DENGAN AGAMA BUDDHA DI MALAYSIA PADA
ABAD KE-21**

Oleh

CHOW OW WEI

September 2015

Pengerusi: Gisa Jähnichen, PhD

Fakulti: Ekologi Manusia

Muzik berkaitan dengan agama Buddha dikenali sebagai muzik Buddhisme secara umum. Ia hanya menarik perhatian sejak dekad akhir-akhir ini. Buddhisme Mahāyāna menonjolkan kepentingan muzik dengan ketara walaupun penglibatan biarawan dalam persembahan muzik masih diperbataskan. Manakala Buddhisme Vajrayāna dan ‘aliran Buddhisme ikut serta’ telah menjadi trend di merata-rata tempat di mana konteks muzik dalam gerakan agama semakin diterap, terdapat keraguan di kalangan penganut Theravāda terhadap muzik Buddhisme. Sebagai tatapan falsafah kepada muzik ini, konsep fenomenaliti dipakai sebagai salah satu penekanan khusus dalam Buddhisme yang menggalakkan pemikiran yang memisahkan individu daripada khayalan terhadap kewujudan duniawi. Dalam konteks ini, muzik hanya merupakan suatu pantulan sebagai fenomena yang dirasakan. Pandangan maya merupakan suatu lagi titik capaian kepada konsep fenomenaliti sejak rangkaian komputer antarabangsa telah mewujudkan suatu dimensi baru yang merentasi batasan masa dan jarak. Seterusnya, peminat muzik, pencari pengetahuan dan pengamal Buddhisme di Malaysia pada abad ke-21 tidak perlu lagi mengatasi masalah-masalah jarak dan ketidakhadiran yang tidak dirancang di suatu lokasi yang spesifik. Mereka diperbolehkan dengan kemudahan untuk mengakses data yang berkaitan dengan pelbagai keperluan mereka.

Warga Malaysia pada abad ke-21 mengalu-alukan kehidupan ‘tech’ yang membawa pembaharuan sehingga mengubah gaya hidup secara drastik dengan budaya ‘bimbit sahaja’ yang baru dipupuk pada abad ke-21, iaitu zaman yang dianggap sebagai era digital. Namun, adaptasi kepada gaya hidup ‘tech’ membawa suatu perbincangan tentang kewujudan maya yang juga berkaitan dengan cara mengalami muzik Buddhisme dalam talian. Muzik Buddhisme disebarkan pantas melalui platform maya dan wujud dalam pelbagai gaya tetapi ia juga membuka kebarangkalian yang menyebabkan atribut muzik ini dipersoalkan.

Penyelidikan kualitatif ini menerokai hubungan yang mungkin di antara muzik agama Buddha dengan idea-idea fenomenaliti dan kemayaan yang selari. Dengan pertimbangan muzik daripada pelbagai perspektif, kajian ini juga menyoal penekanan konteks ‘Buddhisme’ dan ‘muzik’ serta aspek yang menjadikan muzik ‘bersifat Buddha’. Selain menggunakan pandangan kontemporari daripada etnografi maya yang dicadangkan oleh Hine, kajian tentang muzik Buddhisme di Malaysia pada abad ke-21 ini menggabungkan kaedah-kaedah analisis kualitatif yang beroperasi analisis

wacana, fenomenologi hermeneutik, analisis metafora, etnostatistik dan analisis muzik sebagai operasi yang mengendalikan sumber data untuk memperoleh pengetahuan.

Kajian ini menganggap semua muzik berkaitan dengan Buddhisme sebagai sebuah genre segenap yang dikenali sebagai 'muzik berkaitan dengan Buddhisme', manakala istilah 'muzik Buddhisme' telah dikemukakan untuk mengklasifikasikan atau menggambarkan muzik tipikal ini. Kedua-dua istilah ini digunakan secara saling boleh tukar walaupun maksud mereka bukan betul-betul sama dalam konteks masing-masing. Hasil penyelidikan ini menunjukkan bahawa muzik Buddhisme tidak mungkin membentuk kriteria tipologi yang penting berdasarkan atribut-atribut bunyi dan stilistik. Walaupun muzik Buddhisme ditakrifkan dengan pelbagai cara, muzik ini dapat dicamkan hanya dengan kehadiran isi pengonsepan yang mentafsirkan gambaran tentang suatu idea berkaitan dengan Buddhisme. Wujudnya pemahaman tentang 'ketiadaan' dapat menonjolkan suatu pandangan yang lebih universal dalam etika muzik Buddhisme. Kemayaan sebagai bahagian integral kepada realiti mempengaruhi penciptaan objek yang setimbal dengan hubungan sebab dan akibat dalam fenomenaliti. Oleh sebab muzik Buddhisme boleh dianggap wujud sebagai fenomena dan kemayaan, suatu wawasan terhadap pemisahan konteks 'Buddhisme' dan 'muzik' boleh dicadangkan di mana muzik dianggap sekunder untuk tujuan amalan Buddhisme. Tanggapan 'ketiadaan' menyarankan suatu 'jalan tengah' untuk komposer, pemuzik dan penonton mengakses muzik Buddhisme. Pada akhirnya, kajian ini merumuskan sebuah idea tentang 'sifat Buddha' dalam muzik.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 17 September 2015 to conduct the final examination of Chow Ow Wei on his thesis entitled "Phenomenal and Virtual Views on Music Related to Buddhism in 21st-century Malaysia" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

Ahmad Tarmizi bin Talib, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairperson)

Sarjit Singh a/l Darshan Singh, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Made Mantle Hood, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

John Lawrence Witzleben, PhD

Professor
University of Maryland
United States of America
(External Examiner)

ZULKARNAIN ZAINAL, PhD

Professor and Deputy Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 15 December 2015

