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Response to Lam - 2

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Response

Chuen-Fung Wong

Over the last decade or so, "globalization" has swiftly become one of the favorite buzzwords in various fields of Chinese studies, music being one of the last to embrace such interdisciplinarity. This is particularly salient among writings by the indigenous scholars who often join their "research subjects" in imagining a globalizing China in which music should not be ignored in the process. Optimistic critics deploy languages of modernist reformism and argue for a better and faster integration of Chinese music into the imagined global music family in which a seat is due to be secured. Pessimists, on the other hand, are never indolent in reminding their colleagues of the danger of cultural dilution and other unwelcome consequences in the seemingly irreversible wave of globalization.[1]

This essay is written as a response to Joseph Lam's "Chinese Music and its Globalized Past and Present," as presented at the Fourteenth International Roundtable at Macalester College, Saint Paul, Minnesota, in 2007. Following Lam's article, my discussion revolves around the intertwined questions of Chinese music, globalization, and the Chinese self. I shall begin by contextualizing Lam's findings and arguments in the trajectories of globalization critiques in the field of ethnomusicology. Examples from my own research on Chinese minority music will be brought in to recast a relational construction of the Chinese self, highlighting the dynamics among the local/ethnic, the national, and the cosmopolitan in global encounters and imagination. Last but not least, I argue for a more nuanced view of globalization in which music assumes an indispensable role in articulating the simultaneous occupancy of self in various local and global terrains.

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Well-versed in Chinese music scholarship, Lam provides compelling analyses of the role of music in mediating between global discourses and local practices in both the past and the present of Chinese music. Weaving together snapshots from a variety of traditional and modern Chinese musical genres, Lam portrays a vibrant world of Chinese music in which globalization ought to be considered not only in its geographical dimension but also as historical moments when

music acquires global meanings and connections, what he refers to as "China's globalized past." The unique contribution of Lam's article lies in his commitment to finding historically informed answers to the distinctive ways in which Chinese music encounters the globalizing world. He reminds us once again that there is little new about music as a globalizing form; in China's past and present, music has always been used to mediate geographical or temporal discontinuities. It is music's capacity in ascribing identity and place and its ability in what ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman calls "moving into and out of various histories" that has made it versatile in narrating histories.[2] Lam offers excellent examples from a globalizing China where the convergence of music and history has been indispensable in its global imagination.

Locating his analyses squarely in local contexts, Lam follows the analytical approach that favors detailed studies of local practices, attending to meanings of global musical forms for local musicians and audiences. Such an approach turns the conventional paradigm of globalization upside down. Instead of theorizing a global condition within which Chinese music inhabits and commutes, Lam chooses to approach the topic in the spirit of what Simon Frith calls "globalization from below," which entails "particularistic analyses of the ways in which music articulates identity in specific local contexts."[3] Put somewhat differently, Lam does not seem to be concerned with the ways in which the West has consumed the exotic and re-imagined it as global. Instead, he seeks to ask how an internalized "globalism"—or "the multifarious ideological and conceptual motivations behind, and responses to, the mechanics of globalization by individuals and by groups,"[4] to borrow Timothy Cooley's definition—functions to re-energize globalization through musical imagination and cosmopolitan being. In this light, globalized forms of Chinese music do not simply become hybridized and speak to a destabilized subjectivity. They neither shatter their capacity to reference the world, nor serve merely as a medium or context for other forms of social interaction. Rather, they rearticulate particular experiences and distances, reorganize senses of similarities and differences, and reorient identifications of self and *other* in response to a globalizing world.[5]

This globalization-from-below approach informs the way in which Lam deals with musical sounds. He does not attach globalization to particular sonic constructs, be they triadic harmony, regular meters, or equal-tempered scales—characteristics that are often considered symbolic of the musical global. Instead, he attempts to locate the glo-

balizing potentials in Chinese musical sounds or, put another way, the potential of Chinese music to enter the orbit of globalization. For example, while the sounds of ancient courts, the seven-string zither (*qin*), and regional operatic excerpts are often symbolically associated, respectively, with solemn antiquity, elitist elegance, and folksy indigenousness, Lam is dedicated to tracking down how these musical sounds have transcended old boundaries—traditional and modern, local and global—and found a new life in signifying the myriad facets of the Chinese self in global encounters. Along the same lines, Lam seems to associate himself with the optimistic thread of globalization critiques, which maintains that "musical creativity always involves cultural borrowing; [and] changes in musical tradition don't mean the loss of cultural identity but articulate the way it changes with circumstances."[6] Global musical forms, in other words, creatively provide an authentic expression of contemporary and particularized conditions (such as the negotiation of self/identity), which has replaced details of musical sound and performance context to become the new qualifier of authenticity.

