

Hearing Gender: Re-thinking Gender, Sound and Public Space Through a Female Soundwalk Project and a Sound Installation in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Over the past three years, we conducted two rounds of soundwalks with Chinese female immigrants in Hong Kong's public spaces. These soundwalks, designed to guide participants through diverse public spaces, facilitated deep listening, creative recording, and reflective practices. By documenting their auditory experiences and personal reflections, we observed the manifestation of gendered perceptions of safety, belonging, and identity within urban environments. Our analysis reveals how these gendered auditory experiences correlate with theories of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) and spatial dynamics (Massey, 2013). These interactions highlight the influence of gender on auditory perceptions in public spaces, underscoring the socially constructed nature of both gender and space. Building on these insights, we developed an interactive sound installation that aims to consider gender in auditory experiences. This installation processes all input sounds to produce "gender-reflective" outputs, enabling participants to hear each other's voices devoid of visual cues. This design compels the audience to engage with the content of speech rather than traditional auditory markers such as pitch or timbre, fostering a critical re-examination of the relationship between gender and sound. Our findings amplify the sounds of migrant women and challenge conventional, patriarchal frameworks within sound studies. By integrating participants' narratives and soundscapes, this project advocates for more inclusive urban planning and policies that acknowledge the auditory dimension of women's lived experiences, echoing the call for situated knowledge in feminist geography (Haraway, 1988).

Keywords: Gender, Sound, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Sound is one of the important ways we perceive and communicate with the world. World Soundscape Project (WSP) is the earliest soundscape research project, the WSP researchers defined soundscape as “the relationship of man and sonic environments of every kind¹”, exploring the dynamic links between people and sound environment. The concept of “gendered soundscapes” explores how sound environments both reflect and reinforce gendered dynamics. This idea integrates insights from the studies of acoustic ecology and feminist geography. Previous works have examined gendered soundscapes in various contexts. For instance, Salam Al-Mahadin’s research focuses on how nationalist radio stations in Jordan reinforce a cultural division of dialects, marginalizing urban dialects used by women (Al-Mahadin, 2017). In a similar vein Christine Ehrick, analyses how women’s voices were gendered in radio, examining the participation of women in the broadcasting field (Ehrick, 2015). Feminist scholars also developed a new type of sonic arts practice based on feminist theory and practice (Keeffe & Nogueira, 2022). Sound as a unique medium is widely used for feminist research and practice.

This study is born in the context of the first author’s PhD research, which focuses on Chinese female immigrants’ auditory experience in Hong Kong’s public spaces. Over the past three years, we have engaged in various practices and fieldwork to explore how sound serves as a unique medium to reflect gender dynamics and identity issues. The soundwalk project discussed in this paper refers to an artist-led project which puts Chinese female immigrants at the centre of the creative soundwalking process in Hong Kong’s public spaces. Following on and based on discoveries from the fieldwork, we collected diverse data and utilised sound data in artistic creations, such as soundscape compositions and sound installations, to explore gender and sound in different spaces. These experiences help us understand how gender is shaped and performed in different contexts. One of the attempts was an interactive sound installation created in 2024, which was exhibited at Tung Po Multi-Purpose Hall in Hong Kong on 26 August 2024.

In recent years, Hong Kong has seen a significant rise in female immigration including those who are joining the labour force. As a 2024 report notes: “The sex ratio (i.e. number of males per 1,000 females) of the Hong Kong population has decreased continuously. This arose as a result of the large inflow of female One-way Permit holders from the mainland of China joining their husbands in Hong Kong and the considerable number of female foreign domestic helpers working in Hong Kong.²” Immigrants from the mainland to Hong Kong have made an important contribution to the growth of the total population of Hong Kong. Chinese immigrant women live in Hong Kong in different ways and face different situations, in terms of culture, language, or social system. With similar but different experiences from native Hong Kongers, their unique identities also caused conflicts and contradictions at different levels, such as language barrier, unemployment problems ect.

This study begins with the auditory stories of Chinese female immigrants who face the challenges of negotiating their gendered identities within their cultural heritage and new urban environments. As they navigate the spaces, they offer a unique perspective on the interplay between sound and space. This paper aims to provide a unique lens for exploring

¹ Truax, B. (1974). Soundscape studies: an introduction to the world soundscape project. *Numus West*, 5, 36-39.