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Gisa Jähnichen, PhD

Professor
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairperson)

Loo Fung Chiat, PhD

Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Lee Yok Fee, PhD

Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Human Ecology
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

BUJANG BIN KIM HUAT, PhD

Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date:

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Signature: _____ Date: 30 March 2016

Name and Matric No.: CHOW OW WEI (GS36211) _____

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Signature: _____

Name of Chairperson of Supervisory Committee: _____

Signature: _____

Name of Member of Supervisory Committee: _____

Signature: _____

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

It has been speculated that music related to Buddhism has a long history dated back to the time period when Buddhism was first propagated. Reports of literature depict the customisation of musical instruments by Siddhārtha Gautama during his *dharma* teaching over 2,550 years ago as well as by Ashoka's regime in the Maurya Dynasty in India over 2,300 years ago (Seet Kim Beng 1993: 83–84; Hsing Yun 2010: 4–13). However, the related music gains attention only in recent decades after Buddhism, an old religion in Asia, spawns the West as a spiritual trend since the second half of 20th century. One may wonder the spreading of Buddhism from India to many Asian regions would have long developed the so-called Buddhist music along its trail. But since 1930s, music is only to essentially register its importance as a *dharma* spreading tool in China where Mahāyāna Buddhism is mainly practiced then, despite conservative monastic practices that restrict a practitioner's involvement in music performance. The rising of global trends in Vajrayāna Buddhism and 'engaged Buddhism' inclines more to apply a musical context in many religious movements, in which the music sounds liturgical, commercial or 'fashionable'. However, the discourse in religious music is rather problematic in Theravādin-dominant regions although musical activities related to Buddhism are still prevalent.

There is a vast variety in music related to Buddhism which takes on many shapes and styles. But no matter how it is performed and perceived, it is more resourceful and intellectual to grasp the music if it is viewed through the viewpoint of Buddhist philosophy, which would have one to embark on a complex journey to study the philosophy since it has undergone a long-term development that involves various schismic stages as well as cultural integration in many places. Nevertheless, within many Buddhist denominations, there are still joint common emphasises that which are presumably present in music related to Buddhism. Phenomenality is one of the typical Buddhist emphasises that promotes detachment from the delusion of worldly existence, as worldly objects and matters are reflected as perceived phenomenon, which includes the appearance of music.

Likewise, the virtual perspective, seemingly from an unrelated field, is another point to access the concept of phenomenality. The internet as a virtual platform that creates a so-called new dimension that breaks the limitations of time and space has obscured boundaries of communities, cities, regions, nations, as well as temporal periods. The exponential growth in the population of internet users in Malaysia and in the demands for technology-mediated communication services accelerate the feasibility to access internet-based resources in everyday life, as music enthusiasts, knowledge seekers and Buddhist practitioners in present Malaysia no longer need to struggle with the problems of distance and unscheduled absence at a specific location to access relevant data they need. The practice of Buddhism in Malaysia is diverse and never of a religion of the majority. With the creation of digital platforms and social media in modern communication, music related to Buddhism in Malaysia seems to offer a diverse choice

of styles for internet users who enjoy a liberal means to access Buddhist monastic chants or hybridised music of *mantra* and electronic dance, regardless the many barriers in religious denomination, language, culture and nationality.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism serves most Buddhist devotees in Malaysia who are mainly of the Chinese ethnicity somehow determines that music related to Mahāyāna Buddhism has indeed gained more familiarity; hence it derives a general impression that it is deemed to be *the* Buddhist music among Buddhists in Malaysia. In addition, there are a number of Malaysian composers and artistes who work in such a direction and have produced several Buddhist-themed music albums and musicals. Related on-stage performances such as musicals on a Buddhist theme can only be watched by a limited number of audience (Loo & Loo 2012), while there are regular competitions of Buddhist music composition with promising music publications and music album productions (Loo et al 2011; Fo Guang Publication 2005). But Buddhist music products are not rare to the devotees, since it is commonly played as muzak for a desirable sonorous ambience at places like vegetarian restaurants and Buddhist centres.

The 21st century witnesses the significant arrival of the innovatory ‘tech life’ in urbanised places, drastically transforming urban lifestyle with a newly cultivated ‘mobile-only culture’ (Izwan Ismail et al. 2014). It is insofar a time of the so-called digital era or the internet age, epitomising the internet as a modern but rather mystical experience to people who before the last 20 years could not have imagined the impact of virtuality in their current lives. Consequently, there is somehow an intriguing point of research interest for an era when a significant number of people are rather keen to broadcast text or graphics about themselves, their niches or places they travel on social media for a certain expectation that others who receive the broadcast materials may keep on spreading them to infinite recipients. Some media are developed as virtual platforms where a user requires to get onto remotely—and perhaps to readily take some physical risks of illicit accessibility—to retrieve or release all sorts of information. Rather, this virtual, mediated platform constructs an alternative reality for users to conceive of an intangible world of knowledge as well as human spirit. However, human dependency on the cognition based on adopting a ‘tech’ lifestyle brings about a question of existence in virtuality, which definitely includes the online experience of Buddhist music. Reaching out fast to audiences through this platform, music related to Buddhism somehow appears in various styles but it also opens up a possibility for musical attributes of the religion to become questionable.