Such exotic-turned-authentic finds its way into almost every single corner of Chinese music today. In his essay, Lam details the way in which such traditional Chinese sounds have adopted non-indigenous elements and aesthetics in the course of becoming global. According to Lam, for example, the music of the *qin* has gained a global dimension in the twentieth century with the appearance of public concerts, silk strings, abridged compositions, minimized dissonance, and sanitized timbre—practices that were largely absent in pre-modern settings. Similar changes have been made to Chinese music since the early twentieth century under overlapping discourses of modernist reformism and nationalism.[7]

In trying to understand these musical changes in the logistics of globalization, however, Lam seems to be stretching the boundaries of the term to its fullest extent. Processes commonly known as "modernization" or "Westernization" are conflated with and understood as components of globalization; their differences seem to be trivial. Without any doubt, practices of modernization and Westernization have often been driven by a certain extent of globalism. Differences between globalization and other modernizing processes, however, are far from being irrelevant. If globalization does not ask an ontologically different question from that of modernization or Westernization, then how do we account for the fact that more and more *qin* players in mainland

China, where discourses and practices of musical globalization are growing as fast as its GDP and inflation rate, are looking toward the *qin* music as practiced in Hong Kong and Taiwan for authentic performing practices—such as intimate gatherings and playing with silk strings—in attempts to retune their nostalgic ears to traditional aesthetics and timbres?[8] In other words, how do cosmopolitan musicians of traditional, folk, and popular music in our increasingly globalized societies connect themselves to the world beyond, when older means of being global, such as Westernization and modernization, are being replaced by renewed global aesthetics and practices—in this case, a voguish nostalgia for an authentic past?

My purpose, however, is not to look at globalization as an exclusive and unique condition or to define it against other processes of modernity; nor do I want to formulate neologisms or new paradigms for some unprecedented social procedures. What I am calling for is a more nuanced view of globalization—not as an indiscriminate blanket label, lumping together all trajectories and practices of modernity, but as a specific and focused framework for understanding particularized appropriation of universalizing global procedures. The challenge is to distinguish globalization from the other processes of unseating culture from its indigenous contexts and modes of production. The nationalist-driven modernist reformism, despite being benefited by technologies that have enabled faster and more effective movements of music and musicians, seems to have little to share with the capitalist, colonial, and diasporic implications of the globalization discourse.[9]

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Permeating Lam's historically informed analysis is the assumption that the boundary between the past and the present has often been easily dissolved and transcended through historical memories. To the Chinese, the past is sometimes not perceived in linear temporality as a distant other, which demands solid evidence in reconstruction; instead, it is actively practiced in the present as both contemporaneous realities and vivid remembrances, which require little or no historically faithful substantiation. Such transcendence of temporal boundaries, according to Lam, is often appropriated into a geographical one, which has discursively been deployed to validate the adoption of any foreign musical elements and to endorse their eventual domestication. Such domesticating processes, the argument continues, often provide the

discursive ground for appropriating foreign musical elements, and eventually invigorate musical changes. Citing examples ranging from millennium-old musical sources to twentieth-century mass-mediated music, Lam appears to maintain that such an ideological construct of musical domestication has been a long-standing one, inherited and internalized by contemporary Chinese musicians when negotiating their selves in a world where globalizing discourses and practices are swiftly reorienting musical tastes and meanings.