² “Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics” 2024 edition by Census and Statistics Department

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region:

https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/data/stat_report/product/B1010003/att/B10100032024AN24B0100.pdf

the meaning of “Hearing Gender”, which aims to capture the dynamic relationship between gender and auditory experience through listening, rather than simply focusing on the different identities of the listening subjects. By examining how these female migrants navigate public spaces through sound, we found that their unique auditory experiences uncover the nuanced ways in which gender is perceived and performed. Building on these insights, we developed the sound installation to further expand our understanding of gender and the auditory experiences, and invite broader engagement of gender and sound issues. Through this progressive exploration - from specific cultural auditory experiences to broader theoretical reflections, provides new perspectives for sound studies and feminist geography, and advocates rethinking the inclusivity of urban spaces, promoting the importance of diverse auditory experiences.

Soundwalk as a Feminist Methodology

Soundwalk practice began in the last century, developing from a methodological tool to include recent artistic approaches (Paquette & McCartney, 2012). The concept of “soundwalk” was first introduced by R. Murry Schafer, the leader of the World Soundscape Project, who argued that “The soundwalk is an exploration of the soundscape of a given area using a score as a guide³”, a score consisting of sounds that attract the listeners’ attention and ambient sounds in the vicinity. Soundwalking has also been used as a feminist methodology to explore females’ sensory engagement and embodiment of hidden contexts (O Keeffe & Nogueira, 2018). In addition, Stephanie Loveless argues for listening as a feminist and ecologically oriented way of engaging with the world, highlighting the shift from eye to ear in soundwalking (Loveless, 2020). In our project, we developed the soundwalk methodology following Schafer’s concept of “score guide”, but granted the female participants more active roles, allowing them to design the “score/map” by themselves. Our focus was observing different specific listening modes, with a great level of performativity (Drever, 2020) through the sonic fabrics. By positioning soundwalk as a feminist practice in public space, we aim to capture the sensory engagement, the invisible dynamics, also the identities and memories through females’ engagement in the public space.

We’ve conducted two rounds of soundwalk activities in Hong Kong from 2022 to 2024. Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, at the beginning of this project we interviewed 13 different Chinese female immigrants online about their situations and lives in Hong Kong, the interview questions including the personal identity and living experience, public space perception, and urban sound environment perception. Based on these, we drafted an initial analysis of our participants’ identities and aural experiences in Hong Kong’s public spaces.

According to their lifestyles, the interview outcomes revealed that the active public spaces for them are both daily routines they pass by and public spaces that align with their interests. Thus, we categorised their later soundwalk practice routes into “daily route” and “favourite route”. Following the routes they chose by themselves, we conducted individualised soundwalks (under the researchers’ guidance) in different areas in Hong Kong. During the process, we encouraged our participants to use their bodies as a medium for exploring the relationship between sound, space and identity, activating their auditory sense to feel, capture, and resonate with the environment. A Zoom H3VR audio recorder and headphones

³ Schafer, R. M. (1993). *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. Simon and Schuster. p213

as the key equipment were provided to the participants, and during the soundwalk they followed these basic rules:

1. Aim to listen attentively and avoid speaking or talking during the soundwalk;
2. Control the pace and stopovers of each walk as they see fit, but ensure each route lasts for at least 30 minutes;
3. Capture the sounds during the walk if something catches their interest.

After the soundwalk, they were interviewed. A few weeks later, we invited them to listen to the recordings they had recorded before to carry out reflective listening. Throughout the whole process, we focused on their behaviour, found the differences between how they selected the recording locations, how they listened and interacted with the sound environment and how they reflected on their recordings.

During the soundwalk activity, the Chinese female migrants are not only listeners but also creators. David Ben Shannon defines four different ways within soundwalking practice to discuss the possibilities of feminist sound studies and give a self-assessment on how to judge a soundwalking project as a feminist project (Shannon, 2019). In our soundwalk process design, the identity of Chinese female migrants and their listening background are important elements to be considered. The soundwalk here is not only a medium for articulating the subjectivity of the female body but also a method for using sound to communicate women's lived experiences. This process facilitates reconfiguring their roles and positions through auditory engagement in different spaces, cultivating an "audible female" presence.