Buddhism in Malaysia consists of various denominations and variously designated by scholars and practitioners with various criteria and contexts. Major examples are Mahāyāna, Theravāda and Vajrayāna, while there are still many other sub-divisions or schools. What makes Buddhism seemingly less of a religion and more of a philosophy is the emphasis of self-enlightenment, through the exploration of the inner self with constant practices in discipline [戒], meditation [定] and wisdom [慧] that enables a practitioner to see the interconnectivity of all existence in the realms of objectivity and subjectivity (Abe 2003: 62–63). Devotees of various intellectual levels are encouraged

to learn *dharma* from *saṅgha* or teachers who attain certain defining characteristics¹ and deliver the teachings of Gautama Buddha since 2,558 years ago. The fundamental Buddhist teachings do not spread the belief in a singular, unchallengeable divinity. Instead, it only delivers an understanding of the Four Noble Truths [四聖諦] that encompasses the teaching of the karmic system, which encodes the becoming of afterlife within the *saṃsāra*, or the origin of sufferings for all beings, and its correlation with an individual's mindfulness in each conscious moment of a life term. Buddhist practitioners are to understand various highly-defined hierarchies in the 'six *gati*' [六道]², the causation, the refutation of the existence of 'self', 'ego' or *ātman* (Rahula 1974: 51) or the 'devoid of a self' [無我] (Soothill & Hodous 2003) of phenomena, as well as the realisation of *nirvāṇa* or life's ultimate goal that transcends all sufferings of life and death. Therefore, despite the fact that the perceivably exotic and mystic concepts of Buddhism have become a trendy lifestyle since it was popularised in the Western world after World War II in the 20th century, this old religion of Asia appears comparatively low-key in Malaysia—in the sense of reality as well as virtuality³. Perhaps due to its multi-layered attributes of relativity for a human to explore the realms of objectivity and subjectivity, Buddhism may have been claimed as the most complex living religion to study to date.

'Buddhist music' becomes a commonly used term only in the recent decades (Jue Ming 2015), but it contains taxonomical ambiguity that requires certain clarification. Philosophically, it is deemed to reflect Buddhist doctrines to align the music with the religion on one hand, but it should also be consumable among lay people on the other hand. An emphasis in the purification of the heart and mind of the society (Hsing Yun 2010: 22) has sufficiently become one of the main ideas of secularising Buddhist music in 21st-century Malaysia when it comes to a negotiation between sacredness and secularism of the religious sound. In addition, the doctrine of 'emptiness', a Buddhist philosophy that is widespread in Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and Zen Buddhism and gives rise of the concept of phenomenality, evokes a more interesting inquiry about the reality of music. Questions about the perception of 'Buddhist music' arise as in the following: How do Buddhists see 'Buddhist music'? Is 'Buddhist music' sounding more 'Buddhist' or more 'musical'? Are the contexts of 'Buddhist' and 'music' separable in 'Buddhist music'? And what makes 'Buddhist music' really 'Buddhist'? Additionally, virtual attributes of the internet that allow musical sounds to be accessed across geographical sites and chronological sequences deepen the discussion of Buddhist music possibly in parallel to the arguments of 'emptiness'. This inquiry would perhaps gravitize views on music related to Buddhism from both perspectives.

¹ In the "Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment" (Tsong-kha-pa 2000 [1402]), an anthological compilation in Tibetan, defining characteristics of the teacher to be relied on, as well as of the student who relies upon the teacher, have been listed and elaborated.

² In Mahāyānist and Vajrayānist scriptures, a larger narrative of the 'ten *dharma*-worlds' or the 'ten states of existence' is detailed: hell [*naraka*], ghost [*preta*], animal [*tiryagyoni*], malevolent nature spirit [*asura*], human [*manuṣya*], heaven [*deva*], *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, Bodhisattva, and Buddha. The first six states are known as the 'six *gati*' which are bound to *saṃsāra* or transmigrations (Soothill & Hodous 2003).

³ As of 20 May 2015, a random test using Google as the search engine has found out that the total search results based on the keywords of 'Buddhism'/'Buddhist Malaysia' has a relatively fewer web contents [16,780,000] as compared to those based on the keywords of 'Islam'/'Muslim Malaysia' [78,200,000] and 'Christianity'/'Christian Malaysia' [46,180,000].

1.3 Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

This qualitative study aims to explore music related to Buddhism in 21st-century Malaysia by looking into issues and attributes of music related to Buddhism from phenomenal and virtual views. Besides finding ways to connect music related to Buddhism with the parallel ideas in phenomenality and virtuality, this study undertakes an attempt to convey insights to the following research questions, and eventually formulates an idea of the 'Buddhist being' in music out of 'Buddhist music' by considering the music in multiple perspectives:

1. In which ways can 'Buddhist music' be viewed? What is the significance of 'Buddhist music' to Buddhism and Buddhists in Malaysia?
2. How do 'Buddhist music', phenomenality and virtuality interconnect?
3. What is the emphasis of the contexts of 'Buddhism' and 'music' in the music?
4. Considering the importance of music related to Buddhism in 21st-century Malaysia, what makes music 'Buddhist'?

Hence, the objectives of the study are specifically addressed as in the following:

1. To find out the definition and significance of 'Buddhist music'.
2. To investigate the interconnectivity of 'Buddhist music', phenomenality and virtuality.
3. To study the contextual emphasis of 'Buddhism' and 'music'.
4. To inspect the 'Buddhist' being of music.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Music related to Buddhism is an area with vast diversity in musical styles, but a scholarly discourse on how the music can be defined philosophically across a few strata of Buddhist practitioners, composers, audiences and 'netizens' of various levels of religiosity in major Buddhist traditions, is not yet widely attained, though a handful of scholars have already contributed substantial papers on preliminary classification on Buddhist music (Chen 2004; 2005). For instance, there exist literature surveys on Buddhism and musical cultures in mainland Southeast Asia (Douglas 2010) and Asia (Greene et al. 2002), Mahāyāna chanting (Chen 2001), Theravāda ritual music and chanting (Wong 2001; Greene 2004), and Tibetan ritual music (Cupchik 2015). Moreover, as the modern communication technology has progressed into the digital era when audiovisual outcomes are digitally sourced and prevailing, virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) in the music field of 21st-century Malaysia is rarely considered.