That brings us to the central part of Lam's analysis: the concept of the Chinese self, carefully characterized not as a steadfast, informing essence but as a multi-faceted and fluid entity that is constantly transformed and negotiated through music. Lam accordingly registers nine facets of the Chinese self: the historical and spectacular, the civilized and expressive, the religious and social, the populist and regional, the imperial and orderly, the modern and international, the gendered and sensuous, the exotic and ethnic, and the young and lovable. Musical examples are correspondingly drawn from various geographical and temporal locales—from a reconstructed performance of thousand-year-old ancient court music in Amsterdam to a controversial production of the elegant *kun* opera at Lincoln Center—in order to illustrate the multiple façades of the Chinese self. By bringing a set of nine discernible and rather unequivocal traits of the Chinese self into the picture of Chinese music encountering the world, Lam once again underlines his commitment—and optimism, indeed—in finding historically informed answers to explaining local/national ways of imagining and being global. At its best, with Lam's formulation, we are promised to comprehend a globalizing process that is less disorienting and unpredictable than others have postulated it. However, such security and convenience also make us more susceptible to the accusation of being deterministic, trying to explain some reductive cultural happenings in terms of the Chinese self, relegated as a predetermined derivative and irreducible entity.

In the following paragraphs, I shall complicate the picture of the Chinese self by offering two interrelated examples, both recycled from Lam's essay, in an attempt to explore the possibilities for theorizing a less untroubled view of the Chinese self and its role in the globalizing Chinese musical world.

The collapse of geographical boundaries and distances—a defining feature of globalization—begs the question of how the distance between self and *other* is problematized and redefined. Following the

groundbreaking work *Orientalism* by Edward Said, who argues that the West has relied on hegemonic orientalizing strategies for constructing its own self, much has been written in the field of post-colonial studies on how the construction of self has always involved hegemonic strategies in creating inferior *others*, be they the Orientals, the minorities, or the feminine—so as to construct its own superiority. The first question to pursue for our case here, then, is how has the Chinese self been constructed and remolded through musical associations with its various domestic and global *others*?

A good example, as mentioned in Lam's article, is "*Yizu wuqu*" (Dance Music of the Yi People), a modern Chinese instrumental composition that draws on elements from the traditional music of the Yi minority people in southwest China. The image of singing and dancing exotic minorities, as notoriously noted, enables the Chinese to portray submissive minority *others* who were culturally domesticated in the past and are politically contained in the present. Issues of cultural imperialism and pseudo-colonial control aside, the minority subjects, on their way to modernity, are actively engaged in the construction of the Chinese self through musical representation. Numerous studies have confirmed that the Chinese have relied on the identification of certain groups within China as "minorities" in order to recognize itself as a unified "majority" in the very process of its own construction.[10] Minority music, accordingly, often finds that its pragmatic role in modern Chinese compositions is to showcase a unified yet heterogeneous China with displayable exotics. It also works to reaffirm once again the image of the Han Chinese majority as advanced, civilized, and modern, at the expense of representing the minorities as backward, uncivilized, pre-modern, and always necessitating domestication and improvement.[11] Oriental-type compositions such as "*Yizu wuqu*" are abundant in the modern Chinese repertoire. Each major minority group is associated with at least one or two such compositions, invariably imbued with "exoticizing" strategies and colonizing discourses. Through creating and consuming minority music, the Chinese self is dialectically produced and maintained against its minority *others*, without whom it would not have been the same.

Ethnicity, however, is far from the only category of difference in the relational construction of the Chinese self, which has also involved the various domains of otherness in the local and national hierarchies. Analyzing the discourse of world music, Simon Frith, citing sociologist Motti Regev, remarkably points out that the presence of non-West-

ern rock music in their own cultures is often seen as an important tool for strengthening their contemporary sense of local identity and autonomy.[12] Producers and listeners of local rock music feel that they are participants in a specific contemporary global-universal form of expression and, at the same time, feel the innovation of local, national, ethnic, and other identities. In this way, global cultural forms are powerful emblems in constructing senses of local difference and authenticity. As "local authentic music," they are important "for resolving the postmodern condition of occupying global/mediated and local/immediate spaces simultaneously." Globalized forms of local music, therefore, can be interpreted as "a site on which new sorts of (hybrid) identity are being performed."[13]

Returning to our case of Chinese music, a second important question to ask is how has the global identity acquired by cosmopolitan musicians been employed to articulate a sense of local difference? Can global musical imagination be understood as an outcome of such domestic processes in a way that the local is far from being a simple context for supra-local happenings?

