Harmony and Collision: Automobility and Ways of Hearing in Urban Taipei

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From the buzzing of scooters along large boulevards to the metallic timbre of sales calls through loudspeakers, from the mechanical music of garbage trucks to the welcome jingles at the entryways of 7-Eleven, sounds fade in and out along Taiwan's city streets and create paradoxical layers of organization and chaos. In this paper, I meditate on the perception of mobile sound (sound that travels and sound on traveling bodies) following two summers of pre-dissertation research in Taipei. Whether it is through radio waves, ultrasound, low frequency sound, or imaginary sound, urban Taipei is surrounded by a world of sound that is both everywhere and nowhere. I provide examples of interesting ways Taipei residents manipulate sound in their everyday lives that demonstrate a locally-situated acuity to hearing. Then, I introduce the discourse of noise in Taipei that transposes sound into a normative site of contestation. Given Taipei's current trend towards urban revitalization and planned urban space, I ask, what qualities of sound and hearing emerge at the foreground and what becomes suppressed in the process of shifting one's subjective aurality into the domain of governance? Key concepts in my paper are Michel Chion's synchresis, the unintentional convergence of different sounds to form a new sonic image in a specific moment in time, and John Cage's ontology of sound that collapses and re-organizes the perceptual divide between sound, music, and noise.

Jennifer C. Hsieh is a 3rd-year Ph.D. student in Anthropology at Stanford. Her main preoccupations are with sound in urban space, sound as semiotics and sound as physical phenomena.

Monday
November 4, 2013, 12:00-1:05 pm
Conference Room, Building 50, Room 51A

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