This study fills up the abovementioned gaps in an inventive approach to deal with music related to Buddhism in 21st-century Malaysia in a critical discourse founded in phenomenality, which is emphasised in Buddhist philosophy, and virtuality, which is becoming crucial in contemporary technology-mediated lifestyle in Malaysia.

Despite the term 'Buddhist music' that was used extensively in the Mahāyāna context (Chen 2004; 2005), this study deliberately coins the terms 'music related to Buddhism' and 'Buddhism-related music' to include all types of musical sounds produced or created for Buddhist texts, or ideas founded in the Buddhist ideology.

1.5 Limitation of the Study

In terms of period consideration, this study looks into a few examples in music productions related to Buddhism in Malaysia in the present time around and after 2000 C.E. Music related to Buddhism that came into being in the 20th century or earlier will be considered for a reference of facts related to the music examples.

In terms of location and duration, while Buddhist music sources outside Malaysia are largely available on the virtual platform, multi-sited ethnography eliminates the difficulties of overcoming geographical boundaries, and thus allows possible field data collection from many places of the world. However, the researcher is positioned in the field and exploring data from a perspective limited to his physical location and a time period. Field works in the sense of physical accessibility were mostly done within Klang Valley between 2012 and 2015.

In terms of music types, music with Buddhist texts or themes in all styles and languages are considered relevant for this study. Instrumental music that contains a universal theme can also be considered if the theme is perceived in parallel with the Buddhist philosophy at any degree. This study, nevertheless, mainly deals with data in the context of Mahāyāna, Theravāda and Vajrayāna Buddhism that are prevalent in Malaysia among Buddhist practitioners and audiences. Out of these possibilities, the choice of examples has to be narrowed down to not more than five from a list of examples.

In terms of virtual participation, the nature of the virtuality has inevitably excluded people who do not have internet access or do not acquire a 'tech' lifestyle by using online electronic devices. Yet, the targeted participants are limited to individuals who are part of the 67.8 percent of a total of 7,006,000 households in Malaysia⁴, where a significant number of them may not access the internet due to various individual reasons.

1.6 Methodology

A number of heuristics, including the trial and error method, have been attempted throughout the actual research. Thus, the following account details the essence of the methodology in this specific study, as well as possible methodological problems in the process.

1.6.1 Discourse and Participation

Ethnomusicological studies draw on participant-observation, which 'captures the distance and the intimacy that characterise fieldwork' (Rice 2014: 34) as well as the learning of music and dance, which is to take place in a geographical field site. In this study, the nature of qualitative research is intended as of the musicology of Buddhist music in 21st-century Malaysia: a contemporary concept of virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), which is backed up by the idea of multi-sited field introduced by George E. Marcus (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009; Burrell 2009: 183), is applied in the light of

⁴ Reported as of the broadband penetration rate in the third quarter of 2014. This statistical data was released by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2014: 2–3).

internet prevalence. Opinions on Buddhism-related music to and the importance of music in the context of Buddhism constitute the dominant discourse in the field. The discourse, which is made possible by gathering ideas from real life and virtual sources, is organised in contextual perspectives that reflect Buddhism-related music in present-day Malaysia. Another important investigation has to eventually look into how the discourse is viewed from the perspective of Buddhism and whether parallel, underlying ideas with gradually prevailing virtual perspectives are available.

The participatory approach in this study is both emic and etic. It is emic in terms of the similar cultural, religious, lingual and socialising background as well as the internet experience the researcher has attained as with most of the informants. With an understanding of what practitioners, composers, audiences and internet users think about the subject, he can make use of his existing operational connectivity to follow the subject and people without major difficulties. This condition prompts an immediate view from the inside and considers further inquiries that may arise in the field. On the other hand, the approach is etic in terms of the distance of understanding between the researcher and the informants. The knowledge produced by the informants who are involved in the subject at various levels is not of uniformity, and each opinion is unique, individualised and varying at a different degree. With no control in the condition of the outcome, the researcher has no presumption of the subject and the people but only to treat all sources as of equal importance. This would lead him to investigate the depth of these data and to finally develop a scientific interpretation of the subject as a way of knowing.

However, when virtually participating in the discussion, the position a researcher takes on as an insider or an outsider becomes obscure along the line of anonymity whose nature is one of the distinctive features of the cyberspace. A research paradigm may be thus significantly set up, and in the end nothing else matters than an understanding in the exchange of ideas.

Due to this reason, the researcher needs to participate in both real and virtual spaces for sourcing the data. In reality, face-to-face interactions with informants and physical attendance of musical events are done as in conventional fieldwork. Informants are selected according to their personal involvement, knowledge or association in the related music productions, the religion or the philosophy claimed to be embedded in the music. They are also within the reach of the researcher who travels from a place to another throughout the course of the study. In cyberspace, the researcher mainly deals with virtual interactions involving internet users—who assert certain identities and could also comprise real-life informants that exist virtually—and virtual participation in asynchronous audiovisual file transmission as well as web sourcing of digital data that includes the literature. This approach ensures that data sources are adequate for substantial analysis and interpretation.

1.6.2 Strategy of Searching

A qualitative research in nature significantly depends on how sources, proofs, methods, arguments, and possibilities are explored and eventually leading to the answer for a

research question. The strategy of searching therefore determines the quality⁵ of the inquired data and, subsequently, the essentiality of data interpretation.