The controversy initiated by the Twelve Girls Band, as discussed in Lam's essay, offers a good instance to reflect on this question. Formed in 2001 by a group of twelve young conservatory-trained female instrumentalists, the Twelve Girls Band has been in the national and international spotlight for their sexualized oriental image and fusion-styled interpretation of well-known Chinese, European, and world-music tunes on electrified traditional Chinese instruments. Their sweeping success initiated debates among Chinese music critics on the desirability of this latest attempt to globalize and modernize traditional music. Lam contends that the Twelve Girls Band and its music encapsulate the politics generated by the "gendered and sensuous" facets of the Chinese self, a marketable self-identification for female musicians in order to stand out in the highly competitive domestic and international markets.

It is difficult to disagree with Lam's observations. We should not be surprised to observe that the sexualized oriental image of the Twelve Girls Band works to reaffirm a long-standing fantasy for such an idealized female-musician stereotype among middle-aged Chinese men. It is also true that the electrified traditional timbre and fusion-styled interpretation by the band invoke a musical imaginary that is decidedly global to the average Chinese audience. However, how can we understand the correlation between such facets of the Chinese self—which

bear no necessary conceptual motivations for global connection—and the band's deliberate appropriation of global musical expression? While a "gendered and sensuous Chinese self" informs and endorses the sexualized and marketable image of the Twelve Girls Band, the global sound they have strategically appropriated should also be interpreted as a means to articulate an internal difference against their rustic fellows at home, who have chosen to safeguard the integrity of tradition, and argue for alternative and more authentic renditions of musical creativity. Globalized Chinese music, in other words, is not so much a product of certain inaccessible and remote global conditions as it is a response to or an escape from the local, the national, and the ethnic—an articulation of difference that is situated squarely in local networks. At the same time the Twelve Girls Band is looking beyond the immediately local to shape their musical styles, in order to become naturalized as global music citizens, they are also investing in a cosmopolitan project at home by positioning themselves as the cosmopolitan *other* within the local circuit. The self comes into the picture, I argue, not so much as a malleable essence or multifaceted origin that informs cultural procedures, as it is a performative nexus where the spaces of the global/mediated and the local/immediate encounter and interact.

The musicological interest here lies in understanding the capacity of music in resolving such simultaneous occupancy of the Chinese self in the local, ethnic, global, and many other terrains. In other words, how does music work to connect these terrains and transcend their boundaries? One of the major challenges for ethnomusicologists over the past two decades is how to return a sense of agency to musical sound, seeing it not only as a mediator and product but also as a producer and constituent of social processes and identifications, through means and procedures that are primarily musical and performative. Research has been done on how various globally circulated musical practices have created global landscapes: European classical music and African diasporic music are among the most widely studied examples.[14] The central question to ask, as Martin Stokes succinctly puts it, is "how and why do particular musical forms, styles, processes, sounds, rhythms, and metrical practices traverse national cultural boundaries? How do they cross so many cultural boundaries with such energy, boundaries at which so much else comes to an abrupt halt?" Stokes accordingly makes a list of other potential globalized musical landscapes, including Italian *bel canto* singing, Anglo-Celtic jigging and reeling, Latin dance forms, modal improvisation in the Middle East, toasting and

rapping in the Caribbean and the United States, Central European polka, the bell-patterns of African drumming, the timbre-rich droning of Australian aboriginal music, and the colotomic processes of Javanese gamelan.[15]

One potential Chinese candidate for such cross-border musical travels is the post-1970s light-rock, ballad, and karaoke-styled popular songs of Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which have conquered the mainland Chinese popular music industry over the last two decades, and have been adapted and rearranged into numerous Southeast Asian popular songs (in Thailand and Vietnam, for example) and continue to thrive in global pan-Chinese communities in Australia, Europe, and North America. How do they cross the borders of so many mutually unintelligible languages, transcend the deep political ruptures of rival ideologies, and connect heterogeneous societies across various boundaries? How do they facilitate the transnational imagination of Chinese and Asian identities? To recast a view of globalization that is musical, these are meaningful questions to pursue.