Gender, Sound, Public Space

Listening, as an important feminist practice within arts activism (Firth, 2020), it's more than just focusing on sounds, also requires expanding our sensory and perceptual engagement with the environment (O Keeffe & Nogueira, 2018). Feminist geographers apply feminist theory to geographical analysis to explore how gender influences space and place. For example, Doreen Massey claims that spaces and places, and our senses of them, are gendered through and through, and we are not dealing with essential things about women or men, but how they are constructed. (Massey, 2013). In our research, we take soundwalk as a feminist method, engaging the female body in the public space environment through listening. We aim to illustrate that listening, as a method, can uncover hidden dynamics within space, while embodied listening can also serve as a way of constructing both space and gender. Here, we would like to discuss the dynamics of gender performativity in public space with an engaging listening experience. Judith Butler considers gender as being performative (Butler, 2004), and gender is constructed through constant behaviour rather than innate nature. The auditory sense reflects gender as performative during the soundwalk project in different ways. Here what we would like to discuss is the "sound", not only from the sound itself and its material aspect but also within a multidimensional context related to sound, including women's voices, listening, and sound practice engagement.

The first thing to note is the relationship between gender and sound. As Marie Thompson pointed out, sound and gender are both inseparable from other things (Thompson, 2018). Here, we aim to discuss the dynamic relationship between sound and gender, which is interwoven within the complex context of the epistemology of the listening subject, the physical environment of sound transmission, and the interrelations between sound and technology. We consider sound, as a material attribute, to be neutral, but under the combined influence of other factors, a "gendered soundscape" is constructed. At the same time, sound

can also serve as a factor in gender performance, connecting people, sound, and the environment within different listening paradigms. Following on, the concept of space we discuss here is not only geometric, but also concerns linearized time and imaginary space which can be put in an open contextualization. Lefebvre divided the analysis of space into three levels or aspects: the “spatial practice”, “representations of space” and “representation space” (Lefebvre, 1991). Sound inter-weaves in different layers of the “space”, and plays different roles when shuttling through different subjects.

We would like to use an example from one participant’s soundwalk experience to further illustrate this point in more detail. One of the soundwalk routes she chose was her regular running path, located in a district mostly built on reclaimed land along the Shing Mun River in Sha Tin. We stopped at different spots during the soundwalk. The first stop was near a tree with many birds singing. She mentioned that she liked the sounds of the birds, as it gave her a feeling of peace. Later, before we arrived at the next location, we could already hear some sounds ahead of us. It turned out to be a man singing a Cantonese song – something quite common in Hong Kong (often, elderly men or women sing karaoke in public spaces). Unexpectedly, the participant recorded the old man’s singing and stood there for a long time, seemingly captivated by the sounds.



Figure 1: Soundwalk in Shing Mun River

“This is my dad’s favourite song, ‘Love in the Late Autumn’ by Alan Tam, my dad really likes Hong Kong culture, he used to play some songs by Hong Kong singers at home when I was a kid, that’s how I got some first impressions of this place, some fantasies about this place, so I ended up choosing Hong Kong myself when I took the university entrance exams, I think it’s quite destiny and quite emotional.”

After talking about the background of these sounds, I heard she was singing along to the song in a quiet voice. I asked why she was not singing louder, and she said she had gotten used to keeping her voice down in public space – she also mentioned she was educated to behave in this way – and did not feel that confident singing in front of people. During the playback of the recordings, the participant noticed that the bird sounds she had previously enjoyed during the walk no longer evoked the same sense of peace. Instead, she experienced a sense of irritation when listening to the mechanical reproduction of these sounds. This shift in emotional response prompted us to reflect on the influence of technology in mediating auditory experiences. In this case, the participant’s soundwalk experience indirectly reflected the connection between her auditory habits and memories. At the same time, through listening in public spaces, we unexpectedly discovered how gender performativity manifests.

By interpreting this from a sonic perspective, we were able to gain insight into certain aspects of gender performance. Through this case, we can imagine how sounds shut in different layers of the space, the informative, fading, bouncing, and shaping characteristics, actively connected the human and environment.

A Sound Installation: Re-thinking

The sound installation, *Whispered Silhouette*, was created as an artistic exploration to further explore the interrelated dynamics between sound, gender and space. The exhibiting space is described as an acoustic environment where sound, space, and time intersect in intriguing and challenging ways for the audience (Bandt, 2006). The sonic aspect becomes the primary feature of the artwork, allowing the audience to explore the space in various ways. Sound can be understood as a triangulation of events: sonic vibrations, our bodies' culturally shaped capacity to receive these vibrations, and how we interpret them, all of which are constantly interacting and subject to negotiation (Eidsheim, 2011). We aim to use the sound installation to critically rethink the intersection of sound, space, and gender which can reveal culturally embedded listening practices, and challenge traditional perceptions of how bodies experience and navigate acoustic environments.