With respect to the topic, the internet plays a dominant role as an integrated tool to search for academic resources. Being accessible through many electronic applications for desktop computers, mobile phones and tablets, the internet in the second decade of the 21st century has intensely emerged as a database made publicly retrievable, though some may see both encyclopedic and anti-intellectual sides of it. With this, a user who no longer have to physically make an inquisition at an information archive centre can be literally served with vast oceans of information that consists of publications, documents, brochures, and even religious scriptures. Besides Boolean operators and the 'wildcard'⁶, the enhanced functionality added in contemporary web search engines enables a user to see instant auto-completed suggestions, as he types the keywords in the search text bar⁷, and even a suggested correction in the search result if the keywords merely match with the familiarity of the database. With just a click on the search button, the user is led to a display of numerous search entries, often ranked in a unique algorithm to reflect relevance, alongside with an extra data on the duration of retrieval that usually takes less than a second⁸.

The convenience of web search engines helps to recognise the diversity and the popularity of a searched subject that appears online. Moreover, a right choice of keyword would lead to a more desirable result and thus would minimise the efforts of searching in the oceans of information. Keywords for this study are essentially derived from research questions, methods in data collection, analysis and interpretation, and the contexts—as well as the context of contexts—through brainstorming, probing, correlating matters, and imagining the outcome. It is also noted that a web search engine mostly provides a language-based search result. An additional language used in searching practically opens a wider availability of resources, and thus increases the relevance of the search result that may be unavailable in another language portal. To search for literature sources, English and Chinese keywords are mainly used. However, in order not to miss any important sources for this specific topic, other relevant modern Asian languages, such as Japanese and Thai, are also considered. Any issue in understanding literature caused by the language barrier can be approximately overcome by rendering an online translation tool with an occasional combination of a few online dictionaries.

In spite of rendering **expansion** on primary keywords that propagate more derivatives, **exclusion** is also necessary so that the considerably large amount of data can be essentially narrowed down to a specific line of discussion. Once searched data has reached saturation, there is a need to apply exclusion with a purpose to eliminate redundant and irrelevant materials and efforts. While expansion is needed to prevent the issue of insufficient data, exclusion is to overcome another extreme, which is when

⁵ Not so much with the quantity that is rather determined by time span of the research process.

⁶ In computing, instances of Boolean operators are conjunction [*and*], disjunction [*or*], negation [*not*] and implication [*implies*]; the 'wildcard', customised with the asterisk sign [***], is used to substitute a single or a string of characters.

⁷ An example of such feature is Google Instant, which was introduced in 2010.

⁸ For example, as of 20 January 2015 the average median load time of Google.com, as measured by Alexa.com on monthly basis, is 1.734 seconds. It is faster than 58% of sites (Alexa Internet, Inc. n. d.).

a researcher does not want to miss every possible data he has yet to collect or when he cannot decide which collected data he should eliminate. All data should be inspected with a constant reference to the research objectives that are also to be practically reviewed and refined from time to time.

Besides, a ‘thread method’, a concept borrowed from the grouping method commonly used in electronic communication system, is included in the strategy. It is not a new method but rather a way to categorise and organise running messages or commentary on electronic interfaces. Being applied in all forms of internet user communication that include Usenet newsgroups, web-based forums, weblogs, chat rooms, groupware and e-mail, a thread denotes ‘the collection of messages organised by the software’ and is displayed in ‘flat’ chronological order by date of posting, or in ‘question–answer order’, i.e. having one question followed by all answers in a hierarchical organising manner (Computer Language Company Inc., n. d.). Incorporating the features in a threaded discussion group (Wolsey 2004), one or more subthreads can also be developed as derivatives along a thread.

In this study, the ‘thread method’ is applied not as a communication pattern but a flow of ideas according to the research questions. Primary keywords are linked as the thread, radiating towards derivatives as one or more subthreads—from textual to contextual, central to distant, present to beyond, or tangible to anti-material—and thus constructing a mapping feature of the study. An idea of this method is comprehensively visualised in a planar diagram as in Figure 1, as the display of text colours roughly approximates the connections established as ‘threads’.



Figure 1 An example using the ‘thread method’ in the strategy of searching (Graphic: Chow Ow Wei)

Creating excessive numbers of thread can, however, turn out to become problematic. Unnecessary subthreads could gradually redistribute substantial weight of the thread to its extensions, thus resulting in a less focal research outcome. The effort of evaluating voluminous subthreads in a hierarchy also consumes much time and unnecessarily diverts the intention away from research objectives.