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In this article, I have discussed how Lam's historically informed analysis presents a globalizing China in which the convergence of music and history has been indispensable in its global imagination. I have also explained how Lam theorizes a less disorienting and unpredictable world of globalizing Chinese music by registering nine facets of the Chinese self. In addition, I have elaborated on a few musical examples mentioned in Lam's essay and argued for a more nuanced and less unproblematic view for both the concepts of globalization and the Chinese self. While a more focused scope is demanded for the former in order to distinguish itself from other processes of Chinese musical modernity, the latter calls for a more particularized realization as a performative nexus for global-local encounters.

If the Chinese self ceases to occupy the locality as the derivative, enduring, and deterministic core of some reductive cultural happenings, then we are prompted to ask a series of pressing questions about Chinese musical globalization. In the process of global encounter and musical domestication, if the boundary between selfness and otherness collapses and the distance between them is not only shortened but also negated, then to what extent is the self not simply reconfigured but potentially also penetrated by, surrendered to, and eventually sub-

verted by its otherness? If music history is a chronicle and measure of selfness, as Lam has implied, then to what extent is the Chinese self also a product of our own historiography, which has preferred to safeguard temporal and geographical integrities at the expense of trivializing ruptures, discontinuities, and other inconvenient outcomes of global encounters? When old distinctiveness is lost and old differences become unqualified, then shall we take on a less untroubled view of the Chinese self, to look at it not as a self-remolding, pervasive, and unproblematic entity, but as being highly differentiated, if not subverted, by its otherness, to such an extent that it becomes difficult to prescribe an increasingly heterogeneous world of the Chinese and its music?[16] After all, ethnic minorities, the impoverished, and other subaltern and marginalized communities in China are not ready (if not reluctant) to share the same self with the consumers and producers of the Twelve Girls Band in cosmopolitan Shanghai and Beijing.[17]

A final note to add to our discussion on the impact of globalization on Chinese music is the dynamics between nation-state and globalization. Numerous studies have confirmed that nationalistic discourse continues to play a vital role in shaping global trajectories, despite the seemingly homogenizing forces and de-nationalizing promise of globalization. In a study on Zimbabwean popular music, for example, ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino observes that nationalism "is neither increasingly irrelevant for cultural analysis nor at odds with cosmopolitanism and globalization."[18] Instead, he seeks to understand nationalism and cosmopolitanism as intertwined and mutually reinforcing processes, mediated by urban, educated, and well-connected cosmopolitans who have become political, social, and cultural leaders in nationalistic movements. "Nationalism," Turino argues, "emerges out of cosmopolitanism and, in turn, it functions to diffuse cosmopolitan ethics and practices among culturally distinct groups within the state's territory."[19]

The case of Chinese music shows a comparable yet different and perplexing picture. On the one hand, we witness the omnipresence of the Chinese state in processes of musical globalization. Under discourses of musical universality, selected practices for the "internationalization" of Chinese music are endorsed and embraced as a *sine qua non* for a better, if not more advanced, national musical future, with Chinese music as an active member of the global musical family. On the other hand, the musical tastes and preferences of the cosmopolitan Chinese do not always comfortably correspond to the desires of the

proletarian state—the condemnations of "yellow music" and Chinese rock-n-roll are but two excellent examples.[20]

Lately, in order not to be marginalized by the increasingly uncontainable waves of globalization, the Chinese state has worked to form active partnerships with multinational corporations in their "glocalizing" projects, gate-keeping the logistics of global cultural flow. Both ways of the global-local cross-border traffic—of musical styles, entertainment forms, and artistic expressions—are still rigorously monitored and manipulated by state agencies, which aggressively adopt what Cooley calls "the technologies of globalization and the ideas of globalism," and use them for their own purposes.[21] All these demonstrate that the state remains an important actor in Chinese musical globalization, demanding our close scrutiny.

Notes

1. For a much-read Chinese-language article on globalization and Chinese art and literature, see Chou 2005, pp. 3–8.

2. Bohlman 2002, pp. 1–2.

3. Frith 2000, pp. 319–320.

4. Cooley 2005, pp. 200–201.

5. Veit Erlmann offers a contrasting view. In global culture, Erlmann argues, "music no longer signifies something outside of itself, a reality, the truth." Music, he continues, becomes a medium for mediation and "functions as an interactive social context, a conduit for other forms of interaction, other socially mediated forms of appropriation of the world" (Erlmann 1999, p. 6).