Figure 2: The Interactive Sound Installation, *Whispered Silhouette*, 2024

The installation consists of a discarded moving box with two metal horns—one for speaking and the other for listening. The visitors can sit down to listen or speak. Also the instructions encourage the visitors to interact with the box, the aim being to activate the ear, the body, and perceive the sound inside the space in a different way. The speaker's voice is transmitted through the horns and undergoes one of seven or eight pre-programmed sound transformations using the audio programming environment Max/MSP as it reaches the listener, and the effects change every minute. The input voices are altered using distortion, amplitude modulation (AM), ring modulation (Ringmod) and variable delay (VD) individually or in combination. An important feature of the installation is its unidirectional communication structure, whereby the speaker cannot hear the transformed sound and the listener receives two simultaneous inputs at the same time: a faint trace of the original unprocessed voice, and a more dominant transformed voice. This superimposed auditory experience creates a unique tension between clarity and distortion, requiring the listener to discern between the intelligibility of the original speech and the ambiguity of the sound distortion. The undeformed voice, although faintly audible, still reminds the listener of the speaker's original voice. In addition to the auditory component, this installation also emphasises the importance of physical interaction in sound perception. While speaking/listening is one of the main modes of engagement, the installation encourages participants to interact with the box through their bodies, generating sound through

movement and touch, encouraging the audience to engage in different ways in which sound is generated and perceived.

An influential feminist psychoanalytic tradition has regarded the voice as a crucial site of subjectivity, and it engages with gender as a fundamental and generative category of difference (Sterne, 2012). As Julia Kristeva has argued, the voice is not merely a tool for language but also a means of embodying desire and sensibility (Kristeva, 1986). In terms of the sound itself, the installation transforms the raw human voice signal into a de-semanticized sound experience, where the sound processing effects change periodically through timers and stochastic modules, ensuring that the listener hears different sound morphing effects at different times of the day. In contrast, the ambient sounds (the sounds within the exhibition space) are fed into the system at a faint volume, but they pass through the same sound processing modules. They are joined by the participants' voices to undergo morphing, mirroring the fluidity of sound and serves as a metaphor for how technology influences our sense of identity and subjectivity. The design aims to disrupt the clarity of speech, and de-semanticizing sound can be seen as a strategy to defy gender norms and experience the texture and variation of sound solely through the senses and the body.

From a listening perspective, the installation evokes a layered auditory experience, where the dual auditory experience serves as a metaphor for rethinking the intersections of gender, sound, and public space. In this installation, we consider the transformation of sound in space as a process from the "authentic" to the "constructed", and we would like to convey that "listening" itself is full of uncertainty: it should not simply be categorised but should be seen as a multi-layered phenomenon in constant flux. In this way, the installation leads the listener to reflect on the diversity and complexity of the relationship between sound, space and gender, which takes on different meanings as they change socially, culturally and spatially. In the artistic practice of soundwalk project mentioned earlier, we emphasise the relationship between listening and space, arguing that women, as both vocalising and listening subjects, are not only passively receiving sound, but also experiencing the different dimensions of sound through the movement of their bodies and the transformation of space, and we hope to reinforce the participants' bodily involvement and interaction with space in this installation as well. By encouraging participants to physically and aurally engage with the installation, we hope to help listeners rethink the complex dynamics of sound, identity, and spatial issues.

Conclusions

In summary, this paper explores the fluid relationship between gender, sound, and public space through our soundwalk practices and interactive sound installations, with a particular focus on the auditory experiences of Chinese female migrants in Hong Kong. Discussing various sound-related projects, we advocate for a listening approach that captures the dynamic interplay between gender, identity, and the urban environment. This approach emphasises active, embodied participation and layered listening to reveal the fluid, mutually constitutive relationships among these elements, continuously shaped through the act of listening. The interactive sound installation further expands this exploration by removing sonic semantics and directional cues, prompting participants to rethink the relationship between sound and gender. Through this installation, we encourage a re-examination of how we navigate and interpret auditory environments, fostering a deeper reflection on the ways sound influences our understanding of space and identity. By combining artistic practice with insights from feminist geography, this research offers new perspectives on the experience and navigation of sound and space, highlighting the importance of diverse and situated auditory

knowledge. We call for not only a re-evaluation of inclusivity in public spaces but also a more nuanced understanding of how diverse auditory experiences can inform urban planning and contribute to more inclusive and responsive spatial designs.

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