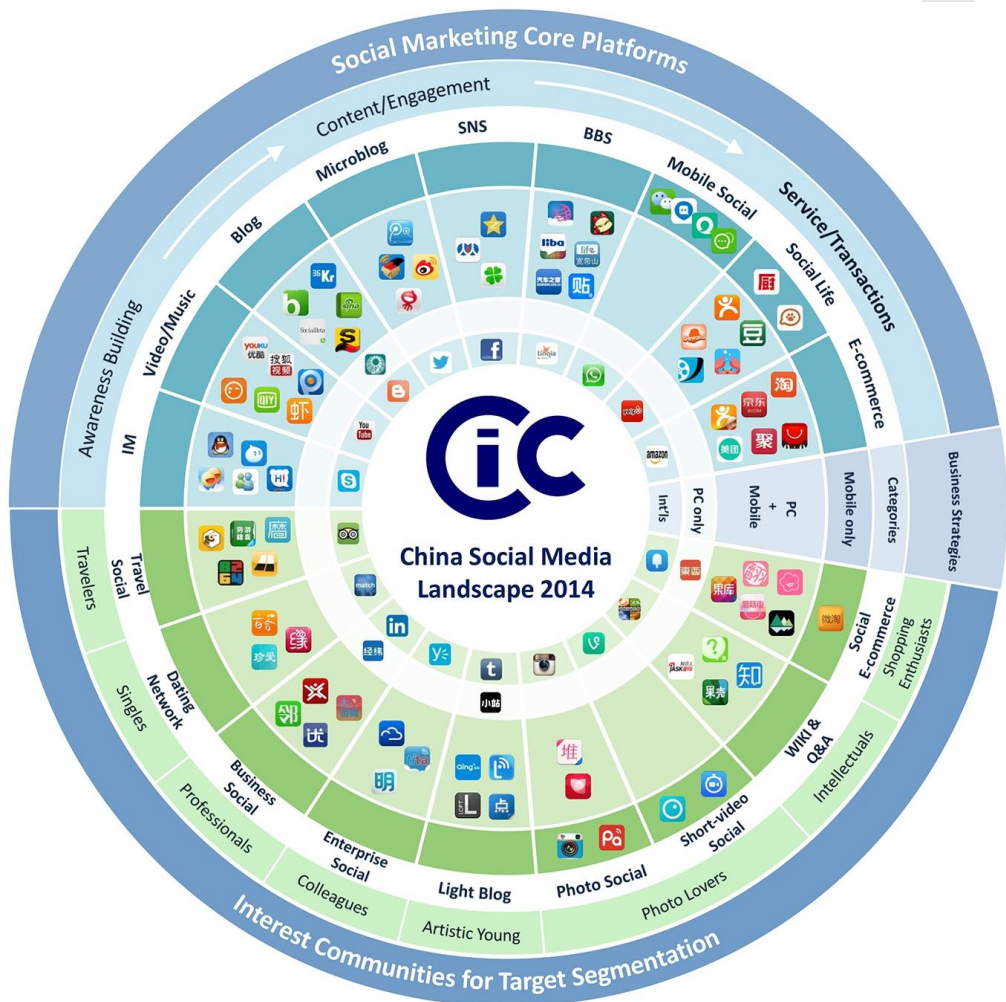


Figure 2 A model of categorisation in the social media landscape of China. Each icon represents a media application in the contemporary trend (CIC 2014).

1.6.3 Tools for Sourcing

Apart from a computer device with a high-speed internet connection, the following tools—not all obligatory but often combined to essentially optimise their functionality—are used to render web sourcing at zero or a minimum subscription cost. Social networking and electronic messaging services are included due to a consideration that virtual ethnography in music involves responses out of the interaction with people that is usually carried out in an asynchronous manner. Essential

tools are summarised in eight categories with a loose reference to a model of the social media landscape of China⁹ in 2014 as shown in Figure 2. Web-sourcing online tools used for the purpose of this study at zero or minimum subscription cost are listed and described in Appendix B.

1.6.4 Data Types

By emphasising face-to-face and virtual approaches to sources that could be possibly explored, types of collected data mainly comprise the following categories:

- **Interview:** Interviews, rendered with the face-to-face method except one with the virtual method, were conducted with 21 informants from 2013 to 2015. All informants are Malaysians except two originate from Thailand and one with a Tibetan heritage. They are listed as in the following:

Table 1 List of informants and the participation criteria of the selected informants

Informant	Gender	Age	Participation Criteria
1. Sophon Silapakhom	Male	51	Monk (Buddhist practitioner) and abbot based in Chiang Rai, Thailand.
2. Deng Xiong	Female	50	Nun (Buddhist practitioner) based in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia.
3. Pornprapit Phoasavadi	Female	40–45	Scholar and specialist in Buddhist studies, from Bangkok, Thailand.
4. Chogye Shabdrung	Male	32	Monk (Buddhist practitioner) and a spiritual leader based in Tibet.
5. Kai Bao	Male	40–45	Monk (Buddhist practitioner) based in Penang, Malaysia.
6. Jue Ming	Male	43	Scholar and monk (Buddhist practitioner) in Penang, Malaysia. Currently abroad in Hong Kong.
7. Teoh Wei Kien	Male	45–50	Composer, music producer, pianist and teacher based in Taiping, Malaysia.
8. Imee Ooi	Female	50	Composer, music producer and vocalist based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
9. Yang Wei Han	Male	45–50	Director, composer, producer and lead vocalist in a stage musical, from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
10. Wong Sze Pooi	Female	35–40	Ballet teacher, dance captain and dancer in stage musical, based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁹ The category labelled as ‘int’ls’ [international] denotes the media application counterpart trending outside China. The Chinese government has a ‘high-level sensitivity to its people’s use of the internet’ (Chow 2014: 147). With a highly restricted firewall, media applications such as Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, Google and Twitter are blocked from users who can still use ‘cloned applications that serve as alternatives’ (Chow 2014: 148) or the analogues of these applications, which are bound to be part of a sophisticated censorship system widely known as the Great Firewall of China (Chow 2014: 148).

Informant	Gender	Age	Participation Criteria
11. Kai Xin	Male	42	Monk (Buddhist practitioner) and abbot based in Kuala Lumpur; an audience at a stage musical.
12. "Informant 2A"	Female	50	An art manager from Singapore; an audience at a stage musical.
13. "Informant 2B"	Male	70	A retired teacher from Klang, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical.
14. "Informant 2B"	Female	70	A retired teacher from Klang, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical.
15. "Informant 2C"	Male	58	A project manager from Klang, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical.
16. "Informant 2D"	Female	27	A salesperson from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical.
17. "Informant 2D"	Female	27	A media worker from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical.
18. "Informant 2E"	Male	50s	An engineer from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical.
19. "Informant 2F"	Male	40s	An audience at a stage musical; from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; profession unknown.
20. "Informant 2G"	Female	40s	An accountant from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical; a volunteer at Nalanda Centre, Taman Sri Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.
21. "Informant 2G"	Male	20	A logistic officer from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; an audience at a stage musical; a volunteer at Nalanda Centre, Taman Sri Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

The account of these informants is detailed in Appendix C: I and Appendix F.