6. Frith 2000, p. 312.

7. For an overview of traditional Chinese music practices and critiques on modernist reformism in twentieth-century Chinese music, refer to Wong 2002, pp. 379–90, and Yu 2005, pp. 205–325.

8. Since the mid-twentieth century, Hong Kong and Taiwan have been the cultural and political havens for Chinese artists and intellectuals who were fleeing wars and Communism from mainland China. Living in diaspora, they have circumspectly preserved traditional cultural practices and values. Musicians of the *qin*, for example, have preserved an uninterrupted tradition of performing with silk strings in Hong Kong and Taiwan, while most *qin* musicians in mainland China have adopted metal strings in the 1970s as an attempt to reform and modernize the instrument and its music. See Yu 2005, pp. 205–325, for an overview of the reform done on Chinese traditional and folk music in the twentieth century.

9. The difference between the two should not be understood as temporal. A good example of the latter is the genre of commercial popular songs called *shidaiqu* (contemporary song), which flourished in the 1930s and 1940s among the cosmopolitan Chinese in Shanghai. For a detailed study of *shidaiqu*, refer to Jones 2001. On Shanghai cosmopolitanism in the early twentieth century, see Lee 1999.

10. See Gladney 2004, pp. 51–84, for a detailed analysis of the construction of what he calls "Han (Chinese) modernity through minority primitivity."

11. For an overview of Communist policy toward minority performing arts, refer to Rees 2000, pp. 19–27. For specific examples of Chinese representation of minority music, see Harris 2005, pp. 381–405, and Rees 2000, pp. 170–92. A detailed examination of the issue of minority subjectivity and the construction of otherness in China can be found in Litzinger 2000.

12. Simon Frith 1997, pp. 125–42, citing sociologist Motti Regev.

13. Frith 2000, pp. 313–14.

14. For an example of African musical diaspora, refer to Ingrid Monson's influential article on the global circulation of riff patterns (Monson 1999, pp. 31–65).

15. Stokes 2004, pp. 65–68.

16. I am reminded here of ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman's "World Music at the 'End of History,'" in which he examines the dynamics between the historiography of world music and the teleology of "endism," defined as "the belief that the end of history as it is known is imminent," as a result of the fear and anxiety incurred from global encounters. Music, according to Bohlman, has been a language in and for globalization, marking historical moments of global encounters. Globalization of world music and its history, he continues, has made world music available to us as an imported commodity and empowered music to enhance a language of strangeness or exoticism. It is also an "iconography of domestication, of drawing the world closer to us, [and eventually] of negating the space of encounter." If history is a chronicle and measure of selfness, then it is no longer true when the boundaries between selfness and otherness collapse and selfness has been subverted by otherness. In the course of domesticating world music, and when world music has become a part of the everyday encounter, the otherness it initially signified has been kidnapped for the assumption and pleasure of the Western self. In this sense, the designation "world music" is almost a misnomer; the "exotic" has lost its power and become an empty signifier, and its identity an unqualified difference. See Bohlman 2002, pp. 1–32.

17. In a study of what she calls "(re)cosmopolitanism in Shanghai," Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (1997: 287–319) argues that transnational media since the 1980s have brought about a "deterritorialized Chinese subjectivity" among the cosmopolitan Chinese in Shanghai, by detaching themselves from the state and its mobilization across imaginary spaces. Her optimism notwithstanding, Yang's findings show us the remaking of a fractured and malleable Chinese subjectivity/self against the backdrop of multiple national and transnational discourses.

18. Thomas Turino considers "cosmopolitanism" to be a more precise term than the unrestricted and totalizing implications of "globalization," for the former refers to "objects, ideas, and cultural positions that are widely diffused throughout the world and yet are specific only to certain portions of the populations within given countries" (Turino 2000, p. 7). Such distinction is valid and important. In order not to further complicate our discussion here, however, I have opted to use the term "globalization" throughout this paper, without drawing on its totalizing assumptions.

19. Turino 2000, pp. 12–13.

20. See, respectively, Jones 2001 and Baranovitch 2003.

21. Cooley 2005, pp. 166–67.

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