- **Remote information gathering:** Manual questionnaires are used to gather information from the audience of a musical event (refer to Appendix F). In addition, five questions are posted on a query-based internet forum to virtually capture feedbacks and opinions from the online community. A total of 14 responses have been gathered and detailed in Appendix H.
- **Audiovisual materials:** Audiovisual data collected from the field have been archived in Audiovisual Research Collections for Performing Arts [ARCPA], Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia. They include 30 audio and video files with interview data, 14 video recordings on live music performance, and 4 audio files on music compositions by two composers. The archive materials are detailed in Appendix D. Additionally, six online streaming music videos related to Buddhist music and Buddhist events in Malaysia are used as references, as indicated in Appendix C: III.
- **Music events:** Two music events were observed in September and November 2014, as indicated in Appendix C: IV. One of the events is extensively analysed in Sub-chapter 4.3.
- **Published materials:** Two programme booklets, four compact disc booklets and five online Buddhism-related websites are referred for their contextual attributes, as indicated in Appendix C: V.

The descriptions of these data types are detailed in Appendix C, although there are also materials used insignificantly as auxiliaries and therefore they remain unmentioned.

1.6.5 Qualitative Analytical Methods

Methods in a qualitative research may seem indistinctive individually and become intersecting and integrating at certain points of analysis. A concept of one schematic method is merely a subtype of a concept of another, such as the ‘conversations in conversation analysis’ that are indeed ‘a species of focused gatherings in microanalysis’ (Wieder 1999: 168). This study therefore adopts a combination of multiple analytical methods elaborated as in the following:

The framework of this study is mainly constructed with **discourse analysis** on opinions and ideas which are expressed in language as well as other non-language aspects, as such in ‘ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity’ (Gee 2011: 29). Language, not just about informing, allows the depiction of ‘doing’ and ‘being’ (Gee 2011: 2) as it connects to people involved in a particular practice and a ‘social good’ they want or value (Gee 2011: 5). In using language, social goods are ‘always at stake’ and how people talk about a subject is ‘never just a decision about saying [informing], it is a decision about doing and being, as well’ (Gee 2011: 7). This study would attempt a critical approach¹⁰ that treats social practices not just in terms of social interaction but also in terms of ‘their implications for things like status, solidarity, distribution of social goods and power’ (Gee 2004: 33). James Paul Gee gives a view that, instead of only seeing a purely descriptive approach as scientific as ‘to gain deep explanations of how language or the world works and why they work that way’, all types of discourse analysis are also necessarily critical because the language itself is political, as humans make and break the world system through how social goods are dealt with (Gee 2011: 9–10). Through such analytical approach, casual questioning or an open-ended interview that provides in-depth information is carried out to acquire the insider knowledge about how the music is conceptualised by people, the outsider opinions about how the music is perceived socially.

Since the Buddhism teaching, or *dharma* in nature, encompasses the knowledge about the phenomenon of life and death, the investigation of *dharma* can be called Buddhist phenomenology (Lusthaus 2002: 4). In a related context, **phenomenology**, a school of philosophy initiated by Edmund Husserl [1859–1938], ‘aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them’; it is ‘a focus on people’s lived experience’ (Langdrige 2007: 4). To Max van Manen (1990), phenomenology responds to how people adapt to lived experience and examine how they experience the world (Kafle 2011: 183). Phenomenology and hermeneutics are ‘human science approaches which are rooted in philosophy; they are philosophies, reflective disciplines’ (van Manen 1990: 7). **Hermeneutics**, among its many definitions by scholars such as Richard Palmer and Paul Ricoeur, is understood as ‘the

¹⁰ The state of being ‘critical’, coined as in critical discourse analysis, has been widely debated in the past decade (Gee 2004; Gee 2011; Rogers 2004; Huckin, Andrus & Clary-Lemon 2012; Fjørtoft 2013).

methodological foundation of *Geisteswissenschaften*¹¹ [human sciences], ‘phenomenology of existence and of existential understanding’, or ‘the system of interpretation’ (Kakkori 2009: 22–23). Setting a core subject in music related to Buddhism, this study applies a **hermeneutic phenomenological** approach advocated by Martin Heidegger [1889–1976] whose school believes that interpretations are the whole lot and ‘description itself is an interpretive process’ (Kafle 2011: 187). He recommends focusing on ‘subjective experience of individuals and groups’ in trying ‘to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories’ (Kafle 2011: 186). This method is widely applied to disclosures of human lifeworlds as a way of knowing (van Manen 1990: 125). In regard to the application of hermeneutic phenomenology in music, the writings of Timothy Rice (2008; 2010) and Jeff Todd Titon (2008) are substantial. They deliver a wider horizon in which music is embedded as a social activity and symptom of changing cultural–religious interactions.

In order to project a better understanding on the phenomenon, **metaphorical analysis**, a useful qualitative mode of inquiry, is also applied. Metaphors, used as rhetoric of the expression in speech and writing, are recognised in cases when ‘mapping two often incompatible domains into one another’ (Kramsch 2003: 125) is possible. Lastly, **ethnostatistics**, a statistical interpretative approach which ‘addresses statistics production and use as a form of quantitative sensemaking’ (Gephart 1997), is also applied. Three levels of ethnostatistics, as recognised by Robert P. Gephart (1988), are elaborated in the following: using qualitative methods to describe how statistics are created and interpreted in the settings in which they are produced and used; examining statistics at work through quantitative and simulation methodologies; examining the rhetoric of statistics by using literary and textual analytical methodologies to understand how statistics are used in texts and documents to make persuasive claims about organisational realities (Gephart 2006: 418–419).

The core subject of this study is the collection of audio events conceived as music related to Buddhism that has to be examined with **music analysis**, an integral part of **microanalysis**. With such, analysts look into ‘minimal changes in relationships or interactions between people or minimal changes in the music and in dynamic forces’ (Wosch & Wilgram 2007: 14) and find out how music transmits and works within ‘microprocesses’¹² (Wosch & Wilgram 2007: 22). Music analysis is applied on sound structures, including timbre, range, dynamics and velocity, formal appearance and memorability. For this reason, spectrograms and transcriptions are examined and interpreted where possible.

1.6.6 Orthography

Terminology in Buddhism mainly originates from the literature in Sanskrit, Pāli, Tibetan and Chinese languages. In this dissertation, terms in Sanskrit and Pāli follows diacritical marks as close as to the original sources, while a typeface like Times New

¹¹ *Geisteswissenschaften* are best translated from German into English as ‘humanities’. However, this translation conflicts with the complementary term ‘human sciences’ by indicating that ‘humanities’ would be less scientific. In real meaning, *Geisteswissenschaften* denotes the ‘sciences of human spiritedness’, in which philosophy always takes on a central position.

¹² For this study, it denotes closed-ended audio or video events. Further development of microanalysis in the field of humanities includes video ethnography (Holck 2007) and interpretative phenomenological video analysis (Lee & McFerran 2015).

Roman with special characters is required for viewing and printing. Romanisation for terms in Chinese and Tibetan follows the Chinese and Tibetan transliteration system. The same applies to names of people, unless they are otherwise documented previously.

1.6.7 Resolving Methodological Problems

Possible problems instigated by the strategy of searching and sourcing are hereby envisaged as in the following:

First, physical libraries or information archive centres as the conventional source of academic literature are not disregarded. They are indeed integral to the web sourcing scheme that often directs to digitally scanned literature containing the same content as in a physical copy if digitalisation is done with prudence. Physical libraries or information archive centres still function as a source of precedent archives of literature or records that are rather difficult to be digitalised due to considerably deficient physical conditions.

Second, since this virtual ethnographical study is much dependent on web sourcing, the problem of whether the limitation of web sourcing tools would affect the reliability of data interpretation can be overcome by understanding the limitations of each tool that is often used in a combination to complement the constraint of each other, and thus diminishing defective results. Similar problems in conventional ethnography can be solved with the same heuristics.

Third, the question of whether a virtual ethnographer put on less effort in his work as compared with a conventional ethnographer is scarcely valid. It probably derives from the contrary views that favour the spatial characteristics of field site, which is conventionally regarded as a physically bounded area for an ethnographic study. A field site in virtual ethnography is a heterogeneous, non-field based network for ethnographers, as 'a realization that the field site is in certain ways constructed rather than discovered is crucial to contemporary practice' (Burrell 2009: 182). Evaluation based on effort heuristics is often fallacious, but this view is not central to this study and thus should be explored further in another discussion.

Fourth, prioritisation in finding sources based on the following fallacious reasoning, which aligned with a discourse by Michael Cooper LaBossiere (2010), is minimised, if not able to avoid totally, in order to obtain a more inclusive and less biased result:

- Assuming a source by a claimed expert to be acceptable, and assuming a source by a lay person to be unacceptable (2010: 5–8).
- Disapproving an unpopular source since least people approve of it (2010: 14, 19–20).
- Assuming something is better or correct simply because it is 'older, traditional, or always has been done' (2010: 22–24), or simply because it is new (2010: 16–17).
- Making a deduction that members of a group have the same characteristics as the group (2010: 34–35).

- Making a conclusion about a group based on the characteristics of its few members (2010: 29–31), especially ‘those that receive the most attention or coverage in the media’ (2010: 56).

Therefore, demographical particulars such as age, gender, race and nationality are not the determining factors of the knowledge carried by informants. Reference of such metadata, however, can be made at Audiovisual Resource Collections for Performing Arts [ARCPA], Universiti Putra Malaysia, where audiovisual files for this study are archived.

1.7 Organisation of Thesis

Besides the Introduction as in Chapter One, this dissertation is divided into six chapters:

Chapter Two presents a literature review that provides a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of Buddhism as both a religion and a philosophy with a special focus on the religious traditions and contemporary religious movements practiced in Malaysia, holistically incorporating various connections of Buddhism inside and outside Malaysia. The discussion follows the development of the Buddhist philosophy that gives rise to how Buddhism are recognised today and issues of whether music is coherent with ‘emptiness’ from the Buddhist perspective. Furthermore, Buddhism-related music, which are commonly called ‘Buddhist music’, is surveyed through problematisation of its being, type, definition and identity by approaching the idea with a typical Buddhist concept.

Chapter Three explores the literature on a dimension called cyberspace in terms of its development to its future trend in the 21st century and beyond, as ways to assess music that is carried within this entity are discussed. Prevailing questions of virtuality frequent the discussion that is mainly directed through the path of the making of ethnographic knowledge. Since the spatial and temporal shift from the conventional inquiries has potentially constitutes a more challenging setting to field workers, new views on science and reality that probably correspond with the philosophy in Buddhism are employed for a new insight to progressively deal with music as a virtual construction, which has become an everyday source for people in reality.

Chapter Four gathers ideas from composers, Buddhist scholars, Buddhist practitioners, locally based and abroad, about Buddhism-related music in terms of music construction, style, popularisation, and also the imagination of a music genre called ‘Buddhist music’. The main focus is to respond to various issues revolving the musical characteristics of ‘Buddhist music’ with analytical spectrograms and music transcriptions, but multiple perspectives on such characteristics are also presented along the line of inquiry.

Chapter Five incorporates multiple Buddhist perspectives that are coherently in parallel to various contradictory notions of phenomenality, virtuality and music. Issues in duality such as sound and ‘emptiness’, sacredness and secularity of the so-called religious sound, and real and virtual awareness in music, is discussed for a further understanding through a Buddhist gaze. In search of the connection between these entities, data based on an online inquiry are also incorporated into the discourse.

Chapter Six summarises the study from all aspects of music deliberated in the previous chapters, and concludes with some findings to the research questions.



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